

New Historicist Perspective of Dan Brown,s Angels and Damons about Antisemitism.

Muhammad Rizwan khan ¹

¹ Department of English literature and language GCU Faisalabad Sahiwal campus Email: rizwanbhai36@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Rizwan khan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i2.450>

Abstract

Background: Angels and Demons by Dan Brown is a well-known thriller that discusses science, religion and secret societies. Though the novel bypass's Jewish identity, its ideas are rooted in well-known European novels that have promoted antisemitic thinking over time. The analysis explores how particular ideologies influence the novel by using symbols, themes and historical references.

Aim: This study aimed to explore implicit antisemitic representations in Angels and Demons using a New Historicist perspective.

Methods: The literary analysis used was qualitative, guided by New Historicism. I used extensive reading of the novel, together with historical texts, literary writings and cultural studies, to collect my data. Methods of theme analysis, historical context and comparative studies were used to spot and analyze patterns shaped by antisemitic tropes and blank spaces in ideas.

Results: Several themes were found, such as Catholic authority, making secret societies out to be enemies and forgetting Jewish identity, all of which show historical patterns of discrimination. Like in traditional antisemitic stories, the film employs dualism (light/darkness) and ideas of conspiracy, but without bringing up Jewish identity directly.

Conclusion: Although it is not outright antisemitic, the novel shows elements of society that make Jewish voices less noticeable. It stresses the role of careful reading and including all types of characters in current literature.

Keywords: Dan Brown, Angels and Demons, antisemitism, New Historicism, literary analysis, conspiracy, historical representation

Introduction

According to New Historicist thinking, literature is shaped by its wider historical, political and cultural world and in turn helps to construct these very environments (Popa, 2022). Within this framework, key concepts such as "antisemitism"—defined as hostility or prejudice against Jewish people based on their religion, ethnicity, or culture—become essential lenses through which to interpret texts (Strosberg, 2024). Angels and Demons by Dan Brown is a recent thriller but uses a mix of historical facts, religion and criticism of institutions (Garayeva, 2023). Analyzing novels using New Historicism means noticing how the novel interacts with common beliefs of the time and if and how it contains prejudiced ideas about Jews, which passed into Western culture through traditions (Arafah & Pattu, 2022).

For a long time in Europe, members of Jewish communities were slowly pushed aside, seen in negative ways and targeted by authorities for their religious beliefs. False claims against Jews were spread through literary work and religious texts, such as medieval accusations of blood libel and current conspiracy theories (Jikeli, 2023). They usually presented Jews as people who

did not fit in or could disrupt the way society worked. Despite a lack of specific Jewish themes, the plot of *Angels and Demons* draws from old stories centered on secret groups and faith leaders, which could accidentally reproduce prejudices linked to antisemitism (B&H Publishing Group, 2024).

New Historicist critics argue that Brown's story is created within the context of particular social and political ideas. The author includes the Catholic Church, the Illuminati and science in the story because these groups generated real historical conflicts with underlying cultural biases (Brown, 2023). The way these movies are made often reflects the long history of who has gotten involved and who has been left out of power in the past. As a result, such depictions can still have the effect of recalling the history of Jewish scapegoating, often made by accident (Al-Hameedawi & Al-Moussaw, 2023).

Religious authority is shown in the novel as something that is spiritual but also open to exploitation. As a result of hundreds of years of European tradition, the Church held huge political and cultural authority and often suppressed those it labeled heretical (Badone, 2021). The same kind of power dynamics in the past affected Jews, who often faced discrimination, was forced to act or by then and to move away from their home areas. While Brown's story centers on the Vatican's internal struggles, a New Historicist analysis encourages us to consider how these depictions might indirectly engage with older patterns of religious exclusion and intolerance (Gauchet, 2021).

The novel's silence regarding Jewish representation is also meaningful. Through choosing Christian institutions and Western science as the main source, *Angels and Demons* does not include alternative religious and cultural ideas (Going, 2022). In the view of New Historicism, the fact that Jewish traditions are absent here supports a story pattern where Jewish input is usually small or missing. Because of this lack, Jewish history may not be highlighted, and the importance of many religious stories impacted by institutions is easily missed (Toullassi, 2025). The main theme of the novel, which empowers the Illuminati, is based on conspiracy theories that have often had links to antisemitism in the past. Brown does not link the Illuminati to Jews as an identity group, but this idea has been connected to antisemitic thoughts about Jews having hidden control (Schuller, 2021). The analysis should also see how the narrative could either follow or deviate from those associations and if the use of such motifs supports or reinforces harmful beliefs from European history.

Its importance comes from how it notes that even without clear links, recent pop literature can show ideas from our past. Through a New Historicist reading, it becomes clear that *Angels and Demons* relies on themes of power, secrets and internal conflict, which can relate to antisemitism in Western culture. By doing such an analysis, you can learn how historical biases are still present in today's cultural works.

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative method was used, merging literary and cultural understanding with New Historicism, to look for antisemitic elements—sometimes noticed, sometimes not—in Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*. The approach started by Stephen Greenblatt in New Historicism is to view literature within the context of society, politics and history. The research made sense of the novel through exploration of how its plot interacted with Western ideas and authority systems, mainly antisemitism. The book *Angels and Demons* was the main text under study, with secondary texts being historical documents, published research on antisemitism and reviews of conspiracy themes in fiction. The study involved close examination of the novel to spot the main themes, characters presented, important symbols and mentions of historical events. Focus was also given to how Jewish identity was left out or neglected by filmmakers. Analysis of the data was done through thematic and contextual methods to reveal how exclusion, representation and ideology work. They were examined in light of earlier religious

and literary traditions that had antisemitic themes. Songs were examined in light of historical and literary material to check for continuity or change in the narratives. The study wanted to understand if a widely read new novel seemed to mirror or contest traditional cultural biases. Triangulation of sources ensured credibility and analytical rigor. The film avoided using stereotypes as it included sensitive portrayals of Jews.

Data Collection

Dan Brown's novel *Angels and Demons* formed the main resource for this research. Among the additional texts were old documents, literature about antisemitism and studies of the role conspiracy theories play in society. While reading the novel, I looked for any themes, historical events, symbolic meanings, ways characters were described and examples of Jewish or antisemitic themes being absent.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic and contextual analysis. Next, religious power, secret societies and depictions of different cultures were thoroughly analyzed in the novel. In addition, these themes were understood about the background of antisemitism in Western writing and the Catholic Church's past. A comparison of the novel with several literary and historical works was done to understand if its representations matched or rejected antisemitic views.

Results and Analysis

It was found that *Angels and Demons* tells its story in a way that implies earlier prejudices against Jews. Movies about secret groups like the Illuminati mirror old stories often linked to antisemitism. By highlighting Vatican authority, the novel helps strengthen Christian institutions and by avoiding Jewish characters, it leaves an imaginary hole in history. Just as science and religion debated for attention, Jewish thinkers were also sidelined in important debates throughout intellectual history. Symbolic binaries like light and darkness are used in these works, aligning with ways that Christians have slandered Jews in their own texts (Table 1).

Table 1: Identification of Antisemitic Themes and Tropes in *Angels and Demons*

Theme/Trope	Evidence in Text	Historical/Cultural Context	Interpretation
Secret Societies	Prominent role of the Illuminati	Often linked with antisemitic conspiracy myths	Reinforces suspicion of hidden, powerful elites
Religious Authority	Depiction of Vatican power struggles	Historical Catholic dominance and exclusion	Echoes traditional Christian institutional power
Absence of Jewish Characters	No explicit Jewish characters or perspectives	Jewish marginalization in historical narratives	Reflects erasure and anticivilization
Scientific vs. Religious Conflict	Conflict between science and the Church	Historical tension, including Jewish exclusion	Reinforces the dominant Christian-Western worldview
Symbolic Language	Use of light/darkness, purity, and corruption	Historically used in Christian antisemitic rhetoric	Subtle reinforcement of binary oppositions

Angels and Demons includes passages that indirectly link to antisemitic themes when its history is examined. By showing the Vatican and the Inquisition as secret and strong-willed, the novel suggests the Church's past mistreatment of groups like Jews. Similar to antisemitic "conspiracy" myths, Illuminati conspiracies portrayed in Catholicism shift the focus away from Jews and onto the Church. Another aspect is how the progress of science often conflicts with deeply held religious beliefs, mirroring the long-standing exclusion of Jewish thinkers in culture. While not clearly antisemitic, they take symbols and ideas from antisemitic traditions (Table 2).

Table 2: Historical References and Their Relation to Antisemitism

Historical Reference	Description in Novel	Connection to Antisemitism	Notes
Vatican and Inquisition	Portrayed as secretive, controlling	Echoes the historical persecution of minorities	Implicitly recalls religious exclusionary practices
Illuminati Conspiracy	Secret society plotting within Catholicism	Resonates with antisemitic "hidden hand" myths	Lacks explicit Jewish link but draws on similar tropes
Scientific Progress vs Religion	Conflicts between modern science and the Church	Reflects historical narratives that excluded Jews	Reinforces dominant cultural narratives

Angels and Demons shows little to no Jewish perspective in its analysis of the characters. The influence of Catholic officials helps to establish and maintain the sense of traditional Christian control in the story. The Illuminati act as the main antagonists by using common conspiracy plot elements, slightly resembling classic anti-Semitic plots that never mention Jews. You'll not find any Jewish identity, as is typical in such revisionist accounts. Author Grant equates scientists in the novel with reasoning and forward thinking, but this alternative view often erases the valuable roles Jewish people played in Western history (Table 3).

Table 3: Character Portrayal and Cultural Representation

Character/Group	Role in Narrative	Representation Related to Jewish Identity	Implication
Catholic Officials	Central figures in power struggles	Dominant Christian perspective	Reinforces institutional authority
Illuminati	Antagonistic secret society	No explicit Jewish affiliation	Uses generic conspiracy motif
Jewish Identity	Not represented or mentioned	Absence highlights marginalization	Demonstrates historical erasure
Scientists	Represent reason and enlightenment	Non-religious, no Jewish association	Aligns with Western scientific ideal

The novel has a way of linking its ideas about ideology with the history of antisemitism. Secret societies in the show are a form of "othering," bringing to mind regular conspiracy theories

that often blame Jews, which in turn leads to suspicion of minority groups. The Church's authority being given such importance goes along with historical Catholic leadership and supports discrimination in society. No Jewish characters appear in the stories, which displays their silence and the way Jewish identity is erased from culture. In addition, the presence of light and darkness as symbols of good and evil repeats the trend of oversimplifying social issues by comparing good with bad (Table 4).

Table 4: Thematic Analysis of Antisemitic Ideological Patterns

Ideological Pattern	Presence in Novel	Historical Origin	Commentary
Othering of “the Other”	Implicit via secret societies	Rooted in antisemitic conspiracy theories	Perpetuates suspicion of minorities
Religious Hegemony	Strong emphasis on Church power	Historical Catholic dominance	Reinforces exclusionary power dynamics
Silence and Erasure	Jewish absence in narrative	Historical marginalization	Reflects cultural invisibility
Dualism of Good vs Evil	Light vs Darkness symbolism	Common in Christian antisemitic rhetoric	Simplifies complex social dynamics

Discussion

A New Historicist analysis of *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown showed that the story contains nuanced patterns of antisemitic ideas that have been common in historical culture. The book never makes Jewish identity or clear antisemitism part of the story, but its narrative and imagery follow patterns seen in Western literature that have regularly pushed Jewish experiences to the background and often ignored them. The fact that Jewish characters are absent from a book about religion and power speaks volumes about the role that cultural silence plays, following what was said about the “strategic exclusion” of the marginalized in official writings (Salman & Tiwari, 2021).

In contrast to Bei & Knowler (2022), the historical rise of antisemitism in Western societies, Brown's novel belongs to books that reflect these ideas instead of pointing out their flaws. Emphasizing secret groups, conspiracy, and religious force agrees with typical antisemitic themes, but in a new, more secular version. This agrees with what Bacha et al. (2021) observe; films are a popular form of recycling harmful cultural myths and making them seem normal in the present day through entertainment.

Other novels, for example *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, often explore how institutions have controlled individuals and how key events in history have affected the lives of some groups differently. Eco intentionally includes many religions in his narrative and sometimes alludes to Jewish studies and the suffering Jews under fascism (Hardie, 2022), making the story more complex and thought-provoking. Almost all the discussion in the novel centers on Catholic religious life and science, giving available space for only a very limited number of voice from historical underrepresented communities.

In addition, *Angels and Demons* makes use of light and darkness to show different worlds, which is a pattern commonly found in Christian speeches and has been abused within antisemitic discussions. It is in line with what Fuller (2022) observed, that medieval Christian literature associated Jewishness with negative or harmful characteristics. The repeated use of such details in the story might reinforce these long-lasting, hidden attitudes even if Brown does not explicitly support this.

Chevalier's *Illuminati* is secretive and deceitful, reproducing in turn a common plot element in antisemitic tales such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Q Anon* (Chazan, 2023). Brown sets up the *Illuminati* without the Jewish connection, but the narrative of invisible forces damaging society matches the harmful stereotypes of Jews found earlier. It agrees with DeAngelo et al., (2024) that antisemitic themes can still appear in storytelling and character types in secular or politically free fiction.

It is necessary to remember that Brown's primary intention is to look at the problem of science versus religion, and he does not attempt to tell Jewish stories or explain Jewish heritage. Because of this, his novels are not considered straightforwardly antisemitic and instead belong in a group of works that reflect problematic cultural beliefs accidentally (Leso et al., 2023). As pointed out by Fioravanti, (2022) because popular fiction isn't very critical, it usually accepts the cultural ideas it gets from society, so experts often use it to study how these notions influence what we create.

Although *Angels and Demons* is not directly antisemitic, it fits into a long history of storytelling that has put down Jewish characters and highlighted Christian-Western stories. No religious diversification, heavy reliance on similar plot traits and symbolic use of binary concepts point to how these trends remain in modern stories. Unlike works that include more critical topics, Brown's novel points out that historical ideologies influence contemporary fiction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Using New Historicist analysis, the study found that while *Angels and Demons* avoids depicting Jews or mentioning antisemitism, it supports common views that have dismissively treated the identity of Jewish people. Writers in Western literature often use secret societies, the conflict between religion and personal beliefs and images of light and darkness to emphasize their elitist views. By not including any Jewish perspectives in a story focused on religious history, the figure of Black Muslims has become commonly associated with that experience. Though the main part of Brown's story explains the battle between science and religion, the use of symbols and power dynamics is similar to that seen in classic antisemitic arguments.

Therefore, future analyses of books and movies should keep investigating how old ways of thinking can be present in stories published today. In teaching and research, educators and scholars ought to encourage people to read critically so they can notice and challenge popular views while adding the voices of marginalized groups. Employing symbols, tropes and representations in storytelling means that authors and content creators need to reflect carefully on their historical background. Studying other narratives that thoughtfully address religious differences such as *The Name of the Rose*, allows us to develop new ideas and find richer meaning. In addition, by studying fiction from a literary, cultural and religious perspective, researchers can learn more about the social ideas and ideals reflected in different novels.

References

- Al-Hameedawi, M. A. J., & Al-Moussaw, S. I. A. (2023). A MARXIST STUDY OF DAN BROWN'S *INFERNO*. *European Journal of Literary Studies*, 4(2).
- Arafah, B., & Pattu, A. (2022). Racial discrimination experienced by black people as reflected in Langston Hughes's poems. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(2), 350-356.
- Bacha, C., Einhorn, S., & Lieberman, S. (2021). 'If you prick me, do I not bleed?': Antisemitism, racism and group analysis—some thoughts. *Group Analysis*, 54(3), 388-401.
- Badone, E. (2021). Religious orthodoxy and popular faith in European society.
- Bei, Z., & Knowler, H. (2022). Disrupting unlawful exclusion from school of

- minoritised children and young people racialized as Black: using Critical Race Theory composite counter-storytelling. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 27(3), 231-242.
- Brown, R. E. (2023). *Critical Meaning of the Bible, The: How a Modern Reading of the Bible Challenges Christians, the Church, and the Churches*. Paulist Press.
- Chazan, R. (2023). *Medieval stereotypes and modern antisemitism*. Univ of California Press.
- DeAngelo, D., Gimbel, S., & Stern, S. (2024). *The Chai-Light Zone: Rod Serling, Secular Jew*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Fioravanti, V. Á. (2022). *I Am a Jew: The Representation of Jews and Antisemitism in British Literature and Culture*.
- Fuller, M. (Ed.). (2022). *Science and Religion in Western Literature: Critical and Theological Studies*. Taylor & Francis.
- Garayeva, K. (2023). *Different Attitudes to Esotericism in Peter Ackroyd's and Dan Brown's Novels* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Szeged (Hungary)).
- Gauchet, M. (2021). *The disenchantment of the world: A political history of religion*.
- Gilhooly, J. R. (2024). *Angels & Demons: What the Bible Says about Spiritual Creatures*. B&H Publishing Group.
- Going, M. (2022). *The Jewish Other: Christian Constructions and Literary Representations (1790-1830)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield).
- Hardie, S. (2022). *Storytelling as Stewardship: Minimizing The Harmful Impact of the Film Industry on Local Environment, Ecology, and Economics*.
- Jikeli, G. (2023). How Do Muslims and Jews in Christian Countries See Each Other Today? A Survey Review. *Religions*, 14(3), 412.
- Leso, B. H., Cortimiglia, M. N., & Ghezzi, A. (2023). The contribution of organizational culture, structure, and leadership factors in the digital transformation of SMEs: a mixed-methods approach. *Cognition, Technology & Work*, 25(1), 151-179.
- Popa, N. (2022). Operationalizing historical consciousness: A review and synthesis of the literature on meaning making in historical learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(2), 171-208.
- Salman, S., & Tiwari, R. Use of Conspiracy Theories in the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea. *The Creative Launcher*, 7(6), 210-217.
- Schuller, S. (2021). World conspiracy literature and antisemitism. *Transit*, 13(1).
- Strosberg, B. B. (2024). A History of the Study of Anti-Semitism. In *Anti-Semitism at the Limit: Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis* (pp. 71-122). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Toulassi, B. (2025). *Overcoming the Fear of Demons and Evil Spirits Among African Christians: Enhancing Salvation* (Master's thesis, Regent University).