THE NOT SO SACRED FEMININE:
FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND GENERIC CONSTRAINTS IN THE DA VINCI CODE

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2007

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ABSTRACT

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Since its publication in 2003, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has dominated bestseller lists, becoming one of the most widely read, discussed, and analyzed books in recent history. Although *The Da Vinci Code* offers a radical view of history that argues for the equality and power of women, at the end of the novel nothing has actually changed. In light of this, my thesis is a feminist analysis of the female protagonist, Sophie Neveu, in both Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Ron Howard’s 2006 film adaptation. In analyzing these texts, I ultimately conclude that the lack of actual female empowerment is the result of the conventions of the classical mystery/detective genre.

John Cawelti’s theories of genre and formula and Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytical theories of gender and the gaze form the theoretical base for my observations. These theories, along with those relating to gender and the detective genre, are instrumental in my close readings of Dan Brown’s novel and Ron Howard’s film adaptation. In examining *The Da Vinci Code* in terms of its popular culture effects and popularity, I situate the text within the historical locations of postmodernism and a post-9/11 United States. My analysis of *The Da Vinci Code* reveals our contemporary culture’s unease with both domestic and international politics in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With our vulnerabilities as a nation exposed, the American public embraced texts that not only safely allowed them to explore their fears, but distracted them from the more pressing issues at hand. Coupled with this preoccupation was the
desire to return to a sense of “normalcy.” As a result, more traditional models of living, including notions of gender, have been embraced. Given the text’s popularity, a gendered study of *The Da Vinci Code* reveals the negative stereotypes of women that still exist in current American society, and shows the roles popular media such as literature and film have in both reflecting and perpetuating these beliefs.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 2003, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has dominated bestseller lists, becoming one of the most widely read, discussed, and analyzed books in recent history. Transcending the traditional status typically ascribed to genre fiction, the mystery and suspense elements of *The Da Vinci Code* have been widely heralded by most popular press critics. The much anticipated paperback release of the novel reflects this, showcasing such accolades as “Blockbuster perfection” (*The New York Times*), “A new master of smart thrills” (*People Magazine*), and “One of the finest mysteries I’ve ever read” (Clive Cussler). As for the academic scholarship surrounding the novel, it has done little to question the text’s formulaic plot and characterizations, tending to focus more toward the validity of the novel’s historical and artistic claims. While some periodicals, such as *National Catholic Reporter* and *Christian Century*, have questioned the role of the sacred feminine in the text, there is a lack of any substantial work examining actual female representation in *The Da Vinci Code*. In view of the text’s overall concern with the sacred feminine and the role of women in society as a whole, this seems to be a gross academic oversight. Although *The Da Vinci Code* offers a radical view of history that argues for the equality and power of women, at the end of the novel nothing has actually changed. Therefore, in this thesis, I offer a feminist analysis of the female protagonist, Sophie Neveu, in both Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Ron Howard’s 2006 film adaptation, ultimately concluding that the text’s lack of actual female empowerment is the result of the conventions of the mystery/detective genre. Given the text’s popularity, a gendered study of *The Da Vinci Code* reveals the negative stereotypes of women that still exist in current American
society, and shows the roles popular media such as literature and film have in both reflecting and perpetuating these beliefs. This becomes particularly significant in view of *The Da Vinci Code’s* concern with the sacred feminine and claims of female empowerment.

Considering that *The Da Vinci Code* is first, and foremost, a mystery/detective hybrid, I argue that the text’s lack of female empowerment is ultimately a result of its generic constraints. In arguing my position, in addition to using the novel and film, I draw upon criticisms of male and female representations in mystery and detective narratives of novel, film, and television. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the historic development of women within the genre. As a starting point I draw from John Cawelti’s study of literary formulas in his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), concentrating first on the broader cultural significance of formula and then more specifically on the mystery genre. Focusing on the character of Sophie, I specifically address the genre’s conventions in relation to gender, revealing how *The Da Vinci Code* is adept at questioning conventions and stereotypes without ever really being transgressive.

When discussing genre, many different definitions have been put forth by theorists. In his study of the development of film genres, Rick Altman writes,

> It should be possible to outline the major principles of genre theory established by two millennia of genre theorists. Yet this is precisely what we cannot do. Even so simple a question as the meaning and extent of *genre* remains confusing, for the term inconsistently refers to distinctions derived from a wide variety of differences among texts. (11)

Given these discrepancies, then, I find it necessary to discuss how I will be using the term genre for the purposes of this thesis. Although I will discuss this topic in much further detail, distinguishing between genre and formula is a good introductory starting point. While these two terms are often regarded as interchangeable, it is more appropriate to regard them as two distinct
steps in a particular method of textual study. If, at its most basic, genre is combination of
conditions and inventions, then formula is the structure of specific conventions and inventions
utilized by a body of similar works.

Looking at the structure of formula, genres are interpreted not necessarily by what they
say, but rather how they say it through repeated elements or conventions. As Cawelti writes,

> Genre can be defined as a structural pattern that embodies a universal life pattern
or myth in the materials of language. Formula, on the other hand is cultural; it
represents the way in which a culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and
its own preoccupations in narrative form. (Mystery 9)

Producers and audiences have shared expectations regarding genres. Formulas tap into these
expectations, drawing from previous archetypes while simultaneously confirming current beliefs.
By working within the bounds of formula, conventions provide the necessary structure while
inventions work to perpetuate the genre and are the basic differences required to make texts
unique.

In terms of my thesis, the mystery genre is my starting point. Within this genre are
numerous subgenres including crime, detective, and police narratives. As stated, I consider *The
Da Vinci Code* to be a mystery/detective hybrid. Although not a traditional detective, the male
protagonist, Robert Langdon, functions as one in the text. The character of Sophie, as a DCJP
cryptologist, operates as a police detective. The murder of Sophie’s grandfather, Jacques
Saunière, is the text’s crime. In looking at the generic functions of mystery and crime, Cawelti
notes, “Throughout its long-lasting tradition, literary crime serves as an ambiguous mirror of
social values, reflecting both our overt commitments to certain principles of morality and order
and our hidden resentments and animosity against these principles” (77). Saunière’s murder and
its association with religious secrecy reflect Cawelti’s assertion. Throughout the story the crime
and the mysteries surrounding it comment on and reflect moralities, resentments, and ambiguities
in contemporary society. The main ambiguity I explore in this thesis is the text’s ambivalence toward women. Despite the text’s overt claims for the sacred feminine or female equality, the subtext, conclusion, and development of characters reveal a very different agenda. As I’ve stated, at the end of the text, nothing actually changes, despite the somewhat radical amendments to history suggested. However, this is not that surprising given the formula for detective fiction, where “In essence the detective story constitutes a mythos or fable in which crime, as a distinctive problem of bourgeois, individualistic, and quasi-democratic societies, is handled without upsetting society’s fundamental institutions or its world-view” (Mystery 286). As Cawelti suggests, and as is seen in The Da Vinci Code, by the end of the detective narrative society’s fundamental beliefs must be confirmed.

Taking a feminist approach to my study, I concentrate on the role of the detective, authority, agency, objectification of women, and the privileges of the male gaze. Additionally, I offer a chronological overview that looks at the connections between historical changes, such as the passing of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1972, and their reflections in the evolution of the mystery/detective genre. Works from which I draw upon for this include Kimberly Dilley’s Busybodies, Meddlers, and Snoops: The Female Hero in Contemporary Women’s Mysteries (1998) and Linda Mizejewski’s Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture (2004). While Dilley focuses on women in literary mystery fiction, Mizejewski looks at the roles of women detectives in both literature and films. Therefore Mizejewski’s analysis is helpful as I look at both Brown’s novel and Howard’s movie. In looking at Howard’s film adaptation, Brian McFarlane’s Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation (1996) is useful in analyzing Sophie’s characterization as it shifts from page to screen. In developing my screen analysis I also rely heavily on Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and
Narrative Cinema” (1975), and her theory of “to-be-looked-at-ness” in relation to female objectification and the male gaze.

From the historical outline of the genre, I shift my focus to the hype and popular press surrounding both the novel and movie. In the second chapter I not only summarize the popularity and effect of *The Da Vinci Code*, but also offer an explanation for the explosive fame of the novel and the anticipation and responses to the film. It is here that Cawelti’s theories on the cultural significance of genre and formula will be put to use. The study of genre often looks at certain texts as a form of escapism for consumers. Cawelti finds merit in the study of formula not only in the consideration of a new aesthetic, one in which *The Da Vinci Code* shines, but also in terms of what these popular texts say about those who consume them. Working together, genre and formula can therefore provide valuable insight into the collective fantasies of populations of people. In looking at *The Da Vinci Code*, it is important to look at how the text has been received by audiences. Examining the shifts and developments in this genre, one can infer shifts and developments in the ideals and priorities of producers and audiences from one historical period to another. Using this logic, I argue that *The Da Vinci Code* is a reflection of traditional and pre-existing cultural practices and concerns.

Although I do not go into a detailed response study, I do provide an overview of how both the film and novel have been received by audiences. In this chapter I also discuss the controversy surrounding the religious and artistic claims put forth by *The Da Vinci Code*, and briefly touch upon the scholarship concerning the text’s religious, historical, and artistic aspects. Although the second chapter does not exclusively look at gender, nor does it discuss the character of Sophie specifically, I think it would be remiss to not give some attention to the popular culture effects of *The Da Vinci Code*. Looking at the ways the novel and film have been
received, examining the effects it has had across a variety of media, is important considering the negative message towards women the text promotes. In order to truly understand the extent of the message, it is necessary to demonstrate and examine the wide array of effects the text has produced. These range from television documentaries claiming to “unlock” the code, numerous books, and even Da Vinci Code vacation tours. This second chapter is crucial in supporting my later assertions about the ways in which The Da Vinci Code both reflects and shapes societal views of women.

Shifting to the actual text, then, in the third chapter I offer a detailed, feminist reading of the novel, exploring Sophie’s role throughout the text, focusing on descriptions of the character, her development throughout the text, and her relation to other, mainly male, characters. Looking specifically at how, like many forms of popular culture, The Da Vinci Code questions societal taboos, I demonstrate that the novel ultimately reinforces the very institutions it challenges. As a mystery/detective novel, The Da Vinci Code works within the rules and conventions of genre fiction. Using religion and gender to develop inventions, The Da Vinci Code draws upon taboo issues in culture, commenting on our own society and its gender conventions. Although The Da Vinci Code may be attempting to critique Western society’s position on both religion and women, in the end it only confirms the patriarchal status quo. My analysis reveals how this hegemonic text demonstrates this point by systematically stripping Sophie of power and control, and ultimately denouncing the idea of the sacred feminine.

Across a variety of disciplines the term “sacred feminine” suggests different meanings. For the purposes of looking at the role of the sacred feminine in The Da Vinci Code I use the definition the text sets out. Described not as a symbol of virginal purity, but rather aligned with Hieros Gamos, the sacred feminine is seen as the female element of “the natural sexual union
between man and woman through which each became spiritually whole” (Brown 125). Further, although I describe my approach to the text as “feminist,” it should be noted that in analyzing the character of Sophie I also look at male characters; however, this analysis is used only as a comparison for female representation.

As my research shows, detective fiction has evolved over the last couple of decades to allow women to have positions of authority, removing them from traditionally accepted female roles. The Miss Marples and Jessica Fletchers may have been pushed aside to make room for their more powerful and authoritative sisters, but as I question throughout the thesis, at what cost? As has been suggested, under their blatant sexist constraints, traditional mystery and detective texts at least left some room for women’s resistance against marginalization. Conversely, under the guise of inoculation, texts such as *The Da Vinci Code* appear to give audiences legitimate models of female agency, but as a closer examination reveals, these women come in a much tighter overall package of patriarchy.

Keeping this in mind, in the fourth chapter I shift my analysis to Ron Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Audrey Tautou’s portrayal of Sophie Neveu. Drawing from film and adaptation theory, I look at the challenges of transformation from novel into film, specifically on the adaptation of character. At the most basic level, semiotics is useful in this analysis, where “Attention to semiotic issues can diminish the massive differences so apparent between the two mediums [novel and film], allowing us to compare presentations of narrative despite artists’ use of differing sign systems” (Reynolds 2). In particular, I use this theory to look at how the essence of Sophie (speech, mannerisms, thoughts, and feelings) is translated from page to screen. In his book *Crime Film* (2002), Thomas Leitch discusses the role of the feminist film critic and writes, By changing the feminist critic’s question from “Does this image of woman please me or not, do I identify with it or not?” to “What is being said about
women here, who is speaking, for whom?” Gledhill and other feminists redirect the focus of genre theory from the content of stories, images, and conventions to the ideological conditions under which they were produced. (69)

While my analysis will not abandon content, it will focus on what is being said about women, through a variety of codes, and by whom. I will also be devoting attention to the ideological conditions under which *The Da Vinci Code* was produced and the conditions under which it has been consumed.

There are specific scenes in the book that I analyze in chapter three that are absent from the movie. I spend some time discussing these absences in chapter four, and offer an analysis for the changes from book to film. According to Francesco Casetti, when looking at the adaptation of a text from literature to film it is important to consider these two realms as sites of production and circulation of discourses and connect them to other social discourses in order to trace a network of texts, within which we can identify the accumulation or dispersion, the coming forth or the reformulation, the emergence and the disappearance of some themes and issues. (90)

This idea is significant for a number of reasons. First, as two different sites of production, novels and films work in different, if at times complementary, ways. Looking at their structures within specific genres (in this case mystery/detective) it can be seen how both the novel and film contribute to an existing discourse. Then, by considering where the film diverges from the novel, one can gain a greater insight not only into the individual mediums, but also postulate on the reformulation and distribution of certain themes and ideologies.

Although I discuss the significant changes between Brown’s novel and Howard’s film, ultimately the major plot points and message of the novel remain the same. As in my study of the novel, then, I look at how Sophie is characterized throughout the film, her relationships with other characters, and her relationship to authority and power. Further, I concentrate on elements
specific to film, such as casting, wardrobe, camera angle, and gaze. Taking into consideration these elements, looking at what is kept from the novel for the film and what is changed, I explore how the film is, and is not, different from the text.

My interest in studying *The Da Vinci Code* comes from a deeper interest in how popular literature reflects culture and, taking it a step further, how literature can then be used to influence cultural values. While I find little hope in *The Da Vinci Code* bringing forth any positive social change, I still find it a useful text to study. Literature does not exist in a vacuum; it is one of the many playing fields in which ideology creeps into cultural discourse. Film holds this hegemonic power to an even greater extent. Based on plot elements alone, I have a strong basis for my conclusion that *The Da Vinci Code* is one of the most current and salient examples of the gender disparities and inequalities that still exist in contemporary American society. In my conclusion, then, I reflect on the political implications of this fact in the hope that bringing awareness to this issue will be the first steps in making some sort of a cultural change. At the end of *The Da Vinci Code*, Sophie’s male counterpoint and the text’s protagonist, Robert Langdon, figures out the final clue to where the Holy Grail, key to the concept of the sacred feminine, lies. Upon his realization, the final lines of the text are, “For a moment, he thought he heard a woman’s voice . . . the wisdom of the ages . . . whispering up from the closeness of the earth” (Brown 454). As my research shows, gender equality as a concept has been discovered, for sure, but as evidenced by *The Da Vinci Code*, it has yet to register as more than a whisper. Therefore in concluding my thesis, I speculate as to why this is, and more important, what the study of literature and film can do to bring forth positive social change.
The Rise of the Female Detective

From Edgar Allen Poe’s Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes to Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe to Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski, detectives have been a mainstay of popular literature over the last hundred plus years. During this period, the patterns and formula of these stories have evolved and changed to reflect their times, but ultimately they have stuck to a series of conventions which form the basis of the detective subset of the mystery genre. Tracing the development of the detective from drawing room sleuth, to the hardboiled dick, to the empowered female detectives that appear today, provides a foundation for the study of The DaVinci Code. Looking first at Cawelti’s theory of formula, applying it specifically to the mystery/detective genre, then shifting to the application of formula to film analysis and feminist criticism, offers the theoretical framework for subsequent chapters’ analysis of The DaVinci Code in both its novel and film versions.

In developing his theories of formula and genre in his work Adventure, Mystery, and Romance (1976), John Cawelti acknowledges the connectedness of the two, writing, “A formula is a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype. It is also similar in many ways to the traditional literary conception of a genre” (6). Here the traditional literary conception of genre is seen as a series of expected conventions, whose orderings form the foundation of formula. Conventions are often tied up with cultural significance, such as the rise of espionage detective fiction that became popular during the Cold War, and therefore formula becomes a way in which conventions are structured to convey meaning and form ideological discourses.

Where conventions are the bedrock of genre, inventions provide the material which allows genres to evolve. Inventions provide the necessary differences needed to keep stories
fresh and interesting. Over the life cycle of a genre old conventions are either established or abandoned as certain inventions are refined and developed into further conventions. In addition to their practical necessity, conventions and inventions also maintain a second level of significance. In his more recent work, *Mystery, Violence and Popular Culture* (2004), Cawelti addresses this, stating,

Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of values; inventions confront us with a new perception or meaning that we have not realized before. Both these functions are important to culture. Conventions help maintain a culture’s stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world. (7)

Here Cawelti not only outlines the functions of conventions and inventions to genre, but also confirms and explains a function of genre to society. Conventions validate existing beliefs while inventions allow genres to conform and respond to shifts in current cultural ideologies. Formulas, then, become the way in which conventions and inventions are structured to fit cultural needs. Further, “formula is useful primarily as a means of making historical and cultural inferences about the collective fantasies shared by large groups of people and of identifying differences in these fantasies from one culture or period to another” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 7).

Looking at the evolution of genres, therefore, is instrumental in tracking shifting cultural ideals from one time period to another.

However, despite the importance of this, genre and formula are often poorly regarded due to “their essential standardization and their primary relation to the needs of escape and relaxation” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 8). Mystery and detective stories hit their stride early in the twentieth century with their inclusion in nickel weeklies and monthly periodicals such as *Mystery and Detective Monthly, Detective and Murder Mysteries*, and *Detective Classics*, and then later with the popularity of mass produced pulp paperbacks. As the genre refined itself, a
reliance on conventions allowed authors and publishers to quickly produce works with a high probability of selling. The mass market production of stories not only led to the standardization to which Cawelti refers, but also to the marginalization of the genre by many literary critics. The acceptance of these texts, and their consumption by working class Americans, led to their reputations as “escapist” forms of literature, and the arbiters of “high culture” saw them as little more than opiates for the masses.

Rather than stress character development or over-arching themes, motifs, and metaphors, formulaic works focus on a cyclic sense of excitement, suspense, and gratification. The sense of excitement and suspense, however, is mediated by formulaic structures and conventions, and the anxiety felt is therefore not real; the reader is always confident that there will be a resolution. Similarly, the sense of gratification felt is in many ways false since there is no real apprehension. Further, these stories offer no real resolution to the real-life situations that provide the need for escapist literature in the first place. As a result, the need for escapism remains, fueling the industry for this and other types of popular texts.

Despite standardization and false gratification, “formulas become collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to if not preferred by the cultural groups who enjoy them” (Cawelti, Adventure 34). One way this is achieved is through the affirmation of existing beliefs through the presentation of them as the material that make up the interest and attitudes of characters and situations in genre fiction. The inclusion by authors of existing values and positions not only works as a means of reader identification, but also as way to “resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values” (Cawelti, Adventure 35). As I will demonstrate in later chapters, this is exactly what The
*Da Vinci Code* poorly attempts to do with conflicting values and attitudes surrounding women and religion. Although I argue that the text does not really resolve any tensions, it does allow readers and audiences to “explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and forbidden” and to experience the possibility (in a controlled way) of crossing this boundary (Cawelti, *Adventure* 35). In a similar way, *The Da Vinci Code* offers readers and audiences the chance to experience an alternate view of history without ever having to commit to it. Although the possibility of looking at religion and women in a different light is explored, it is done in a safe and controlled manner where the audience is eventually pulled back through the confirmation of existing beliefs.

The mystery/detective genre is especially adept at crossing such boundaries. At its inception, “the classical detective story with its focus on the investigation of mystery showed a particular fascination with the hidden secrets and guilts that lay within the family circle” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 77). While this still remains true to some extent, in the more recent past this has shifted to an interest in mysteries with more of a social and/or political impact. *The Da Vinci Code*, therefore, is particularly appealing since its “hidden secrets and guilts” pertain to both a family circle and a broader political and religious significance. Additionally, *The Da Vinci Code* further situates itself within the patterns of Cawelti’s detective formula, particularly in the spheres of situation, pattern of action, characters, and relationships.

Working from Edgar Allen Poe’s conception of the detective story, Cawelti devised a formula for the classical detective genre. Beginning with situation, Cawelti writes, “The classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the elucidation of its mystery” (*Adventure* 80). *The Da Vinci Code* clearly fits this pattern, with the murder of Jacques Saunière. This sets up the action for the rest of the story and the discovery of who murdered Saunière and
why. This falls into step with what Cawelti terms the “pattern of action.” This includes the introduction of the detective, the location of clues and the subsequent investigation, the announcement and explanation of the solution, and the final conclusion. While this may seem a bit broad, give or take a few exceptions, this is the pattern of most detective mysteries, including *The Da Vinci Code*. In regards to character and relationships in detective stories, they include the victim, the criminal, the detective, and “those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 91). In *The Da Vinci Code*, the character of Sophie is complicated as she functions as both a detective and as one threatened by the crime and incapable of solving it. This complexity lends itself to the duality of *The Da Vinci Code*, where the text is compelling in its inventions on the classic formula of the detective story, but at the same time fits into patriarchal conventions in doing so. One such invention on the formula is the function of setting in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Most often the setting of the classical detective story is divided between an isolated home location and the bustling outside world. This corresponds, respectively, to the crime’s connection to the family unit and its greater political and societal implications. *The Da Vinci Code* differs from this, however, as the story moves from clue to clue, location to location. Although the events of the story begin at the Louvre, there is no central location to the text. This works well in the novel as it functions to keep the plot moving and maintain reader interest. Each chapter ends like a mini cliffhanger, often with the characters darting off to a new location in order to break the next “code.” However, this pace translates poorly in the film version, as events often seem rushed and scenes appear choppy. In having the setting constantly change, the focus of the text becomes less about solving Saunière’s murder, and more about solving the mystery of the Holy Grail.
Perhaps the most crucial convention of the mystery/detective genre is the crime. Yet, although the pattern of action of the text leads to the resolution of the mystery, “it is nevertheless quite evident that we are more interested in the form of the crime and the process of its solution than in the sinfulness of the criminal and his punishment” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 55). This is obvious in most stories, including *The Da Vinci Code*, where upon the text’s final conclusion the audience rarely learns of the criminal’s punishment. However, *The Da Vinci Code* is an interesting case where the sinfulness of the crime is concerned. Connected to secret societies and religious mysteries, Saunière’s death seems particularly sinful. The additional revelation of Sophie’s relation to the victim further complicates the matter. On the one hand, Saunière’s murder has tremendous political, religious, and societal consequences. On the other, the relationship between Saunière and Sophie de-emphasizes these implications by making the crime personal. The emphasis of this towards the text’s conclusion, in addition to the public lack of explanation for Sauniere’s murder, “affirmed the basic principle that crime was strictly a matter of individual motivations and thus reaffirmed the validity of the existing social order” (Cawelti, *Adventure* 105).

In addition to making the crime a family matter, *The Da Vinci Code* de-emphasizes the relevance of Saunière’s murder through the use of clues and code-breaking. As Cawleti notes,

> By reducing crime to a puzzle, a game, and a highly formalized set of literary conventions, it transformed an increasingly serious moral and social problem into an entertaining pastime, thereby enabling a comic metamorphosis of the materials of crime: something potentially dangerous and disturbing was transformed into something completely under control. (*Adventure* 105)

*The Da Vinci Code* takes this idea to the extreme with a literal metaphoricalization of the game of “whodunit.” Although the text deals with serious topics such as murder, religious conspiracies, and gender equality, they are framed within the puzzle of breaking the Da Vinci
“code.” In many ways the crime is turned into a game, which takes the focus away from the serious issues at hand. As a result, “the game dimension of formula is a culture’s way of simultaneously entertaining itself and of creating an acceptable pattern of temporary escape from the serious restrictions and limitations of human life” (Cawelti, *Mystery* 11). Although *The Da Vinci Code* tackles issues of religion and gender, it is only on a superficial level, and rather than confront these issues, the text instead offers an escape from their inherent seriousness.

Gender, then, becomes particularly problematic within the confines of the mystery/detective genre. As Kathleen Klein notes in her work *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (1988), “The predictable formula of detective fiction is based on a world whose sex/gender valuations reinforce male hegemony” (225). Statements such as this have led many theorists to argue that as a result of its characterizations and structure, detective fiction is inherently, and therefore inescapably, sexist. In general,

One important difference between the mimetic and escapist impulses in literature is that mimetic literature tends toward the bringing of latent or hidden motives into the light of consciousness while escapist literature tends to construct new disguises or to confirm existing defenses against the confrontation of latent desires. (Cawelti, *Adventure* 26)

Historically, women in traditional detective fiction have been characterized as the victim, the vamp, or both. In these negative depictions, they are reduced to passive bodies or amoral seductresses. In either case, the emphasis is on women as body, not as possessing an active, thinking mind. Even in the role of seductress, most often by the end of the text the woman is “put in her place” through murder, incarceration, or at the very least domestication. Through this pattern, “Despite its low-brow status, the detective story, like the Western, has gotten considerable respect and attention as contemporary male epic. Women are right to be skeptical because we know this story all too well: male sexuality as power, knowledge, entitlement; the
female body is the site of seduction and death” (Mizejewski 17). Returning to Cawelti’s assertion regarding escapist literature, this suggests that through popular narratives latent desires of female empowerment are disguised or made to conform to existing perceptions and beliefs of patriarchy.

As a result,

Because detective fiction follows rather than parallels social reality, the genre’s inherent conservatism upholds power and privilege in the name of law and justice as it validates readers’ visions of a safe and ordered world. In such a world view, criminals and women are put in their proper, secondary places. (Klein 1)

Similar to the false sense of suspense related to the fear and mystery of the crime, alternate models of gender activity are tolerated only in the same respect that in the end the audience’s sense of order and stability is validated. In this way, the conclusions of these narratives confirm existing modes of gender representation, ultimately denouncing alternative depictions of acceptable male and female behavior. When order is restored at the end of the text, it is not only in relation to criminal activity, but also with respect to the expected roles of male and female characters.

As society evolved to grant more autonomy to women, detective fiction was slow to follow. Despite the occasional Miss Marple, matronly drawing room sleuth, or juvenile Nancy Drew, there were no female detectives with any professional authority or relation to the state. Indeed, it was not until the amendment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1972 (which prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, nationality, or sex) that professional female detectives began to appear. As Linda Mizejewski notes, “If the female sleuth was most typically the curious old lady, the spunky spinster, or someone’s girlfriend, this was mostly due to real-world constraints. The professional woman investigator was a historical rarity until the 1970s” (17). Even then, change was slow to be seen, both in the real world and in fictional portrayals.
Although “the first serious professional women investigators began to appear in mainstream fiction in the early 1970s, . . . fans claim the turning point was 1982, when Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky introduced their female P.I. series” (Mizejewski 19). The success of these novelists, and the popularity of their characters Kinsey Millhone and V.I. Warshawski, began a new boom in detective fiction. By the mid-1990s, these authors, and others such as Janet Evanovich and Patricia Cornwell, were dominating best-seller lists with their empowered female investigating heroines. However, despite the creation of this new subgenre, there is still a large market for mystery and detective fiction working with more traditional conventions of the genre, particularly in respect to gender binaries. *The Da Vinci Code* and its popularity constitute a prime example of a still existing desire and presence for this type of fiction.

Until recently, the historical exclusion of the female detective has been linked to the historical position of women in society. Before women were employed as professional detectives, it was unlikely for writers to place a fictional character in this position. However, when she does begin to appear in print, film, and television, it is not without reservation and restriction. As Kathleen Klein notes, “Like the criminal, she is a member of society who does not conform to the status quo. Her presence pushes off-center the whole male/female, public/private, intellect/emotion, physical strength/weakness dichotomy” (*The Woman Detective* 4). As a result of the imbalance caused by the power granted by her position, the female detective must be placed in check in other areas. “Therefore, her façade of normal respectability – like the criminal’s – must be stripped away. If she can be shown as an incompetent detective or an inadequate woman, readers’ reactionary preferences are satisfied; their second catharsis is achieved” (Klein, *The Woman Detective* 5). As will be discussed in detail in chapters three and
four, in both Brown’s novel and Howard’s film the character of Sophie is continually made to be an incompetent detective in an attempt to place her within more acceptable feminine parameters.

**The Detective in Film**

The ways of reading a character differ from page to screen. Although given visual descriptions by authors, readers are ultimately able to imagine their own images of characters, settings, and situations. However, the visual elements of film make this impossible. As a result of this, Mizejewski speculates, “Readers of women’s mystery fictions can easily picture versions of themselves as the main characters, but once we move from book to movie, the picturing of this character gets more complicated” (5). This happens for a number of reasons. First, to cite an old cliché, a picture is worth a thousand words. No matter how well an author’s description is, it is always subject to the reader’s interpretation. The reader can therefore find ways to identify with the character based on the author’s depiction. Film, however, leaves less room for this type of identification and interpretation. Further, in cases of adaptation, the viewer is left to identify with a specific construction, the director’s vision of the character. This may or may not be what the author intended, and often it limits broader viewer identification.

Viewer identification, particularly for women, played a role in early feminist film criticism. With respect to the media, feminism in the 1970’s was concerned with the portrayal of women in TV and film. Their initial studies were quantitative and focused on how often women were seen on screen, what positions they held, and in what types of roles. Particular attention was paid to “how women’s conventional roles, for example, as mothers or girls next door, had little representational bite on women’s real identities and experiences. According to these critics,
mainstream cinema did not represent women’s lived experience but only stereotypes of women’s social status or, indeed, lack of status” (Humm 13). In placing women in archetypal roles of either caregivers or sex objects, gender norms for the division of labor were perpetuated and made to appear natural. Little attention was paid to the actual lived experiences of women, while instead constructing ideas of femininity and womanhood that stressed women as passive bodies and little else.

In 1975 the journal Screen published Laura Mulvey’s influential essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Relying heavily on psychoanalysis, Mulvey’s essay provides much of the framework for feminist film theory for the past thirty years. This theory is important in the field of film criticism, and is one from which I draw heavily when analyzing Ron Howard’s The Da Vinci Code. To begin with, Mulvey discusses scopophilia, or the sexual pleasure one derives from the act of looking. In this sense, scopophilia is seen as active. However, as Mulvey notes, “the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect” (25). Mulvey goes on to explain this contradiction by stating, “one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like” (26). As a result of these dual scopophilic impulses, Mulvey sees identification with scopophilia falling along gender lines, with males as active bearers of the look and women their passive, narcissistic objects.

Mulvey writes,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their
appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” (27)

Here, Mulvey positions women as the object of visual desire, both for the characters within the film and for audiences at home or in theaters. In this sense, women are no more than passive bodies for their active male counterparts. As my discussion of Sophie Neveu in Howard’s adaptation will show, this theory still holds weight in this respect. Where this theory becomes somewhat problematic, though, is with Mulvey’s conception of the female spectator.

For Mulvey, women viewers have two options when watching films. They can either take a masochistic or sadistic approach. The masochistic audience over-identifies with the image of women as a mere object, while the sadistic approach involves viewing women, the female viewer herself included, from the male point-of-view. It is here that Mulvey’s theory begins to show signs of its age. In addition to totally disregarding the idea of man as object, Mulvey’s options for viewer identification are limited to say the least. Her total disregard for queer, oppositional, or negotiated readings binds viewers to a strict patriarchal worldview. Yet, despite these failings, her theory is still influential and salient for today. Mulvey took feminist film criticism to the next level, moving away from quantitative studies to more relevant and telling qualitative observations.

Similar to feminist film criticism, which did not receive much respect until the 1970s, criticism in the genre of crime films also did not receive much attention until the 1970s. When this shift occurred, traditional cinematic criticism drew heavily from theories about literary crime fiction to inform the emerging field of crime film studies. Similar to crime fictions, “Crime films present as their defining subject a crime culture that depends on normalizing the unspeakable, a place where crime is both shockingly disruptive and completely normal . . . Every crime in every crime film represents a larger critique of the social or institutional order” (Leitch 14). Just as
Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* attempts to critique institutional patriarchies in religion and society, Howard’s film adaptation also dips into these controversies. However, the film version glosses over this much more in its attempt to “normalize the unspeakable.” In solving the crime and returning events to normal order at the end of the film, it is to be believed that, by extension, the social and institutional orders critiqued have also been stabilized and returned to respectable parameters by the film’s conclusion.

While there are many notable differences between the novel and film versions of the *The Da Vinci Code*, I will focus primarily on those relating to the portrayal of women and women’s issues. In doing this, I will not “simply focus on the structure of those texts – their form and content – but on the dialogue between the text and its context . . . Adaptation is primarily a phenomenon of recontextualization of the text, or, even better, of reformulation of its communicative situation” (Casetti 83). It is in looking at the recontextualization and reformulation of the text’s assertions regarding women that Mulvey’s theories of scopophilia and “to-be-looked-at-ness” will come into play in my analysis. However, as Humm notes,

> The relationship between gender and film is primarily cultural – a web of constituent social, psychological, political and aesthetic presences and absences which catch all women (and men) in complicated negotiations too dissonant to be netted in a singular, racially undifferentiated psychoanalytic sweep. (195)

Therefore, while Mulvey’s theories will prove useful in my analysis, it would be far too limiting to rely only on this mode of critique. Therefore, my analysis of the film takes from Mulvey’s theories, in addition to theorizing on cultural and political influences seen in the film.

When looking at the cultural and political implications of Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code*, I will again return to the conceptions of genre and formula. Before turning to textual analysis, though, I would first like to look at the cultural impact of *The Da Vinci Code*. Using Cawelti’s theories on the cultural significance of genre and formula, the next chapter will look at the
cultural conditions in which *The Da Vinci Code* was produced, and offer an explanation to the spectacular success of the novel and subsequent failure of the film. In doing this, I will not only be discussing the popular culture effects of genre in literature and film, but also laying the groundwork for my own theories on *The Da Vinci Code*’s influences on the popular culture discourse surrounding women in society.
CHAPTER II.

THE DA VINCI CRAZE: MANUFACTURED MANIA AND UNCONSCIOUS DESIRES

A recent trip to a Christian bookstore revealed a prominent display of books concerning *The Da Vinci Code*. Curious, I approached and discovered numerous titles devoted to providing the “real religious truth” regarding the “fictitious” claims made by Dan Brown in his novel. This display did not surprise me as much as it was worthy of note in comparison to the numerous Da Vinci-inspired displays that have crowded entry tables at virtually every secular bookstore I have visited in the past year and a half. It seems that Christian or not, Americans love gossip. The bigger the “celebrity,” the greater the interest, and when it comes down to it, there aren’t too many names bigger than Jesus Christ. So when Dan Brown dared to claim that not only was Jesus involved in a secret marriage, but (gasp), he was a father, America took notice. In addition to becoming one of the fastest selling novels of all time, *The Da Vinci Code* has spawned an industry of related goods ranging from the above mentioned books, a movie adaptation, television specials, clothing, games, diets, and vacation tours. In this chapter I not only look at the wide array of popular culture effects of *The Da Vinci Code*, but also draw upon theories of postmodernism, post-9/11 fundamentalism, religion, and genre to explain the popularity of this text.

A quick keyword search of “Da Vinci Code” on amazon.com reveals over one hundred items in eight different merchandise categories. A similar search on eBay reveals anywhere from hundreds to thousands (during the height of the text’s popularity) of auctions of Da Vinci
paraphernalia, most “offered by independent operators unaffiliated with the movie or book” (Bosman 1). In addition to the board games, video games, calendars, puzzles, and signed pictures and posters, the most abundant by-products of Da Vinci mania are the various books that have cropped up surrounding the novel. Feeding off of Brown’s success, numerous authors and publishers are hoping to strike similar gold by hitching themselves to the Da Vinci bandwagon. As the controversy surrounding the book’s claims regarding Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Leonardo Da Vinci reached its fervor, a variety of “experts” chimed into the discourse. Professing to “solve” or “unlock” the “real” Da Vinci code, works such as *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code: A Challenging Response to the Bestselling Novel*, Richard Abanes (2004); *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone’s Asking*, Darrell L. Bock (2004); *Da Vinci For Dummies*, Jessica Teisch and Tracy Barr (2005); *The Keys to the Da Vinci Code: The Hidden Lineage of Jesus And Other Mysteries*, Lorenzo Fernandez Bueno and Mariano Fernandez Urresti (2006); and *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine*, Bart D. Ehrman (2006) began to appear. The list goes on, with similar titles all claiming to reveal the “truth” in Dan Brown’s fiction.

It is not only books directly relating to Dan Brown’s work that have hit best-seller lists. Since the success of *The Da Vinci Code* publishers have seen an increase in sales in books marketed as religious and/or historical thrillers. A whole new subgenre has been reinvigorated with the sales of not only Brown’s works, but also novels dealing with similar themes and characters. Whether it is further printings of works such as *The Last Cato* (2006), Matilde Asensi’s fictional chronicling of the quest to find the cross on which Jesus was crucified, or new releases such as Javier Sierra’s *The Secret Supper* (2006), Raymond Khoury’s *The Last Templar*...
(2005), Steve Berry’s *The Templar Legacy* (2006), and Kate Mosse’s *Labyrinth* (2006), religious fiction has been creeping steadily onto best-seller lists for the past two years. There is even Kathleen McGowan’s *The Expected One* (2006), which details protagonist Maureen Paschal’s visions of Mary Magdalene and subsequent discovery that she is a descendent of the royal bloodline of Mary and Jesus. From here, the novel turns into a quest to find the secret gospels written by Mary Magdalene and hidden in the south of France. What makes *The Expected One* of particular note is McGowan’s claim that her novel is semi-autobiographical, and that she too has experienced visions of Mary Magdalene which have led her to discover that she is a descendent of a union between Mary and Jesus. Although McGowen says she is not at liberty to go into the details of her heritage, both she and her publishers at Simon & Schuster are assured of its authenticity.

For those who also wish to live the Da Vinci lifestyle, there are a number of options. In addition to adorning oneself and home with licensed merchandise such as t-shirts and posters, one can attempt to stay in shape and live a healthy lifestyle by following *The Diet Code: Revolutionary Weight Loss Secrets from Da Vinci and the Golden Ratio* (2006) by Stephen Lanzalotta and *The Da Vinci Fitness Code* (2005) by Joseph Mullen. Or, for those who crave the experience of *The Da Vinci Code*, there are also vacation tours and travel guides that allow you to trek along on your own Da Vinci Code-inspired journey. US and European tourism companies are offering packages that hit upon the book’s various locations and trace the sequence of events, beginning in Paris and ending in Edinburgh, with stops in Vatican City and London. Those willing to go it alone can use the many travel guides associated with the book, including *Fodor’s Guide to The Da Vinci Code: On the Trail of the Best-Selling Novel* (2006).
This is the first time the famous travel company has published a guide based on a book or movie, and in anticipation of its success, Random House printed over one hundred thousand first-run copies of the guide, compared to the typical run of twenty to fifty thousand. In a synergistic move, Random House released *Fodor's Guide to The Da Vinci Code* on March 28, 2006. This is the same day that Anchor’s long anticipated paperback release of *The Da Vinci Code* and Broadway Publishing’s paperback edition *The Da Vinci Code Special Illustrated Edition* hit stores. Not surprising is the fact that Fodor’s, Anchor, and Broadway, as well as Doubleday (publisher of the hardcover edition of *The Da Vinci Code*), are divisions of publishing giant Random House. Along a similar vein, on May 19, 2006, the movie release date of *The Da Vinci Code*, Doubleday published *The Da Vinci Code Illustrated Screenplay: Behind the Scenes of the Major Motion Picture*. Opportunistically, at this same time, the Hearst corporation-owned History Channel got in on the action with their “Da Vinci Decoded Week,” which aired more than a dozen specials having to do with the book, movie, and related topics.

The hype surrounding Ron Howard’s adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code* began long before the film’s May 19th release date. Clearly the effects of the novel, and by association its ideological messages, were still being felt well after the book’s 2003 publication. Casting speculation for the film took place before any formal agreements were made. Once it was learned that Ron Howard, Tom Hanks, and Audrey Tautou were onboard, the buzz only grew stronger. By December of 2005, *Newsweek* had already declared *The Da Vinci Code* the “hottest movie” of 2006, months before it was even released. Adding to the excitement surrounding the film was the anti-Da Vinci stance made by many religious leaders, particularly in the Catholic Church, warning would-be audiences of the movie about the novel’s false claims and negative portrayals of the clergy. In fact, William Donahue, president of the Catholic League, was so outraged by the
novel’s portrayal of Christ that he demanded movie executives attach a disclaimer to the film letting audiences know that the movie is a work of fiction.

Despite this warning, or perhaps because of it, crowds gathered for the movie’s May 19 premiere. Critics and fans alike wondered if the film could actually live up to the hype. The answer to that question has been mixed. While virtually all critics have panned the film, it still managed to take in $77 million domestically in its opening weekend, exceeding the studio’s expectations by $10 million, proving “what many executives at Sony Pictures said privately before the movie’s debut: that the movie, like the book, was critic-proof” (Bowles 1). Internationally, where the book has been translated into over forty languages, the film found similar success, taking in “$224 million worldwide, the second-largest debut, behind only last year’s Star Wars, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith, which did $253 million worldwide” (Bowles 1).

Yet regardless of financial success, the film was received poorly by critics universally. While Lou Lumenick of the New York Post praised the movie, calling it “a crackling, fast-moving thriller that’s every bit as brainy and irresistible as Dan Brown’s controversial bestseller,” most others were not so kind. Boston Globe reviewer Ty Burr labeled it as “a small, surprisingly ordinary movie,” the Hollywood Reporter’s Kirk Honeycutt panned it as “an unwieldy, bloated melodrama,” and Rolling Stone’s Peter Travers found it to be a “dreary, droning, dull-witted adaptation.” It is suffice to say that there are many more reviews along a similar vein. Although audiences still flocked to the theaters in the film’s opening weeks, much of the Da Vinci fervor has since died down.

Although looking at the popular culture effects of The Da Vinci Code is interesting in and of itself, I am more concerned with what aspects of the text hold cultural resonance and what
insights on contemporary society can be gained from the study of The Da Vinci Code’s popularity. In his book Understanding Theology and Popular Culture (2005), Gordon Lynch asserts,

Analyzing how religion is represented in contemporary media is not therefore simply a case of describing these representations. Rather it involves asking what these representations may tell us about wider biases, values, and concerns in contemporary society, what interests these representations might serve, and how these representations may be helpful or damaging to particular groups or individuals. (24)

In general, religion has been gaining ground across media and popular entertainment in the past ten years. This has only increased recently, where “religion is very much in the public square,” says Lynn Garrett, a religion editor at Publishers Weekly. “We see that today in television and movies as well as publishing. Post 9/11, a lot of today’s issues wrap themselves around religion” (Nelson 8). Coupled with the continued rise of media dominance in the everyday lives of Americans, the lines of religion as popular culture and popular culture as religion are becoming increasingly blurred. Or, as Joel Martin writes in Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (1995), “It is not the case that religion is fading with the secularization of society; rather, religion is being popularized, scattered, and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions” (157). Indeed, this has been seen through the success of films such as The Passion of the Christ (2004), The Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), and C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (2005); television shows such as 7th Heaven (1996 – present) and Joan of Arcadia (2003 – 2005); the rise of Christian rock and the mainstreaming of bands such as Creed and P.O.D., as well as in the publishing industry. As Henry Jenkins notes, “According to a 2002 ABC News/Religion poll, 83 percent of Americans consider themselves to be Christians, and Baptists (only one of the evangelical denominations) make up 15 percent of the nation. As commercial media producers have realized the size of this
demographic, the walls between mainstream and popular culture are breaking down” (200). The “discovery” of this new marketing category has contributed to the current increase in religious-themed texts.

Regardless of a specific religious agenda, “Many movies include explicit representations of religion or religious figures, although they may not be the focus of the films: priests, monks and nuns, rabbis, evangelists, sun dancers, gothic cathedrals, Muslim prayer rugs, exorcisms, and so on,” notes Bruce Forbes in his book Religion and Popular Culture in America (10). The importance for scholars lies in the “attempt to discern patterns in these portrayals of religion, asking what the patterns reveal about the creative forces behind the images and the audiences who respond” (Forbes 10). In a text such as The Da Vinci Code, the use of religion is explicit. Brown’s manipulation of it, however, is what can be unclear. While Brown’s religious claims offer a radical departure for the recognized history of Christianity and the Catholic Church, the text’s conclusions, and its insistence on maintaining the status quo, ultimately reaffirm the institutions the text questions. Indeed, for many religious leaders who have been able to look past the sensational aspects of the story, The Da Vinci Code has been a great tool in generating religious discussion with a diverse audience.

Turning then to the question as to why Americans are increasingly drawn to “extra-ecclesiastical” or “popular” religion, Joel Martin speculates that people “participate in such activities because these and other forms of popular culture function in the same way traditional religion has always functioned: to provide ways for one to make sense of one’s world and life” (158). Despite American society’s past shifts toward secularization, with claims for separation between church and state, people still crave answers to the ambiguities of the unknown. When both the church and state fail to give satisfactory answers for understanding the conditions of
modern life, and with nowhere else to turn, “popular culture provides the context for understanding values, belief systems, religious imaginations, and myths of a particular people at a particular time” (Martin 158).

In many ways, it is because of the distrust of institutions of authority such as the church and state that people are turning to popular culture for answers. In his discussion of the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, Maurice Reidy notes,

> The publication of *The Da Vinci Code* took place in 2003, just one year after the damaging reports of sexual abuse by priests. For months Catholics heard and read about bishops who sought to cover up a damaging truth. It’s not surprising that a book that details another kind of coverup resonated with readers. (12)

This, coupled with our nation’s historic prejudices against the Catholic Church (held over from discrimination towards Irish and Roman Catholic immigrants in the early twentieth century), as well as our distrust of the power of establishment, makes *The Da Vinci Code* a perfect fit for a cultural need. Along this line of analysis, “In postmodernity, we often regard powerful institutions with distrust . . . One of the places where this distrust can be seen most clearly is in the remarkable rise of conspiracy theories of all kinds” (Couchman 72). Not only do people like doing exactly what they are told not to do, they also question and become suspicious as to why they are told not to do a particular thing. People are also particularly suspicious of people or organizations that attempt to intervene in their religious beliefs. The more religious leaders condemned the book and warned against the movie, the more people became suspicious, or at the very least curious, and read the book and anticipated the film. The church, rather than helping their cause, was helping sales of the novel. This coincides with Couchman’s assertion that “one of the main reasons for the massive popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is that it resonates with the postmodern distrust of institutions, and with a desire to see the church as an ancient and powerful conspiracy” (73).
Undeniably, America’s postmodern sensibilities, coupled with post-9/11 fundamentalism and anxieties, play a large role in the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*. In his article “Dan Brown: What Can the Church Learn From the Pied Piper of Postmodernity?” David Couchman states that “one of the hallmarks of postmodernity is a suspicion of large scale truth claims . . . In *The Da Vinci Code*, this suspicion comes out particularly in Dan Brown’s attitude toward history” (72). The confusion and collapse of space over time associated with postmodernism results in a popular culture that is outside of history. This, along with the postmodern abandonment of metanarratives, makes our culture fertile ground for *The Da Vinci Code*’s revisionist historical narrative. Due to our distrust of history, there is a postmodern tendency to rewrite, or at least rework, history to fit our own current needs and agendas.

As a result of this phenomenon, claims Marcia Nelson in her article “Religion Sells,” for some, there is a “postmodern pendulum swing toward conservatism or traditionalism, or what postmoderns believe a safe and desirable past might have looked like” (10). Whether this turn is directly related to postmodernism is up for debate, but I would argue that there has been a definite swing in this direction in post-9/11 America. As a result, “if we are to attempt to understand the contemporary United States, we must study the books Americans are reading, the films they are paying to see, and the religious expressions that have found their ways into twentieth-century pews” (Martin 159). Most obviously, one of these books is *The Da Vinci Code*.

Our current political climate, both domestic and international, makes *The Da Vinci Code* a zeitgeist for a post-9/11 United States. Whether it is the internal “Big Brother” policies of the Patriot Act, or our international war on terror, rife with religious undercurrents, *The Da Vinci*
Code allows us safely to explore our anxieties by providing us with a mystery and plot that is structured around conspiracy theories, flawed authority, and religious extremism. Historically, the literature of mystery and its relationship to the ambiguity or tension between religion and the secular has existed since the eighteenth century. This would suggest that the literature of mystery is a relatively modern cultural phenomenon that addresses in secular terms the concerns and themes that were once dealt with in religious myth and ritual. (Cawelti *Mystery* 337-8)

When the tensions between religion and the secular intensify, the mystery genre becomes a popular way to mediate these oppositions. The issues that cannot adequately be dealt with by religious myth or ritual then become the realm of the secular and the popular. This trend has only escalated since the inauguration of President George W. Bush and his agenda of extreme right-wing Christian conservatism. As a result,

In the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 and the invasion of Iraq, in a world where a mysterious and opaque global network of religious terrorists called al-Qaeda threatens the west as well as, it is believed, communication via encoded messages, a novel such as The Da Vinci Code carries a powerful political charge. This parable of extreme belief is about how modernity is being compromised by rivalrous premodern belief systems purporting to offer the absolute truth. (Cowley 19)

In tapping into our current fears, The Da Vinci Code works as a mode of escapism. This fits into genre theory, where “certain story archetypes particularly fulfill man’s need for enjoyment and escape . . . But in order for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that appropriate meanings for the culture which produces them” (Cawelti *Adventure* 6). The Da Vinci Code has been successful because it draws on the rich history of the church, which has already been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny, as it uses perhaps the greatest historical figure of all time, Jesus Christ, as the main focus of controversy.

Despite its resonance,

Our cultural elite seem largely uninterested in the phenomenon of Dan Brown and his novel The Da Vinci Code, even though many of the most urgent political
themes of our time – religious extremism, the idea that history itself is a vast conspiracy, the power of secret networks and societies over our lives, the global reach of the internet, the omnipresence of satellite surveillance and other new technologies – are present in the book. (Cowley 18)

While critics may have panned the far-fetched plot and less than perfect prose, mainstream audiences couldn’t get enough of the book. What critics failed to realize is that many Americans (as well as others, worldwide), dissatisfied with the answers being provided by the church and state, looked to the only “government” or “religion” they have learned to trust – popular culture – to validate their fears and suspicions and to distract them from the harsh realities of contemporary life.

In addition to the elements mentioned above, the use of another postmodern trope struck a cord with Da Vinci Code readers. Represented in both postmodernism and third-wave feminism,

A key aspect of today’s culture is the desire to hear from those whose voices have been marginalized in the past – from those of other races or social groups, and especially from women. Postmodern people distrust the church not only because it is a hierarchical bureaucracy, but also because it is male dominated. (73)

Taking this into account, then, the figure of Mary Magdalene becomes key in understanding both the church’s resistance to The Da Vinci Code and the popularity of the novel. In their article “There’s Something About Mary Magdalene,” Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre write, “The interest in her [Mary Magdalene] is part of the women’s movement itself, especially with the development of women’s studies and increased activism in religious and sociopolitical arenas” (50). Indeed, Brown is not the first author to look into the historical figure of Mary Magdalene.

Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln’s Holy Blood, Holy Grail (1982) purports to be the nonfiction, historical account of the marriage between Mary Magdalene and
Jesus. Like *The Da Vinci Code*, the book claims that after Jesus’ death, Mary fled to France where she gave birth to Christ’s heir. The book also discusses the Priory of Sion and their association with the Knights Templar. Although Dan Brown acknowledges the influence of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* on *The Da Vinci Code*, going as far as to name the character Leigh Teabing after Leigh and Baigent (Teabing is an anagram of the name), the authors were less than flattered and took Random House to court over the matter. Charging Brown with plagiarism and breach of copyright, Baigent and Leigh felt that Brown took too literally from their text. The court disagreed, and both Random House and Brown were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Despite this controversy, one positive effect of books such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* is the way in which “Mary’s story casts light on the way society stigmatizes women’s sexuality and fear’s women’s intelligence” (Schaberg 50). Mary Magdalene’s story can work as a metaphor for the historic disenfranchisement of women. The treatment of Mary Magdalene, at worst as a whore, at best as inconsequential, mirrors the ways that women have been, and still are, treated in our contemporary society. Or, to look at this through the lens of postmodernism,

A valuable aspect of postmodernism has been the recognition that there is no such thing as an objective ‘view from nowhere,’ or ‘God’s-eye-view’ of history. Everyone who writes history comes to the task with an agenda. As mentioned earlier, one effect of this is that it has become increasingly acceptable to re-write history for the purpose of an agenda, without regard for scholarly integrity. The divinization of Mary Magdalene is surely an example of this. (Couchman 74)

Although Couchman appears to be condemning the divinization of Mary Magdalene, and in effect, Schaberg and Johnson-Debaufre’s claims, both arguments lead to an important point. History, and in this instance the history of women, is malleable and can be altered to fit political and cultural agendas. However, as the dual representations of Mary Magdalene show, those being manipulated do not have the power to affect their own representations.
Magdalene is characterized as a whore or as a wife, it is not through her own words. The only history we are given of Mary is in the words of others, mostly male. The ability to re-write history comes with a position of privilege, one that is rarely afforded to women.

Using a similar line of reasoning, Schaber and Johnson-Debaufre write,

While scholars instead emphasize Mary’s role as resurrection witness and a prophet and teacher in her own right, The Da Vinci Code – in romance-novel fashion – replaces the prostitute with Mrs. Jesus . . . In the end, she is a vessel, a womb, a body part – no longer a prostitute, but now properly married. Has she been rescued, or covered up again? (52)

Although the text’s treatment of Mary Magdalene and the sacred feminine appears to be transgressive, it is really not. This is similar to the argument I will make in the next chapter when looking at the character of Sophie, and her treatment within the text and the overall genre. Brown uses the figure of Mary Magdalene for his own artistic ends. The text’s conclusion, and its refusal to openly acknowledge and disseminate the concept of the “sacred feminine,” undermines any positive light that may have been shed on the subject. Schaber and Johnson-Debaufre question this even further by suggesting that by marrying Mary Magdalene off to Jesus, Brown does little more than domesticate her, putting her barefoot and pregnant in the proverbial kitchen.

From looking at Mary Magdalene, the correlation to how the character of Sophie is treated within the conventions of detective fiction can be seen. “The widespread popularity of detective fiction whose readers cross economic, social, educational, and gender lines suggests that it makes an important political statement about how the culture works; when women are involved, that statement is traditional, stereotyped, and restrictive” (Klein 225). Just as genre is useful to look at the portrayal of women in The Da Vinci Code, it is also useful when analyzing the popularity of the text. In looking at this popularity, we can easily see that part of the
attractiveness of these texts is attached to their ability to validate the confinement of women in “traditional, stereotyped, and restrictive” roles.

In general,

Determining why a particular novel or film becomes a best-seller is problematic because it is difficult to be sure what elements or combination of elements the public is responding to . . . Clearly, we can only explain the success of individual works by means of analogy and comparison with other successful works, through the process of defining those elements or patterns that are common to a number of best-sellers. (Cawelti Adventure 21)

I have already discussed how postmodernism and religious tensions have played into the success of The Da Vinci Code. I would now like to look at some of the common elements and patterns of detective and mystery fiction that have played into the book’s success. Taking a symbolic approach to the understanding of literary significance, we can see that “formulas are cultural products and in turn presumably have some sort of influence on culture because they become conventional ways of representing and relating certain images, symbols, themes, and myths” (Cawelti Adventure 20). In understanding The Da Vinci Code, then, it becomes important to understand the images and symbols it represents and the themes and myths it perpetuates.

As demonstrated, religion is clearly a theme explored in The Da Vinci Code. The mystery genre has become an excellent forum for discussing ambiguities surrounding religion for a number of reasons. Plot is an obvious example, where most mysteries and detective stories (and The Da Vinci Code is no exception) revolve around “the central religious issues of sin, death, and salvation in secular terms” (Cawelti Mystery 338). Further, “with the separation of church and state and the consequent disassociation of religion and law, it became increasingly possible for men to view crime in aesthetic as well as moral terms” (Cawelti Adventure 56). With the media touting rising rates of crime and senseless violence, genre fiction allows readers to distance themselves from the harsh realities of these transgressions. While they are still morally and
religiously able to disdain these actions, they can at the same time aestheticize them and view them from an entirely removed stance. In mystery and detective fiction crime becomes less an act of violence against another person and instead becomes a “whodunit,” a game, a puzzle, or in the case of The Da Vinci Code, a series of codes to be cracked.

Although he does not link it directly to postmodernism, Cawelti notes, “There is a strong modern fascination with the intersection between larger mysteries and lesser mysteries, those that are beyond human understanding and those that can be solved or at least resolved through human reason and action” (Mystery 336). The Da Vinci Code works on the same principle, with multiple mysteries needing to be solved in the text. By solving the lesser mysteries, and by giving them a clear sense of right and wrong, guilty and innocent, the reader achieves a false sense of satisfaction. Although the greater mysteries remain unsolved, there is ambivalence to this as a result of the resolution of the lesser mysteries. The main plot has been resolved, distracting the reader from the greater issues still at hand.

Another way of looking at this could be that “the reader’s pleasure, therefore, assumes complicity in the thriller’s strongly conservative deep structure, for, set beside this fundamental politics of the text, any other political message that is overtly at variance with the basic generic formula can only be a mere ‘superficial layer’” (Glover 69). This is a way of de-politicizing texts, allowing producers, consumers, and critics to ignore the serious implications of popular culture. Once the case is “solved,” readers can go on their merry ways, dismissing the rest as incidentals or details. By identifying with the rigid structure of the formula and conventions of the mystery/detective genre, readers not only confirm the institutions that the genre upholds, but also participate in the marginalization of bodies outside of these conservative politics.
This discussion will be further explored in the next chapter, in which I analyze Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, concentrating specifically on the character of Sophie and the conventions and formula of the mystery/detective genre. However, to understand the serious implications of the treatment of women in the text it was imperative to examine the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* in both its causes and effects. The manufactured mania surrounding *The Da Vinci Code* fed the unconscious desires of a post-9/11 United States. With history constantly being re-written before our very eyes, the lines between truth and fiction, along with those of church and state, are becoming increasingly blurred. All of this is taking place as the media continues to be an ever-increasing dominance in the culture of everyday life. Therefore as a nation, in our search for truth and answers we have embarked on our own quest, one that has led us to embrace *The Da Vinci Code* and our own gods of popular culture.
CHAPTER III.

AN UNEQUAL BALANCE OF POWER: FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN DAN BROWN’S

*THE DA VINCI CODE*

Before the 2003 publication of *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown enjoyed a modicum of success with the previous novels *Digital Fortress* (1998), *Angels and Demons* (2000), and *Deception Point* (2001). Yet despite his only mediocre prior sales, publisher Doubleday ordered more than ten thousand proof copies of Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* to be sent to bookstores nationwide (Cowley 19). As chronicled in the preceding chapter, this was the first step in setting off the “Da Vinci craze” that swept the nation. Having already looked at the popular culture effects of Da Vinci mania, as well as having established the theoretical groundwork for genre analysis, I will deal directly in this chapter with Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Specifically, I will be offering a gendered analysis of the female protagonist, Sophie Neveu, and arguing that despite the text’s claims of equality between the sexes, an unequal balance of power ultimately results due to the text’s generic constraints.

*The Da Vinci Code* begins with the murder of museum curator Jacques Saunière. As Grand Master of a secret society known as the Priory of Sion, Saunière has been in charge of guarding the location and secret of the Holy Grail. Before his death, Saunière leaves clues to the location of the Grail, and the story revolves around Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon and DCPJ (French police) cryptologist Sophie Neveu’s search for the artifact. Complicating matters, Langdon is the prime suspect in Saunière’s murder, and Sophie is Saunière’s estranged granddaughter. As the text unfolds, it becomes apparent that the Grail is not the chalice from which Jesus drank at the last supper, but the bones of Mary Magdelene, wife of Jesus and mother
of his daughter. More important, the Grail is a symbolic representation of the sacred feminine, which in the text represents a balance of power between men and women, an equality of the sexes.

In order to see how *The Da Vinci Code* is tied to the conventions of genre, it is first necessary to revisit some of the conventions of mystery and detective fiction, concentrating specifically on the role of the detective, authority, agency, and objectification and the gaze. Traditionally, crime narratives have revolved around male investigators. In her article “Murder, Mass Culture, and the Feminine: A View From the 4.50 From Paddington,” Angela Devas attributes this convention to the fact that

> A detective novel concerns elements that can be seen as related to the masculine sphere, such as rationality and authority, with the detective responsible for the restoration of justice and the imposition of moral order. The persona of the detective embodies the ability to enact these qualities, and therefore the obvious candidate for this kind of role is a man. (258)

Here Devas touches upon many of the conventional characteristics ascribed to males in the genre. They are associated with rationality, authority, justice, and morality, this suggesting, that women are associated with the converse of these characteristics: irrationality, powerlessness, injustice, and immorality. Historically, in the detective genre, this is how women have been viewed. Indeed, “when she does appear in the traditional story, the woman shows up as a body – if not the victim, then the seductress or suspect” (Mizejewski 14). As a body, women are more often than not seen as the object, rather than the subject, in these texts.

This objectification of women, then, becomes problematic, or unnatural, if she is to be seen in an active role. Hence, “where the detective is a woman, there is therefore a disturbance in the ‘natural’ state of affairs and the boundaries of the genre itself are called into question” (Devas 258). Or, the classic archetype is called upon, where “a Miss Marple or a Jessica Fletcher
generally operates within the domestic sphere, solving drawing-room crimes and reestablishing harmony through a combination of skillful listening, good sense, and intuitive judgment about character” (Shuker-Haines 71). A clear division is shown as to what traits are feminine versus those that are masculine. As previously noted, detective fiction was initially situated in the home, with domestic crimes and parlor-room allegations. Early female detectives were differentiated from their male counterparts by being tied to this sphere, using domestic knowledge and good sense, as opposed to the professional training and rational fact employed by their male foils. Contrasting the archetype of the sexualized femme fatales, they were often older and matronly (like the aforementioned Miss Marple or Jessica Fletcher), further associating them with the traditional sphere of domesticity through a lack of overt and physical sexuality.

These stereotypes would change, though, in large part due to the aforementioned amendment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1972. As a result of the changes this law brought about, detective and crime fiction was influenced to evolve and allow women more “legitimate” roles of agency and power, resulting in the genre’s establishment of new conventions pertaining to the portrayal of females. The female detective, in an attempt to stay within the traditional boundaries of the genre, is often depicted under patriarchal control, be it by the constraints of judicial authority and/or a male boss, or through the professional partnering with a man. Additionally, her femininity is kept in check by placing her within the confines of Western standards of feminine beauty. The female detective’s power must always be held in a series of checks and balances between masculine agency and feminine constraints. This tactic is employed in *The Da Vinci Code*, where a balance is created with the partnering of Sophie, a cryptologist working for the French judicial police, and Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon.
Interestingly, the idea of balance is central to the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. In many ways, the protagonists’ search for the Holy Grail is a search for balance. As Langdon explains in the text, “The ancients envisioned their world in two halves – masculine and feminine. Their gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power. Yin and yang. When male and female balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos” (Brown 36). Here, the idea of balance suggests harmony, rather than control. Throughout the text, there appears to be a balance between Langdon and Sophie as they work off their individual strengths to solve the mystery. However, upon examining the plot more closely, it becomes apparent that as the text progresses there is an unequal balance of power, with Langdon’s strengths increasing as Sophie’s decrease.

In her book *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, Linda Mizejewski writes, “Popular genres are gold mines for cultural studies because they tap into our fantasies and assumptions about gender, power, and sexuality. A genre like the crime story works only as long as there are readers and audiences literally willing to buy into it” (15). In general, audiences are “willing to buy into it” because although detective fiction plays with taboo subjects, the moral order is only temporarily disrupted. Typically at the end, the male detective solves the mystery, and the female, whether she is suspect, victim, or sidekick, has in some way been contained. Therefore, if *The Da Vinci Code* is going to make claims for female religious and sexual power and equality, then it can do so only under the heavy constraints of the detective formula. Audiences will not swallow such a fantastic generic invention, unless it comes with a heavy dose of conventional sexism.
Like most good mysteries, *The Da Vinci Code* begins with a murder. Museum curator Jacques Saunière has been shot in the stomach at the Louvre. By the time he is found by the police,

He had stripped off every shred of clothing, placed it neatly on the floor, and lain down on his back in the center of the wide corridor, perfectly aligned with the long axis of the room. His arms and legs were sprawled outward in a wide spread eagle, like those of a child making a snow angel . . . or, perhaps more appropriately, like a man being drawn and quartered by some invisible force . . . Employing his own naked abdomen as a canvas, Saunière had drawn a simple symbol on his flesh – five straight lines that intersected to form a five-pointed star. The pentacle. (35)

In setting up the corpse, and his plot, in this way, Brown is tapping into the very fantasies of gender and power that Mizejewski describes. Saunière is sexualized by his nudity and feminized by the goddess symbol of the pentacle. The role of the body is an important one. As Mizejewski notes,

The detective story is all about bodies, usually beginning with homicide, the disturbing discovery of the body, a threat to meaning and order. The goal is to restore order through the justice system. But the usual machineries of justice – investigators, police, the legal system – are overwhelmingly filled with masculine, white, heterosexual bodies – an old-boys network, shot through with suspicion of women. (14)

Certainly, the spectacle of Saunière’s body is a threat to meaning and order. In arranging himself in such a manner he problematizes his own crime scene, defacing himself with symbols and codes. Lead inspector Captain Bezu Fache, who is immediately identified with both the law and religious righteousness, is necessary in the text to provide balance and be the driving force in restoring the moral order. Langdon, as the crime’s prime suspect, and Sophie, as a female investigator, serve as foils to Fache’s authority.

The character of Sophie Neveu serves multiple purposes within the text, and she is the main focus of my analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*. Although Langdon is positioned as the hero of
the story, the mystery surrounding the death of Sophie’s grandfather, and the subsequent search for the Holy Grail and the secret of Sophie’s heritage, form the crux of the novel. Rather than include Sophie as a mere relative of the victim, Brown chose to portray her as an investigative cryptologist for the French police. Her career makes her slightly unnatural, yet provides her with the authority necessary for her to partner with Langdon. A codebreaker, “Sophie made her living extracting meaning from seemingly senseless data” (Brown 78). Working in a masculine specialty, she is employed making sense from chaos, a field which aligns her with meaning and order. Investigating the murder of her grandfather, she is cold and detached throughout much of the investigation, having cut herself off from him, her only family, years before. However, her need to know her family’s history drives her investigation and the search for the Holy Grail. Therefore, Sophie is a character of contradictions. Although these contradictions initially work to position her as a powerful female character, ultimately her power does little else than advance the plot, and as the novel ends, the appearance of empowerment has disappeared.

The contradictions of Sophie are established with her first appearance in the text. Upon hearing that she is at the crime scene, Captain Fache thinks,

Sophie Neveu was one of the DCPJ’s biggest mistakes. A young Parisian déchiffreuse who had studied cryptology in England at the Royal Holloway, Sophie Neveu had been foisted on Fache two years ago as part of the ministry’s attempt to incorporate more women into the police force. The ministry’s ongoing foray into political correctness, Fache argued, was weakening the department. Women not only lacked the physicality necessary for police work, but their mere presence posed a dangerous distraction to the men in the field. As Fache had feared, Sophie Neveu was proving far more distracting than most. (Brown 49-50)

This description is the reader’s first introduction to the character. Although she is part of the police force, her authority is immediately questioned by Fache’s assertion that she is there as a result of “political correctness.” Further, she and her female contemporaries are weaknesses due to their physicality, a physicality that instead of embodying strength, works as a type of
distraction. She is not characterized as an active body, but rather, as an objectified one. And, fitting in with historic generic conventions, she is a body that is dangerous.

Langdon’s description adds to her objectification. He describes Sophie:

Dressed casually in a knee-length, cream-colored Irish sweater over black leggings, she was attractive and looked to be about thirty. Her thick burgundy hair fell unstyled to her shoulders, framing the warmth of her face. Unlike the waifish, cookie-cutter blondes that adorned Harvard dorm room walls, this woman was healthy with an unembellished beauty and genuiness that radiated a striking personal confidence. (Brown 50)

By comparing Sophie to “waifish, cookie-cutter blondes” he is associating her with something other than typical representations of female beauty. At the same time, though, he is confirming her “to-be-looked-at-ness” by concentrating on her physical appearance, suggesting her confidence comes from her “unembellished beauty.”

In looking at these descriptions, it must be taken into account the context in which they are given. In Busybodies, Meddlers, and Snoops: The Female Hero in Contemporary Women’s Mysteries, Kimberly Dilley writes, “The norms and expectations of genre fiction are enmeshed with the norms and expectations of society. Focusing on genre fiction exposes how gender enters into, and is constructed by, the form” (59). With this precept in mind, Fache’s comments can be seen to reflect the unease that Mizejewski discusses when she writes, “Police departments and federal agencies were radically jolted by these laws [Title VII], which literally demanded reimagining the bodies on the force” (59). Throughout most of the text, Fache is an unlikable character. However, it would be negligent to merely dismiss his remarks due to his initial characterization. First of all, Fache is a character associated with authority, which therefore lends credibility to his comments. Secondly, by the end of the novel, Fache is seen in a much softer light, and his initial distastefulness is redeemed. Most important, though, is what Dilley and
Mizejewski suggest, that Fache and Langdon’s comments are not just that of characters, but rather, a reflection of real-life, societal beliefs.

As for Langdon’s comments, in many ways they are necessary to the text in providing the reader with a mental picture of the character. However, in his comparison of her to other women, and linking her confidence with her attractiveness, Langdon’s description aids in the objectification of Sophie. Further, Fache and Langdon’s descriptions are given before the reader has any actual contact with the character, giving these two male characters authority over her. It is through their lens that the reader begins to view Sophie. Even though she takes an active role in the scenes immediately following the descriptions, she is first, and foremost, seen by the readers as a body, not a mind.

Immediately following these descriptions, Sophie is in her most powerful position in the text. Interestingly, though, it is a power based on deceit. She lies to get access to the crime scene, she lies to Fache and Langdon regarding her purpose there, and she abets Langdon’s escape from the Louvre. Here Sophie is working most definitely outside of the law. In looking at the role of the female detective, Dilley writes,

> As an officer of the state, the woman ‘police-trained’ detective joins a predominantly male profession. She must work in company with these men on a daily basis. The woman is granted a degree of authority and control by the state that is not usually given to women. The state works to frame her professional behavior, experiences, and attitudes according to its androcentric priorities. (58)

From Dilley’s claim, one can see another of Sophie’s contradictions. As an officer of the law, Sophie is separated from most women by her authority, an authority that has been granted and constructed by men. There is a code which she is expected to abide by, one that has been shaped by gendered priorities. Through her lies and deception, Sophie is working outside, and against, this patriarchal apparatus. However, although she is employing modes of agency, by framing
them outside the social order she is aligned with the traditional models of injustice and immorality related to women in detective fiction.

At the crime scene, Sophie lies to Langdon telling him that there is a message for him from the US Embassy. She then gives him a slip of paper with a phone number and message code, which connects Langdon with Sophie’s personal answering machine. There she has left a message instructing Langdon to tell Fache that there had been an accident with one of his friends back home, and to excuse himself to a nearby restroom. Although Fache and Langdon do not realize it at the time, she has already begun manipulating them and taking control of the situation. While Langdon is still on the phone, Sophie starts an argument with Fache and pretends to leave the Louvre. Instead of leaving, though, she meets up with Langdon in the restroom. Before she can explain her actions, Langdon observes her, and “was surprised to see that her strong air actually radiated from unexpectedly soft features. Only her gaze was sharp, and the juxtaposition conjured images of a multilayered Renoir portrait . . . veiled but distinct, with a boldness that somehow retained its shroud of mystery” (Brown 64). Here, any empowerment Sophie has gained is quickly underscored by Langdon’s thoughts. Her “strong air” is tempered by her “soft” (i.e., womanly) features. Although some authority is given to her gaze, she is quickly identified with a portrait, something to be gazed upon, and appreciated, for its beauty. Further, her boldness remains shrouded by her feminine mystery.

Once Sophie’s femininity is reestablished, she explains to Langdon that he is the prime suspect in Saunière’s murder, and that Fache has planted a tracking device in Langdon’s jacket so he can follow his every move in the Louvre. Sophie, believing in Langdon’s innocence, flings the tracking device out the window onto a moving truck in order to throw Fache off track and
make him believe that Langdon has escaped. Dazed, “Langdon decided not to say another word all evening. Sophie Neveu was clearly a hell of a lot smarter than he was” (Brown 87). Her intention is to take Langdon to the US Embassy for protection, but before they can leave, Langdon manages to figure out the code that Saunière has left on his body. Not only does this put the plot in motion, setting Langdon and Sophie off on a scavenger hunt for clues to the Holy Grail, but it also puts Langdon in the position of authority, showing that he is “clearly a hell of a lot smarter” than a female DCPJ cryptologist.

The second code that Langdon breaks before leaving the Louvre aligns Saunière with the Priory of Sion. As he explains to Sophie, “The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the Goddess from modern religion forever” (Brown 125). This clue is important not only because it introduces the Priory, and Saunière’s connection to the society into the story, but because it introduces the concept of the sacred feminine. Here the sacred feminine is not a symbol of virginal purity, but rather is aligned with Hieros Gamos, “the natural sexual union between man and women through which each became spiritually whole” (Brown 125). The sacred feminine signifies a dependency between the sexes based on equality and a balance of power.

As Sophie and Langdon continue to evade the police and follow the trail of clues, Langdon explains that the purpose of the Priory of Sion is to guard the secret of the Holy Grail. Further, “According to the Priory of Sion, the Holy Grail is not a cup at all. They claim the Grail legend – that of a chalice – is actually an ingeniously conceived allegory. That is, that the Grail story uses the chalice as a metaphor for something else, something far more powerful” (Brown
Before Langdon can explain to Sophie what this is, Sophie notices that the driver of the taxi they are in is attempting to radio authorities. Before he can make contact, “Sophie turned now and plunged her hand into the pocket of Langdon’s tweed jacket. Before Langdon knew what had happened, she had yanked out the pistol, swinging it around, and was pressing it to the back of the driver’s head” (Brown 164). Here Sophie takes the active role in the scene, but it is tempered by the fact that she must gain her power from Langdon. She must reach into Langdon’s pocket and remove his symbolic phallus, the gun, before she can gain control over the other man in the scene, the taxi driver. Still holding the gun, she orders Langdon to drive. “Langdon was not about to argue with a woman wielding a gun,” so he begins to drive, despite the fact that he does not know how to operate a standard transmission (Brown 165). When it becomes apparent that he does not know what he is doing, Sophie, still in possession of the gun, takes over at the wheel, at ease with driving a stick. Although Sophie is clearly seen as the character in power, this power is only granted after she has taken possession of the weapon.

Without this phallus, Sophie’s power is diminished. When Sophie and Langdon reach their destination, she instructs Langdon, “You’d better leave the gun here” (Brown 177). Their search has led them to a Swiss bank deposit box, and after retrieving the cryptex from the safety deposit, Sophie and Langdon escape with the help from the bank president, Andre Vernet. However it quickly becomes apparent he is not out to help the two, as he pulls a gun on them, forcing them from the armored truck in which they had escaped the bank. Without her own gun, Sophie is helpless. Langdon, using both intelligence and physical strength, knocks Vernet down and the gun out of his hand. Sophie and Langdon quickly get back in the truck, this time with Langdon capably driving them to safety. As Sophie sits in the passenger’s seat, waiting for Langdon, Brown writes, “Her grandfather’s rationale for including him [Langdon] was now
clear. Sophie was not equipped to understand her grandfather’s intentions, and so he had assigned Robert Langdon as her guide. A tutor to oversee her education” (Brown 216). The balance of power has shifted from the earlier scene in the taxi. Langdon is now in the driver’s seat, both literally and figuratively, a position he will hold onto throughout the rest of the story. Sophie, “unequipped” to handle her grandfather’s quest, is in many ways, just along for the ride.

Langdon takes Sophie to the home of Grail expert Sir Leigh Teabing. There Sophie, and readers, finally learn the “true” meaning of the Holy Grail. As had already been established, the Grail is literally the ancient symbol for womanhood, and the Holy Grail represents the sacred feminine and the goddess, which of course has now been lost, virtually eliminated by the Church. The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred, but it posed a threat to the rise of the predominantly male Church, and so the sacred feminine was demonized and made unclean. (Brown 238)

Here it is reestablished that the Grail is associated with the power of womanhood, but that the power is a threat to male dominance. As a result, the sacred feminine has been demonized. Although this statement is particularly referring to the sacred feminine, it is not a far stretch to see this is as a representation of women historically. Seen as a threat to men, women have been rendered powerless and/or vilified. Stretched further, this analogy also fits nicely with the aforementioned conventions of detective and mystery fiction, where women are demonized as seductresses or suspects, yet ultimately are powerless to the control of men.

It is Teabing who finally reveals the truth behind the Holy Grail when he explains, “The legend of the Holy Grail is a legend about royal blood. When Grail legend speaks of ‘the chalice that held the blood of Christ’ . . . it speaks, in fact, of Mary Magdalene – the female womb that carried Jesus’ royal bloodline” (Brown 249). He goes on to explain, “The Church, in order to defend itself against the Magdalene’s power, perpetuated her image as a whore and buried evidence of Christ’s marriage to her, thereby defusing any potential claims that Christ had a
surviving bloodline and was a mortal prophet” (Brown 254). Here, the threat of women is directly linked with the power of their sexuality and ability to bear children. By characterizing Mary Magdalene as a whore, the text argues, history has been able to make her existence shameful and less of a threat.

Shortly after this explanation, the scene is interrupted by Saunière’s murderer, Silas, who has come in search of the cryptex. After knocking Langdon unconscious, Silas aims his gun at Sophie. Brown writes, “Sophie Neveu, despite working in law enforcement, had never found herself at gunpoint until tonight” (276). In contrast to her earlier depictions, and despite the fact that she is a law enforcement agent, Sophie is helpless at this point. With Langdon temporarily out of commission, the only other character left to rescue her is Teabing. Here her helplessness is even more poignant, as she is aided by Teabing, a character already emasculated due to his physical handicap.

With the true nature of the Holy Grail finally revealed, the focus of the text shifts to what will happen once the protagonists find the Grail. Teabing strongly advocates sharing the Grail’s secret, saying, “The Priory has not protected the truth all these years to have it gather dust until eternity. They have been waiting for the right moment in history to share their secret. A time when the world is ready to handle the truth” (Brown 295). Sophie, however, prefers “to trust that the Grail has found [her] for a reason, and when the time comes, [she] will know what to do” (Brown 295). Teabing thinks little of Sophie’s opinion, finding her to be “light-years out of her league” (Brown 299). As soon as he reaches this conclusion, though, Sophie proves him to be wrong by breaking the next code. The back-and-forth opposition between these two characters is telling on a number of levels. Teabing, misogynistic towards Sophie, is the text’s strongest proponent in revealing the Grail’s secret. However, he wants the revelation to come from
himself, a man. Further, although Teabing is initially aligned with the positive position of revealing the power of the sacred feminine, it is later discovered that he is the mastermind behind the murder of Saunière and members of the Priory of Sion. His credibility, therefore, is diminished. Sophie, who as a woman should be for the exposing of the Holy Grail, is unsure.

A large part of her discomfort is due to her grandfather’s involvement with the Priory of Sion. Sophie’s estrangement from her grandfather stems from her witnessing his participation in Hieros Gamos, a ritualized sex orgy, some ten years earlier. As Langdon explains to Sophie,

> Historically, intercourse was the act through which male and female experienced God. The ancients believed that the male was spiritually incomplete until he had carnal knowledge of the sacred feminine. Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve gnosis – knowledge of the divine. (Brown 308)

After accidentally seeing her grandfather engaged in Hieros Gamos, Sophie flees from his home, never to speak with him again. She does not even give him a chance to defend what was happening, despite his pleas over the years to explain. Sophie is seen not only a prude, but also as unreasonable and irrational. Saunière was the only family she had, and she shut him out of her life without even allowing him to explain what she had witnessed.

Sophie continues to be haunted by this memory, reluctant to even discuss it with Langdon. When she does open up, she describes the scene, recalling, “Straddling her grandfather was a naked woman wearing a white mask, her luxuriant silver hair flowing out behind it. Her body was plump, far from perfect, and she was gyrating in rhythm to the chanting – making love to Sophie’s grandfather” (Brown 311). In focusing on the female participant, “Here we find ourselves back in the traditional dynamics of the detective novel; female sexuality is a disruptive force that threatens the social order and must be punished” (Shuker-Haines 74). Not knowing the female partner, and thus unable to punish her, Sophie carries the punishment over to her
grandfather. Further, Sophie’s description of the scene adds to the objectification of women. Sophie sees this act as abhorrent, in part, because the woman does not fit the mold of feminine beauty. Her “silver hair” suggests age, and the body is “far from perfect” due to its weight. These attributes, coupled with the open sexuality of the act, disgust Sophie. Her rejection, along with her indecision regarding the grail, is a rejection of the sacred feminine.

Teabing, holding Sophie and Langdon at gunpoint, attempts to convince Sophie of her duty, saying, “Your grandfather’s love for you prevented him from challenging the Church. His fear of reprisal against his only remaining family crippled him. He never had a chance to explain the truth because you rejected him, tying his hands, making him wait. Now you owe the world the truth” (Brown 409). Here, Sophie should be seen in a position of power. She has the ability to change the way the world has looked at history, and women, for the past two thousand years. While she grapples with her decision, however, the thoughts of the male characters severely undermine this power.

Assessing the situation with Teabing, Langdon thinks, “Despite the torrent of questions running through his mind, he knew only one thing mattered now – getting Sophie out of here alive . . . I took her to Château Villette. I am responsible” (Brown 409). With this sentence, Langdon has taken away whatever traces of empowerment Sophie had left. Not only is he not responsible for their situation, lest the reader forget that it was Sophie’s initial plan that started the night’s events, but nothing leading up to this point has suggested that Langdon is in any way capable of saving Sophie. However, as the plot reaches its climax, the traditional, or classical, detective formula dictates that the characters must realign themselves in this way. For Sophie, this requirement means the woman that skillfully evaded Fache and planned the escape from the Louvre must be gone, leaving in her place the conventional damsel in distress.
Teabing furthers the degradation of Sophie, saying, “‘How was I to imagine the Grand Master would go to such ends to deceive me and bequeath the keystone to an estranged granddaughter?’ Teabing looked at Sophie with disdain. ‘Someone so unqualified to hold this knowledge that she required a symbologist baby-sitter?’” (Brown 411). Although this assessment initially seems to be unfair, it does bring up the question as to how a DCPJ cryptologist could be so inept at breaking codes, codes written by her own grandfather, nonetheless. Separating the two, “Teabing sensed he had successfully alienated the two companions from one another. Sophie Neveu remained defiant, but Langdon clearly saw the larger picture. He was trying to figure out the password. *He understands the importance of finding the Grail and releasing her from bondage* (sic)” (Brown 421). The “her” to which Teabing refers is Mary Magdalene, yet Langdon is more concerned with Sophie’s well-being. In juxtaposing Sophie and Mary Magdalene this way, the characters are seen to be in opposition. Ironically, just as the concept of female equality has been in bondage for centuries, the character of Sophie is bound by generic conventions.

As the standoff between Teabing and Langdon reaches its conclusion, the positions of the characters are put in contrast. For Teabing, “Langdon’s attempts to be gallant were more pathetic than anything. *On the verge of unveiling one of history’s greatest secrets, and he troubles himself with a woman who has proven herself unworthy of the quest*” (Brown 422). Sophie, in a final attempt at control, declares, “‘Robert, my grandfather would prefer his secret lost forever than see it in the hands of his murderer.’ Sophie’s eyes looked as if they would well with tears, but they did not. She stared directly back at Teabing. ‘Shoot me if you have to. I am not leaving my grandfather’s legacy in your hands’” (Brown 422). It would be foolish to suggest that as an individual life, Sophie is unimportant, but Teabing’s thoughts do bring up an interesting
dilemma: how does the importance of one life measure up against the history and oppression of millions? Sophie, in her attempts to be valiant, is not willing to sacrifice herself for the truth, but rather, for secrecy.

Given the Priory’s true agenda in response to the Grail, Sophie’s suggested sacrifice does not seem out of line. Like Sophie, the Priory is a contradiction, a body that appears to be progressive, while ultimately perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes. On the one hand, “the Priory had always had female members. Four Grand Masters had been women. The sénéchaux were traditionally men – the guardians – and yet women held far more honored status within the Priory and could ascend to the highest post from virtually any rank” (Brown 444). In this way, the Priory embodies and promotes gender equality. However, despite the text’s original assertion that the Priory was waiting for the right moment to reveal the Grail, Sophie’s grandmother explains, “The Priory has always maintained that the Grail should never be revealed” (Brown 444). After more than four hundred pages, not only is this a letdown to readers, but this statement completely undermines any positive claims the text may have attempted to make towards women’s rights and equality.

When Langdon attempts to protest, Sophie’s grandmother continues, “Her [Mary Magdalene’s] story is being told in art, music, and books. More so every day. The pendulum is swinging. We are starting to sense the dangers of our history . . . and of our destructive paths. We are beginning to sense the need to restore the sacred feminine” (Brown 444). Perhaps “her” story is being told in art, music, and books, but are we really sensing the dangers of history? If The Da Vinci Code is the best example we have to answer that question, then the answer is a resounding “No.”
The text goes on to read, “It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself. The beauty of the Grail lies in her ethereal nature . . . And for most, I suspect, the Holy Grail is simply a grand idea . . . a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today’s world of chaos, inspires us” (Brown 444). After the text’s pretense of empowerment, I find these lines extremely difficult to take. If we consider, as the text previously suggested, the Grail as a metaphor for female empowerment, then this passage can be interpreted to read, “It is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not woman itself. The beauty of woman lies in her ethereal nature . . . And for most, I suspect, the sacred woman is simply a grand idea . . . a glorious unattainable treasure that somehow, even in today’s world of chaos, inspires us.” With this simple substitution, these lines reveal the misogynistic undertones that run throughout the text. It is the mystery and wonder surrounding women that serve a purpose to the text, not actual women. The beauty of women, their only asset, lies not in strength, but rather in an ethereal (i.e., unearthly, fragile, or unsubstantial) nature. Therefore, anything sacred or powerful about women is a myth. In searching for the Holy Grail, the characters have been chasing a glorious, yet inevitably unattainable, treasure.

Looking specifically at how, like many forms of popular culture, The Da Vinci Code questions taboo elements of our society, in this case religion, sexuality, and gender roles, we see that the novel ultimately reinforces the very institutions it challenges. The text states, “The modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda – to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base” (Brown 234). While I in no way desire to make comparisons between the Bible and The Da Vinci Code, this statement does help demonstrate the ways that popular texts reflect, and promote, political and hegemonic ideals. Further, “Popular fiction is not simply a product of the reader
enjoying the novel, but also of its attraction to agents, editors, and publishers as a product that will generate revenue by attracting an audience with disposable income” (Dilley xvii).

Conspiracies, religion, and sex not only make for a compelling story, but they sell well. *The Da Vinci Code* presents messy subjects in a neat and pretty package for an affluent and conservative audience.

Or, to place this idea in the context of genre,

The conventions of the mystery novel comprise the system of codes that make meaning possible. The writer reaches out to the reader and society through the genre’s codes. Readers and writers expand to conventions of genre by drawing attention to them and employing them in new situations. Genre fiction comments on society and its own conventions. Thus, it is both a reflection and a critique. (Dilley xvi)

As a mystery/detective novel, *The Da Vinci Code* works within the rules and conventions of genre fiction. Using religion and gender to develop inventions, *The Da Vinci Code* draws upon taboo issues in culture, commenting, as Dilley states, “on society and its own conventions.”

Although *The Da Vinci Code* may be attempting to critique society’s position on both religion and women, ultimately it confirms the authority of the very institutions it questions. Specifically with respect to women, “The message of the detective novel is that any changes in social organization that arise from women’s active participation in public life can be dismissed by the reader as short-lived and inconsequential” (Dilley 58). The text goes to extremes getting this point across by systematically stripping Sophie of power and control, and ultimately denouncing the idea of the sacred feminine.

If “the ‘feminisation’ of certain popular texts provides an opportunity to analyze the way they provide an understanding of the marginalization of women and how that marginalization may be resisted by still locating women within acceptably feminine parameters,” *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that marginalization cannot be avoided (Devas 251). Detective fiction has
evolved over the last couple of decades to allow women to have positions of authority, removing them from what Devas terms “acceptably feminine parameters.” The amateur sleuths and spinster meddlers such as Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher may have made room for the more modern female detective with institutional authority, but at what cost? Sophie may look better than her predecessors and carry a badge, but is that necessarily an improvement? At least the Miss Marples and Jessica Fletchers were able to actually solve the crime, whereas Sophie, despite her training, seems to possess skills far inferior. Although there are empowered female detectives in various media, the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* and its harkening back to the classic detective formula suggest there is still much ground to be broken.

At the end of *The Da Vinci Code*, Langdon figures out the final clue to where the Holy Grail lies. Upon this realization, the final lines of the text are, “For a moment, he thought he heard a woman’s voice . . . the wisdom of the ages . . . whispering up from the closeness of the earth” (Brown 454). Gender equality as a concept has been discovered, for sure, but as evidenced by *The Da Vinci Code*, it has yet to register as more than a whisper. As Kathleen Klein notes, “Sex-role stereotyping is so automatic, readers and writers alike perceive it as natural and logical even when it undercuts the novels they produce or consume” (Klein 152). As demonstrated by *The Da Vinci Code*, such blatant anti-woman propaganda goes unnoticed not only by the producer, but by the majority of the audience consuming these texts. The “FAQ” page of Brown’s website features the question, “This novel is very empowering to women. Can you comment?” Brown replies,

Two thousand years ago, we lived in a world of Gods and Goddesses. Today, we live in a world solely of Gods. Women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power. The novel touches on questions of how and why this shift occurred…and on what lessons we might learn from it regarding our future. (www.danbrow.com)
I find this comment problematic not for what it says, but for the mere fact that Brown is blind to the reality that his own text plays into, and promotes, the “stripping of power” that he is attempting to condemn. If academics and audiences are unwilling to look at popular texts, unwilling to engage in struggles at the site where they are currently happening, then texts such as *The Da Vinci Code* will continue to perpetuate dominant ideology. If we can learn anything regarding the future from *The Da Vinci Code*, it is that if things continue the way they are, the future for women is bleak.

Ideologically our culture is founded on an unequal balance of power between the sexes, and various forms of entertainment, such as popular fiction, only strengthen and add to the discourse surrounding this disparity. However, despite the impact of print, the visual element of film holds an even greater resonance in our society. Therefore, in the next chapter I will look at how *The Da Vinci Code* and its ideological messages have been adapted for the screen.
CHAPTER IV.

THE LOSS OF THE SACRED FEMININE IN RON HOWARD’S *THE DA VINCI CODE*

As discussed in chapter two, the hype surrounding the release of Ron Howard’s adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code* was about as big as it could get. Howard, coming off of his success from *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), and Hanks, adored by critics and audiences alike, seemed like a winning combination. Rounding off the triumvirate was the casting of French starlet Audrey Tautou in the pivotal role of Sophie Neveu. Yet despite this recipe for success, overall reaction to the film seems to be mediocre at best. Having already discussed the film’s reception in chapter two, in this chapter I would like to turn to an in-depth analysis of the film, paying particular attention to the character of Sophie. As in my treatment of Dan Brown’s novel, I will first explore theories on crime films and literary/film adaptations, leading into feminist film theory before directly addressing Howard’s film. This analysis, then, will be useful as a point of comparison to the previous chapter’s discussion of Brown’s novel, and is necessary to illustrate my claims regarding the negative portrayal of women in both the novel and film. Although Howard’s adaptation for the most part remains faithful to Brown’s novel, the differences between the two are crucial to my argument regarding the texts’ treatment of women. Although Brown’s novel, particularly in its conclusion, is more overtly misogynistic, Howard’s adaptation, with its de-emphasis of the sacred feminine and its erasure of the majority of Sophie’s empowering scenes from the novel, adopts a similar tone and plays into the existing conventions of mystery/detective films.
Crime films suffered from a lack of attention during the earliest years of film study and theory. Few critics paid attention to the form until the 1970s, and early theories on crime film stemmed from emerging theories on crime fiction. Like its literary predecessor,

The genre of crime films includes all films that focus on any of the three parties to a crime – criminal, victim, avenger – while exploring that party’s links to the other two. What defines the genre, however, is not these three typological figures any more than a distinctive plot or visual style, but a pair of contradictory narrative projects: to valorize the distinctions among these three roles in order to affirm the social, moral, and institutional order threatened by crime, and to explore the relations among the three roles in order to mount a critique that challenges that order. (Leitch 16)

*The Da Vinci Code* fits this formula well, with multiple characters filling all three roles of criminal, victim, and avenger. Further, certain characters blur the distinctions between the three, as they simultaneously act out multiple positions within the narrative. As the movie begins, Sophie is seen as the avenger; aligned with the DCJP French police, she appears at the crime scene to help figure out the codes surrounding Saunière’s body. However, as soon as she helps Langdon avoid the police, she becomes a criminal as she aids and abets his escape. As it is quickly learned, Sophie is the granddaughter of Saunière, which also aligns her with the role of victim. Functioning in all three roles, Sophie challenges the distinctions between them. Not only does she confirm their generic importance, but also shows how the lines between “good” and “bad” can become blurred.

In investigating the crime and acting on behalf of the victim and/or his or her family, the avenger or detective’s purpose is to bring “the criminal to justice and [reestablish] the social order the crime has disrupted” (Leitch 13). As the events of the movie unfold, Sophie finds herself further in the position of victim, as Langdon’s role shifts from suspected criminal to detective. However, as he continues to figure out the clues, the mystery becomes less about solving Saunière’s murder, and more about the search for the Holy Grail. If the ultimate goal of
the detective is to restore social order, then one would expect that the discovery of the Holy Grail should somehow aid in the achievement of this goal. At the movie’s conclusion, the location of the Grail is discovered, but it is kept a secret. This, therefore, suggests that in order to restore the social order, the nature of the grail must not be revealed, but like the power of the sacred feminine, must be kept hidden.

In addition to this duty, “the mortal detective of the suspense novel, who can be either fallible professional detective . . . or an innocent suspect who turns detective in order to clear his or her name, represents the genre’s dissatisfactions with the detective formula and the endeavor to renew that formula by retaining only its suspense elements” (Leitch 66). Langdon, as the innocent suspect, falls into this pattern. However, this has become somewhat standard in crime films, and as a result, has evolved from an invention to a convention of the genre. The character of Sophie – detective, victim, and eventual police suspect – provides the necessary twist to keep the plot fresh while still sticking to the traditional structure of the detective story.

Another decisive convention of the genre is that crime films all attempt to solve the criminal problems they present through a happy ending, “yet the frequency of crime in such films suggests that the more general problems posed by crime will never be solved” (Leitch 12). Not only does this point back to the cyclical nature of the genre, but it also points to a greater issue: despite the happy endings provided on film, they do not necessarily correspond to a happily-ever-after reality. This becomes crucial when considering the aforementioned fact that “every crime in every crime film represents a larger critique of the social or institutional order” (Leitch 14). The sustained popularity of this genre suggests that while detective fiction and film may attempt to provide a happy ending for a particular crime, the social order that has been disrupted is only temporarily restored. If “crime films present as their defining subject a crime
culture that depends on normalizing the unspeakable, a place where crime is both shockingly
disruptive and completely normal,” then in order for the genre to continue the normalizing of the
unspeakable, it can only be an impermanent act (Leitch 14). In that sense, while individual
crimes themselves may be disruptive, the culture of crime is actually quite normal. In order for a
particular text to stand out, then, the nature of the crime must continually push the envelope of
what is acceptable and normal within the frame of criminal activity. Alternatively, there must be
something special about the victim and/or the detective. *The Da Vinci Code*, with its religious
and historical conspiracy theories, the nature of its crime and crime scene, and its imaginative
use of clues, separates itself from standard detective stories. However, in order to stay true to its
generic roots, (the film) *The Da Vinci Code*, like the novel, sticks to strict gender binaries and
codes.

When looking at adaptations, “such films, like novels whose narrative trajectory they
borrow, rely on the audience’s acceptance of most of their elements as previously encoded
knowledge; thus the audience is freed to address only the unique elements the directors and
producers wish to foreground” (Klein 148). As I have argued, Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is
encoded with numerous ideological messages, particularly those relating to gender. Therefore,
audiences coming to the film having already read the novel may subconsciously carry these
messages into their viewing of the film. However, it is never safe to assume what information an
audience carries going into a text, and many people who have seen *The Da Vinci Code* the movie
have not read the book. Therefore, when analyzing the film, it will be necessary to focus on
Howard’s vision of the text, paying special attention to the elements he stresses, specifically with
respect to the character of Sophie.
In examining Brown’s novel, vocabulary, characterization, the structure of the plot, and the resolution of events are important to the analysis of meaning and intent. When looking at its adaptation,

The vocabulary of film is the simple photographed image; the grammar and syntax of film are the editing, cutting, or montage processes by which the shots are arranged. Single shots have meaning much as single words do, but a series of carefully arranged shots conveys meaning much as a composed phrase does. (Richardson 65)

Based on these elements, a number of things become necessary when analyzing Howard’s The Da Vinci Code. When looking at the film, it is not only the images that become significant, but the angles and frames in which they are shot, the lighting, and the editing also need to be considered. The images alone are important, but as they are strung together, a narrative of meaning becomes evident. Therefore, when one analyzes the character of Sophie, individual scenes are vital, but an even greater meaning can be deduced when the character is examined over the entire film.

In deriving this meaning, the role of imagery, both in single scenes and as overarching metaphors, becomes crucial. “Imagery is used both for vividness and for significance,” with the goal of literature being “making the significant somehow visible,” whereas “film often finds itself trying to make the visible significant” (Richardson 68). This is a tricky balance, then, for both writers and directors. In the case of the novel, Dan Brown uses the conclusion to emphasize the text’s stance on Mary Magdalene, and by association, female equality. In the film, Ron Howard has a different emphasis as he downplays the aspect of the sacred feminine. The movie seems choppy at times as Howard attempts to fit as much of the book into two hours as possible. He also employs visual effects, such as certain letters or clues appearing seemingly in mid-air in front of Langdon, which seem out of place. Not only does this technique take away from the
film, but it also a blatant rip-off from his previous film, *A Beautiful Mind*. This failure to make these visible effects significant is, at least in part, a contributing factor to the movie’s poor reviews.

Despite this flaw, the visual sequence of events in the film is of great importance. Like the progression of events in the novel, it not only fuels the plot, but it is also the main mode of transmission of the cultural significance of the text. In the attempt to draw meaning from the images on the screen, semiotics is a useful methodological tool. When one extracts importance from signs, “the creative gap between signifier and signified occurs in film during the presentation of photographic images, one after the other, in time. Because visual images, like the verbal ones, have culturally determined connotations, film has a wide-ranging connotative ability” (Reynolds 3). This is what makes the study of film, as well as other forms of popular entertainment, so important. Encoded with ideological messages, they have the ability to reach a wide and disparate range of audiences. The more popular a text, the more people it reaches.

This is significant because

Film and other cultural forms have the potential to mirror, reinforce, challenge, create, overturn, or crystallize beliefs and fears. The bottom line is that a film can become, and sometimes does become, an important vehicle or critic of society’s values and accepted truths, and popular films most assuredly reflect or otherwise interact with the ‘social and moral values’ of the predominant culture.

(Martin 156)

With respect to *The Da Vinci Code*, I am most concerned about its beliefs and fears related to women. While *The Da Vinci Code* does indeed challenge, and in some ways attempt to overturn, existing beliefs relating to religion and history, at the same time it also reinforces negative and detrimental stereotypes related to women. While this is not uncommon for popular films, especially those defined by their genre, *The Da Vinci Code* does this while its plot and characters operate under the guise of sexual equality.
Early feminist film criticism focused on quantitative data, looking at the number and variety of roles offered to women on the screen. Although not very in-depth, these primary studies at least brought to light the problem of gender inequality. As more and more women began to speak up and demand greater diversity and screen time, changes began to appear on screen. At this point feminist film theory, spearheaded by Laura Mulvey’s influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), began to take a more nuanced and closer examination of the role of women on the screen. In arguing that women on the screen are merely objects of desire for male and female audiences, Mulvey brought the subject of “the gaze” to the forefront of film theory. This is important because it places an emphasis on the ways that women are seen, despite the apparent autonomy granted by their roles. On the surface, Sophie may appear to be empowered by the fact that she is a cryptologist working with the French police; however, Mulvey’s theory becomes important when one considers the ways in which Sophie actually appears on screen.

Currently, “feminist theory focuses particularly on women’s experience of sexuality, work and the family, inevitably challenging traditional frameworks of knowledge and putting into question many assumptions such as ‘universalism’” (Humm 5). Although *The Da Vinci Code* does not address issues of Sophie’s sexuality, her experience with work and family are integral to the plot. Differing from the typical critique of women and the seemingly endless question of “Can women have it all,” Sophie’s balance of work and family are crucial in figuring out her grandfather’s code. However, similar to standard texts, in response to the question of whether women can balance both work and family, *The Da Vinci Code* suggests the answer is “No.” Sophie is seen at her most powerful at the beginning of the film, when she strides in, lies to Fache, and confronts Langdon in the restroom. At this point, it has not yet been revealed that
she is Saunière’s granddaughter. Cut off from family, Sophie is seen as strong and in control. However, once it is learned that Saunière is her grandfather, Sophie begins her descent into the role of stereotypical damsel in distress. As she becomes more and more distraught over Saunière’s murder and their estranged relationship, she becomes less and less capable as a cryptologist.

This conflict between work and family fits into Humm’s argument that “since ideological tensions are negotiated mainly through gender, women’s representations are inevitably contradictory” (13). Although the book emphasizes this more than the movie, it is unnatural that Sophie is a cryptologist working with the French police. Since society is still uneasy with women in traditional male workplaces (such as law enforcement), Sophie’s character must compensate for this anxiety in other ways. Hence the casting of Audrey Tautou, the waifish French starlet, whose stature and appearance in no way resemble Sophie’s description in the book. She brings an immediate vulnerability to the screen that begins to set up the contradictions to which Humm refers. There is nothing butch about her (as opposed to common stereotypes of female detectives), and her diminutive size and wide-eyed innocence make her a model of stereotypical femininity. As for her personal conflict, Sophie’s initial lack of family, and the film’s underlying plot to reconnect her to her history, represents an attempt to resolve the conflicting ideologies of work and family with respect to women.

Looking at the casting of Audrey Tautou, I return to Mulvey’s concept of the gaze. Taking a technical approach to the subject, Mizejewski adds, “Feminist film theory makes a persuasive argument that much of traditional Hollywood cinema has been unconsciously organized along these lines: men looking and taking action, women being looked at. The conventions of framing, lighting, and editing women’s bodies and faces all play to these
dynamics” (7). Therefore in analyzing the film, it is important to examine not only what is said, but how it is said – how the elements of the film other than dialogue are important in conveying meaning. Clearly Sophie is crucial to this analysis, but her reactions to others, and the reaction of others to her, are also important. Additionally, the technical aspects of lighting, sound, and editing are also necessary components for consideration.

As the movie begins, non-diegetic music sets the mood. It has an eerie, ominous sound reminiscent of church music. This helps set up the crime, the murder of Jacques Saunière, which happens in the film’s opening scene. From here, the mood shifts as the camera cuts from the crime and introduces the movie’s hero, Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks. Although Langdon is not a traditional detective, the movie is quick to set up credentials that make this shift in character seem credible. A symbologist, Langdon is first seen giving a lecture on the language of symbols. As he tells the crowd, “Symbols are a language that can help us understand our past.” Rather than a conventional detective that solves crimes, Langdon uses his sleuthing skills to interpret the past. As he goes on to tell his audience, “As the saying goes, a picture says a thousand words, but which words?” This is not only important to the plot of the movie, in which Langdon will use clues to decipher different meanings from symbols and works of art, but it has a greater impact when considering the implications of The Da Vinci Code itself.

Although it originated as a successful novel, as a widely viewed film, The Da Vinci Code is worth more than a thousand words; but as Langdon queries, which words? How does The Da Vinci Code represent more than just the plot at hand? As I explained in chapter two, much of the novel’s underlying success had to do with its ability to address unspoken fears and anxieties concerning the church and organized institutions post-9/11. I also examined in chapter three the implication the text had in relation to the position of women in society. The film tackles these
same issues, while alluding to its own position in these debates. In talking about the representation of symbols, Langdon explains, “Understanding our past determines actively our ability to understand the present. So, how do we sift truth from belief? How do we write our own histories, personally or culturally, and thereby define ourselves? How do we penetrate years, centuries, of historical distortion, to find original truth?” In relation to the film, this scene is clearly setting the viewer up for the film’s later revelation regarding the “true meaning” of the Holy Grail. Howard is putting his audience in a frame of mind that is willing to question long-lasting “truths,” for a more radical view of history. However, Langdon’s questions also work nicely when we attempt to position Howard’s film within a greater cultural milieu. Specifically, in questioning how we view our own personal and cultural histories in relation to self-definition, one can see the importance that entertainment such as novels and films have in influencing this self-definition and the general defining identities and gender roles in society.

The pace of Howard’s film is quick, similar to the novel. After the initial set-ups of the crime and Langdon, the plot of the story quickly begins to unfold. As in the novel, Langdon is initially approached by French police to help make sense of Saunière’s crime scene. Although the film has him being approached at a book signing and not at his hotel, the camera clearly shows the detective picking up Langdon’s jacket, giving him ample opportunity to plant the tracking device. After getting dropped off at the Louvre, Langdon first meets Captain Bezu Fache. Just as in his depiction in the novel, he is portrayed as serious, curt, and all business. His association with Opus Dei is also quickly noted, as the camera focuses in on his lapel pin, a cross within a circle, a symbol of Opus Dei.

The sacred feminine is first alluded to at the crime scene. In attempting to make sense of what Saunière has done, Langdon explains to Fache that although the pentacle is often
mistakenly associated with devil worship, it is actually “a symbol for Venus, [and] it represents the female half of all things.” Fache’s disgusted response, “You’re telling me that Saunière’s last act on earth was to draw a goddess symbol on his chest? Why?” not only shows his disbelief of Langdon, but also implies contempt for women. Fache cannot fathom why any man would use his dying strength to draw a feminist symbol. Instead, he would rather believe in the more common association of the pentacle – devil worship. Not only does this position Fache’s attitude, but it is also telling in terms of attitudes toward women. If, as Langdon set up early in the film, *The Da Vinci Code* is about the interpretation of symbols, then one of the first things audiences learn is that a symbol originally representing womanhood has now come to more commonly represent evil.

Before the two can discuss the symbol further, Sophie enters as Fache is questioning Langdon. This is the audience’s first introduction to the character. She enters the scene confidently and with a purpose. She is wearing a trenchcoat over a blouse, cardigan, and skirt, with high heels. This is different from her more practical attire in the novel. The trenchcoat, which harkens back to an early icon of detective films, adds to her mysterious appearance. She and Fache speak in French as Langdon stands by as she explains that she has figured out the code of Fibonacci’s sequence. Although she pauses when she sees her grandfather’s body, she does not react too seriously or for long. At this point, one would not realize that they were related at all.

As is the novel, Sophie’s first scenes place her in a position of power. She shows her intelligence by figuring out the numeric sequence at the crime scene, and she invades Fache’s male dominated space without his permission. It is on her own authority, not his or the DCJP’s, that she enters the scene. Telling Langdon she has an urgent message for him, she secretly
instructs him to listen to a message she has placed for him on her own answering machine.

Meeting up with Langdon in the restroom, she demands, “Do you have a message from Saunière?” At this point, she begins to lose some of her cool as it becomes apparent that she does not have all the answers. As Langdon professes his confusion, she shows him the tracking device that has been planted in his jacket, as well as the original photo from the crime scene, which has Saunière’s writing: “PS Find Robert Langdon.”

Now that it is established that Langdon is the prime suspect in Saunière’s murder, Sophie and Langdon argue a bit over his association with Saunière. Once she realizes that Langdon has no clue as to what is going on, she explains that she is Saunière’s granddaughter, telling Langdon, “Apparently it was his dying wish that we meet. If you help me understand why, I will get you to your embassy where we cannot arrest you.” Here Sophie is straddling the lines of detective, victim, and criminal. In her desire to solve her grandfather’s murder, she is willing to help Langdon evade the police. As this scene is taking place in the bathroom, the camera cuts to an agitated Fache receiving word that “Headquarters didn’t send Sophie Neveu.” Before he can ponder the implications of this, the tracking device planted on Langdon begins to show movement, and they believe that he has jumped from the bathroom window.

Although this scene differs only slightly from its written counterpart, the implications of this difference are great. In the book we read how Sophie adopts an active role by taking the tracking device, sticking it into a bar of soap, and then throwing it out a very high window onto a distant moving truck. In the movie, however, none of this is seen, or even suggested. It is unclear whose idea it was to throw the tracking device and who actually completes the act. Later in the film when the police find the truck and the bar of soap, a cop says to Fache “Smart of him to hit the truck.” To which Fache replies, “What, do you admire him now?” This suggests that in the
film version of the text, it is Langdon who has taken control of the situation and temporarily thrown the police off track. Therefore, it is he, not Sophie, who is worthy of admiration. The scene of Sophie throwing the soap out of the window is one of the most powerful ones of her in the book. Its absence in the film severely undermines her potency, while further positioning Langdon in the role of power.

With the police off trailing the false movements of Langdon, the professor and Sophie return to the crime scene. Sophie goes and looks at her grandfather and has a flashback to her childhood. In a cold and detached voice she tells Langdon, “I haven’t seen or spoken to him in a very long time.” Then, showing some compassion, she kneels down and strokes the dead man’s face. Before she can say anything else, Langdon realizes that the Fibonacci numbers are out of sequence and he deduces that Saunière is trying to reach them through a code. As Sophie stands back, looking somewhat confused and disinterested, Langdon begins to figure out the first anagram – O, Draconian devil! Oh, lame saint!: Leonardo Da Vinci! The Mona Lisa!

As the two rush off to the painting, Langdon explains to Sophie that the left side, the feminine side, appears larger on the Mona Lisa. This begins to set up a pattern between the two, where Langdon bestows information on Sophie as she “benefits” from his wisdom. When they reach the painting they find another clue: “So Dark the Con of Man.” Sophie asks Langdon, “Is it another anagram? Can you break it?” Now as a cryptologist, as Saunière’s granddaughter, or as somebody with at least half a clue, she should be able to realize that this is another anagram. However, instead of using her training to solve the puzzle, she pleads with Langdon, “Professor, hurry. Hurry.” Yet, despite this pathetic behavior, as Langdon tosses out word suggestions, Sophie recognizes “Madonna of the Rocks.” This speaks to the contradictions that Sophie must embody. When she shows strength, it must immediately be tempered by a stereotypical feminine
“weakness,” and in order for her to be strong, she must first remind audiences that she is inherently weak.

At *The Madonna of the Rocks*, the two find a key. As Langdon begins to ask if Sophie has ever seen it, or the fleur shape of it, the two realize they must leave before the police return. As Sophie drives Langdon to the embassy, she explains to him that she has seen the fleur before. She has a brief flashback to a scene of Hieros Gamos as Langdon describes the Priory of Sion and the group’s duty to protect a secret supposedly known as the “Dark Con of Man.” Setting up the ultimate mystery of the story, he tells her that the Priory “protects the source of God’s power on Earth.”

Before Langdon can explain any further, the two reach the gates of the embassy and see the French police waiting for them. Faced with the mystery of her grandfather’s death and not given much time to decide what to do, Sophie tells Langdon, “I cannot do this by myself.” He replies, “I’m in enough trouble as it is.” Sophie, however, does not give Langdon much of a choice as she throws her Smart Car in reverse, weaving through traffic, making their getaway. This scene is much more dramatic than described in the novel, and is not only Sophie’s most empowering scene, but probably the most exciting scene in the entire movie. Maneuvering through traffic in reverse, she shows grit and determination, as well as considerable driving skill, while Langdon nervously frets in the passenger’s seat. As the scene climaxes, Langdon screams, “We’re not going to make it,” as Sophie barely squeezes between two large trucks. For this scene, Langdon and Sophie have switched roles. Although the action is initiated with Sophie lamenting that she cannot solve the mystery alone, it is necessary to show her weakness before showing her strength. Then, as she takes control of the situation, Langdon compensates by taking
on the more traditional feminine role in the passenger’s seat. He is the one who is nervous and questions their ability to get out of the situation.

This shift in the power dynamic carries into the next scene between the two. Needing a place to hide while figuring out a plan of action, Sophie takes Langdon through the seedy part of a city park. Spying a table, Sophie tells Langdon to stay back when she goes up to the drug dealer occupying the space and offers him 50 euros for all his stuff if he leaves. Again, Sophie is still in control. Langdon asks her, “Did that ever occur to you that that could be dangerous?” “No,” she replies, “And now we have a place to think. Any ideas professor?” Again, their power relationship goes through a give-and-take. Any power Sophie shows must be tempered. So, while she showed no fear in approaching the drug dealer, she then immediately turned to Langdon for ideas regarding Saunière’s murder.

After Langdon gives more of a history of the Priory and Knights Templar, he reveals to Sophie that the fleur they found at *The Madonna of the Rocks* “is more than a pendant. This is a key that your grandfather left you.” She quickly corrects him, saying, “He left us, professor.” Here Sophie is subtly shifting the emphasis back on Langdon. She is not capable of handling this alone; Langdon is there to guide her. She points out that the inscription on the key is an address, and the two set out to see what they can uncover next. Unlike the taxi scene in the book, which I describe in the previous chapter, the scene of Sophie and Langdon’s journey to the Swiss bank is omitted in the movie. Since the book does not have the same early car chase scene that the movie does, I can only assume that the taxi scene has been omitted because of the car chase. One scene where Sophie is in control of the situation apparently is enough for the filmmakers.

After retrieving the cryptex from the safety deposit box, Langdon and Sophie must escape quickly as the police have trailed them there. André Vernet, the bank’s night manager,
informs the two that there is a “safe-passage clause” connected with the box’s account, and hides Sophie and Langdon in the back of an armored truck. While riding, Langdon becomes agitated, due to the claustrophobia he suffers as a result of a childhood incident. Sophie, sensing Langdon’s agitation, places her hands on Langdon’s head and “heals” him from his discomfort. Sophie explains that she learned the “trick” from her mother, and then describes the accident that took the lives of her mother, father, and brother. Not only does this scene explain part of Sophie’s past, but it softens her character. Her healing powers reveal a more feminine side. They also foreshadow the movie’s later revelation that Sophie is a descendent of Jesus, suggesting that her healing powers have a sort of divinity to them.

After traveling for a bit, the truck pulls off to the side of the road and stops. Vernet opens the back, points a gun at the two, and then shoots at the ceiling. He accuses the two of them of murder and demands the cryptex. From here, the scene plays out similarly to the novel. Langdon notices the bullet has landed on the floor of the truck and kicks it so it rests in the door frame. This prevents Vernet from closing the door properly, allowing Langdon to throw his body into the door and knock Vernet down. A scuffle ensues between the two and Langdon instructs Sophie to get into the passenger seat. Langdon gets the cryptex back from Vernet before driving away in the truck. This scene is pivotal for Langdon because in taking control of this situation, he assumes control for the rest of the film. Sophie has now been demoted to sidekick, and as the movie progresses, will fall into the stereotypical role of damsel in distress.

This switch in roles is confirmed when the two arrive at Teabing’s estate, Chateau Villette. Sophie gives the symbolic power, the cryptex, to Langdon and tells him, “I still don’t know why he put you into this and I’m sorry. But I’m also very glad.” When the two meet Teabing, he refers to Sophie as a “maiden” and comments to her, “What a lovely smile you
have.” Teabing’s remarks reinforce the subtle shift in power that had just occurred between Langdon and Sophie. In referring to her as a maiden, he is implying Langdon is the knight on the Grail quest. He then comments on her physicality, securing her position as an object of the gaze.

With their roles clearly in place, Teabing can now educate Sophie on the true meaning of the Holy Grail. He begins by correcting her, saying that the Priory does not protect God’s power on Earth, but “protects the source of the Church’s power on earth – the Holy Grail.” Sophie, playing the part of a foolish student replies, “I don’t understand. What power, some magic dishes?” The two men then explain to Sophie the concept of the sacred feminine. Howard, reacting to some of the Church’s apprehensions about the book’s religious claims, tries to present a more balanced view in the movie. He has Langdon and Teabing debate some of the more heated issues, such as what actually happened at the Council of Nycea. Langdon, as our hero, is of course more skeptical than Teabing, and continually argues that this is all speculation, telling him, “You’re attributing facts to support your own conclusion.” Eventually Sophie must break up the fight between the two of them so she can complete her “education.”

Using Leonardo Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* as backdrop for their discussion, Teabing explains, “The Grail has never been a cup; it is the ancient symbol for womanhood. A woman who carried a secret so powerful . . .” Still playing the voice of reason, Langdon interrupts with, “This is an old wives’ tale.” From Teabing’s explanation of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, he and Langdon go on to discuss the sacred feminine and the religious treatment of women in history. Langdon begins by explaining, “In paganism, women were worshiped as a route to heaven, but the modern Church has a monopoly on that in salvation through Jesus Christ.” Here he establishes the importance of women in early religion, and their subsequent erasure in modern, Christian beliefs. Teabing elaborates on Langdon’s point by
explaining, “he who keeps the keys to heaven rules the world.” Therefore, in order for the Church to keep hold of their power on earth, they have a strict domination on worship and theories on the afterlife. Langdon goes on to explain that in paganism, with its emphasis on the sacred feminism, “Women, then, are a huge threat to the church, [and as a result] the Catholic inquisition soon published what may be the most blood-soaked book in human history,” The Malleus Maleficarum, more commonly known as The Witches’ Hammer. Producing the book, Teabing explains that first published in Germany in 1487, “it instructed the clergy on how to locate, torture and kill all freethinking women.” This of course led to three centuries of witch hunts where hundreds of thousands of women were captured and killed.

This exchange is important not only to the plot of the story, but to my argument as well. It is here that the movie is most “pro-woman” in its agenda. Langdon and Teabing shed light on the conspiracy theory that for centuries women have been systematically silenced and stripped of power. They argue that the sacred feminine has slowly been erased by history for a more negative portrayal of women, one that promotes their supposed inferior status. Given the context of this film, however, their message seems somewhat contradictory. Langdon and Teabing preach one thing, but their treatment (and by extension, the film’s treatment) of Sophie demonstrates quite another.

For example, it is Langdon that shows Teabing the keystone, not Sophie. When Teabing tries to get her to talk about her grandfather and the Priory, she is resistant to the idea of the sacred feminine. She pleads to Langdon, “Tell him please, I don’t know any of this.” Before she can protest further, Silas comes in and attacks Langdon. After Langdon is beaten and on the ground, Sophie gets up as if to help. Although she has been trained by the DCJP, she shows none of her supposed law enforcement skills. Her inferior status is confirmed when Silas points the
gun at her and says, “Do not move woman.” Frozen, Sophie stares silently as Teabing attempts to reason and bargain with Silas. As in the book, Teabing uses his disability to his advantage, jabbing his canes into Silas’ cilice, knocking the monk down. Sophie screams as the gun goes off. Teabing continues to beat Silas with his canes, and only then does Sophie run forward to help. Although she does take Silas’ head into her hands and repeatedly slams it into the floor, it is only after Teabing has reacted and the immediate threat of danger has been removed. The scene quickly switches to the police gathering at Chateau Villette, before cutting back to inside. When it does, Silas is unconscious and Sophie is taking his gun. Teabing says to Sophie, “Well, well, my dear,” both impressed and surprised that she has finally taken some initiative and action.

Sophie’s next dramatic scene comes once the group has escaped to Teabing’s plane. She approaches a bound and gagged Silas, ripping off the duct tape that had been covering his mouth. Getting close up to his face she demands, “Did you kill Jacques Saunière?” When he doesn’t reply, Sophie grabs him, shakes him, and asks again, “Did you kill Jacques Saunière?” Silas coolly replies, “I am the messenger of God.” Upon hearing this Sophie violently slaps Silas across the face. The shot cuts to one of Langdon, who is getting concerned, watching Sophie, then quickly cuts back to Sophie asking Silas, “Did you kill my grandfather?” The shot then cuts to Teabing, also watching this confrontation, then back to Silas. He begins to reply, “I am the messenger –,” but before he can finish Sophie hits him again, this time less violently. With renewed vigor, he says, “Each breath you take is a sin. No shadow will be safe again for you will be hunted by angels.” “Do you believe in God?” Sophie asks Silas. “Your God doesn’t forgive murders. He burns them.” Silas and Sophie continue to stare at each other until Langdon comes and pulls her away from him. This is the first time Sophie shows any real emotion over the
situation, as it briefly appears that she might cry. She quickly gains her composure, though, and the plane takes off. This scene is important because it is the first time Sophie really reacts to the death of her grandfather. It explains her violence towards Silas, but at the same time, it feminizes her. Not only is she showing emotion, but her emotions are making her act out of character. She is not in control of herself or the situation, and needs Langdon to pull her out of it.

The next time that Sophie will need Langdon to rescue her is at Temple Church in London. When they enter the church, Teabing, and especially Langdon, seem to be on a mission. The men search for clues while Sophie complains about the cold and the scariness of the gargoyles. “This place is wrong,” she tells them; “Can we go now? We should go.” Before they can answer, the camera quickly jumps to a shot of Silas. The monk lunges after her while Langdon screams, “Sophie, no.” Grabbing her, Silas puts a knife to her throat, holding her hostage while demanding the keystone. Sophie remains silent while the knife is at her neck and her head is violently jerked.

Coming to her rescue, Langdon approaches with the keystone. “Here it is,” he tells Silas. “Just let her go and you and I can – we’ll come to some agreement.” Before an “agreement” can be made, Remy enters with a gun as Silas continues to threaten Sophie. A scuffle ensues, and Silas throws Sophie aside. Langdon runs to her, and Sophie looks pained as Langdon helps her to stand. Remy attempts to shoot the two, but is distracted by a bird. Seizing the opportunity, Sophie and Langdon begin to run away. In the chase scene that follows, Langdon and Sophie are holding hands, and at times it seems if he is pulling her along with him. Although she has been injured, so has Langdon. This also seems odd because as a police officer, Sophie should be in better shape than Langdon, a middle-aged professor. She is, of course, wearing heels, an impractical shoe choice, which contributes to her inability to keep up with Langdon.
Still needing to figure out the next clue, the two get on a city bus. When Langdon mentions he needs Internet access, Sophie notices a passenger with a cell phone. She approaches the young gentleman, and although the audience cannot hear what she is saying, we see him hand Sophie his phone. Once she has it, she motions for Langdon and hands the phone to him. The passenger then says, “You didn’t say you had a boyfriend,” which implies that Sophie’s sexuality and attractiveness was how she got the phone. Here she is fitting into the more standard conventions of feminine power in detective fiction – sex appeal. Then, while Langdon uses the Internet, Sophie tends to her bleeding leg, further feminizing herself by reminding audiences that she is weak and injured.

By the time the movie reaches its final confrontation between Teabing and Langdon, Sophie has completed her transformation into the damsel in distress. Teabing pulls a gun on Langdon and Sophie, forcing Langdon to get down on his knees and help him figure out the last clue. Without even being instructed to, Sophie, too, begins to kneel, but Teabing stops her, saying,

Not you. No, my dear, you dear, you’re my miracle, Sophie. You’re the guardian of the Grail. All the oppression of the poor and the powerless, of those of different skin, of women. You can put an end to all that. You must explode the truth onto the world. It’s your duty. You know the answer to this riddle. Open the cryptex and I’ll put down the gun.

Here, Sophie is presented with her choice of who she is going to be in this story. Up until this point, she has gone back and forth between hero and victim, without ever fully committing to either role. Teabing is now giving her the opportunity to redeem herself, to be the savior of not only herself and Langdon, but of all the powerless and all the women of the world. Although he is the villain, Teabing seems to be the only one who truly knows what is at stake. However, as the villain, he is coded as morally wrong. Therefore, by extension, the text implies that exposing
the truth of the Grail is also morally wrong. Rather, the text is further promoting the
disenfranchisement of the poor, the powerless, and women.

Sophie, choosing the role of the damsel in distress, confirms this. When Teabing rolls the
cryptex to her, she tells him, “I have no idea how. I don’t know the code. And even if I did, I
wouldn’t tell you.” To prove her point, she gets down on her knees, visually and symbolically
demonstrating her inferiority. Once Sophie has aligned herself in this role, Langdon is then given
full license to be the movie’s hero. Teabing alludes to this shift when he asks Sophie, “By the
way you’ve been looking at your hero I wonder, would you let him die for you? Open it, Sophie,
to save his life.” Sophie continues to repeat that she doesn’t know how to open the cryptex,
further confirming to the audience that she is incapable of solving the mystery and of saving
herself and Langdon.

Finally, Langdon, as the hero, speaks up, screaming “Stop it!” before more softly adding,
“She can’t do it Leigh.” He pauses, and then says, “But give me a moment.” Teabing shifts from
pointing the gun at Langdon to point it towards Sophie as Langdon begins to work on the
cryptex. At this point, figuring out the cryptex becomes more about saving Sophie, and less
about solving the mystery of the Holy Grail. As Landgon works on figuring out the cryptex, the
music swells, audibly positioning him as the hero as he attempts to solve the mystery and save
the girl.

As the movie concludes, the question comes back to what Sophie will do with her
newfound knowledge. Unlike the novel, which firmly suggests that the secret will remain hidden,
the movie is a bit more open-ended. However, the message is still the same. Langdon asks
Sophie, “Well, here’s the question: A living descendent of Jesus Christ, would she destroy faith?
Or would she renew it? So again I say, what matters is what you believe.” Since Sophie does not
seem inclined to reveal her secret, the movie suggests that a female descendent of Christ would not renew faith, but rather, would destroy it. The sacred feminine is soundly rejected. What is confirmed, however, is Langdon’s status as hero, as Sophie tells him, “Thank you. For bringing me here. For letting him chose you, Sir Robert.” Not only has he saved Sophie, but he has reunited her with her past, giving her a community that will continue to protect her. So elevated is his status, he has risen from hero to knight.

At the end of the movie, there is no significant discussion of Mary Magdalene like there is in the book. In considering this omission, I find the movie less offensive than Brown’s novel, because the film does not try to position itself as a feminist text the way the book does. As I have mentioned, the basic plot of the *The Da Vinci Code* remains the same as it moves from one medium to another. However, in the recontextualization of the text from novel to film there seems to be a loss of the emphasis on the sacred feminine. Where “cultural images often subtly, or not so subtly, codify and articulate ‘backlash’ misogyny,” it seems that “the goal of feminist aesthetics is to appropriate the power, if not the privilege, of such dominant images” (Humm 3). Whereas Brown’s novel appropriates the type of “backlash” misogyny to which Humm refers, it also does so without any substantial or lasting feminist appropriation of power and privilege. Although the loss of the sacred feminine in Howard’s *The Da Vinci Code* is problematic, at least the film does not overtly rely on inoculation in an attempt to cover-up a more covert anti-feminist message.

The differences between the novel and the film, then, become less significant when we consider their respective contexts. Both show an inherent misogyny that merely manifests itself in different ways. The novel, in its attempt to be a feminist text, denounces the sacred feminine through its characterization and treatment of Sophie and the legend of Mary Magdalene. The
film, on the other hand, takes the route of entirely de-emphasizing the role of the sacred feminine and Mary Magdalene. Both texts punctuate their points through the conventions of the mystery/detective genre, which are employed by the various techniques of their respective mediums.

Ultimately, the significance of this goes back to Langdon’s very first lines of the film, when he questions the use of symbols to analyze our past. As I have argued in the chapter, it is not only the past, but current cultural situations that can also be examined using this method. With the ever-growing dominance of the media, popular texts become crucial in this investigation. What this film shows us through its treatment of women is that perhaps the real problem lies not with history’s treatment of women, but in our society’s inability to see how history continues to repeat itself.
CONCLUSION

I first read *The Da Vinci Code* almost a full year after it had been published. Although I am interested in the academic study of popular literature, I must confess I am not always its most enthusiastic reader. However, after a year of seeing and hearing about *The Da Vinci Code* everywhere I went, I finally caved and borrowed a copy before heading to the beach one day. I will admit, Brown certainly has a style that draws readers in quickly. From the frontispiece alone, which begins with “FACT,” and ends with the sentence, “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate,” the book is intentionally created to be a fast-paced page-turner (Brown I). As I read, the plot intrigued me, but I wondered how Brown could satisfactorily wrap things up. By the time I reached the text’s conclusion, it was clear to me that he couldn’t. I was disappointed, but more than that, I was angry. Here was a book which appeared to encourage sexual equality, but which in its conclusion instead clearly promoted an anti-feminist message. Admittedly, genre fiction has not always been the kindest in its representations of gender. However, I was (and still am) particularly offended by *The Da Vinci Code*’s twisted use of the sacred feminine and the figure of Mary Magdalene to ultimately denounce female empowerment. But perhaps even more upsetting to me was the fact that people were eating this book up. What, then, does this say about our unconscious desires as a society?

As I was seething, critics and academics appeared to be able to find only fault with the text’s religious, historical, and artistic claims. This, in turn, seemed to add fuel to the fire in terms of the text’s popularity, resulting in a plethora of Da Vinci-inspired merchandise and knock-offs. *The Da Vinci Code* became an international bestseller, and has been translated into
over forty languages. Its film adaptation, despite being panned by critics, also did well financially, grossing over $218 million domestically and $532 million internationally in box-office receipts. Clearly the themes of *The Da Vinci Code* struck a chord with audiences around the globe. The global aspect of this phenomenon is intriguing, and tracking the text’s international appeal, comparing receptions of it between different countries, would be a fascinating direction for further research. However, although exploring the popular culture effects of *The Da Vinci Code* has been interesting in itself, ultimately in my research I have been more concerned with what aspects of the text hold cultural resonance, and what insights on contemporary American society can be gained from the study of its popularity. Therefore, in my analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*, I have situated my reading of the text and its effects within the current social climate of contemporary American society.

As the media continues its dominance in the everyday lives of the American public, popular culture increasingly becomes a barometer for measuring society’s values and beliefs. One recent shift, particularly since the terror attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, has been an increase of religious themes in popular culture. Given George W. Bush’s emphasis on God in the White House and the religious undercurrent of the “War on Terror,” it is no surprise that the American public is concerned with the role of religion in everyday life. This coincides with a predominance of postmodern sensibilities that call attention to a distrust of institutions and the abolishment of meta-narratives, historical “facts,” and large-scale truth claims. Therefore, a text such as *The Da Vinci Code*, which plays with the themes of religious conspiracies and corrupt authority, becomes an appealing text for audiences needing an outlet to safely explore anxieties surrounding religious and political tensions.
The escapist aspect of literary genre fiction allows audiences to participate in taboo subjects without ever really being transgressive. Readers can escape into a fantasy world that allows them push the envelopes of right and wrong, without ever really being held accountable for these imaginary actions. The mystery/detective genre is particularly adept at crossing these boundaries, and looking at shifts in its themes can lead to insight into the shifting desires of audiences from one time period to another.

Of particular interest to my research is the changing treatment of women within the mystery/detective genre. Although the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a boom in publishing of mystery/detective novels featuring empowered female detectives, *The Da Vinci Code* marks a shift back toward traditional gender stereotypes featuring a dominant male hero and the female victim or damsel-in-distress. In his 2004 assessment of genre, John Cawelti questions this trend:

> In the case of the detective genre, perhaps the central question has been if, and if so to what extent, the detective story can be regendered as a nonsexist narrative or whether, like many popular genres, the form is inherently and inescapably patriarchal. (*Mystery* 291)

In many ways, this question has been the crux of my analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*. While I do not think the genre is inherently or inescapably patriarchal, I do argue that historically the authors of mystery/detective fiction have been informed by patriarchal attitudes which resulted in texts that perpetuated these beliefs. The success of authors such as Sara Paretsky, Patricia Cornwell, and Sue Grafton, suggests that mystery/detective genre can do well when working outside patriarchal stereotypes. However, it must be acknowledged that these authors and their texts seem to represent the exceptions rather than the rule. Further, the success of *The Da Vinci Code*, and its treatment of Sophie, seems to reflect a current desire for more traditional notions regarding gender and authority.
The reviews of Howard’s film adaptation seem to support this sentiment. Although the majority of reviewers had little to say about Tautou’s performance as Sophie, those that did often reflected on Tautou’s appearance rather than her talent. In Newsweek’s preview of the film, Devon Gordon comments,

Hanks will surely add to *The Da Vinci Code*’s box-office appeal – as if the book’s title alone weren’t star power enough – but its artistic success might ride on the delicate shoulders of Audrey Tautou, the 27-year-old French ingénue. Sophie Neveu is more than just the story’s emotional core; as the plot unfolds, all the crucial puzzle pieces seem to point back to her. (106)

This description is interesting in two respects. In terms of the character of Sophie, Gordon’s statement reflects that Sophie is identified with the feminine aspect of emotions, rather than being seen as an intelligent police cryptologist. Also of note is Gordon’s physical description of Tautou’s “delicate shoulders” and suggests that the success of the film will at least, in some part, be dependent on an aspect of her physicality and appearance.

Other reviewers were blunter with this point. *People* magazine writes, “Tautou, playing a cop aiding Langdon, is strictly decorative” (Rozen 33), and *Sight and Sound*, speculates that “though Audrey Tautou, playing cryptographer Sophie Neveu, is given almost nothing to do with her part except look worried and dismayed, she is… well, Audrey Tautou. Red-blooded chaps will not find it too hard to stay awake during her scenes” (Jackson 52). Focusing strictly physical attributes, reviewers such as Rozen and Jackson position Tautou as valuable for her “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Although Mulvey coined this term in the 1970s, it is clear that, her theories still have relevance.

Despite these remarks, I have less of a problem with Howard’s adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code* than with Brown’s actual text. While I do not feel that it is an especially well-made film, at least it is not trying to be something that it is not. A crucial difference between the film
and the novel has to do with the sacred feminine. While it works as a form of inoculation in the novel, it is barely present in the film. It serves only as a plot function, while in the novel, Brown stresses the sacred feminine as a way to sensationalize his plot without ever giving it the respect it deserves. His abandonment of this idea at the end of the novel is indicative of his ambivalence toward the subject.

Given the ways that popular texts reflect and promote political and hegemonic ideals, it would be remiss to neglect them academically. If academics are unwilling to look at popular texts, unwilling to engage in struggles at the site of where they are currently happening, then texts will continue to perpetuate dominant ideology. It can be too easy to dismiss a text by saying “it’s just a book,” or “it’s just a movie,” but it is never really that simple. These books and movies so often being dismissed by critics are the very same ones being embraced by the public. Therefore the study of these texts is crucial in an effort to better understand the anxieties and desires of different populations at different times.

My analysis of The Da Vinci Code reveals our contemporary culture’s unease with both domestic and international politics. The events of 9/11 popped America’s false bubble of security and forced the country to, among other things, take a closer look at the role of religion in politics. With our vulnerabilities as a nation exposed, the American public embraced texts that not only safely allowed them to explore their fears, but distracted them from the more pressing issues at hand. Debating the truths in Dan Brown’s fiction became far more appealing than examining the truths of our own current administration. The “controversy” surrounding The Da Vinci Code preoccupied the public at a time when they would have been better advised to pay closer attention to current political figures, rather than dead historical ones. Coupled with this preoccupation was the desire to return to a sense of “normalcy.” As a result, more traditional
models of living, including notions of gender, have been embraced. Given the text’s popularity, then, a gendered study of *The Da Vinci Code* becomes extremely relevant. Not only does it reveal negative gendered stereotypes that still exist in current American society, but perhaps more important, it shows the roles played by popular media such as literature and film as they both reflect and perpetuate our beliefs.
WORKS CITED


