

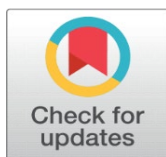
# SACRED SPACES, INSTITUTIONAL POWER, AND PERSONAL REVOLT IN THE DA VINCI CODE AND THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative reading of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), arguing that sacred spaces in both novels function as crucibles where institutional power and personal faith collide. It distinguishes between formal sacred spaces, churches, chapels, cathedrals, and symbolically sacred or liminal spaces such as The Cobb, the Undercliff, crypts, and museums. Formal sanctuaries embody institutional dogma and social control, while liminal spaces enable private epiphanies, feminist resistance, and existential self-discovery. Drawing on Kilde's account of sacred space as culturally constructed, Van Huyssteen's narrative theology, and existentialist perspectives from Tillich, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Taylor, the study shows how space in these narratives is never neutral but charged with theological and ideological significance. Both novels dramatise a broader cultural shift from publicly anchored, church-centred religion to privatised, experiential forms of the sacred. At the same time, the analysis acknowledges that 'personal' sacred spaces remain in dialogue with, and partly defined by, the religious institutions they contest. The paper argues that sacred spaces in these texts operate as 'sites of tria' where characters renegotiate the meaning of faith, authority, and freedom.

**Keywords:** Sacred Space, Institutional Religion, Personal Revolt, The Da Vinci Code, The French Lieutenant's Woman

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious spaces in literature often serve as more than mere backdrops; they become arenas where institutional authority collides with individual destiny. This paper examines how Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) depict sacred spaces, both traditional 'churches, chapels, cathedrals' and symbolic natural or secular sites imbued with sanctity, as sites of tension between institutional frameworks and the

personal revolutions of the main characters, by focusing on these novels and analysing how each space is used to dramatise conflicts over faith, identity, and autonomy. Existing studies examine religion, feminism, or power in these novels separately, but insufficient attention has been paid to how sacred space mediates the shift from institutional authority to privatised faith across genres and periods. The study has been divided into two sections: first, examining sacred spaces associated with religion and how they relate to the societal constructs of power inherent within them. Second, investigating sacred or liminal spaces where religion has not necessarily been established and how these spaces create private moments of revelation and rebellion for these other characters. These divisions were chosen because they offer ways for writers to explain why sacred spaces require this kind of individual study. These spaces reflect either the power of tradition and religion, which these writers choose to challenge or conform to, or how these other writers rebel beyond these spaces into their own constructs of meaning. Employing an interdisciplinary theoretical framework including Jeanne Kilde's theory of religious space as culturally constructed rather than inherently sacred, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's narrative theology which sees storytelling as a mode of theological exploration, and existentialist perspectives Sartre's and Taylor's insights on individual freedom in a secular age, this will justify how and why each type of space functions in the narrative.

## 2. SACRED SPACES AND INSTITUTIONAL DOGMA

The interior of Rosslyn Chapel, a key sacred site in *The Da Vinci Code*, is symbolically laden with secrets of the Church and used to challenge institutional truth. In both novels, established religious structures, such as churches, chapels, and cathedrals, represent the prevailing institutional religious framework, the collective doctrines, moral codes, and power structures of organised religion. These formal sacred spaces are typically seen as domains of authority and tradition, but the protagonists engage with them in ways that reveal tension and subversion. This section examines how each novel portrays such spaces as arenas of conflict between external authority and personal truth, and why analysing them is crucial for understanding the protagonists' struggles. By focusing first on institutional locales, this paper can examine how the weight of communal belief and historical dogma creates the backdrop against which personal revolutions take shape, essentially setting the stage for characters to either conform to or break away from.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown deliberately situates critical moments of the mystery within prominent Christian settings - ancient churches, abbeys, crypts, and cathedrals - only to turn their traditional meaning on its head (Brown, 2003). These spaces, architecturally grand and resonant with history, are usually emblems of the Church's authority. However, Brown employs these real-life locations as those of which the institutional religiosity has been challenged in ways that involve hidden truths and individual revelation. For instance, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu find themselves at Paris's Saint-Sulpice Church, then at London's Temple Church and Westminster Abbey, while ending at Scotland's Rosslyn Chapel. This site serves as an individual's haven for hidden truths or access to new revelations not revealed by the institutional religiosity represented by the Catholic or Protestant Church. Rather than serving as inactive sacred sites, these locations become proactive agents within these stories. Also, Langdon and Sophie must literally and symbolically go 'deep' into crypts and sanctuaries, confronting puzzles and codes that undermine Catholic orthodoxy (Brown, 2003). As a result, Brown portrays the churches and chapels as places where the tension between institutionalised knowledge and personal revelation comes to a head. Jeanne Kilde's theory of sacred space helps explain this dynamic: in other words, religious places are 'more than buildings; their meaning is deeply found in history, culture, and spirituality' (Kilde, 2022). Brown leverages the embedded meaning and the gravitas of centuries-old sanctuaries, but repurposes them. The very same stone walls that have heard church doctrine now echo with 'whispers of the Holy Grail's presence' and pagan symbolism (Brown, 2003). For instance, Rosslyn Chapel is described as "a shrine to all faiths... and, above all, to nature and the goddess" (Brown, 2003, p. 290), a striking description that blends Christian architecture with pagan and feminine imagery. By labelling Rosslyn 'the Cathedral of Codes' and associating it with a Mithraic temple and the 'sacred feminine, the novel subverts the chapel's institutional identity (Brown, 2003, p. 290). It becomes a site where personal awakening occurs for Sophie; she discovers her own sacred lineage there, suggesting that the true holiness of the place comes not from Church consecration but from individual connection to truth. In Brown's narrative, then, formal holy sites paradoxically facilitate anti-institutional outcomes: they host the uncovering of secrets that threaten the Church's authority, 'proof of Mary Magdalene's bloodline' (Brown, 2003). The effect is that these edifices of power are symbolically turned into arenas where the protagonists, and by extension the reader, question what really imbues a space with sacredness: the Church's sanction or the seeker's experience.

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, set a century earlier in Victorian England, presents a different yet related use of formal sacred space (Fowles, 1969). While Fowles's narrative does not revolve around religious puzzles, it indeed grapples with the moral and religious orthodoxy of its era, embodied mainly by the Anglican Church and its social influence. Here, the institutional framework is the rigid code of Christian morality and class propriety in 1860s society. Notably, the novel contains fewer scenes inside churches or chapels than *The Da Vinci Code*, but it vividly depicts how organised religion's values permeate the community and constrain the characters. Cooper (1991) reads such figures as emblematic of a Victorian religiosity that masks social control and status anxiety behind a façade of devout respectability. Salami and Soltani (2023) likewise stress that Fowles uses Mrs Poulteney's rigid Anglican morality to expose how patriarchal religious structures work to police and punish female autonomy in the novel. The presence of formal religion is personified in characters like Mrs Poulteney, a sanctimonious widow who hires the protagonist, Sarah Woodruff, as a companion. Mrs Poulteney 'makes quite a show of her religious faith' and judges everyone by skewed religious standards, using the threat of hell to terrorise those under her power. She represents 'the rotten hypocrisy of the Anglican Church' in the novel, illustrating how institutional piety can serve as a cover for cruelty and status-seeking rather than true charity. By examining Mrs Poulteney and her relationship to sacred space, this shows why a discussion of formal religious settings is needed: Sarah's personal rebellion is defined in opposition to the values enforced by figures like Mrs Poulteney and the church-going society of Lyme Regis. For example, Mrs Poulteney forbids Sarah from visiting the Undercliff, a wild coastal area, on the pretence that it is a den of immorality; when Sarah is spotted walking there, Mrs Poulteney fires her immediately for this "sin" (Fowles, 1969). However, even in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, formal sacred spaces and symbols occasionally appear to mark the weight of institutional influence: for instance, when Charles briefly seeks counsel or when Victorian funerary and marriage rites are referenced, the church's presence is felt as a force the characters must respond to. Salami and Soltani (2023) read this reconfiguration of divine authority as central to the novel's project of exposing how religious discourse underwrites gendered oppression while simultaneously opening a path toward female liberation. Ji and Li (2013) likewise emphasise that Sarah's movement to the social and spatial margins figures an existential quest for freedom beyond the constraints of Victorian religious morality. When highlighting how oppressive and hollow the officially 'sacred' sphere has become for someone like Sarah, the novel questions the trustworthy source of spiritual value. In one metafictional moment, the narrator invokes a 'Victorian image' of God as a strictly authoritative figure and contrasts it with a new "theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority", equating God with the "freedom that allows other freedoms to exist" (Fowles, 1969). This narrative aside explicitly ties the author's approach to a religious concept: the novelist is "still a god" but no longer an omnipotent one, just as society's notion of God and by extension, sacred space must evolve to prioritise freedom over authoritarian control. Such commentary cements the idea that Victorian churches and their agents upheld authority at the expense of individual freedom, setting the stage for characters like Sarah to rebel.

What is observed in both novels is that major sacred spaces, such as churches and cathedrals, are depicted as centres of institutional power that inevitably provoke the protagonists' challenge. Sophie Neveu's journey takes her into the heart of venerable temples only to find that truth has been entombed there, whether literally in a sarcophagus or figuratively under layers of dogma, and she must extract her personal revelation from beneath the weight of history (Brown, 2003). Lynch (2012) similarly argues that in the modern world, the sacred is increasingly experienced through personalised, culturally mediated practices rather than through unquestioned institutional structures. Van der Tol and Gorski (2022) further describe this process as a fragmentation of the sacred and sacred space, in which religious meaning disperses into multiple, often private or liminal locations rather than being monopolised by traditional ecclesial sites. Indeed, Taylor argues that as religion becomes 'one option among many,' spirituality is privatised and people seek "fullness" through personal experience rather than institutional ritual (Taylor, 2007). Both *The Da Vinci Code* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* dramatise this shift. The grand church buildings are still there, but what they signify has changed: Langdon and Sophie enter Westminster Abbey not as devout pilgrims, but as detectives hunting a clue; they treat the church as a puzzle chamber, not a house of worship (Brown, 2003). Charles and Sarah, in their own way, treat the village church and all it represents as something to leave behind in order to be true to themselves. This narrative choice implies that sacredness has been unmoored from the institution and must be reclaimed personally, a point that Brown's novel makes quite literally in its final pages by hiding the ultimate sacred symbol, the Holy Grail/Mary Magdalene's tomb, outside any church, beneath the Louvre Museum's modern glass pyramid (Brown, 2003). The institutional sacred spaces thus provide the foil or antithesis that makes the protagonists' personal sacred spaces stand out in relief. It is necessary to analyse them first, because they illustrate the norms and constraints the heroes rebel against. When illustrating how *The Da Vinci Code* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* portray churches and related

locales as contested sites, “dynamic arena[s] whereby characters test the parameters of institutional power and self-meaning, this paper sets the context for why the characters seek or create alternative sanctuaries for themselves. The following section will delve into those alternative spaces, which often carry a quasi-sacred significance precisely because the protagonists imbue them with the meaning and autonomy that the official sacred sites failed to provide.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown deliberately situates critical moments of the mystery within prominent Christian settings - ancient churches, abbeys, crypts, and cathedrals - only to turn their traditional meaning on its head (Brown, 2003). These spaces, architecturally grand and resonant with history, are usually emblems of the Church's authority. However, Brown uses them as places where hidden truths and personal discoveries challenge institutional religious narratives. For example, the plot takes Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu to Saint-Sulpice Church in Paris, to London's Temple Church and Westminster Abbey, and ultimately to Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland, all of which are depicted as repositories of secret knowledge or gateways to revelations that the official Church has suppressed. Far from being passive holy ground, these sites become active players in the story: Langdon and Sophie must literally and symbolically go ‘deep’ into crypts and sanctuaries, confronting puzzles and codes that undermine Catholic orthodoxy (Brown, 2003). In doing so, Brown portrays the churches and chapels as places where the tension between institutionalised knowledge and personal revelation comes to a head. Jeanne Kilde's theory of sacred space helps explain this dynamic: religious places are “more than buildings; their meaning is deeply found in history, culture, and spirituality” (Kilde, 2022, p. 14). Brown leverages the embedded meaning and the gravitas of centuries-old sanctuaries, but repurposes them. The very same stone walls that have heard church doctrine now echo with “whispers of the Holy Grail's presence” and pagan symbolism (Brown, 2003). For instance, Rosslyn Chapel is described as “a shrine to all faiths... and, above all, to nature and the goddess” (Brown, 2003, p. 290), a striking description that blends Christian architecture with pagan and feminine imagery. By labelling Rosslyn “the Cathedral of Codes” and associating it with a Mithraic temple and the ‘sacred feminine’, the novel subverts the chapel's institutional identity (Brown, 2003). Kirkpatrick's (2019) research on existential feminism sheds light on Sarah's resistance activity and identity construction as acts of philosophical and spiritual independence. It becomes a site where personal awakening occurs for Sophie - she discovers her own sacred lineage there - suggesting that the true holiness of the place comes not from Church consecration but from individual connection to truth. In Brown's narrative, then, formal holy sites paradoxically facilitate anti-institutional outcomes: they host the uncovering of secrets that threaten the Church's authority (proof of Mary Magdalene's bloodline) (Brown, 2003).

### 3. SYMBOLICALLY SACRED AND LIMINAL SPACES AS PERSONAL CRUCIBLES

If cathedrals and chapels represent the authority of organised religion, the novels counterbalance them with symbolically sacred or liminal spaces that exist at the margins of society and doctrine. These are spaces made sacred by the characters' own perceptions and experiences, wild landscapes, crypts, museums, and other unconventional sanctuaries where the protagonists undergo personal revelation or transformation. In this section, this paper focuses on such locales: why they function as ‘secular-sacred’ sites of personal power for the characters, and how they often contradict or subvert the institutional framework. This study examines these spaces as a standalone category and appreciates how the novels construct a parallel ‘spiritual geography’ in which the protagonists, rather than religious authorities, define what is holy or meaningful. This analytical choice is justified because it highlights a key thesis: that personal revolution often requires stepping into spaces not officially consecrated, but rendered sacred through individual struggle and insight. This will show through examples how each protagonist's existential quest imbues specific physical locations with an aura of sanctity that stands in direct contrast to traditional holy ground.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the natural, liminal landscapes of Lyme Regis serve as unconventional sanctuaries for Sarah Woodruff. Fowles introduces Sarah to us as a solitary figure standing on the edge of the Cobb, gazing out to sea in defiance of polite society's gaze. This image is loaded with symbolic meaning: the Cobb is a boundary between land and sea, society and chaos, and Sarah's haunt there marks her as a liminal, almost otherworldly figure. Bauer (1999) reads this seaward stance as Fowles's deliberate relocation of the heroine from domestic and ecclesiastical interiors to a liminal “stage” where the romance plot can be radically rewritten. Ji and Li (2013) and Özdemir (2024) likewise argue that the Cobb and the Undercliff operate as threshold zones in which Sarah's pursuit of existential freedom and feminist self-definition unfolds beyond the constraints of Victorian respectability. The novel's commentary and subsequent criticism make this explicit. Sarah's solitary inhabitation of the Cobb becomes a secular-sacred site of control over her own life (Kirkpatrick, 2019); in other words, by frequently placing herself on this stark, windswept wall, she claims a kind of spiritual independence she cannot find within society (Kirkpatrick, 2019). The use of the term ‘secular-

sacred' is deliberate and paradoxical: it implies that even though the Cobb is a secular (non-religious) structure, it functions for Sarah like a sacred space. In this place, she can confront herself and assert her identity free from social judgment. Similarly, the Undercliff is portrayed as wild, fertile, dangerous, yet beautiful, a place which the tame conventions of society cannot penetrate, where anything goes. The Undercliff's very wildness makes it symbolically sacred in the novel: it is untamed nature, not yet domesticated by Victorian order or prying eyes. This makes it an ideal setting for Sarah's most intimate and transformative encounters with Charles. This analysis highlights the isolation and untamed nature of the Undercliff, making it "the perfect location" for Sarah and Charles to meet privately and a place where Victorian social rules are less applicable and "new and beautiful things can happen" away from the prying eyes of judgment (Fowles, 1969). In essence, the Undercliff is a natural chapel of freedom for Sarah - a heterotopia where she can communicate her true thoughts and desires without being immediately condemned. Small wonder that Mrs Poulteney and the Lyme Regis gossips look on the Undercliff with such alarm: it represents a zone they cannot control, a 'Garden' of unorthodox behaviour and thus threatening their moral monopoly. Indeed, Sarah deliberately appropriates outcast status because, having already broken all the rules of society, she finds freedom in being herself beyond the constraints of the time (Kirkpatrick, 2019). From Sarah's point of view, however, walking in the Undercliff or keeping her vigil on the Cobb is akin to a personal ritual. This analysis compares Sarah's lonely excursions to 'vigils' and confrontations with her greatest fears and hopes, aligning her with an almost religious quest for meaning. In these scenes, she is not unlike an ascetic or a pilgrim, except that her pilgrimage is to inner freedom rather than to an altar.

Paul Tillich's existentialist theology gives us language to describe what happens here: entering an awe-inspiring or forbidding space, be it a church or a 'wild hill', symbolises confronting the 'anxiety of meaninglessness', these fears about one's life and identity (Tillich, 1952). Sarah's time on the Cobb and in the Undercliff constitutes precisely this kind of confrontation. As interpreted through Tillich, "holy space is the crucible in which [characters] make the choice of faith in an ultimate significance or personal truth over despair" (Tillich, 1952). For Sarah, the significance she seeks is the courage to be herself, outside the roles of governess, fallen woman, or wife that society imposes. Each solitary moment in her self-chosen sacred spaces hardens her resolve and clarifies her identity to the point that she chooses an outcast life and orchestrates her own fate, preferring uncertainty and freedom to the false sanctuary of marriage or respectability. In this sense, the Cobb and Undercliff serve as existential testing grounds. They are liminal (threshold) in the geographic sense and in the spiritual sense: Sarah stands at a threshold between nonbeing and social annihilation if she loses herself and being her true selfhood, very much in line with Sartre's concept of confronting anguish and freedom in a godless world (Sartre, 1946/2007). Fowles even imbues these environments with a persona; critics have called them 'brooding characters' in their own right (Hutcheon, 1988). The land and sea reflect Sarah's inner landscape of alienation and possibility, making her private rebellion inseparable from the physical spaces in which it unfolds. An insightful interpretation by Elaine Showalter suggests that Fowles uses the natural or feminine space as sacred and authentic, in contrast to patriarchal structures (Showalter, 1977). Thus, treating the Cobb and Undercliff as a standalone focus is warranted; they encapsulate how a space with no formal sanctity can become "sacred" through a character's transgressive use of it, symbolising her break from institutional confines.

On the other side, *The Da Vinci Code* features its own set of symbolically sacred spaces, though of a different flavour (Brown, 2003). As a mystery thriller, many of Brown's 'sacred' spaces are hidden rooms, secret vaults, or crypts, places literally beneath or behind the public face of institutional religion. These cryptic spaces serve as the narrative's liminal realm of personal revelation. Consider the crypt at Westminster Abbey, where a knight's tomb yields a clue, or the hidden chamber in Rosslyn Chapel that houses family secrets, or even the Louvre Museum's Grand Gallery, where the novel begins a secular temple of art that becomes ground zero for a spiritual secret (Brown, 2003). Each of these locations is portrayed as suffused with mystery and guarded knowledge, requiring the protagonists to cross a threshold, often breaking rules or trespassing, to retrieve the truth. These spaces, Sophie and Langdon essentially move from the realm of official, communal knowledge into the realm of private, esoteric knowledge, a transition that mirrors Sophie's own shift from accepting the Church's version of history to uncovering her personal heritage (Brown, 2003). The paper presenting this pattern: crypts, cathedrals, hidden rooms in *The Da Vinci Code*, is a pattern of tension between institutionalised knowledge and personal revelation. They are, physically, part of church architecture or religious institutions, though the use of these spaces in the story is subversive. For instance, the crypt under the church of Saint-Sulpice is where the zealot monk Silas searches for the keystone and is led by a nun who secretly betrays him, turning piety into deception right in front of a sacred altar. The vault of Rosslyn Chapel, on the other hand, also contains the secret of Sophie's ancestry, hidden from visitors except when she and Langdon sneak out of the typical tourist view and into a restricted area with the help of the chapel's caretaker. In essence, *The Da Vinci Code* considers these crypts and

hidden places to be the real sanctuaries of meaning, rather than the prominent sanctuaries upstairs where the mass is performed or where tourists gather (Brown, 2003). This narrative choice suggests that personal spiritual epiphanies demand immunity from public view, requiring retreat into some secret. This is underscored by the novel's major plot reveal: the Holy Grail (the tomb of Mary Magdalene) is hidden not in any cathedral or hallowed ground, but beneath the pyramids of the Louvre, a secular space teeming with ignorant crowds (Brown, 2003). When Langdon finally realises "the truth lies beneath the Rose", which is the Rose Line marker under the Louvre, he has a moment of private reverence, even going down on his knees in awe (Brown, 2003). Here, Brown sends an extraordinary message in tune with the themes of this novel: the sacred feminine, the novel's symbol of a purer, individual spirituality, has been quite literally buried in a modern, secular institution (a museum), and how far institutional religion, the Church, has departed from what is sacred to the individual. This blending of a museum's symbol of enlightenment and secular knowledge with a tomb of Mary Magdalene, a symbol of religious truth and feminine principle, creates a new kind of sacred space that is neither wholly religious nor wholly secular. It is an apt fictional illustration of the idea that modern people often find spiritual meaning outside traditional religious locales. The Louvre's inverted pyramid skylight and the tiny stone pyramid beneath it form a quasi-altar for Langdon's epiphany, yet unlike a church altar, no clergy or liturgy sacralize it; it is Langdon's and Sophie's personal knowledge and belief that sacralize that spot. Schroeder (2021) further shows that spaces in consumer and cultural environments are sacralised through the practices and perceptions of participants rather than through formal consecration, a dynamic that closely mirrors the way Langdon and Sophie transform the Louvre's architecture into a site of spiritual significance.

Critically, what unites these symbolic/liminal spaces in both novels is that their sanctity is earned or constructed by the characters' actions and choices, not bestowed by any institution. This speaks to Kilde's contention that "sacred space is not an absolute given, but is created and shaped" through narrative and cultural interpretation (Kilde, 2022). The believing community, or in these cases, the protagonists and those who share their quest, are the ones who invest these spaces with sacred meaning (Kilde, 2022). In Fowles's novel, Sarah and, eventually, Charles form a kind of micro-community of two, within which the Cobb and Undercliff become their sacred refuges, symbolising honesty and freedom (Fowles, 1969). In Brown's novel, the small band of allies Sophie, Langdon, and their helpers form a temporary community that reinterprets Rosslyn Chapel and the Louvre's bowels as places to "worship" truth and love rather than to worship God in the orthodox sense (Brown, 2003). Indeed, Jeanne Halgren Kilde's 2022 research, as cited in the proposal, notes that sacredness can be "entirely created by the believing community" (Kilde, 2022). This idea comes alive when Sophie steps into Rosslyn: initially, she does not recognise it, but soon she feels something familiar and significant, which turns out to be her own family history calling to her from that place. The chapel's meaning to Sophie is utterly different from its meaning to, say, a regular Christian pilgrim; it has become her sacred space by virtue of personal connection. Likewise, Sarah's solitude on the Cobb is meaningless or scandalous to onlookers. However, to her it is a source of strength, a self-styled rite of penance or empowerment that only she and perhaps Charles, once he understands her, believed in her (Fowles, 1969).

It is important to acknowledge a counterpoint here. These personal sacred spaces often stand in implicit critique of the institutional ones, but they do not entirely escape the influence of institutional religion. The novels' assumptions are whether these alternative spaces truly liberate the characters, or whether they may be defined in opposition to the very institutions they reject. Beauvoir (2011) likewise notes that women's projects of freedom are often dialectically bound to the patriarchal norms they oppose, a framework that helps explain why Sarah's "sacred" spaces remain haunted by the very Victorian religious order she is striving to transcend. In Sarah's case, her Cobb and Undercliff adventures derive meaning largely because they flout Victorian norms; without those norms, her acts would not carry the same charge. She needs Mrs Poulteney's world to be restrictive so she can step out of bounds and feel empowered. This suggests that her 'sacred' natural spaces are, in a sense, negative images of the church and the drawing-room: they gain sacredness by reflecting, in inverse, what the official sacred denies: 'solitude, female autonomy, communion with unmediated nature'. Sarah is keenly aware of this dynamic. According to one critic, Kirkpatrick (2019), Sarah purposefully assumes outcast status because having already broken all the rules of society gives her a sense of freedom, a yearning for the freedom to be her true self beyond the era's constraints (Kirkpatrick, 2019). Her revolt is thus somewhat dialectical; her identity "free woman" is forged against the identity society gave her "fallen woman". Rather than invalidating her rebellion, this interplay actually enriches it, showing that the personal sacred and the institutional sacred exist in a tense dialogue. Sarah's sacred spaces contradict the institutional framework by offering her something the church and society would not forgive, purpose, and self-respect. However, they also reference that framework by being contrarian. At the same time, Sophie's journey in *The Da Vinci Code*, while very much an assertion of personal belief and discovery, literally leads

her to believe in herself as the Grail and does not lead her to a purely individualistic spirituality detached from any community (Brown, 2003). In fact, her revelation ties her to an age-old lineage and a small community of guardians like her grandmother and others who kept the secret (Brown, 2003). This could argue that *The Da Vinci Code* swaps one institution, the Church, for another, albeit a more secretive and inclusive one, the Priory of Sion and the egalitarian Grail cult (Brown, 2003). Sophie's final decision at Rosslyn is not to broadcast her holy bloodline or to start a new church, but to privately embrace her identity and perhaps continue the guardianship in silence (Brown, 2003). This implies that even her most intimate sacred moment, kneeling at what might be her ancestor's grave, is intertwined with a communal narrative and responsibility, just on a more personal, decentralised scale (Brown, 2003). The 'privatisation of religious experience' noted in the proposal is evident here: sacredness is shifting to the personal, yet it does not become solipsistic; rather, it allows plural narratives and small communities to flourish rather than a single hegemonic story (Taylor, 2007). Both novels thus suggest not that institutional religion is entirely obsolete, but that its claim to sole ownership of sacred space is broken. The sacred is pluralised and personalised, found on a cobblestone pier at dawn, or in a crypt beneath a pyramid, and this reflects the broader cultural move from collective frameworks to individualised belief systems (Taylor, 2007).

From a narrative theology perspective (Van Huyssteen's framework), these spaces are crucial because they are where the characters live out and "story" their beliefs (Van Huyssteen, 1999). Rather than discussing doctrine abstractly, the novels let their physical settings narrate the struggle between faith and doubt, between freedom and constraint. Van Huyssteen 1999 suggests that fiction can serve as a site of theological reflection, embedding religious questions in lived experience (Van Huyssteen, 1999). In *The Da Vinci Code*, the question What is sacred truth? Is debated not in churches or sermons, but through the visceral experience of fleeing into a Templar church's crypt or deciphering an ancient text in a monk's library, etc. (Brown, 2003). In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, questions of divine justice, sin, and redemption are played out through Sarah's choices to isolate herself or to connect with Charles outside the bounds of matrimony (Fowles, 1969). In both cases, the space itself participates in the storytelling: the openness of the Undercliff or the gloom of a crypt externalise the characters' inner state and the existential stakes. When Sophie and Langdon are trapped in the oppressive silence of a church at night, hunted by a killer monk, the very ambience, the traditionally sacred quietude turned eerie, heightens the sense that they must rely on their wits and each other, not the Church, for salvation (Brown, 2003). When Sarah wanders the misty Undercliff at dawn, the uncultivated landscape around her symbolises her inner wilderness, full of both threat and promise, where she must confront fear of social damnation, of loneliness, to find the 'courage to be' herself (Tillich, 1952).

All in all, symbolically sacred and liminal spaces in these novels operate as crucibles of identity and meaning that stand apart from, and often in opposition to, official religious locales. They demonstrate the narrative principle that where a character is, and how that place is characterised, can speak volumes about their spiritual journey. By isolating and examining these spaces, this paper offers more profound insight into each protagonist's 'personal revolution': Sarah's emancipation from Victorian patriarchy and Sophie's awakening to a truth beyond Catholic dogma. These revolutions are spatially mediated. The novels suggest that to truly find themselves, the characters must step outside the traditional 'holy ground' and into the wilderness or the hidden chamber. In doing so, they paradoxically make those new spaces holy by what transpires there. As the research proposal succinctly put it, 'sacred or symbolically charged places in both novels serve as sites of personal transformation and resistance'. They are 'sites of trial' that become personal altars where private incidents turn into larger questions of faith and authenticity. Thus, covering these symbolically sacred spaces as a standalone focus is not a tangential digression but a necessary complement to the earlier discussion of institutional sacred spaces: it completes the picture of how space and spirituality interact in the novels, showing the two halves of the equation, the official stage 'churches' from which the characters depart, and the personal stage 'wild or hidden spaces' on which they arrive to define their own truths.

## 4. CONCLUSION

### 4.1. SYNTHESIS

When comparing *The Da Vinci Code* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it becomes clear that despite their differences in genre and tone, both novels utilise sacred space, existential identity, and theological conflict as key lenses to interrogate the relationship between the individual and larger belief systems. Each theme manifests in distinct ways in the two works, yet striking parallels emerge. Brown's fast-paced modern thriller and Fowles's reflective postmodern Victorian tale both stage dramas of personal and spiritual awakening, using physical and symbolic settings to amplify

their thematic concerns. This approach views stories as a means to grapple with faith and meaning, and here it helped us see Langdon and Sophie's experiences, as well as Charles and Sarah's, as forms of "embodied narratives" where belief and identity co-develop. There is room for expanded analysis using narrative theology across more novels to see how fiction serves as a site of theological exploration for readers and characters alike.

#### 4.2. SPACE AS THE CRUCIBLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AND PERSONAL FAITH

Through the above analysis, it becomes clear that *The Da Vinci Code* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* both construct a spatial dialectic between the institutional and the personal, the communal and the individual, the prescribed and the discovered. By deeply examining religious spaces in these novels, it becomes clear that architecture and landscapes are not passive settings but active narrative devices that both reflect and shape the protagonists' inner transformations. Major sacred spaces like churches and cathedrals come to symbolise the weight of institutional frameworks, the Catholic Church's historical authority in Brown's thriller, and the Anglican-Victorian moral order in Fowles's novel (Brown, 2003; Fowles, 1969). In these spaces, characters encounter the legacy of tradition: sometimes oppressive, sometimes simply insufficient for their needs. Sophie Neveu's and Robert Langdon's forays into temples of Christendom reveal cracks in the pillars of orthodoxy, hidden scrolls, secret histories, and human frailties, which correspond to the cracks forming in Sophie's inherited faith (Brown, 2003). Sarah Woodruff's exclusion from and disillusionment with the church-going world of Lyme Regis highlights the gulf between public piety and personal truth; the official sacred places offer her no sanctuary, prompting her to seek meaning elsewhere (Fowles, 1969). In contrast, the symbolically sacred spaces, the Undercliff, the Cobb, crypts, and museums, stand as arenas of personal revolution, where each main character takes command of their spiritual narrative. Sarah's decision to stand apart from society and define her own virtue is an existential debate staged in the open air: What is sin or salvation when removed from communal judgment? Each space, therefore, is a test that the characters undergo, and through which they articulate a balance or imbalance between personal religious knowledge and communal religious authority (Taylor, 2007).

A key insight that emerges from this comparative study is that both novels reflect a broader cultural shift toward the privatisation of religion and the questioning of traditional authority, albeit in different contexts (Taylor, 2007; Casanova, 1994). *The Da Vinci Code*, a postmodern thriller, explicitly questions Catholic authority and history, even positing alternative gospels and goddess worship, thereby aligning with a contemporary scepticism of grand religious narratives. Its sacred spaces are often sites of controversy: the novel plays with historiographic metafiction, turning the Louvre and Westminster into places where the official story is suspect and must be reinterpreted (Brown, 2003; Hutcheon, 1988). This corresponds to what Linda Hutcheon described, and the proposal cites historiographic metafiction as a challenge to authority (Hutcheon, 1988). Meanwhile, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, though written in 1969, is set in 1867 and provides a kind of retrospective critique of how personal faith and virtue could survive under a repressive social religious order (Fowles, 1969). It resonates with Charles Taylor's description of the move from a society where "religion [structures] public life to one where faith is an issue of conscience and choice" (Taylor, 2007). In Fowles's portrayal, we see the early seeds of that transition: Charles Smithson's crisis of faith one critic noted it as 'the loss of a relationship with God' in his life leads him to rely on an 'inside out' search for meaning, much as Taylor says modern individuals must 'create their own sense of the sacred' (Taylor, 2007). Sarah, too, embodies a proto-modern individual who finds what is holy in nature and in her own autonomy rather than in church sacraments. By the novels' conclusions, sacred space has been effectively "privatised not sanctioned from the outside but generated through one's own experience" (Taylor, 2007). The Abbey or Chapel is sacred to Sophie because of what she discovers there, not because a priest says it is holy; the woods and cliffs are sacred to Sarah because of what she overcomes there, not because anyone sanctified them. This is a profound reconfiguration of the sacred, echoing sociologist José Casanova's point that modern religion often becomes a 'personal matter' (Casanova, 1994).

However, prioritising truth over a neat, agreeable narrative, we must also note that neither novel suggests that personal spirituality exists in a vacuum. Both acknowledge the social dimensions of even individual religious stories (Van Huyssteen, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Sophie's personal revelation has communal consequences; it strikes at the heart of an entire religious institution's credibility, and it redefines her place within a lineage and possibly a community of Grail guardians (Brown, 2003). Sarah's private acts of defiance eventually ripple outward, affecting Charles and even society at large. In one ending of the novel, imagine Charles raising their child alone, a single father by choice, which challenges social norms. (Fowles, 1969). In both cases, the authors seem aware that the line between personal and communal is porous: personal epiphanies can disrupt collective teachings, and personal virtues can inspire or unsettle the community

(Taylor, 2007). This interplay ensures that the novels' sacred spaces are not painted as either purely oppressive or purely liberating; instead, they are arenas of negotiation. Characters negotiate their identities and beliefs in these spaces, and in doing so, negotiate (or renegotiate) their relationship to the broader society or tradition.

In conclusion, analysing sacred spaces in these two novels, following the proposal's leads, reveals a deeply human struggle at the crossroads of place, power, and spirit. Readers have to justify a two-part focus: the formal sacred spaces show how institutional frameworks seek to contain meaning and how they can be challenged from within, while the symbolic/liminal sacred spaces show how individuals carve out new meanings in the gaps and margins of those frameworks. This comprehensive look, supported by theory and textual evidence, demonstrates that space in literature is never neutral: it is charged with cultural and emotional significance that can either uphold the status quo or, in the hands of characters, become a tool for radical change. As Jeanne Kilde notes, sacred places "carry spiritual and cultural associations that symbolise and constitute social values" in these novels; the protagonists essentially rewrite those associations (Kilde, 2022). They turn the symbols toward their own purposes: the church becomes a place to unearth suppressed truths for Sophie, and the wilderness becomes a chapel of liberty for Sarah. By challenging assumptions and considering alternative perspectives, we see that the conflict is not between space and person per se, but between different uses and interpretations of space. Institutional religion uses space to assert authority and collective identity; the protagonists repurpose space to seek authenticity and personal faith. Both novels ultimately valorise the latter without entirely denying the former. There is a suggestion in each that truth and grace - the core of what sacred space is supposed to facilitate - might be found not by abandoning all structure, but by allowing more pluralism and personal experience within it. *The Da Vinci Code* hints at a reconciliation between Sophie's devout grandmother and the hero Langdon, both of whom value the sacred, just in unorthodox ways, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ends with an open question of whether Charles and Sarah will find a new equilibrium for themselves in a world that's changing around them.

In the final tally, religious spaces in these novels serve as mirrors and moulders of the characters' existential journeys. They relate to institutional frameworks by either reinforcing or critiquing them. A grand cathedral can reinforce dogma, but it can just as soon become a crypt of hidden challenges to that dogma. They also reflect and sometimes facilitate personal revolutions: an abandoned corner by the sea can become the stage for a woman's self-realisation, and a museum's basement can host the climax of a spiritual awakening. The deep analysis of these spaces affirms that to fully grasp the themes of a literary work, whether faith versus doubt, or freedom versus conformity, one must pay close attention to its geography of sacred and profane. By planning our examination in sections and justifying each, first the macro, sanctioned spaces of religion, then the micro, reclaimed spaces of individual spirituality, ensured a coherent yet thorough exploration. The coherence comes from understanding the dialogue between these spaces, and the depth comes from not accepting at face value that church equals good or wilderness equals freedom, but seeing how the novels invite us to question those assumptions. In doing so, in treating the texts with the 'freedom as first principle, not authority,' much like Fowles's narrator described (Fowles, 1969). This approach underscores the essence of both novels' messages: that true faith or truth is not handed down from on high, unquestioned, but is found in the courageous, often solitary endeavour of individuals making meaning for themselves, sometimes against the very altars at which they were raised.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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