

THE ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN “*DIGITAL
FORTRESS*” BY DAN BROWN

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Abstract. *This article provides a comprehensive character analysis of Susan Fletcher, the protagonist of Dan Brown’s Digital Fortress. A brilliant cryptographer working for the National Security Agency, Susan exemplifies resilience, intellect, and emotional depth in navigating the novel’s high-stakes challenges. The analysis examines her personality traits, relationships, and pivotal decisions that drive the narrative forward. Special attention is given to how her logical mind balances ethical dilemmas and personal loyalties, shedding light on her growth throughout the story. Through this character exploration, the article illustrates Susan’s role as both a moral anchor and a symbol of strength in the face of adversity. By delving into her character, this study deepens the understanding of how Dan Brown crafts compelling protagonists that resonate with readers in a complex technological thriller.*

Key words: *character, main hero, cryptography, National Security Agency (NSA), Digital Fortress, technology, human values, security, individual rights.*

Digital Fortress is the debut techno-thriller novel by American author Dan Brown. In addition to this work, Brown has penned other notable novels, including Angels and Demons (2000), Deception Point (2001), The Da Vinci Code (2003), and The Solomon Key (2008).⁷ These books are characterized by gripping crime scenes, suspense, and intricate exploration. Digital Fortress follows the story of Susan, a cryptographer, who finds herself in a challenging situation, fighting to ensure the survival of humanity.

As scholars mentioned, *literary work is the cornerstone of humankind’s civilizations, values, and customs, acting as a reflection of society, artistic output, and a glimpse into an ideological dogma. People who engaged with literary work frequently express one’s subjective ways of seeing the world with one another and alongside their audiences.*⁸

In the work analyzed in the article, the author’s perception of the world and thoughts are depicted with a unique charm and through a sharp plotline, captivating the reader in an intense emotional experience from beginning to end. The events develop around the life of a young girl named Susan Fletcher.

⁷ Ika Nofi Indria Wati. The need for virtual ethics in Dan Brown’s Digital Fortress. – Surakarta, 2009. – P.2.

⁸ Danil Bram Hardiansyah. Imagery analysis in Dan Brown’s Digital Fortress. (A thesis) – Indonesia, 2023. – P.2.

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Susan Fletcher, the protagonist of Dan Brown's "Digital Fortress," is a brilliant mathematician and the NSA's head cryptographer. She is depicted as a dedicated, determined, and independent woman, serving as an influential figure for goal-driven women pursuing challenging careers. At the beginning of Digital Fortress, Susan Fletcher is portrayed as a romantic and pure-hearted woman deeply in love with her fiancé, David Becker. Her initial characterization highlights her tender emotions and longing for a life of simplicity and happiness with the man she adores. Susan is shown reminiscing about their shared moments, embodying the innocence and hope of someone who envisions a future filled with love. For instance, she eagerly awaits a weekend getaway with David, cherishing the prospect of spending time together away from the pressures of her demanding job at the NSA. The writer starts the novel as follows:

They were in the smoky mountains at their favourite bed and breakfast. David was smiling down at her. "What do you say, gorgeous? Marry me?"

Looking up from their canopy bed, she knew he was the one. Forever. As she started into his deep-green eyes, somewhere in the distance a deafening bell began to ring. It was pulling him away. She reached for him, but her arms clutched empty air.⁹

Through these lines we can feel that Susan is an ordinary romantic woman who dreams of living a happy life with her beloved one.

This depiction establishes Susan as a multi-dimensional character, contrasting her technical brilliance and professional demeanor with the vulnerability and warmth of a woman in love. Her pure-hearted dreams about David form a stark counterpoint to the high-stakes, ethically complex world she is soon thrust into, showcasing her as both relatable and admirable. However, as the events unfold, it becomes increasingly clear that the protagonist is highly capable and intelligent, possesses strong willpower, and is a specialist who can think quickly and make decisions in extraordinary situations.

Susan's remarkable intellect and steadfast dedication to her profession are consistently showcased in the novel. For example, her expertise becomes indispensable when the NSA's code-breaking supercomputer, TRANSLTR, faces an uncrackable code. Her resolve to safeguard national security is further emphasized as she uncovers internal conspiracies within the agency, revealing her sharp analytical abilities and strong ethical principles.

The author vividly conveys Susan's commendable abilities, which earned her a respected position and admiration within the team in a short time, through Commander Strathmore's attitude:

Commander Strathmore, the fifty-six-year-old deputy director of operations, was like a father to Susan. He was the one who'd hired her, and he was the one who'd made the NSA her home. When Susan joined the NSA over a decade ago, Strathmore was heading the Crypto Development Division—a training ground for new cryptographers—new male cryptographers. Although Strathmore never tolerated the hazing of anyone, he was especially protective of his sole female staff member. When accused of favoritism, he

⁹ Dan Brown. Digital Fortress. — New York, St, Martin's Press, 1998. — P.4.

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*simply replied with the truth: Susan Fletcher was one of the brightest young recruits he'd ever seen,*¹⁰

This passage illustrates Commander Strathmore's respect and recognition for Susan Fletcher's exceptional talent and intelligence. It underscores his role as a mentor and protector, highlighting a workplace dynamic where merit is acknowledged. Strathmore's unwavering defense of Susan against accusations of favoritism reflects his acknowledgment of her unique abilities and her invaluable contribution to the team. His declaration that Susan is one of the **"brightest young recruits"** he has ever seen not only reinforces her professional excellence but also adds depth to her character as a distinguished and capable individual in a challenging and male-dominated field. This depiction elevates Susan's status in the narrative, portraying her as a pivotal figure whose skills and integrity command admiration and trust.

Susan Fletcher's decision-making and problem-solving abilities are vividly depicted in Chapter 22 of *Digital Fortress* when she discovers the unusual and unbreakable code, a key element of the plot. Her ability to think critically and remain calm under pressure is demonstrated as she analyzes the code and attempts to identify its origin and purpose. Therefore, the commander consistently relies on Susan in high-stakes situations, entrusting her with the most critical responsibilities. She is regularly assigned tasks that require the highest level of accountability and trust.

In the following sentences, we can observe Susan's ability to make firm decisions and apply her intellect to find solutions to problems:

*"We must contact Tankado! There must be a way to convince him not to release! We can offer him triple the highest bid! We can clear his name! Anything!"*¹¹

In *"Digital Fortress"*, Dan Brown skillfully uses metaphorical expressions to describe Susan Fletcher. These metaphors often highlight her intellect, strength, and inner conflict. One metaphor frequently used to describe Susan is as a "key," particularly in relation to her role in unlocking secrets. This metaphor represents her ability to break codes and reveal hidden truths, positioning her as someone with the power to solve the mystery at the heart of the novel.

Despite her sharp intellect and high IQ, at times, Susan appears in the form of a simple and trusting girl, like any other ordinary woman. Through this approach, the author prevents the protagonist from being overly idealized, hinting that she is still an ordinary human being:

Susan was confused. It seemed to her that Ensei Tankado's timely demise had solved their entire problem.

*"Commander," she argued, "if the authorities are saying he died of a heart attack, we're off the hook; his partner will know the NSA is not responsible."*¹²

Susan's initial reaction reflects a sense of relief, as she believes that Tankado's death, attributed to a heart attack, clears the NSA of any suspicion. This reveals her

¹⁰ Dan Brown. *Digital Fortress*. – New York, St, Martin's Press, 1998. – P.20.

¹¹ Dan Brown. *Digital Fortress*. – New York, St, Martin's Press, 1998. – P.35.

¹² Dan Brown. *Digital Fortress*. – New York, St, Martin's Press, 1998. – P.40.

desire for a quick resolution and the ease of assuming that the situation has been neatly concluded. The use of the phrase ***“we’re off the hook”*** suggests she feels their involvement in the larger conspiracy has been absolved, which is a common psychological defense mechanism when facing an intense crisis.

The phrase ***“we’re off the hook”*** demonstrates how Susan is trying to rationalize and simplify the situation. While the death of Tankado may seem to solve the immediate problem, the reader is aware that it might not be as clear-cut. This creates dramatic irony because the reader knows that Tankado’s death might not have been entirely coincidental and could have deeper, more dangerous implications. It foreshadows how the narrative will unfold, keeping the reader on edge as the characters’ assumptions unravel.

Susan mentions that Tankado’s partner will understand that the NSA is not responsible. This highlights the ongoing theme of trust, reputation, and credibility. Tankado’s death, if perceived as natural, would, in theory, prevent further suspicion about the NSA’s involvement. However, it implies that there’s an external entity (Tankado’s partner) who could hold a different perspective, which will complicate matters further. This introduces the concept of competing narratives and how perceptions of truth can vary.

At the end of the novel, Susan is visibly affected by the betrayal of an individual she held in high regard, akin to a father figure. Simultaneously, her profound love and unwavering loyalty towards David are evident.

*Susan’s mind told her to run, but David’s dead weight pressed down all around her. She thought she heard his voice calling to her, telling her to escape, but there was nowhere to go. Crypto was a sealed tomb. It didn’t matter; the thought of death did not frighten her. Death would stop the pain. She would be with David.*¹³

This passage explores Susan’s deep emotional and psychological state as she faces a life-threatening, high-pressure situation. It highlights her internal battle between survival and despair, with death representing both an escape from pain and a potential reunion with a lost loved one. The writer uses vivid imagery of weight, entrapment, and a haunting longing for David to show the profound toll that the situation is taking on Susan’s mind and spirit. Ultimately, this scene underscores the themes of sacrifice, loss, and the complex relationship between life, death, and emotional attachment.

In conclusion, Susan is portrayed as both a mentally strong and emotionally sensitive woman. Dan Brown skillfully depicts her full character by portraying her in various situations.

¹³ Dan Brown. Digital Fortress. – New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1998. – P.260.

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