Finn Amster

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**Secrets and Structures in Robert Langdon Novels**

Dan Browns’ Robert Langdon novels each follow a similar structure when creating the plot. In many ways, although Robert Langdon is the protagonist, in each of his novels Brown centers the plot around the antagonist. The antagonist, usually an individual with reach and influence, sets off a string of events with the goal of accomplishing some greater task. In most of Brown’s novels, the antagonist does this by either posing as, or infiltrating, an organization or group, in the process gaining a pawn, someone willing to do whatever they ask. Robert Langdon enters at this point, working to uncover the deception. More often than not, the antagonist is someone close to Langdon, who manipulates him as he tries to reveal the truth behind what is going on in each book. By using a common structure and drawing from established themes in Western literature, Brown links each of his books to create a series defined my manipulation and secrets.

Dan Brown’s *Origin* is both a culmination and an extension of the formulas used to create antagonists, secrecy, and manipulation in his previous novels. Initially, the novel seems to directly mirror Brown’s previous Langdon books. The Regent, an anonymous figure who has powerful influence, contacts Admira Avilá, a member of the Palmarian church. Posing as a high-powered member of the church, the Regent manipulates Avilá into killing Edmond Kirsch. As in earlier books, the Regent is able to recruit Avilá by demonstrating his power and telling Avilá, “*We occupy the highest levels of government*” (Origin, 62). At one point Avilá thinks to himself, “*My actions are sanctioned by a higher authority…There is righteousness in what I do*” (Origin, 61). Avilá believes he is working for his church and therefore sees his action as justified and protected. Once again, the hired killer who is in conflict with Langdon throughout the book is influenced by an unknown figure and is motivated by ideology. After Kirsch’s death, the Regent instructs Avila to kill Robert Langdon and Ambra Vidal to stop Kirsch’s presentation from being released and protect the church, thus initiating the familiar rush to the finale. Throughout the book, the identity of the regent is withheld, the motives of the Guardia Real, the royal palace, the prince, and many other people and groups are questioned. Even Winston, the artificial intelligence Langdon works closely with throughout the novel, deceives Langdon. All of this is familiar to an experienced Brown reader, as this is repeated in his past books.

However, in the end of the novel, Brown reveals that the structure his readers are expecting was significantly altered. Instead of multiple figures manipulating each other and working against Langdon, the reader learns that all of the deception stemmed from one source: Winston. After the action of concludes, Langdon begins to realize that there were too many coincidences over the past few days. First, Langdon realizes that monte@iglesia.org is a code for Winston and this is confirmed when Winston tells him, ““Someone needed to fan the flames for Edmond. Who better to do it than myself?” (Origin, 444). So, the figure feeding information to the outside world and creating the theories that tied Valdespino and the Palmarian Church to Kirsch’s murder was Winston. Langdon also realizes that, as tragic as Edmond’s death was, it worked out a little too well. Brown writes, “he thought of how Edmond’s public death had guaranteed that his presentation would be the dominant topic of conversation on the entire planet” (Origin, 446). “He thought of Edmond’s long-held desire to destroy the Palmarian Church” and how “public perception would be that Edmond had been struck down by a religious fanatic” (Origin, 446). A this point Langdon realizes that Edmond’s death was orchestrated so every one of his goals could be fulfilled. Langdon asks Winston, “*who* is the Regent? Who is the person who hired a Palmarian Church member to assassinate Edmond in the middle of his live presentation?” (Origin, 447). Winston reveals that he orchestrated everything to ensure that Edmond’s did not have to die a painful death in vain. However, despite the revelation that Winston is behind the manipulation, it is unclear whether “he” is the antagonist. Here, Dan Brown poses an important question: can machines be accountable for their actions?

The question of whether artificial intelligences can be blamed for their actions has been posed before and there is no definitive answer. First, one must examine the likelihood that artificial intelligence can actually mimic human intelligence and have some degree of free will. Marvin Minsky, a former Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor and the co-founder of the MIT artificial intelligence lab, proved that this is a possibility. In Arthur C. Clarke’s novel, *2001, A Space Oddyssey*, which is mentioned in *Origin*, he writes, “In the 1980s, Minsky and Good had shown how neural networks could be generated automatically — self replicated — in accordance with any arbitrary learning program. Artificial brains could be grown by a process strikingly analogous to the development of a human brain. In any given case, the precise details would never be known, and even if they were, they would be millions of times too complex for human understanding” (2001: A Space Odyssey, 86). Although the technology did not exist at the time, Minsky’s theories on artificial intelligence showed that, with sufficient computing power, one could theoretically create a program that learned on its own and would eventually reach a level of complexity comparable to the human brain. So, it is theoretically possible that Winston could have some form of free will. However, this does not mean Winston acted with malice. When receiving the Turing Award, Minsky told the crowd, “Computer languages of the future will be more concerned with goals and less with procedures specified by the programmer” (Form and Content in Computer Science). In *Origin*, Winston tells Langdon that Kirsch’s “instructions required me to find creative ways to make his presentation as widely viewed as possible” (Origin, 445). This follows what Minsky said in 1970 and it seems that, if Winston was taught to solve problems creatively, “he” cannot be held accountable for “his” actions.

*Origin* is Dan Brown’s newest take on a Robert Langdon novel and it is structurally and thematically similar to his previous books, but the question of Winston’s guilt differentiates it from previous works. This is because one of the main elements that connects his previous books, but is arguably missing in *origin*, is the presence of a Judas figure. Judas Iscariot was the 12th disciple of Jesus Christ, the son of god and prophet in Christian faith. In Matthew Parris and Nick Angel’s book, *The Great Unfrocked: Two Thousand Years of Church Scandal*, they write that Judas, “has become the archetype of traitors for all time, his name an immediately understood reference, in hundreds of languages, for betrayal” (The Great Unfrocked, 140). Although Winston’s actions were the result of his programming, he cannot be considered a betrayer, but in each of Dan Brown’s previous works, elements of the Judas archetype can be found in his antagonists.

In Dan Brown’s first Robert Langdon novel, *Angels and Demons*, Camerlengo Ventresca is a quintessential Judas, and this presents the basic structure that Brown will go on to use in his subsequent novels. The Camerlengo is angry with the church and their newfound tolerance of science, and therefore resurrects the Illuminati threat in order to unite the Catholic church against this common threat. He recruits an assassin and gains the trust of Langdon and others, only to eventually betray them. This is the basic plot structure that Brown will use in his subsequent novels. The backbone of this structure is the antagonist, who is developed following the Judas archetype. The Camerlengo’s actions mirror those of Judas. Judas gained the trust of the apostles, but in the end, betrays Jesus. However, when one looks deeper, more interesting connections can be found. Judas’ motivation is a highly debated topic within the field of religious studies. Each of the gospels provides a slightly different reason behind his betrayal of Jesus. However, for *Angels and Demons*, interpretations of the Gospel of John seem to fit best. In the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, it is posed that “Judas was a disillusioned disciple retaliating against Jesus not so much because he loved money but because he loves his country and thought that Jesus had failed it” (Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 407). The Camerlengo killed the pope, one of his closest friends and mentors, and Brown explains his motivation, writing, “The camerlengo was certain the Pope would see the perils, but the Holy Father saw only hope in Vetra’s breakthrough. He even suggested the Vatican *fund* Vetra’s work as a gesture of goodwill towards spiritually based scientific research. *Madness!*” (Angels and Demons, 453). The camerlengo felt betrayed and thought that the pope was taking the church in the wrong direction by not condemning Leonardo Vetra. This seems to fit the earlier interpretation of Judas. It is interesting to note that Judas’ anger and sense of betrayal stemmed from misunderstanding. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of god, he was referring to a metaphorical and spiritual kingdom, not an earthly one (Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 407). However, the disciples misinterpreted this, believing he was describing an earthly kingdom and was referring to their eventual overthrowing of the Romans. Judas did not think that Jesus was following through with this. So, some argue that Judas’ betrayal stemmed from this deeper misunderstanding of Jesus’ teachings. It is interesting that the Camerlengo’s anger also came from his being misinformed. He believed the pope was betraying the church by embracing science, but, unknown the Camerlengo, the pope had a great love for science because, “science let him experience the joys of fatherhood without breaking his vow of celibacy” (Angels and Demons, 457). When the Camerlengo learns that he was the child the pope fathered, he takes his life, similarly to Judas when he realized the extent of his betrayal.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing, the antagonist, is similar in many ways to the Camerlengo. He assumes the role of The Teacher, posing as a high-ranking member of the Opus Dei church. Although not a formal secret society like the Illuminati, Opus Dei, as depicted by Brown, functions very similarly to a secret society. There are different levels of involvement, and those at the top withhold information from those at the bottom. Instead of directly contacting a pawn, like the Camerlengo did, Teabing contacts the head of the church, Bishop Aringosa. Aringosa then recruits one of his followers, Silas, who is already loyal to the church. Teabing also manipulates Langdon, much like the Camerlengo. However, instead of using his position to shift suspicion, Teabing takes advantage of his long-time relationship with Langdon. However, unlike in *Angels and Demons*, Langdon actually helps Teabing in his quest, although unaware of Teabing’s actual motives. Teabing feels that the Priory of Sion, a secret society dedicated to protecting the secret of the Holy Grail, has failed the world by not releasing their secret. He tells Sophie and Langdon that Jacques Saunière, “failed the Grail. He failed the Priory. And he failed the memory of all the generations that had worked to make that moment possible.” (Da Vinci Code, 407). It seems that the interpretation of Judas in the Gospel of John once again fits best. Teabing believed that his actions were a necessary evil, required to benefit the world with the information being kept secret by the Priory. His betrayal reminds readers of *The Da Vinci Code* where, like in *Angels and Demons*, the antagonist is a betrayer and deceiver motivated by ideology.

Dan Brown’s *Inferno* is the first book in the Langdon series that begins to deviate from this structure. For the first time in a Robert Langdon novel, the line between protagonist and antagonist is blurred. Many different characters in the novel seem to fit the established Judas role. The Provost, initially fits the antagonist model created in Brown’s earlier books. His group, the Consortium functions similarly to the organizations and societies present in Brown’s earlier works. The Provost also has a pawn, Vayentha, who, like Silas and the Hassasin, is willing to kill for her boss and is eventually found to be expendable. In the first part of the book Langdon is in conflict with the Consortium. They first trick him in to solving Zobrist’s puzzle and then attempt to kill him. The Provost is willing to use violence against Langdon not for ideological reasons, but for monetary ones. The Provost does not care what his clients’ goals are and despite his concerns about Zobrist’s plans, “he had decided long ago that the consortium had no ethical responsibility to judge” their clients (Inferno, 160). He provides the services they pay for without asking questions. This fits the Judas archetype, for in every gospel it is agreed that, “as far as a human motive is concerned, Judas’s betrayal of Jesus was done for the money” (Dictionary of Jesus and Gospels, 407). However, when the Provost learns what Zobrist was planning, he agrees to work with the World Health Organization (WHO). So, although he initially could be seen as a Judas figure, he does not end up betraying Langdon. Around the time he learns that the WHO and Consortium are now allies working to stop the release of the virus, Langdon also realizes that Dr. Sienna Brooks, his companion throughout the novel, was in a relationship with Zobrist, and seems to be working to execute his plan. However, she reveals to him that, “I went to the cistern to *stop* Bertrand’s virus… to *steal* it and make it disappear forever… so nobody could every study it” (Inferno, 431). Throughout the book, Langdon is manipulated by many different people and groups, but none of them end up having darker motives. This leaves Zobrist, who is the most likely candidate for the position of antagonist, despite his being dead for the entirety of the novel. This is how *Inferno* structurally differentiates itself from the other Langdon novels. The secrets and manipulation that drive the plot stem from characters other than the antagonist, who simply set the process in motion.

*The Lost Symbol* contains elements seen in previous Robert Langdon novels, but in this novel Brown changes this structure in order to tell a narrative that is different than others in the series. Brown begins by changing the order in which the familiar components appear. The antagonist in the novel, Mal’akh, infiltrates the society in an effort to uncover their deepest secrets and destroy them. However, he does so before the novel takes place. The novel begins with Mal’akh tricking Langdon into going to Washington D.C, where he reveals that he has kidnapped one of Langdon’s mentors, Peter Solomon. Unlike in previous novels, Langdon quickly learns that he has been manipulated and because of this he is never betrayed in the novel. Langdon is forced to help Mal’akh solve the Masons’ greatest puzzles, and Brown writes, “Not only had Langdon reunited the pieces of the Masonic Pyramid, he had figured out how to solve the arcane grid of symbols at the base” (Lost Symbol, 387). It is interesting that, for the first time in a Robert Langdon novel, Langdon solves the puzzles while fully aware that he is aiding the antagonist. But, the novel truly goes in a new direction in the end, when Mal’akh’s identity and motivation are revealed. Mal’akh reveals that he filmed a secret masonic ritual and that, “*This video will create chaos*” (Lost Symbol, 438). However, unlike in *Inferno* and *Origin*, releasing the video is not Mal’akh’s true goal. The reader also learns that Mal’akh is actually Peter Solomon’s son and, “had waited years for this moment… to take revenge on the man who had abandoned him” (Lost Symbol, 448). Yet, once again, this is just a step towards his final objective. Mal’akh wants power above all else and believes that by sacrificing himself he will, “establish his rank in the hierarchy of demons. Darkness and blood were where the true power lay” (Lost Symbol, 447). By using the video to force his father to sacrifice him, Mal’akh will gain the power he desires, have revenge on his father, and destroy the secret society he hates. This is unfamiliar to readers, who have yet to experience an antagonist driven by greed and anger. Despite this, Mal’akh still contains basic elements of the Judas archetype, because he is a betrayer who is motivated by a form of greed. Yet, like in *Origin*, in the end of the novel, Brown makes it difficult to apply this archetype. Mal’akh, while revealing his identity, tells his father, “Your prodigal son has returned” (Lost Symbol, 448). This references the story of the prodigal son, who returns home to a loving father despite being absent for years and spending all of his money on carnal pleasures. Here, Brown begins turning Mal’akh in to an empathetic character and this transition is completed when Peter tells him, “Wherever you are going, please know this… you were loved” (Lost Symbol, 460). While he is still certainly the antagonist, the end of the novel paints Mal’akh as a misguided son, instead of a Judas who betrayed his family. Similarly, to Winston, one is forced to question whether or not Mal’akh acted out of malice.

Dan Brown’s Robert Langdon novels are all connected by similarities in structure, theme, and content. In each novel, Robert Langdon is deceived, lied to, manipulated, but eventually learns the truth and solves the puzzles placed before him. Along the way he gains a female accomplice and is forced to use his vast knowledge of art, architecture, history, symbols, puzzles, and many other things in order to stay ahead of those working to stop him. It is worth noting that other, less important things, are also repeated throughout Brown’s novels. For example, both the Camerlengo and Admiral Avilá are motivated by the loss of their families in church bombings. However, despite these many similarities in his books, it does not seem that he is simply trying to replicate the formula that brought him his initial success. It seems that in each book Brown builds off of that formula, working to adapt his writing to the changing times. *Angels and* *Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* both are very similar. They both contain ideologically driven antagonists who manipulate and betray Langdon. However, *Inferno* shifts away from this model. Langdon is still betrayed, but there is no longer a single antagonist. It is interesting that this change comes with the introduction of technology, something fairly absent from previous Langdon novels. *The Lost Symbol* also changes this formula, creating an antagonist driven by anger instead of ideology or money, who never attempts to gain the trust of Robert Langdon. Finally, in *Origin*, Brown returns to his initial formula, only to reveal that it was fabricated by Winston. When viewed together, it seems that these changes in the structure of each book are connected. In each book Brown picks and chooses from his previous books, while introducing new aspects as well. It seems that it is not a coincidence that his three most recent novels, *Inferno, The Lost Symbol,* and *Origin*, all are heavily intertwined with technology. It seems that Brown realizes that his initial formula seen in his early Langdon novels is too limited to be adapted to modern times. Perhaps he is trying to show his readers that the world is becoming more complicated and the familiar plot structure of a single antipathetic antagonist is no longer representative of reality.

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