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Heroines in the Robert Langdon series by Dan Brown

In Dan Brown’s most recent novel *Origin,* Ambra Vidal is the newest in the line of intelligent and attractive heroines that accompany Robert Langdon during/throughout their quest to uncover a groundbreaking secret that will change the way we see the world. Vidal possesses all the characteristic features that Dan Brown heroines display in the previous novels. Her connections to the victims and key characters of the plot, her attractive features and relationship with Langdon and lastly her distinguished intelligence as well as her educated and cultured background indisputably/undoubtedly establish her as this novel’s female protagonist. The qualities she displays are typical of Dan Brown heroines – what changes depending on the novel is the extent to which Dan Brown decides to emphasize certain qualities over others.

A distinguished expert in her field, Vidal is the “highly respected” (Origin, Ch. 22, p.107) director of the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain and holds a degree in art history from Universidad de Salamanca. She is thirty-nine years old and has never been married, yet she is engaged to Prince Julian, the future King of Spain. She is also Edmond Kirsch’s trusted friend and hosts the event where he plans to uncover his great scientific discovery about the origin and future of human life. Just like all previous female characters, her presence in the novel is necessitated because of the strong connections she has with important characters. Her recent perceived falling out due to their rushed engagement and her infertility decreased her trust in the Prince, making her unwilling to return to the palace when Kirsch’s murder takes place. Instead she escapes her security guards with Langdon. Her close friendship with Kirsch and, as a result, her insider knowledge about Kirsch’s scientific research and life in general, are invaluable assets that make her partnership with Langdon necessary for figuring out a way to find the presentation and broadcast it to the world. Her connection to Prince Julian makes her unwilling to return to the Palace and her connection to Kirsch makes her passionate and adamant about staying with Langdon and helping him figure out Kirsch’s password, a task whose completion requires her presence. Both of her relationships make her deeply motivated to figure out the Kirsch’s password and broadcast his discovery. On the one hand she wants to respect her friend’s last wish to make his work public and on the other hand she hopes that her fiancé is not involved in the assassination. In other words, her connection to two key characters necessitates her companionship with Langdon and because the implications of the quest affect her personally the quest becomes more intriguing to the reader.

Her character not only provides valuable pieces of information that determine the progress of the search for Kirsch’s password, but also serves as the person Langdon develops an infatuation with. He typically shares a romantic relationship with the heroine of each novel – a flirtatious interaction meant to create a playful tone in some parts of the novels. Her attractiveness is what captivates Langdon from the beginning, as when he first sees her he describes her as “an elegant woman” who is “strikingly beautiful” (O, Ch.14, p.71) and “looks like a retired fashion model” (O, Ch.22, p.107). The sexual tension between Vidal and Langdon is revealed in certain moments such as when they are cramped up in Kirsch’s car trunk and Langdon “could not help but recall his first teenage experience in the backseat of a car with a pretty girl” and thinks “[he] was more nervous back then” (O, Ch. 51, p. 232). They share a long embrace in the end of the novel, with Langdon’s “strong hands on her back pulling her very close” (O, Ch.102, p.438) and during which “he held her for several seconds, longer than he probably should have” (O, Ch.102, p. 438). Vidal admits to herself that she “could feel affection for two different men” (O, Ch.102, p. 438) and they part their own ways. Her stunning physical appearance is also one of the qualities that intrigue Prince Julian’s interest in her.

Aside from her attractive features, Vidal’s character peaks Prince Julian’s interest she is educated and cultured — two elements typical of Dan Brown heroines. Her educated and cultured background wins over the public’s approval and support after her engagement to Prince Julian is announced. In the eyes of the public, “she [is] cultured, successful, and most importantly, not a scion of one of Spain’s noble families. Ambra Vidal was of the people.” (O, Ch. 22, p. 107). The daily reports by the press soon reveal that she is “much more than a pretty face[[1]](#endnote-1)” as she “quickly revealed herself as a fiercely independent woman” (O Ch. 22, p. 107). In fact, her independence and assertiveness are proven when she “flatly refused to permit the Guardia Real to interfere with her daily schedule” and when she threatens the Guardia agent Fonseca to follow her orders “or [her] first order of business when [they] return will be to have [him] fired” (O, Ch. 22, p. 108).

She also knows how to face misogynistic comments about what she chooses to wear: When commander of Guardia Real suggests she wears “more conservative and less form-fitting clothing” (O, Ch. 22, p. 108) she makes “a public joke about it, saying that she had been reprimanded by the commander of the “Gurardarropia Real” — of the Royal Wardrobe.” Similarly, although when attending certain events, she feels that “the museum sometimes felt more like an awkward pickup bar than a cultural center.” (O, Ch.44, p.196) she is not disconcerted by that feeling and knows how to face that type of approach by men by “affixing a polite smile on her face,” and spinning around “to dispatch [them]” (O, Ch.44, p.196).

Apart from her educated and cultured background, as well as her independence and assertiveness, Vidal has a sharp intellect and good intuition – praiseworthy qualities that once again perfectly fit the Dan Brown heroine profile. Vidal’s quick wittedness is revealed when she figures out Kirsch’s “clever decoy” (O, Ch.70, p.314) with the pages he chose to display in the crypt of Sagrada Familia. Apart from being observant and clever, she also has exceptional intuition and judgment. At first, a lot of the events that occur point to Prince Julian as the primary suspect as he is the only individual that could have authorized the actions of the Palace. Despite the mounting evidence, Vidal knows deep down that he is not guilty and only doubts him and thinks that he can’t be “an innocent bystander in all of this” (O, Ch.56, p. 255) at specific moments of emotional despair. She also recognizes the immense influence that Bishop Valdespino imposes on him and so knows that Bishop Valdespino could be manipulating him.

Thus, Vidal possesses many commendable qualities that make her exemplary and admirable as a heroine, however she does have one “weakness”; she is infertile because as a child she had a “terrible infection that almost killed [her]” (O, Ch. 44, p. 201). She always wanted children but cannot bear any of her own. As she says herself, “sometimes [she] feel[s] like children are the only thing missing in [her] life”. This desire of hers that hasn’t and can’t ever be fulfilled makes Vidal more human and invokes the readers’ empathy. When the subject of children is brought up, although she attempts to tell Julian, she “tried to speak but couldn’t make a sound” (O, Ch. 44, p.199). She is later subjected to the shocking experience of a public proposal, where she felt “paralyzed with disbelief” and “trapped” in the “silent panic” (O, Ch. 44, p.200). When she reveals the truth to Julian about her inability to bear children, her worst fear materializes as she feels him shift away “ever so slightly” and “in an instant, knew it was over.” (O, Ch. 44, p. 201). Vidal is attractive, intelligent, independent, and a respected expert in her field, yet, as all humans, she has difficulties she needs to face, and those struggles are what humanize her.

Lastly, it is worth noting that in Spanish the meaning of the name Vidal is life.[[2]](#endnote-2) Dan Brown often chooses names whose meanings are relevant to the novel’s theme. In Origin, “life” is pertinent as the theme of the novel is meaning of life or “where we come from” and “where are we going”.

The Dan Brown heroine profile consists of a couple of key elements, one of them being their attractiveness. All heroines in the Robert Langdon series share the attribute of being incredibly mesmerizing to Langdon – usually due to their physical appearance, confidence and elegance. Their attractiveness is usually pointed out from the very moment they are introduced to the reader. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Sophie Neveu walks with “fluid strides” and a “haunting certainty to her gait” towards Langdon. Her “striking” confidence is further underlined by her “strong air” and “sharp gaze.” (DV, Ch.9). Similarly, in *Angels and Demons* Vittoria Vetra’s appearance captivates Langdon who says she possesses “full, earthly features that […] seemed to exude a raw sensuality” (A&D, XIV, 69) and he notices her “slender torso and small breasts”. Thirty-two-year-old Sienna Brooks’ “tall and lissome” (I Ch 1 p.26) body, as well as her “willowy elegance” (I, Ch.1 p.26) and “penetrating eyes” (I. I. 26) are also noted by Langdon, in *Inferno.* In *Origin*, Ambra Vidal is also “tall and willowy,” “wearing a formfitting white dress” and “seem[s] to drift effortlessly across the floor.” (O, Ch 14, p.71). All the heroines are attractive to Langdon, and a flirtatious atmosphere often dominates their conversations. But their romantic relationships with Langdon are not analyzed to the same extent or do not progress to the same point. For example, in the end of *The Da Vinci Code*, Sophie and Langdon share a passionate embrace and kiss and agree to spend a week in Florence together. In *Angels and Demons*, Langdon’s and Vetra’s relationship is concluded with a sexual innuendo, as she undresses in front of him in a hotel room in Rome. In *Inferno*, Langdon and Brooks develop deep feelings for each other and passionately embrace before parting their own ways as Brooks heads to deal with the ethical predicament regarding the infected population at the WHO headquarters. In contrast, in *The Lost Symbol*, Katherine Solomon only has a flirtatious relationship with Langdon which doesn’t become physical. In *Origin*, Vidal and Langdon develop deep feelings for each other, but the relationship remains platonic, as Vidal is also in love with Prince Julian.

Another element that all Dan Brown heroine’s share is that they are distinguished experts in their field or exceptionally intelligent, resourceful, and quick-witted. Sophie is a young Parisian cryptologist for the French national judicial police and proves her astonishing resourcefulness and intelligence from the start, when she uses a bar of soap to trick the police into thinking that Langdon is escaping the Louvre. Her childhood memories that depict her grandfather teaching her riddles and puzzles reaffirm that from a young age she was remarkably cunning. Similarly, Vittoria is a distinguished CERN physicist and “a woman of tremendous personal strength” (A&D, XIV, 69). However, although she displays exceptional intelligence which one would think would be instrumental during the hunt for Hassassin and the canister, her main function is to be Langdon’s love interest and later to be treated as an object of sexual desire by Hassassin. Therefore, it becomes clear that although all heroines possess a sharp intellect, the extent to which their ability and knowledge are used in the development of the plot varies. Sienna, for example, who is a doctor and had “off-the-chart IQ” (I, Ch 7, p.57) as a child prodigy, has a much more active role in the pivotal moments of Inferno. She turns out to be a transhumanist and feels morally obliged to save the world by destroying the virus before it infects the population or the WHO gains access to it: her moral assessment of the situation, because of her intelligence, affect her actions which in turn majorly affect the plot. Katherine’s intelligence and knowledge, as a pioneer in Noetic Science, is also relevant to the hunt for the Masonic pyramid and the importance of the ancient mysteries, which she explains to Langdon throughout the novel. In contrast, Ambra, although clearly educated, intelligent and an expert in art history, doesn’t mainly use those virtues to help discover the password with Langdon – it is mostly her insider knowledge about Kirsch.

The insider knowledge that all the heroines provide – some to a bigger extent than others — reveals one of the key aspects of Dan Brown heroines: they all have a personal connection to the victim of each novel, typically a man that has power or tremendous influence. In Sophie’s case, Jacques Sauniere, her grandfather, the Grand Master of the Priory of Sion and the curator of the Louvre gets murdered in the museum. He has written a personal message to her urging her to find Langdon. As a result, Sophie becomes Langdon’s partner on their quest of identifying Sauniere’s murderer and the location of the Holy Grail, which is deemed successful because of her “insider” knowledge about Sauniere and their conversations when she was a child. Similarly, Vittoria is the adopted daughter of Leonardo Vetra, a world-renowned CERN scientist who is murdered and has his eye removed for the killer to gain access to their lab. Vittoria and her father conducted their groundbreaking research together and therefore Vetra knows more than anyone else about the potential and dangers of antimatter. Katherine is the sister of Peter Solomon, head of the Smithsonian Institution and billionaire philanthropist and Freemason who is kidnapped and has his hand severed. Following this pattern, Ambra shares a close bond with Edmond Kirsch, a futurist, billionaire computer scientist, who gets shot right before he reveals his proudest discovery. Ambra is the one person who knows the most about Kirsch’s work and life because of their personal connection. She knows that he has a forty-seven-letter password that unlocks his phone and that it is a line of poetry related to a prophecy – information that is invaluable in figuring out how to access and release his scientific discovery.

Sienna also has a personal connection to a victim, but in contrast to the rest of the heroines’ cases, this connection is not revealed until the end of the novel and the victim is the plot’s “bad guy.” Specifically, Sienna is the lover and disciple of Bertrand Zobrist, a genius, world renown scientist who creates the infertility virus to stop overpopulation and then commits suicide. Because of this personal connection, Sienna receives a letter from Zobrist where he explains his plans with the virus. Having burnt the letter so that the information doesn’t land in the wrong hands, Sienna is the only person with this “insider” information that can help deal with the impending global crisis.

All heroines, despite displaying exceptional qualities, have at least one struggle they face in their personal lives — a fact that makes each novel’s plot more fascinating. The extent to which this struggle is analyzed is analogous to the extent to which background information about the heroine’s past is provided and analyzed, which varies in each novel. Sophie is traumatized from her family’s mysterious death and suffers a painful fall out with her grandfather after witnessing a disturbing sex ritual. This makes her emotionally dependent on the result of their hunt as she correctly suspects that the truth about her family and grandfather will be uncovered through identifying Sauniere’s killer and the location of the Holy Grail. The fact that she has endured traumatic experiences directly linked to the ongoing events she is faced with makes her heroic bravery and calmness in times of crises even more impressive; her character becomes more human and simultaneously heroic.

Vetra has also faced struggles during her childhood, specifically that of being an orphan. Katherine has suffered from her mother’s assassination by an intruder, however not much information is provided on the psychological effects of those experiences. Generally the background provided about them is limited in the two novels. Likewise, Vidal is infertile — but again the emotional impact this has on her isn’t presented in depth.

In contrast, Sienna’s depression as a child prodigy and her devastating experience of almost being raped in the Philippines are extensively described to the reader. Her character is thus multidimensional — she has well above-average skills, but her more human side with her weaknesses and life struggles also shape her personality and goals. The depiction of the struggles and inner challenges of a heroine add depth as well as complexity to the character — elements that entice the reader. In the Robert Langdon series, all heroines have at least one “weakness” that humanizes them, even though their weaknesses and traumatic experiences are not analyzed in the same depth in each novel.

In conclusion, Brown remains consistent in his portrayal of heroines in his newest novel *Origin*. Ambra Vidal is strongly connected to major characters of the plot: her fiancé is the future King of Spain presumed to be directly involved in Kirsch’s assassination and her close friend is Edmond Kirsch, the influential scientist that has made a groundbreaking discovery that is going to change the world’s perspective on human life. These two relationships grant her insider knowledge which necessitates her presence and justifies her companionship with Langdon. As all Dan Brown heroines, she is attractive, a quality that captivates Langdon, and they develop a romantic relationship. She is a highly respected expert in her field, like most of the heroines, and educated and cultured, elements that help her win over the public’s support. In addition, she is independent and assertive, knows how to deal with misogyny, and has good intuition and a sharp intellect. Lastly, she faces the struggle of being infertile and the fear of being rejected because of it.

All the Dan Brown heroines share the same qualities, but the degree to which he describes them varies. They are all attractive, confident and develop an affectionate relationship with Langdon. They are experts in their fields, intelligent and hold invaluable insider knowledge due to their personal connections. They face struggles in their personal lives but the extent to which these are portrayed once again varies. The novels such as *Inferno* where the heroine’s past battles are more deeply analyzed are more intriguing to the reader because the character has more dimensions, complexity and development.

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)