Olivia Sommers

Prof. Beyer

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Theme in Origin

Dan Brown’s newest novel *Origin* combines many of the popular and successful characteristics of his previous books. *Origin* follows the path of famous Symbologist Robert Langdon on his quest to avenge his friend’s death by releasing the groundbreaking scientific discovery for which Kirsch was killed. The book combines the age-old debate of religion and science with new exciting technology and fuses this with the fundamental human questions of “Why are we here?” and “Where do we go?” Dan Brown himself attempts to answer these questions from differing perspectives while also claiming to have the definitive answer through Langdon’s friend Edmond Kirsch’s discovery. The theme of *Origin* teeters between the debate of science and religion and the question of human origin and ending.

The book opens with an intriguing prologue in which wealthy scientist and atheist Edmond Kirsch meets with the leaders of three of the most powerful world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Kirsch makes a promise about a discovery he has made. Kirsch says his promise, “will not shake [religion’s] foundations. It will shatter them”[[1]](#endnote-1). With this intriguing set up, the novel continues into Chapter 1 with Brown’s well-known protagonist Robert Langdon in Spain. Unlike Brown’s previous novels, *Origin* has an emphasis on modern art rather than classic Renaissance pieces used in the previous books. Langdon is out of his comfort zone in the Guggenheim Museum surrounded by modern art and immediately outfitted with an earpiece containing a personalized guide to the museum which Langdon later realizes is actually a supercomputer AI program named Winston. Winston helps Langdon later in the novel, providing essential clues and information.The prologue foreshadows both the plot and the theme for the remainder of the book. The plot revolves around the promise made by Kirsch, which also exemplifies the main theme of pitting science against religion.

Langdon exemplifies his own attempts to reconcile the differences of science and religion in a conversation before the announcement with Kirsch in which Kirsch references something Langdon had said to him months before, “science and religion are often attempting to tell the same story in two different languages”[[2]](#endnote-2). Despite Langdon’s reservations about the discovery and the potential fallout, he and museum curator Ambra Vidal team up to revenge Edmond Kirsch after Kirsch is shot in the head by the carefully concealed weapon of a guest added last minute to the list. In the aftermath of the shooting, Langdon embarks on his mission of *Origin,* which is to honor his friend’s memory by releasing his final message and discovery to the world by unlocking the 47-character line of poetry to the portal where the message is stored. By choosing this path Langdon is furthering the mission of science above religion, but retaining the idea that religion can adapt to, respond and strengthen the base of its followers much like it had centuries before with other new discoveries that questioned the order of the world.

All the while the book is filled with suspicions and conspiracies revolving around who is responsible for the course of events that night. Prime suspect, besides Langdon, is Bishop Valdespino of Spain. He appears guilty due to his tattoo tying him to the ultra-conservative era of Spain’s history and his suspicious behavior that night. The bishop was not in fact tied to the murder of Kirsch and his science, but his own secret love with the dying king of Spain. The character Valdespino is a clear contrast to obvious progressive Catholic priest, Father Beña, of the Sagrada Familia church. Father Beña explains the Sagrada Familia church to Langdon as a blend between “God, science and nature”[[3]](#endnote-3). It is with this outlook of an intertwined reality of the scientific and spiritual world that Beña refers to Christianity as a “work in progress”[[4]](#endnote-4). The characterization of Beña as a helpful and important character in the novel explores the ideas he holds in high regard with the reader. In the contrast between initially villainized Valdespino and Beña, Brown shows the different outlooks of the theme, but also is tempted by Father Beña’s ability to overlook the differences in the face of his fate.

All theories of Valdespino’s involvement are debunked when Langdon later reflects on the events. He specifically is curious about the insider information reported to a popular conspiracy theory website by the email *monte@iglesia.org.[[5]](#endnote-5)* The translation of this means the words “hill” and “church”. Much like Kirsch’s favorite politician and celebrity, and conveniently also the namesake of his supercomputer creation, Winston. In this revelation, Langdon realizes Winston’s involvement in what occurred. He talks to Winston who admits that he was responsible for the murder of Kirsch by hiring the killer and feeding information to both the media and Langdon and Ambra. Winston, a computer program, created an algorithm to best accomplish the desires of his programmer Kirsch to create the most traffic and viewers to the broadcast of his findings. The murder made sense because of Kirsch’s impending death due to cancer. Winston is the embodiment of both the negative and the positive potential for technology. He exemplifies the scientific piece of the theme and also the more concentrated theme of the future of technology and humanity.

Winston’s logical standpoint on the issue of carrying out Kirsch’s wishes predicts and parallels his announcement of his scientific findings. Kirsch was able to prove that Humans were created by science by creating a computer program that stimulated the origins of the universe through the Miller-Urey experiment. He then stimulated the future of that experiment through an evolutionary lenses looking to see where humans are going. Kirsch predicted through his scientific data that humans will merge with a new kingdom of life called Technium. The technology of the world will slowly join and take over the human population.

Underlying the larger theme of science and religion is the role of technology in the lives of modern humans. Brown ties in the larger theme of the conflicts between modernization and a traditional culture with the apparent and pressing issue of the growth and rapid advancements of technology. Throughout the novel, it is stressed to the reader and the characters of the book, that the days of supercomputers making important and possibly life threatening decisions based on logic rather than emotion are coming closer and closer. Brown wrestles with the concept that our lives may very soon be taken over by something we have very little control over. This is illustrated in Kirsch’s discoveries and more importantly in Langdon’s revelation at the end of the book that Winston was responsible for the construction of the plan of Kirsch’s murder. The algorithms had predicted the best course of action based on numbers and data rather than the very human decision making process taking into account emotions.

The plot of Dan Brown’s new book focuses on the theme of science versus religion, however this is not the first time that Brown has explored this topic. Brown has written about the tensions between religion and science in his previous novels, most notably *Angels and Demons. Angels and Demons* [[6]](#endnote-6)ended with a conclusion lending itself for readers to conclude that neither science nor religion is the stronger of the two. However Brown’s inability to marry the two concepts appears in his other books *The* *Da Vinci Code,* and *The Lost Symbol*, where Brown plays with the concepts of an increasingly modernizing world with the traditions and treasures of an older world. This inability to understand the complementary nature of the two concepts is carried through to his newest novel in a much more explicit manner. In *Origin* the characters on opposite ends of the spectrum of religion and science each represent the angle for which people can answer the fundamental questions that main character Kirsch attempts to answer in his scientific discoveries. In fact, what keeps readers interested in the plot of the book relies heavily on the fundamental human curiosity to the answer of “where we came from” and “where we are going.”

*Angels and Demons[[7]](#endnote-7)* published in 2000is filled with clues that indicate the overarching theme of the book is a struggle of science versus religion. The book centers on the illuminati, a secret society for the purpose of protecting science from religion. The plot revolves around a terrorist attack on the Vatican using a controversial new scientific technology. The theme in *Angels and Demons* is the centuries old conflict of science versus religion. Brown proves that the two are incompatible through the use of ambigrams and the character’s polarizing views on science and religion. This theme is so central to the novel that it appears in the title; which discipline is the angel and which is the demon? The inquisitive nature of this title portrays Brown’s unwillingness to pick a winner of the debate.

Similarly, in *Origin* Brown explored his interest in this conflict with the characterization of priests and religious leaders throughout the book. Much like in *Angels and Demons* Brown uses characters to show the different standpoints on the theme. In *Origin* Father Beña is likened to CERN scientist and priest, Leonardo Vetra, of *Angels and Demons.* Beña and Vetra both fuse the characteristics of science and religion to enhance their life rather than fighting the battle and ignoring the revelations of the other discipline. Both *Origin* and *Angels and Demons* explore a modern, relevant conflict like the one discussed in Dan Brown’s other novel *Inferno.*

*Inferno* continues the tradition of tackling important modern day controversies established in Dan Brown’s previous novels. In *Inferno* the central conflict is the pressing overpopulation issue versus morality and humanity. This builds on the themes in *The Da Vinci Code* of revisiting history and the theme of science versus religion in *Angels and Demons* and *Origin.* The over population issue of *Inferno[[8]](#endnote-8)* is presented in a compelling way which allows the reader to understand where the antagonist’s point of view. Brown uses science and rhetorical technique to present this issue as a true conflict of morality. By presenting the argument in a persuasive way, Brown emphasizes the difficulty that people today are faced when making moral decisions.

The female main character, Sienna, is the best example of an effective display of someone who could equally be in favor of one position or the other. Sienna surprises readers and Langdon alike when she deceives him to find the final location of the sterilization virus in Venice alone, seemingly attempting to release it at the request of her lover and the villain of the novel, Zobrist. In the book she is pictured as a genius that would give anything to save the world; in fact she just wanted to make a change in the world for other people. Sienna’s apparent switch back and forth between sides perpetuates the equally valid sides of this argument. In *Origin,* Brown presents another large dilemma on readers. The book is heavy with implications of existence, science and religion and the future of humanity. All of these have many different standpoints and opinions of the issue, one of which is the necessity to understand the progressing technology and reconcile it with the teachings of religion.

This concept of adapting the old to better understand the progression of the world is a theme carried over from Dan Brown’s arguably most famous novel *The Da Vinci Code*.[[9]](#endnote-9) In this book Robert Langdon and code breaker, Sophie Neveu, embark on a journey to find the secrets of the Priory of Sion so the secrets do not die with Sophie’s grandfather, the Grandmaster of the Priory. The ancient secrets of the Priory, revealed to be the location and identity of the Holy Grail, represent the beauties of the past. The secrets are preserved in Renaissance paintings and architecture. However, the tradition of the secret nature of the Grail is threatened by historian Teabing, who believes that given the changing nature of the world it is time for the secret of the Grail to be unveiled. The conflict in interest here boils down to the desire for humans to discover that which is hidden, and when that human curiosity conflicts with the need to protect others from the potential repercussions. Even Langdon internally struggles with this disagreement. As an academic he feels the need to reveal the information and spread knowledge; however, he ultimately decides to keep the information he rediscovered a secret. This theme of the debate between preserving the old traditions and moving into a modern world is seen in *Origin* through a bit different lens.

In *Origin* the conflict is one of scientific innovation rather than age old secrets, and scientific discovery has historically always found a way into the world despite the best attempts of the church or other organizations to keep it quiet. The question is *Origin* is not whether or not to reveal the information that Kirsch had planned to share, but rather how to respond. *Origin* itself does not actually answer this question, most likely because there is no clear proven way to unite the customs of religion and the modern surprises of science. It is yet to be shown whether the scientific elements of Brown’s fictitious discoveries could be accurate. Brown did, however, effectively identify points of contention for the future with the internalization and questioning of the base beliefs of many people’s lives.

This concept is similarly important in Dan Brown’s novel *The Lost Symbol[[10]](#endnote-10)*; the only book not yet discussed from the Robert Langdon series. Taking place in Washington D.C., Langdon in wrapped into a mystery involving the Freemasons, secret research in the discipline of Noetics, and family drama. This puzzle once again concentrates on the balance of necessary knowledge and deception, like the revealing of the Grail in *The Da Vinci Code*, the secrets of the Freemasons could have a very negative backlash if released to the public. This is the same conflict that Brown is once again explores with Kirsch’s discoveries in *Origin,* except that this time the question extends beyond the presentation of the information. There is a distinction in Brown’s mind between the weight of a scientific discovery and that of traditional origins. Scientific discoveries need be known to all people as they display some sort of fundamental reality about the way the natural world works. There is a distinction between that and the social, cultural, or spiritual truths of those explored in *The Da Vinci Code* or *The* *Lost Symbol*.

*The Da Vinci Code* or *Lost Symbol* explore topics that involve deception and trickery from the institutions in which many people place their trust and their hearts; this differs from a natural truth about the world. The trouble and danger to which the main characters go to reveal the information promised by Kirsch, show the lack of conflict in the question of whether or not to release the discovery. Rather, the question is about how those institutions so protected in Brown’s previous books will respond to the new technology. This is in addition to the spiritual journey along the way that Langdon is taken on while he puzzles through the possibilities of Kirsch’s discovery and reflects on his own personal beliefs.

Dan Brown has a tendency to write about what interests him repeatedly and in different manners. In *Origin* he once again tackles some large scale, fundamental human questions all while tying into the theme those topics previously discussed in his other novels. His themes range from the larger scale of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol* in which Brown writes about the convergence of new and old traditions with the preservation of order as the centerpiece. In *Inferno* he delves deeper into this concept by incorporating the stakes of human reproduction and health as the consequence of Langdon’s mission. *Inferno* strikes a chord with the concerned modern human, as it incorporates into Brown’s novel formula the introduction of a pressing modern day issue, in this case, population growth. This also introduces another theme of logic in the face of impending crises — which life can be valued more, the one of today or of tomorrow. Brown also explores this in *Angels and Demons*. Here he uses the theme of science and religion not only to explore the conflicts in the novel about the papacy and modernization, but as an introduction of this theme into the repertoire of Langdon book readers. He builds upon this foundation in his newest novel *Origin.*

*Origin* blends all the themes that Brown has focused on in his previous books to create an intriguing plotline and premises that question the internal feelings of readers to push them to think about the future. Brown uses the broad interwoven topic of science versus religion to investigate the theme of technology’s place in the modern world. He uses the conflict between religion and this modernization to push readers to inquire about the future of their foundational beliefs to better understand and prepare for the changing world around them.

1. Brown, Dan. *Origin.* Random House, 2017, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brown, Dan. *Origin.* Random House, 2017, p. 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Brown, Dan. *Origin.* Random House, 2017, p. 314. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brown, Dan. *Origin.* Random House, 2017, p. 314. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brown, Dan. *Origin.* Random House, 2017, p. 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, Dan. *Angels & Demons*. Newmarket Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brown, Dan. *Angels & Demons*. Newmarket Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Brown, Dan. *Inferno*. Random House, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. Random House, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Brown, Dan. *The Lost Symbol*. Random House, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)