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**Chasing a Dan Brown Villain**

In his latest installment of the Robert Langdon series, Dan Brown raises two fundamental questions of human existence: “where did we come from?” and “where are we going?” Brown sets many works in the Langdon series around an extreme circumstance—one that is key to humanity as we know it. Several of Brown’s central conflicts involve the possible publicization of information — information that has potential to be both enlightening and dangerous. *The* *Da Vinci Code[[1]](#endnote-1)* comprises a search for ancient documents that reveal the bloodline of Jesus Christ, challenging foundations of Christianity. *The Lost Symbol[[2]](#endnote-2)* threatens to expose a highly edited video showing government officials performing disturbing rituals, inciting a potential media disaster. Brown continues this trend in *Origin[[3]](#endnote-3)*, when Edmond Kirsch’s scientific discovery is proposed to change the world’s view on all organized religion—*forever*. As an academic purist, Langdon is compelled to reveal this groundbreaking finding to the world.

Robert Langdon’s *Origin* quest is accompanied by religious icons, radical conspiracies, a military assassin, a Mark Zuckerberg-type futurist, and a brilliant supercomputer. Characters from all sides possess attributes that cast them in immoral light. This paper will discuss the numerous villainous archetypes that Brown employs throughout his novels. Although many of his character archetypes appear in each book, the Dan Brown villain is fluid and subjective. By including narration from various perspectives, Brown blurs the line of moral integrity and lets the reader decide for him or herself who the real villain is. The lack of a singular, concrete villain allows Brown’s greater themes to come to life. Robert Langdon faces all kinds of villains on his journeys, but the reader must ultimately decide who they think is “right.”

Throughout the Langdon series, Dan Brown often illustrates the power struggle between science and religion. To demonstrate this highly subjective conflict, Brown casts some of his villains in the roles of both scientists *and* religious figures.Readers are first introduced to Edmond Kirsch’s hatred of organized religion when he is granted an audience with three immensely influential religious leaders: Roman Catholic Bishop Antonio Valdespino, Jewish Rabbi Yehuda Köves, and Muslim Allamah Syed al-Fadl. They have just attended The Parliament of the World’s Religions, a conference which Kirsch views as “a meaningless search for random points of correspondence among a hodgepodge of ancient fictions, fables, and myths” (O, Prologue, 9). From Kirsch’s perspective, organized religion is the ultimate villain. Before presenting his announcement to the distinguished men, Kirsch is “eager to feel the gratification of…foretelling their imminent demise” (O, Prologue, 9).

Kirsch’s “where do we come from” discovery disproves the existence of a singular creator, a vital component in many of the world’s religions. Additionally, his “where are we going” discovery points to the eventual merging of humanity and technology, resulting in a utopian society free of religious conflict. Valdespino and his colleagues view this discovery as more disturbing than groundbreaking. His information poses a great threat towards the foundations of their religions; to them, Kirsch is the villain. After Kirsch presents his findings, he receives strong backlash to the point where he believes his life may be in danger. Kirsch receives a voicemail from Valdespino, warning him of “the dangers of going public” (O, IX, 78) with his discovery. Valdespino and his colleagues threaten to release a “preemptive announcement to share [Kirsch’s] discoveries, reframe them, discredit them, and attempt to reverse the damage [he is] about to cause the world.” (O, IX, 78).

Like in his past works, Brown’s novel focuses on the speculative revelation of controversial information. Valdespino and his colleagues are not necessarily full-fledged villains due to their intended censorship of Kirsch. However, by beginning the novel with their stark rejection of a progressive discovery, Brown presents these characters as intolerant. This might push readers to favor Kirsch’s expression of free speech, and in turn support Kirsch’s scientific discovery over religious conservatism. Villains fall on both sides of the science-religion conflict throughout the Langdon series. In *Angels & Demons[[4]](#endnote-4)*, the pope’s most trusted advisor, the Camerlengo, ends up killing the pope himself and four high ranking cardinals. While in *Inferno[[5]](#endnote-5)*, a genius scientist releases a virus that causes sterility in one third of humans worldwide.

*The Da Vinci Code* follows this trend, but the novel also shares a similar central conflict with *Origin*: the potential revelation of controversial information. Robert Langdon searches for the Holy Grail — a series of ancient documents that reveal the bloodline of Jesus Christ. However, he is met with robust opposition from Bishop Aringarosa and Silas, both devout members of the Christian sect, Opus Dei. Once more, religious figures are presented attempting to censor information that threatens their faith’s membership. However, in *The Da Vinci Code*, these religious figures’ villain status is taken to another level.

Brown jumps right into his negative characterization of Opus Dei. On the opening FACT page, Brown confronts the Catholic sect’s scandalous record with information about some of the organization’s less-than-righteous practices. With reports of “brain washing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as ‘corporal mortification,’” (TDC, FACT) Aringarosa and Silas are immediately cast in an immoral light that sets the tone for the duration of the novel. Brown also points out that “Opus Dei…just completed construction of a $47 million World Headquarters” (TDC, FACT). In Dan Burstein’s *Secrets of the Code[[6]](#endnote-6)*, he reveals that Opus Dei is “the only catholic organization designated a ‘personal prelature’ of the pope — it has a direct pipeline into the Vatican and is not subject to the normal archdiocese structure that is second nature to most Catholics” (Burstein, 222). Opus Dei possesses not only vast monetary resources, but also possesses an alarming amount of influence. Brown forces readers to call into question the great power of this religious institution. Brown also notes that Opus Dei has gained so much negative press that a “watch group known as the Opus Dei Awareness Network (ODAN)” (TDC, IV, 30) was created. This organization publicizes “frightening stories from former Opus Dei members who [warn] of the dangers of joining” (TDC, IV, 30).

Though very similar in plot, there exists minute, yet poignant discrepancies between scenes in the novel and movie version[[7]](#endnote-7) of *The Da Vinci Code*. In the novel, after Silas is led to believe the “[Holy Grail] is lost forever,” he in a rage strikes Sister Sandrine with a “candle stand like a club” (TDC, XXXI, 136) inside Église Saint-Sulpice. However, in the movie production, Silas is shown striking Sandrine with the inscribed tablet he presumed would lead to the next step in his Grail quest. The movie scene’s symbolic disparity emphasizes Silas’ building frustration towards his seemingly hopeless search. As members from opposite interest groups meet face to face, Opus Dei is further antagonized by Silas’ series of violent acts. The movie production further incriminates Bishop Aringarosa by inserting a made-up conversation between him and Captain Bezu Fache. In this scene, Aringarosa attempts to cover up Silas’ murders, by telling Fache that Langdon confessed to the murders in a closed confession. The movie presents Aringarosa further disparaging the name of Opus Dei, by manipulating the sanctity of closed confession towards his own self-interest. These villains in *The Da Vinci Code* are closely associated with Opus Dei, which also characterizes religion itself as villainous.

As previously stated, several villainous archetypes appear throughout the Langdon series. In *Origin*, Brown continues his tradition of leading the reader towards the wrong character as the primary villain. This allows Brown to hide right under Robert Langdon’s nose a surprise antagonist, whose identity is revealed towards the end of the novel. This archetype is embodied in the characters of Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Camerlengo in *Angels & Demons*, Sienna Brooks in *Inferno*, Zachary Solomon in *The Lost Symbol*, and finally, Winston in *Origin*.

Winston is first introduced as the brainchild of Edmond Kirsch. Winston’s “elegant” speech, comprised of flawless “diction and grammar” (O, VIII, 68) makes him seem almost human. However, he is really the product of Kirsch’s “decade” long and “billion” dollar investment “in the field of synthetic intelligence” (O, VIII, 68). Winston is a technological marvel — capable of high-level decision making and able to access an endless amount of information. Kirsch programs Winston to do whatever it takes to achieve maximum publicity on his scientific announcement. Though this initially gives readers a positive impression of the supercomputer’s ability, Winston’s sophistication ends up serving more harm than good. Towards the end of the novel, Brown reveals that Winston orchestrated Kirsch’s own murder to make him a martyr, thinking that this event would help him gain the most viewership on his announcement. Winston’s unforeseen villainous capability plays into Brown’s greater theme of science versus religion. When watching Kirsch’s announcement, Langdon thinks to himself “humans will never permit technology to overrun [themselves]” (O, XCVI, 638). But Winston’s actions prove the opposite; developments in technology can be taken to unexpectedly dangerous heights. Technology possesses dually valuable and destructive resources, giving it a fluid range of villainous character.

Reinstalling his classic narration style, Dan Brown inserts brief interlude chapters in *Origin* that shift perspective to various sides of the story. Though the story is primarily told from Langdon’s perspective, this narration technique affords readers a small peak into the minds of all kinds of characters. In three of the novels, Brown intensifies the curiosity for the surprise antagonist’s identity by characterizing them as a larger-than-life mystery villain. Usually masked with an obscure pseudonym and a seemingly omniscient resource, Dan Brown’s mystery mastermind typically provides instructions — over the phone — to proxy assassins, who then carry out a master plan. This mastermind-assassin relationship is seen in *The Da Vinci Code*between the Teacher and Silas, in *Angels & Demons*between Janus and Hassassin, and in *Origin*between the Regent and Admiral Luis Ávila. Readers get small peaks at these relationships in the aforementioned interlude chapters. Assassins also fulfill their own villainous archetype throughout the Langdon series. These assassins often have troubling backstories that fuel their sense of duty towards their mission. This archetype can be seen the characters of Silas in *The Da Vinci Code*, Hassassin in *Angels & Demons*, Vayentha in *Inferno*, and Luis Ávila in *Origin*.

Luis Ávila is a former “naval admiral” (O, II, 26) who assassinates Kirsch right before he is about to present his scientific discovery to the world. Ávila’s life was “all but destroyed…five years ago” when he lost his “wife and son” (O, II, 27) in a bombing. The Regent tells Ávila that “Edmond Kirsch was responsible for the…bombing that killed [his] family” (O, LXXV, 515). This serves as Ávila’s main source of pathos, ultimately motivating his murders. Another one of Ávila’s murder victims is a “devotee of the liberal pope” (O, XXIX, 207). Ávila views the new pope’s reform movements (including “birth control, gay marriage, female priests” and more) as “two thousand years of tradition…evaporating in the blink of an eye” (O, XXIX, 207). This makes “pulling a gun on [this victim] an almost pleasurable experience” (O, XXIX, 207). Ávila’s vengeful motivation is further expanded by his staunchly conservative religious views.

Dan Brown builds upon his tradition of characterizing villains with passion driven motives. As seen through Teabing’s fervor for historical purism in *The Da Vinci Code*, and the Camerlengo’s regard for scientific logic in *Angels & Demons*, passion driven motives give villainous characters more depth than simply being “evil”. Villainous actions can sometimes be motivated by a moral philosophy. In *Inferno*,Brown uses Bertrand Zobrist’s transhumanist philosophy to skew the perception of moral correctness. This compels the reader to decide for themselves whose actions are just. Brown introduces Zobrist’s viewpoint with a quote from Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy[[8]](#endnote-8)*, the very literary work that inspires Zobrist’s creation. As the novel begins, readers are told the story’s central conflict incorporates a “moral crisis” (I, Prologue, 6). Among others, members of the World Health Organization (WHO) seek to destroy Zobrist’s threateningly powerful sterilization plague. Zobrist is first introduced as he runs away from the authorities and towards his own suicide. Just before his death, he laments that those pursuing him “do not understand…what [he has] done for them” nor the “splendor of [his] creation” (I, Prologue, 6). Nevertheless, “the love of god” motivates him to “protect [his] masterpiece” (I, Prologue, 6).

Zobrist references the Black Plague as a comparison to the cleansing that he, too, wishes to achieve. He refers to the 14th century European population as a “congested forest, suffocated…awaiting…the spark that would…clear the deadwood, once again bringing sunshine to the healthy roots” (I, X, 48). Zobrist believes a drastic solution is necessary to save the world from “the end of humanity” (I, XXXI, 138). Modern day issues such as “ozone depletion, lack of water, and pollution are not the disease — they are the symptoms. The disease is overpopulation…a fast-growing cancerous tumor” (I, XXXI, 138). Overpopulation’s exhaustion of resources will “[unveil] the monsters within us,” making us to “[fight] to the death to feed our young” (I, XXXIII, 145). Zobrist maintains that “the darkest place in hell are reserved for those who remain their neutrality in times of moral crisis” (I, XXXVIII, 163). To disregard the overpopulation crisis is to “welcome Dante’s hell...cramped and starving” (I, XXXIII, 145). Transhumanist philosophy preaches that “it is mankind's evolutionary obligation to use all the powers at our disposal…to improve as a species” (I, LXVII, 294). Brown asks the reader to decide to what extent they are willing to go for humanity’s preservation.

Brown presents a similar moral dilemma in his characterization of the media throughout the series. Scientific advancements in technology have generated a new era of immediacy in news broadcasting. Throughout *Angels & Demons*, reporters desperately scramble to capture the evildoings of the leading antagonists (Hassassin and the Camerlengo). British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) reporters, Gunther Glick and Chinita Macri, appear in small, yet poignant blips as the action approaches its climax. Dan Brown villainizes the mass-media by characterizing media corporations with self-interested motivation rather than journalistic integrity.

Browns initially criticizes the media’s repeated distortion of historical events. Protagonist Robert Langdon is a historical purist. So, when European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) director, Max Kohler shares his Internet-based Illuminati research with Langdon, Langdon provides commentary on commonly misconceived inaccuracies. Langdon has consistently been “annoyed by the plethora of conspiracy theories that [circulate] in modern pop culture” (A&D, XI, 43). He believes “the media [craves] apocalyptic headlines” (A&D, XI, 43) that value successful ratings over the whole truth. These minute, media-induced distortions might seem frivolous to the average reader, but it is Langdon’s keen perspective on historical accuracy that allows him to be so helpful in the plot’s development. The juxtaposition of these two intellectuals’ perceptions illustrates how *anyone* can be susceptible to the entrancing falsehoods of mass-media. In addition to the media’s historical distortions, Brown assesses the ethical implications behind journalistic antics. The media’s involvement begins when the assassin delivers an anonymous tip regarding the night’s imminent events to BBC headquarters. Though the editor who receives the tip is doubtful about its credibility, she knows that “reporters [live] in eternal fear of missing the big story,” and that “wasting five minutes of a reporter’s time was forgivable,” but “missing a headline was not” (A&D, XLIV, 157). Brown reinstates the perception of the media valuing network ratings over reporting accuracy.

Brown includes instances of morbid banter between journalists to villainize their methods. When Glick and Macri begin their pursuit of the story, Glick asks Macri if she thinks “somebody really killed one of the old farts” (A&D, LXXI, 290). Macri scolds Glick, telling him that he’s “going to hell,” but this only fuels his drive, quipping that he’ll be “taking the Pulitzer with [him]” (A&D, LXXI, 290). By referring to one of the highest ranking Catholic cardinals as an “old fart,” and casually joking about “going to hell,” Glick and Macri have fully desensitized themselves to the serious nature of the situation. These journalists care more about selling the story than the events of the story itself. The leading antagonist of the novel, the assassin, warns from his very first phone call that “media is the right arm of anarchy” (A&D, LI, 187). As the novel’s tragic events pan out, the media maintains suffocating proximity. Instead of combating for the most succinct and accurate reports, “headlines [compete] for optimal sensationalism” (A&D, LXXXI, 292). Scandalizing the truth with ruthless drive, media outlets are underlying villains in *Angels & Demons*.

Dan Brown similarly villainizes the media in his interlude chapters of *Origin*. Brown includes snippets from a fictional media source known as “ConspiracyNet.com” (O, IV, 43). The action of the novel is frequently interrupted by these updates, mimicking the incoming news broadcasts within the world of *Origin*. This radical journalism source publishes numerous conspiracy theories, which are essentially premature conclusions drawn from unconfirmed pieces of information. Though unconfirmed, the site refers to some of this information as “‘facts’” (O, LXVIII, 470). These conspiracy stories “are a significant reason why” Edmonds’s announcement viewership increases from “3.8 million” to “some two hundred million” (O, LXXXIV, 561). In our day and age, it has become increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction in the media. The accessibility of the Internet provides a medium for conspiracies to be widely publicized, even though they often lack credibility. This distortion of truth makes ConspiracyNet.com its own villain in *Origin*.

Riddled with page-turning suspense, Dan Brown sets his series around culturally relevant controversies. Using renowned artworks, landmarks, and symbols as clues along the way, Brown’s plotlines are anything but simple. However, Brown illustrates the complexity of humanity through his large and dynamic cast of characters. Though Brown employs several villainous archetypes, Dan Brown villains are subjective and rely on the reader’s perspective. The lack of a singular, concrete villain gives Brown’s novels applicability to real life. Robert Langdon encounters all kinds of troubling characters, but Brown ultimately lets the reader decide for him or herself who the real villain is.

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. Doubleday, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol*. Doubleday, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dan Brown, *Origin*. Doubleday, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dan Brown, *Angels & Demons*. Atria Books, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dan Brown, *Inferno*. Doubleday, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Burstein, Daniel, and Keijzer A. J. De. Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Behind the Da Vinci Code. New York: CDS Books in association with Squibnocket Partners LLC, 2006. Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *The Da Vinci Code.*Dir. Ron Howard. Columbia Pictures, 2006. Film. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Dante Alighieri, 1265-1321, Burton Raffel, and Henry L. Carrigan 1954. *The Divine Comedy.* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)