

The Missing Piece of Sagrada Família: A Study of Dan Brown's *Origin*

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الجزء المفقود من كنيسة سكرادا فاميليا : دراسة حول رواية الاصل للكاتب دان براون

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مستخلص

رواية "الأصل" لدان براون تجمع بين العديد من الجوانب والسمات الناجحة لرواياته السابقة. تتبع مغامرات بطل سلسلة القصص روبرت لانجدون، الذي يسعى للكشف عن ملابسات موت صديقه وطالبه السابق إدموند كيرش. قتل كيرش قبل أن يعلن اكتشافه العلمي الرائد. تهدف الرواية إلى مناقشة الجدل الدائم بين العلم والدين باستخدام التكنولوجيا المتقدمة للإجابة على السؤال الأساسي "لماذا نحن هنا" و"إلى أين نذهب؟". وفقا لخلفية دان براون الدينية والعلمية، حاول الرد على هذه الأسئلة من منظوره الخيالي الخاص، بالإضافة إلى تقديمها خلال اكتشاف الشخصية الرئيسية إدموند كيرش. تعتبر ساغرادا فاميليا في برشلونة موقعاً رئيسياً، رمزاً يشير إلى تقاطع التقاليد والحداثة والروحانية والعلم. يتشابك السرد بين مواضيع الدين والعلم والتكنولوجيا، محفزاً القراء على التأمل في هذه القضايا المعقدة في عالم يتطور بسرعة. يتطرق البحث إلى تأثير الذكاء الاصطناعي على الإنسانية والمصير المحتمل للإنسان. كلمات مفتاحية: دان براون، الأصل، الذكاء الاصطناعي، الدين، العلم، ساغرادا فاميليا

Abstract

"Origin" by Dan Brown brings together many successful aspects and characteristics of his previous novels. It follows the adventure of a famous symbolologist, and protagonist, Robert Langdon, who seeks to unveil and avenge the death of his friend and former student Edmond Kirsch. Kirsch was killed right before realising his groundbreaking scientific discovery. The novel aims at bringing forth the non-ending debate between science and religion using advanced technology to answer the fundamental question of "why we are here" and where do we go"? From Dan Brown's religious and scientific background, he tried to answer these questions from his own fictional perspective, in addition to presenting it throughout the discovery of his scientific character Edmond Kirsch. The Sagrada Familia in Barcelona serves as a key location, symbolizing the intersection of tradition, modernity, spirituality, and science. The narrative intertwines themes of religion, science, and technology, prompting readers to contemplate these complex issues in a rapidly evolving world. The Paper extends to the impact of artificial intelligence on humanity and the potential doom of humanity.

Key words: Dan Brown, Origin, Ai, Religion, Science, Sagrada Família

Introduction

"Origin" is a novel written by renowned author Dan Brown in 2017. It marks the fifth instalment in the Robert Langdon series. The novel is significant in contemporary literature for several reasons, such as the exploration of fundamental questions that have intrigued humanity for centuries: Where do we come from, and where are we going? This exploration of existential questions makes the novel thought-provoking and relevant to contemporary readers. Also, it discusses the intersection of science and philosophy where the author weaves a narrative that combines elements of science and philosophy. The book explores the tension between scientific discoveries and traditional religious beliefs, a theme that resonates with the ongoing discourse on the relationship between science and faith in today's world. While grappling with philosophical questions, "Origin" also incorporates elements of a technological thriller. It features sophisticated technologies, including artificial intelligence, which adds a contemporary and futuristic dimension to the plot. As it has been clear in all of Dan Brown's novels, they have a global appeal, and Origin is not an exception, they are known for their intricate

plots, suspense, and intellectual depth. This widespread recognition and readership contribute to the novel's significance in the literary landscape. In addition, the novel understudy engages with contemporary debates surrounding the intersection of science, technology, religion, and the human quest for meaning. It encourages readers to contemplate these complex issues in a rapidly evolving world. Overall, "Origin" stands as a compelling work of contemporary literature that offers readers an intellectually stimulating and engaging experience. This paper examines the gap between the two main elements of religion, represented by all major faiths in the world: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, on the one hand, and science on the other. It seeks the missing link between them to reach an understanding that both complete each other in order to achieve a harmonic life. To create a safer world where both coexist without any clash, despite that Kirsch, who is one of the main characters, claims that his discovery will not only shake the foundation of religion, but it will shatter it.

The Quest of Origin

Robert Langdon is the main protagonist in most of Dan Brown's Origin. He is a Harvard professor of symbology and religious iconology, a character that has appeared in several of Dan Brown's previous novels, including "The Da Vinci Code," "Angels & Demons," "The Lost Symbol," and others. In "Origin," Langdon finds himself in a complex and thrilling adventure, trying to solve a mystery related to the origin of humanity and the future of science and religion. Since the novel explores themes of artificial intelligence, evolution, and the impact of scientific discoveries on religious beliefs, Langdon's character plays a vital role in deciphering codes and symbols, which is central to the plot of many of Dan Brown's novels (Al-Halbosy & Al-Shaia, 2012, p. 3).

In an interview with Dan Brown about Origin and why would he choose the main theme of his novel; he answered by saying "I grew up in a very religious household, my mom was a church organist. I was a religious kid and my dad was a mathematics teacher [...] so I lived in these two worlds of science and religion" (CBS Mornings, 2017). This statement explains how he lived in two worlds of religion and science, and also explains his fascination with religious symbolism and organizations which was reflected in his novels, especially the Robert Langdon series. He also added in the same interview that "It is a kind of a personal journey to try to reconcile the two against each other".

Dan Brown also emphasises how AI plays a vital role in our daily life, by saying:

"The thing that will make artificial intelligence so powerful is its ability to learn. The way AI learns is to look at human culture; everything we do now is digitised, all our books, all of our podcasts, all of our little YouTube videos, our e-mails. So, it is possible for a computer to read all of that and learn how human interact and how they make decisions. The question is: is our culture the best role model for a new consciousness a new intellect. If it learns to be like we are, it is going to learn a lot of compassion, but it could also learn a lot of self-centred evil". (CBS Mornings, 2017). Therefore, the author was well aware of the impact that technology has on our lives. Also, how these technologies evolve daily to take a large part in our decision-making and life direction. The novel starts with an intriguing speech by Edmond Kirsch directed to the world's main and most powerful religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Kirsch stated, while speaking to the Bishop, that his discovery is not going to shake but shatter these religions' foundations by saying "The bishop sighed loudly, sounding more bored than concerned. "An intriguing preamble, Mr. Kirsch. You speak as if whatever you are about to show us will shake the foundations of the world's religions." Kirsch glanced around the ancient repository of sacred texts. *It will not shake your foundations. It will shatter them*". (Brown, 2017, p. 15). With this catching setup and outstanding statement, the novel presents its main character and protagonist, Professor Robert Langdon, in an unusual setting. We, as readers, used to see the interest of the author in classical pieces of art rather than the modern ones, however, this is not the case with *Origin*, as Langdon appears in Spain, in the Guggenheim Museum with modern art all around him! This situation reflects an uncomfortable state for Langdon. Also, with an earphone that contains an audio guide to the museum, Langdon later figured out it is an automated supercomputer guide, or AI, named Winston. This AI guide plays an essential role in solving the mystery of Kirsch's murder. Therefore, it can be realised that the statement of Kirsch and his promise will create the main theme of the novel which is the indirect attack of science towards religion. Langdon is in different from Kirsch's belief, as the first has a conservative view about the gap between religion and science. Langdon's view was clearly explained in a conversation between him and Kirsch months ago, when he said "Well, science and religion are not competitors, they're two different languages trying to tell the same story. There's room in this world for both" (Brown, 2017, p. 19). In this statement, Langdon tried to reconcile the difference between science and religion in a conventional discussion before any announcement that Kirsch may make. Although

there were some changes in the main character, Brown keeps the main functions of the character which are impertinence and immorality (S. M. & O., 2019, p. 190). Despite Langdon's position, he and Ambra Vidal, the museum curator, team up to go on a quest to investigate and avenge the murder of Kirsch who was shot in the head by a concealed weapon. The doubts and accusations were heading toward a guest, Luis Avila, whose name was added to the list at the last minute of the conference. Avila is a Navy admiral who has been recruited by the Palmerian Catholic Church, which has a schismatic branch of Catholicism that rejects the Holy See of 1978. In an attempt to honour his friend, Langdon took the responsibility to release his late friend's message and his discovery to the whole world. However, this means that Langdon must unlock the 47-character line of poetry to the portal where the message is hiding behind. By taking this step, Langdon here backing up science over religion despite his belief that they can coexist just like how they did centuries ago despite any discovery that questioned the relationship between them.

The Sagrada Familia

Throughout the narrative, *Origin* is replete with suspicions and intrigues concerning the identity responsible for the unfolding events on that particular night. Besides Langdon, Bishop Valdespino of Spain emerges as the primary suspect. His alleged guilt stems from his tattoo, which connects him to Spain's ultra-conservative historical era, and his questionable conduct on the fateful night. However, it is revealed that the bishop's involvement is not related to the murder of Kirsch and his scientific endeavours but rather his hidden affection for the ailing King of Spain. Valdespino's character serves as a stark contrast to Father Beña, a progressive Catholic priest at the Sagrada Familia church. Father Beña introduces Langdon to the Sagrada Familia church by saying "This is Sagrada Família. Within these walls, Gaudí blended God, science, and nature"(Brown, 2017, p. 282) embodying an intertwined reality of the scientific and spiritual realms. Beña also describes Christianity and his way of thinking by stating that "Not all of our clergy are as progressive as I am, but as you know, for all of us, Christianity remains a work in progress"(Brown, 2017, p. 282). Beña's characterization as a helpful and significant figure in the novel delves into the ideals he cherishes, resonating with the reader. Through the dichotomy between the initially vilified Valdespino and Beña, Brown explores divergent thematic perspectives while also highlighting Father Beña's capacity to transcend differences in the face of fate.

Modern media also played a vital role in exposing the murder of Kirsch. There was a famous website, which was specifically concerned with conspiracy theories that had some serious news and feeds about Kirsch and the way he was murdered, despite all the secrecy that was around it (Miranda, 2019, p. 3). Langdon later realised that Winston, the AI created by Kirsch is behind feeding the website of the information and the progress of the case. Langdon questioned Winston about the matter to find out that the killer was none but the AI itself. And that all the murder and the leak of news was part of Kirsch's algorithm, and everything was set up by Kirsch so his discovery would get the publicity he desired, and his voice could reach as many people as possible. Also, his death in the way made sense to Kirsch, since we were impending death due to cancer. Winston informed Langdon about all this information and created a great shock to Langdon on how AI can act as a human and think on its own, which reflected how future technology can impact humanity. (Abdulbaqi & Al-Halbosy, 2022, p. 288)

Science and the Existential Quest

Science and faith have some significant issues that set them apart from each other and they keep clashing since the beginning of history. These issues vary from the creation of the universe to the way of the creation and where it is heading. The first focuses on tangible facts and evidence analysis while the other relates to faith.(Samanik & Lianasari, 2016, p. 18) Therefore, they have never met over these points. As a result, any discussion over these points would create a huge argument that would reach a meeting point or a mutual understanding.(Samanik & Lianasari, 2016, p. 19)

"I love all technologies but AI is something that fascinated me deeply, mainly because scientists can't agree whether it is going to save us or kill us"(CBS Mornings, 2017) Dan Brown explains his personal view on AI and how it might solve many world issues such as: overpopulation, poverty, pollution etc. however it is a double-edged sword that might be a salvation to humanity or it might turn on it and cause its doom.

The danger of AI was revealed throughout the logic that Winston dragged from fulfilling the wish of Kirsch in announcing his discovery. Kirsch found out the origin of humanity through a computer program which simulates the origins of the universe via the Miller-Urey experiment. He also simulates the future using an evolutionary

lens to see the destination of humanity. He illustrates his findings by saying that humanity will merge with a new kingdom of life which is called Technium. This technology will slowly join and take over humanity by controlling every aspect of it. (Joy & Nair, 2020, p. 61)

Brown incorporates the broader concept of clashes between modernization and traditional values. He also intertwined this concept with the urgent challenges of the rapid expansion of technology. Origin consistently highlights the impending reality that supercomputers getting closer to making critical, potentially life-altering decisions rooted in logic rather than emotions. Such a shift affects both the characters in the story and the readers alike. Brown wrestles with the idea that our lives may soon be controlled by something which we have so little control over. This was both presented by Kirsch, and the revelation of Langdon, at the end of the story, when he realised the involvement of Winston, the AI, in the death of Kirsch. The algorithms of Winston predicted the best-case scenario and took action based on numbers and data instead of the emotions of the human decision-making process.

The theme of conflict between religion and science is not something new to Dan Brown, because he discusses it in several previous novels such as *Angels and Demons*. He proves that no one can take one side and adopt it since science and religion represent the angle from which people can answer the fundamental questions, that Kirsch attempts to answer in his scientific discovery. Also, what keeps those readers interested in pursuing the reading of this novel is their curiosity to find out the answer to the exact questions.

Dan Brown's novel *Origin* discusses one of the controversial questions between science and religion which is "how did it all begin? Where do we come from [...] where are we going" (Brown, 2017, p. 52). These questions are all along in the mind of Robert Langdon, who is a professor at Harvard University and the protagonist of the novel, to his futuristic student Edmond Kirsch.

The Sagrada Família, a massive Catholic Basilica designed and built by Antoni Gaudi, plays a significant role as one of the key locations where important events in the story unfold. The novel, set in Barcelona, explores themes related to religion, science, and technology. The Sagrada Família, with its unique architecture and spiritual significance, serves as a backdrop for discussions and plot developments related to these themes. Despite the importance of the Sagrada Família as a heritage site, and a famous location, that "dominates Barcelona's skyline, and which critics hailed as being unlike anything in the entire history of art" (Brown, 2017, p. 202).

The novel also highlights the importance of Sagrada Família through the main character, Robert Langdon, and how this piece of art fascinates him besides all the works of Antoni Gaudi's works. As the narrator stated, "Langdon has always marveled at Gaudi's audacious vision for Sagrada Família ___ a basilica so colossal that it remained under construction today, nearly 140 years after its groundbreaking." (Brown, 2017, p. 202)

The fascination with Gaudi's art was not exclusive to Robert Langdon only but to Edmond Kirsch too, and this reflects the common feelings and thoughts of both characters regarding the soul issue of the world. Winston, one of the characters of *Origin*, stated that "Edmond loved everything Gaud [...] in particular his concept of nature as organic art". (Brown, 2017, p. 202)

This paper explores the link between the location and the theme of religion and science. For instance, it is an iconic landmark to symbolises the intersection of tradition and modernity, spirituality, and science, which are central themes in *Origin*. It also represents a gate between the past and the present, tradition and modernity. Furthermore, being unfinished work, it leaves a gap to fill, and a space to explore, in other words, a missing piece that we may look at from a different angle, which is related to what man believes and what technology tries to take us to. The unfinished work of Sagrada Família mirrors the idea of ongoing human evolution and discovery explored in the book.

AS LANGDON AND Ambra followed Father Beña toward the colossal bronze doors of Sagrada Família, Langdon found himself marveling, as he always did, over the utterly bizarre details of this church's main entrance. It's a wall of codes, he mused, eyeing the raised typography that dominated the monolithic slabs of burnished metal. Protruding from the surface were more than eight thousand three-dimensional letters embossed in bronze. The letters ran in horizontal lines, creating a massive field of text with virtually no separation between the words. Although Langdon knew the text was a description of Christ's Passion written in Catalan, its appearance was closer to that of an NSA encryption key (Brown, 2017, p. 270)

Sagrada Família, as described by Robert Langdon, is portrayed as a complex and enigmatic structure. Langdon's fascination with its details suggests that it holds deeper symbolic significance. From a literary standpoint, this

could represent the idea that the church itself embodies a mystery or a puzzle that Langdon, a symbol of intellect and symbolism, is compelled to decipher. Langdon's observation of the church's entrance as a "wall of codes" and its resemblance to an "NSA encryption key" underscores the interplay between religion and technology, a recurring theme in Brown's novels. This fusion reflects the contemporary world's collision of ancient traditions and modern complexities, offering a lens through which readers can contemplate the evolving nature of spirituality and knowledge in the digital age.

Therefore, this quotation exhibits Dan Brown's penchant for infusing his narratives with layers of symbolism, merging the sacred and the cryptic, and challenging readers to explore the intersection of religion, technology, and cultural identity. It invites readers to engage with these themes from a literary and intellectual perspective, mirroring Langdon's own intellectual curiosity and penchant for solving intricate puzzles.

Furthermore, the link between the past and present is conveyed in the previous quotation to reflect the change in the royal blood from the old generation to the new one. The old generation of the ruling family, which is based on a religious backbone, reflects the beliefs and traditions from one generation to the other. While modernity proceeds to reach out to the new generation of young blood that opens their eyes to advanced technologies and tries to co-op up with modern life and the natural transition to a new and young ruling person.

Conclusion

This paper presents a controversial idea of how AI could solve many issues of our modern life, but at the same time can cause our distinction. Science and religion construct the fabric of our society and despite their contradictions and conflicts, they keep our lives in balance. *Origin* of Dan Brown does not actually answer the fundamental questions of where we are coming from and where are we going, most likely because there is no definite way to prove any theory yet. Also, there is no method to unite religion and science. However, Dan Brown opened a window through his fictitious ideology of how we can predict and what to expect from what we see from the advancement of technology, which rapidly developing.

Predicting the future of technology and supercomputers is so scary, since we have so little control over them, and as soon as we grant them logic and consciousness, we are likely to be subjected to machines that have no emotions in executing their decisions. This idea is creating a nightmare that we might soon have to fight our own creation rather than using it for our own good. AI that we create to ease our lives and solve serious issues such as overpopulation and pollution might lead to our doom.

Therefore, from one hand the perception of religion is that everything was created by God out of nothing, as explained in the holy books. On the other hand, we have science where everything should have matter to be created, which means that this argument would never reach an end, and those two perspectives should coexist. Therefore, the missing piece of *Sagrada Familia* is a scientific touch that lead to the completion of this religious masterpiece.

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