The Name of the Rose Study Guide

The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

First published in Italy in 1980 as *Il nome della rosa*, William Weaver's English translation of author Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* appeared in the United States in 1983, and in England in 1984. The novel, with its labyrinthine plot, deep philosophical discussions, and medieval setting, seemed an unlikely candidate for worldwide success. Yet by 2004, the book had sold more than nine million copies and had never been out of print. Critics and readers alike enthusiastically received *The Name of the Rose*, and the 1986 Jean-Jacques Annaud film, starring Sean Connery and Christian Slater, only fueled interest in the novel.

If *The Name of the Rose* seems an odd choice for such critical and popular acclaim, Eco's elevation into literary superstardom seems just as surprising. A scholarly university professor, Eco's main fields of interest include semiotics, aesthetics, and medieval philosophy. Before *The Name of the Rose*, Eco was well-known among academicians as the writer of many scholarly books, particularly in the field of semiotics. No one could have predicted the furor caused by his debut novel; yet the well-drawn characters, the mysterious setting, and the detective-fiction plot continue to attract a diverse audience for the book. In addition, new critical studies of *The Name of the Rose* appear frequently, and there seems to be no slowing of critical interest. Rich, complicated, and multi-layered, *The Name of the Rose* promises to be an important novel for study for years to come.

Author Biography

Umberto Eco was born on January 5, 1932, in Alessandria, Italy, to Guilo and Givovanna Eco. He attended the University of Turin, where he studied medieval philosophy and aesthetics. He published his doctoral thesis, *Il Problema estetic in Tommaso d'Aquino* (*The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*) in 1956. In that same year, he began his academic career as a lecturer at the University of Turin. Eco's familiarity with and attraction to popular culture was manifested early; he began writing a monthly column called "Diario minimo" in 1959, and has continued to comment actively on current affairs and culture since that time. Eco has continued to teach at a variety of worldwide universities, and he served as the chair of the semiotics department at the University of Bologna in Italy for many years. Beginning in 1999, he served as the President of the Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici at the University of Bologna.

For most of Eco's early career, he was well known as an academic writer and teacher of semiotics and philosophy. Most scholars considered his work to be brilliant. However, in 1980, the publication of *Il nome della rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*) in Italy, followed by the 1983 publication of the English translation, shifted Eco from the relative obscurity of a well-published academic to the public limelight as a literary super star with a bestselling novel. In 1984, Eco published an English translation of an essay on the composition of *The Name of the Rose* called "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*." This essay is included in the Harcourt 1994 edition of the novel.

Eco has won many awards for his fiction, including the Prix Medicis Etranger, 1982, for *The Name of the Rose*; France's Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, 1985; the Marshal McLuhan Award from UNESCO Canada and Teleglobe, 1985; the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur, France, 1993; Golden Cross of the Dodecannese, Greece, 1995; and the Cavaliere di Gran Croce al Merito della Repubblica Italiana, 1996.

Eco followed the successful *The Name of the Rose* with several more novels, all translated into English by William Weaver. These include *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989); *The Island of the Day Before* (1995); and *Baudolino* (2002). In addition, Eco has produced an astounding number of books in Italian, as well as English, on a variety of philosophical topics, as well as countless interviews, articles, and essays.

Plot Summary

Naturally, A Manuscript

The novel *The Name of the Rose* begins with what appears to be a preface to the book itself. In the opening pages, a narrator who seems to be Eco describes finding a book in 1968 that reproduced a fourteenth-century narration by the monk, Adso of Melk. The preface continues to describe how the narrator then lost the book, only to find it again under strange circumstances. He also describes his choice to publish his edition of the manuscript as well as the editorial choices he has made.

Prologue; First Day; Second Day; Third Day

Next, readers find a prologue provided by Adso of Melk, written as an old man. The events he is about to relate are in the distant past and took place when he was a young Benedictine novice in the service of a Franciscan monk, William of Baskerville.

Adso shifts to the past, specifically to the year 1327, dividing his story into seven days with each day structured by the canonical hours, those hours when the monks engage in formal prayer. On the first day, William and Adso approach the abbey, an abbey that contains the greatest library in all Christendom. They come as emissaries from the emperor to participate in a debate with a papal legation over the poverty of Christ as well as the status of the Franciscan order. They are greeted by the abbey cellarer, Remigio, who is astounded by William's knowledge about the abbot's lost horse.

Later, in their room, the abbot Abo visits William and Adso. He tells them the story of Adelmo of Otranto, a young illuminator who has fallen (or was pushed) to his death. He asks William to investigate. The two enter into a discussion about the library, and the abbot explains that only the librarian and his assistant may enter the library.

William and Adso then meet Ubertino, an elderly Franciscan taking refuge at the abbey, as well as Severinus, the herbalist; and Nicholas, the glazier. They also meet Jorge of Borgos, an elderly blind monk who is angry about laughter.

The morning prayers are interrupted early the next day because villagers have found a dead monk in a vat of pig's blood. It is Venantius, a translator and friend of Adelmo's. Severinus and William examine the body for evidence. Throughout the day, William and Adso continue to learn more about the library and the abbey. It is clear that the monks are hiding something. In addition, throughout the day, there are a number of learned conversations about laughter and heresy. Eventually, William learns about a secret entrance to the library, and he decides to investigate. He first goes to the Scriptorium, looking for a particular book that he believes both Adelmo and Venantius were reading. While there, William and Adso are disturbed, and someone steals both the book and William's glasses.

Next, William and Adso enter the labyrinth of the library. William believes that he has figured out the architecture, but he is wrong, and the two have great difficulty leaving the library before eventually finding their way out.

On the third day, Berengar, the assistant librarian, goes missing and a blood stained cloth is found in his cell. William continues his investigation and is successful in deciphering a code left by Venantius that William believes will guide them in further searches of the library for the lost book. Later that night, Adso finds himself alone in the kitchen and encounters a young peasant girl who seduces him. This is his first sexual experience. He falls deeply in love with her, although he does not now or ever learn her name. Confused and guilty, he confesses to William, who offers him absolution. As the day draws to a close, the pair find Berengar dead in a tub of water.

Fourth Day; Fifth Day; Sixth Day

On the fourth day, the Franciscan legation arrives, as does Cardinal del Pogetto and Bernard Gui, sent from the Pope. Again, there is a good deal of discussion about heresy, and both sides prepare for the meeting. The reader learns that Bernard Gui is an Inquisitor, a position formerly held by William, who has given up his judgeship because of the difficulty of knowing the truth. Late in the evening, William and Adso again try to find their way to the "finis Africae," the room in the library where they believe the lost book is located. They are still unable to access this room because they do not know the codes. Meanwhile, Salvatore, who procures women for the cellarer, is captured by Bernard Gui, as is the girl Adso loves. She is accused of witchcraft, and Salvatore and Remigio are placed under arrest.

On the fifth day, a heated debate between the Franciscans and the Pope's envoys takes place. Meanwhile, Severinus is found murdered, and the book that William has entrusted to him has been stolen. William believes that Malachi has the book. Bernard holds court, questioning the cellarer who eventually confesses to all of the murders as well as to heresy. It is clear, however, that it is the inquisitorial methods that have elicited the confessions rather than the truth.

On the sixth day, Malachi keels over dead during prayer. William continues to investigate the murders and is convinced that there is a pattern that connects all of the murders as well as the mystery of the library. Just as it appears that William will solve the case, the abbot tells William that he no longer wants him to investigate. Remigio has confessed, and the abbot is worried more about the good name of the abbey than the truth. Undaunted, William and Adso return to the library. They discover that the abbot is in a secret stairway and will soon suffocate if they are unable to find their way to the top of the labyrinth and enter the finis Africae. Late that night, the two finally enter the finis Africae.

Seventh Day; Last Page

In the finis Africae, William and Adso find Jorge. He is the mastermind behind the murders, although neither the pattern nor the motive is as William had surmised: Adelmo's death was a suicide; Venantius, Berengar, and Malachi died from reading the lost book whose pages had been poisoned by Jorge; Malachi killed Severinus; and Jorge refuses to save the abbot who suffocates in the secret stairway. William correctly surmises that the book they have been seeking is Aristotle's treatise on comedy. Jorge refuses to let anyone read it and instead chooses to eat the poisoned pages. He also knocks over Adso's lamp and sets the entire library ablaze. William and Adso barely escape with their lives, and the library is lost.

In the chapter called "Last Page," Adso returns to his present and tells of how William later died of the plague mid-century. He also tells of returning to the charred remains of the library and sifting through the remains, trying to find something that made sense. He ends his manuscript not knowing for whom he writes and no longer knowing what it is about.

Characters

Abo

Abo is the abbot of the Benedictine abbey who asks William to investigate the murders of several monks. Abo is more interested in the good name of the abbey than he is in the truth. At the end of the novel, Abo has died, the victim of murder himself.

Adelmo of Otranto

Adelmo is a young illustrator of manuscripts. Before the book opens, he has engaged in a homosexual affair with Berengar, perhaps in order to gain access to an important, yet sequestered, book. As a result, he has committed suicide just before William and Adso's arrival at the abbey.

Adso of Melk

Adso of Melk is an elderly Benedictine monk who writes of his experiences as a young novitiate who accompanies William of Baskervilles on his trip to a northern Italian abbey in 1327 where they encounter a series of murders. Adso thus plays two roles in the novel: in the first place, his is an older voice, one that has had time to consider and reflect on the events of which he writes. In the second, he is young, innocent and naïve, the younger son of a wealthy nobleman, pledged to the church. *The Name of the Rose* is very much the story of Adso's coming of age; he loses his virginity to a young peasant girl, and he grows from ignorance to knowledge. He encounters the most pressing theological debates of his day at the abbey, as well as a thirst for knowledge that leads several other young monks to their deaths. He also plays "Watson" to William's "Sherlock" in the investigation of the murders. Eco's intention that readers connect Adso to Watson is clear: "Adso" in Italian and French is pronounced nearly identically to Watson in those languages. Adso's simple questions allow William to expound on his hypotheses and methodology in solving the crimes, mirroring the relationship between Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes in the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Ironically, chance comments from Adso provide the key clues for William.

Benno of Uppsala

Benno is a rhetorican, someone who studies the figures of language. He dies by rushing into the library to save books and becomes engulfed in flames.

Berengar of Arundel

Berengar is the assistant librarian at the abbey and is thus privy to many of the secrets of the place. He is also a homosexual who has engaged in affairs with both Malachi, the chief librarian, and Adelmo. Berengar is murdered (by being poisoned with a poisoned book).

Bernard of Gui

Bernard is a real historical figure who was an important judge in the Inquisition, sentencing many heretics to their deaths by fire. In this novel, Eco portrays Bernard as an inquisitor who, in his obsessive pursuit of the Truth, subjects suspects to torture and the threat of horrible death. His inquisitorial techniques lead to confessions; yet it seems clear that, while he arrives at confessions, he fails to arrive at the truth of the murders. His chief role in the novel is as a mirror for William, whose ideas about truth, orthodoxy, and heresy stand in direct contrast to Bernard's.

Jorge of Burgos

Jorge is a blind, elderly monk who knows a great deal about books and the library. (Late in the book, William deduces that he was even the head librarian for a time.) In one of the most important passages in the novel, he and William enter into a heated debate over laughter. This debate reveals William's position as an early humanist and liberal theologian, while Jorge is both conservative and strongly opposed to anything but a strict interpretation of the Bible. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that Jorge is the real power in the abbey. He has worked diligently across the years to prevent access to Aristotle's lost book on comedy, even to the extent of poisoning the pages so that anyone who reads the book will die. Jorge believes that the book could cause the complete destruction of Christianity, and so feels that he is doing the will of God by first destroying those who would read the book and finally destroying the book itself.

In a mostly playful tribute, Eco models Jorge after Jorge Luis Borges, the influential Argentine writer. As Eco writes in his "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*," "I wanted a blind man who guarded a library. . . . and library plus blind man can only equal Borges, also because debts must be paid."

Malachi of Hildesheim

Malachi is the chief librarian of the abbey. As such, he alone knows the exact location of every book stored in the library and all of the entrances and exits to the building. He has unrestricted access to the library and to the books, but can prevent others from entering or from reading books that he deems dangerous. Malachi serves a gatekeeper role, both to the library and to knowledge. He dies from reading the poisoned book.

Nicholas of Morimundo

Nicholas is the abbey's glazier. That is, he is the monk in charge of glass in the abbey. He is fascinated by William's glasses and learns to construct a new pair when William's are stolen.

Remigio of Varagine

Remigio is the cellarer of the abbey. His job is to supply the abbey with food and to care for the storing of food. He is short, stout, and jolly, someone who clearly partakes of his position to supply himself well. He also satisfies his carnal appetites on peasant women with whom he trades provisions for sex. He was formerly a member of a heretical sect, and under Bernard's inquiry ends up confessing to all of the murders and to heresy. As a result, he is condemned to burn.

Salvatore

Salvatore is an oddly-shaped and animal-like monk who speaks a pastiche of all the European languages. He procures women for Remigio and was also a member of a heretical cult.

Severinus of Sankt Wendel

Severinus is the herbalist at the abbey, and as such has both knowledge of and access to herbs of all sorts, including poisonous ones. He supplies Malachi with the herbs needed to create visions in anyone who attempts to enter the library, and he also unwittingly supplies Jorge with the poison that contaminates Aristotle's book on comedy. Severinus is killed by Malachi, who steals Aristotle's book from him.

Ubertino of Casale

Ubertino is an elderly Franciscan who has taken refuge at the abbey for many years. Many of those who followed him or his fellows bordered on heresy, according to the orthodox church, and thus Ubertino's life is in danger as a result of the debate between the papal legation and the Franciscan brothers. Ubertino's role in the novel is to provide a statement of the Franciscan position on love and poverty. His attachment to Adso, however, is not unproblematic. In several scenes, it is clear that Ubertino feels an unseemly attachment to the young man.

Venantius of Salvermec

Venantius is a young translator of manuscripts who recognizes Aristotle's book on comedy for what it is because of his knowledge of Greek. He dies, poisoned by the book.

William of Baskervilles

William is a Franciscan monk sent by the emperor to mediate the debate between the papal legation and the Franciscan order on the question of Christ's poverty. William is a former inquisitor; however, he has given up this role as he realizes that the line between heresy and orthodoxy is very thin. He is heavily influenced by the teachings of Roger Bacon, a rational empiricist. This means that William uses his observations to test his hypotheses rather than appealing to either pure reason or authoritative text. Like his teacher, William of Occam, William of Baskervilles is a nominalist and rejects the notion of universals. That is, he believes that only individual things exist, and that abstract general concepts only exist in the mind and nowhere else. For example, a nominalist would say that while there are many individual chairs, there does not exist in reality a universal chair from which all individual chairs are copied.

William is a wonderfully complicated character. In some ways, he is clearly modeled after Sherlock Holmes in his name, his appearance, and his method. In other ways, he seems to be modeled after Eco himself. William often seems to be a modern semiotician who finds himself struggling within the confines of medieval debate. He is remarkably intelligent, and yet he arrives at his final solution to the mystery of the murders purely by chance and not by his investigative method. William struggles with his own arrogance and his own thirst for knowledge, the very attributes which lead others in the book to their deaths. Ultimately, it is William's interference in the case that leads to the destruction of Aristotle's book on comedy, which is the very thing William seeks.

Social Sensitivity

Like the entirety of the novel, the social concerns expressed in The Name of The Rose function on at least two levels: they are applicable to medieval times as well as to contemporary society. As Eco writes in his Postscript to "The Name of the Rose": "The Middle Ages are our infancy, to which we must always return, for anamnesis." In addition to the attention paid to various heresies and sects, Eco deals extensively with conflicting ideas on clerical poverty. The Emperor Louis IV asserts the need for the vow of poverty among the clergy, while the corrupt Pope John XXII argues that poverty would diminish the prestige and power of the Church. Other groups, such as the Fraticelli, argue for complete poverty through the abandonment of all material possessions. These conflicts anticipate the battles between religious, social, and political ideologies today.

Especially important are the extremes to which these groups go to combat their opponents. The persecution, factionalism, and hatred depicted in a medieval context have direct contemporary political and social parallels in Europe, the Middle East, and throughout the modern world. Some Italian reviewers, in fact, saw The Name of The Rose as an allegory on contemporary Italian politics.

The Name of The Rose considers diametrically opposed attitudes toward knowledge and learning. The confrontation between a blind monk, Jorge of Burgos, and William pits a repressive, destructive, censorial attitude against one of intellectual freedom. There is no question but that Eco's sympathies lie with the latter. William describes Jorge's hatred of philosophy as that of the Antichrist, "born of excessive piety." Jorge's repressive certitude is ultimately the principal destructive force in Eco's novel, the force against which William and Eco struggle.

Techniques

The novel is structured around the liturgical hours (e.g. Matins, Vespers, Compline) of the seven days that William and Adso spend at the monastery in Northern Italy in 1327. But the entire work, described by the subtitle "Naturally, a Manuscript," is introduced as a copy of an authentic work which has been lost. Eco presents himself not as the traditional novelist, but as yet another amanuensis who transcribes a nineteenth-century reproduction of the original work "as if it were authentic, the manuscript of Adso of Melk."

Again, Eco shows that his work not only engenders but also grows out of an individual interpretation.

In Postscript to "The Name of the Rose" Eco explains his choice of genres: "since I wanted you [the reader] to feel as pleasurable the one thing that frightens us namely, the metaphysical shudder I had only to choose (from among the model plots) the most metaphysical and philosophical: the detective novel." Yet Eco himself acknowledges that The Name of The Rose is constructed as "a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated." Indeed, many of William's theories about the murders prove to be incorrect. Worse, the library and the entire monastery burn to the ground.

In his attempt to recover the lost volume of Aristotle, William ends by seeing the best library in all Christendom completely destroyed.

The world of the abbey is meticulously constructed both through floor plans and descriptions. Eco's assiduous attention to the details of the abbey its pace of life, its rituals, its politics, its relationship to the outside world, its internecine rivalries, its history makes the novel a seamless garment, a fabric perfectly woven and beautifully fashioned. The wealth of historical detail that informs the novel establishes a basic creditability to the world that Eco creates.

Themes

Language

Semiotics is Eco's academic field of study, and greatly influences the ideas on which he builds his novel. Semiotics refers to the study of signs, sign systems and the way meaning is derived. Signs can be nearly anything in a given culture that conveys information. Signs are generally conventional; that is, signs are meaningful to those who understand the unwritten codes that underpin them. A good example of this might be the way that people greet each other from culture to culture. In American culture, kissing someone on arrival is a sign designating a close and intimate relationship between the two people. Men, however, rarely kiss each other, although they might hug and slap each other on the back. In France, however, the sign is subtly different, and strangers meeting for the first time might kiss each other on each cheek. For those who understand such signs, the communication is clear.

The Name of the Rose is nothing if not a story of signs, including religious, political, and social signs, among many others. William prides himself as a savvy reader of signs; yet his mistake□in assuming that the system underpinning the series of murders was following the pattern of the Apocalypse□demonstrates how a faulty initial assumption can lead to a complete misunderstanding of a situation. In such a case, while the signs are still there, they have no meaning because there is no underpinning system. Likewise, the novel's title is ambiguous and mysterious because it is impossible to assign one meaning to the sign "rose." As Eco writes in the "Postscript," "the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meaning that by now it hardly has any meaning left. . . . The title rightly disoriented the reader, who was unable to choose just one interpretation."

Nominalism

Nominalism is also an important topic or theme in *The Name of the Rose* closely related to language. During the Middle Ages, there was heated debate over the nature of reality. Realists, such as Jorge in the novel, argued that there were such things as universals. Realists support the supposition that to every name and term there corresponds a positive reality that is outside of the mind. Thus, there would be a universal "rose" that exists in reality outside of the mind, and that individual roses only differ accidentally one from another rather than in substance. Nominalists, such as William of Ockham and William of Baskerville, would argue, however, that there are only individuals. Universals are only categories the mind uses to make sense of the world rather than having any extra-mental reality. While this argument seems abstract, it is pertinent to the novel. The closing Latin words, translated into English, demonstrate this: "yesterday's rose endures in its name, we hold empty names." Thus, *The Name of the Rose* is a book about an empty sign, about the *name* of the rose, rather than the rose itself.

Style

Detective Fiction

Detective fiction is one of the most popular genres of novels in contemporary culture. Yet it seems an unlikely choice of format for such an erudite writer and book. Eco chooses detective fiction very deliberately, however, and not only to make his book more of a commercial success. Detective fiction offers a series of conventions and rules that attract a particular kind of reader, one who knows what ought to happen next. In addition, the reader of detective fiction is not taken in by what people say; rather, they have learned to look carefully at evidence and to make guesses about what might be the reality of the case. Some of the conventions of detective fiction found in *The Name of the Rose* include the ultra-intelligent detective; his faithful if obtuse young companion; a series of murders; a series of witnesses and interviews; villains who try to foil the investigation; and a final assembly of those involved where the detective reveals the murderer, the motive, and the means of the murder. In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco plays with his readers' expectations, creating a tension between what his audience believes will happen and what really happens, calling attention to the novel as a text, not reality. Furthermore, such playing with generic conventions undermines all such conventions, and reminds reader that what they are reading is a novel, not life.

Intertextuality

Another device that Eco employs magnificently is intertextuality. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray in *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* define it as "the condition of interconnectedness among texts, or the concept that any text is an amalgam of others, either because it exhibits signs of influence or because its language inevitably contains common points of reference with other texts through such things as allusion, quotation, genre, style, and even revisions." For postmodernists, the notion of intertextuality is an important one; it suggests that all literature, and for that matter, all writing, is comprised of writing that has already and always been written. Thus, text leads always to more text, rather than to some transcendental truth. *The Name of the Rose* draws on vast numbers of other texts in its constructions as evidenced by *The Key to "The Name of the Rose,"* by Adele J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White, a whole book dedicated to identifying the medieval historical and literary allusions, and translating passages from Latin and other languages into English. Indeed, some critics have called *The Name of the Rose* a pastiche, or collage of many other sources, pasted together into something like a novel. By creating such a text, Eco opens the door to many interpretations.

Historical Context

Italy in the 1970s

While *The Name of the Rose* is set in the fourteenth century in an unnamed Italian abbey, it may also be read as allegory of Western culture in general, and Italy in the 1970s, specifically. David Richter in his essay, "The Mirrored World: Form and Ideology in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*" argues that whether the reader associates Emperor Louis with the USSR and Pope John XXII with the United States or the reverse, Eco seems to be concerned "with the impact of their struggle on the three billion people elsewhere in nations that might have preferred to remain unaligned . . ." The cold war, reaching its height during the years that Eco wrote the novel, deeply influenced the writer, and it is little wonder that the confrontation between the papal legation and the Franciscans is so heated.

Perhaps even more relevant to the novel, however, is the kidnapping of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigade. The kidnapping took place on March 16, 1978, the month Eco reports he began writing the novel. Moro was the President of the Christian Democratic Party and had been Prime Minister of Italy three times. A series of convoluted negotiations ensued as different parties tried to secure Moro's release. Much of what happened is ambiguous; however, Moro was eventually murdered. Eco and other Italian intellectuals were deeply shocked by this assassination, and his outrage seems to make it into the pages of *The Name of the Rose*.

Europe in the 1300s

The fourteenth century was a watershed period in medieval history, and there is little question of why Eco chooses to situate his novel in this troubled time. In the first place, philosophers and theologians were deeply immersed in a number of debates, including not only the question of Christ's poverty, but also the nature of language and truth. If language cannot be connected to a transcendent reality outside of the words themselves, then it undermines the entire Christian project. While this concern seems more postmodern than medieval, any close reading of medieval philosophers demonstrates the anxiety caused by new ways of thinking. In addition, Eco deliberately chooses to have Adso write about the events of 1327 from the vantage point of the middle of the century, at a time after the ravages of the Black Death. The spread of the plague in the years between 1348 and 1350 was cataclysmic; Europe lost nearly one-third of its total population, sending social, political, and religious institutions into chaos. For Adso, the plague must have seemed Apocalyptic. He mentions the death of William in the plague, and his own existence in an "aged world." The contemplation of death and of the world grown old is a common medieval motif; yet the images that Eco provides of Adso sifting through the ashes of the burned Scriptorium could just as easily apply to some cold war vision of nuclear holocaust. Thus, the connection between the

twentieth century and the fourteenth century seems closer than might otherwise be thought.

Critical Overview

The Name of the Rose, first published in Italian in 1980 and in English in 1983, was both a critical and popular success, staying at the top of the bestseller lists for weeks, and eventually selling more than a million copies in hard cover and more in paper back. The novel has remained in print for more than two decades, and continues to generate a large body of critical commentary. While academic interest might have been predicted, given Eco's reputation as a scholar, the popular response to the book took all by surprise. Who could have imagined that a long, complicated, multi-layered novel, set in the fourteenth century and with long passages of untranslated Latin, German, and French would appeal to the world-wide reading public?

Contemporary reviews find a variety of reasons for its appeal. Masolino D'Amico, in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, says that *The Name of the Rose* "is no mere detective story; rather, its framework serves as a vehicle for nothing less than a *summa* of all the author knows about the Middle Ages . . . Eco's rare gift for epitome has a chance to shine forth in this book and his own delight in his task is often infectious." D'Amico argues that the main point of the book is "to vindicate humour." Likewise, Gian-Paolo Biasin in *World Literature Today* writes that "Play is at the core of the plot." Michael Dirda, in *The Washington Post* review of the novel credits "Gothic hugger-mugger" with lightening "Eco's operatic gravity." He also, however, notes the vast scope of the novel: "In its range, *The Name of the Rose* suggests an imaginative *summa*, an alchemical marriage of murder mystery and Christian mystery."

In the years since the book's publication, scholars have written volumes dedicated to unpacking the novel. Many note the influence of Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentine writer, on Eco. Eco himself makes it clear in the "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*" that he deliberately invokes Borges in his character Jorge of Borgos, the blind librarian. Other critics note the connections between *The Name of the Rose*, Sherlock Holmes, and other detective stories. Jorge Hernández Martín, for example, devotes five chapters of his book *Readers and Labyrinths: Detective Fiction in Borges, Bustos Domecq, and Eco* to this project. He writes, "The name of Eco's detective, William of Baskerville, evokes in turn the renowned sleuth of Baker Street and Holmes's best known case, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*."

Still other critics concentrate on the intertexuality of the novel. Teresa De Lauretis in her chapter "Gaudy Rose: Eco and Narcissism," suggests that *The Name of the Rose* is "made up almost entirely of other texts." Likewise, Peter Bonandello in *Umberto Eco and the Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction, Popular Culture* argues that Eco's "work represents a pastiche and a parody of a number of other traditions□some obvious, others less so□that enable the novel to appeal to all his intended audiences simultaneously."

Other readings include Jonathan Key's "Maps and Territories: Eco Crossing the Boundary," in which he carefully examines the role that the abbey map and the library map play in the reading of the novel. He argues that "the library as map of the world

stands as a metonym for the frequently expressed formulation of the novel as a device for mapping the world."

Indeed, there seem to be as many readings as there are critics of this novel. All are universal in their praise for the richness of the text, and for the possibilities for continued study.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College who writes widely on literary topics for academic and educational publications. In this essay, Henningfeld discusses the concept of the labyrinth, the encyclopedia, and model reader for The Name of the Rose*.*

Entering a book as wonderfully rich and complicated as *The Name of the Rose* is both exhilarating and frightening. Where to begin? How to read? What ought a reader do with the vast quantities of information Eco spills out on every page? One helpful way of entering the text is to first consider two of Eco's controlling metaphors□the labyrinth and the encyclopedia□then to examine the idea of the model reader, and finally to imagine a number of possible (but by no means exhaustive) entry points.

That Eco wants readers to consider the idea of the labyrinth is clear. Early in the book, Abo tells William to beware of the library: "The library defends itself, immeasurable as the truth it houses, deceitful as the falsehood it preserves. A spiritual labyrinth, it is also a terrestrial labyrinth. You might enter and you might not emerge." In addition, Eco has written extensively on the idea of the labyrinth in his essays on semiotics. Rochelle Sibley, in her chapter "Aspects of the Labyrinth in *The Name of the Rose*: Chaos and Order in the Abbey Library," both reviews and comments on Eco's use of labyrinths. According to Sibley, Eco classifies labyrinths in three ways: the "classical;" the "Mannerist maze;" and the "rhizome," or net. The classical labyrinth has just one path in and out, and no decisions are required of the labyrinth walker. The maze, on the other hand, has several entrances, and many dead ends, cross roads, and mis-directions. The abbot's statement to William seems to refer to this kind of labyrinth; there is always the danger that those entering a maze may become so hopelessly lost that they will never find their way out. Indeed, it is this notion of the labyrinth that may intimidate readers of *The Name of the Rose*. For readers accustomed to thinking about the labyrinth as a maze where one must choose the right path to reach the center, or heart of the maze, choosing the "right" path into *The Name of the Rose* is nothing if not daunting. What if the reader makes a mistake and finds him or herself in a blind alley? Further, given the sheer number of entry points the novel offers, choosing just one may prove an impossibility.

However, Eco posits a third kind of labyrinth which he calls the rhizome or net. Sibley quotes Eco's definition of a net from *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984):

The main feature of a net is that every point can be connected with every other point, and, where connections are not yet designed, they are, however, conceivable and designable. A net is an unlimited territory. . . . the abstract model of a net has neither a center nor an outside.

Thus, in a rhizome, a labyrinth walker may move from point to point because all points are connected. Moreover, the pathways between the points are not yet fully defined; connections may still be made. Considering the labyrinth in this sense provides the

reader with nearly endless possibilities for interpretation. Indeed, wandering in a rhizome ought not elicit fear, but rather laughter, as the reader moves from node to node, recognizing that walking in circles in this kind of maze is not necessarily a bad thing, as new connections might reveal themselves at any moment. As Jorge Hernández Martín writes in his book *Readers and Labyrinths: Detective Fiction in Borges, Bustos Domecq and Eco*, "The possibilities for reading *The Name of the Rose* are as varied as the many individuals who appropriate the text by their readings."

An additional metaphor employed by Eco that is helpful in reading *The Name of the Rose* is the encyclopedia. Again, this term surfaces primarily in Eco's semiotic work, and it has technical meanings beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, the reader of *The Name of the Rose* can think of an encyclopedia in the more common usage of the term: a collection of knowledge, comprised of many sources, categorized and organized so that that a reader can move from topic to topic. Not surprisingly, delving into an encyclopedia often pushes a reader to make new connections. The encyclopedia is a particularly apt metaphor for a novel set in the Middle Ages, which was a time of great encyclopedists. As Christina Farronato observes in her book *Eco's Chaosmos: From the Middle Ages to Postmodernity*, "The medieval thinkers had an encyclopaedic approach to the reality of the universe. They elaborated a series of encyclopaedias that served to catalogue every object or event in the universe." Moreover, the fourteenth century in particular was a time of great social, religious, and political upheaval. Consequently, the medieval encyclopedists felt great pressure to recover and preserve the treasure troves of knowledge endangered by the fall of Rome and the crises of their own time.

Eco uses the notion of encyclopedia on a personal level. Each person is like a continually growing encyclopedia. Thus, for Eco, *The Name of the Rose* is not merely a novel, but also a cataloguing of his own encyclopedia. It is this encyclopedia that creates the labyrinth and the world of the novel. Why is this important for the reader to know? Because the way a reader brings his or her own encyclopedia to bear on *The Name of the Rose* will deeply impact the text the reader and the author collaboratively create. As Eco writes in the "Postscript," "What model reader did I want as I was writing? An accomplice, to be sure, one who would play my game."

Consequently, because Eco's encyclopedia is vast, there are many *The Name of the Rose* novels. It is in format a detective novel. Thus, readers who are aficionados of this genre will have no difficulty recognizing William of Baskerville and Adso of Melk as Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. In addition, these readers know from their own experience that there will be murders to be solved and evidence to observe. However, because Eco is also playing a game with the reader, most reader expectations of how the crime will be solved are undermined, not because the crimes go unsolved, but because William turns out to be utterly wrong in his assessment of the situation. He tells Adso, "I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs. I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental." For the reader of detective novels, such an admission is unheard of; although the detective might follow several blind leads, he or

she ought to always find the truth in the end. In *The Name of the Rose*, however, William simply finds accident, not order, and chaos, not truth.

Readers who hold the literature of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in their personal encyclopedias, likewise, will have no difficulty recognizing other structural influences. Eco uses several of Borges's stories; he also creates the character of Jorge of Borgos as a blind librarian. Any reader of Borges knows that Borges himself was both a librarian, and blind. Specifically, Eco borrows both style and content from Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," a story that opens with these lines: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia." Borges goes on to write about the loss of an article in an encyclopedia and his search to recover it. The story is remarkably similar to the opening of *The Name of the Rose*, called by Eco, "Naturally, a Manuscript." The insertion of a labyrinth in *The Name of the Rose* also has its roots in another short story by Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths." In this story, Borges creates a labyrinth that is not a physical labyrinth, but is instead a book. Finally, in Borges's famous detective story, "Death and the Compass," the detective follows a series of clues that seem to point to a particular pattern. He fails to apply Ockham's razor, "the principle that one should not postulate the existence of a greater number of entities or factors when fewer will suffice," according to Frederick C. Copleston's *Medieval Philosophy*. Instead, the detective chooses an elaborate pattern based on the Cabbala to explain a series of murders. Like William, this detective finally finds the answers he seeks, but only accidentally.

Finally, readers who bring to the novel an encyclopedia that includes knowledge of medieval history, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and religion will find a very different kind of reading and will find evidence of Eco's use of Roger Bacon, William of Ockham, and Thomas Aquinas, among many others. Such a reader will understand the intricacies of the debate between the papal legation and the Franciscans, and will delight in the finer points of orthodoxy and heresy. It is also likely that such a reader will have at least a rudimentary knowledge of Latin, and perhaps German, and so, will find the text less opaque than readers who do not know these languages.

There are countless entries into the labyrinth that is *The Name of the Rose*, some of them not even yet discovered. This is because, according to Teresa De Lauretis in her essay "Gaudy Rose: Eco and Narcissism," *The Name of the Rose* "is a novel made up almost entirely of other texts, of tales already told, of names either well known or sounding as if they should be known to us from literary and cultural history; a medley of famous passages and obscure quotations, specialized lexicons and subcodes . . . and characters cut out in strips from a generic World Encyclopedia." Lauretis here echoes Adso's epiphany:

Until then I had thought each book spoke of the things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many

minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors."

Eco welcomes readers into the murmuring labyrinth he has created in *The Name of the Rose*, and eagerly shares his encyclopedia with those readers who dare to play his game. He invites readers to move quickly from node to node, seeking knowledge, building connections, seemingly finding a pattern in the novel, and in the world. In the end, however, *The Name of the Rose* does not offer a glimpse of the truth at all, but rather provides only Adso's "lesser library . . . a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books."

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on *The Name of the Rose*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Name of the Rose was made into a film in 1986, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Sean Connery as William of Baskerville, Christian Slater as Adso of Melk, and F. Murray Abraham as Bernard Gui. The film was released on DVD in 2004 and is available from Warner Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

The Name of the Rose is filled with literary, historical, and philosophical allusions. Use "An Annotated Guide to the Historical and Literary References in *The Name of the Rose*" in *The Key to "The Name of the Rose"* (1999) by Adele J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White, to select one or more significant historical figures to research. How does Eco draw on this figure in his novel?

Most critics agree that Edgar Allan Poe is the father of the detective story. Read "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" by Poe, stories that all feature his detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Identify the most striking conventions of the detective story. What do readers expect to find when they read a mystery? How does Eco meet or subvert these expectations? How does reading Poe change or influence your reading of *The Name of the Rose*?

Write out a time line of the major historical events in Western Europe in the fourteenth century. How do these events play a role in *The Name of the Rose*? How does having a background in medieval history affect your reading of *The Name of the Rose*?

Examine as many copies of medieval manuscripts as you can find. (Good places to look include art history books or on line medieval history sites, such as the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library Western Manuscripts webpages, or the British Library's Lindisfarne Gospels webpage.) If possible, visit a museum and view a real medieval manuscript. At the same time, research the writing of medieval manuscripts. Write an essay in which you consider the techniques, strategies, problems, and challenges faced by medieval scribes in their efforts to produce texts.

Compare and Contrast

1300s: Religious philosophers argue over the proper interpretation of the written text of the Bible. Those who find themselves on the wrong side of the debate are often burned for heresy.

1970s: Philosophers of language for the past decades have argued that reality is created by text rather than the reverse. Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction, writes that text is no more than the play of signifiers.

Today: Debate over the meaning (or lack of meaning) of language continues, although deconstruction has less influence in academic debates.

1300s: The Black Death rages across Europe mid-century, leading people to believe that it could be a punishment from God and a sign of the Apocalypse.

1970s: At the height of the cold war, the entire world fears nuclear holocaust and the post-Apocalyptic vision. Movies such as *Planet of the Apes* graphically provide images of such a future.

Today: While the ending of the cold war eases nuclear fears, the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers in 2001 raises renewed fears of destabilization and chaos at the hands of terrorists. Further, it raises fears of another world-wide plague precipitated by terrorists.

1300s: Scribes work long hours copying manuscripts in the attempt to recover and preserve knowledge that was lost during the fall of the Roman Empire but finally makes its way back to Europe through the growing trade with the East.

1970s: Libraries and books exist worldwide and are easily accessible. Technology such as typewriters and copy machines, as well as radio and television, make information quickly and readily available.

Today: The explosion of computer technology puts entire encyclopedias on one small disk. There is sometimes the experience of "information overload," as well as the confidence that anything that needs to be known can be accessed on the Internet.

What Do I Read Next?

A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century (1978), by Barbara Tuchman, is a fascinating and readable study of Europe in the 1300s.

In 1993, noted historian of philosophy Frederick C. Copleston published the second volume of his *History of Philosophy*, which covers the philosophy of the Middle Ages, including discussions of both Roger Bacon and William of Ockham.

Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories (1986) provides an excellent introduction into Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's legendary sleuth.

Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, translated into English by William Weaver in 1989, is another philosophical novel, investigating the secrets of the Knights Templar.

Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (1962), edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, contains some of Borges's most influential stories, including "Death and the Compass," "The Garden of Forking Paths," "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

Key Questions

Eco's fiction provides an unusual wealth of material for discussion. He is always aware of the reader, and makes it his business to provide plenty of ambiguities and puzzles so as to provoke thought and debate. Despite the formidable difficulties it presents, The Name of The Rose has remained popular since its publication. Its appeal seems likely to endure, at least in part because it gives readers so much to talk about. Whether one considers it as a detective novel, historical fiction, psychological narrative, or philosophy, it offers a well-nigh inexhaustible source of topics.

1. Do William's many failures diminish his stature? Is he truly a Great Detective, or just a parody of one?

2. Adso is represented as an old man recalling events of many years ago. Does he seem to be a reliable narrator? Does Eco ever give us cause to doubt Adso's memory or frankness?

3. Most of the sex in the novel is homosexual. Does Eco feature the illicit relations of the monks with each other simply to reflect a historical reality, or does he have some other reason?

4. How does Eco make the medieval fears and joys of the characters comprehensible to modern readers?

5. Jorge of Burgos proves a formidable antagonist, despite his blindness. How does his blindness actually make him more dangerous?

6. William is forced to discard his apocalyptic theory of the murders. Are they really just random events? Is there a deeper sense in which the apocalyptic pattern is valid after all?

7. Eco includes many passages in Latin, which he cannot reasonably expect most readers to understand.

Assuming that he has a more serious purpose than showing off, why does he run this risk of alienating his readers?

8. What is the point of the repeated allusions to William's eyeglasses?

9. Why does Eco complicate matters with his odd tale of the fortunes of Adso's manuscript?

10. Several of the monks consider the unique manuscript of Aristotle to be worth killing or dying for. Does Eco expect us to grant it such a high value? Would it have been better if Jorge had destroyed it as soon as he became aware of its nature?

11. The book ends grimly, with death all around, the diplomatic mission failed, the library destroyed, and Adso finishing his narrative as a tired old man. Have the forces of light humor, tolerance, intellectual freedom won anything?

Literary Precedents

The Bible, the Conan Doyle stories, the works of Aristotle, medieval literature of every sort herbals, theological studies, romances and Eco's own writings on semiotics are the most important sources and inspirations for The Name of The Rose. But it would be easier to identify the works that have not in some way contributed to the characters, themes, and plots of The Name of the Rose than those that have.

Eco's erudition is so broad, his writing so informed that authors as diverse as James Joyce and Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges and John Barth, Thomas a Kempis and Thomas Aquinas inform the novel.

In Eco's own terms The Name of The Rose is a postmodern novel that insists on the primacy of plot. As he himself argues: "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently." There are hundreds of allusions to classical, medieval, and modern works in The Name of The Rose. Eco's novel is replete with instances of untranslated Latin, German, and other languages as well as anachronistic references, often in the form of disguised quotations, to authors like Ludwig Wittgenstein. Eco also sees The Name of The Rose as a historical novel that illuminates the medieval age and shows how modernity derives from that age. As Eco observes: "If a character of mine, comparing two medieval ideas, produces a third, more modern idea, he is doing exactly what culture did."

Further Study

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