

Medieval Symbols in “The Name of the Rose”, by Umberto Eco

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Abstract: The purpose of the present article is to identify and analyze some of the medieval symbols present in the novel *The Name of the Rose*, written by Umberto Eco, insisting on their importance. Combining elements of a historical romance, a thriller and a novel of ideas, Umberto Eco manages to create a vivid, intertextual book who is filled with mysteries, intriguing the reader from the beginning to the end.

Keywords: Middle Ages, symbols, *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco.

Thinking in the Middle Ages was deeply marked by symbolic connotations, the world and the surrounding universe bearing the fingerprint of deeper essences. The enigmatic character of symbols and also their meanings had the role of restricting the direct access to understanding reality, functioning as a metaphorical shield, beyond which there were true mysteries.

We have thought about the reason why Umberto Eco decided to write a novel about the Middle Ages, because the action takes place in 1327 and the entire novel is actually the text written by an aging monk, Adso of Melk, in 14th century Italy, being the mysterious saga of seven deaths investigated by William of Baskerville, the master of Adso who is a Franciscan monk, very well educated and known for his Sherlock Holmes abilities as a former inquisitor. Therefore, in the *Prologue*, Adso states:

Having reached the end of my poor sinner’s life, my hair now white, I grow old as the world does, waiting to be lost in the bottomless pit of silent and deserted divinity, sharing in the light of angelic intelligences; confined now with my heavy, ailing body in this cell in the dear monastery of Melk, I prepare to leave on this parchment my testimony as to the wondrous and terrible events that I happened to observe in my youth, now repeating verbatim all I saw and heard, without venturing to seek a design, as if to leave to those who will come after (if the Antichrist has not come first) signs of signs, so that the prayer of deciphering may be exercised on them.¹

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¹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose, Prologue*, Warner Books Edition, 1986, p.11.

In an essay called “Ten Ways to Dream the Middle Ages”, Umberto Eco seems to have offered the answer to our question, for he mentioned that we do not dream the Middle Ages because it represents the past, but because it is the crucible of Europe and of our modern civilization. That period was the time when the majority of the things we are still grappling with today were invented, from the banking system to class struggle and pauperism to our western concept of love. This book is a wonderful blend of medieval studies, Biblical analysis and literary theory.

Regarding the characters of this novel and their symbolism, Brother William symbolizes knowledge and logic, unlike most people of that period, and he makes use of this knowledge to decipher the death of the seven monks that happened in the monastery of Melk. What is simply enigmatic is the fact that the abbot of the monastery have Father William and his apprentice, Adso, free access everywhere, except for the library. Judging things from this perspective, the monks could symbolize the corruption of the society, the fact that they withhold information from the rest of the world is intriguing, for they should be the ones to enlighten people. It is also known the fact that in the Middle Ages, access to knowledge was given especially to people that belonged to aristocracy and to the monks.

In the *Prologue*, there is a fragment which is extremely vivid and applicable today, because it catches a contrastive perspective between the way the world was and the way it is now:

In the past, men were handsome and great (now they are children and dwarfs), but this is merely one of the many facts that demonstrate the disaster of an aging world. The young no longer want to study anything, learning is in decline, the whole world walks on its head, blind men lead others equally blind and cause them to plunge into the abyss, birds leave the nest before they can fly, the jackass plays the lyre, oxen dance. Mary no longer loves the contemplative life and Martha no longer loves the active life, Leah is sterile, Rachel has a carnal eye, Cato visits brothels, Lucretius becomes a woman. Everything is on the wrong path. In those days, thank God, I acquired from my master the desire to learn and a sense of the straight way, which remains even when the path is tortuous.²

As the title of this article has announced, we will focus our attention on discovering the symbolism of this novel. We will start by stating that the book is organized in seven chapters, according to the days of the week and each of them is subdivided into the canonic hours of praying according to the Benedictins: *Matutini, Laudi, Prima, Tertia, Sexta, Nona, Vesper, Completa*, thus the author offers the feeling of authenticity.

² Idem, p.13.

Even the construction of the abbey of Melk is presented in a way which has mostly connections to religious interpretations:

This was an octagonal construction that from a distance seemed a tetragon (a perfect form, which expresses the sturdiness and impregnability of the City of God), whose southern sides stood on the plateau of the abbey, while the northern ones seemed to grow from the steep side of the mountain, a sheer drop, to which they were bound. I might say that from below, at certain points, the cliff seemed to extend, reaching up toward the heavens, with the rock's same colors and material, which at a certain point became keep and tower (work of giants who had great familiarity with earth and sky). Three rows of windows proclaimed the triune rhythm of its elevation, so that what was physically squared on the earth was spiritually triangular in the sky. As we came closer, we realized that the quadrangular form included, at each of its corners, a heptagonal tower, five sides of which were visible on the outside – four of the eight sides, then, of the greater octagon producing four minor heptagons, which from the outside appeared as pentagons. And thus anyone can see the admirable concord of so many holy numbers, each revealing a subtle spiritual significance. Eight, the number of perfection for every tetragon; four, the number of the Gospels; five, the number of the zones of the world; seven, the number of the gifts of the Holy Ghost.³

It is intriguing from the very beginning the fact that the abbot forbids Father William to access the library during his investigations:

“Very well,” William said then, “may I question the monks?”

“You may.”

“May I move freely about the abbey?”

“I grant you that power.”

“Will you assign me this mission coram monachis?”

“This very evening.”

“I shall begin, however, today, before the monks know what you have charged me to do. Besides, I already had a great desire –not the least reason for my sojourn here –to visit your library, which is spoken of with admiration in all the abbeys of Christendom.”

The abbot rose, almost starting, with a very tense face. “You can move freely through the whole abbey, as I have said. But not, to be sure, on the top floor of the Aedificium, the library.”⁴

³ Umberto Eco, *op. cit.*, p.16.

⁴ Umberto Eco, *op.cit.*, p.24.

Actually, the interdiction regarding the library was connected to the fact that the monks had unique books and copies of others which were rare or to be found nowhere else. Moreover, there was a secret regarding the way the books were placed, the secret was known only by the librarian and the one who was his right hand.

You see, Brother William, the abbot said, [...] the library was laid out on a plan which has remained obscure to all over the centuries, and which none of the monks is called upon to know. Only the librarian has received the secret from the librarian who preceded him, and he communicates it, while still alive, to the assistant librarian, so that death will not take him by surprise and rob the community of that knowledge. And the secret seals the lips of both men. Only the librarian has, in addition to that knowledge, the right to move through the labyrinth of the books, he alone knows where to find them and where to replace them, he alone is responsible for their safekeeping. The other monks work in the scriptorium and may know the list of the volumes that the library houses. But a list of the titles often tells very little; only the librarian knows, from the collocation of the volume, from its degree of inaccessibility, what secrets, what truths or falsehoods, the volume contains. [...] 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. And having said this, I would like you to conform to the rules of the abbey.⁵

In the book *Dictionary of Symbols*, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant have underlined the meaning of the labyrinth which has its origins in the palace of Minos⁶, the labyrinth was an elaborate, confusing structure designed and built by Daedalus in order to hold the Minotaur, the monster which was finally killed by the hero Theseus.

From the beginning to the end, *The Name of the Rose* contains a plethora of symbols, relying on descriptions and actions. One section describes the front of the abbey:

The church was not majestic like the ones I saw later at Strasbourg, Chartres, Bamberg, and Paris.[...] I saw a throne set in the sky and a figure seated on the throne. The face of the Seated One was stern and impassive, the eyes wide and glaring over a terrestrial humankind that had reached the end of its story; majestic hair and beard flowed around the face and over the chest like the waters of a river, in streams all equal, symmetrically divided in two. The crown on his head was rich in enamels and jewels; the purple imperial

⁵ Umberto Eco, *op.cit.*, pp.25-26.

⁶ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionar de simboluri*, vol.2, Ed. Artemis, Bucuresti, pp.191-193.

tunic was arranged in broad folds over the knees, woven with embroideries and laces of gold and silver thread. The left hand, resting on one knee, held a sealed book, the right was uplifted in an attitude of blessing or –I could not tell- of admonition. The face was illuminated by the tremendous beauty of a halo, containing a cross and bedecked with flowers, while around the throne and above the face of the Seated One I saw an emerald rainbow glittering before the throne, beneath the feet of the Seated one, a sea of crystal flowed, and around the Seated One, beside and above the throne, I saw four awful creatures –awful for me, as I looked at them, transported, but docile and dear for the Seated One, whose praises they sang without cease.

Or, rather, not all could be called awful, because one seemed to me handsome and kindly, the man to my left (and to the right of the Seated one), who held out a book. But on the other side, there was an eagle I found horrifying, its beak agape, its thick feathers arranged like a cuirass, powerful talons, great wings outstretched. And at the feet of the Seated One, under the first two figures, there were the other two, a bull and a lion, each monster clutching a book between talons or hoofs, the body turned away from the throne, but the head toward the throne, as if shoulders and neck twisted in a fierce impulse, flanks tensed, the limbs those of a dying animal, maw open, serpentlike tails coiled and writhing, culminating, at the top, in tongues of flame. Both monsters were winged, both crowned by haloes; despite their formidable appearance, they were creatures not of hell, but of heaven, and if they seemed fearsome it was because they were roaring in adoration of One Who Is to Come and who would judge the quick and the dead.⁷

Regarding the four symbolic presences near the throne of Jesus Christ, in Adrian Stoleriu’s book, *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului*⁸, we have found data about the visual representation of the four evangelists:

omul (înăripat) pentru Evanghelistul Matei, întrucât începutul Evangheliei sale descrie întruparea lui Hristos, *leul* pentru Evanghelistul Marcu, amintind de “glasul celui care strigă în pustiu”(Matei, 3, 3), cu care începe Evanghelia acestuia, *taurul*, ca symbol al jertfei descrise în Evanghelia Sfântului Luca, și *vulturul*, ca simbol al înălțării spirituale propovăduite în Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan. [the (winged) *man* for the Evangelist Matthew, because the beginning of his Gospel describes the embodiment of Christ, *the lion* for the Evangelist Mark, reminding us of “the voice of the one who shouts in the desert” (Matthew, 3,3) which starts his Gospel, *the ox* as a symbol of the sacrifice described in the Gospel of Saint Luke, and *the eagle* as a symbol of the spiritual ascension preached in the Gospel of Saint John].

⁷ Umberto Eco, *op.cit.*, pp.28-29.

⁸ Adrian Stoleriu, *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2013, p.43.

Consequently, the door of the abbey seems to show a depiction of heaven, with God looking down on people, with an unhappy look smitten across His face. The throne in the sky with the majestic Seated One represents God Who is holding a book in his left hand and has a halo behind His head, wearing a purple tunic, the sign of regality and political power in Ancient Rome. The imposing door of the abbey sends a message regarding the seriousness which should characterize any mortal who enters the place, being aware that the abbey is protected by the highest power.

If we think about the presence of the Franciscan monk William in the Benedictine monastery, he is there in order to solve the mystery of the murder of a dozen monks who lost their lives in the most bizarre ways. Towards the end of the book, it turns out that all those horrible crimes were committed for cultural and ethical reasons. It is launched the idea that the library is the place where the lost second part of the *Poetics* by Aristotle can be found, the lost book about the theory of comedy and laughter. The real librarian of the monastery proves to be Jorge, the one who does anything to stop the circulation of that manuscript. Father William made Jorge speak about one of the topics debated with the other friars:

“We talked about laughter,” Jorge said sharply. “The comedies were written by the pagans to move spectators to laughter, and they acted wrongly. Our Lord Jesus never told comedies or fables, but only clear parables which allegorically instruct us on how to win paradise, and so be it.”

“I wonder,” William said, “why are you so opposed to the idea that Jesus may have laughed. I believe laughter is a good medicine, like baths, to treat humors and the other afflictions of the body, melancholy in particular.”

“Baths restore the balance of the humors,” Jorge said. “Laughter shakes the body, distorts the features of the face, makes man similar to the monkey.”

“Monkeys do not laugh; laughter is proper to man, it is a sign of his rationality,” William said.

“Speech is also a sign of human rationality, and with speech a man can blaspheme against God. Not everything that is proper to man is necessarily good. He who laughs does not believe in what he laughs at, but neither does he hate it. Therefore, laughing at evil means not preparing oneself to combat it, and laughing at good means denying the power through which good is self-propagating. This is why the Rule says, ‘The tenth degree of humility is not to be quick to laughter, as it is written: *stultus in risu exaltat vocem suam*’.⁹

⁹ Umberto Eco, *op.cit.*, p.79

The monks bring examples from their readings regarding laughter, they even debate on the fact that Jesus Christ has never laughed:

And John of Salinsbury authorized a discreet hilarity. And finally Ecclesiastes, whom you quoted in the passage to which your Rule refers, where it says that laughter is proper to the fool, permits at least silent laughter, in the serene spirit.

The spirit is serene only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in good achieved, and truth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh. Laughter foments doubt.¹⁰

The question which naturally arises from this discussion is this: why is Aristotle's book considered so valuable? First of all, Jorge was the one who had the only copy left of it, secondly, by the power of the words of Aristotle, many people would have started to think differently. The moment when, after great torment, Father William finally discovers that the murderer was Jorge and the crimes took place because he had tried to protect the book from the other monks, for fear that

This book could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the evil is wisdom, this book could teach learned men the clever and, from that moment, illustrious artifices that could legitimize the reversal of laughter.

The method used for protecting the book was unique and painful for the monks that had the curiosity of reading it: they all died ingesting the poison with their hands, while turning the pages and putting their hands in their mouth afterwards.

Moreover, the presence of Latin quotations in the entire novel is also a sign of appreciation for the importance of this language which is rarely used nowadays, but who was considered essential for an educated human being in the Middle Ages. However, in order to facilitate the understanding of the book, we believe that these Latin fragments should be translated, given the fact that the people who know this language today are very few.

In conclusion, far from being an exhaustive approach, we have tried to decipher some of the symbols that are specific to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, insisting on their meaning seen from a nowadays perspective.

¹⁰ Idem, p.80.

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