

## Gothic Elements in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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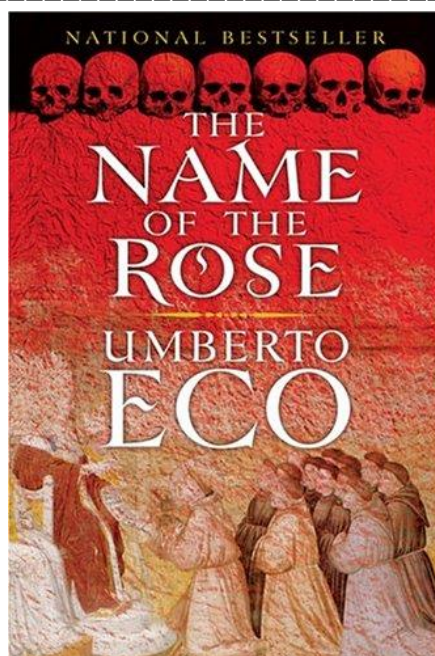
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### Abstract

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1988) is a novel which is set historically in the fourteenth century and deals with a story of a murder which happens in an Italian monastery. The Elder monk, William of Baskerville, who arrives at the monastery becomes terrified only to find that the happenings were not just an ordinary crime but was actually part of a prophecy. When one thing leads to another, there are other mystifying things which unfold one by one and are finally solved by William. By genre, the novel has not been classified under gothic tradition. But the novel actually has many gothic elements imbibed in it, both implicit and explicitly. So the objective of the paper is to reveal the elements which may make Eco's novel as a gothic novel. The research paper will contain textual evidences from the selected novel and also from various theoretical texts to justify the research focus.

### Change as an Integral Process in Creative Writing

In any form of literary writing the reader as well as the writer could be sure of a constant change which may occur in the style, form and content of the writing. In other words, a text's meaning could be ever changing like the new critics argue and so does the change occur with the form

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and content of a literary work. A literary work prone to change does not risk the factor of its evolution being unacknowledged by the readers of the literary work whether it is in the negative or positive side. While considering this a Gothic fiction since the time of Horace Walpole to the present day has evolved in a very flexible way as to cater the needs of the contemporary times.



Umberto Eco

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto\\_Eco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umberto_Eco)

But any change does not totally reform the elements, in this case, of gothic, completely. So there is always the trace of both early and modern trends which could be clearly seen upon a closer introspection. Whether this statement suits other forms of writing does not concern this research paper but gothic writing/fiction can be seen as an example of a form of writing which possess in itself the trends of both early and the contemporary form of writing. A literary work like *The Name of the Rose* (1983) comes in handy to explicate such an idea.

### **The Focus of This Paper – Gothic Fiction**

The objective of the research paper is to provide examples from the chosen text and various other texts to illuminate that *The Name of the Rose* has gothic elements stored in it which has to be brought out of the darkness prevailing in the text. The Gothic fiction has come a long way before the day in which horror writing was considered as a gothic writing too. The Early gothic writing of the eighteenth century, to be recognised as a gothic writing was only to have ‘ruins, castles, monasteries,

and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural' (Smith 4) which typically characterise the form. Gradually these elements were transcribed from external elements like buildings, which created terror in the minds of the reader, to internal elements which portrayed 'evil' in a particular form, by the start of nineteenth century.

### **Self-reflexive Form**

Before this stage gothic writing was a self-reflexive form which paved way for the exploration of what comprises 'evil' in order to identify the political outlook of a gothic text. Because gothic texts had an anti-enlightenment idea which were often professed in works like, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* by Mathew Lewis and many others. Hence it was necessary for the gothic writers to be critical in their view, so they hid their contexts in symbols because they were living in the age of reason which wanted to cancel all irrationality and particularly supernatural elements.

### **Specific Geographic Context, Tabooed Sexuality as Features of Gothic Fiction**

Apart from this, the gothic takes into consideration a national specific context and also represents 'tabooed' sexuality. So a text which is explored under these criterions, if at all it reveals above mentioned elements could be deemed to be a gothic writing. *The Name of the Rose* written by Umberto Eco can be explored in such a light a light so as to reveal the gothic elements in it which in turn will make it a gothic text.

#### ***The Name of the Rose***

The story of *The Name of the Rose* is set in a monastery in Italy during the start of fourteenth century. A friar, William of Baskerville and a novice, Adso of Melk arrive at the monastery to investigate the murder of a young priest. The turn of events put them in a tight situation as to hunt for a particular book from the forbidden library of the monastery and also to undergo the investigation of consecutive murders which happen on the same note after their arrival at the monastery. The novel itself was written in Italian in 1980 in the name of *Il Nome Della Rosa* (1980) and later published in

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English in 1983. But the setting of the novel in the fourteenth century itself is a technique of gothic writing according to Andrew Smith who says that it is ‘...somewhat fantasised version of the past...’ (Smith 2). The text is specific to the writer’s country and he looks back at the past by mixing fiction with history, specific to that particular time period.

### ***Library – A Forbidden Fruit***

Then, the library which remains as a ‘forbidden fruit’ throughout the story which comprises many secrets as being told by the librarian Malachi who prohibits entry to the library except him. The abbot of the monastery at the first encounter with William, who wishes to enter the library, is denied entry stating that,

‘to achieve the immense and holy task that enriches those walls devout men have toiled for centuries , observing iron rules . 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 the knowledge’ (Eco 37).

### **Obscurity of the *Library***

The obscurity which remains throughout the story involving the library is central to the novel. The Librarian, the Assistant librarian, the Abbot and Jorge are the only people who know about the holdings of the library and also the layout of the library. Because it is constructed like a maze so that no one would enter. Among the people who know about the library, it is only discovered by the end of the novel that Jorge also knows about the library inside-out which is a twist in the story.

### **Fear of the *Library***

All the residents of the monastery are afraid to enter it as anyone would not wish to enter a ruined castle, monastery or a haunted place. This is because they don’t fully understand the library,

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both the physical structure and the mental imagery of the library since they have never entered it. Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Entry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) called this particular phenomenon as being sublime.

‘Burke’s influential account of the sublime distinguished between sublimity and beauty. The sublime was associated with grand feelings stimulated by obscurity and highly dramatic encounters with the world in which a sense of awe was paradoxically inspired by a feeling of incomprehension’ (Smith 11).

### **Persuade and Provoke**

The sublime had the power to persuade its reader and provoke terror in them because they too like the others do not understand why the entry to the library is prohibited. It’s a mixed emotion of wonder and fear about what would be inside the library?. Burke’s argument is that people fear things which they don’t fully understand to which we have ample examples throughout human history like in Thunder and lightning itself becomes a matter of worship because they didn’t fully understand it and also people died due to it.

### **Fearsome Tales about the *Library***

The priests, monks and novice of the monastery have been told stories always about the terrifying library which will consume the one who enters disrespecting the prohibition. The abbot of the monastery in the same way tries to prohibit the inquisitor for the crime, William, from entering the library by saying that

‘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 confirm to the rules of the abbey’ (Eco 38).

In this way Burke's critical text becomes an important treatise in showing that *The Name of the Rose* is a gothic fiction. He also says that sublimity brings out various feelings of anxiety like privation, vastness, Power and finally Obscurity.

### **Only the Owner-Guardians Understand *Library***

By the description of William, the library is very vast and no one except the librarian and the assistant librarian, who own the power to it, are the ones who fully understand it. There are other various instances in which there are lessons learnt that none should enter the library because one or more trespassers start claiming that the library housed many supernatural elements adding to the fear and terror of other in the monastery. One among the testimony is that there were

‘...rumours about a monk who decided to venture into the library during the night, to look for something Malachi had refused to give him, and he saw serpents, headless men, and men with two heads. He was nearly crazy when he emerged from the labyrinth...’ (Eco 89)

### **Focused on Anti-Enlightenment Principles**

As Andrew Smith notes in his book Gothic Literature, the gothic writers created literary works which were created based on anti-enlightenment principles. When it was the age of reason, human beings started rationalising things and hence ghost, phantoms, apparitions were thought to make no sense. It was attempted to rule out the supernatural elements on the basis that they were irrational. Hence it was necessary that the next change was made in gothic writing. The gothic writer dug deep into core of their writing and started planting symbols in them. On the surface a gothic writing would seem like it comprises things which cannot be reasoned but on the deeper side there emerged a political, social or cultural context which the writer wished to portray.

### **Heavy Symbolisms**

So a fiction like *The Name of the Rose* can be traced with the use of heavy symbolisms. The ‘Forbidden’ library for example is actually forbidden because it possesses knowledge. No more can an

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ignorant man be called innocent after he pursues knowledge. The library has a particular kind of knowledge which spiritual young people should not lay their hands on. And if they do, they might start questioning God and his creation which is not expected from ecclesiastics. That might make them a heresiarch. The knowledge being discussed here particularly comes from an Aristotle's book of comedy. The book is supposed to be real but the one and only copy has been lost forever.

### **Forbidden Territory**

The ecclesiastical society, particularly the Benedictine order, forbids others from entering library. Ecclesiastical society also forbids one from laughing. Because of the fact that they claim in the novel that Jesus Christ never laughed and only devils laughed. So Aristotle's book would provide laughter which is against the moral norms of the ecclesiastical order. Eco represents such an idea through his novel and debates it thoroughly.

### **Theology of Anti-laughing**

Jorges, an elderly blind monk is opposed to the idea of laughing when he says that, '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' (Eco 132). Coincidentally the gothic as a literary mode also does encourage such kind of debates. This particular debate happens between Jorges and William as a sub-plot. On the wider term there is the debate which goes on for centuries in Christianity, especially the ecclesiastical society. There is one group which argues that in order to serve people and reach to the love of God one must be humble in terms of material wealth. But the other group is under the notion that wealth is important. The Benedictines who argue that spiritual people shouldn't possess any material wealth offends the opposing party by claiming that they are heretics. This debate goes on without a conclusion in the novel. But a debate is always a healthy way of resolving issues and in this case the debate itself represents a gothic element as it is pointed out that, 'the Gothic is a mode which searches for new ways of representing complex ideas or debates' (Smith 8). Whether the conflict is resolved or not a gothic writing always presents itself as a ground for fighting out complex and different ideas which contradict each other.

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## **Paradoxes Galore**

There are many instances to be offered from Eco's work which function as a paradox. Debating an idea may be simple enough to be contradicted but there are much more complex things in the novel which dwell deep in the novel. For example, Benedictines are the ones who call people of riches among the ecclesiastical society, as heretics. Like mentioned above there are debates between two groups notably the Franciscans and the Benedictines in trying to arrive at a conclusion whether the church should be rich or not. But it is very ambivalent that the Benedictines who profess that the church should be poor, actually does not follow their teachings themselves. Because the abbey which they are living itself is a very rich one and it employs hundred and fifty servants to serve sixty of the spiritual residents. This is self-contradictory and invites critical judgement. Hence by noting that Smith once again states that one of the key terms of gothic writing is 'ambivalence' (Smith 23). The novel is both Pro and anti-aristocratic in its approach. It produces an idea, which is highly debatable, and cancels it out all by itself.

## **Committed Inquisitor**

William the protagonist of the novel wouldn't let himself be defeated very easily as he is an inquisitor who has come to investigate the mystery. William and his Assistant doubt that the library has something to do with the ill-happenings in the abbey. So they try and venture into the library and its labyrinth. Gradually they solve the mysteries of the library one by one and find that Jorge was the murderer who killed everyone who tried to read that particular book. The rest of the terrifying things about headless men, dead monks and vision of hell were all illusions of modern science which Jorge uses to keep people away from the library. Thus all the myths involving the library are shattered, because the headless-men were nothing but an illusion created in a distorted mirror. And the person looking at it would feel terrified of the image.

## **Visions Explained**



The vision of hell, William explains rationally, comes from inhaling the smoke of a particular herb when it is burnt. A learned scholar in the present day would know that a particular drug called LSD could create such illusions. And William explains all of the myths and destroys them with the truth thus arriving at the meaning. It is a postmodern characteristic of a gothic text which questions everything which is held as truth. There is only a subtle difference between modernism and postmodernism,

‘Whilst modernism focused on the fragmented nature of subjectivity (and so exploited the Gothic fascination with fractured selves), postmodernism represents a scepticism about the grand narratives (such as religion, for example) which once provided social and moral norms. In a contemporary, postmodern age one can no longer believe in coherent, universal, claims to truth which, so the argument goes, are replaced by moral relativism. Such a world is defined by the absence of absolute meaning, and in literature this becomes manifested through stylistic play in which narrative forms are run together to create synthetic worlds which foreground issues about representation above any moral or metaphysical concerns. In other words, postmodernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world’ (Smith 141).

### **Committed Testimony to Objectivity**

William stands testimony to the objectivity of this novel as opposed to modernist approach. He questions everything and goes by fact rather than by opinion. But Eco gives the novel a postmodernist touch by letting William discover all by himself that he was actually misled by the scriptures that the murder were actually committed by an anti-Christ. As it turns out , William finds out that it was not true and he only found the criminal by sheer coincidence since he was misled.

Thus a literary work like *The Name of the Rose* while being scrutinised under the light of gothic style of writing circumscribes not only the elements which can be seen in the early gothic

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writing, like ruins, castles, tall towers, monks, aristocrats, but also shares the elements of other modes of gothic writing which were added into it as the form gradually evolved by the imagination and creativity writers who contributed towards it. In conclusion, a gothic text in all times is prone to change and the gothic mode is continually evolving which also is exemplified by this research paper.

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