

Meta narratives in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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Meta narrative is a term developed by Jean- Francois Lyotard. It is "a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values" (Lyotard). Eco believes this type of meta narrative description and it is clearly portrayed in his novels.

Umberto Eco, an Italian novelist, literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, and professor, is best known for his 1980 novel *Il nome della rosa*. It was translated into English in the name *The Name of the Rose*. The novel is a historical mystery. The novel is rich in Biblical allusions, medieval history, semiotics and literary theory. In simple words the novel could be defined as a well constructed labyrinth. The novel is a meta narrative fiction. It brings in many stories to support the main story line.

The novel begins with the narrator giving an introduction to the story. This could be taken as the first phase through which one enters the novel. Next, the novel goes into how Adso writes the manuscript. The third phase of the novel reveals what is written in the manuscript. All the three phases are written in first person narration. Thus the beginning of the novel itself is in a meta narrative form, which unveils historical events, social activities, cultural and religious phenomena.

As declared by Bertens regarding meta narratives, that is "a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other little stories within conceptual models that assemble the little stories into a whole" (186) is vividly presented in *The Name of te Rose*. According to Bertens's and Fokkema's explanation, Eco builds many sub stories in order to support the main story. The main story is William of Baskerville's visit to the abbey belonging to the Benedictine order. William belongs to the Franciscan order. In order to support this main story, Eco pens down many small stories like, the story of Adelmo's death, the death of Venantius of Salvemec, and many sequential mysteries. Each supporting story has the tendency to stand alone as an individual story. William's visit to the abbey remains unknown even to Adso of Melk, his scribe. The mysteries of the abbey begin with the death of Brother Adelmo of Otranto. Adso is sure that William has been assigned with some important job, but does not know what it was. He implicitly obeyed his master's word. He had a habit of asking questions frequently. Once William and Adso reached the abbey, the abbot visited them. Adso came to know of William's mission through their conversation. The death of Adelmo has left the entire abbey in sorrow. William had many perceptions. He was not able to guess whether it was a suicide or a murder.

According to John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, "a meta-narrative is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Web). William's intelligence is proved at every phase in the novel. William started his inquiry from where the body was found. William was informed on how and where Adelmo's body was found. He collected many possibilities as how the body could have come to that place. He was not able to arrive at a conclusion. He started his inquiry with the other priests in the abbey. He examined Adelmo's desk at the scriptorium. He examined the books which Adelmo was translating. By the time William could examine all the books that Adelmo was working on, it was time to close the scriptorium and the librarian requested William and Adso to leave the scriptorium. William requested the librarian to take care of Adelmo's desk. When William came to examine Adelmo's desk again, he sensed that something was missing, but he was not sure about what was missing.

In spite of many interruptions William continued his inquiry. There was a sequence of deaths that followed Adelmo's death. When William was nearing a clue by his investigation with a person, the person dies. William was confused. He was not able to arrive at anything concrete. Each death left William more confused. It seemed like there was no connection between the deaths. But William guessed that there was some thread that was linking everything.

First Adelmo's body was found at the foot of the sheer drop. Adelmo of Otranto was young, but he was already famous as a master illuminator. Next was Venantius of Salvemec, the Greek scholar with whom William and Adso had talked with, that afternoon about the codices that they have found in Adelmo's desk. He was immersed in a vessel of blood. The third day Berengar was missing. There was a blood stained cloth in his room. Later, his body was found swollen in the bath. Berengar's tongue was black. This was unusual in a corpse that has been swollen due to drowning. Fourth, Severinus of Sankt Wendel was found brutally murdered in his lab. The following day Malachi of Hildesheim was missing during prayer. Blind Jorge was worried. He kept searching for Malachi in his place every now and then. Suddenly Malachi entered and took his place. Everyone where relieved. But immediately Malachi fell to the ground. His body shivered and he breathed his last.

William was in a pool of confusion. He stumbled at every point. He came to the abbey to find out the mystery behind Adelmo's death. But now the sequence of deaths left him puzzled. He first wanted to know what Adelmo was trying to copy. He felt that he would reach at a point if he decoded what he copied from Adelmo's paper.

William wanted to visit the library. But the abbot refused to give him permission to do so. William decided to sneak into the library. By doing this he tried to break the rule that stopped him from doing his work. Adso and William entered the path which led to the library. The library was a real labyrinth. William and Adso where totally confused. William felt that someone other than Adso and himself was also present. He tried to call out to that person. In the darkness of the path someone crossed past them and William lost his glasses. William felt that his investigation will have to wait until he has found his glasses. When Berengar died, William's glasses were found along with his belongings. So William found it was Berengar who was in the library the other day. William continued trying to decode Adelmo's codices.

When Berengar's body was found in the bath, his tongue and finger tips were dark. So, William guessed that it could be some poison that had caused his death. He enquired Severinus whether he had painful poisons in his lab and whether something went missing. Severinus replied saying that there were certain medicines that become poisonous when taken in large quantity. He also said that there was once a storm and his lab was totally shattered. During that disaster there was a painful poison that went missing. He thought that it was also destroyed in the storm. "it had the power of thousand scorpions" (Eco, 498). William created a hypothesis with everything that he heard from Severinus. William acting with knowledge is a sound proof that he was not a mere priest but also a wise person who had worldly knowledge. This was in contradiction to Jorge's idea. According to Jorge attaining worldly knowledge is equal blasphemy.

The next day Severinus spoke to William about a strange book. He said he has kept the book in the lab. Before William could reach the lab Severinus was found murdered. William searched for the book but it was missing. In fact William did not know what he was searching. But by then he knew he was searching for a Greek book. Thus was the power of William's intelligence.

William and Adso went back to the scriptorium and asked Benno whether they could examine the catalogue. While doing so they saw that there was a group of four titles in a single entry. It meant that there were several texts in one volume. And they also tried to check the succession of the librarians with the help of the handwritings with which the entries were made. William asked Benno about *finis Africae* and *Coena Cyprian*. Benno said that the abbot has said that it was an ignoble book and that it was a forbidden one. Benno continued telling William about the book he had hidden. He said that it seemed to be a strange one. It was completely written on a different parchment and it was very old and rotten. The pages were crumbled and stuck together. Benno assured William that he did not know what was written in the book.

William felt that the missing book and *finis Africae* would serve as an answer to all the mysteries happening in the abbey. William walked around the abbey to find out the construction of the library from the outer side. He somehow arrived at a design. With the design they entered the library. After several confusions they reached *finis Africae*. After many trials they entered it.

Jorge welcomed William and Adso. They did not expect Jorge in that room. There was a book lying on a table in front of Jorge. William identified the book immediately. Jorge said that he was expecting William there. Now William tried to understand what was going on all these days. Jorge and William had a brief conversation. Through the conversation William understood that all these days he was investigating the issue in the wrong path. But the point they have arrived was right.

Jorge was strongly against the knowledge of the world. He was trying to hide a book written by Aristotle from the eyes everyone. He never wanted anybody to read it. He had it concealed all these years. He made sure that nobody learns of the contents of the book even if someone got their hand on it. For that he applied a painful poison on the pages of the book which he had stolen from Severinus's laboratory many years ago. So, anyone who found the book and tried to read it will be disturbed by the pages that are stuck

together. While trying to separate the pages with the help of their fingers and tongue, the poison enters the person's body and causes their death. This was the reason for all the mysterious deaths in the abbey. And Jorge was the one behind all the misery. Jorge justified his act by telling that it was sin to go against the word of God. And believing in the knowledge of the world was equal to blasphemy. According to Jorge, laughing was also a sin, "laughter is proper to the fools" (Eco, 142). He said that Aristotle was against God by writing this book. William and Adso tried very hard to get hold of the book. In the struggle they accidentally set fire to the library.

The mysteries of the abbey were finally detangled. It was the search for knowledge that caused their death. It could be more accurately mentioned as forbidden knowledge. The curiosity of the brothers in the abbey to get hold of the book and know what it held led to their destruction. All the people who found the book were subjected to painful deaths. In the end Jorge, in order to destroy the book swallowed the pages of the book which was poisoned by him. Jorge too in the end died a painful death. Thus there were six people who died a painful death just because of a book. Five died for their curiosity to attain the forbidden knowledge and they were keen on decoding some message and one to prevent the others from attaining the forbidden.

The main phase of the novel begins with William of Baskerville visiting the abbey. The reason for his visit remains unknown in the beginning. In order to make the reason known to the reader, the author narrates the story of Adelmo's death. Then there is a mystery in Adelmo's death. Then there is a sequence of deaths in the abbey. The mystery behind every death is sorted out through the stories that are said by other monks. The incidents that are narrated by every monk can be collectively taken as the investigation story. When the final part of the investigation is reached and Jorge is identified to be the culprit, Jorge explains why he did everything that he was accused of. This can be taken as the final story that supports the first part of the novel and William has completed his task.

The novel is written in such a way that there is a description even for the construction of the buildings and the library in the abbey. This part of the narration also supports the main story line. The novel creates many individual stories, connects them with the other and finally supports the main story line thus forming a perfect chain.

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