

The Name of the Rose

- A Study Guide -

Daren Blanck

The Name of the Rose, a 1980 novel by Umberto Eco, is a murder mystery set in an Italian monastery in the year 1327 during the papacy of Pope John XXII. The book was also made into a film in 1986, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring Sean Connery as the intrepid Franciscan monk, William of Baskerville. Along with his apprentice Adso of Melk (played by Christian Slater), William journeys to an abbey where a murder has been committed. As the plot unfolds, several other people mysteriously die in a sub-plot of censorship and fear of documents that might dilute the faith of the Christian world. William and Adso discover a labyrinthine library, the subversive power of laughter, and come face to face with the Medieval Inquisition.

The central character, William of Baskerville, is loosely based on William of Ockham (1285-1349), who first put forward the principle known as "Ockham's Razor": that one should always accept as most-likely the simplest explanation that covers the facts. Baskerville is a nod to Sir Conan Doyle's fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, and his book *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The narrator, an old librarian at the time of his telling, is William's sidekick Adso of Melk. His name is among other things a pun on Simplicio a character in Galileo Galilei's *Dialogue*; Adso = *ad Simplicio* ("to Simplify") and a reference to the Stift Melk, a Benedictine Abbey in Austria founded in 1089. Eco's monastery may have been based on Stift Melk which is perched on a rock high above the city of Melk on the River Danube. Adso's characterization is also a play on Holmes' friend Dr. Watson.

The action takes place at a Benedictine abbey during the controversy between different branches of monasticism. A number of the characters, such as the Inquisitor Bernardo Gui and the Minorite Michael de Cesena, are historical figures.

Bernardo Gui was a Dominican Inquisitor. His *Practica Inquisitionis* was completed in 1323-24 containing the accumulated expertise for dealing with heresy. Gui was not interested in the beliefs of the individual being questioned. Rather, he counseled that suspects be asked: "Whether he had any familiar association with heretics; when; how; And who was responsible for it". Soviet security forces are known, for example, to have based their interrogation techniques on those recorded in the *Practica Inquisitionis*. *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, explores its implications in the 17th century Salem Witchcraft Trials.

Michael of Cesena (1270-1342) was a Franciscan theologian, who advocated for ecclesiastical poverty. He was detained in Avignon by Pope John XXII in 1327, along with William of Ockham. In the following year, they were freed by agents

of Louis IV, the Holy Roman Emperor as part of the Roman deposition of the papacy.

The blind librarian, the Venerable Jorge of Burgos is a reference to Jorge Luis Borges, a 20th century Argentine scholar and author. Borges' short story, *The Library of Babel*, inspired the secret library in Eco's book. In both works the library burns down and men are killed in the pursuit of forbidden knowledge. In Borges' *The Secret Miracle*, we find the basis for the character of the Venerable Jorge. A librarian wearing dark glasses asks the protagonist Hladik, who has fallen asleep in the great Clementine Library: "What are you looking for?" Hladik answers: "God." The Librarian told him: "God is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the 400,000 volumes of the Clementine. My fathers and the fathers of my fathers have sought after that letter. I've gone blind looking for it." He removed his glasses, and Hladik saw that his eyes were dead." The blind librarian was an important figure for Borges. Borges himself began to go blind due to a congenital disease in the 1940's.

Throughout *The Name of the Rose*, there are discussions of the philosophy of Aristotle and reference to a variety of heresies, especially those associated with the Fraticelli and Dulcinites.

Aristotle's worldview made a rather unexpected comeback in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Known for being one of the few figures in history who studied almost every subject possible at the time, Aristotle placed much value on knowledge gained from the senses. His ideas lead rise to empiricism, the philosophical theory that matter is the only reality, and materialism, the doctrine that knowledge derives from experience. He set the stage for what would eventually develop into the scientific method. Although he wrote dialogues early in his career, no more than fragments of these have survived. The works of Aristotle that still exist today are in treatise form. In 1210, the teachings of Aristotle were banned by the Catholic hierarchy. In 1230, Aristotle works were revised to the satisfaction of the magisterium. In 1270, the Bishop of Paris condemned as heretical 18 propositions being taught by Aristotelian professors, and a student of that school of thought, Thomas Aquinas was condemned seven years later.

The Fraticelli ("Little Brethren") were extreme proponents of the rule of Saint Francis of Assisi, especially with regard to poverty, and regarded the wealth of the Church as scandalous, and that of individual churchmen as invalidating their status. They were thus forced into open revolt against the whole authority of the Church in 1318. Likewise, the Dulcinites were a radical Christian sect in the early 1300s that rejected the official Church and embraced an extreme notion of the good of poverty. Before being crushed by the pope, they were known for attacking churches and murdering priests. The spirituals within the Franciscan order in the debate depicted in the film abhor wealth, bordering on the Dulcinian heresy.

One of the central themes of *The Name of the Rose* is Knowledge. Knowledge was one of the most powerful tools of the middle ages. It was highly valued by many kings and members of nobility, but the greatest procurer of knowledge through the middle ages was undoubtedly the church. Monks would scrupulously copy manuscripts day after day, hour after hour sometimes by candlelight and at times in freezing cold in their Scriptoria. It has been postulated that the church's motive for the capturing of wisdom was not for their own enrichment, but predominantly self-preservation. If the general public were to get hold of such a wealth of philosophical and scientific works that were withheld in the monastic libraries then they would almost certainly begin to formulate their own religious ideas, therefore releasing the societal stranglehold the church held so tightly at that time. Ironically it is through these library holdings that we have come to possess this knowledge today.

On one level, the book and film are an excellent exposition of the scholastic method popular in the 14th Century. William demonstrates the power of deductive reasoning. He refuses to accept the diagnosis of simple demonic possession despite demonology being the traditional monastic explanation. He keeps an open mind, collecting facts and observations, following even pure intuition as to what he should investigate, exactly as a scholastic would do. The story also demonstrates the crucial importance of chance in any investigative endeavor. Nevertheless, William could not have solved the cases if he had not properly prepared a framework of facts and interconnections, which the chance discovery then made meaningful.

As mentioned previously, the Medieval Inquisition is also a central theme in *The Name of the Rose*. In the Middle Ages investigation of heresy, or holding to a belief opposed to accepted church doctrine, was a duty of the "Holy Inquisition". By the thirteenth century most areas of continental Europe had been assigned inquisitors. The overwhelming majority were Franciscans or Dominicans, since members of these two orders were seen as pious, educated and highly mobile.

The trials were conducted secretly in the presence of a representative of the bishop and of a stipulated number of local laymen. Torture of the accused and his witnesses soon became customary and notorious. Generally the inquisitors were eager to receive confessions of heresy and to avoid trials. Most trials, however, resulted in a guilty verdict, and the church handed the condemned over to the secular authorities for punishment. The overwhelming majority of sentences seem to have consisted of penances like wearing a cross sewn on one's clothes, going on pilgrimage, etc. The inquisitor's goal was not primarily to punish the guilty but to identify them, get them to confess their sins and repent, and restore them to the fold. Burning at the stake was thought to be the fitting punishment for obstinate heretics (those who refused to repent and be reconciled) and lapsed heretics (those who repented and were reconciled at one time but then fell back into error).

Finally, *The Name of the Rose* examines the perception of women by the church during the medieval period. William of Baskerville, for example, takes his young novice Adso to task for having had intercourse with a young peasant girl: "Adso, you have sinned that is certain, against the commandment that bids you not to fornicate, and also against your duties as a novice. In your defense there is the fact that you found yourself in one of those situations in which even a father in the desert would have damned himself. And of woman as a source of temptation the Scriptures have already said enough. *Ecclesiastes* says of woman that her conversation is like burning fire, and *Proverbs* say that she takes possession of man's precious soul and the strongest men are ruined by her. And *Ecclesiastes* further says: 'And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, her hands as bands.' And others have said that she is the vessel of the Devil. Having affirmed this, dear Adso, I cannot convince myself that God chose to introduce such a foul being into creation without also endowing it with some virtues."

As a result of the church's rules on celibacy of the clergy, including monastic orders, Adso is forced to choose between a relationship with the girl and the pursuit of knowledge.

Eco's novel, *The Name of The Rose* ends with the phrase: "stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus." ("Yesterday's rose endures in its name; we hold empty names." or "All that remains of a dead rose is its name")

The verse is from *De contemptu mundi* by Bernard of Morlay, a twelfth-century Benedictine. Eco explains, "The great of yesteryear, the once-famous cities, the lovely princesses: everything disappears into the void." Bernard suggests that all these departed things leave their names behind them. In other words in this imperfect world, the only imperishable things are ideas. Peter Abelard, a monk and one of the great intellectuals of the 12th century, used the Latin example "Nulla rosa est" ("A rose is not") to demonstrate how language can speak of both the nonexistent and the destroyed. Abelard's forbidden romance with Heloise served as a source for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which the bard pens the line "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet". The line is uttered by Juliet, who is prevented from marrying Romeo by the feud between their families. She complains that Romeo's name is all that keeps him from her. Shakespeare in a way stands in direct contrast to Morlay, suggesting that a thing is what it is, not what it is called. (Interestingly the the reference may have also been a side-swipe at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre's rival the Rose Theatre which had less than "sweet smelling" sanitary arrangements.) Perhaps Adso's dilemma regarding his affection for the peasant girl contrasting with his desire for knowledge in some ways parallels Juliet's dilemma, and by extension Abelard's. In any case Eco leaves the meaning of the title up to the reader and viewer.

As you watch the film keep the following questions in mind:

1. What do the people who live in the monastery appear to do with their time? How do they supplement their food stores/income?
2. What examples of religious rituals and ornamentation did you see in the film?
3. How did William of Baskerville's investigation of the murder reflect the approach that most scholars took in the Middle Ages? How does his approach reflect the scholastic method?
4. What role do heretics play in the film?
5. Delineate the different groups of monks depicted in the film.
6. What role did the Holy Inquisition play in the film?
7. What was sensitive about the works contained within the library?
8. How were the peasants depicted in the film?
9. Identify instances when women are portrayed in the film? Do these portrayals reflect different attitudes towards women in the Middle Ages?