



Remembering Umberto Eco...

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ABSTRACT

Umberto Eco was an Italian novelist, essayist, literary critic, philosopher and semiotician. He is much known as the author of the novel *Il Nome della Rosa* (The Name of the Rose), an intellectual mystery combining semiotics in fiction, biblical analysis, medieval studies and literary theory. On 19 February 2016, at the age of 84, Eco died because of cancer. Hence this paper is a sort of a tribute to him.

KEYWORDS

Umberto Eco, novelist, academician, semiotician, The Name of the Rose, How to Write a Thesis

Whenever I think of Umberto Eco, the first thing that grips my mind is *The Name of the Rose* (*Il Nome della Rosa*), an important novel by this author. By the time he published (*Il Nome della Rosa*) *Nome della Rosa*, he had already become one of the celebrated author-academicians and had been recognised as a master of Italian culture.

Umberto Eco was born on 5 January 1932 in Alessandria, the city in Piemonte state in Italy and on the evening of 19 February 2016, Friday, he died battling with cancer, at the age of 84. While paid him tribute, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said "He was an extraordinary example of a European intellectual, combining unique intelligence of the past with a limitless capacity to anticipate the future. It's an enormous loss for culture, which will miss his writing and voice, his sharp and lively thought, and his humanity"¹.

According to the *New York Times*, Eco had already declared in 1995 "what he desired to carve on his tombstone: A character in a book by the Renaissance philosopher Tommaso Campanella says, 'Wait, wait,' and another man responds, 'I cannot' "².

Eco refused his father's mandate to study law; rather he studied philosophy and literature at the University of Turin. After procuring the degree of doctorate of philosophy he worked with Italy's state broadcaster, RAI, as a cultural editor.

During the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, Eco was the part of his force, as one of the Young Fascists. During the German occupation of northern Italy he experienced starvation and later recalled how he had dodged the bullets traded by the fascists and partisans. After the Second World War, as a teenager, he explored American literature and jazz. At the age of 14, he was absorbed in a Catholic youth organisation and became a national leader. Due to the conservative policies of Pope Pius XII, he resigned from there but he always had a great attachment with the church. Afterwards he abandoned Catholicism for the sake of secular morality.

Eco began his career as a scholar of medieval studies and semiotics. He had an inclination towards the study of signs and symbols --- words, religious icons, banners, clothing, musical scores, even cartoons. As the presenter here, I feel it's my duty to reveal about semiotics. Semiotics is the general science of signs, developed by the postmodernist French theorist Roland Barthes, which eyes all cultures as a web of signs, from which messages have to be decoded for hidden meanings.

Eco became a professor of the subject at the University of

Bologna, Europe's oldest university. He proved his authority in the fields of semiotics, cultural studies and literary theories with his publications like *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975), *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1981) and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). His most significant academic writings include *On Beauty* and a later creation titled *On Ugliness*, exploring how people's perceptions are shaped and formed through history.

According to Saussure, a Swiss linguist and semiotician whose ideas laid a foundation for many significant developments both in linguistics and semiology in the 20th century, one of the consequences of looking at the language has been to encourage a comparative study of the literary visual media, especially in the area of narrative.

Among other things Eco decoded James Bond novels and strip-cartoons such as *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian*. In one striking essay he evaluated the cultural significance of his own denims: "Well, with my new jeans life was entirely exterior: I thought about the relationship between me and my pants, and the relationship between my pants and the society we lived in. I had achieved epidermis self-awareness"³.

Apart from being a semiotician, he was a revered literary critic, author and essayist as well, and the professor metamorphosed into a literary star. Eco gained fame as an author, on the international level, with the launch of his bestselling novel *The Name of the Rose*, on which was based the film with the same title, produced in 1986, starring Sean Connery as Brother William of Baskerville who investigates a series of suspicious deaths. It's a detective thriller, set in a 14th-century medieval Italian monastery or abbey, where monks are being murdered by their co-religionists who are bent on obscuring a long-lost philosophical treatise by Aristotle. The novel is narrated by a young novice who accompanies William through his investigation at the murder-prone monastery and acts as a medieval Doctor Watson. Despite having devoted whole chapters to arguments on Christian theology and heresies, Eco managed to mesmerise a large number of readers with this book.

In the years since then, he continued to write fanciful essays, scholarly works, and produced four more bestselling novels, including *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), *The Prague Cemetery* and *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004). His most recent opera is *Number Zero* (*Numero Zero*) that was published last year, in 2015.

In an interview (1995) with *Vogue*, Eco confessed that he was not an easy-read and easy-comprehend. "People always ask

me: How is it that your novels, which are so difficult, have a certain success?" His reply was: "I am offended by the question. It's as if they asked a woman, how can it be that men are interested in you?". Eco then added with an irony: "I myself like easy books that put me to sleep immediately."⁴

The critics were received by Eco with grace and serenity. Eco told to *Guardian* in 2011 "It's only publishers and some journalists who believe that people want simple things. People are tired of simple things. They want to be challenged."⁵ According to him, people want the confrontation with some new adventure that enables them to ponder.

Eco's novel received mixed reviews. British novelist Salman Rushdie, burlesqued Eco's 1988 novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, as "humourless, devoid of character, entirely free of anything resembling a credible spoken word, and mind-numbing". On the other hand, English writer Lorna Sage proclaimed it as "sanitising power of mockery, irony, laughter."

As told to a *Guardian* journalist: "I'm not a fundamentalist, saying there's no difference between Homer and Walt Disney." However, when he was told that "Mickey Mouse can be perfect in the sense that a Japanese haiku is,"

But, as said, it was the launch of *The Name of the Rose* that took him to the summit of global stardom.

Foucault's Pendulum, Eco's second novel, portrays the story of the 19th century. Although a pendulum a device invented by physicist Léon Foucault has a role in the plot but Foucault himself is not a character in the novel. The novel is about the conspiracy and not about him. Though its sale was reasonably good, it did not acquire much fame or even the critical acknowledgement of the kind *The Name of the Rose* received as it represented an amalgamation of mathematical formulas and Disney characters.

Though other novels by Eco were knocked down by critics for their repetitive patterns, dense prose and difficult concepts, they were however relished by readers. His third novel *The Island of the Day Before* (1994) has a setup in which an Italian nobleman, who cannot swim, survives on his shipwrecked vessel at a certain point in the tropical Pacific Ocean where the dateline divides one day from another. His fourth novel *Baudolino* (2000) concentrated on the disputes and wars of the 12th century.

In a review in the *New York Times*, Richard Bernstein wrote about *Baudolino* that it "will make you wonder how a storyteller as crafty as Mr Eco ended up producing a novel so formulaic and cluttered as this one".

Eco's last novel, *Numero Zero* has been translated into English by Richard Dixon. The story, set in 1992, revolves around a ghost-story writer who is pushed into an underworld of media politics and murder conspiracies. He is suggested that Mussolini did not actually die in 1945 but remained alive obscurely for decades. John Williams wrote in the *New York Times* Book Review: "This slender novel, which feels like a mere diversion compared with his more epic works, is nonetheless stuffed with ideas and energy."

The French government honoured him with the most esteemed title, a *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur*, and he also received the highest literary award of Italy, the *Premio Strega*. He was also an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Eco never felt uncomfortable with the critical remarks made by other scholars on his novels *Foucault's Pendulum* and *Numero Zero* which were termed as "losers." Moreover, he admired his dual role as he had certain responsibilities as an academician. He said: "I think of myself as a serious professor who, during the weekend, writes novels". Eco told *New York Press Review's* Scott Simon, "in the world, there are more los-

ers than winners, and so my readers can identify themselves with the characters".

Eco, however, did not detach his academic life from his popular fiction. By giving a kind of respectability to the study of popular art forms, he managed to change the academia's approach towards literature.

It's the human fantasy that is found fused in both Eco's fiction and academic works to shape the human endeavour: *Captain Cook in search of Terra Incognita*, and *Christopher Columbus is about to sail for India*. It's thus a mechanism which he explored in such works as *Faith in Fakes* (1984), *Kant and the Platypus* (1999) and *The Book of Legendary Lands* (2013).

Eco had been an important voice of the Left wing debates on abortion, the mafia and corruption. He was an eminent critic of the former Italian President, Silvio Berlusconi, whom he once compared with Hitler and who had a 90 per cent monopoly on Italian television. He called him as a "tragedy for a democratic country."

Last but not the least, a few years before the publication of *The Name of the Rose*, Eco published a sort of reference book for his students under the title *Come Si Fa Una Tesi di Laurea: le Materie Umanistiche* which has by now run its 23rd edition in the original Italian. It has been translated into 17 languages, including Persian, Russian and Chinese, and recently into English as *How to Write a Thesis*. Eco offers relevant and practical suggestions on all the steps involved in researching and writing a thesis: starting from choosing a topic to organising a work schedule and writing the final draft. It also considers larger questions about the value of the thesis-writing exercise. *How to Write a Thesis* has thus become a classic.

As a professor-supervisor, he felt concern for his inexperienced research scholars who are always too ambitious about incorporating all the multifaceted issues and topics. According to Umberto Eco, research supervisors often face difficulties in explaining and resolving the pitfalls that are common in research proposals.

How to Write a Thesis has, unlike any other writing manual, a novel-like flow. It appears impertinent, sometimes controversial, and often hilarious too. Eco advises students how to avoid "thesis neurosis" and he also answers the important question "Must You Read Books?" He advises them "Write everything that comes into your head, but only in the first draft".⁶

Eco's novels were full of postmodern irony and symbolism. Through the protagonists of his novels and like a visionary crusader of the Middle Ages or a shipwrecked adventurer in the 1600s, the author seeks not only to narrate the fictions but also to meditate over semiotic broodings.

For himself, Eco once said he was "always defined as too erudite and philosophical, too difficult. Then I wrote a novel that is not erudite at all, that is written in plain language, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004), and among my novels it is the one that has sold the least. So probably I am writing for masochists."

A leading daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* described Eco as "The writer who changed Italian culture".

Eco will always be remembered for having boosted his country's reputation in the literary world, so much so that publishers began to call his influence on sales as - the Eco's effect (*l'Effetto Eco*)

Books by Umberto Eco Novels

- *Il nome della rosa* (1980; English translation: *The Name of the Rose*, 1983)
- *Il pendolo di Foucault* (1988; English translation: Fou-

- cault's Pendulum, 1989)
- L'isola del giorno prima (1994; English translation: *The Island of the Day Before*, 1995)
- Baudolino (2000; English translation: Baudolino, 2001)
- *La misteriosa fiamma della regina Loana* (2004; English translation: *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, 2005)
- *Il cimitero di Praga* (2010; English translation: *The Prague Cemetery*, 2011)
- *Numero zero* (2015; English translation: *Numero Zero*, 2015)

Non-Fiction Books

- Sviluppo dell'estetica medievale", in *Momenti e problemi di storia dell'estetica* (1959 – *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 1985)
- *Opera aperta* (1962, rev. 1976 – English translation: *The Open Work* (1989)
- *Il costume di casa* (1973 - English translation: *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, 1986)
- *A semiotic Landscape. Panorama sémiotique*. Proceedings of the 1st Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Den Haag, Paris, New York: Mouton (=Approaches to Semiotics, 29) (with Seymour Chatman and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg).
- *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975 - English translation: *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976)
- *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio* (1984 - English translation: *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 1984)
- *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979 – English edition containing essays from *Opera aperta*, *Apocalittici e integrati*, *Forme del contenuto* (1971), *Il Superuomo di massa*, *Lector in Fabula*).
- *Kant e l'ornitorinco* (1997 - English translation: *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, 1999)

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5. *Umberto Eco, Semiotics Scholar Who Became a Best-Selling Novelist, Dies at 84*. New York edition, 23 February 2016
6. *Umberto Eco, Italian author of 'The Name of the Rose,' dies at 84*. Reuters. Retrieved 20 January 2016
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- https://www.academia.edu/9427692/Umberto_Eco_How_to_Write_a_Thesis_Caterina_Mongiat_Farina_and_Geoff_Farina_trans_Cambridge_MA_MIT_Press_2015