

The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939)

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IN the Victor Hugo novel of 1831, the title – *Notre-Dame de Paris* ('Our Lady of Paris') – has a double meaning. On one level it alludes to the gypsy woman Esmeralda, who captures the hearts of several men in the story. On the other level it refers to the cathedral of that name on which the story is centred. Indeed, large parts of the novel are taken up with Hugo's views on building styles.

Notre-Dame cathedral is one of the finest examples of French Gothic architecture with its use of the rib vault and flying buttress and its enormous rose windows. The building was started in 1163 under Bishop Maurice de Sully and largely completed by 1345, though there were frequent modifications in the following centuries. It suffered considerable damage during the French Revolution.

Hugo wanted to increase awareness of medieval Gothic which was being replaced by buildings in a newer style. This change was even being applied to the cathedral itself where architectural 'vandals' had replaced the stained glass panels with white glass to let more light into the church, which itself was crumbling and neglected. Hugo's protest in the novel won the day, and a major restoration project began in 1844.

Unfortunately, not much of this aspect of the novel survives today. It is little known that Hugo invented the story as a drawing in device for a treatise on the preservation of Gothic architecture. This vulgarisation is not purely down to Hollywood because it began almost immediately. Frederick Shoberl's 1833 English translation was published as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which became the accepted title in English, named after the bellringer Quasimodo (literally 'half-formed'). Hugo rebuked this translation



because he felt it distracted from the cathedral and placed too much emphasis on the bellringer's morbidity. It also shifts the focus away from Esmeralda, who is the tragic heroine, just like the cathedral itself.

I say 'tragic' because in Hugo's narrative Esmeralda dies by the gallows and Quasimodo dies of a broken heart (his skeleton is later found entwined in an embrace with hers). But Hollywood couldn't tolerate such a sad ending, and in the films Esmeralda finds her true love. In the 1923 Lon Chaney film Quasimodo is fatally stabbed in the back by Frollo, while in the 1939 Charles Laughton version Quasimodo survives, and his powerful last words are addressed to a gargoyle on which he ruefully leans his head: "Why was I was not made of stone like thee?"

More annoying from a non-believer's viewpoint is that in the novel Claude Frollo, the villain, is the Archdeacon of Notre-Dame, but Hollywood gives this role to his brother Jehan (Jean in the films), and Frollo is designated as the Chief Justice of Paris. The change in the 1939 film is explained by the Hays Motion Picture Code of 1930, written and presented to Will Hays, Chairman of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, by Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest. Perhaps it should really be called 'The Lord's Code'.

Religious groups had campaigned for some time for federal censorship of the movies. The industry hired Hays as a public relations ploy and much was made of his conservative credentials, including his roles as a Presbyterian deacon and past chairman of the Republican Party. His job was to try to prevent individual state censor boards from banning films by advising the studios what not to include, but it didn't work. When Lord presented the Code to him, Hays accepted it, saying that it was the very thing he had been looking for. The studio heads agreed to make the Code the rule of the industry, though they were less enthusiastic about it than Hays. It was finally abandoned in the late 1960s when enforcement had become impossible.

One of its specific restrictions was that "The ridicule of religion was forbidden, and ministers of religion were not to be represented as comic characters or villains". Considering that anticlericalism was one of Hugo's main themes, this is a serious omission, especially as in later life Hugo called himself a 'free-thinker' and in his will he stipulated that he should be buried without a crucifix or priest.

AND yet, despite all these imperfections, the 1939 film version of the novel is a masterpiece of cinema. There are so many reasons. Let's start with the acting. As the carrillonneur Quasimodo, Charles Laughton gives one of the most unforgettable performances in film history. The American film critic Pauline Kael described it as 'an appallingly masochistic performance', but it works perfectly and is entirely in keeping with Victor Hugo's conception. Laughton's bravura portrayal evokes immense pity, for tragically encased in this repulsive body is a truly tender heart. —>

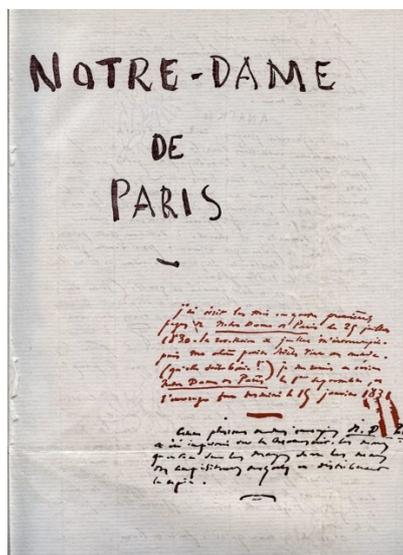
Hugo's point, of course, is that although we may be seduced by the appearance of a beautiful woman, we should never forget that ultimately it is superficial and often leads to destructive passions. Real beauty lies beneath the surface. In the current world dominated by images and labels, it is a particularly relevant message. Laughton encapsulates this truth perfectly: unlike the Lon Chaney version, there is no bitterness in his Quasimodo, only a misunderstood and beautiful soul. He is a Christlike figure, prepared to sacrifice himself without demanding anything in return.

As if inspired by Laughton's *tour de force*, the rest of the cast rise to the occasion. Cedric Hardwicke as Frolo is evil incarnate, Thomas Mitchell is marvellous as Clopin, the self-styled 'king of the beggars', Edmond O'Brien in his cinema debut perfectly captures the idealism of the poet and playwright Pierre Gringoire, and a 19-year-old Maureen O'Hara is splendidly sensual as Esmeralda, the gypsy dancer. It is rare to witness five actors in one film performing at the top of their game.

The directing by William Dieterle, a German who left for America in 1930, is also masterly. It is not just a matter of eliciting great performances from the cast. Dieterle creates a superb evocation of late medieval life, complete with vast, richly detailed sets, vigorous crowd scenes and, towering over it all as in the novel, the awesome presence of Notre-Dame itself – or rather a mock-up built in California's San Fernando Valley at a cost of \$250,000. Dieterle indeed manages to capture the novel's depiction of multiple strata of medieval society within a single panorama.

Hugo's novel, written when he was 29, is not only a work of great passion but is also full of ideas about art and life. He believed that for thousands of years architecture was the greatest form of art because its buildings endured and were accessible. The peak of its achievement was the beginning of the Renaissance in late medieval times because it was an architecture of freedom and the people. Books and manuscripts, on the other hand, were fragile and destructible. But

the printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440, changed all that. Here was a means of disseminating ideas cheaply to the mass of people that would create a huge demand for learning and knowledge. This transformation is dramatised in a print shop at the beginning of the film in an argument between King Louis XI (Harry Davenport) and Frolo, who opposes the new invention as a threat to the existing order. The King replies: "The cathedrals are the handwriting of the past. The press is of our time, and I won't do anything to stop it". Notably, the book being printed is entitled *On the Freedom of Thought*.



First page of the 1831 manuscript

This opening scene succinctly captures Hugo's own view. The written word was now the dominant art form. But the hybrid Gothic/Romanesque architecture of late medieval times displayed a free creative style that needed to be preserved as an inspiration for all art and literature in the future. The best of the old would be a guide to the best of the new.

Freedom itself is another theme of the novel. According to Hugo in the preface, he was inspired to write the work by discovering the Greek word 'anankē' carved into a wall in the cathedral. It refers to the Greek goddess who personified 'fate' or 'destiny'. Throughout the work the author stresses that the pursuit of noble ideals such as freedom, love, truth and knowledge is constantly thwarted by a surrender to the imagined forces of fate.

Thus Frolo is a determinist who believes that nothing can stop him from having Esmeralda. Just as the fly is inevitably caught in the spider's web, he thinks that she is bound to fall into one of his traps. Yet he misses the irony that he is the one who is trapped in his own lust and sexual repression (and, being the priest in the novel, by superstitious religion). The lesson is that by taking responsibility for our actions and acting with others, we can behave morally and thereby defeat 'fate' and become 'free'.

Like Hugo's later novel, *Les Misérables*, the democratic rights of the people are central to *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Just as the cathedral is a work built and rebuilt over centuries by no individual artist but is "the offspring of a nation's effort", so too progress in future will be based on people power. "All civilisation begins with a theocracy and ends with a democracy", Hugo writes in Book 5, Chapter 2. As a member of the French Assembly in the late 1840s he campaigned for universal suffrage and free education for all children. In short, Hugo believed in progress, which he identified with the forces of freedom and democracy. And, as he famously remarked, "no army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come".

We should also note that the script of the 1939 film, written by the Russian Jew Sonya Levien and made in August and September of that year around the outbreak of World War Two, contains timely parallels between the persecuted Jews in Germany and the mistreated gypsies in 15th century Paris. This is perfectly in keeping with Hugo's concerns. In 1882 he led a protest meeting in Paris to denounce the pogroms in Russia that were devastating Jewish communities. He also defended Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish officer scapegoated by the French army.

Notre Dame de Paris in some editions runs to 940 pages. It is impossible in a two-hour film to do full justice to its narrative, ideas and themes. But the spirit of the novel shines through in this 1939 *Hunchback*. Ignore all other versions – this is one of the all-time great movies. □