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Notre Dame de Paris: Before, During, and After the Hunchback: A Study in Medievalism

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Nestled against the banks of the River Seine towers a monument of a time and place lost to the world surrounding it. The building's dark and brooding facade watches over the crowds that visit it every day of every year, swarming in herds to take pictures with it. However, as the cameras snap millions of pictures in the quest for the perfect selfie, the question arises: are the photographers really seeing the testament to medieval life that looms above them or do they see a beloved character from a wildly manipulated fairytale? Good afternoon. My name is Maura Wilson and this is Notre Dame: Before, During, and After the Hunchback: A Study in Medievalism.

Aside from being a beautiful tribute to the Christian God, when construction began on Notre Dame the building was also to be the tallest and most impressive medieval building in all of Paris, located on its own island in the middle of the Saine River. It would also be built on top of the ruins of the basilica that once stood in the same location, which itself had also been constructed on the remains of the first known civilization in Paris, the Parisi. Upon its completion in the 13th century, Notre Dame would be visible throughout all of Paris, and where it could not be seen, its bells would be heard throughout the city. Not only would the completed cathedral be positioning itself on the location of the origins of Paris, but the very act of its construction provided generations of laborers with steady, reliable work thus establishing the church at the heart of the Parisian community.

The rising popularity of cathedrals in France correlated with the budding movement of scholasticism. Scholasticism combined the theological teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas with the rational thinking of Aristotle. It was assumed that because God is a perfect being his mind must, therefore, be made up of geometrically perfect shapes. Because God's mind was made using geometry, a study which humans could comprehend, it was believed that by understanding geometry humans could hope to come closer to understanding God. In combining religious iconography with mathematically perfect geometric shapes, Notre Dame was able to simultaneously convey biblical stories and themes to the illiterate and a deeper spirituality to those who understood the complexities of the geometrically perfect architecture. In addition, the statuary that covers Notre Dame would only to serve as a teaching tool to convey biblical stories to the illiterate, but also created an otherworldly atmosphere. It the invisible characters in biblical stories visible and, therefore, real to the viewer. Not only would the completed cathedral exist in the heart of Paris, both literally and metaphorically, but it would also exist in their minds as intellectual stimulation.

In the post medieval periods, dissatisfaction with the clergy of Notre Dame coupled with a growing anti-Catholic movement in France led to Notre Dame's first instance of massive vandalism. In 1548 the Protestant-based group, the Hugonaughts, ransacked Notre Dame and declared it an "idoltris armpit".

Centuries later, in 1793, when the French Revolution was still six years away from ending, revolutionaries mistakenly assumed that the Gallery of Kings on Notre Dame depicted images of past kings of France. The statues were designed to depict the Kings of Israel and convey Jesus and his mother's direct lineage to King David, but the

revolution, fueled by hatred for the monarchy, had all 28 statues decapitated, tore down the cathedral's original spire, and melted all but one of the original bells. Notre Dame was then declared the headquarters and temple of The Cult of Reason, a state-sponsored and atheistic religion which hosted enormous parties in the cathedral as an act of ultimate rejection of the Catholic Church and the monarchy. To the revolutionaries, Notre Dame de Paris was everything wrong with the world. So strong was their hatred, in fact, that plans had been made to demolish the cathedral entirely. Little did they know at the time, but soon Notre Dame Cathedral was soon to be eternally rebranded.

By 1802 Notre Dame once again became a Catholic sanctuary but it was in shambles and a shadow of its former self. Perhaps seeing the grandeur of Notre Dame cathedral, or perhaps recognizing its location at the center of Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte chose to have his and his wife's, Josephine's, coronation at Notre Dame in 1804. Nothing was done to salvage the cathedral, which could have been a strategic move on Napoleon's part to imply that he will be Paris's salvation from hardship. Whatever his purpose in selecting Notre Dame, after the coronation France's feelings towards the building remained neutral and the building remained untouched for the next 30 years.

Notre Dame de Paris was over 500 years old by the time Victor Hugo fell in love with the dilapidated medieval structure. In 1828 Victor Hugo signed with his publisher and began work on his novel, "Notre Dame de Paris", later retitled "The Hunchback of Notre Dame". When the book went to print in 1831 it erupted in popularity and drew attention back to the building at the center of Paris.

When he began to write his book, Victor Hugo wanted to work on this project as a personal study of Notre Dame's architecture. He recognized that it wasn't the ceremonies

held in the building that were the purpose of Notre Dame as much as the visual story told within the architecture that held the meaning of Notre Dame's existence. He understood that architecture was the original way to convey grand ideas on a grand scale before the age of the printing press. He also recognized that without acknowledging buildings like Notre Dame, advancements in printing and media technology would lead to the end of art and meaning in architecture. Hugo's hope in writing "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" was that his readers would recognize that architecture and its messages effect the everyday lives of humans and what humanity does is ultimately meaningless because this impressive building will ultimately outlive any life that comes in contact with it. Hugo hoped that by understanding this an effort would be made to restore Notre Dame and buildings like it.

From this point on it is futile to speak of Notre Dame cathedral simply in terms of a physical structure because the story of the building as a structure and the way in which viewers understood it as a visual message altered significantly after its restoration by Viollet le Duc in 1845. The building has not physically changed much since 1845, but as soon as Hugo turned Notre Dame de Paris in to a character the building ceased to exist as only a physical structure and took on a new life as a literary character.

Even during his life, Victor Hugo was reworking and repurposing his original novel. In the first edition of his book, all of the characters in the story played a relatively minor part in pushing the overarching theme of the entire novel and almost every one of them died in the end. It was the cathedral, Notre Dame, that remained steady, constant, and sane throughout the story and continues on after the story ends and all else has passed away. However, in 1836, Victor Hugo reworked his story to make it more palatable for a

wider audience and turned the story in to an opera production that he named “La Esmeralda”. It was never as popular as the novel had been, though this was the first time that the story of Nôtre Dame was reworked and the building’s role in consumer’s minds changed. Despite Hugo’s obvious love of Notre Dame cathedral, he does play an active roll in changing its original religious message for popular culture.

With the invention of film, movie adaptations further romanticized Notre Dame Cathedral as a melodramatic backdrop. The first production of “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” in film was a 1923 production starring Lon Chaney. This version almost completely disregarded its architectural namesake. The story was pitched to studios and advertised to audiences as a love story and the building merely acted as a gothic setting in which the love story took place. Hugo’s original warning to the public to appreciate architectural art to keep this visual storytelling alive, lest the need for visual art be negated, had already come true.

Other adaptations of this movie followed but it wasn’t until the debuted of the 1939 film version that the story of Notre Dame was once again a non-romantic one. In this version the humanist themes of a passion and need for justice are clear. Rather than being a flouncy love story, this version of “The Hunchback” made it plain that people were not the enemy; rather, it was elitist ideals that would lead to humanity’s destruction. This version even borrows, to some extent, from the original meaning of Notre Dame as a building. Here Notre Dame behaves like another version of the Catholic God. The building offers sanctuary to those within its walls who need it and ask for it, it keeps characters hidden who don’t want to be found, and it listens to the prayers of those whom ask to have them answered, all the while overseeing the events of the characters everyday

lives. The film premiered at a time when the world was in political unrest. With the oncoming threat of Fascism in Europe, this film debuted at a festival given specifically to retaliate against Fascist ideals. Now Notre Dame's message became acceptance and caring for one another, because if a building can offer more hope to humanity than our fellow humans can, then the human race is on the verge of self-destruction.

The most recent adaptation of the story of Notre Dame is the version by Walt Disney Animation Studios. This version of "The Hunchback" was actually adapted from a combination of the 1939 movie, which it borrowed heavily from and a comic book version of Victor Hugo's story that the producer thought was "charming". This movie is an adaptation of an adaptation and therefore cannot be compared to the original novel, but can be compared to the message of the cathedral.

This adaptation focuses heavily on justice, oppression, humility before God, women's rights, and internal versus external monsters. This is also the first time that the theme of "monsters" plays such a large role in the Notre Dame story, but not the first time that it has been associated with the building. As a cathedral, Notre Dame does aim to save the eternal soul for heaven. Through the use of stained glass windows, the crucifix floor plan, the way the building is designed to fill the space with light, and even the way the building comes to life when a choir sings in it were all intended to inspire thoughts of heaven in the minds of medieval spectators. The church aims to rid the individual of monsters altogether, but the Disney movie raises the question of who actually is the monster: the person who was brought up to believe they are one but lives their life in an intrinsically good way, or the person who believes they are good due to their piousness but who behaves in a way that hurts others?

Ending with Disney's version of Notre Dame's character, Notre Dame de Paris's meaning has come full circle though it has gone through many changes. As a literary character, Nôtre Dame changed from being an omniscient presence which helped to recognize the flaws within ones self, to aid in rising above one's flaws to become a better person, and to recognizing the good in others, then changed to a setting for a love story, and even acted as a platform for fighting the Fascist regime in Italy. As an actual structure, the building changed from being a form of religious propaganda to being a living example of what Gothic architecture could have looked like. Today the building has become more celebrity than anything else. Visitors go to Notre Dame today not to see the gothic pilgrimage site but rather to see the romantic and beloved literary character and setting. Nôtre Dame was rescued from obscurity and destruction several times to continue to live on as a beautiful building that withstands the test of time and outlives humanity, and the hope is that the visitors of the future will recognize how adaptable Nôtre Dame Cathedral had to be to stand before her visitors today. Thank you.