

Soteriology of Beauty and the Beast and The Hunchback of Notre Dame

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Abstract

Popular culture is prevalent in the ability of citizens to conceptualize complex issues and situations within society. Several religious scholars, including John Lyden, propose that elements of popular culture relate to and interact with sociopolitical anomalies in a way that mirrors and mobilizes patterns of religion. As such, these scholars conclude that certain popular culture phenomena act as a kind of religion in and of themselves. Drawing from the work of several such scholars and the concept of soteriology in narrative, I analyze the similarities between two Disney animated films, Beauty and the Beast and The Hunchback of Notre Dame and their overall interaction with the sociopolitical landscape of the 1990s. Both Beauty and Hunchback provide a lens of commentary, criticism, and guidance in light of the now infamous events that took place during President Bill Clinton's administration.

Disney and Theories of Salvation

Among the four canonical gospels of the Christian scriptures, the Gospel of Saint John is unique as it seems oddly numinous regarding content. Furthermore, John 3:16¹ has become one of the most important, influential, and important scriptures in modern day Christendom. This text—which tells us that “God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life”—would seem to suggest that the crucifixion of Jesus was a freely given act of love to save all people and bring them back to the love of God. While this understanding of salvation is present in certain theological traditions, this idea is incredibly new, emerging only in the past century or two. Historically, soteriology—theories of salvation—has been defined and characterized by dogma and dominance of power. It states that rather than the crucifixion as a gracious act of love, Jesus submitted to the will and power of God, His father. These two narratives—*salvation as a product of love* and *salvation as dominance of the will of God*—can be found in two of the most popular and critically acclaimed films of the Walt Disney Corporation’s “Renaissance” of the 1990’s: 1991’s *Beauty and the Beast*, and 1996’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, respectively.

In the span of only five years, we can see a very marked shift in the tones and narratives of these films, from love and acceptance to dominance and submission. This is important, because the Walt Disney Corporation occupies a unique position in modern American culture, holding a prominent role in forming culture while simultaneously acting as a massive mirror being held up to the culture itself. Furthermore, as evident with the term “cult following,” it is clear in popular imagination that films can often function and act in parareligious capacities. In essence, these films combine aspects of religion with secularized cultural productions.

This drastic shift in the salvation narratives of these two films reflects the turbulent socio-political landscape of the 1990’s, coinciding with the rise and fall of President Bill Clinton and his administration. Furthermore, *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* serve religious functions and interact with politics in a way similar to that of well-established religious traditions. Drawing from the work of Gary Kessler, John Lyden, Elizabeth Johnson as well as the findings of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and Catherine Lofton, this paper analyses the ways in which *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* convey religious narratives such as soteriology, acting in a way that is analogous to religion. Disney and these films excerpt influence, playing a unique, nuanced role in both the creation and reflection of society.

Relevant Scene Descriptions: Conflict to Salvation

An analysis of several tableaux from each movie work to elucidate the interplay

between politics and religion. In *Beauty and the Beast*, one significant scene depicts a mob from the village storming the Beast's castle. Gaston—the film's antagonist— finds the Beast and fights him. The confrontation takes on ever dramatic overtones as rain starts to pelt both combatants. Belle arrives just as the Beast is about to deliver a final blow to Gaston. When he sees Belle, with whom he has fallen deeply in love by this point in the film, he turns to Gaston and growls, "Get out, and never come back." He lets Gaston go and begins to climb up the castle roof to the balcony where Belle is waiting for him. At the last moment, Gaston comes from behind and stabs the Beast in the back; this, of course, insinuates the cowardice of the film's villain and his characterization as the narrative's true "beast." Gaston then loses his balance, and skulls flash across his eyes as he falls to his death in the gorge below the castle. The Beast collapses onto the balcony and Belle runs to him as the servants watch from the doorway. She tries to coax him from losing consciousness, saying; "Please don't leave me; I love you."²

The Beast stops breathing, and Belle starts sobbing into his lifeless chest; the castle servants bow their heads in the first throws of mourning. The shot then pans back to show Belle and the Beast; colorful sparks of light begin falling from the sky, eventually replacing the rain. The Beast then rises into the sky as a smoke-like fog clouds the scene, and he emanates light from his limbs as they transform from paws into hands and feet, eventually suspended in the air, and emanating light. His legs remain extended straight down while his hands and arms fully outstretch at his side. The former Beast then floats down to the floor, inspecting his transformed appendages before looking at the astonished Belle.

Likewise, in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*³ after Quasimodo saves Esmeralda from the lit pyre on which she was to be burned alive, he carries her up the walls of Notre Dame as the orchestra, choir, and organ thunder the strains of the "Sanctus." Quasimodo lifts Esmeralda high above his head, framing her with the cathedral's famed Rose Window, and cries out in a loud voice "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" As the wicked Judge Claude Frollo realizes what's happening, he lays siege on the cathedral, leading Quasimodo to throw a series of massive rocks and beams. He also pours molten lead down on the streets of Paris to defend the cathedral and the girl he loves, who is one of the only people who purely returns his affections. While the assault is mostly successful, Quasimodo's master still finds his way inside the cathedral, and Quasimodo confronts Frollo's misguided attempts of achieving "righteousness." Frollo then pulls a knife on the pair, and Quasimodo picks up Esmeralda and runs while Frollo pursues them across the roof. The two eventually hide on one of the gargoyles on the cathedral's exterior walls, and Frollo attempts to climb down to reach them. He stands up on another gargoyle, lifts his sword high over his head, and says "And he shall smite the wicked, and cast them into the fiery pit."⁴ The gar-

goyle on which he is standing cracks, causing Frollo to lose his balance. In a final miasma of nightmarish symbolism, Frollo ends up face to face with the gargoyle, clinging onto the underside of the statue. It comes to life—eyes and mouth glowing orange—and growls, completely breaking off from the cathedral's walls. This sends the judge plummeting to his death in the lake of molten lead below.

By mobilizing these scenes, it becomes possible to apply theoretical frameworks, beginning with the underpinning foundation that these films use to function in ways analogous to religion. In *Studying Religion*, Gary Kessler proposes that the term “religion” is difficult to accurately pin down.⁵ He draws from the work of Catherine Albanese⁶ and proposes a four-tiered definition of how we may engage with this concept: “Creed,” consisting of proclaimed beliefs; “Code,” which consists of rules and regulations which the followers are expected to adhere to; “Cultus,” which consists of the ways by which religion is established as an organized group; and “Community,” which are the interactions the adherents have within and without their group. In the analysis of these two films, I have found that both exhibit these four criteria in different ways, respective to the type of soteriology present in their narratives.

For *Beauty and the Beast*: “Creed” consists of the soteriological idea that love leads to salvation; “Code” consists of the means by which one is saved, because “If [the Beast] could learn to love another, and earn their love in return . . . the spell would be broken”⁷ “Cultus”—which, for the purposes of this analysis, refers to the thing which drives these narratives forward and moves toward the realization of their soteriological functions—is the curse which the Beast must break; and “Community”—here functioning as the impact on culture as a whole—refers to the immense popularity of the film, often regarded as one of the best films of the Disney Renaissance of the 1990s, which won an Academy Award⁸ and was nominated⁹ for five more. Likewise, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*’s “Creed” is that salvation is found through dogma and as a product of the dominance of God’s will; “Code” takes the form of Quasimodo’s submission to Frollo’s dominance, as seen in a line from the song “Out There,” where Frollo says “Remember Quasimodo, this is your sanctuary” (Trousdale and Wise, 1996); “Cultus” takes the form of Frollo and his dominance; and “Community” takes the form of the underwhelming reaction of the film, especially when compared to *Beauty and the Beast*.¹⁰

Now, to see the ways in which film can function as religion, we turn to the work of John Lyden, as proposed in *Film as Religion*. In *Film as Religion*, John Lyden writes that films labeled as “thrillers” are defined narratives that “seek to create terror through the depiction of frightening situations from which individuals attempt release.”¹¹ Furthermore, he highlights their display of male sexuality with inappropriate limits, which leads to

violence due to an inability to fulfill these desires, which itself is “due to their monstrous natures.”¹² (Lyden, 228). I suggest that these films meet Lyden’s definition of thrillers and function as such, despite being children’s musicals. The urge to escape and be “released” from current situations is displayed by both Quasimodo and the Beast. Lyden’s criteria is also fulfilled by the antagonists in these respective films—Frollo and Gaston—who exude inappropriate manifestations of their own sexuality. Yet, so does the Beast, the protagonist in the film that bears his name, due in no small part to his initial motivations for pursuing Belle; he does not want her love for its own sake; initially, he wants to use her love so that his humanity might be restored. The Beast was originally a handsome young prince that had been turned into a monster by an enchantress due to his selfishness — or “monstrous”—desires. Viewers are told that the only cure is “to love another and earn their love in return . . .”¹³

The Beast, Gaston, and Frollo: Characterization

From a pragmatic perspective, what separates these three characters is narrative positionality. The Beast is the subject of his movie’s soteriological narrative; he shows an active desire to receive salvation. On the other hand, Quasimodo urgently seeks freedom from his oppressive situation, but lacks the agency to do so. He requires an act of God—the gargoyles coming to life—to break free of Frollo’s oppression and domination. It is essential to establish the differences between the Beast, Gaston, and Frollo in order to proceed with this analysis and outline the ways in which the Beast receives salvation while Frollo and Gaston do not.

I return to Elizabeth Johnson and her work studying renewals in Christology in the last century. Johnson’s book, *Consider Jesus*, adds context to the idea of evolving soteriologies and changes in religion as well as popular culture. She explains that before the Second Vatican Council, soteriology had been defined by dogma since the Middle Ages. She tells readers that during the Middle Ages, “persons not baptized [were not seen as] related to Jesus Christ and [did] not follow his way . . . Jews and infidels were thought to be beyond the pale of God’s saving mercy in Christ, [and] mercy was not abundantly available even to Christians who *lived in fear* of their own damnation.”¹⁴ After the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s, however, she explains that the Roman Catholic Church affirmed that salvation is possible for every person. She quotes the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* from the Council, saying: “[The work of God and salvation] holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For since Christ died for all people . . . we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every human being the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.”¹⁵

According to Johnson, this leads to three interpretations of religion in practice: the first is that Jesus Christ is constitutive for salvation. This is one of the more conservative, traditional, and exclusive interpretations of soteriology, in that salvation is meant only for a select few in particular and exclusionary means, forms, and processes. The second is that Christ is constitutive for salvation but is to be interpreted in an inclusive sense. This interpretation holds that it is the will of God to save all, and those who have not heard of Christ's salvation can be saved by holding to the universal truths present in their religion. The third and final interpretation is that Christ is not necessary for salvation but is instead "normative."

It is the second of these interpretations that emerged after the Second Vatican Council. It is considered much more liberal leaning regarding theological applications. Hans Urs von Balthasar—a Swiss Cardinal-Elect who passed away days before the ceremony that would have marked his ascent to the College of Cardinals—from a Good Friday sermon, saying; "Through the cross, the *love of God* wins what it has been after all along, namely, *the return love* of the beloved creatures, even those who had shut themselves off."¹⁶ Johnson uses this moment from Balthasar's speech to conclude this chapter of her work, and the impact is compelling. Of interest to this analysis are the parallels between von Balthasar's quote and the prologue of *Beauty and the Beast*. To illustrate this, we turn to the film's prologue.

The beginning of the film provides audiences with a voice-over narration accompanying a visual of several scenes depicted by figures set within stained-glass windows; the opening exposition tells of a selfish prince transformed into a beast after turning away an old woman seeking shelter from a winter storm. She curses the castle and the prince, giving him an enchanted rose which acts as a magical hourglass; the narrator states that the rose "[will] bloom until his 21st year . . . [and] if he could learn to love another and earn their love in return by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time."¹⁷ As the Beast follows the soteriology in the narrative of his film—love leads to salvation—he receives redemption. This obviously distinguishes him from Gaston who acts purely on selfish desire throughout the duration of this film.

Likewise, von Balthasar's—and, subsequently Johnson's—summary of love serves as the ultimate soteriology and translates to *Hunchback* albeit through different means. Rather than acceptance of love leading to individual salvation, love's function serves as a simultaneous critique of the original proposed soteriology, submission to dominance. Appropriate to the 15th century setting, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* proposes a soteriology of fear and submission to the domination of powerful figures misusing their power. However,

the midpoint of the film depicts Frollo—who, up until this point, has been spear-heading his supposedly righteous purge of the Parisian Romani—asserting his dominance as he begins to search for Esmeralda. This backfires as Paris, the city that Frollo wishes to save, is consumed by flames. Frollo himself vows that he will “find [Esmerelda]” even if he has to “burn down all of Paris.”¹⁸ With Frollo’s subsequent fall from power, and literal fall into the fiery streets below complete with the demonic gargoyle’s animation, we can surmise that the giver of salvation is rejecting Frollo’s attempts at achieving it while simultaneously accepting that Quasimodo could not receive salvation without being freed from his oppressor.

Frollo and the Beast display several parallels; they both wish to achieve salvation, and this is apparent when closely comparing each character’s motivations. However, it is the Beast who finally experiences a change of heart during his story’s second act. Frollo increases his domination and abuse of power, and ultimately suffers the consequences.

Eras of Hope, Eras of Distrust

The theme of powerful figures misusing their authority and falling from grace along with theoretical foundations allows analysis of the socio-political atmosphere in the United States during the period (1991-1996) when these films were released. Furthermore, it makes possible an engagement between soteriological narratives commentary and specific sociopolitical events from the era. American politics in the 1980’s is largely defined by the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. Many believed that the American people were hoping for fresh perspective amid the stagnancy they had come to associate with the government. In this quest for political “salvation” the motives for fictional, projected soteriologies, that the longings of some of America’s citizens become clear. The exuberant and charming governor of Arkansas, William Jefferson Clinton seemed an appropriate shift away from certain attitudes and political trends. However, directly after announcing his campaign, Clinton was plagued by scandal. The Whitewater Scandal from the early 1990’s is now hailed as part of the permeant American consciousness. Whitewater subsisted on a claim that the Clintons were involved in a scam where elderly residents of the Whitewater real-estate complex were evicted after missing one payment of their massive mortgage. Further evidence of the scandal manifested in a series of documents which were related to the incident and later removed from record after the 1993 suicide of Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster. This further compelled the Senate-appointed independent counsel Kenneth Starr to begin his investigation of wrongdoing by the president.

Then, in May 1994, an Arkansas woman named Paula Jones filed a civil lawsuit against President Clinton, claiming that he sexually harassed her in a hotel room while

he was then serving as the Governor of Arkansas. The subsequent midterm elections produced the “Republican Revolution” of 1994, which overturned the previously considerable Democrat majority in the House of Representatives and Senate. This Congress effectively proceeded to block all of Clinton’s proposed legislation and reforms, exemplified by the government shutdown between December 16, 1995, and January 6, 1996. The Republican Revolution shows very clearly that the opinions of the American people—the constituents of these Congressmen and women— had changed between the overwhelming Democrat majorities in the Congressional and Presidential elections of 1992 and the 1994 midterm elections. As Clinton was making significant headway into liberal reforms and was quite popular up until this point, it stands to reason that the Jones lawsuit was the incident that tipped the scales to the favor of the conservative Republicans.

When news broke in January 1998 that President Clinton and a former White House intern named Monica Lewinsky had lied under oath about their affair, Starr’s investigation switched from exploring possible financial wrongdoings to investigating perjury and obstruction of justice by President Clinton. Eventually, Starr’s office would release its 300+ page report, and charge the president on eleven “acts that may constitute grounds for an impeachment.”¹⁹ Since *Hunchback of Notre Dame*—which features this narrative of figures falling from power—was released in 1996, and the events which led to Clinton’s impeachment were exposed more than a year after the release of this film, most of the report is not useful in this analysis. However, Starr’s report provides a detailed timeline of Clinton’s presidency, as it relates to the scandals that plagued his administration.

Overall, the timeline submitted in the *Starr Report* accurately fits the proposals this paper presents—the President began campaigning in early October 1991; *Beauty and the Beast* was released in late November 1991. Paula Jones filed her sexual harassment lawsuit in 1994, and the Republican Revolution blocked Clinton’s reforms and shutdown the government in 1995. This occurred right before *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was released in 1996. *Hunchback* features prominent narrative devices of powerful figures falling from power, and Bill Clinton became the third president to become impeached by the House of Representatives in 1998 (though this did not pass with the 2/3 majority in the Senate) after *The Starr Report* revealed that the president and Monica Lewinsky had committed perjury and lied to a grand jury under oath. It is in the Paula Jones lawsuit and the Republican Revolution that we can see this discernable shift in politics and popular culture, as the American people elected a new, completely different Congress as social values changed. It is possible to argue that the producers of this media noticed this shift and built narratives that reflected the moment’s cultural zeitgeist.

Conclusion

I have established these films as they correlate to functions of religion; they provide a popular mythos, and the events in the sociopolitical sphere of American culture likely impacted the collective understanding and perception of these events and were, in turn, impacted. To definitively conclude the importance of this claim, it is productive to view Disney's impact on certain aspects of life and the mundane. Turning to Katherine Lofton's work in *Introduction to Consuming Religion*, she "[offers] a profile of religion and its relationship to consumption in the modern world" and "how religion manifests in efforts to mass-produce relations of value," where religion can at times be "something controlling and disciplining," but at other times "something pliable and enfranchising."²⁰ The more popular culture is consumed by large numbers of people rather than a select few, the more their choices regarding consumption reveal their priorities and values. In Nestor Garcia Cancilini's text *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, the writer claims that "to consume is to participate in an arena of competing claims for what society produces and the ways of using it."²¹ Lofton uses this broadly accepted claim by Cancilini to ultimately tie consumer culture, "pop" culture, and societal attitudes.

The Walt Disney Corporation—one of the most influential corporations on Earth—occupies a unique position in culture, simultaneously creating and reflecting culture. It is in Lofton's text that we can see the validity of this idea. *Consuming Religion* also provides the crux of my analysis. A display of Lofton's theory regarding consumption can be observed when engaging with *Beast* and *Notre Dame*, both with perspectives of film production and the themes that impact narratives chosen by producers. These depictions are ultimately consumed by the masses, and the consumption of these two films by Americans may have fed the already prevalent trends in public opinion; in turn, that opinion continued to be reinforced. The American people wanted a political salvation; they believed that they had found it in Bill Clinton. This is reflected with the hopeful themes of the cultural artifacts from this period, such as *Beauty and the Beast*. In contrast, when it became painfully obvious that the president had misused his power and authority, their dreams and salvation were dashed. At this juncture, the salvation elements of cultural artifacts, such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—while still remaining hopeful—were framed as a fight against a domineering, hierarchical structure of power that disenfranchises vulnerable members of society.

Endnotes

1. *NIV Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1995), 1624
2. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise *Walt Disney Pictures Presents Beauty and the Beast*. (Milwaukee, WI: H. Leonard Pub Corp., 1991).
3. Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz. *Walt Disney Pictures presents The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. (Milwaukee, WI: H. Leonard Pub Corp., 1996).
4. Menken, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*.
5. Gary E. Kessler. *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008).
6. Albanese, Catherine L. *America: Religions and Religion*. (Santa Barbara: Wadsworth Cengage Learning 2005), 153-152.
7. Trousdale, *Beauty and the Beast*.
8. Howard Ashman and Alan Menken won Best Original Song for the title song, "Beauty and the Beast."
9. Best Picture (the first animated film to be nominated in for this award, losing to *The Silence of the Lambs*), Best Sound, Best Original Score, and Best Original Song for the songs "Be Our Guest" and "Belle," respectively.
10. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was nominated for Best Score at the 1997 Academy Awards and received significant pushback from religious communities in the United States for its negative portrayal of religion vis-à-vis Frolo
11. John C. Lyden. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 191-201.
12. Lyden, 228
13. Trousdale, *Beauty and the Beast*.
14. Elisabeth A. Johnson *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 130, emphasis added.
15. Johnson, 131.
16. H. Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, eds. M. Kehl, W. Löser, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 149.
17. Trousdale, *Beauty and the Beast*.
18. Menken, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*.
19. Kenneth Starr. *The Starr Report: The Findings of the Independent Counsel Kenneth W. Starr on President Clinton and the Lewinsky Affair*. (New York: Public Affairs, 1998).
20. Catherine Lofton. *Consuming Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.
21. Néstor García Canclini. *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*. Vol. 6. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 39.

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