

Medieval Elements in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*

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Abstract

Published in 1831, the classic historical Gothic romance *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is representative for narratology, since the plot is majestically set in medieval Paris and Victor Hugo manages to create a specific Middle-Ages atmosphere without having studied in a formal manner about the specificity of medieval times, therefore he is a medievalist *avant-la-lettre*. Moreover, it is important to underline Hugo's attention to details, the realism of description and the manner of giving shape to vivid characters, the predilection for creating memorable, powerful epic moments with a deep religious-ethical component. Furthermore, our purpose is to analyze medieval and modern elements in the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, also insisting on the symbols present in the novel, its impact on the readers and also the narrative techniques used by Victor Hugo.

Keywords: medieval, modern, text analysis, writing technique, narratology, narrative techniques, film adaptation.

This article has emerged as a natural reaction to the writing of Victor Hugo, characterized by the prevalence of visual elements, of details connected to Gothic art and, of course, to the narrative techniques of the writer who has proved to be a medievalist *avant-la-lettre*.

Firstly, we would like to underline the fact that perhaps no other work of Victor Hugo, except for *Les Misérables*, the other masterpiece of the French author, has received so much attention regarding its cinematographic representation. Fortunately, we had the chance to see several film adaptations, among which we consider *The Hunchback from Notre Dame from 1997* the best¹, being an Alliance Communications production, starring Richard Harris as Dom Frollo, Salma Hayek as Esmeralda, Mandy Patinkin as Quasimodo, Edward Atterton as Pierre Gringoire, the film was directed by Peter Medak. This deep connection between Victor Hugo's book and cinema has its roots in the fact that the author's writing style is predominantly visual, not to mention the narrative themes and techniques of the novel. If we

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¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCHm5DURhMw>, viewed on 26 November 2018.

analyze the second chapter of Book V from the novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, we discover the ways in which literature supplanted architecture as the first mode of expression of civilization. Furthermore, the ways in which Hugo put accent on motion and visualization in his written pages are, according to the words of Bradley Stephens from the introduction to the book published in 2010 by Signet Classics, “almost prophetic of the rise of the moving image over the written word”². In this respect, we have wondered about the impact of this work written in the 19th century over the nowadays reader, especially taking into account the modern ways of creating cinematographic representations of classic books. Modern times are marked by great changes, also regarding the perception of classic literature. Most people do not have the necessary time for reading, this is the reason why they prefer to see a movie made after a book which is considered part of the basic, undeniably well-written books of classic literature. Therefore, when we asked our students of the first year, studying Computer Science at the University “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” if they had read the book, we were surprised to notice that there were only 41 out of 300 that have read the book, while more than a third (to be more precise, 156 students) had seen the movie based on the book.

In this respect, we consider that this book’s popularity is explainable by the fact that it anticipated “a modern, image-driven culture”; for example, there are numerous images with the elaborate architecture of Notre-Dame which has always inflamed the imagination of people; moreover, there is a scene in which Quasimodo is fighting against the Parisian crowd. Furthermore, we believe that the essence of this perpetual attraction of the writing of Hugo is due to the fact that not only are these images well-drawn, but also dynamically animated: Quasimodo slides down the cathedral’s façade to rescue Esmeralda “like a raindrop rolling down a pane of glass”³ or when “the waves of that human sea”⁴ part under boiling metal that pours down from Notre-Dame heights, the page creates in the readers’ mind a cinematographic sequence of images.

In this novel, Victor Hugo’s major focus is on the notions of perspective and observation. In connection to these issues, we have noticed that the author frequently uses verbs of appearance and perception and there are also allusions and metaphors. We have identified the motif of the eye in the following fragments: in the northern part of the cathedral, there is a

² Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Translated by Walter J. Cobb, with a new introduction by Bradley Stephens and an Afterword by Graham Robb, Signet Classics, 2010, p.X.

³ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Translated by Walter J. Cobb, with a new introduction by Bradley Stephens and an Afterword by Graham Robb, Signet Classics, Penguin Books, London, 2010, p. 344.

⁴ Idem, p.414.

window which resembles the only open eye of Quasimodo; Esmeralda's beguiling dark eyes often focus on the narrator's description of the gypsy dancer; Frollo's devilish madness is betrayed by "the look of hell"⁵ which lies in his searching eyes. To complete the literary painting, the characters of this novel are forever watching one another.

In the article "Medievalism and Modernity in Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*"⁶, Alex Novikoff underlines that the first section of the book contains a historical reconstruction which offers an excellent example of Hugo's medievalism. First of all, the novel opens on the 6th of January 1482, when it was celebrated the annual Feast of Fools. The Feast was a celebration specific to France which was respected both by clergy and laic people before the 16th century, the main idea of this event was the inversion of power, a mockery meant to give the poor the power that they did not have, power, dignity and impunity were "briefly conferred on those in a subordinate position", according to Novikoff. In this respect, this feast was somehow a medieval successor of the Roman *Saturnalia* which also had a parodic function. The Feast of the Fools starts with the election of Quasimodo as "king". A major advantage of this novel is the fact that it offers the readers a complete portrait of medieval society, accomplished through the recognition of the tensions that exist among the different classes. Hugo's intention was to trace current social and political problems back to their medieval roots and, in order to achieve the maximum effect, he reconstructed medieval Paris with its buildings and its people. Consequently, the reader is invited to imagine the hub of intellectual life back then: the Cité, the University, the Palace of Justice. Of course, the biggest point of attraction is the Cathedral Notre-Dame de Paris, which also gave the original title of the novel. Later on, it was changed to Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre-Dame, but Hugo believed that the emphasis should be on the Gothic majestic cathedral, not on the morbidity of Quasimodo. In order to underline the beauty of the neglected marvels of Paris, there are numberless digressions. In one of his characteristic *cri de coeur*, Hugo said: "Our fathers had a Paris of stone; our children will have a Paris of plaster". How exactly did Hugo manage to re-create medieval Paris? By reading, of course, his sources being Henri Sauval's *Histoires et recherches des Antiquités de la Ville de Paris*, published in 1724 and still read by experts today. He also relied on P. Jacques de Breul's *Le Théâtre des Antiquités de Paris* (1622) and Pierre Matthieu's *Histoire de Louys XI, roy de France* (1610).

⁵ Idem, p.294.

⁶ Alex J. Novikoff, *Medievalism and Modernity in Victor Hugo's Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Fiction and Film for Scholars of France – A Cultural Bulletin, <https://h-france.net/fflh/classics/medievalism-and-modernity-in-victor-hugos-hunchback-of-notre-dame/>, last seen on 17 September 2018.

Regarding the narrative techniques that Victor Hugo uses, we have noticed the massive usage of descriptions of significant medieval Parisian places, thus contributing to the impression of moving painting. A strategy that the writer uses in order to attract the reader is the novel's interpretative ambiguity, the message is left for each consumer of literature to be decoded; according to Bradley Stephens, "this freedom of interpretation is surely another of the novel's lasting strengths. [...] The narrator never adopts a moralizing approach to the events he describes, obligating readers to understand the text for themselves."⁷

Notre-Dame de Paris has a dramatic effect on the outside world. In 1831, "medieval" meant unsafe housing, dark doorways and festering drains. The word "gothic" was an insult. Therefore, according to Graham Robb, when critics wanted to accuse Hugo of artistic vandalism, they called his writings "Hugothique".⁸

Reading the descriptions of the medieval places that used to mark medieval Paris, we believe that the purpose of creating these long passages with minute details regarding what used to exist once in that place is the salvation of medieval treasures. In the preface to the second edition, Hugo underlines the idea of saving these buildings from the hammer of progress. Not only did Hugo manage to describe representative building, but also he created memorable characters that have continued to live in the imagination of readers over decades: the penniless poet Gringoire; the demonic, debauched priest Frollo; the handsome guardsman Captain Phoebus; the deaf bell ringer Quasimodo; the amazingly beautiful gipsy girl called Esmeralda who makes everybody fall in love with her, the gipsy woman being always followed by her only friend, the performing goat Djali (the same name of Djali was given by Madame Bovary to her lapdog twenty-six years later).

How exactly has *Notre Dame de Paris* inspired film industry? Well, in 1923, appeared the movie *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, starring Lon Chaney as Quasimodo. The same combination of repulsion and sensitivity can be detected in Charles Laughton's incarnation of Quasimodo in 1939, while Anthony Quinn in 1956 and Sir Anthony Hopkins in 1982 gave this character life in a similar manner. In 1996, Walt Disney Pictures released an animated version of the novel. Closer to our times, appeared *Batman* in 1989, having Tim Burton as its protagonist. We have identified in *Batman* the themes of surveillance and detection to the backgrounds of a society marked by injustice and corruption, just like in the novel of Victor Hugo. In a nutshell, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is a complex Gothic Romantic novel

⁷ Bradley Stephens in *Introduction to Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Signet Classics, Penguin Books, London 2010, p.xiii.

⁸ Graham Robb in *Afterword to Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Signet Classics, Penguin Books, London 2010, p.505.

whose purpose is to shed light on all the aspects of a medieval Paris which has very many things in common with the modern version of Paris, thus inviting the readers into a journey of comparison and discovery.

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