

Reflections on Victor Hugo's "Notre Dame de Paris"

by Stuart Fernie

There have been a number of filmed versions of Hugo's tale, though few have remained very faithful to his original storyline. The musical version by Luc Plamondon and Richard Cocciante, starring Bruno Pelletier, H el ene S egara and Garou, is probably the most faithful and one of the most touching.

The questions set out below are intended to help readers/viewers clarify their own thoughts about its main characters and themes. I have supplied my own responses below the questions.

- 1) What is the nature of Quasimodo's relationship with Frollo?
- 2) Describe Quasimodo's and Frollo's feelings for Esmeralda. How do they contrast?
- 3) What does Quasimodo's attempted kidnap of Esmeralda tell us about Quasimodo and Frollo?
- 4) Esmeralda offers some water to Quasimodo after his torture – what effect does this have on him?
- 5) What are we to think of Phoebus and Fleur-de-Lys?
- 6) What are we to make of Frollo's conduct?
- 7) How does Quasimodo change in the course of the story?
- 8) How is the architecture of Notre Dame used to support the story?
- 9) What are the main themes?
- 10) What role does fate play in the proceedings?

What is the nature of Quasimodo's relationship with Frollo?

Quasimodo appears to have a great variety of feelings toward Frollo. He has an overwhelming sense of debt towards him as it was he who took him in and brought him up when his own parents abandoned him. He also fears and respects Frollo, perhaps because Frollo has always maintained a certain distance and has avoided the emotional bond Quasimodo needs. Although Frollo is a father figure to Quasimodo, there remains a

certain detachment, even a business-like quality on the part of Frollo in their relationship. Above all else, perhaps as a result of recognition of all he owes him, Quasimodo has an unquestioning allegiance toward Frollo, similar to the faith Frollo expects as the result of the position he holds – that of moral guardian.

Quasimodo displays intelligence, sensitivity, and a desire for love, but he receives no real love in return. Frollo allows Quasimodo to feel this way – he encourages him to feel a debt rather than offer unconditional love, which causes us to question Frollo’s feelings for Quasimodo. Frollo saved him and has treated him relatively well, but there is no closeness on his part. He appears to have acted out of a sense of duty rather than as an act of charity or love.

Quasimodo is open to love, indeed he offers love and clearly wants to please. Frollo, however, does not offer love. For him, love is replaced by principle, duty, faith and pride in his position.

Describe Quasimodo’s and Frollo’s feelings for Esmeralda. How do they contrast?

Quasimodo clearly finds Esmeralda very attractive, but he is under no illusion that she could feel the same way about him. Quasimodo shows intelligence, understanding and respect for Esmeralda. He also displays self-awareness and humility, provoking the reader’s sympathy and compassion. He is treated as a figure of fun at the “Fête des fous”, but he reveals a tender heart, intelligence and sensitivity.

Here we, the readers/viewers, are made aware of the difference between inner and outer beauty, one of the major themes of the piece. Clearly Quasimodo is a “nice” guy trapped in a deformed body, which causes a certain reaction in others. Yet he does not react in kind. He retains the capacity for love and understanding despite his treatment at the hands of others, which is another of the work’s major themes – that of compassion and optimism in the face of adversity and injustice, as a result of the capacity for love.

Frollo’s reaction to Esmeralda is quite different, however. He treats her like dirt and suggests she might be responsible for putting good men’s souls in danger through temptation, though all she has done is dance and have fun. The temptation is in the eyes and minds of those who behold her. Frollo shows her no respect or understanding, in stark contrast to Quasimodo. Frollo overreacts somewhat to Esmeralda’s very presence. He sees her through the eyes of the protector of public morality and, in his mind, seeks to protect society from the danger she represents.

What does Quasimodo’s attempted kidnap of Esmeralda tell us about Quasimodo and Frollo?

The very idea of kidnapping Esmeralda is a vast overreaction. As protector of public morality, Frollo should act in accordance with the law, whose objective application should serve to protect all of society. Here Frollo shows he is acting on personal impulse as he instructs Quasimodo to kidnap Esmeralda. This is not for public protection, but for personal gratification and he is willing to make use of Quasimodo as an instrument of achieving this end. Frollo is showing a vindictive side to his character. He abuses his position, and shows no respect for either Esmeralda or Quasimodo.

Quasimodo shows devotion to Frollo by undertaking to kidnap Esmeralda. He doesn't really understand why, but he accepts Frollo's authority, and assumes Frollo is acting in good faith and for good reasons.

Esmeralda offers some water to Quasimodo after his torture – what effect does this have on him?

Esmeralda shows compassion and sympathy for the man who tried to kidnap her. She shows the capacity for love and humanity. Quasimodo is stunned by Esmeralda's act of charity, and this only increases his admiration for her on a spiritual level. At the same time he begins to question and doubt Frollo's motives and character.

Frollo is revealed as a cold and calculating man who sees his protégé Quasimodo's suffering and does nothing to help him, in spite of knowing the truth. Frollo undoubtedly realises he has done wrong, but he is acting to protect his position and order in society. His total belief in himself and his purpose mean that pain and suffering caused to others who may be innocent, in order to deflect attention from his own weakness (which may offer a threat to stability and order in society), is seen as acceptable.

What are we to think of Phoebus and Fleur-de-Lys?

It is hard to feel much sympathy for Phoebus. We understand his attraction to Esmeralda, but from the outset she is a "plaything" for him. It is a purely physical attraction for him and he pursues his lustful feelings for Esmeralda as he claims he still loves Fleur-de-Lys. Clearly he has little real thought or respect for either Esmeralda or Fleur-de-Lys.

Esmeralda finds Phoebus physically attractive and appears to impute something more spiritual in her desire to make it so. She is undoubtedly flattered by the attentions of one she herself finds attractive, and thus fails to see clearly the full picture.

All sympathy for Phoebus evaporates when he participates in Frollo's conspiracy against Esmeralda. This is a way out for him as well as for Frollo. Neither accepts responsibility for his actions and is content to see another suffer for their actions, if that means they can avoid repercussions for their own deeds.

Fleur-de-Lys is driven wild by jealousy as she schemes the death of Esmeralda in order to ensure the security of her own future.

Esmeralda's death suits Phoebus and Fleur-de-Lys. They are willing to sacrifice an innocent to cover their own moral or political weaknesses and misjudgements, and allow them to pursue their own ambitions.

Phoebus and Frollo both occupy positions of some moral authority in society, and they will not allow those positions to be compromised by personal feelings or weaknesses. Phoebus is driven largely by ambition, but Frollo feels that his feelings for Esmeralda will compromise the very position he holds in society – thus society itself is in danger of being damaged as a result of Esmeralda's "tempting" of Frollo.

What are we to make of Frollo's conduct?

As suggested above, Frollo's position as moral guardian is both a source of pride and a problem for Frollo. He must remain impartial and fair as he represents a mixture of law, morality and religion. In order to be able to judge impartially, he must be above mere temptation. He must, at least to some extent, share the traits and principles of God himself. Frollo is stunned to discover a weakness – his attraction to Esmeralda, which he cannot control. She comes to represent a threat not just to Frollo himself, but to his very position in society. In his mind she is the criminal, threatening to undermine the very fabric of society. As such she must be done away with.

In a way, then, he is protecting society by trying to get rid of Esmeralda. However, he becomes truly monstrous in offering her freedom if she will sleep with him. He is no longer the protector of society, but a man abusing his position and authority.

Of course, Hugo is also criticising what he considers the unnatural position of a priest with respect to the allure of the opposite sex. He appears to be suggesting that it is unnatural and probably impossible to try to rise above nature, and in so doing Frollo has left himself open to human weakness – weakness which neither he nor his position can tolerate.

Perhaps Frollo's conduct represents a more general weakening of the position (and authority) of the church as its position of strength and influence deteriorates while reason and scepticism are spread by the production of printed material accessible to all (who could read).

While the very stonework and glassware of the cathedral recounted and reinforced the "official" version of the Christian story and morality with immense and overwhelming size and authority, these could now (with the invention of the printing press) be challenged to the point of destruction by the ideas contained on a piece of paper. All the characters are thus at the mercy of, and perhaps even victims of, the times in which they lived.

How does Quasimodo change in the course of the story?

Quasimodo is transformed from an obedient and faithful servant of Frollo, respectful and afraid, to an anarchic participant in a revolt against Frollo and his position.

How and why did this happen? In a nutshell, it is due to love. Quasimodo's love and respect for Esmeralda opened his eyes to injustice and the lack of love and respect shown to him (and others) by Frollo. Love brings with it a sense of worth and self-respect which he has hitherto been denied. In a way he is liberated by these feelings. He has come to respect his own inner beauty, and spiritual love for others – in direct contrast to the supposed spirituality of Frollo who is so consumed with lust and desire that he has turned his back on the very principles he was supposed to uphold. Rather than embrace these feelings and try to grow, he decides to quell them. He has turned his back on humanity and has become his position rather than a man fulfilling a role in society.

In many ways Quasimodo's development and turning against Frollo's authority is akin to the Enlightenment Movement of the 17th and 18th centuries – challenging the authority of those in power and holding them accountable for their actions. This movement represented compassion and humanity as opposed to the dogma and rigidity of those in authority at the time.

How is the architecture of Notre Dame used to support the story?

The Gothic style of architecture, in contrast to the preceding Romanesque style, is a much freer style and represents a certain dissent from other rather dogmatic styles, suggesting dissent from authority and control.

Height is also used to suggest man's aspirations towards ever-greater heights (climbed with considerable ease by Quasimodo, while Frollo dies as the result of a fall).

What are the main themes?

I have touched on a variety of themes above. These include:

Love and its power to bring about great change, as well as potentially causing great pain. It can inspire acts of jealousy, but also acts of courage, and bring about personal development.

Revolt against injustice and authority where justice is not seen to be done.

Inner and outer beauty

The Enlightenment Movement and dogma.

What role does fate play in the proceedings?

This is a recurring theme in Hugo's work. "Notre Dame" was supposedly inspired by a Greek word, anarkia, which Hugo found scratched on a wall in the cathedral. Anarkia

means fate, and from this word found in Notre Dame cathedral, combined with fragments of other experiences and people he had met, Hugo created the story of Quasimodo, Esmeralda and the others.

There is no definitive answer to the question, but clearly Hugo felt it was important to encourage us to think about the way in which our destinies are intertwined, just as the destinies of Quasimodo, Frodo and the others are dependent on one another. Do events occur purely by chance, or is there some element of fate involved? Are we to believe in chaos or divine order?