

THE SAINT [1997]

by

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The Saint. Directed by Phillip Noyce. Written by Jonathan Hensleigh and Wesley Strick. Distributed by Paramount Picture, 1997.

Young Simon Templar is abused in a Dickensian, religious orphanage for illegitimate children where his name is taken from him, and he is forced to use the name of a saint. He also falls in love with a young girl who is accidentally killed because of his adventures. Grown, Simon (Val Kilmer) has become a cat burglar whose services go to the highest bidder, a master of disguise, and an inveterate womanizer. Ivan Tretiak (Rade Serbedzija), multi-millionaire oil magnate who has his eyes on overthrowing democracy and becoming the first post-Soviet czar of Russia, hires Templar to steal a cold fusion formula from its inventor, the brilliant and beautiful Dr. Emma Russell (Elisabeth Shue). Templar's plans go awry when he falls in love with her. Through the rest of the film, the pair play tag around the world, escape from the police and the Russian Mafia, and prevent another Russian Revolution by making the cold fusion device work. (Rated PG-13).

In 1926, Leslie Charteris created a gentleman crook and wrote about a dozen novels about him before his death in 1993. The Saint also became the basis of nine movies between 1938 and 1954 (starring the likes of Louis Hayward, Hugh Sinclair, and George Sanders) and a 1960s TV series starring Roger Moore (ironically, a future James Bond and the narrator of the closing credits here). There is no question that when Ian Fleming began writing his James Bond novels, he was aware of The Saint. Aside from an extensive knowledge of fast cars and fine wines, both our heroes have a taste for beautiful women and expensive toys. Both are charming and debonair. The major difference between The Saint and Bond is their psychic backgrounds.

The Saint continues in the tradition of damaged hero. The most famous of these is Batman – that is, the Dark Knight, not the Adam West (zing, pow, pop) version. Young Bruce Wayne sees his parents murdered and because he is unable to resolve the trauma, develops an alternate, schizoid personality – Batman – to do what Bruce is unable to do, that is, fight crime to try to resolve the loss of his parents. Simon Templar suffers equally, but in a different mode, one that brought him to be The Saint.

Young Simon is raised in a Catholic religious school where orphans and illegitimate children are deprived of their names (which deprives him of his personality) and forced to use assigned names of various saints (whose personality he adopts). Here, to escape the brutality, he flees into a world of comic books (like the Knights Templars

comic from which he got his last name), and into the darker corners of Catholic mythos (his identification with the magician Simon Magus rather than Saint Simon who preached the Gospel in Egypt and later joined Jude Thaddeus in Persia, where he was crucified. Simon is the patron saint of couriers, tanners, and sawyers.). He falls in love, but the girl is killed and thus he becomes a seducer who cannot commit to any woman. He lacks a stable personality and thus dons a series of disguises and names while looking for his true self.

What transforms him is an encounter with a similarly damaged person (but reflected in a gender mirror – the feminine) which puts both his talents and his diseases in a new perspective. For instance, he clandestinely searches Russell’s apartment and later uses the information to impress her with his sensitivity in “reading” her. Much to his surprise, she does the same to him without resorting to subterfuge. He suddenly realizes that he has been imitating and perhaps usurping innate feminine talents. In many ways, Russell awakens Templar to what he has been doing all along; she puts things in a psychological perspective in which he can resolve his childhood traumas and become a whole person. Toward the end of the film, she insists on knowing who he is, forcing him to discover a stable personality in the multiple personalities that he has used since childhood, unsatisfactorily, to float through life. And this brings us to the next set of metaphors *The Saint* uses.

What Alfred Hitchcock calls the McGuffin – the ridiculous thing that the fuss is all about but really makes no difference to the film – is cold fusion (All the reviewers who deride this film simply don’t understand what it is really about; they probably think *Notorious* is about uranium ore hidden in wine bottles!)! “Workable cold fusion” (how’s that for an oxymoron?) is pretty ridiculous at the level of text (even though the film is placed in the near future).

However, as metaphor it is stunning! And it reflects perfectly the central characters. Simon Templar is cold, Dr. Russell is cold (this is one of the few films in recent memory with a pair of introverted characters as the leads). When they fall in love, the passions of each melt the frost of the other, and – poof – their “coldness” “fuses” into love. This is seen several times in the text of the film. Moscow is endlessly cold – the villain has been hoarding heating oil. Even more to the point, the couple escape the Mafia by hiding on an icy ledge above a river and Templar falls in. To prevent his freezing, Dr. Russell uses her body heat (literally) to pull him back from the brink of hypothermic death. In this film, there are almost too many symbolic icy baptisms and cold, wet metaphoric birth images to count.

Another set of metaphors the film uses very cleverly are the names of the saints. A look at any Dictionary of Saints will open up the meanings of the various disguises Templar assumes so I will not burden you with these details. However, the central figure’s instability of character is further emphasized by looking back further than the Saints, into the Bible. There are no less than *nine* men with the name of Simon found in the New Testament! And the idea of sainthood takes on further meanings within the film.

Despite being placed in the future (to accommodate the preposterousness of cold fusion – especially as generated by the tinker-toy equipment shown in the film), the film really crosses the boundaries of believability when it embarks on the working of saintly miracles. Yet these boundaries exist only at the level of the text; if we cross into the land of psychological metaphor, all works beautifully.

Templar tells Russell that in order to be a saint, one must perform three miracles. By his own count, he performs two: the success of the cold fusion machine and the arrest of the villains. These are very masculine miracles of science and law, of action and justice. However, he is unaware of the third miracle. Russell no longer needs her medicine for her “weak heart.” Her experiences with him have cured her! I seriously doubt this third miracle was performed by running around in the sewers of Moscow, being hunted by the Russian Mafia, or being proven right in the world of science. What cures Russell’s weak heart is finding love. While this may seem sappy and sentimental, it is hard to disagree with: love melts the cold heart and cures the weak one.

In this way, Russell’s character becomes an interesting one. It is in stark contrast to Templar: He hides by using disguises and avoids interactions while she exposes herself to the public and thus endures ridicule. His mathematical and computer skills are used for personal benefit while her’s are used to help the world. While he takes physical risks to steal from people, she takes intellectual risks to steal from nature itself. Templar’s secrets are contained in a Power PC and a palm-top cellular phone – a substitute brain. Russell’s secrets are hidden in her bra, almost becoming part of her breast (with which she wants to feed the world and give it warmth). Obviously, a blending of the two – the archetypal masculine and the archetypal feminine – will result in a greater being . . . a successful fusion from the cold.

They cure each other. Through him she finds not only love, but her own competence and confidence to deal with the real world outside the cloister of the science lab. On the other hand, Russell intuits the truth about Templar and nails him, “You’re running away from your past and your pain, and yet you keep it so close to you.”

The Saint is not a great film, but it is a fun film – not only at the surface level of a neatly put together spy/science fiction story, but also as a thoroughly worked out symbolic study which resonates with religious and alchemical references. The acting is good, the cinematography is good, the writing is good, but the film’s strong suit is metaphor. And if one can enjoy it at that level, one can get great pleasure from a spy story worked out at multiple levels with great delight.

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