



4-1-2004

Fall, Creation, and Redemption in Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*

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Recommended Citation

Olson, Duane (2004) "Fall, Creation, and Redemption in Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.08.02.02>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/2>

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Abstract

The Shape of Things is a contemporary restatement of the biblical story of the fall. Unlike other recent films about a fall from innocence, like *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*, which portray the fall as a rise into a meaningful life with limited and guarded harshness, LaBute's drama presents the fall as entrance into a world of unreserved individual and social depravity. I analyze LaBute's creative interplay with the biblical story and show the different directions of sinfulness that the film exposes, including the social critique underlying those directions. While the film presents no social redemption, I disclose the brief glimmers of the possibility of individual redemption that shine through it.

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Introduction

Writer/director Neil LaBute first gained national attention when his picture, *In the Company of Men*, won the Filmmakers Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival in 1997. He followed that success with *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998), proving in these films to be a serious analyst of the twistedness of contemporary relationships and an unrelenting critic of contemporary culture. After directing two relatively light-hearted films for which he did not write the screenplays, he returns to the theme of human depravity in his latest film, *The Shape of Things* (2003).¹

The film was originally written as a play. It opened in London in 2001 under LaBute's direction with the same actors in the same roles as the movie. There is minimal adaptation in the movie version, something for which LaBute has been criticized. Like the play, there are only four characters with speaking parts in the film, and each scene in the movie is limited to what is easily staged and involves minimal action. The movie is driven by the subtleties of dialogue and plot, and while this may not lead to box office success in a day of computer-generated special effects, it gives ample substance for reflection.

LaBute's work is filled with symbolic actions, multiple ironies, and double or submerged meanings. *The Shape of Things* is an extended play on submerged meaning, since it involves the retelling of the biblical story of the fall. The main

characters, Adam and Evelyn, reenact the major elements of the drama played out by their biblical counterparts. One of the purposes of this paper is to explore the way in which LaBute creatively restates the main themes of the biblical story: the temptation of the serpent, the forbidden fruit, the fall from innocence, the gaining of knowledge, and the emergence of sexuality. LaBute interprets the fall into sin as entrance into a world of unrelenting brokenness, a world containing only the faintest glimmer of redemption.

In LaBute's restatement of the biblical story, the main characters sin in different ways. Adam fails to use his freedom to actualize his true self, while Evelyn fails to submit to finite limits. I call these two directions respectively the sins of sloth and hubris. I analyze each under the same comprehensive religious categories drawn from the thought of Paul Tillich: ultimate concern and the demonic. Ultimate concern is the religious directedness toward some object, which places ultimate meaning upon it. The object of ultimate concern becomes a god, or bears sacred meaning, demanding complete sacrifice while promising total fulfillment. The demonic refers to a destructive rather than a fulfilling ultimate concern. It can take different directions, but when an ultimate concern destroys one's being instead of fulfilling it, it is demonic.² In their sloth and hubris, Adam and Evelyn display different forms of a demonic ultimate concern. I analyze Adam

and Evelyn's sins respectively, before turning to the glimmers of redemption in the film.

A. Adam's Fall

We first meet Adam and Evelyn at the art museum of the college they attend in a small, unnamed town. Adam (Paul Rudd) is a pudgy undergraduate literature major with rimmed glasses and unfashionable slick hair combed to the side. Evelyn (Rachel Weisz) is beautiful and alluring. A graduate student in art, while she is often enigmatic, she nevertheless displays an appealing boldness, a kind of unapologetic certainty about who she is and what she does.

Adam is a security guard at the museum, and in the opening scene he approaches Evelyn, who has "crossed the line" by stepping over the ropes cordoning off the statue of a large male nude. The statue, we learn, is Fornecelli's representation of God. When Adam steps over the ropes himself to confront Evelyn, we have a symbolic recreation of the Garden of Eden scene. The garden is the world of art at the museum. Adam is the keeper of the garden, and Evelyn is a late arrival, who, as we learn, has plans to disrupt the order in the garden.

Evelyn boldly and without shame tells Adam that she has come to the museum with the intent of defacing the statue of God. She explains that a plaster cast of leaves and grapes was added to cover the exposed genitals on the statue "by

a committee who had complaints from local townspeople." She intends to spray-paint a penis on the plaster. In Evelyn's plan, we see the meaning of the temptation of the serpent in this story. The serpent is the lure of absolute art; art at all costs that demands a complete sacrifice for its creation and is not bound by any norms or standards. The serpent has been speaking to Evelyn and has drawn her to the museum with this plan.

As keeper of the garden of art, Adam objects, but in his characteristic low-key fashion. He is clearly more intrigued with Evelyn than the demands of his job. In what appears to be a reference to the forbidden fruit, Evelyn explains her project to Adam and takes Adam to the side of the statue where they lean over to look behind the plaster leaves and grapes. Evelyn tells Adam, "Look at it, you can see the ... See, right behind the grapes there, you can just see his ..."

As the forbidden fruit, the penis represents sexual allure and all of the attractions that go along with it like good looks, style, fashion, and composing oneself in an enticing manner. It represents what Evelyn will later call in a reference to the title of the movie "an obsession with the surface of things, the shape of them." In this sense, it is the knowledge of good and evil from the Garden of Eden story. It is the kind of knowledge that breeds popularity and success in a culture obsessed with attractiveness, fashionableness, and sex appeal.

By painting a penis on the plaster covering, on a surface level, Evelyn is an art major making a statement against censorship. As we will see, however, on a deeper level, she is denying that there are any lines in art or that the artist is limited by any standards. This statue is fitting for making such a statement, since it is a representation of God and has itself "crossed the line," breaking the second commandment against visible images of Deity. But there is still another level of meaning in what she does, given the fact that the penis represents the forbidden fruit. Painting the penis, and in effect exposing it from its hiding place, is symbolically partaking of the forbidden fruit. Following the biblical story, Evelyn partakes of it and will give it to Adam. Adam is a bumbling nerd, who looks and dresses funny, bites his fingernails, and even into his 20's rides a bicycle instead of owning a car. Evelyn will lure Adam into a relationship through which she will give to him the knowledge of sex appeal. Gaining this knowledge constitutes his fall.

While Adam is simply entranced by the beautiful Evelyn and wants a relationship, unbeknownst to him, Evelyn views Adam as an art project. She feigns attraction to him, entering into relationship simply to get him to change himself and make himself more physically appealing. Sculpting Adam into a hot guy becomes her master's thesis. Evelyn prompts Adam to change with suggestions backed by the promise of a deepened and more committed relationship, along with evermore thrilling sexual encounters.

It is certainly a contemporary twist on the biblical story to define the knowledge of good and evil specifically in terms of our culture's obsession with appearance and sexual allure, and to make this web of attraction that into which Adam falls. Still, LaBute maintains the connection with one of the major themes of the biblical story by showing that sexual awakening and the fall coincide. Adam's fall into the standards of surface appeal is simultaneously his sexual awakening. This awakening is shown poignantly in an early scene, where Adam and Evelyn are alone in bed, having just made love. They are discussing Adam's becoming less inhibited about his body, something Adam admits he is only beginning to overcome. The scene ends with Evelyn giving Adam a blow job. She eats of the forbidden fruit as she simultaneously brings Adam out of his sexual innocence.

LaBute does a masterful job of presenting the cause of Adam's fall as an inextricable combination of deceit and personal responsibility. Evelyn deceives Adam effectively and shamelessly. Early on, she chides him for questioning why she would like a guy like him, claims that she likes him, and says he should trust her about this. A bit later in their relationship, in the midst of what we will discover is a lie, she calls herself "a very straightforward person," and says "It's the only way to be. Why lie?"

Adam, for his part, falls hopelessly for Evelyn. While he goes through moments of self-reflective questioning about whether he should follow her suggestions and change, he always overcomes these inner qualms by sacrificing who he is in order to maintain the relationship with the enchanting Evelyn. She gets him to work out and lose weight, though he admits he does not like to do it and is doing it only for her. At her prompting, he changes his hairstyle and eating habits, buys a new wardrobe, wears contacts, and quits biting his nails. She encourages him to keep a journal about his progress, which is ironic since journals are supposed to record one's inner thoughts and feelings, but she gets him to use it to record progress on his surface changes.

The climax of his transformation comes when she convinces him to get a nose job and give up his friends. Adam says he never imagined himself as someone who would have cosmetic surgery, and at first he balks about going through with the procedure. Evelyn points out the ordinariness of the procedure, but also makes a coy demand with the claim that he has a "good face, a nice shape to your nose, actually, but it's just got that bit of ... bulb ... at the end." Finally, Evelyn distracts Adam with sexual banter and Adam goes through with the procedure.

In the next scene, Adam wears a bandage on his nose and explains in a wonderful double entendre to a friend's query about the bandage, "I fell." Adam is ashamed to admit he has had plastic surgery and gets angry at his friend's persistent

questioning about what happened. Beneath his inability to expose publicly what he has done or why he has done it, is an implicit awareness of personal responsibility. He has done something out of character, only to please Evelyn, and he must cover it up.

The only other characters with lines in the movie are Adam's friends, an engaged couple, Jenny (Gretchen Mol) and Phil (Frederick Weller). Before meeting Phil, Jenny had a crush on Adam, and while he apparently felt the same way, Adam was too reserved to act on his feelings. Deep into his transformation, Jenny and Adam meet alone, presumably to talk about Jenny's doubts about Phil's faithfulness. Jenny is overcome that Adam would change for a woman. She calls him "hot" and "cute." Being sexually awakened, Adam responds. They kiss and apparently do more. Both Phil and Evelyn find out about the kiss. In a scene in a coffee shop, Evelyn ruthlessly confronts Adam and Jenny. Jenny leaves angrily, but Evelyn continues to work on Adam's guilt and threatens to leave the relationship. The threat prompts Adam to exclaim, "I'll do anything you want, okay? ... I just, I just don't want to lose you." Adam agrees to Evelyn's demand never to see or speak to Phil and Jenny again.

These final acts of compliance show how the relationship with Evelyn has become a totalizing obsession. In religious categories, it is an ultimate concern, demanding complete sacrifice, and, at the same time, promising total fulfillment. It

is a demonic ultimate concern, because it destroys who Adam is rather than leading him to deeper levels of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. The Adam we get to know at the beginning of the film, for all his nerdiness, displays a clever wit and a knowledge of literature, from which he quotes frequently. He shows himself to be an interesting conversationalist. It is true that he is not fully alive. His shyness and insecurities have locked him away from others and kept him from realizing his potential. It is because of his insecurities that he is such an easy prey for Evelyn to manipulate. Yet there is never a moment in the movie where who he is, as a unique individual with special creative potential, is affirmed by Evelyn. Instead, he continually sacrifices himself in order to change his surface appearance to become acceptable to Evelyn and to receive the rewards of this surface appeal, which include sexual rewards and the ego massaging that comes from having a hot girlfriend and being regarded as cute. His fall involves sacrificing meaningful self-actualization for something shallow.

Presenting the fall in this way, LaBute plays on the old moralist theme that in our relationships with others and even our view of ourselves, we are more dominated by surface appeal than the deeper aspects of personal identity. We care more about the shape of things than the character of people. The universality of the fall is expressed in the fact that Adam will fall into a way of acting and being already firmly entrenched in the culture. Because the culture is dominated by the

surface standards of sex appeal, Adam's fall is, ironically, a rise. Evelyn acknowledges this when she makes her deception public at the end of the movie. Speaking of Adam, she says, "open any fashion magazine, turn on any television program, and the world will tell you he's only gotten more interesting, more desirable, more normal, in a word, better." The double irony is that a rise by cultural standards means to lose one's true self. A cultural rise is in fact a fall into depravity.

LaBute is unrelenting in his social critique on this point. He gives us no sense that a person can appreciate human physical beauty without being dominated by the standards of surface appeal and driven by the desire to receive shallow physical rewards. Similarly, he gives us no sense that there can be a genuine sexual awakening without being dominated by these same standards. Those who stand outside the cultural drivenness by these standards, like Adam at the beginning of the movie, do so not because of some higher realization, but because of their insecurities, and they miss out on life. To participate in culture means to participate in its brokenness, and it is this brokenness that is unrelentingly brought to the fore in the film.

Religiously analyzed, the web of objectification and surface appeal into which Adam falls is a kind of works-righteousness. Failing to experience acceptance of who he is, Adam works desperately to make himself acceptable to

Evelyn. Evelyn is a demonic ultimate concern, but she can only lead Adam to fall because the cultural standards of objectification and surface appeal have universal power. Evelyn is able to be a demonic god of law because of a perverse ultimate concern within the culture that seeks acceptance in the endless quest for physical beauty and the promised reward of physical pleasure.

B. Evelyn's Creation

Adam's fall is simultaneously Evelyn's creation. At the end of the movie, when Evelyn unveils the fact that Adam was her thesis project, she expresses no regret for what she has done. She says, "I have always stood by the simple and single conceit that I am an artist, only that. I follow in the long tradition of artists who believe that there is no such concept as religion, or government, community, or even family. There is only art; art that must be created whatever the cost." Art is the serpent that has beguiled Evelyn, and, like her biblical counterpart, she holds it accountable for her actions. It is her ultimate concern that negates all other concerns and also promises complete fulfillment. It too is demonic, although this demonry moves in a different direction than Adam's.

Evelyn absolutizes art to stand above ethics. If Immanuel Kant is correct that the foundational ethical maxim is always to treat others as ends in themselves and never merely as means, Evelyn's maxim that everything is a potential object of

creation, of aesthetic expression, overrides this. With Evelyn, the individual stands above the universal on aesthetic grounds. As an artist, Evelyn experiences the demand to create, or to bring forth something new. Absolutized, this demand means she is above or beyond any standards that regulate what-is.³

Evelyn's absolutization of art is an example of hubris. It is the counterpart to the story of Adam's fall, which is an example of sloth, defined as the failure to use one's freedom to actualize one's true self. Evelyn refuses to acknowledge genuine human limits. In a twist on the biblical story, she does not want merely to know good and evil, but to enter the realm of the gods where she is beyond the standards of good and evil altogether. Yet another layer of meaning in her spraying a penis on God at the beginning of the movie is that she refuses to be subject to God's moral law, or any laws of finitude, above her. She makes God into another human being in order to take God's place.

There are significant transformations of the biblical story in LaBute's portrayal of Evelyn, even while he maintains the basic idea from Genesis that the female is more active in sinning while the male is more passive. Evelyn's participation in sin is not in gaining the knowledge of good and evil, but in denying that good and evil have any validity. Unlike Adam or her biblical counterpart, she feels no shame for what she does. She is unrepentant to the end. She insists to Adam that they tape their love-making against his objections, and eventually makes the

tapes public as "supporting materials" for her thesis project. Whereas the biblical Eve seeks the covering of her nakedness, Evelyn seeks exposure. All of this is required to make Evelyn, with her sin of hubris, a genuine counterpart to Adam. With her, we have an active, assertive sinfulness, rather than a passive fall.

In her assertiveness, absolutizing art above all else, Evelyn is a demonic creator, destroying what she creates. The movie shows, ironically, that her failure to submit to standards is destructive not only of the potential in relationships, but of art itself.

The Adam that she creates is not someone genuine and unique, someone fully himself, or more himself, the telos of genuine relationships. As her creation, he is either an object of social critique or he is a stereotype. Social critique presumes some standard of good and evil to be valid, and this is the very thing Evelyn has abrogated to create him. At the end of the movie, Adam is nothing other than a cookie cutter co-ed. He is bad art.

Bad art, however, is something Evelyn is unable to acknowledge. Her failure to submit to standards applies even to art. Several times in the movie, Evelyn mentions that art is "subjective." It is clear she means by this that art is nothing other than what the individual who makes it or looks at it takes it to be, and there are radically differing opinions about what that is. In an inconsistency of character,

while Evelyn holds this position in theory, in fact, she gets angry with those who question her interpretations of art. The main point, however, is that if art is subjective, there can be no great art and no bad art because there are no standards to judge it. In fact, there cannot even be a line between what is and is not art. The failure to submit to standards destroys the meaning of art altogether. It is all subjective. Anything can be art, and anything is as good as anything else.

A critique of ethical and aesthetic relativism runs through the movie in the figure of Evelyn. Ethical relativism destroys people. Aesthetic relativism destroys art. The irony is that the relativist, represented by Evelyn, claims to affirm others in affirming that all positions are subjective. Since there are no standards of any kind, anyone can have their own opinion and every opinion is as good as any other. What LaBute exposes, however, is that if there really are no standards, then anything goes. One who manipulates another's freedom has just as much validity as one who respects it, and there cannot be anything like good and bad art. This means that the relativist is not the one who affirms others, but is actually the one who destroys them in a hubris that stands beyond all standards. It is unclear exactly who the object of LaBute's critique is in the figure of Evelyn, because we know nothing about the influences on her. However, she appears to represent a relativistic tendency in culture, a tendency perhaps most prevalent in the academic environment from which she comes.

In a common critique, feminist theologians have pointed out the problematic definition of sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition as most fundamentally pride or hubris. They say hubris is typically a male problem, while females typically struggle with the opposite problem, with easy acquiescence to others and the failure to use their freedom to actualize themselves. With Adam and Evelyn, LaBute has reversed the typical sins of the genders, without suggesting that a problematic part of Evelyn's hubris is her failure to submit to the traditional female role, or of Adam's sloth to realize the traditional male role. Paradoxically, it is perhaps a positive sign that gender roles have become undifferentiated enough that the traditional male and female sins can be reversed in this way. Sin can be understood as a human problem, taking different forms in different individuals. LaBute has, of course, opened himself up to feminist critique in creating a character as revoltingly manipulative and aggressively sinful as Evelyn, but Evelyn is balanced by equally perverse male characters in LaBute's other films.⁴

C. Redemption

In the biblical story, God condemns and covers Adam and Eve, casting them from the garden to a life of harshness for their acts. This sets the context for the biblical drama of redemption, understood variously by biblical writers in this-worldly and other-worldly, present and future, social and individual terms. In any

case, the last word on the world in the biblical view is not the brokenness of the fall, but redemption.

By contrast, the world LaBute shows in his film lacks the healing of redemption, at least explicitly. Adam, who had gone so far as to propose to Evelyn, faces a public exposure of the truth of her manipulations. As the film ends, he is ashamed to show his face in public. Evelyn is unrepentant and unfazed. Presumably, she will approach life and her next art project with an unchanged attitude. Even Phil and Jenny break off their engagement, although given the nature of their relationship this seems to be a good thing. In any case, LaBute's world is a fractured, topsy-turvy world, where nice guys get manipulated and shamed, while those who do unconscionable acts simply move on without their consciences.

Despite this, at least two glimmers of redemption can be drawn from the film. One glimmer comes, paradoxically, in the fact that LaBute's characters are so unreservedly twisted. Evelyn is a manipulator beyond compare, and, viewing the film from a distance, it is actually astonishing that LaBute is able to make her as realistic a character as he does. Adam proves to be a hopeless wimp who cannot stand up for himself.

Both characters, though Evelyn especially, expose a kind of raw perversity, and one cannot watch such perversity without feeling some kind of revulsion. Such revulsion, in turn, involves the awakening of conscience. Whatever her motives, to see someone like Evelyn be uncaring enough to engage in the complete manipulation of another human being, awakens one to disgust at manipulation in relationships, all manipulation. To see Evelyn as unrepentant, seemingly without a conscience, awakens one's conscience in judgment of her. To see someone like Adam fail to be true to himself, to objectify himself and become obsessed with his own surface appeal and that of others, awakens one to disgust at this deeply entrenched cultural game.

While there are no doubt many biblical analogues to this kind of awakening of conscience, a notable one is the prophet Nathan's parable to King David in II Samuel 12:1-9, after David's adultery and murder. By telling the story of a wicked person, Nathan effectively arouses David's conscience and gets him enraged at such an evil act. Nathan is able then to turn David's judgment back onto David himself in such a way that he sees the fullness of what he has done and has no place to escape from his own conscience.

Jenny and Philip express the revulsion and awakening of conscience in the film. Both are seated in the audience (like the movie-goer!) at Evelyn's master's

thesis, where she exposes that Adam was her art project. While they are no paragons of virtue, when they discover what Evelyn has done, they leave in disgust.

It appears that LaBute is too pessimistic to present any substantial conversion in his characters. We see no hope for any substantial social change in the film. Still, at least the possibility of an awakening of conscience, a critical awareness, is present in the perversity of his characters. In both the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions, the first use of the law is said to be to convict one of sin. LaBute turns this upside down, using perversity to bring about such conviction.

The other glimmer of redemption comes through an odd scene in the movie. Adam and Evelyn are alone in Adam's bedroom early in the relationship. They have just made love, and Adam has agreed to allow Evelyn to tape their love-making. The tape is still rolling while they talk. Conscious of the tape, Adam whispers something into Evelyn's ear. Evelyn smiles, responds with a whisper, and they laugh and hug. At the very end of the movie, Adam confronts Evelyn, asking whether anything about their relationship was true. Evelyn can seemingly think of nothing, and goes through a list of lies. Finally, however, she says the one genuine thing she said was in her whisper to him.

The world of LaBute's movie is full of manipulation, lies, and deceit. In fact, LaBute himself manipulates his audience, letting us think Evelyn is genuinely

attracted to Adam until the very end. In the midst of this, we are told that there was one truthful thing said in a whisper, but we are not allowed to hear it. We know it is there. We see the whisper. But we do not know what it is.

The fact that Evelyn and Adam are being taped in the scene represents a reflexivity in the movie. LaBute is acknowledging to the audience that he is making a movie. In that context, he appears to be stressing to the audience that in this movie you will not be allowed to hear anything genuine or real. All you will hear is manipulation, lies, and deceit. But you are to know that there is something real. It appears in a whisper, which seems to be a reference to the whisper of conscience. The whisper is not given content in the movie. It is not something LaBute will say to us. The place it is given content must be outside the movie. It is something we must say to each other.

¹ For a review of LaBute's career see <http://www.ldsfilm.com/directors/LaBute.html>. LaBute attended Brigham Young University and is a convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

² See *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), ch. 1, for Tillich's description of both concepts.

³ Of course, LaBute himself is an artist and one must wonder about self-critique in his presentation of Evelyn. In particular, as a playwright, one wonders about the self-critique involved in turning relationships with others into one's dramas.

⁴ This is not to say that a study of gender differentiation in LaBute's films is not important. An interesting contrast can be drawn, for example, between the way Evelyn manipulates Adam, as a female, and the way Chad manipulates Christine in *In the Company of Men*. In both, physical attractiveness plays a major role, and in both, the manipulative characters show themselves to be

strong and confident people. But Chad masquerades a level of tenderness in order to effect his manipulation that Evelyn lacks, or seems not to need.