having to listen to your verses, your second-rate songs, your mediocre performances. Adhere to your special gifts, Nero – murder and arson, betrayal and terror. Mutilate your subjects if you must, but with my last breath I beg you: do not mutilate the arts. Farewell, but compose no more music. Brutalize the people but do not bore them, as you have bored to death your friend, the late Gaius Petronius.

Though the film collapses the final four years of Nero’s reign into one violent summer, *Quo Vadis* offers an exciting, visually stunning, and historically evocative impression of an especially eventful period in Roman history, as it navigates the critical moment of transition between the first two imperial dynasties, from the end of the Julio-Claudian line to the beginning of the Flavians. This notion that positive change is at hand is embedded in the cinematic narrative and forms the background to the main story of one man’s acceptance of the new religion of Christianity, yet Marcus does not renounce all the elements of his Roman character. On the film’s insightful depiction of a state of historical and cultural flux, one scholar notes: “This theme, besides mirroring the Romans’ very real elation at the possibility of a fresh start to the Imperial concept, also mirrors in Roman terms the Christian hope for a new world” (Elley, 126). The film achieves an unexpected balance between the two concepts, and it never lingers, carrying the audience with its sweeping epic momentum into the shifting destinies of the characters, both real and fictional. LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis* was to set an exceptionally high standard for epic films about ancient Rome, in terms of its multi-million dollar budget, dazzling yet authentic-looking sets and costumes, fine acting performances, and spectacular scenes that would be borrowed, emulated, and even caricatured in later movies.

**Themes and Interpretations**

Soon after its release in February 1951, LeRoy’s splendid production of *Quo Vadis*, with its rousing story and stunning presentation, was a smash hit at the box office, and has earned $25 million worldwide. The film was also a critical success, earning eight Oscar nominations (although no wins), including Supporting Actor nods for Ustinov and Genn, as well as Best Picture, Film Editing, Cinematography, Art Direction/Set Decoration, Costume Design, and Musical Score for Rózsa. The film clearly attracted viewers as an extravagant and entertaining cinematic spectacle, but its
narrative and thematic focus also served as a complex and sometimes ambiguous analogy for American contemporary politics in the early 1950s. Produced just a few years after the end of World War II in 1945, *Quo Vadis* portrays a “good” Roman (and proto-Christian), Marcus Vinicius, his staunch ally, Fabius Nerva, and their loyal armed forces working together to attain a military victory over the corruption and decadence of Nero’s tyrannical rule, especially embodied by Tigellinus and the Praetorian Guard. From the opening voice-over, the film sets up a polarity between totalitarianism and freedom: “The individual is at the mercy of the state. Murder replaces justice. Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage.”

The cinematic plot of *Quo Vadis* suggests America’s latest conflict with European dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini during World War II, and thus celebrates the success of American and Allied opposition to the imperial ambitions and atrocities of those brutal European regimes (Wyke, 139–40). Film historians have noted that post-war Hollywood epics of the 1950s follow a general “linguistic paradigm,” by which British actors are often cast as wicked Roman oppressors, like emperors, generals, or power-mad aristocrats, while American actors take the roles of their righteous adversaries, whether Jewish, Christian, or “good” Romans on the cusp of conversion (Wyke, 23, 133; Fitzgerald, 25). This polarity of accents would remind American filmgoers not only of their country’s virtuous and victorious resistance to British oppression during the Revolutionary War of 1776, but also the more recent American military successes against the European autocracies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Thus Marcus, the film’s hero, speaks in the broad, sturdy, Midwestern cadences of Nebraska-born Taylor, while the fiendish Nero intones his crazed utterances with the languidly foreign-sounding inflection of Ustinov’s English accent.

One scholar sees clear parallels between the fascist totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and the depiction of Nero’s despotic regime in *Quo Vadis*, where echoes of Hitler’s extreme ideology can be detected in the viciousness of Nero (Winkler, 2001c, 55–62). An example is Nero’s promise to “exterminate” the Christians after the fire, a chilling phrase that would have struck post-war viewers “as an unambiguous reference to Nazi atrocities,” most heinously the murder of thousands of Jews in Nazi concentration camps (Winkler, 2001c, 62). Another scholar locates the analogy closer to Rome itself, in Fascist Italy (Wyke, 140–1). When Nero divulges his outrageous plan to burn down the city of Rome and build it anew, in a rambling and demented speech about being a “supreme artist,” he pulls
back the curtain and shows his astonished courtiers a scale model of Rome (note the Pantheon in the center, built about fifty years after Nero’s death). The *Forma Urbis*, a plaster scale model of imperial Rome, was originally made for Mussolini, known as *Il Duce* or “the Leader” in Italy, for a Fascist exhibition in 1937. Scholars describe how Mussolini wished to exploit certain images from antiquity in order to associate his regime with the colossal magnificence of imperial Rome, a connection expressed in his government symbols (especially the Roman *fasces*), public ceremonies and parades, and architectural projects (Bondanella, 172–206). The film *Quo Vadis* gives the imperial city back to Nero, but the link between the earlier and later Italian tyrants is brought vividly to mind for the movie’s viewers. As Petronius wryly comments: “Now indeed Nero has his place in history.”

In the film’s spectacular burning of Rome sequence, post-war audiences would also be struck by the visual parallels from World War II in the utter devastation of a city by fire.

But in the early 1950s, America was girding itself for another conflict, this time against what was perceived to be the mounting threat of “godless” Communism in the post-war world, epitomized by the enhanced and growing military and technological power of the Soviet Union. By the time *Quo Vadis* was released in 1951, the anti-Communist crusade in the United States was in full swing, and the film also conveys some of the social and political concerns arising from this new struggle: “The voiceover that opens *Quo Vadis* and the subsequent narrative drive of the film resonate with both the rhetoric of America’s wartime combat against European tyrannies and the strident terms of the more immediate and pressing conflicts of the Cold War era” (Wyke, 142–3). As Communism began to be associated with atheism, and “godless” became the fixed epithet of that sinister political system, the practice of religion started to assume a patriotic urgency, and more Americans became active members of organized religious groups. So the film’s depiction of a Christian victory within the totalitarian Roman context corroborates the increased religiosity of Americans in the 1950s, as part of a collective national effort to battle the godless Communist enemy.

Yet even if Marcus accepts Christianity at the end of the film, he responds to Nero’s atrocities more like the soldier he was trained to be, with political plans to trigger a military coup to replace Nero with another general. Marcus retains his soldier’s attitude throughout the film, rather than accept the purely pacifist teachings of Christianity. This characterization of the film’s hero as a “Christian soldier” suggests an endorsement of the “peaceful militarism” of the Eisenhower years of the 1950s, which in
Later decades evolved into the American military-political doctrine of “peace through strength.” The final exchange between Marcus and his tribune Nerva as they watch the approach of Galba and his legions into the city suggests that Rome – and by extension, America – must remain vigilant in the face of charismatic leaders. Their conversation exhibits “a very early fifties Red-alert toughness” (Elley, 126). “Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome . . . what follows?” asks Marcus. “A more permanent world, I hope. Or a more permanent faith,” answers Nerva. “One is not possible without the other,” says Marcus, with the voice of experience.

Just as Marcus evinces contradictions between the Roman and nascent Christian sides of his character, critics note that there is a provocative ambiguity in the film’s representation of Rome itself: “Rome is not only the decadent Old World about to be superseded, but also an aspect of the American self” (Fitzgerald, 27). While Quo Vadis constructs an explicit interpretation of historical analogies in which American military power is associated with the triumph of Christianity over its Roman autocratic enemies, at the same time American audiences are invited to enjoy and identify with the spectacle and luxury of Nero’s imperial Rome, and encouraged to link their viewing pleasure with the satisfactions of the rising consumerism of boom-time 1950s America. The studio, MGM, actively engaged in this “commodification of Rome,” by offering American consumers countless product tie-ins to exploit the marketing of this expensive and lavish cinematic production as a symbol of the prosperity of capitalist America, and in particular, the success of the Hollywood film industry (Wyke, 145–6). Even the scene where Nero unveils the Forma Urbis model and outlines his plan for rebuilding Rome suggests a multivalent reading, in that a contemporary American audience might see parallels to recent national strategies for “urban renewal” in the early 1950s, when a well-intentioned American government sought to raze existing communities and build new, improved ones.

Yet the film also suggests a more problematic aspect in the “America as Rome” formula. When the evil Nero turns the guilt for the great fire on the innocent Christians, a cautionary analogy is evoked to contemporary McCarthyism and the persecution of artists as scapegoats. In 1947, and again in 1951, the same year Quo Vadis was released, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) led by Senator Joe McCarthy held a series of hearings targeting what they alleged were the politically subversive elements embedded in the Hollywood movie industry. In the post-war climate of America’s “Red Scare” and strident anti-Communism, it was clear what the investigations were after. Anyone, including writers,
directors, and actors, who invoked their right against self-incrimination by declining to discuss their political affiliations, or refused to disclose the names of colleagues suspected of being Communists, was sent to jail for a year and “blacklisted,” that is, prevented from doing any more work in the film business.

The film’s moving portrayal of the suicide of the writer Petronius sharpens this correlation between an oppressive Roman regime, controlled by the false performer Nero, and an American government engaged in the harassment of Hollywood artists. Petronius summarizes the intellectual’s questioning of the credibility of political leaders: “People will believe any lie if it is fantastic enough.” The fact that Petronius is depicted as troubled and ultimately overcome by his own cynicism in the face of Nero’s brutal authority may suggest the movie industry’s discomfort at its own complicity in perpetuating the cinematic image of America as a heroic superpower. “The film replays and reinforces the rhetoric of the Cold War . . . but it also, through the death of the true artist Petronius, appears in passing to mourn the repression of the film industry’s creativity which constant vigilance against Communism has required” (Wyke, 144). Thus the narrative of Quo Vadis simultaneously highlights the patriotism of a studio eager to avoid political controversy, yet proposes a subtle political critique of the restraints on artistic freedom.

While the post-war political environment profoundly affected epic films of the 1950s, the films also provided a stage on which gender roles in American society, both static and changing, are acted out for a receptive audience of men and women. Movies about imperial Rome, in particular, cast sexual imagery in terms of conquest and surrender, with films of a religious nature adding a dose of morality and redemption to the cinematic equation. One film historian describes the way the Christian-themed epics assign masculine and feminine identities: “Here the yin/yang conflict takes on a moral aspect: power, domination, cruelty and lack of understanding vs. contentment, equality, tenderness and compassion” (Elley, 88). Quo Vadis follows the course of three male/female relationships, where the erotic plotlines suggest a narrative taste for tragic, star-crossed pairings as well as some old-fashioned ideas about fateful romance. In each case, the love of the female redeems the male just before the moment of real or expected death, which irrevocably changes the relationship and emphasizes a strong element of destiny in each pair.

Marcus is drawn to Christianity through his love for Lygia, and only accepts the new religion when faced with her death. Just before Lygia enters the arena, they are joined as husband and wife by the words of
Peter. Eunice is the slave of Petronius, who has her whipped for her dedication to him, but she reveals her love of the noble Roman part of him, the man of art and letters, by kissing his statue in the courtyard. Her prophecy that she is destined to suffer in love comes true, yet just before they die, Petronius frees Eunice from slavery, thereby dissolving the bonds of Roman dominance and liberating them both. Acte is also subjugated to Nero by her status as a servant in the imperial house of women. While the film never explains why Acte loves Nero with such “bovine solicitude,” like Eunice, she knows her fate is to be with her beloved at the end. The film delineates Acte’s compassionate character when she helps Lygia, and reveals that she wants to be a Christian by drawing the sign of the fish in a pile of spilled face powder. Like an “Angel of Death” (Elley, 125), Acte appears to Nero and lovingly gives him the death he is too cowardly to achieve himself: as she cradles him in her arms with maternal devotion, she reverses the hierarchy of power between them. Death, or the thought of dying, frees the man from his privileged Roman authority, and unites him to the feminine forces of love and peace.

The theme of sexuality is more straightforward and overt in *Quo Vadis* than in later epics of the 1950s, and is thus somewhat at odds with the film’s virtuous articulation of Christian spirituality and asceticism. Perhaps the film is closer in spirit to movies of the previous decade, the 1940s, where onscreen erotic relationships between strong, sexy women and lusty, vigorous men were more freely explored. At the beginning of the film, Marcus openly expresses his hunger for the sexual companionship of refined females after three years on the front with only raggedy camp followers and captives to entertain him. He grumbles his frustration when Plautius says they live a “quiet life” at his country estate, and tries to lure Lygia into town where they can enjoy some adult diversions. The film depicts Marcus’ sexual appetite as an extension of his Roman military power, his red-meat heroism, and his desire for conquest, and it is contrasted with the more passive concerns of family man Nerva, who turns the conversation to his children when Marcus talks about his interest in erotic gratification. His initial approach to Lygia is candidly aggressive and unapologetically sensual, quoting a verse about Mars, god of war, who desires Venus, goddess of beauty. Even when he is upset about losing Lygia, he doesn’t hesitate to join Poppaea on her luscious couch, as he informs Petronius: “I leave you to your fascination – I have been summoned to mine.”

As noted above, the portrayal of the empress Poppaea is an essay in pure animal sexuality. While later epic films such as *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*...
(1960) tend to celebrate and focus more screen time on the display of the naked male body (Fitzgerald, 36–7), in Quo Vadis it is the female body that is the object of the erotic gaze. There is frank talk about feminine physical assets, as the men measure and evaluate the charms of women. Marcus drinks in Lygia’s golden beauty and strokes her hair, just as Petronius fixes his eyes on Eunice, commanding her to turn and expose her beauty in the round. The female is also the subject of the sexual gaze, through the desirous, jealous eyes of Poppaea as she spies on Marcus and her rival, Lygia. From the glamorous denizens of “Nero’s House of Women” to the soprano voices of the Christian assembly, Quo Vadis exhibits a very feminine world, one that is not presented in such luscious and appealing detail again until Joseph Mankiewicz’s Cleopatra in the early 1960s.

CORE ISSUES

1. How does the film represent the struggle between personal freedom and traditional order?
2. How does the film portray Roman morality in the character of Marcus Vinicius? Does his outlook change during the film?
3. How is Rome displayed through the use of spectacle? How is Christianity portrayed in this Roman context?
4. How does the film present the theme of male/female relationships? Consider the three pairs: Marcus/Lygia, Petronius/Eunice, and Nero/Acte.
5. How do the themes of the film relate to contemporary American politics of the early 1950s? Are these themes still relevant to us today?