The Characterization of Phantom in
Gaston Leroux’s
The Phantom of the Opera

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Abstract

Based on the dark side of his personality, most critics assume that Phantom is a frenzied and violent person (JOYCE Y CHIOU, 2006; Pei Zhong Yang, 2006). This study aims at exploring the reason why he gives the reader such an impression and why we find that he is not so inhuman. We will put our emphasis on the weak side of his personality, on which he is full of sense of inferiority and hatred. Our conclusion is that Phantom is characterized as a human instead of a demon.
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Introduction

The Phantom of the Opera is a French novel written by Gaston Leroux (1910). The novel was sold very poorly. It was translated into English in 1911 and has since then been adapted many times into films and stage musicals. The musical created by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1986) has been successful and has become one of the most popular musicals in history.

The last time the musical was presented to the audience in Taiwan was the summer of 2009. My fellow Phantom fans’ enthusiasm for the show urged me to explore into Phantom's personality. In the beginning, I used the musical for our research but part of the story about early years of Phantom’s life was omitted. It was hard for me to make a full research on his personality, so I decided to use the novel.

Summary

Christine’s father died when she was a child. Her father told her that the Angel of Music would look after her, teach her to sing and talk with her. When Phantom appears in her life, she believes that he is the Angel. But Phantom is not an angel at all; he has done many terrible things to people working in the theater because they took the threat made by him for jokes. At a retirement party held for two managers of the opera house, Christine’s performance is successful. Raoul sees her performance and recognizes her as his childhood sweetheart. He follows her to her dressing room and hears outside the room a man who is talking with her wants her to love him. The man is Phantom who has fallen in love with Christine while she is fascinated by his guidance and his talent in music. She falls in love with Raoul soon after they meet again after the retirement party. Phantom gets madly jealous; he kidnaps Christine and threatens to kill Raoul. Finally, a kiss on the cheek by Christine makes Phantom realize that he should respect her free will and let her leave with Raoul.

Review of Literature

Kuper & Kuper points out, “Psychology provides another route to interpretations of acts of the violence. Low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy, and depression are found among the explanations given for those who commit violence” (1996). Phantom’s low self-esteem is derived from his lacking parental love. He tells Christine about his mother. He says, “...my poor, unhappy mother would never...let me kiss her...she used to run away...and throw my mask!” (245).* He had to leave
his home when he was still a child because his parents were frightened by his ugliness.

Lacking parental love and his ugliness make Phantom unable to accept himself. According to Li-Yi You, “when one is different in physique, feature and ability, he might underrate himself (my translation)” (1978). Since he is ugly, people can’t accept him either. His low self-esteem makes him tend to do bad things. For instance, he moved around with a circus. He was shown as a “living corpse”. This kind of experience might give him wrong ideas that he can treat people in whatever ways he likes. He seems to be unable to differentiate good from evil.

He learned particular art and magic when he was traveling through Europe. During an indistinct period of his life he had developed a great voice in some way before he was found again. He became well known for his performance. Then he was taken to Persia. No one knew how to play the Punjab lasso better than he did. When the little sultan asked him what magic was the most thrilling, he introduced the sport of the Punjab lasso to her. He had stayed in India for a long time and gained unbelievable skill. He killed enemies with the lasso, and then dragged the bodies to the palace and showed them to the little sultana and that made her laugh. Killing had become an interesting hobby for him. He had also taken part in a few political assassinations when he was in Persia. This can explain why he could kill Joseph Buquet immediately after Buquet found his secret.

After he built the edifice-labyrinth for Shah of Samarkand, the king ordered to have him killed. The unfair treatment might have made him more cynical and hateful to the society. He fled to Paris to live a common life as an ordinary people. He resumed his artistic and fantastic skills of building houses and became an engineer assistant. When he undertook a project of the opera house he found a room underground. His ugliness has always made him dream of creating a secret abode of his own. “Thinking himself without the pale of humanity, he was restrained by no scruples and he employed his extraordinary gifts of dexterity and imagination, which he had received by way of compensation for his extraordinary ugliness, to prey upon his fellow-men” (253). So, he decided to use this space as residence. He set up mechanical devices to block people out. But he could not avoid meeting people while he was roaming around in the opera house. That is the reason why he had to kill Joseph Buquet—only to keep his hideout unknown to the outside world.

For Phantom, another way to “prey on his fellow-men” was to make rules with
theater managers in order to prove his authority. He intimidated them and extorted money from them to see whether they would follow his instructions or not. Out of love for Christine, he wanted the managers to make her the leading soprano. Since they didn’t listen to him, bad things happened, though those bad things, such as the fall of the chandelier on the audience causing one death and the leading soprano’s loss of voice couldn’t be attributed to him.

Bad experiences make Phantom’s mind unhealthy. He doesn’t trust anyone, but he still desires romantic love like any normal man does. He falls in love with young Christine and deliberately makes his beautiful voice heard by Christine through her dressing room walls. As Nelson points out in *Andrew Lloyd Webber*, Phantom “has three names: “the Phantom of the Opera” to those who see the supernatural and diabolic in him, “Opera Ghost” to those to whom he represents a meddlesome and dangerous blackmailer, and “Angel of Music” to Christine” (2004). Christine’s father told her before he died that the Angel of Music would come to her. Christine has been missing her father so much that the mysterious beautiful voice makes her believe that the Angel has finally come to her. She accepts him as her mentor.

Christine follows the voice underground. She hears him talking to a white horse that was stolen by Opera Ghost. Christine never believes the rumor about him, but she is sure that the Ghost exists. In the underground vault, Christine passes out and is awakened by Phantom’s composition. Christine tells Raoul later, “His *Don Juan Triumphant* (for I has not a doubt but that he had rushed to his masterpiece to forget the horror of the moment) seemed to me at first one long, awful, magnificent sob. But, little by little, it expressed every emotion, every suffering of which mankind is capable” (124). The music revealed his secret. Being eager to see Phantom’s face under the mask, she tears it off and that irritates Phantom. He tells her,” Look, I am not laughing now, I am crying, crying for, Christine, who has torn off my mask and who therefore can never leave me again! . . . As long as you thought me handsome, you could have come back, but, now that you know my hideousness, you would run away for good. . . . So I shall keep you here! Why did you want to see me? . . . When my own father never saw me and when my mother, so as not to see me, made me a present of my first mask!” (123-24). Whenever he is facing the world, he wears the mask, a symbol of the duality of humanity, which only covers the distorted part of his face. We see under the half-mask, his frailty and helplessness; he braces himself up by the mask and all those evil-doings.
Christine told Raoul what has happened underground. Phantom has found out about Raoul and her. Out of jealousy, he threatens to kill them if she doesn’t return to him. Raoul asks her to run away with him immediately, but Christine insists on leaving after the performance. She promises him she will cooperate with him and the police to arrest Phantom. For Christine, Snelson asserts that by “choosing to help trap the Phantom she also rejects the unique creativity as a singer which the Phantom facilitates in favor of domesticity with Raoul; she rejects the struggle and ultimate spiritual freedom that the Phantom can give through music for a life of wifely dependence and comfort. Ultimately, she knows her place and so rejects the overturning of society’s rules that the Phantom personifies, turning instead to the societal conventions offered through romance and Raoul. It’s the old dilemma of having your man or your career; . . .” (2004). This can be true only when Phantom plays the sublime Angel of Music. His ugliness and feelings toward Christine change the whole situation. After all, sometimes people value appearance more than talent, especially when the appearance is not acceptable.

At the same time, being afraid that Christine might run away with Raoul after the performance, Phantom decides to kidnap Christine when she is performing on the stage. Finding that Christine has been kidnapped, Raoul and the Persian rush to her rescue. They are trapped in the torture-chamber designed by Phantom. To save them, Christine let Phantom kisses her. He describes his love for Christine to the Persian after he sets her and Raoul free, he says, ”Of love . . . daroga . . . I am dying . . . of love . . . That is how it is . . . I loved her so! . . .If you knew how beautiful she was . . . when she let me kiss her . . . alive. . . . It was the first . . . time, daroga, the first . . . time I ever kissed a woman. . . . Yes, alive. . . . I kissed her alive . . . and she looked as beautiful as if she had been dead! . . .” (243). This kiss makes Phantom realize that Christine is subdued to his evil power and that she will never really belong to him even if she stays. At this critical moment, Phantom is sane and sober enough to set his prisoners free. The reader might expect him to be wild and frantic while the woman he loves rejects him. However, he acts like a decent man who knows what true love is and who really loves the woman—he let her do what she wants. In this case, no one can deny that he is human.
**Conclusion**

Three people die in the novel: only one is deliberately killed by Phantom in order to protect himself. It is only human for him to be affected by his miserable past and hideous look. Falling in love with Christine further proves that he is nothing more than a man who needs a woman’s love. Thanks to the background of the story, Paris in the end of the nineteenth century, which is suitable for creating the “all-too-human Phantom” (Snelson, 2004).

*Quotations from Leroux’s novel are hereafter given page numbers only.*

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