

Nicole Benjamin

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THE INDIVIDUAL AS A WHOLE: LEROUX'S USE OF OPPOSITE AND THE UNCANNY
IN *THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA*

Four years before Gaston Leroux published his sixth novel, Ernst Jentsch released his essay, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, in a German medical journal (Jentsch 1). Although unlikely that Leroux ever read Jentsch’s theory, he nonetheless produces the same sense of uneasiness the psychiatrist was aiming to explain. By creating a world of opposites through his depiction of the opera house, the Phantom, and Christine’s simultaneous attraction and repulsion of him, Gaston Leroux’s *Phantom of the Opera* instills a sense of discomfort that leaves readers unable to put down the story, yet relieved when it’s over. With the uncanny as my backdrop, I will show how Leroux masters this play on opposites to highlight the often-paradoxical nature of the human spirit itself.

Starting with the opera house, Leroux details an intricate structure consisting of layers upon layers of floors that exist both above and below the ground level of the stage. Indeed the stage itself almost takes a backdrop to the real drama that is occurring either above or below it at any given time, and Leroux clearly defines who is the leader of each of these realms. Above the opera house belongs to Christine: “She took him to the wardrobe and property-rooms, took him all over her empire, which was artificial, but immense, covering seventeen stories from the ground-floor to the roof and inhabited by an army of subjects. She moved among them like a popular queen” (123). Below the opera house is the Phantom’s: “I forbid you to ever go down there! Besides, none of this is mine. *Everything below belongs to him!*” (125). Separating the opera house into two distinct realms, much like heaven and hell, Leroux further polarizes its

leaders by making Christine the good queen to rule above and Erik the evil phantom lurking below. The sense of discomfort occurs when these two figures pass into each other's realms. If Christine and Erik stayed in their designated spheres, Leroux wouldn't have had much of a story; however, the tension arises when these two characters and their worlds clash by either Christine venturing below or Erik creating chaos above. In his 1919 essay titled "The Uncanny", Freud looks to elaborate on Jentsch's earlier theory by stating "everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light" (4). This play on light and dark further illustrates the opera house's two extremes: from the hunch-backed trap door workers and the fiery-headed rat catcher below, to the hustle and bustle of the scenery hoisters and sound producer above, all comes together to present a unified front to the audience. Leroux is drawing a connection between the opera house to the human spirit itself, a spirit that is often divided and struggles with the tempestuous urgings of the subconscious while also reconciling with the lofty ideals of our projected self.

Leroux also manages to create tension through his use of mirrors. Christine first gains access to below the opera house through the mirror in her dressing room and "in the center of Erik's subterranean dwelling lies another architectural fantasy in which the structural meets the optical, a hexagonal torture room composed of mirrors in which illusions are conjured and multiplied to infinity and in which Erik's victims are driven mad by a succession of illusory scenes combined with oppressive heat and thirst" (Gunning 114). Mirrors typically reflect our own familiar images and surroundings, yet Erik – who undoubtedly has a natural distaste for an object that reflects his own ugliness – uses mirrors to instill fear or death. In this sense, he manipulates the purpose of the mirror to reflect his own evil intentions. Leroux seems to be warning us to not take appearances for granted, yet also of our own power to manipulate our

surroundings until they're what we want to see. This falsity wreaks real terror and destruction for *Phantom's* characters, and yet it can also wreak havoc within us. Freud notes the connection the "double" has with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian spirits, and with the belief in the soul and fear of death". Initially created as a preservation of the ego and assurance of immortality, with self-awareness the "double takes on a different aspect. From having been the assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death" (Freud 9).

In creating Erik, Leroux has pulled out the dark side of human nature and housed him entirely within Erik's rotting frame. The effect is quite unsettling, as those who come into contact with the Phantom attribute it to meeting Death itself. Joseph Buquet, who later meets his untimely demise in the mirrored torture chamber, describes the Phantom:

He is extraordinarily thin and his black coat hangs loose off his skeletal frame. His eyes are so deep-set that you cannot make out his pupils: all you can see are two big black holes, as in a skull. His skin is stretched over his bone structure like a drumhead, and is not white but an ugly yellow. His nose is almost non-existent when seen sideways; and this *absence* is a horrible thing to *behold*. As for his hair, it consists of no more than three or four long dark strands on his forehead and behind his ears (13).

By making the Phantom look like a living corpse, a sense of the uncanny is produced. Freud notes, "many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (13). Leroux creates abjection by making his antagonist corpse-like, a form that we can both relate to and also want to shun or turn away from. In her essay on abjection titled "The Power of Horror", Julia Kristeva says the following on the power of the corpse:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (13).

Neither completely dead nor alive, Erik defies categorization and therefore exists outside of our comfort zone.

In her article “The Monster Never Dies”, Heidi Strengell refers to the term *Gothic double*, which signifies the duality within a “single character on the further presumption that the duality centers on the polarity of good and evil” (Americana 2). Leroux taps into this Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde concept yet splits the single character into two: Erik is the exact opposite of the story’s protagonist, Christine. Like the contrary above-and-below of the opera house, Erik is ugly, whereas Christine is beautiful; sinister and malignant, while Christine is innocent and pure; male versus female; rotting and decaying as opposed to alive and vibrant; and Erik remains hidden in the shadows of the opera house, while Christine shines in the spotlight of the stage. By taking the polarities of traits that often exist in a single character and splitting them, Leroux draws more attention to the extremes. Strengell continues, “flawed humanity moves between the two poles of good and evil, causing contradiction and anguish to the subject” (Americana 11). The “subject” in this case is the reader, as Leroux bounces us back and forth between the evil of Erik and good of Christine like a maniacal game of pinball. As so often happens in real life, we are torn between trying to reconcile the good with the bad to come up with a happy medium, and the characters of Erik and Christine are no exception. Until the drama peaks in the scene where Christine is willing to give her life so that the Persian and Raoul may live and Erik is willing to put aside his rage to not destroy all, the reader feels as though they too may also go up in flames.

Christine and Erik show us that opposites not only attract, but they're also often tied together at their core. Fueled by his passion to be loved, Erik initially deceives Christine into thinking he's the "Angel of Music", which her dead father promised to send from heaven. Not yet aware of the deception, Christine becomes enraptured through the music she makes with the Angel, therefore evoking "potent escapist fantasies" (Cohen 17). As her teacher, Erik is placed in a reverent role and the subject is Christine's favorite and only one she knows: music. It is this fantasy to escape to that higher world of music and devotion, one she only briefly experienced as a child with her father, which keeps her searching for her Angel again and again.

Even after she is kidnapped, terrified, and now knows what the "Angel" really is, "Oh! Horror! Horror! Horror!" (145), Christine is still compelled to visit Erik several more times in his lair. Jeffrey Cohen describes "this simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition" and "accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity" (Monster Culture 17). Christine is unsettled by Erik's home below the opera house, a home that almost mocks the world above with its contradictions. Secret and surrounded by a deadly lake, which Erik himself mans as the evil creature lurking within its depths, Erik's home couples normal furnishings with coffins; carpet with torture chambers; and it is both a sanctuary for the Phantom and a prison for Christine. Christine knows that something is terribly wrong, is aware that she is being held against her will and yet she continues to return after Erik finally releases her. She is horrified at the creature Erik is, yet does not hate him. This simultaneous push and pull of Christine and Erik is reminiscent of love that is based on pity, not true devotion. Christine doesn't love Erik in the same sense that she loves Raoul, yet she does feel an immense amount of sympathy for the crazed creature. Christine's feelings toward the Phantom ask us to look within our own hearts and question the depth of our compassion and even that of our depravity.

When Erik approaches the Persian for the last time explaining all that occurred in his lair under the opera house, we see a monster who has finally embraced his humanity: “Of love...Daroga...I am dying...of love...That’s the truth of it...Listen...I loved her so...I love her still...and that love is killing me...She was so beautiful...so *alive*...when she let me kiss her...It was the first time, Daroga...the first time I ever kissed a woman...and she was so alive...so beautiful...as if she were dead!” (270). This play on opposites was no accident as Leroux finally bridges the gap between the bad and good, from Erik to Christine. Strengell takes a more pessimistic view, “Good and evil can and do exist within a single person and, concomitantly, we are ultimately unable to evolve, to purge our baser selves from psyche” (Americana 11). However, by embracing the bad in Erik and taking pity on him, Christine has in effect taken away his power, and she does manage to purge and evolve. Without his tormenting rage to drive him on, the Phantom has nothing to do but die, which allows Christine to live a life in the light with Raoul. Just like Leroux warns us of too hastily exposing the evil parts within us, he seems to also be saying that the bad parts within us will die when forgiven.

In closing, Leroux’s *Phantom of the Opera* takes readers on a roller coaster of emotions. It grabs us by the hand and pulls us down one winding corridor to the next. Yet this pulling also often occurs in opposite directions. We are split from the dark bowels of the opera house, to its moon-bathed roof, or from the evil within Erik’s demonic red eyes to the purity in Christine’s blue. I’d argue that this is no accident on Leroux’s part; by fragmenting the human spirit in such a manner, he gives us a broader picture of the whole. Humanity isn’t purely good or purely evil, it’s both and Leroux examines it all within the setting and characters of *The Phantom*.

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