

Title:

Erik: The Man Behind The Phantom

Word Count:

938

Summary:

Like most horror novel figures of his time, the Phantom of the Opera was a monster that bore a human face beneath the mask. Underneath the creature that haunted the novel was a complex man who, in his own way, merely sought acceptance and recognition of his talents.

Keywords:

fear and anxiety, status anxiety, emotional healing

Article Body:

In the literary world, there are few villains and monsters as sympathetic and as "human" as Erik, the Phantom of the Opera. The man behind the monster has been labeled as the villain of Gaston Leroux's novel just as often as he has been named a misunderstood protagonist. He was the ghost that haunted the halls of the Opera Populaire, terrorizing the diva Carlotta and several other performers who were housed there, as they clashed with his artistic sensibilities. In almost all incarnations of the character outside of the novel, there is almost always only a small measure of sympathy accorded to the deformed and persecuted Erik. The focus had always been on the horrifying visage he presents before the public, and less on "Angel of Music" persona he bore when he trained the young ingénue, Christine Daae.

However, behind the mask was, ultimately, a man. Erik was not the overwhelming force of evil that people had portrayed him to be. Indeed, along with many of his contemporaries, Erik shared traits and attributes that were all too human. He needed to feel loved by the ones he believed he loved... he craved for recognition for his achievements... and desperately needed to interact with the world without having to strike terror in the hearts of those who see him. In this way, he echoes earlier figures of horror, such as Quasimodo of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and the Frankenstein's Monster from "Frankenstein." His quest to love and to be loved, as well as his aristocratic demeanor, also mirror the nobler qualities of an earlier literary figure, Bram Stoker's Dracula. In the end, like all of the above literary icons, Erik was more than the "Phantom of the Opera." Erik was, underneath the mask, a human being, albeit one with a number of issues, including social anxiety and paranoia. Andrew Lloyd Weber's

musical, despite having taken a number of liberties with the story, has lyrics that echo the various complex emotions that Erik had to endure in his lifetime.

This face that earned  
A mother's fear and loathing  
A mask my first  
Unfeeling scrap of clothing

From an early age, Erik instilled fear and anxiety in the people around him because of his deformed face. The interpretations and versions of the story vary in the details, but in the original novel, he was described to have looked like a living corpse. From Leroux's description, one could deduce that his face was deformed such that it appeared more like a skull than a normal face. His mother, feeling overwhelming fear and anxiety over her son's monstrous appearance, eventually abandoned him. He managed to make an early living in a carnival, where he inspired mockery rather than fear and anxiety. That mockery would eventually evolve into a total dislike of society and people in general, morphing into a twisted form of social anxiety.

Masquerade!  
Paper faces on parade...  
Masquerade  
Hide your face,  
So the world  
Will never find you!

His social anxiety forced him into seclusion, though he was not completely without contact with the outside world. He gained a good handle on architecture and engineering, building palaces for two prominent rulers, while also serving as an assassin for one of them. His fear of society led him to go to great lengths to remain unseen and hidden in the shadows. With his mask, he was able to conceal his disfigured features to those whom he chose to reveal his presence. He also attained a high sense of appreciation for music, which turned out to be a natural talent for him. Indeed, it was this natural aptitude for performing and composing music that would eventually lead him to seek out Christine, which he probably saw as an outlet for his status anxiety.

Those who have seen your face  
Draw back in fear  
I am the mask you wear...  
It's me they hear.

It is easy to speculate that Erik's initial reasons for training Christine

stemmed from his desire to overcome his status anxiety. As he discovered his talent for music, it is possible that he developed the idea to showcase his talent to the world at large, and let them see how much musical brilliance can be produced by someone who was scorned by society. He wanted to use her as his mouthpiece, his "avatar" to the world and society above his shadowy lair. However, even a man that has lived a life alien to concepts such as love and devotion can be made to feel them, in much the same way as Frankenstein's Monster and Quasimodo did in their respective stories. In a way, his pursuit and desire for the love of Christine was his own twisted way of achieving a sense of emotional healing.

Pitiful creature of darkness  
What kind of life have you known?  
God give me courage to show you  
You are not alone

There is little argument on whether or not Erik loved Christine, albeit he expressed that love in a rather twisted manner. Despite the emotional healing that came with training Christine in music, he still behaved very much like the figure of darkness that everyone perceived him to be. This is likely because, despite having felt more human emotions, emotional healing cannot instantly undo a lifetime of psychological damage. His mind was, unfortunately, still damaged and incapable of seeing his actions as anything more than things done out of necessity, unaware of how monstrous his tactics would seem to others. In the end, his music was not able to remove the terror that came with his persona as the Phantom of the Opera.