

# **PHANTOM OF THE OPERA CONCEPT/VOCABULARY ANALYSIS**

Literary Text: The Phantom of the Opera by Gaston Leroux

## **ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS**

The Phantom of the Opera is a fictional work crafted by author Gaston Leroux to be read as a non-fictional novel. Leroux presents the events, characters, and plot as if the proceedings actually took place. He supports each claim with “evidence” and historical documentation which is orchestrated in such a way as to continually leave the inexperienced reader guessing. The work begins with a Prologue which introduces the foundational “evidence” with supports for the claims to the reality of the existence of the Opera Ghost, and the veracity of the claims made within the work written by the author. The following three chapters give a narration of the events that occur in the Opera Popular preceding the climax of the Opera Ghost, given in the perspective of the characters. Chapters 5 – 20 are written in the third-person point of view of the author who recounts the dialogue and retells the events of the characters. Scattered throughout these chapters are evidential documents in the form of segments of Memoirs from the managers of the Opera House, letters written in the curious red ink of the Opera Ghost himself, official police reports surrounding the events, as well as correspondence between the two lovers which supports the reality of the events described within the plot. The third segment of the novel comprising chapters 21-25 are the personal narrative written by the Persian who gives the history behind the life and magic of the Opera Ghost, as well as a first person account of the last events of this saga. These previous chapters are obtained through a personal interview from the author Leroux to the Persian himself, in which chapter 26 recounts the “actual” interview and direct quotations. This work concludes with the Epilogue in which the author again assumes the voice and speaks from his own “experience” as he explores the old Opera House and gives an eye-witness account of the events recorded within this novel. This is followed by a Publisher’s note which was published in the original American edition of this work produced in 1911 which affirms, “Mr. Leroux has used, for the scene of his story, the Paris Opera House as it really is and has not created a building out of his imagination,” and concludes by giving facts which affirms not only the setting but the “truth” of this novel (Leroux 265).

## **ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE**

*Themes:* The central theme relating to the plot exposes the true nature of love and the essential desire for every human and creature to be loved. This novel also addresses the issues of class or social differences in society, physical appearance, and the influence that these factors have within relationships. By the nature and composition of the work it also allows the reader to discover and identify truth for themselves. Is this work true?

The readers have to discern for themselves the facts surrounding this record. Much like the mask of the Opera Ghost each reader must choose to accept the mask or uncover the truth lurking behind and see the truth as it is.

*Setting:* This work revolves primarily around the Paris Opera House in an age where the Paris elite still attended the Opera as a social duty and sign of social status. This work was published in 1911 and told as if these events occurred just previous to the author's lifetime.

*Point of View:* As discussed before in the organizational patterns of this work, the point of view and voice of the author is central to the organization and understanding of the reader in this novel. The work begins and ends with the Leroux writing in first person affirming the truth of the events which occurred within this novel. The first twenty chapters are a third person narration of the events which occurred surrounding the plot, but includes "documentation" by the characters involved in the form of letters, memoirs, and other "factual" reports. These are followed by five chapters written in first person narration which records the events through the Persian's person narrative, but written by the author.

## **LITERARY TERMS**

Before reading the novel take time to explain the Setting and Scenes of this novel. Tell students about the time period in which it was written. Give a brief overview about the history and culture of France. Some of the vocabulary used within the novel are French and deal with social class issues which would be difficult for student without a basic understanding of French culture to understand. What was the Opera House's role within French Society? Etc.

Have students diagram the following plot sequences: Complication, Conflict, Rising Action, Climax, and Falling Action (denouement), Resolution. To ensure that students understand the basic plot, it is important to engage the students by having them outline these basic elements. If taught in Middle School I would include an art project and have student diagram these elements using cartoon style expressions. If taught in High School I would simply have a reading quiz to ensure they understand the basic plot and allow you to focus more on the literary elements demonstrated within this novel.

The characters presented within the novel provid ample opportunity to explore the literary elements of Characterization and Character sketch. Leroux introduces, describes, and develops his characters through using third person descriptions, dialogue, and evidential history which provide the "true" history behind the character. The development of the characters are central to understanding the plot and themes of the novel.

Explore Hero and Foil with your students. Who is the villain? Is it really the Opera Ghost? Who is the real hero? What makes a hero? Explore the characters and nature of Raoul the stereotypical “hero,” Erik, and the Persian.

Due to the change in Voice and interweaving of “factual” documentation which support the plot it is important to address the Narration of this novel to help students understand who is speaking. The sequence of narration explores the elements of Flashback and Foreshadowing. Involve the students with asking them why do you think the author included these elements and what is going to happen next? Allow student to make their own conclusions.

What kind of Genre is this book? Discuss what a Suspense novel is? Engage the student by having them decide for themselves if the Opera Ghost really did exist? Discuss the major Themes within the novel. Why is this novel considered a classic? How does it relate to us in our day?

### **AFFECTIVE ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK**

This novel is a classic work which many students will be familiar with. With the current popularity of the musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and its Hollywood portrayal students will be familiar with the plot and general themes of this work. However, this novel will “fill in the blanks” and enrich their understanding of this well known musical sensation. Building on the students’ basic exposure to this work, and incorporating literary elements will provide strong grounds building on preexisting interest. Because of the interesting narration of the author and fast paced plot this work will appeal to the students.

The Phantom of the Opera also addresses in a heightened fashion many of the issues which students face daily: popularity, physical appearance, love, relationships, fear, control, manipulation, and truth to name a few of the general themes addressed within this work. Students will be able to identify with the longing and isolation of the Opera Ghost, yet cheer for the classic love affair of a Parisian “Romeo and Juliet.” All of the drama, mystery, intrigue and sensation found in popular media today are beautifully written and presented in this classic work.

### **VOCABULARY ISSUES**

As mentioned before, many French titles are used to introduce characters which are difficult to understand without basic knowledge of French Culture. Explain such words as: M’sieur, Mademoiselle, Comte, Comtesse, Viscount, etc.

Other uncommon vocabulary used to describe characters: brats, rogue, miscreant, commissary, siren, sultana, bohemian, gypsies

There are many operatic terms used for which it would be important to explain their meanings for students: soprano, prima dona, baritone, corps de ballet, requiem mass, conservatoire

Possible unfamiliar cultural allusions used: Dr. Faust, Venus de Milo, Shrovetide, Commune, Resurrection of Lazarus, Profeta, Don Juan Triumphant, Othello, Louis-Philippe, Mazenderan, Apollo's Lyre, St. Andrew Cross, "left the women's apron-strings"(20), "catastrophe that broke the arms of the Venus de Milo"(78)

There are many adjectives that are used to describe the setting of the opera house and characters which are difficult for the average reader: Seraphic, radiance, melancholy, ghastly, cadaverous, arabesques, balusters, foyer, equerries, supernumeraries, hermitically, desist, cabal, brougham, gibbet, scruples, shrewdest, consternation, serile, wheedled, odiously, motley, facetious, insidious, stupefaction, aperture, sinister, labyrinth

*Examples that model good writing are found in passages such as these:*

"None will ever be true Parisian who has not learned to wear a mask of gaiety over his sorrows and one of sadness, boredom, or indifference over his inward joy [ . . . ] In Paris, our lives are one masked ball"(28).

This passage describes the culture of Paris, and provides a metaphor for the novel. Don't all of Paris and society hide behind masks to hide their true nature?

"It was a noise as though thousands of nails had been scraped against a blackboard, the perfectly unendurable noise" (194).

Leroux is incredibly descriptive, he uses passages such as these to allow you to sense and feel the words by connecting which sensations that readers have already experienced to present a tangible feeling in his descriptions.

"Love, jealousy, hatred, burst out around us in harrowing cries. Erik's black mask made me think of the natural mask of the Moor of Venice. He was Othello himself" (127).

This passage incorporates the allusion to Shakespeare classic work Othello, which helps readers further visual the scene and emotion portrayed by the characters.

"If Erik were good-looking, would you love me, Christine?" (131)

This quote provides opportunities for readers to discuss the themes of the novel. The theme presented here is physical appearance and love.

## **BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

As mentioned before a basic knowledge of the history and culture of France will help the students understand the culture and events described within the novel. Teachers should introduce particularly the class system in France to help students understand the differences in classes between Christine Dae and the Viscount de Chagny. Help student understand the central role and character of the Opera. Explain the purpose of the Opera house within the upper classes of French society. Teachers should utilize such resources as music, opera, and theater to help students understand the setting by exposing them to these cultural experiences personally. Have students hear songs from the Opera's mentioned within the novel such as Dr. Faust. Discuss masks and the masks in which all societies and culture have. Have them make connections with the masks that they wear within their current context and social groupings.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY**

By utilizing French culture as a vehicle to explore and celebrate all cultures this allows teachers the opportunity to discuss the role culture has in the lives of all people. One of the central themes of the novel is diversity. Within this novel we have Erik, the Opera Ghost, who experiences prejudice and discrimination because of his physical appearance. There are many forms of diversity within society whether it is racial, gender, economic, or even those with special needs. However everyone regardless of other factors can identify with the element of physical appearance. Discuss how individuals are judged by physical attributes which is the basis of all discrimination. This novel provide countless opportunities to explore why there is prejudice, how it is manifested, and the end result of discrimination of any kind on not only the victim, but also those who carry such prejudice. Prejudice and discrimination are just a few of the many masks worn within each society.

## **GENDER ROLES**

Within the cultural and historical context of this novel there are many implied and blatant gender stereotypes within this novel. Christine is the beautiful and naïve female who is seduced by the voice of the Angel of Music. She is utterly helpless and controlled by her feelings of pity for Erik. However, regardless of her helpless nature like all heroines she falls in love with the rich, handsome, and daring Raoul. However, while the gender roles and descriptions of characters are very stereotypical the ending of the novel provides a twist. In the end Raoul is helpless and Christine is left to "save" her male counterpart. It is important for students to identify the gender stereotypes in both the novel and those which daily surround them. One of the ways teachers can address this subject is have students recreate this novel in their current context. If this novel was written today what would Christine, Raoul, and Erik been like? How would the ending

have been different? Encourage them to break down and recreate characters which go against stereotypical gender roles.

## **THE CENTRAL QUESTION OR ENDURING ISSUE**

What is the truth, or is it the truth hidden behind the masks that each of us wear? While not clearly stated, but strongly implied, Leroux explores the nature of truth versus the masking of it. He does this through the way he writes, since he writes the novel as truth complete with evidence which supports each element. Even at the very end the reader is forced to decide the truth of the evidence presented from the fictitious element of any well written novel. The mask of the Opera Ghost also becomes the metaphor for this central question as the reader wonders what is the truth behind the mask. Is the Opera Ghost a villain or a hero? What is the truth behind every person or is it just merely the mask that each of us daily wear?

## **RESEARCH ISSUES/ PROJECT IDEAS**

Before reading the novel students can research and present their reports about the history and cultural context of France. Give them a list of topics dealing with the novel, have them select and do the research making cultural connections about the novel. Example: History of French Opera House, History of Opera, Social Hierarchy of French Society

Have students write their own opera for this novel. Through utilizing poetry and dialogue have student construct and perform their own version of The Phantom of the Opera.

Attend an opera with your students. Have them dress up and experience the culture of the theater. Arrange to have a fieldtrip to the local theater and a tour behind stage so that they can see the setting and organization.

## **INFORMATION/ FUNCTIONAL TEXTS**

The Literature Network provides a brief bibliography, quizzes, and commentary from reading of Phantom of the Opera

[http://www.online-literature.com/leroux/phantom\\_opera](http://www.online-literature.com/leroux/phantom_opera)

Provides a brief overview and plot analysis. Also provides listings on additional resources and further reading.

<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/leroux.htm>

