



NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF GASTON LEROUX’S THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

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Abstract

Literary narratives have a proper arrangement of events and characters in an order of time and space to produce meaning and other discursive functions. The basic idea of analyzing a narrative is to examine the skillful act of storytelling. The Phantom of the Opera by Gaston Leroux is considered as the precursor of the twentieth-century detective and mystery fiction that flourished both in France as well as abroad through its unique narrative style even though it follows the aspects of the Gothic and the fantastic. The paper analyses the novel in the light of narrative theory. Treating the text as narrative, it focuses on the structural aspects of the novel, concentrates on the important techniques and devices, explores the usages of the narrative levels and their functions, and analyses how they are employed by the author in certain occasions to narrate the events inside the text. It subsumes all aspects of the interactive relationship of narrative agents, including such issues as the modes of narration, focalization, and spatial and temporal relationships.

Keywords: Narrative theory, Leroux, gothic, narrator, focalisation.

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The narrative is inseparable from human language. All human beings are said to be narrative animals or ‘homo fabulans’ says Paul Ricoeur (McQuillan 257). The oral narrative storytelling has its own form and style to arrive at a rhythmic mood to convey a story. It involves constant repetition of words that try to make some impression in



the minds of the listeners; it must rely on the makeup of words, phrases, images, and comparisons of the epic formulas to draw the attention of the hearers. Literary narratives have a proper arrangement of events and characters in an order of time and space to produce meaning and other discursive functions. The paper analyses the novel *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux in the light of narrative theory. It focuses on the structural aspects of the novel, concentrates on the important techniques and devices, explores the usages of the narrative levels and their functions, and analyses how they are employed by the author in certain occasions to narrate the events inside the text.

The basic idea of analyzing a narrative is to examine the skillful act of storytelling which differs from one writer to the other. E.M Forster in his essay on ‘The Story’ and ‘The Plot’ stresses that, the fundamental aspect of a novel is its “storytelling” aspect (McQuillan 44). The greatness of a writer lies in his skillful manipulation of the story he wants to convey to his audience. The story is the raw material or the actual sequence of actions and events which the author has to use for his work, which the Formalists call ‘fabula’. A single story can be told in many ways. There are countless novels, plays, and romances which deal with the same story. Each work of art differs from the arrangement of linguistic discourse manipulated in the text. The focus of analysis of discourse raises questions about the narrative situation, the point of view in which the story is presented, the employment of narrative modes, the representation of speech act by the characters, the chronology of events dealt with, and the narrative style, etc. These elements are always used to certain effects. Gaston Leroux has chosen for his novel, a common story: beautiful heroine who becomes a victim of a selfish villain, later saved by the hero who undertakes adventurous tasks to save the damsel in distress. This story line is transparent in many of the tales of fantasy and Gothic fictions. There will certainly be a tight-plot structure in this novel where the suspense is maintained till the climax. Most of the novels have multiple-plot lines. Leroux has also formed a multiple-plot line in his novel where the main plot centers on finding the mystery and secret of the character Erik, who is the main figure of the story. The humorous 2 comic scenes related to the managers of the opera contribute to the subplot of the story.



Leroux formulates twists and surprises for the progress of the plot and holds the reader’s attention throughout the novel.

In *The Phantom of the Opera*, Gaston Leroux follows the stereotype of Gothic fiction, combining fantasy and romance with elements of mystery and horror. The elements of gothic abound in this novel: the red, blood-like ink with which Erik signs his letter, madness, the coffin, and the torture chamber. The physical characteristics and extraordinary abilities of the opera ghost, the exotic character of the Persian, the ratcatcher, and the spectral “shade” who polices the underground and the elaborately detailed torture chamber constantly prove the fantastic elements. The assertion made by the author that the opera ghost “existed in flesh and blood” (TPO 5), seems to contradict and deflate the conventions of fantastic literature. But the tension created amidst the reader’s guessing whether the detailed accounts on the actions of the ghost are real or not is the central element of fantasy in this novel.

The Construction of a detailed fictional world is a key feature of most fantasy fiction. world in a work of fantasy may be our own world, rendered strange by the presence of certain fantastical phenomena; or it may be a wholly separate world; or it may involve movements between, or the perception of, different realities existing simultaneously. In this novel, the entire setting is the real Paris Opera House situated at Rue-Scribe side. The novel’s plot moves simultaneously on-stage and off-stage of the opera house. Leroux claims the existence of the ghost in the underground cellars of the opera, which was forgotten for a long time. The “underground” is a metaphor for one of the darkest places where the demons and ghosts reside, and it has its own secrets and mysteries:

Those old people remembered nothing outside the Opera. They had lived there for years without number. Past managements had forgotten them; palace revolutions had taken no notice of them; the history of France had run its course unknown to them; and nobody recollected their existence. (TPO 110)

The remarks on the “forgotten” underground inhabitants contribute to the fabric of the novel’s fantastic elements. The world of the underground which belongs to Erik creates a special interest among the readers to peep into the secrets of the character



which often marks the novel’s motives. It is often mentioned in the novel that, “everything that is underground belongs to him!” (TPO 111). The secrets of the opera ghost Erik, the evil genius, the monster and evidently the angel of music; all emerges from ‘his’ mysterious locale, the underground.

The novel centers on the character Erik whose physical and mental deformity reminds the prototype of the human monster in most of the gothic novels. Erik’s deformity is the 3 cardinal function of the narrative which serves as an important part of a narrative which cannot be removed from the narrative action. Leroux has followed the style of the earlier gothic novels of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) and Anne

Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The characteristic conventions of followed by the setting of the haunted Opera, the mysterious anti-hero Erik, and a heroine in distress and the plot including elements of horror and suspense and the significance of supernatural phenomena are reflected in this ‘Opera Ghost’ novel. The notion of the “evil genius” represented by Erik as mentioned in the novel resembles the mysterious quality often visible in this type of genre which shows special interest in the underside of humanity: the evil within the psyche and the disintegration of subjectivity. (Herman 208). Like other precursors of modern superheroes, such as the Hunchback of Notre Dame and Frankenstein’s creature,

Erik balances sympathy with horror, admiration with revulsion.

Leroux crafts the events, characters, and plot as if the events were historically true. He supports each claim with ‘evidence’ and historical documentation which is arranged in such a way as to continually leave the inexperienced reader’s guessing. He merges reality with fiction, tries to assert the reader with details of real incidents by rendering his imaginary story as the original one. The Phantom of the Opera begins with a third-person omniscient narration which introduces the foundational evidence and supports for the claims to the reality of the existence of the Opera Ghost. The third person narration is often considered as a replica of the author himself.

The Phantom of the Opera is told from the point of view of a narrator whose name is not given, who is examining the events of the novel thirty years after the fact. In the



prologue, emphasis is repeatedly placed on the notions of inquiry, certainty, proof, reason, and logic, from the confident claim made by the author: “In Which the Author of this Singular Work Informs the Reader How He Acquired the Certainty that the Opera Ghost

Really Existed”. He again claims the same idea of the existence of the opera ghost in his Epilogue stating that: “There are today so many proofs of his existence within the reach of everybody that we can follow Erik’s actions logically through the whole tragedy of the Chagnys” (TPO 252). The whole story including the author’s proof of *Memoirs of Moncharmin* is the purest of fictions. Leroux must have got this idea of writing this fiction from his personal encounter and research on the real Opera House building’s construction and history.

In his novel, Gaston Leroux employs a range of stylistic and narrative techniques. The Preface gives details of his search of his own investigations: he examined the records of the 4 opera library and interviewed people who had been present at the time of the story including

Little Meg Giry and the Persian, whose character proves to be a major part of the action in the book’s final chapters, and gives details of how he examined a skeleton found in the catacombs under the opera house. He has incorporated excerpts, song lyrics, footnotes, police reports, newspaper clippings and other devices to convey the tale of the Phantom. The narrative techniques are successfully employed by Leroux that the readers of the fantastic literature would certainly feel the novel interesting from first page to the last. It creates an alienation effect among the readers where one can experience the beauty of the real Paris

Opera House as a haunted castle of the ghost encouraged by the perspective of the narration. The novel’s structure is very complex throughout the narrative as it leaves the reader an ambiguity in identifying the art from the artifice. But the skillful act of his storytelling holds the reader under “willing suspension of disbelief” throughout the reading and every twist and turn makes the story to move forward. Leroux’s narrative is fast moving, and he uses complicated plots. He plays with words and genres, developing a new variety of aesthetic literature which gives paradoxical expressions.



Every narrative is created by a narrative voice. The narrator is the narrative ‘voice’ which tells the story in the first or third person, sometimes as a character in the story and, on occasion, even omnisciently (Cobley 140). The narrative voice may belong to the author himself or it may be of the characters inside the text. But this position often changes when the object of the focalizer and the focalized makes their turns. The narrator’s mental experiences in the story world are different from that of the character’s mental experience. Only a ‘competitive reader can easily understand the meaning conveyed by the narrator through the nuances and voices of the narrative which Mikhail Bakhtin calls the polyphony of language

(Aczel 444). The existence of the opera ghost is asserted by the narrator who informs the reader of his own knowledge of the ghost that he is a real man rather than the imagined phantom. The point of view of the narration is ‘omniscient’ but it also proves the ‘authoritative’ comment of the narrator where he overcomes all the other characters’ idea of the ghost that he knows better than the other characters in the text he has created. Sometimes the narrator intervenes into the flow of narrative of events to give comments and tries to evaluate the actions and motives of the characters. In the passage below, the narrator comments on Christine Daae’s intention behind her action at a specific situation as if he were to catch her internal thoughts. Such intrusive narrator always tries to comment on the attitudes of the characters. “people on the stage are not so modest as all that; and I think that I shall not be far from the truth if I ascribe her action simply to fear. Yes, I believe that Christine Daae was frightened by what had happened to her.” (TPO 48).

The narrator interrupts the process of his narration by stating his observation on her thoughts and actions. Wayne Booth calls this type of narrator as the self-conscious narrator, who is aware of himself as the narrator (McQuillan 72). By the end of the twentieth chapter, the narrator announces that the next five chapters will be narrated by the Persian: “What the Persian knew . . . shall be told in his own words . . . which I copy verbatim” (TPO 199). The Persian then begins by recounting in detail his experience with the opera ghost Erik: Persian is an intradiegetic narrator in the last part of the novel as he himself present as a character in the story he ‘tells’ which in turn is



responsible for the progress of the plot. In this passage, Persian’s view of the character Erik is entirely subjective, where he says of Erik’s nature as “a regular child, vain and self-conceited” and it is restricted to his own personal experience and knowledge about him. The veracity of the narrative is always questioned when a character-narrator tells his story or the story of others. It is important for the reader to determine the motivation and psychology of the character Erik assumed by the character-narrator Persian. Such a narrator withholds some point of a story according to his personal interests. Wayne C. Booth calls this type of a narrator as the unreliable narrator (McQuillan 70). In some places when the narrator generalizes some statements to the reader by changing the narration to second person as it mainly addressed to the reader of certain assumptions by the author about the certain norms of the society:

Everybody remarked that the retiring managers looked cheerful, as is the Paris way. . . . You know that one of your friends is in trouble; do not try to console him: he will tell you that he is already comforted; but, should he have met with good fortune, be careful how you congratulate him: he thinks it so natural that he is surprised that you should speak of it. (TPO 29-30)

The narrator is the fictive textual speaker who functions as narrating the subject, and he is the medium for the creation of the narrated world. In the *Phantom of the Opera*, the narrator tells a story that dates to the later part of the nineteenth century. The narrator addresses the listeners who are implied and constructed by himself and the modern readers find it difficult, and they might ignore the specific details: “And he takes his vermouth at Tortoni’s with

Lagrene, Scholl and Pertuiset, the lion hunter,” (TPO 70). The café Tortoni was one of the most popular Parisian cafés of the nineteenth century. The narratee or the intended readers of the novel can only recognize this reference made by the narrator whether or not explicitly mentioned by the narrator that he is really addressing him. In the sentence, “Gounod had 6 conducted the Funeral March of a Marionette . . . the drinking song in *Lucrezia Borgia*.” (TPO 20) proves the narrator’s credibility by his reference to the details of the opera where the composers, singers, and works mentioned here are real and accurate. When the conversation between the managers is



mimetically represented by the narrator, he refers “Franconi’s stables” (TPO 68). By this reference, the narratee exactly identifies the Franconi family best-known for riding in the nineteenth-century France. Gerald Prince, in the Introduction to the Study of the Narratee, states that the narratees can be classified according to the narrative situation, to their position in reference to the narrator, the characters, and the narration (McQuillan 99). In the last five chapters of the novel, the character is Raoul because the Persian narrates his own story of the ‘rosy hours of

Mazandaran’ to the character Raoul. The narrator has the choice to select the ‘angle of vision’ from which he is going to present the story. The angle of vision is nothing but the ‘focalization factor’ of the narrative. According to Mieke Bal, “Focalization’ is the most important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation available to the narrative text, whether literary or otherwise.” (Neill 86). Focalization is a discursive element added to a narrative's story. It is established through narration from the variable points of view. The points of view can be perceived externally as well as internally: “The first thing they saw was a box of English sweets on the little shelf of the ledge. Who had put it there? ... they went back to the shelf and, next to the box of sweets, found an opera-glass. They looked at each other...They sat down in silence. (TPO 75). In this passage, the stage managers’ first encounter with the mysterious opera ghost box is presented by the narrator. Here, the first part of the sentence is externally viewed by the omniscient narrator describing the action and conversation very much visible to the other participants of the scene. In the second part of the passage, the focus is on what the two managers ‘think’ and ‘feel’. It is the internal focalization of the characters as their unspoken thoughts and feelings are presented by the narrator which even the other characters in the scene could be completely unaware of because of their fear. (Jahn 174).

There are some non-narrative elements in the narrative of The Phantom of the Opera, such as for interpolated songs from the operas. These elements give some clues to the narrative’s meaning, but sometimes they are simply decorations which are not an integral part of the story itself. The narrative of The Phantom of the Opera imbibes the concept of Leit motif as it uses frequent repetition of musical phrases and set of



complex images for which the novel’s setting is totally related to the opera. It uses quotations from the popular opera 7 plays such as Faust serve as significant element in the narrative. The most famous opera

Faust figures prominently in the novel on both real and symbolic levels:

Vain! In Vain do I call, through my vigil weary,

On creation and its Lord!

Never reply will break the silence dreary!

No sign! No single word! (TPO 72)

These are the opening lines of Gounod’s Faust. All of the musical phrases are taken directly from the opera. The choice of Faust matches clearly with its themes of genius and dark creative energy. The text can sometimes provide hints to connect the text to larger structures of signification. Symbolism is the creative use of arbitrary symbols as abstract representations of concepts or objects or of attribution of symbolic meanings or significance to objects, events, or relationships.

The narrative of the Phantom of the Opera creatively uses of several allusions to classical figures: The passage, “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” (TPO 127), incorporates the allusion to Shakespeare classic work Othello, which helps readers further visual the scene and emotion portrayed by the characters. In the passage below, the conversation about the story of Blue Beard is referred: “I don’t like curious women,” he retorted, “and you had better remember the story of Blue-Beard” (TPO 219): In Charles Perrault’s seventeenth-century fairy tale, Bluebeard is an ugly tyrant who gives his gives his young wife keys to all the rooms of their castle but forbids her to enter one particular room. When Bluebeard is next away, she enters the room and finds the bodies of all previous wives. The key becomes stained with blood, and Bluebeard discovers that his wife has disobeyed him. Often an author incorporates layers of meaning into his work through the cultural codes or cultural referents that the readers could identify the particular cultural and social background of the age in which the work follows. The Phantom of



the Opera is set on the early 1880s. Leroux portrays the culture of Paris of the time in many instances of the novel.

He emphasized the importance of Opera as a social medium which reflects the aristocratic mindset of the noblemen: “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” (TPO 29). This passage describes the culture of Paris and provides a metaphor for the novel. 8

Attending Opera House was once considered as a pride, and it became one of the important duties for the wealthy men and women to watch opera shows in that period. To offer sponsorship for the opera shows was considered as a matter of aristocracy. Leroux often comments on the class consciousness of those aristocratic people: I know that the count was said to be “on terms” with Sorelli. But it could hardly be reckoned as a crime for this nobleman, a bachelor, with plenty of leisure . . . And besides, there are places where a true Parisian, when he has the rank of the Comte de Chagny, is bound to show himself; and at that time the foyer of the ballet at the Opera was one of those places. (TPO 23)

This long description of Philippe establishes him as the perfect example of the real and literary type of aristocratic playboy in the nineteenth century. The narrator provides the cultural code by emphasizing that the noblemen “have to show their rank in some places” and opera is one among those places. Again the ‘embedded references’ can be identified in the line: “he knew that Christine could not be the wife of Vicomte de Chagny.” (TPO 53), this thought attributed to Raoul is indicative of the class structure of nineteenth century France.

Aristocrats in particular did their best to preserve their names and social status by marrying within their class, although mutually beneficial unions between aristocrats and members of the wealthy bourgeois were more and more common. Marriage with a penniless singer would indeed have been considered scandalous for Raoul and his family. Many French titles are used to introduce characters which are difficult to understand without basic knowledge of



French Culture as Monsieur, Mademoiselle, Comte, Comtesse, Viscount, etc. Some referential codes can be identified in the flow of the narrative in the text. The reference particularly, “Daddy was beginning to cough at that time” (TPO 53) can be assumed that he had tuberculosis, one of the leading causes of death in the nineteenth century. The narrative techniques handled by the author are applauded by the readers to produce such a fantastic work of art.

The discussion of the novel *The Phantom of the Opera* is necessarily concerned with narrative structure relating to the discursive presentation of narrative events. Treating the text as narrative, it subsumes all aspects of the interactive relationship of narrative agents, including such issues as the modes of narration, focalization, and spatial and temporal relationships. Narrative techniques such as temporal ordering involving analepsis and prolepsis are discussed with respect to the author’s usage of all the devices. The paper further examines the work *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux of his significant usages of variety of genres in the singular work. It analyses the different roles taken by the narrator to 9 narrate the story. Leroux’s has produced a new variety, building the plot with several anticipatory hints by alternating a serious tone with a more comic one. Leroux’s novel stands for its complexity that every detail the narrator gives is constantly repeated through the progress of the plot. He reworked the conventions of the fantastic with the techniques of the novelist and the rational, explicit approach favoured in the flourishing detective story that he arrives at a particular method of creating and prolonging suspense. The reader knows the novel’s outcome from the beginning, but they must wait for the narrator to unravel the mystery of the characters’ motivation

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