Victor Hugo and *Notre-Dame de Paris*

The 1923 silent film “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” was based on a novel by Victor Hugo (1802-1885). Hugo, whose father had been a general in Napoleon’s army during the French Revolution of 1789, conceived the novel during the revolution of July 1830. Published as *Notre-Dame de Paris* in 1831, it became an immediate success.

Hugo was a pioneer of the Romantic Movement in literature, which stressed individual experience over classical themes. Even though he set *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in 1489, he did not search out historical events for his plot. The story originated entirely in Hugo’s imagination, and it unfolds feverishly with a myriad of characters and vivid, melodramatic action. Quasimodo, the deformed bell-ringer of Notre Dame Cathedral—his name means “half-made”—is elected the Pope of Fools for the dubious honor of being the ugliest man in Paris. Esmeralda, a gypsy street dancer, appears, and arouses the interest of Claude Frollo, an evil priest who enlists Quasimodo to kidnap her. She is rescued by Captain Phoebus who becomes infatuated with her. Frollo stabs Phoebus in a jealous rage, and Esmeralda is accused of the crime. Quasimodo, remembering how she once was kind to him, attempts to shelter Esmeralda in the cathedral. In the novel, Esmeralda is captured and hung. In despair over her death, Quasimodo throws Frollo from the cathedral towers. The hunchback is never seen again, but years later, his remains are found embracing the skeleton of Esmeralda.

An ardent republican, Hugo wove the historical and political trends of the time into the story of gypsies, misfits, and vagabonds—issues of equality, liberty, and fraternity.
The Hunchback of Notre Dame, the movie

The movie differs from the novel in a number of ways, but it remains faithful to Hugo’s focus on the twelfth-century Cathedral of Notre Dame as the heart and soul of Paris. By writing of Notre Dame as a relic of France’s glorious past, Hugo had raised public consciousness for the neglected and damaged structure and as a result was instrumental in saving it. Notre Dame was replicated for the movie in two ways: its lower half was built on the set, but the towers and the top half are rendered by a “glass shot,” a miniature that hangs in front of the camera.

At a total cost of $1,250,000.00, “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” (1923) rivaled “Robin Hood” (1922) as a Hollywood spectacle. The two blockbusters shared a number of similarities—a strong-willed and talented star who dominated the film, a plot that explored themes of social justice, and dazzling special effects. Like Robin Hood director Alan Dwan and star Douglas Fairbanks, Hunchback director Wallace Worsley was a friend of Lon Chaney, and he tailored the film to magnify the star’s ability to physically embody the grotesque Quasimodo.

Hugo’s intense, dramatic story lent itself well to a silent movie presentation, providing just the right mixture of swashbuckling action scenes and intimate encounters. The Festival of Fools revelry that opens the movie and the storming of the Cathedral that ends it literally involve a cast of thousands, and the birds’-eye shots evoke a Bruegel painting. The varied and detailed costumes bring the rich diversity of a medieval city to life, and the struggle between aristocracy and peasant has resonance even today.

The silent movie proves to be an effective medium for visual metaphor, not the least of which is the omnipresent Cathedral as a symbol of refuge and safety. Another arresting image appears in both book and movie, that of the spider and its web. Victor Hugo used this image as a
metaphor for inescapable fate, and in the movie a short clip of a spider appears as Esmeralda succumbs to the charms of Captain Phoebus.

The sheer number of characters in “Hunchback” presents a challenge. Each time one is introduced, a title card appears that imparts a little background—Gringoire the poet; Gudule, who turns out to be Esmeralda’s real mother; Clopin, the King of the Gypsies; Fleur-de-Lys Gondelaurier, Phoebus’s intended bride. The audience is helped to understand Sister Gudule’s hatred of the gypsies through a flashback sequence. Closeups help define the characters and allow the actors to explore a range of emotions—broken hearts, bitterness, lust, and adoration. No one is more expressive than Lon Chaney as Quasimodo.

Lon Chaney, The Man of a Thousand Faces

Lon Chaney had already established his reputation as a versatile character actor before his role in “Hunchback.” Closely following Victor Hugo’s description of Quasimodo, he transformed his face with false teeth, a wax wart, and greasepaint, then devised a hump that could be attached to his body by a harness and breastplate.
The contraption twisted his torso so that he could not stand erect, and the combined weight of hump and breastplate has been estimated at from 50-70 pounds. Over all he wore a skin-tight, flesh-colored rubber body suit covered with animal hair, the heat inside leaving him perpetually drenched in perspiration. The rope-swinging, bell-riding, and gargoyle-leaping stunts must have been excruciating, whether they were performed by Chaney himself as the studio advertised, or by a stunt man.

He could have relied on the disguise to portray Quasimodo, but there was more to Chaney’s art. He used his body and face to bring his characters to life. In “Hunchback” he cavorts, grimaces, recoils, scowls, and in general “chews the scenery.” However, in portraying these emotions, Chaney manages some psychological nuance, inspiring both revulsion and pity. Chaney’s skill at observing human nature and mimicking what he saw can be traced to his childhood. Born in 1883 to deaf-mute parents, he learned at an early age to communicate through facial expressions, pantomime, and sign language, skills that served him well in theater and the movies. The silent world of his parents also instilled in him an insight into what it was like to be an outsider.

A number of deformed characters like Quasimodo appear during the era of silent films, possibly due to the visual appeal of difference. Chaney played many of these roles, from the villainous to the bizarre, including a legless man and “The Phantom of the Opera.” Between 1913 and 1930, he appeared in more than 150 Hollywood films.

Lon Chaney died of bronchial cancer in 1930, just as he was about to make the leap from silent films to “talkies.” His genius at transformation inspired a popular Hollywood joke, “Don’t step on that spider! It might be Lon Chaney!”