

WHO IS THE PROTAGONIST OF VICTOR HUGO'S
THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME?

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Abstract

There has been much discussion about the protagonist of Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame, and many believe that Quasimodo is the protagonist. After all, the title of the novel specifically refers to him. But other critics believe that the true focus is the cathedral of Notre Dame, pointing to the French title of this work, which is Notre-Dame de Paris. Whether Quasimodo or the cathedral is argued to be the protagonist or focus, it is quite clear that the ultimate motivating force in the plot is La Esmeralda. She is the spark that sets this story in motion and continually inspires the other characters to act out their roles. In the following paper, an attempt has been made to explore the role of La Esmeralda and the force she portrays in uniting the characters and moving the story forward.

Key Words: Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, protagonist, La Esmeralda, motivating force etc.

By the time Victor Hugo wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (published in French as *Notre-Dame de Paris*), he had already made a name for himself as a poet and dramatist. Although he had written one other novel (*Han d'Islande*, 1823), he had not really been known as a novelist. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was to change all that. Even more popular than it became throughout the twentieth century and into the early 2000s, this romantic story grabbed the imagination of the French people who embraced it for its melodramatic storyline and Hugo's detailed rendering of the life and culture of fifteenth-century Paris.

On the surface, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is a story of unrequited love between a man horribly disfigured and a beautiful woman who loves someone else. But Hugo was a very complex writer who gave his readers a much more complicated story. Underneath the unfolding of Quasimodo's love of La Esmeralda is a historical drama set in 1482, a time that in many ways mirrored the times and political struggles of Hugo's nineteenth-century world.

With almost the entire novel set in the cathedral of Notre Dame, the novel also conveys a spiritual element not only in its setting but in its characters. There is a priest who has lost his spiritual path; there is a physically disfigured man who is shunned and must find solace not in the material world but deep within himself; and there is the beautiful woman, innocence personified, who searches for a spiritual form of love.

Although his contemporaries applauded his novel, in many ways Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was also shocking in its time. Hugo was, after all, a central figure of the Romantic Movement in literature. Readers, prior to Hugo's works, were used to literature that was influenced more by the classical form, which emphasized rational rather than emotional topics and points of view. Also, Hugo's main character, Quasimodo, is physically repulsive, whereas in classical works, writers focused on idealized form. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* also focuses on the personal rather than on classical universal themes, which may be one of the reasons why the novel retained its popularity for almost two hundred years.

According to his biographer, Graham Robb, in his award-winning book *Victor Hugo*, "by the time he fled the country in 1851, Hugo was the most famous living writer in the world . . . His influence on French literature was second only to that of the Bible." Although Hugo's life's work included "seven novels, eighteen volumes of poetry, twenty-one plays," and as Robb writes, "approximately three million words of history, criticism, travel writing and philosophy," Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* retains the honor of being one of his two most famous works. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was very popular in France when it first came out despite the fact, as Robb states it, "the immediate effect on readers of the time was horror verging on intense pleasure." The book shocked Hugo's readers with its "extreme states," Robb concludes, which included those of poverty and ugliness as well as the evils of power and the consequences of extreme debauchery. Ironically, it was also these extreme states that made the book so popular. This popularity spread across Europe and the rest of the world and soon tourists were flocking to Paris to visit the sites depicted in Hugo's novel. Many were disappointed at first, writes Robb, with the sad state of the old cathedral, which was in need of a major renovation. But when the literary tourists were shown the word *ANATKH* carved into the wall, some of their disappointment was allayed. They began to look at the cathedral as Hugo presents it in his novel.

Almost two centuries after its publication, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* retained its popular appeal, and, although not claimed as Hugo's best novel (*Les Misérables* usually claimed that prize), it was praised for Hugo's detailed account and description of the cathedral as well as a glimpse into fifteenth-century France culture. The novel was deeply embedded in twentieth-century French culture, and the popularity of the novel, no doubt, played a significant part in influencing the French government to finance a restoration of the

cathedral. Its effect could also be seen in the many interpretations that movie producers give it about every thirty years. Popular all over the world, Hugo is especially revered in France. As his biographer, Laurence M. Porter, in his book *Victor Hugo*, explains, Hugo's writing has sometimes been referred to as simplistic because of his "dualistic rhetoric of light versus darkness," which implies an uncomplicated and noncomplex view of life. Although the characters in Hugo's novel may seem simplistic, Porter writes, closer study of his novels show that "[Hugo] repeatedly implies a cosmic vision deeper than the limited visions of his characters. Hugo finds a hidden God revealed not through the rites of a church but through nature and the human heart."³

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The novel begins with a lot of commotion. The city is in the throes of a large celebration. There are parades and visiting dignitaries. There are parties and plays. But the action is scattered and constantly interrupted until one defining moment, when La Esmeralda makes her first appearance. Suddenly everyone's attention is focused as people run to the streets or to the windows and doorways of buildings calling out her name as she passes by. Her beauty and innocence draw their attention: the women wish they could be her and the men desire her touch.

As La Esmeralda moves through the streets, she draws the story forward. Gringoire, the poet and playwright, follows her, taking readers along with him. Gringoire is driven to find out who this beautiful woman is and why she demands so much attention, pulling his audience away as they have more interest in her than in Gringoire's play. Gringoire soon becomes obsessed with this woman, whose magic turns out to be more than just her beauty. She also has the gift of music and dance, and she seems to have mesmerized a goat just as she has captivated those who watch her. Gringoire is the first to be struck and motivated by La Esmeralda. He tries to save her from the hunchback who attempts to kidnap her, and thus Hugo, through this gypsy beauty, pulls his readers into the next phase of the story.

Gringoire is later saved by La Esmeralda. She marries him, and it is through this marriage and her subsequent demand that her relationship with Gringoire remain platonic, that she neutralizes Gringoire. He becomes a shadow in the story, flitting in and out of the background, not to fully reappear until the end, when he becomes unknowingly a catalyst for La Esmeralda's death. The story continues without him, as it now focuses on Quasimodo who

attempts to kidnap La Esmeralda. Quasimodo does not fully comprehend why he has been asked to do so, nor does he completely understand the consequences when he is caught. Quasimodo is the blind follower of his master's will. Frollo is, after all, the first person Quasimodo learns to love. But once Quasimodo sets his eyes on the beautiful La Esmeralda, and once he witnesses her gentle spirit (offset by Frollo's betrayal), when La Esmeralda offers Quasimodo water, he, like all others, has trouble taking his eyes off her. But Quasimodo, who has suffered much rebuke because of his physical appearance, sees much deeper than La Esmeralda's surface beauty. He sees that she alone has looked at him (despite her repulsion of him) not solely as a beast but as a person who has physical needs. And it is through her gift of water that the story takes another turn. Up till now, Quasimodo has done as he has been told to do. But from now on, because of La Esmeralda's innocent heart, Quasimodo discovers thoughts and feelings all his own. He learns to act instead of to react. He will do what he concludes must be done. He will fight to the death to save his queen. In contrast to what La Esmeralda has done to Gringoire, quieting him and sending him to the back of the stage, she has brought Quasimodo to life. He, who has lived in seclusion, in silence, in the darkness and shadow of near nonexistence, has been pushed forward into the light through the power of La Esmeralda.

But the story has not yet progressed that far. Hugo has yet to fully expose the complete contradiction in Frollo caused by La Esmeralda. Frollo has existed on the food of thought. Frollo has not only committed his life to the intellect, he has surrendered his soul to the church. He has sworn to remain celibate as his religious vows dictate. His mind, throughout his adult life, has been focused on books and the care of two orphaned children. He is sought after as a master of reasoning and understanding. His knowledge far exceeds the dogma of his church; he studies medicine and science and alchemy. And yet, beneath the mantle of intellect is Frollo's Achilles heel, his mortal character flaw. Frollo melts at the sight of La Esmeralda. He not only is affected by her beauty, his passions for her controls his behavior. La Esmeralda has turned this great angel of intellect into a devil of lust. Because of his need of her, Frollo will abuse Quasimodo and will attempt to assassinate his rival Phoebus. He will lie, cheat, and scheme. In other words, because of La Esmeralda, Frollo is, along with the story, transformed.

It should be pointed out that La Esmeralda is powerful in spite of herself. Although her god-given beauty incites the characters of this novel and moves the story along, La Esmeralda herself lacks personal power. Or maybe this should be stated in another way. La Esmeralda has her own Achilles heel, her own point of weakness. She desires a perfect love. And her definition of perfect love comes to her in the form of Phoebus, a vain, shallow soldier, whose own beauty inflates his ego and overshadows his heart. Whether it is the handsomeness of this king's archer that captivates La Esmeralda or it is his rank, the young gypsy

woman cannot see beyond what she thinks he is to the real dangers that he presents. He is the one she wants no matter how heartlessly he treats her. Thus La Esmeralda is blinded. But even in her weakest state, even in spite of herself, La Esmeralda exerts power. As ruthless as Phoebus is, how can he not be affected by the innocent La Esmeralda. He has no doubt wronged many women in his lifetime, but who among even the most cynical of men could watch the hanging of this woman, knowing that his voice of truth could save her life and not be affected by her innocence? Hugo writes that after La Esmeralda's death, Phoebus marries, but Hugo leaves undetermined the idea that the young couple lived happily ever after. There is another option available, one more plausible, one that rings more true. Phoebus, in his inability to speak out and save La Esmeralda, is a marked man. Let there be no doubt of the psychological consequences of his missed actions. Although Phoebus may witness and maybe even cause, many deaths in his lifetime, La Esmeralda's will be the one that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

In the dramatic conclusion of this story, it is not through Frolo, in his vow to either have La Esmeralda or to destroy her, that the final turn in the story takes place. It is not really Phoebus, in his role of king's deputy, whose order it is to find La Esmeralda and bring her to the hangman's rope, who moves the novel to its final resting place. Even Quasimodo, in his deep love to save La Esmeralda, is helpless to shift the story from one path to another. And what about Gringoire? He does reappear, and he is instrumental in helping to bring the story to a conclusion, but his actions do not define the final swing. Rather, as in all other parts of the story, in all the other transitions, it is La Esmeralda who casts the final dice in determining how the story concludes. Whether one wants to portray La Esmeralda in the light of power or in the consequence of her weakness, it is for her unselfish love of Phoebus, her blind desire for a perfect love that this story takes its last turn. She has found her mother at last, and her mother, in the last few breaths of her life is determined to save her daughter—this child who was stolen from her and for whom the mother has grieved all of her life. The mother hides La Esmeralda, but La Esmeralda cannot hide from her lover. She cannot protect herself from the wrath of this man. She is willing to give him one more chance. She believes that his love of her is much greater than the love of her mother. La Esmeralda will offer herself to Phoebus, believing that he alone can save her. But she is mortally wrong.

And so the story takes its final turn. La Esmeralda has led the story along its path, turning and twisting its fate, persuading and evading its characters, challenging and tempting its motives from beginning to end. And in that end, she once again has a profound effect, not just on the storyline and the fictitious people who play out their created roles. This time, if in no other portion of the novel, La Esmeralda uses her power to affect readers. Even in death, after the flesh of her beauty has been eaten away, after her pure heart has shriveled out of sight and all that remains is her skeleton, La Esmeralda leaves her readers with a disturbing

image that will revisit them and possibly drive them to visit Paris in irrational hopes of catching a glimpse of the dancing gypsy. Hugo gives La Esmeralda the last moment, demonstrating the power of this female character, who may not be the protagonist but without her the story would lack the energy to propel itself to the end. Who would not be moved by the final sight of Quasimodo's skeleton embracing his only true love, the giver of strength and inspiration of change? Of course, it is La Esmeralda.

Hugo presents La Esmeralda as the physical antithesis of Quasimodo. She is so beautiful crowds form around her just so they can see her walk by. Despite this physical disparity, La Esmeralda and Quasimodo have much in common. They are both outcasts (Quasimodo because of his physical infirmities and La Esmeralda because of her lack of proper standing in the community) and they both have pure hearts. They are also individuals who reach out to others in time of need. Both are depicted as innocents, people who are filled with complete trust, often even blinded by it.

La Esmeralda, like Quasimodo, knows little of her parentage. She was stolen by Egyptian gypsies when she was a baby. But unlike Quasimodo, La Esmeralda, as she matures into full womanhood, loves to be around people. People respond to her in positive ways. Because of her beauty, men cannot help but want her for their own. Gringoire falls in love with her for her beauty. Frollo and Phoebus lust after her. And Quasimodo falls in love with her for her generous heart. But La Esmeralda wants only Phoebus. She thinks only he can give her the love that she craves. After Frollo stabs Phoebus, La Esmeralda is left with his body. When the king's authorities arrive, she is accused of the crime and sentenced to death. Quasimodo saves her by stealing her away, but Frollo eventually turns her in. She is hanged for the crime. La Esmeralda affects many of the characters in this novel, but her character is not well developed. She enters the story and leaves it unchanged – beautiful and innocent.

The theme of the 'power of physical appearance' in affecting others is played out at its fullest in the characters of Quasimodo and La Esmeralda. Quasimodo is scorned, mocked, abandoned, ridiculed, and beaten for having been born in a twisted body. Whereas La Esmeralda is loved, lusted after, praised, and celebrated for her innate beauty. It is, however, interesting to note that neither Quasimodo's ugliness nor La Esmeralda's beauty grants a better outcome. Although Quasimodo must seek refuge in isolation because of his physical appearance, La Esmeralda suffers from the jealousy of others when she exhibits herself in public.

Disguise of one's physical appearance is also used throughout Hugo's story. Frollo often tries to disguise himself either in a common cloak or in the clothing of his priesthood. His cloak is used to give him an advantage in getting closer to La Esmeralda, who has resolved to resist him. But his priestly habit, if one takes the highest ideals of spirituality that his religious outfit represents, also disguises Frollo's carnal lust.

There are many men who want to be close to La Esmeralda. Each man has his own reasons. Of all of them, Quasimodo and Frollo have the strongest desires, and those desires are born from opposite feelings. Quasimodo is sincerely in love with La Esmeralda. He demonstrates this by his ability to satisfy her needs without receiving anything in return. He wants to be able to look at her, but he turns his head so she will not have to see his ugliness. He serves her and then leaves her alone. He protects her although he knows that she does not love him.

By contrast, Frollo is obsessed with La Esmeralda. Or more precisely, he is obsessed with the thought of her. He really does not know her. He is merely aroused by her beauty, by her female form, how she moves, how she laughs, and as a result he wants to own her. His obsession drives him away from his own rational thoughts and his vows of spirituality. His lofty ideals are corrupted by his carnal desires, and he will do anything, even break his God's commandments, to possess her. His obsession controls his body and his mind, pointing him in the direction of the darkest evil rather than toward the spiritual light. He, who is dressed in the garb of the priest, Hugo seems to be saying, is really the devil. While Quasimodo, who has been accused of being the devil because of his physical garb, is more like a saint.

Notes

1. Graham Robb. *Victor Hugo: A Biography*. (Norton, 1997).
2. Some critics believe that Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) outshines *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The book exposes the struggles of the underclass in France. It is interesting to note that the year this book was published, Hugo began financing a weekly dinner for fifty poor children, reflecting the sentiments he expresses in this story.
3. Laurence M. Porter. "Preface," in *Victor Hugo*. (Twayne Publisher, 1999, p. vii-xviii).
4. Victor Hugo. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. (Penguin, 2018). All the quotations from the novel have been taken from this edition. Page numbers in parentheses have been given in the body of the text