

Original Paper

Study of the Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty in the Images of Major Characters in Western Drama —A Case Study of Quasimodo

Bin Li

The School of Foreign Languages, China University of Petroleum, Beijing, China

Received: July 10, 2026

Accepted: August 13, 2026

Online Published: August 18, 2026

doi:10.22158/jecs.v10n3p69

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v10n3p69>

Abstract

The dramatic work Notre-Dame de Paris is adapted from the eponymous novel by the great French literary figure Victor Hugo and is a representative masterpiece of French musical theatre. This paper takes the main character Quasimodo in this musical as an example to conduct a study on the images of ugliness and beauty in the major characters of Western Drama. Theories of Victor Hugo's Principle of Aesthetic Contrasts, Gérard Genette's Focalization, Marxist Principle of Dialectical Unity and theories in Aesthetics are adopted to find that Quasimodo's deformity and ugliness coexist interdependently with the beauty manifested through his character image, virtuous and righteous actions and stage performance. Musical theatre has the integrated advantage of all the stage elements to advance the narrative in interaction with the audience, collectively creating a representative dramatic character in whom ugliness and beauty are fused in the rising cognition of gestalt. It would be helpful in drama study and the formation of character cognition and education in our lives.

Keywords

Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty, Principle of Aesthetic Contrasts, Victor Hugo, Focalization, Character, Image, Quasimodo, Musicals, Notre-Dame de Paris

1. Introduction

The musical *Notre-Dame de Paris* is adapted from the eponymous novel by Victor Hugo, with music composed by Riccardo Cocciante, lyrics by Luc Plamondon and direction by Gilles Maheu. In January 1998, it held a concept preview at the MIDEM international music market in Cannes. It officially premiered on September 16, 1998, at the Palais des Congrès in Paris. Its captivating pop music, entangled love stories, and breathtaking stage design have made it one of the representative works of French

musical theatre. It was awarded a Guinness World Record as the most successful musical in its first year of performance, ranks first among the four major French musicals, and has earned worldwide prestige for French musical theatre. In Shanghai alone, over 15 years, the musical has been staged 113 times, drawing nearly 200,000 attendees.

It tells the tragic story of Quasimodo, the hideously deformed but kind-hearted bell-ringer, whose pure and unwavering love for the beautiful gypsy girl Esmeralda - caught between Archdeacon Frollo's lustful obsession and Captain Phoebus's fickle infidelity - ultimately makes him the sole soul who guards her unto death, embodying Romanticism, humanitarianism and the coexistence of ugliness and beauty.

The fusion of ugliness and beauty in the protagonist Quasimodo is a subject worthy of scholarly investigation. Wang Yinong (1987) analyzed the unity of greatness and truth in this work; Zhang Bixia (2007) examined its aesthetic characteristics. Wang Chao (2012) studied its aesthetic implications; Huang Taomei (2002), Zhong Chunyan (2006), Liu Yanfei (2013) and Jia Wenhui (2014) analyzed the character portrayals in the work. Yang Yan (2008) analyzed the character image of Quasimodo as a unity of humanity and animality; Jiang Peiwen (2013) examined the psychological causes and development of Quasimodo from the perspective of individual psychology; Cheng Weijuan (2014) explored the roots of Quasimodo's tragic love; Chen Xiaowei (2005) and Yan Xiaojun (2019) explored the rhetorical effects of the contrast technique employed in the work; Jin Hu (1985) and Luo Fan (1997) respectively investigated the Hugo's thought and realistic underpinnings reflected in the beauty-ugliness contrast art of the work; Li Yingbo (2013) and Li Shuping (2024) studied the aesthetics of Quasimodo's ugliness; Pan Daozheng (2011) examined Quasimodo's love, revealing the eternal contradiction between love and ugliness; Shi Ying (2016) compared beauty and ugliness across four dimensions: character appearance, character personality, character behavior and social phenomena. This paper aims to conduct a further analysis of the protagonist Quasimodo, exploring the fusion of his ugliness and beauty.

2. Quasimodo's Ugliness

2.1 *Extraordinarily Hideous Appearance*

Quasimodo's entire physique was a grotesque sight. He looked fierce and ferocious, like a beast. On his large head stood bristling reddish-brown hair; between his shoulders protruded a huge hump, counterbalanced by a protruding pigeon chest; from his hipbones down to his feet, the entire lower limbs were completely misaligned, with only his knees able to touch each other with difficulty. Seen from the front, his two legs resembled two curved sickles whose handles were joined together. The hump made him walk with a limp, leaning to one side, with one foot higher than the other. His feet were thick and broad, and his hands were extraordinarily large. This was the established King of Fools, the ugliest, like a giant who had been dismembered and then haphazardly reassembled. The height of his body was almost equal to its width, just as the square of the base. Seeing his half-red, half-purple cloak adorned with silver bell-shaped patterns, and especially his ugliness, which had reached perfection, the audience immediately recognized who he was-the hunchback of Notre-Dame, the deaf man, the one-eyed man, the bow-legged

man, the monster, the devil.

2.2 Ugliness in Stage Portrayal

The designers, actors, director, and other creative personnel jointly created an ugly character image of Quasimodo. Quasimodo's black and brown eye shadow, drooping dark circles under his eyes, twisted and cracked red lips, face covered with wrinkles, and thorny, bramble-like earth-red hair, together with his earth-red, patched, tattered and ragged cloak, complemented each other perfectly, presenting an image that was more slovenly and wretched than a stray dog. The hunchback and lameness made Quasimodo's gait extremely heavy, dragging, and unsightly, like a walking corpse or a wandering hyena. Coupled with the leading actor's hoarse and weathered voice, his awkward speeches invite contempt. The extraordinarily ugly character from Hugo's pen is miraculously brought to life on the theatrical stage, creating a multi-dimensional clown figure.

3. Gérard Genette and Focalization Theory

Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1990) coined the term "focalization" to replace the more visual terms of "perspective" and "point of view", establishing a crucial distinction between "who sees?" and "who speaks?". He refers focalization as a selection or restriction of narrative information in relation to the knowledge of the narrator or characters. Genette classifies focalization into three types: zero (narrator knows more than characters), internal (narrator knows only what a character knows), and external (narrator knows less than the characters). Kylee-Anne Hingston (2019), in *Articulating Bodies*, argues that Hugo strategically employs external and internal focalization in *Notre-Dame de Paris* to shape the reader's perception of Quasimodo's disabled body and his ugliness and beauty.

Initially, Hugo uses external focalization to present Quasimodo's body from a perspective outside the narrative action. We, like the Parisian crowd, see him only as a grotesque spectacle-a hunchbacked one-eyed deaf monster, dehumanized and devoid of interiority. This restriction of information, where the narrator "says less than the character knows", distances the reader and elicits only horror. However, Hugo subverts this by shifting to an internal focalization, forcing the reader to perceive events through Quasimodo's own senses and consciousness. We experience his thirst on the pillory, his awe at Esmeralda's kindness and his subsequent emotional awakening. This technique removes the boundary between self and other, compelling the reader to share Quasimodo's embodiment and feel his profound sorrow and devotion. Through this strategic manipulation of focalization - from external to internal - Hugo does not merely describe Quasimodo's dual nature but enacts the fusion of the grotesque and the sublime within the reader's own experience, guiding us from a gaze of rejection to one of empathy.

4. Beauty and Ugliness in Aesthetics

Within the category of aesthetics, beauty is the prototype. When the aesthetic subject interacts with the aesthetic object, they discover the beautiful features of the object, generating aesthetic meaning and aesthetic imagery. Regarding the essence of beauty, there are various theories, including harmony theory,

formalist theory, idealist theory, objective theory, subjective theory, and practice-based theory. Beauty is truth and goodness; it is significant form; it is the result of subjective empathy, the sublimation of desire and the product of human social and aesthetic practice. It represents the unity of content beauty and formal beauty, evoking feelings of affection and pleasure in the aesthetic subject. Within the category of beauty, objects that are unified, symmetrical, proportionate, and harmonious are the prototypes of beauty. Hegel (2009) believed that beauty is “the sensuous appearance of the Idea” - that is, the manifestation of a work’s inner meaning, as seen in Gothic architecture. The beauty of Western musicals lies in the audience’s ability to perceive on site the formal beauty, content beauty and intellectual beauty integrated through dialogue, performance, music, singing, dance, stage design, etc. They are highly appreciable, thought-provoking and artistic. Musical theatre synthesizes music, dance, story, lyrics, drama, visual arts, lighting, scenery, props, multimedia and other elements to present narrative conflicts and storytelling in real time. The various components - sound, light, electricity, drama, performance, scenery - are highly integrated to deliver a sophisticated and rich aesthetic experience to the audience, possessing an extraordinary comprehensive beauty and artistic mood, as seen in works like *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Ugliness is the opposite of beauty. Ugliness is the deformity, falsity, evil, strangeness and disorder manifested in the form and content of the aesthetic object, evoking feelings of disgust and pain in the aesthetic subject. Within the category of ugliness, objects that are deformed, disordered, disproportionate and inharmonious are the prototypes of ugliness. Baumgarten (2023) held that an imperfect form is ugliness, and ugliness itself repels the viewer. Rodin (2009) believed that ugliness is disfiguring and unhealthy, reminiscent of disease, decay and pain, and is contrary to the symbols and conditions of normality, health and strength.

5. Hugo’s Principle of Aesthetic Contrasts

Victor Hugo was a representative writer of positive Romantic literature in 19th-century France and a leading figure of humanitarianism. In his 1827 “Preface to Cromwell”, Hugo articulated his Principle of Aesthetic Contrasts of beauty and ugliness. Hugo (2013) believed that beauty has only one type, while ugliness has a thousand variations. Logically speaking, beauty is merely a form, the simplest form relative to our organism - it is absolutely symmetrical, harmonious, and consistent. Ugliness, however, is entirely different; it belongs to that part of the whole that we have not yet mastered - a part that is in harmony with all things in the world rather than with us humans. This is why ugliness always presents us with new yet incomplete aspects.

Not everything in the world is “perfect”; ugliness coexists with beauty, deformity lies adjacent to elegance, the grotesque is hidden behind the sublime, good stands alongside evil, and light travels with darkness... In a certain sense, does imperfection not more readily achieve a harmonious and complete outcome? (Hugo, 2013: 80) This dialectical thinking differs from the classical view that beauty and ugliness are merely contradictory opposites. Instead, it creatively posits that beauty and ugliness coexist, interpenetrate, and are revealed through contrast.

6. The Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty in Quasimodo

Both ugliness and beauty possess degrees of aesthetic cognition, and different values can reflect the aesthetic subject's judgment of the object's ugliness or beauty. Quasimodo is a quintessential character created by Hugo under the guidance of his theory of the Principle of Contrasts of beauty and ugliness. Quasimodo's deformity and ugliness coexist interdependently with the beauty manifested through his virtuous and righteous actions, standing in mutual opposition, which conforms to the Marxist Principle of Dialectical Unity. Within the theatrical context, the actors and creative personnel interact with the audience, employing sound, lighting and other means, as well as music, dance and performance, to advance the narrative, collectively creating a representative dramatic character in whom ugliness and beauty are fused.

6.1 *The Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty in Character Image*

The bell-ringer Quasimodo is extraordinarily hideous in appearance - lame, deaf, blind and hunchbacked. Regarded as a monster, Quasimodo was abandoned by his parents at birth. It was Frollo, the archdeacon of Notre-Dame, who found him, held him in his arms and brought him back to the cathedral to raise. Quasimodo's ugliness could rival the grotesque beasts on the stone pillars - fierce and ferocious, the very image of a wild beast. Yet, the acceptance, appreciation and affection people have for the monstrous Quasimodo prove that ugliness, too, can be pleasing to the eye.

Frollo taught him to read, write, speak and sing, and protected him as he grew up. This unusual upbringing as an orphan gave Quasimodo a kind heart - he knew gratitude and the importance of giving back, vowing to be as loyal to Frollo as a dog, ready to go through fire and water for him. Quasimodo also yearned for love, passionately hoping that the gypsy girl Esmeralda could love him, and was willing to give everything for her. Quasimodo is kind-hearted, honest, understanding, possesses a sense of righteousness and justice, and remains steadfast and unwavering in love, capable of both deep affection and decisive hatred.

In Leonardo da Vinci's view, beauty and ugliness are mutually dependent and symbiotic; if the ugliness he depicted had no meaning, then the beauty he produced could not have meaning either (Bailey, 2014: 18). Aristotle (1994) believed that imitating repulsive things, if executed with skill, can create beauty. The actor portraying Quasimodo is the singer Garou, whose uniquely hoarse voice made him the ideal choice for the role. The charm of popular music and vocal style lies in its uniqueness - the release and expression of individuality. When Quasimodo's voice rings out - rough, hoarse, laden with masculine magnetism - it merges with the disheveled and decrepit image, driving fans into ecstatic frenzy. Kant (2017) held that beauty is the object of pleasure without any interest. Garou's portrayal of Quasimodo is successful, offering the audience a universally shared aesthetic pleasure. Thus, ugliness and beauty, this pair of contradiction and contrasts can also develop into one due to the actor's design and display. Ugliness can bring delight - a stimulating pleasure that excites and engrosses - and its portrayal is a fusion of ugliness and beauty, the heated unity of the ugliness into the beauty - the prototype of aesthetics.

6.2 *The Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty in Stage Action*

“Ugliness in nature repels us, but in art that ‘beautifully’ presents ugliness, it becomes acceptable and even pleasurable.” (Eco, 2011: 133) The uniqueness of Romantic aesthetic theory lies in the bond it establishes with form, guided by emotion and reason. The goal of this bond is not to eliminate contradictions or resolve oppositions - the finite and infinite, the whole and the fragment, life and death, the mind - but to bring them all together in one place (Eco, 2011: 299). What Romantics sought was not static, harmonious beauty, but dynamic beauty. Dynamic beauty resides in flux, and is therefore discordant, because beauty can even arise from ugliness and formlessness, and vice versa (Eco, 2011: 315). Beauty can be manifested in the convergence of opposites; ugliness, therefore, is no longer the negation of beauty, but beauty’s other face (Eco, 2011: 321).

When Quasimodo rescues Esmeralda from execution, Hugo employs external focalization to emphasize physical disparity: “his calloused hands” holding “a delicate, exquisite, and precious thing,” his “angular chest” against her “white drapery”. The narrator reports actions from an outside perspective - Quasimodo “held the young girl,” “carried her,” “pressed her in his arms”. These actions, viewed externally, appear as monstrous strength gripping a fragile victim. However, Hugo shifts to internal focalization to reframe these same actions as expressions of protective love. The narrator reveals Quasimodo’s inner motivation: he handled her “with so much precaution that he seemed afraid of breaking or withering her”. A triptych of comparisons transforms the action’s meaning: “like his possession, like his treasure, as a mother would have done for this child”. Hingston (2019) observes that this focalization shift destabilizes the boundaries between normalcy and abnormality. The same physical action, embracing Esmeralda, is first focalized externally as grotesque appropriation, then internally as maternal tenderness. This narrative technique enables what Hingston calls the “dialogic conflict of these two opposing voices”, proving that Quasimodo’s heroic beauty is not an alternative to his ugliness but emerges through it in the reader’s perception, the process of rising fusion as a gestalt, which can also be gained after strong contrast to Frollo’s lustful obsession as a demon and Captain Phoebus’s fickle infidelity as a betrayer.

6.3 *The Fusion of Ugliness and Beauty in Stage Performance*

“Upon encountering deformity, the modern sublime has acquired something greater and more sublime than ancient beauty.” (Hugo, 2013: 84) Quasimodo’s birth, appearance, and disabilities are innate - a fate beyond his control or choice, which in itself constitutes a tragedy. After being abandoned by his parents at birth, he was fortunate to be adopted by Frollo, yet Frollo, in pursuit of his own selfish desires, treated Quasimodo as his lackey. The kind-hearted Quasimodo won Esmeralda’s understanding. Frollo chose evil over good, while Quasimodo chose good over evil. Thus, in the depths of inner conflict, Quasimodo ultimately chose the righteous path, pushing Frollo down the cathedral steps, breaking free from the guards and rushing to the side of the already-hanged Esmeralda, singing *Dance, my Esmeralda*.

The music begins gently, and the melody as a whole descends progressively. Quasimodo confesses his love for Esmeralda, expressing his desire to embrace her and depart together, leaving behind the suffering of the mortal world. In the chorus, the melody moves from high to low; each stanza of the libretto begins

with Dance and Sing, like a lament, wishing to die with Esmeralda, for their love will transcend life. The chorus is repeated and modulated repeatedly, with the actor's delivery exquisitely nuanced and emotionally progressive, until the final word "you" reaches the highest note - the climax of the entire song, paralleling the high note of Dance - as Quasimodo, anguished to the point of despair over Esmeralda's hanging, sings "you" with all his strength before succumbing to grief and death. The stage is surrounded by darkness; the background lighting is deep blue, casting a hazy glow over the massive backdrop of Notre-Dame. A dim yellow overhead spotlight focuses a beam on Esmeralda and Quasimodo, revealing the patterns of the cathedral's rose window. Three pairs of dancers enter from center and right stage. Pale blue overhead spotlights shine down as the male dancers hold the female dancers and then lay them on the floor. As Quasimodo sings, the male dancers lie down while the female dancers, suspended on wires, fly higher and higher, floating and dancing in the air. Dance, stage design, music, libretto, acting and directorial technique together elevate Quasimodo - this strangely ugly, kind-hearted, loving, grateful, and morally discerning artisan and angel - into a towering presence on stage.

Ye Lang (2009) argues that the pleasure evoked by the sense of ugliness arises from multiple factors. Primarily, what we call ugliness is not an external, independent entity, but an aesthetic image, a fusion of scene and emotion that necessarily contains the aesthetic subject's consciousness and taste. The existence of ugliness reveals the suffering or dark aspects of history and human life, which both shocks us and makes us feel the complexity and depth of history and life. This brings a spiritual satisfaction which merges into the image of ugliness, thereby giving rise to a kind of pleasure. As for the formal dissonance in ugly art, it too arises from the expression of inner conflict and the complexity of life, providing a sense of satisfaction and thus bringing pleasure after sublime and greatness.

7. Conclusion

Quasimodo's skeleton wrapped around Esmeralda's corpse, disintegrating when touched. Focalized externally, this is grotesque spectacle; focalized internally through reader imagination, it is a final act of devotion. Genette's theory reveals that Quasimodo's fusion of ugliness and beauty is not a static quality but a dynamic effect of narrative focalization from the external to the internal: the reader is positioned first to judge, then to perceive, and finally to experience the tragic fusion of his being. Quasimodo's deformity and ugliness coexist interdependently with the beauty manifested through his character image, virtuous and righteous actions and stage performance. Therefore, audience can see, feel and get the transformation of his ugliness to beauty, and gain the gestalt perception. Musical theatre has the integrated advantage of all the stage elements to advance the narrative in interaction with the audience, collectively creating a representative dramatic character in whom ugliness and beauty are fused in the rising cognition of gestalt, which would be helpful and valuable in the interpretation of the works and in the education of character cognition.

Fund Project

Undergraduate Teaching Reform Project of China University of Petroleum, Beijing

References

- Baumgarten Alexander Gottlieb. (2023). *Aesthetica, Volume 2*. Paris: Legare Street Press.
- Bayley Stephen, & Yang Lingfeng. (Tran.). (2014). *Ugly: The Aesthetics of Everything*. Beijing: Gold Wall Press.
- Eco, U., & Peng Huaidong. (Tran.). (2011). *The History of Beauty*. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.
- Eco, U., & Peng Huaidong. (Tran.). (2010). *The History of Ugliness*. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.
- Gérard Genette, & Wang Wenrong. (Tran.). (1990). *Articulating Bodies*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Hegel, & Zhu Guangqian. (Tran.). (2009). *Vorlesungen Über die ÄsthetikI*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Hingston, Kylee-Anne. (2019). Grotesque Bodies: Hybridity and Focalization in Victor Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris. *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Hugo Victor, & Zhou Ying. (Tran.). (2013). *Selected Essays of Victor Hugo*. Wuhan: Changjiang Literature & Art Publishing House.
- Kant Immanuel, & Zong Baihua. (Tran.). (2017). *The Critique of Judgment* (Vol. 1). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Kant, & Li Qiuing. (Tran.). (2016). *Collected Works on Kantian Aesthetics*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press.
- Miao Litian, & Cui Yanqiang. (Tran.). (1994). *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume IX*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press.
- Rodin Auguste. (2009). *Rodin on Art and Artists*. Dover Publications.
- Ye Lang. (2009). *Principles of Aesthetics*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Zhu Qi. (2016). *Chinese Translation of French Musical Works*. Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House.