

Hugo, Quasimodo and Notre Dame

Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Notre Dame de Paris, or “Our Lady of Paris”, is a Gothic cathedral situated on a small island in the middle of the river Seine which flows through Paris. With a history of about 700 years, the cathedral took almost 200 years to build and has survived two World Wars. It is often seen to epitomise French Gothic architecture, and is a place that no visitor to Paris will miss.

Despite its sacred grandeur, the cathedral does appear somewhat macabre. Most appalling are the monstrous gargoyles perching on the twin towers. They overlook the riverbank as if they were guardians of this holy place. The flying buttresses supporting the fine walls of the cathedral are like limbs stretching out in various directions, echoing the internal ribbed vault and accentuating the sense of being confined in a skeletal structure. The great height of the sharply pointed spire piercing into the sky was interpreted by people of the time of its construction to represent closeness to heaven.

This both awe-inspiring and grotesque setting forms the backdrop of the best known masterpiece of the French writer, Victor Hugo (1802-1885), – *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (or *Notre Dame de Paris* in French), which was first published in 1831. It was a trip the author made to the cathedral that inspired this great novel. One day Hugo climbed into the bell tower and caught sight of the Greek word “ΑΝΑΓΚΗ” meaning “fate” carved on the wall. Suspecting the mark to have been left by a soul in pain, he began searching for the story of the doomed fellow who had made the inscription. In the course of this, he came up with the idea of writing a novel about people associated with Notre Dame.

It is a story about love, hate and fate. Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame and also the protagonist of the novel, was abandoned at the cathedral as a baby and taken in by Frollo, archdeacon of Notre Dame. Thereafter, he finds shelter in the dimly lit bell tower of the cathedral, charged with the duty of ringing the bell. But the din of the bell-ringing soon deafens him.

Archdeacon Frollo becomes infatuated with Esmeralda the gypsy girl when he sees her dancing in the street. He orders his



foster son to kidnap her, but the plan is thwarted by Phoebus, captain of the King’s archers. Quasimodo is pilloried and humiliated in public for his evil attempt. But he finds comfort in Esmeralda’s kindness when she comes forward to offer him water.

Esmeralda falls for her rescuer Phoebus instantly, but Frollo, driven by undying lust, stabs him during his rendezvous with her. Esmeralda faints on the spot and is later convicted of murdering Phoebus. Frollo offers to save Esmeralda if only she gives herself to him. The girl prefers choosing death to submission. Just about to be hanged on the gallows, Esmeralda is saved by Quasimodo, who swings down on a rope from the bell tower and seizes her. He then harbours her in the sanctuary of the cathedral where she is temporarily safe. But out of selfishness, Frollo removes her from safety. Esmeralda is eventually hanged, and Quasimodo, realising that it is Frollo that has caused her death, kills him by pushing him off the parapet of the cathedral. Quasimodo disappears after that, and it is only years later that the skeleton of a humpback is found next to the remains of Esmeralda.

Ugly as he looks, the misshapen Quasimodo embodies the inner beauty of good nature. Rejected by society, he saves all his affection for his guardian Frollo. It is only when Esmeralda comes into his life that he finds love. In the finale, seeing Esmeralda swinging from the gibbet and Frollo lying motionless at the foot of the tower, Quasimodo yells in despair, “Oh, all that I ever loved!”

Aside from telling the story of Quasimodo, there was a further intention of Hugo to revive people’s respect for ancient architecture. At the time he wrote the novel, Notre Dame de Paris was falling apart. Hugo devoted many pages to the description of the cathedral, and following the publication of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a massive restoration programme of this ancient monument began. It is said that the wide popularity of Hugo’s masterpiece aroused the French people’s interest in medieval life and their awareness of the importance of conserving historical buildings. Thanks to Hugo’s efforts, Notre Dame is maintained in its original state, and in the way we see it now when strolling along the river Seine.

