

Analysis of erik, phantom of the opera using two contrasting personality theories...

[Psychology](#), [Personality](#)



The tremendously popular and well-known Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1986 musical production of The Phantom of the Opera was based on the French novel *Le Fantome de l'Opera* written by Gaston Leroux in 1910 (Leroux, 1910/1990). The original novel gave little direct details with respect to Erik's past; what was abundant however were hints and implications about the character's life history throughout the book (Leroux, 1910/1990).

Erik was actually not his birth name but rather a name given to him by accident, and Leroux had simply called him "the man's voice" in the novel; Erik, however, had referred himself as "the opera ghost" and "the angel of music" throughout the texts (Leroux, 1910/1990). The history of Erik was revealed in the novel mostly by the character Persia (also known as the Persian or the daroga), a local police chief in Persia that followed Erik to Paris.

The character Erik will be described below based on the translated work of Leroux (1910/1990), followed by an analysis of his personality using concepts derived from (1) the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis, and (2) the Skinnerian radical behaviorism concept. These two theorists were chosen because they represent polar opposites on how personality is viewed. While Freud maintained that the unconscious is the underlying driving force from which personality develops, Skinner rejected all non-observable parameters such as thoughts, feelings, emotions, and the unconscious in his scientific analysis of human behavior.

Freud's emphasis on personality development was on the continuous struggle between the id and the superego, and how successfully the ego can

manage a healthy balance between them. Freud also determined 5 psychosexual stages that must be negotiated and satisfied during childhood development, failure on doing so will result in aberrant personality traits. Skinner, however, believed that all behavior, and hence personality, are learned as a function of environmental factors.

A behavior that is reinforced will likely to be repeated, one that is punished will most likely not. He maintained that genetic predispositions allow humans to react to stimuli within a certain range, and where within that range our behavior falls is determined by how we are shaped by the influence of the environment we find ourselves. In this paper, the major differences in how those two theorists might interpret Erik's personality will be discussed. The Character Erik Erik was born in a small town on the outskirts of Rouen, France.

Hideously deformed at birth, his mother was horrified by his appearance and his father refused to even look at him. Tortured by ridicule and spite from his own mother, he ran away as a young boy and was adopted by a band of travelling Gypsies. He earned his living by performing in freak shows, where he was labeled as the living death. Despite his monstrous appearance, Erik was an extremely talented individual. In addition to possessing a most eerie and supernatural singing voice, he gained great skills as an illusionist, magician, and ventriloquist.

A fur trader recognized Erik's gifted abilities and mentioned it to the Shah of Persia, who then ordered to have him brought to his palace. Erik soon proved to the Shah his knowledge in architecture, and the Shah commissioned him

to design and build Mazenderan, an elaborate palace full of trap doors, hidden passages, and secret rooms such that no one could be certain of his/her privacy: someone would be listening or spying at anytime and anywhere. The Shah could practically vanish from a room in an instant and reappear elsewhere in utter secrecy.

During Erik's tenure with the Shah, he was also employed as a political assassin, carrying out the Shah's orders by strangling his victims using an unique noose known as the Punjab Lasso. Pleased with his work but determined that no other such palaces should be built and owned by anyone else (not to mention Erik and his workers were the only ones that had intimate knowledge of the palace's layout), the Shah first ordered Erik and his workers be blinded but then realized he could build another one even without his eyesight, ordered their executions.

By the intervention of the local police chief (the Persian), Erik escaped to Constantinople and was employed by its' ruling Sultan to build his grand palace of a similar design. Alas, he was later forced to escape Constantinople for the same reason he fled Persia. Erik's next destination was most likely to be somewhere in Southeast Asia, where he decided that he was tired of his nomadic lifestyle. Eventually, he returned to Paris and successfully bided on a contract to help build the Paris Opera. Using his extensive experiences from the past, the theater was built with

trap doors and secret passageways throughout. In addition, Erik built himself a palace, or a playhouse, of a sort deep within the cellar of the opera house so that he did not have to live amongst the cruelty of humankind. He spent

the next 20 years or so in his “home” writing and composing music of various sorts. At about the same time, a beautiful and technically talented chorus girl by the name of Christine Daae, who had lost all passion to sing and perform due to her father’s passing, somehow heard Erik’s singing and music in her dressing room at late nights.

Thinking that must have been an “angel” sent by her father, Christine took singing lessons from the “Angel of Music” during the nights and later emerged as a virtuoso singer better than she ever was. By now, Erik was secretly in love with Christine, and one night he revealed himself to her from behind a mirror in her dressing room, wearing a mask, and led her through the mazes and labyrinths into his domain in the cellar of the theater.

It turned out that Erik had been composing his masterpiece for the last 20 years, and realizing his genius, Christine asked if he would play a part from the masterpiece for her, and Erik refused as the piece was yet incomplete. Erik’s original plan upon the completion of his masterpiece was to go to his bed, which was in fact a coffin, and fall into an eternal sleep. Feeling the obvious pain from Erik and yearning to see his face, Christine ripped the mask off, and saw the horrible disfigurement. Another person vying for Christine’s affection was the Vicomte Raoul de Chagney.

A childhood friend of Christine, he was captivated by her new-found voice, so unearthly passionate that led Raoul to fall madly in love with her. In the final chapters of Leroux’s novel, Erik kidnapped Christine straight from the stage during one of the performances, showed her the completed masterpiece, and asked her to marry him instead of the Vicomte so that the two of them

can live a happy life, rather than him simply slip way into his “ bed” and dies. If she were to refuse, however, Erik would detonate the massive amount of gun powder he had secretly accumulated under the opera house over the years.

Christine submitted to his request in order to save herself, unknowing Raoul had fallen accidentally into Erik’s torture chamber while searching the opera house for her with the help of the Persian and the opera house staffs. Acknowledging her acceptance, Erik gave Christine a gold ring and kissed her cheek. He was so overwhelmed with joy that he fell to his knees and cried uncontrollably. Seeing the genius with a tortured soul finding happiness at last, Christine cried with Erik. Erik then surprised Christine by saying that he is now willing to let her go, and she was free to marry Raoul.

Erik freed Raoul and let them both leave the dungeon, but not before making Christine promise to come back and bury him upon his death. Christine kissed Erik on his forehead, and disappeared into the night with Raoul. Carrying his most cherished possession, the diary kept by Christine detailing everything that had happened between them, Erik went to the Persian and told him the whole story, with the hand-written diary as proof. Erik died three weeks afterwards. Christine kept her promise and returned to the opera house, but before the burial, she slipped the gold ring Erik had given to her three weeks earlier onto his finger.

Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic Approach to Erik’s Personality The core concept of psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) is the

significant influence the unconscious mind has on the conscious (Burkitt, 2010; Freud, 1923/1990). The unconscious is a vast reservoir of latent thoughts and memories (real, repressed, or false) that are not associated with the activities of the conscious mind, but those activities consciously executed are in fact directed and driven by the unconscious (Burkitt, 2010; Freud, 1923/1990).

In the novel, Erik was able to utilize this power of the unconscious to strategically place himself in the mind of Christine, letting her to believe that he was sent by her deceased father and thus masquerading as the “Angel of Music”. According to Freud, the oral stage is the first stage of psychosexual development (Freud, 1923/1990; van Beekum, 2009). In addition to providing nourishment, the mother’s breasts provide a source of love, pleasure, and security to the infant (Freud, 1923/1990; Wagg & Pridmore, 2004).

Weaning would therefore create a stressful situation for the infant: giving up the comfort feelings the mother’s breasts have provided. Some infants are easier than others to succeed in negotiating and resolving this conflict between the id and the ego (Freud, 1923/1990; van Beekum, 2009) by redirecting their psychosexual energy (libido) toward other challenges. For those infants that do not, the psychosexual development theory affirms they will develop into orally fixated adults (Freud, 1923/1990; van Beekum, 2009; Wagg & Pridmore, 2004).

Although it was not detailed in the novel, Erik most likely was never breast-fed as his mother loathed his appearance and his father refused to even look

at him. It is therefore reasonable to assume that as an adult, Erik would have an extreme case of oral fixation, constantly seeking for the pleasure and comfort that would have been derived from oral stimulations denied during infancy. In theory, adult manifestations of oral-stage fixation include nail-biting, eating, chewing, smoking, and alcoholism (Wagg & Pridmore, 2004).

Similarly, they may derive psychological pleasure from talking and constantly seeking knowledge (Wagg & Pridmore, 2004). Although Leroux did not detail Erik's personal habits, we can certainly see that he was constantly looking for and acquiring knowledge and skills, being an accomplished magician and ventriloquist, a brilliant architect and master builder, a royal assassin, a music genius with a most haunting, unearthly, yet passionate voice (Leroux, 1910/1990).

Instead of talking, Erik's obsession with oral stimulation was manifested as singing: singing to himself, hoping to seek solace throughout his life; and later to Christine as well as giving her vocal lessons. It therefore appears to me that the desirable, pleasurable substance he chose to keep in his mouth was music in the form of his own voice. The first, and most psychoanalysts would argue to also be the most important, ego defense mechanism identified by Freud was what he called repression: threatening thoughts and ideas are repressed, or pushed back into the unconscious (Freud, 1923/1990; Rosenzweig, 1943; Wagg & Pridmore, 2004).

Repression can therefore be viewed as a barrier used by the conscious mind to block out specific (usually painful, unpleasant, or inappropriate) thoughts arising from the unconscious. In the phallic stage (around age 4 years)

during which a child's sexual energy is focused on the genitals, the aggressive thoughts in the Oedipus complex about the same sex parents are learned to be repressed (but must be resolved later) by the developing boy (Adler, 2010; Rosenzweig, 1943; Wagg & Pridmore, 2004). One of those feelings the boy represses is the fear of castration, which will be discussed below.

Base on a Greek legend in which Oedipus, the Thebes king who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother, the term " Oedipus complex" was used by Freud to describe a boy's sexual desires toward his mother and rivalries toward his father (Adler, 2010; van Beekum, 2009). Freud theorized that such thoughts and feelings and the psychological defenses against such thoughts and feelings are of critical importance in personality development as they will become the fundamental reaction pattern the individual relies on throughout life (Adler, 2010; van Beekum, 2009).

Freud noted that during this phallic stage when children begin to explore their genitals – boys with their penises, at the same time they are also concerned with their fathers' penises and girls who do not have them. Freud theorized that while the boy is struggling with his intense sexual desire toward his mother, he must have also realized that he does not have the physical strength to overpower his father; he fears the father may castrate him as an act of revenge, leaving him without a penis and therefore resembling a girl – Freud termed this unconscious fear " castrationanxiety" (Adler, 2010; van Beekum, 2009).

In order to resolve this conflict successfully, the developing boy pledges allegiance to his father. He tries to become a person like his father, and by assuming his characteristics, the boy replaces his father to become the authoritative, father-of-the-household figure and so, by extension, achieves sexual relations with his mother while diminishing the fear of being castrated (Adler, 2010; van Beekum, 2009).

In Erik's case, I believe his total alienation from his family as well as the society at-large led to a totally unresolved Oedipus complex: he felt no love for his mother, he did not know his father at all, and therefore no parent to identify with. Failing to identify himself with one parent, Erik therefore was incapable of moral internalization. He did whatever made him feel good at the time; he neither feared nor knew punishment because it did not matter what he does or does not do, the results were inevitably the same.

In other words, his repressive defense mechanism, neither learned nor developed in childhood, was practically non-existent. Having no basic repressive skills and thus letting the thanatos force of the id to freely and repeatedly surface to the conscious and gratified, it is no wonder why Erik experienced frequent negative emotional outbursts, lack of remorse as an assassin, and an irrational, maniacal fixation on whatever he wished for, specifically, Christine. In addition, his obsession with Christine may be a way Erik dealt with impulses that he knew was unacceptable even to himself.

I believe he unconsciously identified himself with Christine, both talented and tormented but with the exception of her being accepted publically and he loathed. Because he could never be accepted by the public regardless of

how talented he was, teaching Christine all he knew and thus controlling her may be a way Erik thought he could live his imaginary “good life” through her success. By allowing Erik to kiss her on her cheek, a pivotal moment in the novel was created as Christine appeared to have melted his cold heart.

Although Maslow’s self-actualization theory may view Erik’s reaction as a peak experience, I do not believe that to be the case. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs placed self-actualization on the very top of the ladder and can only be achieved after all other needs, physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and esteem, are satisfied (Hanley & Abell, 2002). Clearly, none of Erik’s life needs were even close to being satisfied, and therefore the innate process of self-actualization (Hanley & Abell, 2002) must have been foreign to him.

I believe Erik’s reaction was another manifestation of the uncontrolled id surfacing to the conscious. This time, however, it was the eros force of the id that surfaced. This tremendous emotional release of positive energy, or catharsis, was so foreign yet comforting to him that he broke down and cried uncontrollably. This was most likely the very first time the eros and not the thanatos force of his id was gratified as he was so accustomed to in his life up to that very moment; he finally felt the positive aspect of what it is to be human.

The sensation of having the eros drive satisfied was so much more pleasurable than having the thanatos drive satisfied, his ego decided to choose to release Raoul and free Christine, allowing them to be married. B. F. Skinner’s Radical Behaviorism Approach to Erik’s Personality In stark contrast to personality theorist such as Freud and Jung, Burrhus Frederick

Skinner (1904 – 1990) viewed personality as a result of previous history of reinforcement (such as rewards and punishments) and that personality is determined and controlled by environmental factors (Moore, 2011).

Therefore, in order to understand the behavior of a person, we must first uncover the set of environmental conditions where the behavior is exhibited. Skinner reasoned that in the presence of a discriminative stimulus, a characteristic response is elicited (Moore, 2011). Depending on how the response is reinforced, the behavior of the individual toward that discriminative stimulus is gradually shaped (Moore, 2011). In his principles of operant conditioning, Skinner emphasized how behavior can be changed by manipulating the reinforcing consequence (Moore, 2011).

Skinner strongly rejected mentalism; terms such as personality, psychical structures (Freud's id, ego, and superego), needs, and instinct were of no meanings to Skinner and instead, he favored the directly observable behaviors and emphasized on the function of the behavior in his research (Moore, 2011). According to Skinner, there is no free will (Moore, 2011). In Skinner's view, what we see as personality is basically a group of responses to the environment, and if the responses are rewarded, then they are more likely to be repeated.

Freud viewed the id as the instinctual driving force from the undifferentiated core of personality while Skinner asserted that what we see as a driving force is really humans' innate susceptibility to reinforcement (Moore, 2011). Rather than seeing the ego as how humans respond to the world according to the reality principle, Skinner reasoned that all responses are learned, and

different behavior will be exhibited by an individual under different circumstances.

Refuting the Freudian concept of the superego as a set of internalized social rules and values that guide the ego in the continual struggle and negotiation with the id, Skinner believed that behavior is learned from how the society punishes such behavior: we simply control those behaviors that are not allowed by the society – exhibiting such behaviors will lead to unpleasant consequences. Therefore, Skinner interpreted the Freudian ego defense mechanism as avoidance to conditioned aversive stimulations, or punishments (Moore, 2011).

In terms of genetic predispositions, Skinner suggests that genes (biological factors) provide an individual a range of response capabilities, but it is the environment that selects for the type of response that best suits the individual's survival. Skinner also did not deny the existence of internal processes such as emotions and thoughts; he viewed them as individual characteristics caused by the environment and as such they are irrelevant in the explanation and the understanding of behavior (Moore, 2011).

Erik appeared to have been genetically gifted with an extremely wide range of response capabilities as well as a talent in knowledge acquisition. Born grotesquely deformed, the environmental factor that selected him came in the form of a band of wondering Gypsies. Exploiting his deformity for monetary gain, they actually provided Eric a chance to survive into adulthood. Because he was gifted as a learner, he mastered the Gypsies' many different performing skills and incorporated them into his own

routines, further securing his acceptance within the band – the members could reliably depend on him as amoneymaker.

His childhood experience thus far conditioned him to be independent: He could not depend on his family because he was a disgrace to them, he had no friends, and the band of Gypsies took pity on him for the sole reason of being able to make money off him. The more he enriched himself, the more valuable he was to the company. The reinforcing consequence was shelter and food, and his learned response to the environment was therefore to learn as much skill as he could and to become as selfish as he could.

To Erik, it was every man on his own and for his own. Erik would not have any problem in being an assassin. Within the Shah's realm, killing as directed by the Shah was rewarded. In addition, I believe that it is more than likely that Erik viewed "punishment" as normal, and hence his interpretation of "punishment" was not as an aversive stimulation, but rather normalcy. He therefore had no fear of being "punished" for being a killer and at the same time, successful killings were repeatedly reinforced with wealth and status.

This changed, however, when Christine entered the picture. Erik developed an obsession toward the beautiful, talented, but emotionally devastated (due to the death of her father) chorus girl. Behaviorist view obsession as random acts that are by chance reinforced (Moore, 2011). Christine was fascinated with his genius, and thought that he was an angel sent by her father. Having not seen his disfigurement, I believe Christine did love Erik before that revelation. She respected Erik for his talent, and curious

enough to learn more about this “ Angel of Music”. Erik no doubt was first captivated by her beauty, and when they actually spoke, Erik must have been pleasantly surprised that, for the first time in his life, he was treated as a person with no ill side-effects. These encounters-in-the-shadow made Erik feel good about himself, and together with a lack of negative consequences, he became obsessed with her – having a “ relationship” with Christine made him happy, easing the anxiety within.

Under Skinner’s concept of operant conditioning (operant because, in Erik’s case, he did not expect to be reinforced with kindness), I would think that by changing the environment from greed, hate, treachery, and death to that of kindness and warmth provided by the presence of Christine, Erik was able to radically change his behavior from total selfishness, oblivious to the needs of others to one that was more or less compassionate. This radical change, however, did not come overnight.

It was through multiple encounters with Christine, each time they learn more about each other, each time his action was reinforced by the increasing level of kindness and respect returned to him, that his behavior was shaped. Erik did not know love, compassion, kindness, or any other behavior that we associate as positive, and clearly those behaviors were not instinctual to him. With Christine, he was being rewarded for “ being good” – a teacher, a nurturing figure, or even, a lover.

The need to possess Christine solely for himself, however, proved to be overwhelming. Brief liaisons in the shadows, no matter how frequent, were no longer satisfying. He needed the environment created by the presence of

Christine all the time. Simply put, Erik had learned to become an addict; he was addicted to Christine. Behaviorists view love as a stimulus that elicits a range of responses (Moore, 2011; Tolman, 1923). Upon experiencing the love stimulus, infants and toddlers may respond by stop crying, smiling, cooing, etc.

and the outstretching and flaying of their arms may be interpreted as wanting more of the stimulus (Moore, 2011; Tolman, 1923). Erik never experienced love and yet he felt pleasure from the stimulus. Unlike unpleasant stimuli such as fear and anger that one reacts by removing oneself away from the hostile environment, Erik needed to remain in the environment that gave him pleasure. In order to do so, he must have Christine in order to create an environment that continuously provides him with that stimulus, love.

Most likely triggered by seeing her perform on stage that night, Erik resorted to the familiar solution in obtaining reward quickly and easily: he kidnapped her, threatened her with her very life if his addiction was not satiated. However, the environment where Christine is present may prove to be the key in his ultimate decision to free her. Skinner viewed that all behaviors are controlled by the environment, and I believe we are seeing this concept consolidate in Erik's decision. In the presence of Christine, Erik was compassionate, accommodating, and aware of the turmoil within himself and Christine.

I believe that in the environment created by her presence, he saw the impracticality and impossibility in the hope of spending the rest of his life

with her. Letting her free was the choice he made in order to make Christine happy, for giving her this happiness would be his own greatest reward.

Summary In this essay, the personality characteristics of Erik, Phantom of the Opera, were discussed using the Freudian psychoanalytic approach and the opposing Skinnerian radical behaviorism as references.

The Freudian approach would suggest that Erik's personality was a manifestation of his unconscious, orally fixated psychosexual development and an unresolved Oedipus complex with no repressive ego defense mechanism. Erik's life had been devoted to the satisfaction of the thanatos, the id driving force that leads toward aggression, destruction, and death. Without any internalized social rules and values (superego) as a guide to his actions, his ego had very little to resolve between the id and the superego.

As such, the id, driven by the thanatos force, repeatedly surface to the conscious and thus repeatedly gratified. The Skinnerian approach would view Erik's personality as shaped by previous history of reinforcement in his given environment, steadily and progressively as he developed from a severely deformed, ridiculed child to a highly talented but tormented adult with little conscience. Everything that made up the person Erik was learned, and he had no free will to choose otherwise. Through operant conditioning, Erik learned to be ruthless, selfish, and hateful.

A behaviorist may interpret Erik's need to possess Christine as a conditioned need for a stimulus, an addiction, and the respect and kindness returned to him by Christine functioned as reinforcers. In total disparity to his personality, the pivotal moment of the story came when Erik chose to let Christine and

Raoul free. A Freudian psychoanalyst may interpret this as his unconscious need to re-experience the pleasure he felt when he first unleashed the id eros force when Christine allowed him to kiss her on the cheek, a pleasure far surpassing what a gratified id thanatos force was able to offer him up to that point.

Radical behaviorism may view Erik's decision in releasing Christine and Raoul was environmentally influenced. First in the presence of Christine's voice alone and later with her physical presence repeatedly created an environment that was pleasurable to Erik – he was rewarded and reinforced with respect and human kindness. In that environment, he behaved compassionately – making Christine happy gave him pleasure in return. It would make her happiest with Raoul, and so the decision to free them was made. These two opposing theories provided very different explanations to Erik's personality.

However, I believe elements from both theories may be combined for a more comprehensive analysis on his behavior. It is very likely that Erik's behaviors were learned and shaped by the hostile environment he constantly found himself since birth. Those behaviors, however inappropriate from a "normal" person's point of view, were none-the-less necessary in ensuring his survival. The other aspect of his personality was his unconscious need for love and human kindness, something that he knew not existed until he encountered Christine.

This is the turning point for Erik's personality development and likely to be the first battle between the thanatos drive that he was so accustomed to and

the newly surfaced eros drive that his ego now must resolve. At the end, it was the eros force that predominated. Behaviorists would interpret that his act of compassion was defined by the environment with the presence of Christine; in her presence, Erik was able to explore the positive aspects of human behavior, ultimately realizing that he too possessed those qualities all along, just that they were, as Freud would put it, hidden in the unconscious.