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### Exploration of Theme



"Island I" by Ken Steinkamp; [www.kensteinkamp.com](http://www.kensteinkamp.com)

*In this section, we aim to explore themes in popular literature, poetry, plays,*

*art and music. In doing so, we gain new understandings and learn more through the words of the greats and the potent images of our collective histories. Write in, tell us your interpretations of your favorite works, and feel free to suggest the next piece of culture we research to divine its theme! Contact us! [themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org](mailto:themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org)*

In this issue, we look behind the mask to unveil the secrets of The Phantom of the Opera, the 1910 French novel. Gaston Leroux would herald the completion of each of his novels by running out onto the front lawn of his property and firing off a single pistol shot. Is it any wonder then that this powerfully dramatic sensationalist would be behind one of the most lasting, imaginative works of the twentieth century? Hardly surprising. Even less so when taking into consideration Leroux's experiences.

At a young age he came into a substantial inheritance and lived in a wild fashion until the money wore thin. He studied in law school and in addition to working as a court cleric, took on the vocations of journalist and theater critic for L'Echo de Paris. When writing for Le Matin he covered the Russian Revolution and the in-depth investigation of the Paris Opera House whose basement housed a cell of prisoners of the Paris Commune. With incredible inspiration and a voice for writing, he then pursued fiction ardently. His detective novels were to France what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works were to England. He co-founded a film company to simultaneously adapt newly-published novels into features.

This vision and mix of mediums is readily seen in The Phantom of the Opera where there is a keen interest in the visual aspects of art (the theatre productions) and the more literary backstage character development. In the realistic prologue to the book, Leroux portrays the Phantom almost as a real person, methodically delving into the case as would a journalist.

The balance between non-fiction (the journalist perspective) and fiction (the novel itself) portray the central theme of reality vs. illusion. The phantom, Erik, relies heavily on illusion to manipulate his reality. The theatre with its productions, stage, costumes and props show a fictional side of the Opera House while Leroux takes the reader backstage to explore the real world of the performers including Christine Daae. The managers learn the difficult way from the phantom that their "place is in the office"; this is another clash of art

and the real material world. Carlotta refuses to face the reality that the height of her career has passed. Christine's innocence doesn't allow for her to initially see the phantom (her Angel of Music) for who he really is and Raoul tries to deny his existence completely.

Despite the struggles for illusion, its comforts and dangers, truth prevails when the phantom is shown humanity ergo he in turn shows kindness. The glittering facade is pulled back to reveal truer gifts of heart. Fear is replaced with understanding, hatred with compassion, naivety with knowing. The music and art of the novel, though used at times for character's own purposes, also show beauty where there was perceived to be none. Reality is left as a loosely-defined term in the story as though the reader is intended to keep hold of part of the mystery, beauty and ambiguity in the world.

Write in with your views/favorite adaptations of The Phantom of the Opera!  
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