

# The Hunchback of Notre Dame Study Guide

## SETTING

The entire plot of the novel takes place in the city of Paris in the fifteenth century. Most activity takes place in and around the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, one of Paris' most notable landmarks. From the tower of Notre Dame, the entire city is visible. Beneath the tower is the Place de Greve, a dark and sinister place where criminals are hung. Many of the novel's tragic events take place in the Place de Greve. The Court of Miracles, a Parisian neighborhood, is also of importance to the novel, for the gypsies and vagabonds live here and have formed their own mini- government.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

### Quasimodo

A deformed "hunchback" who has only one eye and cannot hear. He lives in the bell tower of Notre-Dame, where he is responsible for ringing the bells. As an infant, he was rescued from an orphanage by Claude Frollo, a priest at Notre-Dame, and raised within the walls of the cathedral. He is vilified by the entire city of Paris simply because of his deformities. During the course of the novel, he proves that he is a brave and kind character with a noble heart.

### Claude Frollo

A priest of Notre-Dame and the archdeacon of Josas. He adopts Quasimodo as an infant and becomes the hunchback's master. During the course of the novel, he develops an obsession for La Esmeralda and determines that if he cannot have her, no one will have her. He stabs Phoebus, her lover, and tries to do away with Gringoire, her husband. When he learns that La Esmeralda will never love him, he allows her to die on the gallows. He becomes a melodramatic villain whose evil passion destroys everyone.

### La Esmeralda

A gypsy girl who is beautiful, kind-hearted, and charming. She is a street entertainer who performs tricks with her pet goat, named Djali. Because of her loveliness, men cannot resist her. Gringoire becomes her husband and gives up being a philosopher; Phoebus, a captain in the King's army, has an affair with her; Frollo, the priest, is obsessed with her; and Quasimodo genuinely loves and protects her.

### Gringoire

A poet and philosopher who studies with Claude Frollo. When La Esmeralda marries him to save him from the gypsies, he gives up his studies and becomes a street performer with her. During the course of the novel, he becomes a pawn of the evil Claude Frollo, leading an attack by the gypsies on Notre-Dame as they try to free La Esmeralda.

### Captain Phoebus

The captain of the archers in the King's army. He seduces La Esmeralda, which causes Claude Frollo to stab him. When the priest leaves Phoebus to die in a pool of blood, La Esmeralda is found near his body and arrested for the crime. Throughout the rest of the novel, she is madly in love with Phoebus, even though she believes him to be dead. In truth, Phoebus recovers from his wounds and eventually leads the attack on the gypsies who are storming Notre-Dame. He, therefore, is instrumental in the arrest and subsequent hanging of La Esmeralda, who loves him until the end.

## **CONFLICT**

### **Protagonist**

Quasimodo is the central character and protagonist of the novel, as indicated by the title of the book. Because he is a deformed, deaf, and one-eyed hunchback, he is exiled from society and cruelly treated. For most of his life, his only companions are Claude Frollo and the bells. When La Esmeralda, the gypsy street performer, shows him a kindness, Quasimodo becomes devoted to her, becoming her savior and protector.

### **Antagonist**

There are two antagonists in the novel. The first is Quasimodo's deformity. Because of his hunched back, his one-eyed and disfigured face, and his deafness, Quasimodo is misunderstood and hated by the people of Paris, who call him the devil. When he saves La Esmeralda from certain death and carries her into Notre-Dame for sanctuary, she cannot bear to look at him because of his ugliness.

The second antagonist is Claude Frollo, his master. Though he was once a good man who helped Quasimodo, Frollo becomes transformed by his lust for La Esmeralda. Driven by his evil passion, he ignores Quasimodo, stabs Phoebus, manipulates Gringoire, and eventually causes the hanging of La Esmeralda. When he fiendishly laughs about her execution, Quasimodo pushes him off the balcony of Notre-Dame, causing him to fall to his death on the street below. Ironically, with the death of the priest, Quasimodo is totally alone in the world. He disappears from Notre-Dame and perishes in the Montfaucon vault, clinging to the dead body of La Esmeralda, his beloved. Frollo is therefore, indirectly responsible for the death of the hunchback of Notre Dame, as well as the death La Esmeralda.

### **Climax**

The climax of the novel occurs when Quasimodo realizes he has lost La Esmeralda, in spite of the fact that he has tried to save her by fighting the mob of gypsies from the Court of Miracles. Since he no longer has anything to live for, Quasimodo later kills Claude Frollo, who is responsible for La Esmeralda's disappearance from her cell in the tower and her eventual hanging, and then perishes in his grief.

### **Outcome**

The novel ends in tragedy, for Quasimodo is defeated by his deformity and by his master, Claude Frollo. La Esmeralda, whom he genuinely loves, can never return his love because of his horrible appearance; in fact, she finds it difficult to even look at him, even though she tries to be kind to him. Frollo defeats Quasimodo in a worse way. He causes the death of La Esmeralda, which takes away the hunchback's purpose in life. With nothing to live for after La Esmeralda's death, Quasimodo perishes in the vault, clinging to her dead body. In death, his misshapen body no longer distances him from the one he loves.

## **PLOT (Synopsis)**

In the fifteenth century, the city of Paris is alive with festivals. As part of one of the celebrations, a playwright, named Pierre Gringoire, has written a mystery play, which he believes is a masterpiece. As the play is performed, there are continuous interruptions, and the audience does not seem to understand or enjoy the play. Gringoire is devastated that his drama is not popular and is enraged when the audience decides to desert the play and commence the festival to elect the Pope of Fools. In this contest, people stick their faces through a curtain and make fiendishly silly faces. The ugliest face is declared the winner and called the Pope of Fools.

A man named Quasimodo lives in the tower of the cathedral of Notre Dame and serves as the bell-ringer. He is physically atrocious, having a deformed body, a hunched back, a disfigured face, and a single eye. Because of his freakish appearance and his deafness, Quasimodo has been vilified by the citizens of Paris. As a result, he is a loner who seldom ventures out of his tower. His only friend in the world is Claude Frollo, the priest at Notre-Dame who adopted Quasimodo as an infant and brought him up in the confines of the cathedral. Quasimodo somehow gets caught up in the Festival of Fools and is thought to be a contestant. Because of his horribly disfigured face, he easily wins the contest and is crowned the Pope of Fools. As is tradition, he is lifted up through the streets of the city, celebrated instead of vilified; but his celebration does not last for long.

The dejected Gringoire leaves the scene of his play and walks miserably through the streets of Paris, feeling like a failure. When he comes upon La Esmeralda, a gypsy street entertainer who does tricks with her goat Djali, Gringoire stops to watch her performance.

He notices that someone else in the crowd watches La Esmeralda intensely. It is Claude Frollo, the priest of Notre-Dame and the master of Quasimodo. Gringoire also hears an old woman, locked away in Rolande's Tower for the insane, as she shouts curses on the gypsy. The old woman, named Pacquette, is known as Sister Gudule. Many years ago she gave birth to a beautiful girl, who was kidnapped by Egyptian gypsies and replaced with a horribly deformed baby. When Pacquette went insane over the loss of her baby girl, the deformed replacement was given up for adoption and taken in by Claude Frollo. Pacquette was locked away in Rolande's Tower, where she nurtured her hatred for all gypsies.

As the procession of the Pope of Fools comes near, Claude Frollo sees his bell-ringer taking part in the grotesque celebration and makes him quit. When they leave the area, they come upon La Esmeralda. Frollo, who is in love with La Esmeralda, tries to kidnap her, but when his actions are seen, he slips away. Quasimodo is left to take the blame. Gringoire rushes in to protect La Esmeralda. The hunchback strikes him, knocking him to the ground. Within moments, a soldier, named Phoebus, comes to La Esmeralda's rescue and takes Quasimodo into custody. Gringoire continues on his way, wishing he had a place to sleep and food to eat. He comes to a place known as the Court of Miracles, where gypsies and vagabonds live by their own laws. When he dares to enter the Court of Miracles, Gringoire is told he will be executed for trespassing unless someone in the band agrees to marry him. La Esmeralda, proving her kindness, steps up and volunteers to become his wife. By marrying Gringoire, the gypsy girl saves his life.

Quasimodo is sentenced to a public beating for taking part in the attempted kidnapping of La Esmeralda. A large crowd gathers to watch the hunchback receive his punishment. Quasimodo spies his master, Claude Frollo, in the crowd, and thinks he will be saved; but the priest does nothing, not even acknowledging that he knows the hunchback. Quasimodo is devastated, for he has always believed in Frollo. After the flogging, Quasimodo is exhausted and parched. When he begs for water, La Esmeralda is the only person in the crowd to take pity on him. As she gives him water, her kindness brings tears to the hunchback's eyes, and he falls in love with her.

## **THEMES**

### **Major**

The most important theme in the novel is that a person cannot be judged on appearances. Since Frollo is a priest, a person would normally assume him to be a kind and righteous man. In truth, he is despicably cruel, manipulative, and evil. In contrast, most people judged Quasimodo to be the devil because of his disfigured outward appearance. Inside, however, he is filled with love and kindness, becoming La Esmeralda's savior and protector. La Esmeralda is also misjudged. Because she is a gypsy street entertainer, the people of Paris believe she is evil; but like Quasimodo, she is filled with love and kindness. She marries Gringoire to save him from execution and steps forward on the pillory to give the parched and beaten Quasimodo a drink when no one else will.

### **Minor**

The key minor theme in the book is the importance of fate in a person's life. The characters in the book are seldom in control of their own destinies. La Esmeralda is snatched from her crib as a baby and brought up by gypsies. Because of her beauty, which she does not realize, Gringoire, Frollo, and Quasimodo fall in love with her; she, however, is in love with Captain Phoebus, who does not return her love because he believes she is beneath him. Because Frollo is obsessed with La Esmeralda, he stabs Phoebus in her presence; through no fault of her own, she is blamed for the crime and sentenced to die. Because of a previous kindness that La Esmeralda displayed to Quasimodo, he rescues her from hanging and gives her sanctuary in the cathedral. But because of his appearance, she cannot stand to look at her savior and protector as he watches over her in her cell at Notre-Dame. Frollo, the priest, is driven mad by La Esmeralda's presence in his church. The priest tries to force himself on her, but the hunchback again comes to La Esmeralda's rescue. Frollo is incensed that he cannot have the gypsy girl for his own and plots to have her executed. After stealing her from Notre-Dame, he puts her in Rolande's tower, where La Esmeralda discovers that Pacquette is her mother. When Pacquette tries to protect her newly found daughter from the King's army, she is struck by a soldier and killed. When Quasimodo sees his beloved La Esmeralda being hung, he kills Frollo in a rage and then perishes in grief. It is fate that causes the book to end in great tragedy.

## **MOOD**

The general mood of the novel is dark, somber, and tragic, with elements of mystery, the supernatural, and wickedness. Largely due to fate, all the major characters die in the course of the novel, adding to the tragedy of the book.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Author Information

Victor Hugo was born in France on February 26, 1802. The only systematic education he received was between the years of 1813 and 1818, when he attended school at the Pension Cordier. During that time he experimented with writing, attempting odes, satires, tragedies, elegies, idylls, translations of Latin poets and even one comic opera. In 1819, he and his older brother founded a fortnightly review called *Le Conservateur Littéraire*. The years that followed saw the advance of the Romantic Movement, and Hugo and his companions became the leaders. During this romantic period, Hugo's most important works were a collection of poems, *Les Orientales*, and the historical novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

In 1841, Victor Hugo was elected as a member of the French Academy, and by 1845, he had established himself as the leading lyrical poet of France. During this period, he wrote the poems *Les Feuilles d' Automne* and *Les Chants du Crépuscle* and the plays *Le Roi Amuse* (on which Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* is based), *Ruy Blas*, and *Marie Tudor*. After the revolution of 1848, which ended with the abdication of Louis Philippe, Hugo was elected Deputy to the National Assembly. For a short time, he supported Louis Napoleon as President of the Republic, but after the coup d'état of 1851, he turned against him. In order to avoid being arrested, he fled to Brussels and began his exile in Guernesey, which continued until 1870. During these years he wrote some of his most famous works: *Les Châtiments* (1853), *Les Contemplations* (1856), *Les Misérables* (1862), *Les Travailleurs de La Mer* (1866), and *L'Homme qui Rit* (1869).

Victor Hugo lived through the siege and capitulation of Paris in 1871. In the following years, he took an active part in the political life of the new Republic. In 1873, he published his last great novel, *Quatrevingt-treize*. During the last few years of his life, he became a spokesman for his country and was adored by all. Victor Hugo died on May 22, 1885 and was laid to rest in circumstances of unparalleled pomp and ceremony in the Pantheon.

### Historical Information

In 1830, the Romanticists, including Victor Hugo, were rebelling against classicism and its insistence on traditional topics and prose that was characterized by order and regularity. They dared to experiment with unlikely subjects, like ugliness, and to employ irregular prose and structure. While writing *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Hugo chose to use the form of the traditional historical novel, but his approach and his subject matter were new and shocking. Quasimodo, his main character, was a terribly deformed and deaf man who was shunned by all.

Hugo's choice of 1482 as the setting for the novel is highly significant. Louis XI, a character in the novel, helped to dismantle feudalism and bring the Middle Ages to an end. The transitional period that followed the Middle Ages gave rise to civil unrest and generated all sorts of new ideas, making it similar to the Romantic Period in which Hugo lived and wrote. This period of transition at the end of the fifteenth century was a compelling time in which to set an epic novel, especially when the novel challenged traditional, classical literature.

## QUESTIONS

1. Quasimodo's first appearance in the novel is comic; his second is threatening and evil. He is a character full of contrasts in appearance and personality. Describe him in detail, giving specifics from the novel to support your opinions.
2. Why is Quasimodo considered the protagonist of the plot? Explain his antagonists and the outcome of his story.
3. Claude Frollo has two sides to his personality. Compare his early aspirations and goals to his eventual downfall.
4. Compare and contrast Esmeralda and Quasimodo. Why are they perfect complements to one another?
5. What is Quasimodo's relationship to the bells of Notre-Dame? How do the bells both harm and protect Quasimodo?
6. What causes Quasimodo's relationship with the bells to change? Explain why you think this is good or bad.
7. Explain how appearances are deceiving in the novel.
8. Explain how fate plays an important role in the novel, giving at least three specific examples of how fate affects the outcome of the plot.
9. How is the character of Quasimodo in keeping with the Romantic Literary movement?
10. Describe Phoebus as a character. Explain if you think he is a villain.
11. Discuss the irony of Claude Frollo's religious position and his wicked behavior.
12. Explain the details and the importance of the final scene in the vault at Montfaucon.