A Journey from Adolescence to Adulthood: An Analysis of Color Using Semiotic Criticism Theory

The Phantom of the Opera, perhaps one of the most famous plays and films, is a classic piece that people from all generations have seen. Joel Schumacher directed the most recent version of the musical in 2004, which appeared in movie form. The film is about a disfigured man, the Phantom, who lives in the basement of The Opera House in Paris. The Phantom terrorizes The Opera House cast so that Christine, a ballerina, will take the place of lead vocal performer Carlotta. Throughout the film, the Phantom trains Christine to sing as he falls in love with her. The cast of The Opera House is petrified of the Phantom, while his talent intrigues Christine. Although the storyline is captivating and unique, one could argue that the wardrobe of the characters is just as fascinating. The storyline takes place in the late 1800’s when women dressed with full hoop skirts and petticoats. Every move that the characters make in the film is dramatic due to the visual stimuli of the mixture of colors and stunning wardrobes. Using the issues of semiotic criticism theory, an analysis of the color of Christine’s wardrobe shows her transformation from a young innocent girl to a full experienced woman. The purpose of this critical paper is to first explain semiotic criticism theory and then to analyze the different wardrobe changes of the main character, Christine, with semiotic criticism theory.

Semiotic criticism theory deals with the study of signs in terms of their connotative and denotative meaning. In order for a word and symbol to take form of an
alternative meaning, there must be a sign. A sign is composed of the signified and the signifier. According to Arthur Asa Berger, a Professor at San Francisco State University and the author of *Media Analysis Techniques*, he believes, ”A sign is a combination of a concept and a sound-image, a combination that cannot be separated” (19). Berger explains that if the signifier or the signified is missing, a sign cannot be apparent. By definition, the signifier “refers to a meaningful form, while the signified designates the concept which that form evokes” (Silverman 6).

Along with these ideas, there are three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is “when there is a topological similarity between the signifier and its denotata” (Blonsky 465). The icon resembles the actual meaning. For example, women and men restroom signs are iconic because they show the universal man and woman sign for which door a man and women should use for the bathroom. An index is when “the signifier is contiguous with its signified, or is a sample of it” (Blonsky 465). An example of an index is knocking. People know when they hear a knock someone is trying to get their attention, usually at the door. Lastly, a symbol is “a sign without either similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata” (Blonsky 466). When dealing with symbols, multiple words may represent the same thing. People usually have to analyze the symbol in order to make an accurate meaning to their study of work. A great example of a symbol is color, which demonstrates the multiple meanings a color can have in different cultures. In China, it is tradition for a bride to wear red as opposed to the American tradition for a bride to wear white. In China, the citizens think that white resembles death while citizens of America think white
represents purity and virginity. Since the color of wedding dresses can have multiple meanings, critics argue that it is a symbol.

The last popular issue of semiotic criticism theory is codes. Codes are groups of symbols that are associated with a meaning. Berger states, “these codes, or ‘secret structures’ in our minds, affect the way we interpret signs and symbols found in the media and the way we live” (34). Berger explains that codes can define multiple cultures while the people in these cultures are not consciously aware of the impact codes have on their lives. For example, when people drive, there are codes that they follow. People know of the rule to stop at a red light, not to pass on a double line and to wear seatbelts. Drivers subconsciously perform these “codes” without hesitation. Using the issues of semiotic criticism theory, almost all types of communication means are candidates for analysis, including film and wardrobe.

The issues of semiotic criticism theory also apply to the film The Phantom of the Opera, when analyzing the symbolic meaning of color. Christine Daaé, one of the main characters of the film, prays every night to her deceased father to send her the angel of music. Christine hopes that an angel of music will bless her with the ability to star in a lead soprano role at The Opera House and her wishes come true as the Phantom listens to her prayers daily. The Phantom takes her wishes upon him and tries to scare away the current soprano, Carlotta, so that the audience can hear Christine’s pure voice. The Phantom first appears in front of Christine while she prays, so she believes that the Phantom is her “angel of music.” The first important time that the audience sees Christine, her wishes have come true and she takes the lead role of the Opera since Carlotta chose to quit. In this scene, Christine is singing in a full, pure white dress for her
opening performance of the Opera Popular. In the western culture, white is thought to be “an all-round color of protection, bringing peace and comfort, alleviating emotional shock and despair, and helping inner cleansing of emotions, thoughts and spirit” (Chiazzari 20). The statement “alleviating emotional shock and despair” applies to this scene because Carlotta has chosen to quit and Christine stepped up to take her role. She is the alleviator of the problem and viewers can at her as a savior. If Christine did not take on the lead role, the Opera would not have been able to put on the play and would have lost a lot of money and customer trust.

The next main scene that Christine appears in, she is in the chapel praying to her father and thanking him for sending her the angel of music. Her wardrobe is still the full, white dress and in the chapel, she appears to be more angelic. The idea of Christine taking time to pray after her feature performance shows dedication to her father and God. When Christine stands up to leave with her friend Meg, the camera zooms into a stained glass window baring the picture of an angel. The color white symbolizes that Christine is not only a savior, but also possesses pure and superior angelic qualities.

The third scene that the audience sees Christine in, the Phantom has taken her to his basement corridors and tries to seduce her while promising to be her vocal coach. Christine appears in the color of white in this scene too, but she is dressed in a provocative white nightgown. Her nightgown bears a slit that traces up her leg and stops right before her undergarments. Since the color white represents virginity (brides are supposed to be virgins to wear white), it is evident that Christine does not feel promiscuous towards the Phantom, as he does for her. From the analysis of the color of Christine’s nightgown, the viewer can assume that she does not intend to have sexual
relations with the Phantom as he leads her to his bedroom. Rather, Christine looks up to him as her “angel of music.” Although Christine is pure and possesses virginal qualities, the provocative nightgown can also symbolize she may be sexually interested even if she does not intend for the Phantom to seduce her.

The next important scene that bears colorful symbolism of Christine’s wardrobe is when she is on the roof of the Opera House and is talking to her childhood love, Raoul. Raoul sings to her, in order for Christine not to worry about the entrapment of the Phantom and reassures her that he does not exist. After he quits singing, he professes his undying love for her and explains that he has loved her since childhood, when they used to play together. Christine is shocked and scared that the Phantom will hear his profession, but is excited about Raoul’s feelings. Her wardrobe is a full pink skirt with a white corset top. This outfit is very symbolic for her feelings towards Raoul. Since she is still a virgin and very innocent, her top bears the color of white. The white may also represent her uncertainty of her feelings toward Raoul since she is not experienced with relationships. The color pink is “emotionally soothing and calming and surrounds us with a sense of love and protection. While red relates more to sexuality, pink is associated with unselfish love” (Chiazzari 18). Since pink is associated with the feelings of unselfish love and protection, Christine’s skirt symbolizes that she feels protected and when she is with Raoul. The color of her skirt also shows that she has loving feelings towards Raoul, but since her top is white it is evident that she is adventuring the adolescent stages of love.

After Raoul professes his love to Christine, the next scene shows the two of them at a masquerade ball. In this scene, Raoul has already proposed to Christine and she
wears the engagement ring around her neck so that the Phantom does not realize he is losing her to Raoul. Raoul tells her that he wishes she would wear the ring and not fear because an engagement is something to celebrate, not hide. Although Christine would love to wear the ring, she fears that the Phantom will kill Raoul. The outfit Christine wears is an elegant, long and full pink dress. The dress is very appropriate for the ball and she looks absolutely stunning. The color of her dress fits symbolically with her mood of the evening. Raoul has just recently proposed to her and she cannot help but feel in a state of bliss. Pink also “lessens the feelings of irritation and aggression, and surrounds us with the sense of love and protection” (18). Since earlier in the night Christine was frustrated due to the Phantoms control over her, the pink dress may symbolize that she is no longer frustrated because Raoul is there to alleviate her stress and to protect her from her deepest fear: the control of the Phantom. The pink also symbolizes Christine’s love for Raoul since they are preparing to be married.

The last significant outfit that Christine wears is when she is visiting her father’s grave in the cemetery. In this scene, she wears a full-elaborated black dress. In the Western culture, “black is associated with death; mourners wear dark clothes and the body is transported in a black limousine” (Fisher and Zelanski 31). When she goes to visit her father’s grave, she is deeply saddened that she is under the control of the Phantom and she prays to her father that everything will be okay. Christine’s black dress symbolizes her sad feelings of being controlled and the mourning of her father. Not long after she arrives at the gravesite, Raoul meets her there. Raoul realizes that the Phantom has secretly driven Christine’s carriage and she does not know of his presence. Since black is associated with death and mourning, Christine’s dress foreshadows the fight
between the Phantom and Raoul. The full graveyard scene is not positive and leaves Raoul’s arm injured from the Phantom and Christine fearing for her life.

Christine’s outfits throughout the film *The Phantom of the Opera*, change rapidly through the experiences of her life. She starts in a full white angelic dress, which symbolizes her innocence and inexperience for life. One of the films last scenes ends with Christine wearing a black dress, mourning her life and the life of her father. Viewers can see Christine begin as an adolescent when she first appears and ends as a blossomed women who has experienced love, death, and the wonders of life. Without the usage of color, Christine’s progress would not be as easily recognizable to the audience and her character would not develop fully. Christine’s character development is important to understand because if she were not naïve, she would never have been under the rule of the Phantom. At the end of the play when she has blossomed into an experienced woman, she escapes from the Phantom and is able to live a healthy loving life with her true love, Raoul.

*The Phantom of the Opera* has reached many generations of audiences who love the common storyline of the beast who tries to get the beauty. Joel Schumacher’s version of *The Phantom of the Opera* leaves the audience with a connection to the main character, Christine, due to her transformation from adolescence to adulthood. The symbolism of the color of her elegant wardrobe helps explain to the audience that before people may reach adulthood, they first go through a state of innocence. Through the issues of semiotic criticism theory, the color of Christine’s wardrobe shows her transformation from a young innocent girl to an experienced woman.
Works Cited


