

“Beauty and the Beast”: Romance, Reform and Mystery in the Films of Lon Chaney

Lon Chaney was a phenomenon of the silent cinema and, according to exhibitors, he was the most popular male star of 1928 and 1929 (Studlar 202). He was born in 1883 and began a theatrical career in his late teens, working with touring vaudeville acts for about ten years before moving into film. During 1912 and 1913, his first film work was in uncredited bit parts for various studios but he then worked under contract to Universal until around 1917, after which Chaney again worked for various studios and made a name for himself in strong supporting roles, such as in *The Scarlet Car* (1917) and *Riddle Gawne* (1918). His break came in 1919, when he played “The Frog” in *The Miracle Man*, the same year that he also made *The Wicked Darling* for Universal, which was his first feature-length collaboration with director Tod Browning, with whom he would work ten times over the following decade, particularly during the period 1925-1930, when Chaney was working exclusively for M-G-M. By the time he signed his contract with M-G-M, Chaney was already a huge star, who was known for his mastery of make-up and disguise, a skill that he used to great effect throughout the 1920s, and earned him the name of “The Man With a Thousand Faces”. When sound was being introduced during the late 1920s, Chaney initially resisted the transition and, by the time that he made his first sound film, a remake of his 1925 film *The Unholy Three*, he had been diagnosed with cancer, and passed away one month after the film’s release.

Following his death, the industry was eager to find a replacement and the horror stars that emerged after 1930 were usually judged in relation to him. For example, in 1933 alone, it was suggested that Lon Chaney’s ‘historical mantle ... has apparently descended on Mr Karloff’s shoulders’ (Mannock 30), while Claude Rains was declared to be ‘the new Lon Chaney’ (Anon, “New” 5). However, although Chaney is acknowledged to be a key figure in the history of horror in particular, and of cinema more generally, it is still the case that, as

Gaylyn Studlar observed over twenty-five years ago, beyond *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), “the numerous other films from his seventeen-year movie career are almost totally neglected by contemporary scholars.” (204; for notable exceptions see Skal and Worland)¹

Studlar’s study of him is therefore an important intervention and it brilliantly explores the “failed and freakish” masculinities that he performed (210), masculinities that drew upon the traditions of the Freak Show. However, she is too quick to read him as *different* from other male stars such as John Barrymore and Rudolph Valentino and this is due to an understandable, but none the less misleading, focus on the body. As she puts it, “Chaney’s variations of the grotesque male body create a radical contrast with the male body foregrounded for the audience’s spectacular consumption of Barrymore, Valentino, and, albeit in less explicitly sexual ways, of Fairbanks.” (201)

For example, the focus on the body distracts from that which unites Chaney with Valentino, their narratives of sacrifice. As Studlar notes, Valentino may have been intoxicatingly beautiful but his ethnicity also made his desirability problematic. He was associated with the figures of the “tango pirate” or the “lounge lizard,” figures who operated as folk devils in the 1920s, which witnessed intense campaigns by a nativist “white America” to assert racial hierarchies and halt immigration from Southern Europe, China and Japan (Gerstle). The tango pirates and lounge lizards were ethnic males who entertained “white” women in tea dances and night clubs and were identified by campaigners as a “danger to America’s biological future”: “the nation’s dancing, pleasure-mad women were leading the country into ‘race-suicide.’” (Studlar 163)

Consequently, Valentino’s sexuality was not only associated with pleasure but also with danger, and his most successful film, *The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* (1921) required that he “be redeemed through suffering and the realization of true love” (Studlar

170). If his love is initially illicit, he proves his worthiness in the end when he “dies on a muddy battlefield” during the First World War and then makes “a ghostly return to encourage Marguerite [his lover] to fulfil her duty to her now blind husband.” (Studlar 170) As we will see, Chaney’s films revolve around similar narratives of sacrifice: his films are usually love stories, in which he initially seems to be an inappropriate suitor for the woman that he desires; but eventually proves his worthiness through sacrifice at the end.² Certainly, this love is sometimes presented as a paternal affection, as Studlar notes, but many films explicitly concern romantic love, and even sexual desire.

The focus on Chaney’s physicality is therefore misleading, given that it accepts that which the films often worked to challenge. Elsewhere, Studlar challenges “the popular assumption that he was a star of horror movies” and she lists an alternative set of terms through which his films were understood in the period (Studlar 205). On the one hand, as Jancovich and Brown have shown, these terms were often explicitly associated with “horror” at the time (Jancovich and Brown); and, on the other, Chaney’s association with horror was so strong that his presence shaped the ways in which his films were read. As one article put it: “In each and every picture, the unmistakable menace of Chaney will be there – the nightmare shocks – the lurking, nameless terror that grips the heart, and makes each separate hair to stand on end” (Ussher, “Menace” 30).

Furthermore, Jancovich and Brown also stress that, in the 1920s, horror was associated with another term, mystery, and that horror and mystery were understood in ways that was quite different from contemporary uses of these terms (Jancovich and Brown). Horror and mystery concerned investigations into the strange, eerie and uncanny, in which appearances were not to be trusted and in which strange goings-on within a haunted house might either be revealed to have a rational explanation (thus demonstrating that what appeared to be supernatural was an illusion) or the inverse: that rationalist accounts of the

world might be exposed as illusions and that which is usually dismissed as fantasy or superstition might be shown to be real.

Consequently, rather than being “a shocking spectacle of difference” (Studlar 241), Chaney’s performances often illustrated that things were not how they appeared: that his monsters might be *visually* marked as *other* but that their physical appearance was deceptive, a theme that brings us back to ethnicity in various ways. On the one hand, like Valentino, his characters were often marked as ethnically other but, on the other, these narratives often chimed with the ethnic audiences of 1920s cinema. As Douglas Gomery has pointed out, the Hollywood studios operated by owning “15% of all US theatres (but the majority of first-run)”, a strategy that allowed them to cream off the most valuable audiences and “gather 50-75 per cent of box-office revenues” (Gomery, *Hollywood* 18). However, as he also points out, the core of its audience were the new ethnic middle classes, for whom the cinema confirmed their sense of having achieved socially mobility.

As Gomery discusses, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Balaban and Katz became one of the most powerful and influential cinema chains in the US and by 1925 had “merged with Hollywood’s largest studio, Famous Players-Lasky” to form “the most powerful movie company in the world” (Gomery, *Shared* 34). The basis of this success was the company’s initial strategy of targeting areas such as North Lawndale (Chicago), in which, as the 1920 census demonstrated, 75% of the population were “Russian Jews who had come to America in the 1880 and 1890s, settled in the neighbourhood around Hull House (Maxwell Street)” but had then “moved to [North Lawndale] in order to prove that they had ‘made it.’” (Gomery, *Shared* 44) Furthermore, Balaban and Katz constructed their cinemas to enhance this feeling of having “made it”. The buildings were designed lavishly so that they “spelled opulence to the average Chicago moviegoer” (Gomery, *Shared* 47), while service workers were on hand to treat “the movie patron as a king or queen” (Gomery, *Shared* 47). In this

way, these “movie palaces” were designed to create an “upper class atmosphere” (Gomery, *Shared* 49).

But while these movie palaces may have offered an experience *like* that of an upper class theatre or hotel, these venues were *not* upper class theatres or hotels. These movie palaces offered their patrons the *illusion* of entry into the world of the glamorous upper classes but their customers came to the cinema because they implicitly acknowledged their exclusion from the worlds of the upper class: they knew that they would not be welcome in that world or feel that they fitted into it. As we have seen, this was a period of struggle between what Gerstle has called “civic nationalism” and “racial nationalism” (Gerstle). If the first promised ethnic groups that, if you work hard, you can become one of us; the latter asserted that you can never become one of us, no matter what you do!

It is this experience that confronts the eponymous heroine of Olive Higgins Prouty’s 1923 novel, *Stella Dallas* (Prouty 1923), and its 1925 film adaptation. Stella dreams of escaping her working class roots and becoming upper class; but she ultimately finds that she is neither accepted by high society nor comfortable within it. At the film’s end, then, she is resigned to her poverty but stares through a window (that looks very much like cinema screen) as she witnesses her daughter’s marriage. Stella is able to witness (but cannot be a part of) the ceremony which will enable her daughter to achieve the social mobility that Stella will never enjoy and which, ultimately, depends on Stella being rejected by her daughter. Like both Myrtle Wilson and James Gatz in *The Great Gatsby* (published three years after the novel and one year after the film, 1926), Stella is condemned to moments of spectatorship, in which she can only ever stare longingly at that which will always be beyond her grasp. Furthermore, Stella’s decision to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her daughter, not only looks very similar to the sacrifices that conclude most of Chaney’s films but also the

familiar narrative in which the ethnic immigrant sacrifices their own life for the sake of the next generation.

The following essay will therefore examine articles on Chaney, and reviews of his films, that were written during his career and use them as evidence of *some* of the ways in which he may have been understood during the 1920s. Of course, these articles were usually exercises in public relations that were designed to sell Chaney and his films in specific ways, but even so they provide a sense of how audiences were cued to read these films. In the process, the first section will explore the ways in which these films were discussed as weird romances in which Chaney’s monsters are motivated by a hopeless love but achieve redemption at the end through self-sacrifice. The second section then moves on to analyse the ways in which his monsters are often seen as sympathetic and appealing figures and that, even when they are not, their monstrous actions were understood as being a product of social conditions. In other words, Chaney’s monsters need to be understood in terms of changing attitudes to social deviance and are often contrasted with an apparently respectable pillar of the community who acts as the real villain. Finally, the third section investigates Chaney’s films as mysteries in which things are not how they appear and the ways in which this is related to the representation of various deviant “underworlds”. Furthermore, these underworlds are related to a growing interest in subcultural communities in the US at the time, and to the ways in which “cultural relativism” worked within the 1920s. This will finally bring us back to the ways in which Chaney’s films evoked contradictory responses in viewers of both horror and pleasure, repulsion and desire.

Romance, Redemption and Sacrifice

As has been demonstrated elsewhere, Chaney did not simply address a male audience but was understood as having an appeal to women (see also Jancovich and Brown, “Finest”).

Nonetheless, this appeal needs clarification and one can see Chaney’s monsters as almost an inversion of Barrymore’s Mr Hyde. Mr Hyde might have his attractions but he was basically evil and repulsive, while Chaney’s monsters may have looked repulsive, and even have been psychologically twisted by circumstances, but they were usually tortured souls that “aroused sympathy” in viewers (Rush., *Laugh* 14). For example, *Picture-Play* claimed that, in *He Who Gets Slapped*, Chaney “pulls your heart strings until they nearly break” (Denbo 88) while *Variety* condemned *Mockery* (1927) for “striking no sympathetic chord”, a criticism which implied that sympathetic chords were crucial to his other roles (Abel. 23). Of course, sympathy was not limited to women, but it was predominantly associated with femininity at the time, and implied both “womanly comparison” and “spiritual affinity” (Kistler 366).

Many of Chaney’s films were even explicitly seen as romances, although they were also impossible and doomed romances, in which Chaney falls for women that (for one reason or another) can never be his partner. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was clearly understood as the story of Quasimodo’s doomed love for Esmerelda, while *The Phantom of the Opera* concerns a young opera singer, with whom, “the phantom has fallen in love” (Hall, “Fantastic Melodrama” 9). *Mockery* is also supposed to strive for a “beauty and the beast effect” in its story of “a Russian peasant” and his devotion to a “countess” (Abel. 23), while the story of *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928) is “built upon an aging man’s hopeless love for a young girl” (Rush., *Laugh* 14).

In other instances, as Studlar has noted, the story is one of parental, rather than romantic, love. For example, in *The Trap* (1922), Lon Chaney’s character is robbed of his wife and property by another man but, when his wife dies, he adopts a five-year-old boy that he believes to be his rival’s child. Initially, his intention is “to wreck vengeance on the child,

but instead he learns to love it.” (Fred., *Trap* 33) *West of Zanzibar* (1928) follows a similar storyline, while both *The Road to Mandalay* (1926) and *Mr Wu* (1927) concern a father’s attempt to protect his daughter from men whom he believes to be a threat. In all of these films, the love for the child is intense, and its intensity is captured in Mordaunt Hall’s description of *The Tower of Lies* (1925) in the *New York Times*, where he claimed that Lon Chaney plays a character whose

whole life changes ... when he takes the baby in his arms. He is tender and feels the awakening of paternal affection. Thereafter he goes about his labor with cheer and good will, always looking forward to going home and seeing his child. (Hall, “Swedish Story” 24)

Sometimes, the story is even about a surrogate daughter. For example, *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924) concerns an older man, whose paternal feelings compel him “to save the young [female] rider from marriage to the heavy” (Fred., *He Who* 24).

Furthermore, the line between romantic and paternal love is often unclear. It is therefore interesting that many later versions of *The Phantom of the Opera* explicitly make the Phantom into a paternal figure, while *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* starts as the story of “hopeless love” but transforms into one of parental sacrifice, in which Chaney’s clown manages “to open the way for her mating with a young lover.” (Rush., *Laugh* 14) In *Shadows* (1922), Chaney’s character even sacrifices himself for a male friend, a minister, rather than either a lover or a child, and so “makes possible a happy ending to the troubles that beset the minister and his wife.” (Fred., *Shadows* 43)

In all cases, however, the point is that “Lon Chaney doesn’t do at all in a semi-heroic role” (Rush., 1928, 24), and while most of his roles are motivated by love, this love is rarely required. Consequently, *Variety* complained that *While the City Sleeps* (1928) was uncomfortable viewing:

The spectacle of a middle aged cop with fallen arches and uncouth manners, even if he has the heart of a lion, getting himself in a sentimental love affair with a flighty flapper, is dreadfully hard to take. (Rush., *While* 24)

The problem here is not that he finally gets the girl – which he doesn’t – but that the romance is not marked as impossible from the outset. A similar point was also made in regards to *Nomads of the North* (1920), which was criticised for being unconvincing because Chaney “lacked the romantic bearing to capture the heart of a girl like Nanette.” (Leed. 35) It is hardly surprising, then, that Chaney rarely gets the girl; and *The Shock* (1923) is one of the only exceptions. Here he plays “a cripple with a twisted mind”, who “falls in love” with a young girl and, under “her good influence”, is cured both physically and mentally, all of which “opens the way to a happy ending, with the cripple restored and in happy embrace with the heroine.” (Rush., *Shock* 36) If this ending is rare, so are the films in which Chaney is *not* motivated by love or where his love is presented as evil. This might be true of films such as *Voices of the City* (1921) and *While Paris Sleeps* (1923), but these were early starring roles.

Indeed, these romantic elements were so explicit that critics understood Chaney’s films as being versions of the “Beauty and the Beast” story – his breakthrough role was even as “The Frog” in *The Miracle Man* – although in Chaney’s cases his fairy tale creatures were not capable of being transformed into handsome princes at the end. The importance of this dynamic is made explicit in the *Variety* review of *Mockery*, a review that condemned the film as a failure because this “beauty and the beast effect is entirely lost ... The contrast is not strong enough, since Chaney does not look as repulsive nor Miss Bedford as beautiful as it is intended to convey.” (Abel. 23) In other words, most of Chaney’s films were romantic stories in which he appears to be a monster but is not only redeemed by his love for a woman but proves his worthiness by sacrificing himself for her. This theme of redemption is even taken to extremes in *The Shock*, where his underworld “cripple” is “miraculously made whole when

he is crushed in a falling building while engaged in an effort to rescue the heroine from a band of criminals.” (Rush., *Shock* 36) The film is also described as an attempt to emulate *The Miracle Man* (1919), the film “in which Chaney came to the fore almost overnight in the part of the ‘Frog’”, a “fake cripple” who is involved in a scam but is finally converted into a believer when he witnesses a “real” miracle (Anon, *Miracle* 66).

Elsewhere, in *The Trap*, Chaney’s character is similarly transformed by his love for a child, so that he is cured of his desire for revenge. Although the film eventually ends with the boy leaving Chaney for his rival, the film still suggests that Chaney’s character “is finally to find happiness, after he has been practically a victim of his own hatred for years.” (Fred., *Trap* 33) *West of Zanzibar* features much the same dilemma: Chaney’s Flint is the victim of Crane, who seduces his wife and leaves him crippled. When the wife then gives birth to a child, Flint “suspects Crane of being the father” and treats the child cruelly (Hall, *Revenge* 9). However, when Flint finally gets his revenge on Crane, he discovers that the child is actually his own daughter, and the film ends with him “sacrificing his life” to save her (Waly. 11). Similarly, in *The Road to Mandalay*, Chaney’s Singapore Joe may be a villain but the plot is motivated by his desire for revenge against a man whom he mistakenly believes to have wronged his daughter; and once again the film finishes with Joe sacrificing himself so that his daughter and her lover can “escape” from a villainous rival. He even protects his daughter from the knowledge that she has been responsible for her father’s death. At the end, she still does not know that Joe is her father and has fatally wounded him when she “stabs her father in the back” to protect her lover (Meakin 12). Consequently, Joe chooses to die without revealing that he is her father and so save her from the realization that she has committed patricide.

Similarly, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is centred on the ways in which Esmeralda is “saved by the hideous bell ringer” and the punishments and sacrifices that Quasimodo

accepts for her sake (Anon., *Hunchback* 9), while *Mockery* concerns the agonies that Chaney's Sergei endures in order to protect his beloved Countess. It even climaxes when "Sergei almost loses his life ... to save the Countess from another attack" (Abel. 23). Similarly, *He Who Gets Slapped* ends when Chaney's clown dies in order to save the female lead from the villain and Chaney's sacrificial death is also central to the ending of *The Unknown* (1927), in which he plots to destroy his rival but, when the plot threatens the woman that he loves, he "dashes to her rescue, and is himself killed by the plunging hoofs." (Sid. 20) Alternatively, although *While the City Sleeps* does not end in his death, it still requires Chaney to sacrifice himself for the woman he loves: "In the end Dan, of course, learns that the girl really doesn't love him for himself alone [and] brings the two lovers together." (Rush., *While* 24) Even in *The Unholy Three* (1925), Chaney's villainous Echo is finally redeemed by his sacrifice for the woman he loves: "in the finish the regeneration of Echo is brought about, and he releases the girl from her promise so that she can go to the arms of the man she loves." (Fred., *Unholy* 30)

Monstrosity, Society and Transformation

Consequently, Chaney's monsters operate ironically and while they might start out by obstructing, frustrating or even opposing the creation of the couple, they ultimately succeeds in unifying the young lovers – but only through the sacrifice and self-destruction of these monsters. As we have seen, this dynamic is central to one of the key women's pictures of the period, *Stella Dallas* (1925), of which *Variety* claimed that "Women will love it"; and that it "tells of a mother who eliminates herself" so that her daughter can achieve social mobility and so marry the boy that she loves (Skig., *Stella* 42). Like Chaney, then, Stella loves her

daughter but finally realises that she must sacrifice herself so that her loved one can achieve happiness.

To put it another way, Chaney's monstrosities are only monstrous in physical terms, and this is perhaps most clear in relation to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, where one critic described his character as being "an extraordinarily grotesque and hideous human with the soul of an appealing child." (Ussher, *Chameleon* 22) The same article also claimed that Chaney's character in *He Who Gets Slapped* was "a satirically broken, highly disappointed man of subtle dignity" (Ussher, *Chameleon* 22). As Chaney put it himself: "I wanted to remind people that the lowest types of humanity may have within them the capacity for supreme self-sacrifice. The dwarfed, misshapen beggar of the streets may have the noblest ideals. Most of my roles since *The Hunchback*, such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *He Who Gets Slapped*, *The Unholy Three*, etc., have carried the theme of self-sacrifice or renunciation. These are stories which I wish to do." (Chaney 1925)

In this way, Chaney can also be seen as operating in similar ways to Chaplin's little tramp. As Maland argues, in the mid-1910s, Chaplin "was consciously beginning to shift and mold his star image" in an attempt to "make him acceptable to genteel Americans" (17). His "Charlie" character was made less "vulgar" and his 1915 film, *The Tramp*, "concentrated ... on trying to achieve pathos." (22) Not only was this similar to the pathos of many Chaney films but both *The Tramp* and *The Bank* (1915) sought to "reinforce a value dear to the Genteel Tradition" (and that was also a feature of many Chaney pictures): "In both films Charlie feels deeply discouraged but shakes off that discouragement with an energetic resilience." (23) However, it is not only his resilience that is important here but the sense that, as is emphasized in *The Kid* (1921), Charlie is a "social pariah whose intuitive goodness opposes the flaws of respectable society" (61) so that *The Kid* offers a "vivid portrayal of

cruel people and venal social institutions that make it difficult for the poor but noble Charlie to survive.” (56)

Furthermore, as with Chaney, romance not only plays a central role in Chaplin’s films, but Charlie rarely gets the girl at end. Even when Chaplin made an exception to this rule, *The Gold Rush* (1925), that provides a final scene which is “superficially a happy ending” (79), Maland notes that this scene is “subtly undercut” through “a self-referential gesture”: as Charlie and his love have their picture taken together, he kisses her, prompting the photographer to exclaim: “Oh, you’ve spoiled the picture.” (80) More commonly, Charlie is required to accept romantic defeat or even to sacrifice himself for the happiness of his love one. For example, in *The Circus* (1925), Charlie is in love with Merna but comes to realize that “he is not right for [her] and that Rex is, so he sacrifices his own desires for the well-being of the other two.” (107)

Like Chaplin, then, Chaney’s creatures may be social pariahs but they are often good at heart; and even when their actions are monstrous or lack redemption at the end, they are usually understood as being motivated by mistreatment from others, so that their actions are not necessarily a clue to their true character. As the *Variety* review of *Outside the Law* (1920) put it: “It’s real underworld stuff, of an educational sort, bringing out the inner emotions of thieves” and as such represents the “now prevalent belief there is always a chance for a crook to reform” (Sime., *Outside* 40). In this way, Chaney’s films can be seen, at least in part, as a product of changing attitudes in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As May put it, reformers

like Jane Addams and Frederic Howe ... felt the onslaught of modern life disrupting their early values. In their minds, the industrial order had run wild, taking victims in its path. Prostitutes were no longer seen as inherently depraved, but as victims of

urban life which destroyed domestic bonds and unleashed chaos, lust and exploitation. (50)

Similarly, the criminal was no longer simply evil or immoral but a victim of social forces. For example, in *He Who Gets Slapped*, Chaney’s character has been become twisted due to “his painful experience in life when he was a scientist” and suffered both “the theft of his brainwork and his wife” by the villain of the story (Fred., *He Who* 24).

In fact, even Chaney’s most villainous characters are the product of painful events that have left them bitter and twisted: in *The Penalty* (1920), his “vendetta ... against society” is due to a childhood trauma, in which he was “deprived of the use of his legs by the mistake of a practicing doctor” (Sime., *Penalty* 34); in *The Trap*, Chaney “plays a trapper who ... discovers that he has lost his sweetheart to a stranger”, a stranger that has also taken “legal possession” of “a mine the trapper had started” (Fred., *Trap* 33); in *Mr Wu*, Chaney’s character seeks revenge against “a young Englishman [who] makes love to and seduces” his daughter (Ung. 17); and, in *West of Zanzibar*, he plots revenge against the man who has destroyed his marriage and left him crippled (Waly. 11). In fact, it is rare to find a case where Chaney plays a villain whose actions are not given an explanation, with *A Blind Bargain* (1922) and *The Monster* (1925) being notable exceptions.

Furthermore, Chaney’s films often feature doubles but, unlike Barrymore’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920), in which the high-minded Jekyll is contrasted with the monstrous Mr. Hyde, Chaney’s humane monsters are contrasted with a series of monstrous humans. Sometimes Chaney even played doubles as in *A Blind Bargain* and *The Blackbird* (1926), but, whether or not the film featured Chaney in dual roles, his hideous outsiders are usually victimized by an antagonist, who is not only free of physical deformity, but also has a superior social status. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Quasimodo is confronted by “the dirty villain”, Jehan, the brother of Notre Dame’s archdeacon (Sime., *Hunchback* 22); in *He*

Who Gets Slapped, he is the victim of Baron Regnard; and, in *Shadows*, his “oriental” outcast is an innocent, who sacrifices himself to protect a missionary that is being blackmailed by an evil banker (Fred., *Shadows* 43). Also, as we have seen, *Mr Wu* features him as “a great Chinaman” whose antagonist is a respectable “young Englishman” who has wronged his daughter (Ung. 17); while *West of Zanzibar* concerns Flint’s mission of vengeance against Crane, a “white trader” who operates as another villainous gentleman (Waly. 11). The ambivalence of this kind of plot is also signalled by *Variety*’s review of *The Devil-Doll* (1936), a Lionel Barrymore film that was explicitly seen as an imitation of Chaney’s horror films and in which the main character is likened to one of literature’s great revengeful heroes: “Lionel Barrymore ... is a scientific Count of Monte Cristo who avenges his false imprisonment.” (Bige. 18) Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo* not only justifies its hero’s quest for vengeance by pitting him against various pillars of society, who attained success at his expense, but its hero eventually abandons his quest so that the next generation can achieve happiness.

In other words, all is not what it appears to be in Chaney’s films and the hideous outsider turns out to be more virtuous than some respected pillars of the community. These concerns are also related to Chaney’s continual association with clowns, magicians, illusionists and mesmerists; and with his use of masks and disguises. These narratives stress the unreliability of appearances and were repeatedly described as mysteries, stories where the apparently supernatural is finally given a rational explanation or where that which is dismissed as superstition turns out to be real. In this way, these films relate to one of the key features of the period. As Susman notes, transformation

becomes a key word in this period. Taking on meaning in the new worlds of physics and modern biology, it was used in connection with a fairy world where rocks changed to gold and frogs become princes. It could, and often did, suggest a world of

ambiguous sex roles where girls might easily ‘be’ boys and even boys might ‘be’ girls. Transformation seemed to be what the new culture was about. (xxvii)

In other words, although the period was distinguished by conflicts between science and superstition, often exemplified by the Scopes Monkey Trial, the distinction between the two was never as clearly distinguished as is often supposed. As Susman puts it, “some of America’s most distinguished practical scientists – Edison and Burbank are examples – were presented to the enthusiastic and interested American public as ‘wizards’ rather than scientists.” (xxvii)

This sense of Lon Chaney (as a figure who exemplifies the period’s notion of transformation, and demonstrates that things are not necessarily the way that they appear) is captured by “the quip that has sprung up about him because of his various make-up feats” and of which he “was himself extremely fond”: “Don’t step on it – it may be Lon Chaney!” (Anon 25) Also *Picture-Play* described him as a “wizard of make-up” (Denbo 89), a phrase that linked him with scientists such as Edison and also to the hugely popular magicians and illusionists of the time, such as Houdini. Elsewhere, these associations were made through references to him as “the miracle man of make-up” (Howe 39); as a figure with “magic powers” (Howe 39); and as “a master showman” (Gebhart, “The Last” 46). However, while these relationships might be read as connoting deception or trickery today, they were not only positive but virtually reverential at the time. If his similarity to magicians and illusionists made him a consummate showman, the reference to “miracles” carried religious connotations, while his creations were also celebrated for the “artistry” in their construction (Gebhart, “Would You” 84) so that he was repeatedly likened to “the artist or sculptor or painter” (Howe 97). His “wizardry” was therefore bound up with a world of both “transformation” and “illusion,” and his performances were seen as being part magic act, part religious miracle and part artistic creation. In fact, illusion was a term that Chaney frequently

used in relation to his own work and his “illusions” were things that he valued and fought to protect: he claimed to have given “every ounce” of himself “to increase the illusion” of his characterisations and he expressed deep concern about anything that might mean that this “illusion would be spoiled” (Denbo 100)

Mystery, Relativism and Ambivalence

This tension between illusion and reality, superstition and science, was also at the heart of many of Chaney’s films and accounted for their categorisation as mysteries. For example, while *The Phantom of the Opera* involves an investigation into seemingly supernatural events that turn out to be the work of a mad criminal, *London After Midnight* (1927) “probes the hidden mysteries of the spirit world, and the many mazes of mental telepathy and mesmerism” (Ussher, “Menace” 31), at the end of which it is eventually revealed that its “atmosphere of mystery [and] unearthly characters” (such as ghosts and vampires) are illusions created by Chaney’s detective who is out to catch a murderer. If these stories involved investigations into the apparently supernatural, even Chaney’s straight crime stories involved mysteries. They were usually described as “underworld” pictures (Mori. 30), in which Chaney is often “mastermind of [the] underworld” (Sime., *Penalty* 34), and the notion of the “underworld” referred to a mysterious, shadow realm that is hidden from everyday perceptions of reality and yet determines the “reality” that renders it invisible.

These underworlds are therefore subcultures (or even countercultures) that worked to question, or at least relativize, the dominant culture. As Sue Currell notes, the 1920s was a period in which relativisation was a key concern: “the Chicago School attempted to portray a reality that was multilayered and relative rather than the singular vision of the moralistic reformer of previous decades.” (10) It was a period in which Margaret Mead’s *Coming of*

Age in Samoa (1928) “popularised the idea of cultural relativism by showing that all cultures had equal validity, and shocked many by showing a ‘primitive’ culture as happier and more stable because less sexually repressed than more ‘civilised’ American society.” (10) Consequently, many social studies explored ‘foreign’ underworlds within America: *The Negro in Chicago* (1922); *The Neighborhood* (1923), *The Gang* (1927) and *The Ghetto* (1928). It was even a period when the Lynds turned these techniques back on the supposedly typical American city in *Middletown* and when Freud’s theories of the unconscious became popular within the United States.

Of course, as the reference to Freud makes clear, these underworlds were not only imagined as mysterious places, but places of *sexual* mystery. Again, then, we return to the sense of Chaney as a figure associated with sexual taboo – that which is both attractive and repulsive – but also with narratives that, as was also the case in Valentino’s films, sought to reconcile that which was sexually taboo with that which was socially respectable. Consequently, while many of Chaney’s characters are driven to madness and crime by their love, love is never simply “a veritable pathology of emotions, a sickness that can never be cured, but remains unrequited until death.” (Studlar 210) If Chaney’s monsters are destroyed by love at the end of most films, this destruction is not a punishment for transgression, or a sign of failure, but rather evidence of their redemption or even of their virtue, nobility and self-sacrifice.

This aspect of Chaney’s “monsters” is also related to another aspect of his star persona. It is often noted that, unlike many other stars, he avoided the public eye and kept his private-life hidden from scrutiny. However, there are exceptions to this rule, the most notable of which were in his accounts of his parents, both of whom were disabled and both of whom he presents as anything but monstrous. On the contrary, his parents are described as *heroically* normal, or heroic in their ability to *achieve* normality:

The more delicate nuances of his art, Chaney acquired from his parents, both of whom were deaf-mutes. His amazing father is still hale and hearty at seventy-three, and recently married again – another lady deaf-mute.

With genuine pride, he will tell how that father, handicapped as we should have supposed, made a successful living for his family of four children by being a first-class barber in Colorado Springs ...

“As children,” the actor adds, “we learned to communicate all our emotions and confidences without speech or hearing. That is where I get my sense of pantomime.” (Ussher, “Chameleon” 22)

This emphasis on the “amazing” *normality* of his family is also part of his own biography. If he doesn’t seek the public eye, this is due to his own modesty and ordinariness. He is “a thoroughly normal and genial person”:

the most sedate and orderly resident of the Hollywood film colony. Contrary to local custom, when not required by production, he is abed every night at eleven o’clock, and awake every morning at six-thirty. The alleged wild life of Hollywood holds no charms for him whatsoever. (Ussher, “Menace” 31)

This normality even had its “freakish” aspects, so that “those who have known and worked with him through the years say that they have never become intimate with him – they never really know him”. Indeed, one article claimed that he was “a spiritually lonely man”, like many of his creations (Ussher, “Menace” 30).

He was therefore often presented as a performer who sought to erase himself in the pursuit of his illusions. *Picture-Play* claimed that he “gives his time entirely to his work” (Gebhart, “Would You” 58), and that it is his “illusions” that are more real than his private self. This article also reported that he “is proud of having made his strange characterizations so real that almost no one knows what he is really like.” (Gebhart, “Would You” 84)

Elsewhere, his self-effacement goes one better and he is quoted as saying that there “is no *real* Lon Chaney that belongs to the public ... I want to be like a material ghost of an idea, with no man, Lon Chaney, to be seen through the make-up” (Denbo 100). Furthermore, according to *Picture-Play*, his performances may have life but they left their creator drained and lifeless, and it gives an account of the filming of a particularly dramatic performance, after which the author observed that the “instant the scene was shot [Chaney] sank back in his chair passive” (Gebhart, “Would You” 59).

Consequently, it is not just his characters who are seen as mysterious. *New Movie Magazine* quoted him as saying that “I want to be a mystery” (Biery 79), while *Picture-Play* claimed that he was worried that, if people knew the private Lon Chaney, “this mysterious phantom of the screen [will no longer] catch and hold your attention as greatly as he did when he was only a shadow from an imaginary world” (Gebhart, “The Last” 112). For Chaney, his private self must remain a shadow so that his creations would have life. In this way, *Picture-Play* described his private self as being an uncanny figure, a “phantom” who inhabits the world “unseen, unheralded, unrecognized” (Denbo 88) and asked its readers “Would you know Lon Chaney?” (Gebhart); or as they put it more clearly elsewhere: “I never see you in person anywhere, and if I did I do not believe I would recognize you.” (Denbo 100). For *Picture-Play*, this division between his public and private selves even made him “the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of pictures.” (Howe 97)

Of course, while Chaney’s characters might evoke sympathy, pity and even suggest a romantic dignity, they were usually monsters that elicited screams from other characters in the films and from the audiences watching these films. As one *Picturegoer* article put it:

In his own sphere, he is, perhaps, the specialist supreme and unsurpassed, for despite the infinite variety of his dreadful disguises, every movement, every gesture, every footstep of this extraordinary man spells but one word in the eyes of the multitude –

that of MENACE – secret, impending, stealthy, mysterious, terrible. (Ussher, “Menace” 30)

It is therefore no surprise that Chaney is often supposed to excite “thrills” and “horror” in spectators, or that these responses are seen as having a sexual dimension.

This dynamic was even stressed in reviews and articles at the time, where Chaney was claimed to provoke weird, physical thrills in his viewers that involved both horror *and* pleasure. For example, *Picturegoer* praised him for the ways in which “he makes such a palpable, menacing reality out of every shadowy movement that ... bring gasps of horror from the spectators.” (Ussher, “Chameleon” 23) If these “gasps of horror” also suggest gasps of pleasure, the relationship between horror and pleasure is even more pronounced in another *Picturegoer* article, where the same author describes audiences’ response to Chaney in virtually orgasmic terms:

His new releases clearly accentuate this peculiar quality of Chaney’s appeal. They form a gradual accumulation of horror upon horror; a rising crescendo of crime, culminating in a wild orgy of Black Magic. (Ussher, “Menace” 30)

Although the gender of the spectator is not specified here, the author of this article is female and she is writing for a magazine with a readership largely made up of women. Also the passage evokes a sexual passivity on the part of the viewer that not only blurs the line between pleasure and danger but suggests a masochism that was strongly associated with heterosexual femininity and male homosexuality at the time (Brown). This dynamic can also be seen in accounts of *The Monster*, where Chaney’s “masterful” villain not only “cunningly suggests a specious concern for the unhappy victims of his mania” but is strongly described in terms of sexual fascination and directly associated with perversity, domination and control. For example, *Picturegoer* claimed that Chaney displays “a savage joy in the torture he inflicts” and is driven by an insatiable desire that results in “a deepening depression, heavy,

drowsy, unimpassioned, that finds no outlet, no relief in word, or sigh, or tear.” (Ussher, “Chameleon” 23)

As we have seen, then, the thrills that Chaney elicited were similar to those associated with Valentino, who also manipulated the bodies of women, even if this was supposed to be seduction rather than torture, and to induce pleasure rather than pain. Both also possessed a hypnotic gaze through which they dominated women in the film and thrilled spectators in the audience. Of course, given the prohibitions of the period, seduction and sexuality were often as much about horror as pleasure – after all, “passion” originally meant “to suffer or endure” and was used to refer to the agonies of Christ and of other religious martyrs. It is therefore hardly surprising that Chaney was directly associated with Valentino and his charms, with *Picture-Play* even claiming that he possessed “the manners of Valentino” (Denbo 89).

Conclusion

Chaney’s association with Valentino, then, demonstrates the ways in which both figures were defined in relation to conflicts between the old elites of small-town, rural America and a series of social outsiders associated with the new urban centres, many of whom were marked as ethnically other. However, neither Chaney’s nor Valentino’s films simply demonize these outsiders, although they did erase their otherness either. Certainly, as Jonathan Munby has argued, underworld films can be read as adopting “a socially reforming point of view” (21) that took their “cue from the perspective established most powerfully in the photojournalism of Jacob Riis” (21), whose photographs did not explore the underworld through the eyes of its inhabitants but instead offered “a projection dictated by the middle class perception of the slum dweller as threat.” (24) Even then, while some might have appropriated such images in a way that “fed nativist middle class fantasies about those who live on the wrong side of

town” (23), there is still a world of difference between gaze of those reformers who worked to bring these social groups *into* American citizenship and the gaze of those who fought hard to exclude them *from* it, who deemed these groups to be racial degenerates that were incapable of ever being anything but alien and un-American.

In this way, Chaney’s films can be seen as asserting the possibility of reform but even then, while this position might seem to privilege the old elites of White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant America, these films actually display considerable ambivalence: Chaney’s outsiders are often celebrated as heroes (or act heroically at the end), while the real villains are often revealed to be figures from supposedly respectable elites. Nor should this ambivalence be a surprise, given that the White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant elites were not the cinema’s core audience in the period but rather those of ethnic origins that had escaped the ghetto and had become middle class. In other words, while these films inevitably addressed a range of audiences, they were particularly sensitive to the contradictory situation of ethnic, middle-class cinemagoers: both to their desire for inclusion *and* their experience of exclusion. It is this condition of contradiction and ambivalence that explains why Chaney’s characters evoked both pleasure *and* danger; and why he became such a major star of the 1920s.

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¹ It is also worth noting that most accounts of Chaney's film associate them with various forms of sadomasochism and stress the pain and torture that he endured to bring his creations to life (see both Skal and Worland) but we found very little discussion of this in the press during his lifetime. These concerns seem to have started shortly before his death, but after the announcement of his illness. Prior to this, reviews and articles certainly stressed the difficulties that he underwent but these were not matters of pain and torture but simply technical or artistic difficulties: these illusions were difficult in the sense that no one else had the talent to achieve them, rather than the resilience to endure them.

² Of course, there are also significant differences between Chaney and Valentino. For example, as Brown discusses, Valentino became the focus of a moral panic about supposedly new and "effeminate" masculinities, in contrast to which figures such as Douglas Fairbanks and Lon Chaney were sometimes seen as an antidote (Brown; and Studlar).