

Who Thought of it First?

Carl Laemmle had Paul Leni make *The Cat and The Canary* as a test to see if the German director's Expressionistic style could be successfully used in a Hollywood film. Laemmle was so pleased with the results that he gave Leni the task of directing Universal's next large production of a "human tragedy" (i.e., a horror film). Laemmle had purchased the rights to *The Man Who Laughs* shortly after the success of the earlier *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by the same author, Victor Hugo. Hugo's "monsters", Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Gwynplaine in *The Man Who Laughs*, are both sympathetic characters who are only monsters because of their physical appearances. Both, in fact, do have good hearts and their stories are, indeed, human tragedies.



But there is a significant difference in why each looks as they do. Quasimodo, we know, was born deformed, but Gwynplaine was born looking completely normal. Gwynplaine was the son of an English lord who was executed by the evil King. In those days whole families

were punished for the actions of one member, so the King gives the five-year-old Gwynplaine to a group of evil gypsy "Camprachicoes" (child buyers/stealers. Gypsies had also kidnapped Esmerelda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Hugo seems to have hated gypsies for some reason). The *Camprachicoes* buy or steal children and then they do terrible things to them like cut off their feet or blind them or, in Gwynplaine's case, cut the cheeks of his face so that he has a permanent deformed "smile". Then the *Camprachicoes* turned the children into slaves who were forced to beg on the streets. People would see that they were blind or crippled or deformed and give them money out of pity which the *Camprachicoes* would take from the children. If the children did not earn enough money begging they would be beaten or just allowed to starve. I hate to tell you this...but these things really did happen...and they still do! There are still beggars' "guilds" that enslave children this way.



So, the story of Gwynplaine in *The Man Who Laughs* reminds us again of what we learned from the film *Freaks*, that looking abnormal does *not* make a person evil, *evil is what people do to one another*. The King and the *Camprachicoes* are the evil monsters in the

story, not poor Gwynplaine.

Paul Leni chose the incredibly talented Conrad Veidt for the part of Gwynplaine. They had already worked together on a number of films in Germany and Veidt had been Ivan the Terrible in *Waxworks* which so impressed Carl Laemmle. But even Conrad Veidt could not simply act the part of the deformed Gwynplaine. They would need to do what Lon Chaney had done for Quasimodo, create makeup to show the character's deformity.

But, of course, Lon Chaney, the great master of monster make-up, had left Universal in 1925 and was using his skills over at M.G.M. Laemmle and Leni turned to a man named Jack Pierce (1889-1968) who had started doing make-up for Universal after Chaney departed.



It was Jack Pierce who created the incredible makeup for Gwynplaine. The key to the make-up was a pair of oversized false teeth which Conrad Veidt put into his mouth while Jack Pierce turned the corners of his mouth up with hidden wires. It created a startling and very disturbing effect.



Oversized false teeth and wires to turn the corners of the mouth up in a hideous "grin".

The only problem was that before the release of *The Man Who Laughs* from Universal, M.G.M released the Lon Chaney film *London After Midnight* with Chaney playing a character called “The Grinning Vampire”.



The problem was that the makeup Pierce created for Veidt seemed to be an almost exact copy of the method used by Lon Chaney for his vampire.

It might seem obvious that Jack Pierce “borrowed” the idea from the great master, especially so because Chaney’s movie came out before *The Man Who Laughed*. But that might not have been what actually happened. For one thing, while *London After Midnight* was released in December of 1927, and *The Man who Laughs* was released four months later in April of 1928, the production schedule shows that *The Man Who Laughs* actually went into production *before London after Midnight*. That is because it was a much longer and far bigger film and also because it had problems in post-production. But there is also the quite obvious point that the character Gwyplaine with his facial deformity comes from a novel published in 1869 while the Grinning Vampire character in Chaney’s film was created by Tod Browning in 1927 specifically for the film.

So...*who thought of it first?* It is one of those mysteries that may never be solved. One reason why it may never be solved is that neither Lon Chaney nor Jack Pierce, or M.G.M. or Universal made an issue out of it. Nobody sued anybody else for “stealing” the idea. They all just shrugged and let it go.

Today there would be lawyers fighting over the case for years!

But actually, this gives us the perfect introduction to our next film. Because the next film we will be looking at sparked perhaps the most famous lawsuit in the early history of film and it was all about stolen ideas. The film was *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terror* (1922) which we saw an excerpt from in our very first lesson.