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Inspecting Javert:

Moral Complexities of Revolution from a Villain's Perspective

For the duration of the course we have discussed revolution, and while revolution itself is crucial to the class, I believe it is also important to discuss the ways we tell revolution. The stories and myths that emerge after the revolution in some cases leave a more lasting impression of the revolution than the real history itself. The real history of an event or revolution can be dull or overly complex to be the source of inspiration, it is in this situation where the need for a good, lasting revolutionary tale emerges. In this essay I examine the ways in which Inspector Javert is the subject of change to meet the needs of a true revolutionary story for 20th and 21st century audiences.

Throughout the 2012 version of *Les Misérables*, varying degrees of revolutionaries are portrayed; from the lower class, die hard revolutionaries like Enjolras to the participating bourgeois Marius, one of the most interesting characters to trace throughout the film is the establishment-loving Inspector Javert. Through the dissection and characterization of Inspector Javert, *Les Misérables* is able to narrate moral complexities surrounding the revolution from the perspective of the establishment.

Dedicated, loyal, and thorough are all words that define the character of Javert, portrayed by Russell Crowe in the film version. Javert, in all his loyalty to his duty, spends decades of his life tormenting and chasing Valjean anywhere he goes. He is the poster boy for the oppressive rule and harshness the revolution fights against. While there is an urge to loathe the character as

he is, at face value, the central villain I would argue his morals and character are much more complex than that simple judgement.

In the character of Javert, Hugo is able to relate an uncommon narrative of the french revolution: those who stood against revolution and change. Javert serves as an interesting case study of sympathy for the oppressor in a revolution.

Unlike the coded “heroes” of the story he is not for any revolutionary change: he follows the revolution and infiltrates it to find Valjean. However he is also one of those that hold a significant, powerful death (much like those of Gavroche and Fantine). All three of these deaths were of people wronged by the system they exist within. Fantine dies of tuberculosis after being forced to work in the docks and Gavroche is killed by cannon fire fighting for what he believed in. I would argue Javert’s death holds a similar significance. His suicide was a direct result of his being driven mad because of his occupation and the conflict it put him through. Javert is also a wrongful death within the government that the revolutionaries sought to change. To paint Javert as a villain is to not understand the moral obligation that he feels, and to look at revolution as a whole as a binary event rather than a complex intermixing of peoples and experiences.

I now would like to consider Javert’s death further. He is the only character in a musical full of death and chaos to die at his own hand. Why? Unlike the character-driven analyses I have been drawing throughout the essay, I would like to consider the symbol of Javert and what he stands for. He is the audience’s main portal into the world of the established French government and law enforcement, and for that reason he is a symbol for this crumbling establishment. His death is not just an individual’s suicide after being driven mad by guilt and confusion; rather it is a symbol for an entire government, rotted to the core and falling over the edge. The entire French government, obsessed with their control, is eventually lost because of this.

My interest in Javert was piqued by his simplicity in the musical version. He is easy to hate and root against, yet I was curious as to whether or not that interpretation held true when considering Victor Hugo's original text. As described in the book, Javert is born in a prison, and consumed with self-hatred due to his lowly birth and a disgust with his parents. He retreats to law as a way to bring order and some sense of being to his personhood. Being an extension of the law allows him some inclusion into a society he was not born into.

I would like to add a caveat: I am not trying to foment sympathy with law enforcement. The system Javert navigated came with being a brutal, non-empathic man, and there is no ethical way to be a police officer (even if conflicted) but I do see the sympathy and trouble within the character and his background. It is these exact complexities that are left behind in the Broadway rendition.

It is also essential to consider Javert's age, and how that removes him from the revolution. The main revolutionary subject of *Les Misérables* is a student revolution, and so Javert being an older gentleman is even just by age removed from the movement. Throughout the class I have noticed in general a connection between younger people and revolutionary thought (for example Miguel in *The Imposter*) and I believe that *Les Misérables* is no exception. Even if for no other reason than age, Javert cannot be a part of the revolution.

The 2012 version of *Les Misérables* offers an overly simplified version of morals and "actors" within a revolution. With easily digestible characters and ideologies, a complex story of revolution becomes a big box musical, and a major motion picture success. I believe firmly that Javert could not exist in his original form, the musical is without the nuance that Hugo writes into the character of Javert. American audiences crave an easy understanding of the good guys and the bad guys, and if Javert had been portrayed as a self-hating troubled man, he would not

have so easily made the perfect opposite to Valjean. This adaptation narrates a more simplistic version of revolution, then what Hugo initially intended with his novel.

I am curious as to the repercussions of what I addressed above. I believe that the musical sells people what they want to see when they think of “revolution”, whereas Hugo offers a much richer and deeper understanding of events (this can also come with the difference between a two hour musical and a thousand page book). I believe that why this is a product of many confounding factors, one of the more prominent ones is proximity to subject and revolution. Hugo who lived during the events depicted in *Les Misérables* was close to subject matter; why his book romanticized aspects and does partially focus on a love story, it may offer a much truer interpretation what revolution could look like. Broadway on the other hand, is far removed from revolution. This is not to say that theater and film cannot be revolutionary -- I would not be in this course had I believed that -- but rather that theater and film created to generate a profit cannot. So instead of lengthy character descriptions, characters are more of a stock character we can recognize and know how to respond to. Modern Broadway has not borne witness to revolution and strife in the same way Hugo did and is therefore able to romanticize and generalize even more.

I would like to add a layer of complexity provided through Eric Selbin’s *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story*. In particular Selbin points to the importance of a piece of text being a “heirloom of humanity”, a story that everyone knows and has recognizable themes and ideologies across cultures. I would argue that in its original literary form, *Les Misérables* was not an heirloom, and the 2012 film version sought to simplify the story and sought to do so through a slashing of the depth of the villain, Javert. While his fall from grace

might be recognizable across some stories, there was not enough villainy to make him overly recognizable.

The photo I chose to accompany this piece comes from a set of Vogue press photos taken before the release of the 2012 version of *Les Misérables*. I was so drawn to this photo of Javert because he looks undeniably regal, posed, and honorable. What struck me was how little he looks like a villain within this photo. I think in this photo lies some of the honor of Inspector Javert that is lost within the actual film. This photo also makes a strong parallel to old paintings of Napoleon. Both men represent a deep commitment to their own ambitions and a willingness to shed blood to achieve it, and each prioritized law and order and found themselves against the revolution.

