

Film: *Les Misérables*

Director: Tom Hooper

Genre: Musical/ Historical Drama

Summary

Set two decades after the French Revolution, the political and social upheaval that shook the country to its knees, the plight of the poor lingers and injustice plagues the bottom tier of the social hierarchy. At the centre of the chaos is Jean Valjean, an ex-convict who seeks redemption and respite from his past. Hot on his heels is the police officer Javert, whose iron-clad devotion to the law and the deliverance of justice blinds him from seeing the possibility that criminals can be redeemed. Scattered throughout this historical drama are a cast of characters each representing a facet of social injustice, each a shining example of the transformative power of love. A sentimental yet biting satire permeated with universal themes that are equally applicable to this day and age, Tom Hooper takes a daring approach to the timeless epic by taking live singing and gritty realism to their full extents in order to bring Victor Hugo's vision of *the wretched poor* from page to screen.

Characterisation: Eponine

Adjective 1: A desperate waif, streetwise and lonely

At first the spoiled, self-satisfied daughter of the ethically-challenged Thenadiers, Eponine and her family are one of the many who experience the steep and cruel fall from wealth to poverty. An impoverished Eponine becomes a roguish, streetwise waif who remains dutiful to her criminal father as his schemes are her only path to survival. However, Thenadier's hold over her is broken when Eponine becomes deeply infatuated with her neighbour, Marius Pontmercy, a rich Parisian student who alone of all the people in her life treats her with respect and kindness.

The poverty-stricken Eponine is a victim -- of her neglectful and cruel parents, of social injustice, and of unconditional, unrequited love. For Marius, she throws away every other aspect of her life: she turns her back on her family and leads a love-stricken Marius to Cosette, only to watch from the shadows.

As one of the most central in *Les Misérables*'s ever-expanding cast of tragic characters, Eponine is often compared to her doppelgänger, Fantine, who similarly undergoes a storm-tossed plunge into prostitution and poverty, driven by her desperation to keep her child, Cosette, alive. The forces behind their downfalls are hauntingly similar: unrequited love for another man. Fantine is betrayed by a rich scholar who abandons her and her child; Eponine takes a bullet for Marius.

Their descent into wretchedness and desperation is highlighted in the change of their costumes. Fantine first appears dressed in a innocent, childish dress of pale pink. Later, Fantine is dressed in a harsh, theatrical scarlet that marks her life and identity as a prostitute, her cheeks highlighted with the deathly pallor of tuberculosis. Eponine's childhood clothing is fashionable, especially in contrast to the ragged clothing that the enslaved Cosette wears. Later, in an interesting case of role reversal, it is Eponine who is dressed in rags, while Cosette's dresses are more sophisticated. Of course, the viewer knows that Cosette is now not only economically superior to the impoverished Eponine; she is also Eponine's romantic rival and the one who wins Marius's heart.

Eponine's impoverished life is portrayed in the ragged dress she wears, the corset that offsets her skinny frame and highlights her hunger, and the dirtiness of her boyish disguise. It is also notable that Eponine is almost constantly dressed in green or khaki colours, from which the viewer can draw distinct irony. Green often has connotations of fertility, growth, and even feminine beauty; however, Eponine has obviously been robbed of her youth, and her death at the barricades ends her chances of growing up. Although her complex, manipulative book counterpart, who is grotesquely described in the likeness of an old woman, is muted in the film, the movie version of Eponine retains the crucial essence of grace and youth robbed by debauchery and poverty. She is a rogue on the streets, a desperate waif who retains vestiges of her former charm and innocence.

Adjective 2: A romanticized, self-sacrificing heroine

Having to compress a 650,000-word volume into a 2-hour film means that Hooper had to flatten Eponine's jealous, manipulative character into a romanticized, self-sacrificing version of her original book counterpart. However, this is also where her character arc diverges from its parallel with Fantine.

Fantine never manages to dictate her own fate in the film. From the very beginning, the betrayal of her lover has set into motion the irreversible and irrevocable events that lead to her downfall: she is fired from the factory in which she works when her colleagues find out she has a bastard child, and falls into the wretched life of a prostitute, robbed of her youth, dignity and pride. At first, Eponine seems to follow a similar trajectory: her descent into poverty and her parents' cruelty are things beyond her control. However, unlike Fantine, Eponine manages to decide her own course of action in the film, which leads to both her death and her redemption. Her decisions are instrumental in bringing Cosette and Marius together: she brings Marius to meet Cosette despite her own heartache, intercepts Cosette's letter to Marius before ultimately delivering it to him out of love, and takes a bullet for Marius.

As a parallel figure to Fantine, Eponine completes her character arc in much the same way that Fantine does. Where Fantine is redeemed by her love for Cosette, Eponine is redeemed by her deep, impossible love for a Parisian student who is blind to her affections. Her devotion to Marius keeps her from reiterating the sins of her father and mother, whose pure evil is in stark contrast to Eponine's nobility. Eponine comes into focus as a fallen woman, defeated not only by poverty and social injustice but unrequited and impossible love; her act of self-sacrifice elevates her to the status of true hero. However, it is crucial to recognise that her self-sacrificing nobility, though heroic, resonates with grim and heart-wrenching tragedy: worn down by social injustice and lack of compassion, Eponine fears neither pain nor death. It is impossible, unconditional love that redeems this fallen woman as she dies in Marius's arms: happy, for the first time in her life.

The Theme: Social Injustice

No one escapes the cruel chains of social injustice, and Hooper brings Hugo's enduring theme front and center in his enthralling, brutally realistic depiction of 19th-century France. Having undergone the French Revolution, one is inclined to think that the people of France are at last given '*the right to be free*', but from the beginning Hooper's film rejects this idea. This is a world in which ex-convicts are never truly freed of blame; in which a young man is forced to look down and perform bitter manual labour for twenty years in repentance for the crime of stealing a mouthful of bread; in which a young grisette is condemned and forced into prostitution after the desertion of her lover leaves her the single mother of a bastard child. This is the world Jean Valjean and Fantine know and are betrayed by, a world that transforms Valjean into a hardened criminal and breaks Fantine's dreams and spirit. Fantine's beauty and Valjean's massive strength do not make them immune to the injustice of legal and religious systems that claim to be the epitome of justice. Nor does Cosette's innocence and naivety grant her mercy; she is used by the Thenadiers for hard labour and turned into a powerful symbol of the misery and exploitation of children, a biting critique of social wretchedness and the indifference of the wealthy.

Hooper and his crew employ both visual and audio effects to create a staggering illusion of social injustice and inequality. Architects and carpenters on the set constructed a Parisian street of sagging buildings that give the illusion of being on the verge of collapse. With the curious absence of straight lines and steady foundations, the makeshift Parisian street radiates an aura of insubstantiality and unreality, with a dreamlike quality, which both reflects and mocks the insubstantiality of the poor and downtrodden and the lack of care that the rich impart to them. To the wealthy, the poor have faded into the landscape, invisible to their eyes, although the morally conscious viewer will no doubt take note of the extreme poverty and wealth disparity.

One controversial aspect of Hooper's stage adaptation is his decision to allow live singing on set, with a pianist playing live into the ears of the actors. This revolutionary and radical approach, which sidesteps the falseness of actors recording the voices beforehand and miming alongside it, allows the actors to control the tempo of the songs, and thus the freedom and spontaneity of normal filmmaking. Anne Hathaway's breathtaking performance

has an extraordinary fragility and raw emotion that portrays the utter despair of a prostitute who had fallen from pride and dignity, a performance that highlights the cruelty of the justice system within 19th century France. To young Fantine, the world is merciless: the legal system, one dominated by menacing figures like Javert, is the one that punishes her for defending her bodily autonomy from a man who tries to rape her; even the potentially higher justice system developed by the Church is unmoving and callous in her eyes. Even then, these systems of justice are overshadowed by individual acts of morality, most strikingly demonstrated in Valjean's decision to reveal his identity as the ex-convict who breaks parole rather than let an innocent man be accused for his actions. Hooper's film throws shade on authorities, who use the name of God as their justification and their front for their cruel actions.

However, the film also provides a sympathetic perspective to the ones who have caused social injustice in the first place. Jean Valjean chooses to spare the life of his captor, the police inspector who has perpetually shadowed his idyllic life with Cosette, threatened to expose his identity and deliver him once more to the galleys -- Javert, who has been the axe hanging over his head his entire life. The film remains faithful to the source material in its portrayal of Javert, who, despite his cruelty and callousness, is as much a victim and a slave of the law and the system as his nemesis Valjean. In one of the most striking lines that provide an interesting depth to Javert's character and his determination to cause Valjean's downfall, Javert tells Valjean that he '*was born inside a jail/ I was born with scum like you/ I am from the gutter too.*' For the cold, uncompromising police inspector, all forms of rebellion are forms of crime, and the law above all must be upheld and obeyed. His wholehearted devotion to the law, which he holds to be sacred, is also the cause of his downfall. The world that the film depicts in brutal, crushing realism is a world of cruelty, injustice and social wretchedness, a world in which children like Eponine and Gavroche are slaughtered before they get to grow up. It has too much complexity, too many moral grey areas for something as idealistic as the absolute law; Valjean's individual sense of morality is proof that the law itself is corrupted, for the law refuses to recognise the plight of the poor and the suffering of the people. It is a law that suppresses the revolutionary fervour of freedom and kills the children of its country for doing so. It is a law that creates disillusionment in even the most devoted of its followers, and Javert is only an example. All of the characters in the film are 'slaves of the law', as Valjean puts it. They are only freed from the chain of slavery after death, as stated by Gavroche, the sturdy street urchin with an uncanny wisdom, in what seems like a pessimistic but brutally realistic line: *Everyone's equal when they're dead.*

Commentary: What self-discovery has/ have the protagonist(s) made? How are they able to find the answers they need? Are there any obstacles they have met and overcome in the process? (Question 11)

At the heart and core of both the film and Hugo's original, monumental volume is the ex-convict Jean Valjean, a man hardened by his years of slavery and turned against both the justice system and his faith in religion, who stumbles unexpectedly upon the grace and forgiveness of one Bishop Myriel. And yet although Myriel lays the path to virtue beneath his feet, Valjean finds the dream of redeeming his sins tantalizingly out of reach, unable to escape the thralls of his past.

Multiple facets of his identity come into focus in the film. In the first shot, as the camera passes over the crashing waves towering over the convicts as they drag the monstrous, bulbous ships into the docking harbour inch by inch, Jean Valjean is one of the convicts dressed in the same harsh red as the theatrical gown of the prostitute Fantine later in the movie, one of the fallen men who growl the striking lyrics of the ballad *Look Down* in deep baritone voices that establish the tone for the rest of the film. The Valjean that we first meet is a product of the evils of the prison system -- a convict who will be shamed and shunned for the rest of his life for a simple crime, a man who has been stripped of his name and addressed by the number 24601.

As Valjean embarks on a long, torturous journey towards virtue and redemption, his clothing also becomes more sophisticated; he leaves behind the rags of the galleys and dons trench coats instead. Over the years, he changes identities several times to evade capture by Javert, who remains in hot pursuit of the infamous criminal Jean Valjean. Although the film glosses over these makeshift identities, it faithfully and splendidly replicates the cornerstone of Valjean's own self-discovery as he gives up the facade of the wealthy and respected Monsieur Madeleine to save an innocent man, mistaken to be himself, from the galleys. Actor Hugh Jackman delivers a

groundbreaking performance that fully portrays the agony of indecision and the resignation to fate, summarised in the ballad *Who Am I*.

*And so your Honor, you see it's true
This man bears no more guilt than you
Who am I?
24601.*

The ballad is a magnificent number that portrays Valjean's struggle with his own conscience before reconciling himself with his true identity as a convict on the run from the law. In doing this, Valjean is not only giving himself over to the torturous labour of the galleys. He is putting aside the invented identity of Father Madeleine, known by the people for his good works and faith. He has given up the conviction that he has repented for the past and paid for his sins. Valjean demonstrates the ultimate act of redemption and virtue by giving up his chance at redemption itself.

Following this, Valjean finds a reason to cling to his freedom: to offer protection to Cosette, the daughter of the young woman he has wronged by turning away from her at her hour of need, thus redeeming himself for his part in Fantine's fall from dignity and pride. However, even in this act of love and virtue the film finds room to question Valjean's righteousness: he has subjected a young girl to the life of a criminal running from the law. More than once, in the second act, Valjean becomes less of a protector to the grown-up Cosette and more of a jailer, who prevents her from pursuing her own relationship with the Parisian student Marius out of his own possessive love for her.

As violence erupts in Paris, the focus of the film is shifted somewhat from his main protagonist and upon newer characters: at its center are Marius, Enjolras and Eponine, the children of a revolution. As the cries of *Vive le France!* echo across the streets of Paris, and Valjean forces Cosette to go into hiding, the hour of true redemption dawns upon Jean Valjean. When he intercepts a letter from Marius to Cosette, the cruel knowledge is forced upon him: Cosette has never been his to keep. Valjean's righteousness and virtue bring him to the barricades, where he vows to save Marius from the same bloody fate as his comrades with the enthralling ballad *Bring Him Home*.

The bloody and tragic battle at the barricades escalates into the climactic act of the film: Valjean carries an injured Marius home through the sewers to avoid detection, bowed under the weight of a dying man. As the moonlight filters down in a stark contrast to the darkness of the sewers, Hooper presents us with a metaphorical journey that mirrors Valjean's struggle for redemption and the survival of human spirit; Valjean is reliving the darkness of his past in a desperate attempt to seek out the light.

Jean Valjean has become an iconic figure in both literature and on the screen, as a timeless and enduring testament to the survival of the human spirit. As he threads his way through the sewers of Paris, carrying the man he loathes for taking Cosette away from him, the reader is presented with a familiar tale -- familiar because Valjean's metaphorical journey is a universal one. Each of us try to escape our own past, to change our own fate, in order to seek some higher moral ground; but Hugo and Hooper's separately told tales shed light on the redemptive power of love. Just like he is redeemed by love, Fantine and Marius are redeemed by their love for Cosette, Eponine is redeemed by her love for Marius, while the student revolutionaries are redeemed by their mutual friendship and their patriotism. *Les Miserables* may seem foreign in its historicity, but its themes are equally applicable to the modern day as they were in 19th century France. Throughout the mesmerizing and empowering ballads is threaded a familiar plotline of oppression, liberation and redemption: it is a tale that brings us home to our own identities and forces us to reconcile ourselves with our past. In the end, there is only one way to redemption, as Valjean and Fantine so rightly tell us as the film draws to a close:

To love another person is to see the face of God.