

Javert: the righteous villain



“ Les Miserables” by Victor Hugo is one of the most unique and powerful stories of redemption of all time. This story is unique in many different ways; from its diverse cast of characters to its meticulous blend of storylines. One of the truly unique aspects of “ Les Mis” is the character of Javert, the principal antagonist. The factor that makes Javert so unique is that rather than the atypical “ bad guy” of modern literature, Javert is a complex individual with a decided sense of justice and morality. Indeed, only in such a thoughtful and religious novel like “ Les Mis” could Javert even be considered an antagonist. As one analyses the intricate themes of “ Les Mis”, it can be seen that very deliberate writing was required to successfully create this character.

Given a simple description of Javert and his actions, one might not immediately deduce that he is in fact an antagonist. Succinctly put, Javert is a police inspector, totally dedicated to his work, zealous for justice to the point of obsession, and morally upstanding. This could quite easily be the description of the protagonist of any detective story. This then leaves the question: how can Javert be an antagonist? The direct answer is quite simple: he is in direct opposition to Jean Valjean, the protagonist. Javert must then, by default, be the antagonist. By definition, an antagonist opposes and/or fights against the hero of the story. Throughout “ Les Mis”, Javert hunts Valjean zealously, stopping at nothing to see him returned to the galleys. He also sides against the student rebellion, which Valjean seems to support, causing an opposition of ideals.

Even with these arguments, the concept of Javert being a “ villain” could be confusing to some readers. If Valjean is a convict and Javert is a police inspector, is not he (Javert) simply “ doing his job”? The reader could begin

to wonder if Valjean is in fact an antihero, a tainted individual with his own sense of morality. This concept, however, is not the case in “ Les Miserables”. Jean Valjean is an upstanding citizen, a mayor, a factory owner, and a philanthropist, who follows Christian principles with no ulterior motives. He is a genuine hero in every sense of the word.

To fully understand the concept of Javert as antagonist, one must go to the very heart of “ Les Miserables”. Ultimately, “ Les Mis” is a story of redemption. It is a detailed account of the journey of a soul from darkness into light. Throughout the course of this story, the message of justice seasoned with mercy comes forth time and again. Jean Valjean, as protagonist, is essentially the embodiment of this message, a living testimony of the power of grace. It is when we examine Javert against this backdrop that we see him for who he is: if Valjean is the embodiment of grace, Javert is the embodiment of condemnation. Just as protagonist and antagonist oppose one another, mercy and condemnation oppose one another. Valjean and Javert now become not a clash of individuals, but a clash of theologies; with Valjean representing righteousness through grace, and Javert representing righteousness through the law. James 2: 13 of the New Testament says that “ mercy triumphs over judgement”. Hugo, a religious man, no doubt had this in mind when he orchestrated the conflict of Valjean and Javert. He also expounds on this by revealing to the reader the ultimate end of these two characters, and in essence, these two theologies. Valjean, the representative of righteousness through grace, dies contented and fulfilled, having received mercy himself having shown mercy to others. Javert on the other hand, when presented with a righteousness which was

greater than his own legalistic ideals of right and wrong, experienced a shattering of his world and was driven to suicide.

One of the most poignant points of the antagonism of Javert is how it clarifies the redemption of the convict Jean Valjean. One realizes that if Valjean had never experienced grace, had never been redeemed, Javert could never be considered an antagonist. Valjean, the ex-convict, hardened and embittered, would no doubt end up back in the galleys, a subject to the rigid rules and judgements of Javert's legalistic world. After his epiphany however, Valjean becomes, in a sense, reborn. He is now a man not under judgement, but under grace. He has, in a sense, escaped the world of Javert. By Javert's repeated attempts to recapture him, to consider him as nothing but the "old Valjean", he opposes the whole concept of righteousness through grace. Because of this, he remains one of the most unique and complex antagonists in all of literature.