

Jean valjean: an angel in hell



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Les Misérables is a story of redemption, forgiveness, charity, salvation and moral obligation. The main character, Jean Valjean, enters the novel as a thief, having spent nineteen years in prison. He is given this second chance by M. Myriel, a prominent bishop, who offers Jean Valjean food and lodging, and by doing so he paves the way for Jean Valjean to live a life of financial prosperity and renewed spiritual faith. Jean Valjean poses as M. Madeleine in this pure and natural life but soon comes across a dilemma. Jean Valjean has to choose “to remain in paradise and there become a demon!” or “to reenter into hell and there become an angel” (p. 84)! Through this conflict, Hugo proposes two kinds of life: the life of a comfortable, wealthy man with few moral obligations and the life of a struggling, but ultimately virtuous convict. Through this conflict, Hugo expresses Jean Valjean’s inner turmoil and his ultimate choice to trade material comfort for moral comfort and selfishness for selflessness. In this paradise that Jean Valjean lives in, he takes on the role of M. Madeleine, a prosperous mayor, who brings wealth to the entire region of which he governs. He is very generous to the poor, has a good conscience, and seems always to be calm. One day Fauchelevent, an old man, falls under his cart and is unable to get out. M. Madeleine goes under the cart and risks his life for this old man. M. Madeleine also saves Fantine from time in jail. Javert sentences her for defending herself from someone who taunts her because of her looks. Despite all of these acts of goodness, Jean Valjean has done little to reconcile the real moral and legal dilemmas in his life, and they eventually begin to reappear. The deeds he carries out are true to his kindly nature, but they almost also seem like repayment to the world for the ills that he has done. The problem is that, according to society’s laws, the only way to right his wrong is by allowing

himself to be punished and treated as a criminal. Worse yet, he has become a devil by becoming part of the society he denounced years before. He says early in the book, “ If it were not outrageous that society should treat with such rigid precision those of its members who were most poorly endowed in the distribution of wealth that chance had made, and who were therefore, most worthy of indulgence. Those questions asked and decided, he condemned society and sentenced it” (21). He denounces the upper class, who have taken advantage of those already in dire situations, but years later, he has become what he sentenced to his hate. The disparity between the image he portrays and his reality causes great conflict within him and leads him to reassess his choices. The moment at which Jean Valjean” s world becomes a hell is precisely the moment in which it becomes salvation for Javert, “ Javert was at this moment in heaven, . . .” (113) Hugo writes, as the inspector feels that he has triumphed over evil. As Javert becomes a devil in heaven, Jean Valjean becomes an angel in hell. The world that Jean Valjean emerges into is a far cry from the comfortable existence as M. Madeleine. However, despite the tragedy that surrounds him, this choice is a better one for Jean Valjean, and he is able to right the real wrongs in his life. After saving Champmathieu, the first deed he does is to save Cosette from the Thenardiers, and in return, the deed provides him with something he has not known before: love. The description of Cosette as he first finds her is terrible; the Thendardiers have nearly killed her. However, Jean Valjean offers to take her away and acts as an angel for a second time, this time in a place that seems like hell. In fact, he is described as being from heaven. “ As demons and genni recognize by certain signs, the presence of a superior God, Thenardier comprehended that he was to deal with one who was very

powerful” (155). Furthermore, when Cosette is with him, “ she felt somewhat as if she were near God” (157). Even his stay in the convent suggests that he has found God or spirituality in a way that he never could have as M.

Madeline. His good deeds continue as the situation in Paris becomes even more like hell. In a short scene at the start of his section, Jean Valjean gives up his uniform so that a soldier, who is a complete stranger to him, can live. In fact, the uniform is described as “ dropping from heaven” (414), which seems to directly support the image of Jean Valjean as an “ angel.” When one soldier asks who this man is, the reply is, “ He is a man who saves others” (414). Furthermore, there is no reason that Jean Valjean should help Enjolras other than as an unselfish sacrifice. At this point, the transition from a devil in heaven to an angel in hell seems very obvious. Years before, he had been a mayor, wealthy and powerful, living in luxury. Now he has put himself into a world of turmoil, danger, and filth. He now is an angel, running around a sewer, trying to help others. However, his truly angelic acts are still to come. The two choices he makes in saving Marius and Javert are clearly difficult for him to make, and in the end, both men could both mean his future downfall. First, he chooses to let Javert go in an act that is so virtuous that it causes the evil Javert to kill himself. He confronts his past as he gives Javert his false name and address in case Javert chooses to pursue him.

Shortly afterwards, he makes the choice to save Marius, even when it means that he will lose Cosette, his love, to him. His last act is to reveal his identity to those around him, an act which could destroy him. In the end, though, his good deeds have outweighed his past, and he is treated by Marius as a hero. In fact, he says, “ Cosette, that man is an angel!” (515). He leaves this world with his “ daughter” happy and content, the sacrifice of an angel. When he

dies, he is met by another angel, welcoming him to heaven “ with outstretched wings, awaiting the soul” (520). When Jean Valjean decides whether “ to remain in paradise and there become a demon!” or “ to reenter into hell and there become an angel!” (p. 84), he defines his whole existence and the major theme of the book. He believes that he is only choosing to save one man wrongly accused of his crimes. However, his choice leads him to many chances for redemption. By saving Cosette and finding love, he becomes an angel who is willing to save others even at his own expense. He saves Marius and Javert even when their deaths would have meant comfort for him. He chooses to reveal his identity even when it means he will lose what he loves. But all these things are better than the life he would have led, hidden, and without love, if he had stayed in heaven.