

LES MISÉRABLES [1998]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1999, 2020

In 1813, Jean Valjean (Liam Neeson) is paroled after a 19-year prison sentence. The penal system's brutality has left him equally brutish, relying only on his wit and physical strength for survival. He steals some silver from a kindly Bishop (Peter Vaughan). Caught and returned to the scene of the crime, the Bishop says he gave him the silver and sets him on the road to reform. This unexpected kindness eventually leads him to respectability as the prosperous, just and kind mayor of Dijon. A prison guard who knew Valjean, Inspector Javert (Geoffrey Rush), is installed as the police chief of Dijon and suspects Valjean. Meanwhile, an employee in Valjean's tile factory, Fantine (Uma Thurman) is fired from her factory job because she has an illegitimate daughter, Cosette (Mimi Newman, and later, Claire Danes). On her deathbed, Valjean promises to take care of her daughter. When another man is accused of being Valjean, the real Valjean confesses but escapes with Cosette to hide in a Paris convent. A decade later, Javert is still in pursuit. Cosette meets and immediately falls in love with Marius (Hans Matheson), a revolutionary. During the 1832 uprising, Valjean saves both Javert and Marius. Realizing his misdirected life, Javert commits suicide and allows Valjean to escape. (PG-13).

Victor Hugo's 19th century novel seems to have a lasting fascination not only for the reading public, but also the world film industry. It was given the Hollywood treatment first in 1935 by Richard Boleslawski (with Fredric March miscast as Valjean and Charles Laughton as Javert) and then again in 1952 by Lewis Milestone. There have been TV adaptations. There are Italian and French versions (in 1997 by Claude Lelouch, for instance, featuring Jean-Paul Belmondo and cleverly intercut with a World War II setting for a fascinating political twist). And, of course, there is the long-running musical version.

This filming by the Danish director Bille August does some clever things with the story but missing are the sense of life and vibrancy we expect from such a text. We see a lot of beautiful people posturing beautifully in beautifully impoverished and beautifully dirty scenery. Most of the emotions are presented as clearly and unambiguously as semaphore signals and thus neither develop nor involve the viewer in the novel's mystery of the human soul and its torments. Apparently to make the story more "filmic," it has been cut into three clear acts: Valjean released from prison, nine years later in Dijon, and finally 10 years later in Paris. Put this way, the thinness of the "three act" structure is pretty obvious. The screenplay, an ossified spectacle, seems more derived from the Classics Illustrated comic book than the novel.

A film based on a famed literary text is, presumably, intended to attract the literate. However, this version fails in this regard. It seems destined to be used, like Cliff Notes for the media generation, by college literature students cramming for mid-term

exams. Since the same story has recently become a highly successful musical, that audience will be disappointed by the somberness of the piece (the more naive may wonder why no one is singing). Just for whom this film is intended remains a mystery.

Valjean's moral struggle and Javert's struggle with obsession could have held the film together. Unfortunately, neither of these is very deeply developed.

Javert, being less explained by the film, becomes the more interesting character. Both he and Valjean come from the same background – Javert's father was a thief, his mother a prostitute. A more important similarity between the men is that they both live in fear: Valjean of getting caught, and Javert of becoming a criminal. This fear is reasonable in the twilight of the days of the Divine Right of Kings, where inheritance meant power, privilege and personality. It was also the dawning of the age of genetics, when it was felt that the wealthy inherited not only their position and right to rule from their parents, but also their superiority. This was extended to the working class, the poor, and the criminal – their progeny were destined to the same fate as their parents. Valjean demonstrates the falseness of this assumption (and because of its widespread acceptance, no one suspects him once he becomes the prominent mayor of Dijon).

Javert is more complex. He stands constantly at the edge of the precipice that leads to criminality. He compensates for his fear of succumbing to his criminal inheritance by projecting outward an overwhelming need for absolutism and order. For him the law cannot be flexed in the slightest way, for any softening or bending could lead to breaking which, in his case, would inexorably lead to a fall into a life of crime. However, the expression of these problems doesn't come across very well in the film.

Most filmic adaptations of great literature suffer in problems resulting from the difference between the media: in books people *think*, while in films people *do*. Some filmmakers seem aware of this problem and make attempts to solve it, however, with only occasional success. Mercifully, August avoids the common cop out of a narrator replacing literature's inner voice. To replace "thinking" with "doing," a film must weave a tapestry of visual symbols as powerful as the literary metaphors.

For instance, the first time we see Valjean, he is walking atop a berm between two fields at sunrise. (Director August begins his film in the middle of the story, with Valjean just released from a 20-year stretch in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. Well, not really. Most of the prison time added to his original sentence resulted from other infractions arising from his bad attitude. Lionizing the hero, this is never mentioned. In no way is the book's Valjean a model prisoner.) This gives us a nice symbolic introduction to the man and his predicament. The sunrise indicates a new day – he's just out of prison. The raised berm predicts his encounter with the kindly Bishop. He can descend on either the right or the left, toward goodness or toward evil – at this point in the film, both are equally possible.

Later, when Valjean must leave Dijon, we see that he still has the candlesticks the Bishop gave him. He presumably sold the silverware to open the factory. Thus, he has

sacrificed a means of personal nutrition, the silverware, in preference to keeping the candlesticks, symbolic of light, illumination, intelligence and warmth.

There are many other nice visual touches: Cosette, smitten by Marius, promptly gets lost in the labyrinth of the city – and in the labyrinth of love. However, despite the superb international cast, there are not enough of these meaningful visual touches to constitute the sweep and movement such a story needs to come to life on the screen.

Historical films, especially epics, often alter history to address issues contemporary to the viewing audience and often have little to do with the period they represent on the screen. The best recent examples are *Braveheart* [1995], which has less to do with 13th century Scotland than it does with the contemporary ultra-right militia movement (hidden illegal arms glorified, cries of freedom which amount to replacing “their” despot with “our” despot, fear of foreign influence taking over our government, etc.) and *Dangerous Beauty* [1998] which injects contemporary feminist ideology into an era where there was none. However, the film of a historical literary classic can function differently.

Literary classics become so not only for the glimpse into a historical period they offer nor the pure beauty of their writing, but for the depth of their perception into the human condition. The baroque of human affairs is endlessly fascinating. While the world may change, the issues dealt with in the classic novel – and the film derived therefrom, if we are lucky – don’t. Thus, we should be able to find contemporary references, implications and parallels to the world of *Les Misérables*.

Politics and punishment, for instance, seem to have changed little. Javert’s tactics remind one of the McCarthy-era witch-hunts. The disproportionate consequences accrued from a small misdemeanor (nineteen years for a loaf of bread), seem like an uncanny parallel to President Clinton’s current predicament, being embroiled in major legal problems from attempting to cover up a minor peccadillo.

Contemporary social issues are also addressed. Like today, *Les Misérables*’ students led protests and riots. In an era when we question the role of the government in reforming the individual through welfare, this film claims that religious kindness reforms criminals better than the state penal system. Crime is not genetic, but environmental and economic genesis. Furthermore, Valjean separates the sexes in his tile factory to protect the women – this eliminates sexual harassment.

Even our so-called computer age gets a mention. Javert wants to do a survey to gather data on the people of Dijon and thus control the dangerous elements. Even then, there was a concern with what we now call the “information society.”

Les Misérables is an early story of social/moral inversion so common in contemporary film: the criminals uphold the society through a strict set of rules and humanistic moral codes while officialdom is corrupt, uncaring and criminal.

And familiar problems have changed little. Cosette is the model of a modern adolescent. She pleads boredom when asking to leave the convent (she might as well be headed to the local mall). Told to stay in a cab when her father is on an errand in a dangerous neighborhood, it takes her only seconds to disobey her father and leave. Later, like many contemporary daughters, she must choose between the father figure and the lover.

(With the same star, it is difficult not to compare *Les Misérables* with *Schindler's List* [1993], especially in the factory scenes. Valjean/Schindler both care for their employees and protect them from an oppressive, violent, dominant (mostly patriarchal) society. And Valjean gives his factory to the workers, something that Schindler, given the opportunity, would probably also have done.)

Unfortunately, all this doesn't add up to an exciting film. For instance, portraying everyone as disgustingly self-sacrificing is obviously an attempt to reflect on our selfish and "yuppie" times, and it sounds like a lecture. Too much effort has gone into underplaying the complex politics of the book and watering down love, forgiveness, and redemption (Hugo's major concerns) for the benefit of a modern audience. The great emotional scope of the novel, from high idealism to abysmal outrage, has become muted and picturesque; passion has become mere dissatisfaction – and an unsatisfying film.

Directed by Bille August. Written by Rafael Yglesias. Based on the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, Cinematography Jorgen Persson, Costume design by Gabriella Pescucci, Art direction by Peter Grant, Production design by Anna Asp. Distributed by Sony Pictures, 1998.