

# “JE ME NOMME THÉNARDIER”: THROUGH THE MELODRAMATIC MIRROR

by

AMY ELLEN LAWS

(Under the Direction of Timothy Raser)

## ABSTRACT

The name Thénardier has become a synonym for “evil” as a result of Victor Hugo’s melodramatic characterization of Monsieur and Madame Thénardier in *Les Misérables*. Describing these characters in exquisite detail and revealing nearly countless evil deeds, the reader is left wondering how a couple capable of such deplorable acts could ever find redemption in what seems like a state of absolute evil. Upon closer examination of the melodramatic genre and Hugo’s own insertions through the lines of his characters and his poetry, he reveals the answer. The reader must decide if any of the characters in his novel are absolutely good or evil, and whether, in the melodramatic world, absolutes are even required.

INDEX WORDS: Victor Hugo, Thénardier, melodrama, redemption, *Les Misérables*, Les Miz

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Johnny and Sandy Laws. They are my real-life heroes and the best parents a girl could have. Thank you for being my constants in a world of chaos.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
I. Introduction.....	1
II. “Portrait complet de deux figures louches”.....	5
III. A Family Portrait and “The Good Ones”.....	24
IV. Conclusion.....	40
REFERENCES.....	45

## Chapter I. Introduction

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the author presents a portrait of the *misérables*, characters who suffer under the weight of poverty, betrayal, and the impending shadow of death in post-revolutionary France. Hugo brings his characters to life in the minds of his readers in this novel which, despite its melodramatic aspects is surprisingly realistic. According to Annie Ubersfeld :

Toute la dernière partie des *Misérables* est un énorme mélodrame où rien ne manque, ni l'exploit héroïque du Héros, ni la différence entre le héros et le jeune premier, ni la Barricade comme succédané de la catastrophe naturelle, ni la méconnaissance, ni la reconnaissance, ni le comique de Nias, ni le mariage des amoureux qui ont 'beaucoup souffert' [parce que] tous les ingrédients sont là [et] toutes les scènes sont présentées. (134)

In particular, Hugo evokes a sense of evil with his characterization of Monsieur and Madame Thénardier, presenting two characters who personify it in an unmistakably melodramatic style. The Thénardiens "tous deux étaient au plus haut degré susceptibles de l'espèce de hideux progrès qui se fait dans le sens du mal" (Hugo 220; vol. I, pt. 1, bk. 4, ch. 2). His portrait of the couple is so convincing that it becomes the model for malice itself. For example, in the 2001 play *Le Complexe de Thénardier*, José Pliya uses the name Thénardier<sup>1</sup> to represent a person who abuses another and reduces her to slavery. Pliya notes in his introduction that his play has nothing to do

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<sup>1</sup> Phillippe Bunau-Varilla also references the name Thénardier in *Panama: The Creation, Destruction and Resurrection*: "No one who writes of the wars of the First Empire confines himself to the personality of a Thénardier, emptying the pockets of the heroes fallen on the battlefield" (94).



with Hugo's novel, but he nonetheless uses the name Thénardier<sup>2</sup> in his title to represent a vicious mother. Victor Hugo seems to have created two characters who could easily write the villain's handbook and their influence is legendary.

Using a monstrous physical description of the couple ("Première Esquisse de Deux Figures Louches") and a summary of their melodramatically deplorable actions, Hugo characterizes them and creates a perfect model for malevolence. Hugo describes the couple in gruesome detail, leaving nothing out, producing a vivid portrait. He introduces Monsieur Thénardier "off-stage" to increase the suspense for the reader before revealing his character sketch many pages later. Fantine only hears Monsieur's voice as he hides in the shadows. This presentation alludes to Thénardier's dark and criminal lifestyle that will plumb the depths (quite literally, as he ends up in the Paris sewers) ever more deeply over the course of the novel. Employing the same type of suspenseful introduction for Madame Thénardier, he has her physical description precede that of her spouse. These introductions contribute to the macabre and sinister nature of the characters as well as the melodramatic and theatrical presentation. Martin Kaner affirms that melodrama "proceeds at a headlong pace; it opposes events and individuals in radical ways; it presents us with violent moral opposites; it highlights brutal words and acts; it is peopled by pure villains and pure victims; above all, its narrative surface covers, by implication, a dark and troubling underworld" (26). According to Peter Brooks, melodrama "differs in constantly reaching toward the 'too much,' and in the passivity of response to anguish, so that we accede to the experience of the nightmare" (35). "Too much" is what we find here.

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<sup>2</sup> In Opal Stanley Whiteley's *The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart*, she states "But the printers...with a brutality that would do credit to a Thénardier, first threatened, then destroyed the plates" (xv).

The level of evil encompassing the couple is illustrated by their deplorable actions. Their dastardly deeds add up as quickly as the preposterous tabs that they create for their customers at the inn. From a mother who favors her daughters while rejecting her sons, forcing them to live by their wits on the streets of July Monarchy Paris to a father who uses his children as accomplices to contribute to his life of crime, the Thénardiens are the definition of a dysfunctional family. From Monsieur Thénardier's shameless robbery of the corpses of war victims and his manipulation of his hotel guests to his complex and abominable plots to Madame Thénardier's blind following of her husband, promoting evil at every level, Hugo leaves no stone unturned in his exquisite creation of the diabolical portrait of the Thénardiens.

According to Mario Vargas Llosa, in the notebook for *Les Misérables*, Hugo used the following adjectives “étonnant, extraordinaire, surprenant, surhumain, surnaturel, inouï, fauve, sinistre, formidable, gigantesque, sauvage, lugubre, funèbre, hideux, épouvantable, ténébreux, mystérieux, fantastique, nocturne et crépusculaire (89).” Each word is “meant to determine the mood of the story” (90). Llosa affirms that these adjectives “all refer to ‘another world’ of excess, extravagance, surprise, and color. A world that could be found in the most gruesome melodramas of popular theater” (90). Therefore, Hugo's world is where one learns how to be a proper villain through melodramatic representations of evil.

With this portrait of evil in its most diabolical form, one must ponder the following question: Are Monsieur and Madame Thénardier absolutely evil or can they be redeemed? Taking a brief look at the descriptions and actions of Jean Valjean, Fantine, Monsieur Bienvenu Myriel, and various other characters in the novel, I will compare and contrast the characters that are considered “good” next to the Thénardiens who are considered “evil.” Are any of the

characters entirely good or wholly evil? Is there a representation of absolute good and evil or are the lines quite blurry? Alternatively, does melodrama, as Brooks claims, require absolutes?

At the same time, I will examine the family dynamics of the Thénardier family including all the children: Azelma, Éponine, Gavroche, and the two unnamed sons. Why does Hugo choose only to spare the lives of Monsieur Thénardier and Azelma (the daughter who is often excluded in film adaptations and is completely forgotten in the musical version) while he chooses to kill off Éponine, Gavroche, and Madame Thénardier (who lives on in the musical version)? Do the deaths of these members of the Thénardier family contribute to the overall portrait of malice?

The goal of this thesis is then to determine whether or not his melodramatic and villainous couple is redeemable or if they are indeed absolutely evil. Hugo sketches a complete portrait of evil and in effect, produces a primer for villains. With his hideous description of Madame Thénardier like a fairy tale witch, unfit mother, and blind disciple, Hugo reveals one side of his diabolical duo. With his illustration of Monsieur Thénardier as a fake philosopher, practical politician, wheeler-dealer, and man of the shadows, Hugo presents a perfect image of malice. Can this couple possibly find redemption or are they irretrievably evil and absolutely malevolent?

## Chapter II. “Portrait Complet de Deux Figures Louches”

When Hugo introduces Mme Thénardier for the first time, he describes her as “rousse, charnue, anguleuse; le type femme-à-soldat dans toute sa disgrâce...une minaudière hommasse” (Hugo 216, vol. I, pt. I, bk. 4, ch. 1). He adds that she is “jeune encore; elle avait à peine trente ans.” Madame sits during her introduction, but Hugo employs exaggeration to reveal her height stating “si cette femme...se fût tenue droite, peut-être sa haute taille et sa carrure de colosse ambulante propre aux foires, eussent-elles dès l’abord effarouché la voyageuse, troublé sa confiance, et fait évanouir ce que nous avons à raconter” (216). The author’s melodramatic and terror-inducing description of Madame’s physical appearance provides an introduction to her repulsive qualities, immediately setting the stage for a fiendish production.

The first introduction of Monsieur Thénardier is unique and significant. He speaks “du fond de la gargote” and does not emerge until the moment when Fantine promises financial support for Cosette’s care (Hugo 218; vol I, pt. I, bk. 4, ch. 1). Hugo states that “la face du maître apparut,” but he reserves his physical description for the next chapter. It is important to note that Monsieur Thénardier is introduced first vocally because this allows him to remain in darkness. Llosa writes that “the *ténébreux* Thénardier...tends to appear in the night rather than in the day because he feels an irresistible attraction for the shadows, for a life of stealth” (Llosa 90). Thénardier’s shadowed introduction alerts the reader that darker deeds lie ahead for this innkeeper. Hugo utilizes suspense here to augment Thénardier’s mysterious nature and add a macabre overtone to the scene.

In the next chapter, the reader immediately deduces the character of the couple, but with exceptionally vivid description, Hugo reinforces their monstrous qualities. Regarding their general appearance, he declares that “c’étaient de ces natures naines qui, si quelque feu sombre les chauffe par hasard, deviennent facilement monstrueuses” (220; vol I, pt. I, bk. 4, ch. 2). Starting with a physical metaphor, he returns to darkness implying that their lives are lived in shadow and that only the light reveals their true nature. The theme of darkness continues with the declaration that “il existe des âmes écrivisses reculant continuellement vers les ténèbres, rétrogradant dans la vie plutôt qu’elles n’y avancent, employant l’expérience à augmenter leur déformité, empirant sans cesse, et s’empregnant de plus en plus d’une noirceur croissante {et} cet homme et cette femme étaient de ces âmes-là” (220). Hugo’s interesting choice to describe the Thénardiens as having “crayfish-like souls” alludes to the nocturnal habits of crayfish and their existence, which is anchored in disguise. They are bottom-feeders that are only discovered when a large rock is overturned or some other clever hiding place is shattered. Therefore, Hugo presents the couple as shadowy figures, the quality that eclipses all of their other physical characteristics and solidifies their malice. Adding an element of suspense, he tells the reader that “nous compléterons le croquis plus tard” as if to imply that the reader could not possibly process the entire description at once (220).

Although Hugo paints “deux portraits complets,” he reminds the reader that “on n’a encore aperçu dans ce livre les Thénardier que du profil” and he augments the suspense with the declaration that “le moment est venu de tourner autour de ce couple de le regarder sous toutes ses faces” (494; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Finally, the reader will see the two characters in the light. Hugo brings them out of the shadows. Madame Thénardier is described as “grande, blonde, rouge, grasse, charnue, carrée, énorme et agile” (494). In addition, “son large visage, criblé de

taches de rousseur, avait l'aspect d'une écumoire" and "elle avait de la barbe" (494). To complete the portrait, "au repos, il lui sortait de la bouche une dent" (494). Later, in order to augment the level of Cosette's fear of Madame Thénardier, Hugo uses an animal metaphor and describes her as "la Thénardier hideuse avec sa bouche d'hyène et la colère flamboyante dans les yeux" (506; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 5). By choosing the hyena, Hugo reinforces both her mocking and cruel nature and her treatment of Cosette as prey. The reader is left without any doubt that she is hideous and resembles a wicked witch from a fairy tale designed to frighten children. Madame's resolutely physical description serves two purposes. First, this description empties her of emotional and intellectual depth, further reinforcing the idea that she blindly follows her husband without pausing to consider her own views. Secondly, the physical description matches her ferocious comportment portraying her as more of a creature than a human being. Hugo's animal references perpetuate this notion.

To bring Monsieur to light, Hugo explains that he is "un homme petit, maigre, blême, anguleux, osseux, chétif" with an "air malade" but "qui se portait à merveille" (506). Thénardier "avait le regard d'une fouine et la mine d'un homme à lettres" so he is presented as a sordid and sly man (506). (The fact that Hugo refers to Thénardier as "un homme à lettres" reveals a level of hypocrisy on Hugo's part as he does not include himself in this condemnation, nor does the reader detect irony.) Thénardier smokes a large pipe and he "portait une blouse et sous sa blouse un vieil habit noir" (506). Hugo adds that Thénardier "ressemblait beaucoup aux portraits de l'abbé Delille" (506). (This literary model references Jacques Delille or the "abbé Delille" who wears quite a mischievous expression in his portraits and is known for writing epistles and inspid "nature" poetry.)

Later in the Paris sewers, Thénardier is described as “hagard, fauve, louche, un peu menaçant, pourtant amical” (Hugo 700, vol. II, pt. V, bk. 3, ch. 8). After this description, Thénardier “entrebâilla la porte, livra tout juste passage à Jean Valjean, renferma la grille...et replongea dans l’obscurité” (700). Once, again he hides his face in the darkness.

With his detailed descriptions of the couple, Hugo serves as an artist drawing the perfect sketch, and with his complete and astonishing characterization, he complements their evil souls with hideous faces, constructing perfect monsters. The first introduction of the couple’s individual personalities in the same chapter contributes to their malevolent portrait.

Madame is described as a brute with a masculine quality. She does all of the household chores but “elle avait pour tout domestique Cosette” (Hugo 494, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). In addition, “tout tremblait au son de sa voix, les vitres, les meubles et les gens” (494). She “jurait splendidement; elle se vantait de casser une noix d’un coup de poing” (494). In addition, “elle vivait avec emportement toute dans la minute” (Hugo 499, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Here, Hugo shows her brutality and her quick temper.

On the other hand, “sans les romans qu’elle avait lus, et qui, par moments, faisaient bizarrement reparaître la mijaurée sous l’ogresse, jamais l’idée ne fût venue à la personne de dire d’elle: c’est une femme” (Hugo 494, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Therefore, her predilection for romance novels is the sole indicator of her gender. She chooses the names of her daughters Eponine and Azelma because of her adoration for romance novels. In addition, she “était créature formidable qui n’aimait que ses enfants et ne craignait que son mari” (Hugo 498, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). This brutal woman’s fear of her husband reinforces the level of evil attributed to

Thénardier. Madame Thénardier is much like Thénardier's slave, particularly useful, exhibiting both brute force and obedience.

Madame's love for her children is unequal because "sa maternité s'arrêtait à ses filles, et...ne s'entendait pas jusqu'aux garçons" (498). She adores her two daughters but neglects her son. Hugo states that she "l'avait nourri, mais ne l'aimait pas," and that he annoys her and when he cries she responds "Bah!...il m'ennuie" and allows him to "crier dans les ténèbres" ( Hugo 493, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Once again, the shadowed life of the Thénardiens surfaces, this time, hiding an infant (le Petit Gavroche) in its darkness. Eventually, Gavroche becomes a "gamin de Paris." (A more detailed portrait of Gavroche will appear in chapter three.) Madame also rejects her other two sons:

La Thénardier s'était débarrassée des deux derniers, encore en bas âge et tous petits, avec un bonheur singulier...la Thénardier n'était mère que jusqu'à ses filles. Sa maternité finissait là. Sa haine du genre humain commençait à ses garçons. Du côté de ses fils sa méchanceté était à pic, et son cœur avait à cet endroit un lugubre escarpement. Comme on l'a vu, elle détestait l'aîné; elle excrétaient les deux autres. Pour quoi ? Parce que. Le plus terrible des motifs et la plus indiscutable des réponses. Parce que. – Je n'ai pas besoin d'une tiulée d'enfants, disait cette mère. (Hugo 266, vol. II, pt. IV, bk. 6, ch. 1)

According to Isabel Roche, she represents "la mauvaise mère," a recurring motif for Victor Hugo (204). Her indifference regarding her sons adds another layer to her vicious personality. It is also



important to note that while she lavishes affection on her daughters, she nevertheless measures it out: “une somme de caresses et une somme de coups et d’injures à dépenser chaque jour” (Hugo 223; vol. I, pt. 1, bk. 4, ch. 3). Hugo notes that if Cosette had not entered the picture, she would have most likely abused her daughters in the same manner (223). This zero-sum transaction model reflects Madame’s characterization as the brutish romantic, a walking paradox. Her ferocious side strikes and insults Cosette while her romantic side reflects her romance novel heroines who radiate love and charm.

With this description, Madame’s portrait is complete. Mostly masculine, severe and disagreeable, she is also an unfit mother and a blind disciple of her husband. She is capable of fits of rage, a brutal comportment, a bizarre love limited to her daughters and romance novels and a single fear: of her husband. These two sides reveal her malicious nature. She is capable of becoming a character, much like her beloved romance novel heroines. Since Madame reads romance novels on a regular basis, she can duplicate charming and seductive behaviors. For example, she creates a storybook environment, luring Fantine into her web through a rose-colored window. Evidenced in her deceptive behavior toward Fantine, and her complete willingness to do whatever her husband tells her, Madame Thénardier is capable of deplorable acts. Learning from her shape-shifter husband (and her romance novel heroines), she is able to lure her prey seductively while secretly plotting their demise and waiting on her husband’s instructions for carrying out their exploitation.

Monsieur Thénardier “souriait habituellement par précaution, et était poli à peu près avec tout le monde, même avec le mendiant auquel il refusait un liard” (Hugo 495; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). In addition, “sa coquetterie consistait à boire avec les rouliers” et “personne n’avait jamais pu le griser” (495). He is “attentif et pénétrant, silencieux ou bavard à l’occasion, et toujours

avec une haute intelligence” (Hugo 497; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Thénardier seems to make a habit of being a friend to the masses but never loses his sense of awareness in order to gather the most information while appearing to be “one of them.” He “comprendait le mieux, avec le plus de profondeur et de la façon la plus moderne, cette chose qui est une vertu chez les peuples barbares et une marchandise chez les peuples civilisés, l’hospitalité” (Hugo 495; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Here, Hugo comments on the fact that no matter what the social class, Thénardier can manipulate anyone by gathering just enough information to employ his skillful charm. He also implies that hospitality should be offered, not sold. While Madame shouts and plays the role of the brute, he plays the role of politician, “servant to the poor,” “butler to the great,” and “life-long mate” (Kretzmer and Boubilil). He is a chameleon who welcomes everyone with a “handshake and an open palm” (Kretzmer, and Boubilil).

Thénardier presents himself as an educated man because he is a “beau parleur” (Hugo 496; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). He often uses the names “Voltaire, Raynal, Parny, et chose bizarre, saint Augustin” in conversation (496). He considers himself quite the philosopher. However, for Thénardier’s description, Hugo employs a play on words that combines “filou” (a slang term for crook) and “philosophe.” Thénardier asserts that he is an intelligent man, colorfully contributing to most any conversation with “des prétentions à la littérature et au matérialisme” (Hugo 495; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Therefore, he is most accurately described as a “filousophe.” However, he often makes spelling errors and speaks with poor pronunciation (Hugo 495; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). For example, on the bill that he writes for Jean Valjean, he writes service as “*servisse*” (Hugo 540; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 9). His talent for trickery with finesse contributes to his malicious nature and makes him an impostor.

He claims to have served in the military but he “appartenait à cette variété de catiniers maraudeurs dont nous avons parlé, battant l’estrade, vendant à ceux-ci, volant ceux-là, et roulant en famille, homme, femme et enfants, dans quelque carriole boîteuse, à la suite des troupes en marche, avec l’instinct de se rattacher toujours à l’armée victorieuse” (Hugo 496; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). With his “‘quibus’ composé des bourses et des montres, des bagues d’or et des croix d’argent récoltées au temps de la moisson dans les sillons ensemencés de cadavres” he opens an inn in Montfermeil (496). Here, Hugo metaphorically presents Thénardier as a farmer harvesting crops, where the seeds sown are corpses and the crops are the possessions that he steals from those who died in battle. Although this “quibus” does not make him a rich man, his income comes from the exploitation of *misérables*, soldiers who died in Waterloo. His actions render him deplorable.

Arguably, his worst quality is his ruthlessness. He voraciously seeks out opportunities for revenge. Because of his “profonde fournaise de haine,” he is someone who “se veng[e] perpétuellement, qui accus[e] tout ce qui passe devant [lui] de tout ce qui est tombé sur [lui], et qui [est] toujours prêt[t] à jeter sur le premier venu, comme légitime grief, le total des déceptions, des banqueroutes et des calamités de [sa] vie” (Hugo 496-97; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Hugo adds: “Malheur à qui passait sous sa fureur alors!” (496-97). Thénardier is the worst type of man: a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Establishing an atmosphere of trust and confidence, he manipulates his victims, exploiting them without remorse.

The couple functions as a unit. Thénardier gives the instructions and Madame follows them because “le maître et la maîtresse, c’était le mari. Elle faisait, il créait” (Hugo 497; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). Madame Thénardier is a blind accomplice in the Thénardier machine. Monsieur Thénardier “creates” opportunities for the couple’s gain and Madame Thénardier

simply follows instructions. Monsieur Thénardier must also carefully remedy disruptions caused by Madame Thénardier's brutal temper. In addition, knowing that he is in full control of the operation, he is both the husband and the wife and essentially the slave master.

Despite the fact that Madame is quite the brute and more than likely feared by the masses for her violent temper, she “fears only her husband” and is “une montagne de bruit et de chair qui se mouvait sous le petit doigt de ce despote frêle”(Hugo 497; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2, ma trad.). Thénardier is the “master of the house” (497 and Boubilil and Shönberg). The couple represents “ruse et rage mariés ensemble, attelage hideux et terrible” (497). According to André Brochu, “La Mauvaise Action semble cimenter l’union des époux” (130). Hence, it seems that the only thing truly uniting this couple is their propensity toward malevolence and their equally insatiable appetites for the orchestration of evil deeds.

To better understand the level of evil, it is useful to analyze the couple in light of the actions of Thénardier himself because he is the puppeteer. However, first, it is necessary to analyze the couple's treatment of Fantine and her daughter Cosette. As soon as Fantine leaves Cosette at the Thénardier's inn, they write letters to her asking for more money in order to properly care for her daughter. For example, “un jour ils lui écrivaient à chaque instant que sa petite Cosette était toute nue par le froid qu’il faisait, qu’elle avait besoin d’une jupe de laine, et qu’il fallait au moins que la mère envoyât dix francs pour cela » (Hugo 255; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 5, ch. 10). As a result, Fantine sells all of her hair for ten francs and she sends a child's skirt (Hugo 256; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 5, ch. 10). Getting a skirt while expecting money, “les Thénardier [sont] furieux, ils donnèrent la jupe à Éponine” leaving Cosette to freeze (256). Not only are they only looking out for themselves with no intention of taking care of Cosette, they give Cosette's skirt to Éponine out of spite and misplaced economy.

Plus tard, ils écrivent une lettre tellement terrible:

Cosette est malade d'une maladie qui est dans le pays. Une fièvre miliary...il faut des drogues chères. Cela nous ruine et nous ne pouvons plus payer. Si vous ne nous envoyez pas quarante francs avant huit jours, la petite est morte. (Hugo 257; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 5, ch. 10).

Panicked, Fantine sells her teeth, "les dents devant" so that when she smiles, she reveals a "sourire sanglant" and sends forty francs to the *Sergent de Waterloo* (Hugo 259; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 5, ch. 10). As usual, it is a "ruse de la part des Thénardier pour avoir de l'argent" because Cosette is not sick (259).

They continue to exploit Fantine demanding more and more money, once declaring that if she does not send one hundred francs immediately "qu'il mettrait à la porte la petite Cosette, toute convalescente de grande maladie, par le froid, par les chemins, et qu'elle deviendrait ce qu'elle pourrait, et qu'elle crèverait, si elle voulait" (Hugo 261; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 5, ch. 11). This letter forces Fantine to enter into a life of prostitution and she becomes more and more ill until she dies. The couple kills Fantine with their greed.

Despite the money that Fantine sends, the couple neglect and abuse Cosette. They force her to wear rags and to serve as their personal slave. Cosette is "entre eux, subissant leur double pression, comme une créature qui serait à la fois broyée par une meule et déchiquetée par une tenaille" (Hugo 499; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). To explain this analogy, Hugo states that "l'homme et la femme avaient chacun une manière différente; Cosette était rouée de coups, cela venait de la femme; elle allait pieds nus l'hiver, cela venait du mari" (499). She has "la paupière

noire d'un coup de poing que la Thénardier lui avait donné, for example (Hugo 500; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 3).

La gargote Thénardier était comme une toile où Cosette était prise et tremblait. L'idéal de l'oppression était réalisé par cette domesticité sinistre. C'était quelque chose comme la mouche servante les araignées. La pauvre enfant, passive, se taisait. (Hugo 499; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2)

The effect is to show that Cosette's misery is fated. Here, the reader views an example of intertextuality and the motif of the fly and the spider. In *Notre Dame de Paris*, Hugo describes in grotesque detail the spider and the fly:

Charmolue, en suivant la direction de son regard, vit qu'il s'était fixé machinalement à la grande toile d'araignée qui tapissait la lucarne. En ce moment, une mouche étourdie, qui cherchait le soleil de mars, vint se jeter à travers ce filet et s'y englua. À l'ébranlement de sa toile, l'énorme araignée fit un mouvement brusque hors de sa cellule centrale, puis d'un bond, elle se précipita sur la mouche, qu'elle se plia en deuil avec ses antennes de devant, tandis que sa trompe hideuse lui fouillait la tête. –  
Pauvre mouche ! (Hugo 68 ; vol. II)

The Thénardiens treat Cosette with violence, intimidation and contempt. As a result, "Cosette avait tant souffert qu'elle craignait tout, même de parler, même de respirer" because "une parole avait si souvent fait crouler sur elle une avalanche" (Hugo 721; vol. I, pt. II, bk.8, ch. 8).

Cosette's trauma reveals another level of the Thénardier malice, but then in typical style, with the

ability to deceive the masses, Hugo has the villagers say that “ces Thénardier sont de braves gens. Ils ne sont pas riches, et ils élèvent un pauvre enfant qu’on leur a abandonné chez eux !” (Hugo 224; vol. I, pt. I, bk. 4, ch. 3). The general public is completely unaware of Cosette’s true situation and this is exactly what the couple wants everyone to think. They are master manipulators.

When Jean Valjean stays at the *Sergent de Waterloo*, Thénardier provides a “complete” list of charges for his guest:

NOTE DU MONSIEUR DU N 1

Souper.....	fr. 3
Chambre.....	10
Bougie.....	5
Feu.....	4
Servisse.....	1
TOTAL.....	fr. 23

(Hugo 541; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 9).

When Madame sees the bill, she cries out with “un enthousiasme mêlé de quelque hésitation” but Thénardier reassures her with a “cold” laugh (Hugo 540-41; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 9) that indicates “la signification supreme de la certitude et de l’autorité” (541). Thénardier instructs his wife regarding the management of his inn, and she listens to every word with an unshakable faith in her husband:

Le devoir de l'aubergiste...c'est de vendre au premier venu du  
 fricot, repos, de la lumière, du feu, des draps sales, de la bonne, des  
 puces, du sourire; d'arrêter les passants, de vider les petites bourses  
 et d'alléger honnêtement les grosses, d'abriter avec respect les  
 familles en route, de râper l'homme, d'éplucher l'enfant ; de coter la  
 fenêtre ouverte, la fenêtre fermée, le coin de la cheminée, le  
 fauteuil, la chaise, le tabouret, l'escabeau, le lit de plume, le  
 matelas et la botte de paille ; de savoir de combien l'ombre use le  
 miroir et de tarifier cela, et par les cinq cent mille diables, de faire  
 tout payer au voyageur, jusqu'aux mouches que son chien  
 mange ! » (Hugo 499; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2).

Kretzmer, following Boublil, rephrases Thénardier's words in "Master of the House" from the  
 musical version:

Charge 'em for the lice, extra for the mice  
 Two percent for looking in the mirror twice  
 Here a little slice, there a little cut  
 Three percent for sleeping with the window shut  
 When it comes to fixing prices, there's a lot o' tricks I knows  
 How it all increases, all them bits and pieces  
 ...it's amazing how it grows! (1985)

According to the original French lyrics, un "bon aubergiste...sait...faire tout payer par le  
 voyageur jusqu'aux mouches que son chien gobe dans le secteur" (Boublil). Thénardier is a



wheeler-dealer and he takes everything he possibly can from his guests at the inn. For Thénardier, everything has its price. This quality reveals another layer of evil, one that consists of buying and selling that which should not be sold.

Turning attention toward Thénardier, it is necessary to examine his “military service” at Waterloo. Hugo introduces him at Waterloo as a “rod[eur],” “ni Anglais, ni Français, ni paysan, ni soldat, moins homme que goule, attiré par le flair des morts, ayant pour victoire le vol, venant dévaliser Waterloo” (Hugo 466, vol. I, pt. II, bk. 1, ch. 19). His activities and his “gestes rapides et mystérieux le faisaient ressembler à ses larves crépusculaires qui hantent les ruines et que les anciennes légendes normandes appellent les Alleurs” (466).

Le rôdeur nocturne, que nous venons de faire entrevoir au lecteur,  
allait de ce côté. Il furetait cette immense tombe. Il regardait.

Il passait on ne sait quelle hideuse revue des morts. Il marchait les  
pieds dans le sang. (Hugo 469; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 1, ch. 19).

In his “hideuse revue des morts,” Thénardier carefully scrutinizes each corpse at length to assess its value. Without respect for the battlefield, covered in blood, he spends an inordinate amount of time contemplating the scene, not for a nighttime vigil, but as if it were a treasure chest left unattended. Thénardier steals precious objects from soldiers. His nocturnal activities showcase his depraved qualities. He glides through the shadows like a ghost or a sewer rat.

Returning to the shadows, Thénardier eventually finds himself in the sewers of Paris as the keeper of the key that opens the sewer gate. There he sneakily waits for desperate *misérables* in darkness. In the sewers, he announces that he is a friend to criminals. For example, thinking that Jean Valjean has killed a man, he says “Je ne te connais pas, mais je veux t’aider. Tu dois

être un ami” (Hugo 698; vol. II, pt. V, bk. 3, ch. 8). Immediately, he reveals his reason for befriending criminals and evildoers when he says “Tu n’as pas tué cet homme sans regarder ce qu’il avait dans ses poches. Donne-moi la moitié [et] je t’ouvre la porte” (698). When Jean Valjean gives money to Thénardier and exits the sewers, he sees that “cette grille et ces gonds, huilés avec soin, s’ouvriraient plus souvent qu’on ne l’eût pensé” and that “cette douceur était sinistre; on y sentait les allées et venues furtives, les entrées et les sorties silencieuses des hommes nocturnes, et les pas de loup du crime” (Hugo 702; vol. II, pt. V, bk. 3, ch. 8). He notes that “cette grille taciturne était une recéleuse” (702). This notion suggests that Thénardier is part of a regular crime network. Once again, Thénardier depends on corpses for financial gain, working under the cover of night.

In the portion of the novel where he calls himself Jondrette, he writes letters and sends his daughters, Éponine and Azelma, to distribute them to the rich in order to reap financial gain. He writes dramatic letters with information concerning his hopeless situation. He invents characters such as “Don Alavarez, capitaine espagnole de *caballerie*,” “Femme Balizard, une malheureuse *meré* de famille de six enfants,” “Genflot, homme de lettres,” and “P. Fabantou, artiste dramatique” (Hugo 14-17; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 3). It is important to note the spelling errors in italics. (At this point in the novel, the reader does not yet know that Jondrette is, in fact, Monsieur Thénardier, but Hugo provides clues with the spelling errors.) At the end of one letter, he writes “P.S. Ne serait-ce que quarante sous” and that he is sorry to send his daughter but “de tristes motifs de toilette ne [lui] permettent pas, hélas ! de sortir...” (Hugo 16; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 3). According to Karen Masters-Wicks, “this scoundrel’s speech shifts linguistic registers as it suits his purposes, transforming himself into whatever character furthers his evil plans, and attempts, unsuccessfully, to imitate standard written discourse” (101). His talent for disguise and

chicanery reveal yet another level of malice in that as he ages and loses his inn, he becomes more and more clever in manipulating others, and rather than exploiting the poor, he goes on to exploit the rich in the second volume after Waterloo. This “chameleon-like speech...attaches itself to slang as a means of survival” (Masters-Wicks 101).

The name Thénardier itself evokes a sense of evil in the novel. Hugo uses suspense with his dramatic revelations of Thénardier’s identity in various parts of the novel. During what is arguably the most dramatic scene in the novel, the ambush of Jean Valjean (as Monsieur LeBlanc) when the reader follows the actions of Monsieur Jondrette, at the moment he announces his real name, he cries:

‘Je ne m’appelle pas Fanbantou, je ne m’appelle pas Jondrette, je me nomme Thénardier ! Je suis l’aubergiste de Montfermeil ! Entendez-vous bien ? Thénardier ! Maintenant me reconnaissez-vous ? (Hugo 87; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 20).

Here, revealing his alter-egos, Jondrette finally confirms the reader’s suspicion that Jondrette is, indeed, Thénardier. At Waterloo, Hugo describes Thénardier’s nocturnal prowling without naming the criminal. However, the following conversation between a nearly-dead soldier and the criminal reveals his identity in a spine-tingling moment:

- Quel est votre grade ?
- Sergent.
- Comment vous appelez-vous ?
- Thénardier. (471; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 1, ch. 19)

With vivid memories of his nocturnal habits, the reader immediately inscribes the crimes with the name.

Finally, when “le baron du Thénard” tries to sell information regarding Jean Valjean to Marius, the conversation where Marius reveals that he knows the “baron”'s true identity captivates the reader.

Je sais votre secret extraordinaire ; de même que je savais  
le nom de Jean Valjean, de même que je sais votre nom.

- Mon nom?
- Oui.
- Ce n'est pas difficile, monsieur le baron. J'ai eu l'honneur de vous l'écrire et de vous le dire. Thénard.
- Dier
- Hein ?
- Thénardier.

Qui ça ? (Hugo, 862; vol. II, pt. V, bk. 8, ch. 4)

Hugo compares Thénardier's reaction to a porcupine in danger that plays dead (862). So, he continues his game.

- Vous êtes aussi l'ouvrier Jondrette, le comédien Fabantou, le poète Genflot, l'espagnol don Alvarès, et la femme Balizard.
- La femme quoi ?
- Et vous avez tenu une gargote à Montfermeil.

- Une gargote ! Jamais.
- Et je vous dis que vous êtes Thénardier. (Hugo 862; vol. II, pt. V, bk. 8, ch. 4).

In these tense moments, and with the associations of the name Thénardier, Hugo shows the malice that *Thénardier* represents. Perhaps his most thorough analysis reveals his complete judgment of Thénardier:

Thénardier était une de ces natures doubles qui passent quelquefois au milieu de nous à notre insu et qui disparaissent sans qu'on les ait connues parce que la destinée n'en a montré qu'un côté. Le sort de beaucoup d'hommes est de vivre ainsi à demi submergés. Dans une situation calme et plate, Thénardier avait tout ce qu'il fallait pour faire – nous ne disons pas pour être – ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler un honnête commerçant, un bon bourgeois. En même temps, certaines circonstances étant données, certaines secousses venant à soulever sa nature de dessous, il avait tout ce qu'il fallait pour être un scélérat. C'était un boutiquier dans lequel il y avait un monstre. Satan devait par moments s'accroupir dans quelque coin du bouge où vivait Thénardier et rêver devant ce chef-d'oeuvre hideux (550; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 10).

He uses melodramatic action to show the couple's capacity for evil, particularly Thénardier himself. According to Roche, Hugo's villains are "all rendered as animals or even monsters

defined by their irremediable moral decay” (81). The exaggerated physical descriptions and behaviors of the Thénardier serve to emphasize their diabolic natures.

### Chapter III. A Family Portrait and “The Good Ones”

The Thénardier children are a unique cog in the family machine. Observation of Éponine, Azelma, Gavroche and the two unnamed children and their evolving characterization reveals more information about the demise of certain characters and the salvation of others. The children are clearly products of their parents, but referring back to Kanès, in typical melodramatic fashion, the characterization of the children “opposes events and individuals; it presents us with violent moral opposites” (26). This close analysis provides invaluable insight into the malicious nature of the name Thénardier.

The characterization of the Thénardier daughters presents the reader with a melodramatic display of these “violent moral opposites” (Kanès 26). The first glimpse of the Thénardier daughters appears through the window of the inn as Fantine watches with Cosette in her arms. The picture of the daughters seems like a perfect postcard except for the fact that both girls are propped on the rusty chain of a dilapidated wagon, “enchantées sur leur escarpolette monstre” (Hugo 215; vol. I, pt. 1, bk. 4, ch. 1). The contrast between the adorable children and the dangerously decaying wagon foreshadows the evil that lurks behind the façade. This “vision de joie,” as seen on the faces of the children with their attentive mother looking on, blinds Fantine in a sort of “éblouissement” (215). Therefore, while Thénardier hides in the shadows, the artificial light that Mme Thénardier and her children bestow creates as much blindness as the shadow. Therefore, while Hugo presents the children in light, this light blinds Fantine to the reality of the situation and ultimately leads to her demise. Because Madame treats Cosette with

contempt, the daughters follow suit because “les enfants à cet âge ne sont que des exemplaires de la mère” (Hugo 224 ; vol. I, pt. 1, bk. 4, ch. 3).

“Ponine” and “Zelma” (as Cosette refers to them) are allowed to play and live as children while Cosette acts as their slave (Hugo 519; vol. I, pt. 2, bk. 3, ch 7). According to Cosette “Ponine et Zelma ne veulent pas que je joue avec leurs poupées” (519). Therefore, Éponine and Azelma mirror their mother’s behavior isolating Cosette and treating her as an unwanted intruder. They never even look at Cosette and for them she is “comme le chien” (Hugo 525; vol. I, pt. 2, bk. 3, ch 7).

The novel pays very little attention to the daughters during their childhood other than to portray them as typical children playing with dolls and the family cat, but they treat Cosette with contempt and malice as does their mother. However, in volume II, the teenage daughters play a greater role in the development of the story. In typical Hugo fashion, the Thénardier family are hidden throughout most of the second volume under the name Jondrette and while the reader receives clues that they are, indeed, the Thénardiens, Hugo does not reveal their true identity until much later.

In stark contrast to their first mention in volume I as joyous children enraptured in their perfect family life, in volume II, the daughters appear in rags, “[l’une] longue et mince, l’autre un peu moins grande qui passaient rapidement, essoufflées, effarouchées, et comme ayant l’air de s’enfuir” (Hugo 12; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 2). Ghostly creatures of the night, they run through the streets whispering in their mischief. This time, the daughters appear in twilight, “figures livides, leurs têtes décoiffées, leurs cheveux épars, leurs affreux bonnets, leurs jupes en guenilles et leurs pieds nus” (12). (One must note the striking resemblance to the description of Cosette as



a child at the *Sergent de Waterloo* and that the daughters and Cosette have switched roles as they grow older.)

The daughters speak “argot” discussing “les cognes” (the police) and Éponine reveals that the best way to avoid the “cognes” is to “cavaler” (run away). Hugo treats slang as an inferior language, a “langue des ténébreux” and “il semble en effet que ce soit une sorte d’horrible bête faite pour la nuit qu’on vient d’arracher de son cloaque (321, vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 7, ch. 2). Therefore, the Thénardier daughters’ use of slang emphasizes their degradation. According to Marius, “autrefois, c’étaient les anges ; maintenant ce sont les goules” (Hugo 13 ; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 2).

Éponine is described as “une créature hâve, chétive, décharnée” and meagerly dressed with only a shirt and a skirt and strings for her belt and headdress (Hugo 19; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 4). With “des épaules pointues sortant de la chemise, une pâleur blonde et lymphatique, des clavicules terreuses, des mains rouges, la bouche entr’ouverte et dégradée, des dents de moins, l’œil terne, hardi et bas, les formes d’une jeune fille avortée et le regard d’une vieille femme corrompue,” she seems to have lived much longer than her fifteen years and elicits both fear and pity (19). Her clothes become more and more tattered as the novel continues and she possesses a “front terni et ridé par le hâle, ce même regard libre, égaré et vacillant” but “avec tout cela elle était belle” (Hugo 186 ; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 2, ch. 4). While Hugo describes her mother as hideous, despite her degradation, Éponine is still beautiful.

Delivering letters for their father who, as previously mentioned, assumes various identities in order to exploit others for financial gain, Marius notes that these girls are “ni des enfants, ni des filles, ni des femmes, espèces de monstres impurs et innocents produits par la

misère” (Hugo 21-22 ; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 4). Éponine and Azelma simply follow their father’s orders, and as a result, become part of the Thénardier (Jondrette) web of malice. Having led a carefree childhood playing with dolls, now they work as couriers as part of their new “métiers sombres” (Hugo 21; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 4).

Éponine, infatuated with Marius, makes it clear that she is educated and can both read and write. She seems captivated by Marius’s books and reads enthusiastically, out loud, about Waterloo noting “mon père y était” (Hugo 23; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 4). At the same time, when she hopes to impress Marius with her writing skills, she chooses to write “Les cognes sont là” seemingly defeating her purpose by choosing “argot” to showcase her written expression (23).

Éponine’s infatuation with Marius leads her to act as his personal assistant, gathering information regarding “Ursule” (Cosette) simply because he asks her for help. She declares that she will give him “tout ce que tu voudras” (Hugo 52; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 11). It is not until page 183 in volume II that Marius uses Éponine’s name and Hugo notes that “il savait maintenant comment elle se nommait” (183; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 2, ch. 4). Therefore, Marius does not value Éponine despite the fact that she continues to love with him throughout the novel and while he pities her, he uses her for his own gain just as her father exploits her. Marius offers her money, but she somberly replies “Je ne veux pas de votre argent” (Hugo 189; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 2, ch. 4).

Éponine’s moral character reveals itself as the novel progresses. She protects Monsieur Leblanc (Jean Valjean) and Cosette from her father. She stands up to her father and his entire crime ring.

--Je n'ai qu'à crier, on vient, patatras. Vous êtes six ; mais je suis tout le monde.

Thénardier fit un mouvement vers elle.

--Prochez pas ! cria-t-elle.

Il s'arrêta, et lui dit avec douceur :

--Eh bien non. Je n'approcherai pas, mais ne parle pas si haut. Ma fille, tu veux donc nous empêcher de travailler ? Il faut pourtant que nous gagnions notre vie. Tu n'as donc plus d'amitié pour ton père ?

--Vous m'embêtez, dit Éponine.

--Il faut pourtant que nous vivions, que nous mangions...

--Crevez (Hugo 360-61; vol II, pt. 4, bk. 8, ch. 4).

Éponine, unlike her mother, defies her father. She represents truth and brings an element of purity to the family. Éponine meets her demise later in the novel, having joined the resistance “habillée en homme” in “un pantalon de gros velours déchiré [et] des pieds nus” (Hugo 507; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 14, ch. 6). Marius discovers her “dans l'obscurité” after she pronounces his name for the last time as formally as always, “Monsieur Marius.” He does not recognize her at first, and she dies in his arms after finally declaring her love for him avec “sa main percée sur sa poitrine où il y avait un autre trou, et d'où il sortait par instants un flot de sang comme le jet de vin d'une bonde ouverte” (Hugo 509 ; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 14, ch. 6). She dies, therefore, having served her family, Marius, and her country, but she also seems to die nameless, exhibiting neither the

qualities of the Thénardiens or the “Jondrettes.” Her death strikes her name from this negative legacy.

Azelma is the less-mentioned Thénardier daughter but this does not decrease her importance in the Thénardier “machine.” Much like her mother, Azelma blindly follows her father and does not stray from the family business. Very little space is dedicated to her physical description, but through Marius’s peephole (the perspective through which we receive almost all of our information regarding the Jondrettes (Thénardiens), she is described as “onze ou douze ans” but on closer observation “elle en avait bien quinze” (Hugo 33; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 6). She is “de cette espèce maligne qui reste longtemps en retard, puis pousse vite et tout à coup” (33).

Madame Thénardier and Azelma seem to sit in waiting for Thénardier’s instructions. Hugo declares that “la femme ne parlait pas, la jeune fille ne semblait pas respirer” (34; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 6). When her father asks her to break the window with her fist, she complies in “obéissance terrifiée” (Hugo 37; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 6). Showing no concern, Thénardier sees her injured hand as an opportunity to play his role more fully.

Azelma and Monsieur Thénardier appear in Mardi Gras masks toward the end of the novel and once again, Thénardier attempts to find out information regarding Jean Valjean. Their masks are significant as they show that they present a false identity. According to Ubersfeld, “ce carnaval est à la fois une image littéraire et la figure tout à fait référentielle du masque et des faux-semblants qui permettent au *lumpenproletariat* de survivre” (124). Azelma assumes the role of spy for Thénardier, gathers information regarding Jean Valjean and finally leads him to Marius

to attempt to sell the information, unaware that Marius already knows both his identity and his character (Hugo 864; vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 8, ch. 4).

Azelma lives on in the novel. She does not die as her sister Éponine does. Having continued a life of crime following her father, she essentially assumes her mother's role (now that Madame Thénardier is dead). She travels to America with her father, where the reader assumes she obeys his every order, as he has now become a slave-trader (Hugo 873; vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 8, ch. 4). The Thénardier legacy, indeed, lives on with Azelma Thénardier, who seems to have grown into a carbon copy of her mother.

According to Hugo, the most endearing character in the novel, the precocious "petit Gavroche" is a true "gamin de Paris." It is interesting to note that if he is arguably the most beloved character the musical version, this version also removes all connection between him and the Thénardier couple. One must note, however, that in the film version from 2012, during "Master of the House," Madame hands a baby in a basket to someone as he exits the inn. Perhaps this is intended to be Gavroche. Gavroche is introduced as a crying baby in the first volume where he greatly annoys his mother. He is not seen again in the novel until volume II as an adolescent, "pâle, maigre, vêtu de loques, avec un pantalon de toile au mois de février, et [il] chantait à tue-tête" (Hugo 117 ; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 22). He refers to his parents and sisters as his "ancestors" as he no longer lives in their home but visits them from time to time (117).

Gavroche is not always well-nourished, as noted in volume II: "Un soir le petit Gavroche n'avait point mangé ; il se souvint qu'il n'avait pas non plus dîné la veille ; cela devenait fatigant" (Hugo 237 ; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 4, ch. 2). However, he does manage to find clothing such as a "châle de femme en laine, cueilli on ne sait où, dont il s'était fait un cache-nez." Despite his

creative methods of staying warm, he is generous and gives his shawl away to a girl who is freezing, calling her “Pauvre fille !” (Hugo 273; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 4, ch. 2). Gavroche’s true nature shows in his treatment of his younger brothers, even if he fails to recognize them. He provides them with bread, giving them the largest pieces of a baguette and telling them: “Colle-toi ça dans le fusil !” (Hugo 276; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 4, ch. 2).

Ever the resourceful one, Gavroche even has a “house” courtesy of Napoleon (Hugo 270; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 6, ch. 2). Living in the “Bastille elephant,” the plaster model for one of Napoleon’s grand projects, which has since fallen into ruin, “le lit de Gavroche était complet. C’est-à-dire qu’il y avait un matelas, une couverture et une alcove avec rideaux” (Hugo 288, vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 6, ch. 2).

Becoming a member of the resistance, like his sister Éponine, Gavroche delivers messages and cheats death many times. However, he also dies tragically outside the barricade, collecting cartridges for the ABC members from the twenty dead bodies that lie there (Hugo 596; vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 1, ch. 15). His death scene is one of the most heart-rending scenes in the novel.

La barricade tremblait ; lui, il chantait. Ce n’était pas un enfant, ce n’était pas un homme ; c’était un étrange gamin fée. On eût dit le nain invulnérable de la mêlée. Les balles couraient après lui, il était plus leste qu’elles. Il jouait on ne sait quel effrayant jeu de cache-cache avec la mort ; chaque fois que la face camarade du spectre s’approchait, le gamin lui donnait une pichenette [mais] une balle pourtant, mieux ajustée ou plus traître que les autres finit par atteindre l’enfant feu follet. On vit Gavroche

chanceler, puis il s'affaissa...Gavroche n'était tombé que pour se redresser...et se mit à chanter :

*Je suis tombé par terre*

*C'est la faute à Voltaire*

*Le nez dans le ruisseau*

*C'est la faute à...*

Il n'acheva point. Une seconde balle du même tireur l'arrêta court...cette petite grand âme venait de s'envoler. (Hugo 598-99; vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 1, ch. 15).

It is difficult to connect Gavroche with his parents, and he is “sublime proof that in fictional reality good and evil are not hereditary” (Llosa 82). Street-smart Gavroche is resourceful and clever, but is a friend to the *misérables*. Always singing and always giving, he lives in stark contrast to his parents. According to Llosa, “he has had to struggle hard to live, but he is not aware of this because he has turned his life into one of those dangerous games that children love to play” (81). Just like Éponine, he dies nameless, eternally disconnected from his sinister roots.

The last of the Thénardier children remain unnamed. Having been discarded and sent to live with Madame Magnon, “les petits Thénardier devinrent les petits Magnon” (Hugo 267; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 6, ch. 1). Therefore, not only are their characters denied a first name, but they are also stripped of their parents' names. Madame Magnon collects monthly payments from Monsieur Gillenormand for the children that she claims are his illegitimate children. However, they die due to an epidemic and she needs to replace them in order to continue to collect payments. Despite the fact that they are not poorly treated at Madame Magnon's, once she is

captured by the police, they return home to discover that they are to live with Gillenormand: “Vous ne demeurez plus ici. Allez là. C’est tout près. La première rue à gauche. Demandez votre chemin avec ce papier-ci” (Hugo 269; vol. II pt. 4, bk. 6, ch. 1). However, the wind carries away the note and the children become true “gamins de Paris” wandering aimlessly without a home.

The anonymous children are described as “deux enfants de taille inégale, assez proprement vêtus, et encore plus petits que [Gavroche], paraissant l’un sept ans, l’autre cinq” (Hugo 271 ; vol. II, pt. 4, bk. 6, ch. 2). When Gavroche first sees the two boys they “parlaient tous deux à la fois, et leurs paroles coupaient la voix du plus jeune et que le froid faisait claquer les dents de l’aîné” (271). Following Gavroche’s “guidebook for gamins,” the eldest of the two brothers learns to care for his younger sibling and even reproduces street “argot.” Perhaps the most poignant moment in their story comes when a bourgeois gentleman and his grandson carelessly toss a brioche to the swans because the child no longer wants it. The bourgeois child even goes as far to say “Mon gâteau m’ennuie. Il est rassis” (Hugo 606; vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 1, ch. 16). Before the swans can devour the brioche:

L’enfant donna un coup vif, ramena la brioche, effraya les cygnes, saisit le gâteau et se redressa. Le gâteau était mouillé ; mais ils avaient faim et soif. L’aîné fit deux parts de la brioche, une grosse et une petite, prit la petite pour lui, donna la grosse à son petit frère et lui dit : « Colle-toi ça dans le fusil. » (Hugo 608 ; vol. II, pt.5, bk. 1, ch. 16).

Mimicking Gavroche, this shows that the eldest sibling demonstrates what he learned about survival. The reader never discovers what becomes of the two brothers. One simply concludes



that they continue to live by their wits, forgotten children of the streets, and simply another addition to the *misérables*.

The mother and two Thénardier children are dead; two are forgotten, and one lives. Why does Hugo choose to kill off certain family members; leave the fate of others mysterious; and spare Azelma and Monsieur Thénardier? With Azelma doggedly loyal to the Thénardier name, she replaces Madame Thénardier, blindly following her father throughout the novel. When he asks her to break the window, she does not hesitate and follows his orders implicitly. Her blind complicity never falters, and therefore, Madame is no longer needed. It is of little consequence that she disappears from the novel because Thénardier's malice carries on with Azelma's support. Moving to America, they continue their lives of exploitation for personal gain. As slave-traders, they profit from the suffering of others. Nothing changes, for the name Thénardier means the same thing in America as it does in France.

Éponine and Gavroche abandon the Thénardier name, so their deaths essentially remove them from a macabre legacy. They are both fiercely independent and selfless. Éponine acts as Marius's personal servant all in the name of love. While this blind discipleship mirrors her mother's behavior, there is a distinct difference between the two. Madame Thénardier's obedience to her husband results in financial gain, and her actions contribute to the overall evil that the couple represents. While she acts as her husband's servant, she reaps the same benefits because she is part of the machine. Éponine's actions are by contrast selfless, as she allows Marius to love someone else and serves him so that he may achieve happiness, even with another. In addition, she refuses the money that Marius offers for her services. This clearly distinguishes her behavior from that of her mother. Éponine never falters and even as she dies, she thinks of Marius warmly, as dying in his arms leaves her with the memory of his face.

Gavroche cares for the outcasts because neither his hopeless street life nor his familial connections have destroyed his compassionate nature. It is this selflessness and fierce courage that lead to his demise. Gavroche and his father both search through corpses to find hidden belongings, but while Thénardier seeks personal gain from his treasure hunt in the darkness on the Waterloo battlefield, Gavroche searches the bodies to find ammunition and objects to take to the barricade, serving those in need with useful objects. Once again, Thénardier's child is selfless while he is selfish.

The two unnamed children are neither Thénardier's nor Magnon's. They belong to Paris. But, as Paris continues to survive, so do they. Hugo alludes to the fact that the eldest of the two brothers is an apprentice Gavroche when he quotes him directly. Alas, after Gavroche's death, the nameless brother replaces him and one can imagine that he continues to care for his brother and possibly the *misérables*. Brooks affirms that "children, as living representations of innocence and purity, serve as catalysts for virtuous or vicious actions [and] through their very definition as unfallen humanity, they can guide virtue through perils and upset the machinations of evil, in ways denied to the more worldly" (34). Therefore, four of the five Thénardier children bear no resemblance to their parents or their family name.

While the Thénardier children both defy their evil name (as evidenced in Éponine, Gavroche and the two unnamed children) and embrace it (Azelma), Hugo creates a diverse list of characters who seem to contrast greatly with the Thénardier machine. In theory, these characters are "the good ones" who seem to represent absolute good where the Thénardiens represent absolute evil. However, upon closer examination, one finds that this distinction is not so easily made. Monsieur Myriel Bienvenu, Jean Valjean, Fantine, Cosette. These four characters represent arguably the quintessential "good" characters in the novel. However, are they entirely

good? The modern reader tends to despise Javert and the Thénardiens and cheer for the four aforementioned characters. But are they without blemish? Can we truly categorize them as angels and treat the Thénardiens as demons?

Llosa asserts that Monsieur Bienvenu is “kind-hearted, calm and gentle” and that “he is a good judge when it comes to matters of the spirit, he is an optimist who is convinced of the inexorable triumph of good over evil, and he prefers to preach by example instead of on the pulpit” (62). Considering that Monsieur Bienvenu inspires Jean Valjean’s complete conversion, one could argue that he is superior to all other characters in the novel in morality. However, Jules-Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly, a devout Catholic, disagrees whole-heartedly, claiming that Monsieur Bienvenu’s comportment is preposterous. He states that “il n’est pas d’homme qui se conduise comme l’évêque Bienvenu dans les mêmes circonstances” (9). He also declares that Hugo ignores the fact that Bienvenu is a priest and there are codes of conduct for priests that Hugo rejects in his novel (9).

Il n’y a jamais eu et il n’y aura jamais de prêtre catholique  
qui...allant...confesser un régicide, ne le confesse pas, oublie en le voyant  
sa fonction sacerdotale et foudroyé par le vieux endurci, dans le sinistre  
rayonnement de son impénitence finale, s’effondre lâchement sur ses  
genoux comme une argile coulante, et renversement des deux rôles, lui  
demande finalement sa bénédiction (Barbey d’Aurevilly 8-9).

To add emphasis to his passionate disapproval of Bienvenu’s behavior, he adds “Ah ! Soyons sacrilèges, très-bien ! Mais ne soyons pas bêtes !” (9). Barbey d’Aurevilly later states that Bienvenu’s purpose is to inspire the conversion of Jean Valjean (the true hero of the novel, in his

opinion) and that he is simply a product of a novelist's imagination and that he could not possibly exist outside the novel. Llosa asserts that "for [Bienvenu], faith is a question of feelings and love rather than ideas; it is impulse, emotion, giving, action, rather than theory and doctrine" (63).

While Jean Valjean exhibits lapses in judgment in the beginning, "we witness a conversion" after his experience with Bienvenu. However, "there is a gap between him and ordinary mortals" (Llosa 67) and "...he seems so distant from us ordinary mortals that we do not feel for him the fondness and sympathy that we have for a character like Gavroche [because] Jean Valjean's excessive humanity makes him somewhat inhuman" (67). Jean Valjean's heroic actions equate him to some type of mythical "colossus" in that he "can lift the cart that is squashing old Fauchelevent on his back like Atlas, pick Marius up one-handed when the young man has fainted on the barricade, and carry him four hours through the entrails of the Leviathan...or when he climbs the vertical wall of the convent of the Petit Picpus with little Cosette on his back" (65). It seems that his conversion, inspired by the "mythical" Monsieur Bienvenu, renders him a more mythical type of character in return.

If Jean Valjean is an angel is Thénardier a demon? Thénardier exhibits the same inhuman qualities in his excess. The reader must also take a look at the similarities in the lives that Jean Valjean and Thénardier lead. Both live behind masks, using disguises and costumes to hide their identities. Jean Valjean hides from Javert. Thénardier manipulates. Both men are hiding from "justice." One must not forget the incident with the Petit Gervais where Jean Valjean steals a forty-sou piece from a child for no apparent reason. It is this moment that inspires him to convert when he remembers Bienvenu's words: "Vous m'avez promis de devenir honnête homme. Je vous achète votre âme. Je la retire à l'esprit de perversité et je la donne au bon Dieu » (Hugo

169 ; vol. I, pt. 1, bk. 2, ch. 13). Having stolen silver from Bienvenu and a coin from a child, Jean Valjean is evidently human. However, these moments allow him to see the error of his ways and inspire him to live a sanctified life. The difference between the two men is that Jean Valjean eventually rejects evil and Thénardier embraces it.

Fantine and Cosette seem to be mirror images of one another. Both characters are only physically described in the novel. Fantine's beauty is described in meticulous detail and her teeth are mentioned time and time again. After Fantine's degradation, her looks are described to reflect the complete loss of that beauty, the beauty that was all that Fantine really possessed. The reader knows very little of her character, except for the suffering, resulting from her pregnancy, the abandonment by Tholomyès and the loss of her position at the textile factory. Her devotion to her child is evident, but the reader only observes the suffering that Fantine endures as she attempts to care for the child from afar. The same can be said for Cosette, a vacant character whose looks seem to be the central focus of Marius's affections. She has become the doll that she always admired in the store window, but left behind at the Masure Gorbeau. In leaving it behind, she has now become the object itself, a beautiful plaything observed with fascination. Fantine and Cosette's lives seem to work in reverse. In the beginning, the reader sees the beautiful, young Fantine and her giggling friends and then witnesses her slow degradation into a nightmarish monster. It is the opposite with Cosette. One watches in horror as she is the victim of countless episodes of abuse and neglect, but then observes her as she blossoms into a beautiful and beloved young woman, eventually marrying. Casting aside the horrific suffering of both the mother and daughter, the reader does not receive enough information about the characters' personalities to judge whether or not they are entirely good. It is true that neither of the two committed evil

deeds to offset their *misérable* conditions, but can one judge their character based solely on their suffering?

#### IV. Conclusion

With the nightmare-inducing physical descriptions of the Thénardier couple and their appalling actions, one automatically assumes that the couple is beyond redemption. However, looking at the seemingly “good” characters in the novel, with the exception of Monsieur Myriel Bienvenu, there is no clear designation of absolute good and absolute evil. In fact, taking a closer look at Hugo’s own words, the answer to the question “Can the Thénardiens be redeemed or are they absolutely evil?” one soon finds the answer. It comes to the reader through the words of Marius and Jean Valjean. One must remember that Marius is a reflection of Victor Hugo himself, therefore, one can argue that these are Hugo’s very words:

Sans doute ils paraissent bien dépravés, bien corrompus, bien avilis, bien odieux même, mais ils sont rares, ceux qui sont tombés sans être dégradés ; d’ailleurs il y a un point où les infortunés et les infâmes se mêlent et se confondent dans un seul mot, mot fatal, les misérables ; de qui est-ce la faute ? Et puis, est-ce que ce n’est pas quand la chute est plus profonde que la charité doit être plus grande ? (28-29 ; vol. II, pt. 3, bk. 8, ch. 5)

According to Ubersfeld, “il faut bien manger... [et] Thénardier n’hésite pas” (123-24).

Therefore, “masque, déguisements, tragicomédies aident les misérables à manger, tout en les amusant : le théâtre est à la fois leur culture et leur pain quotidien” (124). The Thénardiens have found a way to survive in a *misérable* world. Even Jean Valjean himself, on his deathbed,

implores Cosette to forgive the couple, declaring that “Ces Thénardier ont été méchants. Il faut leur pardonner” (Hugo 885, vol. II, pt. 5, bk. 8, ch. 5). Understanding life as seen through a mask, while Jean Valjean leads a seemingly more ethical life than the Thénardiers, he pardons them at the end of his life in a realization that they are all *misérables*: products of nearly impossible circumstances. Perhaps Jean Valjean simply needs to forgive them as a type of spiritual cleansing before he dies, but he pardons them nonetheless.

Pierre LaForgue asserts that “en la personne de Thénardier, mal et misère ne sont pas séparables” (76). In addition, he notes Fantine’s words regarding Thénardier stating “ça n’a pas de raisonnement, il leur faut de l’argent (I, 261)” (LaForgue 82). Alas, the quest for a means of survival dominates the spirit of Thénardier. Thénardier manipulates his wife because she is his blind disciple and after her death, he replaces her as his partner-in-crime with his daughter Azelma and they travel to the United States where they continue to “survive” albeit through continued corruption. As a slaver, Thénardier once again uses brute force (as he did with Madame Thénardier) to fulfill his role as “maître” and “maîtresse.” To Thénardier, everything and everyone has a price. One must recall his exorbitant lists from the Sergent de Waterloo days, on which he fixes a price for everything “jusqu’aux mouches que son chien mange,” or as Kretzmer would have it, “lice” and “mice” (Hugo 499; vol. I, pt. II, bk. 3, ch. 2). To Thénardier, money and malice are synonymous terms. Food and fraud go hand in hand. Brooks affirms that “melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (20). As Balzac observes in nineteenth century Paris, “le char de la civilisation, semblable à celui de l’idole de Jaggernaut, à peine retardé par un cœur moins facile à broyer que les autres et qui



enraye sa roue, l'a brisé bientôt et continue sa marche glorieuse" (44). Is Thénardier evil or just capable of survival by whatever means he deems necessary?

In the world of the nineteenth century novel, and more particularly in melodrama, must we decide what is absolutely good and what is absolutely evil? Hugo's "forte of juxtaposing moral imperatives...engenders electrifying scenes [in which] the clash of good and evil on the social stage is repeated by the inner strife of the characters—Jean Valjean, Javert, Marius—and by their evolution toward a higher form of conscience" (Grossman 93). Alas, "in each case, competing voices split the personality into factions that war over loyalties, choices, course of action [and it is] little wonder that, for the reader, the conclusion of each anguished decision-making process has a cathartic effect" (93). Peter Brooks refers to the nineteenth century "dramatizations of human encounters" as "intense, excessive representations of life which strip the façade of manners to reveal the essential conflicts at work—moments of symbolic confrontation which fully articulate the terms of the drama" (3).

The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order. Man is seen to be, and must recognize himself to be, playing on a theatre that is the point of juncture, and of clash, of imperatives beyond himself that are non-mediated and irreducible. That is what is most real in the universe. The spectacular enactments of melodrama seek constantly to express these forces and imperatives, to bring them to striking revelation, to impose their evidence. (Brooks 13)

In Hugo's "Ce que dit la bouche de l'ombre," the poet attempts to dole out just punishment to history's most notorious villains, such as Nero and Delilah. He assigns punishments that seem to fit the crime, such as punishment by fire for Nero and a snake for Delilah. In his poem, he considers the opposition of light and shadow and asks:

Ne réfléchis-tu pas lorsque tu vois ton ombre ?  
 Cette forme de toi, rampante, horrible, sombre,  
 Qui liée à tes pas comme un spectre vivant,  
 Va tantôt en arrière et tantôt avant,  
 Qui se mêle à la nuit, sa grande sœur funeste,  
 Et qui contre le jour, noire et dure, proteste ?  
 D'où vient-elle ? De toi, de ta chair, du limon  
 Dont l'esprit se revêt en devenant démon ;  
 De ce corps qui, créé par ta faut première,  
 Ayant rejeté Dieu, résiste à la lumière ;  
 De ta matière hélas ! de ton iniquité.  
 Cette ombre dit : -- Je suis l'être d'infirmité ;  
 Je suis tombé déjà ; je puis tomber encore. —  
 L'ange laisse passer à travers lui l'aurore ;  
 Nul simulacre obscur ne suit l'être aromal ;  
 Homme, tout ce qui fait de l'ombre a fait le mal.

The phrase “je suis tombé déjà [et] je puis tomber encore,” reminds one of Jean Valjean and the fact that while he undergoes a profound conversion experience after his robbery of both Bienvenu and le Petit Gervais, he is a human being, always trailed by his shadow, and that in each of us lies both light and darkness.

To conclude, in reading Hugo’s melodramatic portrayal of the Thénardiens, the reader feels a strong need to reconcile their evil. However, “morality is ultimately in the nature of affect, and strong emotion is in the realm of morality: for good and evil are moral feelings” (Brooks 54). When Jean Valjean steals a coin from an innocent child after Bienvenu gives him the silver that he stole, does that make him different from Thénardier? In the nineteenth century *melodramatic imagination*, “virtue has become the capacity to face the abyss even if its content may be nothingness, and to assume the burden of consciousness that results from this confrontation” (Brooks 206). In confronting this seemingly monstrous couple at the height of their most evil deeds and also in confronting the fact that the “good” characters are also still mere mortals, one stares into the melodramatic mirror, soon realizing that in one’s own reflection is where the answer lies.

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