**Beyond the Barricade: How *Les Miserables* Narrates the Humanity of the French Revolution**

The following essay closely examines the symbolism depicted in Les Miserables, more specifically, the Tom Hooper film adaptation of the story, and how it reveals the humanity of the French Revolution. Throughout the course, we have learned about what makes up a revolution; the skeletons and bare bones that structure a movement to be revolutionary. Thus, this essay attempts to reveal the personal layer within revolutionary tales, and what such battles mean for people who fight in them, watch them, and are impacted by them. Revolutions are not just about the battles, rather about the heart of the people revolting for change within their world, and the stakes that hold individuals accountable for the change.  We see these various stakes in Les Miserables.

According to Susan Maslan, theater itself is culturally revolutionary, but not politically revolutionary. Throughout the course of history, we see various forms of art, specifically theatrical art, used as a vehicle of portrayal and representation of revolutionary significant acts. Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*novel turned musical makes such statements on the narration and performance of the French revolution through Hugo’s uses of parallelism, romanticization, juxtaposition and, in Tom Hooper’s movie adaptation, lighting and costume. Though the piece itself is not inherently about the French Revolution, its commentary does shape the way the French Revolution was viewed by millions around the world.

The main premise of the plot is about Jean Valjean’s journey of creating a new life for himself outside the constraints of the unforgiving law; this parallels the revolutionaries’ journey of creating a new life for themselves, away from the greedy bourgeoisie that leaves more than half the country with barely enough to eat. Interestingly, this ties in with why Valjean is in jail in the first place: for stealing a small piece of bread to feed his starving family. This implies that Valjean was also among the proletariat class and was also struggling to survive just like the rest of the people. Hugo’s story argues the necessity of the French Revolution by framing the audience to inherently empathize with the revolutionaries. Even the title itself, “The Miserables” implies that everyone in the story is miserable in some way during this moment in French history. This sets up the entire plot to be viewed  from a somewhat biased perspective; the audience becomes part of the revolution alongside the revolutionaries, and they root for their success.

Susan Maslan states that revolutionary theater was about “unfolding” the representations of what was happening in the political sphere. *Les Miserables*does exactly that through the characters that represent different aspects of revolution. Javert is the only clear antagonist of the entire plot, while all the other characters are part of a joint struggle in survival. Though Javert does not represent the bourgeoisie, his efforts are still in favor to maintain the unbalanced class climate of the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. However, all characters do go through some sort of struggle due to France’s class struggle: Valjean went to jail for stealing, Fantine makes many sacrifices and dies trying to earn money to send back to Cosette, Marius leaves Cosette for war, Eponine loses her life to the war, the Innkeepers have to steal to survive, Javert sacrifices his life due to his inner morality behind the law, and many other deaths through the war. As such, these characters all represent something significant of this period of French history, portraying the thought that the French Revolution was not just about war, it was truly about what class struggle meant for the proletariat, and the sacrifices pushed people to the point of death. *Les Miserables* depicts why the Revolution was so necessary for the French people, by illustrating how destitute the characters’ lives were due to the class struggle.

I argue that Tom Hooper’s *Les Mis*juxtaposes kitchen sink realism with romanticization in order to portray the French Revolution in an artistic yet gruesome way. Kitchen sink realism depicts the harsh realities of the world, which can be seen a plethora of times throughout the movie. We see this kitchen sink-esque portrayal during the dock scene, where Fantine must turn to sex work along with many other women, in order to earn money to send to her daughter who she believed to be ill. Fantine sacrifices herself in unimaginable ways, including selling her hair, her tooth, and body, all depicted in such horrifying ways. The scene in the movie is extremely darkly lit, while all the women are wearing torn dresses and are all covered in dirt. As such, Hooper is depicting the destitution that so many people experienced due to the French class struggle. On the other hand, there is romanticization of the period as well. One scene in particular that this can be seen in is “Red and Black”, where Marius had just fallen for Cosette, and is now talking to his fellow revolutionaries about their war plans. In the song, his companions are all building excitement about the revolution, while Marius is distracted and expresses his love for Cosette. By the end of the scene, Marius does find clarity and is back to feeling gung-ho about the revolution, however the song does romanticize the war in the sense that it makes the Revolution look easily planned and easily recruitable.

Hooper’s artistic portrayal of the war is overall dark. Throughout the film, the lighting is consistently dark and the weather is consistently gloomy filled with overcast. This cinematic depiction purposely associates the French Revolution with poverty and anguish. The tones of gray, along with the muted costume colors all contribute to the argument that there is no brightness, or positivity, for these people during this time. The only character that wears bright/ light colors throughout the film is Cosette. I argue that this was intentionally done because Cosette is the one symbol of hope throughout the film. Cosette symbolizes hope for Fantine and for Valjean, who sacrificed so much for her to prosper and live a fulfilling life free of the hardships that they both had to go through. In addition, Amanda Seyfried who plays Cosette has strikingly bright blonde hair, and is the only one with this feature in the film, again, to symbolize brightness, happiness, and hope that is free struggle.

According to Maslan, political theater is about who the audience is cheering for. Hugo’s *Les Miserables* sets up the audience to cheer for everyone besides Javert. The audience feels inclined to root for everyone to deserve better because there is an understanding that the people have so little to begin with. The end of act one, “Do You Hear the People Sing” is the true epitome of the revolutionary aspect of the revolution. The audience sees the collected efforts and necessity to win. Furthermore, the “Epilogue” illustrates that the revolution was not in vain; it artistically portrays that all the deaths were not pointless, that the sacrifices were virtuous, and that hope remains for the future.