

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lorrel Lynn Sullivan entitled "Getting into Bed with Les Misérables: A Study of the Symbolism(s) of the Bed." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

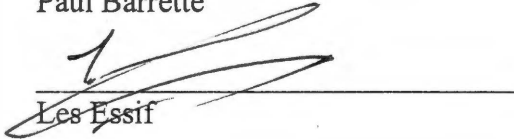


Patrick Brady, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

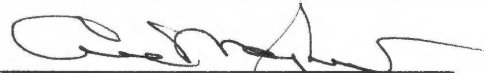


Paul Barrette



Les Essif

Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

GETTING INTO BED WITH LES MISÉRABLES:
A STUDY OF THE SYMBOLISM(S) OF THE BED

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lorrel Lynn Sullivan
May 2003

Thesis
2003
.S885

Copyright © Lorrel Lynn Sullivan, 2003

All rights reserved

Acknowledgements

I would like to express appreciation for all the enriching relationships and rewarding experiences that I have enjoyed with the faculty and graduate students in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures over the last five years. I would particularly like to acknowledge the encouragement and guidance given to me by the members of my thesis committee, Drs Patrick Brady, Les Essif and Paul Barrette. I am grateful for their helpful suggestions and for their willingness to accommodate graduate school deadlines on short notice. Finally, I would not have survived the completion of this work without the reassuring support and endearing sense of humor of my closest friend, Elena Dalla Torre.

Abstract

While Victor Hugo's Les Misérables remains enormously popular and has received great critical interest, one important and abundant symbolic component has been inexplicably neglected: the bed. This thesis examines the plurality of meanings that the bed evokes, traditionally, and its multiple functions as a repository of human dignity and well-being, in particular. The thesis consists of three parts corresponding to the logical pairings of six principle symbolisms of the bed, each of which is examined for its connection with the conception and portrayal of human suffering in this novel. In general, the absence of the bed both reflects and perpetuates physical, emotional and moral distress, while its presence testifies to and aids in the survival of humanity.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Traditional symbolism(s) of the bed	3
The bed in <u>Les Misérables</u>	5
I. COMFORT AND REST.....	9
II. LIBIDO AND PROCREATION.....	30
III. ILLNESS AND DEATH.....	45
CONCLUSION.....	62
REFERENCES.....	63
VITA.....	66

Le lit, songez-y, c'est le symbole de la vie; je me suis aperçue de cela depuis trois jours. Rien n'est excellent hors du lit.

Le sommeil n'est-il-pas encore un de nos instants les meilleurs?

Mais c'est aussi là qu'on souffre! Il est le refuge des maladies, un lieu de douleurs aux corps épuisés.

Le lit, c'est l'homme. Notre Seigneur Jésus, pour prouver qu'il n'avait rien d'humain, ne semble pas avoir jamais eu besoin d'un lit. Il est né sur la paille et mort sur la croix, laissant aux creatures comme nous leur couche de mollesse et de repos.

Guy de Maupassant (Le lit)

Introduction

Images of the bed abound in Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, yet they have, surprisingly, gone unnoticed by literary critics. In fact, not a single study exists on the subject of the bed in this well-known novel. Although Pierre Laforgue examines the process of symbolization in Les Misérables, he focuses on the relationship between the fiction in the work and the referents, whether exterior (historical, biographical, political, etc.) or internal (textual episodes and circumstances) (157-162). This sort of symbolic correspondence between the action of the story and events beyond that action has little to do with the symbolic meaning of materials inside the story (such as the bed), and is particularly irrelevant in an immanent approach to the text, such as that adopted for the present analysis. Henri Meschonnic, on the other hand, suggests an intrinsic symbolization within Les Misérables. Meschonnic emphasizes the poetic nature of this novel in itself, and indicates that it is precisely the symbolism of certain words and concepts that creates this poetic tone. Meschonnic cites, for example, the opposition of "en haut" and "en bas," as well as "cette opposition des clartés et du noir, de l'âme et de la matière, du bien et du mal" (xxxvii); certainly the presence of these symbolic

dichotomies is undeniable. Another easily recognizable and important symbol in Les Misérables is the sewer, “l’égout dans lequel Jean Valjean sauve Marius, c’est l’intestin de Léviathan, le monstre biblique” (Seebacher 67); Jacques Seebacher claims this particular symbolism to be “à la mémoire de tous,” but his statement suggests that “l’égout” represents *the* symbolism in Les Misérables, and he refuses, in fact, to address the subject altogether, as if it were “old news,” territory sufficiently explored previously (67).

Robert Ricatte comes closer to discovering the symbolism of the bed in Les Misérables with his observation on Hugo’s approach to the subject of passions:

[Hugo] travaille sur des absences et des poussées. Il descend en lui-même pour y éprouver la présence des sentiments, la plénitude ou le vide de la conscience, objets très particuliers d’observation, qui mettent en œuvre des fonctions proprement tactiles. (xxiv)

This observation of Hugo’s method reflects the opposition of absence and presence that characterizes the concept of *misère* in the novel. Yet this perception of emotional or moral misery in the novel remains incomplete, for Ricatte fails to make *tangible* connections to absence/presence, which would have, inevitably, led to the bed. Similarly, Françoise Chenet-Faugeras identifies the important symbolism of one particular character stretching her hand out from her bed, indicating a connection with humanity represented therein: “[...] la main tendue [...] et prise conjure la distance et rétablit l’individu dans sa dignité d’être humain” (16). Although Chenet-Faugeras makes a noteworthy observation of the importance for this particular *misérable* (Fantine) to maintain contact with humanity, this critic completely ignores the role of the bed here, neglecting to examine the relationship between the outstretched hand and the bed from which it emerges.

In spite of the fact that the importance of the bed in Les Misérables has not been previously explored, the bed is, in fact, a very significant and richly exploited symbol in this novel. The current analysis will examine the symbolic function(s) of the bed on two levels: that of the general, traditional symbolism(s) of the bed, and that concerning the specific dimension of symbolism attributed to the bed by Victor Hugo.

Traditional symbolism(s) of the bed

What is a bed? According to Diane Von Furstenberg, “By definition, the bed must be different from a mere place to sleep – a pile of straw, a thickness of leaves, a reed mat – placed on the floor. The bed has to be a structure, something elevated from the ground, a raised platform, usually with legs and decoration of some sort [...]” (113). The bed thus distinguishes itself today from “the first sleeping-place of primitive man” (Eden and Carrington 17); it is a conception of modern, “civilized” (13) humanity, historically elaborated out of concern for comfort, as well as esthetics (18). However, it must be noted that this definition of “the bed” necessarily disqualifies as such the more simple sleeping places found in Oriental cultures today, where “it is often the custom to sleep on neatly woven mats” (17). In the metaphorical sense, where one “makes his bed” is wherever one chooses to sleep; but this place for sleeping is not necessarily a bed in the modern, Western sense of the word. Since the bed is both historically recent and specific to certain cultures, its traditional symbolism is not very archetypal. However, certain implications of the bed, which will be discussed in the following pages, may be

considered quasi-universal within the general context of modern Western civilization, and in the specific context of Les Misérables.

The bed serves as more than just a sleeping place of human beings: “Beds are much more than material structures [...]. They are also the stage on which all the major biological activities of man are enacted” (13). Perspectives sometimes differ concerning the most evident function(s) of the bed, but there is general consensus about what we actually associate with the bed. Mary Eden and Richard Carrington point out:

Sleep is the most obvious and universal use of the bed; we are born and die but once, and our love-making is limited by our opportunities and physical resources; but we normally retire to the bed to sleep each night. Moreover, sleep is a need we share with all other vertebrate animals. (76)

On the other hand, Jean M. Goulemot concludes:

Si le lecteur d’hier et d’aujourd’hui unit le lit à l’érotique et à l’intime de la vie de couple, [...] nul n’ignore, depuis toujours, sans le recours des lexiques et des dictionnaires, que le lit sert aussi à dormir, parfois à souffrir, presque toujours à mourir. (7-8).

The bed plays a “poetic role [...] in so many of the joys and sorrows of human life”

(Eden and Carrington 14). We are born, die, and have most of our pleasures *and* pains in the bed; the bed is inseparable from the most intense of human experiences. Diane Von Furstenberg summarizes the personal essence of the bed:

Reserved for the most intimate parts of the home and for life’s most intimate moments, the bed is an exclusive zone of contemplation, tenderness, love, sickness, recuperation, death – all the aspects of life that require a protected, safe, and comfortable place walled off from the noise and the interference of our public spaces. (125)

Von Furstenberg goes on to say that the bed often represents one’s home – or at least reflects “a home within a home” (3): “There seems to be no more personal a reflection of the self than one’s bed” (5). Von Furstenberg explains that “beds reflect life,” and it is

through examining a person's bed that we can see just how life is lived by that person (5). Although Von Furstenberg neglects to address the issue of a person whose "self" is represented by a bed with little or no substance, she does effectively outline the different roles the bed plays, and describes different categories of bed. From the cradle, which "has always symbolized the dawn of a new life" (7), to the deathbed, "the place of final wisdom" (12), Von Furstenberg offers descriptions that enrich our understanding of the deeply human and truly personal nature of the bed. The child's bed, for example, "reflects a budding independence"; it is a "place of dreams and nightmares", as well as a "refuge" and a "shelter" (7). "The first bed of love," says Von Furstenberg, "is rarely a premeditated one. It is a bed of passion and of promise. It is an unexpected bed, a bed of adventure, a memory for life"(8).

The bed in Les Misérables

Traditional symbolisms attributed to the bed, those of birth, rest, copulation, procreation, illness, death and luxury ("Bed")¹ have a strong connection with the conception and portrayal of despair in Les Misérables. These symbolic meanings of the bed are, in general, easily recognized. What is a bed, after all? It is above all a place where one can rest, but it is also a place for love-making, where children are often conceived. It is a refuge where the sick recuperate from illnesses and the dying surrender their last breaths, as well as a piece of furniture whose possession represents the financial

¹ "bed: repose; marriage; procreation, copulation, rest; illness; childbirth; secrecy; anguish; reflection; languishing; a phase of thought or opinion; dispensation of justice; luxury."

ability of a human being to provide for his/her needs. One dictionary of literary symbols specifies the varied symbolism of the bed:

Symbole de la régénérescence dans le sommeil, et dans l'amour; il est aussi le lieu de la mort. Le lit de la naissance, le lit conjugal, le lit funéraire sont l'objet de tous les soins et d'une sorte de vénération: centre sacré des mystères de la vie, de la vie en son état fondamental, non à ses degrés les plus développés.

[...] Le lit participe de la double signification de la terre: il communique et absorbe la vie. Il s'inscrit dans la symbolique d'ensemble de l'horizontalité.

[...]

Dans la tradition chrétienne, le lit ne signifie pas seulement un lieu de repos sur lequel l'homme s'étend pour accomplir les actes fondamentaux de la vie, selon les anciens usages. Il symbolise le corps. Ainsi le paralytique guéri par le Christ reçoit l'ordre de porter son lit, c'est-à-dire d'utiliser son corps affermi par la vertu divine. Le lit peut désigner le corps de péché restauré par la grâce et purifié. ("Lit")

The connection between the symbolism of the bed and the consequences of living without access to one is a central theme in Les Misérables, for to be *misérable* has specific connotations linked to the absence of a bed. Notably, it is not *only* physical distress, "extrême pauvreté, pouvant aller jusqu'à la privation des choses nécessaires à la vie," which characterizes *la misère*; emotional suffering and "malheur extrême" ("Misère") can also render one *misérable*, or "une personne malheureuse." Additionally, the morally *misérable* being is one "[d]ont la conduite mérite l'indignation, le mépris" ("Misérable"). Likewise, André Brochu points out that "[l]e miserable, chez Hugo, ce peut être le défavorisé (physique ou social), le méchant ou le malheureux. Au sens fort, il est tout cela ensemble" (66). The absence/presence of the bed has consequences for each of these categories of *misérable* in Hugo's novel, where the narrator reminds us that "[...] il y a un point où les infortunées et les infâmes se mêlent et se confondent dans un seul mot, mot fatal, les misérables [...]" (II: 273).

The symbolic functions of the bed, (such as comfort, rest, libido, procreation, illness and death) are perhaps common and unsurprising when connected with the milieu of the bedroom. It is, however, when the bed appears in unexpected locations, or when it is incorporated or employed in an unpredicted manner, that the most striking symbolism is sometimes evoked. Von Furstenberg addresses the presence of a bed outside of the traditional space of the bedroom, which can produce various effects, notably the raising “[...] to our consciousness [of] those themes inherently linked to a bed: relaxation, luxury, fantasy, and romantic pursuits.” The impression stirred by the untraditional and perhaps unexpected presence of a bed in a living or dining space will inevitably vary according to the “intimacy and familiarity” shared by the people occupying that space. For example, “Early on in a courtship, the presence of a bed might create an awkward pressure – or it might provide an amusing private joke to mix with the body language and unspoken dynamics as the couple becomes acquainted” (79). In addition, Von Furstenberg points out that these untraditionally placed beds “can appear in the most accidental locations, or the most calculated” (81), implying the possibility for a certain amount of purposeful manipulation of a given space through the imposition of a bed on that space and its occupants. It is certainly in this context that the symbolism of the bed becomes most evident, as Von Furstenberg points out: “The bed outside the bedroom makes apparent [...] the rich catalog of associations that the subject provokes” (83).

For Hugo, the absence of a bed corresponds generally to a state of misery, while its presence indicates survival, or a rising above misery. In Les Misérables the bed is also associated with the alleviation of and escape from distress, which sometimes actually results in its perpetuation. On another level, unavailability of a bed implies a separation

from humanity, and sometimes from morality. The present treatment of this symbolism will deal with the following aspects of the bed: comfort, rest, libido, procreation, illness and death.² Hugo's initial title for this novel, Les Misères (Houston 141), is an early indication that the distresses endured by human beings – and subsequently reflected by the status of the bed – must be considered in conjunction with the people suffering those distresses. Meschonnic supposes that Hugo's ultimate choice of title for this novel reflects an exclusionary focus on the suffering people represented in the novel, rather than on the things suffered:

Hugo lui-même, en remplaçant le titre primitif Les Misères [...] par celui des Misérables, montrait un souci de prose, signifiant sans doute, [...] son dessein de décrire (ce qui est plus réel, plus vrai), non pas les souffrances, mais les souffrants. (xxvi)

However, it is impossible to separate sufferers from sufferings. The present analysis will therefore examine the significance and symbolisms of the bed in specific relation to *les misérables* in this “épopée du genre humain” (Brochu 247), while demonstrating that the bed is an indication of and catalyst in *les misères*.

² In order to keep this analysis to a reasonable length I have omitted with regret a number of interesting connections with the bed that could prove fruitful for a future critical analysis of this novel. Among those subjects not included in the current work are: night, dreams, birth, the after-life and horizontality.

Chapter 1: COMFORT and REST

Perhaps the most obvious symbolism of the presence or absence of a bed in Les Misérables, or in any story of misery and human struggle for survival, is the financial situation that ownership (or lack) of material goods demonstrates. Without specifically mentioning the bed, Jean-Claude Nabet and Guy Rosa *do* make the distinction between the material state of “la société” in this novel and that of the “misérables,” the former being that of the “possédants” and the latter being that of the *démunis* (94). There is undeniably a link between money and possessions; for the *misérables* there is often a lack of possessions due to a lack of money. The acquisition of goods, or possessions, is associated with the rise to a less wretched condition.

It may be universally accepted that ownership of material goods is in direct relation to one’s financial comfort level. It would not be surprising to discover that the bed is among such possessions sometimes considered a “luxury” to be enjoyed only by those who can afford to pay for one. Likewise, to be rich or even *aisé* would imply an increased ownership of material goods. However, the “luxury” or privation of owning a bed has far deeper implications than simply reflecting one’s economic means. And to be misérable has more far-reaching consequences than a diminished ownership of material goods, for *not* having a bed at one’s disposal is humiliating and demoralizing, as Jean M. Goulemot reminds us: “Rappellera-t-on que l’absence de lit est le symbole de la dégradation de Rameau [chez Diderot] réduit à la paille des écuries [...]” (9). The importance of the bed is clearly *not* a simple reflection of one’s socioeconomic status: it is a reflection of the degree of humanity one is permitted to enjoy.

There is inarguably a correspondence between one's degree of *misère* and the amount of rest one is allowed, both of which are reflected by the condition of the bed. A lack of rest corresponds to misery not only because the miserable being does not have the financial means to procure a suitable sleeping place (a bed) for him/herself, but also because this unfortunate must find a way to earn a living, and necessarily spends a lot of time concerning him/herself with this; as a consequence, there remains very little time for rest. The most miserable situation is, of course, that of not possessing a bed at all.

Rest, much like food, is a physical need that is fundamental to human survival, and the bed – an essential place where one finds *repos* – cannot be separated from this need. Like hunger, physical weariness and the lack of rest are closely linked to poverty and misery. The person who does not get enough rest because he/she does not have access to a bed is, in fact, even more *misérable* than the person who does not get enough food. Often these two privations -- food and rest -- go hand in hand for a human being in *la misère*. Yet a lack of *repos* or loss of appetite is also sometimes a reflection of a state of misery that is not necessarily related to financial deficiencies. For the person “qui est dans le malheur” (“Misérable”), emotional sufferings or non-material concerns might in fact be the cause of insomnia, “[...] which is one of the less agreeable experiences associated with the bed.”

The main mental conditions causing insomnia are excessive brain activity, such as fruitlessly turning over the day's problems or planning tomorrow's work, sorrow over illness or death, fear of economic ruin, or an excessive sense of one's own sins or failures compared with one's fellows'. (Eden and Carrington 78)

Although one may actually have access to a bed, emotional or psychological distress may not be relieved there, and the suffering individual remains unable to benefit from his/her bed.

The importance of the bed in Les Misérables manifests itself from the very beginning of the novel, in the introduction of the character M. Myriel, a humble and generous Bishop. This religious figure wishes to offer his "palais épiscopal" (Hugo I: 28) in exchange for the small lodging next to it that serves as a hospital, with the sole hope of providing more beds to the sick poor. This first mention of *le lit* occurs on just the fifth page of the novel (I: 29), immediately revealing the concept of the bed as inevitably linked to the fundamental needs of human beings, of which M. Myriel makes us immediately conscious by demonstrating his own humanitarian interest in assuring that beds be available for those who have none. Myriel reminds us that *every* human being, even the poorest of the poor, needs a bed. He dedicates his own life to helping les misérables physically and spiritually. The Bishop gives himself entirely to those in poverty, completely depriving himself and living a "sainte misère" (I: 72) in order to give them even more; all this is done in an effort to give these *misérables* access to *repos*.

As previously mentioned, the more one is distanced from the availability of a bed, the more one approaches a state of misery. The *misérable* human being is therefore always in the process of either searching for a bed or of keeping the one he/she has. When the protagonist Jean Valjean is introduced for the first time in Les Misérables (I: 85), this *misérable* is looking for lodging for the night; he is looking for, specifically, a bed. In his concern to find a bed, he is willing to accept more and more meager, and

more and more precarious lodgings. He is rejected from the inn. He asks for a place to sleep in the stables, or at least a corner in the "grenier" with a bundle of straw (I: 88). Chased from the inn, chased from the cabaret, he seeks shelter in a prison (I: 91), then in a shed (I: 92). Continually rejected, Jean Valjean is reduced to considering a more and more wretched sleeping-place for the night, and comes across "une sorte de hutte" that he believes to be a lodging abandoned by a roadworker. He finds inside "un assez bon lit de paille"(I: 93), but this "bed" actually belongs to a dog, and this time Jean Valjean suffers the humiliation of being chased away by a domestic animal ("Je ne suis pas même un chien!"). As Valjean is forced to accept lodgings that are more and more mean and miserable, his sleeping-place resembles a "bed" less and less; he thus separates himself more and more from humanity and resigns himself more to a state of despair. Finally, Valjean "se retrouve dans la rue, seul, sans gîte, sans toit, sans abri...."(I: 94) and he feels truly *misérable*. Desperate and exhausted, Jean Valjean resigns himself to sleeping on the hard stone: "Épuisé de fatigue et n'espérant plus rien, il se coucha sur le banc de pierre à la porte d' [une] imprimerie." He justifies his resignation, as if to convince himself of his easy adaptation to this non-bed: "J'ai eu dix-neuf ans un matelas de bois, [...] j'ai aujourd'hui un matelas de pierre." But an elderly woman, taking pity on him in seeing him thus reduced, recognizes that this sort of bed is not suitable for any human being: "Il est impossible que vous passiez ainsi la nuit"(I: 95). This woman indicates to Jean Valjean a door where he will surely find shelter for the night.

This door, as Jean Valjean will learn, is the door of the Bishop, a door that is always open to welcome the most *misérable* of visitors. The Bishop welcomes Jean Valjean into his home without hesitation: "Madame Magloire, dit l'évêque, vous mettez

des draps blancs au lit de l'alcôve. [...] Monsieur, asseyez-vous et chauffez-vous. Nous allons souper dans un instant, et l'on fera votre lit pendant que vous souperez" (I: 101).

Jean Valjean is very grateful for the generosity of the bishop and for having at last found lodging for the night, but he is especially enthusiastic about the idea of sleeping in a real bed, the "luxury" of which he has been deprived for the last nineteen years. Valjean is truly on the verge of ecstasy as he contemplates his fortune: "[...] un lit avec des matelas et des draps! comme tout le monde! un lit! il y a dix-neuf ans que je n'ai pas couché dans un lit!" (I: 102). The "gift" of a bed for this night, accompanied by the fact that the bishop calls him "monsieur," re-identifies Jean Valjean as a human being, the category of "tout le monde," restoring a little of his human dignity and giving him his first glance into a non-miserable existence. At this moment, the bed becomes the symbol of the humanity that Jean Valjean wishes to rejoin, although our *misérable* protagonist is not necessarily conscious of this symbolism. Jean Valjean reminds the reader that in prison he had only "une planche pour dormir" (I: 104): the form of the bed was reduced to a bare and minimum wooden plank – hardly what one would consider a veritable bed fit for a human being. It is difficult to believe that (even within the walls of a prison) a human being can find him/herself in such a low and degrading state that he/she be reduced to sleeping on a bare piece of wood or on the hard ground. Every human being should at least have a bed. Now that Jean Valjean currently finds himself actually in the grace of a true bed, and he consequently finds himself once again considered a man, a human being, he is too overwhelmed by his life of misery to profit from the hospitality of the bishop:

Quant à l'homme, il était vraiment si fatigué qu'il n'avait même pas profité de ces bons draps blancs. Il avait soufflé sa bougie avec sa narine à la manière des

forçats, et s'était laissé tomber tout habillé sur le lit, où il s'était tout de suite profondément endormi. (I : 110)

It seems that this miserable man, at first so delighted by the idea of sleeping in a real bed, has at this point neither the strength nor sufficient consciousness to take advantage of this opportunity to reach a non-miserable state.

At the home of the bishop, Jean Valjean wakes up during the middle of the night: "Ce qui le réveilla, c'est que le lit était trop bon. Il y avait vingt ans bientôt qu'il n'avait couché dans un lit, et (...) la sensation était trop nouvelle pour ne pas troubler son sommeil." In fact, Jean Valjean felt uncomfortable in this true bed; he would have been more at ease in a more rudimentary sleeping-place. After nineteen years in prison and sleeping on a wooden plank, he lost the "habit" of comfort, which both directly resulted from and was caused by his loss of the "habit" of being treated like a human being. After a few hours of rest, Jean Valjean's unconscious recognizes this bed as beyond his social state and, moreover, beyond his recognition. He is wretched and has known nothing but misery during nineteen years. Besides, like all *misérables*, Jean Valjean "était accoutumé à ne pas donner beaucoup d'heures au repos" (I: 125). Whether due to his existence of incessant labor in prison, or caused by his four days of foot-travel since his release, or even because of his general acclimation to a life of misery, rest does not yet suit Jean Valjean. His unconscious refusal of the bed at the bishop's home this night suggests that he is perhaps yet unable to detach himself from a condition of misery, and equally suggests that his reintroduction to a non-miserable existence is still too disorienting and strange for him. In reality, one cannot expect such a *misérable* being as Jean Valjean to come out of his state of misery "overnight."

The case of Jean Valjean offers just the first example in Les Misérables of the impact of the miserable conditions of the bed. While Jean Valjean begins, for us, as a *misérable* without a bed and whose exposure to a non-miserable existence and eventual ascension are generated by his access to a bed, the case of Fantine demonstrates, rather, a process of decline. The progressive diminishing of Fantine's bed and its eventual loss illustrate this character's spiral toward a more and more sorry state, which is directly related to her financial instability.

Initially, Fantine begins to distance herself from destitution when she acquires furnished accommodations: “[Fantine] loua une petite chambre et le meubla à crédit sur son travail futur” (I: 205). Her small financial success is symbolized especially by the obtaining of a bed. However, Fantine loses her job at the factory of Monsieur Madeleine (an alias of Jean Valjean), and she can no longer earn enough money to pay for her furniture; consequently, she “rendit au marchand les trois quarts de son mobilier, ne garda que le nécessaire, et se trouva sans travail, sans état, n’ayant plus que son lit” (I: 208-209). Unemployed, Fantine can no longer maintain her progress against *la misère*. The fact that she manages to keep *at least* her bed, which is recognized as “le nécessaire,” signifies that she is still able to protect herself from extreme misery, if only provisionally. In debt and not knowing where to turn, desperate to conserve her bed and, more importantly, to preserve a bed for her child, Fantine sells first her hair, then her teeth. Afterward, we see her “assise sur son lit, pâle, glacée. Elle ne s’était pas couchée” (I: 213). This is the very last time that we find Fantine in her own self-procured bed; although now unable to find *repos* there, she seems to guard her last moments in her bed

like a last conservation of a non-miserable condition. Fantine clings to the remaining traces of humanity that the bed holds for her, as she confronts the great sacrifices she has made in order to keep this bed and guarantee a bed for her child. Yet Fantine's situation continues to deteriorate, and she loses her bed entirely: "Elle n'avait plus de lit, il lui restait une loque qu'elle appelait sa couverture, un matelas à terre..." (I: 214). Without a bed, this creature resigns herself to her *misère*, which she no longer has the strength to combat. In the absence of the bed, there is no longer hope for Fantine, for she lacks the means for *repos* and finds her humanity completely diminished:

La vie et l'ordre social lui ont dit leur dernier mot. Il lui est arrivé tout ce qu'il lui arrivera. Elle a tout ressenti, tout supporté, tout éprouvé, tout souffert, tout perdu, tout pleuré. Elle est résignée de cette résignation qui ressemble à l'indifférence comme la mort ressemble au sommeil. (I, 216)

The Thénardier family, especially Monsieur Thénardier, is represented as less than human, a classification of *miserable* that we find linked to the bed in a number of ways in Les Misérables. Upon our first glimpse of the true "species" to which M. Thénardier belongs, we become immediately aware of the inhuman nature of this character. M. Thénardier is introduced to the reader as "moins homme que goule, attiré par le flair des morts" (I: 387), as he scavenges the field of dead and wounded at the Battle of Waterloo, an "immense tombe" (I: 389). This is clearly *not* a man sensitive to the sacred nature of the human repose. Thénardier is lacking in humanity; yet we discover that this *miserable* is, in fact, familiar enough with humanity to be able to manipulate and exploit it.

Although M. Thénardier is referred to and self-credited as an “aubergiste,” he does not belong conscientiously to this class of lodgers who provide *repos* to others: “On comprend que le mot *aubergiste* est employé ici dans un sens restreint, et qui ne s’étend pas à une classe entière” (I: 413-414). Thénardier represents a corrupt breed of *aubergiste* who “[...] n’avait qu’une pensée: s’enrichir” (I: 413), by capitalizing on the needs of civilized man:

[...] le Thénardier était un des hommes qui comprenaient 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. (I: 414)

Yet Thénardier only understands the vital human need for a bed and for rest insofar as he is personally able to take advantage of that need, as reflected by his distorted and materialistic conception of hospitality -- and of the duties of an *aubergiste*:

Ses théories d’aubergiste jaillissaient quelquefois de lui par éclairs. [...] – ‘Le devoir de l’aubergiste, [...] c’est de vendre au premier venu du fricot, du 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, de plumer la femme, 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!’ (I : 414)

Despite his materialist motivations, Thénardier clearly recognizes the distinction between sleep and rest that separates the “haves” and the “have-nots,” for *repos* is a luxury that one must be able to afford. Thénardier plays with this distinction in order to manipulate his patrons and raise the price of a room in his *auberge*:

-- Est-ce que monsieur ne va pas se reposer?
Ne va pas se coucher lui eût semblé excessif et familier. *Reposer* sentait le luxe et était du respect. Ces mots-là ont la propriété mystérieuse et admirable

de gonfler le lendemain matin le chiffre de la carte à payer. Une chambre où l'on *couche* coûte vingt sous; une chambre où l'on *repose* coûte vingt francs. (I: 445)

Even the name Thénardier gives his *auberge* (I: 408) comes from a lie (I: 411) intended to manipulate public perception. Having embellished his role in saving the life of colonel Pontmercy, Thénardier boasts the name of “cabaret du sergent de Waterloo” (I: 411) for his *auberge*; for “l’enseigne du cabaret” Thénardier displays a self-portrait, a painting which depicts “[...] une bataille, un fond de fumée, et un homme qui en portait un autre. C’était le groupe de Thénardier et de Pontmercy; le sergent sauveur, le colonel sauvé” (II: 327). Attempting to profit as much as possible from this falsely heroic tale, Thénardier thus adds credibility – and even honor – to his *auberge*, and inspires confidence in his humanitarian capabilities, a comfort, perhaps, to his potential patrons.

Fantine certainly believed she had secured *repos* for her child – and found a temporary solution to protect Cosette from suffering – by lodging the child at the inn operated by Monsieur and Madame Thénardier: “C’est le bon Dieu qui m’a fait passer devant votre auberge” (I: 180). The symbolism of the bed undoubtedly had its impact on Fantine’s decision to leave her child in the care of these strangers. An inn is, after all, a place where one finds many beds; one would logically count on enjoying a certain amount of rest at an inn, accompanied by an atmosphere of hospitality and security. Ironically, and at the horror of the reader, little Cosette receives none of these physical or emotional comforts within the home of the Thénardier family; inside a lodging filled with beds, Cosette’s greedy and unscrupulous guardians exploit her to increase their own

comforts, depriving Cosette a veritable bed and of essential rest. As a result, “D’année en année, l’enfant grandit, et sa misère aussi” (I: 185).

Indeed, the Thénardier *auberge* is likened to an inhuman, animalistic residence, and becomes the source of ultimate oppression for Cosette:

Nulle pitié ; une maîtresse farouche, un maître venimeux. 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 des araignées. (I : 415)

Distanced from humanity, the existence of Cosette here is gloomy and desperate, one of subjection to – rather than protection from – misery. Often “épuisée de lassitude” (I: 421), the young Cosette, just eight years old, is hardly afforded *repos* by her “hosts;” she is not given consideration as a human being by those entrusted to care for her. Called a “goueuse” (I: 441) and treated like “une chienne” (I: 444) by the Thénardiens, Cosette lived – and slept – without the sense of comfort and security which is vital to every human being, but especially to the vulnerable and innocent child. Her miserable sleeping-place is even physically separated from the rest of the *auberge*, symbolizing, like the condition of the “bed” itself, the separation of this *misérable* from humanity:

[...] une espèce d’enfoncement triangulaire pratiqué sous l’escalier ou pour mieux dire formé par l’escalier même. Cet enfoncement n’était autre chose que le dessous des marches. Là, parmi toutes sortes de vieux paniers et de vieux tessons, dans la poussière et dans les toiles d’araignée, il y avait un lit ; si l’on peut appeler lit une paille trouée jusqu’à laisser montrer la paille et une couverture trouée jusqu’à laisser voir la paille. Point de draps. Cela était posé à terre sur le carreau. Dans ce lit Cosette dormait. (I : 447)

In contrast with “deux petits lits jumeaux très blancs” the Thénardiens provided for their own daughters (I: 447), this pathetic sleeping place for the child-servant Cosette certainly

inspires little *repos*. For the Thénardiens, the presumed hospitality of their establishment does not extend to those from whom no profit can be drawn.

In delivering Cosette from the trenches of servitude and an inhumane existence at the Thénardier inn, Jean Valjean represents a savior for Cosette, who "ne sentait plus la fatigue" (I: 430) from the moment Jean Valjean entered her life:

De temps en temps, elle levait les yeux vers cet homme avec une sorte de tranquillité et d'abandon inexprimable. Jamais on ne lui avait appris à se tourner vers la Providence et à prier. Cependant elle sentait en elle quelque chose qui ressemblait à de l'espérance et à de la joie et qui s'en allait vers le ciel. (I : 430)

Providing Cosette with this initial *repos* which relieves some of her misery is only the beginning for Jean Valjean in the role of bed-provider (and its implications) that he will play in her life. Already he gives Cosette some semblance of hope to escape her misery.

Depuis qu'elle avait rencontré ce bonhomme dans le bois, tout était comme changé pour elle. Cosette, moins heureuse que la moindre hirondelle du ciel, n'avait jamais su ce que c'est que de se réfugier à l'ombre de sa mère et sous une aile. Depuis cinq ans, c'est-à-dire aussi loin que pouvaient remonter ses souvenirs, la pauvre enfant frissonnait et grelottait. Elle avait toujours été toute nue sous la bise aigre du malheur, maintenant il lui semblait qu'elle était vêtue. Autrefois son âme avait froid. Maintenant elle avait chaud. (I : 454)

Upon removing Cosette from the miserable conditions she suffered at the Thénardier *auberge*, Jean Valjean assumes the role of caregiver for this child. Among his primary concerns is the reunion of this child with humanity by, among other things, providing her with a true bed. This begins on the very evening of Cosette's departure from the *auberge*, when Jean Valjean himself serves as a bed for this child who is weary from a day of travel:

[Cosette] ne se plaignait pas, mais elle était fatiguée, et Jean Valjean s'en aperçut à sa main qu'elle tirait davantage en marchant. Il la prit sur son dos; Cosette, sans lâcher [sa poupée] Catherine, posa sa tête sur l'épaule de Jean Valjean et s'y endormit. (I: 461)

Jean Valjean represents, in this way, the bed for Cosette ; he serves – and will continue to serve throughout her childhood – as the means for Cosette to rise above misery.

Jean Valjean continually yields the better bed – and sometimes the *only* bed available – to Cosette, ever concerned with providing for *her repos* and well-being before seeing to his own. Upon his arrival at the Petit-Picpus convent, for example, he defers “le seul lit qu’il y eût dans la baraque” to Cosette, while “une botte de paille” suffices for his own makeshift “bed” (II: 52). Later, living in Paris outside the convent walls, Jean Valjean makes Cosette “la maîtresse de la maison” and “[...] avait fait mettre dans [sa chambre] un lit à baldaquin d’ancien damas à trois couleurs [...]” (II: 410), while “Lui, il habitait l’espèce de loge de portier qui était dans la cour du fond, avec un matelas sur un lit de sangle, [...]” (II: 411). This father-figure for Cosette continues to provide for her bed, with little consideration for his *own* bed, thus exhibiting selfless parental attention to the child’s welfare. Moreover, whenever there is a question in the novel of Cosette’s well-being, we find synonymous mention of a bed, whether her current or eventual bed. For example, in making arrangements for Cosette’s entry into the convent’s boarding school, Fauchelevent proposes to leave her temporarily “chez une vieille bonne amie [...] où il y a un petit lit” (II: 57). What seems an obvious supposition – that wherever Jean Valjean might lodge Cosette (even temporarily), there would be a bed in which she would sleep – is seemingly overstated. However, in the context of the importance of the bed itself, whose procurement is a symbol of non-misery, this overstressed detail takes on additional significance, emphasizing the relevance of the presence of a bed in the relief

and/or avoidance of misery. Cosette herself later recognizes the generosity of Jean Valjean and the role he has played in her wellbeing, for “[...] il était pauvre lui-même, et qu’il se privait de tout en ne la privant de rien” (III: 35).

Jean Valjean’s concern over the availability of a “proper” bed to others is not limited to the child that has come to regard as a daughter. For example, Valjean hopes to divert a 19-year old “fainéant” (who aspires to become a “voleur”) from the life of *misère* that would await him; Valjean warns this young *misérable* that there is no bed, no *repos* for the prisoner:

Une fois pris, n’espère plus rien. A la fatigue, paresseux ! plus de repos. (II: 449)

Ah ! tu n’a qu’une pensée : bien boire, bien manger, bien dormir. Tu boiras de l’eau, tu mangeras du pain noir, tu dormiras sur une planche avec une feraille sur ta chair ! (II: 451)

Additionally, Jean Valjean the “philanthrope” works to improve the condition of the beds of other *misérables*, donating “couvertures neuves” to them (II: 293). It is, in fact, through his charity work that Jean Valjean becomes (unfortunately) reacquainted with the contemptible M. Thénardier, becoming the victim of another Thénardier scheme to exploit the human need for a bed.

It is Marius’ decline into *la misère* that puts him – and the reader – in contact with a now truly destitute Thénardier family (calling themselves “les Jondrette”) who has lost its *auberge* and now occupies the “taudis” (II: 274) next to Marius’ lodging. This decline began when Marius sold his clothes and his watch in order to pay for the hotel where he had been staying since being thrown out of his grandfather’s home (II: 205); the dispensable was thus exchanged in order to retain the necessary, a bed. When Marius ran

out of money for the hotel, he simply left, “[...] ne voulant pas s’y endetter.” It was after this that Marius began to know difficult privations:

La vie devint sévère pour Marius. Manger ses habits et sa montre, ce n’était rien. Il mangea de cette chose inexprimable qu’on appelle *de la vache enragée*. Chose horrible, qui contient les jours sans pain, les nuits sans sommeil, [...]

Marius enjoyed little or no *repos* in this existence, where “[...] il connut les hontes injustes et les rougeurs poignantes de la misère” (II: 207). Then, with the help of Courfeyrac, Marius found modest employment, and has been able to live on his wages and even arrange for his own lodging: “Marius occupait dans la mesure Gorbeau, moyennant le prix annuel de trente francs, un taudis sans cheminée qualifié cabinet où il n’y avait, en fait de meubles, que l’indispensable” (II: 209). Among the “indispensable” of Marius’ living accommodations, there is, notably, a bed (II: 308). Moreover, “Ces meubles “étaient à lui” (II: 209), revealing a certain distance from *la misère*. In fact, Marius recognizes later that, despite his sufferings, he had not himself known *true* misery: “Marius depuis cinq ans avait vécu dans la pauvreté, dans le dénuement, dans la détresse même, mais il s’aperçut qu’il n’avait point connu la vraie misère” (II: 271). Marius realizes that he was far from the point of degradation suffered by his neighbors, the Jondrettes, for whom he now considers himself “[...] le dernier chaînon du genre humain qu’ils touchassent [...]” (II: 272).

It is through Marius’ eyes that we first glimpse the “bouge” that the Thénardier family is now occupying, where we find “[p]our tous meubles, une chaise de paille, une table infirme, quelques vieux tessons, et dans deux coins deux grabats indescritibles [...]” (II: 274). The deplorable living conditions of this family and their indescribable sleeping-places conjure images of this family as low and uncivilized. The continued

references to the Thénardiens using animalistic, inhuman terms – “un nid de monstres,” “la toile de ces araignées” (II: 298), “comme les louveteaux” (II: 307) – reinforce the minimal degree of humanity that they possess and enjoy. Eponine and Azelma, now adolescents, have become hideous products of this *misère*: “[...] deux misérables êtres qui n’étaient ni des enfants, ni des filles, ni des femmes, espèce de monstres impurs et innocents produits par la misère” (II: 267). Eponine has become so accustomed, in fact, to the absence of a veritable bed and of the *repos* that accompanies it, that she is almost nonchalant about where she sleeps, bearing no real attachment to the bed, *per se*:

-- Des fois je m’en vais le soir. Des fois je ne rentre pas. Avant d’être ici, l’autre hiver, nous demeurions sous les arches des ponts. [...] Je vais toute seule quand je veux, je dors des fois dans les fossés. (II: 270)

[...] elle avait couché dans quelque grenier d’écurie. (II: 403)

The miserable condition she is in does not apparently occur to Fantine. Or at least her distress and her disconnection from the bed is so complete that she is blind to the symbolic importance of the bed, for she easily disregards the bed as a potential hiding place when searching Marius’ quarters:

-- Eh bien ! cria le père , qu’est-ce que tu fais donc ?
-- Je regarde sous le lit et sous les meubles, répondit-elle en continuant d’arranger ses cheveux, il n’y a personne” (II: 308).

Eponine lies and says that she is checking under the bed, while she instead admires herself in the mirror next to it. It seems that for Fantine, the bed is *not* a positive place, a place of protection, and perhaps it seems unlikely to her to find Marius under the bed, which would explain her ease in lying about checking there.

M. Thénardier, however, is clearly conscious of the significance – and the potential – of the bed. At the *auberge* he exploited others’ need for a bed; now his

business is that of exploiting others' *compassion* for those in need of a bed:

“[Thénardier] avait pour industrie dans sa détresse d’exploiter la charité des personnes bienfaisantes [...]” (II: 266). Weary from his own “*misère*,” he contrives to escape it:

[...] j’en ai assez eu de la misère ! [...] je veux manger à ma faim, je veux avoir boire à ma soif ! bâfrer ! dormir ! ne rien faire ! je veux avoir mon tour, moi, tiens ! avant de crever ! je veux être un peu millionnaire ! (II: 295)

It is not surprising that Thénardier does not simply ask to no longer be *misérable*; he wants to be *rich*. However, he notably associates the ability to sleep – and, we presume, to sleep as much as he likes – with being *far* from *la misère*.

Thénardier’s plan to extort money from Jean Valjean hinges on first luring the “philanthrope” into Thénardier’s “bouge,” and then threatening Valjean’s own *repos* by using Cosette’s safety as a bargaining chip. This threat to Valjean’s psychological *repos* manifests, as well, by the physical threat to the bed through which Valjean first perceives that he is in danger:

[...] le regard de M. Leblanc revint vers le fond de la chambre. Il y avait maintenant quatre hommes, trois assis sur le lit, un debout près du chambranle de la porte, tous quatre bras nus, immobiles, le visage barbouillé de noir. Un de ceux qui étaient sur le lit s’appuyait au mur, les yeux fermés, et l’on eût dit qu’il dormait. (II: 318)

These “bandits” hanging around on the beds represent the general menace by immorally *misérable* beings to the basic need of humankind for a bed; there is a threat associated with taking away Jean Valjean’s means for providing a bed for himself and for Cosette.

As Jean Valjean (referred to here as “M. Leblanc”) is tied up to one of the beds in the Thénardier “bouge,” he “[...] semblait avoir renoncé à la résistance:”

Le grabat où M. Leblanc avait été renversé était une façon de lit d’hôpital porté sur quatre montants grossiers en bois à peine équarri. M. Leblanc se laissa faire.

Les brigands le lièrent solidement, debout et les pieds posant à terre, au montant du lit le plus éloigné de la fenêtre et le plus proche de la cheminée. (II: 329)

The fact that Jean Valjean ceases to resist the aggression of these criminals in being reunited with the bed is symbolic of the confidence and reassurance he feels at this moment for escaping his current *misérable* situation. However, Valjean's calm in being attached to the bed derives *not* from his own contact with the bed, but from his patient plan to protect Cosette's bed and well-being: Valjean gives his aggressors a "fausse adresse" to lead them *away* from Cosette's lodgement and to "Gagner du temps !" in order to detach himself from the bed and make his escape (II: 338).

As evidenced by the case of M. Thénardier, the immoral or criminal *misérable* often remains disconnected from *repos* and from the bed as a reflection – or even a result – of his/her personal disconnection with humanity. Hugo highlights the example of the *bandits* Claquesous, Gueulemer, Babet and Montparnasse:

Ces quatre hommes n'étaient point quatre hommes ; c'était une sorte de mystérieux voleur à quatre têtes travaillant en grand sur Paris ; c'était le polype monstrueux du mal habitant la crypte de la société. (II: 253)

These *bandits* do not use the nighttime for *repos*; when they *do* sleep, it is in deplorable non-beds of their choosing:

Le jour, fatigués des nuits farouches qu'ils avaient, ils s'en allaient dormir, tantôt dans les fours à plâtre, tantôt dans les carrières abandonnées de Montmartre ou de Montrouge, parfois dans les égouts. Ils se terraient. (II: 255)

Despite their own dissociation with the bed, these criminals manipulate the bed and the human need for *repos* in order to commit crimes... or to get away with them. For example, two criminals use the bed as an accomplice for their escape from prison:

[...] Brujon et Gueulemer [...] se levèrent doucement et se mirent à percer avec le clou que Brujon avait trouvé, le tuyau de cheminée auquel leurs lits touchaient. Les gravois tombaient sur le lit de Brujon, de sorte qu'on ne les entendait pas. (II: 498-499)

This same night, Thénardier makes his own escape by putting his guard to sleep with a wine “[...] auquel se mêle un narcotique et que la bande des *Endormeurs* a rendu célèbre” (II: 498). Afterward, Thénardier manages his mysterious escape with the aid of the bed, literally (“Une planche de son lit avait été arrachée et sans doute emportée [...]”), which apparently served as a bridge to get beyond the prison walls (II: 500-501).

Jean Valjean shares some of these *bandits*' disregard for the bed as a component of their own personal needs. Despite Jean Valjean's awareness of the great importance and implications of a “real” bed for humankind, as well as his efforts to ensure its access or protection for others, he is, himself, content with the most humble and basic of sleeping accommodations. Years after coming out of prison, having clearly risen above and beyond the state of misery which previously burdened him, Jean Valjean still does not identify himself with humanity and deserving the comforts of a bed. He even seems to still feel more comfortable in a *misérable* sleeping-place. Upon his arrival at the Thénardier inn he modestly declares “Mettez-moi où vous voudrez, [...] au grenier, à l'écurie. Je paierai comme si j'avais une chambre” (I : 433). When M. Thénardier offers him, instead, a room “qui était d'une rare *spendeur*, toute meublée en acajou avec un lit-bateau et des rideaux en calicot rouge” (I : 445), Valjean responds:

- Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?
- C'est notre propre chambre de noce, dit l'aubergiste. [...]
- J'aurais autant aimé l'écurie, dit l'homme brusquement. (I : 445-446)

Incredibly, Jean Valjean's distancing from a "real" bed – and hence from humanity – is self-imposed, for this wretched man still feels he doesn't belong to humanity:

Je ne suis d'aucune famille, moi. Je ne suis pas de la vôtre. Je ne suis pas de celle des hommes. [...] Il y a des familles, mais ce n'est pas pour moi. Je suis le malheureux, je suis dehors. Ai-je eu un père et une mère ? j'en doute presque. (III: 423)

Valjean continues to refuse the comforts of a bed; he persists in blocking his own *repos* because of his conscience, which will never allow him to be anything but a *misérable*:

Donc avec la conscience on n'a jamais fini. [...] Elle est sans fond, étant Dieu. [...] on y jette son bien-être, on y jette son repos [...] (III: 415)

Pour être heureux, moi ! Est-ce que j'ai le droit d'être heureux ? je suis hors de la vie, monsieur. » (III: 425)

[...] vous avez un misérable homme devant vous, monsieur. (III: 427)

In spite of Jean Valjean's refusal to recognize his own human need for the bed, his insomnia is a clear indicator of his frequent lack of psychological *repos* when the symbolism of the bed for him, personally, is threatened. This is especially evident concerning his relationship with Cosette, whose happiness and wellbeing has become the purpose of Valjean's existence: "Son bonheur, c'était le but de ma vie" (III: 446):

Quelquefois, au lieu de se coucher, Jean Valjean restait assis près de son grabat la tête dans ses mains, et il passait des nuits entières à se demander : Qu'y a-t-il dans la pensée de Cosette ? et à songer aux choses auxquelles elle pouvait songer. (II: 432)

Cosette était sa nation. Cosette suffisait à son bonheur ; l'idée qu'il ne suffisait peut-être pas, lui, au bonheur de Cosette, cette idée, qui avait été autrefois sa fièvre et son insomnie [...] (III: 179)

The idea that *he* is not enough for Cosette's happiness disturbs Jean Valjean's own possibility for *repos*. On Cosette's wedding night, when this father figure's role of bed-

provider and *repos-ensurer* is replaced by the conjugal bed, Jean Valjean suffers his greatest struggle with his own humanity:

Sa rêverie vertigineuse dura toute la nuit.

Il resta là jusqu'au jour, dans la même attitude, ployé en deux sur ce lit, prosterné sous l'énormité du sort, écrasé peut-être, hélas ! [...]. Il demeura douze heures, les douze heures d'une longue nuit d'hiver, glacé, sans relever la tête et sans prononcer une parole. Il était immobile comme un cadavre, pendant que sa pensée se roulait à terre et s'envolait, tantôt comme l'hydre, tantôt comme l'aigle. A le voir ainsi sans mouvement, on eût dit un mort [...] (III: 416)

This night of “insomnie” (III: 418) will, in fact, propel Jean Valjean into an irreversible spiral toward his greatest *misère*.

Chapter 2: *LIBIDO and PROCREATION*

In addition to satisfying the fundamental physical need for rest, the bed is largely associated with another human physical drive, the libido: “[...] physical love-making [...] is normally, although not invariably, performed in bed” (Eden and Carrington 87). The human need for passionate love – for both emotional and physical connections with others – represents an essential component of the human experience; love and the bed are therefore inseparable from our ability to survive. This is first evident in Les Misérables in the case of Fantine, for: “[e]lle travaille pour vivre; puis, toujours pour vivre, car le cœur a sa faim aussi, elle aime” (Hugo I: 151). The appetite of the libido thus reflects another facet of human survival: Fantine is able to satisfy fundamental needs in loving Tholomyès and, more significantly, in seeking his love in bed. Kathryn Grossman notes that Tholomyès, for his part, is “an insatiable predator” who “reduc[es] love to the same level as food” (99). This first love for Fantine is both sincere and faithful, yet it is also a means for her to find respite from *la misère*, for the presence of the bed serves not only to ward off misery, but can also relieve suffering for the person who has reached sexual maturity. From this point of view, the bed represents a simple enough source of escape and relief: in the arms of a lover – in the protection of a bed – one can ease or at least momentarily forget his/her misery.

The concept of appetite, as well as the image of the bed as a symbol of fundamental needs, is reinforced by the composition of the dining room at the cabaret where Fantine and her friends gather together the evening that Tholomyès and the others abandon these young women. These couples find themselves in “une chambre grande,

mais laide, avec alcôve et lit au fond (vu la plénitude du cabaret le dimanche, il avait fallu accepter ce gîte)” (I: 158). Favourite, one of the young women, remarks that it is both strange and disagreeable to have to look at a bed while dining: “c’est une horreur, nous dînons dans un endroit où il y a un lit, ça me dégoûte de la vie” (I: 162). This bed, imposed on the view of these dining couples, is an important symbolic (and anticipatory) image. The ensemble of the bed and the meal reminds us again of the image of the double physical appetite. Furthermore, we learn that the presence of the bed does not always have positive implications in Les Misérables. Given their lower social position and their inability to pay for a more extravagant dinner, these diners are forced to accept a less tasteful and less than desirable situation, despite their will. In the case of Fantine, we will see that the bed, at first a source of relief, eventually perpetuates her misery as it invades her life from all directions. In succumbing to her inevitable, undeniable appetites, Fantine is not prepared for the consequences of her actions: “elle s’était donnée à ce Tholomyès comme à un mari, et la pauvre fille avait un enfant” (I: 172).

As a direct consequence of the libido, the bed provides the opportunity for procreation, which has some specific positive implications in the survival of humanity. First, in satisfying a reproductive instinct, procreation allows the preservation and continuation of the self, the family... and the human species. Secondly, raising a child may fulfill a maternal or paternal desire, bringing joy into an otherwise wretched existence.

Procreation can also frequently result in a negative impact on wretched individuals for whom additional (economic) complications arise when there is “another

mouth to feed.” *Repos* is easily threatened in such circumstances, and the individual may react either desperately or nobly in order to elude or overcome the additional “acquired” misery. In sleeping with Tholomyès – in sharing a bed with him, as well as her body –, Fantine becomes pregnant. This results in increasing her misery after the father of her child abandons her. Cosette, born of the love affair between Fantine and Tholomyès – that is, born out of a search to escape misery – becomes the cause of the perpetuated misery of Fantine as well as her reason to live. If Cosette is now the joy of Fantine’s life, she is also the weight that pushes her into a more and more inescapable state of misery.

Fantine recognizes that “elle avait commis une faute” (I: 176) in giving herself to Tholomyès; this mistake will be costly for her, and one that “il faudrait cacher” (I: 177) after the birth of her child in order to avoid scandal and recrimination. Fantine must conceal her young daughter, the result and proof of her “faute,” in order to find work and have any hope of pulling herself out of her distress: “L’ouvrage ne le permet pas. Avec un enfant, on ne trouve pas à se placer” (I: 180). Unfortunately, as we know, the guardians Fantine hastily chooses for her child turn out to be less than ideal; but leaving Cosette with the Thénardiens permits Fantine to present herself honorably for employment at “la fabrique” operated by Jean Valjean under the name of “M. Madeleine” (I: 205). However, it is not long before Fantine’s secret, her immorality, is discovered (“Sa faute était donc maintenant connue de tous!”) and she is fired. Unable to find other employment because “[p]ersonne ne voulut [de ce misérable]” (I: 208), Fantine turns to desperate measures in her increasing *misère*.

Having forfeited her body symbolically in losing her bed, Fantine finds herself reduced to selling her body literally, as it is the only thing remaining in her possession. In her diminished humanity, in her struggle for survival, “L’infortunée se fit fille publique” (I: 215). Ironically, in order to earn a living, and without a bed to call hers, Fantine must seek out revenue by sharing the beds of strangers – by satisfying the libidinal desires of others. Though she attempts to escape *la misère* through the experience of a vicarious bed, having been “[...] sinistrement manié[e] par ce tâtonnement qui cherche des ressources, qui rencontre l’opprobre, et qui s’en accommode” (II: 272), Fantine finds herself even more *misérable* as a result of “la prostitution par détresse” (III: 218), “[...] forme par excellence de la déchéance de la femme dans la mythologie romantique” (Brochu 137). In her effort to avoid or alleviate material misery, the prostitute reduces her own level of human dignity, and maintains or even increases her moral misery.

Although the exploitation of the carnal bed effectively perpetuates misery for practitioners of prostitution, the repression or oppression of the libido can have both positive and negative results. The chaste individual, disconnected from the carnal or conjugal bed, both suffers certain shortcomings and enjoys certain virtues of a lifestyle distanced from libidinal activity. Unable to access the distraction of misery that sexual satisfaction and/or procreation would provide, the chaste *misérable* is, however, able to avoid certain threats to the stability of his/her well-being.

The only surviving daughter of M. Gillenormand (Marius’s grandfather) (“La cadette avait épousé l’homme de ses songes, mais elle était morte. L’aînée ne s’était pas

mariée.”) (Hugo II: 134) remains a “vieille vierge” (II: 135) at the age of 50, as well as a prude: “[...] l’étiquette: *Prude*, sous laquelle nous l’avons classée, lui convenait absolument” (II : 135). Mlle Gillenormand incarnates the dual role that prudery plays in the coexisting alleviation and perpetuation of misery where the libido is concerned, for she “était une espèce d’âme crépusculaire. La pruderie est une demi-virtu et un demi-vice” (II: 135). Prudery is virtuous not only for moral or religious reasons, but because it is a rejection of procreation, which would increase and prolong a poor woman’s or poor family’s suffering, as is seen in the case of Fantine. Yet procreation would ensure the long-term survival of the family, as M. Gillenormand hopes to see accomplished, and therefore prudery can be seen also as part-vice.

In addition to a lack of childbearing due to prudery, it is essential to note that a prude also suffers from a lack of sexual satisfaction that would actually provide some alleviation of misery. In fact, Mlle Gillenormand is lacking an essential human experience by denying herself sexual satisfaction, and so it seems that, now *d’un certain âge* and certainly past her childbearing years, she has not really lived: “Elle était triste d’une tristesse obscure dont elle n’avait pas elle-même le secret. Il y avait dans toute sa personne la stupeur d’une vie finie qui n’a pas commencé” (II: 135). It is interesting to note that the bed of this “prude” is never mentioned. And yet she exhibits a slight, albeit suppressed, sexual pleasure in having her nephew Théodule present in her *bedroom*: “Elle poussa un cri de bonheur. On est vieille, on est prude, on est dévote, on est la tante, mais c’est toujours agréable de voir entrer dans sa chambre un lancier” (II: 165).

Another “vieille vierge” mentioned in Les Misérables is the servant of M. Mabeuf (Marius’ elderly friend who had known his father):

Sa servante était, elle aussi, une variété de l'innocence. La pauvre bonne vieille femme était vierge. Sultan, son matou [...] avait rempli son cœur et suffisait à la quantité de passion qui était en elle. Aucun de ses rêves n'était allé jusqu'à l'homme. (II : 218)

This virgin symbolically finds her greatest happiness in laying out on her bed each Sunday the un-sewn pieces of dresses which she never makes: "Elle passait son temps le dimanche après la messe à compter son linge dans sa malle et à étaler sur son lit des robes en pièce qu'elle achetait et ne faisait jamais faire" (II: 218). Like the libidinal connections this woman will never make, the pieces of cloth remain separated, yet seen against the backdrop of a virgin's bed, implying an essential connection of the human being to the needs satisfied by the bed, even if this connection is unconscious.

Jean Valjean, like these "vieilles vierges," is entirely distanced from passion and libidinal satisfactions. Valjean's chastity is so complete that his consciousness of his own libido is even doubted. Yet chastity is, notably, credited as the worst aspect of imprisonment, which Jean Valjean suffered for 19 years of his life: "Ce qu'il y a de plus terrible pour le prisonnier dans les quatre murs de pierre qui l'ensevelissent, c'est une sorte de chasteté glaciale [...]" (III: 18). Perhaps this *misérable* had been forced to deny his sexual drive for so long as a prisoner that, as with *repos*, he had lost the inclination. Jean Valjean's inexperience with passionate love is nonetheless apparent many years after he is unbound from the forced chastity of prison life, and represents a handicap for him in empathizing with certain instincts and *souffrances* of others:

Jean Valjean n'avait aucune expérience de ces misères, les seules qui soient charmantes et les seules qu'il ne connût pas; cela fit qu'il ne comprit point la grave signification du silence de Cosette. (II: 431)

Having never experienced the *misères* of passionate love, Jean Valjean's libidinal instinct lies dormant.

As the other extreme of the libidinal exertion of prostitution, chastity presents another, although very different, experience of the vicarious bed. The chaste individual, disconnected from the libido, remains necessarily connected to the bed in other ways. One function of the bed is often substituted for another through, for example, devotion to helping others find physical or spiritual *repos* or becoming abundantly maternal or paternal toward someone else's child. Jean Valjean, for example, has unconsciously – and innocently – transferred his inhibited passions onto Cosette, for whom his paternal intentions are entirely pure. Consequently, Cosette represents several facets of Jean Valjean's unacknowledged or unaccepted ties to the bed, particularly those of libido and procreation:

Le pauvre vieux Jean Valjean n'aimait, certes, pas Cosette autrement que comme un père; mais, nous l'avons fait remarquer plus haut, dans cette paternité la viduité même de sa vie avait introduit tous les amours; il aimait Cosette comme sa fille, et il l'aimait comme sa mère, et il l'aimait comme sa sœur; et, comme il n'avait jamais eu ni amante ni épouse, comme la nature est un créancier qui n'accepte aucun protêt, ce sentiment-là aussi, le plus imperdable de tous, était mêlé aux autres, vague, ignorant, pur de la pureté de l'aveuglement, inconscient, céleste, angélique, divin ; moins comme un sentiment que comme un instinct, moins comme un instinct que comme un attrait, imperceptible et invisible, mais réel [...] (III: 181)

Jean Valjean at first selfishly envisions a chaste future for Cosette: she will become a nun (« certainement elle se ferait religieuse ») and she and Jean Valjean will spend the rest of their days within the protective walls of the Petit-Picpus convent; she will grow old and he will die, of course, but at least they will be happy and together (II: 408). However, Jean Valjean discovers that he is unable to deny any part of Cosette's

human nature and condemn her in advance to a life of chastity, even if out of a desire to protect her from the risk of suffering or out of fear of losing her:

Il se disait que cette enfant avait le droit de connaître la vie avant d'y renoncer, que lui retrancher, d'avance et en quelque sorte sans la consulter, toutes les joies sous prétexte de lui sauver toutes les épreuves, profiter de son ignorance et de son isolement pour lui faire germer une vocation artificielle, c'était dénaturer une créature humaine et mentir à Dieu. (II: 408)

Leaving the safe haven of the convent means leaving the protection of a chaste existence and exposing Cosette to the temptations of the libido; this, in turn, means putting Jean Valjean once again at risk of being discovered by the authorities pursuing him, thus disturbing his *repos*: "Et puis, à voir le pire, il n'y avait de danger que pour lui-même, et il n'avait pas le droit de condamner Cosette au cloître par la raison qu'il avait été condamné au bagne" (II: 409). In ceding to Cosette's yet unmanifested human desires, Jean Valjean recognizes her right to realize the full potential of the bed as a symbol of humanity.

Upon leaving this existence at the convent, Cosette still possessed "un esprit vierge:" "Cosette était sortie du couvent encore presque enfant [...]" (II: 417). But time and nature have produced a remarkable metamorphosis in her, as Marius discovers:

La personne qu'il voyait maintenant était une grande et belle créature ayant toutes les formes les plus charmantes de la femme à ce moment précis où elles se combinent encore avec toutes les grâces les plus naïves de l'enfant ; moment fugitif et pur que peuvent seuls traduire ces deux mots : quinze ans. (II : 231)

Hugo likens Cosette's transformation to that of someone who has overcome *la misère*, has had an opportunity to compensate for the lack of *repos* previously suffered, and

finally wakes up from the stupor of their state of misery to join the world of the “non-*misérables*:”

On voit quelquefois des gens qui, pauvres et mesquins, semblent se réveiller, passent subitement de l’indigence au faste, font des dépenses de toutes sortes, et deviennent tout à coup éclatants, prodigues et magnifiques. (II: 232)

This period represents the incognizant awakening of the libido for Cosette, and leads to the “[c]ommencement d’une grande maladie” (II: 234): *l’amour*, which is symbolically linked to different stages of the bed and has the potential to both alleviate and perpetuate human misery.

L’amour n’a point de moyen terme ; ou il perd, ou il sauve. Toute la destinée humaine est ce dilemme-là. Ce dilemme, perte ou salut, aucune fatalité ne le pose plus inexorablement que l’amour. L’amour est la vie, s’il n’est pas la mort. Berceau ; cercueil aussi. Le même sentiment dit oui et non dans le cœur humain. De toutes les choses que Dieu a faites, le cœur humain est celle qui dégage le plus de lumière, hélas ! et le plus de nuit. (III : 29-30)

Luckily for Cosette, and contrary to her mother’s case, “Dieu voulut que l’amour que Cosette rencontra fût un de ces amours qui sauvent” (III: 30). In enduring the sufferings of her chaste love for Marius, Cosette will gradually approach the libidinal function of the bed, though the *misère* brought on by her passion will only ultimately be relieved in the nuptial bed.

Once conscious of Cosette “femme” and her attraction to him (via the *regard* of this “vierge qui regarde comme une femme”), Marius is moved and excited by the first stirrings of “amour” (II: 234). An appetite for love and passion is thus roused in Marius, interfering with his appetite for food, for he forgets his stomach the day he makes his first conscious and deliberate approach to Cosette: “Ce jour-là il oublia d’aller dîner” (II: 237). Hugo reveals to the reader that Marius “était éperdument amoureux” (II: 239).

Immediately following this explicit revelation of Marius's passion for Cosette, Marius celebrates his happiness by inviting Courfeyrac to the theater: "Ils allèrent à la Porte-Saint-Martin voir Frédérick dans *l'Auberge des Adrets*. Marius s'amusa énormément" (II: 239). It is interesting to note that in his celebration of being in love Marius sees a play which is, in fact, about an *auberge* – a location of an abundance of beds. Although Marius's passion for Cosette remains chaste at this time, there is an implied libidinal link in this connection between the bed and Marius' temporary reprieve from *misère*. There seems to be a premature celebration of the carnal bed that Marius subconsciously plans to share with Cosette. Additionally, the specific association of an *auberge* with Marius's happiness at this time reflects perhaps the role that he will play in Cosette's happiness and well-being by lavishly fulfilling the functions of the bed which were absent for Cosette at the Thénardier *auberge*.

The "chaste amour presque farouche" (III: 32) shared by Marius and Cosette is, in one respect, greatly distanced from the libidinal function of the bed, for Marius "[...] n'avait pas le moindre désir de cette femme ravissante [...]" (II: 469). Marius has no conscious intentions to disturb Cosette's "lit innocent" (III: 231), and is profoundly offended at his grandfather's suggestion that he find libidinal satisfaction with this woman:

[--] On n'épouse point, mais ça n'empêche pas. Tu me comprends ? [...]
Bêta ! fais-en ta maîtresse.

Marius pâlit. [...] un mot que Marius avait compris et qui était une mortelle injure à Cosette. Ce mot, *fais-en ta maîtresse*, entra dans le cœur du sévère jeune homme comme une épée. (III: 64)

Despite this denial of a libidinal instinct, which Marius regards as offensive to Cosette's purity, he is unconsciously drawn to Cosette's bed. This first manifests in Marius's

desperation to learn Cosette's address, for his happiness depends completely on knowing where she resides – on knowing where Cosette's bed can be found (II: 404). A symbolic penetration of Cosette's bed follows, as these *amoureux* "[...] étaient convenus de ne jamais dormir sans rêver l'un de l'autre, et ils s'étaient tenu parole. [Marius] possédait donc tous les rêves de Cosette" (III: 49). This "possession virginale" of Cosette (III: 50) is, however, not absolutely chaste; instinctively, Marius will draw nearer to a carnal possession of Cosette:

Depuis six semaines, Marius, peu à peu, lentement, par degrés, prenait chaque jour possession de Cosette. Possession toute idéale, mais profonde. Comme nous l'avons expliqué déjà, dans le premier amour, on prend l'âme bien avant le corps [...] (III: 49)

Despite the chastity of these *amoureux*, instinct ("[l]e permanent et l'immuable") will eventually render them lovers:

[...] à l'insu même des cœurs ivres de chasteté, la nature inoubliable est toujours là. Elle est là, avec son but brutal et sublime; et quelle que soit l'innocence des âmes, on sent, dans le tête-à-tête le plus pudique, l'adorable et mystérieuses nuance qui sépare un couple d'amants d'une paire d'amis. (III: 34)

It is now only by marrying Cosette – by, essentially, sharing a nuptial bed with her – that Marius sees any possibility of easing his *misère*, for he is unable to cope with the alternative of separation that threatens this couple: "Il faut absolument que je l'épouse puisque je deviendrais fou" (III: 63). The "lit nuptial" (III: 409) thus becomes the solution to the *misères* of love, which Marius and Cosette do not regret since *les insomnies* suffered for their inability to be together "[...] rendaient plus charmante encore [...]" the approaching sharing of "l'oreiller nuptial:" "Avoir souffert, comme c'est bon ! Leur malheur faisait auréole à leur bonheur. La longue agonie de leur amour aboutissait à une ascension" (III: 403).

The ascension above misery to be enjoyed by this couple has as much to do with procreation as with the satisfaction of the libido, two human drives united by a very basic instinct for survival. A reproductive desire invades the subconsciousness of the chaste Cosette long before her nuptial bed is consciously considered:

[...] sans presque oser s'avouer qu'elle pensait en même temps à Marius, [elle] se mit à regarder ces oiseaux, cette famille, ce mâle et cette femelle, cette mère et ces petits, avec le profond trouble qu'un nid donne à une vierge. (III: 233)

The reproductive instinct is highlighted by M. Gillenormand, who contends, in fact, that procreation is woman's greatest purpose: "[...] je veux que les filles se marient, c'est fait pour ça. [...] Rester fille, c'est beau, mais c'est froid. La Bible dit: Multipliez (III: 374). Hugo blatantly defines a woman's happiness by her reproductive success: "Une petite fille sans poupée est à peu près aussi malheureuse et tout à fait aussi impossible qu'une femme sans enfants" (I : 438) ; the child who can not imagine the maternal role in play is as pitiable as the woman who can not play the maternal role in life.

Although the young Cosette could not express the void in her wretched existence at the Thénardier *auberge* in terms of the bed, she manifested, in playing with her makeshift doll, an instinctual understanding of the importance of the bed for a child and the importance of the sense of security a child feels in his/her parents' arms:

Comme les oiseaux font un nid avec tout, les enfants font une poupée avec n'importe quoi. Pendant qu'Eponine et Azelma emmaillotaient le chat, Cosette de son côté avait emmailloté le sabre. Cela fait, elle l'avait couché sur ses bras, et elle chantait doucement pour l'endormir. (I : 437)

La poupée est un des plus impérieux besoins et en même temps une des plus charmants instincts de l'enfance féminine. Soigner, vêtir, parer, habiller, déshabiller, rhabiller, enseigner, un peu gronder, bercer, dorloter, endormir, se figurer que quelque chose est quelqu'un, tout l'avenir de la femme est là. (I : 438)

Cosette daydreamed about a bed for her "doll," recreating the mother-child relationship that never existed for her, at least not in her memory: "Cosette [...] s'était remise à bercer l'espèce de maillot qu'elle avait fait, et tout en le berçant, elle chantait à voix basse: Ma mère est morte ! ma mère est morte ! ma mère est morte !" (I : 440). The action of rocking the makeshift doll to sleep had a soothing effect on Cosette herself, while reaffirming the absence of her own mother. Although Cosette displayed a maternal instinct even from an early age, the mature Cosette has difficulty equating reproduction with the libido, "[...] la maternité d'ailleurs étant absolument inintelligible à la virginité [...]" (II: 420).

Maternal instincts are *not* necessarily shared by all women, especially not by those *misérables* with the greatest detachment from humanity. When procreation threatens one's stability and wellbeing, the morally *misérable* person may respond with selfish and inhumane measures. This is certainly the case with Madame Thénardier who, like her husband, is characterized as less than human: "[...] jamais l'idée ne fût venue à personne de dire d'elle: C'est une femme" (I: 411). There is, indeed, but a limited maternal aspect about this woman that is due, undoubtedly, to her disconnection with humanity: "Elle était mère parce qu'elle était mammifère. Du reste, sa maternité s'arrêtait à ses filles [...]" (I: 413). The role played by Mme Thénardier, "ce monstre" (I: 446), within her marriage and within the body of the family is warped and reversed: "Le maître et la maîtresse [de la maison Thénardier], c'était le mari. Elle faisait, il créait" (I: 413). Procreation by the Thénardier couple is reduced to an animalistic concept of

breeding, devoid of maternal and paternal tenderness, and where patriarchal dominance is clear. Moreover, procreation is viewed as a burden by this couple; childrearing is not a joy for these *misérables*, it is a nuisance. The Thénardiens are not at all inspired by reproductive instincts:

[...] la Thénardier n'était mère que jusqu'à ses filles. Sa maternité finissait là. Sa haine du genre humain commençait à ses garçons.

-- Je n'ai pas besoin d'une taulée d'enfants, disait cette mère." (II: 471)

The two youngest sons of the Thénardier couple, both undesired products of the bed, are summarily sold for good riddance as well as to avoid further *misère*.

The libido is a strong human drive that survives well beyond the youthful years of one's prime. M. Gillenormand, for example, even having surpassed his 90th birthday, still yearns to satisfy both a libidinal and a reproductive urge: "Son rêve était de faire un héritage et d'avoir cent mille francs de rente pour avoir des maîtresses" (II: 126). Despite his desires, he claims that he is no longer able to please women – due not to his advanced age, but rather to his poor financial state ("Je suis trop pauvre."). M. Gillenormand therefore gives up his dream: "Il était d'humeur amoureuse, mais disait que depuis une dizaine d'années il avait décidément et tout à fait renoncé aux femmes" (II: 125). His subsequent libidinal and reproductive dissatisfaction results in a cranky old man who must dote on his only grandson as a substitute for the functions of the bed which he can no longer personally enjoy: "M. Gillenormand, sans pourtant se l'avouer à lui-même, car il en eût été furieux et honteux, n'avait jamais aimé une maîtresse comme il aimait

Marius” (III: 55). When Marius eventually weds, the grandfather promptly and joyfully gives up his own bed to the couple:

Il fut arrangé que le couple habiterait chez le grand-père. M. Gillenormand voulut absolument leur donner sa chambre, la plus belle de la maison. – *Cela me rajeunira*, déclarait-il. *C’est un ancien projet. J’avais toujours eu l’idée de faire la noce dans ma chambre.* (III: 384)

The elderly M. Gillenormand, by having the young couple make their conjugal bed in his own room, seeks to regenerate himself through the vicarious libido of his grandson, and to participate, in his own way, in the process of procreation that will ensure the survival of his family.

Long before Marius met Cosette, M. Gillenormand believed that Marius’ requests for permission to take short trips away from home was attributed to “[q]uelque amourette” (II: 158), and, noticing the recurrence of these requests, commented: “Il découche avec récidive” (II: 165). It is interesting that M. Gillenormand immediately made this association of Marius *not* staying in his own bed (not getting *repos*) with the pursuit of a love interest, “une fillette” (II: 167). The lack of *repos* is associated by the grandfather with a positive element – that of achieving the satisfaction of libido. However, Marius’ absence (and lack of *repos*) is due to a less pleasurable connection with the bed. He wishes to re-establish a link, although post-mortem, with his father, hence “[l]a fillette était une tombe” (II: 169). Marius does not stay out all night for the purpose of satisfying the libido, as assumed; instead, he sacrifices his own *repos* in order to visit another type of bed, the eternal resting place of his father.

Chapter 3: *ILLNESS and DEATH*

The bed serves more than just the daily human need for rest or the purposes of the libido; the regenerative nature of the bed is duly exploited by those suffering from illness, for “[...] poets as well as doctors have testified to its healing virtues” (Eden and Carrington 76). The healing effect of the bed for the afflicted *misérable* is due largely to its encouragement of *repos*. The presence of the sickbed in Les Misérables demonstrates this association of the bed with the alleviation of physical suffering when, for example, Jean Valjean is encouraged to retire to his bed early in order to recuperate from an ailing hand: “[M. Gillenormand] affirma que [Jean Valjean] faisait bien de se coucher de bonne heure, s’il souffrait [...]” (Hugo III: 405). An improvised sickbed also becomes the place for *repos* and recuperation for the injured unfortunates at the barricade: “Sur ces matelas on avait étendu les blessés” (III: 166). And for the wounded Marius a hospital bed is promptly set up, an initial precaution to ensure his survival: “Sur l’ordre du médecin, un lit de sangle avait été dressé près du canapé. Le médecin examina Marius, [...] le fit poser à plat sur le lit [...]” (III: 342).

The sickbed is a resting place that allows the body to gather its forces as well as guard against impending mortality, in worst cases. While *repos* is a fundamental human need, sleep itself can be deadly when not occurring in the protective shelter of a proper bed. After narrowly escaping recapture by the inspector Javert, Jean Valjean hides himself and Cosette in a “hangar” (I: 494) fully exposed to the cold night air, and discovers the icy cold body of a sleeping Cosette who “ne s’éveilla pas” (I: 498). Jean Valjean “se souvint que le sommeil peut être mortel en plein air dans une nuit froide” and

knows that Cosette's life depends, more than at any other moment, on being reunited with a bed:

Il écouta son souffle; elle respirait; mais d'une respiration qui lui paraissait faible et prête à s'éteindre.

Comment la réchauffer? comment la réveiller? tout ce qui n'était pas ceci s'effaça de sa pensée. Il s'élança éperdu hors de la ruine.

Il fallait absolument qu'avant un quart d'heure Cosette fût devant un feu et dans un lit. (I : 499)

The regenerative aspect of the bed will remove the threat of illness and prevent Cosette from entering the permanent sleep-state of death.

The healing and regenerative properties of the bed have implications for the human being that transcend sickness and physical injury: the sickbed can be a place of recovery and reunion with humanity for the psychologically or morally *misérable* being, as well as for the ill and infirm. Upon discovering his role in Fantine's fast decline to extreme *misère*, Jean Valjean promises to reverse her suffering by providing security and shelter from her wretched existence, a cessation of the self-indignity which she has been enduring, and a reunion with her child: "Vous redeviendrez honnête en redevenant heureuse," he declares (I: 227). Fantine's first steps back in the direction of humanity – and away from *la misère* – are subsequently revealed in the chapter titled "Commencement du repos" (I: 228), stressing the important role of rest in the human survival struggle. This chapter marks the beginning of veritable *repos* for Fantine, which starts, naturally, with her reunion with a proper bed: "[Jean Valjean] confia [Fantine] aux sœurs qui la mirent au lit" (I: 228).

Sometimes the bed simply succeeds in delaying the inevitable, in temporarily prolonging one's life, according " [...] the natural wish to postpone the moment of final departure for as long as possible [...]" (Eden and Carrington 99). The bed remains nevertheless a clear connection between illness and death, for "Death in bed is normally preceded by illness [...]" (Eden and Carrington 99).

Having taken gravely ill since being reduced to the most miserable of conditions, Fantine is welcomed into the home of Jean Valjean, who oversees her care. Once established in this new existence full of *repos*, reunited with a bed and without worry, Fantine is expected to recover from her illness and her *misère*. However, "Fantine ne se rétablissait point" (I: 229) despite the fact that her contact with the bed remains constant at this point. While the bed offers Fantine protection from additional misery, this mother and ex-prostitute has reached far too despondent depths of existence to be able to ward off the consequences of her excessive *misère* indefinitely. Certainly, her renewed occupation of a bed provides some comfort and reprieve from her suffering, and Fantine is herself misled by her happy and unexpected reunion with humanity ("—Bien, j'ai dormi, [...] je crois que je vais mieux. Ce ne sera rien") (I : 229). It soon becomes clear that Fantine's misery has exceeded that which can be alleviated by the rejuvenating effects of *repos*; indeed, it is only the protection of the bed which continues to prolong Fantine's life, and she risks herself in separating herself from it: "Vous parlez trop vivement, et puis vous sortez vos bras du lit, et cela vous fait tousser" (I: 315).

The deathbed offers a different kind of comfort or *repos* for the sorry or sorrowful being; it plays a concluding role in the cycle of human life, and is generally occupied with little resistance for, as Toussaint tells Cosette, “Ce n’est pas tant de mourir, on meurt, c’est bon, on sait bien qu’il faut qu’on meure [...]” (II: 459). Death in bed is a unique characteristic of the human experience, for “[...] our own species [...] is the only one which habitually takes to the bed for the purpose of dying” (Eden and Carrington 102) and indeed “[...] most of us may hope to die in bed” (99). Although it is sometimes untimely, and often unwelcome, death is both an immediate cessation of physical suffering, and a looming reminder of the fleeting pleasures of human life. Likewise, the parallel that is made in Les Misérables between death and the alleviation of misery cannot be ignored.

Fantine can no longer overcome her misery, which was, for her, at the same time relieved and perpetuated by *le lit*. The bed now determines and symbolizes Fantine’s inability to rise above her misery, representing her *misère fatale*. It was in a bed that Fantine’s true misery began, with the conception of her child, and it is in another bed that she will receive the final blow of that misery. Her misery only ends, finally, with her death; it is therefore the deathbed that will provide the ultimate relief of Fantine’s misery.

Jean Valjean has done everything he can to make amends for Fantine’s previous *misère*, for which he feels responsible. But his efforts are in vain, for death has now claimed this soul, freeing her, at last, from suffering: “La main de Fantine pendait hors du lit. Jean Valjean s’agenouilla devant cette main, la souleva doucement et la baisa” (I :

324). Fantine's outstretched hand in this scene represents, as noted by Chenet-Faugeras above, the continuation of her desire, even in death, to be in contact with humanity; moreover, it represents Fantine's renewed attempts to escape misery, an objective that she never completely succeeded in fulfilling. Her wretched circumstances killed her; she arrived at a state of misery beyond repair, to a point of misery where a reunion with the bed would no longer save her. Yet it was her eventual opportunity for bed rest, along with her hope of seeing her child again, that prolonged her life. Her outstretched hand symbolizes the small part of Fantine that remained untouched by despair, to her knowledge, at least; it is to her daughter, or at least to the hope of her daughter, that Fantine reaches one last time.

For Fantine, the sorry circumstances of her death resemble those of her life: in her *misère*, incapable of keeping a bed for herself and obliged to earn a living by getting into the beds of others, Fantine will share her eternal rest with other *misérables* like herself. For her final resting place, Fantine "fut jetée à la fosse publique. Sa tombe ressembla à son lit" (I: 329). These last words from the first part of Les Misérables emphasize that Fantine's misery truly finished where it began: in a bed. But the end of her misery resulted from neither a righting of wrongs, nor a rising above it. Rather, Fantine's relief came through escape. According to Chenet-Faugeras, "La misère [de Fantine] se traduit par une diminution de son espace privé qui finit par se confondre avec l'espace public" (36). This private space rendered public for Fantine is, symbolically, that of the bed.

The image of the outstretched hand is again evoked when M. Thénardier is scavenging the “immense tombe” which was the battlefield of Waterloo. Here, too, we find a hand reaching out beyond a sort of deathbed, for the “tombe” is indeed a bed for the dead. We have therefore the powerful image of a human being reaching out for help, reaching out to make a connection with humanity: “[...] au point où finissait le monceau des morts, de dessous cet amas d’hommes et de chevaux, sortait une main ouverte, éclairée par la lune” (Hugo I: 389).

This hand belongs to colonel Pontmercy, for whom a second symbolic parallel with Fantine is uncovered when the colonel is “[...] atteint d’une fièvre cérébrale” and takes to his sickbed. As in Fantine’s case, it is only the protection of the bed that separates the very ill colonel Pontmercy from death. Physical detachment from the bed during this crucial period of *repos* will, in fact, prove fatal for Marius’ estranged father, who is impatient to see his son before perishing. Having awaited his son’s arrival for three days, the colonel Pontmercy, in a moment of delirium, gets up from his bed and speaks of going to meet his son:

Le soir même de l’arrivée de Marius à Vernon, le colonel avait eu un accès de délire ; il s’était levé de son lit malgré la servante, en criant : -- Mon fils n’arrive pas ! je vais au-devant de lui ! -- Puis il était sorti de sa chambre et était tombé sur le carreau de l’antichambre. Il venait d’expirer. (II: 155)

The colonel, in leaving the security of his sickbed, puts his life in imminent danger; we can easily suppose that had he stayed in bed he would not have immediately died, and would have had a chance to see his son, who was to arrive shortly thereafter. His son’s visit might even have had a healing effect upon him. This scene is certainly reminiscent of Fantine on her deathbed, for whom a reunion with her own child might have succeeded

in delaying death for the simple fact that Cosette's presence would have brought Fantine great joy. However, all means of healing (body, soul, broken heart) arrive too late for this *misérable*: "On avait appelé le médecin et le curé. Le médecin était arrivé trop tard, le curé était arrivé trop tard. Le fils aussi était arrivé trop tard." Colonel Pontmercy's final bed, in life, was the cold tile of the antechamber, where Marius found him "à terre en chemise couché tout de son long sur le carreau," the doctor and priest huddled over him (II: 155). The selling of his own furniture, his bed, etc., was used to pay for his burial expenses. One bed exchanged for another, and the coffin becomes his eternal resting place: "Le colonel ne laissait rien. La vente du mobilier paya à peine l'enterrement" (II: 156).

The protective quality of the bed in preserving or prolonging human life is also exemplified in Les Misérables by a more literal usage of the bed as a defensive shield. At Fantine's "lit de mort" (I: 503), for example, Jean Valjean symbolically makes one last attempt to stave off Fantine's misery – and perhaps drive away death itself – by literally using the bed as an instrument of protection. Valjean threatens his oppressor, the inspector Javert, with a fragment of another bed, from which he quickly fashions his weapon of defense:

Il y avait dans un coin de la chambre un vieux lit en fer en assez mauvais état qui servait de lit de camp aux sœurs quand elles veillaient. Jean Valjean alla à ce lit, disloqua en un clin d'œil le chevet déjà fort délabré, [...] saisit à poigne-main la maîtresse tringle, et considéra Javert. Javert recula vers la porte. [...] Jean Valjean, sa barre de fer au poing, marcha lentement vers le lit de Fantine. (I : 323)

Jean Valjean again makes use of the bed as a protective material object when, later confined with the rebels at the barricade, he and the others are threatened by the rain of

police gunfire. A bed's mattress is deemed necessary as a shield to "amortir les coups," to fill a "coupure" in the barricade. However, there is no question of removing the mattress – the makeshift bed – from the "[...] blessés [qui] sont dessus;" an alternative must be found. In expertly shooting down and heroically retrieving a mattress hanging in a nearby window ("On se souvient qu' [...] une vieille femme, prévoyant les balles, avait mis son matelas devant sa fenêtre.") (III: 228), Jean Valjean risks his own life in, once again, attempting to preserve the lives of others:

Jean Valjean sortit de la coupure, entra dans la rue, traversa l'orage de balles, alla au matelas, le ramassa, le chargea sur son dos, et rivint dans la barricade.

Lui-même mit le matelas dans la coupure.

The portion of bed succeeds in shielding the rebels from the ensuing "mitraille," and a reaction of awe concerning the witnessed power of the bed follows:

Bossuet admirait et riait. Il s'écria:

-- C'est immoral qu'un matelas ait tant de puissance. Triomphe de ce qui plie sur ce qui foudroie. Mais c'est égal, gloire au matelas qui annule le canon!
(III: 229)

This is a rare verbal recognition of the bed's capacity to protect against suffering, harnessed here by Jean Valjean, who is identified as "un homme qui sauve les autres" (III: 214).

The deathbed is largely accepted as a source of serenity from a dolorous existence. As Marius concludes, death is a less dreadful fate than conditions of no *repos* in life. Marius summarizes the sentiment that it is preferable to die than to sustain a life of *misère*: "Pauvres mères ! pensa-t-il. Il y a une chose plus triste que de voir ses enfants mourir ; c'est de les voir mal vivre" (II: 259). Death is also not a great concern

for Jean Valjean (“Je vais mourir tout à l’heure. [...] mais ce n’est rien”) (III: 484); death is not dismal in comparison with the potential despondency of life: “Ce n’est rien de mourir ; c’est affreux de ne pas vivre.” (III: 485). Death is even sometimes welcomed or even solicited, for it is equated with a triumph over *la misère* (“Tu vas mourir ici, c’est-à-dire triompher”) (III: 217), an escape into “la paix glaciale du sépulcre” (III: 149) where suffering is erased.

For Marius, the deathbed becomes an alternative to the bed he will apparently not be able to share with Cosette. Unable to withstand the enormous despair of unconsummated love that his separation from Cosette represents, Marius desperately seeks an end to his suffering: “[...] accablé à la fois par toutes les reveries du désespoir, il n’avait plus qu’un désir: en finir bien vite” (III: 144). Marius sees death as his only relief: “Vivre sans Cosette, il ne le pouvait. Puisqu’elle était partie, il fallait bien qu’il mourût. [...] A quoi bon vivre et pourquoi vivre à present?” (III: 151). For the *misérable*, “[l]a fatigue de vivre est insupportable; la mort, c’est plus tôt fait” (III: 173).

Death embodies not only a form of escape from misery, but in certain circumstances death, real or presumed, functions to protect against impending misery. This is clear in the case of Jean Valjean, whose presumed death serves as a protection from further misery, and provides a relief which is likened to that resulting from actual death: “Du reste, on le croyait mort, et cela épaississait l’obscurité qui s’était faite sur lui. A Paris, il lui tomba sous la main un des journaux qui enregistraient le fait. Il se sentit rassuré et presque en paix comme s’il était réellement mort” (I: 461). This presumed death permits a certain amount of *repos* because Valjean’s fear of being sought and discovered is minimized: “[...] légalement, la mort éteint la poursuite” (III: 351).

When his pursuer dies, Jean Valjean “se savait délivré” (III: 377) from further menace. In such circumstances, death certainly does alleviate psychological *misère*, since: “La mort, c’est la même chose que la grâce” (III: 427).

Hugo likens the Petit-Picpus convent to a “tombe” or “tombeau” (II: 8), to a place of death: the resting-place of the dead. Yet inside the convent, where “une sorte de paix effrayante” reigns (II: 9), there remains something beyond the obscurity and darkness of this funereal « espèce de sépulcre » (I: 497): “il y avait une vie dans cette mort.” The inhabitants of the convent of the “bernadines de l’Adoration Perpétuelle” (II : 9), “vêtue[s] de deuil,”(II: 8) (as is the custom of the nuns belonging to this religious order), represent a particular category of *misérables* because their suffering is self-imposed. In practicing their vows of “obéissance, pauvreté, chasteté, stabilité sous clôture” (II: 11), these individuals deprive themselves of human comforts as well as some essential human needs, namely *repos*. The beds of these *religieuses* seem to be conceived for as little rest as possible, for their brief occupants “se relèvent dans leur premier sommeil depuis une heure du matin jusqu’à trois pour lire le bréviaire et chanter matines, couchent dans des draps de serge en toute saison et sur la paille” (II: 11). Moreover, the nuns take turns staying up all night praying for the sinners of the world, and thus depriving themselves of their own physical *repos* in order to achieve the spiritual *repos* of others:

A tour de rôle chacune d’elles fait ce qu’elles appellent *la réparation*. [...] Pendant douze heures consécutives, [...] la sœur qui fait *la réparation* reste à genoux sur la pierre devant le Saint-Sacrement, les mains jointes, la corde au cou. Quand la fatigue devient insupportable, elle se prosterne à plat ventre, la face contre terre, les bras en croix ; c’est là tout son soulagement. Dans cette attitude, elle prie pour tous les coupables de l’univers. Ceci est grand jusqu’au sublime. (II: 12)

Indeed, this “discret asile” (II: 32) where Jean Valjean manages to find shelter for himself and Cosette seems an unlikely source of relief of misery. Rather, the convent is a place where misery is not only accepted but sought out. Hugo points out the incongruous nature of human existence in this place “ tout rempli du rayonnement noir de mort” (II: 39), where the women “se croient épouses” of God (II: 40): “Un couvent, c’est une contradiction. Pour but, le salut ; pour moyen, le sacrifice. Le couvent, c’est le suprême égoïsme ayant pour résultante la surpême abnégation (II: 49).” The existence here is one of suffering – mortal suffering for redemption in the immortal afterlife:

Au cloître, on souffre pour jouir. On tire une lettre de change sur la mort.
On escompte en nuit terrestre la lumière céleste. Au cloître, l’enfer est accepté en
avance d’hoirie sur le paradis.

La prise de voile ou de froc est un suicide payé d’éternité. (II : 49)

Jean Valjean regards the existence of these nuns as one of subjugation, and draws a parallel between the convent and the prison, recalling especially the singular condition of the bed that seems to be a common factor in the two communities of *misérables*:

Il se rappelait ses anciens compagnons ; comme ils étaient misérables ; ils se levaient dès l’aube et travaillaient jusqu’à la nuit ; à peine leur laissait-on le sommeil ; ils couchaient sur des lits de camp, où l’on ne leur tolérait que des matelas de deux pouces d’épaisseur, dans des salles qui n’étaient chauffées qu’aux mois le plus rudes de l’année [...] (II : 98)

In prison, Jean Valjean and his companions suffered less than hospitable conditions, meager beds and a great lack of *repos*; stripped of their humanity and relegated to a non-human status in the ranks of numbers, these prisoners “[...] vivaient, n’ayant plus de noms, désignés seulement par des numéros et en quelque sorte faits chiffres [...]” (II: 98). For the inhabitants of the convent, a similar fate is encountered:

Ces êtres [...] couchaient, non sur des matelas épais de deux pouces, mais sur la paille. Enfin on ne leur laissait pas même le sommeil ; toutes les nuits, après une journée de labeur, il fallait, dans l'accablement du premier repos, au moment où l'on s'endormait et où l'on se réchauffait à peine, se réveiller, se lever et s'en aller prier [...] (II : 98-99)

Jean Valjean considers these two milieus in light of their quality of misery, and the possibility for escaping the miserable existence of each circumstance. He marvels that in each case, the *misérables* are seeking atonement, and that there are two very different outcomes:

Deux lieux d'esclavage ; mais dans le premier la délivrance possible, une limite légale toujours entrevue, et puis l'évasion. Dans le second, la perpétuité ; pour toute espérance, à l'extrémité lointaine de l'avenir, cette lueur de liberté que les hommes appellent la mort.

Dans le premier on n'était enchaîné que par des chaînes ; dans l'autre, on était enchaîné par sa foi.

Que se dégageait-il du premier ? Une immense malédiction, le grincement de dents, la haine, la méchanceté désespérée, un cri de rage contre l'association humaine, un sarcasme au ciel.

Que sortait-il du second ? La bénédiction et l'amour.

Et dans ces deux endroits si semblables et si divers, ces deux espèces d'êtres si différents accomplissaient la même œuvre, l'expiation. (II: 99)

These beings endure what some might consider the worst physical misery of all, and yet they would not consider themselves *misérables*; rather, their misery brings them closer to God and closer to “la plénitude” which will presumably accompany death.

Cette existence claustrale si austère et si morne [...], ce n'est pas la vie, car ce n'est pas la liberté ; ce n'est pas la tombe, car ce n'est pas la plénitude ; [...] c'est la pénombre du tombeau. (II: 50-51)

The positive attributes of the deathbed and of the “resting place” of the dead, *la tombe*, become thus apparent in light of the consequences of death: an end to all human misery and all physical sufferings, and – if one is a believer – an eternal life of abundance.

These *religieuses* deliberately distance themselves from the bed – from the mortal interest

in rest – in order to ensure their enjoyment of the spiritual *repos* associated with the death. As a consequence, their existence is one of part-life, part-death; they live in constant awareness and appreciation of the approach of death. Hugo asserts his conviction that continual consciousness of one's mortality is positive:

Sans rien infirmer de ce que nous venons de dire, nous croyons qu'un perpétuel souvenir du tombeau convient aux vivants. Sur ce point le prêtre et le philosophe sont d'accord. *Il faut mourir*. (II: 50)

The deathbed takes on further positive symbolism for Jean Valjean, as an additional opportunity to escape misery. The elderly Fauchelevent, the gardener employed at the convent Petit-Picpus, notes the harmony of the positive and negative repercussions of death, as it pertains to Valjean's situation:

-- Monsieur Madelaine, reprit Fauchelevent, vous êtes arrivé dans un moment très bon, je veux dire très mauvais, il y a une de ces dames fort malade. Cela fait qu'on ne regardera pas beaucoup de notre côté. Il paraît qu'elle se meurt. On dit les prières de quarante heures. Toute la communauté est en l'air. Ça les occupe. (II: 55)

The fact of this nun lying on her deathbed has produced the effect of placing Jean Valjean and Cosette in greater security, since all the attention of the convent's inhabitants is currently focused on this "malade." For Jean Valjean, therefore, this woman's taking up of her deathbed constitutes a lucky distraction, one that will delay his having to explain his presence there. Jean Valjean also recognizes, perhaps a bit nostalgically, the irony of the presumed death of his persona, M. Madeleine (one which, while allowing him to escape a return to prison as well as retrieve the wretched Cosette from the clutches of her oppressors, also coincided with an end to his life without *misère* as the factory owner and mayor):

[--] Mais que d'événements depuis hier ! la mère Crucifixion est morte, et le père Madeleine...

-- Est enterré, dit Jean Valjean souriant tristement.

Fauchelevant fit ricocher le mot.

-- Dame ! si vous étiez ici tout à fait, ce serait un véritable enterrement.

(II: 58)

Later, when the nun in question (mother Crucifixion) dies, her death provides the solution for Jean Valjean's plight:

[--] Les croque-morts viendront et soulèveront la bière ; il n'y aura rien dedans.

-- Mettez-y quelque chose.

-- Un mort ? je n'en ai pas.

-- Non.

-- Quoi donc ?

-- Un vivant.

-- Quel vivant ?

-- Moi, dit Jean Valjean. (II : 73)

In order to achieve a safe and clandestine exit from the convent walls, Jean Valjean will occupy the empty coffin of Mother Crucifixion, who is, in turn, to be secretly buried under the altar of the convent chapel (II: 65). Posing as a corpse allows Jean Valjean to be transported, unsuspected, out of the convent in the back of a hearse. His premature confinement to the ultimate bed of eternal rest poses a challenge to Jean Valjean, for whom "savoir étouffer sans mourir" is "un des sombres talents" (II: 75), for "[i]l est des choses plus fortes que l'homme le plus fort" (II: 84). In allowing himself, essentially, to be buried alive, all to find a pretext for legitimately re-entering the convent, Jean Valjean risks his own death. His subordination to the survival instinct is equated with that of an ill person subjected to attacks:

Ce qui semblait inouï à Fauchelevant était [...] simple pour Jean Valjean. Jean Valjean avait traversé de pires détours. Quiconque a été prisonnier sait l'art de se rapetisser selon le diamètre des évasions. Le prisonnier est sujet à la fuite comme le malade à la crise qui le sauve ou qui le perd. Une évasion, c'est une guérison. Que n'accepte-t-on pas pour guérir ? (II : 75)

Jean Valjean will accept any price, any risk, to escape his misery... or to avoid it. Yet the deadly risks of the current operation seem of no great concern to Jean Valjean, who is of an eerie calm, stretched out inside the coffin. He seems to be swept away by the reposeful inspiration of his milieu:

C'est une chose étrange à quel point la sécurité de la conscience donne la sécurité du reste. [...] Jamais situation plus critique, jamais calme plus complet. Les quatre planches du cercueil dégagent une sorte de paix terrible. Il semblait que quelque chose du repos des morts entrât dans la tranquillité de Jean Valjean. (II : 83)

Jean Valjean does not seem truly conscious of the “drame redoutable qu’il jouait avec la mort” (II: 83); he is recognizably affected by the temporary repose he is enjoying, which is likened to the repose of the dead. He is clearly beyond a state of misery at this moment, like the corpses that ordinarily occupy his current bed. In the comfort and safety of the bed, all misery is forgotten; in the slumber of death, no further misery can reach him. In fact, Jean Valjean nearly slips away into the death without realizing it.

When Fauchelevent manages, finally, to open the coffin, he believes Jean Valjean to be dead, for in his current posture “Jean Valjean gisait, blême et immobile” (II: 87). Then, suddenly aware of Jean Valjean’s gaze upon him, Fauchelevent becomes startled:

Voir une mort est effrayant, voir une résurrection l’est presque autant. Fauchelevent devint comme de pierre, pâle, hagard, bouleversé par tous ces excès d’émotions, ne sachant s’il avait affaire à un vivant ou à un mort, regardant Jean Valjean qui le regardait.
-- Je m’endormais, dit Jean Valjean. (II : 88)

Jean Valjean is not himself aware of how close he has come to death. For him, the episode of the coffin is a simple occurrence of a man resting in a bed. He was carried away by the *repos* that he enjoyed in this experience, and the only trace of death’s caress

is, for him, the stiffness of his body from having lay motionless for a long period, like rigor mortis setting in:

Jean Valjean eut quelque peine à se remuer et à marcher. Dans cette bière, il s'était roidi et était devenu un peu cadavre. L'ankylose de la mort l'avait saisi entre ces quatres planches. Il fallut, en quelque sorte, qu'il se dégelât du sépulcre. (II : 90)

As for the now empty coffin, Jean Valjean and Fauchelevent "firent l'enterrement de la bière vide" (II: 89), and symbolically buried the fictional M. Madeleine as well.

The conception of the coffin as form of bed – indeed, a bed where a corpse lies, enclosed and buried in a bed of earth and posed for eternal rest – and of death, therefore, as a sleep state, is most clearly revealed in the passage where the wishes of the deceased Mother Crucifixion are revealed:

-- Père Fauvent, il faut faire ce que veulent les morts. [...] D'ailleurs, c'est plus qu'une morte, c'est une sainte.
-- Comme vous, révérende mère.
-- Elle couchait dans son cercueil depuis vingt ans, par permission expresse de notre saint Père Pie VII. (II : 64)

We may presume that this saintly woman spent the last twenty years of her life actually sleeping in her own eventual burial coffin in anticipation of death itself. However, it is more likely that Mother Crucifixion benefitted from some alleviation of misery, as well as from spiritual peace of mind, by choosing such a morbid and foreboding bed. It is also likely that she chose this bed in conjunction with the convent's agenda for perpetuated misery. For Mother Crucifixion, the coffin-bed was the sole source of relief from a lifetime of misery endured; this resting place represented a network to the afterlife, and perhaps a psychological sharing of spiritual *repos*, pre-mortem:

-- Père Fauvent, la mère Crucifixion sera ensevelie dans le cercueil où elle a couché depuis vingt ans.

- C'est juste.
- C'est une continuation de sommeil. (II : 65)

These lines mark even more clearly the symbolic association of death – and the coffin – with the bed. Mother Innocent affirms that “le cercueil” is indeed a symbolic place where one goes to sleep, for death is “une continuation de sommeil,” that is, eternal rest. The deathbed and the “lit de parade” (“a place of serene repose for the shell of our humanity”), along with the subsequent burial coffin, succeed in eternalizing the human connection with the bed, for “[...] even when death itself has come, [...] the bed still remains” (Eden and Carrington 104-105): the final resting place represents one’s last and everlasting connection with humanity.

Conclusion

Although the bed of Les Misérables has not received the attention of critics, it is clearly an important symbol in this novel since the bed constitutes a semantic instrument for observing and reinterpreting the notion of *misère* and its implications. The plurality of meaning that the image of the bed evokes offers an opportunity to expand and enrich the reading of the novel from a socio-historical perspective.

The examination of the symbolic connections of the bed with comfort, rest, libido, procreation, illness and death has led to the following preliminary conclusions: (1) since the availability of the bed and its material characteristics are determined by socioeconomic status, the bed is a constitutive element of human dignity; (2) the bed is necessarily connected to physical and psychological *repos*, which are fundamental to human wellbeing and survival; (3) sexual drives and reproductive instincts can have both positive and negative implications in the protection of the bed and of humanity; (4) reunion with the bed, and its regenerative nature, is essential not only for physically ailing persons, but for the otherwise wretched, for the bed is a singularly human refuge from all distresses; (5) death represents the ultimate reprieve from human suffering and, for some, provides spiritual and eternal *repos*.

The present analysis has attempted to demonstrate how the absence of the bed, a fundamental human need, both mirrors and perpetuates physical, emotional and moral distress in Les Misérables, while its presence testifies to and aids in the survival of humanity. The ability to rise above a *misérable* condition is reflected in the capacity to procure – or to keep – a bed.

References

References

- “Bed.” Olderr, Steven. Symbolism: A Comprehensive Dictionary. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1986.
- Brochu, André. Hugo: Amour/Crime/Révolution: Essai sur les *Misérables*. Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1974.
- Chenet-Faugeras, Françoise. Les Misérables ou “L’Espace Sans Fond. Paris: Libraire A.-G. Nizet, 1995.
- Eden, Mary and Richard Carrington. The Philosophy of the Bed. London: Hutchinson, 1961.
- Goulemot, Jean M. “Du lit de la fable dans le roman érotique.” Études Françaises 32.2 (Automne 1996): 7-17.
- Grossman, Kathryn M. “Narrative and Androgyny in Les Misérables.” Nineteenth-Century French Studies 20 (Fall-Winter 1991-92): 97-106.
- Houston, John Porter. Victor Hugo. Rev. ed. Twayne’s World Authors Ser. 312. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
- Hugo, Victor. Les Misérables. 3 vols. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1967.
- Laforge, Pierre. “Fiction et Symbolique dans Les Misérables.” Op. Cit: Revue de Littératures Françaises et Comparées November 1994: 157-162.
- “Lit.” Dictionnaire des symboles. Éd. Revue et augmentée. Ed. Jean Chevalier and Alan Gheerbrant. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1982.
- Maupassant, Guy de. Le lit. 1882. 14 November 2000
“<http://www.bmlsieux.com/litterature/maupassant/lelit.htm>”.

- Meschonnic, Henri. "La Poésie dans Les Misérables." Victor Hugo: Œuvres Complètes. Édition chronologique. Ed. Jean Massin. Vol. 11. Bergame, Italy: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1969. xxv-xlvii.
- "Misère." Le Nouveau Petit Robert. Dictionnaires Le Robert : Paris, 1995.
- "Misérable." Le Nouveau Petit Robert. Dictionnaires Le Robert : Paris, 1995.
- Nabet, Jean-Claude and Guy Rosa. "L'argent des Misérables" Romantisme 13.40 (1983): 87-113.
- Ricatte, Robert. "Les Misérables: Hugo et ses personnages." Victor Hugo: Œuvres Complètes. Édition chronologique. Ed. Jean Massin. Vol. 11. Bergame, Italy: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1969. i-xxiv.
- Seebacher, Jacques. "Le Symbolique dans les romans de Victor Hugo." Lectures de Victor Hugo. Colloque franco-allemand de Heidelberg, 1985. Paris: Nizet, 1986. 67-76.
- Von Furstenberg, Diane. Beds. New York: Bantam, 1991.

Vita

The eldest of seven children, Lorrel Lynn Sullivan was born in Detroit, Michigan on September 23, 1973. She graduated with honors from Algonac High School in Algonac, Michigan in June 1991. She subsequently entered Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, in September 1991. She graduated from Wittenberg *cum laude* in June 1995 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in French, with minor concentrations in Sociology and Global Studies. She was employed as a Flight Attendant with US Airways Express from August 1996 to August 2001, during which time she entered in the French Graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She took a leave of absence from October 1999 to May 2000 in order to work as an English Teaching Assistant at the *Lycée Polyvalent Jean-Baptiste Dumas* in Alès, France. From August 2001 to December 2002 she was a Graduate Teaching Associate in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Tennessee. She officially received her Master of Arts degree in French in May 2003.