

E p o n i n e
A Les Miserables Character Evaluation

Of the characters introduced by Victor Hugo in Les Miserables, perhaps none is as complex and unpredictable as Eponine. She is simultaneously a figure of tragedy and elusive hope; tragic for what she has endured and her difficulty in fully breaking free from her lot in life, yet hope because the reader sees how close she is to doing so, and how her conscience – previously unencumbered by matters of morality, ethics or compassion for others – is reframing itself due to her affiliation with Marius and the natural progression of adolescence. She is a young girl caught in the netherworld between dependency upon and loyalty to her parents, and an emerging individualism. Yet there remains a sense that she cannot sever completely who she was from who she might become. Her surname, therefore, is both a curse and a badge of honor. She acts in accordance with what it represents, yet as she ages she grows less timid about the prospects of charting her own path.

What it means to be a Thenardier

In order to assess the degree in which she was able to transcend beyond the family name, if at all, it first becomes necessary to delineate just what this is. Psychological theory has long held that people are primarily products of their environments. There is no hereditary basis for criminality or kindness, and while there may be a genetic predisposition to things like alcoholism, one nevertheless needs exposure to the substance first before addiction takes hold. This perspective, commonly referred to as “nurture”, demands a brief examination of Eponine’s upbringing.

What little is known is significant. Residing in poverty as the eldest of five siblings, she stood in the shadow of two strong-willed authoritarian parents. Her unnamed mother, whose commanding presence was omnipresent and juxtaposes sharply against the calculated speech of her father, hid manipulation and scorn beneath a facade of strict maternal oversight. That the mother was indifferent to the plight of her own children was a fact lost on them while living in Montfermeil. Mr. Thenardier, simply put, is malevolent. This sheer evil commonly manifests itself in the form of greed, selfishness and in decision making which offer a glimpse of moral deprivation. The extent of his lying borders on the pathological.

The first appearance of Eponine portrays her and her sister Azelma in May 1818 as happy and well-dressed children at play. Yet it would be misleading to assert that their entire existence reflected this. This could be due to the fact they were outside and allowed to play, rather than being held in the doldrums of the inn the reader will later see. There is not enough information to derive conclusions as to their quality of life at such a young age. However, the nature of the parents is clearly established. When Fantine first broached the topic of the Thenardier’s taking in young Cosette after spying how happy Eponine and her sister appeared, and once the financial negotiations for the arrangement were concluded, Mr. Thenardier approvingly states to his wife “You have provided a good mousetrap with your little ones”². How this moment of happy, well-dressed youth transitions to more impoverished imagery several years later is not fully explained, aside from the frequent implications that Mr. Thenardier lived beyond his means and sought to capitalize upon all whom he came across, culminating in the bankruptcy of their inn. Their later move to Paris was as much about escaping the creditors they owed as it was about getting a new start.

By the time Jean Valjean arrives in Montfermeil in December 1823 to collect Cosette, honoring an oath to her deceased mother, the dynamics within the Thenardier household have become harsh. Again, the modeling of what is acceptable behavior by the parents toward their youth is significant. Cosette had been beaten, starved, and forced to do manual labor. She had been forced to walk a mile in the dark, alone, to collect water from a river beyond the city, and she exists in a perpetual state of fear. This fear stems from what she will be told to do, as well as a feeling of terror particularly when Madame Thenardier is around. She is unaware that her

¹ ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Cornet is from the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a Social Studies Instructor at Phoenix High School (Phoenix, Oregon, USA) and Adjunct Professor of political science at Southern Oregon University (Ashland, Oregon, USA). His other published works include Getting There...A Backpackers’ Journey Navigating Through Foreign Lands and Cultures (isbn 978-1609116651) and Conflict Resolution in Schools – A Practical Guide for Creating and Advancing Successful High School Peer-Mediation Programs (available as a pdf from the author)

² Les Miserables by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 92

guardians are increasing the demand for money from Fantine. By contrast, the Thenardier girls do not work. They have come to recognize Cosette's place as the house slave, as evidenced by their telling their mother when Cosette attempts to play with a discarded doll which they themselves have little care for. They are also spoiled, as indicated by the better livelihood they have vis-à-vis Cosette and further implied by their jealousy when Jean Valjean brings Cosette a new doll. At this youthful seven years of age, they expect their livelihood to be a certain way and complain when it is not so. This youthful unkindness which Eponine shows toward Cosette reflects bullying tendencies, such as the incessant teasing as modeled by her parents. Years later in Paris it is demonstrated that Mr. Thenardier continues to maintain control of his home and daughters. In order to make the family look more destitute for the expected arrival of a philanthropist, for instance, he orders Azelma to break a window with her hand, thereby causing severe bleeding; over the faint disagreement of the mother, Azelma does as she is told. The family follows the father's lead without question, and Eponine is a party to this.

Any attempt to resolve an inquiry into whether Eponine truly overcame the Thenardier name – that is, the reputation associated with the family surname – requires this establishment of what this name represents. In short, the surname is synonymous with selfishness, dishonor, manipulation and thievery, a pattern established by the parents and emulated by their children.

Eponine as a Teenager in Paris

This behavior seems to continue upon her time in Paris some eight years later, albeit in a manner befitting her age. Her family reappears in the novel in 1831, which would make Eponine about sixteen years old.

It is possible that financial circumstances heightened her father's willingness to gain wealth by any means. The manifestation of her life experiences and parents influence continues to be apparent. By this point Eponine is a malnourished girl in rags. She has missing teeth and is often barefoot. She spoke of having had to live under bridges with her family during the previous winter, of how she might sleep in ditches or walk the boulevard in the darkness of night, how she contemplated suicide by drowning and briefly alludes to hallucinations³, yet as plausible as these events are, it is unclear if they are being stressed to invoke pity in her host or if she was speaking without thinking. Her commentary is inconsistent, quickly stacking sentences one upon the other which alternate in temperament between melancholy, whimsical and capriciousness.

Nevertheless, by these teenage years the reader sees an Eponine seemingly set in her ways. When first meeting Marius, the ease with which she welcomes herself into his apartment – which is also his bedroom – is unnerving.

Meanwhile, while Marius fixed upon her an astounded and sorrowful look, the young girl was walking to and fro in the room with the boldness of a spectre. She bustled about regardless of her nakedness. At times, her chemise, unfastened and tore, fell almost to her waist. She moved the chairs, she disarranged the toilet articles on the bureau, she felt of Marius' clothes, [and] she searched over what there was in the corners.

“Ah,” said she, “you have a mirror!”

Beneath this boldness could be perceived an indescribable constraint, restlessness and humility. Effrontery is a form of shame.⁴

Her comfort with that setting and the discourse which follows suggest a history of having been prostituted, likely for profit and on the initiative of her father. This is suggestive by the note she delivers from Mr. Thenardier and as her subsequent conversation with Marius implies. Furthermore, she cryptically comments about how she has known “unkind” men, and overtly alludes to having been beaten by her father. While there is no reference as to when these events occurred, they speak to a continuing pattern of treatment which affected her outlook upon and approach toward the world.

The degrees of criminality and other behaviors which would not be acceptable morally to the polite French society of the era are noteworthy. Eponine is complicit in multiple plots to defraud people under false pretenses when she attempted to deliver the letters which Marius found, an event which also witnesses she and Azelma fleeing from the police. The aforementioned discussion with Marius includes hints of a history of selling herself. As her father and the Patron-Minette gang were awaiting M.LeBlanc (Jean Valjean), it was Eponine's

³ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 433

Eponine speaks to Marius: “The stars are like spotlights, one would say that they are smoking, and that the wind is blowing them out, I am confused, as if I had horses panting in my ear; though it is night, I hear hand-organs and spinning wheels, I don't know what. I think that somebody is throwing stones at me, I run without knowing it, it is all a whirl, all a whirl. When one has not eaten, it is very queer.”

⁴ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 430-431

assignment to be on the lookout for the authorities and, if necessary, provide warning to the plotters. She also gathered information for and communicated with Babet, one of the Patron-Minette who was imprisoned at the time. It is revealing that, when trying to impress Marius by demonstrating she is literate, she write “The cops are here.” Eponine is fluent in Argot, a type of slang commonly used within the criminal underworld, and there are several allusions to drinking in spite or her youth.

Eponine’s Transformation Begins

Eponine’s transformation seems to begin with her meeting Marius. She approaches his door with only the knowledge that he paid rent for her family. She is struck by his appearance, generosity and by the fact that he does not take advantage of her in spite of overtures to do so by both her mannerisms and her father’s written words. Marius is unlike anyone she has known. He is an honorable person residing in near poverty.⁵ Marius, for his part, is rather put off by the impulsive, impetuous and wretched figure standing before him. Rather than view his discomfort as annoyance, she interprets their one-sided discourse as an opening to friendship. In her worldview, Marius may be the only friend she has ever known. That this friendship would grow to infatuation is not surprising.

Witnessing the melancholy mood surrounding Marius, Eponine inquires why, only to learn that he sought in vain to locate the girl (Cosette) who had just visited the Jondrette family⁶. She offers to assist, but this offer is not without qualification. She agrees to help locate her if he gives her anything she wants in return. This remains ill-defined, and was stated in a manner which suggests it would provide an excuse to reconnect with him later for any reason. She is agreeing to help Marius locate Cosette even though is it against her nature. And the few joys she has in life are in making Marius happy. In revealing to Marius that she has located Cosette after two months following his inability to find her, Victor Hugo writes:

She bit her lip; she seemed to hesitate, as if passing through a kind of interior struggle.

At last, she appeared to decide on her course.

“So much the worse, it makes no difference. You look sad, I want you to be glad. But promise me that you will laugh, I want to see you laugh and hear you say: Ah well! That is good. Poor Monsieur Marius! You know, you promised me that you would give me whatever I should ask – ”

“Yes! But tell me!”

She looked in Marius’ eyes and said: “I have the address”

“What address?”

“The address you asked me for.”

She added as if she were making an effort: “The address – you know well enough!”

“Yes!” stammered Marius.

“Of the young lady!”

Having pronounced this word, she sighed deeply.⁷

Her want to be in Marius’s favor blinds her from realizing the conflicting cross-purposes of her action. If she helps Marius find Cosette, then she will risk losing him to Cosette’s affections; if Eponine does not help him, then a foundation pillar of their association will be removed and she fears not seeing Marius again. That this dilemma exists is not lost on Eponine, but rather than dwell on any long term effect of her options, she is guided by whichever decision would most immediately allow she and Marius to spend time together. Her conversational tone on this topic is dense with jealousy.

She withdrew her hand and added in a tone which would have pierced the heart of an observer, but which did not even touch the intoxicated and transported Marius:

“Oh! How glad you are!”⁸

Parallel to this euphoria is her inability to view Mr. Thenardier as a threat, and consequentially she feels it unnecessary to promise Marius that she would keep the location of this residence from her father.

⁵ Although, unknown to Eponine, Marius’s poverty is self-imposed due to his pride through which he rejects support from his wealthy aunt. Had she known this, it would likely have enhanced her perception of his honor and, had her father known of Monsieur Gillenormand’s (Marius’s grandfather) place in society, undoubtedly Mr. Thenardier would have done everything possible – no matter how deceitful – to get he and his daughter together. Eponine later learns that Father Mabeuf calls him by the title “Baron”, but Marius does not verify it.

⁶ This is the name the Thenardier’s were living under, so as to escape notice by debt collectors and authorities.

⁷ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 514

⁸ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 515

Nevertheless, this may be the first time she has genuinely put another ahead of herself. For the first time, she is wrestling with adolescent emotions. Does Marius represent a possible escape from her sad existence? Perhaps, although any allusion to this occupying her thoughts is sparse.

The more she assists Marius, the more her affection for him grows. Nevertheless, seeing a rival for his affection in Cosette, she does not disparage Cosette nor seek out to harm her, but neither does she seek to embrace her. She does, however, protect Cosette, knowing that harm to her would pain Marius. Eponine not only provides Cosette's location to Marius, but also cannot resist following and observing their time together at the Rue Plumet residence. When her father arrives with Brujon and the Patron Minette gang to rob the home, Eponine stands up to them, threatening to scream to alert the neighbors if they attempt anything. Similarly, Eponine clandestinely gives a note to Jean Valjean (whom she assumes to be Cosette's father or guardian) cautioning him to move due to ill-defined dangers. Her actions here may appear to be selfless on the surface, but really she is striving to protect Marius. She does not want to see him in pain. She had no way of knowing whether the guardian's move would also mean that Cosette would move as well. The degree to which this is an altruistic motive remains debatable. Certainly she is experiencing emotions and divided loyalties for the first time which is causing painful confusion.

There is a point at which her facilitating the meeting between Marius and Cosette becomes intolerable. She is adrift and uncertain. In despair, Eponine tells Marius that his revolutionary friends are awaiting him at the barricade at the Rue de la Chanvreris. Pained by his grandfather's rejection of his wish to marry Cosette and paralyzed by the knowledge that her guardian is taking her away, Marius joins the insurrection. For the first time, Eponine is now purposely shaping events as well as being a party to them. She is intentional rather than flighty.

During the insurrection of 1832, a soldier makes it inside the barricade and takes aim at Marius. In a moment of instinctive reaction, Eponine reaches for his musket, taking bullets meant for Marius through her hand and back. It is in her death which proves most revealing. She herself cannot explain her moment of action: "And still when I saw him aiming at you, I put my hand upon the muzzle of the musket. How droll it is!"⁹ This second sentence of astonishment suggests how far she has come. However, her subsequent confession offers a counterpoint. She admits she wanted Marius at the barricade so she can die with him. She wants them to be together in the afterlife or heaven. This act of self-sacrifice was not so much about atoning or her past sins, but rather a reflection of a logical act on her part; she wanted to die first. She, in fact, was thankful that everyone there would die. Death would be an escape from the turmoil in her heart of the past year, and over her lifetime. In her final moments she reveals the existence of a letter Cosette asked her to pass on to him a day earlier. Was this a last act of contrition or honesty? By her own admission, she was fearful Marius would be angry at her for keeping the letter secret. She felt he would be appreciative. And when he took the letter, she was content. In her final words she asks for a kiss, thereby fulfilling the promise he agreed to when he promised to do anything for her when she agreed to locate Cosette at the outset of their journey together. "And then, do you know, Monsieur Marius, I believe I was a little in love with you.' She essayed a smile again and expired."¹⁰

Conclusion

Perhaps the true tragedy is that on the pendulum of shifting behaviors, just as she appears to transcend beyond the characteristics associated with her family name, Eponine voluntarily regresses back to the behavior she knows. These retreats into instinct, into how she was raised, are partially immaturity yet also fear. She has never had a role model to demonstrate what it would be like to truly embark on her own life. At the most basic level, Eponine used deceit and partial-truths to lure Marius to the barricades. When she realized the no-win situation she was in – to gain Marius' trust by helping him meet Cosette or to lose contact with him because she would no longer be useful for him in achieving his wants; either way she would eventually be alone – in true Thénardier fashion she found a third path, one prefaced upon well-intended (in her view) deception. Her motive was pure, but her intentions certainly more nefarious.

⁹ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 644

¹⁰ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 645

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Supplemental discussion prompts – Eponine

This paper is purposely designed to have a provocative thesis, one which may be little addressed nor appreciated in some classrooms or discourse communities surrounding Les Miserables, yet one which remains deeply intrinsic to the storyline and characters.

It is hoped that the ideas in this essay serve as a starting point for further discussion among students, in classrooms and between anyone who appreciates Victor Hugo's work. To that end, the following discussion prompts are offered for contemplation for you to deliberate with others. While I will sadly not be within earshot to listen in on your brilliance, to engage in these and related questions critically and philosophically will bring honor to yourself and the book. Have fun.

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the author's (John Cornet) thesis that Eponine never fully transcended beyond the Thendarier name? Consider what you feel to be the major points and any particular weaknesses in the argument.
2. Identify Eponine's worldview, and explain how she views her place within it.
3. Looking at Eponine and her siblings Gravoche and Azelma, if we were to place them on this spectrum of acting in accordance with the Thenardier reputation as opposed to those who have matured beyond it, whom would you place where and why? (The two young brothers are too young and too little addressed to be included in this analysis)
4. How are those in poverty perceived and treated by French society of the era? How does the lifestyle and culture of those in poverty differ from those not residing in poverty? What does this suggest about the culture of France at the time?
5. Contrast the personalities, agendas and ideological (faith, politics, etc) beliefs – as well as any transformation of them – of Eponine, Cosette, Marius, Enjolras and Gavroche. To what extent do these characters share similarities and to what extent and they juxtaposed in contrast to one another?
6. To what or to whom does Eponine own her allegiance?
7. How would you characterize Eponine's religious leanings?
8. If one were to ask Eponine what she fears or what in society she would characterize as evil, how might she respond?
9. The original (text) version of Eponine paints her in a dark light with ambiguous motives, while the musical rendition offers a more sympathetic and transparent figure. Identify specifically how these two portrayals differ, and explain which – in your view – is better for the story.