

The Development of the Major Characters in the Drama “Les Miserables”

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Abstract

This study entitled “The Development of the Major Characters in the Drama Les Miserables” was aimed to identify the methods of characterization used in introducing the major characters, and also analyzing the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that the major characters develop. The data for this study was taken from the drama script and 25th Anniversary stage performance of the drama “Les Miserables”. In collecting the data this study used library research and the data itself was analyzed qualitatively. Finally, the method of characterization of the major characters as well as the characters’ motivations are explained.

Reaske’s theory of characterization in drama is used to determine the major characters’ methods of characterization. For analyzing the motivations of the characters’, the theory by Ryan and Deci is applied. From the discussion of characterization and human motivations it can be concluded that the major characters have various methods of characterization, such as character in action, dialogue between characters, asides and soliloquies, the appearance of a character, and hidden narration. However, the one that was used twice on two separate characters was dialogue between characters. The characters develop in accordance to their motivations and the majority of the character’s motivations are concluded to be intrinsic.

Keywords: *drama, major characters, characterization, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation*

1. Background of the Study

Drama is a type of a play written for theaters, televisions, radios and films, it is a composition in verse or prose presenting a story in pantomime or dialogue, containing conflict of characters, particularly the ones who perform in front of audience on the stage. The person who writes drama for stage directions is known as a dramatist or playwright.

Since drama presents us directly with scenes which are based on people's actions and interactions, characters play a dominant role in this genre and, therefore, deserve close attention. The characters in plays can generally be divided into major characters and minor characters, depending on how important they are for the plot. A good indicator as to whether a character is major or minor is the amount of time and speech as well as presence on stage he or she is allocated. There are several types of drama; they are comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama and musical drama. The drama which will be analyzed in this study is the sung-through musical drama "Les Misérables" based off on the books of the same name by Victor Hugo. The drama is chosen as the topic of this study because the writer finds it interesting how the characters and their dynamics have been handled throughout the entity of the drama.

2. Problems of the Study

There are two problems formulated in this study based on the background:

- a. What methods of characterization are used to present the major characters of the drama "Les Misérables"?
- b. How do the major characters develop through the plot of "Les Misérables"?

3. Aims of the Study

After formulating the problems of the study, the aims of the research are:

- a. To identify the methods of characterization used to present the various major characters of the drama "Les Misérables"
- b. To analyze the ways in which the major characters develop themselves and their motivations throughout the plot and events in the drama "Les Misérables".

4. Research Method

The primary data for this study was taken from the script of the drama entitled "Les Misérables" based on the book written by Victor Hugo. The secondary data was taken from the 25th Anniversary performance of Les Misérables on stage. The major characters of the drama which are analyzed are Fantine, Jean Valjean, Jvert, and Cosette. The method that is used in collecting data is library research which is defined

as the systematic study where conclusions are based on the analysis of data collected with pre-established research designs and methodologies. The collected data is qualitatively analyzed based on the theory of drama and theory of human motivation to answer the problems imposed. Qualitative research is used to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. The analysis is done by identifying each major character in the drama and focusing on their actions and development from the start to finish of the drama by giving attention to their characterization, development and motivation.

5. The Analysis of the Methods of Characterization of the Major Characters

This analysis presents the four major characters: Fantine, Jean Valjean, Javert, and Cosette.

5.1 Fantine

"Les Miserables" manages to present a sympathetic and admiring picture of women and what they have to tolerate in society. This is exemplified with Fantine and the suffering she endures. In the story she represents maternal love and the length to which a mother may be prepared to go to in order to protect and save her child. Although she abandoned her child Cosette, this was done with the best of intentions and was the result of pressure applied by society in the form of prejudice and hypocrisy. She is, in her way, devoted to her child and is willing to sacrifice her own wealth, health and dignity in order to protect and save Cosette.

Based on Reaske's theory of method of characterization, Fantine's characterization is presented with her actions and interaction with other characters.

a) Character in action method: when the playwright chooses to have a character act a certain way and not another, the character is much better understood. Motivation usually translates into action. (Reaske 1964:46)

b) Dialogue between characters method: the audience gets a perception of the character when he talks by himself and when he is the company of other characters and how he presents himself in front of them (Reaske 1964:46).

When Fantine is first shown on stage in ACT 1 SCENE 2 "The Factory at Montreuil" she is inside the woman's segment of a jewelry factory in a small French

town. As the audience we are shown her hardworking side as she continues focusing on her task despite the sexual harassment she is receiving from the only male in the scene, the Foreman, who is there to observe the work quality. Fantine is truly characterized by her interaction with one of the other factory workers, as everyone is queuing for their payment, Fantine receives a letter. Before she manages to read it, the other factory girl snatches the letter and reads it out loud. It is revealed that Fantine has a sickly child and needs to send more money to the innkeepers taking care of her since she does not have much more time. This gets the attention of everyone in the factory and Fantine gets flustered and tries to take the letter back saying this is no one else's business. She even insults the girl by implying that she is not being faithful to her husband at home: "*Fantine: Give that letter to me / It is none of your business. / With a husband at home / And a bit on the side!*".

5.2 Jean Valjean

Jean Valjean stands at the center of *Les Misérables* and becomes a trial figure for Hugo's grand theories about the redemptive power of compassion and love. Valjean goes into prison a simple and decent man, but emerges from the chain gang a hardened criminal who hates society for what it has done to him. The Bishop he meets later turns out to be the first person in decades to treat Valjean with love and respect. The Bishop makes Valjean promise to become an honest man and forever changes his character.

Based on Reaske's theory of method of characterization, Valjean's characterization is his interaction with other characters, as well as his monologues:

- a. Dialogue between characters, the audience gets a perception of the character when he talks by himself and when he is the company of other characters and how he presents himself in front of them. (Reaske 1964:46)
- b. Asides and soliloquies, all further characterization is established by dialogue, the audience learns more about the character through their speech in short asides or longer soliloquies. (Reaske 1964:46)

Valjean is first seen alongside all the other criminals in jail in ACT I, SCENE I. Valjean, prisoner 24601, is summoned by Javert who announces that he is to start his parole. Valjean defends himself and his actions of how he stole bread to help his sister's child. He is a strong character who does not believe saving a life equals to a crime, but

is repeatedly shut down by Javert. However, when his identity is referred to his prisoner number, his slave number, he quickly and with emotion corrects his jailer. He announces his name, takes the paper of leave and goes on his way: *“Javert: Five years for what you did, / The rest because you tried to run. / Yes, 24601!”*

Valjean: My name is Jean Valjean!”

In the next scene he addresses the audience and shows how cynical he is towards everyone, he feels as if he is wronged and the rest of the world should pay for that. The director’s description mentions that “we see for the first time the darkness in his face give way to a new hope”, for the first time his face lightens up with hope for what’s to come, but is quickly hidden again when he starts blaming everyone for his misfortunes. *“Freedom at last – How strange the taste! / Never forget the years – the waste, / Nor forgive them for what they’ve done. / They are the guilty – Everyone!”*. This side of him, however, gets changed into a kinder and more empathic side as his journey and development goes on.

5.3 Javert

Javert is so obsessed with enforcing society’s laws and morals that he does not realize he is living by mistaken assumptions, a tragic and ironic flaw in a man who believes so strongly in enforcing what he believes is right. Although Javert is such a stern and inflexible character that it is hard to sympathize with him, he lives with the shame of knowing that his own Gypsy upbringing is not so different from the backgrounds of the men he pursues. He lives his life trying to erase this shame through his strict commitment to upholding the law.

Javert’s flaw, however, is that he never stops to question whether the laws themselves are just. In his mind, a man is guilty when the law declares him so. When Valjean finally gives Javert irrefutable proof that a man is not necessarily evil just because the law says he is, Javert is incapable of reconciling this new knowledge with his beliefs. He commits suicide, plagued by the thought that he may be living a dishonorable life.

Based on Reaske’s theory of method of characterization, Javert’s characterization is presented in his dialogue with Valjean in ACT I SCENE I, but it does not truly present who he is. As the story progresses, the audience is allowed to see more of his characterization through his actions:

a) Dialogue between characters, the audience gets a perception of the character when he talks by himself and when he is the company of other characters and how he presents himself in front of them. (Reaske 1964:46)

Javert thinks of himself as honorable and presents himself with an aura of power. He looks down on everyone and does not have one meaningful and love-filled relationship in the story. In the beginning he confronts Valjean about his parole, but does not treat him as a human, he sees him as the scum of the earth since that is what the law has categorized him as. *“Javert: This badge of shame / You'll show it everywhere. / It warns you're a dangerous man.”*

Later on when he meets Valjean again, who is in disguise as the Mayor of the city, Javert has a suspicion on who his true identity is. However, after filling a report and learning that, unbeknown to him, a lookalike has been captured he feels shame and begs Monsieur Madeleine (Jean Valjean) for forgiveness and punishment. *“Javert: Monsieur le Mayor I have a crime to declare! / I have disgraced the uniform that I wear. / I've done you wrong, let no forgiveness be shown. / I've been as hard on every rogue I have known. / I'll bear the blame, I must be treated just the same.”* Javert shows that he does not hesitate to be put under the law when he himself judges his actions as wrong. Not many characters in fiction are ready to admit their wrongdoings and seek out punishment alone. Just as he has treated every criminal in his grasp, he is prepared to take on any punishment until he is satisfied he has gotten what he deserves.

5.4 Cosette

Cosette is a very important part of Les Miserables and every character's storyline somehow connects back to her. Cosette is Fantine's daughter and when her father abandoned them he put Fantine in a very desperate situation. When Cosette was just a toddler, Fantine had to leave her hands in the Thenardiers' because Cosette was an illegitimate child, which was illegal in 19th century France. By the time Cosette was five, she became a servant of the Thenardiers' where she was horribly abused.

Cosette represents the future of society and shows youthful high spirits, and perhaps as a result of her education and experience she is sincere, genuine, devoted and loyal.

Cosette is officially introduced on stage in ACT 1 SCENE 6 “The Inn”. First shown as a girl is at the age of eight who is sweeping the floors of the inn that she lives in.

Based on Reaske’s theory of method of characterization, Cosette’s character earns her characterization from her own appearance and narration, as well as another character’s interpretation of her:

- a) The appearance of the character is often described by the playwright in the prologue or in stage directions, the audience then learns what the character looks like and how they are dressed when they walk out on stage. (Reaske 1964:46)
- b) Asides and soliloquies, all further characterization is established by dialogue, the audience learns more about the character through their speech in short asides or longer soliloquies. (Reaske 1964:46)
- c) Hidden narration is one device that is frequently used, for instance having a character in a play narrate something about another character despite the estimation being truthful or false. (Reaske 1964:46)

Her appearance is not stated in the stage directions, but once the actress comes onstage, it is painfully obvious how her character should be taken. Cosette is dressed in rags and (in some productions) wears no shoes during the winter season. She is alone in the inn sweeping the floorboards as she wishes she was somewhere else. Amid cleaning, Cosette sings of her dreams where she goes to a more loving place “on a cloud” where she doesn’t cry, doesn’t sweep floors and where her mother is with her and keeps her close. “*Cosette: There is a lady all in white / Holds me and sings a lullaby. / She’s nice to see and she’s soft to touch / She says, Cosette, I love you very much.*” Unfortunately she is abruptly shaken out of her daydreaming when her guardian, Madame Thenardier makes her appearance. The woman is shown to be rude and abusive, expecting Cosette to do all the work in the inn for her. She is the 3rd part of Cosette’s characterization with her opinion on Cosette and her mother. “*Madame Thenardier: We should never have taken you in the first place / How stupid the things that we do! / Like mother, like daughter, the scum of the street.*” Her opinion on both Fantine and Cosette is rotten, even though the money Fantine sends is the reason for the inn still working. Madame Thenardier is not grateful in any way and even antagonizes Cosette. Her impression of Cosette is very far from the truth.

6. Conclusion

After a long discussion, the major characters in the musical drama “Les Miserables” have been analyzed based on the method of characterization which have been used in their introductions. Fantine is introduced by the use of character in action method and dialogue between characters method, showcasing her strength and determination, as well as her usually hidden defensive side. Jean Valjean is presented by dialogue between characters method and asides and soliloquies method, the audience is introduced to his anger as well as his regret in the very first few scenes in the drama. Javert’s character uses only one method of characterization and that is dialogue between characters. The image his character portrays shines through his first interactions with Jean Valjean. Cosette is introduced by the use of three methods of characterization, the appearance of a character, asides and soliloquies, and hidden narration. Not only does the actress convey the poor conditions Cosette lives in based on her clothing and disheveled looks, but with a short aside she expresses her dreams of a happy life. The last part of her characterization is minor in consideration as it only shows her abuser’s opinion of her.

In the second part of the analysis, in terms of motivation and development it is concluded that each of the major characters has changed by the conclusion of the plot. Fantine’s motivation is intrinsic and it all comes around love and ambition, Jean Valjean’s intrinsic motivations are concluded to be a result from guilt and spirituality. He grows from the pessimistic person he once was and takes on the path of forgiveness and spirituality due to the teachings of the Bishop who spared his life. Javert’s motivations are both intrinsic (justice) and extrinsic (dominance and perfectionism). He is motivated by being the “God” who punishes the “wicked” and by following the law to the smallest detail. Cosette's intrinsic motivations are love and growth, and her extrinsic motivation is curiosity.

In conclusion, this study’s main focus was the major characters in the splendid musical drama “Les Miserables” and their development throughout the plot. The characters may be seen as simple at first glance, but each one has the components that

make them great characters; from their characterizations in their introductions to the motivations that guide them through each step of the story.

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