

***Serenity's* Operative and *Les Misérables's* Inspector Javert: The Masculinity of Scrupulous Civil Servants**

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[1] Fans of Joss Whedon's movie *Serenity* (2005), the sequel of his short-lived series *Firefly* (2002), have linked this film to Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) (whose plot is usually known through the West End musical adaptation [1985]). For instance, on her blog *Spooky Flashlight*, Erin Sneath reads *Serenity* as "one big homage to *Les Misérables*," whereas a certain aliasaddict09 has created on YouTube a mash-up video of scenes taken from *Serenity* with the song "One Day More" from the musical. Although Joss Whedon has not mentioned *Les Misérables* as a source of inspiration for *Serenity*, their respective plots share many similarities: both stories, for example, focus on an outlawed hero (Jean Valjean and Malcolm Reynolds) who is a criminal in the eye of the law, but who is considered to be a good man from the viewers' perspective, who is guided by a spiritual figure (the bishop of Digne and Shepherd Book) and tracked throughout the story in a context of social unrest (the 1832 Parisian insurrection and the "misbehavior" against the Alliance).¹

[2] More specifically, fans have noticed a resemblance between *Les Misérables's* Inspector Javert and *Serenity's* Operative, played by the English actor Chiwetel Ejiofor. Both lawmen are entirely dedicated to their missions and true believers in law and order. In fact, on the forum *Ask Meta Filter*, Science!

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suggests “‘True believer’ as personified by the Operative in *Serenity*” to the person who seeks “an adjective to describe a person who believes in absolute obedience to the law, as personified by Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables*.” Furthermore, Sneath analyzes the character: “The law is his [the Operative’s] everything, his identity, and he refuses to question the regime he serves.” Fans have also alluded to, or even highlighted explicitly, Javert and the Operative’s moral dilemma, as they have to choose between law and morals, and unexpectedly make the moral choice, break the law, and save the heroes (when Javert lets Valjean go free after the outlaw saved his life and when the Operative asks his troops to stand down and not to kill Mal and his crew). In his analysis of the Operative, the author of the blog *Never Felt Better* points out: “Like Javert, he cannot reconcile his set in stone world view with this sudden, glaring contradiction, and sees his identity destroyed” (“*Serenity: The Operative Destroyed*”).

[3] The fanfiction “Miranda” written by Dyce, which revisits the plot of *Serenity* by imagining an emotional bond between River and Jayne (as well as sparing the lives of Book, Wash, and Mr Universe), goes further in its linking of the Operative to Javert. The literary reference is signalled several times by the Operative, Mal, and the author, who explains in an endnote: “Javert is the relentless and ultimately tragic policeman in *Les Misérables*. The song River sings while she dances [“Stars” in the musical] is one of his.” In this story, the Operative is held prisoner on *Serenity*, and River calls him “Javert,” later imitated by Mal, Zoe, Jayne, the narrator (in order to distinguish him from another Operative), and the Operative himself, after experiencing an epiphany. However, in this version, his moral dilemma is easily resolved, since the Operative-Javert considers that his duty is to serve the people of the Alliance, not the Parliament, and, therefore, helping the crew of *Serenity* to broadcast the message does not conflict with his duty.

[4] Whether intended by Whedon or not, the similarities between the Operative and Inspector Javert that have been

highlighted by *Serenity*'s fans deserve further analysis. This essay will do so by referring to Jacques Dubois's concept of "scrupulous civil servant." In his article "Le Crime de Valjean et le Châtiment de Javert" ("Valjean's Crime and Javert's Punishment"), he explains: "It is by enforcing the law with obtuse rigor that Javert becomes evil, and even unfair. However, in his own implacable and cruel way, he simply conforms to the image of the scrupulous civil servant" (321; my translation). I will consider the Operative as a modern embodiment of the scrupulous civil servant who enforces the law with obtuse rigor, implacability, and cruelty. Although coming from different backgrounds (Victor Hugo's nineteenth-century France and Joss Whedon's post 9/11 America), Javert and the Operative share an analogous unstable "historical" context that influences their masculine identity. Blindly conforming to the dominant model of masculinity at the beginning of the stories, they experience an epiphany that enables them to question this oppressive model. Nevertheless, Whedon, who has often deconstructed the myths of masculinity in his works (Dunaway par. 1), goes further than Hugo in his critique of masculinity; through the Operative adopting an alternative masculine model promoted by Mal Reynolds, he subverts masculine codes and values.

Masculinity and Its "Crisis"

[5] Masculinity in Western societies has long been supported by the so-called "natural" superiority of men over women. Indeed, as the values associated with men—activity, culture, and reason—were ascribed greater importance than so-called feminine values—passivity, nature, and emotion (Gutterman 58), men were encouraged to exercise their authority over women. This model of dominant, or hegemonic (Connell 77), masculinity, has been characterized by its relative permanence (Bourdieu 114) and by the simplicity of its script, which is summarized by David Gilmore (233) as: "impregnate women, protect dependents from danger, and provision [*sic*] kith and kin."

[6] Despite its apparent stability, the model of hegemonic masculinity has occasionally been weakened and questioned. Scholars have developed the concept of a crisis of masculinity originally to designate a phenomenon that arose during the period following the Second World War, when men developed insecurities concerning their masculine role within society. Two interconnected characteristics can be identified. A crisis of masculinity is defined, on the one hand, by men's actual loss of power due to social changes (such as the rise of feminist movements in the twentieth century) (Brittan 180-81; Beynon 78; Connell 86; Edwards 8-16). It includes, on the other hand, the questioning of men's "natural" dominance and the re-definition of masculinity's intrinsic virtues (will, strength, and autonomy) as flaws (abuse, violence, and coldness) (Badinter 213-14; Whitehead and Barrett 6; MacInnes 47).

[7] The second half of the twentieth century is not the only crisis of masculinity. Other periods have been identified as showing similar "symptoms" of insecure masculine identities. The sociologist Michael Kimmel has convincingly argued that some historical moments are particularly favorable for giving rise to gender issues and masculine insecurity. During these periods, men feel unable to meet the ideal model of manliness. Kimmel (123) "identif[ies] how historical and social changes create the condition for gender crisis" and argues that "these crises occur at specific historical junctures, when structural changes transform the institutions of personal life."

The "Historical" Contexts of *Les Misérables* and *Serenity*

[8] The periods in which the Operative and the Inspector live are precisely characterized by insecurity regarding institutions. The Inspector lives in troubled times and has experienced many changes of regimes, including absolute as well as constitutional monarchies, a revolution, a republic, and an empire.² However, in spite of all the historical, political, and social changes of his times, Javert remains true in serving law and

order, regardless of their coming from an emperor, an absolute king, or a constitutional king.

[9] During the Restoration and the July Monarchy periods (1815-48), the main periods depicted in *Les Misérables*, the ideal of masculinity was fashioned by the virile model of revolutionary and Napoleonic soldiers, who promoted martial virtues, such as strength, bravery, glory, and honor (Hughes 51-52; Forrest 112-17). The Inspector undoubtedly embodies this manly model; he is described many times as tall and impressive: “The man was tall, dressed in a long redingote, and he had a cudgel under his arm. He had Javert’s bull neck” (*Les Misérables*, II.4.5, 369; see also III.8.14, 634; V.3.9, 1068).³ The huge stick that he carries around, “a monstrous knobby cudgel” (I.5.5, 145), is an obvious symbol of his virility. Although many cinematographic and television adaptations of *Les Misérables* emphasize the Inspector’s bureaucratic rank by casting actors of stature that is not overwhelming,⁴ Tom Hooper’s adaptation of the West End musical (2012) gives Javert his impressive physique back by casting Russell Crowe.⁵ Javert’s law-abiding conformation to the martial model contrasts with that of the younger generation, those who endeavor to be heroic and virile not by following the path of military service but by embracing that of rebellion.⁶

[10] The fictional context in which the Operative lives is as troubled as that of Javert—and there is no doubt that this context echoes that of the twenty-first century on Earth-That-Was.⁷ The ‘Verse is a post-war world, after the Independents lost the civil war against the Alliance. Certainly, the Operative is on the winning side, contrary to Mal and Zoe who fought for their independence, but this does not mean that his side is not wavering. The authority of the Alliance appears weakened on the border planets. As enforcing peace is a difficult operation, the Alliance (which seldom ventures outside of the central planets) has to hire private firms to do so. The world depicted in *Serenity* and above all in *Firefly* is populated with lawless tyrants (Froese and Buzzard par. 16).⁸ Smuggling, robbery, pirating, and organ trafficking are commonplace there.

[11] In this insecure context, the Operative refers to a stable model: he follows a strict code of honor inspired by the Romans (Wilcox 160). As Robert Nye has shown in *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*, honor constitutes an important element in the definition of masculinity, in nineteenth-century France as well as in the world of the Operative. The latter regards highly his own honor and that of his enemies. He prefers to solve his issues with Mal “as men, not with fire” (*Serenity* 01:21:32-36) and he considers, like the Romans did, that suicide is the honorable way to deal with failure: “in certain older civilized cultures, when men failed as entirely as you have, they would throw themselves on their swords,” says the Operative to the Alliance doctor who has experimented on River (00:07:31-40). This code belongs to another time and includes complete disregard for dishonorable human life in order to achieve a goal. It is not understood even by other representatives of the Alliance, such as the aforesaid doctor, but it appears to be silently approved, or even imposed, by the invisible authorities. At no moment is the Operative’s carnage stopped or even seen to be frowned upon. Finally, like Javert’s, the Operative’s virile identity is enhanced by a phallic symbol: his sword.

[12] As it is women who are traditionally characterized by emotion, and men who are reputed to be rational (Gutterman 58), it is not surprising that these manly civil servants are portrayed as unemotional and rational. The Operative tells Mal: “You can’t make me angry” (00:51:23-25), whereas the narrator of *Les Misérables* frequently underlines the protagonist’s impassivity: “Javert was imperturbable; his grave face betrayed no emotion” (I.5.13, 161). This absence of emotion influences the way these men respond to events. They are seldom properly violent. Javert does not kill; he arrests the bad guys—Jean Valjean, but also “real” bad guys, such as Thénardier and the gang of criminals called “Patron-Minette.” Certainly, the Operative is an assassin; we can see him execute, or order the massacre of, numerous people. However, he cannot be depicted

as brutal, because he commits these actions quietly, without showing any emotion of pleasure or disgust, or any animosity against his victims.⁹ Indeed, he kills only to achieve two goals: to meet the objectives set by the Alliance and to give honor to dishonorable men (like the Alliance doctor). As rational and cold as the scrupulous civil servants seem, their rationality is nonetheless a “seeming veneer,” as Samira Nadkarni points out about the agent of the Alliance (par. 15). Alike puppets handled by their respective governments, they are not used to thinking and making decisions by themselves. The Operative lacks concern about the secrets of the Alliance or the reasons of his mission (00:07:16-22), whilst Javert lacks discernment (Grossman 84) and, towards the end of the novel, he discovers with anxiety the constraint of thinking by himself (V.4, 1080).

“Society Kept at Bay Two Classes of Men, Those Who Attack It and Those Who Guard It”

[13] The Operative and Inspector Javert are both civil servants; they are the “member[s] of the civil service;” that is, “the permanent professional branches of a state’s administration, excluding military and judicial branches and elected politicians,” according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (319). However, as Sneath has highlighted in her blog, civil service is not only their work; it is their whole life. Their identity is strictly defined by the authority, the law, and the code that they serve because this strict framework gives them little or even no room to develop their individual and social masculine identity. Both Javert and the Operative seem deprived of a social identity. The Operative does not even have a name; he is only designated by his function by the Alliance doctor (00:05:28) and Shepherd Book (00:43:36). The other characters refer to him as “this man” (Inara: 00:49:02), “this guy” (Jayne: 00:54:16), “the government’s man” (Mal: 01:00:21), “Sir” (his troops: 00:54:01); and Mal calls him “an assassin” to his face (00:50:41). All these appellations are vague and emphasize his belonging to the Alliance and dirty work. The Operative admits having neither rank nor name: “I don’t exist” (00:05:40-41).

Conversely, Javert has a name and a rank (and is promoted throughout the story, from jail officer to Parisian inspector), but he does not have a first name, which is uncommon among the main protagonists of *Les Misérables* (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 17). Javert does not seem to belong to society; rather, his social background puts him outside of society (I.5.5, 144). His father was an inmate and his mother was a fortune-teller; he was born in prison and seemingly never left it. A virgin at forty, he has never engaged in human relationships (I.5.5, 144). At best, like the Operative, he is surrounded by flunkies, whereas Mal and Valjean, despite not being very extroverted themselves, are surrounded by close friends: the crew of *Serenity* for the first, and Cosette, Fantine, and destitute people for the latter.

[14] Civil servants’ exclusion from society and human relationships is best expressed by the Operative when confronting Malcolm Reynolds in the temple of the Companions’ training house: “I’m not going to live there [the better world without sin that he hopes to help construct]. There is no place for me there anymore than there is for you, Malcolm” (01:05:49-55). With these words, the Operative explains the reason why scrupulous civil servants are deprived of a social identity: they cannot serve society—as their function requires—if they belong to it. This means that they have more in common with the outlaws whom they are chasing that they wish to admit:

He [Javert] noticed that society kept at bay two classes of men, those who attack it and those who guard it; his only choice was between those two classes. At the same time, he felt in himself some kind of basic rigidity, steadiness, honesty, clouded by an inexpressible hatred for that race of bohemians to whom he belonged. He joined the police. (I.5.5, 144)

[15] By deliberately excluding themselves from society, the scrupulous civil servants highlight their sense of sacrifice. They accept sacrificing their own identity to build a better world: “I believe in something greater than myself. A better world. A world without sin,” declares the Operative (01:05:37-44). The

Inspector serves a world of blind justice (I.8.3, 243); this justice, based on legal codes and bureaucracy, does not care for individual fates and motivations (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 322). More importantly, Javert personifies this justice (I.5.13, 165; I.8.3, 243; II.4.3, 365), and this personification makes him confident in his superiority (Grossman 83). His devotion to law and order leads him to excessive righteousness: “This man was composed of two sentiments, very simple and very good in themselves, relatively speaking, but which he made almost bad by exaggeration: respect for authority, and hatred of revolt” (I.5.5, 144).

[16] This extreme belief in the justice system links the civil servants to religious fanatics. Shepherd Book explains to Mal: “Sort of man they’re like to send believes hard. Kills and never asks why” (00:44:39-45). Later, Inara uses almost the same words: “He [The Operative] is a believer. [...] He is intelligent, methodical and devout in his belief that killing River is the right thing to do” (00:54:21-29).¹⁰ Likewise, the narrator of *Les Misérables* claims:

He [Javert] was stoical, serious, austere, a gloom-filled dreamer; humble and haughty like all fanatics. [...] his conscience was completely bound up with his usefulness, his public role was his religion, and he was a spy by vocation the same way others are priests. (I.5.5, 144-45)

[17] Nothing is more important than the Inspector and the Operative’s obsession with law, order, justice, and their devotion to the institutions that they serve, the Alliance and the French government(s). Consequently, they cannot see the weaknesses of such institutions. The French society is unable to take care of its weakest, poorest members (I.2.7, 76), and the French justice system does not make room for rehabilitation. Jean Valjean cannot rid himself of the symbolic mark of the *bagne*, the prison; since his yellow passport signals him as a former convict—and a dangerous one (I.2.3, 64), people are scared of him and allow themselves to treat him worse than they would a dog (I.2.3, 66).

Worse, rather than rehabilitating him, the galley has turned him into a cold, insensitive man (I.2.6, 75)

[18] As for the Alliance, they believe that they can improve people by depriving them of their agency. Indeed, the recorded message found on the planet Miranda (01:14:54-16:45) explains that the Alliance has mixed a gas called Pax (which ironically means “peace” in Latin) into the air in order to pacify the local population (who might have been hostile to the Unification). As a result, the vast majority of the population became so pacified that, says the holographic messenger, “they all just let themselves die” (01:15:51-53), whereas the gas has the opposite effect on 0.1% of the population, that is about 30,000 people, who became excessively aggressive and were turned into flesh-eating monsters: the Reavers. The Alliance hid their actions for years, deleted Miranda from their files and claimed that the Reavers did not exist.¹¹ The worst part is that the Alliance may not have learned from their inhuman mistakes and may be willing to start all over again. In his “I aim to misbehave” speech to his crew, Mal says: “They will try again. Maybe on another world. Maybe on this very ground swept clean. A year from now, ten, they’ll swing back to the belief that they can make people... better” (01:18:06-19).

**“I Am A Monster. What I Do Is Evil. I Have No Illusion
about It, But It Must Be Done.”**

[19] And yet, in spite of its crimes, the Alliance is not entirely evil. Indeed, the Operative tells Mal and Inara: “The Alliance isn’t some evil empire” (00:53:11-13). The Alliance is not embodied by emblematic evil entities like Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*; the Operative, the man closest to personifying the Alliance in the mind of the viewer, is only one of its agents. As Sutherland and Swan show (97), the Alliance is animated with good intentions when meddling with the local population on Miranda. It is a culturally and scientifically advanced society, characterized by its love for bureaucracy and social hierarchy.¹² Although River’s teacher claims at the

beginning of the film that the Alliance brings the outer planets “the comfort and enlightenment of true civilization” (00:01:11-16) the viewer of *Firefly* has seen many times that this is not the case. Most of the inhabitants of the border planets are maintained in a state of permanent poverty and dependence on the Alliance’s scarce supplies of food and medicine (Sutherland and Swan 92; Jencson par. 11; Froese and Buzzard par. 13).

[20] The Alliance’s moral ambivalence, along with the Operative and Javert’s devotion to law and order, points to the fact that these civil servants are different from “regular” villains, such as the cunning Thénardier and the fierce Reavers—who are, nonetheless, victims of the injustice of French society and of the experiments of the Alliance. In an analogous fashion, the episode of “The Bad Pauper” (III.8) in *Les Misérables*, which is often considerably shortened or deleted in adaptations (see Beaghton 145; 147), unusually posits Inspector Javert as a heroic character and attenuates his malice.¹³ This is the only episode in which Javert is not busy tracking Jean Valjean, as his focus is on Thénardier and the “Patron-Minette” criminal gang. The Inspector keeps a cool head when arresting the bandits, who, as terrible as they are, are afraid of him (III.8.21, 668), and shows his “highly efficient micromanagement of events” (Grossman 82), as well as discreet irony (Dubois “L’Affreux Javert” 26) and a sense of humor that were so far unknown to the reader.¹⁴ In all his actions and speeches, the Inspector appears as the quiet hero of a crime novel who comes to the rescue of the innocent, which both emphasizes his opposition to “real” villains and his shared interests with Valjean through their common enemy Thénardier.

[21] The scrupulous civil servants’ opposition to “real” villains, their blind faith in law and order and their moral rigidity make them strange kinds of monsters: they are virtuous monsters. *Les Misérables*’s narrator calls the Inspector a “monstrous Saint Michael” (I.8.3, 243). Whilst Javert certainly does not consider himself a monster, the Operative is more lucid regarding his condition, as he declares: “I am a monster. What I do is evil. I have no illusion about it, but it must be done”

(01:05:56-06:02). Here, the Operative remarkably expresses his awareness about the burden of duty. Like a Machiavel, for whom politics and morals are separated, the Operative claims that the end justifies the means. As Jeffrey Bussolini (150-52) argues, “he regularly commits undemocratic acts in order to defend democracy.”

[22] The main adversaries of the civil servants are not common criminals; they are the heroes of *Serenity* and *Les Misérables*. For the Operative and the Inspector, they are the bad guys because they broke the law: Mal Reynolds is a smuggler, River Tam is an escapee, her brother Simon is her accomplice, and the whole crew of *Serenity* are outlaws; Jean Valjean is a thief and a convict who broke his parole. Whereas the civil servants cannot see beyond the law, the audience of *Serenity* and the readers of *Les Misérables* share neither this perspective nor the rigid code of masculine honor that guides both the Operative and the Inspector. They forgive Mal and Valjean their infringement of the law because they value a higher sort of justice, and they adopt a different moral system: a moral system made of nuances, in which free will and atonement are essential. Indeed, Victor Hugo does not hesitate to compare Jean Valjean to Christ (for instance one chapter is called “He, Too, Bears His Cross” [V.3.4]): like Jesus, he is the victim of unfair human justice. However, as Dubois (“Le Crime de Valjean” 321-22) points out, Valjean’s flawless philanthropy and his insistent “goody two-shoes” image can hardly appeal to modern readers, especially those who are familiar with Joss Whedon’s nuanced portrayals of atonement, notably through the character of Angel. As for Mal Reynolds, he has gone down exactly the opposite path of Jean Valjean: his story is that of a man who has lost faith in the face of adversity, while Hugo’s hero has found faith through his encounter with the bishop of Digne. Although no such comparison with Christ can be found in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Mal’s decision to misbehave and to broadcast the message to the whole ‘Verse testifies of a possible renewed faith in humanity. Moreover, Mal is depicted throughout the show and the film as a

man of honor. David Magill has analyzed the masculinity of Mal Reynolds and showed how it is based on an ethical code, although less rigid than that of the Operative: “take care of your crew; protect the weak and help the needy; exercise lethal violence with restraint” (80; see also Jencson on Mal’s “moral economy” par. 13; De Jesus 88; 91). Mal, indeed, exercises reluctantly a kind of philanthropy more realistic and therefore more appealing to the viewer than that of Jean Valjean.

The Hunt

[23] The plots of *Serenity* and *Les Misérables* are based on the scrupulous civil servants tracking the so-called villains to arrest or even kill them.¹⁵ Hunting constitutes an obvious symbol of a ferocious masculinity (for instance, when the hounds are given their quarry to eat), but it also signifies rational masculinity, because the hunter uses reason to interpret clues and find his prey. Hugo’s novel contains numerous references to hunting, especially at the end of the second part, “Cosette,” when Javert has discovered that Jean Valjean is alive and hiding in Paris: he tracks him down and attempts to set him up, but Valjean manages to get away and to hide in a convent. The book narrating this manhunt (II.5) is called “A Mute Pack of Hounds for a Dirty Hunt.” On the one hand, Javert is compared to a dog (“He bent his head and thought hard, like a bloodhound putting his nose to the ground to pick up the right trail” [10, 394]), to a huntsman (“a hunter can’t be too careful when he is hunting nervous animals like a wolf or a convict.” [395]), to a tiger who finds his prey (“In this world there are two beings who are thrilled to the marrow: a mother when she finds her child again and a tiger who catches up with its prey. Javert experienced that profound thrill” [393-94]) and to an animal who likes to play with his prey (“the rapture of a spider letting a fly flit about or of a cat letting a mouse run around free” [394]).¹⁶ On the other hand, Jean Valjean is compared to a hunted beast (“Jean Valjean gave the shudder of an animal whose scent has been picked up again.” [II.5.2, 375]; see also II.5.1, 372).

[24] The reference to hunting is not as overt in *Serenity* as in *Les Misérables*, but it is nevertheless present. During the encounter at the temple, Mal throws *Serenity*'s pulse beacon at the Operative (who was erroneously led to believe that he was detecting the signal of the ship) and explains to him that one should use one's own eyes to find a person, opening the statement with "Advice from an old tracker" (00:51:10-11). Afterwards, numerous electronic trackers are seen to be sent in different directions while the Operative thinks: "There must be another way to track this ship" (00:53:54-56). Indeed, his new method is radical: slaying all the persons who have ever given shelter to the crew of *Serenity*. After the massacre at Haven, the Operative explains his action to Mal by referring to hunting: "If your quarry goes to ground, leave no ground to go to" (01:05:14-17). Like Jean Valjean and Cosette, Mal, River and the others have become the hunted prey of a civil servant.

[25] These scrupulous civil servants have different weapons to hunt and catch their enemies: their virility, their phallic symbols (the sword and the stick), their cleverness, which enables them to decipher clues (Dubois "L'Affreux Javert" 33), their lackeys, and the support of their governments. Their most powerful weapon is, nevertheless, their gaze. As Dubois ("L'Affreux Javert" 19) and Kathryn Grossman (100-01) note, Javert's penetrating eye is one of his main attributes: "Javert's gaze was terrible," summarizes the narrator of *Les Misérables* (V.3.9, 1069). Indeed, Inspector Javert is gifted with piercing eyes that are often compared with cold, metallic tools, which scrutinize, search, penetrate, and accuse ("His stare was a corkscrew. It was cold and piercing" [I.5.5, 144]). Like Medusa's stare (Dubois "L'Affreux Javert" 20), Javert's is able to petrify his victims (I.5.5, 145); that is, to terrify them to the point of reducing them to immobility and inaction. Even the infamous criminals of the "Patron-Minette" gang are afraid of the Inspector. If Javert is perceived as a hunting dog and a bird of prey ("Madeleine [...] met the falcon eye of Javert still fixed on him" [I.5.6, 148]), he is also a formidable tiger: "He [Jean Valjean]

had the impression you would have if you had suddenly come face-to-face with a tiger in the dark. He leaped back, frightened stiff” (II.4.5, 368). When encountering this tiger of justice, apparently, the only way of surviving is, as the criminals have shown, to flee and hide. Valjean does not act differently when he runs away with Cosette and hides in a convent.

[26] The Operative is as scary as the Inspector, in spite of his soft voice and mild gaze. Mal Reynolds, nonetheless, does not realize it straight away and underestimates his opponent, when he comes to the temple to look for a fight, as the insightful Inara points out (00:56:04-05). His fight with the Operative starts to open his eyes; the discovery of the massacre of his allies at Haven and on other planets enlightens him; so does his conversation with the Operative, who, as mentioned before, reveals his belief that the end justifies the means, even when this means murdering children (01:05:24-28). When they meet again at the backup transmitter, the unusually angry Operative is terrifying. The shadow that partially conceals his face emphasizes by contrast his eyes, and, during his final fight with Mal, his stare looks as terrible as that of Javert (for instance 01:33:15). At first, like Jean Valjean, Mal and his crew consider running and hiding. However, this survival technique is not the best one. It is when the heroes decide to confront the scrupulous civil servants, when Valjean surrenders to Javert and when Mal fights with the Operative, when they expose the civil servants to their contradictions, that they can survive.

The Epiphany

[27] Hunting the “villains” ends when the civil servants experience an epiphany, or, as the narrator of *Les Misérables* puts it in the book “Javert Derailed” (V.4), “[a] new thing, a revolution, a catastrophe” (V.4, 1079).¹⁷ They discover a weak spot in the social system in which they believe: “there may be error in dogma, [...] the code does not have the last word [...], the courts can be wrong!” (1084). Javert realizes that his enemy is actually a good man; that a criminal can be a saint (1081-82). Jean

Valjean spared the life of Javert and freed him at the barricade and later surrendered to him; in return, Javert lets his prisoner go and intentionally drowns in the river. As for the Operative, it is not so much the enemy who has been misinterpreted, but rather it is the Alliance that has been idealized. When hearing the message, the Operative realizes that the authoritarian regime is corrupt because it has pacified the inhabitants of Miranda to the point of killing them and turning some of them into monsters in order to create a world without sin. The respective systems that defined the identities of the Operative and Javert collapse under the weight of these revelations: “All the axioms that had propped up his whole life collapsed before that man,” the narrator of *Les Misérables* states (1081). For the first time, the Inspector experiences doubt and uncertainty (1079; 1082). Likewise, for the first time, the Operative shows benevolent emotion, as he sheds tears while watching the holographic recording (01:41:23-35).

[28] The reaction of the protagonist from *Les Misérables* is, however, different. Javert cannot admit such a change. Whilst finally embracing the “justice of the heart” (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 322) promoted by Hugo through Jean Valjean—“some indefinable sense of justice according to God’s rules that was the reverse of justice according to man” (V.4, 1082), he cannot renounce the “justice of the code” (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 322; see V.4, 1086). His farewell letter, written in a Parisian police station before drowning, shows his extreme—even ridiculous due to the tragic circumstances—dedication to improving the justice system and, surprisingly, a kind of altruism that reminds the readers of Valjean’s own generosity, as the Inspector thinks about improving the living conditions of inmates (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 331-32).¹⁸ Nevertheless, Javert fails to embrace completely Jean Valjean’s philanthropy. As the moral law that incited him to free Valjean infringes the human law (“he had just committed a terrible offence. He had just turned a blind eye to a recidivist in breach of his ban. [...] He had just robbed the laws of a man who was theirs by rights” [1084]), Javert feels compelled to commit suicide in order to

reconcile the two laws. Indeed, “suicide appears as the stubborn expression of someone who can find no solution to his contradiction and whose reasoning is stuck” (Dubois “Le Crime de Valjean” 325-26; my translation).

[29] In contrast, the Operative accepts the change: he kills neither the crew of *Serenity* nor himself; he retires from the Alliance system and, like his former enemies, he becomes an outlaw. However, his last statement, “There is nothing left to see” (01:45:47-49), is ambiguous. Rhonda Wilcox (160) states: “In the end of the story, acknowledging that Captain Mal Reynolds is right, the Operative also acknowledges that he is nothing but ‘a shadow’ himself.” Whilst this reading is sound, the Operative’s statement arguably has, not one, but two implications. On the one hand, it can suggest that the Operative is willing to kill himself, like Javert, because he feels disillusioned towards the institution that he used to serve and its promise to make a better world, but is not ready to embrace the counter-model that Reynolds and his crew embody.¹⁹ On the other hand, it can underline the annihilation of his old self, the scrupulous civil servant who blindly followed orders and was unable to think by himself and criticize the masculine model imposed by the Alliance, to allow a new masculine identity to emerge. In other words, and contrary to De Jesus (93) and Nadkarni’s (par. 25) pessimistic interpretations, the Operative finds his free will and becomes able to make his own choices when leaving the Alliance. This hypothesis is more convincing because it corresponds to the hopeful atmosphere that characterizes the ending of *Serenity*, with the crew re-building the spaceship, Kaylee finally having sex with Simon, and River replacing the late Wash as the pilot of *Serenity*, thus starting a new cycle of life. Here, the ineluctability of change includes the acceptance of a new identity. Previously, like Javert, the Operative was deprived of his own identity, as he was assimilated to the order that he served; once he starts to doubt the Alliance, once masculine insecurity is acknowledged, he can construct his own identity.

[30] Finally, I would like to mention the impact of the Operative's development of a new identity on the representation of masculinity in the film. Contrary to Javert, who does not fully accept his agency and his own morals, the Operative embraces his autonomy: "I'm no longer their man," he claims (01:45:31-33). His rupture from the political model of the Alliance also implies his rejecting the dominant virile model that the institution promoted and his adopting new values. Both *Serenity* and *Les Misérables* agree that traditional virility is nefarious to women (say, for instance, Fantine and the whores of "Heart of Gold" [1.13]), but also to men. Research has highlighted the dangers of the hegemonic model to men by showing that they have a shorter life expectancy because they are encouraged to be careless with their health, obsessed with performance, and turned into cannon fodder (Badinter 209-11; Beynon 77; Dunaway par. 26; Edwards 14-15). The ending of *Serenity* suggests that the Operative will escape the rigid masculine code that dominated his life and join counter-Alliance activism (Jencson par. 47). Moreover, he will certainly embrace Mal's code of honor, composed of "feminine" values and emotions, such as generosity, protectiveness, and rejection of gratuitous violence, as he spared the lives of the crew of *Serenity* and helped them to recover.²⁰ The alternative model of masculinity promoted by Mal (and Valjean) and embraced by the Operative corresponds to what Élisabeth Badinter calls "the reconciled man," that is, "the *gentle man* [*sic*] who can combine solidity and sensitivity" (239; original emphasis, my translation). By converting the Operative to this model, Mal succeeds where Jean Valjean failed: making a disciple of his own version of the "justice of the heart."

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Notes

¹ For people little acquainted with this nineteenth-century French novel, let us summarize briefly the plot of *Les Misérables*. The novel tells the story of Jean Valjean, a man who stole bread to feed his family and was consequently condemned to forced labor. Liberated after nineteen years, he realizes that French society is not willing to rehabilitate him. His encounter with the bishop of Digne encourages him to make amends and follow the path of goodness. Jean Valjean changes his name and, under the identity of the businessman and mayor Monsieur Madeleine, becomes the benefactor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, an impoverished town in northern France. Madeleine is recognized by Inspector Javert as the former convict who broke his parole. Forced to reveal his true identity, Valjean manages to escape Javert and, while being on the run, he adopts Cosette, the daughter of a dead prostitute, who was entrusted to the Thénardiens, a wicked couple of innkeepers; he raises her as if she were his own daughter. Javert does not give up the case; his path crosses Jean Valjean's more than once, but he does not manage to arrest him despite his best efforts. Towards the end of the novel, Valjean surrenders to the Inspector, but the latter lets him go before drowning in the Parisian river.

² Javert grew up during the Old Regime, under the Bourbon dynasty; he experienced the French Revolution (1789-99) and the short-lived First Republic (1792-1804), served as a lifeguard at the *bagne* of Toulon (a penal colony) when Napoleon was the Emperor of the French (1804-14/15), worked as a police inspector in Montreuil-sur-Mer, and then in Paris, during the Restoration of the Bourbon dynasty (1814/15-30), and pursued this function during the July Monarchy (1830-48), a constitutional monarchy.

³ The novel is divided into five parts "Fantine," "Cosette," "Marius," "The Idyll of the Rue Plumet and the Epic of the Rue Saint-Denis," and "Jean Valjean;" each of which is divided into books and chapters. The Roman numeral refers to the part, whereas the next two Arabic numerals respectively refer to the book and the chapter; the number after the comma refers to the page of the edition used. "Javert Derailed" (V.4) constitutes an exception, as it is both a book and a chapter.

⁴ For instance, Bernard Blier in Jean-Paul Le Chanois's film (1958), Anthony Perkins in Glenn Jordan's TV film (1978), and John Malkovich in Josée Dayan's TV series (2000).

⁵ Andrea Beaghton notes the same casting of "physically imposing" actors for the West End musical (152-53) and for the musical film (154-55), but emphasizes the fact that Russell Crowe's looks do not correspond to that of Hugo's Javert.

⁶ For example, on his way to the barricade, Marius Pontmercy (Cosette's lover) seems eager to have the approval of his dead father, a colonel in the Great Army, regarding his involvement in the insurrection of 1832 (IV.13.3, 923-24).

⁷ As Linda Jean Jencson (like other scholars) points out: "His [Whedon's] stories are intended—and taken—as metaphors for the world in which we live" (par. 5).

⁸ For instance, Patience in the pilot "Serenity" (1.01), Niska in "The Train Job" (1.02) and "War Stories" (1.10), Burgess in "Heart of Gold" (1.13), and, to a lesser extent, Higgins in "Jaynestown" (1.07)

⁹ My interpretation thus differs greatly from Desirée De Jesus's (92), as she analyzes the Operative as an embodiment of the brutal black buck.

¹⁰ On the Operative's fanatic religious belief and its link with his racial identity, see De Jesus's article.

¹¹ Simon, who received the best education from the Alliance, is first convinced that Reavers are "campfire stories" ("Serenity" 00:52:35-36), while Jayne, who knows well of their existence, compares them to "the bogeyman from stories" (*Serenity* 00:26:55-57).

¹² A relevant example is the Guild of Companions, to which Inara belongs. It is comprised of highly skilled courtesans who are submitted to an annual physical examination in order to renew their license (“Ariel” [1.09]) and who apparently despise unregistered prostitutes such as those shown in “Heart of Gold.” It is such compartmentalization of society that *Firefly* and *Serenity* denounce.

¹³ Thénardier ambushes Jean Valjean in his lair, with the help of “Patron-Minette”, but Inspector Javert and his men enter the den to free the victim (Javert ignores that it is Valjean) and arrest the criminals, while Valjean manages to run away.

¹⁴ When the gangsters argue to decide which one will escape first and one of them suggests to draw lots, Javert offers his hat to them (III.8.20, 667), and he advises them not to leave by the window as it is dangerous (21, 668).

¹⁵ Beaghton (144; 147; 156) points out that, due to the constraints of adaptation, the story of Javert is often reduced to his pursuit of Jean Valjean.

¹⁶ References to the game of cat and mouse appear many times (for instance “Looks like the mouse caught the cat,” Gavroche tells Javert when he is held prisoner at the barricade [IV.12.7, 913]; “Javert now displayed a sort of arrogant confidence, the confidence of a cat allowing a mouse the freedom of the length of its claw” [V.3.11, 1073]).

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of Javert’s “crisis of identity,” see Grossman (89-94)

¹⁸ For instance: “For a dropped thread, ten sous are held back from a prisoner in the weaving workshop; this is an abuse on the part of the contractor, since the cloth is just as good.” (V.4, 1087)

¹⁹ Indeed, on the forum *Fireflyfans.net*, one fan hopes that “the Operative doesn’t jump off a bridge” like Javert.

²⁰ It is also the code of other heroes of Joss Whedon, like Buffy and Angel (think of the slogan of Angel Investigations, “We help the hopeless”).