Les Miserables – How Society Affects Human Nature Essay, Research Paper

In Les Miserables, Victor Hugo portrays human nature in a neutral state. Humans are born with neither good nor bad instincts, but rather society affects our actions and thoughts. Hugo portrays the neutral state of mind through Jean Valjean and Cosette. The two extremes of good and evil are represented through Th?nardier and the bishop. Good and evil coexists in the society and affects Valjean and Cosette. It is the two extremes of good and evil that dictate the lives of Valjean and Cosette. The bishop represents charity and love. Everything he’s ever had, he gave to charity. When the bishop first met Valjean, he said, “You need not tell me who you are. This is not my house; it is the house of Christ. It does not ask any comer whether he has a name, but whether he has an affliction. You are suffering; you are hungry and thirsty; be welcome. And do not thank me; do not tell me that I take you into my house….. whatever is here is yours.” (pg. 15-16) The bishop didn’t look at him as a convict; he looked at him as a fellow brother. Later, when the bishop found out that Valjean stole his silver, he wasn’t mad, but offered all of his silver to Valjean saying, “Don’t forget that you promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.” Th?nardier, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of the bishop. He represents the corruptive nature of society. He’s the one that changes people for the bad. An example of how Th?nardier represents greed and evil is how he mistreated Cosette when he was taking care of her. He made her wash and clean, while letting his kids run around and play. Th?nardier took advantage of Cosette’s mother, Fantine. He kept on asking her for more money, when in fact he didn’t really need it. When it was cold, Th?nardier told

Fantine that her daughter was cold and they needed money for a wool skirt. This was just an excuse to get money. Also, Th?nardier billed Fantine forty francs to cure a fever that Cosette had supposedly contracted (pg. 56). Fantine had to sell her hair and teeth just to

meet Th?nardier’s demands. Later, she had to become a prostitute because she didn’t have enough money. Jean Valjean was affected by society in many ways. Valjean was poor and needed to feed his family, so he stole a loaf of bread. Consequently, he was sentenced to five years in jail. Trying to escape, Valjean’s sentence was lengthened to nineteen years. The harsh treatment that Valjean received from prison corrupted the goodness inside of him and turned him into a bad person. If he wasn’t poor, he wouldn’t have had to steal. As a result, society beat down on him. Jean Valjean struggled to survive, living in poverty. When he got out of prison, he walked twelve leagues from Toulon (page 13) to Paris, but the people refused to give him a room. Valjean went to all the Inns, but everyone, knowing that he was an ex-convict, refused him. After time, society changed Valjean’s human nature. He became good with the help of the bishop. At first, Valjean thought he would always be looked upon as a convict, so he was bad and stole. Valjean described himself as “less than a dog” (pg. 9; 1961 ver.) His last criminal deed was when he stole the coin from little Gervais (pg. 31). When Valjean became M. Madeleine and M. Leblanc, he was good and gave lots of charity. The bishop gave Valjean a sense of hope. He gave him a whole new life. Valjean couldn’t have changed without the help of the bishop. Cosette was affected by human nature in many ways as well. She experienced both goodness and evil. At first, Cosette’s environment was harsh, therefore, she was harsh. When Cosette lived with Th?nardier, she was deprived of her childhood. Cosette was forced to do all the chores. Thinking that she was a slave child, Cosette had low self-esteem and thought of herself as displeasing and ugly. When Cosette moved in with Valjean, she realized that she was just a kid. She learned to have fun and played like the others. Being in a caring and loving environment made Cosette realize that she was in fact beautiful and educated. She also grew to love a man by the name of Marius. Victor Hugo shows that good and evil coexists. Through the use of symbolism, he portrays the two extremes using Th?nardier and the bishop. Through the use of these characters, he shows how society dictates the actions and thoughts of man. Man is born neither good nor evil. It is society which causes man to either be good or evil.