Rich VS Poor in 19th Century France

Hugo was convinced that one social reform that needed to happen was to close the gap between the very rich and the very poor of his time period and country.

19th century France was still a peasant nation, with three out of four Frenchmen making their living by farming, many of whom were poverty-stricken. The government was just beginning to think about welfare programs, but didn’t institute them until much later on in the century, so there was little to no government aid for those without any home or money.

The poor class was also known as “the dangerous class,” as they were seen as lazy, immoral, and sinful people who were usually vagabonds, beggars, criminals, or prostitutes. Of course, some of this was correct since their desperate situation often forced them into criminal activities, such as stealing food like Jean Valjean or prostitution like Fantine.

Children in particular were in a bad situation, as they were often abandoned, became wards of the state, or remained in unstable home environments where they sometimes were abused or sold into prostitution. Some facts about children in 19th Century France are:

1. The upper class believed that children of the poor inherited their parents’ criminal tendencies, so they didn’t want to take them in when they were abandoned.
2. The government set up a program in 1801 that would take abandoned children.
3. One way you could turn your child over to the state was to leave it at a hospice by dropping it off yourself or the police would take the baby from the hospital once the parents signed a statement saying that they didn’t want the baby.
4. When delivering the baby to the hospice, parents would place the baby on a turntable in a window and then ring a bell to signal the hospice that a new baby was at the window. Babies were taken in, cleaned, and given an identification necklace with the day they were left engraved on the necklace. Due to unsanitary conditions (such as milk being left out for days), one half of babies abandoned at hospices died.

Women were another group that had a very difficult time in 19th century France. In Paris, 3% of women lived on the streets, 25% of women lived with their families or friends, 20% lived in the households where they were employed as servants, and the other 52% lived in very poor housing, often in the center of the old cities.

In contrast to the poverty stricken multitudes in 19th century France, the middle and upper class of French society enjoyed a more carefree lifestyle, with their biggest concerns being obeying the rules of society, such as:

1. The Sumptuary Laws were 18 laws about the type of clothing that different classes of people could wear. For example, only the upper class could wear gold, pearls, or velvet, while the lower class was not even permitted to wear jewelry. Thus, just by looking at what a person was wearing, you knew immediately which class he or she belonged to.
2. When going to a ball, there were certain rules that you had to follow, or you would be banished, such as: when greeting a hostess of a party, women had to slightly incline the head and smile while men were expected to bow and make a pleasant observation about the hostess. Women were also not allowed to ask men to dance or to have unauthorized conversations with unmarried men.