Les Misérables Study Guide

“You are right, Sir, when you say that
Les Misérables is written for a universal audience.
I don’t know whether it will be read by everyone,
but it is meant for everyone”

- Victor Hugo

Les Misérables

When Victor Hugo’s novel Les Misérables first came out in 1862, people in Paris and elsewhere lined up to buy it. Although critics were less receptive, the novel was an instant popular success. The French word “misérables” means both poor wretches and scoundrels or villains. The novel offers a huge cast that includes both kinds of “misérables.” A product of France’s most prominent Romantic writer, Les Misérables ranges far and wide. It paints a vivid picture of Paris’s seamier side, discusses the causes and results of revolution, and includes discourses on topics ranging from the Battle of Waterloo to Parisian street slang. But the two central themes that dominate the novel are the moral redemption of its main character, Jean Valjean, an ex-convict, and the moral redemption of a nation through revolution. Victor Hugo said: “I condemn slavery, I banish poverty, I teach ignorance, I treat disease, I lighten the night, and I hate hatred. That is what I am, and that is why I have written Les Misérables.” The novel is a critical statement against human suffering, poverty, and ignorance. Its purpose is as much political as it is artistic.

Historical Background

Victor Hugo arranged the events of Les Misérables in and around Paris between 1796 and 1833. This was a tumultuous revolutionary era in France’s history and was a particularly dismal period for the poor. To understand the plights of the characters in this novel, one must understand the historical struggles to which these characters react.

France endured an extended era of revolution spanning from 1789 to 1852. With Paris as the center of discontent, this period witnessed numerous rulers, from kings, to dictators, to presidents. France had long adhered to a rigid class system, and the only people with any power or influence were the wealthy. In response to poverty, inflation, and food shortages, peasant uprisings began. King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette were executed by a new liberal revolutionary order, hence began the Terror in 1792. During this time, anti-revolutionaries were mercilessly executed, and the anti-church sentiment resulted in the destruction of numerous churches. By 1796, the power had shifted, and the Directory of conservative bourgeois ruled France by intimidation, enlisting the army to squelch any anti-government riots. This period birthed serious economic problems in an already troubled economy, and in 1799, a brigadier named Napoleon overthrew the Directory.

Napoleon appealed to France and awarded peasants what they had won in the revolution, restored the church, and wrote a code of laws. Of course, he established himself as a dictator/emperor and focused his time and France’s money on foreign conquest. By 1811, a serious economic crisis in France and Napoleon’s loss of military might have led to Napoleon’s surrender. In 1814, Napoleon was exiled to Elba, and Louis XVIII, the Bourbon monarch, was welcomed to the throne in hopes that he would repair France’s economy and social system. In 1815, Napoleon returned to France, resumed power, gathered an army, and continued his quest for a European empire. He was defeated at Waterloo, and the Restoration ensued.
According to the Restoration, Europe was restored to its pre-1789 structure. Since this required France to lose territory, those soldiers who helped conquer those territories were treated as though those battles never occurred. This meant that France denied Napoleon’s soldiers their earned ranks and awards of valor. France assigned these soldiers ranks and pensions in accordance with the ranks they would have achieved under the old order. Despite this setback to the military, Louis XVIII returned to the throne from 1815 to 1824 and helped an exhausted France recover peacefully.

France entered a recession and experienced the beginning of the industrial revolution. Charles X, another Bourbon monarch who ruled from 1824 – 1830, accepted the throne after Louis XVIII. Charles X demonstrated his allegiance to the old order by restoring the old church and the aristocratic control of power. This again instigated social, political, and intellectual upheaval, and the revolution reignited. In 1830, a bad harvest, an economic crisis, and a strong anti-Bourbon sentiment led to insurgency and barricades in the streets. Charles abdicated the throne.

**Pre-Reading Background**

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Both natural and official justice fail the hero of the story, Jean Valjean, proving how cruelly law and society can treat honest people. Valjean attempts to live a good and honorable life, but his high moral values do not bring him rewards until the end of his life. For most of the story he is forced to live the life of a criminal, always on the watch for the police. The real criminal, Thénardier, escapes to America with a small fortune. Inspector Javert represents official justice. He is not interested in anything outside the bare facts of a case and never takes account of human suffering. His kind of justice upholds the harsh social system.

To enjoy this kind of literature, we often have to suspend our disbelief. There is a great deal of coincidence in Hugo’s story. The central characters bump into each other many times by chance and the reader may sometimes get the impression that only a few people inhabit the great city of Paris. The characters often disguise themselves, too, and go unrecognized even by people who know them well. As readers, we have to accept that these things have to happen to carry the story along.

*Note* – the original text was written in French then translated to English. During Hugo's life, he authorized at least three editions of *Les Misérables*. In some editions he used the "D-" to represent the town of Digne, but in the 1880 edition, made near the end of his life he authorized a version using the full names of the towns, which was his written request. The version you will be reading has the names of towns and some people blocked out. You will see the first letter, then a dash instead of the rest of the name.

The publishers of the earlier editions asked for the place names to be blanked out just in case they got sued by the real mayor of Monstreuil and the real Bishop of Digne. Novelistic convention of this time period, tend to do
this. At first, it was because the authors used real people as their model, and, to avoid any libel suits, they chose to leave the names blank so that the readers may laugh at their satirical caricature without those people coming knocking at their doors. Either that, or, to both move it away from an actual setting and avoid, accidentally or purposely, connecting it to real people. It is also done with dates for the same reason.

**Study Guide Questions**

**Book I - “Fantine”**

1. Using examples from the novel, explain the meaning of the narrator’s statement “Ignominy thirsts for respect.”
2. How did society turn its back on Jean Valjean?
3. How did the Bishop of Digne help Jean Valjean?
4. What is the effect of the Bishop’s kindness on Jean Valjean?
5. Why does Fantine leave Cosette, and why do the Thenardiers take her in?
6. Why does Monsieur Madeleine reveal his true identity even though it means he must go back to prison?
7. Which examples of poverty and bad treatment to the poor have you found in these chapters?

**Book II - “Cosette”**

8. How do you feel when you read about Fantine’s short and terrible life? Why?
9. Describe Fantine’s efforts to make a life for herself and her child and how society and specific individuals contribute to her destruction.
10. How do you feel when you read about the treatment of Cosette at the hands of the Thenardiers? Why?
11. How does Cosette change Valjean’s attitude toward life?
12. Explain the kindness of Fauchelevent, the gardener at the convent in Paris.

**Book III - “Marius”**

14. Explain the beliefs that were instilled into Marius Pontmercy as a young child and how these beliefs changed as he learned more about himself and his country.
15. Explain how his association with the Friends of the ABC caused Marius to question his new-found beliefs.
16. Explain why Marius leaves the home of his grandfather, and why he refuses money from him.
17. To what is Hugo referring when he writes, “For five years Marius had lived in poverty, in privation, in distress even, but he perceived that he had never known real misery?”
18. The author states “Marius almost reproached himself with the fact that he had been so absorbed in his reveries (daydreams) and passion that he had not until now cast a glance upon his neighbors. Paying their rent was a mechanical impulse; everybody would have had that impulse.” Why does Marius say this and do you agree?
19. Describe the type of person Jondrette (Thenardier) is. Use examples from the text for support.
20. What is similar about Cosette’s and Marius’s early lives?

**Book IV - “Saint Denis”**

21. What does Marius discover can be even more hideous than the evil rich, and to whom specifically is he referring?
22. Explain what Cosette discovers about herself in this section of the book.
23. Hugo states, “The power of a glance has been so much abused in love stories, that it has come to be disbelieved in. Few people dare now to say that two beings have fallen in love because they have looked at each other. Yet it is in this way that love begins, and in this way only.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.

24. Why is Marius eager to put his life in jeopardy by going to fight at the barracks?

25. Reflect on these words spoken by Enjolras: "This barricade is made neither of paving stones, nor of timbers, nor of iron; it is made of two mounds, a mound of ideas and a mound of sorrows." Choose two of the characters who exemplify this statement and explain why they became involved in the insurrection at the barricade.

26. The rebels know they have no chance against the soldiers. Why do you think they still fight to death?

**Book V - “Jean Valjean”**

27. Why does Jean Valjean go to the barracks where Marius is, after receiving Gavroche’s note from Marius to Cosette?

28. When given the opportunity to shoot Javert, why does Jean Valjean let him go free?

29. Explain what happens to Javert and why you think he does what he does.

30. Explain why Jean Valjean reveals his past to Marius.

31. What is ironic about Thenardier going to Marius to tell him that Jean Valjean was an assassin and robber?

32. Explain the significance of the title of this novel.

33. In a critical study of *Les Misérables* from 1974, John Porter Houston pointed out that Jean Valjean's "self-redemption is accomplished through saving others." Choose one episode of the novel and explain how Jean did save someone else from harm or evil and how this action brought him closer to God and a more moral existence.

34. The evil Thénardier gets away with a fortune. Fantine dies just when she achieves happiness. Valjean enjoys only a few moments of comfort at the end of his life. His honesty during his life denied him material happiness. It seems that dishonesty is rewarded and honesty is punished. What is Hugo’s moral message here?

35. Why do you think that Victor Hugo said ‘books like this are always going to be needed’?

**“Final Question”**

36. Can one person make a difference in making the world a better place? Explain.

**Investigating Thematic Elements**

37. The basic problem central to Hugo’s work is stated in its title: *Les Misérables*, or “the miserable ones.” Today, we would call them the poor, or the homeless. Poverty is an international problem which continues to grow every year. How do you feel about the homeless and the poor?


39. How do you think poor people feel about the way they are treated?

40. Today, many believe, like Javert, that no mercy should be shown to criminals. Do you agree with this? Why?

41. When Valjean is released from prison he is given a yellow ticket of leave, effectively branding him a criminal to all he meets, making it impossible for him to lead a normal life again. How does our society treat people on parole, or ex-convicts? Are they able to lead normal lives again? Why or why not?

42. A great percentage of convicts released from prison end up back in jail soon after. Why is this, and what does it say about our “rehabilitation” system?
43. The students in *Les Misérables* believe that there are things worth fighting for. Do you agree with them? Why?
44. The students are taking the law into their own hands. Do you think they are right or wrong? Is such action ever justified?
45. Did the students at the barricade die in vain? How do you measure whether the death of a young person in such a circumstance is “worthwhile?”
46. Discuss the Thénardiers as individuals living in a savage society who have lost their humanity and become brutes. Are there people in our society who fit this description?

47. *Les Misérables* is one of the most widely read novels of all time, and the show has been received with immense success around the world. How do you explain its great appeal to so many different kinds of audiences over more than 130 years?
48. What makes a theme “universal?”
49. List the universal themes in *Les Misérables* and explain why they are universal
50. In *Les Misérables* (the Broadway show), the beggars sing “When’s it going to end? When we gonna live? Something’s gotta happen now or something’s gonna give”; what do they mean by this?
51. In the story of *Les Misérables*, what reforms does Victor Hugo indirectly or directly advocate to fight social injustice?
52. Each of the characters in the story deal with the problem of *Les Misérables* in a different way. Describe how each of these characters see the poor:
   1. Jean Valjean
   2. The Bishop of Digne
   3. Javert
   4. Enjolras
   5. Thénardier
53. Which of these viewpoints do you agree with? Which do you think Victor Hugo agreed with?
54. Describe how Hugo uses his characters to describe his view of human nature. How does each character represent another facet of Hugo’s view?
55. Discuss Hugo’s undying belief that man can become perfect. How does Jean Valjean’s life illustrate this belief? In the end, what does Jean Valjean prove with his life?
56. Javert is a watchdog of the legal process. He applies the letter of the law to every lawbreaker, without exception. Should he have applied other standards to a man like Jean Valjean? Why?
57. What does Javert say about his past that is a clue to his nature?
58. What finally destroys Javert? Hugo says he is “an owl forced to gaze with an eagle.” What does this mean?
59. The figure of Justice is always portrayed as being blindfolded, that is, completely blind to anything but objective facts. Write about your thoughts on “blind justice”. Is justice ever completely blind? Is it ever completely blind in *Les Misérables*?
60. Both Jean Valjean and Thénardier commit crimes in *Les Misérables*: Valjean first steals food to feed his family, then breaks parole when he is treated like an outcast by society, while Thénardier commits fraud and robbery for his own ends. Remember the blindfolded figure of Justice: should Valjean and Thénardier be treated differently by the Justice system? Is there a place for mercy in the Law? How so?

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**Top Ten Quotes**

**Directions** - choose FIVE quotes to focus on. Read the quote and type up a response to the quote. Your response should include the following,

a. an interpretation of what the quote means in your own words
b. an explanation of whether or not you agree or disagree with the quote as stated (*you may use
the first person point of view while writing this section)
c. use specific examples from the novel to support your interpretation of the quote.

1. "So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation which, in the midst of
civilization, artificially creates a hell on earth, and complicates with human fatality a destiny that is divine; so
long as the three problems of the century - the degradation of man by the exploitation of his labor, the ruin of
women by starvation, and the atrophy of childhood by physical and spiritual night - are not solved; so long as,
in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a still broader point of view, so
long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, there should be a need for books such as this." (Preface)

2. "The bishop approached him and said, in a low voice, 'Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use
this silver to become an honest man.' Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of any such promise, stood
dumbfounded. The bishop had stressed these words as he spoke them. He continued solemnly, 'Jean Valjean,
my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from
dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!'" (105-6)

3. "An army is a strange composite masterpiece, which strength results from an enormous sum total of utter
weaknesses. Thus only can we explain a war waged by humanity against humanity in spite of humanity." (368-9)

4. "Undoubtedly they [The Thenardiers] seemed very depraved, very corrupt, very vile, very hateful even, but
people rarely fall without becoming degraded. Besides, there is a point when the unfortunate and the infamous
are associated and confused in a word, a mortal word, les miserables; whose fault is it? And then, when the fall
is furthest, is that not when charity should be greatest?" (744)

5. "Yes, the enigma will say its word, the sphinx will speak, the problem will be solved. Yes, the people, rough-
hewn by the eighteenth century, shall be completed by the nineteenth. An idiot is any who doubts it! The future
birth, the speedy birth of universal well-being, is a divinely inevitable phenomenon." (1000)

6. "The mirror reflected the writing, resulting in what geometry calls the symmetric image, by which the writing
reversed on the blotter was corrected by the mirror and presented its original form; and Jean Valjean had
beneath his eyes the letter Cosette had written Marius the evening before. It was simple and devastating."
(1152)

7. "Let us acknowledge it without bitterness, the individual has his distinct interest and may without offense
announce that interest and defend it: The present has its excusable quantum of selfishness; the life of the
moment has its rights and is not bound to sacrifice itself continually to the future. The generation now having its
passing turn on earth is not compelled to abridge it for the generations, its equals after all, that will have their
turn afterward . . . Hence, at certain periods, a deep chill on the magnanimous vanguard of the human race."
(1237)

8. "The book the reader has now before his eyes - from one end to the other; in its whole and in its details,
whatever the omissions, the exceptions, or the faults - is the march from evil to good, from injustice to justice,
from the false to the true, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from rottenness to life, from brutality
to duty, from Hell to Heaven, from nothingness to God. Starting point: matter; goal: the soul. Hydra at the
beginning, angel at the end." (1242)
9. "The history of men is reflected in the history of cloacae." (1260) (* cloacae = a waste pipe that carries away sewage or surface water)

10. "Cosette and Marius fell on their knees, overwhelmed, choked with tears, each grasping one of Jean Valjean's hands. Those noble hands moved no more. He had fallen back, the light from the candlesticks fell across him; his white face looked up toward heaven, he let Cosette and Marius cover his hands with kisses; he was dead. The night was starless and very dark. Without any doubt, in the gloom, some mighty angel was standing, with outstretched wings, waiting for the soul." (1462)