

Les Misérables

Victor Hugo



About the author

Victor Hugo is one of the most famous Romantic writers. For information about him, refer to the Introduction in the reader.

Summary

In *Les Misérables*, set in France in the nineteenth century, there are different stories intertwined and bound together by the life story of its main character, Jean Valjean, a former convict who seeks social redemption by means of good deeds, but is haunted by his past.

Chapter 1: Jean Valjean has just been released after nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. Nobody will give him a bed or a meal, except for a bishop who puts him up for the night at his home. Valjean repays him by stealing his silver and running off into the night. When the police drag Valjean back, the bishop says the silver was a gift and that Valjean is free to go. This one act of kindness changes Valjean forever.

Chapter 2: Fantine is a poor single mother who leaves her small daughter, Cosette, with the Thénardiens in Montfermeil, in order to look for work in a factory in Montreuil. The Thénardiens make Fantine pay a lot of money to take care of her daughter but they actually spend it all on themselves and mistreat the child. Fantine sells her hair and her teeth, and even becomes a prostitute, to provide for Cosette ignoring that the child is starved, dressed in rags, and treated like a slave.

Chapter 3: Valjean changes his name to Monsieur Madeleine and starts a new life and business in Montreuil. He becomes a successful and respected citizen, and even the mayor of his town. Yet, two people there upset his life – Fantine, who accuses him of firing her from her job at a factory and the local inspector of police, M. Javert,

who recognises him as Jean Valjean and wants to send him back to prison. M. Madeleine tries to compensate Fantine by putting her up at his place and helping her to get her daughter back, but she dies. M. Javert finally catches Valjean and sends him back to jail, but he escapes and leaves Montreuil.

Chapter 4: Valjean, looking for Fantine's daughter, arrives in Montfermeil and stays at the Thénardiens' inn. He sees how they treat the little girl and gives a lot of money to them to take Cosette with him. He adopts Cosette, removing her from danger and unhappiness and moving to Paris with her.

Chapter 5: Valjean and Cosette stay in Paris for a while. As he takes care of the girl, he understands what love is for the first time. Valjean gives money to many beggars, and one of them ends up being Inspector Javert in disguise. So Valjean decides that he and Cosette should leave Paris in no time. They are chased by Javert's men but they finally escape.

Chapter 6: Just like many other robbers at wartime, Thénardier steals money and jewellery from dead bodies during the Battle of Waterloo and, by chance, he saves the life of a dying soldier, M. Pontmercy. The man is grateful and makes his own son, Marius, promise that he will help Thénardier if he is ever in need. Marius is a young shy man who works in a bookshop and enjoys walking around the Luxembourg Gardens. One day he sees Valjean and Cosette and falls in love with her at first sight. From that day on, he goes to the park every day to see her. He finds a handkerchief that she dropped and the initial on it leads him to believe that she is called 'Ursula'. Valjean believes that Marius is a policeman and he and Cosette escape once again.

Chapter 7: The Thénardiens are Marius's neighbours but they call themselves 'the Jondrettes' and they continue to lie to people in order to steal from them. Unaware of this, Marius pities them for being so poor and looks through a hole in the wall to see how they live. He sees how one of the Thénardier daughters, Éponine, brings Valjean and Cosette home, since the old man always gives her money at church, and the family pretends to be in a terrible plight. The Thénardiens recognise Valjean and Cosette and they plan to hurt them to get more money from them. Marius witnesses this and warns the police about what the Jondrettes are about to do. The Thénardiens are caught and sent to jail and Marius discovers that his neighbours are the very same family that he is supposed to help.

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Chapter 8: Marius sends money weekly to the the Thénardiens. His disappointment about having lost track of Valjean and Cosette becomes happiness when he runs into one of the Thénardier daughters, who gives him the address of 'Ursula'. Marius leaves a set of love poems for Cosette in her garden and as soon as she finds them she thinks of the handsome man in the Luxembourg Gardens and feels they are his. One evening they meet, they declare their mutual love and kiss. From that day on, they spend wonderful evenings together until Cosette tells him that she and Valjean are leaving for England. Desperate, Marius promises her that he will get enough money to go with them.

Chapter 9: Marius visits his rich grandfather, who brought him up, M. Gillenormand, to ask him for money and for permission to marry Cosette. The old man criticises his looks, his political ideas and his foolish dreams, and refuses to help him. Marius is annoyed by the old man's attitude and leaves his house. Marius's only hope is to meet Cosette for the last time. Yet he is left in despair when he finds that there is nobody at his beautiful girlfriend's house. While there, someone tells him that his friends are waiting for him at the barricade on the rue de la Chanvrière.

Chapter 10: Marius's friends, together with a lot of people, build a barricade to prepare for war. They grow suspicious of an old man, Inspector Javert in disguise, who seems to have come to spy on them. They capture and tie him up. Marius watches the soldiers advance towards the rebels at the barricade and tries to save them. He and his friends fight fiercely. A bullet is aimed at Marius but Éponine, dressed up like a boy, puts herself in front of the gun and gets wounded instead. Marius threatens to blow up the barricade and the soldiers leave. In agony, Éponine tells Marius that she is in love with him and hands him a letter from Cosette. Marius sends a letter to her saying that he cannot marry her and that he will die of love.

Chapter 11: Cosette and Valjean moved to a new house before leaving for England. Valjean discovers the letter that Cosette has written to Marius and remembers the young man in the Luxembourg Gardens. He is afraid that she might abandon him. He meets a boy in the street who brings a letter for Cosette from Marius. Valjean finds out that Marius will die and, even though he feels happy for himself, he knows Cosette will feel miserable, so he decides to help Marius wearing his National Guard uniform.

Chapter 12: Marius and his friends decide that married men should leave the barricade and Valjean arrives just in time to help the rebels fight bravely. Valjean finds that Javert is tied to a post and asks the rebels to allow him to kill the police inspector. They both leave the barricade and Valjean sets Javert free. Marius and the other rebels continue to fight fiercely. He is shot in the shoulder and taken prisoner. All his friends are killed.

Chapter 13: In fact, Marius is taken prisoner by Valjean, who notices that Marius has been wounded and tries to help him. They are trapped between the battlefield and the barricade and Valjean escapes through a hole in the road and then through an underground passage along the sewers carrying Marius. Valjean finds the address of Marius's grandfather in his pocket and he and Javert take the dying body of the young man there. Valjean promises Javert that he will surrender after going home for the last time. Both men go back to Valjean's place. Unable to understand Valjean, Javert kills himself. Against all odds, Marius survives.

Chapter 14: Marius is in a bad health for several months. Once he is out of danger, his grandfather tells him that Cosette has come to visit him disguised as an old man. Gillenormand asks Valjean for Cosette's hand on behalf of his grandson and he agrees to their getting married. On the day of Marius and Cosette's wedding, Valjean confesses the truth about his past to Marius. He begs him to keep it secret and to allow him to visit his 'daughter', his only reason for life.

Chapter 15: Valjean visits Cosette every evening but she finds him strange and distant. He does not allow her to call him 'father' and makes her call him Monsieur Jean instead. Valjean starts feeling that he is not welcome at the Pontmercy's home and stops visiting Cosette. She feels very sad but she does nothing about it since she realises her husband dislikes her 'father'. Thénardier visits Marius to ask him for money in exchange for information. He tells the young man that, contrary to what he thought of his father-in-law, Jean Valjean is M. Madeleine and that he did not kill Inspector Javert. But the most important item of news is that it was Valjean who saved Marius's life. Both Cosette and Marius go to Valjean's place to make up with him and find him on his death bed.

Background and themes

The original book

Victor Hugo was deeply interested in politics and thought that writing could influence the course of events. Hugo

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did vast amounts of research for *Les Misérables*, and put a lot of factual detail into it to portray the atmosphere of daily life among both poor and rich. The action of this novel begins in 1815, the year that Napoleon and his empire were defeated. This was a time of political turmoil in France, and huge social change throughout Europe, as much of the population moved away from the countryside and into the towns to work in the new industries. Between 1800 and 1825, the population of Paris doubled to over one million. The speed of this change caused terrible social problems and misery. Victor Hugo wrote about this misery, showing how both wealth and poverty can destroy lives. Hugo's novels look into the darkest corners of human activity for goodness, but the message of *Les Misérables* is fairly pessimistic.

Some of the main themes and symbols in the book

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 honourable 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 unrecognised even by people who know them well. As readers, we have to accept that these things have to happen to carry the story along.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Group work

Divide the class into two groups. Group One should write down the problems, activities, duties, etc., of poor people in early nineteenth century Europe. Group Two should write what children were supposed to do in those days.

Introduction

2 Discuss: Who are *Les Misérables*?

After reading the Introduction, discuss with your students who they consider are *Les Misérables* in their own country, city or town.

3 Tie in with films: What are they saying?

If you have access to video or DVD, watch the first three to five scenes of any of the film versions of *Les Misérables* with the sound off. Have students choose one of the scenes and imagine what the characters say. Play the film again and check whose guess was closest to the original.

Chapters 1–3

While Reading

4 Discuss: Reactions

Tell students to answer points **a–d** below. Guide them with the following question: *What are the reactions of these characters to these events in the story?*

- a** Fantine, when she is arrested (page 14)
- b** Fantine, when she first sees M. Madeleine at the police station (page 15)
- c** Javert, when M. Madeleine forces him to let Fantine go (page 15)
- d** Thénardier, when he first receives 300 francs from M. Madeleine (page 16)

Take advantage of this opportunity to revise adjectives.

5 Role play: Have students choose one of these two situations in Chapter 2 and get them to dramatise them:

- a** *Imagine you are the Thénardiens in Chapter 2. Talk about all the money you got from Fantine and how you plan to lie to her so as to get more money.*
- b** *Imagine you are Fantine in Chapter 2. You meet one of your ex work partners and you tell her what has happened to you since you were fired.*

6 Write: Get students to write Jean Valjean's personal diary. Tell them the following:

In Chapter 3, we find that M. Madeleine goes to Arras and confesses that he is Jean Valjean. Write out his secret thoughts and feelings in his personal diary explaining why he did so.

After reading

7 Discuss: *Les Misérables*

Ask students to work in small groups and to discuss poverty, social inequality and injustice. Guide them with these questions:

- a** *Which examples of poverty and bad treatment to the poor have you found in these chapters?*
- b** *How do you feel when we read about Fantine's short and terrible life?*
- c** *Why do you think that Victor Hugo said 'books like this are always going to be needed'?*

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8 Predict. What will happen?

Ask your students:

- Write five questions you would like answered about how the story continues. Make sure each question is about a different character.
- Try to answer the questions imagining what may happen next.

Chapters 4–6

While reading

9 Research: Social differences in France

Give your students the following instructions:

- In groups, re-read pages 22–24 and 31–32. Discuss what you know about social differences in France at the time of the Waterloo Battle in the early nineteenth century.
- Decide what you would like to learn about social differences in France in the early nineteenth century and about the Waterloo Battle. Use the library or the Internet to find out.
- Tell other students what you found out.

10 Role play: Guide your students with these instructions:

Imagine that you are Javert and his men in Chapter 5 following Valjean and Cosette through the narrow streets. Choose one of these two situations:

- Write down your ideas to catch Valjean and Cosette. Act out your conversation.
- Javert is talking to the soldiers after they fail to arrest Valjean. What do they say?

After reading

11 Check: Were you right?

Tell students to go back to the list of questions they made in activity 8.

In pairs, re-read the questions you asked in activity 8 in the previous section and try to answer the questions now that you have read this section.

12 Discuss: A happy family?

Get your students to discuss the following questions in small groups:

How does Cosette change Valjean's attitude to life? What is similar about Cosette's and Marius's early lives?

13 Write: Students work in pairs. Ask them to write a few sentences describing the way these characters behave in this section of the story:

- Mme Thénardier in Chapter 4
- Inspector Javert in Chapter 5
- Marius in Chapter 6

Compare descriptions with the whole class.

14 Role play: Get students to work in pairs and act out the following conversation:

You are two gossips sitting on a bench in Luxembourg Gardens. Imagine you observe the behaviour of Marius, the old gentleman and the young girl each day. Talk about them.

Chapters 7–8

While reading

15 Discuss: The Jondrettes?

Guide pair discussion with these questions:

What do you think has happened to the Jondrettes since we last met them as the Thénardiers in Montfermeil in Chapter 4? Why are they so poor? Talk to another student. Write down some ideas.

16 Write: A perfect plan.

Ask students to do the following writing activity:

As you read Chapter 7, write out Thénardier's plan to capture Valjean in note form. Start like this:

We send the concierge out on some excuse. We make sure Marius next door is out. ...

17 Role play: Ask students to work in pairs. One is Marius and the other one is Cosette. You can use these instructions:

Cosette meets Marius in her garden. In Chapter 8 we are told that they talk about 'their dreams, their mistakes, their moments of happiness, their moments of despair'.

Write down this conversation and get ready to act it out.

After reading

18 Discuss: Compare female characters

Get students to make the following comparisons and write the different points on the board. Encourage students to use their imaginations and write up details that are probably true as well as those actually mentioned in the book:

Éponine has lost some of her teeth, just like Cosette's mother, Fantine. Compare what we know about Éponine's life with what we know about Cosette's life.

19 Write: A new love?

Put students in small groups and ask them to imagine what Marius wrote in his notebook.

You are Marius. Write down very romantic love poems for Cosette. Be as creative as possible.

20 Predict. What happens next?

Ask students to do this activity:

We know that Marius has one day to get the money he needs to leave with Valjean and Cosette. Write down what you think he will do.

Chapters 9–12

While reading

21 Write: Grandpa's expectations

Tell students to work in pairs. Give them these instructions:

As you read Chapter 9, think of what kind of life you think M. Gillenormand wants for his grandson. Write a short description.

22 Group work: Men of honour

Ask student to discuss the following in small groups: In Chapter 12, the rebels know they have no chance against the soldiers. Why do you think they fight to death?

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After reading

23 Write: Fighting for freedom

Get students to write in response to these instructions:

Imagine you are the young boy, Gavroche. You are with Enjolras and his friends in the rue de Chanvrière from the beginning. Write a description of:

- a how you built the barricade.
- b the battle with the soldiers.

24 Pair work: Javert's own story

In pairs, students imagine they are Inspector Javert. Inspector Javert makes his way back to the police chief's office. He makes a report about what has happened to him. Write his report.

25 Group work: Through the barricades

Students work in groups on the activity below. As a whole-class activity groups will present their ideas to the rest of the class.

Fighting on the barricades became a tradition in Paris in the nineteenth century. The narrow streets were easy to block off and provided easy escape routes for anti-government rebels. You plan to build a barricade in a small street which has two cafés, a grocery shop, and a cheap clothes shop. What will you build it with? How will you defend it?

Chapters 13–15

While reading

26 Predict. What happens next?

Guide your students with these instructions:

Before you read Chapter 13, discuss how the lives of Javert, Valjean and Marius will change after what happened at the barricades. Write ideas for a chapter that could be included in the book and decide where in the book you would put it.

27 Group work: Read and check.

Ask students to work in the same groups as in Activity 1 and to compare the chapter they wrote to Chapter 13.

As you read Chapter 13, compare the events in the chapter you have written in Activity 32 with those in the book. Check how close you were in your predictions.

28 Guess: Who's who?

Tell students to read Chapter 14 up to page 85.

Guide their work with the following ideas:

In pairs, each student chooses to be one of the characters in Chapter 14 without telling their partner who they are. You have to imagine you both meet at M. Gillenormand's house. As you have a conversation about what you are doing there, try to find out who the other is.

29 Role play: Cosette wants to find out about her mother, Fantine. What questions would she ask Valjean?

Get students to make a list of questions and dramatise the conversation.

30 Write: The last letter

Ask students to imagine they are Cosette in Chapter 15 and to write her last letter to her father. *You are Cosette in Chapter 15. You are very worried about your father's health. What do you write in your last letter to him?*

After reading

31 Discuss: The moral of the story

Students discuss these ideas in groups and try to answer the question below:

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?

32 Write: Saving a life

All of these characters are involved in saving Marius's life? How? Write about them.

- a Jean Valjean b Thénardier c Inspector Javert
- d M. Gillenormand

33 Group work: Film directors

Tell students to work in small groups and imagine they are film directors:

If you were filming the scene in the sewers of Paris, what background music would you choose? Talk to other students. Compare your choices.

Extra activities

34 Group work: The Musical

Ask students to discuss how to put this story on the stage. Guide their work with the following ideas: *Les Misérables was made into a successful musical in 1986. Which scenes would present the most difficult problems and how would you solve them? Who would you like to get to play the major roles?*

35 Write and artwork: Have students design a poster to advertise the book.

36 Role play: An interview

If students had the chance to interview Victor Hugo, what would they ask him? Get them to write a list of questions and imagine that they can travel in time and dramatise the interview.

37 Project work: Get students to do research on how the poor are protected in their own country today. Were things like that in the past? Have laws changed? If there is inequality and injustice, what would they do to improve the situation? Get them to report their findings and suggestions using charts and posters and share them with the rest of the school.