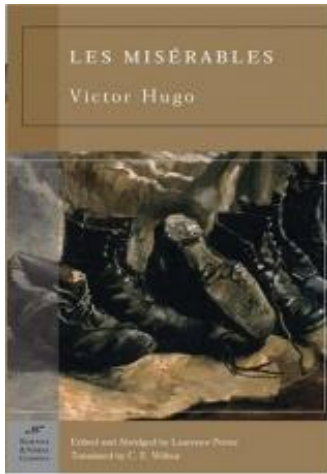


Les Misérables

by Victor Hugo



About the Book

Les Misérables, translated variously from the French as *The Miserable Ones*, (*The Wretched*, *The Poor Ones*, *The Wretched Poor*, or *The Victims*), is an 1862 French novel by author Victor Hugo and is widely considered one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth century. It follows the lives and interactions of several French characters over a seventeen-year period in the early nineteenth century, starting in 1815 and culminating in the 1832 June Rebellion.

The novel focuses on the struggles of ex-convict Jean Valjean and his experience of redemption. It examines the nature of law and grace, and expatiates upon the history of France, architecture of Paris, politics, moral philosophy, antimonarchism, justice, religion, and the types and nature of romantic and familial love. The story is historical fiction because it contains factual and historic events. Contrary to what some believe, it does not use the French Revolution as a backdrop. The French Revolution took place in the eighteenth century; *Les Misérables* takes place in the nineteenth. The only "revolution" depicted is the June Rebellion, a student uprising.

Les Misérables contains many plots, but the main thread is the story of ex-convict, Jean Valjean (known by his prison number, 24601), who becomes a force for good in the world, but cannot escape his dark past. The novel is divided into five volumes, each volume divided into books, and subdivided into chapters (for a total of three hundred sixty-five chapters). Each chapter is relatively short, usually no longer than a few pages. Nevertheless, the novel as a whole is quite lengthy by modern standards, exceeding fourteen hundred pages in unabridged editions (nineteen hundred pages in French). It also contains what has many times, incorrectly, been considered the longest sentence in a published novel. Within the borders of the novel's story, Hugo fills many pages with his thoughts on religion, politics, and society, including several lengthy digressions, one being a discussion on enclosed religious orders, one on the construction of the Paris sewers, another being on argot, and most famously, his retelling of the Battle of Waterloo.

Discussion Guide

1. How did Bishop Bienvenu's visit to the dying revolutionary G?change him? What about this man surprised the Bishop and why? How are the Revolutionary ideals espoused by G? similar to or different from the pure Christian ideals of the Bishop?
2. Why did Jean Valjean steal the Bishop's silver? How was this act influenced by his experience in prison? Discuss the process of change that occurred in Valjean after the Bishop "bought back his soul from Satan" with the silver. Would this bargain have been successful with every person? Why was Valjean subject to such transformation?
3. Discuss what you know about the French Revolution and its cultural echoes in France. Could this story of Valjean's redemption be told in another historical context? In what ways is this story dependent on and independent of its setting?
4. How would you characterize Hugo's political and nationalist stance based on his description of the Battle of Waterloo and his account of other political events? Can his loyalties?Monarchist, Bonapartist, nationalist, humanist, etc.?be discerned and defined?
5. Marius's friends die in the July Revolution. What values were they defending? What do you think Hugo values in these heroic characters and how does his description of them show this?
6. Hugo inserts a rather scathing aside about the nature of Fame in Part I, chapter one: "Prosperity presupposes ability." Jean Valjean is an example of a man who is exceptional in many significant ways, who positively and profoundly affects the lives of people around him, and who lives and dies in absolute obscurity. This portrait is drawn by a man who was inarguably the most famous man in France, literally "a legend in his own time." How can fame adversely influence one's ability to do good in the world? How does Valjean safely covet his obscurity, and how does this obscurity contribute to the good deeds Valjean habitually performs?
7. Cosette was never more fortunate than when she left the home of the socially "respectable" Thénardiens to be raised by a feared ex-convict. How is this an indictment of Hugo's society's criteria for respectability? What are the Thénardiens symbolic or symptomatic of?
8. One of the most psychologically complex characters is Javert, who? though he plays the role of a villain?acts not out of malice but out of a sense of duty to what he truly believes is ethically correct. How would you define Javert's value system? There is a weak link in Javert's chain of rationalizations for his behavior and his life. Identify it and explain how it leads to Javert's suicide. At which points in the book does Hugo show Javert to advantage? At which points does Javert appear to be more a classic villain?
9. Hugo clearly adores Paris. How is the street urchin Gavroche symbolic of the city in which he runs rampant? If he is truly a "son of Paris," which attributes did he inherit from his "mother"? Compare Hugo's descriptions of Paris to his descriptions of the French countryside and smaller cities. How do Parisians differ from denizens of the rest of France? Are these differences slight or serious?
10. Compare the musical *Les Misérables* to the book. What is left out, emphasized, or added? How does the change of medium effect the pace and tone of the story? To what do you attribute the long-running success of the musical?

Author Bio

Victor Hugo, in full Victor Marie Hugo was a French poet, novelist, and dramatist. He is considered the most well-known French Romantic writer.

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