

# Les miserables essay

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Reaction Paper - Les Miserables Les Miserables translated variously from French as The Miserable Ones, The Wretched, The Poor Ones, The Wretched Poor, The Victims) (1862) is a novel by French author Victor Hugo and is widely considered one of the greatest novels of the 19th century. It follows the lives and interactions of several French characters over a twenty-year period in the early 19th century, starting in 1815, the year of Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. 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 expounds 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, historic events, including the Paris Uprising of 1832 (often mistaken for the much earlier French Revolution). Les Miserables is known to many through its numerous stage and screen adaptations, such as the stage musical of the same name, sometimes abbreviated "Les Mis".

These are the lead characters of the novel: Jean Valjean — Convicted for stealing a loaf of bread, he is paroled from prison nineteen years later. Rejected by society for being a former convict, Bishop Myriel turns his life around. He assumes a new identity to pursue an honest life, becoming a factory owner and a mayor. He adopts and raises Fantine's daughter Cosette, saves Marius from the barricade, and dies at an old age.

Javert — An obsessive police inspector who continuously hunts, tracks down, and loses Valjean. He goes undercover behind the barricade, but is

discovered and unmasked. Valjean has the chance to kill Javert, but lets him go.

Later Javert allows Valjean to escape. For the first time, Javert is in a situation in which he knows that the lawful course is immoral. His inner conflict leads him to take his own life by jumping into the River Seine. Bishop Myriel, the bishop of Digne — A kindly old priest who is promoted to bishop by a chance encounter with Napoleon. He convinces Valjean to change his ways after Valjean steals some silver from him and saves Valjean from being arrested. Fantine — A Parisian grisette abandoned with a small child with her lover Felix Tholomyes. Fantine leaves her daughter Cosette in the care of the Thenardiers, innkeepers in a village called Montfermeil. Unfortunately, Mme. Thenardier spoils her own daughters and abuses Cosette. Fantine finds work at Monsieur Madeleine's factory, but is fired by a female supervisor who discovers that she is an unwed mother, as Fantine, being illiterate, had other people write her letters to the Thenardiers. To meet repeated demands for money from the Thenardiers, she sells her hair, then her two front teeth, and finally turns to prostitution. Valjean learns of her plight when Javert arrests her for attacking a man who called her insulting names and hurled snow at her back. She dies of a disease that may be tuberculosis before Valjean is able to reunite her with Cosette. Cosette — The illegitimate daughter of Fantine and Tholomyes.

From approximately the age of three to the age of eight, she is beaten and forced to be a drudge by the Thenardiers. After Fantine dies, Valjean ransoms her from the Thenardiers and she becomes his adopted daughter.

She is educated by nuns in a convent in Paris. She later grows up to become very beautiful. She falls in love with Marius Pontmercy, and marries him at the end of the novel. M.

& Mme. Thenardier — A corrupt innkeeper and his wife. They have five children: two daughters (Eponine and Azelma) and three sons (Gavroche and two unnamed younger sons). They take in Cosette in her early years, mistreating and abusing her. They also write fabricated letters about Cosette to Fantine in order to extort money from her. They end up losing the inn due to bankruptcy and moving to Paris, living as the Jondrettes.

M. Thenardier is associated with an infamous criminal gang called the Patron-Minette, but contrary to common belief he is not their head, both sides operate independently. The Thenardier family also live next door to Marius, who recognizes M. Thenardier as the man who “tended to” his father at Waterloo. They are arrested by Javert after Marius thwarts their attempts to rob and kill Valjean in their apartment.

At the end of the novel, Mme. Thenardier has long since died in prison while M. Thenardier and Azelma travel to America where he becomes a slave trader.

Marius Pontmercy — A second-generation aristocrat (not recognized as such because it was Napoleon who made Marius' father a noble) who fell out with his royalist grandfather after discovering his father was an officer under Napoleon. He studies law, joins the revolutionary ABC students and later falls in love with Cosette. Enjolras — The leader of the Friends of the ABC in the

Paris uprising. A charming and intimidating man with angelic beauty, he is passionately devoted to democracy, equality and justice.

Enjolras is a man of principle that believes in a cause – creating a republic, liberating the poor – without any doubts. He and Grantaire are executed by the National Guards after the barricade falls. Eponine — The Thenardiers' elder daughter. As a child, she is pampered and spoiled by her parents, but ends up a street urchin when she reaches adolescence. She participates in her father's crimes and begging schemes to obtain money. She is blindly in love with Marius. At Marius' request, she finds Cosette's address for him and leads him to her. After disguising herself as a boy, she manipulates Marius into going to the barricades, hoping that they will die together.

However, she saves Marius' life by reaching out her hand to stop a soldier's bullet heading for Marius; she is mortally wounded as the bullet goes through her hand and back. As she is dying, her final request to Marius is that once she has passed, he will kiss her on the forehead. He fulfills her request not because of romantic feelings on his part, but out of pity for her hard life.

Gavroche — The unloved middle child and eldest son of the Thenardiers, younger than his sisters. He lives on his own and is a street urchin. He briefly takes care of his two younger brothers, unaware they are related to him. He takes part in the barricades and is killed while collecting bullets from dead National Guardsmen for the ABC students at the barricade.

Les Miserales 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 365 chapters). Each chapter is relatively short, usually no longer than a few pages.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is quite lengthy by common standards, often exceeding 1, 200 pages in unabridged editions. Within the borders of the novel's story, Hugo fills many pages with his thoughts on religion, politics, and society, including his three lengthy digressions, one being a discussion on enclosed religious orders, another being on argot, and most famously, his epic retelling of the Battle of Waterloo. God has graced mankind with countless attributes that can be portrayed as minor or major roles in one's daily walk. Among these features are ambition and hope.

Ambition, defined as an eagerness or strong desire to achieve something, relates significantly to motivation, an act of movement toward a goal. Hope, a confidence and trust that something will take place, is extensively used when ambition and motivation are of topic. Victor Hugo, a French novelist during the eight-hundreds, adeptly and cleverly exercises ambitions and aspirations, hopes and dreams and motivations throughout his later written novels, such *Les Miserales*. In *Les Miserales* a single glimpse into each character's life, such as Jean Val Jean, the main character, or Cosette, Jean Valjean's daughter, illustrates progression. Hints of greed, love, and sacrifice can be traced far into each man's struggle within himself and with man. Each character uses their attributes to gain and over come their obstacle. Victor Hugo is known to be one of the greatest leaders of the French Romantic Movement, which sought independence from the conservative limitations of

the classical style. Hugo's works convey his indignation at social injustices and human affliction.

Hugo knew how to write effectively and with simplicity of the common joys and sorrows of the average man and woman. *Les Miserales* covers a time span of more than twenty years—from the fall of the first Napoleon to the revolts of a generation later.