

Les misérables by victor hugo

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Les Misérables, a well-written, spellbinding novel by Victor Hugo, paints a vivid picture of redemption and grace through its intricate plot, set against the violent and idealistic French revolution. Set in nineteenth century France, this book tells the story of Jean Valjean, an escaped convict determined to put his criminal past behind him. However, these attempts at integrity are constantly threatened, first by his conscience, when during a case of mistaken identity another man is arrested in Valjean's place, and always by the relentless policeman Javert, who tirelessly haunts the trail of the convict. Valjean must remain free from the law, though, due to a promise to protect the young daughter of Fantine, a woman driven to prostitution by poverty. Accordingly, Valjean slips from the clutches of the authorities and succeeds in escaping for a time from his old life by taking the young child, Cosette, and disappearing into a convent, where he serves as gardener for many years. After Cosette grows old enough to wonder about the world outside the convent walls, Valjean decides to take his chances with the law again in order to provide a proper home for his adopted daughter.

Upon leaving the convent, Cosette is thrust suddenly into life as a "real" person, and she falls head-over-heels in love with a young student, Marius Pontmercy. Although Valjean suspects their love and consequently hates the young man, who he sees as a rival who may turn Cosette's heart from him, he is powerless to intervene. When Marius becomes involved in the July Revolution of 1830, Valjean, with the help of Eponine, a destitute girl who loves the dashing young student, saves him from a brutal death on the barricades out of love for his adopted daughter. During the fight, Javert, still on Valjean's trail, experiences mercy for the first time in his life when the

convict saves his life, and unable to take this unexpected grace, he drowns himself in the river. Cosette and Marius marry after the massacre at the barricades, and Valjean dies in peace, finally knowing his name is cleared and his darling Cosette lives in the safe company of Marius, who he has finally forgiven.

Victor Hugo wrote *Les Miserales* with a goal to address the causes and outcomes of social injustice in nineteenth century France. He states, "...while ignorance and poverty persist on earth, books such as this cannot fail to be of value" (15). *Les Miserales* is, in many ways, a social treatise, a philosophical commentary on the social situation during the author's lifetime. Valjean, Fantine, and Cosette, Hugo's three main characters, are essentially stereotypes of the three greatest problems of Hugo's century: "the degradation of man in the proletariat, the subjection of women through hunger, [and] the atrophy of the child by darkness" (15). In writing this novel, Hugo strove to bring these problems to attention and gently influence our thoughts on these subjects. Many strong themes run beneath the surface of *Les Miserales*; man versus himself represents the primary general theme, while redemption and grace constitutes the most prominent specific theme.

Man versus himself shows up starkly in Valjean. He struggles constantly with his conscience, wishing to forget his awful past and yet unable to. Hugo writes of Valjean, " Whichever way he turned, he faced the same alternatives - to cling to his paradise and become a devil, or become a saint by going back to hell...what was he to do" (221)? Javert also struggles with himself when the very morals and values he has build his life upon collapse from under him. Victor Hugo writes, " The code [Javert] lived by was in fragments <https://assignbuster.com/les-miserales-by-victor-hugo/>

in his hand...He could no longer live by his lifelong principles. He was forced to admit that kindness existed...He had failed himself" (1106).

More specific, the theme of redemption and grace pulses a strong undercurrent throughout the novel. While it affects many characters, Marius Pontmercy receives it in abundance. Valjean offers him grace when he forgives Marius for loving Cosette. Eponine also gives grace to Marius when she ignores her own feelings for him and thinks only of his happiness. These themes are evident throughout the entire novel, and they provide a strong base for Hugo's writing. In *Les Miserales*, Victor Hugo employs an interesting style, combining many literary techniques to create a masterpiece.

Hugo balances in-depth descriptions perfectly with his engaging dialogue. His use of both long and short sentences keeps the text from becoming monotonous and lends a sense of competency to his writing. *Les Miserales* is set for the most part in the dirty streets of Paris, the perfect backdrop for Hugo's characters, who he uses to personify the problems he sees in the world surrounding him. Excellent formal diction provides a convincing, if somewhat impractical, story. Relying on chance meetings and near-impossible happenings at times, Hugo nevertheless succeeds in using these scenarios without making his story unbelievable. Flashbacks provide a sizeable piece of *Les Miserales*, with lengthy descriptions of past events that back up one small happening in the plot.

Some of these include chapters on the Battle of Waterloo and a description of Valjean's past life seen through his eyes. Victor Hugo also utilizes the five

senses frequently, bringing life to his tale. This style of writing provides entertainment and engrossment for readers, despite the sometimes wordy quality. This novel will appeal to many readers, though to some more than others, through its strange depiction of common qualities found in many people today. Hugo's characters each hold characteristics that can be related to. Valjean's confusion over the right path to take in his life, Javert's inexorable adhesion to the law, Fantine's unbreakable love for her daughter, Eponine's unanswered love for Marius, all these qualities may be seen in the lives of many people today.

Although Les Miserables takes place in France, people all across the globe can understand and sympathize with the characters. Young readers may not appreciate Hugo's book as well as older, more advanced readers would, although this novel may make a wonderful read-aloud for more mature young children. Les Miserables will bring laughter, tears, amazement, and satisfaction to almost any advanced reader. Hugo draws attention to many morals and values in his book, compassion and standing up for one's beliefs not least among them. Compassion is introduced as a moral from the very start of the book.

Bishop Myriel, a kindly old man, introduces the concept to Valjean in the beginning of Les Miserables, providing him with food and a place to sleep despite his shady background. Valjean, in turn, offers compassion to Fantine in the face of the society by taking her in and caring for her in her sickness. This flying in the face of the rules of society did not faze Valjean, and his compassion for the dieing woman eventually raised him to a level of respect. Standing up for what one's cause is also a prominent moral taught

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throughout the book. All throughout the fight at the barricades, the revolutionaries demonstrate this, never faltering in their mad quest for freedom, and undeterred by the surety of death. Enjolras, a young student and leader of the fight, demonstrates this most clearly, standing up for his cause to the last.

Although the only man left standing, he does not attempt to escape from the slaughter. Instead he embraces his fate, and when faced with twelve loaded muskets only becomes the braver. Victor Hugo states of Enjolras, “ without cartridges or a sword, his only weapon...the barrel of his carbine, the butt of which he had broken on the heads of the attackers...proud-eyed and erect... he was still sufficiently impressive for a space to be left around him” (1056). These morals, compassion and standing up for one’s beliefs, infiltrate throughout the novel in its entirety, encouraging readers to take a stronger stand in those areas of their life. Although Hugo uses a very serious attitude towards many of his characters, he also integrates humor and care into his writing.

Gavroche, a small street urchin, receives the most amusing portrayal, shown as “ a rowdy little boy, [aged eleven or twelve], pale-faced, agile, alert and rascally...He darted here and there, sang, played...stole now-and-then... laughed when he was called an urchin but was indignant when he was called a scamp” (509). Hugo wants his readers to sympathize with the world of such young people, and gives Gavroche a droll, and yet also solemn, character. Also appearing to sympathize with the troubles of a higher, if not the highest, society, Hugo uses slightly stereotypical characters, each one symbolizing a different problem of Hugo’s time.

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Coming from a different viewpoint, Victor Hugo's address of these problems provides an unusual, yet intriguing, read. Characters in *Les Miserales* reveal a diverse range of types, and Hugo develops each one properly in order to best fulfill the needs of his novel. Hugo uses Valjean, the central protagonist, to successfully carry the story along from start to finish, developing him splendidly as a character and revealing his strength, virtue, and integrity throughout. Cosette and Marius, both important secondary characters, also develop smoothly, if slightly stereotyped and not to their full potential. Shrewdly, the author gives a few unpleasant personality traits to these two characters, giving Cosette a somewhat rich, vain nature and Marius an unpractical dreaminess, and so doing, providing an extra measure of believability to their roles.

Javert, the dogged police officer, provides a perfect antagonist, despite his many good virtues and upright personality. Victor Hugo also provides his readers with the interesting character of Eponine. Almost a perfect foil of Cosette, Eponine possesses little vanity and inhabits the slums of Paris. Surprisingly, her character, though unfamiliar and seemingly unimportant at first, becomes the more likeable of the two. All in all, Hugo does an outstanding job of character development and neither overdevelops nor underdevelops his characters.

Set mainly in the anti-romance genre of literature, *Les Miserales* depicts a tale of anxiety, torture, and death. From the beginning, Valjean is tormented with conflicting desires; to “conceal his identity and sanctify his life, and to escape from men and find his way back to God” (209). These two incompatible aspirations, personal security and moral principles, constantly

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wage war inside Valjean, causing him almost invariable turmoil. Aside from Valjean's character, the anti-romance genre presides over the entire book, which contains bloodshed, violence, and descriptions of the French Revolution and the Paris jails and sewers. Throughout his novel, Hugo takes mainly the third-person omniscient point of view, giving his readers insight into the workings of all his character's minds, though he centers on Marius, Valjean, and Cosette. This point of view lends a greater understanding to a reader, allowing them to better follow the story.

Thus, this work of historical fiction is extremely deep and complex and yet does not lose its readers in the intricacy. While *Les Miserales* gives insight into the cruel world of low society in nineteenth century France, it also teaches us about grace and redemption. This message will hold a different meaning for secular and Christian readers, however. Secular readers will see it only as a story of a convict rising from the pit of the jail cells and chain-gang forced labor to a final and complete happiness and purity before death. Conversely, Christians can read deeper into Hugo's message. Underlying the entire story runs the strong theme of God's grace and mercy.

Each character experiences this in some way; from Valjean, who gains a final peace and joy because of his adherence to God's will for him, to Javert, who feels the touch of grace and recoils, finally resolving his confusion with suicide. Valuable lessons may be taken from each of the characters, and readers will benefit in many areas from reading this novel. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserales* leaves one with a sense of renewed perspective on the world, and urges us, as Christians to become aware of such actions as take place in his book and all around the world today.

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