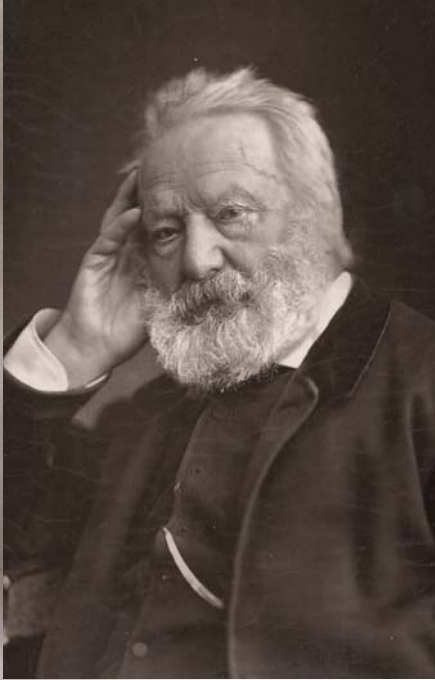


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# ABOUT VICTOR HUGO

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VICTOR HUGO'S enormously successful career covered most of the nineteenth century and spanned both the Romantic and Realistic movements. A great poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, pamphleteer, diarist, politician and moralist, Hugo was a man of immense passion and endless contradictions.

Hugo was born on February 26, 1802. His father, General Joseph Leopold Hugo, was the son of a carpenter who rose through the ranks of Napoleon's citizen army. However, Victor's mother decided not to subject her three sons to the difficulties of army life, and settled in Paris to raise them. Madame Hugo became the mistress of her husband's commanding officer, General Lahorie, who was a father figure to Hugo and his brothers until the General's execution in 1812.

Victor was an excellent student who excelled in mathematics, physics, philosophy, French literature, Latin, and Greek. He won first place in a national poetry contest when he was 17. As a teenager, he fell in love with a neighbour's daughter, Adele Foucher. However, his mother discouraged the romance, believing that her son should marry into a finer family. When his mother died in 1821, Victor refused to accept financial help from his father. He lived in abject poverty for a year, but then won a pension of 1,000 francs a year from Louis XVIII for his first volume of verse. Barely out of his teens, Hugo became a hero to the common people as well as a favourite of heads of state. Throughout his lifetime, he played a major role in France's political evolution from dictatorship to democracy.

**He lived in abject poverty for a year, but then won a pension of 1,000 francs a year from Louis XVIII.**

In 1822, he married Adele Foucher, who became the mother of his children, Leopold-Victor, Charles-Victor, Francois-Victor, Adele, and Leopoldine.

In 1830, Victor became one of the leaders of a group of Romantic rebels who were trying to loosen the hold of classical literature in France. His play *Hernani*, whose premiere was interrupted by fist-fights between Hugo's admirers and detractors, took a large step towards a more realistic theatre and made him a rich man.

During the next 15 years he produced six plays, four volumes of verse, and the romantic historical novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, establishing his reputation as the greatest writer in France.

In 1831, Adele Hugo became romantically involved with a well known critic and good friend of Victor's named Sainte-Beuve. Victor became involved with the actress Juliette Drouet, who became his mistress in 1833. Supported by a small pension from Hugo, Drouet became his unpaid secretary and travelling companion for the next fifty years.

After losing one of his daughters in a drowning accident and experiencing the failure of his play *Les Burgraves* in 1843, Hugo decided to focus on the growing social problems in France. He was joined in his increasing interest in politics by a number of other Romantic writers, marking the beginning of the Realistic-Naturalistic era in French literature.



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# ABOUT VICTOR HUGO

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Hugo was a moderate republican who was made a Peer of France in 1845. After the Revolution of 1848 and the founding of the Second Republic, he was elected a deputy to the Constitutional Assembly. Three years later, when Louis Napoleon abolished the Republic and reestablished the Empire, Hugo risked execution trying to rally the workers of Paris against the new Emperor. However, his efforts failed, and he had to escape to Brussels.

As a result, Hugo spent the next decade in exile with his family and Mme. Drouet on the islands of Jersey and Guernsey. During these years, he wrote satires about Louis

Napoleon, returned to his poetry and published several novels including *Les Misérables*, which he had begun years earlier.

## Over 3 million spectators followed his cortege to the Pantheon.

When *Les Misérables* was published in Brussels in 1862, it was an immediate popular success in spite of negative reaction by critics, who considered it overly sentimental, and the government, who banned it.

After the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Empire in 1870, Hugo made a triumphant return to Paris. He remained there through the siege of the city and contributed

portions of his royalties to purchase weapons. He lost two sons, one in 1871 and one in 1873. Although he was elected to the Senate in 1876, poor health caused him to return to Guernsey. Mme. Hugo died in 1868 and Mme. Drouet in 1882.

Hugo died in 1885 at the age of eighty-three. Although he left instructions that his funeral be simple, over 3 million spectators followed his cortege to the Pantheon, where he was buried amid France's great men. Hugo's death came at the end of a century of war, civil conflict, brutally repressed insurrections such as the student rebellion in *Les Misérables*, and social injustice. Because of his belief in the triumph of good over evil and his pleading for tolerance and non-violence, Victor Hugo was the herald of the new democratic spirit.



Les Misérables

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# ABOUT THE NOVEL

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*LES MISÉRABLES* is a melodramatic novel written from the premise that any man can rise above his circumstances to reach perfection. The plot of the novel is suspenseful from start to finish; it follows both Jean Valjean's and society's struggles with good and evil.

Hugo began to think about *Les Misérables* as early as 1829. He observed the specific incident that triggers the novel's action on the streets of Paris in 1845. On a sunny but cold day, he saw an impoverished man being arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. As the man stood on the street, an ornate carriage pulled up beside

him. Inside there was a dazzlingly beautiful woman dressed in velvet, playing with a child hidden under ribbons, embroidery and furs. The impoverished man stared at the woman in the carriage, but she was totally unaware of him. Hugo wrote that he saw this man as, "the spectre of misery, the ghostly forewarning in full light of day, in the sunshine, of the revolution still plunged in the shadows of darkness, but emerging from them. The moment he become aware of her existence, while she remained unaware of his, a catastrophe was inevitable."

**When *Les Misérables* was published in 1862, it generated more excitement than any book in the history of publishing.**

As the years passed, *Les Misérables* evolved as Hugo's own life experiences shaped his philosophy. He incorporated personal memories of all kinds in the novel, often mixing everyday trivial fact with fiction to give the story a sense of journalistic truth. By the time it was published in 1862, it had become an epic novel, expressed in rich prose within a strong framework of history, philosophy, and political theory. "This is a leviathan I am about to ship out to sea," he said before publishing.

When *Les Misérables* was published in 1862, it generated more excitement than any book in the history of publishing. It was widely advertised in Paris with giant sketched portraits of Cosette, Fantine, Marius and Jean Valjean.

Foreshadowing the success story of the musical, over one hundred years later, the novel *Les Misérables* was, initially, a popular, rather than a critical, triumph. "All the reviews," wrote Hugo, "are reactionary and more or less hostile."

Like the musical, critical opinion had absolutely no effect on public interest in *Les Misérables*. Bookshop owners and other vendors literally battled to buy copies of the book for their customers. Long lines and traffic jams were observed all over the city as people fought to buy one of the 48,000 copies put on sale the first day.

This phenomenon was echoed in 1985, when the musical version of Hugo's novel opened in London to mostly poor reviews. When Cameron Mackintosh, discouraged by the adverse critical response, called the box office, he was greeted by a happily busy ticket salesman.



Les Misérables



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# ABOUT THE NOVEL

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“I’m amazed you managed to get through,” Mackintosh was told, “the phones haven’t stopped ringing.” As with the novel, the story of *Les Misérables* had touched a common chord, and its great success was built on word of mouth.

Hugo wrote about his book, “I don’t know if it will be read by everyone, but it is meant for everyone. It addresses England as well as Spain, Italy as well as France, Germany as well as Ireland, the republics that harbour slaves as well as empires that have serfs. Social problems go beyond frontiers...” To further his goal of presenting the ideas of *Les Misérables* to as wide an audience as possible, Hugo urged his publishers to bring out cheaper editions of the book in small print to make it available to ordinary people.

**The book was a sensation in America, whose own civil unrest at the time seemed to many to mirror the events and feelings of the novel.**

The initial French language success was copied all over the world as soon as the book became available in translation. The book was a sensation in America, whose own civil unrest at the time seemed to many to mirror the events and feelings of the novel. Indeed, Confederate soldiers read the novel voraciously, calling themselves “Lee’s Miserables.”

As with any work of art pleading

for social change, the novel *Les Misérables* acquired many enemies. Conservatives feared the social impact of the novel, and the Vatican banned it for several years. A theatrical version, written by Hugo’s son Charles, was banned in France, opening instead in Brussels. The French newspaper *The Constitutionnel* wrote that if the ideas of the novel were acknowledged, “no part of the social order would remain standing.”

Nonetheless, *Les Misérables* has been translated into nearly every language and, during the past century, has become one of the best-selling books in history.



Les Misérables

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# VICTOR HUGO CHRONOLOGY

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**1772**

Birth of Sophie-Francoise Trébuchet, Victor Hugo's mother.

**1773**

Birth of Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo, Victor Hugo's father.

**1789**

French Revolution begins.

**1798**

First French Republic proclaimed.

**1792 - 95**

The republican 'Convention,' ending in Robespierre's terror.

**1793**

Louis XVI executed. The 'Chouans' (royalist Breton insurgents) begin their full-scale civil war against the republican French government. Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo, an officer in the republican army, is posted to Brittany as part of the repressive peace-keeping force.

**1795 - 1799**

'Le Directoire', the first post-revolution government.

**1796**

Léopold-Sigisbert, on patrol, meets Sophie-Francoise Trébuchet, a Royalist, verifies her identity papers, searches her parents' farm, and falls in love with her.

**1797**

Marriage in Paris of Sophie Trébuchet and Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo.

**1798**

Birth of Abel Hugo, Victor Hugo's elder brother (who dies, insane, 1855).

**1799 - 1804**

The 'Consulat.' Bonaparte takes command.

**1802**

Birth of Victor-Marie Hugo.

**1803**

Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo posted to Elba in disgrace, remains there with his three small sons (Eugene, the youngest, is born in 1803) while Sophie Hugo remains in Paris, and is befriended by General Victor Lahorie, her husband's former commanding officer. Léopold and Sophie drift apart; he takes up with Catherine Thomas (a nurse), and begins living with her. Sophie Hugo finally rejoins her husband in Elba briefly, but they quarrel constantly.

**1804 - 1815**

French Empire; rise and fall of the Napoleonic Empire, ending with the battle of Waterloo.

**1804**

Napoleon crowns himself at Notre Dame; French Empire proclaimed. Sophie and her three children return to Paris, settling at 24 Rue de Chichy. General Lahorie, now retired and wanted by the police for plotting against Napoleon, lives at no.19.

**1807**

Léopold Hugo promoted colonel and posted to Naples, where he makes a favourable impression on Napoleon's younger brother Joseph.

**1808**

Joseph Bonaparte is made King of Spain by Napoleon. Léopold Hugo follows the French King to Spain and gets a lucrative staff appointment.

**1811**

Sophie Hugo makes one last attempt to resume marital relations with Léopold, and joins him, with her family, in Spain. Léopold hears of his wife's affair with Lahorie and sues her for divorce. Sophie and her children return to Paris a few months later.

**1812**

Lahorie is executed for plotting Napoleon's downfall.

**1814**

Back in France, General Léopold Hugo distinguishes himself at the siege of Thionville. Sophie Hugo sues him for maintenance.

**1815**

France becomes a monarchy once more under Louis XVIII. General Léopold Hugo mistakenly hopes that by rallying to Louis XVIII in extremis he will be able to stay in the army. He is retired on half-pay.

**1815 - 1824**

Reign of Louis XVIII.

**1820**

Victor Hugo's Ode to the Death of the Duc de Berri attracts the attention of the Court. Louis XVIII sends him 500 francs.

**1821**

Death of Sophie Hugo. Léopold Hugo marries his mistress, Catherine Thomas.

**1822**

Victor Hugo marries childhood sweetheart Adèle Foucher.

**1823**

Birth of Victor Hugo's first son, Léopold Victor.

# VICTOR HUGO CHRONOLOGY

**1824 - 30**

Reign of Charles X.

**1824**

Birth of Victor Hugo's first daughter, Léopoldine.

**1825**

Victor Hugo awarded the Légion d'Honneur for services to literature.

**1826**

Birth of Victor Hugo's second son, Charles Victor.

**1828**

Death of General Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo. Birth of Victor Hugo's third son, Francois-Victor.

**1830**

Premiere of Victor Hugo's play, *Hernani*, interrupted by fist fights between admirers and detractors. Birth of second daughter Adèle.

**1830 - 1848**

Reign of King Louis Philippe.

**1831**

Victor Hugo publishes *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

**1832**

Hugo meets Juliette Drouet. Funeral of General Lamque – hero to workers and students – degenerates into riots, and the barricades described in *Les Misérables*.

**1836**

Applies for membership of Academie Française; fails.

**1839**

Second Academie Française election attempt again ends in failure.

**1841**

Victor Hugo finally elected to the Academie Française.

**1843**

Death of Léopoldine Hugo.

**1845**

Victor Hugo starts writing *Les Misérables*.

**1848 - 1851**

Reign of King Louis Philippe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes President of the Second French Republic

**1851**

2 December: Louis Napoleon dissolves Parliament, is proclaimed President with full powers for ten years, ratified by a plebiscite. Victor Hugo leaves hastily for Brussels.

**1852**

Louis Napoleon proclaims himself Emperor as Napoleon III. Victor Hugo settles first in Jersey then in Guernsey.

**1852 - 1870**

Emperor Napoleon III establishes cordial relations with Britain. Hugo vows not to set foot on French soil till his removal.

**1853**

Victor Hugo publishes poetry, *Les Châtiments* to great acclaim.

**1856**

Publication of more poetry, *Les Contemplations*.

**1861**

Victor Hugo completes *Les Misérables*.

**1862**

*Les Misérables* published in Paris and Brussels.

**1868**

Adèle Hugo dies.

**1870**

Franco-Prussian war ends with disastrous battle of Sedan. Napoleon III flees France and settles in England. October – Victor Hugo returns to Paris, is elected a member of parliament by the Parisiens.

**1871**

Victor Hugo resigns from Parliament; following the death of his son, Charles, he goes to Brussels to settle the family inheritance.

**1871**

April-May – Paris 'Commune' uprising, soon crushed, leads to appalling carnage and repression.

**1871**

August – From Brussels, Hugo protests against the Belgian Government's refusal to give fleeing 'Communards' status of political exiles. His Brussels home is stoned and he is declared persona non grata in Belgium, moving to Luxembourg, returning briefly to Paris, then to Guernsey to write *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*.

**1875**

Victor Hugo settles permanently in Paris and is appointed Senator.

**1882**

Death of Juliette Drouet.

**1885**

23 May – Victor Hugo dies.

**1885**

1 June – State funeral attended by over three million people.

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# ABOUT EMILE BAYARD

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EMILE BAYARD was Victor Hugo's favourite illustrator, famous in his own lifetime for his brilliant portraits of Fantine, Éponine, Valjean and Javert, but best known today by people all over the world for "his" Cosette, used originally on the sleeve of the French 'Les Mis' record in 1980, and now famous as the *Les Misérables* logo.

Bayard, a prolific lithographer for magazines and books (he illustrated the works of Edmond About - then a fashionable novelist, almost as well-known as Hugo himself), was one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century academic painting school, somewhat unjustly known as "le style pompier".

With infinite attention to detail, Emile Bayard worked for months on huge paintings, of which the best known are "After the Battle of Waterloo" and "Sedan 1870". His real talent, however, lay in his abilities as a brilliant portraitist. In the tradition of the time, he also used his drawing skills to rework original sketches by explorers and travellers, sometimes even transforming pictures of exotic places into lithographs. A close friend of Honoré Daumier and cartoonists such as Paul Gavarni, Henri Monnier, Alfred Grevin, Jean-Louis Forain and Emmanuel Poiré (better known as Caran d'Ache), he wrote about spotting fakes, and identifying antiques.



*Cosette*  
Emile Bayard

Quintessentially a wealthy Parisian "society painter" with pupils and his own atelier, Emile Bayard showed a remarkable understanding of Victor Hugo's work as seen in his illustrations of the cast of characters in *Les Misérables*.



Les Misérables

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# CHRONOLOGY

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THE HISTORY that led to the novel and the musical.

**1845**

Victor Hugo starts writing *Les Misérables*.

**1848 - 1851**

Reign of King Louis Philippe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes President of the Second French Republic.

**1792**

First French Republic declared.

**1792 - 95**

The republican "Convention", ending in Robespierre's "terror".

**1793**

Louis XVI executed. The Royal insurgents begin their full scale civil war against the republican French Government. Victor Hugo describes this conflict in his novel 93.

**1795 - 99**

"Le Directoire" becomes the first post-revolution government.

**1799 - 1804**

"The Consulate"; Napoleon Bonaparte takes command.

**1804 - 15**

French Empire; the rise and fall of Napoleon, ending with the battle of Waterloo.

**1815**

France becomes a monarchy again with Louis XVIII as King.

**1824 - 30**

The reign of Charles X.

**1832**

Death of General Lamarque, a hero to workers and students. His funeral degenerates into riots, described by Hugo in *Les Misérables*.

**1848 - 51**

Regime of Louis Phillippe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes president of the Second Republic. He dissolves Parliament and is given full powers for ten years.

**1852**

Louis Napoleon declares himself Emperor. Hugo urges the populace to rise against the monarch and flees the country to Belgium.

**1862**

Victor Hugo publishes *Les Misérables*, written in exile.

**1870**

Louis Napoleon is forced to abdicate and is replaced by a democratically elected government. Hugo returns to France in triumph.

**1885**

Hugo dies. Two million mourners pay their respects at his massive funeral.

**1906**

The first silent film of *Les Misérables* is directed in France by Albert Capellini.

**1910**

The first American film, *Galley Slaves*, is produced as a silent film, directed by James Stuart Blackton.

**1935**

The first American sound version is produced by Richard Boleslawski.

**1980**

The original arena production of the Boublil-Schönberg musical, *Les Misérables*, is presented at the Palais des Sports, Paris.

**1985**

*Les Misérables* opens at the Barbican Theatre in London.

**1987**

*Les Misérables* opens at the Broadway Theatre in New York.

And remember  
The truth that once was spoken,  
To love another person  
Is to see the face of God.

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# THE CHARACTERS

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## QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is Hugo's view of human nature? Is it naturally good, flawed by original sin, or somewhere between the two?
- Describe how Hugo uses his characters to describe his view of human nature. How does each character represent another facet of Hugo's view?
- 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?
- 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?
- Today, many believe, like Javert, that no mercy should be shown to criminals. Do you agree with this? Why?
- What does Javert say about his past that is a clue to his nature?
- What finally destroys Javert? Hugo says he is "an owl forced to gaze with an eagle." What does this mean?
- Discuss the Thénardiens 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?
- Compare Marius as a romantic hero with the romantic heroes of other books, plays or poems of the romantic period.
- What would Eponine's life have been like if she had not been killed at the barricade?
- Although they are only on stage a brief time, both Fantine and Gavroche have vital roles to play in *Les Misérables* and a deep impact on the audience. What makes them such powerful characters? What do they have in common? Name some other characters from literature that appear for a short time, but have a lasting impact.



Les Misérables

“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

## THE UNIVERSAL STORY

### QUESTIONS/ DISCUSSION IDEAS

- *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?
  - List the universal themes in *Les Misérables*.
  - What makes a theme “universal”?
  - Name some universal themes in one of the following works (or pick one more familiar to you):
    1. *Hamlet*
    2. *The Red Badge of Courage*
    3. *Great Expectations*
    4. *Julius Caesar*
    5. *The Scarlet Letter*
    6. *Of Mice and Men*
    7. *Macbeth*
    8. *A Tale of Two Cities*
- Why have these works stood the test of time, while other works have been forgotten?
  - What themes do they share with *Les Misérables*?

### ASSIGNMENTS/ RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Relate the themes of *Les Misérables* to events occurring in your community, England, or the world today. After reading or seeing *Les Misérables*, describe how it has changed the way you think about these events.

Les Misérables

Look down and see the beggars at your feet  
Look down and show some mercy if you can  
Look down and see the sweepings of the street  
Look down, look down upon your fellow man!



# THE HOMELESS AND THE POOR



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.

## QUESTIONS/ DISCUSSION IDEAS

- How do you feel about the homeless and the poor?
- Who do you feel is responsible for their problems? Themselves? The government? Society in general? Why?
- How do you think poor people feel about the way they are treated?
- In *Les Misérables*, 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?
- In the story of *Les Misérables*, what reforms does Victor Hugo indirectly or directly advocate to fight social injustice?
- How do Hugo and the creators of the musical show the audience what social action is needed to correct these evils?
- 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

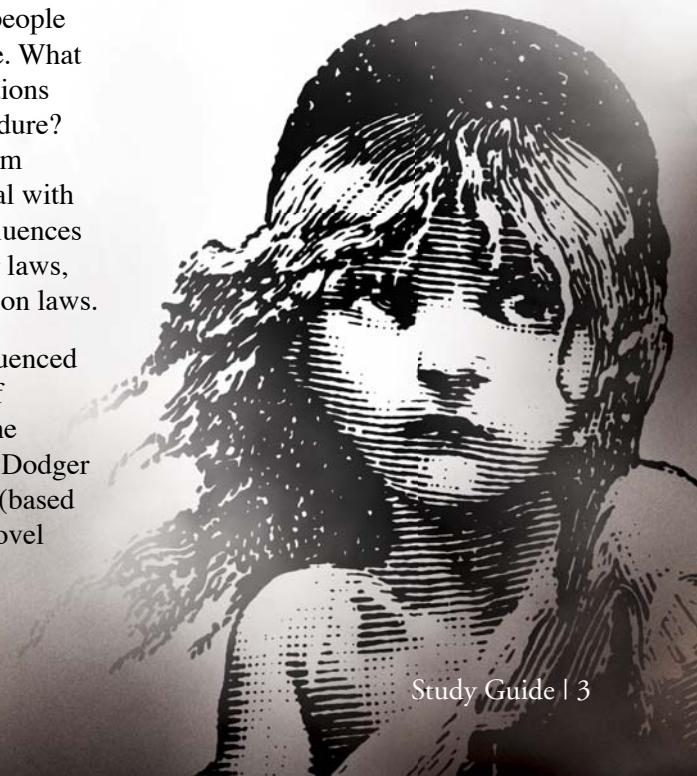
- Which of these viewpoints do you agree with? Which do you think Victor Hugo agreed with?

## ASSIGNMENTS/ RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Hugo attempted to convince his audience that the poor and the outcast are worth saving. In our society, is this belief commonly held? Why or why not?
- Explore the conditions under which most common people worked in Hugo's time. What kinds of factory conditions were they forced to endure? How do they differ from conditions workers deal with today? Explore the influences of unions, child labour laws, environmental protection laws.
- Alain Boublil was influenced to begin the musical of *Les Misérables* after the character of the Artful Dodger in the musical *Oliver!* (based on Charles Dickens' novel

*Oliver Twist*) brought to mind a singing Gavroche. Trevor Nunn and John Caird used techniques on *Les Misérables* they developed while directing *Nicholas Nickleby*, an adaptation of Dickens' novel.

- Compare Dickens and Hugo as authors and social crusaders
- Compare the social problems and solutions in *Les Misérables* to situations addressed in works of Dickens such as: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *A Christmas Carol*.
- Compare Victor Hugo and his work in *Les Misérables* with the work of one of these modern social crusaders: George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, John Steinbeck.



Now every door is closed to me  
Another jail, another key, another chain  
For when I come to any town  
They check my papers  
And they find the mark of Cain

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# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

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## QUESTIONS/ DISCUSSION IDEAS

When we first meet Jean Valjean, he has been in prison for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread. The harsh punishment for theft in the 19th Century was rooted in the belief that theft was a crime against the entire community and should be punishable by extreme means, no matter how petty the crime.

- How do we think about theft in our society?
- Should all crimes be punished in the same way? Should the reason behind a crime have anything to do with the punishment?
- Have you ever had anything stolen from you? How did it make you feel? Would it have mattered if someone had stolen from you to feed his/her family?

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?
- 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?

## ASSIGNMENTS/ RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Trace the concept of crime and punishment from the 12th through the 20th Century. What can you learn about a society from how it treats criminals?
- Do you believe we have an effective system of justice in England? Why or why not?
- The figure of Justice is always portrayed as being blindfolded, that is, completely blind to anything but objective facts.

- Write an essay about your thoughts on “blind justice”. Is justice ever completely blind? Is it ever completely blind in *Les Misérables*?
- 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?

