



## Les Miserables: Justice Delayed or Denied?

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### Abstract

A literary work gains true classical status only when it manages to record the history faithfully. That record must be a valuable lesson for the oncoming generations to study its cultural nuances. Les Miserables is undoubtedly one such classical work of art which has recorded the historical, social, political and cultural nuances of the nineteenth century France. Victor Hugo, an acclaimed nineteenth century French writer has shown a great deal of interest in both culture and politics. He is one among the pioneers of Romantic Movement in literature. He is noted for creating a unique technique of '*imaginative realism*', a literary style that combines realistic elements with exaggerated symbolism. Throughout his career he has expressed his passion for documenting injustice which he had considered as his moral obligation as a writer. All his protagonists stand as champion defenders who struggle to establish order and justice for the marginalized people in the society. Les Misérables is one such philanthropic work that reassures hope in the face of adversity and injustice. Being a historical novel it provides a panoramic vision of nineteenth-century French politics and society. This novel is presented as a story of redemption with a meticulous documentation of the injustices of France's recent past with a vision for its liberal and democratic future. In the modern times we witness people who are ready to do any injustice for gaining wealth and power. While craving for money and power they are no longer bothered about the means of attaining it. This nineteenth century novel is still worth reading and highly relevant for its universal themes of reassuring hope and justice.





## Critical Summary of Les Miserables:

As the story opens, the protagonist-convict Jean Valjean is released from a French prison after serving nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread and for his ensuing attempts to escape from prison. When Valjean arrives at the town of Digne, no one offers him shelter since he is an ex-convict. However he is helped by M. Myriel, the kindly bishop of Digne but Valjean steals his silverware. When the police arrest Valjean, Myriel claims that the silverware was a gift. Valjean is released and Myriel makes him promise to become an honest man. Eager to fulfill his promise, Valjean disguises as Madeleine and enters the town of Montreuil-sur-mer. He invents an ingenious manufacturing process and eventually becomes the town's Mayor. Fantine, a young woman from Montreuil, lives in Paris. She is cheated by Tholomyès, a wealthy student who gets her pregnant and then abandons her. Fantine returns to her home village with her illegitimate daughter, Cosette. In the town of Montfermeil, she leaves her daughter to the Thénardiens, a family that runs the local inn. Fantine finds work in Madeleine's factory but her co-workers find out about Cosette, and Fantine is fired. As the Thénardiens demand more money to support Cosette, Fantine succumbs to prostitution. One night, Javert, Montreuil's police chief, arrests Fantine. She is to be sent to prison, but Madeleine intervenes and promises to send for her child. When Javert tells Madeleine that a man has been accused of being Jean Valjean, Madeleine admits his true identity. Javert arrests Valjean and Fantine dies from the shock. After a few years, Valjean escapes from prison and he buys Cosette from the Thénardiens. The Thénardiens also had two daughters, Eponine and Azelma. Valjean and Cosette are forced to flee to escape from Javert. They find refuge in a convent, where Cosette attends school and Valjean works as a gardener. Marius Pontmercy is a young man who lives with his wealthy grandfather, M. Gillenormand. Marius has never met his father, Georges Pontmercy for his political indifferences. After his father dies, however, Marius learns the truth about him and comes to admire him. Marius moves out of Gillenormand's house and lives as a poor young law student. Cosette and Marius like each other but Valjean tries to avoid their meetings. The Thénardiens under an assumed name of the Jondrettes have moved to Paris. After Valjean leaves, Thénardier announces a plan to rob Valjean but Marius alerts the local police inspector, Javert and the Thénardiens are arrested. Valjean escapes before Javert can identify him. Eponine, who loves Marius, helps Marius find and the two declare their love for each other. Valjean, however, soon





shatters their happiness. Valjean announces that he and Cosette are moving to England. In desperation, Marius runs to his grandfather, M. Gillenormand, to ask for M. Gillenormand's permission to marry Cosette. Their meeting ends in a bitter argument. When Marius returns to Cosette, she and Valjean have disappeared. Heartbroken, Marius decides to join his radical student friends, who have started a political uprising. Eponine throws herself in front of a rifle to save Marius's life. As Eponine dies, she hands him a letter from Cosette. Marius quickly scribbles a reply and orders a boy, Gavroche, to deliver it to Cosette. Valjean manages to save the wounded Marius but Javert immediately arrests him. Valjean pleads with Javert to let him take the dying Marius to Marius's grandfather. Javert agrees. Javert feels tormented and kills himself by drowning in the river. Marius makes a full recovery and marries Cosette's but hates Valjean when he confesses his criminal past. Being unaware that it was Valjean who saved his life Marius tries to prevent Cosette meeting Valjean. Lonely and dejected, Valjean awaits his death. Marius eventually finds out the truth from Thénardier and he rushes to Valjean's side along with Cosette. Happy to be reunited with his adopted daughter, Valjean dies in peace.

## Individual vs Society

From the beginning we are exposed to a highly immoral society and an immoral judicial system where a man like Valjean is made to suffer in jail for nineteen long years just for stealing a loaf of bread. Here we can understand that there was extreme poverty and hunger throughout France in the nineteenth century. The inhuman treatment experienced by Valjean in prison made him rob the Bishop M. Myriel but his innate goodness emerges out when the bishop defends him from the police. His disguise as Madeleine shows his suppression of his real identity. He has eternal hope within his heart and as he enters the town of Montreuil-sur-mer, he proves his real merit of hard work. He manages to become the Mayor of the town but the anti-climax is his innate goodness itself becomes his tragic flaw. The tragic irony is beautifully portrayed by Hugo as Valjean lands into trouble when he tries to help Fantine. Same thing also happens in the climax when he manages to save Marius and Javert. Like Valjean, Fantine is also a victim of the corrupt society, but in her case a male dominated society. Her life becomes waste but again the tragic irony comes into force through her illegitimate baby Cosette, who manages to provide her hope to survive. The so-called strict





judicial system fails to punish the lover of Fantine Tholomyès, since he is filthily rich. So it is obvious that Justice can be bought. It assures us that only a pseudo-judicial system existed in France. Fantine is forced into prostitution only by the society which denied her a decent way of living. She is an embodiment of sacrifice as she decides to sell herself for the sake of her daughter. The Threnardiens also represent the inhuman society which ill-treats Cosette without any pity. Again the Threnardiens did not get punished by the so-called strict judicial system. Repeatedly such evil people manage to escape from law and only innocent people like Valjean, Fantine and Cosette are made to suffer. In Cosette's case her suffering is more intense since it is both physical and mental and her sufferings are also unmerited ones. As a glaring contrast, Eponine stands as a direct opposite character to the Threnardiens. She also sacrifices herself out of true love for Marius.

## **Struggle for Existence**

Both Valjean and Fantine struggle to live a decent life through honest means, but the society does not allow them to live peacefully. Javert, a strict law enforcing authority acts only like a robot or a pre-programmed machine who spends his entire lifetime chasing Valjean and Fantine. When he faces a moral conflict, he commits suicide, proving again that he is incapable of thinking with rationality or common sense. He does not search for the root causes for the problems in the society but instead he wastes his life by hunting innocent people who wanted to lead a sincere life. At this juncture, Hugo again contrasts Javert's inefficiency with that of a revolutionary student group ABC who bravely fought against the government and the army. It also suggests a strong social message to our present student community who have become extremely insensitive towards political and social evils prevailing in our society like unemployment, poverty, underemployment, corruption etc.

## **Quest for Identity**

Quest for identity is yet another major theme in this novel. When reality becomes too much or unbearable, the major characters hide under a new identity or they create a pseudo-identity. They are compelled to wear a mask for the sake of the society. The society does not want a sincere hardworking labourer but it demands a man with a clean personal image which has nothing to do with the job. Valjean cannot find a job with his true identity of being





an ex-convict. So he has to live under disguise. He even manages to become the Mayor of the town but again nobody is willing to forgive his past. The merits of true hard work are washed away or swept away by personal bias. The society finds a sadistic pleasure of digging up one's ugly personal past life and torturing him throughout his lifetime. In the case of Fantine, she also lives under disguise for the sake of her illegitimate daughter Cosette. The society conveniently forgets the fact that only the men had forced her into prostitution and punishes only the lady. As in The Bible, people cast stones on a prostitute forgetting the fact that they were actually responsible for making her a prostitute. Women characters are treated as slaves and they are exploited physically and mentally. They are sold like commodities. The innocent child Cosette had lost its due identity and it suffers due to lack of social recognition. She is ill-treated by the Threnardiers and she is made to live without parental care or affection though both her parents were very much alive. Valjean tries to protect her and manages to provide a comfortable life with Marius. With this mental peace he dies as a contended soul.

## Summing up

Hugo's artistic brilliance emerges when he manages to blend a beautiful love episode of Cosette and Marius with a political theme. Thus the novel provides wide scope for the readers to be studied in various dimensions such as a historical novel, a romantic novel, a philosophic novel, a detective novel, a political/social novel and even as a psychological thriller. Hugo's style of imaginative realism is profoundly visible in Les Misérables. It is set in an artificially created human hell that emphasizes the three major predicaments of the nineteenth century France. Each of the three major characters in the novel symbolizes one of these predicaments: Jean Valjean represents the degradation of man in the proletariat, Fantine represents the subjugation of women through hunger, and Cosette represents the degeneration of the child by darkness and evil. Hugo successfully managed to create characters that serve as symbols of larger problems and not as merely characters with individual personal problems. The corrupt judicial system is also personified and provides the essential setting for the novel. The victims are seen as puppets in the hands of a wrong social order. Like the existential struggle of the classical hero Sisyphus in the story The Myth of Sisyphus, Valjean continues to fight against the corrupt social system. His struggle itself





provides meaning for his existence. He lives for the sake of his adopted daughter Cosette and also dies a peaceful death when he realizes that she truly loves him. Valjean's life is also a struggle or a quest for true love which he manages to get through Cosette. A comparative study can be also taken up between the characters of Jean Valjean and George Eliot's Silas Marner where Silas also sacrifices his entire life for his adopted daughter Eppie. We can find many similarities between these works.

Throughout the novel we can find that justice is delayed, denied, sold out and innocent people get thwarted. Though we come across the unmerited sufferings of innocent people like Jean Valjean, Fantine and Cosette, Hugo manages to provide a ray of eternal hope that eventually essential human faith cannot be shaken. Hugo also proves himself to be strong humanitarian who believes that man is innately good. The kindness shown by the Bishop towards Jean Valjean transforms his soul and it has helped him to lead a moral life. The greatest reward for a writer is the social commendation he/she attains for his /her efforts to record the concern for humanity. Classical works may be ancient, at the same time they must deal with themes which have contemporary relevance. Such literary works stand the test of time and remain as historical archives for posterity. Thus Les Miserables proves itself to be an undoubtedly great piece of classical literature.

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