



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Les Misérables

Victor Hugo



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# Les Misérables

Victor Hugo

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Summary

### Fantine: Pages 15-98

The story opens on a little French town in 1815. Jean Valjean, who has just been released from prison after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread, finds that no innkeeper will allow him to buy either a room or a meal. When he knocks on the bishop's door, however, he is taken in by the kind man. That night, Jean Valjean steals the silver and flees. He is soon arrested and brought back to the bishop—who shocks him by handing over some candlesticks which the bishop says he “forgot,” sending him on his way with the hope that Jean Valjean will use the silver to become an honest man. That night, Jean Valjean steals some money that has been dropped by a young boy, but is immediately remorseful. After failing to find the child and return the money, he goes to pray outside the bishop's door.

We now read the story of a young mother named Fantine. On her way to the country to find work to support her child, she met another mother—the wife of an innkeeper named Thénardier—and entrusted her daughter, Cosette, to the woman's care. Fantine got a job working for a jewelry manufacturer and has been dutifully sending money to the Thénardiers, never suspecting that these people are abusing and neglecting her darling girl. The company—in fact, the whole town—is thriving because of a process that has made its inventor rich. That generous man, who goes by the name Father Madeleine, is actually Jean Valjean, who has turned over a new leaf. Only one person—the policeman, Javert—distrusts the kind stranger. One day “Father Madeleine”—who has become mayor—single-handedly lifts a cart that has pinned an old man. This singular display of strength convinces Javert that the respected citizen is actually the convict, Jean Valjean, wanted for robbing a child, and he denounces the man to the prefect.

When “Father Madeleine” learns that another man thought to be Jean Valjean is on trial for robbery—and for his life—the real Jean Valjean goes to the court and reveals himself. Before the arrest he knows to be impending, Jean Valjean goes to the deathbed of one of his employees, Fantine. Thinking that the mayor has acted on a promise to return her child to her, Fantine literally dies of shock when Javert shows up to arrest Jean Valjean, refusing his request to first retrieve Cosette.

### Cosette: Pages 101-129

Jean Valjean escapes from prison and is recaptured. He escapes a second time when he is presumed drowned after courageously rescuing a sailor. He rescues Cosette from the clutches of the Thénardiers and rents an apartment in a secluded, run-down neighborhood in Paris. Cosette becomes the center of Jean Valjean's life, and she loves the man she knows as “Father.” One day Javert picks up the trail of his quarry, and Jean Valjean barely escapes with Cosette on his back. When he drops into the courtyard of a convent and asks a peasant for help, the man turns out to be old Fauchelevent, still eternally grateful to Jean Valjean for saving his life by freeing him from under the cart. Fauchelevent speaks to the nuns, who agree to let Valjean work there as a gardener. Cosette becomes a student at the convent and she and “Father” live happily there for several years.

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How does he rescue Father Fauchelevant? (*He pulls a cart off the old man, then buys the old man's useless cart and horse.*) Why doesn't Javert trust Monsieur Madeleine? (*He senses he is an ex-convict.*)

10. **Prediction:** How are the Thénardiens treating Cosette? How long will it be before Fantine gets Cosette back?

### Literary Movements: Romanticism

**Romanticism** is a literary and philosophical movement of the 18th and 19th centuries in reaction to the formal classicism (with its specified forms, conventional diction, focus on order and unity) of the preceding period. The theory of romanticism arose gradually in literature as well as art, philosophy, politics, and religion. The individual is seen as being at the center of experience and art, with the purpose of literature being to portray the individual's experiences, feelings, and attitudes. Victor Hugo believed that the artist and writer should be freed from the rules of the classicists; the imagination should be allowed to prevail over reason. Aspects of the romantic movement which he embraced included a stress on individualism, revolutionary political ideas, and human rights.

### Writing Activities

- (a) You are Fantine. Write the letter you plan to give Cosette one day—explaining why you had to leave her with strangers.
- (b) You are the old man who had been caught under the cart. Write a thank you note to the mayor.

### Research

Why did the Emperor Napoleon march from Cannes to Paris in 1815? (p. 15) Who were the Dauphins? (p. 16) How far is 12 leagues? (p. 17) How much would 115 francs and 15 sous be worth today? (p. 26)

### Pages 62-98

### Vocabulary

denounced 64	galleys 65	wheelwright 65	incorruptible 66
tempest 69	transformation 69	transfiguration 69	unassailable 69
inaccessible 69	insinuations 70	enjoined 71	resurrection 71
secretary 72	dilemma 72	tulle 72	formidable 73
paraphernalia 75	artful 76	malefactor 76	denegations 77
lye 78	palpitated 81	brigandage 82	uncouth 82
augury 82	sepulchral 84	infamy 85	pernicious 85
sovereignly 86	unfathomable 91	emaciated 91	orthography 92
abridgment 97			

## Vocabulary Activity

Create a chart like the one below for the vocabulary words. Have students indicate their familiarity with each word by placing an "X" in one of the first three columns. Then have students provide the definitions, using a dictionary if necessary.

	No Idea	Have Seen	Can Define	Definition:
denounced 64				
galleys 64				
etc.				

## Discussion Questions

1. What are your impressions of Javert? (*authoritarian, dutiful, rigid*) Why does he ask to be dismissed? (*He thinks he was mistaken when he alerted authorities that the mayor is a convict.*) What mental image do you have of him?
2. Why does Javert think that the real Jean Valjean has been found? (*He has seen a prisoner whom others have identified as Jean Valjean and that prisoner looks to him like the convict he knew.*) Why does the real Jean Valjean decide that he must go to Arras and reveal his identity? (*Otherwise, the prisoner mistaken for him will be harshly sentenced because Jean Valjean is wanted for robbing the boy.*) What are the pros and cons of turning himself in?
3. What crime had the accused, who called himself Father Champmathieu, supposedly committed? (*stole apples*) How is that like the trouble Jean Valjean originally got into? (*Jean Valjean stole food, too—bread.*) Why does everyone think the prisoner is Valjean? (*Another convict identified him.*) What will happen to him if he cannot convince the judge he is not Valjean?
4. Why does the judge ask, "Is there a physician here?" (p. 84, after Valjean speaks up?) (*He thinks that the mayor, who claims to be the convict, has gone mad.*)
5. Why does Jean Valjean decide that he has to see Fantine? (*She is ill and expects him to bring her daughter.*) Why is she so agitated upon seeing him? (*He doesn't have her daughter.*) Do you think he should lie to her? Do you think he should have gone to get her child rather than turning himself in?
6. What request does Jean Valjean make of Javert? (*to be allowed a few days to retrieve the child*) Do you think Jean Valjean expected Javert to agree to that request?
7. How do you feel when Fantine dies? Would you have preferred a version of the story where Fantine gets to see her daughter one last time? Why does Jean Valjean accuse Javert of killing Fantine? (*She dies right after Javert exposes Jean Valjean and forbids him to go and get the child.*) Do you think her death is his fault? What does Javert's response show about him? Would you say that he is evil? callous? blind?

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8. Why does Jean Valjean turn himself in, then escape? (*He wants time to look for the child.*) Would he have escaped if he hadn't made the promise to Fantine? How has he changed since the day when he stole the silver?
  9. What happens when Javert asks Sister Simplice "who had never lied in her life" (p. 97) whether she is alone in the room? (*She lies to protect Jean Valjean.*) How do you explain this? Is Jean Valjean doing something wrong by expecting a nun to lie for him?
  10. **Prediction:** What will Jean Valjean do now that he is free? Will Javert capture him again?

### The Author's Craft: Point of View

Explain that the **point of view** is the vantage point from which the author tells the story—through whose eyes the story is told. There are two basic ways an author may present the events in the story: first person narrator ("I") or third person narrator ("he"). *Les Misérables* is an example of third-person narration. Third person can be either **omniscient**—where the narrator knows everything about the characters and can move about in time and place and can enter the mind of any character; or **central intelligence**—where narrative elements are limited to what a single character sees, thinks, and hears. The narrator of *Les Misérables* is omniscient. In this section, the narrator knows everything about Jean Valjean, the judge, the prisoner, and the three convicts who testify. Point out the passage in which we learn about Jean Valjean's thoughts and feelings of dread during hours of self-communion (pp. 70-71). On page 71, we actually enter Valjean's head as he struggles with himself about what to do: "...his life, in truth, did have an object. But what object? to conceal his name? to deceive the police?..." This record of the internal, emotional experience of a character is known as an *interior monologue*.

### Writing Activities

- (a) Write two **interior monologues** that reveal what both Jean Valjean and Javert are thinking and feeling at Fantine's deathbed.
- (b) Write a memorial poem for Fantine.

### Pages 101-135

#### Vocabulary

adroit 101	herculean 102	esplanade 105	diminutiveness 106
trundled 107	beldame 111	conjectures 111	mendicant 112
self-preservation 112	truncated 115	colossal 115	transverse 115
porte-cochère 115	espalier 116	conduit 116	consternation 117
requisition 117	precipice 117	cul-de-sac 118	stupefied 119
mutilated 120	penitent 121	enigma 121	reverie 122
pallid 123	cloister 126	convent 126	habituates 128
camphor 128	valise 128	basked 129	bourgeois 133
marquises 133	domestics 133	ethereal 133	harangues 134
prudery 134			