



Danielle Erin Rhodes as Fantine, Christopher Carl as Javert, Mary Little as Eponine, Douglas Webster as Jean Valjean and Karensa LeGear as Cosette in Arkansas Repertory Theatre's production of Les Misérables.

Les Misérables Study guide | Spring 2014
Arkansas Repertory Theatre

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THE STORY OF THE MUSICAL

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Jean Valjean, a thief on a chain gang, is released on parole after a 19-year sentence. After being shown deep compassion by a kind bishop, he changes his ways and becomes a good man. In his new life, he encounters the dying Fantine, a poor unwed mother whose daughter Cosette is being cared for by a ruthless innkeeper and his wife. Fantine dies and Valjean rescues Cosette, adopting her as his own daughter. Some years later, he and Cosette live in hiding in Paris during the summer student uprising of 1832. Cosette falls in love with Marius, a young revolutionary, and Valjean is discovered by Javert, the prison guard who has hunted him mercilessly for almost 20 years since he broke his parole. Valjean rescues Marius from certain death on the barricades but disappears from Cosette's life out of fear that she may find out the truth about his past. As Valjean dies, Cosette tells him that there is nothing to forgive, and he achieves eternal peace.

THE CHARACTERS

Jean Valjean – *the musical's protagonist (main character); imprisoned on a chain gang for stealing a loaf of bread, he violates his parole and assumes a series of new identities to escape the law, and in the process becomes a virtuous man; aliases: Prisoner 24601, M. Madeleine*

Inspector Javert – *the musical's primary antagonist (opponent to the main character); a prison guard who is promoted to chief of police; obsessed with hunting down Valjean and a strict interpretation of the law*

Fantine – *Cosette's mother, a young woman whose life has been filled with heartache and misfortune; she works in a factory owned by Valjean until she is dismissed for being an unwed mother; she sells her teeth and her hair and becomes a prostitute to survive*

Cosette – *Fantine's illegitimate daughter, adopted by Valjean; in love with Marius*

Marius Pontmercy – *wealthy young law student who falls in love with Cosette; friend of the student revolutionaries who fights with them at the barricades when he believes Cosette has been taken to London*

Monsieur and Madame Thénardier – *crooked innkeeper and his wife who raise Cosette until Valjean buys her freedom; in Paris, they become part of a gang of thieves*

Éponine – *daughter of the Thénardiens; secretly in love with Marius*

Gavroche – *street urchin in Paris; associated with Enjolras's student revolutionaries*

Enjolras – *leader of the student revolutionaries of the ABC Café*

Grantaire – *member of the student revolutionaries of the ABC Café; a heavy drinker*

Fauchelevant – *man whom Valjean rescues from being crushed by a runaway cart*

Bishop of Digne – *saves Valjean from starvation after he is released from prison; when Valjean steals his silver, he rescues him from the police and inspires Valjean to become a better man*

Bamabatois – *a cruel aristocrat who abuses the ailing Fantine in the streets, causing her to be arrested by Javert, at which point Valjean rescues her*

THE NOVEL

Les Misérables is an epic historical novel by Victor Hugo, first published in 1862. Originally printed in 5 volumes, it contains 360 chapters and is over 2700 pages long. A full third of its length is devoted to extended passages of historical background and narrative commentary about the social conditions in France during the early 19th century that are only tangentially related to the plot. Taking place over 20 years, the narrative contains flashbacks that encompass more than 50 years of the life of Jean Valjean and the history of France in the early 19th century.

The novel is inspired by several true stories, including Hugo's own encounter with a prostitute that mirrors that of Valjean's rescue of Fantine at the hands of Bamabatois and Javert. The author also developed a close relationship with reformed criminal Eugène Vidocq, upon whose life he based that of Jean Valjean. Hugo even witnessed firsthand the street barricades of the 1832 Paris Uprising.

It took Hugo 19 years to finish his masterpiece, and when it finally appeared on shelves in France the critics dismissed its sentimentality, convenient plot twists, and intrusive social commentary. Nevertheless, since its publication, it has become a classic of world literature whose influence has been felt throughout books, music, television, theatre, and film. It has been adapted into numerous films, operas, soap operas, children's programs, even Japanese anime.

The author's preface to the novel expresses his goals for writing the novel, to free men from artificial "hells on earth" and to bring a dawn of hope to those trapped by "physical and spiritual night":

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.

For over 150 years, the novel has become a source of inspiration and hope for millions of readers, an assertion of the possibility for redemption and spiritual transformation. Valjean has become a symbol of man's innate goodness for generations. The stage musical version of the novel has introduced Hugo's tale to millions more and touched lives around the globe.

Among Valjean's last words on his deathbed in the novel are, "It is nothing to die; it is dreadful not to live."



Emile Bayard's woodcut illustrations of young Cosette (above) and Gavroche (below)



VICTOR HUGO



Victor Hugo, author of *Les Misérables*

Victor Hugo (1802-85) was a French poet, novelist, and playwright. He is most commonly associated with the Romantic movement of literature and art in 19th century Europe. Romanticism rejected the scientific goals of the Industrial Revolution and idealized heightened emotion, dreams, nature, a belief in the supernatural, and the superior role of the imagination in the creation of art and literature.

The Romantics often reached back into the distant past for inspiration and rejected rules, tradition, and conventions that governed “proper” forms of art, such as those mandated by the French Academy, an intellectual and cultural organization dedicated to formalizing French language and literature.

Victor was the son of a military officer and moved frequently, which allowed him to see much of France and Europe. The early years of his life were filled with political and personal turmoil. Shortly after he was born, Napoléon Bonaparte was named Emperor of France, and Hugo’s childhood was marked by a period of violent political upheaval throughout the country. He secretly married Adèle Foucher when he was 19 years old, and they had several children. When his daughter Léopoldine drowned in 1843, he was devastated.

In 1830, his play *Hernani* incited riots among its audiences. Prior to its performance, French playwrights were required to adhere to the Neoclassical unities of place, time, and action in their dramatic writing. These rules basically meant that a play’s action must occur in a single venue, take place over a span of time no longer than 24 hours, and must follow a single main plot with no subplots. *Hernani* defied all of these conventions when it premiered at the Comédie Française in Paris and caused public outrage. Historians have discovered that much of this outrage was manipulated and manufactured by both Hugo and his opponents, the riots becoming acts of theatre in themselves.

In 1841, Hugo became a member of the French Academy, hoping to change its traditional values from within. After several years of open criticism of political leaders in France, he left the country in a period of self-appointed exile from 1851-1870. While in exile in England, he wrote many of his most popular works, including *Les Misérables*.

When he returned to France in 1870, he was considered a national hero. He became active in politics during the final years of his life. When he died from pneumonia in 1885, over two million people attended his funeral. He was buried in the Panthéon, along with the leading thinkers of his time.

Other novels by Hugo include:

Notre-Dame de Paris (1831) – also known as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The publication of Hugo’s novel would ultimately shame the civic leaders of Paris to restore the cathedral and renew an interest in medieval architecture throughout the city.

Quatre-vingt-treize (1874) – recounts the story of the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution.

THE JUNE REBELLION OF 1832

One of the central historical events of the novel and the musical of *Les Misérables* is the 1832 street battle of the barricades. Many people mistake this rebellion as part of the French Revolution, which actually occurred more than 30 years prior.

Marius, Enjolras, Grantaire, and the other student revolutionaries of the ABC (friends of the abaissés) Café are fictional characters invented by Hugo. The Paris Uprising of June 5-6, 1832, also known as the June Rebellion, is historical fact. Hugo's 1862 novel looks back in time 30 years to a period of social and political turmoil that pitted rich against poor, royalist versus republican, and inexperienced students versus the national guard.

Many catalysts set in motion the events that would erupt in this battle in the streets of Paris. Having never truly recovered from the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror which followed, food shortages and disease had spread through the slums of Paris after the decline of the Bonaparte Empire, which widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Several claims to the French throne sparked public debate over the legitimacy of the monarchy of King Louis-Phillipe.

However, the spark that set off the powder keg of public outrage was when General Jean Maximilien Lamarque died on June 1, 1832. Lamarque had been sympathetic to the poor and working classes, but the royalists attempted to hijack his funeral for their own political agenda. Groups of students and workers saw Lamarque's death as a call to arms and his funeral as a perfect opportunity to make a public statement. Protestors seized his funeral carriage and diverted the funeral procession into the Place de la Bastille.

National guardsmen shot into the crowd, causing a riot, during which barricades of furniture and crates and wagons were constructed to protect the protestors from the gunfire of the military. In the end, the 3,000 revolutionaries were no match for the 40,000 militia and army soldiers. 93 insurrectionists were killed, and the June Rebellion became a potent symbol for the growing republican cause, which ultimately resulted in the overthrow of the king in 1848.



1870 illustration of the Paris Uprising, artist unknown

THE HISTORY OF THE MUSICAL

-In 1973, the writing team of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg created the first French rock opera, *La Révolution Française*, based upon the French Revolution.

-After seeing a production of the musical *Oliver!*, based upon Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*, Boublil was inspired to create a musical version of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, patterning the character of Gavroche after Dickens' Artful Dodger. In fact, many French film and television adaptations of the novel focus their attention on the character of Gavroche.

-Boublil contacted Schönberg as his primary collaborator on the project, and they released a 60-minute concept album recording of the score in 1980. Later that year, a fully staged version of the musical was presented at Paris's Palais des Sports.

-Acclaimed West End producer Cameron Mackintosh, who had produced the mega-hit *Cats* in London and New York, heard about the project and approached Boublil and Schönberg about creating an English-language version of the musical. The musical was expanded and produced in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company, opening in London in 1985.

HISTORY OF THE MUSICAL continued:

-When the musical came to Broadway in 1987, featuring many members of the original London cast, it was considered to be part of a larger “British Invasion” of blockbuster musicals that transferred from London to American in the 1980s, including *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Chess*, and *Starlight Express*. The original Broadway production was nominated for ten Tony Awards and won seven. It closed in 2003, but was revived in New York in 2006. In March 2014, a new Broadway revival of the musical will open at New York’s Imperial Theatre.

-*Les Mis* is the fifth longest-running musical in Broadway history. The London production is the longest-running musical in the West End and the second longest-running musical in the world.

-In 2012 Tom Hooper directed the major motion picture adaptation of the musical starring Hugh Jackman as Jean Valjean. The film was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three, including a Best Supporting Actress award for Anne Hathaway, for her performance as Fantine.

FUN FACTS AND TRIVIA

Because the unabridged novel contains 360 chapters, many readers have taken up the challenge to read the complete book within a single year by tackling a chapter a day.

The television series “The Fugitive” (1963-67) is based loosely on Hugo’s novel. The main character, Richard Kimble, is falsely accused of his wife’s murder and hunted by Lt. Gerard (whose name was chosen to sound like Javert). In 1993, a film based on the television program was released, starring Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones. Jones received an Oscar for his role as Gerard.

Broadway megastar Patti LuPone (*Evita*, *Anything Goes*, *Sweeney Todd*) originated the role of Fantine in the 1985 West End premiere of the musical in London.

Jean Valjean’s show-stopping prayer, “Bring Him Home,” was a last-minute addition to the score for the 1985 London production, written specifically for Colm Wilkinson.

In 1993, the television program *Animaniacs* featured an episode called “Les Miseranimals,” a parody of the musical starring the voice of Broadway star Bernadette Peters as Rita, a strIn Hugo’s novel, Gavroche is revealed to be the Thénardiens’ son. In fact, Éponine has several named and unnamed siblings.

In 1998, a feature film version of the novel starring Liam Neeson, Geoffrey Rush, Claire Danes, and Uma Thurman, was released. Infamously, the movie features a happy ending in which Valjean is free to live out the rest of his days without fear of persecution after Javert commits suicide in front of him.

In the 2012 film adaptation of the musical starring Hugh Jackman, Anne Hathaway, Russell Crowe, and Amanda Seyfried, the Bishop of Digne is played by the stage musical’s original Jean Valjean, Colm Wilkinson.

The 2012 musical film also features a soundtrack in which the actors’ singing is recorded live during filming, as opposed to having been recorded in a studio prior to filming, as is most common in the production of musical films.

The musical has been translated into 21 languages and produced in over 42 countries throughout the world.

John Napier’s iconic scenic design for the original London and Broadway productions required drivers to sit inside the moving barricade pieces to guide them to their locations onstage.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

BEFORE YOU ATTEND THE MUSICAL:

Research the 1832 June Rebellion and identify its causes and effects.
Compare the fight at the barricades with other similar acts of protest:

- 1) Tienanmen Square
- 2) Arab Spring of 2010-Present
- 3) Prague Spring of 1968
- 4) Occupy Movement
- 5) Kent State Shootings
- 6) Selma March



Jean Valjean's story demonstrates that small acts of charity can blossom into life-changing moments.

Can you name a simple act of kindness that someone did for you that made a huge impact on your life?

Have you told that person how their action(s) impacted you?

Can you name a similar act of kindness that you have done for someone else? Can you imagine how it might grow into a transformative moment in his/her life?

Can you think of a random act of kindness that would make someone's life better, one that you can perform anonymously?

AFTER YOU ATTEND THE MUSICAL:

Watch one of the many non-musical film adaptations of Hugo's novel. What elements of the story are different from what you saw in the musical? Are there any characters that are eliminated? Are there any characters that were not in the musical, or did not have as prominent a role in the musical's action?

How do these major symbols function in the musical? What do they represent in the lives of the characters? Do their meanings change as the musical progresses? What other recurring symbols did you notice in the play?

- 1) Valjean's yellow ticket of leave
- 2) The bishop's silver candlesticks
- 3) The number 24601
- 4) The red flag at the barricade

A musical uses songs to tell its story and to express the most intense emotions of its characters. Which songs in the musical had the most profound impact on you, in terms of revealing the inner thoughts or motivations of the characters?

Think of a moment in your life when you reached a crisis, a major turning point in the way you see the world around you. Write the lyrics for the song that reveals your thoughts about that moment. Make sure you reveal the transformation – who were you before and who are you now?

Many of Hugo's works, including *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, extol the virtues of people that otherwise might go unnoticed or forgotten by history. Who are those people in your life? What makes them so important, even if the world doesn't feel the need to put them on the front page of the newspaper?

One of the key lessons of *Les Misérables* is that people can change for the better.

- How does Éponine's love for Marius, even though it is unrequited, transform her into a better person and reject her family heritage?
- What other characters in the story change in similar ways?
- If you could change one aspect of your own personality for the better, using Jean Valjean as a model, what would it be and why?

CIVIL LAW VS. MORAL LAW

One of the most prominent themes of the novel and the musical is the difference between civil law and moral law. Valjean is a convicted criminal but serves as the voice of moral justice throughout the musical's plot. The bishop lies to the police in order to save Valjean's soul. Javert's suicide is prompted by his inability to reconcile Valjean's crimes with his acts of compassion, which causes the inspector to question his own values and ultimately commit suicide.

- What are some instances you can think of in which one's moral obligations might supersede the justice system?

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

This theme is linked historically to the idea of civil disobedience. Define this term and research the following people and events and compare their civil disobedience to that of Jean Valjean:

- Antigone (character from Sophocles)
- Percy Shelley (The Mask of Anarchy)
- Henry David Thoreau
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Susan B. Anthony
- Rosa Parks
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Nelson Mandela
- Bishop Desmond Tutu
- Steve Biko
- John Lennon
- Václav Havel
- Lech Walesa
- Dalai Lama

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Complete Book of Les Misérables by Edward Behr. NY: Little Brown, 1989.

Stage by Stage: Les Miserables. Polygram Video, 1988.

(Documentary film about the musical included as a Special Feature on the 2008 BBC DVD of "Les Misérables: The 10th Anniversary Dream Cast in Concert at London's Royal Albert Hall")

Les Misérables: From Stage to Screen by Benedict Nightingale and Martyn Palmer. NY: Applause Books, 2013.

The Musical World of Boublil and Schönberg: The Creators of Les Misérables, Miss Saigon, Martin Guerre, and The Pirate Queen by Margaret Vermette. NY: Applause, 2007.

To Love Another Person: A Spiritual Journey Through Les Misérables by John Morrison. Cheshire, CT: Zossima, 2009.

The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and "Les Misérables" by Mario Vargas Llosa. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.

Victor Hugo: A Biography by Graham Robb. NY: Norton, 1999.

The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848 by Eric Hobsbawm. NY: Vintage, 1996.

Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848 by Jill Harsin. NY: Palgrave, 2002.

The Insurgent Barricade by Mark Traugott. Berkeley: U of CA P, 2010.



OUR STORY

Founded in 1976 and enjoying its thirty-eighth season, Arkansas Repertory Theatre is the state's largest non-profit professional theatre company. A member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT D), The Rep has produced more than 280 productions including forty world premieres on its 385-seat MainStage and 99-seat black box Second Stage located in its historic Galloway building in downtown Little Rock. The Rep relies on season subscriptions, special events, foundation support, corporate and individual donations, Shakespeare in American Communities, The Shubert Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts and Arkansas Arts Council funding.

OUR MISSION

Arkansas Repertory Theatre exists to create a diverse body of theatrical work of the highest artistic standards. With a focus on dramatic storytelling that illuminates the human journey, The Rep entertains, engages and enriches local and regional audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions or comments concerning this production of *Les Misérables* or the Arkansas Repertory Theatre, contact our offices at (501) 378-0445. Additional information may also be found at www.therep.org. The Box Office may be reached at (501) 378-0405.

This study guide was created by Robert Neblett, Dramaturg

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