

Nicholas Tyler

Senior

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# Jesus Valjean

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Mona Shores High School

Mrs. Kimberly Bradshaw

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Nick Tyler

Ms. Bradshaw

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### Jesus Valjean

A man's true value is judged not by the strength of his body but instead the resilience of his mind. In Victor Hugo's classic novel *Les Miserables* a convict is released after serving nineteen years in prison. This convict, Jean Valjean, is released into the world with his shameful past broadcast for all to know. After experiencing an astounding act of kindness despite his loathsome reputation, Valjean alters his own life and shows that a convict in the eyes of the law can be a saint to society. Hugo's novel *Les Miserables* explores the fall and redemption of a good man despite the corrupt justice that holds him down.

Victor Hugo was one of the most powerful and influential writers of the romantic movement. He began writing at a young age, and as he grew he utilized his own experiences in his work which is evident in some of the characters in *Les Miserables*. Hugo's early life as a poor student influenced the creation of the character Marius (Barrère), and Jean Valjean's nineteen years in the Galleys (a brutal work camp for prisoners) are parallel to Hugo's nineteen years in exile (Iosue). In addition to his own experiences, Hugo researched the experiences of others in order to create characters or ideas; inspiration for Jean Valjean came from prisoners who Hugo visited just prior to their execution. He also read a report of a bishop aiding a convict which Hugo used to craft Monseigneur Bienvenu and a theme of religion superseding and transcending societal laws (Iosue). Hugo also incorporated his own ideas into his writing – his opinions on government and society are often woven into his writings such as an

opposition to the death penalty in his novel *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné* or the misery placed on others by society from his classic *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Barrère). This is no different in *Les Misérables* in which Hugo explores the society of Paris during a time of a widening income gap, deteriorating conditions for the working class, and a severe economic crisis (Haven).

It is this very economic crisis that serves as the catalyst for the entire novel. The first act that sends Jean Valjean to his downfall is the stealing of bread for his starving family. For the theft Jean Valjean served five years in the Galleys, and he served fourteen more for attempting to escape. "In October, 1815, he was set at large: he had entered in 1796 for having broken a pane of glass, and taken a loaf of bread" (Hugo 32; ch1). For one small crime, Jean Valjean wasted away for two decades and came out of it as a different person; "Jean Valjean entered the galleys sobbing and shuddering; he went out hardened; he entered in despair: he went out sullen" (Hugo 32; ch 1). Valjean's experiences took the humanity out of him, and he left as a cold, unfeeling man. Valjean was at the lowest point he could reach; he had no family left, struggled to get work, and found no hospitality from others. Valjean was alone and destitute with no sign of improvement when he met his savior in the form of the bishop Monseigneur Bienvenu. Valjean steals silver from the bishop despite the hospitality he had shown him, but upon being caught and returned, Jean Valjean was surprised to hear Monseigneur Bienvenu insist that he keep the silver and he told him "Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man" (Hugo 39; ch1). Through his act of charity, the bishop begins the "chain of beneficence that builds as characters intentionally or unintentionally assist one another, linking all to the overall good" (Iosue). The bishop rescued Valjean from suffering again in the hands of the law in return for Jean Valjean to become a good man. The bishop acted as a catalyst for Valjean's path to

redemption which led him to do good for others and transcend the kindness that was shown to him by Monseigneur Bienvenu.

Jean Valjean's revision of character from convict to benefactor did not occur instantaneously. His redemption was affected by a few major components; among these pieces to the puzzle of Jean Valjean's salvation is his drive to assist others with little worry about how it would affect him. Valjean's selflessness is most evident when he risks his own life to rescue Marius from the barricades. Valjean treks through the London sewer system with Marius' limp body slung over his shoulder, and while most would have left Marius for dead and escaped on their own, Valjean continued on in the darkness. "He walked on, holding Marius with both arms as high above the water as he could... He sank still deeper, he threw his faced back to escape the water, and to be able to breathe" (Hugo 272; ch 27). Valjean does what almost no other man would do and fights through every life-threatening challenge to save the life of Marius with no concern to his own well being. Simply saving Marius does not further Jean Valjean along his path to redemption, but readers see that Valjean is truly selfless when he refuses to share that it was he that saved Marius despite the praise that Marius has for his savior. "Yes, that man, whoever he may be, was sublime. Do you know what he did, monsieur?... He must have made his way for more than four miles through hideous subterranean galleries, bent, stooping in the darkness... Oh! If Cosette's six hundred thousand francs were mine- ... I would give them to find that man!" (Hugo 294; ch 29). Valjean's refusal to reveal his identity contradicts common psychological theories. A. H. Maslow published a paper titled "A Theory of Human Motivation" in which he explains the basic human needs in order of necessity; in this paper Maslow describes the esteem needs where "all people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (Maslow).

Jean Valjean does not seek what Maslow calls “the desire for reputation or prestige” that most search for in return for their good deeds. Jean Valjean is content to keep the knowledge to himself despite the benefits that he could gain. While most members of society would jump at the chance at such a reward after such great sacrifice, Jean Valjean only wishes to live up to Monseigneur Bienvenu’s request for Valjean to become an honest man. Jean Valjean carries this request to his death; he leaves his money to Cosette, his adopted daughter, and Marius and wishes for a humble grave, “My children, you will not forget that I am a poor man, you will have me buried in the most convenient piece of ground under a stone to mark the spot. That is my wish. No name on the stone” (Hugo 332; ch 33). After all the good that Jean Valjean has done for others he desires no acknowledgement because he has sought redemption.

Jean Valjean’s salvation was not reached solely through good deeds; religion took on a huge role in his life after being saved by Monseigneur Bienvenu. The bishop rescues Valjean from his suffering all in the name of God. He recognizes that it is his duty in life to help the less fortunate rather than himself. When the Monseigneur Bienvenu learns that Jean Valjean has stolen his silver and escaped in the night, he simply says “Now first, did this silver belong to us?... I have for a long time wrongfully withheld this silver; it belonged to the poor. Who was this man? A poor man evidently” (Hugo 38; ch 1). Valjean found goodness and salvation in religion which he carried on by giving to others that he did not know in the name of God, just as Monseigneur Bienvenu had to him. A key aspect to the religion that saved Valjean was Hugo’s purposeful distinction between religion and the law. Religion is not held to the normal laws of society which saves Valjean a few times because he does what is ‘right’ in the eyes of religion but may not be considered ‘right’ in the eyes of the law. Two different major religious figures lie to save Valjean from returning to the clutches of the law despite the legality of rescuing a

convict. A nun that was protecting Jean Valjean after he had escaped prison to save Cosette was questioned by Javert and his police force, and she, who is believed to be incapable of sin, lied to him without hesitation.

“Sister,” said he, “are you alone in this room?”... The sister raised her eyes and replied: “Yes.” Then continued Javert—“Excuse me if I persist, it is my duty— you have not seen this evening, a person, a man—he has escaped, and we are in search of him—Jean Valjean—you have not seen him?” The sister answered—“No.” She lied. Two lies in succession, one upon another, without hesitation, quickly, as if she were an adept in it (Hugo 97-98; ch 6).

The nun’s lie went by unquestioned because, to even a law-abiding man such as Javert, religion supersedes all. Jean Valjean was able to avoid recapture and continue on his path to redemption because of the good he was doing in the name of God despite what was right in the name of the law. The nun’s deviation from her expected behavior ties into one of the main components of *Les Miserables*: “*Les Miserables* is based on a chain of beneficence that builds as characters intentionally or unintentionally assist one another, linking all to the overall Good. Although the religion is part of the chain, the law is not... A nun lies for Valjean... But Javert, representing unjust, unquestioning law, pursues him relentlessly...” (Iosue). It is through religious goodness that Jean Valjean spreads that he travels toward salvation because he does what is morally right rather than what society would want him to do.

Religion and good deeds helped Jean Valjean along his path to redemption, but he would be unable to reach salvation without love. Love is key to the evolution of Jean Valjean’s character, and it finds many different forms for many characters throughout Victor Hugo’s novel. “By love, Hugo means not only romantic love but also love of humanity, the love of a kindhearted human being for another human being, the love that must be connected with genuine charity” (Magill 537). The good that Valjean did to redeem himself was done for love in some

way. He gave to the poor because of his love for helping those less fortunate, he spared Javert because of his love for humanity, and he saved Marius because of his love for Cosette. In the earlier referenced report on human motivation by A. H. Maslow, one of the basic human needs is love; "Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general... and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world" (Maslow). Valjean was able to act outside of how society would expect one to act because of Valjean's intense love for Cosette, God, and humanity. These intense loves make Jean Valjean the man he is, and they set him apart from Javert who lives by the law; "Hugo makes it clear that a man cannot exist without love, for if he tries, he becomes warped and less than a man" (Magill 538). Javert relentlessly pursues Jean Valjean in the name of the law no matter the situation; even when Valjean has sworn to care for a deceased mother's neglected child Javert insists on bringing him back to jail. Javert's devotion to justice blinds him to all else, and he serves as the antithesis to Valjean's character. Robert Evans Wilson Jr. writes, "Status is an esteem need and regardless of where we fall on the economic ladder, we all strive to achieve status before we can move on to the highest need. Whether we admit it or not, we all want to feel as if we are a little bit better than the people around us" (Wilson). Wilson's claim clearly does not apply to Valjean because he seeks only to help others, and he wishes for no recognition. Javert, however, continues to push Jean Valjean down. Valjean lives through love and does good for others despite society or the law. However, Javert lives without love or compassion; "He can conceive no point of view other than his own. Sympathy, mercy, and understanding require an insight that he does not possess.

For him there is no such thing as an extenuating circumstance. He clings with mindless, insane tenacity to his belief in 'duty.' At his hands, justice is warped beyond recognition" (Magill 537). Because Valjean lives for love, he finds salvation; but upon realizing that his blind justice was not correct, Javert was left with nothing.

Through his good deeds, religion, and love, Jean Valjean eventually found salvation. This is made clear on his deathbed when Monseigneur Bienvenu appears to be with Valjean in his last moments; "Do you want a priest?' 'I have one,' answered Jean Valjean. And, with his finger, he seemed to designate a point above his head, where, you would have said, he saw someone. It is probable that the Bishop was indeed a witness of this death-agony" (Hugo 331; ch 33). A reader may read this and see that Jean Valjean was redeemed and became a good man in the name of God just as the bishop had, but in fact he managed to transcend the bishop. Early in the novel Monseigneur visits a dying man and intends to bless him, but he instead asked the dying man to bless him despite the fact that he was hated by the entire town because he realizes that he has risen to goodness from below. The bishop understood that he has never experienced a low so he can not truly transcend. Hugo not only tells a tale of Jean Valjean's redemption, but also a story of how a man surpasses all societal complications that have pushed him to his nadir to transcend even he who is considered holy among men. "Unlike the bishop, Valjean, the convict-turned-saint, has descended, and it is he who transcends" (Iosue). Hugo accentuates Valjean's transcendence by comparing him to Christ. In the way that Christ sacrificed his own life for humanity, Valjean made the ultimate sacrifice for another. Before beginning on his path to redemption, Valjean wanted to escape his name at any cost, and eventually he created a better life for himself. However, once Valjean was faced with the decision to keep his new life or save an innocent man he sacrifices himself.



After much mental anguish, Valjean gives up his life for Champmathieu, who would otherwise go to the galleys in his place. Here he realizes that he can 'only enter into holiness in God's eyes, by returning to infamy in men's!' Again a prisoner he breaks his chain to save a sailor on the Orion and then leaps overboard in a sort of baptism. In the law's eyes he dies, but in reality he is resurrected (Iosue).

Hugo continues by this comparison during the chapter titled "He Also Bears His Cross" where Valjean saves Marius by carrying him on his shoulders just as Christ carried the cross.

Victor Hugo crafted a masterpiece that has lasted throughout the ages in which he expresses his opinions through larger than life, though somewhat relatable, characters. Jean Valjean's evolution from convict to saint reflects the idea that the path to true salvation lies not in ascending from the good but from working one's way from the bottom in the name of love for humanity and God himself. Despite the justice that attempts to hold Jean Valjean down, he endures the persistence of the law until it yields to his moral goodness.

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