

Author

Mrs. Thurnau

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### Fantine, Jean Valjean, Enjolras, Marius, and the French Revolution

*Les Misérables*, a classic French novel written in the 1800s by Victor Hugo and translated by Julie Rose in the Modern Library Classics edition, is the story of several Parisians in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Most notable among these characters are Fantine, a single mother forced to resort to prostitution to support her daughter; Jean Valjean, a wrongfully punished and hunted convict turned saint through the generosity of a bishop; Enjolras, a revolutionary youth at the head of anti-Royalist protests; and Marius, an idealistic dreamer who thinks that both Napoleon, the former emperor of France who was against a republic, and Rousseau, a French writer who greatly influenced the original Revolution, were geniuses. These characters are used by Victor Hugo to demonstrate the social conditions of France during the reign of Louis XVIII. This was a very tumultuous, chaotic period in French history. Hugo uses these characters to show the truth behind the revolution. Fantine, Jean Valjean, Enjolras, and Marius demonstrate the social, legal, and political problems of France, and particularly Paris, in the early 1800s, immediately following the French Revolution.

Although Fantine herself does not play a large role in the novel, she embodies much of what the novel stands for – a poor, desperate, loving, beautiful, tragic Parisian lost in trying to find herself and be a virtuous person in a place where only the hardened can survive, as so many French citizens were in the aftermath of the Revolution. For hundreds of years, France had existed under a strict feudal system, with two percent of the population made up of religious leaders and royalty, and the other ninety-eight percent made up of poor peasants, with no chance of moving up in society (Lee). The French Revolution abolished the feudal system, but there were still very distinct classes throughout France, with the poor remaining poor and the rich getting richer. There were also virtually no women's rights at this time, and

Fantine faced the enormous struggle of raising a young daughter on her own with no support. After Fantine is fired from the factory where she works (Hugo, 151), she resorted first to selling her hair (154), then her teeth (155), and finally decided to “sell what's left” (157). When she is later abused by a man and she hits him back, she is charged with assault. Referring to this arrest, Hugo narrates:

This class of women is placed by our laws at the mercy of the police's discretion. The police do what they like with them, punish them however they see fit, and confiscate at will those pathetic things why call their industry and liberty. (161)

Another example of this caste system is shown in the life of the minor character, the innkeeper Thenardier. Hugo says, “In Switzerland or the Pyrenees, this pauper would have become a millionaire” (318). He is saying that if a man had been born as a lower class citizen anywhere other than France, his work could have brought him up. In France, however, this was impossible. This is an accurate portrait of the social injustices of Paris at the time, where the poor, most especially poor women, were without a voice or rights.

Without political stability in France, the legal system was also very disjointed and unorganized, with corrupt judges and police officers and punishments disproportionate to crimes. Political groups such as the Jacobins grew very violent, protesting and even beating or killing people they considered “enemies to freedom” (Lee). As food and money were hard to come by, many people turned to theft to support themselves and their families, imagining that “a person could get out of dire poverty by theft” (75). Jean Valjean, one of the novel's main characters, was imprisoned for nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his nephews (80). Upon being released, he was brought to God by a bishop who gave him all that he had so that Valjean could start a new, good life. Throughout the story, however, Valjean is hunted by a police detective named Javert, whose mission in life was to bring the wicked to justice. Hugo described him as personifying “justice, enlightenment, and truth in their heavenly function of crushing evil” (243). Throughout the novel, Javert continues to refer to his police work as a “holy duty” (185) which exemplifies another aspect of law in the early 1800s of France – Catholicism. Many laws were based on

religious views and although the clergy no longer held the power of the feudal system castes that they did before the Revolution, religious leaders were still in great power (Lee). Not all officers of the law, however, were as just and true as Javert. Many were “traitors...half jailers, half thieves, who sell their disloyal services to the police” (796), who found opportunity in the chaos and need for increased security that came from the French Revolution to make extra money. The desperation of the citizens of Paris and the mix of corruption and sense of divine entitlement that was to be found in the police force of France led to many historical legal and social problems as shown by Hugo through the life of Jean Valjean.

Even greater than the social and legal problems of France were the political. Paris was divided between two groups – royalists who supported the king, some so much that they wanted to go back to an absolute monarchy, and those who would stop at nothing for freedom (Lee). One of the latter was a young man by the name of Enjolras. In the novel, he quotes a poem, saying:

‘If Caesar had offered me  
Glory and war  
But I had had to give up  
My mother's love  
I would say to great Caesar:  
Take back your scepter and your chariot  
I love my mother more, hey nonny!  
I love my mother more.

‘Citizen,’ said Enjolras, ‘my mother is the Republic.’ (557)

Although none of the characters in *Les Misérables* are royalist, Marius represents more of a compromise. At the beginning of the novel, he is fiercely dedicated to his father, and, through that, to Napoleon. Arguing with Enjolras, he says, “Where are you putting your enthusiasm, then? Who do you admire if you don't admire the emperor? If you don't want anything to do with that great man, what great man do you want?” (555). The conflict between Enjolras and Marius is a representation of the conflict between

the two major political groups of all of France. The two groups, one for a republic and the other for a monarchy, fought each other openly, both in the court and in the streets. Meanwhile, the existing government ignored the needs of the people (Lee).

Victor Hugo uses the characters of *Les Miserables* to show the great social, legal, and political conflicts of this tumultuous time period. The lives of the characters Fantine and the Thenardiers show the social injustice of France at this time period, both of how the citizens are trapped in the positions they were born into, as well as how women had virtually no rights. Jean Valjean shows the legal conflicts of this time period. Police officers and jailers were very often either driven by religious ideals that made them unfairly harsh or corrupt and did not uphold the law at all. Finally, Enjolras and Marius show the political problems in this era as France struggled to establish a new government free from the persecutions of the *ancien regime* and feudal system of its past. The French Revolution was a turning point that affected not only French citizens but the entire world. On the Revolution, Hugo stated:

The French Revolution, which was nothing more or less than the ideal armed with the sword, got to its feet, and in the same sudden movement, shut the door of evil and opening the door of good. It made the issue clear, promulgated truth, drove away miasma, cleaned up the century, crowned the people. You could say that it created man a second time, by giving him a second soul, power. (820)

This world-changing event in history and the aftermath thereof that swept through France and Europe is shown by Victor Hugo in the tragic lives of the citizens of Paris as they struggle through this difficult time. Hugo combines story with history in the lives of his characters, each who shows a different problem in France in the early 1800s.

Works Cited:

Lee, Aubrey. Class Lecture. The French Revolution. Midvale Middle School, Midvale, UT. March 2011.