

And remember  
The truth that once was spoken,  
To love another person  
Is to see the face of God.

## THE CHARACTERS

### QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is Hugo's view of human nature? Is it naturally good, flawed by original sin, or somewhere between the two?
- Describe how Hugo uses his characters to describe his view of human nature. How does each character represent another facet of Hugo's view?
- Discuss Hugo's undying belief that man can become perfect. How does Jean Valjean's life illustrate this belief?
- In the end, what does Jean Valjean prove with his life?
- Javert is a watchdog of the legal process. He applies the letter of the law to every lawbreaker, without exception. Should he have applied other standards to a man like Jean Valjean?
- Today, many believe, like Javert, that no mercy should be shown to criminals. Do you agree with this? Why?
- What does Javert say about his past that is a clue to his nature?
- What finally destroys Javert? Hugo says he is "an owl forced to gaze with an eagle." What does this mean?
- Discuss the Thénardiens as individuals living in a savage society who have lost their humanity and become brutes. Are there people in our society who fit this description?
- Compare Marius as a romantic hero with the romantic heroes of other books, plays or poems of the romantic period.
- What would Eponine's life have been like if she had not been killed at the barricade?
- Although they are only on stage a brief time, both Fantine and Gavroche have vital roles to play in *Les Misérables* and a deep impact on the audience. What makes them such powerful characters? What do they have in common? Name some other characters from literature that appear for a short time but have a lasting impact.



“You are right, Sir, when you say that  
*Les Misérables* is written for a universal audience.  
I don’t know whether it will be read by everyone,  
but it is meant for everyone”  
Victor Hugo

# THE UNIVERSAL STORY

## QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION IDEAS

- *Les Misérables* is one of the most widely read novels of all time, and the show has been received with immense success around the world. How do you explain its great appeal to so many different kinds of audiences over more than 130 years?
- List the universal themes in *Les Misérables*.
- What makes a theme “universal”?
- Name some universal themes in one of the following works (or pick one more familiar to you):
  1. *Hamlet*
  2. *The Red Badge of Courage*
  3. *Great Expectations*
  4. *Julius Caesar*
  5. *The Scarlet Letter*
  6. *Of Mice and Men*
  7. *Macbeth*
  8. *A Tale of Two Cities*
- Why have these works stood the test of time, while other works have been forgotten?
- What themes do they share with *Les Misérables*?

## ASSIGNMENTS / RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Relate the themes of *Les Misérables* to events occurring in your community, England, or the world today. After reading or seeing *Les Misérables*, describe how it has changed the way you think about these events.



Look down and see the beggars at your feet  
Look down and show some mercy if you can  
Look down and see the sweepings of the street  
Look down, look down upon your fellow man!

# THE HOMELESS AND THE POOR

The basic problem central to Hugo's work is stated in its title: *Les Misérables*, or "the miserable ones." Today, we would call them the poor, or the homeless. Poverty is an international problem which continues to grow every year.

## QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION IDEAS

- How do you feel about the homeless and the poor?
- Who do you feel is responsible for their problems? Themselves? The government? Society in general? Why?
- How do you think poor people feel about the way they are treated?
- In *Les Misérables*, the beggars sing "When's it going to end? When we gonna live? Something's gotta happen now or something's gonna give"; what do they mean by this?
- In the story of *Les Misérables*, what reforms does Victor Hugo indirectly or directly advocate to fight social injustice?
- How do Hugo and the creators of the musical show the audience what social action is needed to correct these evils?
- Each of the characters in the story deal with the problem of *Les Misérables* in a different way. Describe how each of these characters see the poor:
  1. Jean Valjean
  2. The Bishop of Digne
  3. Javert
  4. Enjolras
  5. Thénardier
- Which of these viewpoints do you agree with? Which do you think Victor Hugo agreed with?



## ASSIGNMENTS / RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Hugo attempted to convince his audience that the poor and the outcast are worth saving. In our society, is this belief commonly held? Why or why not?
- Explore the conditions under which most common people worked in Hugo's time. What kinds of factory conditions were they forced to endure? How do they differ from conditions workers deal with today? Explore the influences of unions, child labour laws, environmental protection laws.
- Alain Boublil was influenced to begin the musical of *Les Misérables* after the character of the Artful Dodger in the musical *Oliver!* (based on Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*) brought to mind a singing Gavroche. Trevor Nunn and John Caird used techniques on *Les Misérables* they developed while directing *Nicholas Nickleby*, an adaptation of Dickens' novel.
- Compare Dickens and Hugo as authors and social crusaders
- Compare the social problems and solutions in *Les Misérables* to situations addressed in works of Dickens such as: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *A Christmas Carol*.
- Compare Victor Hugo and his work in *Les Misérables* with the work of one of these modern social crusaders: George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, John Steinbeck.



Now every door is closed to me  
Another jail, another key, another chain  
For when I come to any town  
They check my papers  
And they find the mark of Cain

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

## QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION IDEAS

When we first meet Jean Valjean, he has been in prison for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread. The harsh punishment for theft in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was rooted in the belief that theft was a crime against the entire community and should be punishable by extreme means, no matter how petty the crime.

- How do we think about theft in our society?
- Should all crimes be punished in the same way? Should the reason behind a crime have anything to do with the punishment?
- Have you ever had anything stolen from you? How did it make you feel? Would it have mattered if someone had stolen from you to feed his/her family?

When Valjean is released from prison he is given a yellow ticket of leave, effectively branding him a criminal to all he meets, making it impossible for him to lead a normal life again.

- How does our society treat people on parole, or ex-convicts? Are they able to lead normal lives again? Why or why not?
- A great percentage of convicts released from prison end up back in jail soon after. Why is this, and what does it say about our “rehabilitation” system?

## ASSIGNMENTS / RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Trace the concept of crime and punishment from the 12th through the 20th Century. What can you learn about a society from how it treats criminals?
- Do you believe we have an effective system of justice in England? Why or why not?
- The figure of Justice is always portrayed as being blindfolded, that is, completely blind to anything but objective facts.
- Write an essay about your thoughts on “blind justice”. Is justice ever completely blind?
- Is it ever completely blind in *Les Misérables*?
- Both Jean Valjean and Thénardier commit crimes in *Les Misérables*: Valjean first steals food to feed his family, then breaks parole when he is treated like an outcast by society, while Thénardier commits fraud and robbery for his own ends. Remember the blindfolded figure of Justice: should Valjean and Thénardier be treated differently by the Justice system? Is there a place for mercy in the Law? How so?

