

Credits:

Les Miserables, Volume I, Book Second, Chapter VI - "Jean Valjean" - by Victor Hugo. Read by Carole Bos, creator of Awesome Stories.

The linked illustrations, of French galley prisoners, are from *Mémoires de Vidocq* (Version illustrée de 1868 [illustrated version, from 1868] - Huillery Editeur).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Les-Miserables-Jean-Valjean-Background-Audio-Reading-0>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Les-Miserables-Jean-Valjean-Background-Audio-Reading-0>

Questions 2 Ponder

Is There a Difference between “Helping Out” and “Taking Responsibility?”

Let’s look at Victor Hugo’s still-popular story, *Les Miserables*. The main character of the story is a Frenchman called Jean Valjean.

At the age of 25, Jean Valjean is responsible for the well-being of his sister and her seven children. Is it fair for him to assume that role? Does he have a choice?

Would such a responsibility become his if he were living today? If not, who would take responsibility for this family?

Is there a difference between “helping out” and “taking responsibility” in a situation like this? What are those differences?

Is Stealing Ever Justified or Excusable?

In Victor Hugo’s story, *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean—the main character—steals a loaf of bread.

He doesn’t steal that bread for no reason. Valjean has no money, and he wants to feed his seven nieces and nephews who are very hungry.

To steal the bread, Valjean must first break-into a local bakery. In other words, he commits the crime of “breaking and entering.”

Did Valjean have another way to help his family? Why didn't he ask the baker for a loaf of bread instead of stealing it?

Under the circumstances, was Jean Valjean guilty of breaking and entering the bakery? Was he guilty of stealing?

Do you think that Valjean's actions were excusable, under these circumstances? Why, or why not?

Is stealing after justified? Explain your answer.

If you think that stealing could be justified or excusable, depending on the situation, who pays the price for the

stolen goods? In Jean Valjean's case, he stole from the local baker. How does the baker get compensated for the stolen bread?

Are Prison Sentences Always Fair?

Jean Valjean, the hero of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, was found guilty of stealing bread from a local bakery. He did that to feed his seven hungry nieces and nephews.

Using what was customary at the time, in France, Victor Hugo gave his character a prison sentence of five years at hard labor. Was that a fair sentence? Would it be a fair sentence today? Are there differences between how sentences were imposed, in the 19th century, and how they are imposed today?

Do you think that a Judge, who has the power to sentence someone to prison, should look at the circumstances behind the crime? In other words ... should Valjean's motive to steal be considered? If so, what difference should the motive make?

Valjean received additional sentences, for many more years at hard labor, because he tried to escape. Were those additions-to-the-sentence fair? Why, or why not?

What can be done, in today's world, when prison sentences are unfair?

Does Poverty Tend to Cause Crimes of Desperation?

As Victor Hugo began the story of his novel, *Les Misérables*, he planned to center his narrative on Fantine, the poor girl who became the mother of Cosette.

Then ... everything changed.

What caused Victor Hugo to change the lead character of his story? Real life disrupted his creative process when Hugo witnessed a scene he could not get out of his mind.

While on his way to work, Hugo saw a young man, very thin whose feet were wrapped in bloody rags instead of socks, carrying a loaf of bread. He was in the custody of police officers who had arrested him. Later, Hugo wrote about that scene (and how it had impacted him):

It made me think. The man was no longer a man in my eyes but the specter of la misère, of poverty.

In the novel itself, Hugo stops the story to interject a personal observation about the crime of stealing bread:

This is the second time ... that the author of this book has come across the theft of a loaf of bread as the point of departure for the disaster of a destiny. ... English statistics prove the fact that four thefts out of five in London have hunger for their immediate cause.

A fighter against injustice, Hugo now had a new idea for his main character. He would invent Jean Valjean, a young man not dissimilar to the real-life peasant he had seen under police control.

To provide even more perspective about life in France, at the time Hugo was writing *Les Mis*, hungry children could be arrested - and sent to jail - for picking a peach from a tree.

At the end of his chapter on Jean Valjean's background - called "Jean Valjean" - Victor Hugo asks a question, about Valjean's five-year sentence:

What had taken place in that soul?

Given the facts of the story, as set forth by Hugo in this chapter, how would you answer that question?

Does poverty tend to cause crimes of desperation? Explain your answer.

Have you ever witnessed a family so poor that it would not surprise you if the parents were forced to steal to feed their children? Describe those circumstances.

What should people in a country do to prevent such events from happening?

Do you think that real-life events are a good basis for authors to invent stories (such as Victor Hugo's real-life experience)? Why, or why not?

If authors base their fictional stories on non-fictional events, does that tend to give those stories more authenticity? Explain your answer.