

Credits:

Les Miserables, Volume I, Book Second, Chapter VII - "The Interior of Despair" - 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-Prison-Impact-Audio-Reading-0>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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

Questions 2 Ponder

Do Two "Wrongs" Ever Make a "Right?"

During his 19 years in prison, Jean Valjean—the main character of *Les Miserables*—has a lot of time to think:

- He thinks about what he did to himself (and questions whether he committed a crime).
- He thinks about the time he has served in prison (and questions whether society committed a crime against him).

Valjean concludes that he committed a crime (by stealing) and that society committed a crime against him (by imprisoning him for so long). There are thus two “wrongs” in the early part of Valjean’s story.

After he is released from prison, and is helped by a kindly Bishop who urges him to change his ways, Valjean does change. He is determined to live a good life.

There is a belief that “two wrongs never make a right,” and that it’s a logical fallacy to even think that way. But if we consider the case of Jean Valjean—when he realizes there are two wrongs (his own for the crime and society’s for the punishment)—he decides to change his life.

Is this one of those rare times when two wrongs actually make a right? Explain your answer.

Does a Loss of Dignity Harden the Heart?

In Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean is serving a 19-year prison sentence. Essentially he’s a slave laborer because he stole a loaf of bread. Five years of the sentence are for the original crime; the rest is because he tried to escape.

As the years pass, Valjean becomes more and more angry. He is humiliated at every turn:

- He must take a bath in the presence of soldiers.
- He must get his hair cut in the presence of soldiers.

- He is subject to harsh punishment for the slightest of rule infractions.
- He is chained to other prisoners when they move around.
- He must watch if a fellow prisoner is executed.
- He knows the bodies of prisoners are disrespectfully handled, after death.

When prisoners are mistreated, and lose their dignity, is the result a hardened heart?

Valjean is someone who once cared so much for his family that he risked getting caught by stealing a loaf of bread. Yet the many years in prison have changed him. He is developing a "hatred of human law." Hard labor on the galleys, Hugo tells us, has remolded him:

From year to year this soul had dried away slowly, but with fatal sureness. When the heart is dry, the eye is dry. On his departure from the galleys it had been nineteen years since he had shed a tear.

What do these words mean: "When the heart is dry, the eye is dry."

What difference does it make if a person is incapable of crying?

What does "hatred of human law" mean? Can a person who has developed a "hatred of human law" be changed? How?

Does Kindness Help to Change a Person?

After years of mistreatment, Jean Valjean—also known as Prisoner 24601—has changed. No longer a caring individual, he has a hardened heart. He has seen next-to-nothing of human justice during his nineteen years of imprisonment.

Is a person, like Jean Valjean, capable of releasing anger and bitterness? Will he ruin his future if he cannot release his overwhelming negative emotions?

From what Victor Hugo tells us about life in the early nineteenth century, will Jean Valjean get any help from the society in which he lives? If he cannot get help from society, at large, could he get help from individuals who care about others?

Jean Valjean experiences great kindness and compassion from Bishop Myriel. The older man helps Valjean to see that he does not have to continue a life overwhelmed with negativity.

What is the impact of kindness and compassion on an individual who is struggling with the burdens of life? Does a loving attitude toward someone like Jean Valjean hold the key to change?

Have you ever seen love and kindness change someone? What happened?

Have you ever experienced compassionate help or love from someone you didn't know? Would the feelings such help produced in you cause you to help others in a similar way?