



**Discussion Questions**  
***Les Misérables***  
**by Victor Hugo**

1. “Jean Valjean was found guilty. The terms of the penal code were explicit. In our civilization there are fearful times when the criminal law wrecks a man. How mournful the moment when society draws back and permits the irreparable loss of a sentient being” (p.84). Jean Valjean is convicted twice in the novel. Are either of the convictions just? Is the punishment proportional to the crimes committed? Were the proceedings fair? Do we have poverty crimes today?
2. After his first release from prison, Jean Valjean has a yellow passport which he presents to the mayor of the town. Subsequently, he is denied lodging repeatedly, because he is a “dangerous criminal.” Is this a discriminatory practice? How does this compare to modern practices regarding ex-felons in the United States?
3. How is Fantine dehumanized throughout *Les Misérables*? Fantine is marginalized repeatedly, how is this exacerbated by her having to prostitute herself? Discuss this in the context of the altercation she has that almost gets her arrested. How is Fantine’s experience similar to that of trafficked women today?
4. Cosette’s treatment by the Thenardiers offends Jean Valjean, but seemingly not other Inn dwellers. What is the obligation, if any, of the temporary guests of the Inn to obviate a child’s suffering? What is our collective and individual responsibility to obviate child abuse? What are the factors that cause Fantine to leave Cosette in the care of the Thenardiers? What is our collective responsibility to support parents and children who are struggling to get by?
5. Hugo writes “...with Louis-Phillippe possessing in good faith, and democracy attacking in good faith, the terror that arises from social struggles is chargeable neither to the king nor to the democracy. A clash of principles resembles a clash of the elements. ... Whatever these tempests may be, human responsibility is not involved” (p.837). What do you think about this view? Do you think this reflects Hugo’s view? Why or why not?
6. Javert functions as a representation of the law. In the story, how is the law used to control people instead of protecting their rights? Are there similar examples from modern conflicts?
7. The socialist approach is summarized in two problems: to produce wealth & to distribute it (p.840). Are these questions reflective of underlying causes of political strife beyond France in 1830? If/how are these reflected in current conflicts, such as Syria and Egypt?