Les Miserables Study Questions

### “Fantine”

**Opening Question**: What is the role of women in 19th century France?

**Core Questions**:

1. Why does Valjean weep at the end of “An Upright Man”?
2. Who is the upright man in this chapter?
3. According to Stuart Fernie, “Hugo considered his book to be profoundly religious.

Presumably he did not intend it to be religious in the accepted ecclesiastical sense, but

In a more broadly spiritual sense, in that he examines his characters’ morality, sense of duty, and faith in God.” Consider how the religious ideas of morality, duty and faith in

God determines each of the following character’s actions:

* the Bishop of D\_\_\_\_\_
* Jean Valjean
* Javert.

1. Briefly summarize Fantine’s story. How does Hugo want us to feel for her? How do you know this?
2. What is the nature of the battle Monsieur Madeleine/Valjean must fight in “The Champmathieu Affair”? Outline his reasons for surrender and remaining silent. Do you approve of his decision and final action?

**Closing question**: On what do we base our ideas of right and wrong?

### “Cosette”

**Opening Question**: How should children be treated within a family?

NOTE: The first chapter has little to do with events in this section but will be important later on. Read and Remember.

**Core Questions**:

1. How does Hugo present Valjean in this section? (choose three adjectives and support.)
2. What is Cosette’s place in the Threnardier family. How is she treated? (Compare the treatment which Mme. Threnardier gives her two daughters with her treatment of Cosette. Does she have good reason to treat Cosette the way she does?)
3. How do Cosette’s fears further enlighten the reader as to Cosette’s character and situation with the Threnardiers? (Of what is she afraid? How does she calm herself at the deepest point of her terror? Why is she not afraid of the stranger? )
4. Why is the contrast between Cosette and the beautiful doll so ironic?
5. In allowing Cossette to leave, which of the Threnardiers is the bigger hypocrite? Why?
6. Who do you suspect the stranger really is? How do you know? Why does Hugo not come out and tell us who this character is?
7. Consider the relationship that develops between Jean Valjean and Cossette; how does each “save” the other?
8. How does Huge add drama to Jean Valjean’s escape from Javert (name at least two).
9. What coincidence provides Jean Valjean and Cossette with a place to stay? Why is this an ideal place for them to reside?

**Closing Question**: What parts of this section appear too contrived?

**“Marius”**

**Opening question**: Does wealth spoil one’s character?

1. According to the Illustrated Oxford Dictionary, “gamin” is defined as a street urchin or impudent child. How does Hugo feel about the gamins in his story? How do you know?
2. Who are the Jondrettes? Who is Gavroche and how is he related to the Jondrettes?
3. Describe the relationship between Marius Pontmercy and his grandfather, Monsieur Gillenormand. How is this relationship similar and/or different to that of Cosette and Jean Valjean? (Continue to look at these relationships throughout the book.)
4. What do you think of Marius’ decision to walk out on his Grandfather and refuse the money he is offered every month? What is Hugo’s purpose here? ( Why does Hugo say that “Misery, we must insist, had been good to him”? p. 229)
5. Compare Cosette with Eponine, as seen through Marius’ eyes. What is ironic about these girls’ situations?
6. What does Jondrette intend to do to/with Monsieur Le Blanc? Why does he feel ill-will toward him?
7. How does Hugo build suspense in the scene where Jondrette tries to capture Le Blanc/Valjean? What ironies does Hugo incorporate into the scene?

**Closing question**: How important is family in developing one’s character?

**“St. Denis”**

**Opening question**: Is all love the same? Can you love different people differently?

1. Trace Eponine’s actions in this section. What does she do? Why does she do it?

Speculate as to why Hugo created such a character – what is her role in the plot?

What is Hugo stating or commenting on through her?

2. How do you account for Eponine’s selflessness? Is it significant that one of Hugo’s

most noble characters is a member of the Thénardier family?

3. Compare Marius and Cosette’s love affair with any other pair of literary lovers; what are the

similarities and differences? (Consider how each relationship begins, the obstacles the lovers must

overcome and how the relationship develops/is strengthened.

4. How do you perceive the two lovers – do you feel sympathetic towards them? Admire them? Find

them silly or inept? Compare this to how you think Hugo wants them to be perceived. If there is a

difference between the two, try to account for it.

5. When Jean Valjean discovers that Cosette loves Marius, he undergoes a serious struggle; how is

this struggle similar to the one he experienced when he was trying to decide whether to give

himself up before the convict Champmathieu was executed in his place? What is his ultimate

decision in this case?

**Closing Question**: Which is more important: Loyalty to others? Or to one’s beliefs?

**“Jean Valjean”**

**Opening Question**: Why does Hugo separate the events that occur at the barricade into two separate “books”?

**Core Questions:**

1. How do the events at the barricade further character development, plot and theme?

2.. Which event at the barricade is the most dramatic to you? Why?

3. What ultimately drives Javert to suicide?

4. Is there anything admirable about Javert?

5. What role does family allegiance plays in the lives of Cosette, Marius, and Gavroche?

6. In what ways does Valjean both help and hinder Cosette as she becomes an adult?

7. What do you think of Marius and Cosette’s treatment of Jean at the end of the book? Is their attitude consistent with their behavior earlier in the story?

8. Which theme does the ending of the book particularly illustrate? How?

**Closing Question**: Did you like the ending of the book? Why/why not?