

“Les Misérables” is a historical novel by Victor Hugo, first published in 1862, that is considered one of the greatest novels of the 19th century. The novel, translated from French to English as “The Miserables,” has been popularized through numerous adaptations for the stage, television, and film, including a musical and a film adaptation of that musical.

The story is set in France and spans a period of 17 years, beginning in 1815 and culminating in the June Rebellion of 1832. It follows the lives and interactions of several characters, focusing mainly on the story of Jean Valjean, a former convict who struggles to escape his past and is pursued relentlessly by police inspector Javert.

Jean Valjean, after serving a prison sentence of nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread and several unsuccessful escape attempts, is released on parole. However, his past continues to haunt him. He faces social rejection – no one is willing to give him work or shelter because of his criminal past. Eventually, Valjean encounters Bishop Myriel, who treats him with kindness and inspires him to transform his life.

Valjean breaks his parole and assumes a new identity, becoming a successful businessman and mayor of the town of Montreuil-sur-Mer. Despite his newfound success, he is constantly pursued by Inspector Javert. Their cat and mouse game is a central theme in the novel, representing the struggle between law and grace.

Parallel to the story of Valjean and Javert is the story of Fantine, a poor young woman who becomes a prostitute to support her daughter, Cosette. When Fantine falls ill, Valjean rescues her daughter from the abusive Thénardiers, who have been forcing her to work as a servant. Valjean raises Cosette as his own.

The novel also portrays the political climate of the time. The character Marius Pontmercy is a young student who falls in love with Cosette. He is caught up in the revolutionary politics of the time and takes part in the June Rebellion.

Hugo uses the novel to critique the social and political issues of his time, including poverty, injustice, and the treatment of criminals. Despite its length – the original French version is over 1,400 pages long – the novel is meticulously planned and presents a detailed depiction of the lower classes in early 19th-century France.

“Les Misérables” is not just a tale of crime and punishment, but also a story of love, redemption, and the resilience of the human spirit. Its universal themes and unforgettable characters have made it one of the most enduring novels in Western literature.