

Movie discussion resource

Les Misérables

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Music/drama (2012)

Rating: M for suggestive and sexual material, violence and thematic elements

Length: 2 hours 38 minutes

Starring: Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway, Amanda Seyfried, Sacha Baron Cohen, Helene Bonham Carter

Director: Tom Hooper (The King's Speech)

Script: Claude-Michel Schonberg, Alain Boublil



Brief synopsis See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Misérables_\(2012_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Misérables_(2012_film))

Set against the backdrop of 19th-century France, *Les Misérables* tells an enthralling story of broken dreams and unrequited love, passion, sacrifice and redemption - a timeless testament to the survival of the human spirit. Jackman plays ex-prisoner Jean Valjean, hunted for decades by the ruthless policeman Javert (Crowe) after he breaks parole. When Valjean agrees to care for factory worker Fantine's (Hathaway) young daughter, Cosette, their lives change forever. (C) Universal

Questions for discussion

This discussion resource does not attempt any particular comment on the movie itself but offers general areas for discussion. Yes, it's a sing-fest and yes, it's long (I loved it all!). Victor Hugo's story is so well-known, and there have been many movies made, as well as the world's longest running musical stage play on which this film is based. No doubt there will be plenty to discuss! Here are some general questions for starters:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

So much could be written for discussion prompts as the story is so rich with revelatory episodes and insights into human nature. However, space constraints limit how much can be offered in this resource, so the following is a catalyst only.

Fantine – a slippery slide into despair

There are so many contemporary examples of Fantine – girls and young women in countries who move from rural areas to the city in search of work but end up in the 'flesh trade' simply to survive. Some are tricked, and end up as victims of human trafficking and the slave trade. Fantine (brilliantly portrayed by Anne Hathaway) works hard so she can send money to support her daughter Cosette, unaware she and her daughter are both victims to the treachery of those who trade on others' misery. When Fantine is dismissed from her job she finds herself suddenly on the street, and descends quickly into despair and desperation. She sells her hair, her teeth and her body seeking to find ways to support Cosette. *'I dreamed a dream'* could be the tragic anthem of the many *Fantines* in our world today. Who might they be and what are their circumstances?

Valjean

Jailed for stealing a loaf of bread to feed a starving child, Valjean endures 19 years of imprisonment and cruel 'justice'. When he is unexpectedly granted parole, he seeks refuge in a church where the kindly Bishop offers food and shelter. Valjean steals the

Bishop's silver during the night but is caught escaping by the authorities. Surprisingly, the Bishop says that the silver was given as a gift, and secures Valjean's release.

Genuinely touched by the Bishop's love, grace and generosity, Valjean tears up his parole papers and vows to start an honest life under a new identity. He comes to be known as a compassionate man, including to Javert himself on several occasions. In your experience, what enables people to make such a change in their lives and what examples do you know?

Convicts jailed for minor offences were transported to the 'penal colony' in Australia, and made the most of a chance for a fresh start. Do you sense there may be ways that the hope of 'second chances' has found its way into Australia's self-identity?

Javert, the law man

(see also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Javert>)

Javert is a prison guard, and later a policeman, who devotes his life to the 'letter of the law', his priorities being to serve God faithfully through the law. Javert pursues Valjean for years. It makes no difference to him that Valjean has long since become a pillar of the community, devoting himself to the welfare of others as a manufacturer and later mayor of a small town. To Javert, he remains a convict who has breached parole. He resolutely holds to the belief that a 'criminal' can never change, and that Valjean is irredeemably evil. What contemporary examples are there when law is applied in a way that denies true justice, and may serve to further oppress people already in dire circumstances?

Javert – the conundrum

Javert is in emotional turmoil when he is unable to reconcile the image of Valjean he has carried all through the years of a brutal ex-convict with what he sees are Valjean's acts of kindness on the barricades. He is horrified to finally realize that Valjean can be both a 'criminal' and a good person. Javert realizes he can't be justified in letting Valjean go, nor in arresting him. His whole world is in turmoil - he cannot act *lawfully* without acting *immorally*, and vice versa. His realization makes a mockery of Javert's entire system of moral and values. (There are other scenes when Valjean and other characters also face ethical and moral quandaries).

Do you know examples of the tension between acting *lawfully* and acting (*im*)*morally*?

The rich and the poor

In 19th century France, the poor were extremely poor and without hope for a better life. If we look at our contemporary world, the extremes in wealth - in and between nations - is deplorable. You may have seen the 'if the world were a village' before - it's sobering, and may prompt a spirited discussion!

'If we could reduce the world's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, the demographics would look something like this: 80 would live in substandard housing; 16 would be unable to read or write; 50 would be malnourished and 1 dying of starvation; 33 would be without access to a safe water supply; 39 would lack access to improved sanitation; 24 would not have any electricity (and of the 76 that do have electricity, most would only use it for light at night.) 8 people would have access to the Internet. 1 would have a university education. 1 would have HIV. 5 would control 32% of the entire world's wealth (all 5 would be US citizens). 48 would live on less than \$2 a day. 20 would live on less than \$1 a day'.

Perspectives about God.

Javert views God through the lens of the law. Valjean's life is transformed by the Bishop's grace and mercy. 'Grace' and 'the law' are often at odds with each other in theological reflection, and in how people reflect on God. What lens/es do you use as you reflect on God? What other theological themes emerge from this story?