The story

Jean Valjean, unemployed and penniless, steals a loaf of bread. He is sentenced to four years in prison. After two escapes, this turns into nineteen years. Finally free, he is hardened and angry. However, the Bishop of Digne treats him kindly; and when Jean is caught with some silver plates stolen from him, the bishop persuades the police that they were a gift. Jean changes his name, and opens a factory with his new-found wealth. One employee is Fantine, an unmarried mother. The Thénardiers, whom she is paying to look after her child, demand more and more money, and eventually she leaves the factory and becomes a prostitute. While being taunted by some men, Fantine attacks one of them, and is arrested by a policeman, Inspector Javert. Monsieur Madeleine intervenes, and explains that the fighting was started by one of the men. Fantine is freed, but she is unwell, and Jean takes her to hospital. Her main concern is her daughter Cosette, and with her dying breath she asks Jean to take care of the girl. Just then, Javert arrives at the hospital. He was a particularly cruel guard when Jean was in prison, and he realises the stranger’s true identity. He arrests Jean for another theft committed long ago. Jean escapes, and goes in search of Cosette. He finds the girl and rescues her from the Thénardiers, who have been treating her as a slave. Jean becomes a father to her, and the two live quietly in Paris. Cosette grows into a beautiful young woman, and Marius, a poor, impetuous student, falls in love with her. He declares his feelings to Cosette, and the two of them start meeting secretly every evening. While this is happening, rebellion is in the air in Paris. Jean, still wanted by the police, is worried by the turmoil, and tells Cosette that they must leave for England. Marius, devastated by the news, becomes reckless, and joins the students on the barricades. He writes a farewell letter to Cosette, which is delivered to Jean, who reads it himself. He is shaken to learn that Cosette is in love, but decides that he cannot abandon the young man to his fate, and joins the students at the barricade. They have captured Javert, who was spying on them, and Jean volunteers to execute him. However, when they are alone he sets Javert free. Confused by this act of kindness, and torn by doubts about his devotion to the law, Javert commits suicide. Soldiers attack the barricade, and Marius is severely injured. Jean carries him to safety, and with Cosette’s care the young man recovers. Marius and Cosette marry. In the end, Jean tells Cosette the truth about her mother, and about his own background. She reassures him that she still loves him as her true father, and he dies a happy man.

Background to the story

Les Misérables was published in 1862, but its author, Victor Hugo (1802–1885), had spent many years thinking about, planning and writing this wide-ranging novel of love, crime, revolution, and social injustice in the France of the 1830s. The story culminates with the unsuccessful anti-monarchist rebellion of 1832 which Hugo had witnessed as a young man. Some critics found the book immoral, or too sympathetic to the rebels; however, it was a huge success with the public, and has remained popular ever since. In the 20th century, many film and TV adaptations were made, and the musical based on the novel is one of the longest-running shows in history in both London and New York. The Bookworms version of the story is not an adaptation of Victor Hugo’s famous novel. It takes a few of the main characters from the novel and tells some of the events of their lives.
Les Misérables
Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures

1. It was the spring and summer of their young lives.
2. A great hand came down and took the bucket from her.
3. Valjean could not take his eyes away from the silver plates.
4. ‘You’re free to go,’ said Valjean.
5. ‘I want to see my daughter, one last time.’
6. A hand came down hard on Valjean’s shoulder.
7. A tall policeman arrived, and pulled Fantine away.

To the teacher

Aim: To introduce some of the main characters, settings, and events
Time: 10–15 minutes
Organization: Give a copy of the worksheet to each student or group of students. Ask the students to match the words with the appropriate pictures. When the students have completed this task, check the answers with them. Then ask them for ideas about the characters, settings, and events shown in the pictures, and how they may link together – for example, do any characters appear in more than one picture? In what order did the portrayed events happen? Do not concentrate on getting the correct interpretation of the pictures: the important thing is for students to develop ideas which they can later check when they read the story.

Key: 1 g, 2 f, 3 d, 4 b, 5 a, 6 c, 7 e
Les Misérables
While reading activity

Order the events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT</th>
<th>ORDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a Jean Valjean starts a factory in Montreuil.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b Marius asks Gavroche to follow Cosette to her house.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c Jean Valjean finds Cosette in the woods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d Jean Valjean goes to prison for a long time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e Fantine asks Jean Valjean to take care of her daughter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f Jean Valjean tells Cosette that they must leave France and go to England.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g The Bishop of Digne gives Jean Valjean two silver candlesticks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h Marius and Cosette meet in the garden at the Rue Plumet.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i Fantine dies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j Jean Valjean steals a loaf of bread.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k Marius sees Cosette in the Luxembourg garden.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l Javert arrests Fantine in the street.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m Jean Valjean starts a job as a gardener at a school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n Fantine starts work at the factory.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To the teacher

Where: At the end of Chapter 4, Marius
Aim: To revise and summarize the key events of the story so far
Time: 15–20 minutes
Organization: Give each student, or group of students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to put the events in the correct order (the first event has been identified for them). They can refer to the book if necessary. When students have finished, go through the answers with the class. Ask students to give as much detail as they can remember about each event: for example, why did Jean Valjean spend so many years in prison? Why was Fantine arrested? Why was Cosette in the woods?
Key: 1 – j, 2 – d, 3 – g, 4 – a, 5 – n, 6 – l, 7 – e, 8 – i, 9 – c, 10 – m, 11 – k, 12 – b, 13 – h, 14 – f.
Les Misérables

After reading activity

Character crosswords

Make ‘crosswords’ for these characters.

JAVERT ARRESTS HIM

THE BISHOP HELPS HIM

STEAN EATS SOME BREAD

CHAINES HIS NAME

FAINTINE

COSSETTE

MARUSS

JAVERT

To the teacher

Aim: To revise some of the characters in the story

Time: 15–20 minutes

Organization: Give each student, or pair of students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to write ‘crosswords’ about the characters following the example given. They can refer to the story if necessary.