

The Merit Prize of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner	: Li Ho Yeung
Name of School	: Sing Yin Secondary School
Book Title	: Les Misérables
Author	: Victor Hugo
Publisher	: Penguin Group

Synopsis:

The story unfolds in the French town of Digne in 1815, when Jean Valjean is released on parole after 19 years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread, as well as for his several attempts to escape. However, after all the years of mistreatment, torment and despair, Valjean has become a hardened cynic who feels a burning animosity towards everyone, especially the high society. On the other hand,

people despise criminals, let alone lend them a helping hand. Fortunately, Valjean meets Bishop Myriel, who repeatedly shows Valjean compassion. Valjean promises to be an honest man and later, under the identity of Madeleine, becomes the Mayor. He possesses a factory and offers the French people jobs. When a miserable woman called Fantine is convicted by Inspector Javert, he intervenes to defend her. As she suffers from sickness and later dies, he takes up the responsibility of looking after her daughter, Cosette. Nevertheless, his cover is compromised. Javert will not give up chasing after him. Escaping with Cosette, he makes up another name, and finds sanctuary with the help of Fauchelevent.

Under Valjean's care, Cosette has grown into a charming lady. She and Marius fell in love with each other head over heels. In 1832, the June Rebellion breaks out.

Marius, a revolutionary, is dying in the barricade. For Cosette's happiness, Valjean rescues Marius, carrying him through the Paris sewer with all his might. When the uprising is over, Marius and Cosette are married. Valjean reveals his real identity of the ex-convict Jean Valjean to Marius. After a number of twists and turns, Valjean is eventually understood by Marius. Valjean, forgiving his misunderstanding, passes away in peace, with nothing to regret.

Analysis and Appreciation:

Themes

“Life's great happiness is to be convinced we are loved.”

Throughout the story, Hugo revolves around love. When everyone turned away from criminals, Bishop Myriel

did not. Not only did he offer Valjean shelter and food, but he also forgave Valjean when he steals his silverware. He could have just ignored his suffering, but he welcomed him. He could have let him be prosecuted and punished, but he told Javert that he has given the silverware to him. Why did he do so? It was because of unconditional love.

Love is universal. It did not matter to Myriel whether Valjean was a criminal or not. Out of compassion, Myriel allowed him to stay in his living place overnight, notwithstanding the potential danger posed by Valjean. He even asked Valjean to take the candlesticks along when Valjean was caught redhanded for stealing. What was he asking for? Instead of rewards or fame, all he wanted was for Valjean to change.

Love heals. Valjean's wounds were healed when Myriel repeatedly showed him mercy. He learnt from

Myriel to forgive and no longer saw everyone as enemies. He became a benevolent Mayor who backed Fantine and Cosette. Love moisturises every withered soul. Love softens the coldest hearts...

The story of Valjean proves that every man can change to the good and love facilitates this transformation. In *Les Misérables*, the French people despised and refused to accept Valjean, who was an ex-convict. Without a chance to change, Valjean could only steal again. It was not until he received the generous assistance of Myriel that he became honest and kind. In fact, if we have paid attention, it is not difficult to find similar situations today. For instance, employers tend not to employ people who have a record of committing crimes. Besides, in our daily lives, we may convince ourselves that those who have made a mistake cannot change. We may suspect them, look down on them

or steer clear of them. Nonetheless, are we in a superior position to judge others? Rather than looking at people with a jaundiced view, we should forgive them and pull them out of the dark, as Myriel did to Valjean. After all, to err is human; as the Three Character Classic tell us, the human nature is good. We have been forgiven, and we forgive. Unfair treatment to people only leads to their sense of alienation, despair and hatred. Are we to be Javert or Myriel?

If we care for others, although we should not desire rewards, people will also give us a helping hand when we are in need. In the story, Jean Valjean used all his might to lift the heavy cart fallen onto Fauchelevent and saved his life. Later, when Valjean was escaping from Javert, Fauchelevent repaid him by providing him refuge, despite the lurking danger of being accused of collusion. Obstacles

are unavoidable in our lives, with mutual support, it is never impossible to overcome the stumbling stones ahead.

Law and justice is another major theme of *Les Misérables*. What exactly is justice? Victor Hugo gives us an answer by the juxtaposition of the values between Javert and Valjean. While Javert, a diehard supporter of the law, emphasised that people must abide by the law under all circumstances and insisted that those who did not must be punished; Valjean held to his view that justice was doing the right thing. After all, law is simply a tool to ensure justice is upheld. It is crystal clear that justice is not just about sticking to the law, which is merely rules set by the people in power, who can also make mistakes. On the other hand, everything is taken into consideration when there is justice. "The highest justice is conscience."

An Unsung Hero -- Jean Valjean

Selflessness was an unforgettable quality manifested by Jean Valjean. While he suffered from not being able to stay with Cosette, he told Marius and her that he was too busy for a visit every time he heard from them, in order to comfort Cosette and not to let her worry. He had made only too many sacrifices for the happiness of Cosette and Marius. When he helped other people, he did not care if they knew it was him. He kept all his good deeds secret and did not blame Marius for his suspicion and disrespect. Only when Marius found out by himself that Valjean was the one who carried him through the dirty sewer did Valjean admitted it. Since his "resurrection", Valjean had devoted his life body and soul to others. His sympathy, his low profile, his love, have made him a hero, albeit unsung.

I also appreciate Valjean's courage to face up to his

own history. He was willing to admit his wrongdoings in the past, as shown by his declaring to Marius that he was the criminal Jean Valjean. He only masqueraded as Madeleine and other identities for safety and took off all his masks in the end. Few people ever say a word about their faults so as to save their faces. Yet, we should accept that no one is perfect and that we all have made mistakes. It is not shameful to do so. Instead, by reflecting on our past, we become better as a person.

Reflection of Social Injustice

“There is always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher.”

Hugo's description of the feudal French society in the late-18th and early-19th century is too heartbreaking to be true. During this period of the French Revolutions, the Third Estate, which accounts for 97% of the population,

were starving under the outrageously heavy taxes. Meanwhile, the First and Second Estate, exempt from taxes, lived in extravagance.

Although two hundred years have passed, the huge disparity between the rich and the poor still persists, if it has not grown larger. While many of the high society are enjoying all kinds of luxury, the underprivileged do not even have food, water and shelter to sustain a living. This problem is especially serious in backward countries like the Philippines as well as in developing countries like China. In spite of the much improved standard of living and level of education in most places, child brides, child labour and unfair wage payments still exist. There is news about the exploitation of workers in Foxconn, for example. Not to be a cynic, but people has to get rid of their selfish desires and we must be more committed to helping the impoverished.

Hugo's Artistic Use of Symbols

The silver candlesticks of Myriel is a powerful symbol in *Les Misérables*. It is a symbol of hope and love. When Myriel gave the candlesticks to Valjean, he was bringing him out of darkness and giving him the chance to turn over a new leaf. From time to time, the candlesticks reappeared, reminding Valjean of his promise to be an honest man. In the end, when he passed away, they shone brightly across his face, which symbolised that Valjean had succeeded in being a man of love and compassion and had lived his life to the fullest. The candlesticks created a warm and peaceful ambience. The scene was remarkably touching -- I cannot help shedding a tear. All in all, Hugo's mesmerising use of symbolism adds to the beauty of language of *Les Misérables* and expresses important ideas subtly.

An All-time Masterpiece

Despite its historic setting, *Les Misérables* is not only suitable for history lovers; it is a masterpiece for all.

"Wherever men go in ignorance or despair, wherever women sell themselves for bread, wherever children lack a book to learn from or a warm hearth, *Les Misérables* knocks at the door and says: "open up, I am here for you" -- Hugo's words are so true. *Les Misérables* is sure to warm and inspire everyone. Perhaps this accounts for its sweeping success -- and even after the years it remains a page-turner that is worth every going back to.