

**“THE PURCHASE OF A SOUL:  
A TALE OF TRANSFORMATION FROM *LES MISÉRABLES*”  
BY VICTOR HUGO**

## **Background on the Selection**

This reading is an excerpt from the famous 1862 novel by Victor Hugo with a foreword by Alonzo L. McDonald. This excerpt sets the stage for the full novel as Jean Valjean, hardened and embittered but newly released from prison, is transformed by his interaction with the Bishop of Digne.

## **Group Discussion Questions**

**1** What do you make of the opening vignettes where we learn how the bishop was appointed and what he does with his palace? How would you describe the way he runs his household? What words would you use to describe his character? Have you ever met anyone like him?

**2** How is Jean Valjean, the traveler, described? Would you have reacted to him any differently than did the townsfolk of Digne? What factors make Madame Magloire “unconsciously exaggerate” the danger the traveler poses? Does Valjean’s first speech in this reading confirm or contradict her reaction? What impression would it have made on you?

**3** Why do you think the villager tells Jean Valjean to knock at the bishop’s house? Would your neighbors tell someone in need to knock on your door? Why or why not?

**4** Consider the way Hugo highlights social status, titles, and courtesies. Why does the bishop tell Valjean that he is a priest? What does Valjean know of bishops? How does this contrast with his reaction to being called *Monsieur*? Why does the bishop’s naming him “brother” so unsettle Valjean?

**5** What does the bishop mean about the two ways of leaving a place of suffering?

- 7 Is the bishop's display of the silver at dinner an affectation? A test? Something else?
- 8 Describe the scene in the bishop's bedroom. What is it that terrifies Valjean? Do you agree with the narrator's words about the juxtaposition of the potential thief and the sleeper? What do you think is going through Valjean's mind?
- 9 What do you make of the way the bishop pronounces that Valjean has promised to reform? How does Valjean react to the unsolicited, unexpected—and unwanted—"purchase" of his soul? How would you react? Have you experienced a similar unwanted gift?
- 10 Do you hear any echoes as Petit Gervais calls Valjean *Monsieur*? Why does Valjean treat the boy as he does? What happens next?
- 11 Why does Valjean wish to remain "hard"? What is easier about that? Why do you think he is at first unable to express his thoughts? What happens after his encounter with Gervais to make him finally begin to understand himself? Why does he take the bishop's forgiveness as an attack? An attack on what? Why does that gift break through nineteen years of hardness and injustice?
- 12 What is the role of society in this story, and what of personal character? What is Hugo saying to his society? What lessons can we draw for ours? Are you responsible for any institutions that add to human suffering? What can you do to ease the suffering of people like Valjean?
- 13 What is Hugo saying about the responsibility of those who suffer wrong from society or individuals?
- 14 What personal lessons do you draw from these encounters? How realistic is your self-understanding? How hard or cynical have you allowed yourself to get? Do you use society to excuse your behavior or attitudes? Have you passed on to others the unexpected gifts you have received in life?

## Further Reading

- "The Sunflower," by Simon Wiesenthal, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2000.