

Les Miserables

Jean Valjean

1. How does this character view the law? In his view, what should happen to lawbreakers?

The law is good and should be followed. However, the safety of human beings comes before strict observance of laws. Valjean broke many laws in order to protect Cosette. Also, forgiveness is preferable to harsh punishment. Valjean believes this due to the bishop's forgiveness (beginning of the movie).

2. How has each character been affected by law and order? Is he devoted to law and order? Why do you think so?

Valjean was treated harshly for his crimes. However, he did not believe that law and order should be neglected. He believed that someone should pay for his own parole violation. He did not let an innocent man suffer for him, however. He believed that he should be the one to pay. He finally agreed to pay the penalty at the end of the movie by freely returning to Javert. He also broke many laws, though (see below).

3. What crimes did each commit throughout the movie? How does each man treat his own actions?

Valjean was a convict in the beginning. He had been caught for stealing. Then, after Javert caught him, he resisted arrest, harmed a police officer, and infiltrated Paris illegally. He also lied in order to keep his identity hidden—not a crime, but not a moral action (in the traditional sense).

4. What Kohlberg stage is this character in?

Stage 5. Valjean still believed in upholding the law. He, however, committed the immoral acts listed in #3 above. He did not want to rid the world of any type of absolute moral code (he tried to protect the virtue of his workers and his daughter...he also wanted his workers and his daughter to follow God. But, he also reinterpreted the law on occasion when he felt the need—i.e. in order to protect Cosette.

5. Who is more moral?

Opinion question. One could say that Valjean is more "moral" due to his love for humanity, his desire for offering second chances, and his mercy shown to others. He loved and cared for Fantine, Cosette, and his workers.

Inspector Javert

The law was of utmost importance. The law is what keeps society together, keeps order. The law should be upheld at all costs. Violators of the law, no matter the motive for the violation, should be punished. Valjean, though, looked past the surface of the law toward deeper motives of goodness.

The inspector was ashamed of his criminal parents. He wanted to make up for their failures by exhibiting absolute obedience to the law. He never broke a law until the end of the movie. He was totally devoted to making sure order was maintained.

The only crime Javert committed concern his actions at the end of the film. In the end, Javert allowed a convicted criminal—Valjean—to go free. Javert killed himself in order to punish his own misdeeds (and probably because he hated his own life). Valjean showed him that mercy is higher than strict observance of the law.

Stage 4. Stage 4 concerns people who believe that morality is summed up in following the rules of society or religion. Laws must be followed in order to keep order in the world, according to stage 4 thinkers. Such was Javert. He went to great lengths to apprehend a convicted criminal (Valjean). Observing the law strictly was Javert's highest calling. Perhaps he decided against this in the end. Perhaps he saw mercy as more important in the end. This revelation rocked his world, causing him to turn to only one alternative—death.

Opinion Question. One could say that Javert was more moral. Valjean committed many crimes in the film...Javert only one. And Javert's single crime actually let a "good" man go free. Opponents to this view would say that Javert was too wrapped up in carrying out the letter of the law—so intense was his devotion that he committed unwritten "crimes against humanity" in order to punish criminals (treatment of Fantine, Valjean, Cosette, Marius).