

Suicide triggers in *Les Misérables*Saxby Pridmore¹, William Pridmore², and Said Shahtahmasebi³¹ University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. ² Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia. ³ the Good Life Research Centre Trust, Christchurch, New Zealand.**Corresponding author:** Prof S Pridmore, Email: s.pridmore@utas.edu.au**Key words:** Suicide, suicide prevention, culture, literature**Received:** 31/5/2019; **Revised:** 3/6/2019; **Accepted:** 5/6/2019[citation: Pridmore, S., Pridmore, W. & Shahtahmasebi, S. (2019). Suicide triggers in *Les Misérables*. DHH; 6(2):https://journalofhealth.co.nz/?page_id=1834]**Abstract**

Background: Suicide has been recorded throughout history. The triggers of suicide are not fully understood. The belief has been promoted that all suicide is the result of mental disorder. Published fiction can give useful information regarding life and typical reactions of the people of a time and place. **Aim:** To understand the triggers of suicide. **Method:** We explored accounts and triggers of suicide as depicted in the novel *Les Misérables* (19th century, Paris) and compared this information to previous and current evidence. **Results:** There were no reports of suicide being triggered by mental disorder. There were two reports of the threat of suicide being used to manipulate/influence others, and three reports of suicide being considered as a solution to poverty and loss of a loved object. There were four accounts of suicide completed as a means of avoiding life circumstances. **Conclusion:** The concepts and triggers of suicide were similar to those encountered in both the past and present. Hence these triggers have veracity and support the view that “every suicide is a solution to a problem”. **Key messages:** There is a pervasive popular view that mental illness is implicated in the vast majority of suicide. In this study, it was demonstrated that suicide is an acceptable response to adversity in 19th century Paris. This has implications for the modern understanding of suicide triggers.

Introduction

Suicide takes 12/100,000 lives per year, on average, around the world. The triggers/motivation are not well understood. For the last century medical experts have claimed that suicide is always or almost always triggered by a mental disorder [1,2], but this is not the case [3] and recently the World Health Organization listed that belief as a myth [4].

Suicide researchers “ignore publications from previous decades, let alone those from over 100 years ago” [5]. This belief has wasted a vast resource of wisdom – from Plato to Durkheim, and the work of current scholars working outside the medical kingdom [6].

While fiction portrays created/imaginary characters and events, it importantly reflects “the values and norms” of a culture [7], it “models life” and gives us an understanding of human responses at a particular time [8]. This is not simply a modern, fashionable idea, Henry James, a key transitional figure between [literary realism](#) and [literary modernism](#) wrote, “A novel is...a direct impression of life”. Thus, fiction may be a valuable source of information in the effort to understand suicide [9].

Of course, there is always need for some caution. Booth [10] states that books are like friends, and just as we need to be careful in choosing friends, we need to be careful in choosing our books. In this regard, Victor Hugo (1802-85) is highly credible. His knowledge of history, and of the times in which his novels are set (the period during which he lived) is beyond question.

Victor Hugo is considered one of the greatest French writers – he published *Les Misérables* in 1862 – it is set in France from 1815 to 1832. It is an important 19th century

novel – a work of the Romantic era, which emphasised emotion and the moral worth of the individual.

Method

We explored accounts and triggers of suicide as depicted in the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (19th century, Paris) and compared this information to previous and current knowledge and experience.

Results

The plot is highly convoluted involving many chance events. In skeleton, it begins in 1815 when Jean Valjean is released from prison. As a result of an encounter with a small town bishop he repents and thereafter lives a very moral and merciful life. Nevertheless, he is pursued by Javert, a policeman who adheres to the letter of the law.

Valjean unofficially adopts Cosette (daughter of a prostitute). He and Javert (neither of whom are committed to the rebellion) attend the barricades of the June 1832 Rebellion. Valjean is instructed (by the chief rebel) to kill Javert. Instead, he pretends to do so, but lets him escape. Cosette marries Marius (a law student).

Jean Valjean

Valjean (45 years) is released after 19 years. He repents and lives a virtuous life.

He raises Cosette and she marries Marius. When Marius learns that Valjean has a criminal background, he makes contact between Valjean and Cosette almost impossible. Valjean “loses the will to live” and becomes bedbound. A doctor is summoned and states, “He’s a man who in all probability has lost a loved one. People die of that” (p. 1278). In spite of a reconciliation, he dies.

It is surprising that the doctor states “in all probability has lost a loved one”, as this is the central problem, and this would have been made clear. Nevertheless, the story of Valjean tells that during the 19th century it was believed a person could lose the will to live and this could be terminal.

The narrator states that Valjean’s brave acts at the barricades could not have been attempted suicide because suicide was “an irreligious act” (presumably because he was virtuous) (p. 1124). It is later written, “Suicide...was impossible to Jean Valjean” (p. 1173).

The view that suicide was a sinful act was held by some Greek philosophers and persisted for two thousand years. Here we learn it was current in the 19th century Paris. It is not currently widely held.

Thénardier

Thénardier is the father of Éponine (see below). He is a criminal and fraudster. While begging, to manipulating people he would say, “There’s nothing left but for me to throw myself into the river!” (p. 712).

Thénardier does not die in this novel. His behavior illustrates the way the threat of suicide can be used to influence others. This strategy continues to be employed at the present time, in a variety of settings, including when there is the desire for unnecessary admission to hospital.

Marius

Marius is in love with Cosette. When she cannot be contacted, he frequently thinks of suicide: “Cosette was gone there was nothing left for him but to die” (p. 938); “to seek death” (p. 1010); “Now that she had left he was bound to die” (p. 1011); “The sooner death comes the better” (p. 1029); “To have Cosette or to die” (p. 1198).

The story of Marius tells of a person having suicidal thoughts because of loss of a loved object. In the end, he is reunited with Cosette and survives. It indicates that a person can have such thoughts (for seven months) but not complete the act. Such thinking is described in current times.

When National Guardsmen enter the barricade, Marius holds a flame near a powder keg and threatens to blow the place up, “And myself with it” (p. 1022). They flee. Marius’ declaration of his willingness to suicide increases the force of his position.

Éponine

Éponine was the daughter of the criminal Thénardier. As a young woman she is dressed in rags and takes excessive alcohol. She meets Marius (a law student) when she delivers him a dishonest letter from her father. Éponine is attracted to Marius and tries to engage him, telling that her family was destitute and sometimes needs to sleep in the open. “We huddled together so as not to freeze... Whenever I thought of drowning myself I’d say, “No, it’s too cold”” (p. 669).

Here poverty and hardship are potential triggers for suicide. This is in agreement with recent findings from India [12] – a positive association between suicide rate and per capita state domestic product.

Éponine helps Marius locate the woman he loves (Cosette). He is overjoyed and she is disappointed (because of her love for him).

By implausible means, Éponine causes Marius to visit the barricades at the June 1832 Rebellion. She goes there herself, hoping they will die together. When a soldier aims a rifle at Marius, Éponine places her hand over the muzzle and a bullet goes through her hand and chest – an ultimately fatal wound (p. 1021). As she is dying she says, “Oh! I’m so happy! Everyone is going to die” (p. 1026). She reveals that she placed her hand over the muzzle, “because I wanted to die before you” (p. 1026).

Éponine could not have a loving relationship with her chosen partner and this triggers her to pursue death. This trigger for suicide was first described nearly three thousand years ago when lovers Pyramus and Thisbe (each thinking the other already dead) killed themselves in Babylon. Fictional cases include Romeo and Juliet (written in the late 16th century). Loss of a loved person remains a trigger for suicide in the present day.

Enjolras and Grantaire

Enjolras is a committed revolutionary who dies in the June 1832 Rebellion. When it is clear the revolution has failed he states that he and some others “are the priests of the Republic, we are the sacrificial offerings that must be made” (p. 1003). When the National Guardsmen arrive he says, “Go ahead shoot me” (p. 1121).

Enjolras could have escaped. His suicide is presented as an act of dying for a cause (the welfare of the people). This is not a common suicide trigger but is not unknown. Leading examples in the 20th century include Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who self-immolated in protest against repression of his faith, and Jan Palach, a Czechoslovakian student who self-immolated in protest against the Soviet invasion of his homeland. While more complicated, suicide bombers of the present time share some motives.

Grantaire is a heavy drinker who associates with the revolutionaries but is skeptical and does not strongly hold their views. He is drunk for two days and wakes to find Enjolras about to be shot by Guardsmen. He gets to his feet and says, “Long live the Republic!”. He strides across the room to Enjolras, stands with and is shot with him (p. 1123).

Grantaire could have avoided death. His suicide has elements of supporting a man he admired, but he had no strong beliefs and was drinking heavily, it is possible he was tired of life (*tedium vitae*) and wanted to escape [13].

Javert

Javert is an inflexible, pitiless policeman for whom the letter of the law is the only moral compass/belief system. He relentlessly pursues Valjean.

During the 1832 June Rebellion Javert mingles with the revolutionaries, but he is recognized as a police spy and taken prisoner. He is placed in the hands of Valjean, whose civility annoys him (p. 1105). Valjean is instructed to kill Javert – but he takes him outside, fires his pistol in the air and tells him to escape (p. 1106).

In a chapter entitled “Javert Derailed” we learn that on escaping with his life, “Javert was suffering horribly” (p. 1180) and “He felt he had lost his moorings” (p. 1183). He could not reconcile his devotion to the law/justice and enmity toward criminals and former criminals, with Valjean’s demonstrated virtues (“more akin to the angels than to man”, he thought) (p. 1183). “Jean Valjean’s generosity towards him crushed Javert” (p. 1182) “So, there is something above duty?” (p. 1184).

“Everything he had believed was disintegrating”. “He no longer had a reason for being” (p. 1185). He threw himself into the Seine and drowned.

The story of Javert posits that people may suicide when faced with a moral/philosophical dilemma. Javert is an extraordinarily rigid and limited individual. It is possible such a predicament may lead to suicide. The current authors could not find clear comparative examples in recent real life. But, should such events occur, they would be very rare, and would not contribute significantly to the suicide rate.

Discussion and Conclusions

It may be argued that a limitation of this study is that it based on created/imagined characters and events and that factual accounts are the only source of useful information. However, academic justification for this method has been detailed above. We are interested to discover whether the triggers of suicide of 19th century Paris are consistent with those of other times and the present. Any such conformity would strengthen confidence in our current observations.

It is unknown how commonly *tedium vitae* triggers suicide, but it is recognized in Swiss euthanasia clinics [14]. It is not uncommon at the present time for the triggers of suicide to be somewhat unclear – the evidence from *Les Misérables* is that such uncertainty has a long history.

These findings are confirmed by studies of other 19th century France novels. In *Scarlet and Black*, Stendhal [15] describes Julien who faces many struggles, as imagining suicide to be “like a vision of blissful rest”. From novels by Zola (1840-1902) we found accounts of suicide triggered by loss of a lover, loss of a wife, and as a means of avoiding starvation and guilt [16].

An examination of Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Misérables* gives insight into the triggers of suicide in 19th century Paris; there were no reports of suicide being triggered by mental disorder. There were two reports of the threat of suicide being used to manipulate/influence others, and three reports of suicide being considered as a solution to poverty and loss of a loved object. There were four reports of suicide, one as a means of escaping the loss of a loved object, one the act of a martyr, and two as a means of escaping complex situations – one of these being an insoluble (for the individual) moral problem.

These triggers were similar to those encountered at the present time (although suicide triggered by an insoluble moral problem is believed to be most uncommon).

As these triggers have survived across time they have veracity and support the view that “every suicide is a solution to a problem” [17].

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