

Paris and environs
The 1890s

Act I

Christmas Eve

In their Latin Quarter garret, the painter Marcello and the poet Rodolfo try desperately to keep warm by burning pages from Rodolfo's latest play. They are soon joined by their roommates, the philosopher Colline and the musician Schaunard. Schaunard has just been paid for a job and he brings food, firewood, and money to share with his friends.

As the men are celebrating, the landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect the rent. The men get the landlord drunk and trick him into admitting to his lecherous lifestyle. They then throw Benoit out, mocking him and threatening to tell his wife about his extra-marital activities.

Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard depart to continue their celebration at Café Momus while Rodolfo stays behind to finish writing an article. There is a knock at the door and Mimì, a neighbor, asks Rodolfo to light her candle that has gone out in the drafty staircase. Mimì begins to feel faint and Rodolfo gives her wine and, once she has recovered, helps her to the door. Mimì realizes she dropped her key. As they search for it, both candles are blown out. In the moonlight, Rodolfo tells Mimì his dreams and Mimì tells Rodolfo of her solitary happy life. The two fall in love and leave for the café.

Act II

Later that same night

All of Paris is out to celebrate Christmas Eve. When the men show up at Café Momus and discover that there is nowhere for them to sit, they bring out a table from the dining room and order up a feast. Rodolfo arrives with Mimì and introduces her to his friends.

Musetta, Marcello's former lover, enters on the arm of the elderly and wealthy Alcindoro. Musetta tries to make Marcello jealous by making a sexy spectacle of herself. Complaining that her shoe pinches, she sends Alcindoro to get her a new pair, and falls into Marcello's arms. The group then departs the café, leaving Alcindoro to foot their bill.

Act III

A few months later on the edge of Paris, dawn

A frail and sick Mimì is wandering the streets searching for Marcello in the bitter cold. When he emerges from a tavern, Mimì pours out her distress over Rodolfo's jealousy. Rodolfo then comes out from the tavern and Mimì hides.

Rodolfo tells Marcello he wants to separate from Mimì and he breaks down, explaining that his jealousy is not the real problem. Mimì is dying and he cannot afford to take proper care of her. Mimì's coughing alerts Rodolfo to her presence. Marcello runs into the tavern to investigate Musetta's laughter.

Mimì and Rodolfo recall their happy times and Musetta and Marcello argue and part ways. Mimì and Rodolfo decide it is best they stay together until Spring.

Act IV

Spring, in the bohemians' Paris garret

Rodolfo and Marcello put on brave faces, but are broken hearted over the loss of Mimì and Musetta. Colline and Schaunard bring in a meager meal. Though poorer than ever, they are still in good spirits. They improvise a drama and a dance to distract themselves from their dire circumstances.

Musetta bursts in, saying Mimì is ill and too weak to climb the steps. Mimì is helped into the apartment and then Marcello, Musetta, and Colline go to town to sell some of their possessions to buy medicine to make Mimì more comfortable. While they are gone, Mimì and Rodolfo reconcile and recall their first days together. As the others return, Mimì dies peacefully, reunited with her true love and surrounded by her friends.