Les Miserables Study Guide

Les Miserables by Victor Hugo

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Contents

Les Miserables Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....6

Characters....9

Themes....16

Style....18

Historical Context....21

Critical Overview....23

Criticism....25

Critical Essay #1....26

Critical Essay #2....29

Critical Essay #3....35

Adaptations....38

Topics for Further Study....39

Compare and Contrast....40

What Do I Read Next?....41

Further Study....42

Bibliography....43

Copyright Information....44

Introduction

When Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables* first came out in 1862, people in Paris and elsewhere lined up to buy it Although critics were less receptive, the novel was an instant popular success. The French word "miserables" means both poor wretches and scoundrels or villains The novel offers a huge cast that includes both kinds of "miserables." A product of France's most prominent Romantic writer, *Les Miserables* ranges far and wide. It paints a vivid picture of Paris's seamier side, discusses the causes and results of revolution, and includes discourses on topics ranging from the Battle of Waterloo to Parisian street slang. But the two central themes that dominate the novel are the moral redemption of its main character, Jean Valjean, an ex-convict, and the moral redemption of a nation through revolution. Victor Hugo said: "I condemn slavery, I banish poverty, I teach ignorance, I treat disease, I lighten the night, and I hate hatred. That is what I am, and that is why I have written *Les Miserables."* The novel is a critical statement against human suffering, poverty, and ignorance. Its purpose is as much political as it is artistic.

Author Biography

As a novelist, poet, political activist, and painter, Victor Hugo was a central figure in the Romantic movement of nineteenth-century France. Both his family and his times influenced Hugo's social views and politics, which included a deep concern with human rights, social injustice, and poverty as the root of evil. Born in Besanron, France, in 1802, Hugo grew up in the years of Napoleon Bonaparte's empire. In 1815, the empire collapsed at the Battle of Waterloo, which Hugo describes in detail in *us Miserobles,* and a constitutional monarchy was established. His father was a general in the Napoleonic army with republican sympathies while his middle-class mother had royalist leanings. The young Hugo spent a large part of his childhood in Paris with his mother. He also traveled through Europe in his father's wake and glimpsed the Napoleonic campaigns. After attending school in Paris, he married his childhood love, Adle Foucher, in 1822.

In that same year, Hugo published his first volume of poetry, beginning a long and diverse literary career that also included drama and novels. He was acquainted with many major figures on the intellectual and artistic scene. His political convictions changed over time as various French governments rose and fell, but his belief in human rights was consistent. In a letter to a friend describing why he wrote *Les Miserables.* Hugo said: "If the radical is the ideal, yes, I am a radical A society which admits poverty, a religion which admits hell, a humanity which sanctions war, seem to me an inferior society, an inferior religion and humanity, and it is towards the higher society, the higher humanity and religion that I turn: society without a icing, humanity without frontiers, religion without a book. I condemn slavery, I banish poverty, I teach ignorance, I treat disease, I lighten the night, and I hate hatred. That is what I am, and that is why I have written *Les Miserables."*

The 1840s to the 1860s were an active time for the writer. He was elected to the Academie Francaise in 1841 and to the peerage in 1845 in recognition of his literary achievements. The late 1840s marked a period of serious political involvement for Hugo. He spoke up in the Chamber of Peers, criticizing the legal system and the treatment of the poor, themes to which he returned in *Les Miserables.* Disillusioned with monarchism, he publicly espoused republicanism and participated in the revolution of 1848. These experiences gave him firsthand knowledge of what barricade fighting was like, which he used in the novel Louis Napoleon, the elected president of the newly established republic, seized power in a coup d'&at in 1851. Hugo criticized the new ruler and ended up in exile, first in Belgium, then later on the Isle of Guernsey in the English Channel, where he remained until 1870. It was during this exile that he wrote most *of us Miserables.*

us Miserables was first published in 1862, appearing simultaneously in cities across Europe. In spite of a mixed critical reaction, the novel, with its championing of the poor and disenfranchised, was an immediate popular success in France and abroad. It sealed Hugo's reputation as a legend.

Upon his return to France in 1870, he received a hero's welcome. He continued to write *for* the rest of his life, but abstained from politics. After his death in 1885, Victor Hugo lay in state under the Arc de Triumphe and was buried in the Pantheon, in the heart of his beloved city. Paris.

Plot Summary

Part I-Fantine

The year is 1815 and Napoleon has just been defeated at Waterloo. Bishop Myriel lives a quiet life as a just man, who is especially sympathetic toward the poor, bandits, and convicts. One day a strange man asks for shelter at his home and, With his usual compassion, the bishop gives him room and board. This man is Jean Valjean, who has just been released from prison after serving a lengthy, unjust sentence, during which he tried to escape numerous times. Valjean is angry, hurt, and vengeful. His soul has "withered" and all but died. The bishop urges him to replace anger with goodwill in order to be worthy of respect: "You have left a place of suffering. But listen, there will be more JOY in heaven over the tears of a repentant sinner, than over the white robes of a hundred good men. If you are leaving that sorrowful place with hate and anger against men, you are worthy of compassion; if you leave it with goodwill, gentleness, and peace, you are better than any of us."

Valjean listens. Nevertheless, he decides to rob the good bishop. During the night, he runs away with the bishop's silver. He is caught and brought back to the bishop, who tells the police that he himself gave Valjean these precious objects. Later Bishop Myriel tells Valjean, "you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition and I give It to God!" Valjean is stunned. After he steals a coin from a little boy, he has an epiphany: "he could see his life, and it seemed horrible; his soul, and it seemed frightful. There was, however, a gentler light shining on that life and soul."

Fantine is a seamstress unjustly fired once her employer learns about her scandalous past. Abandoned by her lover, she is hungry, destitute, and unable to care for her daughter, Cosette. First she sells her hair, then her teeth, before finally prostituting herself. At this stage of the story, Fantine has "endured all, borne all, experienced all, suffered all, lost all, wept for all. She is resigned, with that resignations that resembles indifference as death resembles sleep." She leaves two-year-old Cosette to the care of the Thenardiers, who run a tavern in the outskirts of Paris Cosette is poorly treated by the couple and their two daughters. The Thenardiers view Cosette as their domestic slave, all the while demanding more and more money for Cosette's care. Fantine must continue selling her body to pay for Cosette's keep.

Valjean assumes a new Identity as Monsieur Madeleine, and becomes a good citizen, a rich industrialist, and ultimately mayor. Valjean saves Fantine from the police (headed by Inspector Javert) once he discovers she was fired from the very factory under his care. He wants to redeem her, but It is too late. Fantine is sick and soon dies.

At the same time, Champmathieu is falsely accused of being Valjean by Inspector Javert, whose lifelong goal has been to find the escaped convict Valjean Javert was a "formidable man" whose mother was a fortune-teller and whose father was in the

galleys "His stare was cold and as piercing as a gimlet. His whole life was contained in these two words: waking and watching." After a long night of hesitation-to accuse Champmathieu would save him from Javert, to keep silent would send an innocent man to death-Valjean decides to confess his true identity to save the wrongly accused man:

He declared that his life, in truth, did have an object. But what object? to conceal his name? to deceive the police? was It for so petty a thing that he had done all that he had done? had he no other object, which was the great one, which was the true one? To save, not his body, but his soul To become honest and good again To be an upright man! was It not that, above all, that alone, which he had always wished, and which the bishop had enjoined upon him!... To deliver himself up, to save this man stricken by so ghastly a mistake, to reassume his name, to become again from duty the convict Jean Valjean, that was really to achieve his resurrection, and to close for ever the hell from whence he had emerged to fall into it In appearance, was to emerge in reality! he must do that! all he had done was nothing, if he did not do that, all his life was useless, all his suffering was lost He had only to ask the question "What is the use?"

When the unyielding Javert arrests him, Valjean escapes, and a long hunt begins.

Part II-Cosette

Valjean does not run far Fantine has told him about Cosette, so he goes to the Thenardiers' and saves the little girl from her terrible life. They settle in Paris, where they constantly have to hide from Javert's eye. They finally find shelter in a convent, the Petit-Picpus, where they spend five happy years of redemption: "Everything around him, this quiet garden, these balmy flowers, these children, shouting With joy, these meek and simple women, this silent cloister, gradually entered into all his being, and his soul subsided into silence. His whole heart melted IN gratitude and he loved more and more."

Part III-Marius

Marius is a young student, and like many other young men of his generation, he is passionately interested in Napoleon: "Napoleon had become to him the people-man as Jesus was the God-man." In Paris he meets a group a young radical students, the Friends of the ABC, who are very much like him and who convert him to republicanism: "my mother is the republic." One day, he spots in a park a young girl, walking with her father. "She was a marvelous beauty. The only remark which could be made... is that the contradiction between her look, which was sad, and her smile, which was joyous, gave to her countenance something a little wild." He sees her again the next day, and the next, until, six months later, he falls in love with her. It is the fifteen-year-old Cosette.

Part IV-Saint Denis

Cosette has noticed Marius and falls in love with him, but she does not want Valjean to know about it. One day Marius writes to her and they secretly meet: "these two hearts poured themselves into each other, so that at the end of an hour, it was the young man who had the young girl's soul and the young girl who had the soul of the young man." Valjean suspects nothing until he accidentally intercepts one of Marius' s letters.

Part V-Jean Valjean

Workers and republican students are on the barricades, opposing the police and the army of the monarchy. Many of the revolutionaries are killed in the struggle. Valjean discovers Marius and Cosette's love, but still saves Marius's life on the barricades. He carries the wounded and unconscious young man through the Paris sewers. He has one last confrontation with J avert, his old nemesis, who is at his mercy. He decides to let him go. Moved by this gesture and appalled at himself, Javert kills himself: "Terrible situation! to be moved! To be granite, and to doubt! to be ice and to melt! to feel your fingers suddenly open! to lose your hold, appalling thing!... The projectile man no longer knowing his road, and recoiling!" Still, many died, including Gavroche, a little Parisian boy whose courage inspired the fighters of the barricades.

Cosette restores Marius to health, and they decide to get married. On the wedding day, Marius meets Valjean, who tells him who he really is, a convict still hunted by the police, and that Cosette does not know anything about his unsavory past. However, Valjean does not tell Marius that he saved his life during the insurrections. Marius wants to help him win his pardon, but Valjean refuses: "I need pardon of none but one, that is my conscience." Marius decides to stay silent, but he is horrified by the revelations. Valjean stops visiting the young couple. Soon, Marius learns that he was saved by him and, accompanied by Cosette, rushes to Valjean's home, but it is too late: Valjean is dying. Uttering his last words, Valjean advises them, "There is scarcely anything else in the world but that: to love one another." He is buried under a blank stone.

Characters

Bahorel

Bahorel is a student and a member of the ABC Society, a secret revolutionary group of students and workers. But he has no respect for authority and is a real troublemaker, liking nothing better than a good fight.

Mademoiselle Baptistine

The unmarried sister of the Bishop of Digne, she lives with him and runs his household. She is a gentle, respectable woman who does good works.

Bishop of Digne

See Charles Myriel

Bossuet

A member of the ABC Society, Bossuet is a law student. He is cheerful but unlucky; everything he undertakes seems to go wrong.

Combeferre

Combeferre is a member of the ABC Society, a student, and a philosopher of revolution. He has a scientific mind and dreams of the inventions of the future and how they will benefit the human race.

Cosette

Cosette is the illegitimate daughter of Fantine, a Parisian "grisette" (working woman) whose lover, Felix Tholomyes, abandons her when she is pregnant. Valjean rescues Cosette from the Thenardiers, and she becomes the love of his life and the motivation for his goodness. She is raised and educated in a convent. When she and Valjean move out into the real Paris, she turns into a beautiful young Parisian woman and falls in love with Marius Pontmercy.

Courfeyrac

A member of the ABC Society, Courfeyrac becomes Marius's friend and takes him in.

Enjolras

Enjolras is a leader of the ABC Society. Marius first meets him there and ends up fighting with him on the barricade. The only son of rich parents, Enjolras is a student of the Revolution and has "a nature at once scholarly and warlike" He is indifferent to women and pleasure, but passionate about justice. Enjolras defines what he is fighting for in a speech on the barricade: "Citizens, no matter what happens today, in defeat no less than in victory, we shall be making a revolution. [... Equality] means, in civic terms, an equal outlet for all talents; in political terms, that all votes will carry the same weight; and in religious terms that all beliefs will enjoy equal rights. Equality has a means at its disposal-compulsory free education. The right to learn the alphabet, that is where we must start."

Fantine

Fantine is a Parisian "grisette," or working woman, who falls in love with a student, Felix Tholomyes. Just after Felix breaks off their relationship, she gives birth to their daughter, Cosette. From that point forward her life is a downward Spiral. She gives up her child to the mercenary Thenardiers and finds a job in her home town, but is dismissed when her supervisor finds out about her past She struggles to make ends meet, selling everything she has: her hair, her teeth, and herself (becoming a prostitute). Fantine represents society's cruelty to the poor and its degradation of poor women in particular. Only Valjean shows her any kindness.

Pere Fauchelevent

When Fauchelevent, an elderly carrier, gets caught beneath the wheels of his own can, Valjean rescues him and afterward finds work for him as a gardener in a Paris convent. In doing so, Valjean risks giving away his identity to Javen, who is already suspicious, by showing his great strength. But Fauchelevent repays Valjean by taking him and Cosette in when they are on the run from the police. Fauchelevent, an educated peasant, is both shrewd and good-willed. He recognizes his debt and finds the means to repay it.

Feuilly

A member of the ABC Society of revolutionaries, Feuilly earns his living as a fan-maker and is self-educated.

Mademoiselle Gillenormand

Monsieur Gillenormand's eldest daughter is a prudish, narrow-minded old woman who runs her father's household.

Monsieur Gillenormand

Monsieur Gillenormand, Marius Pontmercy's grandfather and caretaker, is a relic of the past. He had his heyday in the decadent Ancient Regime, the pre-Revolutionary monarchy, in which the nobility dominated France. He still looks back to those days with nostalgia and regret. Gillenormand believes that in modern times people lack the gift of living life to the fullest and enjoying all of its pleasures. He raises Marius to believe that the Revolution "was a load of scoundrels." When Marius discovers that his father was a Revolutionary hero, it causes a bitter break between them.

Theodule Gillenormand

Theodule is Monsieur Gillenormand great-nephew and a lieutenant in the army. He is a vain young man and a favorite of his Aunt Gillenormand. He tries to become Gillenormand's favorite when Marius is out of the picture, but he can't replace Marius in the old man's affections.

Grantaire

Although Grantaire belongs to the ABC Society, he is a cynic and a hedonist and does not believe in the ideals of revolution. But he does believe in one ideal: Enjolras, whom he regards with love and admiration.

Inspector Javert

Inspector Javert is nearly as renowned a character as Jean Valjean, perhaps due to the dramatized versions of *Les Miserables,* which have tended to present the novel as more of a detective story than a morality tale. J avert serves as Valjean' s nemesis throughout the novel, continually threatening to expose his past and bring him under the control of the law. In his exaggerated, nearly fanatical devotion to duty and his lack of compassion, Javert represents a punitive, vengeful form of justice.

Hugo suggests that Javert's "respect for authority and hatred of revolt" are rooted in his past, for he was born in a prison. As if to compensate for this fact, he has spent his life in faithful service to law enforcement. When Valjean saves Javert by helping him escape from the revolutionaries, Javert's rigid system of behavior is upset, for he realizes that Valjean, a criminal who has not yet been officially punished, has performed an act of great kindness and courage. Javert previously would have overlooked such an act and arrested the criminal, but his realization proves more than he can bear. Unable to resolve his inner conflict, Javert drowns himself in the Seine River.

Joly

A member of the ABC Society, Joly is studying medicine. He is something of a hypochondriac.

Monsieur Maheuf

An elderly churchwarden, Mabeuf befriends Marius's father, Colonel Pontmercy, and Marius becomes friends with Mabeuf after Ins father dies. He is a gentle man whose main interests in life are his garden and his books, but he becomes very poor and has to sell all of Ins books Impoverished and without hope in life, Mabeuf joins the rebels, courageously climbs to the top of the barricade to plant a flag, and is shot by the militia. His age and gentleness make his courage even more remarkable, showing that revolution can come in any form.

Madame Magloire

Madame Magloire is the personal maid of Mademoiselle Baptistine and the Bishop of Digne' s housekeeper.

Charles Myriel

Myriel is a kind and generous bishop who gives Jean Valjean aid when everyone else refuses him. Searching for a place to spend the night, the ex-convict finds that he is a branded man and no inn will let him stay His last resort is the home of the bishop, who takes him in and treats him as an honored guest. After Valjean steals the Bishop's silver and is caught by the police, the bishop protects him by insisting that the silver was actually a gift. Afterward, he says to Valjean, "[You] no longer belong to what is evil but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God." The bishop's selfless act inspires Valjean to change his life.

Colonel Georges Pontmercy

A hero of the Napoleonic wars, Pontmercy marries Gillenormand's youngest daughter and has a son, Marius. The villainous innkeeper, Thenardier, drags Pontmercy to safety from the battlefield of Waterloo. Although Marius does not meet his father, Pontmercy watches him from afar in church and loves his son. He leaves Marius a note telling him to adopt the title of Baron (Napoleon gave it to Pontmercy on the field of battle), and to do Thenardier every good in his power Marius worships his father as a hero and is strongly influenced by Ins political beliefs.

Marius Pontmercy

Marius is a young law student who falls in love with Cosette. He also saves Valjean from a plot against his life by the innkeeper-turned-criminal, Thenardier. In turn, Marius is saved by Valjean while fighting on the barricade. He is the son of Georges Pontmercy, a colonel and war hero under Napoleon. But Marius's grandfather, Monsieur Gillenormand, despises Georges and takes Marius into his own home to raise him.

Manus is at a stage of life where he doesn't know yet what he believes. His image of the world keeps opening up as he encounters new points of view. When Marius discovers his father's identity, he worships him as a war hero and adopts a pro-Napoleon stance opposed to his grandfather's royalism. He gets into a quarrel with Gillenormand and storms out of the house to make his way through Paris as a starving student. Marius falls in with a group of students, the ABC Society led by Enjolras, who share his republican beliefs. At first he is reluctant to give up his belief that conquest and war are the greatest Ideals of a nation. But he begins to have doubts when the students present him with a new ideal, freedom: "Having so lately found a faith, must he renounce it? He told himself that he need not; he resolved not to doubt, and began despite himself to do so." When unrest stirs Paris in 1832 and his friends take up arms, he joins them on the barricades. But it is more out of desperation, because he fears he has lost Cosette, than out of political conviction. He is lured there by the voice of the street girl Eponine Thenardier telling him that his friends await him.

Jean Prouvaire

Prouvaire is a member of the ABC Society of students and workers. A wealthy student, he is interested in social questions, but is also a poet and lover with a romantic side.

Eponine Thenardier

The poor daughter of the Thenardiers, Eponine falls in love with Marius and becomes jealous of his love for Cosette. She is tom between wanting to help him and wanting to keep him away from Cosette. She courageously saves his life on the barricade by stepping between him and a bullet, and dies in his arms. Her life is an example of poverty's degradation: "What It came to was that in the heart of our society, as at present constituted, two unhappy mortals [Eponine and her sister] had been turned by extreme poverty into monsters at once depraved and innocent, drab creatures without name or age or sex, no longer capable of good or evil, deprived of all freedom, virtue, and responsibility; souls born yesterday and shriveled today like flowers dropped in the street which lie fading in the mud until a cartwheel comes to crush them."

Gavroche Thenardier

Gavroche is a Parisian urchin (street child), the son of the villainous Thenardiers. Lively and clever, he lives by his wits. He dies by them as well and proves his courage, getting shot by soldiers when he teases them on the barricade. His fate is interwoven with that of Marius, Cosette, and the Thenardiers. The novel presents him as an essential representative of Paris: "He had neither hearth nor home, nor any regular source of food; yet he was happy because he was free. By the time the poor have grown to man's estate they have nearly always been caught in the wheels of the social order and become shaped to its requirements; but while they are children their smallness saves them."

Madame Thenardier

The coarse wife of the innkeeper Thenardier, she takes in Fantine's daughter, Cosette. But she treats her like a Cinderella, feeding and clothing her poorly and making her do the worst work in the household. She helps hatch a plot to entrap Valjean and steal his fortune, but instead ends up in prison. The narrator states that she is naturally cruel and scheming and offers her as an example of those who commit crimes not because they are driven to it, but because it suits them.

Monsieur Thenardier

The unscrupulous innkeeper and his wife take care of Cosette, but treat her poorly. He embarks on a life of crime, getting involved with the worst criminals in Paris, and attempts to entrap and rob Valjean. Although he ends up in prison, he escapes. He helps Valjean escape from the sewers when Valjean is trapped there with Marius. Thenardier plays a central part in the plot He does good in spite of his evil intentions, not knowing what the consequences of his own actions will be.

Felix Tholomyes

A wealthy, rakish student, Tholomyes is Fantine's lover for a while and then abandons her. Their affair ruins Fantine. She becomes pregnant and cannot earn enough to save herself and her child. The narrator says of the relationship: "For him it was a passing affair, for her the love of her life".

Jean Valjean

The chief protagonist, Jean Valjean, is an ex-convict who struggles to redeem himself morally and to find acceptance in a society that rejects him as a former criminal. Valjean's redemption through his many trials is the central plot of *Les Miserables.*

The child of a poor peasant family, he loses both his parents as a young child and moves in with an older sister When her husband dies, Valjean supports her and her seven children by working as a tree pruner. Unable to feed the family on his earnings, he steals a loaf of bread from a baker and ends up serving nineteen years in prison for his crime. Finally free, he finds that he cannot find lodging, work, or acceptance in the outside world. As an ex-convict he is at the bottom of the social order.

But Valjean has a transforming experience when he meets the Bishop of Digne, who accepts and shelters him regardless of his past, even after Valjean tries to steal from his household. Here Valjean learns the lesson of unconditional love, a reason for living that sustains him through all of his trials. And they are many. He lives on the run from two forces: the justice of the law, represented by Javert, a police detective who doggedly pursues him, and his own conscience, which leads him to make difficult choices between what is right and what is easiest.

Valjean starts a new life as the mayor of Montreuil sur Mer. He is the savior of this manufacturing town, rebuilding its industries and economy and sustaining the population with new jobs. But he lives on the run from his dogged pursuer, Javert, and in his first moral trial he has to give himself up to keep an innocent man from going to prison in his place. He escapes again and lives the rest of his life as a fugitive.

The harshness of the society in which he lives presents great obstacles to Valjean' s moral redemption. Only the transforming power of love lets him overcome them. He loves a young girl, Cosette, daughter of the prostitute Fantine, and raises her as his daughter. Most of his good acts center on her welfare: saving the life of her lover, Marius; protecting her, whatever the cost to himself; even giving up Cosette after she marries, so that she will not be sullied by connection to an ex-convict. His love for her teaches him how to act in the world at large. In all of his actions he strives to be honorable and generous.

Themes

Change and Transformation

The most important theme the novel examines is that of transformation, in the individual and in society. Jean Valjean, the chief protagonist, is transformed from a misanthropic and potentially Violent ex-convict to a man capable of heroic love and self-sacrifice. The force that transforms him is love. The Bishop of Digne offers Valjean unconditional love, trusting the former criminal with his life and giving him all that he can. Valjean finds inspiration for an entirely new life from this example. He learns to put another person first when he raises Cosette as his own daughter, and he endures moral trials, such as risking his life to rescue Marius, who loves Cosette and whom Valjean hates. On a broader scale, the workers and students on the barricade fight for social transformation, to create a new France without injustice and poverty.

Human Rights

Closely related to the theme of transformation is that of human rights. This is what the barricade is about and what the students, workers, and downtrodden poor of Paris want. The novel offers many examples of the violation of human rights. Valjean steals a loaf of bread because he has hungry children to feed. The law punishes him for nineteen years because of this petty Crime, and Valjean finds little peace at the end of his term. The police inspector Javert pursues him almost to the grave for the theft of a coin. Fantine loves a man who abandons her, and she ends up as a prostitute. She sacrifices her child, her looks, and her body Just to survive. Even worse, when she does defend her human dignity and accuses a bourgeois gentleman of assault, the police arrest her. As the novel presents it, the aim of revolution is to create a society in which all individuals have equal rights and in which poverty itself is undesirable.

Class Conflict

The central struggle is also a class conflict: revolution mobilizes the have-nots against the haves. The working class of Pans is presented as an ominous force, ready to throw up a barricade at a moment's notice. The barricade is where the life-and-death struggle of the disenfranchised and the government takes place. The students and workers join and fight to create a new and better nation, even at the cost of their lives. Enjolras, their leader, puts it eloquently when he says: "[This] is the hard price that must be paid for the future. A revolution is a toll-gate. But mankind will be liberated, uplifted and consoled. We here affirm it, on this barricade."

Justice and Injustice

Another major question the novel considers is whether the legal institutions of the state exact true justice. While he is in prison, the convict Jean Valjean considers the question of whether he has been treated fairly. Readers must wonder if his crime, stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family, really merits the punishment he receives: four years of imprisonment that stretch to nineteen when he tries to escape. Valjean asks himself "whether human society had the right to ... grind a poor man between the millstones of need and excess-need of work and excess of punishment. Was it not monstrous that society should treat in this fashion precisely those least favored in the distribution of wealth...?" He comes to the conclusion that, although he did commit a reprehensible crime, the punishment is out of proportion, and he develops an intense hatred for society as a whole. Fantine meets the same fate when she defends herself against attack. As a prostitute, she is on the bottom rung of society; the law offers her no protection.

Only respectable people with money appear to have any legal rights.

Meaning of Life

Valjean's great discovery, the one that transforms him, is that the meaning of life lies in love. His love is twofold, both the generalized love for one's fellow creatures that the Bishop of Digne shows toward him and the specific love for another person that he feels for Cosette. Summing up this philosophy at the end of his life, Valjean says to Cosette and Marius, "Love one another always. There is nothing else that matters in this world except love.'"

Style

Structure

In some ways the novel is structured traditionally. It has a rising action, that is, the part of the narrative that sets up the problems that are to be resolved. This consists of Valjean's life up to the point when he saves his enemy Marius by carrying him through the sewers of Paris to safety. The climax, or turning point, when the conflict reaches its peak, is the suicide of the police detective Javert. Caught between his rigid belief in the absolute power of law and his conclusion that he has a moral obligation to break the law and free his savior, Valjean, Javert solves his dilemma by killing himself. The denouement, or winding-down of the story, which describes the outcome of the primary plot problem as well as resolving secondary plots, includes Marius's recovery, the marriage of Cosette and Marius, the revelation of Valjean's true story, and the young couple's visit to Valjean's deathbed.

But the narrative's many departures from the main plot are important to the novel as well. The novel includes separate sections on the sewers of Paris, the criminal underworld, the convent, Parisian street slang, the Battle 'of Waterloo, revolutionary societies, and the barricades. Hugo is telling more than the story of one man; he is telling the story of Paris. His digressions, although they do not forward plot development, give the reader information about the novel's themes, such as human rights, Justice and injustice, class conflict, and the city. He is primarily concerned not so much with narrating a story but with Critiquing society and presenting his notions of reform.

Point of View

The story is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. Omniscient narrators have a god's-eye or all-knowing view, knowing more than their characters do. The narrator breaks in several times to equate himself with the author. For example, at the beginning of the Waterloo episode, the narrator says: "On a fine May morning last year (that is to say, in the year 1861) a traveller, the author of this tale, walked from Nivelles in the direction of La Hulpe." And in describing Pans, he states: "For some years past the author of this book, who regrets the necessity to speak of himself, has been absent from Paris." Although generally there is a distinction between the author and the narrator of a work, this device blurs the boundary. The novel is a vehicle of expression for the author's social views. Whenever the narrator is not describing the actions, thoughts, and speech of the characters, the voice of authority emerges. This includes the discussion of Parisian street urchins, the sewers, the underworld, and the barricades. The narrator pulls back from the characters to look at the broader scenario. Here is a typical example of this device, describing the barricade: "And while a battle that was still political was preparing in that place that had witnessed so many revolutionary acts; while the young people, the secret societies, and the schools, inspired by principle, and the middle-class

inspired by self-interest, were advancing on each other to clash and grapple... there was to be heard the sombre growling of the masses: a fearful and awe-inspiring voice in which were mingled the snarl of animals and the words of God, a terror to the fainthearted and a warning to the wise, coming at once from the depths, like the roaring of a lion, and from the depths like the voice of thunder."

Setting

The setting for most of the novel is Pans around 1830, a character in its own right. The narrative devotes almost as much space to it as to the protagonist, Valjean. It is a dark, gloomy, and sinister place, full of plague-carrying winds and polluting sewers, rotting old districts and slums. Its secretive aspect is a blessing, though, for Valjean, who seeks refuge in dark comers. The narrow alleys lend themselves, too, to the building of barricades. The narrative also presents Paris as a microcosm, reflecting the world as a whole: "Paris stands for the world. Paris is a sum total, the ceiling of the human race To observe Paris is to review the whole course of history" Paris also has its places of beauty and tranquility, such as the Luxembourg Garden on a fair day, but even here discontent lurks, in the form of two hungry boys wandering in search of food.

The novel presents Paris in all its wretchedness and grandeur. The urban environment has power over those who live in it. Some characters, such as Thenardier, an innkeeper who gets involved with the worst criminal elements of the city, are corrupted by Paris's temptations and hardships. Others, like Gavroche, the street urchin who is Thenardier's son, demonstrate courage and compassion in spite of their Circumstances. For Valjean, Paris is both a refuge and a testing-ground. Hugo ranges over many aspects of the city in his portrayal of it, from the convents to the argot, or slang, spoken on the streets, from the heart of the city to its half tamed outskirts, from rooftops to sewers. The sewer system of Pans symbolizes the dark underside of the city, where its secret history is stored: "that dreadful place which bears the impress of the revolution of the earth and of men, in which the remains of every cataclysm is to be found, from the Flood to the death of Marat." (Marat was a leader of the French Revolution who was assassinated.) Most of all, the citizens of Paris make up its character. The novel presents a sprawling picture of the people: criminals, orphans, students, the middle class, and others.

Symbolism

The novel employs symbolism, the use of one object to represent another, on a grand scale. Paris represents the world as a whole. Gavroche symbolizes the heroism of the average individual. The city sewers represent the seamy underside of Paris, filled with scraps of history, both good and evil, that have been discarded and forgotten, but not destroyed. The sewers also represent Valjean's passage through hell to redemption. He carries Marius to safety on his back through their passages like a martyr bearing a cross. A pair of silver candlesticks, stolen from the Bishop, serves for Valjean as a symbolic reminder of where he has come from and how he should act. Such leitmotivs, or recurring themes, woven through the text add depth and meaning.

Romanticism

Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that put the individual mind at the center of the world and of art. Romanticism valued emotional and imaginative responses to reality, the individual's interior experience of the world, which it perceived as being closer to truth. It evolved partly as a reaction to the Enlightenment's emphasis on restraint, simplicity, logic, and respect for tradition. *Les Miserables* is a characteristic Romantic work in both theme and form. In theme, the novel assaults the traditional social structure, glorifies freedom of thought and spirit, and makes a hero of the average individual, such as Gavroche the street urchin, who dies with courage on the barricade. In form, the novel values content over structure, offers passionate rhetoric rather than classical restraint, and ranges freely over many subjects.

Historical Context

Romanticism

Romanticism was an intellectual and artistic movement that swept Europe and the United States in the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. This movement was preceded by the Enlightenment, which emphasized reason as the basis of social life. The Enlightenment also promoted universal, formal standards, dating back to Greek and Roman classicism, for greatness in art. The artists, philosophers, writers, and composers of the Romantic movement rejected these standards and instead valued the individual imagination and experience as the basis of art and source of truth. Nature, the state of childhood, and emotion, rather than logic or scientific investigation, were considered the primary sources of eternal truth.

Victor Hugo was one of the leading writers of the Romantic movement in France, and *Les Miserables* was one of Its major works. The novel is Romantic in style and theme. It is written in a sweeping, emotional manner, taking the experience of the individual as the starting-point for discovering truths about French society.

Revolution

France in the nineteenth century was in a constant state of political and social unrest. In 1789, the newly formed National Assembly created a document called the "Declaration of the Rights of Man," establishing the right to liberty, equality, property, and security, and adding that every citizen had a duty to defend these rights. After King Louis XVI was executed on January 21, 1793, a period of confusion and violence followed. Many people, the innocent along with the guilty, were executed in the aftermath of the Revolution.

With the bloody departure of the monarchy, the legislature appointed a five-man Directory to power in 1795. But conspirators, including Napoleon Bonaparte, staged a coup d'etat, or surprise overthrow of the state, in 1799. Napoleon became dictator and remained in power until he was completely defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. This is when Hugo's novel *Les Miserables* begins.

From 1815 until 1830, France was ruled by Louis XVIII and then Charles X under the Second Restoration. During this time the French used a constitutional monarchy where the king governed alongside an elected parliament. This was a comparatively tranquil and prosperous period, but it ended in the Revolution of 1830, when Charles X published ordinances dissolving Parliament, limiting voting rights to land owners, and abolishing freedom of the press. Charles was forced from the throne and replaced by Louis Phillippe, the "citizen king," who had fought in the French Revolution. This was a triumph for the middle class, but it left the working-class and poor out in the cold.

The insurrection of 1832, the first Republican uprising since 1789, started to stir at the burial of Lamarque, a Revolutionary hero. Republicans shouted, "Down with Louis Ph11ippe!" The barricades went up, and a violent clash ensued. The forces on the barricades, composed mainly of students and workers, lacked public support, and the rebellion was put down by government forces.

In 1848, a new wave of revolution swept across Europe, triggered by the political unrest of bourgeois liberals and nationalists, crop failures several years in a row, and economic troubles. In France, Louis Philippe was driven from his throne. After a bloody struggle between the working-class and the middle-class provisional government in Paris, the Second Republic was established, with a mainly middle-class national assembly and Louis Napoleon, who was related to Napoleon I, as president.

Hugo was sympathetic to the 1848 revolution, became a representative in the assembly, and initially supported Louis Napoleon. However, in 1851 the president assumed control of France in a military coup d'etat, and in 1852 the population voted to disband the republic and reestablish the empire. Hugo was disillusioned with both the French people who were willing to exchange freedom for stability and with Napoleon III, who had traded in his republican opinions to become a dictator. Criticizing the government and Louis Napoleon publicly, Hugo was forced to leave France, first for Belgium and then for the Channel Islands. *Les Miserables,* which Hugo composed from the late 1840s to 1862 during his exile, integrated his feelings about the political situation, his memories of the barricades of 1848, and his republican ideals. The novel denounces the degradation of the urban working-class and society's mistreatment and neglect of the poor, especially women and children.

Industrialization

The continuing industrialization of France in the 1850s and 1860s created wealth for the country, but it also created unemployment as machines replaced manual laborers in many jobs. This in turn led to an increase in crime. Poor working women turned to prostitution as a means of survival, working under the scrutiny of a Police Morals Bureau, which considered them corrupt. The character of Jean Valjean was drawn from a historical person, a petty thief named Pierre Maurin who spent five years in prison for stealing bread for his sister's children. Hugo draws a clear distinction in the novel between those who choose crime because they are corrupt and those who are driven to it by poverty and desperation. On the one hand, there is Thenardier, who is by nature "highly susceptible to the encroachments of evil." On the other, there is Valjean, who stole only to save his family, and Fantine, who suffered for protecting her own child. The narrator blames society's indifference and injustice for the situation of those who fall into the latter category.

Critical Overview

Publishers bid against each other for the right to publish *Les Miserables,* no doubt sensing that the novel would be a great success. It had been awaited for years. The author's exile to Guernsey only increased his international reputation and the suspense of waiting for his next major work. Hugo received an unheard-of 300,000 francs as advance payment for the novel. But the publishers regained their investment and more when the book came out.

Les Miserables appeared in 1862, published by LaCroix of Brussels and Pans. It appeared simultaneously in Paris, London, Brussels, New York, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and other European capitals. Published initially in five parts, divided into ten volumes, the novel was released in three separate installments in April, May, and June. Hugo's family and friends gave it a huge buildup in the press, advertising its release for a month in advance in all the major papers of Europe. Rumors that it might be banned in France built up the suspense even more. The book-buying public gave it an enthusiastic reception. Booksellers in Paris lined up to buy the second installment in such great numbers that police were needed to manage the crowd. It was an enormous success for its publishers and its author. Adele Hugo, the author's wife, wrote that groups of workers shared the cost of the ten volumes in order to pass it from hand to hand and read it. The critic Saint-Beuve commented that Hugo "had snatched the greatest popularity of our time under the nose of the very government that exiled him. His books go everywhere: the women, the common people, all read him. Editions go out of print between eight in the morning and noon."

The book's critical reception, on the other hand, was mixed. Some of his contemporaries perceived Hugo's style as long-winded, digressive, melodramatic, and full of unlikely coincidences. Others found his sweeping, passionate prose, championing of social issues, and ideals of justice and morality inspirational.

On the negative side, many critics disliked the novel's digressions from the main plot, especially the long account of Waterloo. Adolphe Thiers, a historian, expressed the strong Opinion that the novel was" detestable. The spirit is bad, the plan is bad, and the execution is bad." The writer Barbey D' Aurevilly found the novel vulgar and full of improbabilities, and criticized it for its socialist views. Hippolyte Taine, a critic and historian, thought the novel was insincere and its success was a flash in the pan

On the positive side, the poet Charles Baudelaire offered praise for the work's poetic and symbolic qualities. The English novelist George Meredith, though he thought it was drawn in oversimplified terms, called it "the masterwork of fiction of this century-as yet. There are things in

it quite wonderful." The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky considered *Les Miserables* superior to his own *Crime and Punishment,* and saw Hugo as a champion of the idea of spiritual rebirth.

Walter Pater was of the opinion that Hugo's works were among the finest products of the Romantic movement.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Hugo's reputation as a novelist waned. This was in part because of changes in the tastes of writers and readers. First the Realist, then the Modernist writers swept through the literary scene, and it is characteristic of such movements that they debunk what has come before in an effort to break new ground. *Les Miserables* in particular achieved its blinding success partly because of the moment in time when it was released. It was the long-awaited work of a national hero returning from exile, but that historical moment passed, along with Hugo's great influence over national opinion.

But many writers, including Andre Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre, acknowledged his lasting influence. Hugo's works are still widely read today, and he has modern defenders. The literary Critic Victor Brombert, for example, comments: "The dramatic and psychological power of Hugo's novels depends in large part on the creation of archetypal figures. . .. The sweep of his texts and the moving, even haunting images they project are a function of the widest range of rhetorical virtuosity." *Les Miserables* has passed into modern legend in its well-known and popular adaptations for film and the stage, and it is arguably the most important Romantic novel of the nineteenth century

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Cerisola, a former teacher at the Lycee Francais de New York and a current instructor at New York University, outlines some of the biographical background that led to Hugo's great work; Cerisola also discusses the author's ambition of creating not only a great story, but also a novel that would be an epic of its time, thus explaining the story's complicated narrative approach.

Victor Hugo took seventeen years to write *Les Miserables,* his vast fresco of individual and collective destinies, which was published in 1862 when he was sixty years old. The novel is the parallel story of the redemption of Jean Valjean and France-and to a larger extent, the story of humanity's political and social progress. Above all, Hugo intended *Les Miserables* to be a novel about the people, and for the people, and he largely succeeded.

When *Les Miserables* was published, it appeared simultaneously in Paris, London, Budapest, Brussels, Leipzig, Madrid, Milan, and Naples, and was translated into many other languages. The novel's phenomenal success has continued ever since, and understandably so: it is a gripping story well told. As the critic Kathryn Grossman put it, "a plot as full of twists and turns as the treacherous labyrinths-sewers, conscience, streets-Hugo describes." Grossman also reminds us, "in France, Hugo's supporters had prepared the event With a massive publicity campaign. [The book] appeared first in serial form on April 3, 1862. Yet the magnitude of the public's response surprised even the most committed Hugo partisans. According to reports at the time, no one had ever seen a book devoured with such fury: public reading rooms rented it by the hour. By April 6, the book was sold out in Paris."

The novel's power derived from its simple message. Man was not inherently evil, he was made so by an unjust society. In the preface to the novel, Hugo wrote emphatically: "So long as the three problems of the age-the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night-are not yet solved... books like this cannot be useless." Jean Valjean was the perfect illustration of this principle. Valjean was not by nature a criminal. The motive which led him to steal bread, the origin of his fall, was not evil. He was seeking to provide food for hungry children, his sister's offspring, only out of desperation. But his years of prison hardened him. "He had for his motives," says Hugo, "habitual indignation, bitterness of soul, the profound feeling of iniquities endured, and reaction even against the good, the innocent, and the just, if such exist" The story of his conversion is exemplary. As Monsieur Madeleine of Montreuil-surmer, he is the good industrialist, the admirably just and efficient mayor, the caring philanthropist. Forced back into his true identity by the revelation of the imminent exile to the galleys of the innocent Champmathieu, who has been identified as Jean Val jean, he reluctantly fights again with his demons. From this ordeal, minutely analyzed in the chapter "A Tempest in a Brain," he emerges triumphant, saves Champmathieu in time and goes again to the galleys. After his escape, his life is a long record of care and self-sacrifice to Cosette, his adopted daughter. He triumphs even when faced with Marius' s love for Cosette, and is able not only to dominate his

jealousy but to save the life of Marius (the famous episode of the sewers) and make possible Manus's marriage with Cosette.

Moreover, Hugo draws constant analogies between Valjean's spiritual progress and humanity's striving toward freedom and social justice. The fight for justice and freedom is led by Marius' s group of radical friends, the "Friends of the Underdog,"_ and in particular Enjolras, whose speech on the barricades echoed most of Hugo's ideas:

"the nineteenth century is grand, but the twentieth century will be happy. Men will no longer have to fear, as now, a conquest, an invasion, a usurpation, a rivalry of nations With the armed hand. they will no longer have to fear famine, speculation, prostitution from distress, misery from lack of work, and the scaffold, and the sword, and the battle, and all the brigandages of chance in the forest of events. .. Men will be happy. Oh ! the human race shall be delivered, uplifted, and consoled ! We affirm it on this barricade "

However, the young radicals die on the barricades and, as one critic noted, Hugo sometimes seems pessimistic about the outcome of the fight: "The dismal, grotesque imagery with which Hugo consistently depicts les miserables drives home a powerful point. Despite all the talk about progress, nothing has changed for a large swath of humanity. Conditions may have Improved for some individuals and their offspring But each new generation of the poor and uneducated faced the same physical, psychic, and moral disintegration."

Because he wrote *Les Miserables* late in his life, Hugo also wanted to leave a personal testimony on his own political fights. One of the central characters in the novel, Marius, passes through an intellectual evolution closely similar to the author's: at first strongly royalist, then Bonapartist, later Republican He fights for his convictions on the barricades. Hugo was born in 1802 to a royalist mother and a republican father who was one of Napoleon's generals. By the time he was a year old his parents were not living together anymore. Hugo sought fulfillment in and through art, as he was often left by himself. As one of his biographers noted, "Hugo was terribly precocious. He began writing complete plays, echoing his fondness for popular drama, at the age of fourteen; he devoured Walter Scott's historical novels as soon as each translation rolled off the press; and he penned his first work of fiction-whose black rebel hero foreshadowed Jean Valjean-when he was sixteen; finally, he composed poetry that gave him national recognition, including a royal pension, before he had turned eighteen".

At first aesthetically and politically conservative, Within years he backed the new school of innovators-Lamartine, Musset, Nodier, Vigny-who were labeled romantics. In 1830 his first play, *Hernani,* broke completely with dramatic conventions. Hugo became the leader of this group of writers, most of them democrats in a regime that killed civil liberties. However, only the 1848 Revo1ution-the model for the insurrection described in the novel-spawned a republic, which Hugo supported vigorously. He was even elected to the Parliament, on the left. The Republic did not last long. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Hugo had first supported, overthrew the young republic three years later in 1852 and became emperor. Hugo, who never hid his own republicanism, had to flee abroad to avoid arrest. It was from exile that he wrote *Les Miserables.*

Since his earlier work, Hugo believed in the importance of the illusion of reality, what he called verisimilitude. Very often in the novel, Hugo pretends that he is copying from notes left by Myriel or Valjean. He quotes pseudo-newspaper articles and letters that came Into his possession, everything suggesting authenticity. Indeed, he always worked a great deal on sources, and at least two characters of the novel, Bishop Myriel and Valjean, were inspired by real people whose stories Hugo had read. Finally, Hugo was careful to have each character speak according to the language of his or her social class; so much so that when the novel came out he was accused by some critics of being "low." For example, Gavroche, the street urchin, always speaks slang, including his words to the two little orphans he has just met and for whom he buys some bread.

Finally, like *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame,* Hugo's earlier historical novel, *Les Miserables* multiplies the digressions-on Waterloo, on slang, on the sewers-in an effort to give the historical background of the story. According to one critic, "stripped of all its digression, *Les Miserables* would still be an interesting book, containing an essentially great lesson, but It would be much less a book extraordinarily representative of the nineteenth century. In its final form it gives us not only the lesson of Val jean, but it gives us some of the great deeds and Ideas of the century." Hugo justified his all-encompassing approach by saying he wanted to create a contemporary work of fiction that would rival such great national verse epics as *Homer's Iliad* and *Odyssey* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost.*

The strong political content of the novel divided the critics of the time. While popular opinion was virtually unanimous, the many critical assessments-by about one hundred and fifty reviewers in 1862 alone-fell into two camps. Political, social, and religious conservatives assailed the author's intellectual integrity, his motives, his intentions: to blame society for human suffering was, according to them, to deny individual responsibility and to undermine existing institutions.

The more progressive, republican critics, on the other hand, defended the novel as profoundly moral. Imbued With the New Testament notions of grace, charity, and self-sacrifice, the novel depicted the struggles of human conscience with temptation and the eventual triumph of duty over passion, of freedom over nature.

Critics were also uncertain about the genre and the composition of the book. Indeed, Hugo's ambitious goal complicated the structure of the book. There is very little linearity and numerous echoes and parallels, while the narration goes back and forth in time. The effect is a little disorienting for the reader who has problems following the narration, as if Hugo were playing with his reader's patience. In addition to this unconventional composition, it defies any attempt at classification. The mingling of literary *styles-le mélange des genres-was* a hallmark of French romanticism since the 1820s. As a consequence, *Les Miserables* is a blend of epic, myth, dramatic and lyrical components; grotesque and sublime; satire and romance; comedy and tragedy; realism and romanticism which led many Critics to describe the novel as a "monster." Maybe it is, and yet, it still makes people dream.

Source: Anne-Sophie Cerisola, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Sagarin argues that Valjean fails as a symbol of redemption because his crime-stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's children-was an act of altruism.

[What delineates Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables]* is the essential innocence of the man. If he were innocent only in the sense of having been falsely accused, his would be a different tale, and probably one with far less significance for us. Jean Valjean does indeed commit the act that sends him to the galleys and that is the beginning of his downfall. Hugo's supreme indictment of society-for this *is* an indictment of society (he was a forerunner of Zola and other novelists who saw themselves as social Critics)-lies in the nature of the act which his hero has perpetrated and for which he is imprisoned. Literally, Jean Valjean is guilty of stealing a loaf of bread.

It would appear that such an act would ordinarily evoke only sympathy and hence require no further mitigation in order for an author to exculpate his "criminal" and to paint him as the purest and most saintly of all beings (one is almost compelled to use quotation marks around *criminal,* so that Hugo's relentless efforts to remind the reader of Valjean's goodness are rendered with integrity). To this end, the taking of the loaf of bread is an almost perfect transgression, and the breaking of the law is justified or at least extenuated by the forces of hunger, poverty, and the execrable social conditions that followed the counterrevolution in France. But Hugo goes even further than this, and in so doing betrays a weakness not only in the literary work but in the social criticism: it is not for himself and his own stomach that Jean Valjean commits a theft. He does not even so much as expect to taste a morsel of the stolen bread. It is for his sister's children, young, fatherless, and hungry, that he becomes a thief. So two factors are here at work, and as they follow the reader throughout the five volumes that make up this novel, they detract from each other rather than act symbiotically to strengthen the motifs: there is the social indictment, and there is the criminal as saint.

Starting with the criminal as victim, Hugo continues with the criminal (or more accurately the ex-convict) as the embodiment of virtue. He is the penitent incarnate, but he has never done wrong and has nothing for which to repent. Over and over he redeems himself. Without a blemish on his past, however, the redemption is Ill-placed. What emerges, from the viewpoint of the social critic, and in contrast with other great literary images of the transgressor, is a series of unintended ambiguities, with messages not as clearly drawn as are even the one-dimensional characters who inhabit the novel.

If Jean Valjean is going to be painted as pure and saintly, and he is, the theft from the bishop and a subsequent incident with a little boy from whom he takes a coin are the blemishes-these, and not the stealing of the loaf of bread. Through the many years to follow until the last moments of his life, and through the countless pages and the episodes, coincidences, acts of strength, heroism, and sacrifice, there will be nothing but these two acts that are short of Christ like purity. What is Hugo telling us, then, when so good a person as his hero steals first from the bishop and then from the boy

Gervais? That it is prison that brings out all that is worst in man, that turns the potentially best into the most wretched, that leaves one bitter and angry, seeing all humanity, even a man of God and a child, as enemy....

In the message of Hugo, It is kindness, in its most extreme and unexpected form, that alone can bring reform or even instant rehabilitation, not through guilt or expiation but through rebirth and resurrection. Love, Victor Hugo is telling us: love, and the wretched mass of humanity will be redeemed. Man is essentially good, more than good, he is pure and heavenly, he needs only to be shown the other cheek and he will embrace and kiss it, not rebuff and repel it. Jean Valjean is the embodiment of this, but how universal, or how convincing even in his own instance, is a matter of dispute.. . .

[After Jean Valjean's encounters with the bishop and Gervais, we] are given a glimpse of a man in the process of conversion, of the forces of good and evil struggling within him, each seeking victory over the other, the classic theological battle for possession of a man's soul between the devil and God's angels....

[Hugo catches] his character in the very act of change, at the moment of duality when he is traveling from evil to good and both are present as adversary forces. He is neither one person nor the other, neither the convict hardened, gloomy, and bitter against the world nor the redeemed man who has had a vision of the beauty that resides in the good and is beckoned to it. He *is* neither in the pure sense, because he remains both, as anyone at a moment of change must be. For Hugo, he is one of the two persons (or personalities) in his impulses, instincts, and habits, and he is the other in the intellect which is freeing him (or seeking to do so) from the nineteen years of the constant formation of an evil self. When his intellect sees what his habits have brought him to, he recoils, he denies that it is he (the eternal evasion of responsibility, it was not I, it was something in me, something that drove me), he repents and seeks to undo the act. It is Schopenhauer's eternal enmity between the worlds of will and idea, and it is a forerunner of Freud and the struggle between the unconscious and the intellect. In Valjean, the idea and the intellect will triumph.

Now he must run, run endlessly, for as a second offender, he will, if seized, be returned to the galleys for life. Hugo implies some condemnation of the judicial and penal systems, their harshness and cruelty, but essentially they are tangential to his story and even occasionally interfere with it. The galleys are not filled with Jean Valjean's but with men whose depicts are far more serious than the theft of a loaf of bread, and there is not a great deal that Hugo has to say about these men or their conditions of servitude. Here and there a word suggests suffering and cruelty, but Hugo seems to have known little about the actual conditions prevailing for prisoners, and his book falls short as an Important indictment. If it is not an example of successful rehabilitation, for there was no evil in the protagonist but only in the society that condemned him, It nevertheless contradicts the strongly believed tenet that prison itself corrupts. All that is necessary for Jean Valjean to make his way in society is to conceal that he is an ex-convict and, as the event with the child makes him, a fugitive as well.

Had Valjean been a different person, or had there been others from the galleys like him, he might have symbolized what Hugo seems haltingly to be suggesting at times: the criminals are the saints, and their jailers are the sinners. But Thenardier and many others are evil criminals, and aside from Valjean himself there are none that epitomize goodness. Only one man has risen, and in the end he is one who had never fallen.

Andre Maurois has written glowingly of this work. He praises its literary qualities, the excellent prose, the historical frescoes (the description of the Battle of Waterloo, and a more detailed one of the barricades on the streets of Paris in 1832). It is, however, a narrow view, for while *Les Miserables* has these virtues, Maurois ignores its faults-how ill-drawn the characters are, how absurd the plot, how unsubtle the unweaving of the story, as one compares it with the works of the giants of the French novel who came just before Hugo and during his lifetime: Balzac, Stendhal, Gautier, and particularly Flaubert. But then Maurois finds in it great moral qualities, the painful quest of heroism and sanctity It is an interesting evaluation, and heroism and sanctity are indeed here present-frequently, selflessly, passionately, unmistakably. No reader can fail to discern the message. There is satisfaction in finding in another these qualities that one cannot attain oneself, but a reader must wish that there really were base passions in Valjean, and that he had actually conquered them and not merely overcome a momentary bitterness that arose because of the inhuman treatment he was accorded following the theft of the single loaf. If only there had been sin, there might have been redemption. Valjean never rises from the basest passions because he had never descended. The thefts of the bishop's silver plates and of the child's two-franc coin, which he sought to return: these and the loaf of bread are all that we have against him; for these he must spend a lifetime of expiation.

Yet there is expiation. I am not sure, as Maurois contends, that this is the sort of book that gives one "greater confidence in life and in himself." Maurois writes of *Les Miserables* that it speaks more to man of "his liberty than of his slavery." Yes and no, but it depends largely upon the willingness of the reader to suspend confidence in the universality of almost all other characters and utilize the hero as symbol of humanity. For Valjean does have liberty to rise, despite the pursuit by Javert, innumerable social pressures, and the social conditions that caused hunger and virtual thralldom.

Victor Hugo evidently gave great importance to the loaf of bread, and *Les Miserables* has left a legacy to the language of irony, that in the world of unequals he who steals a million dollars becomes a prime minister or an industrial tycoon while he who steals a loaf of bread ends up in prison. Jean Valjean spent nineteen years as a galley slave for his theft, about which Hugo writes in one of the passages in which he departs from his role of novelist and becomes essayist, social commentator, or historian:

This is the second time that, during his essays on the penal question and condemnation by the law, the author of this book has come across a loaf as the starting-point of the disaster of a destiny. Claude Gueux [in the short story *"Claude Gueux"]* stole a loaf, and so did Jean Valjean, and English statistics prove that in London four robberies out of five have hunger as their immediate cause.

Here is Hugo as the critic of society: it is a world populated by prisoners of starvation, and it drives good men to crime. It is a world of cruelty and injustice, and it determines the destiny of men such as Jean Valjean. His, the author's and the hero's, is a cry from the depths of despair. Yet the message of Hugo actually is that all that is good in man cannot be destroyed by the prison air..., not *all* that is good, and not in *all* good men. It can only be driven beneath the surface as one hardens in the struggle for survival.

If this is a story, or even the story, of man rising to heights from the lowest depths, it is also a story of man seeking to escape from a past, to conceal it, to find a manner of starting life anew without pursuit from others and without the cloak that must be worn if one's stigma is to remain invisible. In the first instance, one almost wishes that the rise to heights were to places somewhat less lofty. Maurois is understating when he draws attention to the inability of the reader to fulfill a similar quest for heroism and sanctity. The fact is that Jean Valjean is just too good to be true, and this becomes literal for the reader who cannot immerse himself only in the man as symbol and wants to see him as a living person and to be confronted with greater verisimilitude with his fate.

Hugo's artistry, nonetheless, with all its shortcomings, does present us with an individual who captures our interests; very much as in the old-fashioned cinemas that were continued from week to week, as the hero or heroine hung from the cliffs while the enemy was in hot pursuit, so we read breathlessly and applaud inwardly as Jean Valjean narrowly escapes doom.

Jean Valjean is a sympathetic symbol, but more than a symbol. At times he does emerge as a meaningful personality, even if no one else in the novel has the same good fortune. As symbol, however, Valjean is never at the lowest depths, never has been, and here Hugo fails us. Essentially, Valjean was not converted, especially since his first crime had not been anything other than an act of sacrifice, of altruism, of goodness. Raskolnikov [in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment]* did murder, he killed the pawnbroker and her sister with a hatchet; he planned the murder, and his was an act of baseness. And ... Lord Jim [in Conrad's *Lord Jim]* did abandon ship, as no captain or mate ever should, leaving aboard the sinking vessel the men under his command in contravention of his vows and the moral order of the sea. Moll Flanders [in Defoe's *Moll Flanders]* stole and stole and stole.

But what Hugo has given us is more of a condemnation of society (as his aside on the subject of four out of five English crimes would indicate), and for that reason his novel cannot rank as a study in human redemption. There was really no crime, or so little of one. Valjean had never been a Raskolnikov; Raskolnikov could never have been canonized by Dostoevsky.

Like Lord Jim, Jean Valjean is seeking to escape from a past, but there the analogy ends Lord Jim never wants to be faced by anyone who has learned of his misdeed because it was an act of infamy; It is really from himself that he wishes to find refuge. An impossible task: there are no worlds without mirrors. So while Lord Jim's secret protects him from inner persecution, Valjean's secret must guard him from the outer world, for two reasons: first, because the world will demand a penalty if he is apprehended and his

Identity disclosed; and second, because the world will never cease condemning an ex-convict. [In the world of Hugo, man,] once condemned, is forever condemned; he may be released from the bagnes, the galleys, the walls and bars, but he remains always in prison once he has been there. There is no Christian world that forgives anyone, not even this man for whom there is nothing to forgive. One pays forever, and at best can live only by concealment. The biography is there and cannot be rewritten, but it does not have to be told, or it can be falsified (and the two are essentially one). In this sense, if there is a message that Hugo wants us to learn from the life of Jean Valjean, the book is still very much alive. Ask any ex-convict, in France or the United States and probably most other countries of the world, and they will tell you that the world of Jean Valjean remains almost unchanged among us. If these ex-convicts were to be sanctified, It would give them as little solace as it did Hugo's central figure, for where is the audience that would believe the glorifiers, or perform the canonization rites, except perhaps a century and a half after their death?

The departures that the author takes from his novel in order to offer social commentary often have only tangential reference to the plots and subplots of the book, but they are significant in themselves. Hugo is, as It were, reminding himself that he is writing a story of the wretched, not of one individual, and even if the two clash It does not concern him. "All the crimes of the man begin with the vagabondage of the lad," he states..., although It was hardly true of Jean Valjean and there is little evidence of it in the criminal underworld elements with whom Valjean comes into contact at certain points in his adventures.

A passage that refers to the underworld, the literal criminal underworld though it might be equally applicable to the world of fear of exposure in which Jean Valjean lives, summarizes perhaps as well as any in this novel what Hugo has to say about crime:

The social evil is darkness; humanity is identity, for all men are of the same clay, and in tins nether world, at least, there is no difference in predestination, we are the same shadow before, the same flesh during, and the same ashes afterward, but Ignorance, mixed with the human paste, blackens it, and this incurable blackness enters man and becomes Evil there..

It is more than Jean Valjean that Hugo is discussing when he writes that the social evil is darkness, it is humanity. If only humanity could accept the brotherhood of man, know that we come from nothing and will return to nothing, that the short time between need not be wretched for the millions of poor, *les miserables,* then we could live in harmony and love on earth. Have no illusions: we are not predestined, Calvinism notwithstanding, to eternal damnation or endless bliss. We all have the same future, the darkness of the grave, and if we could lift ourselves from the ignorance that does not accept this, we could bring light into a world of somber shadows. This is Hugo's hope for salvation, but it is a meager hope, and in the end only Jean Valjean finds this salvation, only one unusual soul among millions of ordinary folk. Our sins are greater than thefts of loaves of bread for the hungry and the young, and we will not be able to fulfill en masse the hopes that Hugo expresses so eloquently in this passage.

Source: Edward Sagarin, "Jean Valjean. For Stealing a Loaf of Bread," in his *Raskolnikov and Others. Literary Images of Crime, Punishment, Redemption, and Atonement,* St. Martin's Press, 1981, pp 60-76.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from a review of Part I of the novel, in contrast to most critics of the period following the initial publication of Les Miserables, *this anonymous reviewer gives the novel unqualified praise.*

[Les Miserables] is the greatest and most elaborate work of Victor Hugo's fruitful genius. A novel, in the ordinary acceptation of that term, *[Fantine]* is *not.* The ordinary novel, according to Carlyle, is a "tale of adventures which did *not* occur in God's creation, but only in the Waste Chambers, (to be let unfurnished,) of certain human heads, and which are part and parcel of the sum of No-things; which, nevertheless, obtain some temporary remembrance, and lodge extensively, at this epoch of the world, in similar still more unfurnished chambers." These productions have wonderful plots and still more wonderful machinery. *Fantine* has simply dramatic situations, and therefore *Fantine* is no novel. *They* are remarkable for many words and few ideas; every page of *Fantine* contains some beautiful thought, poetically expressed, or some brilliant passage upon Life, Law, Religion, or Philosophy; hence *Fantine* is not a novel. People with waste chambers, (to let unfurnished,) need not read it; it was never written for them. But to the thinker it will be a solace and delight, albeit its lessons may excite some saddened reflections in sympathetic minds.

We have stated that *Fantine* had not the plot of the ordinary novel; but dramatic situations, instead. Let us add, that the work is composed of a series of brilliant pictures, boldly touched off by a master-hand, as in the case of the great works of Niccola Poussin and Claude Loraine There is not in the literature of fiction a finer portraiture than that given of [M. Charles Francois Bienvenu Myriel, Bishop of D-]. His every trait of character, objective and psychological, is elaborately depicted. It is, for several pages of the book, a lone sketch, nothing to heighten the interest thereof save two old virtuous ladies of his household; who are about as important to the theme, as the occasional and indifferent tree in some of Raphael's paintings. It is quite as powerful and much more elaborate, yet not quite so fearful or mysterious, but far more genial and beautiful in type than, Byron's grand portrait of *Lara;* and equally well sustained in power throughout. But the character of Lara is dark and gloomy; that of M. Myriel radiant with spiritual beauty. We are permitted to look, not only upon the objective form and actions of the man, but as if his mind were spread open to view, we have a full revelation of his psychology-we gaze into the divine depths of his immortal soul. Indeed so beautiful is the moral portraiture of that simple but good man, that one of our contemporaries has pronounced such a being an impossibility ! We cannot think so-and if mistaken, our historic lessons, standard of ideal virtue, and belief in the true, beautiful and good, must have rested upon shifting sands But conceding the supposed fact, that we err-surely it is highly creditable to the genius of M. Hugo, that out of the depths of his contemplation he could create an ideal Character, so perfect as to be an impossibility in humanity; a concession which, however, must greatly reflect upon, and detract from, the boasted grandeur of the human soul.

But, be this as it may, two personages of opposite opinions are brought in contact with the Bishop-one, a Senator, and the other, a Conventioner, persecuted by the ruling power which succeeded to the French Revolution. The former is a kind of little Atheist-a scoffer at the established forms of religion, after the manner of Voltaire. The latter is a bold intellectualist; a master of the syllogistic forms of logic; a dogmatic denunciator of legitimacy and royalty; and a mystic in Deism. In detailing the particulars of M. Myriel's interviews with these men, Victor Hugo has carried to its highest point of delicacy, that civilization in Art, which pervades modern French authorship. The Atheist's sneers against revealed religion, is treated with respectful silence, or returned only with Christian pity. The bold sallies and loud declamations of the old Conventioner, are met with pastoral humility until he is half subdued. And when death is about to close his eyes, the good Bishop is his only friend-the only witnesser of his spirit's flight. It is as if the Lion had made of the Lamb its confidant and friend. This is the place to remark, however, that Senator and Conventioner, are simply machinery whereby lessons upon life, history, and morality are promulged; as with many of the seemingly nonessential characters in Goethe's *Faust....*

[We] do not hesitate to pronounce *[Les Miserables]* the ablest novel-after Goethe's *Welhelm Meister-of* this century.

Certain supercilious young gentlemen, of most questionable principles, and certain publicists of still more questionable morals, think it fashionable and brilliant to decry *Les Miserables* as an immoral book; simply because they have not the brains to understand it. To us, it is a Bible in the fictitious literature of the nineteenth century. To them, it is merely a translation of a French novel; and all France is but *their* second Sodom: we know that France is *not* morally worse than America. To them, it is a production by Victor Hugo; to us it is a protest of genius against universal crimes-the plea of one who advocates, in the face of obloquy and contumely, the cause of the Life-Wretched. To them, it is a proclamation of war against society; to us, it is a grand sermon in behalf of primitive Christianity-a splendid endeavour to have Christendom permeated by the rules and regulations of the "Church and House Book of the Early Christians," and of the "Law-Book of the Ante-Nicene Church." To them, it is massive, grand, unusual, and incomprehensible; to us, it is beautiful as the *Iliad* of Homer-real as a play by Shakespeare. *Les Miserables* is an event-it is a new Jewel in the literary crown of our century....

[Les Miserables] should awaken the conscience of society from its dismal lethargy of evil. For it is profound, straight-forward, and marvelously eloquent. "But then, it is a French novel" -say its critics. So much the better, is our response; because it is greater than all of the English novels, gathered together and massed into one, which have appeared during the past quarter of a century. "But," repeat its critics, "it contains exaggerations." No doubt of it; we admit the fact. But are there not exaggerations in all novels? Was there ever one printed that contained them not? Are there not. . more absurdities and vulgar caricatures in [Dickens's] *Great Expectations,* than there could be found in so many of such books as *Les Miserables,* as would sink the Great Eastern? *A French novel!* Is this phrase used as a term of reproach, applicable to the literature of the most civilized and cultivated empire upon the globe? If so, is the novel, or its

ignorant assailant, to be blamed-and which? Why the latter. Who is the French Novelist, and what is the French Novel? The one, is a scholar of genius and refinement; the other, a reflex of life and society. What English writers-what American Writers-can be compared with such authors, in points of power and art, as Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Alphonse Karr, Edmund About, Emile Souvestre, Octave Feuillet, Alexandre Dumas, Michelet and Sue? Here are no contortionists-no forced humorists-no retailers of vulgar and far-fetched wit-no writers of dreary, idealess wilderness-pages; but gentlemen of power, large and well digested observation, polished wit, noble satire, keen irony, and great Philosophy.... [To] such as find fault with Hugo's humble characters, we would say: first remove Reynold's Dunghill, or clean out Dickens's Augean stables. If they think that the Frenchman crushes society, why, let them the more enjoy Thackeray's crunching and mastication of it. Or if they dislike Jean Val jean, because he was a reformed criminal, then let them revel in the irreclaimable hideousness of Bulwer's Villains. For there are no graceless scamps or vagabonds in the chambers of M. Hugo's mind. His most infamous creation has some principle of homogeneity left; but the vagabond of one

English novel, like the sinner of Jonathan Edwards' theology, is past redemption. In short, the French novel is civilization; the English novel affectation-semi-nude barbarism. It is not, however, much to the credit of our vaunted enlightenment, that the greatest of recent Fictions-this very *Les Miserables-should* have been but poorly received by the press. [it] is safe to say, at the least, that another so grandly brilliant a book, of its class, will not appear in the lifetime of the youngest of this generation.

Source: T W M , in a review of "Les Miserables-Fantine," in *The Southern Literary Messenger,* July, 1863, pp 434-46.

Adaptations

Recorded in 1988, *Les Miserables* is available from Dove Books on Tape in an abridged version read by Christopher Cazenove.

Les Miserables was adapted for the stage as a musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-MIchel Schonberg, with the lyrics composed by Herbert Kretzmer. In 1995, the tenth anniversary concert in Royal Albert Hall, London, was released as a movie by Columbia Tri-Star Home Video.

The musical is also available as a sound recording from Geffen produced in 1987. This version features the original Broadway cast.

Les Miserables was made into a film in 1935, starring Fredric March, Charles Laughton, Cedric Hardwicke, Rochelle Hudson, and John Beal. Directed by Richard Boleslawski, this adaptation is detailed and faithful to the novel, except for a changed ending. Considered a classic, the film received Academy Award nominations for Best Cinematography and Best Picture.

There are many French film adaptations of the novel. A version released in 1957 stars Jean Gabin, Daniele Delorme, Bernard Blier, Bouryil, Gianni Esposito, and Serge Reggiani. Directed by Jean-Paul LeChanois, the film is in French with English subtitles.

A version directed by Glenn Jordan was made for television in 1978, starring Richard Jordan, Anthony Perkins, John Gielgud, Cyril Cusack, Flora Robson, Celia Johnson, and Claude Dauphin.

An animated version of *Les Miserables* appeared in 1979, produced by Toei Animation Company.

A 1994 film version of the novel transferred its setting to early twentieth-century France. Directed, produced, and adapted by Claude Lelouch, the movie, starring Jean-Paul Belmondo, Michel Boujenah, Alessandrea Martines, and Annie Girador, received a Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Film.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate current prison conditions in the United States and compare today's prison experience to Valjean's as described in the novel.

Consider the ethical issues surrounding imprisonment that the novel raises in book two, chapter seven ("The inwardness of despair"). Does Hugo see prison as an effective means of punishing criminals? Does prison reform criminals, according to Hugo, or does it make them more violent? How does the author suggest prisoners should be treated? Use examples from the book to support your answers.

Investigate the economic, legal, and social definition of poverty in the United States today and compare it to the conditions of poverty in Paris as described in the novel.

Compare and Contrast

1830s: Under public pressure, French legislators reformed prisons to some extent. They abolished some of the more barbaric forms of punishment that were practiced under the *Ancien Regime,* such as torture and hanging, and offered education for petty offenders.

1850s: As a result of unemployment caused by industrialization, crime rates rose in France and the prison population increased Inmates were not allowed to speak to each other Riots and suicides took place in prisons.

Today: Due in part to poor economic conditions in France, prison populations are on the rise again, with an increase in the number of convicts serving time for drug-related crimes. With a prison population that is steadily increasing, overcrowding is a problem, and many inmates find themselves sharing a cell with as many as five other prisoners.

1830s: France was beginning to become an industrialized nation, a process that would transform its economy, workplace, working class, and political landscape.

1850s: Increasing industrialization brought wealth to France as well as increased unemployment. Lack of work drove thousands of poor women to prostitution and many of the urban poor to crime.

Today: After rapid consolidation of industries in the 1970s, many French manufacturing jobs were eliminated, resulting in high levels of unemployment. Currently, many young people have difficulty finding permanent work. However, recent changes in the French school system have expanded educational opportunities for students, in an effort by the government to create an employable workforce.

1830s: Antigovernment protesters set up barricades in Pans after Charles X published three ordinances calling to abolish freedom of the press, dissolve Parliament, and limit voting rights to 25,000 landed proprietors. The 1830 revolution successfully removed Charles from the throne; succeeding him was Louis Phillippe.

1850s: A bloody protest occurred in Paris in 1848, removing Louis Phillippe from power and creating a provisional government that extended the right to vote and set up national workshops to combat unemployment. After another violent clash, this government was in turn replaced by the Second Republic, with an assembly dominated by the middle class.

Today: After violent student protests and nation-wide strikes in May of 1968, new French leaders shifted toward a more liberal form of government, trying to balance a market economy while preserving social-democratic principles. Today, France is joining with other European nations to create the European Union, a community which will share a common currency and create a formidable trading bloc.

What Do I Read Next?

Victor Hugo's other major works include the novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* published in 1831, and the poetry collection *Contemplations,* released in 1856, which he wrote at about the same time as *Les Miserables.* Some critics consider the latter, written after the drowning death of his daughter, his best poetry.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment,* first published in 1866, tells the story of Raskolnikov, a man who commits a brutal murder and then can escape neither his own conscience nor the detective who pursues him.

Published in 1940, *Native Son,* a novel by Richard Wright, is the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor black boy raised in the Chicago slums. Wright describes how Bigger's fear of white society, and its fear of him, turns him into a criminal.

In the Belly of the Beast is an insider's account of prison life written by the controversial Jack

Henry Abbott, a convict. Abbott was released after he published the book in 1991, at the urging of a group of writers including Norman Mailer. Shortly thereafter, he killed a man in a bar brawl and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Marie Henri Beyle Stendhal offers a detailed account of the Battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma,* published in 1839. The main theme of this novel is the struggle of the individual against a conformist society.

Charles Baudelaire's 1857 *The Flowers of Evil* is a collection of poems centered on life in Paris. One of the major poetry collections of the century, it bridged the Romantic and Modernist movements. Six of the poems that were considered too erotic and decadent were banned in France until 1949. Baudelaire was Hugo's contemporary and often reviewed his work.

Further Study

Elliot Grant, *The Career of Victor Hugo,* Harvard University Press, 1945.

A very basic and useful study of Hugo's main novels and poetry.

Richard B. Grant, *The Perilous Quest: Image, Myth, and Prophecy* in *the Narration of Victor Hugo,* Duke University Press, 1968.

Hugo described himself as a "prophet" among men, as a translator of myths. This book analyzes this theme by examining Hugo's major novels.

Kathryn M Grossman, *Les Miserables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption,* Twayne, 1996.

Aimed specifically toward students, this work praises the novel as a book that "enables us to escape into the adventures of others It brings us back to ourselves."

John Porter Houston, *Victor Hugo,* Twayne, 1988

A good introduction to Hugo's life and works. Patricia Ward, *The Medievalism of Victor Hugo,* Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975.

Hugo was fascinated by the mysteries and secrets of medieval times Although *Les Miserables* cannot really be called a Gothic novel, some of its episodes, like those in the sewers, belong to the genre.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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