

Unit 2

Focus Text: *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo

Context Reading:

- A fascinating internet introduction to LM and VH:
http://www.penguinputnam.com/static/rguides/us/les_miserables.html
- A Mt. Holyoke site on Victor Hugo's Paris—explore this in detail:
http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist255-s01/mapping-paris/repssandreal_4.html
- Here is a French-language site with information on LM. If you are studying French, you may find it interesting: <http://www.alalettre.com/Hugo-miserables.htm>
- *Invitation to the Classics* ed. By Cowan and Guinness: If you own or can borrow this book, read the section on French Classics (253-258). The editors approach their topic from a Christian worldview, which leads to a slightly different angle of analysis from Norton's.
- Timeline of cultural context: <http://www.wwnorton.com/nawol/timelines/20.htm>
- *Norton Anthology of World Lit.* Vol. E: Introduction to "Revolution and Romanticism in Europe and America" with map and timeline (651-658). A fascinating look at a remarkable period of history. Look at the connections between literature, art, religion, and politics, and note who was living and writing during Hugo's lifetime.
- *Norton Anthology of World Lit.* Vol. E (if you have it): Hugo bio and poem (850), and other works of the time. Just browse a bit to see what was happening in the literary, spiritual, and political arenas.
- *Norton Anthology of World Lit.* Vol. E: Look at the art in the center of the book, noting particularly the French art. Consider what these paintings communicate about the worldview of the artist. If you don't have this volume of the anthology, you may look at an art history book or website for examples of the art of this period. I believe the visual arts offer insight into the cultural conditions that shape the literature of the time. It's fascinating, too!
- You may watch the musical, *Les Misérables*, and compare it to the book.

Honors:

The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas

Any other book by Hugo or Dumas

Assignment Schedule

- Weeks 1-3: Begin readings and write an **approach paper** on LM when you finish the novel. See the EE Handbook for complete instructions and an example.
- Week 3-4: Finish context readings and begin drafting a **750-word analytical essay**. Choose a question from the first four of the following questions to write about. Remember to provide textual support (quotes and examples from the text) for your thesis.. Please copy the question at the top of your essay, so I will know which one you have chosen.

Study Questions for *Les Misérables*

1. Cosette was never more fortunate than when she left the home of the socially "respectable" Thénardiens to be raised by a feared ex-convict. How is this an indictment of Hugo's society's criteria for respectability? What are the Thénardiens symbolic or symptomatic of?
2. One of the most psychologically complex characters is Javert, who— though he plays the role of a villain—acts not out of malice but out of a sense of duty to what he truly believes is ethically correct. How would you define Javert's value system? There is a weak link in Javert's chain of rationalizations for his behavior and his life. Identify it and explain how it leads to Javert's suicide. At which points in the book does Hugo show Javert to advantage? At which points does Javert appear to be more a classic villain?
3. How did Bishop Bienvenu's visit to the dying revolutionary G—change him? What about this man surprised the Bishop and why? How are the Revolutionary ideals espoused by G— similar to or different from the pure Christian ideals of the Bishop?
4. Why did Jean Valjean steal the Bishop's silver? How was this act influenced by his experience in prison? Discuss the process of change that occurred in Valjean after the Bishop "**bought back his soul from Satan**" with the silver. Would this bargain have been successful with every person? Why was Valjean subject to such transformation?

Questions from Penguin Reading Guide. Other study questions included in the syllabus.