

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Count of Monte Cristo

by Alexandre Dumas

written by Bill McMahon

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Notes

Alexandre Dumas was a successful, highly popular playwright and novelist in France in the nineteenth century. His other major works include *The Three Musketeers* trilogy and *The Man in the Iron Mask*. Descended from a French nobleman who was a general in Napoleon's army, Dumas and his family were left in poverty when his father died after falling from Bonaparte's favor. This experience certainly colored the political and social background Dumas painted in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Dumas himself lived an adventurous, amorous, and extravagant life, not unlike his title character, whom he seemed to try to emulate wherever possible, to the point of building his own Château de Monte Cristo. This endeavor bankrupted him, and he was forced to flee his creditors. His exile continued until he died in 1851, in Brussels. His son, Alexandre Dumas, fils, authored the novel *The Lady of the Camellias*, which was the basis of the opera *La Traviata*.

All references come from the Signet Classics edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, published by New American Library, Copyright April 2005.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. state how and why this book is an example of literature of the Romantic Period.
2. identify the relevant symbols and motifs used in the novel.
3. discuss Dumas's views on good versus evil, revenge and its limitations, and the proper role of man in regard to those issues.
4. comment on Dumas's political views and how they relate to his themes and characterizations.
5. comment on the importance of historical events in the story.
6. identify the elements that would classify *The Count of Monte Cristo* as an adventure story today.
7. point out and discuss how the novel can be considered an example of both a political melodrama and an allegory.
8. identify, define, and give examples of the following literary terms:
 - allegory
 - allusion
 - imagery
 - irony
 - metaphor
 - motif
 - symbol
 - theme
9. discuss the use of colorful and exotic imagery, and indicate why it is important to both the protagonist and the story.
10. point out and discuss Dumas's use of dramatic irony throughout the story.
11. trace the growth and change of each character through the plot of the novel, especially Edmond Dantès's transformation into the Count of Monte Cristo.
12. comment on the motif of vengeance, and Dumas's ultimate message regarding its meaning.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the role adversity plays in the evolution of Edmond Dantès's character. How and why does he become the Count of Monte Cristo?
2. Edmond Dantès has three major adversaries, who conspire to imprison him falsely. How do the specific punishments that Monte Cristo inflicts on each of them correspond to their character flaws and crimes? In what ways can their punishments be seen as poetic justice?
3. What roles do politics and history play in the story? How do the author's own political views affect his characterizations?
4. In what ways is the Count of Monte Cristo a precursor of the modern day superhero?
5. How is the red silk purse used as a symbol?
6. Monte Cristo frequently employs disguises. What are some of the other personas he adopts, and how do these guises help him achieve his goals?
7. Nearly all the major characters in the course of the novel adopt different names and/or acquire noble titles. What do those changes reflect about the characters? What statement do you think Dumas is making about nobility and titles?
8. How does Monte Cristo's attitude toward the children of his enemies change throughout the course of the story?
9. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is:
 - an adventure story
 - a political melodrama, filled with intrigue and mystery
 - a story of romance and love
 - an allegory with several morals
 - a combination of some or all of the above.

Choose from the list, and explain why you feel the statement best describes the novel.

10. Discuss the motif of vengeance, and how the story and the protagonist both seem to change attitude in regard to it.

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Chapter I

VOCABULARY

bespoke – indicated, signified
bowsprit – a supporting bar for the foremast of a ship
brail – to hoist a sail by rope (brail)
countenance – the face or facial expression
insolent – disrespectful
lithe – able to move or bend the body lightly and gracefully
Maréchal – [*French*] a military general
obsequious – overly eager to please, usually insincere
purser – the financial officer on a ship
quay – a platform on the edge of a port used for loading and unloading
subordinate – lower in rank; secondary
topsail – a sail set above the lowermost sail on a ship
unprepossessing – unattractive; without charm

1. How does Dumas establish the theme of good versus evil, as well as set the story in motion?

2. What roles do history and politics play in the opening of the story?

Chapter IX

VOCABULARY

bella, horrida bella! – [*Latin*] “War, horrible war!”
cabinet – [*archaic*] a small private room
canimus surdis – [*Latin*] “we sing to the deaf”
carking – burdensome, annoying
Gryphius – a 17th-century German lyric poet and dramatist
hemistich – a fragment of a line of poetry
mala ducis avi domum – [*Latin*] “You go home under a bad omen.”
Pastor Quum Traheret – the Latin title of a poem by Horace
turbulent – unstable; disordered
veritable – absolute, true, unquestioned
Venusia – an ancient city in Italy

1. How does Dumas portray the King, Louis XVIII?

2. What finally convinces the King of the seriousness of the threat?

Chapter XVII

VOCABULARY

bark – a three-masted ship
belay – to fasten a rope or line on a ship
brigand – a bandit
chimerical – imaginary
cleave – to split; cut in half
dissimulation – a disguise; the hiding of one's true identity through pretense
excise – a tax on domestic goods
extricated – removed; disentangled
limpet – a sea creature that clings tightly to rocks, especially when disturbed
lingua franca – the common language made up of the various languages in a given area
masonic – relating to Freemasonry
merchantman – a merchant ship
misanthropy – a dislike or distrust of humanity
scudding – moving quickly
stoutly – stubbornly
stratagems – tricks or manipulations
unhampered – unimpeded; unburdened
torpid – without energy; lazy

1. How does Dantès avoid being recaptured by the guards at the Chateau d'If?

2. How do the interests of the smugglers fit in with Dantès's own interests?

Chapters XLIII and XLIV**VOCABULARY**

churlish – rude, boorish

dogging – following closely

gesticulation – to gesture with hands or arms

heraldry – the coats of arms and the symbols and customs relating to them

odious – hateful; revolting

phlegmatically – unemotionally, apathetically

presage – to warn of a future event

1. What is revealed about the marriage of Danglars and the Baroness?

2. What else is apparent in the scene between Danglars and his wife?

3. What other trap does Monte Cristo set when Danglars visits him?

Chapter LX

VOCABULARY

dilate – to expand, open, or enlarge
hassock – a cushion, a footstool
induce – to persuade or encourage
neutralize – to counteract, defuse
panacea – a cure-all; universal remedy

1. How is Monte Cristo's vengeance again futile in this chapter?

2. How else is Monte Cristo changed?

3. How is Valentine exonerated of any suspicion in the poisonings?

4. How does she escape immediate death?
