

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Les Misérables

by Victor Hugo

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Les Misérables

Historical Background

Victor Hugo arranged the events of *Les Misérables* in and around Paris between 1796 and 1833. This was a tumultuous revolutionary era in France's history and was a particularly dismal period for the poor. To understand the plights of the characters in this novel, one must understand the historical struggles to which these characters react.

France endured an extended era of revolution spanning from 1789 to 1852. With Paris as the center of discontent, this period witnessed numerous rulers, from kings, to dictators, to presidents. France had long adhered to a rigid class system, and the only people with any power or influence were the wealthy. In response to poverty, inflation, and food shortages, peasant uprisings began. King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette were executed by a new liberal revolutionary order, hence began the Terror in 1792. During this time, anti-revolutionaries were mercilessly executed, and the anti-church sentiment resulted in the destruction of numerous churches. By 1796, the power had shifted, and the Directory of conservative bourgeois ruled France by intimidation, enlisting the army to squelch any anti-government riots. This period birthed serious economic problems in an already troubled economy, and in 1799, a brigadier named Napoleon overthrew the Directory.

Napoleon appealed to France and awarded peasants what they had won in the revolution, restored the church, and wrote a code of laws. Of course, he established himself as a dictator/emperor and focused his time and France's money on foreign conquest. By 1811, a serious economic crisis in France and Napoleon's loss of military might have led to Napoleon's surrender. In 1814, Napoleon was exiled to Elba, and Louis XVIII, the Bourbon monarch, was welcomed to the throne in hopes that he would repair France's economy and social system. In 1815, Napoleon returned to France, resumed power, gathered an army, and continued his quest for a European empire. He was defeated at Waterloo, and the Restoration ensued.

According to the Restoration, Europe was restored to its pre-1789 structure. Since this required France to lose territory, those soldiers who helped conquer those territories were treated as though those battles never occurred. This meant that France denied Napoleon's soldiers their earned ranks and awards of valor. France assigned these soldiers ranks and pensions in accordance with the ranks they would have achieved under the old order. Despite this setback to the military, Louis XVIII returned to the throne from 1815 to 1824 and helped an exhausted France recover peacefully. France entered a recession and experienced the beginning of the industrial revolution.

Charles X, another Bourbon monarch who ruled from 1824 – 1830, accepted the throne after Louis XVIII. Charles X demonstrated his allegiance to the old order by restoring the old church and the aristocratic control of power. This again instigated social, political, and intellectual upheaval, and the revolution reignited. In 1830, a bad harvest, an economic crisis, and a strong anti-Bourbon sentiment led to insurgence and barricades in the streets. Charles abdicated the throne.

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Objectives

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

1. define realism and cite three examples from the novel.
2. define idealism and explain how Marius represents this concept.
3. define symbol and discuss the significance of Madame Magloire's candlesticks.
4. identify which characters are compared to beasts and discuss the implications of these comparisons.
5. discuss the reasons why certain characters, particularly children, are compared to angels and/or birds, citing specific references from the novel.
6. create a timeline matriculating the multiple storylines of the novel.
7. identify the moment of Jean Valjean's enlightenment and discuss the significance of the bishop's mission throughout the novel.
8. cite two examples of man-versus-self conflict within the novel and discuss these conflicts' effects on the formation of the plot.
9. define the role of women in nineteenth century France.
10. demonstrate how the novel portrays "...the inhumane treatment of convicts and ex-convicts."
11. cite three examples of the humiliation and shame caused by poverty.
12. explicate one female character's demise through poverty and hunger.
13. explicate one character who is robbed of innocence through poverty and need.
14. discuss Victor Hugo's social commentary as illustrated by the novel.
15. discuss the importance of light and darkness as a theme in the novel.
16. explain why Cosette maintains her childlike innocence and naiveté.
17. discuss which characters display integrity and explain choices using examples from the novel.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Describe Jean Valjean after he is released from the galleys and explain the inhumane treatment that he endures in the town of D—— because he is an ex-convict.
2. Explain the role of the church throughout the novel.
3. What effect does the bishop have on Jean Valjean, both physically and spiritually?
4. Delineate the presence of the bishop throughout Jean Valjean's life.
5. Given the circumstances, do you think Jean Valjean's initial crime, theft of a loaf of bread, is truly a criminal act? Support your answer with details from the novel.
6. Explain why Jean Valjean spends nineteen years in prison. Describe the effect that those nineteen years have on Jean Valjean.
7. Why does the bishop tell the police that he gave Jean Valjean the silver?
8. How do the following words, spoken by the bishop, affect Jean Valjean's life? "Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."
9. What crime does Jean Valjean commit against Petit Gervais? How does Jean Valjean attempt to make amends for this act throughout his life?
10. Discuss light as a symbol of life, hope, and love throughout the novel. How do the bishop's silver candlesticks contribute to this theme?
11. Describe Cosette's life with the Thénardiens. What causes the Thénardiens to treat her as they do?
12. Poverty and need are influences in Cosette's life throughout the novel. Compare and contrast those influences as they affect Cosette's life with the Thénardiens to the manner in which they affect her life with Jean Valjean.
13. Which characters does Victor Hugo compare to birds? How does this comparison exalt these characters above the setting and above the other characters?
14. Compare and contrast Jean Valjean as a convict with Jean Valjean as Father Madeleine.
15. Jean Valjean earns a fortune as Father Madeleine. Just as he benefits from his invention, so do many others. Describe how his manufacturing invention benefits others' lives.

Book One: FANTINE**The Fall****THE NIGHT OF A DAY'S TRAMP****Vocabulary**

apace – quickly
cravat – a necktie
formidable – alarming, frightening
garret – a loft
gendarme – a police officer
hillock – a mound
hobnailed shoes – rough, sturdy shoes, the soles of which are protected by large-headed nails
lackey – a messenger
lugubrious – gloomy
prefecture – a district
proclamation of the Golfe Juan – a notice that Napoleon had returned from exile and reclaimed the throne
promenade – a public walkway, as in a park
rents – rips
scullion – a kitchen servant
throng – a large crowd
truss – a bail

1. The novel opens with a raggedy, dirty traveler, Jean Valjean, entering the town of D——. How does the traveler first experience prejudice?

2. How does the innkeeper snub Jean Valjean?

Book Three: MARIUS**The Grand Bourgeois**

NINETY YEARS OLD AND THIRTY-TWO TEETH

Vocabulary

bourgeois – the upper middle class, characterized as especially materialistic and conventional

1. Describe M. Gillenormand.

TWO DO NOT MAKE A PAIR

Vocabulary

affianced – betrothed, committed to

chimera – a dream

commissary – a person who fulfills a responsibility or role that has been assigned by a supreme power

harangues – lengthy, formal public addresses

1. Explain the following quote, which refers to M. Gillenormand's two daughters.

“Both had wings, one like an angel, the other like a goose.”

2. Why is M. Gillenormand's grandson afraid of him?

Book Five: JEAN VALJEAN**War Between Four Walls**

FIVE LESS, ONE MORE

Vocabulary

banlieue – the outskirts, the suburb
redoubt – a refuge inside another fortification
shakos – military caps with visors and plumes

1. Marius is put in the position to determine which four men may escape the barricade. Why is this such a difficult decision for him? Draw a parallel between the Jondrette incident at the Gorbeau house and this impasse. What saves Marius' conscience?

THE SITUATION GROWS SERIOUS

1. What sound do the men in the barricade hear in the distance?

GAVROCHE OUTSIDE

1. What does Gavroche sneak out of the barricade to do?
2. What social statement does Victor Hugo make through Gavroche's death?
