

## A Big Book in the History Classroom: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

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IN SPRING SEMESTER 2017, I offered an undergraduate senior seminar titled “History and Literature,” for which the main project was a close reading of a big book: Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862). I had long thought about a course like this, but had never even drawn up a proposal because I had reservations about the material and the approach to teaching it I envisioned, both of which seemed outdated. *Les Misérables*, and the nineteenth-century style in which it is written, seemed too lofty for a post-modern audience. A singular focus on a classic of Western literature also struck me as too reflective of a “great books” way of thinking, and not sensitive enough to the reasons why so many teachers (myself included) had long since reacted against a Eurocentric understanding of the world.<sup>1</sup> Another reservation (though also a challenge I was ready to take up) had to do with compelling students to undertake the project of reading a big book—not to mention all the other requirements of a senior seminar (additional readings, presentations, short tests, and a long final paper, with drafts). We are often informed, not only in the broader culture, but also at my own university, that we live in a visual world, which implies an inability to read or concentrate for

stretches of time. In the age of Twitter, tackling a 1,300-page book seemed absurd—an affront, even, to the contemporary mindset. And yet my own experiences with students over the years suggested something else—not only the ability to read, absorb, and analyze a tome, but maybe even a longing to take up the challenge. This was reinforced (crucially—otherwise, I do not think I would have offered the course) by the encouragement of younger colleagues, who insisted that the project was *not* archaic.<sup>2</sup> And so I scheduled the seminar.

### History and Literature

I teach modern world and modern Europe survey history classes, along with specialized courses on topics including revolutions, history and film, and the Holocaust. I consider reading to be central to a liberal arts education, and so in all of my classes, I emphasize reading and the assessment of reading by testing students on all their texts.<sup>3</sup> I generally require a survey text along with four to six supplemental primary and secondary sources, usually including a work of contemporary literature. Over a long career in the classroom, I believe I have used novels every semester (**Appendix A** contains a list of assigned literature). Not all historians use literature in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> Mary Lynn Rampolla's popular *A Pocket Guide to Writing History* has a substantial section on primary and secondary sources, but does not mention the use of literature.<sup>5</sup> Jules R. Benjamin's *A Student's Guide to History* offers this caution: "Works of fiction—novels, poems, short stories, etc.—are primary sources of evidence to anyone conducting research on a well-known author or the literature of a particular time or place...but be careful not to accept a fictional text as historical truth."<sup>6</sup> Literary scholars, including some from the New Historicism school, sometimes show frustration with how historians approach literature in the classroom or in their research. Gerard Carruthers admonished: "it is time for historians to stop using literature as a quarry for facts, [and] to go with the structures of belief—to go with the narrative."<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in language and literature classrooms, *Les Misérables* (or sections of it) is still widely used. And in French history, where I do most of my research and sometimes teach courses, it seems natural to make use of literature in the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

There is an argument for historians to integrate literature into classroom teaching, and to use specific methods for doing so. Gillian Polack noted that while novels may be especially concerned with interpretations or representations, they nonetheless “provide significant insights into the past in terms of thought experiments.”<sup>9</sup> The historian Rachel Fuchs (whose main area of research is nineteenth-century Paris, the setting for most of *Les Misérables*), argued that “Fiction... lends itself to teaching history” by delving into “the emotions and sensibilities” of their time.<sup>10</sup> In terms of methods, David J. Neumann employed rules of rhetoric when using novels in high school history classes.<sup>11</sup> Visually inclined students can be engaged by including graphic history books on reading lists.<sup>12</sup> In my own classes, I have students approach a novel as a primary source: a contemporary assessment of a particular time and place. Part of the idea in using literature is to juxtapose how novelists and historians represent and understand the past. There is, accordingly, a critical historiographical purpose at work.<sup>13</sup> In making this point to my seminar, I drew upon the argument of historian Alan Spitzer that “[t]o the extent that a work’s authenticity depends on a claim to factual authority, it deserves to be judged in light of its claim”<sup>14</sup>; this was a governing principle that the students and I came back to time-and-again during the semester. And yet, I also wanted these history majors to read *Les Misérables* for the same reason we always read novels: to appreciate the story, the writing, and the messages conveyed by the author. *Les Misérables* is one of the great works of literature, Hugo’s self-professed testament to “progress” and “fraternity”—these were universal, timeless aspirations that I expected the students would not consider as out of date.<sup>15</sup> I hoped that the class would grasp how an author we associate with fiction can draw a historical picture, providing insights that are hard to know outside of a work of literature. *Les Misérables* complicates the picture of knowing the past by straddling the boundary between history and literature; but this was fine: more grist for the pedagogical mill. For my purposes, *Les Misérables* was perfect to let history majors explore the use of literature as history and for them to see that disciplinary frontiers are not always hard and fast. These were among the complex topics I intended the students should grapple with.

Would Hugo have approved of an undertaking like this? Hugo was adamant in asserting a role for literature and the writer in making

progressive social change, and, in this sense, *Les Misérables* reflects “his view of the artist as a ‘lighthouse’ that guides his fellow human beings”<sup>16</sup> In Hugo’s words, “I wrote it for everyone.”<sup>17</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian Nobel Prize winner in literature, argued that to approach *Les Misérables* like any other written work would be to miss the universal themes that the “Olympian” Hugo (he is buried in Panthéon of Paris, after all!) was trying to get at.<sup>18</sup> I hoped the students would be enthralled by the central story, the memorable cast of characters, Hugo’s illuminating digressions, the historical context in which the novel is set, and by the sheer audacity of the author’s ambition. The immediate challenge would be getting students to take up the task of reading a big book. This kind of assignment rarely seems to be done anymore.<sup>19</sup> I have used lengthy books as survey texts in the past, but had never centered the entire semester on a single, long work.<sup>20</sup> As an undergraduate years ago, I had been assigned Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* for a history course, and it was one of the formative experiences of my college years. I mentioned this to the students, but I was also direct about the singular focus and amount of work they were about to undertake: *Les Misérables* was to be the seminar’s obsession for a full semester.

Because so many students were already familiar with the story of *Les Misérables* through film or theatrical versions, and because comparing history and literature was a guiding principle of the seminar, I thought it important to spend time going over the background from a historians’ point of view—that background follows.

### **The Background: Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables***

#### *Victor Hugo*

The seminar was set up to work between text and context, and part of the context the students needed to know was the life of Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and some of the story behind the writing of *Les Misérables*.<sup>21</sup> Hugo was one of the great figures of nineteenth-century literature, with *Les Misérables*—along with *War and Peace* (1869) and *Moby-Dick* (1851)—among the classic novels of the time. It is hard to separate Hugo the personality from the literature he created. Hugo’s father was one of Napoleon Bonaparte’s generals, and among Victor’s earliest memories was a stay in Spain, where his

father served during the French occupation of that country (1808-1813). Back in Paris following Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 and his parents' estrangement, Victor and his two brothers were brought up by his mother in comfortable bourgeois surroundings and given a good education. The young Hugo was precocious, and by the time he reached his late teens, he was recognized as one of France's most promising poets. In the 1840s, he was elected to the *Académie française* and during the course of an on-and-off political career was a member of two French legislatures. Hugo wrote poetry, prose, and plays, and periodically cast himself as spokesperson for causes. Politically, he moved from a conservative, pro-royalist stance as a young man to a more socially and politically progressive position as he got older. By the late 1840s, Hugo was a republican. Elected to the French National Assembly in 1848, Hugo exiled himself to Belgium and then to the Channel Islands when Louis-Napoleon—soon to be crowned Napoleon III—overthrew the Second Republic in 1851. Hugo returned to France in 1870 when the Second Empire fell during the Franco-Prussian War. During the last three decades of his life, Hugo cultivated the role of something like the “conscience” of France. He was probably the most famous French personality of his day. When he died in 1885, he was interred at the Panthéon in Paris, the resting place of France's secular “gods.” With about two million persons attending, the crowds for the passing of Hugo's funeral cortege rivaled those for the return of Napoleon Bonaparte's remains in 1840 (**Appendix B** contains a chronology of Hugo's life).<sup>22</sup>

*Les Misérables* was the great accomplishment of Hugo's career. I wanted the seminar to approach the book in a critical, but fair and hopefully sophisticated fashion. I did not intend that the students focus just on whether Hugo got every historical detail right. As Hugo himself suggested, and as Vargas Llosa repeatedly emphasized in his study of the novel, *Les Misérables* should be read less as history than as a moral tale.<sup>23</sup> Still, Hugo chose to place the story in a very specific time and place—one with which some of the book's first readers could have had direct experience, and who might have had a sense of whether or not the history was, indeed, “right.” In order to approach this issue, a particular task I had for the seminar was to juxtapose one part of the novel—Hugo's description of the climactic battle at a barricade in Paris during the June 1832 rebellion—with what historians have written about the event. The Paris rebellion of

June 1832 periodically re-emerges in popular consciousness because of the translation of *Les Misérables* to stage and screen, and for that historians can be grateful. But there is also the historians' history of June 1832, and it is that way of understanding that I wanted students to know, too.

### *Context and Text of Les Misérables*

The story of *Les Misérables* has become familiar through abridged editions and numerous theatrical and film interpretations. Musical versions debuted on theater stages in Paris (1980), London (1985), and New York (1987), where it was rechristened "Les Miz." "Les Miz" is the way that many people—including some of the students in the seminar—knew about *Les Misérables* and its historical setting. These preconceptions were something I intended to tackle, and provided another reason to come back to the full novel.<sup>24</sup>

*Les Misérables* is set in France in the years 1795 to 1833—an era of big promises, big expectations, and big disappointments. These promises arose from the Enlightenment, French Revolution, and Industrial Revolution. They were "big" partly because they were potentially universal in application and appeal. To generalize, the big promises of the period were the fundamental civil and political freedoms we are accustomed to today and, from the productive possibilities of industry and the laws of laissez-faire, a higher standard of living and improved economic opportunity.<sup>25</sup> In France, the attempt to make good on the promises of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" during the Revolution of 1789-1794 was in many ways successful: civil rights were written into law, and forward-looking constitutions created; the abuses of the Old Regime were ameliorated; universal manhood suffrage was gained (though temporarily); and, as the historian Lynn Hunt wrote, human rights were first articulated. But the attempt was also accompanied by economic crisis, foreign and civil war, political turmoil, the wiping out of a 900-year-old monarchy, the creation of a government labeling itself for a time as "terrorist," a dictatorship under Napoleon Bonaparte, and, subsequently, a half-century of intermittent Parisian rebellion. Transforming France from kingdom to republic, and the French from subjects to citizens, was thus hard and perilous work. The political problems were difficult enough, but the transition from Old Regime

economy to laissez-faire and modern industry was just as trying. This is the time in which *Les Misérables* is set.<sup>26</sup>

The novel opens in 1815 with a foreshadowing of an event crucial to the moral evolution of the main character, Jean Valjean. However, Valjean's personal story begins earlier, in 1795, a year after the end of the Terror (the most radical phase of the Revolution), during a period of economic hard times when he steals a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. This single act determines the course of Valjean's life and much of the rest of the story. A morally just deed generates an unjust response, which sees Valjean jailed in dehumanizing conditions, including time spent on a *bagne*—a kind of floating prison notorious for its unhealthy conditions.<sup>27</sup> Several attempted escapes lengthen Valjean's sentence. He is finally released, after nineteen years of incarceration, in 1815—the same year France is released from Napoleon's dictatorship. Brutalized by prison, Valjean's encounter with a Catholic bishop after his release produces a spiritual awakening, but also leaves Valjean suspected of the theft of a silver candlestick belonging to the bishop. Thereafter, Valjean is pursued by the law in the person of Inspector Javert.

The pursuit of Valjean by Javert occupies much of the rest of the story. Sub-plots emerge, and the adventure is periodically interrupted by Hugo's long digressions on a variety of topics, including a history of the Battle of Waterloo, a run-down of the events of the year 1817, and a theoretical exploration of the distinction between "riot" and "rebellion" (the latter "good," the former "bad").<sup>28</sup> Hugo makes Valjean a complex character, more martyr than hero, driven to his destiny by a combination of personal qualities and historical forces. The novel has Valjean encounter memorable characters, including the saintly Bishop Myriel; the destitute young mother and prostitute Fantine (whose suffering is relieved by an early death); the greedy and scheming Thénardiens, from whom Valjean rescues Fantine's daughter Cosette (who he adopts); the idealistic student Marius; and, of course, Valjean's relentless pursuer, Javert. The climax comes during the June 1832 rebellion in Paris, when Javert catches up with Valjean—even as morality and history catch up with Javert. Near the end, Javert, in an abrupt existential crisis and apparently finally realizing the distinction between moral right and legal right, allows Valjean to escape and takes his own life by jumping into the Seine River. *Les Misérables* is a timeless story of injustice and redemption.

Much of the background is based on actual events. Hugo began writing in the 1830s and took up the manuscript more regularly between 1845 and 1848.<sup>29</sup> The initial title was “Les Misères,” then “Jean Tréjean.” Hugo put the manuscript aside in 1848 (a year of revolution in France and Europe), returned to it in 1860, and polished off the writing a year later. It was published in 1862, and serialized and translated into other languages. Hugo expected the book to be a great hit, and, overall, it was.<sup>30</sup> *Les Misérables* eventually became required reading for French schoolchildren. However, some of the first reviewers thought the prose wordy and the philosophy artificial. Alphonse de Lamartine, a contemporary writer and poet and a mentor to Hugo as a young man, wrote a “devastatingly snide” review of *Les Misérables*.<sup>31</sup> Still, over the years, as André Maurois, one of Hugo’s many biographers, wrote: “Time has...delivered its verdict. *Les Misérables* has come to be accepted by the whole world as one of the great works of the human imagination.”<sup>32</sup> Vargas Llosa reaffirmed the greatness, timelessness, and universality of the novel in a book-length analysis in 2007.<sup>33</sup>

Though *Les Misérables* is set in a specific time and place, it is clear that Hugo intended to convey universal and timeless moral lessons. These moral lessons included two of specific importance:

1. Humanity is essentially good, though sometimes misguided (it is mainly institutions that are corrupt).
2. Redemption is possible—there is always hope.

It is these lessons, and Hugo’s great skill in transforming them into a compelling story, that makes *Les Misérables* a classic work of literature, and subsequently a likely vehicle for adaptation to film and stage—and, I thought, a way for our history seminar to take a “deep dive” into a particular past time and place.

### *Hugo on the Rebellion of June 1832*

The rebellion of 5-6 June 1832 is the climax of *Les Misérables*, and the part of the story I wanted the seminar to look at closely as an example of Hugo’s history-writing, since we can compare Hugo’s version of June 1832 against what we know about the event as historians. Again, it is obvious that Hugo did not intend that his account be taken as the kind of history that historians write. Still, I



thought it would be instructive for the seminar to “nitpick” some of the details. We would not be the first to do this. In the nineteenth century, there was a kind of cottage industry of this sort of thing, the most astonishing example being Edmond Biré's *L'Année 1817* (1895), in which Biré savaged the section of the novel that reviewed the year 1817.<sup>34</sup> Hugo's digression on 1817 was eight pages long; Biré's analysis of 1817 ran to an incredible 436 pages! This was an audacious gesture against a lionized figure. Still, Biré's work is instructive for a couple of reasons: First, because, as he rightly noted, Hugo did, in fact, get so much wrong about 1817; accordingly, we may justifiably ask if this is also the case for Hugo's description of the 1832 rebellion. Second, if Hugo did get some of the history wrong, what does this have to say about how we know or remember the past? Again, this was a central question for the seminar.

Hugo placed the climax of the novel at a barricade in central Paris (close to the current Rue Rambuteau) in June 1832. In Hugo's telling, the events at the barricade were part of a contest between a moral good represented by Jean Valjean and his fellow rebels, and the self-delusion of Inspector Javert and the forces of order he represented. We know there were approximately 200 barricades built during the 1832 rebellion.<sup>35</sup> Who was there? The novel describes, along with Valjean, Marius, and the gamin Gavroche, a mostly male crowd of law and medical students, professional revolutionaries, foreign exiles, middle-class property owners, and workers. In the novel, the young republican Enjolras is the leader at the barricade, where students play a prominent role. How did Hugo know about the rebellion of 1832? At the time, he was living in Paris, though in the relatively affluent western section of the city, away from the poorer central and eastern sections of Paris where most of the rebellion occurred.<sup>36</sup> Hugo later wrote that he ventured on to the streets at the time and even had to maneuver to evade some of the fighting.<sup>37</sup> No doubt, Hugo also read the newspaper articles and probably some of the many short accounts published in the aftermath. Following another, smaller Parisian rebellion in 1839, Hugo interviewed soldiers camped on the public squares and then went before the French national legislature to defend one of the rebel leaders (Armand Barbès) of 1839. In 1834, he published the short story “Claude Gueux” with some of the same themes—demoralizing social conditions and wrong-headed laws—that are part of *Les*

*Misérables*.<sup>38</sup> In the 1830s, Hugo thus had relevant experiences, as he was also formulating the ideas that would contribute to the novel, most of which was written in the 1840s.

How can historians know more about 1832 than Hugo?<sup>39</sup> There are, of course, things we cannot really grasp, since those times are gone. Still, research in archives and libraries provide details that Hugo would not have been able to access, and historical distance offers perspective. These are historians' basic tools and their main advantages over contemporary chroniclers. What is the historical evidence for 1832? We can look at most of the same newspapers Hugo might have read, as well as the published firsthand accounts of the rebellion and its aftermath that appeared within a year or so. Most important, we can review contemporary police and trial records, and the government reports that were produced as a follow-up.<sup>40</sup> Finally, we can read memoirs and histories written in later years; Hugo probably saw some of these latter, though others were published after *Les Misérables* was finished. The students in the seminar did not look at French-language primary sources, but were able to use many English-language secondary sources that drew upon them.

At the barricade described in *Les Misérables*, some of Hugo's story matches what historians know about June 1832, and some does not. Estimates of the number of persons involved in the initial street demonstrations of 5 June vary considerably, but certainly it was in the tens of thousands. In response, the government mobilized nearly 70,000 troops. Most of the 200 or so barricades were erected on the Right Bank of the Seine River. There were about 1,200 arrests and 900 casualties, including 70 soldiers killed and 290 wounded.<sup>41</sup> Historians are certain that skilled and unskilled workers were by far the most numerous participants in the rebellion, even though they are mostly in the background of the novel.<sup>42</sup> Among the characters Hugo permits the reader to know in detail are just two workers, both of them viewed in metamorphosis: the street urchin Gavroche (who is killed—perhaps before he can mature into something less desirable?) and Jean Valjean himself, who by this point in the story has escaped his working-class origins and advanced to a higher economic and social plane. Hugo created certain characters—the free spirit Gavroche, the persecuted Valjean, along with the revolutionary incarnation Enjolras—so that the rebellion of 1832 could stand for a moral good; to rise from the bottom of the marsh

and thereby be anointed “insurrection”—a just act—as opposed to “riot,” which Hugo associated with indiscriminate, mob violence.<sup>43</sup>

Historical research shows that the great majority of the 1,200 persons arrested were workers, though, again, the working-class nature of the 1832 rebellion does not come through clearly in *Les Misérables*. Among the approximately 200 persons for whom we have arrest and trial records, there were building workers, charcoal burners, shoemakers, furniture makers, and day laborers. Most lived in working-class neighborhoods of the Right Bank, and many (especially those from the building trades) were probably seasonal migrants who worked in Paris for eight or nine months of the year while residing in rented rooms. Just two of the rebels we know about in any detail were students.<sup>44</sup> Historians have identified Charles Jeanne, who had working-class roots and was a member of the city's National Guard (he left his regiment at the time of the rebellion), as the most prominent figure in a rebellion that otherwise lacked leadership or direction. In his idealism, Jeanne resembles Hugo's republican firebrand Enjolras. Though Hugo's Enjolras may have been partly modeled on him, Jeanne was given only a passing mention in the novel.<sup>45</sup> When we covered this material in class through lecture and additional readings, most of the students were surprised at the distinction between the picture of 1832 rebels identified by historians and that drawn by Hugo.

### *Hugo's Choices*

Not only historians, but also many of Hugo's contemporaries have emphasized the working-class composition of nineteenth-century Parisian rebels, including those of 1832. Why did Hugo construct a version of events in which the picture of the rebels was skewed from what the evidence shows; a version that, arguably, gave a distorted picture of what happened in June 1832? We can only speculate on his purposes. One reason may have been that Hugo's account fit a romantic or utopian view of persecution, suffering, injustice, and redemption that is a persistent theme in both his art and how he sometimes thought about his own life.<sup>46</sup> What do I mean by this? Following yet another Paris revolution—this one successful—in February 1848, Hugo was elected to France's national legislature, where he became a critic of the new president—Napoleon Bonaparte's

nephew Louis-Napoleon. When Louis-Napoleon seized power in a coup d'état in 1851, a number of Second Republic legislators, Hugo among them, left France to protest the lawless and anti-democratic act. Hugo "suffered" in self-imposed exile for nineteen years (the same number of years Jean Valjean spent in prison), even though he was confident that "redemption" for France, the republic, and himself would eventually happen. It was during his exile that Hugo finished writing *Les Misérables*.<sup>47</sup>

Another explanation for why Hugo offered his version of 1832 has to do with the dilemma he would face in casting the event closer to reality. From a historical perspective, the insurrection represented a modern kind of social upheaval that included essentially new historical actors—artisans in the process of being deskilled and newly subject to the uncertainties of laissez-faire economics, as well as less-skilled workers, many of them migrants, who likewise were adjusting with difficulty to the new economic and political realities that came with the Revolution of 1789 and the New Regime of laissez-faire and industrialization. As historians know, the response by social groups or classes most adversely affected by these changes—like the artisans and workers at the June 1832 barricade—could be violent. Hugo underplayed this context and its seemingly disruptive implications to focus instead on unifying themes. At this point in the seminar, the students used Eric Hobsbawm's classic *The Age of Revolution* (1962) to place Hugo's approach to social strife in historical perspective.

From a historical point of view, the discrepancy between the social make-up of the rebels described by historians like Hobsbawm and those in Hugo's story—which, again, gives the paramount role to students—is striking. It is hard to imagine that Hugo was not aware of how the picture he created differed from the general pattern of rebellion in Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century, since in terms of social make-up, the rebellion of 1832 was similar to all the others that occurred during Hugo's life.<sup>48</sup> The social and political aspect of Hugo's interpretation becomes clearer when we take into account the fact that he completed *Les Misérables* after one of the most momentous rebellions of the century. This happened in Paris in June 1848, following Hugo's election to the French National Assembly and before his exile in 1851. The June Days rebellion of 1848 saw a terrible struggle waged over three days across central and eastern Paris, pitting workers against government forces. It was

considerably larger and more deadly than that of 1832, and was put down with much violence, producing hundreds of casualties for government forces, nearly 12,000 arrests, and between 1,500 and 3,000 killed among the rebels—some of whom were summarily shot after being arrested at barricades not very different from what was described in *Les Misérables*. Astute observers of the day, from Alexis de Tocqueville on the political right to Karl Marx on the left, considered June 1848 a class war between workers and a middle-class government. Historians have mostly concurred.<sup>49</sup> The June 1848 rebellion was horrifying and deeply troubling to observers because it seemed to promise only more of the same for the future. And Hugo was there: as an elected representative in the National Assembly, he was out on the streets, including time spent with a troop of soldiers attacking a large barricade in eastern Paris. The experience at the barricade in June 1848, wrote David Bellos, left Hugo a “different man.”<sup>50</sup>

If we can judge by the narrative Hugo constructed in *Les Misérables*, some of which was written in the shadow of the June Days, he simply would not accept what the carnage in the streets of Paris implied.<sup>51</sup> That is, for Hugo, rebellion could not be a function of the seemingly irreconcilable interests of social classes. Rather, social class had to be obscured, and the moral, unifying side of rebellion advanced. This ambiguous, arguably ahistorical view also helps to explain the title of the book. This odd word “*misérables*,” so difficult for American audiences (including the students in the seminar) to pronounce that the producers of the twentieth-century musical abbreviated the title, was given some currency by the book, but in fact was rarely used in Hugo’s day.<sup>52</sup> Hugo practically coined a word when he had many others to choose from that would have been perfectly familiar to his French reading audience: *peuple*, *prolétaires*, *menu peuple*, *sans-culottes*, *classes laborieuses*, *classes dangereuses*, and more.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, if we look to the trial of Charles Jeanne, the actual rebel of 1832, he was described by his own lawyer as a “proletarian.”<sup>54</sup> The term “proletarian” is very old, dating from Roman Antiquity, but had been resurrected and politicized after 1815. By the early 1830s, it was being used to imply class war. Marx famously took up the term, but so did many others, and Hugo certainly would have been familiar with its contemporary usage. Rather than employ “proletarian” or any of the other terms available to him, Hugo came up with a word

derived from a moral quality—“misery,” which for him meant unjust suffering not necessarily related to politics. By using the politically neutral “*misérables*” and by adjusting the social composition of the rebels, Hugo could unite social classes at the barricade—not unlike Eugène Delacroix’s famous 1830 painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, which was copied on the course syllabus (included in **Appendix C**). Hugo’s portrait included Marius, a middle-class student (who Hugo may have modeled partly after himself); Jean Valjean, now a respectable member of the bourgeoisie; Gavroche, a working-class kid and potentially a proletarian, but because he was a child, open to other possibilities; and Enjolras, acting and dying for moral rather than economic cause.

In terms of its usefulness as a historical account of 1832, Hugo made the battle at the barricade a central part of his story, even as he rendered the social make-up and motives of its defenders different from what most contemporaries and historians described. Yet it is Hugo’s version that dominates popular understanding today through the novel and its translation to film and stage. Meanwhile, the real Charles Jeanne, though fortunate enough not to be killed on the barricade in 1832, was arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to prison, where he died of tuberculosis in 1837. Hugo altered, missed, or obscured Jeanne’s story and the larger story of how rebellion happened in nineteenth-century Paris. He neglected or underplayed certain contexts and causes: the political struggles of the era, the economic difficulties associated with *laissez-faire*, and even the impact of cholera (which arrived in Paris in 1832 and set the stage for the June rebellion).<sup>55</sup> As historians, we can say that four things seem to have been especially important in prompting rebellion in nineteenth-century Paris: community (essentially, defense of working-class neighborhoods), politics, economic crises, and social class. Sometimes, these “causes” overlapped. The rebellion of 1832 seems to have been especially a combination of the political and social. It may have been, in fact, one of the first truly modern rebellions, if a sign of modernity is awareness of social class. Hugo passed over this, and probably did so purposefully. As Alan Spitzer queries rhetorically in reviewing a set of well-known historical “truths and lies,” can a representation of the past be truthful if it is not accurate? Applying this standard to the section of *Les Misérables* on the rebellion of June 1832, the answer is probably no.

Hugo's version of the June 1832 rebellion differs from the accounts of contemporaries and historians. Nonetheless, it would be ridiculous to overlook the other kinds of truth to be found in *Les Misérables*. In this sense, I emphasized to the seminar that Hugo aimed at something more than historical accuracy, and that scholars in many disciplines, including historians, understand this.<sup>56</sup> As Rachel Fuchs noted, *Les Misérables* "provides an understanding of poverty on another level than that of historians. The imagery is vivid, transcends historical data, and creates a reality for its time."<sup>57</sup> Another historian, Robert Tombs, who wrote the introduction to the latest English-language translation and who is not sparing in his critique of the novel's sentimentality and its limits as history, nonetheless emphasized the obvious: *Les Misérables* is an epic tale and testament to eternal values of "love, redemption and sacrifice."<sup>58</sup> And to quote Vargas Llosa, who has grasped the greater purpose behind Hugo's work as well as anyone:

There is no way of demonstrating that *Les Misérables* has moved humanity even a few inches along the road to the kingdom of justice, freedom, and peace that, according to Hugo's utopian vision, is the path of humanity. But there is no doubt, either, that in the history of literature, *Les Misérables* is one of the works that has been most influential in making so many men and women of all languages and cultures desire a more just, rational, and beautiful world than the one they live in.<sup>59</sup>

If not for *Les Misérables*, the rebellion of 1832 certainly might have been all but forgotten in the popular imagination.

### The Seminar

Again, the core issues in *Les Misérables* revolving around how we know or represent the past were things I wanted the students in the "History and Literature" seminar to grapple with. The seminar is a required course for graduating seniors in our history major. My Spring 2017 section was small (seven students), and so I was able to conduct it in the style I thought most conducive to our task: everyone sitting around a table, presenting material, and discussing. I did initial background lecturing with special attention to the June 1832 rebellion, focusing on the issues described above, but aside from assessing student work, my main responsibility as instructor

was prompting and moderating the back-and-forth between students, and between the text of *Les Misérables* and the historical context. The students had the real mission, which was to tackle a deep understanding of a big book. As I explained in the syllabus:

Historians know about the past through a variety of sources, especially written documents and artifacts, but also through oral tradition and literature. In this seminar, we will endeavor to know a part of the past by reading a literary classic: Victor Hugo's epic novel *Les Misérables*. Literature has done much to shape how we view the past, and historians can use it in two ways: first, by employing contemporary literature as a primary source written by a participant in the events he/she is describing; second, by approaching literature as history-writing itself, created by a writer interpreting his or her own time and place. *Les Misérables* is both a primary source of contemporary literature and a historical interpretation by a skilled writer. A central question for our seminar is this: Does *Les Misérables* provide a plausible, "truthful" understanding of the time and place it describes?

I listed the following as goals of the seminar: "acquire an understanding of the key events described in *Les Misérables*"; "read and discuss, as a group, a long-form work"; and "produce...a substantial paper." Our method for accomplishing all of this: "reading intensive."<sup>60</sup> In the syllabus, I informed the students:

It is probably unusual these days for a college class to embark upon a project like this, and so, in this sense our task is a little old-fashioned. But one meaning associated with "seminar" has to do with a cooperative project to which everyone contributes; in which everyone shares the travails and rewards; and which plants the seed of understanding. I hope that reading and discussing *Les Misérables* will inspire the "seminarian" in all of us.

It was fortunate that *Les Misérables* is available in an excellent, relatively recent English-language translation by Christine Donougher (released by Penguin Books in 2013). And it was perfect for my purposes that this paperback edition included an introduction and a long section of notes explaining Hugo's many allusions by a respected historian of nineteenth-century France, Robert Tombs. The fact that the publisher chose a historian to introduce and explain the book is telling, and very much supported the approach I wanted to take. Students also read Peter Burke's *What Is Cultural History?* (2008), which provided analytical tools, and, as noted,



Eric Hobsbawm's classic *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (1962). I wanted the Hobsbawm book to help with the historical context, but also to demonstrate that, like novelists, historians can "paint a picture." The readings also included relevant, mostly recent journal articles accessed electronically through our library website. I began the semester by making the case for a big book, and then went to the background lectures. Students read approximately 100 pages from *Les Misérables* each week. By Week 3, they were formulating a paper topic, building a bibliography, and making presentations for which they received peer reviews. We took a break around mid-term to watch and discuss the most recent film adaptation (2012's musical *Les Misérables* directed by Tom Hooper<sup>61</sup>) and then returned to student presentations of prospectuses and more sections from the novel. As the semester progressed, I increasingly saw my responsibility as offering encouragement and reinforcement—essentially, giving periodic "pep talks" to remind students they were accomplishing a memorable task, and that even if they felt overwhelmed, they would look back on the seminar with a sense of accomplishment. Reading *Les Misérables* and writing a substantial paper about it, I told them, was a signal moment in their undergraduate career and a fitting culmination to a liberal arts education. We finished the semester with a focus on the paper: individual meetings at my office, presentations of drafts, and then my marking and returning the final papers to them. Among the paper topics devised by students were analyses comparing Hugo's views on religion, economics, and social justice with interpretations from the historical literature. By and large, the students took the lessons about Hugo's historical approach to the 1832 rebellion to heart and applied them to their own topics.

### *Results*

In the end, I thought our seminar had accomplished the goals I set, and I would teach it again. I had focused on June 1832 as an example of how students might approach the book, and though they were encouraged to select their own topics, we spent a lot of class time analyzing Hugo's take on 1832 compared with that of historians. Several excellent papers were produced, and I was gratified to see the students warm to the task; indeed, over the course of the semester, I thought most developed a real appreciation for a

big book—I had long felt that undergraduates would be interested in this sort of project, and my hope was not disappointed. I think the students will look back on the experience as a memorable one. Still, not everything about the seminar worked. Predictably, one or two students did not keep up with the reading. In their presentations, the students often focused on characters and story development rather than placing things in historical context. Students were initially too ready to take Hugo’s narrative and literary constructions at face value and, as they became invested in the story, they grew a little reluctant to countenance the history written by historians like Tombs and Hobsbawm. However, by the time they produced the final paper, most students had returned to a historical critique.

I do wonder whether the seminar reinforced assumptions about the Western canon. I hope not. After all, *Les Misérables* aspires to universal messages about social justice and the individual and society. I thought the student “seminarians” grasped the underlying universalism of *Les Misérables*, and I do not think our critique undermined the key messages of the novel. The aforementioned epigram from Vargas Llosa, which I used for the syllabus and was periodically referenced in our discussions, reinforced this point: “[I]n the history of literature, *Les Misérables* is one of the works that has been more influential in making so many men and women of all languages and cultures desire a more just, rational, and beautiful world than the one they live in.”<sup>62</sup>

There certainly are other big books that might work in a course like this, not all of them European in origin.<sup>63</sup> Teaching the undergraduate seminar on Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* gave me the chance to return to a book and a historical era I treasure. Working between text and context with students who steadily became engrossed in the project was a relief from the plague of assessments and rubrics that so often intercede in how we would like to teach our classes. Most important, the seminar reinforced my suspicion that students can read in depth and at length—and maybe even that they secretly long to do so!

## Notes

1. A Google search of "History and Literature" turned up a handful of courses and programs, the majority at British universities, where there is an emphasis on linking British literature and history. Harvard University offers an honors concentration in "History & Literature"; Reed College (Oregon) offers something similar. Some study abroad courses combine history and literature. For an example of a "great books" curriculum, see the Thomas Aquinas College (California) syllabus (which does not include *Les Misérables*) at <<https://www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/syllabus>>. The English Department at my institution (University of Southern Indiana) periodically offers courses on the history of the novel.

2. My thanks to colleagues Emily Teising and Abby Alexander for their encouragement. An important source for using *Les Misérables* in the classroom is Michal P. Ginsburg and Bradley Stephens, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Hugo's Les Misérables* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2018), which includes an introduction to the topic, bibliography, critiques of *Les Misérables*, maps of relevant locations in Paris, and other useful material.

3. Casey Harison, "Using Book Tests to Get Students to Read," *Perspectives on History* 46, no. 8 (November 2008): 33-34.

4. T. Mills Kelly argues that there has been little real innovation in the history classroom since the 1960s in "'But Mine's Better': Teaching History in a Remix Culture," *The History Teacher* 44, no. 3 (May 2011): 371. Recent pedagogy on teaching college-level history has focused on online and hybrid learning, the fine-tuning of U.S. and World history surveys, and new approaches like gaming in the classroom. There is considerable scholarship on the use of novels in language or literature (as opposed to history) classrooms. For an argument that history teaching may be "enriched by reference to great works of fiction," see Sigurd O. Shmidt, "Great Works of Literature as a Source of Historical Knowledge," *Russian Studies in History* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 27. Writing about Atlantic history, Eric Slauter notes that "literary evidence has an incontestable role to play in helping historians to see and hear new things"; "History, Literature, and the Atlantic World," *Early American Literature* 43, no. 1 (March 2008): 174. On French literature in the classroom, see William Gaullois, "Émile Zola's Forgotten History: *Les Rougon-Macquart*," *French History* 19, no. 1 (March 2005): 67-90. Like Hugo, Émile Zola worked at a time (the late nineteenth century) when disciplinary frontiers were less firm than today; see Robert A. Schneider and Whitney Walton, "History, Literature, and the History of French Literature," *French Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 377-386; and Julie Kalman, "The Jew in the Scenery: Historicizing Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature," *French History* 27, no. 4 (December 2013): 515-534.

5. Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, sixth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010).

6. Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, thirteenth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 50.

7. Gerard Carruthers and Catriona M. M. Macdonald, "Fictive Pasts and Past Fictions," *The Scottish Historical Review* 92, no. 234 (April 2013): 146. On the use of Victorian-era melodramas and an introduction to New Historicism in literary studies, see Rohan McWilliam, "Melodrama and the Historians," *Radical History Review* 78 (Fall 2000): 57-84.

8. Ginsburg and Stephens' *Approaches to Teaching* is excellent on using *Les Misérables* in the classroom, especially literature and language classrooms. A search on WorldCat for "Victor Hugo" for the years 2000-2019 lists 655 thesis and dissertation titles. "Hugo studies" remains a thriving area of research and publishing in language and literature.

9. Gillian Polack, "Novelists and Their History," *Rethinking History* 18, no. 4 (December 2014): 523, 540.

10. Rachel G. Fuchs, "Beyond Fiction: *Misère* in Historical Context," in *Approaches to Teaching*, 45. Practitioners in the field of emotions in history often use literature as a primary source; Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015). An analysis of the "romanticizing" of history-writing in Hugo's day is Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

11. David J. Neumann, "'What is the Text Doing?': Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach Primary Sources Effectively," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 4 (August 2010): 497ff.

12. J. Spencer Clark, "Encounters with Historical Agency: The Value of Nonfiction Graphic Novels in the Classroom," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 4 (August 2013): 489-508. I have used the graphic history text, Michael G. Vann and Liz Clarke, *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) in a lower-division world history course.

13. Several of the authors in Ginsburg and Stephens' *Approaches to Teaching* make use of film adaptations of *Les Misérables*; see Kathryn M. Grossman, "Les Misérables in/as American Pop Culture," 64-71; and Michal P. Ginsburg, "Teaching an Undergraduate Course on *Les Misérables*: Ways of Doing It," 80-86. In a history and film course I offer, I approach movies in a way similar to literature: as insight into how the past is constructed or represented by a different kind of author and in a different medium from what students typically encounter in the history classroom. On film and history, see Sarah Hanley, "European History in Text and Film: Community and Identity in France, 1550-1945," *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 3-19; Casey Harison, "The French Revolution on Film: American and French Perspectives," *The History Teacher* 38, no. 3 (May 2005): 229-324; and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

14. Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truths and Lies about the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus, de Man, and Reagan* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 101.

15. Robert Tombs, "Introduction," in Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Christine Donougher (New York: Penguin, 2013), xiii.

16. Michal P. Ginsburg and Bradley Stephens, "Introduction," in *Approaches to Teaching*, viii.

17. Victor Hugo, as quoted by David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 237.

18. André Maurois, *Olympio: The Life of Victor Hugo*, trans. Gerard M. Hopkins (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and Les Misérables* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

19. I reviewed the online card catalogs of several universities in my home state of Indiana and could find no courses that revolved around a big book. Robert G. Kane writes: "many qualities of the Millennial Generation can be tapped to enhance learning"; "Teaching as Counterinsurgency: Enhancing Pedagogical Effectiveness and Student Learning in a Culture of Distraction," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 3 (May 2010): 381.

20. Christopher Ferguson makes the case for using a text of over 800 pages in a graduate-level course in "Why I Still Assign E. P. Thompson," *The History Teacher* 48, no. 3 (May 2015): 573-580. The many contributors to Ginsburg and Stephens' *Approaches to Teaching* introduce the book into their teaching by including individual sections, with or without the long digressions by Hugo. Few of these authors thought it possible to fit the entire book into a one-semester undergraduate course; see, for instance, Philippe Moisan, "Les Misérables and the Nineteenth-Century French Novel," and Ginsburg, "Teaching an Undergraduate Course on *Les Misérables*."

21. An excellent source is Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*.

22. Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*; Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Laurence M. Porter, *Victor Hugo* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999); and Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*. See also Kathryn M. Grossman, "From Classic to Pop Icon: Popularizing Hugo," *The French Review* 74, no. 3 (February 2001): 482-495.

23. Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*. Robert Tombs writes in his introduction to Hugo's *Les Misérables* that it "epitomizes (the) boiling down of philosophy, history and politics into poetry," xxx.

24. Ginsburg and Stephens, "Introduction," viii.

25. In the United States, where one of the promises of the era—"all men are created equal"—helped lead to a terrible civil war, an English translation of *Les Misérables* was widely read during the Civil War; Louis P. Masur, "In Camp, Reading 'Les Misérables'," *The New York Times* (February 9, 2013); and Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 238-241.

26. There is an enormous literature on this topic. A good introduction to the modern era in European history remains Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage, 1996), which was a required text in the seminar. See also, William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1980). On human rights, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008). A compelling biography of

Marx is Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liverwright Publishing, 2013).

27. Hugo seems to have begun thinking about the story of *Les Misérables* after visiting a *bagne* in Toulon harbor in 1839; Tombs, "Introduction," xvii. "In the background," writes Tombs, "is the looming nightmare of the *bagne*" (p. xxiv).

28. The section on the Battle of Waterloo runs about fifty pages. It was the last part of the book to be completed by Hugo, who visited the battlefield before he began writing. Like Hugo's description of the June 1832 rebellion, his assessment of Napoleon's last battle has been debated by historians; Tombs, "Introduction," xxi.

29. Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*; and Samuels, *The Spectacular Past*.

30. Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 223ff.

31. Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 234.

32. Maurois, *Olympio*, 356.

33. Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*.

34. Edmond Biré, *L'Année 1817* (Paris, France: H. Champion, 1895).

35. Mark Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 267ff.

36. Just a few months later, Hugo and his family moved to a residence (now the Victor Hugo museum) on the Place des Vosges not far from scenes of the rebellion. See Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, Ch. 1, "Victor Hugo Opens His Eyes," for background on this period of Hugo's life.

37. Maurois, *Olympio*, 163-165.

38. Victor Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man and Other Prison Writings*, trans. Geoff Woollen (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1992), 103-130.

39. On the rebellion of June 1832, the best source is Thomas Bouchet, *Le Roi et les barricades: Une histoire des 5 et 6 juin 1832* (Paris, France: Seli Arslan, 2000). See also Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade*, 267-268; Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 57-64; Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, *L'Insurrection des misérables: romanticism et révolution en juin 1832* (Paris, France: Lettres Modernes, 1992); and Casey Harison, "Victor Hugo and the Epoch of *Émeutes*: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Paris, 1830-1839," in *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850: Selected Papers, 1995* (Tallahassee, FL: Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution, Florida State University, 1995), 606-615. Robert Tombs provides a brief summary of the event in his introduction to *Les Misérables*.

40. Unfortunately, many police records were lost in May 1871 during the Commune, which was the last big Paris rebellion of the nineteenth century.

41. Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade*, 267-268.

42. Tombs writes that the rebels of 1832 "were overwhelmingly young workers"; "Introduction," xxv.

43. Tombs, "Introduction," xxiii.

44. Bouchet, *Le Roi et les barricades*, 18; Harison, "Victor Hugo and the Epoch of *Émeutes*," 611-612.

45. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1061. Before his death in 1837, Jeanne wrote a brief description of the 1832 rebellion and the barricade he led; Charles Jeanne, *À Cinq heures nous serons tous morts! Sur la barricade Saint-Merry, 5-6 juin 1832*, ed. Thomas Bouchet (Paris, France: Éditions Vendémiaire, 2011).

46. Tombs writes that Hugo's description of 1832 "[fed] a Romantic patriotic culture of revolt, what has been called the 'revolutionary passion play,' with its familiar rituals of barricade-building and grandiose oratory. No other work of literature... more completely replaces reality with myth"; Tombs, "Introduction," xxviii-xxix.

47. An excellent description of this period of Hugo's life is Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*.

48. There were rebellions in Paris in 1830, 1832, 1834, 1839, February and June 1848, 1851, 1870, and 1871.

49. A recent survey of June 1848 is Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). See also, Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

50. Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 47.

51. The June Days rebellion of 1848 "cast a shadow" over Hugo and *Les Misérables*; William Paulson, "What the Novel Omits from the Musical: Teaching 1848 and the Misfortunes of Progress," in *Approaches to Teaching*, 175. Tombs writes that the trauma of the June Days of 1848 may have been the "turning point in (Hugo's) life"; "Introduction," xviii.

52. Casey Harison, *The Stonemasons of Creuse in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 107-109; and Andrea Goulet, "Studying Criminality and the Popular Press through *Les Misérables*," in *Approaches to Teaching*, 96.

53. Tombs writes that Hugo began to employ the term regularly in the novel's manuscript in 1853, even though he thought it "untranslatable"—in English, "wretches" or "wretched" seem to be closest; Tombs, "Introduction," xxii.

54. Harsin, *Barricades*, 63; Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 192-193.

55. On the cholera in Paris, see François Delaporte, *Disease and Civilization: The Cholera in Paris, 1832* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); and Catherine J. Kudlick, *Cholera in Post-Revolutionary Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

56. See "Introduction" in Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies*.

57. Fuchs, "Beyond Fiction," 53.

58. Tombs, "Introduction," xxx.

59. Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*, 176-177.

60. Anthony Brundage makes the case for undergraduate history majors doing extended research and writing in "Teaching Research and Writing to Upper Division History Majors: Contexts, Sources, Rhetorical Strategies," *The History Teacher* 30, no. 4 (August 1997): 451-459.

61. For an assessment of the film by a historian, see Michael Sibalís, "Who Were *Les Misérables*?" *Fiction and Film for Scholars of France: A Cultural Bulletin* 3, no. 4 (February 2013).

62. Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*, 176.

63. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2008), at 1,273 pages; and Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), at 736 pages, are the two obvious nineteenth-century companions to *Les Misérables*. Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), at 1,128 pages, is a recent “big book” that, like *Les Misérables* and *War and Peace*, bridges literature and history.



## Appendix A

**Literature Used in Modern World and  
Modern Europe History Courses**

- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958); *Arrow of God* (1964)
- Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet* (1833); *Le Père Goriot* (1835)
- Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)
- Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947)
- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)
- John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930); *1919* (1932); *The Big Money* (1936)
- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1864)
- Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857); *Sentimental Education* (1869)
- Victor Hugo, *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* (1829); *Les Misérables* (1862)
- Christopher Isherwood, *Berlin Stories* (1945)
- Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees* (1924)
- Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (1958)
- Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley* (1947); *Palace of Desire* (1957)
- Herman Melville, *Billy Budd* (1924)
- Raymond Queneau, *Zazie in the Métro* (1959)
- George Sand, *Marianne* (1876)
- Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948)
- Ignacio Silone, *Bread and Wine* (1936)
- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962)
- Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (1991) (non-fiction graphic novel)
- Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886)
- Ivan Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852); *Fathers and Sons* (1862)
- Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)
- Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (1873); *L'Assommoir* (1877); *Nana* (1880); *Germinal* (1885); *La Bête humaine* (1890); *The Downfall* (1892)

## Appendix B

**Chronology of the Historical Background of  
Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables***

- 1802 (26 February)** – Birth of Victor Hugo at Besançon, France
- 1830 (27-29 July)** – Three Glorious Days/Revolution of 1830; Louis-Philippe becomes king of France
- 1832 (March)** – First appearance of cholera at Paris
- 1832 (5-6 June)** – Insurrection at Paris
- 1832 (October)** – Trial of June 1832 rebels
- 1834 (14 April)** – Insurrection at Paris
- 1837 (11 July)** – Death of Charles Jeanne
- 1839 (12-13 May)** – Insurrection at Paris
- 1841** – Hugo elected to *Académie Française*
- 1848 (22-24 February)** – February Revolution at Paris; end of July Monarchy and start of Second Republic
- 1848 (April)** – Hugo elected to National Assembly
- 1848 (June 23-26)** – June Days rebellion at Paris
- 1851 (2 December)** – Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état; Hugo exiled until 1870
- 1862** – *Les Misérables* published
- 1885 (May)** – Death of Hugo and burial at Paris Panthéon

## Appendix C

## Course Syllabus\*

**HIST 499.001  
SENIOR SEMINAR: HISTORY & LITERATURE**

**Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830)**

There is no way of demonstrating that *Les Misérables* has moved humanity even a few inches along the road to the kingdom of justice, freedom, and peace that, according to Hugo's utopian vision is the path of humanity. But there is no doubt, either, that in the history of literature, *Les Misérables* is one of the works that has been more influential in making so many men and women of all languages and cultures desire a more just, rational, and beautiful world than the one they live in.

- Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible* (2007)

**HISTORY & LITERATURE**

Historians know about the past through a variety of sources, especially written documents and artifacts, but also through oral tradition and literature. In this seminar, we will endeavor to know a part of the past by reading a literary classic: Victor Hugo's epic novel *Les Misérables*.

\* Edited to remove administrative and curricular information specific to the University of Southern Indiana.

Literature has done much to shape how we view the past, and historians can use it in two ways: first, by employing contemporary literature as a primary source written by a participant in the events he/she is describing; second, by approaching literature as history-writing itself, created by a writer interpreting his or her own time and place. *Les Misérables* is both a primary source of contemporary literature and a historical interpretation of the past by a skilled writer. A central question for our seminar is this: Does *Les Misérables* provide a plausible, “truthful” understanding of the time and place it describes?

## GOALS

One goal of the class is to acquire an understanding of the key events described in *Les Misérables*, which is set in France, especially Paris, in the first third of the nineteenth century. To achieve this, we will read the full novel, along with a variety of secondary sources that are part of a scholarly literature associated with the book. Another goal of the class is to read and discuss, as a group, a long-form work. It is probably unusual these days for a college class to embark upon a project like this, and so, in this sense our task is a little old-fashioned. But one meaning associated with “seminar” has to do with a cooperative project to which everyone contributes; in which everyone shares the travails and rewards; and which plants the seed of understanding. I hope that reading and discussing *Les Misérables* will inspire the “seminarian” in all of us. A final goal is for each student to produce by the end of the semester and via a series of drafts a substantial paper.

## METHOD

Our method for understanding *Les Misérables* and the historical context surrounding it will be reading-intensive. We will read all of *Les Misérables*. Most of our meetings will be devoted to students taking turns reporting on assigned sections of the novel and then everyone discussing the assignment. I will lecture occasionally to provide historical background, but you will also learn about the topic through additional readings. *Les Misérables* has, as you may know, been translated to film and theater—“Les Miz,” for instance—and so we will sample some of these other versions of the book. My principle role as instructor is to introduce the topic and provide guidance in producing the Final Paper.

The syllabus and course schedule are subject to change with notice given.

## BLACKBOARD

There is a Blackboard website for this class where I will post the syllabus and other course materials, as well as links to relevant Internet websites. Be sure to check Blackboard at least once a week for announcements and updates.

## COURSE TEXTS

The titles listed below are at the USI Bookstore. Most may also be purchased online, and some are available at Rice Library and other local libraries:

- Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Christine Donougher (Penguin Books, 2015).
- Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* second ed. (Polity, 2008).
- Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (Vintage Books, 1996).
- Additional readings available electronically or in the stacks at Rice Library—check Blackboard for announcements and links.

## REQUIREMENTS

Short Presentations on Assigned Readings: Multiple presentations of approximately fifteen minutes by each student on *Les Misérables* and other assigned readings. I will make a schedule of presentations available near the start of the semester.

Book Test: A short (approximately thirty-minute) test on Burke, *What is Cultural History?* The Book Test will consist of objective questions and an essay drawn from a reading guide.

Prospectus: A presentation (in writing and with an in-class report) of your topic and the sources you will use for your Final Paper.

Paper Presentation: In-class report on the penultimate draft of the Final Paper.

Final Paper: Due at the end of the semester. A detailed description of the requirements for the Final Paper will be distributed near the start of the semester.

## POINT DISTRIBUTION

Short Presentations: 20%

Book Test: 10%

Prospectus: 10%

Paper Presentation: 10%

Final Paper: 50%

Participation: Participation is necessary, as your comments for the Short Presentations will be helpful for fellow students. Drafts of each Final Paper will be distributed in advance so that everyone will have a chance to comment.

## GRADING SCALE

- A = 90-100%
- B/B+ = 80-89%
- C/C+ = 70-79%
- D/D+ = 60-69%
- F = 59% and under

**Late Penalty and Make-ups:** *One-half grade off for each day late for the Prospectus and Final Paper. Short Presentations and the Book Test cannot be rescheduled or made up.*



St.-Merri District, Paris—Site of June 1832 Barricade

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1

- Introduction
- Historical Background: French Revolutions, 1789-1871
- Read: Hobsbawm, Preface, Introduction and chs. 1-4

### WEEK 2

- Historical Background: French Revolutions, 1789-1871
- Read: Hobsbawm, chs. 5-8

### WEEK 3

- Presentations on *Les Misérables* (check schedule on Blackboard)
- Read: Hobsbawm, chs. 9-12
- Book Test: Burke, *What is Cultural History?* – **Thursday, 26 January**

### WEEK 4

- Presentations on *Les Misérables* (check schedule on Blackboard)
- Read: Hobsbawm, chs. 13-16

**WEEKS 5 – 6**

- Presentations on *Les Misérables* (check schedule on Blackboard)

**WEEKS 7 – 8**

- Prospectus Presentations (check schedule on Blackboard)

**WEEK 9**

- Spring Break: 6-11 March

**WEEKS 10 – 11**

- Presentations on *Les Misérables* (check schedule on Blackboard)

**WEEKS 12 – 16**

- Research and Consultations
- Prospectus and Paper Presentations (check schedule on Blackboard)
- Tuesday, 28 March – Assessment Day; no classes scheduled
- Final Paper Due: Tuesday, 25 April

**TUESDAY, 2 MAY, 3 - 5 p.m.** – Final Papers Returned