

HUGO, VICTOR (1802-1885)

Victor Hugo, the general profile. Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, and political activist, who lived through and responded to the tumultuous passages from Empire to Monarchy to Republicanism back to Regency, passages which marked the 19th century in France. He was two years old when Napoleon declared himself Emperor, and only eighteen when Napoleon fell.

Victor Hugo the life. Victor Hugo was born in Besancon to a father who held a high position in the French army, and was a freethinking Republican, and to a mother who was a Catholic Royalist; a blend of ideologies which could have been invigorating but in the end drove the two partners apart. While living with his father, as a youngster, Victor Hugo was taken on a six month trip to Spain, the Alps, and Italy, and kept a vivid memory of that experience, which was one of many travel exposures he was to enjoy in his earlier years. For some time afterwards he stayed with his father in Spain, but after Waterloo Victor returned to Paris. His formal education was neglected by both his parents, but during this time he read a great deal (especially the works of Rousseau and Chateaubriand, who was to be Victor Hugo's lifelong idol) and while in his early teens became devoted to the idea of being a writer. He wrote a tragedy when he was fourteen, and three years later edited a newspaper, the *Literary Conservator*. In 1822, the year in which he married Adele Foucher, he published his first volume of poetry. In the early twenties he was a conservative and royalist, but by 1830 he had become an ardent liberal and democrat. His numerous novels, plays, and volumes of poetry, published between 1822 and 1840, his self-confidence and his vociferous advocacy, of the romantic theories of life and literature, made him the recognized leader of the French romantics during the fourth decade of the century. In 1841 he was elected to membership in the *Académie française*. Between 1843 and 1848 he forsook literature for politics; he soon became one of the leaders of the democratic party. His opposition to Napoleon III and the Second Empire led to his being exiled. He remained abroad from 1852 til 1870—at Brussels, in Jersey, and mainly in Guernsey. His last fifteen years were spent in Paris, where he enjoyed the role of grand old man of French letters.

Victor Hugo the poet and novelist. He believed that the poet sees truth more intuitively and more clearly than other men, and feeling that the poet's mission is to lead those other men to the light. Two of Hugo's greatest poetic gifts are imagination and rhetorical dexterity. He also wrote romantic novels of adventure and social novels, and for both of those achievements he is best known outside of France. (While his *Odes et Ballades*, 1824, are perhaps the most known achievements of his vast poetic oeuvre, his best known prose eminences are *Notre Dame de Paris*, 1831—in English *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—and *Les Misérables*, 1862, which celebrates and commiserates with the life of the truly poor of Paris.

Evaluation of Hugo's work. As a classic monument of French literature, Hugo has engendered praises of every kind. Perhaps the flip side of the case is more instructive. He was immensely egotistical, believing that the city of Paris should be named for him. His novels are misshapen and extravagant. His poetry is often empty and rhetorical. Yet for all that flip side, the immensity of this man's achievement, and the breadth of his spirit, continue to lead and inspire world wide readers.

Reading

Primary source reading

Les Misérables, tr. Fahnenstock, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Barnett, Marva, *Victor Hugo on Things that Matter: A Reader*, 2009.

Further reading

Halsall, A.W., et. al. *Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama*, 1998.

Original language reading

Viala, Alain, et al, *Le Theatre en France des origines à nos jours*, 1997.

Suggested paper topics

The musical, *Les Miserables*, has scored a tremendous success in North America, and elsewhere. Check into that musical, if you don't know it, and see what magic of Hugo it captures? Is there in Hugo a powerful sympathy for humanity and its tumultuous history?

Investigate the writing practices of Victor Hugo, who was an immensely prolific writer—like Voltaire before him, and Balzac later—but who at the same time as writing played a vigorous role in the politics of his time and country. How was this achievement possible? What was his secret?

Excerpt

http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/fulltext/2006/04000/les_miserables___excerpt_.11.aspx

Come in," said the Bishop.

The door opened. A singular and violent group made its appearance on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth man by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the other was Jean Valjean.

A brigadier of gendarmes, who seemed to be in command of the group, was standing near the door. He entered and advanced to the Bishop, making a military salute.

"Monseigneur—" he said.

At this word, Jean Valjean, who was dejected and seemed overwhelmed, raised his head with an air of stupefaction.

"Monseigneur," he murmured. "So he is not the curé?"

"Silence!" said the gendarme. "He is Monseigneur the Bishop."

In the meantime, Monseigneur Bienvenu had advanced as quickly as his great age permitted.

"Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier of gendarmes, "so what this man said is true, then? We came across him. He was walking like a man who is running away. We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver—"

"And he told you," interposed the Bishop with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

"In that case," replied the brigadier, "we can let him go?"

"Certainly," replied the Bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who recoiled.

"Is it true that I am to be released?" he said, in an almost inarticulate voice, and as if speaking in his sleep.

"Yes, thou art released; dost thou not understand?" said one of the gendarmes.

"My friend," resumed the Bishop, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean. The two women looked on without uttering a word, without a gesture, without a look which could disconcert the Bishop.

Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

“Now,” said the Bishop, “go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night.”