



A bit of history. . .

### The Historical Background to 'Les Misérables'

<https://www.thoughtco.com/historical-background-to-les-miserables-2713326>

"*Les Misérables*," one of the most popular musicals of all time, is based on a novel of the same name by French author Victor Hugo. Published in 1862, the book referenced what were already historic events.

"*Les Misérables*," tells the fictional story of Jean Valjean, a man who has unjustly been condemned to nearly two decades of prison for stealing a loaf of bread to save a starving child. Because the story takes place in Paris, involves the misery of the Parisian underclass,

and comes to a climax during a battle, many people assume that the story is set during the French Revolution.

In fact, the story of "*Les Miz*" begins in 1815, more than two decades after the start of the French Revolution. However, it is important to know about the French Revolution so that one can understand what is going through the minds of Marius, Enjolras, and the other characters during the Paris uprising of 1832.

## The French Revolution: Storming the Bastille

According to "The DK History of the World," the revolution began in 1789 and was "a deep-rooted revolt by many classes against the whole order of society." The impoverished were infuriated by their economic hardships, food shortages, and the callous attitudes of the upper classes. (Who could forget Marie Antoinette's infamous line about the public's lack of bread: "[Let them eat cake](#)"?) However, the lower classes were not the only angry voices. The middle class, inspired by progressive ideologies and America's newly won freedom, demanded reform.

Finance Minister Jacques Necker was one of the strongest advocates of the lower classes. When the monarchy banished Necker that year, public outrage ensued throughout France. People viewed his banishment as a sign to come together and overthrow their oppressive government. This provides a striking contrast to the events in "*Les Miserables*," in which the young rebels erroneously believe that the masses will rise up to join their cause.

On [July 14, 1789](#), several days after Necker's banishment, revolutionaries overtook the Bastille Prison. This act launched the French Revolution. At the time of the siege, the Bastille maintained only seven prisoners. However, the old fortress held an abundance of gunpowder, making it both a strategic as well as a politically symbolic target. The prison's governor was ultimately captured and killed. His head and the heads of other guards were skewered onto pikes and paraded through the streets. The mayor of Paris was assassinated by the end of the day. While the revolutionaries barricaded themselves in streets and buildings, King Louis XVI and his military leaders decided to back off to appease the masses.

## After the Revolution: The Reign of Terror

Things got messy. The French Revolution started out bloody, and it didn't take long for things to become utterly gruesome. King Louis XVI and [Marie Antoinette](#) were dethroned in 1792 (despite his many attempts to offer reform to French citizens). In 1793 they, along with many other members of the nobility, were executed.

During the next seven years, the nation underwent a series of coups, wars, famines, and counterrevolutions. During the so-called "[Reign of Terror](#)," ironically, Maximilien de Robespierre, who was in charge of the Committee of Public Safety, sent as many as 40,000 people to the [guillotine](#). He believed that swift and brutal justice would produce virtue among France's citizens—a belief shared by the "*Les Miz*" character of Inspector Javert.

## What Happened Next: The Rule of Napoleon

While the new republic struggled through what could euphemistically be called growing pains, a young general named [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) ravaged Italy, Egypt, and other countries. When he and his forces returned to Paris, he and other leaders staged a coup,

and Napoleon became First Consul of France. From 1804 until 1814 he bore the title of Emperor of France. After losing in the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon was exiled to the island of [St. Helena](#). Although he was a fierce tyrant, many citizens (as well as many of the characters in "*Les Misérables*") viewed the general/dictator as a liberator of France.

The monarchy was then reestablished and King Louis XVIII assumed the throne. "*Les Misérables*"'s opening year of 1815 is near the beginning of the new king's reign.

## **The Historical Setting of '*Les Misérables*'**

"*Les Misérables*" timeframe is one of economic strife, famine, and disease. Despite all of the revolutions and changing political parties, the lower classes still have little voice in society.

The story reveals their harsh life, as exemplified by the tragedy of Fantine, a young woman who is fired from her factory job after it is discovered that she bore a child (Cosette) out of wedlock. After losing her position, Fantine is forced to sell her personal belongings, her hair, and even her teeth, so that she can send money to her daughter. Ultimately, Fantine becomes a prostitute, falling to the lowest rung of society.

## **The July Monarchy**

Character Jean Valjean promises the dying Fantine that he will protect her daughter. He adopts Cosette, paying off her greedy, cruel caretakers, Monsieur and Madame Thenadier. Fifteen years pass peacefully for Valjean and Cosette as they hide in an [abbey](#). During this time, King Louis dies and King Charles X takes over briefly. The new king is soon exiled in 1830 during the July Revolution, also known as the Second French Revolution. Louis Philippe d'Orléans assumes the throne, beginning a reign known as the July Monarchy.

In the story of "*Les Misérables*," Valjean's relatively tranquil existence becomes imperiled when Cosette falls in love with Marius, a young member of "Friends of the ABC," a fictional organization created by author Hugo that mirrors many of the small revolutionary groups of the time. Valjean risks his life by joining the rebellion in order to save Marius.

## **The June Rebellion**

Marius and his friends represent the sentiments expressed by many freethinkers in Paris. They wanted to reject the monarchy and return France to a republic once more. The Friends of the ABC strongly support a liberal-minded politician named Jean Lamarque. (Unlike the Friends of the ABC, Lamarque was real. He was a general under Napoleon who became a member of France's parliament. He was also sympathetic to the republican ideologies.) When Lamarque lay dying of cholera, many people believed that the government had poisoned public wells, resulting in the deaths of popular political figures.

Enjolras, the leader of The Friends of the ABC, knows that Lamarque's death may serve as an important catalyst to their revolution.

"MARIUS: Only one man—and that's Lamarque/Speaks for the people here below....Lamarque is ill and fading fast!/Won't last the week out, so they say."

"ENJOLRAS: With all the anger in the land/How long before the judgment day?/Before we cut the fat ones down to size?/Before the barricades arise?"

## The End of the Uprising

As depicted in the novel and musical, the June Rebellion did not end well for the rebels. They expected that the people would support their cause; however, they soon realized that no reinforcements would be joining them.

According to historian Matt Boughton, both sides suffered casualties: "166 killed and 635 wounded on both sides during the course of the struggle." Of those 166, 93 were members of the rebellion. As Marius describes it, "Empty chairs at empty tables, where my friends sing no more..."

## Enjoy *Les Misérables*. But please get the history straight.

<http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2012/12/enjoy-les-miserables-but-please-get-your-history-straight-first/>

. . . So let me help everyone sort this out. The French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille in 1789. The principal events of *Les Misérables* take place in 1832. Different century. The July Revolution two years earlier had put the Orléanist monarchy on the throne, under the popular "Citizen King" **Louis-Philippe**. Popular for awhile, that is. Despite his unpretentious manners and a character that *Les Miz* author **Victor Hugo** commended as "good" and "admirable," the income gap widened and the conditions of the working class deteriorated. By the spring of 1832, a deadly cholera epidemic had exacerbated a severe economic crisis.

In the early morning hours of June 5, crowds of workers, students, and others gathered in the streets of Paris. The immediate trigger was the death of **General Jean Maximilien Lamarque**, who had been a friend to the poor and downtrodden. The crowd had hoped to accompany Lamarque's hearse before it took the general home to his native district in the southwest of France. Those mourning and those with a political agenda merged into a mob that numbered in the tens of thousands – some witnesses claimed it eventually grew to 100,000.

The 30-year-old Victor Hugo was nearby, in the Tuileries Gardens, writing a play. Then he heard gunfire from the direction of Les Halles. Instead of going home to safety, he followed the sounds of gunfire through the deserted streets. He was unaware that the mob had taken half of Paris, and the barricades were everywhere in Les Halles. According to Wikipedia, Hugo headed north up the Rue Montmartre, then turned right onto the Passage du Saumon, finally turning before the Rue du Bout du Monde (if this street still exists, it has a different name now): "Halfway down the alley, the grilles at either end were slammed shut. Hugo was surrounded by barricades and flung himself against a wall, as all the shops and stores had been closed for some time. He found shelter between some columns. For a quarter of an hour, bullets flew both ways." Three decades later, he would write about the unforgettable experience in *Les Misérables*.

Traugott's map of the insurrection shows that Lamarque's funerary procession made a wide arc around the city's right bank. The insurrection affected both sides of the Seine, but the flash points were here, on the right bank.

Dragoons had been under orders to refrain from the use of deadly force, but when a shot rang out from somewhere, the crowd began to throw stones at the military. The cry “To the barricades!” resounded through the streets. But what, exactly, did that mean?

According to Traugott:

“Insurgents began uprooting the saplings planted to replace the larger trees cut down during the July Days. They also scavenged planks and beams from nearby construction sites and improvised tools for prying up paving stones. These classic raw materials were natural choices because they added mass, helped knit the structure together, and were usually found in abundance right at the site of the barricade construction. Between 5 p.m., when the first sporadic gunfire was exchanged, and 6:30, when pitched battles were initially reported, dozens of barricades had been completed on both the right and left side of the Seine. Individual structures took as little as fifteen minutes to erect.

“Even as the first barricades were going up, a frantic search for arms began. Some rebels had to be content with sabers, staffs, or scythes, but rifles were the weapons of choice, and bands of insurgents boldly seized them from small patrols of soldiers encountered in the streets. Others joined in pillaging the premises of Lepage frères, the largest of several Paris gunsmiths whose establishments were looted.”

This little gem of a 16th-century church is Église Saint-Merri. The insurgents staged a desperate last stand in and around this church, at the heart of the district where the fiercest fighting took place.

The insurgents pleaded for help, but no help came. The citizens of Paris were not as quick to join the revolution as they were to join the unruly funeral procession. In the theatrical production of *Les Miz*, the army officer warns the insurgents via a loud-bailer:

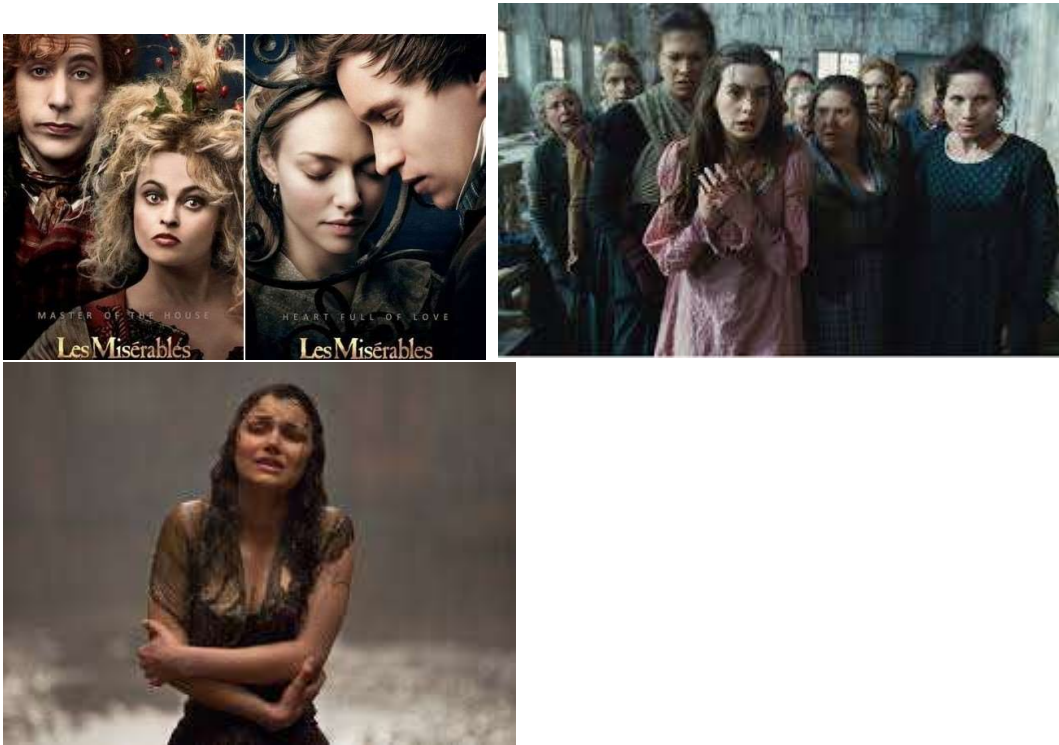
You at the barricade listen to this!  
No one is coming to help you to fight  
You're on your own  
You have no friends  
Give up your guns – or die!

And it was true. According to Traugott, “The casualty toll among the insurgents, mounting as high as 800 dead and wounded, was particularly heavy because the people of Paris withheld their support, leaving most of the committed insurgents of June 1832 to pay for their rebellion with their lives.”

If nothing else, please remember is that the whole point of the French Revolution is that the revolutionaries *won*. Remember the beheading of **Louis XVI** and **Marie Antoinette**, **Robespierre** et al.? This was different. In 1832, writes Traugott, “The last guns were silenced a barely twenty-four hours after hostilities had begun.”

After reading these articles, summarise the information/ history you have learned into bullet point form into your copy.

Think about the female characters in the film. What do they represent and what is the relationship between them. Would you agree or disagree that they are victims of society.



## Character notes

### Jean Valjean

Jean Valjean stands at the center of *Les Misérables* and becomes a trial figure for Hugo's grand theories about the redemptive power of compassion and love. Valjean goes into prison a simple and decent man, but his time in jail has a seemingly irreversible effect on him, and he emerges from the chain gang a hardened criminal who hates society for what it has done to him. By the time Valjean encounters M. Myriel in Digne, he is so accustomed to being a social pariah that he almost seeks out such abuse, greeting even the kindly bishop with scorn and hatred. Myriel, however, turns out to be the first person in decades to treat Valjean with love and respect. The meeting with Myriel forever changes Valjean's character, as Myriel makes Valjean promise to become an honest man.

Once Valjean opens up his heart, he becomes a testament to the redemptive power of love and compassion. His hard work and new vision transform the derelict town of Montreuil-sur-mer into a thriving manufacturing center, which in turn teaches Valjean the value of philanthropy. In taking care of Cosette, Valjean learns how to love another person and how to pass that love onto others. He is exceptional only in his physical strength and his willingness to discover what is good, and this earnestness is enough to make him the novel's hero as well as a savior and a friend to a number of people who find themselves in danger. Hardened by prison and rescued by the kindness of M. Myriel, Valjean is a blank slate, molded by his encounters and circumstances. This ability to change makes him a universal symbol of hope—if he can learn love and charity after suffering so much injustice, anyone can

## **Javert**

Javert is so obsessed with enforcing society's laws and morals that he does not realize he is living by mistaken assumptions—a tragic and ironic flaw in a man who believes so strongly in enforcing what he believes is right. Although Javert is such a stern and inflexible character that it is hard to sympathize with him, he lives with the shame of knowing that his own Gypsy upbringing is not so different from the backgrounds of the men he pursues. He lives his life trying to erase this shame through his strict commitment to upholding the law.

Javert's flaw, however, is that he never stops to question whether the laws themselves are just. In his mind, a man is guilty when the law declares him so. When Valjean finally gives Javert irrefutable proof that a man is not necessarily evil just because the law says he is, Javert is incapable of reconciling this new knowledge with his beliefs. He commits suicide, plagued by the thought that he may be living a dishonorable life. True to Javert's nature, he makes this decision not with any emotional hysterics, but rather with a cool determination. Although he is a man of logic, he is impassioned about his work. To this end, Hugo frequently uses animal imagery to describe Javert, particularly when he likens him to a tiger. In the end, it is difficult to feel anything other than pity for Javert, who assumes his duty with such savagery that he seems more animal than man.

## **Fantine**

Although all of Fantine's misfortunes are caused by the callousness or greed of others, society always holds her accountable for her behavior. In this sense, she embodies Hugo's view that French society demands the most from those to whom it gives the least. Fantine is a poor, working-class girl from the desolate seacoast town of Montreuil-sur-mer, an orphan who has almost no education and can neither read nor write. Fantine is inevitably betrayed by the people she does trust: Tholomyès gets her pregnant and then disappears; the Thénardiens take Cosette and use the child to extort more money; and Fantine's coworkers have her fired for indecency. In his descriptions of Fantine's life and death, Hugo highlights the unfair attitude of French society toward women and the poor. Fantine's fellow citizens criticize her for her behavior and depravity, but they also take every opportunity to make her circumstances even more desperate.

Hugo's portrayal of Fantine's mistreatment distinguishes the honest, hardworking poor from the parasitic opportunism of the working-class Thénardiens. By juxtaposing Fantine with the Thénardiens, Hugo suggests that poverty does not necessarily equal indecency. In doing so, he condemns a system that allows the indecent poor to survive even as it crushes the honest and needy.

## **Cosette**

Cosette, like Valjean, grows up in an atmosphere of poverty and fear, but she is rescued from this life before her innocence gives way to cynicism. Though she spends a number of years under the tyrannical care of the Thénardiens, she never adopts their cruel views, which indicates that she possesses a fundamental decency and goodness that they lack. Once Valjean takes charge of Cosette's upbringing, she quickly transforms from a dirty, unhappy child into a lovely, well-educated young woman. For Hugo, this transformation is so natural that he does not even bother to walk us through it and instead skips several years ahead.

Though she is obedient and fiercely loyal to her adoptive father, Cosette also has her own personality, which emerges as she enters adolescence and begins to hunger for a less sheltered life. In this period of their lives, Valjean's role temporarily changes from Cosette's savior to her jailer. Cosette's ability to truly love Marius, however, is due in large part to Valjean, who has taught her to trust and love. In the end,

Cosette remains true to her upbringing, and her love for Marius becomes her way of applying to her own life what she has learned from Valjean.

### **Marius Pontmercy**

Unlike the other major characters in the novel, Marius grows up in a well-to-do household free of financial worries. Nonetheless, his family is split apart by politics, and it is not until he develops his own personality that he is able to become whole. Marius's loyalties are torn between his father, Georges Pontmercy, who is a colonel in the Napoléonic army, and his staunchly monarchist grandfather, M. Gillenormand, who raises him. The political differences between his father and grandfather threaten to tear apart Marius's identity, as he learns that his conservative grandfather intentionally prevented him from establishing a relationship with his father out of fear that Marius would succumb to his father's liberal political views. Angry and confused, Marius adopts his father's beliefs, but it soon becomes apparent that what he really needs is an idealism of his own. Marius begins to develop truly only when he leaves Gillenormand's house, finding himself and falling in love for the first time.

Marius is more innocent than the other characters in the novel, and while this innocence keeps him from becoming cruel or cynical, it also makes him occasionally blind to the problems of others. This lack of perception first becomes clear in Marius's treatment of Eponine, and becomes especially unattractive when Marius drives Valjean from his house. In the end, Marius is a good person, but his inability to perceive the needs or feeling of others can at times make him unwittingly malicious.

### **Motifs**

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

#### **The Plight of the Orphan**

The prevalence of orphans and unusual family structures in *Les Misérables* is the most obvious indicator that French society and politics in the period described have gone terribly wrong. Valjean, Fantine, Cosette, Marius, Gavroche, Pontmercy, and Gillenormand are all separated from their family or loved ones for economic or political reasons. Marius embodies the disastrous effects of politics on family structure, torn as he is between Gillenormand's monarchism and Pontmercy's embrace of Napoléon. Social instability and poverty, meanwhile, make orphans of Cosette, Valjean, Fantine, and Gavroche. With the exception of Gavroche, whose home life is so wretched that he is probably better off on his own, these characters are unhappy and lonely because they are separated from their parents and have no one to turn to when they most need help.

#### **Disguises and Pseudonyms**

A number of characters in the novel operate under pseudonyms or in disguise, and these deliberate changes in identity become the distinctive mark of the criminal world. Thénardier is a prime example: at one point in the novel, he masquerades under the name Jondrette, and we see that he has adopted other pseudonyms at the same time. Valjean, who uses pseudonyms to hide his past rather than to continue his criminal behavior, inhabits his alter egos more thoroughly. Even Valjean's disguises, while not as dishonorable as Thénardier's, are an unfulfilling way of living, and the first thing Valjean does after Cosette's marriage is shed his fake name in front of his new family. Disguises and pseudonyms are a means of survival for the novel's characters, but Hugo believes that life is about more than mere survival. Ultimately, one of the most important distinctions between the honest characters and the criminals is the



willingness of the honest characters to set aside their alter egos and reveal themselves for who they truly are.

## **Resurrection**

When a character in *Les Misérables* learns a major lesson about life, this realization is often accompanied by a physical resurrection. Valjean undergoes the largest number of reincarnations, each of which denotes that he is another step away from his old moral depravity. After his encounter with Myriel, for instance, Valjean reinvents himself as Madeleine, and he leaves this identity behind when he pretends to drown in the waters of Toulon. The epitome of this resurrection motif is the ruse with the coffin that Valjean devises in order to remain at the convent of Petit-Picpus. Valjean is not the only one to undergo such resurrections, however. When Marius finally recovers six months after being wounded at the barricades, he is a different man from the love-stricken suitor who goes to fight. Although he does not assume a new identity, Marius needs to experience a metaphorical death before he can reconcile himself with his grandfather and successfully court Cosette.

## **Themes**

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

### **The Importance of Love and Compassion**

In *Les Misérables*, Hugo asserts that love and compassion are the most important gifts one person can give another and that always displaying these qualities should be the most important goal in life. Valjean's transformation from a hate-filled and hardened criminal into a well-respected philanthropist epitomizes Hugo's emphasis on love, for it is only by learning to love others that Valjean is able to improve himself. While Valjean's efforts on behalf of others inevitably cause him problems, they also give him a sense of happiness and fulfillment that he has never before felt. Valjean's love for others—in particular, for Cosette—is what keeps him going in desperate times.

Hugo also makes clear that loving others, while difficult, is not always a thankless task, and he uses Valjean and Fauchelevent to show that love begets love, and compassion begets compassion. Valjean jumps out of a crowd of onlookers to rescue Fauchelevent; years later, Fauchelevent repays Valjean's bravery by offering him refuge in the convent of Petit-Picpus. In Hugo's novel, love and compassion are nearly infectious, passed on from one person to another. After M. Myriel transforms Valjean with acts of trust and affection, Valjean, in turn, is able to impart this compassion to Cosette, rescuing her from the corrupting cruelty of the Thénardiens. Cosette's love then reaches fulfillment through her marriage to Marius, and their love for each other leads them both to forgive Valjean for his criminal past.

### **Social Injustice in Nineteenth-Century France**

Hugo uses his novel to condemn the unjust class-based structure of nineteenth-century France, showing time and again that the society's structure turns good, innocent people into beggars and criminals. Hugo focuses on three areas that particularly need reform: education, criminal justice, and the treatment of women. He conveys much of his message through the character of Fantine, a symbol for the many good but impoverished women driven to despair and death by a cruel society. After Fantine is abandoned by her aristocratic lover, Tholomyès, her reputation is indelibly soiled by the fact that she has an illegitimate child. Her efforts to hide this fact are ruined by her lack of education—the scribe to whom Fantine dictates her letters reveals her secret to the whole town. Ironically, it is not until the factory fires Fantine for immorality that she resorts to prostitution. In the character of Fantine, Hugo demonstrates the hypocrisy of a society

that fails to educate girls and ostracizes women such as Fantine while encouraging the behavior of men such as Tholomyès .

Hugo casts an even more critical eye on law enforcement. The character of Valjean reveals how the French criminal-justice system transforms a simple bread thief into a career criminal. The only effect of Valjean's nineteen years of mistreatment on the chain gang is that he becomes sneaky and vicious—a sharp contrast to the effect of Myriel's kindness, which sets Valjean on the right path almost overnight. Another contrast to Valjean's plight is the selective manner in which the Parisian police deal with the Patron-Minette crime ring. Unlike Valjean, Patron-Minette and their associates are real criminals who rob and murder on a grand scale, but they receive only short sentences in prisons that are easy to escape. In the French society of *Les Misérables*, therefore, justice is clumsy at best. It barely punishes the worst criminals but tears apart the lives of people who commit petty crimes.

### **The Long-Term Effects of the French Revolution on French Society**

In *Les Misérables*, Hugo traces the social impact of the numerous revolutions, insurrections, and executions that took place in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France. By chronicling the rise and fall of Napoléon as well as the restoration and subsequent decline of the Bourbon monarchy, Hugo gives us a sense of the perpetual uncertainty that political events imposed upon daily life. Though Hugo's sympathies are with republican movements rather than with the monarchy, he criticizes all of the regimes since the French Revolution of 1789 for their inability to deal effectively with social injustice or eliminate France's rigid class system. Hugo describes the Battle of Waterloo, for instance, in glowing terms, but reminds us that at the end of the glorious battle, the old blights of society, like the grave robbers, still remain. Similarly, the battle at the barricade is both heroic and futile—a few soldiers are killed, but the insurgents are slaughtered without achieving anything. The revolution that Hugo champions is a moral one, in which the old system of greed and corruption is replaced by one of compassion. Although both Napoléon and the students at the barricade come closer to espousing these values than the French monarchs do, these are not values that can be imposed through violence. Indeed, Hugo shows that Napoléon and the students at the barricades topple as easily as the monarchy.