

# ABOUT VICTOR HUGO

VICTOR HUGO'S enormously successful career covered most of the nineteenth century and spanned both the Romantic and Realistic movements. A great poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, pamphleteer, diarist, politician and moralist, Hugo was a man of immense passion and endless contradictions.

Hugo was born on February 26, 1802. His father, General Joseph Leopold Hugo, was the son of a carpenter who rose through the ranks of Napoleon's citizen army. However, Victor's mother decided not to subject her three sons to the difficulties of army life, and settled in Paris to raise them. Madame Hugo became the mistress of her husband's commanding officer, General Lahorie, who was a father figure to Hugo and his brothers until the General's execution in 1812.

Victor was an excellent student who excelled in mathematics, physics, philosophy, French literature, Latin, and Greek. He won first place in a national poetry contest when he was 17. As a teenager, he fell in love with a neighbour's daughter, Adele Foucher. However, his mother discouraged the romance, believing that her son should marry into a finer family. When his mother died in 1821, Victor refused to accept financial help from his father. He lived in abject poverty for a year, but then won a pension of 1,000 francs a year from Louis XVIII for his first volume of verse. Barely out of his teens, Hugo became a hero to the common people as well as a favourite of heads of state. Throughout his lifetime, he played a major role in France's political evolution from dictatorship to democracy.

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In 1822, he married Adele Foucher, who became the mother of his children, Leopold-Victor, Charles-Victor, Francois-Victor, Adele, and Leopoldine. In 1830, Victor became one of the leaders of a group of Romantic rebels who were trying to loosen the hold of classical literature in France. His play *Hernani*, whose premiere was interrupted by fistfights between Hugo's admirers and detractors, took a large step towards a more realistic theatre and made him a rich man.

During the next 15 years he produced six plays, four volumes of verse, and the romantic historical novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, establishing his reputation as the greatest writer in France. In 1831, Adele Hugo became romantically involved with a well known critic and good friend of Victor's named Sainte-Beuve. Victor became involved with the actress Juliette Drouet, who became his mistress in 1833. Supported by a small pension from Hugo, Drouet became his unpaid secretary and travelling companion for the next fifty years.

After losing one of his daughters in a drowning accident and experiencing the failure of his play *Les Burgraves* in 1843, Hugo decided to focus on the growing social problems in France. He was joined in his increasing interest in politics by a number of other Romantic writers, marking the beginning of the Realistic-Naturalistic era in French literature.

Hugo was a moderate republican who was made a Peer of France in 1845. After the Revolution of 1848 and the founding of the Second Republic, he was elected a deputy to the Constitutional Assembly. Three years later, when Louis Napoleon abolished the Republic and re-established the Empire, Hugo risked execution trying to rally the workers of Paris against the new Emperor. However, his efforts failed, and he had to escape to Brussels.



As a result, Hugo spent the next decade in exile with his family and Mme. Drouet on the islands of Jersey and Guernsey. During these years, he wrote satires about Louis Napoleon, returned to his poetry and published several novels including *Les Misérables*, which he had begun years earlier.

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When *Les Misérables* was published in Brussels in 1862, it was an immediate popular success in spite of negative reaction by critics, who considered it overly sentimental, and the government, who banned it. After the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Empire in 1870, Hugo made a triumphant return to Paris. He remained there through the siege of the city and contributed portions of his royalties to purchase weapons. He lost two sons, one in 1871 and one in 1873. Although he was elected to the Senate in 1876, poor health caused him to return to Guernsey. Mme. Hugo died in 1868 and Mme. Drouet in 1882.

Hugo died in 1885 at the age of eighty-three. Although he left instructions that his funeral be simple, over 3 million spectators followed his cortege to the Pantheon, where he was buried amid France's great men. Hugo's death came at the end of a century of war, civil conflict, brutally repressed insurrections such as the student rebellion in *Les Misérables*, and social injustice. Because of his belief in the triumph of good over evil and his pleading for tolerance and nonviolence, Victor Hugo was the herald of the new democratic spirit.



# VICTOR HUGO CHRONOLOGY

**1824 - 30**

Reign of Charles X.

**1824**

Birth of Victor Hugo's first daughter, Léopoldine.

**1825**

Victor Hugo awarded the Légion d'Honneur for services to literature.

**1826**

Birth of Victor Hugo's second son, Charles Victor.

**1828**

Death of General Léopold-Sigisbert Hugo. Birth of Victor Hugo's third son, François-Victor.

**1830**

Premiere of Victor Hugo's play, *Hernani*, interrupted by fist fights between admirers and detractors. Birth of second daughter Adèle.

**1830 - 1848**

Reign of King Louis Philippe.

**1831**

Victor Hugo publishes *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

**1832**

Hugo meets Juliette Drouet. Funeral of General Lamque – hero to workers and students – degenerates into riots, and the barricades described in *Les Misérables*.

**1836**

Applies for membership of Academie Française; fails.

**1839**

Second Academie Française election attempt again ends in failure.

**1841**

Victor Hugo finally elected to the Academie Française.

**1843**

Death of Léopoldine Hugo.

**1845**

Victor Hugo starts writing *Les Misérables*.

**1848 - 1851**

Reign of King Louis Philippe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes President of the Second French Republic

**1851**

2 December: Louis Napoleon dissolves Parliament, is proclaimed President with full powers for ten years, ratified by a plebiscite. Victor Hugo leaves hastily for Brussels.

**1852**

Louis Napoleon proclaims himself Emperor as Napoleon III. Victor Hugo settles first in Jersey then in Guernsey.

**1852 - 1870**

Emperor Napoleon III establishes cordial relations with Britain. Hugo vows not to set foot on French soil till his removal.

**1853**

Victor Hugo publishes poetry, *Les Chaîtements* to great acclaim.

**1856**

Publication of more poetry, *Les Contemplations*.

**1861**

Victor Hugo completes *Les Misérables*.

**1862**

*Les Misérables* published in Paris and Brussels.

**1868**

Adèle Hugo dies.

**1870**

Franco-Prussian war ends with disastrous battle of Sedan. Napoleon III flees France and settles in England. October – Victor Hugo returns to Paris, is elected a member of parliament by the Parisiens.

**1871**

Victor Hugo resigns from Parliament; following the death of his son, Charles, he goes to Brussels to settle the family inheritance.

**1871**

April-May – Paris 'Commune' uprising, soon crushed, leads to appalling carnage and repression.

**1871**

August – From Brussels, Hugo protests against the Belgian Government's refusal to give fleeing 'Communards' status of political exiles. His Brussels home is stoned and he is declared *persona non grata* in Belgium, moving to Luxembourg, returning briefly to Paris, then to Guernsey to write *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*.

**1875**

Victor Hugo settles permanently in Paris and is appointed Senator.

**1882**

Death of Juliette Drouet.

**1885**

23 May – Victor Hugo dies.

**1885**

1 June – State funeral attended by over three million people.



# ABOUT THE NOVEL

*LES MISÉRABLES* is a melodramatic novel written from the premise that any man can rise above his circumstances to reach perfection. The plot of the novel is suspenseful from start to finish; it follows both Jean Valjean's and society's struggles with good and evil.

Hugo began to think about *Les Misérables* as early as 1829. He observed the specific incident that triggers the novel's action on the streets of Paris in 1845. On a sunny but cold day, he saw an impoverished man being arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. As the man stood on the street, an ornate carriage pulled up beside him. Inside there was a dazzlingly beautiful woman dressed in velvet, playing with a child hidden under ribbons, embroidery and furs. The impoverished man stared at the woman in the carriage, but she was totally unaware of him. Hugo wrote that he saw this man as, "the spectre of misery, the ghostly forewarning in full light of day, in the sunshine, of the revolution still plunged in the shadows of darkness but emerging from them. The moment she become aware of her existence, while she remained unaware of his, a catastrophe was inevitable."

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As the years passed, *Les Misérables* evolved as Hugo's own life experiences shaped his philosophy. He incorporated personal memories of all kinds in the novel, often mixing everyday trivial fact with fiction to give the story a sense of journalistic truth. By the time it was published in 1862, it had become an epic novel, expressed in rich prose within a strong framework of history, philosophy, and political theory. "This is a leviathan I am about to ship out to sea," he said before publishing.

When *Les Misérables* was published in 1862, it generated more excitement than any book in the history of publishing. It was widely advertised in Paris with giant sketched portraits of Cosette, Fantine, Marius and Jean Valjean.

Foreshadowing the success story of the musical, over one hundred years later, the novel *Les Misérables* was, initially, a popular, rather than a critical, triumph. "All the reviews," wrote Hugo, "are reactionary and more or less hostile."

Like the musical, critical opinion had absolutely no effect on public interest in *Les Misérables*. Bookshop owners and other vendors literally battled to buy copies of the book for their customers. Long lines and traffic jams were observed all over the city as people fought to buy one of the 48,000 copies put on sale the first day.

This phenomenon was echoed in 1985, when the musical version of Hugo's novel opened in London to mostly poor reviews. When Cameron Mackintosh, discouraged by the adverse critical response, called the box office, he was greeted by a happily busy ticket salesman.

"I'm amazed you managed to get through," Mackintosh was told, "the phones haven't stopped ringing." As with the novel, the story of *Les Misérables* had touched a common chord, and its great success was built on word of mouth.

Hugo wrote about his book, "I don't know if it will be read by everyone, but it is meant for everyone. It addresses England as well as Spain, Italy as well as France, Germany as well as Ireland, the republics that harbour slaves as well as empires that have serfs. Social problems go beyond frontiers..." To further his goal of presenting the ideas of *Les Misérables* to as wide an audience as possible, Hugo urged his publishers to bring out cheaper editions of the book in small print to make it available to ordinary people.

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The initial French language success was copied all over the world as soon as the book became available in translation. The book was a sensation in America, whose own civil unrest at the time seemed to many to mirror the events and feelings of the novel. Indeed, Confederate soldiers read the novel voraciously, calling themselves “Lee’s Misérables.” As with any work of art pleading for social change, the novel *Les Misérables* acquired many enemies. Conservatives feared the social impact of the novel, and the Vatican banned it for several years. A theatrical version, written by Hugo’s son Charles, was banned in France, pening instead in Brussels. The French newspaper *The Constitutionnel* wrote that if the ideas of the novel were acknowledged, “no part of the social order would remain standing.” Nonetheless, *Les Misérables* has been translated into nearly every language and, during the past century, has become one of the bestselling books in history.

# CHRONOLOGY

THE HISTORY that led to the novel and the musical.

## 1845

Victor Hugo starts writing *Les Misérables*.

## 1848 - 1851

Reign of King Louis Philippe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes President of the Second French Republic.

## 1792

First French Republic declared.

## 1792 - 95

The republican “Convention”, ending in Robespierre’s “terror”.

## 1793

Louis XVI executed. The Royal insurgents begin their full scale civil war against the republican French Government. Victor Hugo describes this conflict in his novel 93.

## 1795 - 99

“Le Directoire” becomes the first post-revolution government.

## 1799 - 1804

“The Consulate”; Napoleon Bonaparte takes command.

## 1804 - 15

French Empire; the rise and fall of Napoleon, ending with the battle of Waterloo.

## 1815

France becomes a monarchy again with Louis XVIII as King

## 1824 - 30

The reign of Charles X.

## 1832

Death of General Lamarque, a hero to workers and students. His funeral degenerates into riots, described by Hugo in *Les Misérables*.

## 1848 - 51

Regime of Louis Phillipe ends with uprising and Louis Napoleon becomes president of the Second Republic. He dissolves Parliament and is given full powers for ten years.

## 1852

Louis Napoleon declares himself Emperor. Hugo urges the populace to rise against the monarch and flees the country to Belgium.

## 1862

Victor Hugo publishes *Les Misérables*, written in exile.

## 1870

Louis Napoleon is forced to abdicate and is replaced by a democratically elected government. Hugo returns to France in triumph.

## 1885

Hugo dies. Two million mourners pay their respects at his massive funeral.

## 1906

The first silent film of *Les Misérables* is directed in France by Albert Capellini.

## 1910

The first American film, *Galley Slaves*, is produced as a silent film, directed by James Stuart Blackton.

## 1935

The first American sound version is produced by Richard Boleslawski.

## 1980

The original arena production of the Boublil-Schönberg musical, *Les Misérables*, is presented at the Palais des Sports, Paris.

## 1985

*Les Misérables* opens at the Barbican Theatre in London.

## 1987

*Les Misérables* opens at the Broadway Theatre in New York.



# ABOUT EMILE BAYARD

EMILE BAYARD was Victor Hugo's favourite illustrator, famous in his own lifetime for his brilliant portraits of Fantine, Éponine, Valjean and Javert, but best known today by people all over the world for "his" Cosette, used originally on the sleeve of the French 'Les Mis' record in 1980, and now famous as the *Les Misérables* logo.

Bayard, a prolific lithographer for magazines and books (he illustrated the works of Edmond About – then a fashionable novelist, almost as well-known as Hugo himself), was one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century academic painting school, somewhat unjustly known as "le style pompier".

With infinite attention to detail, Emile Bayard worked for months on huge paintings, of which the best known are "After the Battle of Waterloo" and "Sedan 1870". His real talent, however, lay in his abilities as a brilliant portraitist. In the tradition of the time, he also used his drawing skills to rework original sketches by explorers and travellers, sometimes even transforming pictures of exotic places into lithographs. A close friend of Honoré Daumier and cartoonists such as Paul Gavarni, Henri Monnier, Alfred Grevin, Jean-Louis Forain and Emmanuel Poiré (better known as Caran d'Ache), he wrote about their work about spotting fakes, and identifying antiques.



Quintessentially a wealthy Parisian society painter" with pupils and his own atelier, Emile Bayard showed a remarkable understanding of Victor Hugo's work as seen in his illustrations of the cast of characters in *Les Misérables*.

