

# Romanticism in les miserables



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The Romantic era began with the desire to create something new and pleasurable, and to leave classicism in the past. Parker explains that “Romanticism is the art of presenting to people the literary works which ...are capable of giving them the greatest possible pleasure; classicism, on the contrary, of presenting them with that which gave the greatest possible pleasure to their grandfathers” (Parker 307). Parker thus summarizes the mood by which Romantics were fueled, one characterized by a need to create from their own imaginations, not from those of their ancestors. Romanticism is characterized in a plethora of ways, and ranges from foundations of artwork, to literature, to music, to philosophy- anything requiring creation. The ideals of Romanticism, in addition to creating something new, encompass individualism, imagination, beauty, love, nature, the supernatural, the sublime, organicism, the Byronic hero, and many more depending on the creator.

However, Parker precisely pinpoints the dominating and most recurring traits in Romanticism: “The essential elements of the romantic spirit are curiosity and the love of beauty” (Parker 308). Imagination and beauty, most often in nature, find themselves as key points for Romantic authors, with Victor Hugo a great herald of these ideals. Influenced by his own experiences in the French Revolution, his eventual exile, and loss of loved ones, Hugo created *Les Misérables* as a manifestation of all things Romantic, in an effort to educate and to inspire emotion. He famously writes, as a preface to his novel: “So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation which, in the midst of civilization, artificially creates a hell on earth, and complicates with human fatality a destiny that is divine; so long

as the three problems of the century — the degradation of man by the exploitation of his labor, the ruin of women by starvation and the atrophy of childhood by physical and spiritual night are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible...so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, there should be a need for books such as this” (Hugo 21).

Hugo recognized his duty as a poet, to instruct and legislate through his (often considered divine) ability of writing. Hugo addresses a great many topics in his novel, with focus on a few core values of romanticism: nature, individualism, and imagination, by use of character development and conflict. In Romanticism, nature is perhaps the most recurring theme, and finds itself manifested throughout *Les Misérables*. By emphasizing the importance of nature, Hugo also emphasizes the importance of inspiration that we find through nature. Inspiration takes the form of several ideals in the novel, such as love, beauty, and the sublime. Nature is all consuming, and Nash parallels its complexity to that of the novel, “ the novel, like nature, is a grand paradigm for metaphoricity — the more one looks, the more analogies one finds” (Nash 480). In short, nature is more than just scenery, and *Les Misérables* reflects that depth. Particular scenes of nature’s impact on characters occur throughout the novel, beginning with Bishop Bienvenu, representative of the goodness humanity can possess through his charity and trusting nature.

The Bishop is described by Quale as “ Hugo’s hero as well as saint; and we can not deny him beauty such as those enskied and sainted wear. This is the romanticists tribute to a minister of God; and sweet the tribute is” (Quayle 17). This description shows the value of a man in tune with God’s grace, and

able to receive inspiration through it, which is a common romantic theme. The Bishop finds this inspiration in nature, as he takes walks in his garden before bed each night. His experience is described: “ Was not this narrow enclosure, with the sky for a background, enough to enable him to adore God in his most beautiful as well as in his most sublime works? Indeed, is not that all, and what more can be desired? A little garden to walk, and immensity to reflect upon. At his feet something to cultivate and gather; above his head something to study and meditate upon: a few flowers on the earth, and all the stars in the sky” (Hugo 6). These lines reflect the immensity of inspiration and comfort found in nature, and the Bishop’s feelings of closeness, or organicism, with the rest of the universe. This enables him to feel a closeness with others, and is reflected in his caring and forgiving nature. This personality influences Jean Valjean into becoming more saintlike, and he in turn finds his own solace in nature at various times throughout the novel. One example is when he and Cosette live at a nunnery to escape the policeman Javert; Cosette is taught by the sisters and Valjean works as a gardener. His experience is sublime and described as, “ his soul subsided into silence like this cloister, into fragrance like these flowers, into peace like this garden...” (Hugo 189). As is seen in these lines and the example of the Bishop, garden’s become a recurring motif representing the divinity of nature, and Cosette and Marius both find their own kind of inspiration through it. They find love through nature, with Marius describing his experience thus: “ Never had the sky been more studded with stars and more charming, the trees more trembling, the odor of the grass more penetrating; never had the birds fallen asleep among the leaves with a sweeter noise; never had all the harmonies of universal serenity responded

more thoroughly to the inward music of love; never had Marius been more captivated, more happy, more ecstatic” (Hugo 189). These lines show how the beauty of nature and how nature and love become one — a common romantic theme often referred to as organicism. Nature allows for inspiration through many devices, ranging from solace to pure love, and reflect the romantic theme of nature being the greatest teacher.

Individualism becomes a broad topic in *Les Miserables* with the focus encompassing the individual’s struggle against a greater force, whether it be morality or political conflicts. Through this exploration, Grossman describes the product as, “ Many of the ethical and political overtones of his work also serve the distinctly aesthetic end of defining his mature concept of romanticism and the romantic novel” (Grossman 9). These political critiques are most powerfully manifested in Jean Valjean’s struggle with Javert, and a focus on the unfairness between classes, such as the Thenardiers and Fantine. It is the struggle of the individual against that of higher powers. Cooke describes the struggle as, “ Victor Hugo taught his readers the new truth of the humanity of all men, even the lowest. He opened the eyes of his countrymen to the sufferings and sorrows and humanness of the poor about them- and the injustice which they endured at the hands of law and society” (Cooke 133). This humanity is shown especially in the character development of Jean Valjean. Receiving excessive punishment and unfair treatment for a desire to help others, Valjean greatly reflects a common romantic character — the Byronic hero. Focusing on individualism, the Byronic hero suffers with dignity against all oppositions. Notable as well, is Valjean’s uncanny strength, the supernatural being another common

component of romanticism. Schwartz describes his traits as “ Romanticism praised the genius of the extraordinary man” (Shwartz). Hugo represents the common man, which is extraordinary in the eyes of the Romantic. Quayle relates this supernatural strength back to Valjean’s heroism, describing it as, “ He is a somber hero, but a hero still, with strength like the strength of ten, since his love is as the love of legion” (Quayle 15).

Valjean’s heroism is seen in the good use of his strength, how he uses it to save lives, such as the sailor in peril, and to escape Javert in order to protect Cosette at various points in the novel. Javert, who represents the rigidity of law, eventually succumbs to Valjean’s powerful forces of individualism, manifested in his grace and goodness despite opposition. Duncan describes it as, “ Perceiving Jean Valjean as high-minded, he is no longer able to maintain his view of himself as pure. The rigid compromise formation had kept his self-loathing, his sense of inner pollution, repressed. Now, as these feelings surface, Javert commits suicide” (Duncan 115). The individual, in addition to the poor and the lower-class, win through Valjean, who represents the common man — whom Romantics consistently support. Schwartz describes Hugo’s characterization as, “ His most memorable characters in *Les Miserables* were not of the rich or people of high-standing, but rather, of the poor and common man” (Schwartz). However, Valjean, our hero, also finds death, as is the way of all, but it’s his grace and dignity that set him apart as a Romantic and Byronic hero even at death. “ Love each other dearly always. There is scarcely anything else in the world but that: to love one another...I die happy...” (Hugo 519). These lines express Valjean’s divine fulfillment of love in enduring horrible sufferings, and dies without

fear. Grossman describes it as, “ Death looms as the price of extraordinary merit” (Grossman 7).

As organicism goes, all things are connected, and so are the themes of romanticism, here we see nature conquering all, even the individual. In addition to themes of nature and individualism, imagination is a key component of the Romantic, of which Hugo embodies in his work.

Imagination is broad, with no one definition in the eyes of Romanticism.

Perkins describes it most generally as, “ ‘ imagination’ denoted a working of the mind that is total, synthetic, immediate, and dynamic. In this sense, the theory of the imagination was a reaction not only against empirical analysis but also against the traditional faculty psychology...” (Perkins 19).

Imagination, like most modes of Romanticism, was in an effort to depart from the traditionalist style and to make it new. Hugo shows it through his newness of writing style and intentions, reflected in his character’s choices and actions. It is also depicted in the novel’s spiritual aspects, where religion is explored as an individuals undertaking, as opposed to oppressive institutional religion. Schwartz describes Hugo’s Romantic style thus: “ Hugo presented himself as the poet born of the ideological currents that shaped Romanticism, according to which the poet is a supremely individual creator, whose creative spirit is more important than strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures...The artist is alone capable of directing society, for he alone embraces both God and Man” (Schwartz).

Les Miserables illustrates Hugo’s imagination by its revolutionary ideas as seen in both plot and stylistic elements. Marius, for example, embodies Romantic ideals of imagination through his love letters to Cosette — the <https://assignbuster.com/romanticism-in-les-miserables/>

power of words! Schwartz describes his conquest, as “Marius Pontemercy courts young Cosette from afar, and wins her affections with a love letter... Marius crafted his persona with words, representing and embodying himself in a letter...in the hopes that she would see the depth and sincerity of his love” (Schwartz). The power of imagination in creating something new is seen in Marius, as he wins through strength of mind. In addition to stylistic elements, imagination is also shown through the development of the spiritual, or transcendental. Perkins explains that “Romantic transcendentalism arose as a direct reaction against the empirical tradition... transcendentalism is the belief in the existence of a timeless realm of being beyond the shifting, sensory world of common experience” (Perkins 15).

Religion is not specifically addressed as a single institution or religion, instead it is explored through nature and the individual, as previous sections stress. Brombert summarizes the spiritual nature of the novel as, “Les Miserables is meant to be a religious book...the text dwells on some of Hugo’s most dearly held notions: dynamic undoing and ceaseless reconstruction, the vitality of natural forces, the intimate solidarity of the universe, the dialogue with the unseen, the paradox of the irreducible identity of author and God” (Brombert 118). Spiritualism is overtly addressed as an individual’s connection with God, and how they interpret that connection. This process is seen in characters such as the Bishop and Jean Valjean, the latter especially stresses the ideas of own discovery at the end of the novel, when he is on his deathbed. With Marius and Cosette at his side, they ask if he would like a priest, and his reply is described as so, “ ‘I have,’ Jean Valjean replied; and he pointed upwards as though there were



some other being present whom he alone could see” (Hugo 518). Valjean, representing the common man and Romantic ideals, does not see the necessity in organized religion, instead, he relies on his own connection with God.

In Romanticism, no one term is able to describe the many ideals that have come together. Each poet adds his or her own twist and own interpretation; however, all rely on their freedom as creators rather than followers of traditional style. Victor Hugo, through the incredible *Les Miserables*, embodies this spirit of freedom through depiction various themes. With nature, he expresses the love and solace made possible through its beauty, with Jean Valjean and Cosette and Marius being great examples. With individualism, Hugo shows the humanity and power of the common man against oppressive forces, through the Byronic-type hero of Jean Valjean. Finally, through imagination, great use of revolutionary ideas and expression of ideas, such as spirituality, is depicted through characters such as Jean Valjean on his choice of personal revelation for guidance. *Les Miserables* embodies Romanticism, and continues to provide a powerful sway of emotion and inspiration.

## **Works Cited**

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