



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume II: Epic, Romance and the American Dream

“Les Miserables,”

Guide for Curriculum Unit 87.02.10
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This curriculum unit on “Les Miserables” studies Victor Hugo’s epic novel of Jean Valjean, a victim of poverty and self-made success who works his way from convict to saint by selflessly acting for others as Inspector Javert relentlessly pursues him through the streets of Paris. Though a romance, the novel portrays a realistic picture of Nineteenth-Century France and has been called a historical, sociological, as well as religious work. The unit provides historical, bibliographical, and critical background, and through religious and historical allusions, metaphors, symbols, and other figurative language, students come to understand the novel’s major theme: that salvation for the masses will emerge from the masses.

The unit provides the opportunity for developing skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening through a variety of activities, among them developing a lexicon of slang, listening to a recording of the musical by a London cast, and dramatizing scenes from the novel. The unit also includes a board game designed to motivate students, test their knowledge, and provoke deeper-level thinking. The game takes students through the streets of Paris, confronting them with adversities and opportunities for kindness. Like Valjean they are confronted with choices and chance and are given the opportunity to learn that decisions bring consequences.

(Recommended for English classes, grades 10-12; and English, French, History, interdepartmental study)

Key Words

Literature of Les Miserables France Hugo Victor

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