

The following assignments relate to the book, NOT the film. You are to choose two topics to write about, one from each section below. Yes, this means you are writing TWO separate essays. Get excited!

*Format: Single-spaced with a break between the paragraphs; 1 ½ page minimum each

ESSAY I – CHARACTER-DRIVEN ESSAY TOPIC

Essay topics in this category revolve around one or two specific characters. As you address the essay topic, you must also find cause to bring in philosophy from historical figures (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire, etc) as you deem it appropriate.

1. Take a specific character – Valjean, Fantine, Eponine, Marius, Javert, or Thenardier – and prepare a character analysis which emphasizes his/her beliefs and worldview, demonstrating how this philosophy is reflected by their actions over the events of the text. Be sure to emphasize continuity and change, and how the character confronts, addresses and overcomes such ideological obstacles. (This is not dissimilar from a psychological profile)
↳ You may also chose from any secondary characters, such as Marius’s grandfather, the old recluse from Book I, etc.
2. Examine the character of Eponime, striving to assess the degree to which she has reinforced or overcome her Thenardier heritage.
3. Given that Jean Valjean’s original crime was an act of altruism (stealing a load of bread to feed his sister’s children), to what extent does he succeed or fail as a symbol of redemption?
4. Discuss the role that family allegiance plays in the lives of Cosette, Marius, Eponine, Marius or Gavroche.
5. Discuss the ways in which Jean Valjean both helps and hinders Cosette as she becomes a young adult.
6. Another topic of your choice, pre-approved by your instructor.

ESSAY II – GENERAL THEME-DRIVEN ESSAY TOPIC

Essay topics in this category involve broad themes from your text as your focal point, and are such where you would be expected to utilize examples of many characters in which to support your points. (Remember we need to view this through authentic historical relativism; that is, accept and describe the society as it actually was and as presented by Hugo, not using our modern view to cast judgment upon any aspect of their society.)

1. What is the source of evil in Hugo’s world?
⇒ Consider: Human nature? Poor social arrangements and laws? Accidents? Some supernatural agent?
2. To what extent do the characters in Les Miserables have free will, or do their futures appear determined by fate?
3. Hugo offers five main areas of digression away from the main storyline (although his characters do fall within these confines). Chose one of the following themes of digression and prepare a paper which expresses the author’s philosophical views on the topic. They are . . .
 - a) Contrasting social irresponsibility and responsibility
 - b) Contrasting self-aggrandizement and material pomp with self-effacing service and spiritual grandeur.
 - c) Contrasting social dysfunction in the idealistic child and the corrupt adult
 - d) Contrasting the summit and the underside of society
 - e) The origins of the insurrection and the scenes in the sewers offer opportunity for political and metaphorical analysis of social corruption
⇒ (See page xxxi of the text for an elaboration of the above five digression topics.)
4. A recurring theme in the text may be viewed as ‘The common man’s struggle against the implacable powers that be.’ Elaborate on this premise. Your paper must address the cultural values and realities which existed at the time.
5. Take this following preface from the text (page 3) by the author, and weave its themes into a paper:
“So long as civilization shall permit law and custom to impose a social condemnation that creates artificial hells on earth, complicating our divine destiny with a fatality driven by humans; so long as the three problems of the age – man degraded by poverty, women demoralized by starvation, childhood stunted by physical and spiritual night – remain unsolved; as long as people may be suffocated, in certain regions, by society; in order words, taking a longer view, so long as ignorance and misery endure on earth, books such as this cannot but be useful.”
6. How does the authors description of Paris relate to the central theme of the novel?
7. Another topic of your choice, pre-approved by your instructor.