***Les Misérables***

As you have read, Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* is considered to be a literary masterpiece and has been called a “universal story”.

Before you watch the film, read the attached information about Hugo and *Les Mis*. Remember that the show is a musical, and the entire story is told in song lyrics. It is best to have an understanding of the show and the characters before you watch the play.

Remember that Hugo was a Romantic, a Catholic, and a liberal who lived during the age of revolutions in France. His ideas and beliefs came from the Enlightenment and the revolutionary times he experienced. *Les Mis* touches on several important topics and conflicts: 1.) Crime and Punishment; 2.) Sin and Morality; 3.) Liberalism and Conservatism; 4.) Church and God; 5.) Love and Redemption; 6.) Poverty and Privilege. Each character symbolizes struggles that Hugo believed people of the poor and working classes had to deal with in their lives- not just economically and politically, but spiritually and morally as well.

Below are some topics that you can explore in your paper. You do not have to write about all of these, but choose a few to base your paper on. THIS IS NOT TO BE A SUMMARY OF THE STORY. This is to be your interpretation and analysis of this universal story.

**Characters:**

1. Jean Valjean- given a second chance by the Bishop, he is redeemed by love.
2. The Bishop of Digne- According to Hugo, how does he represent the true purpose of the Church?
3. Fantine- Hugo believed Fantine represented the struggles all working poor women faced, as well as the hideous double standards they had to endure. Show examples.
4. Inspector Javert- a staunch conservative, he is a watchdog of the law. Even though he is “from the gutter too”, what is his view of human nature?
5. Eponine (daughter of the Thénardiers)- Raised in a crude manner by her parents, she is redeemed by love, but does not get a happy ending. How does Eponine represent the struggles and desires of the poor and wretched?
6. The Thénardiers- Poor, crude, and uneducated, they symbolize Rousseau’s idea of how a corrupt and unjust society can turn humans into brutes and greedy savages.
7. Marius Pontmercy- a young bourgeois liberal and revolutionary who is torn by love of country and love for Cosette.
8. Enjolras and Marius’ revolutionary friends- Hugo realistically portrays what happened to many bright, intelligent revolutionaries, despite their passionate defense of liberty. Is this Hugo’s way of criticizing French government?
9. Cosette- an opposite example of the Thenardiers, Cosette is Hugo’s portrayal of a child born into a wicked world, but raised in love and cherished. How is her fate different?

**Questions/Ideas:**

Human Nature: *“And remember the truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God.”*

1. What is Hugo’s view of human nature? Is it naturally good, flawed by original sin, corrupted by society? Or a combination?
2. How does each character represent Hugo’s view of human nature?
3. Hugo believed men could become “perfect”. How does Jean Valjean’s life illustrate this belief? What does Jean Valjean prove with his life?
4. How is Marius a Romantic hero?
5. What would Eponine’s life have been like if she hadn’t died at the barricades?
6. What force redeems the lives and pain of Valjean, Fantine, and Eponine? (Think of the lyrics above)

Crime and Punishment: *“Now every door is closed to me; another jail, another key, another chain, for when I come to any town, they check my papers and they find the mark of Cain.”*

1. When Valjean is released from prison, he is given a “yellow passport”, which tells the world he is an ex-convict. How does society treat people on parole, or ex-convicts? Are they able to lead normal lives again? Why or why not?
2. A great percentage of convicts end up in prison again soon after their release. Why is this, and what does this say about the “rehabilitation” of prison? Is it compatible with the Christian values embodied in the Bishop of Digne?
3. The figure of Justice is always portrayed as being blindfolded, that is, completely blind to anything but objective facts. Should Justice take more into account? That is, should all criminals be treated the same? For example, Valjean, Fantine, and Thénardier all commit crimes: Valjean and Fantine resort to crime to survive and help their families, while Thénardier commits fraud and robbery to suit his own needs. Should Justice treat them differently? Is there a place for mercy in the Law? How so?

The Poor: *“Look down and see the beggars at your feet; Look down and show some mercy if you can; Look down and see the sweepings of the street; Look down, look down upon your fellow man!”*

1. According to Hugo, who is responsible for the condition of the poor? Themselves? The government? The rich? Society? Explain.
2. What do you think is the best way to alleviate poverty? What does Hugo think?
3. How do each of the characters see the poor: Jean Valjean, The Bishop of Digne, Javert, Enjolras, Thénardier. Which of them do you agree with?
4. Hugo attempts to convince the audience that the poor and outcast are worth saving. In our society, is this a commonly held belief? Why or why not?
5. Consider the lyrics “When’s it going to end? When we gonna live? Something’s gotta happen now or something’s gonna give!” What do these lyrics refer to?

The Universal Story: *“Your are right, Sir, when you say that Les Miserables is written for a universal audience. I don’t know whether it will be read by everyone, but it is meant for everyone.” – Victor Hugo*

1. Les Mis is one of the world’s most widely read novels and is one of the most popular theater productions of all time. Why do you think Les Mis is such a universal story? What is its appeal? Is the storyline relevant to today’s world? How?
2. Do the poor of today have much in common with the poor of 1832 France? Explain.

**Notes on the Film**

1. **Human Nature: The Hobbes/Locke?Rousseau Debate**. Are we born good or sinful? If we are born good, how do we become bad?
2. **Religion**: What role should the Church/religion play in our lives, if any?
3. **Crime and Punishment**: Is committing a crime the same as committing a sin? What is the difference? Why are poor people punished in greater numbers than the rich? Does poverty make people bad? Does privilege make people sinful?
4. **Poverty**: Why is it so difficult for poor people to not be poor? What is keeping them poor? Who exemplifies this idea of cyclical poverty in the film?
5. **Women**: Do you recognize any of Rousseau’s ideas about women in the story?
6. **Conservatism vs. Liberalism**. Who exemplifies conservative values, and how? Who exemplifies liberal values, and how?