

FRENCH 212 MASTERWORKS:

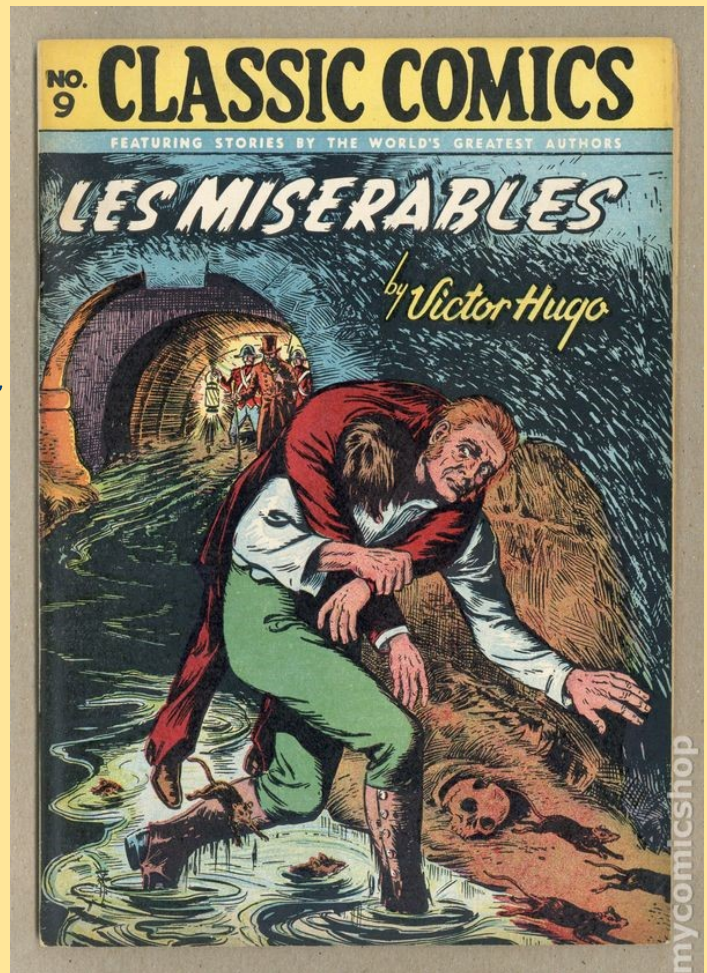
LES MISÉRABLES

Best-selling novel of all time, the world's most famous novel. *Les Miz* has been translated into twenty-two languages, and there have been sixty films adaptations, comic books and the Manga versions. The musical has been seen by 70,000,000 in 44 countries.

In this cosmic drama, through its cascade of surprises, on trial is protagonist Jean Valjean, sentenced to 19 years of hard labor for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. Man of many disguises, of spiritual grandeur, superhuman strength and generosity, he is manically pursued by the implacable Javert who represents the insanity of the law, law detached from empathy and religion, law of black joy in persecution of the sublime innocence it is missioned to protect. Ducking in and out of the multiple plots is a vast array of colorful portraits: Monseigneur Bienvenu, saintly enemy of established Church, Cosette the ultimate child victim, Gavroche, cheerful boy philosopher of the streets who lives in a paper mâché elephant, the vicious Thénardier family, and . . . Napoleon himself. Spoiler alert! The novel concludes with the mad dash to freedom of Jean Valjean through the sewers of Paris.

And yet, and yet, the novel is not much read today. Is the price of the fame of the book an ignorance of the text itself? Has it so successfully done its work that attention to it has become unnecessary? To shrink it to its collision of irresistible

forces, its action-figure acrobatics, its poignancy, the frantic rush of narrative towards redemption, is to slight its multi-dimensional aspect, the astonishment of its linguistic virtuosity, its comic genius, its lessons concerning nineteenth-century Europe: injustice and poverty, women and children, urbanization and rural exodus, war, and the memory and anticipations of revolution, a new reading public with new printing practices attached, the idea of author as messianic force of social transformation, etc. . .



Taught in English | MW 3:30-5:20pm, Savery 155 | SLN: 14998

Instructor: Doug Collins

Questions? Email frenital@uw.edu