



Victor Hugo: The Versatile Romantic

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT Victor Hugo was one of the greatest romantic writers of France. A versatile and freethinking personality, he gave a huge impulse to the Romantic Movement as he made his immense contribution to French literature and culture, as a novelist, a dramatist, and a poet. The genius of Hugo lies in the fact that he gained both literary acclaim as well as public adulation for his enormously popular novels and his intensely lyrical poetry that was characterised by 'powerful sounds and rhythms'. The precocious talent of Victor Hugo was evident only after the publication of *Odes et Ballades* that demonstrated Hugo's prowess in narration and rhyme, and revealed his intense passion and natural fluency. However, the genius of Hugo as a novelist was only revealed in *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné* which would go on to have profound influence over a host of literary legends who would later wield their pen. Hugo experienced unprecedented success with the publication of the *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables*. Today *Les Misérables* remains one of the most enduring books across the world and has been made into movies, television drama, and stage production. Hugo had maintained strong political and social views and sought to articulate them in the legitimate institutions. In 1941, he was made the pair de France and admitted into the Higher Chamber where he made his presence felt by advocating for freedom of press and self-government. However, the over-throw of the parliamentary government by Napoleon III, forced Hugo with into exile in Guernsey, where he would live from 1855 to 1870.

1. Introduction

Victor Hugo was one of the greatest romantic writers of France. A versatile and freethinking personality, he gave a huge impulse to the Romantic Movement as he made his immense contribution to French literature and culture, as a novelist, a dramatist, and a poet. The genius of Hugo lies in the fact that he gained both literary acclaim as well as public adulation for his enormously popular novels and his intensely lyrical poetry that was characterised by 'powerful sounds and rhythms'.

2. The Child Prodigy

Hugo was born in 1802 in Besançon to Joseph Hugo and Sophie Trébuchet. In his childhood, he had to accompany his father, a high-ranking military officer in Napoleon's army, in his frequent travels across France. This exposed the young Hugo to the diversity in the country and the richness and subtleties in the culture and traditions of its people. All these made an enormous impression on the young Hugo, which found expression in his later writings in the form of the snow-clad heights of Alpine, the brilliance of the blue waters of the Mediterranean, and the shifting landscape of Western Europe. However, that soon stopped as his mother Sophie, left her husband to settle in Paris with her young children. Sophie, a strong-minded catholic with great loyalty to the crown, ensured adequate education for her children while imbibing them with strong values. She would go on to have strong influence in the early writings of Hugo, which exhibited great regards for the king and profound commitment to the faith. Nevertheless, following the events leading to the French revolution, Hugo had a radical change of heart, which turned him into a strident republication espousing freethinking.

3. Hugo and His Women:

As a teenager, Hugo fell in love with their neighbour Adele Foucher braving strong opposition from his mother. This however made him delay his marriage to his childhood sweetheart¹ until the death of his mother in 1821.

Adèle and Victor Hugo consummated their union with the birth of a boy in 1823, who was named Léopold. Although he died in infancy, the couple had four more children, of whom the second child *Léopoldine* became Hugo's favourite. Apparently, Hugo had a perfect family life with a loving wife and four children, however within there were signs of discontent-

ment and discord that gave way to infidelities² from both the partners.

The romantic in Victor Hugo often came to the fore through his many liaisons throughout his life. Difficulties in his marriage triggered an affair with the actor Juliette Drouet, who went on to become his mistress³. Nonetheless, Hugo's extra marital romantic tryst extended to other women and included Leonie Biard, Alice Ozy, and many others, which were often censured by the relatively conservative French society of those days. However, others empathised with him to give a long leash to his philandering as an essential license for creativity. This was emphasized by Graham.

Sex for him was a form of contemplation and to him fallen women and courtesans were a pleasant antidote to the hypocrisy of high society as they have as much heart soul and spirit as society women but are frank where society women are prudish (1998, pp. 249-253)

4. The Writings of Victor Hugo

The precocious talent of Victor Hugo was evident very early when as a thirteen year old, his poems won him two 'mentions' from the Academie Francaise. His first collection of poems published under *Odes et poésies diverses* (Hugo, 1822) attracted the attention of Louis XVIII, who granted him a royal pension. But it was only after the publication of *Odes et Ballades* (Hugo, 1826) or *Odes and Ballads* that Hugo came to his own as a serious poet. This work demonstrated Hugo's prowess in narration and rhyme, and revealed his intense passion and natural fluency.

Hugo published his first novel *Han D'Islande* (Hugo, 1823) or *Hans of Iceland* in 1823, which describes the friendship between the African prince Bug-Jargal and Leopold D'Auverney, a French military officer, under adverse circumstances during the slave revolt in Santo Domingo of 1791. This was followed by *Bug-Jargal* (Hugo, 1825) three years later.

However, the genius of Hugo as a novelist was only revealed in *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné* (Hugo, 1829) or *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* which would go on to have profound influence over a host of literary legends who would later wield their pen. Hugo experienced unprecedented success with the publication of the *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Hugo, 1831) or the *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, which weaves the

love story between Esmeralda, a gypsy girl and Quasimodo, a deformed bell ringer. Translated into all major languages, the book would become the theme of many movies and stage plays.

Concurrently his reputation as a dramatist soared with the enormous commercial success of play *Hernani* which ignited a fierce debate on the fresh Romanticism and the traditions of orthodox French theatre. In fact, the introspection induced by the play marks an epoch making event in French literary history.

The author touched his pinnacle with the publication of *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1862) that took seventeen years to complete. Despite the hostile reception by the critics, the book became enormously popular and had a profound impact on the French society. Today *Les Misérables* remains one of the most enduring books across the world and has been made into movies, television drama, and stage production.

Buoyed by the success of *Les Misérables*, Hugo in 1866 shifted to a completely different genre in his next novel *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (Hugo, 1890) or *Toilers of the Sea*, which was inspired by his life in the channel island of Guernsey. Here Hugo depicted man's constant struggle in the sea and with the various creatures that lurked in them. He returned to his more usual theme involving social and political issues in *L'Homme Qui Rit* (Hugo, 1869) or *The Man Who Laughs*. However, the new offering by Hugo evoked lukewarm response which reflection his growing alienation from the masses. Facing declining readership, Hugo took up the highly sensitive theme of the French Revolution and the atrocities committed in it, in what was to become his last novel. Although *Quatre-vingt-treize* (Hugo, 1873) or *Ninety-Three* was largely ignored by the paying public, nonetheless critics considers it to be as good as, if not better, than his previous masterpieces.

5. Hugo the Statesman

Hugo had maintained strong political and social views and sought to articulate them in the legitimate institutions. In 1941, he was finally elected to the *Académie française* after three unsuccessful attempts. In the same year he was made the *pair de France* and admitted into the Higher Chamber where he made his presence felt by advocating for freedom of press and self-government. However, tragedy struck in the hour of triumph when his favourite daughter Léopoldine⁴ died in an accident in 1843.

Following the 1948 revolution, Hugo was elected into the constitutional assembly. However, the over through of the parliamentary government by Napoleon III, forced Hugo with into exile in *Guernsey*, where he would live from 1855 to 1870. Hugo's time in *Guernsey* were his most productive resulting in the great *Les Misérables*, and three highly eulogized collections of poetry ; *Les Châtiments*(Hugo, 1853), *Les Contemplations*(Hugo, 1856) and *La Légende des siècles* (Hugo, 1859).

In exile, Hugo unrelenting censured Napoleon III in *Napoléon le Petit* (Hugo, 1852). He continued in exile even after Napoleon granted a general amnesty, and returned to Paris only after the formation of the Third Republic following the overthrow of Napoleon.

6. The Last Years

Advancing years brought great personal tragedy for Hugo, where his two sons, his wife Adèle, and his mistress *Juliette Drouet* preceded him. Despite his tribulations, he remained committed to his political ideals and spoke for political reforms as an elected member in the newly created senate. In honour of his eightieth birthday, Hugo was presented a *Sèvres* vase, which is an exclusive traditional gift for monarchs.

In 1885, at the ripe old age of 83, Victor Hugo passed away generating nationwide mourning. In honour of his contributions to world literature, his role in promoting democracy and nurturing the fledgling third republic, Hugo was accorded a state funeral that was attended by two million people.

Note

1. Hugo's immediately older sibling, Eugene who secretly loved Adèle lost his mind after Victor married her. He had to be put away in Charenton Asylum where he eventually died in 1837.
2. Adèle, became romantically involved with their family friend, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve who was a prominent literary critic.
3. Drouet became Hugo's on and off companion and often acted as his secretary.
4. Léopoldine drowned in the sea in the Seine at Villequier of Normandy. His husband while trying to save her also perished.

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