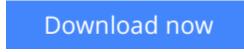


## Figuring Transcendence in Les Miserables: Hugo's Romantic Sublime

Associate Professor Kathryn M. Grossman



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In this first book-length study of *Les Misérables*, Kathryn M. Grossman, with an authoritative command of Hugo's work and Hugo criticism, situates the novelist's masterpiece in relation both to his earlier novels—up to and including *Notre-Dame de Paris*— and to the poetry published during his exile under the Second Empire. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor and on Thomas Weiskel's analysis of the romantic sublime, Grossman illustrates how the novel's motifs and structures correspond to a closely connected set of ethical, spiritual, political, and aesthetic concerns.

The religious motifs in *Les Misérables* identify the sublime not just with utopian ideals (and the overthrow of Napoleon III's grotesque Second Empire) but with artistic death and resurrection. Examining the ways the novel is largely concerned with the monstrous "brutalities of progress" called revolutions that must precede the advent of heaven on earth, Grossman traces that link to a mythos of sin and redemption and shows how the moral concerns of the plot also illuminate Hugo's aesthetics.

Les Misérables explores the tensions between heroes and scoundrels, chaos and order, law and lawlessness. Grossman painstakingly follows the novel's ethical hierarchy from the grotesque (criminality) to the conventional (bourgeois complacency) and the sublime (sainthood), demonstrating how that hierarchy corresponds to two other hierarchies: the literary and the political.

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