Forum Posts
Goals, Guidelines, and Details from DRAM 3559: Les Misérables: From Page to Stage to Screen, Fall 2014 (Marva Barnett), with Analysis Activity and Sample Posts from a previous semester

Goals: Our interactive, shared Forum posts are aimed to enrich and develop our understandings of the novel, our in-class conversations, and your writing by giving you opportunities to . . .

- Share your ideas in writing with others. Your Forum comments should reflect the thoughtfulness and care you bring to thinking and to expressing your ideas.
- Develop your skill in understanding others’ ideas and weighing them deliberately and appreciatively.
- Advance your thinking and our Forum discussions
- Explore your responses to Les Misérables in order to create a compelling digital story or film
- Develop your skill in helping others work out their ideas as you respond to their essays
- Appreciate even better how ideas develop, grow, and improve in dialogue with others
- Practice offering civil, positive, clear comments in writing

Research shows that people improve their writing when they write frequently and receive others’ feedback on their ideas.

Guidelines: What goes into an engaging, thought-provoking, compelling mini-essay:

- Making clear your argument or the position you take
- Providing evidence and logical reasoning that support your argument or position
- Investigating ideas as thoroughly as possible within the length limits
- Organizing to make your mini-essay easy to follow
- Showing that you have read the assigned sections of the novel
- Using correct, engaging style, grammar, and vocabulary
- Identifying your mini-essay with your name, title, whether initial post or comments, word count, format used if any

How the Forum works:
Each week, one member of each three-person forum team posts ideas about the week’s reading in a mini-essay: the initial post. The other two members then respond to that post: response posts. Everyone thus writes a mini-essay each week, each about 300 words long. With your teammates you will determine at the beginning of the semester which type of post you will write each week. You are responsible for posting your mini-essays by the appropriate deadline. The person who wrote the initial post is welcome to continue the conversation.

When you are writing a mini-essay as the initial post:
   a) Answer one of the questions posed for that week’s Forum. OR
   b) Set up an entirely new Forum topic by defining the topic clearly, posing a provocative question (perhaps related to the guiding questions), and answering that question.
   c) Once you find your digital media project focus, you may explore it your mini-essay as it relates to the relevant reading.

When you are writing a mini-essay as a response post:
   a) Remember that you are writing to the teammate who wrote the initial post.
   b) Acknowledge what your teammate contributed, and express any questions or concerns that you have about clarity of argument, evidence, logical reasoning, or details.
c) Make clear how your interpretation differs and/or what you would like to add to the initial post.
If you would like to express your creativity and develop your writing skills in various ways, use some of the Recommended formats (below)—and identify them when you do.

For clarity, label each of your posts this way:
- your name
- title / subject of your mini-essay
- note whether initial post or response post
- word count
- which recommended format you are using—when you use one

Recommended formats for creative ways to post your answer to a question:
- **Word Journal**: Choose a short section of the weekly reading(s) that strikes you, or that you find especially important to the novel. Then summarize that text in a single word, and write your mini-essay explaining why you chose that word. Your completed Word Journal should be an abstract or a synopsis of the text you are focusing on.
- **Unpack a Quote**: Find a quotation in the weekly reading that strikes you and relates to the question posed—or create your own topic. Copying the quotation into your Forum post, react to it, tie together ideas from the quote, the rest of the reading, and, if possible, your life experiences. NB: The word count does not include the quotation.
- **Reflect on a major theme, character, issue, or idea** from the weekly reading: for example, the wretched (les misérables); conscience; sacrifice; duty; charity; maternal love; paternal love; romantic love; war; progress; history; fate, chance, destiny, Providence; God; the infinite; poverty; crime; the prison system; law; society; children or childhood; the gamin; . . . (there are many!).
- **One-Sentence Summary**: Answer the questions “Who does what to whom, when, where, how, and why?” about the question posed or the reading topic you define. Then create a single informative, grammatical, and long summary sentence. In the rest of your mini-essay, elaborate on why this topic interests you, how it might relate to your digital story, and/or why it is important to Les Misérables.
- **Concept Map**: Choose a major theme from the weekly reading and articulate that theme for your readers. Then draw or diagram at least three mental connections that you make between this major concept and other concepts you have learned. Use your mini-essay to explain these connections. (You might create the concept map on your computer—or write it out legibly, scan it, and upload it to the Forum.)

**IMPORTANT DETAILS:**
Each post should be between 250 and 350 words long—a good length to make your case.

*Deadline for posting your initial mini-essay, the first post of each week:* Tuesday 6:00 PM

*Deadline for posting your response to your teammate’s idea, the second post of each week:* Thursday 8:00 AM (8h00)

*Credit for your work:* Thoughtful, provocative, well-articulated mini-essays will go a long way toward orienting our week’s discussion, as we can begin with your ideas, questions, and/or interests. You will get full credit for each week’s post when you complete it on time and when it fulfills the guidelines for what makes an engaging, thought-provoking, compelling mini-essay (see above). Posts that do not meet the criteria or that are submitted after each week’s deadline will receive no credit. Full credit will translate to a grade of A for this part of the course.
Analyzing Forum Posts, An Exercise

For one of the following set of initial posts and comments, complete the table below.
[NB: Half the class analyzed one set, the other half the other set.]

On each of these measures listed in the Guidelines below . . .
1. In what ways is each sample post successful?
2. In what ways might each sample post be improved?

Guidelines: What goes into an engaging, thought-provoking, compelling mini-essay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Successes?</th>
<th>Possible improvements?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Argument or position taken is clear.</td>
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<td>Supporting evidence and/or logical reasoning are visible and compelling.</td>
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<td>The author investigates ideas as thoroughly as possible within the length limits.</td>
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<td>Identifying information (author’s name, title, whether initial post or comment, word count, format used if any) is clearly spelled out.</td>
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Use this checklist for your own posts throughout the semester to make your arguments most compellingly and to improve your writing.

NB: Writing is one of the most important skills you will take into any career you choose. And writing improves with attentive practice.

Sample initial post + two comments: Jean Valjean & Cosette

Initial post:

Mutual Growth, by AAA

“Alas, he was as frail as Cosette. He protected her, and she gave him strength. Thanks to him, she could walk upright in life; thanks to her, he could persist in virtue. He was this child’s support, and she was his prop and staff. Oh, divine unfathomable mystery of death’s compensations.” (439)
The bond which forms between Cosette and Jean Valjean is absolutely pivotal for Valjean’s growth as a character into the man he remains for the rest of the novel. He finds himself at a crossroads in his life where he could very easily have returned to evil, but a little girl who can’t even lift a heavy bucket saves him. Jean Valjean has never before experienced love, (Hugo notes that his sister and her children are a memory of almost another life to him now) and he all of a sudden experiences this well of emotion which leads him in the right direction.

In the musical, this emotional shift is not properly covered, but the movie version fortunately creates an addendum to explain how “Two anxious hearts beat as one”. Jean Valjean finds solace now in watching Cosette be happy, teaching her to read like any real father, and just spending time with her in general. The power of love saves Valjean from when “memories of the bishop might occasionally fade”. (439)

Cosette gained as much as Valjean if not more from their relationship; not only is he her savior from the Thénardiers, but he is also a role model for her now. Hugo writes that she could not see him as an old man, only as a handsome man because she idolized him so much. She depended on him for everything, and this absolute trust and reliance which is so paramount for emotional growth allowed the two of them to become better together.

Word Count: 254

First comment on the initial post, by BBB:

This is great but I would like to highlight the change that Cosette experiences a little more.

“Children instantly accept joy and happiness with quick familiarity, being happy and joyful by nature” (435) This quote is wonderful because it reveals the drastic change that Cosette is experiencing because of Valjean. Before meeting him she would wake up in sadness and begin working immediately. This is shown by her waking up earlier on the page exclaiming “Where’s my broom” She is now able to immediately wake up and grab her doll instead of the broom, without worrying about anything. The end of the page indicated that she was “inexpressibly happy with her doll and her good friend.” A feeling she did not know prior to being with Valjean.

Later on, near the end of our reading, when Valjean returns to Cosette, she “uttered such a cry of joy that any thoughtful person hearing her would have detected in it an escape from the brink of some abyss” (564) This shows how she has developed an unbreakable attachment to Valjean, an attachment you would think she was incapable of forming because of her prior life.

Concluding with their mutual bond, page 437 says it perfectly, “Cosette’s instinct sought a father, as Jean Valjean’s instinct sought a child. To meet as to find one another. In that mysterious moment when their hands touched, they were welded together. When their souls saw each other, they recognized mutual need, and they embraced” They completed each other.

Word Count: 251
Second comment on the post, by CCC:

Although I think BBB makes a point that Cosette probably experienced and benefited more in her bond with Valjean, I completely agree with AAA. The relationship created between Jean Valjean and Cosette is necessary for the development of both characters. Without Valjean, Cosette would remain under the care of the Thénardiers in poor conditions, but to Valjean Cosette provides purpose in life. Without his encounter with Cosette, Valjean could only wander aimlessly after escaping prison, or remain there for his life. To Cosette, Valjean provided also a future most likely similar to her mother, Fantine, who grew up also without love. Hugo draws parallelism between Fantine and Cosette after kissing Cosette’s hand in her sleep, stating, "Nine months before, he had kissed the hand of the mother, who had also just fallen asleep." (434)

In a sense, Hugo implies that having found each other they can finally be complete people. Even though Jean Valjean has become kind and generous, bringing good with him everywhere he goes, Valjean has never experienced love—often believed the strongest emotion associated with good. Hugo portrays character growth in Valjean, from being a bitter and cynical convict to a loving and caring father. Cossette, who has had so much love to give, was never provided a recipient of her affections. Hugo’s titling of his chapter “Two Misfortunes Equal One Happiness” indicates the two characters completed one another, and were necessary to each other’s happiness.

Word count: 239

Sample initial post + two comments: the garden

Initial post by DDD: Close Reading of Chapter VI on page 887, 298

In chapter four on page 887, Hugo begins the chapter by continuing to describe the garden of the house Jean Valjean and Cosette currently live in. He writes of the transformation of the garden from an overly cultivated, “pruned,” and “fashioned” place to an “Eden” with “magnificent disheveled obscurity.” “In this solitude,” he writes, “There was also a heart that was all ready...there was...a soul made of gentleness, of faith, of candor, of hope, of aspiration, and of illusion.” Immediately after this description, Hugo launches into updating the reader on what has happened in Cosette’s life up to this point. The abrupt shift, from garden to Cosette, I believe is intentional and deliberate, with symbolic meaning. We last saw from Cosette’s point of view when she and JVJ escaped from her horrible upbringing with the Thénardiers. Just like the garden, her past and origins have their roots in a degenerate childhood, being surrounded by the corrupt, horrible Thénardiers and born from a mother who turned to prostitution for a living. She was likewise “pruned” and “fashioned” during her time at the convent, where she received an education and yet remained ignorant, limited, and constricted in so many ways. By leaving the convent and her past behind, she is able to grow and become unconstrained like the garden. The garden and its wild growth points to Cosette’s future, I think, and how she will mature and grow, achieve her “aspirations” so to speak, only if she has the freedom that the garden does. Her beauty (her “weapon”) and Marius become these aspirations and are ways for her to achieve freedom, while JVJ’s anxiety of losing her become impediments to it. Thus, tension arises between the two, and will not disappear entirely until JVJ accepts his daughter’s choices (in other words, accepts Marius).
Comment on initial post, by EEE:

DDD, I am so glad you wrote about this! The garden passages were some of my favorite from this reading because, as you pointed out, they are a beautiful metaphor for Cosette. As you mentioned, Cosette's history mirrors the gardens. Hugo perfectly sums up this idea: "this coquettish garden, once so compromised, had returned to virginity and modesty,"(887). The word "compromised" seems to encapsulate how her time with the Thénardiers affected her, whereas "virginity" and "modesty" epitomize her new convent life. When the two first move to the house on Rue Plumet, Cosette "found more pleasure in the paved backyard,"(889) with Valjean. However, as she comes into her own and discovers her beauty she begins to "prefer to stay in the garden," (895). To me, this represented her physical changes in appearance, versus the mental change illustrated before. Lastly, I was struck by Valjean's desire to stay out of the garden. Hugo described the garden as a symbol of life. Perhaps the fact that Valjean "did not set foot in the garden,"(895)is indicative of his age, whereas Cosette, a youthful girl, preferred the garden.

Word Count: 209

Second comment on initial post, by FFF:

DDD,

I agree with EEE in that I’m glad you pointed this out. I started to make the connection after a previous post placed emphasis on Cossette being “The Rose” in Chapter V’s title (892), and I think you definitely hit the nail on the head in unpacking this metaphor. One thing that intrigues me about this symbolism and in your post is when you said Cossette will grow “only if she has the freedom the garden does.” I completely agree the garden is a place of fertility; however, the garden is still a distinct space of its own with the “pavement of Paris...all around” (885). For that reason, even though the garden can grow freely in its own acre, there is a limit to its growth placed by the surrounding city. I think this may tie into our discussion of women's mobility in society in that although, assuming the garden to be a metaphor for any woman, an individual women is free to grow in beauty the same way this particular garden did, there are still limitations placed on her by surrounding society. I may be reading into a bit too much, especially considering, as you very well described, the garden very much reflects Cossette's personal history, but I think the garden's limitations are important.

In trying to garner a precise image of this garden, another thing I noticed was that Valjean may also be included in this metaphor. On p.885, Hugo wrote that “the old rusty grating seemed to say the garden is mine!” The title of the following chapter is “Change of Grating” and includes the transformation you described. I personally interpret the grating to be Valjean, initially having Cossette or the garden as his own before it and her blossomed. Therefore the change in grating refers to the changes in Valjean’s and Cossette’s relationship, namely the development of Valjean’s fears regarding her beauty. “This flower girl now offered her flower to the soul” (887).

Word Count: 325