

# LES MISÉRABLES



**EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES**

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# LESSON ONE

CHARACTERS TELL THE STORY IN  
*LES MISÉRABLES*, THE FILM AND THE NOVEL

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# OVERVIEW

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 1 How do the choices creators make as they develop their characters communicate the major themes of a novel?
- 2 How does sharing the title of a classic novel influence the way viewers see a modern film?

## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This lesson will encourage students in high school English Language Arts, French, or European History focusing on the French Revolution, and/or film classes, who have read the novel *Les Misérables*\* to compare the novel and the film's central themes of social inequality, the morality of crime and criminal justice, and the factors that motivate human beings to action, in order to shed light on whether and how the film represents them in our modern world.

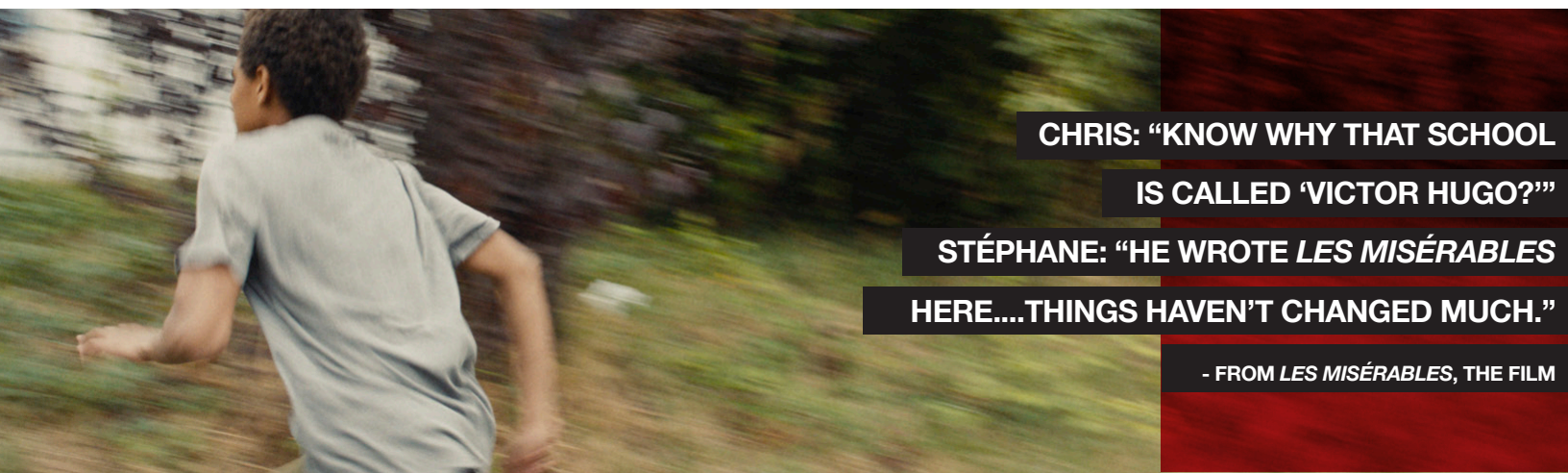
*\*Note: This lesson assumes students are already familiar with the Victor Hugo novel.*





## LESSON OVERVIEW

The 2019 film *Les Misérables* is not a retelling of Victor Hugo's classic novel. But the reference is apt, as the film illuminates some of the universal themes that make the novel an enduring part of our literary canon. As in the novel, the film is placed in a society rife with economic inequality, and both the film and the novel complicate moral notions of "right" and "wrong" when people live in a violent and impoverished system that forces them to make difficult decisions in order to survive.



### In this lesson students will:

- Analyze the way the literary device of characterization is shared between the film and the novel
- Explore how the major themes of the novel shift and evolve as they are applied to the modern day
- Create an argument to support or disagree with the character Stéphane's assertion that "things haven't changed much" since the time the novel was written.



**GRADE LEVEL:**  
10th-12 Grade



**LENGTH:**  
Two-55 minute class period with  
extended learning



## CONTENT NOTE

*Les Misérables* is a French film subtitled in English and is appropriate for a mature student audience. Because of the frequency of expletives and violence, it will be important to secure parental and school permission in order to screen the full film, or film segments, in class.



## MATERIALS

- Handout 1: Copies of the introduction to the novel *Les Misérables*
- Handout 2: Day One Characterization Note Taker
- Handout 3: Day Two Characterization Note Taker



# DAY ONE

## ACTIVITIES

1

Pass out **Handout One** and ask students to do an active read of Victor Hugo's 1862 introduction to his novel, circling any unfamiliar words or concepts, underlining major ideas, and responding to the Stop and Think prompts embedded in the text, either in writing or in group discussion:

"So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth, and adding the element of human fate to divine destiny;"

**STOP AND THINK:** Thinking back to the novel, what kinds of 'decrees' does Hugo refer to that 'artificially create hells amid the civilization of earth'?

"so long as the three great problems of the century—the degradation of man through pauperism, the corruption of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through lack of light—are unsolved; so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world;"

**STOP AND THINK:** How do the three 'great problems' Hugo describes lead to 'social asphyxia'? If social asphyxia is the inability of individuals to change their own social circumstances, what are the examples of characters in the novel who did move from one class to another? Who couldn't? What were the consequences to their lives?

"—in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of *Les Misérables* cannot fail to be of use."<sup>1</sup>

**STOP AND THINK:** What is the use you think Hugo hoped his novel would have? In what ways do you think it is still of use today?

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/135/135-h/135-h.htm>



2

Introduce the Literary Device of Characterization, using this or another definition:

“Characterization in literature refers to the step by step process wherein an author introduces and then describes a character. The character can be described directly by the author or indirectly through the actions, thoughts, and speech of the character.”<sup>2</sup>

Victor Hugo’s characters famously represent specific social issues present in his novels. For example, looking back to his introduction to *Les Misérables*, he mentions the “three great problems of the century.”

Ask students to choose a character in the novel that embodies each, and explain their answers:

- The degradation of man through pauperism (Example: Jean Valjean)
- The corruption of woman through hunger (Example: Fantine)
- The crippling of children through lack of light (Example: Gavroche)

Referring back to class notes, or using a character list from an online source like *Sparknotes*, have students in small groups choose one of the many characters from the novel that interested them and answer the following questions:

- What theme they believe the character stands for
- Specific examples, scenes, or circumstances that defined that character for them
- How the arc of each character’s development reflects a main theme of the novel

*Educator Note: This exercise is meant to take a few minutes and act as a refresher of students’ memories in order to lead to a comparative study of the films’ characters. It is not meant to be an in-depth character analysis.*

<sup>2</sup> <https://literary-devices.com/content/characterization/>





3

Introduce the 2019 film *Les Misérables* by letting students know the film takes place in the Bosquets area of the Parisian working-class suburb of Montfermeil. According to the director Ladj Ly, the film is an accurate representation of his own childhood in the same neighborhood. He says the film is, “about the daily misery shared by everyone in Montfermeil.”

Pass out **Handout 1: Day One Characterization Note Taker**, and explain to students that you will be watching the film clips together, and as they do, they will take note of the following characters. As needed, offer them a few minutes after each clip to complete the relevant section of the handout:

- Issa - a boy growing up in the Bosquets housing projects in the Parisian suburb of Montfermeil.
- Chris - the Sergeant in charge of a Street Crime Unit (SCU) that patrols the Bosquets
- Gwada - partner with Chris in the SCU
- Stéphane - a new partner to Chris and Gwada, recently arrived in Montfermeil from the country

Read the plot notes aloud between each clip so that students can follow the story.

The film opens on a street celebration after France wins a soccer match. Even in a moment of unity, class inequality is visible as youth from Montfermeil travel through the city.

### Clip 1: “The Police Station” (Run time, 4 mins, 40 seconds)

In this clip, Issa’s frustrated father is picking him up from the police station in what appears to be a normal scene for them. Stéphane, newly relocated to Montfermeil from the countryside, is introduced to his sergeant Chris and his new partner Gwada. They get to know one another and receive instructions from the Captain about solidarity with the team.

*In between the clips, a young man named Buzz is using a drone to film girls in the neighborhood. He is found, and other young women threaten to tell on him unless he films their basketball game.*

### Clip 2: “The Neighborhood” (Run time, 1 min, 22 seconds)

In this clip, Chris (front seat, passenger) and Gwada (front seat, driver) give Stéphane (back seat), a tour of the neighborhood and Chris describes his perceptions of the neighborhood and the people who live there.

## CLOSING

Discuss what students will think will happen with each character after the first two scenes. Who do they think is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’? What clues told them that?



# DAY TWO

## ACTIVITIES

- 1 Open class by asking students to remind each other what they have learned about the characters in the film *Les Misérables* so far. What similarities and differences do they notice between them and the characters in the novel?
- 2 Distribute **Handout Three: Day Two Characterizations** for students to take notes on the rest of the clips.

Begin by reading aloud the synopsis of what happens between **Clip Two** (The Neighborhood) and **Clip Three** (The Incident with the Kids)

**Educator Note: Clip Three** “The Incident with the Kids” depicts a child being shot by police. He does not die but he is knocked unconscious. If this is too sensitive for the students in your class, consider reading the clip description, rather than showing the clip to them.

Chris and Gwada tell Stéphane that the “mayor” of Montfermeil is a resident named Le Maire. He is paid by the City to control the area.

While patrolling, Chris, Gwada and Stéphane witness a group of Roma circus performers in a tense stand-off with Le Maire and his men because a resident of Montfermeil stole a lion cub from the circus. The encounter is racially charged, and is threatening to become violent until the police arrive. The circus owner threatens to return with guns if the lion isn’t returned to him.

Issa and his friends have the lion, post a picture on Instagram, and Chris sees it so the policeman start looking for Issa. They go to his home and his mother, an African immigrant, will not let them in. Gwada speaks to her in her language, and she allows Gwada in by himself to look for Issa, but Issa is not there.

The SCU finds Issa on the playground.

**\*Content Note:** *The following clip contains expletives and the image of a child being shot by police. It is suggested because the characters' responses are useful to analyze for the exercise, but it is not necessary if the content feels too graphic for students.*

### **Clip Three: “The Incident with the Kids” (run time 5 minutes)**

In this clip, the police find Issa on the playground and chase him, and the neighborhood gather try to defend him. Issa is shot with a flash-ball, which doesn't kill him, but it does knock him unconscious. The police see the incident was filmed by Buzz's drone. Chris and Stéphane argue, as Chris wants to chase down the drone and the footage to protect themselves, and Stéphane wants to seek medical help for Issa, even if it means the shooting is exposed. They end up chasing after the drone.

The SCU finds the video when Stéphane convinces a local leader to turn it over, weighing the cost of the potential neighborhood uprising against the value of exposing the shooting. But Stéphane will not give the video to Chris. Their shift ends.

### **Clip Four: “This is our Life” (runtime 3 mins, 10 secs)**

Stéphane talks to Gwada at a cafe and gives the video to Gwada to decide what to do with it.

The following day, the neighborhood kids, led by Issa, trap the SCU in a building and start a riot. They violently attack Le Maire, blow up a drug dealer's car. Chris is injured, and Gwada and Stéphane try to help him escape.

### **Clip Five: “The Riot” (runtime 2 mins, 45 secs)**

Chris is injured and Gwada and Stéphane try to seek shelter in an apartment, but no doors open. Issa holds a malatov cocktail and faces Stéphane, who pulls his gun.



3

Have students to create a character profile for one character of their choice - Issa, Chris, Gwada, or Stéphane - that answers the following questions:

- > What do you know about this character's background? What assumptions do you make about him based on hints or clues in the clips?
- > What is the character's main motivation?
- > Did your ideas about whether the character was 'good' or 'bad' change from one clip to the next?
- > What major themes does this character represent?
- > Which character, if any, does this character remind you of from the novel?

Ask students to exchange their profiles with at least one other person who created a profile for a different character.

## ARGUMENT CREATION

Remind students of Stéphane's quote in the first clip with regard to Montfermeil in the time of Victor Hugo and now, "Things haven't changed much."

Based on the clips and the characters, have each student state whether they agree or disagree with Stéphane, and write an argument to support their point of view using evidence from the novel, the film, and their character analyses.

## CLOSING

As a large group, discuss director Ladj Ly's decision to name the film the same as the novel. What do you think the comparison brought to the film? What is challenging about it?

### SUGGESTED EXTENDED LEARNING OR HOMEWORK:

Have students choose another classic novel they admire, and that has themes they believe resonate in today's world. Students will then write an outline for how they would create a modern version of the novel to reflect the same themes.

# STANDARDS

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2**

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3**

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3**

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9**

Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

## **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 and CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1**

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

## VICTOR HUGO'S INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL *LES MISÉRABLES* WITH ACTIVE READ QUESTIONS

“So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth, and adding the element of human fate to divine destiny;”

**STOP AND THINK:** Thinking back to the novel, what kinds of ‘decrees’ does Hugo refer to that ‘artificially create hells amid the civilization of earth’?

“so long as the three great problems of the century—the degradation of man through pauperism, the corruption of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through lack of light—are unsolved; so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world;”

**STOP AND THINK:** How do the three ‘great problems’ Hugo describes lead to ‘social asphyxia’? If social asphyxia is the inability of individuals to change their own social circumstances, what are the examples of characters in the novel who did move from one class to another? Who couldn’t? What were the consequences to their lives?

“—in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of *Les Misérables* cannot fail to be of use.”

**STOP AND THINK:** What is the use you think Hugo hoped his novel would have? In what ways do you think it is still of use today?



# DAY ONE: CHARACTERIZATION CHART

	WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE CHARACTER?	WHY IS HE ACTING AND REACTING THE WAY HE DOES?	WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE HIM AS "GOOD" OR "BAD"? WHY?
<b>CLIP ONE "THE STATION"</b>			
ISSA			
CHRIS			
GWANDA			
STÉPHANE			
<b>CLIP TWO "THE NEIGHBORHOOD"</b>			
CHRIS			
GWADA			
STÉPHANE			

# DAY TWO: CHARACTERIZATION CHART

	WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE CHARACTER?	WHY IS HE ACTING AND REACTING THE WAY HE DOES?	WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE HIM AS "GOOD" OR "BAD"? WHY?
<b>CLIP THREE</b> <b>"THE INCIDENT WITH THE KIDS"</b>			
ISSA			
CHRIS			
GWANDA			
STÉPHANE			
<b>CLIP FOUR</b> <b>"THIS IS OUR LIFE"</b>			
CHRIS			
GWADA			
STÉPHANE			
<b>CLIP FIVE</b> <b>"THE RIOT"</b>			
CHRIS			
CHRIS			
CHRIS			



# LESSON TWO

ANALYZING POINT OF VIEW OF DIRECTOR LADJ LY  
AND *LES MISÉRABLES*

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# OVERVIEW

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- 1 What factors shape an individual's point of view?
- 2 How does point of view inform our perspectives and decision making?

## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This lesson can be incorporated into High School English Language Arts, French, and Media Studies/Film Courses. See the full listing of standards at the end of the lesson.



## LESSON OVERVIEW

Director Ladj Ly of *Les Misérables* shared in the making of the 2019 film, “I was inspired by my own history. Everything in the film comes from my life, from beginning to end.”<sup>1</sup>

This direct and intimate point of view is often termed as one’s “lived experience,” or the personal knowledge about the world gained through one’s own direct and first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations or other viewpoints constructed by people.<sup>2</sup> For Ladj Ly *Les Misérables* - his first fictional work - is inspired by his own lived experience growing up in the Paris suburb of Montfermeil. It stands as a raw and unfiltered portrayal, and social critique, of the tensions he witnessed and experienced between neighborhood residents and law enforcement that inflamed the 2005 Paris riots. The ability and skill to analyze point of view, especially in our media rich environment, is a vital literacy skill and civil right for all students; it enables them to separate fact from fiction and distill the complexity of bias. As Suzanne Plaut argues, “Our youth are truly free only when they are fully literate—when they are able to not only observe but comprehend, and not only understand but evaluate, or take a critical stance; when they can ask about the author’s or source’s bias and viewpoints, note which voices are silenced or discounted, examine issues from alternative perspectives, and take action on the basis of what they have learned.”<sup>3</sup>

As a co-writer and director of *Les Misérables*, Ladj Ly demonstrates literacy as a civil right. He speaks truth to power as a writer, teacher, community member, and filmmaker. His process of filmmaking - using the youth from the community in the film itself and basing the narrative on his lived experience - is not new, yet it stands as a compelling example for students to analyze the development and shaping of point of view.

*Les Misérables* was awarded the Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, and was selected to represent France in the 2020 Academy Awards - a first for a black French director.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/les-miserables-ladj-ly-oscar-1202205076/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100109997>

<sup>3</sup> *The Right to Literacy in Secondary Schools: Creating a Culture of Thinking*, edited by Suzanne Plaut, p. 1.

In this lesson students will:

- > Learn about the lived experience of Ladj Ly
- > Analyze how Ly's lived experience influenced his writing and directing of *Les Misérables*
- > Discuss how one's lived experience compares to other autobiographical frames of reference
- > Demonstrate their understanding of the lesson through writing, or creating a short film, based on their own lived experience.



#### GRADE LEVEL:

10-12th grade



#### LENGTH:

Two-55 minute class period with extended learning. Suggested pacing is included in the lesson.



#### CONTENT NOTE

*Les Misérables* is a French film subtitled in English and is appropriate for a mature student audience. Because of the frequency of expletives and violence, it will be important to secure parental and school permission in order to screen the full film, or film segments, in class.



#### MATERIALS

- > Jigsaw Handout: Paris Riots, 2005
- > Source Materials for the Jigsaw Activity: Print or make available in online shared classroom space.
  1. Timeline: French Riots, 2005: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4413964.stm>
  2. "Ghettos shackle French Muslims" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4375910.stm>
  3. "3 in rioting in suburb of Paris get jail terms" <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/31/world/europe/31iht-france.html>
  4. "Chirac Seeks to Learn Lessons From Unrest" <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/11/10/ap/world/mainD8DPR93GD.shtml>
  5. May 21, 2015, Editorial, "A Lingerin Injustice in France" <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/22/opinion/a-lingerin-injustice-in-france.html>
- > Interview with Director Ladj Ly from Toronto International Film Festival - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbh70zOxoAQ>
- > Trailer for *Les Misérables* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFfdILW9Rwg>
- > Film Clips from *Les Misérables*





# DAY ONE

## ACTIVITIES

1

Ask students to define point of view. What factors shape your point of view? What causes your point of view to change or stay the same?

From this brainstorm have students identify one experience in their life they believe has deeply shaped their point of view. Have students journal in silence for several minutes. This story will not be shared in class and will remain private.

2

Transition from their reflective writing to introducing French filmmaker Ladj Ly using this short biographical profile. As you read, ask students to identify factors in Ly's life that may contribute to shaping his point of view.

**BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE:** Ladj Ly is a French film director and screenwriter. He was born in France in 1978 after his family emigrated from Mali and settled in the Paris suburb of Montfermeil. Ly began making short films at 15, purchasing his first camera at 17, and filming with his friends in the film collective Kourtrajmé. Today he continues to lead the collective as a free film school training youth living in Montfermeil to tell their own stories, just as he did with numerous short documentaries made prior to directing *Les Misérables*. Ly explains, "[I] started the initiative to build a school because France's filmmaking is a closed network and its doors are largely closed to diversity. I'm trying to shift boundaries with the movie, with the school and with production."<sup>4</sup>

*Les Misérables* was awarded the Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, and was selected to represent France in the 2020 Academy Awards for best foreign film - a first for a black French director.

<sup>4</sup> <https://variety.com/2020/artisans/awards/ladj-ly-les-miserables-1203456381/>

## 3

## JIGSAW EXERCISE: BACKGROUND: PARIS RIOTS OF 2005

Share with students that Ladj Ly points to the Paris Riots of 2005 as the inspiration for making *Les Misérables*. Ask if anyone has prior knowledge on what occurred in Paris just 15 years ago?

To fill in the gaps, and to understand more thoroughly the connection between a lived experience as a youth and the development of a cinematic point of view, students will be introduced to different accounts of the Paris Riots of 2005 to deepen their background knowledge.

Begin by distributing the **Timeline: French Riots, 2005** as a handout or on a shared online classroom space. Have students survey the timeline to get a general sense of time, place, and events that occurred. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4413964.stm>

### Step 1: Prepare Home Groups

Organize students into groups of four. These will be their “home groups” of the jigsaw. Tell students they are going to be responsible for teaching this group about their assigned article on the Paris Riots of 2005. As a home group they will also complete the Jigsaw Handout: Paris Riots, 2005.

### Step 2: Distribute/Read Source Material

Print out the following articles, or have them available on an online shared classroom space, for students to read.

➤ **Home Reading Group 1:** October 31, 2005: “Ghettos shackle French Muslims”

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4375910.stm>

➤ **Home Reading Group 2:** November 1, 2005 “3 in rioting in suburb of Paris get jail terms”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110604014024/http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/31/world/europe/31iht-france.html>

➤ **Home Reading Group 3:** November 10, 2005. “Chirac Seeks to Learn Lessons From Unrest”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20051126060706/http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/11/10/ap/world/mainD8DPR93GD.shtml>

➤ **Home Reading Group 4:** May 21, 2015, Editorial, “A Lingering Injustice in France”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/22/opinion/a-lingering-injustice-in-france.html>

**Step 3: Introduce to Home Groups**

Tell students that they are going to be responsible for teaching their assigned article/editorial to the home group they are sitting with now. Tell students that they are going to be responsible for teaching their article/editorial to the group they are sitting with now.

**Step 4: Break into Expert Groups**

Now students will leave their home group to sit with a group of students assigned to the same reading, aka their “expert group.” Ask students to begin reading to themselves, or have them take turns reading aloud. When students are finished reading, the group should discuss the article, fill out their jigsaw handout, and decide as a group what and how they should present to their home groups.

**Step 5: Regroup into “Home Groups”**

Students regroup with their home groups. Each student is responsible for teaching their reading to their home group and to, complete the entire **Jigsaw Handout: Paris Riots, 2005** as a group.





# DAY TWO

## ACTIVITIES

1

Watch interview of Ladj Ly from TIFF. Transition from the jigsaw activity to showing an Interview with Ladj Ly and debrief the interview using these prompts:

- > What stands out about his lived experience and point of view as a filmmaker?
- > What questions still remain?

2

Next show the trailer for *Les Misérables* and reading aloud/project, these quotes from Ladj Ly.

- > “I was inspired by my own history. Everything in the film comes from my life, from beginning to end.”<sup>5</sup>
- > “I have always seen my camera as a weapon...I’ve realized the power and impact of images.”
- > “I believe in the power of cinema as a tool to inspire revolution to challenge the status quo, and bring real lasting change. Some people might be confused or uncomfortable by that sequence, but I hope that in their confusion, they will stop and think about why.”<sup>6</sup>

Have students get in pairs, choose one quote they connect with, share it in their pair, and discuss reasons why they selected this quote.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/les-miserables-ladj-ly-oscar-1202205076/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/11/795281365/france-has-changed-and-so-has-les-mis-rables>



3

Move to watching two short film clips from *Les Misérables*.

**Clip One: (runtime 10 minutes)**

**Contextual Information:** Using Clips One - Three from Lesson One as context, this clip leaves off after the flash-ball injures Issa and the three policeman, Chris, Gwada and Stéphane, are chasing Buzz, the young boy who filmed the incident, to get the memory card from his drone. There is strong language and intense emotions in this clip.

**Clip Two: (runtime: 7:00 minutes)**

**Contextual Information:** This final segment of the film is the climax of the conflict between the community of Montfermeil and the Street Crime Unit (SCU.) It directly precedes Clip Five from Lesson One.

Following the film clips give students a few moments to gather their thoughts and emotions. Have students return to their journals and respond to the following prompt:

“Knowing that the events in the film come from Ladj Ly’s lived experiences growing up in Montfermeil, (1) what questions would you like to ask him if he was in the room, and (2) what reactions do you have to his point of view as it is revealed in these film segments?”

## CLOSING: WRITING ASSIGNMENT

*“Literacy is about more than reading or writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today’s world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of ‘literacy as freedom’.”<sup>7</sup>*

- UNESCO statement published during the decade of literacy, 2003-2012

Have students respond to this statement from UNESCO with a one-page story on a lived experience that connects to this notion of “literacy as freedom.” It can be an experience that has shaped or changed their worldview on a social, political, or economic issue, or an experience they see as one that empowered their voice.

<sup>7</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000192971>



## EXTENDED LEARNING

Watch [365 jours à Clichy Montfermeil](#) - the first short documentary from Ladj Ly on the Paris uprising of 2005

Investigate the free film school, [Kourtrajmé](#), that Ladj Ly helped to establish

# STANDARDS

## ELA

### Alignment of Common Core Standards

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5**

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6**

Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3**

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.3**

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

## French

Alignment of Common Core Standards with [\*World Readiness Standards for Learning Language\*](#)

- Interpersonal: Speaking and Listening
- Interpretive: Listening and Reading
- Language: Proficiency Levels
- Presentational: Speaking and Writing

## JIGSAW HANDOUT: PARIS RIOTS, 2005

### KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER IN HOME GROUP:

- > What does my article illuminate about the Paris Riots of 2005?
- > Why is this important?

### READING ASSIGNMENTS FOR JIGSAW:

- > October 31, 2005: "Ghettos shackle French Muslims", BBC
- > November 1, 2005 "3 in rioting in suburb of Paris get jail terms", *The New York Times*
- > November 10, 2005. "Chirac Seeks to Learn Lessons From Unrest", CBS News
- > May 21, 2015, Editorial, "A Lingering Injustice in France", *The New York Times*

### My notes for assigned selection # \_\_\_\_

#### #1 MAIN IDEA FROM EXPERT GROUP:

- > Supporting Detail A:
- > Supporting Detail B:
- > Supporting Detail C:

#### #2 MAIN IDEA FROM EXPERT GROUP:

- > Supporting Detail D:
- > Supporting Detail E:
- > Supporting Detail F:

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS OR RESPONSES:

OTHER NOTES FROM “EXPERT GROUP:”

NOTES FROM “HOME GROUP” ABOUT SELECTIONS:

#\_\_

#\_\_





# EXAMINING THE POWER OF PROTEST

*LES MISÉRABLES* AND THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

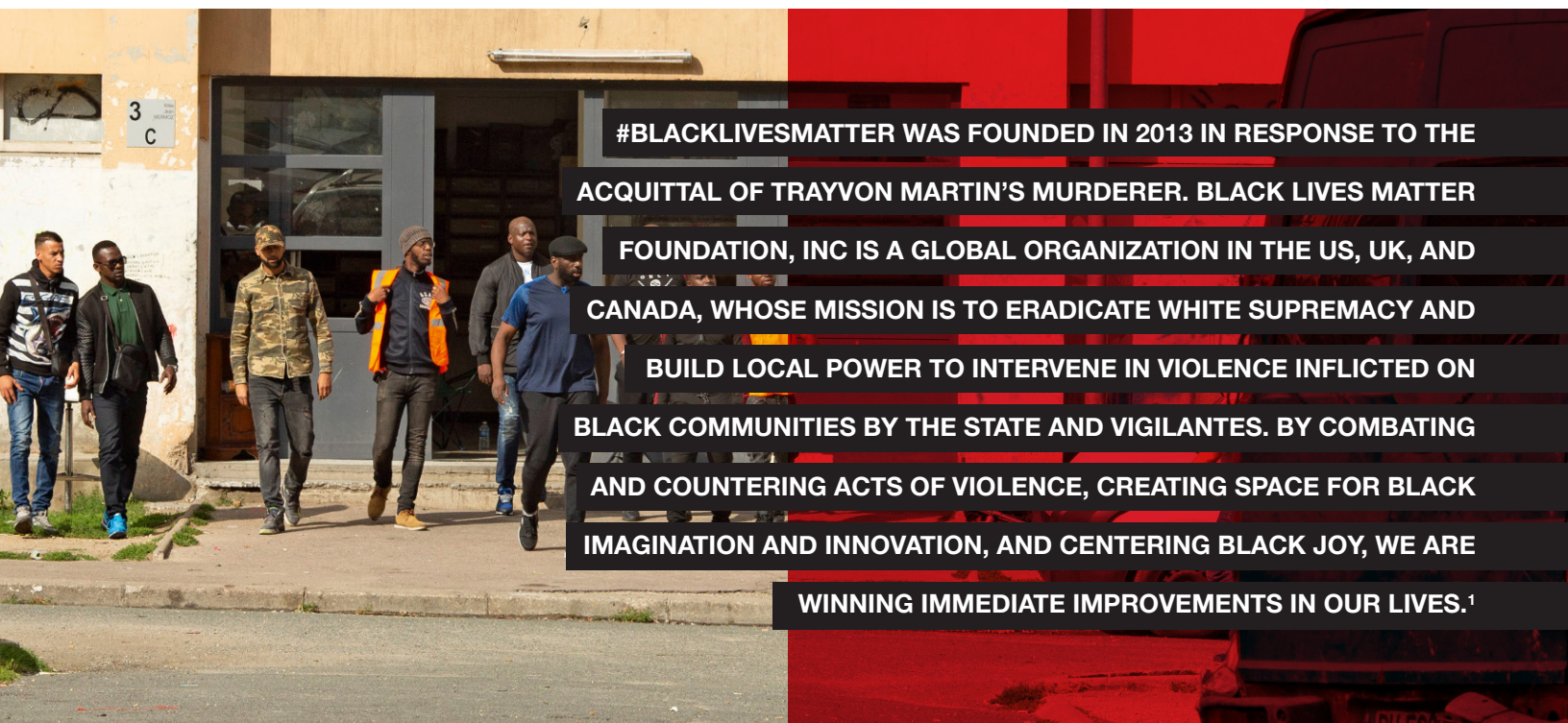
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# INTRODUCTION

*Les Misérables* (2019) is based on actual events of police violence that occurred in the Paris suburb of Montfermeil, a community largely occupied by black African immigrants. The 2018 uprising in the film is reminiscent of the current, widespread protests happening across the United States, France, and the world to the history of excessive police violence against communities of color, and most recently the recorded murder of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer while three other officers watched and did not intervene.

The lesson is developed to bookend a classroom screening of *Les Misérables* and was developed for classrooms seeking to support and learn from engaging resource about Black Lives Matter:



#BLACKLIVESMATTER WAS FOUNDED IN 2013 IN RESPONSE TO THE ACQUITTAL OF TRAYVON MARTIN'S MURDERER. BLACK LIVES MATTER FOUNDATION, INC IS A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION IN THE US, UK, AND CANADA, WHOSE MISSION IS TO ERADICATE WHITE SUPREMACY AND BUILD LOCAL POWER TO INTERVENE IN VIOLENCE INFLICTED ON BLACK COMMUNITIES BY THE STATE AND VIGILANTES. BY COMBATING AND COUNTERING ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CREATING SPACE FOR BLACK IMAGINATION AND INNOVATION, AND CENTERING BLACK JOY, WE ARE WINNING IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENTS IN OUR LIVES.<sup>1</sup>





#### MATERIALS:

Copies of Handout One and Two



#### LENGTH:

One or two, 55-minute class periods



#### PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY:

Begin the lesson with discussing these questions prior to watching *Les Misérables*:

- What do you know about the 2020 protests originating in the United States?
- Why did they start at this moment in time?
- What are the protesters hoping to achieve?



#### INTRODUCTION:

Patrice Cullors, one of the co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter is quoted in an interview on radio program *Here & Now*, saying:

*"For a lot of (the protesters), they want accountability for what these officers have done...I think that's a fine demand and that's not a demand rooted in us being able to change this system, it's holding an individual accountable for their actions...But I do think that the demand of defunding law enforcement becomes a central demand... it's not just about taking away money from the police, it's about reinvesting those dollars into black communities. Communities that have been deeply divested from, communities that, some have never felt the impact of having true resources. And so we have to reconsider what we're resourcing. I've been saying we have an economy of punishment over an economy of care."*<sup>2</sup>

#### Share this background on the murder of George Floyd if helpful:

George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 occurred within the season of other recent police-related deaths of Black people including,

- [Breonna Taylor](#) (March 13, 2020)
- [Ahmaud Arbery](#) (February 11, 2020)
- [David McAtee](#) (June 1, 2020.)

These most recent murders sit against the backdrop of a disproportionate number of African American infections and deaths from COVID-19,<sup>3</sup> ongoing housing discrimination, voter suppression and a majority of the American public who agree that the police are more likely to use excessive force with a black person than a white person in similar situations.<sup>4</sup>



# ACTIVITY

- 1 Pass out **Handout One: #DefundThePolice**, in which Black Lives Matter details its demands with regard to policing, and creating radical, sustainable solutions that affirm black lives and prosperity.
- 2 Have students organize themselves in small reading groups and spend 15 minutes reading the ten demands, writing down any thoughts, questions, or epiphanies (TQEs)<sup>5</sup> they have in response. Have small groups pick their top two TQEs to share with the class.
- 3 As a class have groups share their TQEs and collect these on the board for the full class to see. As TQEs are shared, encourage students to dialogue with one another to increase understanding, and to make note of topics and issues they want to research.
- 4 **CLOSING:** Project or distribute **Handout Two: Letter from *Les Misérables* director, Ladj Ly**. Have students reflect on the perspective of the film's director in response to Black Lives Matter.





# LEARN MORE



Consider asking students to watch Trevor Noah's May 29, 2020 video [“George Floyd and the Dominos of Racial Injustice,”](#) (runtime 18:20)



The broader policy agenda of the [Movement for Black Lives](#), a consortium of black activist organizations that includes Black Lives Matter, united to make legislative change in support of black rights and prosperity around the world.



To research the epidemic of fatal police shootings in the United States at the hand of law enforcement see the database [Fatal Force](#) collected by the Washington Post since the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.



The murder of George Floyd has also reignited [calls for justice for the killing of Adama Traoré](#) in France. Have students research recent international press coverage on these protests and explore how the public in France is reacting.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/03/black-lives-matter-co-founder>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-policy-watch/growing-data-underscore-communities-color-harder-hit-covid-19/>

<sup>4</sup> This poll also found that 76 percent of Americans — including 71 percent of white people — called racism and discrimination “a big problem” in the United States. [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/documents/monmouthpoll\\_us\\_060220.pdf/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/documents/monmouthpoll_us_060220.pdf/) and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/politics/polling-george-floyd-protests-racism.html>, Accessed June 10, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/tqe-method/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://blacklivesmatter.com/defundthepolice/>

# HANDOUT ONE

## PETITION TO DEFUND THE POLICE<sup>6</sup>

### #DEFUNDTHEPOLICE

**May 30, 2020**

Enough is enough.

Our pain, our cries, and our need to be seen and heard resonate throughout this entire country. We demand acknowledgment and accountability for the devaluation and dehumanization of Black life at the hands of the police.

We call for radical, sustainable solutions that affirm the prosperity of Black lives.

George Floyd's violent death was a breaking point — an all too familiar reminder that, for Black people, law enforcement doesn't protect or save our lives. They often threaten and take them.

Right now, Minneapolis and cities across our country are on fire, and our people are hurting — the violence against Black bodies felt in the ongoing mass disobedience, all while we grapple with a pandemic that is disproportionately affecting, infecting, and killing us.

We call for an end to the systemic racism that allows this culture of corruption to go unchecked and our lives to be taken.

We call for a national defunding of police. We demand investment in our communities and the resources to ensure Black people not only survive, but thrive. If you're with us, add your name to the petition right now and help us spread the word.

Currently, we are fighting two deadly viruses: COVID-19 is threatening our health. White Supremacy is threatening our existence. And both are killing us every single day.

We demand real transformation NOW. Transformation that will hold law enforcement accountable for the violence they inflict, transformation of this racist system that breeds corruption, and transformation that ensures our people are not left behind.

It's time for our cities and states to #DefundThePolice and #InvestInCommunities. Sign the petition right now, and share it with friends and family.

# HANDOUT TWO

## LETTER FROM *LES MISÉRABLES* DIRECTOR, LADJ LY

**Ladj Ly wrote the following letter about his personal experience with the complexity of a neighborhood interacting with the police, and how that inspired the film.**

In 1862, Victor Hugo sets the story of his book *Les Misérables* in Montfermeil. Here, in this small village near Paris, stands the Thernardier's joint.

In October 2005, after the death of two teenagers, a series of riots ignited Montfermeil. Scenes of violence, young men wearing hoodies, throwing Molotov cocktails towards an overtaken police was all over television news. To my knowledge, no one ever made the connection between the 1862 Gavroche dying at the barricades of Saint-Denis street and those kids, struggling with law enforcement.

Naturally, no conflation has to be made here and there is no need to blame or heroize anyone. It would be too easy. The film's narrative has nothing to do with Victor Hugo's novel. There is no intention to adapt the book in a modern time, but more to find connections between the characters, places and values in both stories.

Taking the 2005 riots, who would be these characters that carry this story? Do hundreds of Gavroche lie among us, hidden under a hood, waiting to be seen? Is there a Javert to believe in a ruthless but fair justice? Does a Jean-Valjean struggle somewhere to make us believe in humanity? These bridges, these links I'm drawing are more like rhymes and resonances to Hugo's work as the aim of the film is to read today's world in the light of yesterday's fictions. After the 2005 riots, I decided to film my city Clichy-Montfermeil for a year. From this footage emerged a film documentary, 365 in Clichy Montfermeil, which gave me the idea to make a short, and then a feature film of it.

I've always been attracted both by documentary and fiction, but it often occurred to me that with documentaries, I could find the most surprising characters. Observing and filming the city in which I grew up impregnated me with anecdotes and situations that fed the script. The « bugs » who steal a baby lion from a circus, the Montfermeil market and its daily scheming, the neighborhood's deals between the different groups... The characters are inspired by encounters I had, friends, family that I filmed. The « bugs », cops, elders, mothers, employees are no

# HANDOUT TWO - CONT'D

strangers to me. They're not some kind of fantasy or myth. These are people I know intimately for some, they are complex and often contradictory characters, but real people before all. « Everyone has their reasons », said Jean Renoir, it is perhaps even more true in those suburbs where scheming mingles with love and where misery mixes with violence. Thus, I didn't want to give my story a too Manichean aspect, because we all know that reality is much more complex than what we are used to hearing and seeing on TV. There are always good and bad people on both sides. I thought it was necessary to go over the classical anti-police accusation or the naivety behind the speeches on the unfavored "estate kids" or powerlessness of public authorities.

My aim was to film each character in a non-judgmental approach. Like "The Mayor" who waves between his educator position in the estate and his crooked habits, the cops are torn by their duty of order and justice, as well as their own humanity. But they are just all trying to cope with their lives. Their only enemy is misery, even for the police. By filming the officers' private life, I wanted to depict them beyond their function and highlight what their private life can be, sometimes not that different from whose people they are confronted to. They are also abandoned by the institutions.

Like in my short film, I needed a fresh perspective to guide us in the story. Stéphane, this officer freshly arrived in Montfermeil, discovers like the spectator the neighborhood, its inhabitants, the different places and groups that he has only seen on TV. No better or worse than any other, he must do what he's been told to do, his duty. Between the desire for justice and violent gangland slaying. He was asked to enforce the law, but is it really possible here? He is like those Sheriff figures in Westerns movies, the one who tries to impose a semblance of order in a hostile and violent world, in the midst of corruption, killings and fears.

Twenty-five years before *Les Misérables*, *La Haine* (*The Hate*) directed by Mathieu Kassowitz was released. The film has created its mythology and has influenced many filmmakers, but above all, the image of the suburbs changed thanks to it. The film was a perfect resonance of its time. Twenty-five years later, the suburbs have evolved, and it is now time to find new perspectives, new points of view and new stories to narrate, which is always possible, thanks to cinema.

## LADY J



# LES MISÉRABLES



THE EDUCATIONAL CONTENT FOR *LES MISÉRABLES* DEVELOPED BY



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