

REVOLUTIONS IN EUROPE AND LATIN AMERICA
Link to Literature

The revolutions of the mid-nineteenth century were set against a background of great poverty. *Les Misérables*, by French author Victor Hugo (1802–1885), explores the lives of some of France’s poor—the “wretched ones.” The hero of the novel is Jean Valjean, who was once sentenced to five years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread. This excerpt shows the city of Paris responding to an émeute, or uprising, in 1832. ♦ *As you read, notice how the people have grown used to unrest. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

From *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo

Outside of the insurgent quarters, nothing is usually more strangely calm than the [appearance] of Paris during an émeute. . . . These colossal cities alone can contain at the same time a civil war, and an indescribably strange tranquility. Usually, when the insurrection begins . . . the shopkeeper merely says:

“It seems there is some squabble. . . . Somewhere down that way.”

. . . A moment afterwards, if the émeute approaches and increases, he precipitately shuts his shop, and hastily puts on his uniform. . . .

There is firing at the street corners, in an arcade, in a cul-de-sac [dead end]; barricades are taken, lost, and retaken; blood flows, the fronts of the houses are riddled with grape [shot], balls kill people in their beds, corpses encumber the pavement. A few streets off, you hear the clicking of billiard balls in the cafes.

The theatres. . . . play comedies; the curious chat and laugh two steps from these streets full of war. The fiacres [horse-drawn cabs] jog along; passers are going to dine in the city. . . .

Nothing is more strange; and this is the peculiar characteristic of the émeutes of Paris, which is not found in any other capital. Two

things are requisite for it, the greatness of Paris and its gaiety. . . . This time, however, in the armed contest of the 5th of June, 1832, the great city . . . was afraid. You saw everywhere . . . doors, windows, and shutters closed in broad day. The courageous armed, the poltroons hid. The careless and busy wayfarer disappeared. Many streets were as empty as at four o’clock in the morning. Alarming stories were circulated, ominous rumors were spread. . . .

Evening came, the theatres did not open; the patrols made their round spitefully; passers were searched; the suspicious were arrested. . . . Anxiety was everywhere, and a certain tremor, little known to Paris.

People barricaded themselves in their houses; wives and mothers were terrified; you hear only this: Oh! *My God! he has not come back!* . . . People listened. . . . They expected the first cannon-shot. Men rose up at the corners of the streets and disappeared, crying “Go home!” And they hastened to bolt their doors. They said: “How will it end? From moment to moment, as night fell, Paris seemed colored more dismally with the fearful flame of the émeute.

Source: *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, trans. Charles E. Wilbour (The Modern Library, 1992).

Questions to Think About

1. How did the city of Paris generally react during an émeute, or uprising?
2. What contrasting activities might occur in other parts of the city during an uprising?
3. **Analyze Information** What was different about the uprising of June 1832? How did people and officials react? What did officials do?
4. **Make Inferences** What does this excerpt show about Paris in the 1830s?