

# Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*: The Hero with the Passion and Power of Prometheus

## ARU Syllabus

Last updated: April 13, 2025

**COURSE TITLE:** Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*: The Hero with the Passion and Power of Prometheus

**COURSE YEAR AND QUARTER:** 2024-25, Q3

### **COREQUISITE COURSES:**

100-level courses have "Objectivism through Ayn Rand's Fiction" or the "Intensive Seminar on Objectivism" as a corequisite.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

*The Man Who Laughs*, according to Ayn Rand, was the best novel ever written by Victor Hugo, her favorite novelist. Together, we will see why she was right. In our course, we will analyze its structure, relish its descriptive style, and appreciate the integration of the suspenseful plot with the theme, colorful drama, and razor-sharp character portrayals. We will focus especially on the dramatic structure, the key turning points in the hero's life, the crucial conflicts, contrasts, and choices. Our goal is to do justice to the details and the drama of a literary achievement.

**COURSE DURATION:** 8 Weeks

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the context of Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* within the author's life, work, and literary stature.
- Describe and analyze the structure and essence of Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* as a whole.
- Understand Ayn Rand's description and evaluation of Hugo's explicit and implicit goals.
- Analyze Hugo's choices in theme and characterization—and the connections among these choices.
- Grasp the relationship between Hugo's stylistic choices and the values he dramatizes.
- Explore the background, development, and moral decisions of Gwynplaine, the heroic protagonist.

### **INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION**

Instructor:

**Shoshana Milgram**

Dr. Milgram, associate professor of English at Virginia Tech, specializes in narrative fiction and film. Among her recent courses are Literature and the Law, Cinema and Literature, World Novels, and a graduate course on George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. Her scholarship includes introductions to Victor Hugo's novels, a study of Ayn Rand's life up to 1957, and articles on Shaw, Dostoevsky, Hugo, George Eliot, Victoria Cross, Chekhov, Nevil Shute, Nabokov, Steinbeck, Tolstoi, E. L. Voynich, and others. She relishes the role of literary detective.

Teaching Assistant:  
**Nicolas Krusek**

### **WEEKLY COURSE OVERVIEW**

All reading assignments are drawn from the text of Hugo's novel.  
I will provide a list of secondary sources, but no secondary sources are required.

### **Important**

Writing assignments for students are due at 11:59 PM EDT on Fridays prior to each Monday class. The weekly written assignments will be due at 11:59 P.M. EDT (8:59 P.M. PDT) **on Fridays** prior to each Monday class.

### **Week 1: Class on Monday, April 7**

Reading assignment: Part I, Two Preliminary Chapters. Approximately 30 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PDT) on Friday, April 4.

### **Week 2: Class on Monday, April 14**

Reading assignment: Part I, Books I-II. Approximately 70 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT(8:59 PDT) on Friday, April 11.

### **Week 3: Class on Monday, April 21**

Reading assignment: Part I, Book III. Approximately 30 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT(8:59 PDT) on Friday, April 18.

### **Week 4: Class on Monday, April 28**

Reading assignment: Part II, Books I- II. Approximately 100 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PDT) on Friday, April 25.

### **Week 5: Classes on Monday, May 5, and Friday, May 9**

Reading assignment: Part II, Books III-IV-V-VI. Approximately 120 pages. We meet twice this week, to explore these Books within the novel.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PDT) on Friday, May 2.

### **Week 6: Class on Monday, May 12**

Reading assignment: Part II, Books VII-VIII. Approximately 70 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PDT) on Friday, May 9.

### **Week 7: Class on Monday, May 19**

Reading assignment: Part II, Book IX and Conclusion. Approximately 40 pages.

Significant Passages Writing Assignment (on the assigned reading) due no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PDT) on Friday, May 16.

### **Wednesday, June 11, 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PM PDT)**

Due date for Final Paper

### **READINGS**

The required reading is Victor Hugo's novel: *L'Homme qui rit*, translated as *The Man Who Laughs* or *The Laughing Man*.

If you are reading the novel in English, I recommend the most complete English translation in print, *The Laughing Man*, translated by the award-winning James Hogarth, published by Kennedy & Boyd in 2008.

(ISBN 978-1904999843)

I prefer Hogarth's translation; if you can acquire it, I suggest you do so.

If you are unable to obtain this edition, you may read, instead, alternative translations, e.g. the free version in Project Gutenberg:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12587/pg12587-images.html>

Other in-print or electronic editions render the events of the narrative, but have some omissions in the descriptions.

If you are reading the novel in French, the two-volume Nelson edition of *L'Homme qui rit* has the full text and is the edition in Ayn Rand's library.

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

**Significant Passages:** (70 points total for the 7 assignments in this category)

The deadline for each significant-passage writing assignment is 11:59 P.M. EDT (8:59 P.M. PDT) **on Fridays** prior to each Monday class. For the Friday meeting on May 9 (our second meeting that week), there is no additional writing assignment.

From the reading assigned for the week, type or copy two quotations from the designated assignment, and indicate where in the text (chapter, line, or any identifying marker) each quotation appears.

1. For each quotation,  
Explain why you find the passage significant or important. (What questions does it raise? How does it connect with other parts of the work or with other issues we have discussed?) Supply specific, persuasive, and apt evidence for your explanation, and be sure it is clear why your evidence supports your explanation.  
2 points for each explanation-plus-support: 1 point for a clear explanation of the significance of the passage, and 1 point for relevant support.  
4 points total for this part of the assignment.
2. What **parallel or similarity** do you see between an aspect of one of your passages and a passage or scene or event in Ayn Rand's published fiction or non-fiction? Explain your answer with specific, persuasive, and apt evidence, and be sure it is clear why your evidence supports your explanation.  
**(2 points: 1 point for a clear explanation of the parallel or similarity, and 1 point for relevant support.)**  
  
What **contrast** do you see between an aspect of one of your passages and a passage or scene or event in Ayn Rand's published fiction or non-fiction? Explain your answer with specific, persuasive, and apt evidence, and be sure it is clear why your evidence supports your explanation.  
**(2 points: 1 point for a clear explanation of the contrast, and 1 point for relevant support.)**
3. Compose a research question (at least 50 words) arising from the reading (not limited to your quotations).
  - a. The question should be focused and well-defined. The question should be a genuine question (unresolved issues, contradictions, puzzles—not simply a factual matter to which there is a single answer). (1 point for a clear, focused question.)
  - b. You should be convinced that the question matters, and you should explain why it matters. (1 point for a persuasive explanation of why the question matters. )**(2 points total for this part of the assignment.)**

**Final Paper: 30 points**

Deadline: Wednesday, June 11

The general paper topic is as follows:

In Hugo's universe, some characters project virtue, and others project vice; there are rarely mixtures. If you agree with this statement, explain (with support from the novel) how this approach is evident in his characters, and explain why this approach to characterization

supports Hugo's view of the world. If you disagree with this statement, present your own statement (with support from the novel) regarding Hugo's approach to characterization, and why your description of his approach is consistent with his view of the world.

Individualized paper topics may be a possibility. If you have in mind a different topic, please discuss it with me in advance.

The minimum length for the paper is 8 double-spaced pages, or 2000 words, to be submitted as a file.

Evaluation of the paper will depend on the following:

Unity and focus: stating your main point and using it to organize the paper

Accuracy of evidence: choosing relevant evidence to support all of your points, and making it clear why your evidence supports your points

Insightfulness of your thesis

Clear, error-free prose

Please submit this paper no later than 11:59 PM EDT (8:59 PM PDT), Wednesday, June 11. You are welcome to submit your paper early.

The total possible number of points for the course is 100 (70 for the significant passages and 30 for the paper.)

### **OVERALL COURSE GRADE:**

The overall course grade will consist of the total number of points earned for the submitted assignments: seven significant-passage assignments and one paper.

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### **GENERAL POLICIES:**

Familiarize yourself with the [ARU Handbook](#) if you have not already done so. Unless specified otherwise in this syllabus, all policies in the Handbook are in effect for this course.

### **COURSE WEBSITE:**

Logistical details about the course are available at the course website, including:

- Live class schedule and Zoom link for attending live classes
- Recordings of past classes
- Office hour details, including links to book an appointment
- Teaching assistant information
- How to join the ARU Discord server

The course website is also accessible through your dashboard after logging into the [ARU website](#). Contact [aru@aynrand.org](mailto:aru@aynrand.org) if you have any issues accessing the site.

**COURSE COMMUNICATION:**

- Course announcements are posted in the Announcements tab of the course website and automatically emailed to all participants. Please make sure you are receiving these emails and that they are not going to your spam folder. If you join after the start of class, be sure to check the Announcements tab for anything you may have missed.
- For questions about course content, structure or schedule, please ask during the live class or in the course channel on the ARU Discord server (see the Discord tab of the course website). Questions about your assignments and grades should be directed to the teaching assistant.
- For personal administrative issues (e.g., website problems), contact [aru@aynrand.org](mailto:aru@aynrand.org).
- If you have a technical issue preventing submission of an assignment, email your assignment to the Instructor or TA and cc: [aru@aynrand.org](mailto:aru@aynrand.org) to troubleshoot the matter.