

# 'Victor Hugo, the Irish 'Misérables, and Fenian women in the nineteenth-century'

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## Introduction

When W.B. Yeats first met Maud Gonne, he told her of his ambition to be an 'Irish Victor Hugo.' Indeed the influence of France's greatest national poet on Yeats appears to have been profound and lasting. In his youth Yeats claims to have read Hugo's entire works, he quotes frequently from Hugo, and he spoke of Hugo at his meeting with the French poet Paul Verlaine in Paris. While the leader of French Romanticism no doubt very pleasingly appealed to Yeats' literary sensibilities, his political humanism, and his somewhat outlandish spiritual beliefs, the links between France's greatest national icon and Ireland are in fact far greater than has ever been acknowledged. This article seeks to explore Hugo's little-acknowledged, though decisive role as a spokesperson for the Irish 'Misérables' during the nineteenth-century. As well as examining Hugo's much-overlooked support for the plight of the Irish, this article will move on to explore the way in which Hugo's letter of support for the wives of Fenian prisoners is reflective of his wider support for the feminist movement in nineteenth-century. While existing critical appraisal on Hugo's feminism has been largely limited to his fictional representations of women, my research foregrounds the importance of Hugo's undocumented and unstudied primary material for evidence of his feminist convictions, as exemplified by his correspondence with Fenian women.

## Hugo says the 'Ár nAthair.'

When Hugo declared his opposition to Louis Napoléon Bonaparte's 'coup d'état' in 1851, he was forced into political exile on the Channel Islands where he remained until his return to France following the foundation of the Third Republic in September 1870. Although expelled from his homeland and privately mourning the tragic death of his daughter, Hugo continued to exert a gigantic influence over affairs in France, and indeed the world. Far from enclosing him in a personal world of grief, desolation, and private despair, Hugo's experience of exile served only to make him more acutely sensitive to the plight of others, more vehement in his campaign for justice, equality, and an end to all forms of oppression. As a small nation in the throes of violent rebellion and upheaval, it is not surprising that Ireland should have resonated with Hugo's moral conscience and indeed as his many acute literary observations on Ireland indicate, he was just as sensitive to the plight of Ireland as

he was with that of the many other small nations which he defended during his prolonged political exile, most notably Crete, Geneva, Mexico, Portugal, Cuba, and Serbia. In his epic novel describing the ineluctable forces of social progress *Toilers of the Sea*, Hugo describes the Irish immigrants in London as the most wretched of all the 'Misérables' residing in the city: 'Living in wet clothing is a habit which may be acquired. The poor groups of Irish people, — old men, mothers, half naked girls and infants, — who spend the winter in the open air, in the snow and rain, huddled together at the corners of the London streets, live and die in this condition.' To use Jean-Paul Sartre's expression, Hugo was the epitome of the politically-engaged writer or 'l'écrivain engagé' who used his writing in such a way as to highlight the gravest social injustices of his time, whether it be the use of the death penalty, slavery, poverty, or prostitution. In the preface of *Autumn Leaves*, one of his finest poetic masterpieces, Hugo suggests 'a poetry working for the cause of liberty, a poetry for the people and against kings and all kinds of dictatorships.' The preface laments the bad state of affairs in Europe and Ireland is described as a cemetery. This metaphor is continued throughout the work wherein Hugo expresses his profound hatred for the oppression of small nations and evokes 'a bleeding Ireland expiring on its cross.' One of Hugo's most poignant literary references to the plight of the Irish appears in his novel *The Man who Laughs*, a tragic love story in which he launches a scathing attack against social inequality and injustice. In the novel, Hugo gives an account of a storm at sea in which a group of disenfranchised exiles among whom are Irish, French, and Basque women are united in prayer: 'Sanctificetur nomen tuum. Que votre nom soit sacrifié, dit le provençal. Naomhthar hainm, dit l'irlandaise. Adveniat regnum tuum, poursuit le docteur. Que votre règne arrive, dit le provençal. Tigeadh do rioghaehd, dit l'irlandaise.' Hugo describes how the Irish and Basque women, like all 'Misérables', are united not only through their language but also through their suffering: 'The motley nature of the group shone out. The women were of no age. A wandering life produces premature age, and indigence is made up of wrinkles. One of them was a Basque of the Dry-Ports. The other, with the large rosary, was an Irishwoman. They wore an air of indifference common to the wretched.'

## From Fenian wives to Queen Victoria

While such poignant literary depictions of the 'wretched' Irish reveal his deep compassion for the Irish people and the sublime dignity which he bestows on all 'Misérables', Hugo's relationship with Ireland extended far beyond his literary expressions of sympathy when he became directly involved in the Irish political struggle. In 1867, while still in exile in Guernsey, Hugo received a letter from the wives of six condemned Fenian rebels seeking his support in their opposition to the impending executions of their husbands, among whom were the prominent leaders of the Fenian Rebellion of 1867, General Burke, Captain Mac Afferty, and Captain Mac Clure, and three others, Kelly, Joice, and Cullinane, who were each arrested and condemned to death by British authorities in the aftermath of the

Rebellion. Hugo's response to the women's plea for help was immediate and decisive, writing a personal letter to Queen Victoria seeking the reprieve of the condemned men, and cementing his role as a spokesperson for the Irish 'Misérables' of the nineteenth-century. In his letter, Hugo appeals to the renowned, global stature and reputation of England as an enlightened nation of progress, justice, and civilization. His letter is marked by a forceful, rhetorical tone in which he discredits the practice of capital punishment as an 'affront to civilisation' which contradicts England's role as a leading nation for all European nations. Hugo's decision to expressly address the letter to Queen Victoria in his attempt to grant clemency for the Irish rebels is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that it was Hugo's support for a highly satirical article on Queen Victoria's visit to France in 1855 sent by his fellow French exiles to a London newspaper, which led to the expulsion of three French exiles from London, and subsequently Hugo's own expulsion from Jersey. Presumably, given their history, Queen Victoria would not have readily appreciated Hugo's input in an issue of such national concern and political import, yet Hugo's passionate appeal to Queen Victoria to spare the wives and children of the condemned men from social ruin remarkably succeeded in persuading her to grant clemency to each of the six rebels. On a further occasion in 1867, when three Fenians, the so-called 'Manchester Martyrs' were condemned to death after a police sergeant had been killed during a raid on a prison containing two Fenians, Hugo appealed once again for clemency from Queen Victoria. On this occasion however, Queen Victoria ignored Hugo's appeals for a reprieve and the three Fenians were hanged. On the following day, 24 November 1867, Hugo, deeply grieved by the incident, wrote in his manuscript: 'yesterday the three Fenians Larkin, Alton and Gould (the last two were in fact named Allen and O'Brien) were hanged at Manchester.'

## **The 'Don Juan' becomes a feminist**

While Hugo's intervention in the plight of the Irish rebels confirms the lengths to which he went in support of the Irish 'Misérables' and the profound empathy he felt for their cause, his letter to the Fenian women is significant for another reason also. During his exile, Hugo became a spokesperson not only for the oppressed and downtrodden, he also became an international spokesperson in the struggle for women's rights and female emancipation. His participation in the feminist struggle of his time has been woefully overlooked however in the larger scheme of his social and political activism owing to the dominant critical focus on the more high-profile moral causes to which he devoted his attention, most notably, the abolition of the death penalty, an end to slavery, and the freedom of press. Then of course there is Hugo's enduring image as the most notorious 'Don Juan' of his time and the quintessential patriarch of the 19th century which has fuelled the scathing criticisms of his perceived one-dimensional image of femininity whereby women fit neatly into the categories of virginal girlhood or devoted motherhood, and which have made any claims to Hugo's feminism a seemingly implausible, and frankly unrewarding feat. While there are

many reasons why Hugo's contribution to the feminist movement of his time has not been deemed worthy of in-depth critical analysis, my research, which focuses on Hugo's largely undocumented letter correspondences with women during his time in exile and his primary discourse on women's rights breaks new ground in existing Hugolian scholarship by providing an invaluable insight into Hugo's direct participation in the struggle for female emancipation. These new insights cast Hugo's attitudes towards women in a revealing new light, while also offering new perspectives from which to view Hugo's representations of femininity in his fictional works. Over the course of his exile, Hugo received letters from countless groups of afflicted women as diverse as the female victims of the Cuban Revolution and the women at the forefront of the struggle against the introduction of regulated prostitution in England. In his letters of reply to these women, Hugo professes his upmost support for the most pressing demands of the feminist struggle in 19th century Europe. He condemns prostitution as a form of legal tyranny, and declares that a nation can never be free so long as half of its population are oppressed. His support for the women of Cuba and the Fenian women demonstrate his awareness of the changing position of women in the nineteenth-century, and his support for the pro-active, cross-gendered roles which women adopted in the various revolutionary struggles which unfolded during the century. He declared that the greatest achievement of the century would be the extension of equal rights to both sexes thereby completing the aims of the French Revolution. To that end, he argued that women were entitled to equal education, full citizenship, and equal suffrage rights — which were the most radical and defining demands of nineteenth-century feminism. Further, the feelings of displacement, isolation, and social alienation occasioned by Hugo's experience of exile enabled him to form a relational and experiential connection with the afflicted women who sought his assistance, and thus proved indispensable in enabling him to establish himself as a sympathetic voice in the struggle for women's rights. While the ability of men to engage in feminism is often treated with fear and suspicion owing to their privileged position as bearers of patriarchalism, Hugo's self-alignment with the plight of women on the basis of his own oppressed and marginalised status as an exile demonstrates his attempt to speak on behalf of women's rights, not from a privileged, masculinist perspective but from a compassionate and empathetic perspective, something which men involved in the feminist struggle today still struggle unsuccessfully to achieve. Such was Hugo's ability to harness the feelings of exclusion, marginality, and oppression occasioned by his experience of exile into an empathetic feminist voice that during his exile, his letter to the Cuban women was published in the *New York Times*, his progressive anti-prostitution discourse was alluded to in the *International Council of Women* in 1888, and Hugo was chosen as an honorary spokesperson for multiple feminist organisations and a political advocate for the improvement of women's rights in Parliament following his return to France in 1870.

## **An 'Irish Victor Hugo'**

Aside from the many personal reasons why Yeats wished to be an 'Irish Victor Hugo', the deeply compassionate way in which Hugo supported and defended the small, anguished nation so beloved by Yeats more than vindicate this lofty aspiration. His direct involvement in the Irish political struggle make Ireland one of the many small nations whose freedom he advocated, and the Irish people yet another groups of voiceless, disenfranchised 'Misérables' whom he so valiantly defended. What's more, Hugo's response to the Fenian women's plea for help is a further poignant example of his much-overlooked though significant contribution to the feminist struggle of his time. In writing to Hugo, the Fenian women demonstrate the same 'profound respect' expressed by the many other groups of afflicted women who sought his assistance, while Hugo's deep compassion, solidarity, and decisive action on their behalf in turn reflects his conviction in fulfilling his own bold statement that the 'nineteenth-century would proclaim the rights of women.' While Hugo's defence of the Irish 'Misérables' has been greatly overlooked in comparison with his support for the afflicted nations in central and Eastern Europe and his renowned intervention in his campaign against the death penalty in North America, Hugo's primary discourse during his exile illustrates his direct intervention in the Irish political struggle. Further, Hugo's support for the Fenian women is illustrative of his largely unacknowledged though significant participation in the feminist struggle in the mid-nineteenth-century and the merit of investigating his neglected and forgotten primary material in bringing to light this aspect of his social activism, and his support for all oppressed people.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support, insight, and encouragement provided by my supervisor Dr. Paul Hegarty.