



Les Misérables

A Political and Cultural History

Disclaimer:

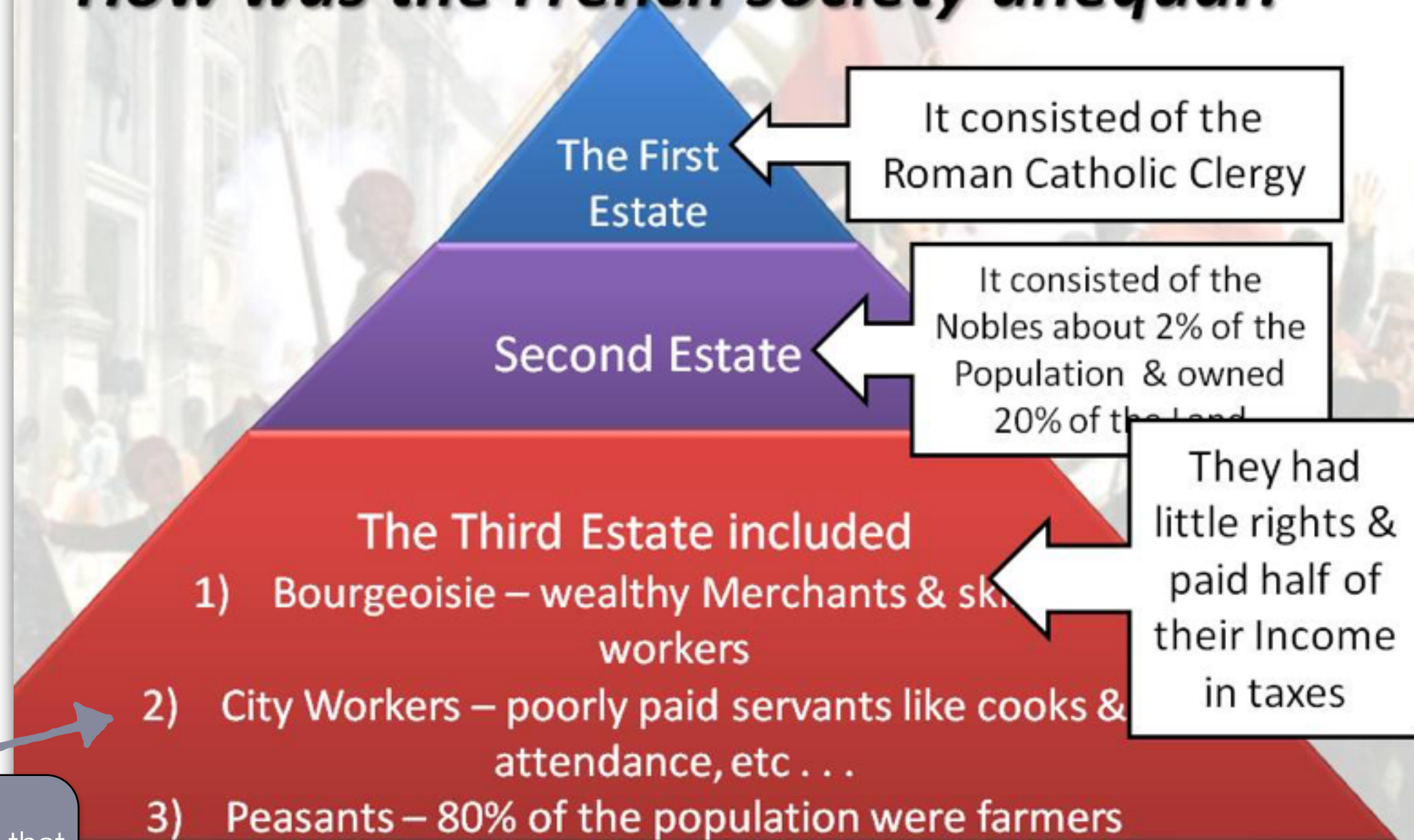
Les Mis is the French Revolution



The actual French Revolution took place nearly 20 years before the start of *Les Misérables*. It began in 1789 and lasted until 1799. The French Revolution consisted of the overthrow of Louis XVI and the introduction of the National Assembly.

Social Hierarchy in Pre-Revolutionary France

How was the French society unequal?



Remember that the poor in *Les Mis* are urban!

ACT ONE SCENE 1: Toulon, 1815

The French Revolution saw the overthrow of the *ancien régime* (the absolute monarchy.) This was great, until the new government (initially the National Assembly) became incompetent. There were rifts between politicians and the government was too decentralized. As a result Napoleon Bonaparte was able to take control of France and crown himself emperor.

So basically the French were back to where they started and the revolutionary efforts of the late 18th century were for nothing.



Napoleon wanted to extend France's influence throughout Europe. A major political event that is occurring when *Les Mis* begins is the Napoleonic Wars. In June 1815, the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo which sent the French Emperor into exile (yay!)



The Duke of Wellington and Prince William of Orange at the end of the Battle of Waterloo

The Napoleonic Wars were very expensive. The French were also still trying to recover from the expense of the American Revolution that Louis XVI had funded. At this time the poor carried the tax burden. As a result the poor people of France were left to extreme measures to survive (why Valjean stole bread to feed his family!)



ACT ONE SCENE 2: Montreil-sur-Mer, 1823

After the fall of Napoleon, Louis XVIII, brother of Louis XVI, assumed the crown. This solidified the return of the *ancien régime* and its strict social hierarchy. The 19th century was a time of great economic innovation. The Industrial Revolution is in full swing by the 1820s. As we see in *At the End of the Day*, the urban poor are feeling its effects.



***The Arrival of King Louis XVIII
of France in Calais in 1814
By William Bird***

Fast Facts on the Conditions of the Urban Poor

- **Population expanded faster than the economy**
- **High demand for agricultural products with few ways for them to reach the city**
- **Rural poverty drove people to the cities**
- **Catholic country is becoming more secularized**
- **Literacy rates are rising (but that doesn't mean they were reading Voltaire!)**
- **Housing conditions are unsanitary and over-crowded**

ACT ONE SCENE 2

A Cultural Note

Romanticism really started to take root following the French Revolution. The movement was all about balancing the scientific, technological, and political advancements of Enlightenment society. Authors and artists of the time started playing with nature imagery as a way of escaping the oppressiveness of urban areas. The Romantics were concerned with human desires like love and war (which are very prevalent in *Les Mis*).



Fun Fact!



Romanticism had its origins in the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement in Germany (learn more here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturm_und_Drang) It was all started by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He wrote a novel called *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Quick synopsis: Werther falls in love with a pretty maiden, finds out she's married, and kills himself. The Romantics will later fashion their heroes off of Werther, even down to his fashion (imagine any depiction of Mr. Darcy). All the students should think of themselves as mini-Werther's...more to be explained.

Blue Jacket + White Cravat =
Most Attractive Romantic
Hero
(Not personal opinion, Goethe
said it)



At the End of the Day has some great nature imagery, especially when we sing:

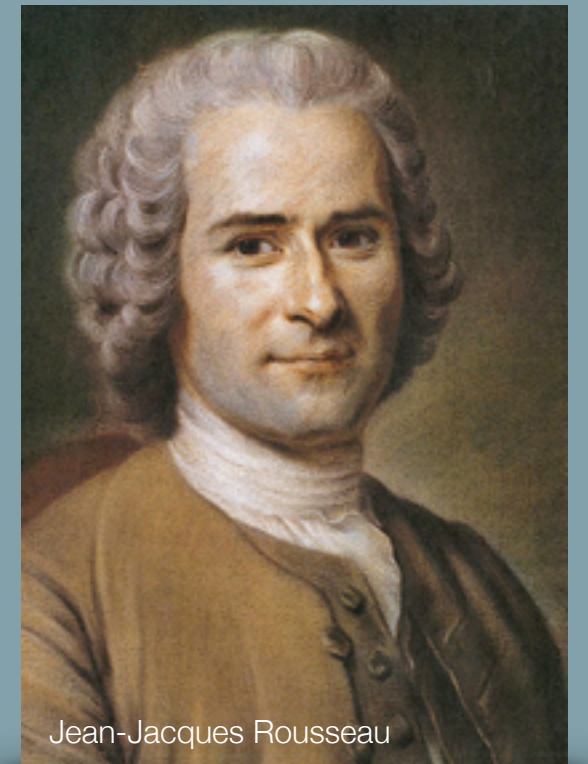
AT THE END OF THE DAY THERE'S ANOTHER DAY DAWNING
AND THE SUN IN THE MORNING IS WAITING TO RISE
LIKE THE WAVES' CRASH ON THE SAND
LIKE A STORM THAT'LL BREAK ANY SECOND...

This is Romanticism and Storm and Stress!!!! This line particularly emphasizes the tension of not only the hope for a better political, social, and economic climate in France, but also the hope that one can escape the oppressiveness of the city and get in touch with nature (aka, frolic in a meadow).

The Enlightenment



David Hume

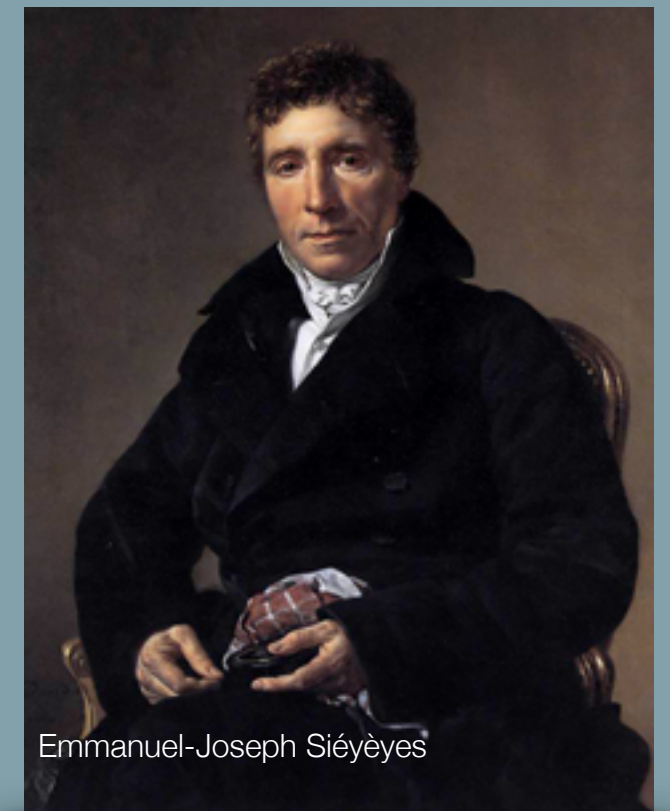


Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Before we can move onto the Barricade, we need to backtrack just a little bit. The Enlightenment occurred in the 18th century. Immanuel Kant defined the movement as “man’s emergence from his self-immaturity.” It was an intellectual awakening of mostly political and economic matters. Without the Enlightenment there would not have been an American or French Revolution.



Voltaire



Emmanuel-Joseph Siyèyes

ACT ONE SCENE 7: Paris, 1832

Charles X became king following the death of his father, Louis XVIII. His reign was threatened by liberals who urged his majesty to give more rights, particularly in regards to voting. The majority of lower middle-class, peasant, and working citizens were still unable to vote. Charles, however, was hesitant to concede these rights (he wanted to make sure the balance of power still tipped in his favor). He ended up abdicating in 1830 and his son became King Louis XIX.



The ABC Cafe

The ABC Cafe is modeled after secret organizations like the *Société des Droits de l'Homme* (Society of the Rights of Man). These groups were considered liberal but they advocated for a republican government (elected officials represent their constituents at the national level—the U.S.).

It is important to remember that all the students in *Les Mis* come from middle class homes. This means that they were all literate and able to devote time to intellectual pursuits. Even though the Enlightenment is long over, chances are the students still read these authors!

Here is a great website that explains the Enlightenment more and gives details about the individual philosophers:

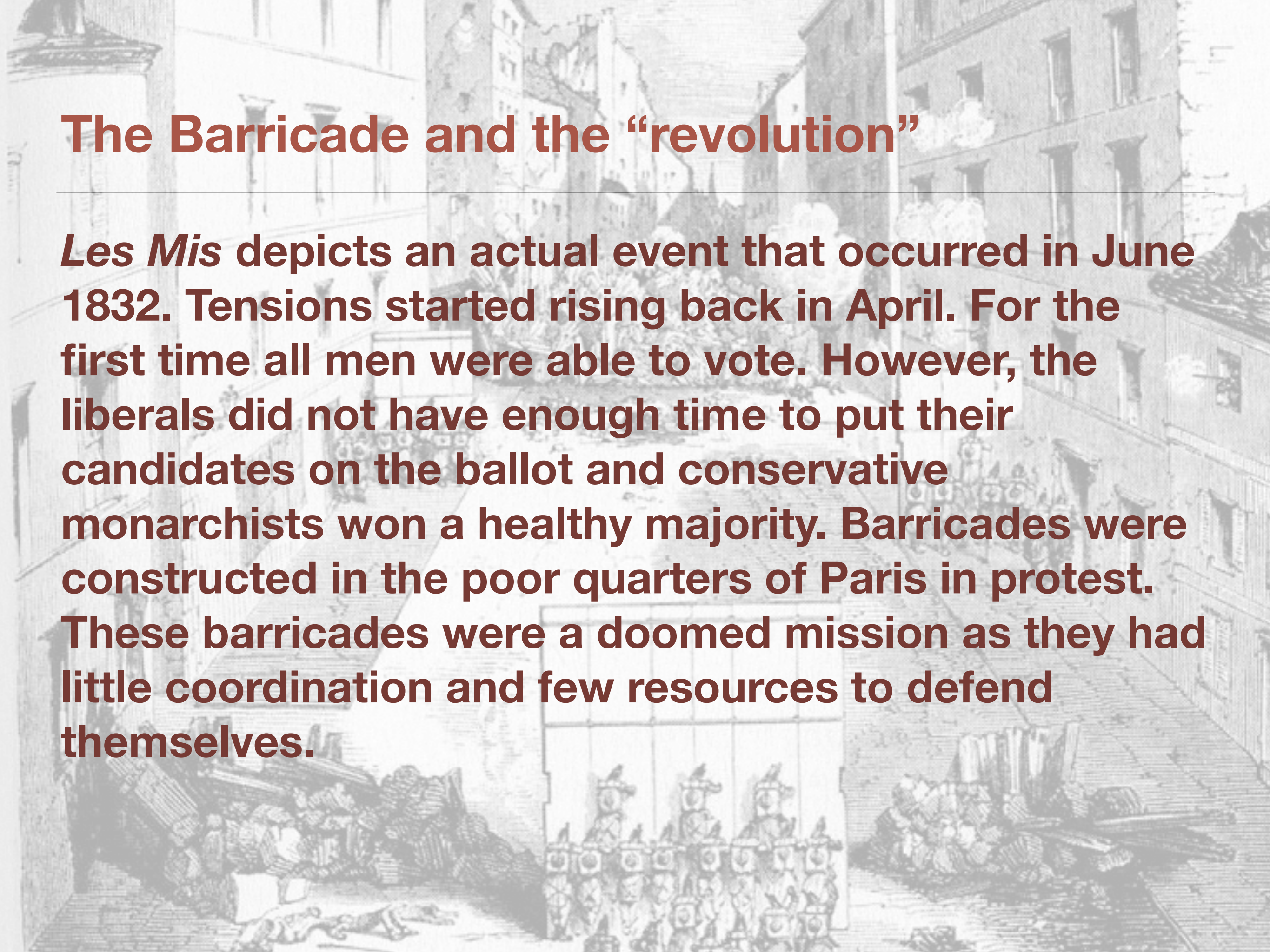
<http://www.online-literature.com/periods/enlightenment.php>



THE FRIENDS OF THE A B C

The Barricade and the “revolution”

***Les Mis* depicts an actual event that occurred in June 1832. Tensions started rising back in April. For the first time all men were able to vote. However, the liberals did not have enough time to put their candidates on the ballot and conservative monarchists won a healthy majority. Barricades were constructed in the poor quarters of Paris in protest. These barricades were a doomed mission as they had little coordination and few resources to defend themselves.**



General Lamarque: Fast Facts

- Joined the army in 1792
- Chief of Staff to King Joseph Bonaparte of Naples
- Entered politics in 1820 as a liberal
- Favored French unification with Belgium and recognized Poland as an independent state
- Awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1831
- Known as an advocate of the people



A “Revolution”?

The June Revolt was not truly a revolution. There are many theories of revolution that prove this. However, in terms of revolutionary process the June Revolt was a significant event in leading to the major revolution that would overthrow the monarchy. It is better to think of the Barricade as a *catalyst*, an isolated event that sparks revolutionary feeling in citizens. Remember the Arab Spring when a fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, lit himself on fire sparking revolution in Tunisia? This is basically what the students are doing, they are lighting themselves on fire to direct attention to the revolutionaries and start a revolution.



Remember Romanticism!

Romanticism is what allowed all of these events to occur. The students are Romantics because their human nature makes them crave battle and the potential glory that comes with victory. Even though the students are not victorious, the fact that they died fighting for a cause that they were passionate about gives them a sense of triumph.

To put in perspective, in the German fraternities those students would duel with swords for fun. They wanted to get a *schmisse* or a scar on their face that proved that they had pursued their Romantic desires for fighting.



Barricade du cloître Saint-Merry.



schmisse