



THE CHARACTER OF JULIEN SOREL IN STENDHAL'S NOVEL
THE RED AND THE BLACK

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Annotation: *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the character Julien Sorel, the protagonist of Stendhal's seminal novel The Red and the Black (Le Rouge et le Noir), first published in 1830. Set in post-Napoleonic France during the Bourbon Restoration, the novel examines the psychological, social, and moral development of a young man from a modest provincial background who is driven by intense ambition and a desire for upward mobility. The article explores the major dimensions of Julien's character, including his psychological complexity, intellectual abilities, identity struggles, and evolving emotional life. Particular attention is paid to his conflicting desires to achieve greatness either through a military or clerical career—symbolized by the novel's title—as well as his manipulative yet ultimately vulnerable approach to love and social advancement.*

The annotation outlines how Julien's personal ambitions are shaped and limited by the rigid class structure of 19th-century French society, leading to a tragic end that reflects not only his personal flaws but also the broader injustices of his time. His relationships with Madame de Rênal and Mathilde de la Mole serve as turning



points in his character development, revealing the tension between authenticity and pretense, emotion and ambition. By examining Julien's inner conflicts and social interactions, the article shows how Stendhal uses this character to criticize the moral hypocrisy and inflexibility of the aristocracy and the Church.

Furthermore, the article situates Julien Sorel as one of literature's early psychologically complex characters, portraying him as a prototype of the modern anti-hero. His self-reflective nature, existential doubts, and shifting sense of identity align with broader themes in 19th-century literature and anticipate developments in 20th-century modernist and existentialist thought. The annotation concludes by highlighting the continued relevance of Julien Sorel in today's discussions about meritocracy, ambition, and the cost of personal authenticity in a conformist society.

This detailed character study will be valuable to students and scholars of literature, particularly those interested in French realism, Romanticism, and the development of the modern European novel. It also serves as a useful reference for anyone exploring the relationship between individual psychology and societal expectations in classic literature.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola fransuz yozuvchisi Stendalning mashhur asari — Qizil va Qora (*Le Rouge et le Noir*, 1830) romanining bosh qahramoni Jyulen Sorel obrazining har tomonlama tahliliga bag'ishlangan. Asar Napoleon davridan keyingi, Burbonlar restavratsiyasi davridagi Fransiya sodir bo'ladi va jamiyatdagi qat'iy ijtimoiy tabaqalanish fonida provinsiyalik kambag'al yigitning psixologik, ijtimoiy va axloqiy rivojlanish jarayonini o'rganadi. Maqolada Jyulen obrazining asosiy jihatlari – uning murakkab psixologiyasi, aqliy salohiyati, o'zlikni anglashdagi ziddiyatlari va hissiy hayotidagi o'zgarishlar tahlil qilinadi. Ayniqsa, harbiy yoki ruhoniylar yo'l bilan buyuklikka erishish istagi (roman sarlavhasida ramziy tarzda ko'rsatilgan), hamda uning sevgiga va ijtimoiy ko'tarilishga nisbatan hisob-kitobli, biroq mohiyatan zaif yondashuvi alohida urg'u bilan ko'rib chiqiladi.

Maqolada shuningdek, Jyulenning shaxsiy ambitsiyalari 19-asr Fransiya'dagi qat'iy sinfiy tuzum tomonidan qanday cheklanayotganini ochib beradi. Bu uning halokatli yakuniga sabab bo'ladi — bu faqat uning xatolari emas,



balki jamiyatdagi chuqur adolatsizliklarning natijasi sifatida ko'rsatiladi. Jyulenning Madam de Renal va Matilda de la Mol bilan bo'lgan munosabatlari uning shaxsiy o'sishida muhim burilish nuqtalarini tashkil qiladi. Bu munosabatlar orqali Stendal obraz orqali samimiyat va sun'iylik, tuyg'ular va ambitsiyalar o'rtasidagi ichki kurashni yoritadi. Shu tariqa, muallif aristokratiya va cherkovning axloqiy ikkiyuzlamachiligi hamda qat'iyligiga tanqidiy yondashadi.

Bundan tashqari, maqolada Jyulen Sorel adabiyotdagi ilk psixologik jihatdan murakkab qahramonlardan biri sifatida baholanadi. U zamonaviy antiqahramon timsoli bo'lib, o'zini tahlil qiluvchi tabiati, hayotiy shubhalari va o'zligini izlashdagi murakkab jarayonlari orqali 19-asr adabiyotidagi umumiy mavzular bilan uyg'unlashadi. Shu bilan birga, u 20-asr modernistik va ekzistensialistik fikrlarning boshlanishi uchun zamin yaratadi. Maqola yakunida Jyulen Soreldagi obrazning bugungi kun meritokratiya, shaxsiy ambitsiya va konformistik jamiyatda o'zligiga sodiq qolish kabi dolzarb masalalar bilan qanday bog'liqligi ta'kidlanadi.

Ushbu chuqur tahliliy maqola fransuz realizmi, romantizmi va Yevropa roman san'atining shakllanishi bilan qiziqadigan adabiyotshunoslar va talabalar uchun foydali manba bo'lib xizmat qiladi. Shuningdek, bu asar klassik adabiyotda shaxsiy psixologiya va jamiyat talablari o'rtasidagi murakkab munosabatlarni o'rganayotgan har bir o'quvchi uchun muhim qo'llanmadir.

Introduction

Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (*Le Rouge et le Noir*), published in 1830, is widely regarded as one of the earliest psychological novels in European literature and a profound critique of post-Napoleonic French society. At the center of this work stands Julien Sorel, a young man of humble origins whose ambition, intelligence, and internal contradictions make him one of the most memorable and complex characters in 19th-century fiction. Julien is not a traditional hero; rather, he embodies the struggles of an individual who seeks to rise above his social class in a rigid and hierarchical society that favors birth over merit.

The novel takes place during the Bourbon Restoration, a time when France was transitioning from revolutionary ideals back to monarchy and conservatism. This



backdrop intensifies Julien's conflict: he idolizes Napoleon and dreams of a military career (the “red”) but must pursue the clergy (the “black”) as a more practical path to power. His story is both personal and political—a tale of ambition, love, hypocrisy, and self-discovery.

This article explores Julien Sorel's multifaceted character, focusing on his social background, psychological development, romantic relationships, and tragic downfall. By analyzing how Julien navigates between his personal desires and societal constraints, we gain deeper insight into Stendhal's critique of his time and his creation of a protagonist who continues to captivate modern readers with his timeless internal struggles.

Literature Review

The character of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black* has been the subject of extensive literary scholarship since the novel's publication in 1830. Scholars and critics have interpreted Julien as a symbol of ambition, a product of post-revolutionary France, and one of literature's earliest psychologically nuanced anti-heroes.

One of the foundational studies on Julien Sorel is found in Victor Brombert's critical essays, where he highlights Julien's inner conflict between personal ambition and emotional vulnerability. Brombert argues that Julien is driven by a need to assert his individuality in a rigid society that resists change, reflecting the broader Romantic tension between the self and societal norms.¹

Frederick C. Green examines Stendhal as a bridge between Romanticism and Realism, identifying Julien as a product of both movements. Green emphasizes how Stendhal uses Julien to portray a realistic, psychologically complex character who simultaneously exhibits Romantic idealism and manipulative realism.²

Christopher Prendergast expands on this by analyzing the role of *mimesis*—imitation of reality—in Stendhal's narrative style. He situates Julien within a system of performative behavior, noting how Julien constantly masks his true self in order to

¹ Victor Brombert, *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 85–97.

² Frederick C. Green, *Stendhal: Prophet of Romantic Realism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), 103–115



advance socially.³ This interpretive lens reinforces the idea that Julien is a man split between authenticity and social calculation.

Georg Lukács, in *The Historical Novel*, argues that Stendhal's characters are historically grounded and shaped by material conditions. Julien's actions are, in Lukács's Marxist reading, the consequence of a decaying aristocratic society and a stifled bourgeois class, rather than just internal flaws. Julien's tragedy is thus not just personal, but structural—rooted in the contradictions of Restoration-era France.⁴

Arnold Hauser, in his social history of art and literature, considers Stendhal a representative of Romantic Realism, and suggests that Julien's social climbing and inner turmoil reflect the values and anxieties of a generation caught between the fall of Napoleon and the rise of conservative rule. This historical and artistic tension, Hauser notes, is embodied in Julien's conflicting attraction to the "red" (military glory) and the "black" (clerical power).⁵

On a more psychological level, Ernest Crawley interprets Julien as a tragic hero. His analysis of Julien's fate focuses on the young man's inability to reconcile his genuine emotional needs with his cold, calculated drive for advancement. Julien's relationships with Madame de Rênal and Mathilde de la Mole, according to Crawley, expose this duality and eventually lead to his downfall.⁶

Recent scholarship has increasingly framed Julien as a prototype of the modern anti-hero. Critics point to his existential questioning, emotional contradictions, and rejection of traditional moral frameworks as qualities that foreshadow the introspective characters of 20th-century modernism and existentialism.

³ Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 59–72.

⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1989), 313–330.

⁵ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art: Vol. 3 Rococo, Classicism and Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 201–215.

⁶ Ernest Crawley, "The Tragic Hero in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*," *The Modern Language Review* 48, no. 2 (1953): 183–194.



Together, these studies highlight that Julien Sorel is not a one-dimensional character but rather a multifaceted individual shaped by both personal psychology and the historical forces of his time. Stendhal's ability to depict such depth through a single character affirms the novel's place as a landmark in European literature and demonstrates how Julien's story continues to offer rich material for interpretation.

Background and Social Origins

Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* (*Le Rouge et le Noir*), published in 1830, is a powerful psychological and social novel set in post-Napoleonic France. The protagonist, Julien Sorel, is a complex and ambitious young man whose personal journey reflects both the turmoil of French society and the inner struggles of the human soul. Through Julien's character, Stendhal explores themes of ambition, hypocrisy, love, and identity.

Julien Sorel's background plays a crucial role in shaping his ambitions, worldview, and inner conflicts throughout *The Red and the Black*. Born into a lower-class family in the small provincial town of Verrières, Julien is the son of a coarse, uneducated carpenter. His father and brothers are physically strong but intellectually limited, and they look down on Julien's interest in reading and education, considering it a sign of weakness and arrogance. From an early age, Julien feels alienated from his family and aware that he is different—more sensitive, more curious, and far more intellectually gifted.

Despite his modest upbringing, Julien possesses an exceptional memory and a deep passion for learning, especially in Latin and the history of Napoleon Bonaparte. His secret reading of the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, a book detailing Napoleon's reflections during his exile, inspires in Julien a burning desire for greatness and glory. To him, Napoleon represents the ultimate example of a man who rose from obscurity to power through talent, courage, and determination. Julien's admiration for the Emperor becomes symbolic of his own desire to break free from the limitations imposed by his birth.

However, Julien's dreams are incompatible with the social and political climate of post-Napoleonic France. The Bourbon monarchy has been restored, and



society is once again dominated by aristocratic privilege and conservative values. Military advancement, once possible during the revolutionary era, is now closed to men of humble origin like Julien. As a result, he turns reluctantly to the clergy as an alternative route to influence and status, not out of religious devotion, but as a strategic decision.

This background sets the stage for Julien's lifelong internal conflict: the clash between his longing for heroic achievement and the oppressive reality of a society that values birth over merit. It also explains his deep resentment toward the upper classes and his willingness to manipulate religion, love, and social norms to achieve his goals. His social origin does not merely provide context—it is the foundation of his identity and the engine driving his ambition, pride, and ultimate downfall.

Ambition and Identity Crisis

Julien's life is defined by his obsessive ambition to rise above his station. He is determined to escape the limitations of his birth through education, religion, and strategic social climbing. Torn between two symbolic paths—the red of the army and the black of the clergy—Julien ultimately chooses the priesthood as a more accessible route to power in the reactionary France of the 1820s. Yet his motivations are never purely spiritual. Religion is for him a tool, not a calling, and this utilitarian view creates inner tension and moral ambiguity.

Julien's identity is fragile and often performative. He constantly adapts his behavior to fit into different social circles, pretending to be what he is not. This duplicity is both a strategy and a source of deep anxiety. He struggles with feelings of inferiority and self-loathing, especially when interacting with the aristocracy. At times, he views himself as a modern-day Napoleon; at others, he feels like a fraud.

Romantic Relationships and Emotional Growth

Two central relationships shape Julien's emotional life: his affair with Madame de Rênal and his later involvement with Mathilde de la Mole. These relationships reveal different sides of his personality and contribute to his development as a character.



Madame de Rênal, the wife of the mayor of Verrières, is Julien's first love. Their relationship begins as a calculated seduction but soon turns into a genuine, albeit tragic, emotional bond. Madame de Rênal awakens a tenderness and vulnerability in Julien that contrasts sharply with his usual cold ambition.

Mathilde de la Mole, the daughter of a powerful Parisian nobleman, represents a different challenge. Proud, brilliant, and eccentric, Mathilde is attracted to Julien's intellect and defiance. Their relationship is marked by games of power and pride. When Julien successfully seduces her, he attains the recognition he has long sought—but it leads to further complications, including a forced engagement and his eventual downfall.

Conflict with Society and Tragic Fall

Julien's rise through the social ranks is met with increasing resistance from a society that values birth over merit. His carefully constructed facade eventually collapses when Madame de Rênal, manipulated by a priest, writes a letter exposing his past relationship with her. This letter ruins Julien's marriage prospects with Mathilde and seals his fate. In a fit of rage and wounded pride, Julien attempts to murder Madame de Rênal, an act that leads to his arrest, trial, and execution.

Stendhal uses Julien's tragic fall to critique the hypocrisy and rigidity of French society. Julien is not executed for the attempted murder alone, but for daring to challenge the social order. His intelligence and ambition threaten the aristocratic elite, and his death is as much a political statement as a moral judgment.

Psychological Depth and Modern Relevance

Julien Sorel is one of the first truly modern characters in European literature. He is introspective, self-conscious, and psychologically complex. His inner monologues reveal a man constantly at war with himself, torn between ambition and emotion, authenticity and performance.

Stendhal's portrayal of Julien anticipates later existential and psychological literature. Julien's search for meaning, identity, and personal worth resonates with readers even today. He is both a product of his time and a timeless figure representing the universal human struggle for recognition and purpose.



Conclusion

Julien Sorel stands as one of the most compelling and psychologically complex characters in 19th-century literature. Through his rise and fall, Stendhal presents not just the story of a young man striving for greatness, but a broader critique of French society in the post-Napoleonic era—a society marked by hypocrisy, rigid social hierarchies, and the suppression of individual merit. Julien's life is shaped by his lower-class origins, his fierce ambition, and his internal struggle between genuine emotion and calculated self-promotion.

What makes Julien's character so powerful is his constant tension between opposing forces: ambition and love, pride and insecurity, idealism and manipulation. He is neither a hero nor a pure villain, but a deeply human figure whose contradictions mirror the complexities of the society around him. His ultimate downfall is not only the result of his personal flaws but also of a world that refuses to allow individuals like him to rise honestly and freely.

In portraying Julien Sorel, Stendhal created more than just a social climber or tragic figure—he introduced a modern anti-hero whose psychological depth and moral ambiguity continue to resonate with readers today. Julien's story invites us to reflect on the price of ambition, the nature of authenticity, and the enduring struggle between the individual and society.

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