

Legitimacy and Usurpation:

Shattering of the Social Walls in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*

Meşruyet ve Gasp:

Stendhal'in *Kırmızı ve Siyah* Adlı Romanında Sosyal Duvarların Yıkılması

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ABSTRACT

Napoleon's rise to the French throne in the 1800s paved the way for a huge shift in the social structure that was dominant in many of the European countries and even throughout the whole world. Social circles started to change their shapes and their representatives now that more and more people started to move from the lower classes to the upper ones. French author Stendhal (1783-1842) focuses on this substantial change in French society in his novel *The Red and the Black* (1830), in which he depicts a life full of scandals and social moves of a young and ambitious Julien Sorel. Julien's fast but precarious rise from the bottom of the social status to the upper one flows through love affairs, affection, respect, pangs of conscience, and betrayal. Julien's sole aim was to get to the top either by the legitimate ways or by usurpation. This study aims to analyse the protagonist's hazardous climbing up the social ladder and his targets. The study will also point out whether Julien has the rights to get these targets, or he gets them by force.

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Introduction

The 1830s have become the epoch of post-Napoleonic chaos bringing about the paradox of existence for the French; although the country "was on the threshold of a great age of peace and plenty" (Turnell, 1962, p. 153), it was mentally shattered and eventually gained a brand-new understanding of a society in general. Coming from minor Italian nobility, but nonetheless, becoming an emperor, Napoleon hugely influenced the unprivileged class by his magnificent rise. A person's skills have overweighed the hitherto stable social hierarchy. The rigid and concrete walls between human beings were shattered. And this challenge has become one of the main canons in world literature. Many literary works focus on such a transgression of barriers between the social classes. One of these works is Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* (1830).

Julien Sorel, a protagonist of Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black*, is a handsome young man with feminine traits and delicate physical appearance. When he is nineteen, Julien – from a small provincial town Verrières – becomes a tutor to the three children of mayor de Rênal. While

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working at the de Rênals, Julien seduces Mme Rênal; and when this affair breaks out, Curé Chélan, a member of the Church, helps him enter a seminary. At the seminary, Julien meets Abbé Pirard, who becomes his spiritual father figure. Later Pirard's influence lands Julien – as a private secretary – into an aristocratic family of Marquis de La Mole in Paris. Julien has a love affair with Marquis' daughter Mathilde and when Marquis learns about Mathilde's pregnancy, he accepts Julien as his legitimate son-in-law. Yet, Mme Rênal's letter to Marquis de La Mole, which uncovers Julien's ambitious acts and aspirations, drives Julien to the murder of Mme Rênal.

The Red and the Black is a novel about Julien Sorel, who, like Napoleon, moves through the social classes upwards. It is a novel of a sensual transformation, a huge shift that Kete explains as “the moment when ambition becomes insanity” (2005, p. 472). It is a novel of challenge and transgression. Julien Sorel “rises through the ranks of society, is ennobled, and marries the daughter of a Marquis. Julien Sorel's spectacular career has been perceived as the very embodiment of 19th century aspirations: success due to personal talent” (Rand, 1989, p. 391). Julien's aim is to withdraw himself from his familial, social, and financial background that does not promise him anything in his social career. Julien, whom Platt (2018) calls “little Napoleon” (p. 7) comes from a peasant family, the members of which – father and brothers – provoke outrage in him by meeting everything he does with hoots of derision: his defective style of working at the mill, his interest in religious matters, his reading. And it is precisely his reading, as Mörte Alling (2018) claims, “inspire him to transgress the limit of the countryside and other geographical and social limits, . . . [and] give him the strength and power to achieve these transgressions” (p. 202). Julien's ability to like reading and learning is his main skill and power, which move him towards his aims.

Julien is displaced and homeless in his own family. It is either because of his ambitious aspirations or because of his brilliant learning skills. As Steven Sands (1975) suggests, all Julien's “actions are prompted by two feelings: anxiety at having no place in his own world and a consciousness of his genius” (p. 337). So, the novel is a portrayal of anxiety, struggle, and sometimes madness. According to Duncan (1988), Sorel's physical appearance, specifically his eyes, suggests his ambition and “psychological passion” (pp. 45-46). Kete even goes further and claims: “Stendhal's novel parallels the drama of the psychiatric case study” (2005, pp. 469-470). Kete adds that Stendhal has been closely interested in the medical science of psychiatry, which, obviously, enriched Julien's characterisation. As a result, the novel is sensually and emotionally rich and variant.

It can be argued that Stendhal's novel mainly focuses on Julien's aim to rise in a social hierarchy, which he eventually gets. The author portrays two substantial ways for the protagonist to get to the top: legitimacy and usurpation. Julien either gets what he wants by means of his legitimate rights or by usurping somebody else's rights. This study analyses these two strategies and puts forth an argument that such transgression of the class boundaries seems fruitless and futile. Julien's subconscious seeking for a motherly or a fatherly hand in his social, physical, spiritual, and psychological development can be analysed in terms of the concept of legitimacy. As regards his usurpation process, he manages to penetrate the Rênals' house in the role of a husband and a father and to obtain an aristocratic status by employing his genuine skills of manipulation, role-playing, and planning. Yet, all his attempts end up in a disaster.

Legitimacy

The definition of “legitimacy” in *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (accessed January 2023) is 1) the quality of being based on a fair or acceptable reason, and 2) the quality of being allowed and acceptable according to the law. Both definitions can be applied to Julien's actions, which he performs to get what he should have had, like having a mother and a father figure. Julien's conscious and subconscious search for parental support in other characters can be based on a fair

and acceptable reason within the frames of the law.

Paradoxically though, Julien must challenge and overcome his biological father. The fact that Julien Sorel does not have a mother and is psychologically, physically and mentally remote from his father bears a close affinity with Stendhal's situation in his own family. Both hate their fathers and try to undermine their authority (Zhang, 2023, p. 1052). Julien's father is depicted as an authoritative man, who wants Julien to be the same with the other members of the family. Julien rejects this framing and fixing of his subjectivity. Moreover, the absence of a mother figure obviously creates a traumatic perspective for the protagonist (Zhang, 2023, p. 1049). The gap created by the mother's absence is not filled in; it is, on the contrary, has been made deeper and deeper. Thus, Julien must have a minor parental support in order to mature healthily and he needs to legitimise himself as a son (Sands, 1975, p. 340).

When Julien starts working as a tutor in M. de Rênal's house, the mother figure appears in the characterisation of Mme de Rênal, M. de Rênal's wife: "Julien was forced to scold her, for she allowed herself the same intimate gestures with him as with her children. This was because there were times when she was under the illusion that she loved him like one of her children" (Stendhal, 2002, p. 107).

There is a hidden, subconscious link of a mother and a son between Mme de Rênal and Julien, since the former's behaviour toward young Julien encompasses the rudiments of motherhood. The psychological emptiness created by the loss of a mother makes Julien succumb to the symptoms of motherhood; Julien is attracted to Mme de Rênal. For example, as Sands (1975) argues, Mme de Rênal has a craving for dressing Julien as she pleases (p. 341). Another thing that Mme de Rênal does for Julien and which goes beyond the circumscribed behaviour of an employer is the honour that she provides for Julien by securing a place in the guard when the king comes to their small town. These places are normally given to the sons of the bourgeoisie (Sands, 1975, p. 341). In this way, Julien, who was deprived of his mother both psychologically and physically, finds for himself a potential, legitimate mother figure in Mme de Rênal.

Some powerful male figures in the novel often serve as the father figures for Julien. Sorel's biological father does not provide any substantial support for his son even when Julien falls into profound troubles (Zhang, 2023, p. 1050). Yet, Julien encounters two religious men, who guide him and provide him with some tangible support. Even though Julien reveals his enmity and complete disbelief in God throughout the novel, the first father figure for him becomes a member of the church, Curé Chélan. "To win over the old Curé Chélan, on whom he clearly saw his lot in life to depend, he had learned by heart the whole of the Latin New Testament; he also knew M. De Maistre's book *Du Pape* and believed in one as little as the other" (Stendhal, 2002, p. 28). Curé Chélan's interest in Julien and his deliberate participation in Julien's life are not without a reason; Julien proves his brilliant capacity in religious matters, though it is without belief. Curé Chélan, "good old man, marvelling at his progress, spent whole evenings teaching him theology" (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 31-32) because Julien could easily say that he wants to become a priest or he could show himself working hard at his father's sawmill and "learning by heart the Latin Bible the Curé had lent him" (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 31-32). In other words, Julien's aim to employ the Curé's social power should be justified and based on a solid ground. If Julien moves one step up on a social ladder with the help of the Curé, he should deserve it in a legitimate way. It is precisely Curé Chélan, who finds Julien a job as a tutor at M. de Rênal's house.

Another father figure, whom Julien encounters, is Abbé Pirard, who is a director of the seminary at Besançon. Albeit heinous at the beginning, Abbé Pirard becomes the protecting father figure for Julien during the latter's stay at the seminary: "I've become fond of you. Heaven knows, it's in spite of myself" (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 209-210). Surely, the strategies that Julien has used with the Curé

previously work with Abbé Pirard as well. Julien is a hardworking fellow, whom Pirard appoints as a tutor. "It had been so long since Julien had heard a friendly voice – his weakness must be forgiven: he melted into tears. Abbé Pirard opened his arms to him; the moment was a comfort for both of them" (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 209-210). Julien's comfort is permeated by his satisfaction of winning over another powerful figure, which can help him move forward. Consequently, in addition to the promotion as a tutor at the seminary, Pirard finds Julien a job in Marquis de La Mole's house as a private secretary and warns him against probable hapless situations in the house (Stendhal, 2002, p. 249). Julien's relentless movement forward on a social ladder is going to become a huge leap because the Marquis is a member of aristocracy.

The last father figure for Julien is the Marquis de La Mole. Giving him a blue coat, in which Julien can communicate with Marquis as a son, has less importance than Marquis's giving him permission to dream about his being a son of a Duke, Marquis's friend (Sands, 1975, p. 343). Moreover, M. de La Mole contrasts Julien with his son, which strengthens Julien's subconscious ambitions to legitimise himself as a son of Marquis. M. de La Mole also gives Julien a cross which Norbert, Marquis's son, always wanted and he even confesses to himself that he loves Julien as a son: "One can become very fond of a beautiful spaniel, said the Marquis to himself, why should I be so ashamed of becoming fond of this little Abbé? – he's an original. I treat him like a son; very well! where's the harm in that?" (Stendhal, 2002, p. 290) Marquis' choice of words – spaniel, this little Abbé – undermines Julien's subjectivity, but, nonetheless, does not prevent Marquis from accepting Julien in his circle. Furthermore, when Mathilde, Marquis's daughter, becomes pregnant during the relationship with Julien, M. de La Mole arranges a noble name and income for Julien to support his daughter. Julien immaturely finds a legitimate reason for his so-called aristocratic background: "Can it really be possible, ... that I am the natural son of some grand seigneur, ... ? Every moment the idea seemed to him less preposterous" (Stendhal, 2002, p. 467). He childishly appreciates his new identity and the "success of his ambition to legitimise himself and to find new parents" (Sands, 1975, p. 345).

Usurpation

According to the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* (accessed January, 2023), "usurpation" is the act of taking somebody's position and/or power without having the right to do so. Here in Stendhal's novel, it goes like legitimacy versus usurpation. While Julien legitimately deserves the support, he gets from the mother and the father figures, his forbidden love affair with Mme de Rênal, his aim to get her children's attachment, and his accurate plan to make Marquis' daughter Mathilde to fall in love with him are the examples of the usurpation.

Stendhal's novel depicts an image of a hero using his genius to overcome his sense of displacement by means of usurpation. Julien is aware of his abilities and uses them to invade the society of the higher class. Subconsciously he has been ready for an attack for a long time since the books that he has read emphasise the greatness of his ambitions to progress in society. Turnell (1962) names two books – *Memorial de Sainte-Helene* and *Tartuffe* – which prepare the young boy to the severe struggle: in the first book the main character attains his highest goals and in the second book there are means to attain these goals (p. 155). Thus, Julien is supplied with the goals and the means: obtaining a good place in a higher society and the ways to do it.

Throughout the novel Stendhal presents Julien's portrayal as a fighter in a severe battle. Julien's ideas and thoughts about his situation and the people around him emphasise his significance as a character designed to get the things that he does not have the right to have. Julien Sorel, a fighter from the unprivileged society, tends towards the invention of a new character out of his own; and this character is challenging because it resembles Napoleon, the great usurper: "For many years, scarcely an hour of Julien's life passed without his telling himself that Bonaparte, an obscure and

penniless lieutenant, had made himself master of the world with his sword” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 32).

Julien is engrossed in his ambitions, even though they require him to behave insincerely and secretly. Firstly, Julien usurps the position of the Mayor as a husband; Julien approaches Mme de Rênal, who does not fail to fall in love with the young tutor. Yet, the process of getting her deserves attention. Julien – young Napoleon – conquers Mme de Rênal step by step (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 60-61).

Julien’s infantile aspirations and childish strategies to get a woman, specifically his ambition to touch her hand, which for Platt (2018) bears the signs of Don Quixote or Emma Bovary’s irony (p. 10-11), add some humour into the novel. Yet, the humour is not of a pleasurable type because Julien’s approach is not sincere. He wants power and he wants to get it by usurping the Mayor’s place of a husband and a lover. Throughout the events happening at the Mayor’s house it is possible to notice the easiness of Julien’s victory (Stendhal, 2002, p. 62).

These detailed accounts of the growing relationship between Mme de Rênal and Julien signify the future success of the affair and Julien’s victory in the possession of Mme de Rênal. The first part of the novel is replete with Julien’s thoughts about the details of his plans to conquer Mme de Rênal. After so many attempts at making her love him Julien enters her private world as her lover. As a consequence of Mme de Rênal’s love affair with Julien, she starts to hate her husband: “she felt disgusted with her husband and hid her face in her hands” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 49). So, the process of usurpation of a position of a husband finishes successfully.

The novel also reflects Julien’s process of usurping the place of a father in M. de Rênal’s house. Unlike the real father, who can leave an ill son and go to sleep, Julien focuses on the inner and tender relationship with the children of Mme de Rênal. And this facilitates his reaching his aim; he becomes the master of Mme de Rênal and the careful father for her children. The children, in turn, become attached to Julien more and more (Stendhal, 2002, p. 155).

The naïveté of the children does not prevent Julien from his relentless progress. On the contrary, he employs it to ensure his status in the house. Eventually, the usurper’s presence starts to irritate the real father: “Yes, yes! I know, he makes me seem disagreeable to my own children; ... In these days everything tends to throw discredit on the *legitimate* authority. Poor France!” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 156) Mayor, who can be accepted as Stendhal’s mouthpiece, draws a parallel between Napoleon and Julien, his home and the whole France. He suggests that the legitimate owners of a status have lost their positions because of the usurpers.

Lastly, Julien usurps a membership of an aristocratic family in Paris. His aim is to be Marquis’ son-in-law. Although there is a stark difference between Julien’s approach to Mme de Rênal and Mathilde, he seems to have similar tactics to conquer them. Yet, Mathilde is a higher-level task for Julien. As Martin (1992) puts forward, “she is the most vital prospect Paris has to offer” (p. 48). So, Julien must accomplish a hard job to get her: “1. Every day you must see Mme ... don’t seem to her to be cold or hurt ... do the opposite of what’s expected. 2. you see her every day; 3. you pay court to some other woman in the same set” (Stendhal, 2002, pp. 410-411). These are the steps Julien must follow in order to get Mathilde. Julien moves by plans rather than by passion or temperament. Mathilde becomes the tool of his usurpation process, and he succeeds as Mathilde implies her love in a letter: “Your departure obliges me to speak ... It would be beyond my capability to see you no more” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 337). The intensity of Julien’s feelings at this victory makes him feel like a God (Stendhal, 2002, p. 341).

After M. de La Mole becomes acquainted with the details of Mathilde and Julien’s love affair and learns about his daughter’s pregnancy, he becomes obliged to provide a good name and income

for Julien (Stendhal, 2002, p. 463). Julien is happy because of his success: “my romance is at an end – and credit to me alone. I have been able to make myself loved by this monstrously proud being, he added, glancing at Mathilde; her father cannot live without her, nor she without me” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 465). And when he learns the details about his conned high birth background, “he saw himself as having been acknowledged” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 467). Julien grabs a status of a noble man for himself and cosily accommodates himself in an aristocratic circle.

As it was mentioned at the beginning, the epoch was the period of Napoleonic ambition and mentality. It was the time when usurpation was accepted as legitimacy. And Julien-the-usurper is not alone. What is more, it would not be correct to claim that people from lower classes are the only ones who tend to usurp anything. The members of the privileged community also transgress the limits and take what they want by force. M. de Rênal, for example, “obtained the permission” for a territory that he needed for his business easily (Stendhal, 2002, p. 13).

Keeping up pretence of performing useful deed for the environment, the Mayor constructs a big wall, which brings him substantial advantages (Turnell, 1962, p. 151). In this way, M. de Rênal usurps the public territory to enlarge his territory. Obviously, he is not the only one. Julien's thoughts related to the income of the privileged society provide hints to the source of their money: “I bet he's even profited from the funds meant for foundlings, for those poor things whose misery is even more sacred than that of the others! Oh! monsters! monsters!” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 43)

The power of the privileged lets them manipulate the money and by doing this they can perform any illegal activity and escape the punishment. M. de La Mole's use of his power to get some privilege for his children also bears the sign of usurpation: “A rank can be obtained. Ten years in a garrison, or a relative in the War Ministry, and a man becomes head of a squadron like Norbert. A great fortune!” (Stendhal, 2002, p. 302) However, there is a huge difference between this kind of usurpation and Julien's process of usurpation. Power, money, connections legitimise the usurpation of the higher classes, while people like Julien break out in the first opportunity. Their success does not last long. As Turnell (1962) states, Julien is executed not because he tries to kill one of the members of the higher society, but because he tries to usurp its privileges (p. 152).

Conclusion

Stendhal's novel about Julien Sorel, who resembles Dickens' Pip with his great expectations, presents a vivid picture of a lively and passionate, but a dangerous life of a dreamer. Set in a post-Napoleonic period in a French society, the novel presents a picture of a traumatic and complicated subjectivity bent under the hard pressure of the contemporary society. Julien's ambition to legitimise himself as a son and his ability to penetrate the higher society by force allows the reader to analyse the novel in terms of the concept of legitimacy and usurpation. Julien is a brilliant mind that takes in everything it sees; if needed he learns the Bible by heart so that he obtains a chance to be promoted at a seminary. In other words, he gets a legitimate access to some circles, and he finds himself a father and a mother figure in this way. When it comes to getting a status in a higher society, he usurps it. The characters whom he employs on his way forward vary from naïve children, desperate housewives, and hopeful young ladies to experienced Curé, Mayor, Abbé, and even Marquis. And none of them can stop him.

To conclude, Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black* not only depicts the main character, Julien Sorel as a young Napoleon, whose illusions come true for a short period of time, but also reminds the reader about the facts of the world and its stable norms. Penetration into unfamiliar atmospheres is possible, but a healthy existence there is not quite possible. The high-class circle may seem vulnerable at first, but it is strong enough to fight against the usurpers. Mme de Rênal's letter is an obvious example for this. Notwithstanding her tender and loving attitude towards Julien, she harshly cuts his attempt at climbing up. Stendhal's aim in writing such a novel was to

procure a vivid and clear way of showing the relentless way of the world that is divided into social classes. And these social classes are impenetrable, although Napoleon's example shows the opposite.

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