

The Two Young Fighters: The Contemporary Significance of Gao Jialin and Julien

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Abstract—In the post-pandemic era—a time of both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges—young people navigating their personal and professional development face a range of difficulties. Cultural shifts, evolving values, and economic pressures have contributed to problematic trends, including extreme phenomena such as “involution,” driven by unhealthy peer competition, and the subsequent rise of withdrawal behaviors like “goblin mode” among some individuals. In such a new era, we need to reread the classics of the predecessors, from which to find some insights into youth development from the realistic perspectives. Julien and Gao Jialin in different times and countries, are typical fighter images of intellectual youth. Their life choices and experiences also the tragedies have profound significance for times and social values. This article aims to explore the similarities and differences between the 2 protagonists and to reveal the various roots that cause the differences between the 2. In this way, the author explores the realistic insights of the protagonists in the development of young people today through comparative analysis.

Keywords—Julien, Gao Jialin, typical young fighters, comparison, contemporary significance

I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-pandemic era, downward pressure on the global economy has intensified, and economic globalization faces unprecedented challenges. From the rise of trade protectionism and unilateralism between nations to the deteriorating living conditions of individuals, all have suffered indelible setbacks. Various social contradictions and issues of injustice have returned to public attention, particularly the bankruptcy of small businesses and rising unemployment caused by economic depression. Negative emotions generated by these conflicts continue to accumulate. With increasing industrial competition and ever-higher educational requirements, many young people are forced—either actively or passively—to lose job opportunities and instead pursue further education. Consequently, phenomena such as feverish enthusiasm for postgraduate entrance exams, recruitment examinations for public institutions, and civil service exams have emerged. However, opportunities always coexist with challenges. Both internationally and domestically, humanity is striving to promote global economic recovery. Most young people still choose to confront difficulties head-on, endeavoring to realize their personal value and contribute to national and collective interests. As times change, so too do circumstances. Young strivers like Gao Jialin and Julien Sorel lived in eras that lacked favorable conditions or sufficient opportunities for personal development. Yet they maintained clear self-awareness, set definite goals, seized every opportunity, and worked hard to achieve success

through personal effort. Today, faced with employment difficulties and widespread industry competition, the youth must draw lessons from their predecessors—understanding fundamental principles and directions for navigating the tides of the times. This will help avoid extreme behaviors such as total resignation, alleviate blind anxiety and other negative emotions, and better position themselves to seize opportunities and grow in this new era. Both works are regarded as classics, it is worthwhile to savor and contemplate in every era. Previous conclusions were often drawn in conjunction with the significance of their times. This paper ultimately aims to address the characteristics and contradictions of the post-pandemic era, and to explore the insights and meanings that young people should seek.

This paper falls within the scope of comparative literary studies, selecting the novels *The Red and the Black* and *Life* as the research texts. Although these two novels were written in different periods and countries, they share a common feature: both are realist works that vividly depict the social realities of their times, thus possessing significant comparative value. The author chooses the protagonists Julien Sorel and Gao Jialin from the two novels as the subjects for comparative analysis, exploring their similarities and differences, analyzing the reasons behind these similarities and differences, and investigating their contemporary relevance.

II. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO STRUGGLERS

By comparing the 2 character portrayals, we can better understand the living conditions of individuals under different national and social systems, as well as more clearly identify the various factors that influence their destinies. Young people living through periods of great historical transformation are certainly impacted by similar personal emotional factors or societal environments. From the broader social contexts and remarkable life experiences of the two protagonists, certain similarities become evident.

A. Similar Historical Backgrounds

Realism emphasizes the portrayal of typical characters within a representative era. Through explorations of characters' destinies, one inevitably gains insights into the merits and drawbacks of the social environment and the overall picture of various social classes. Considering the historical context, Julien Sorel and Gao Jialin seem somewhat ill-fated [1]. Both were born during periods of transition between old and new eras; at such moments when multiple contradictions intertwine, shifts in values and the erosion of traditional morality are inevitable. Julien represents the petite bourgeoisie harboring ideals of liberty,

equality, and democratic humanitarianism, while Gao symbolizes the rural intelligentsia who embrace new ideologies and pursue personal value—a positive driving force amid rural transformation. Fortunately, they represented novelties within their respective social contexts. Unfortunately, for these novelties to advance, numerous obstacles must be overcome, and both appeared relatively weak, constantly facing exclusion and suppression from established forces.

Julien lived during the fall of Napoleon's Empire and the restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy—an era in which feudal remnants temporarily overshadowed the emerging bourgeoisie. For ambitious young men like Julien, who aspired to achieve glory and transcend class barriers under Napoleon's reign, this was undoubtedly a great setback—they once again had to confront clear class-based discrimination and rejection toward those of humble origins. However, the ideals of humanism that emphasized personal happiness, dignity, and individual development had already taken deep root in their minds. Such ideas unsettled the feudal forces, representing an ideological form of class opposition. In this era of faltering feudal rule, the ruling class clung stubbornly to power, desperately resisting change and resorting to any means necessary to suppress dissent. To stifle hundreds of thousands of "Julien's" harboring "heterodox thoughts." Gao Jialin was born in the early 1980s, a period when China was undergoing profound reforms—the fortunate downfall of the Gang of Four. Everything in the country was in urgent need of reconstruction, and large-scale reforms had yet to unfold. A nightmarish era in Chinese history had ended, while new ways of life were still in the process of gestation and exploration. Fortunately, the convening of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee sounded the call for change, soon followed by the implementation of the household responsibility system and the resumption of the national college entrance examination system. Although the social atmosphere appeared gradually more relaxed, it was actually intertwined with certain unfair, improper, and dehumanizing social phenomena [2].

It is not difficult to see that characters in both literary works explore issues concerning the fate and paths of specific social strata following societal transformations. Stendhal created the archetypal character Julien to examine how petit-bourgeois youths striving for success could realize human value and achieve social worth under the dark restoration monarchy. Meanwhile, a decade of turmoil deprived people of their dignity and humanity, suppressing all intellectual freedom and devastating the spiritual foundations of many individuals. After this chaotic period, numerous young people stepped hastily onto the journey of life without having established firm beliefs or proper life values [1]. Sensing this phenomenon acutely, Lu Yao created the character Gao Jialin while exploring the way and life positioning of an entire generation of rural intellectual youth.

B. Dramatic Life Experiences

The life experiences of Julien and Gao Jialin can be considered extremely similar. First of all, both young strivers exist as individuals who are incompatible with their birth environments. Born at the crossroads of urban and rural

areas, Julien is physically weak and thus unable to engage in manual labor. In his original environment—where human value depends on physical strength rather than intellect—Julien is undoubtedly regarded as useless. Similarly, Gao Jialin also faces the same predicament in Gaoshangcun village; having never done farm work since childhood, he is perceived by villagers as a typical example of someone who has neither literary nor practical abilities. Therefore, being born into adverse environments leads both of them to seek every possible means to escape from these circumstances. Regardless of specific motivations, they initially choose to study diligently. Julien successfully seizes the first turning point of his fate through his exceptional memory and intelligence, becoming a Latin tutor for the mayor's family. Gao Jialin, through cultural education, becomes a private school teacher after graduating from high school, thereby altering his destiny of working the land. Here we can draw one conclusion: knowledge changes destiny—at the very least, it provides an opportunity for such change. Later, both suffer multiple setbacks from fate, and the ways in which these occur are strikingly similar. Julien's dream of nobility ends due to an exposé letter written by the mayor's wife, while Gao Jialin similarly returns to square one after Zhang Kenan's mother reports him.

Examining the root causes, it seems closely related to the social environment. Certainly, we will temporarily set aside the issue of their improper methods of achieving success. Could it be social injustice and limited upward mobility that pushed them toward deviant paths [2]. Just as the author previously stated, they were also born in an unfortunate era and failed to receive proper recognition for their talents. Julien deeply laments the darkness of the restored monarchy—a period full of infinite temptation yet inevitably doomed due to the corrupt nature of the collapsing regime. Under the shaky institutional system, the aristocratic class increasingly suppresses those who are different, while secret collusion persists between the big bourgeoisie and the nobility. The church's continuous infiltration and expansion, along with the political intrigues among various factions, are all vividly reflected through Julien's dramatic life experiences. In a world where money-oriented values and materialistic principles erode people's hearts, caught within the struggle between restoration and anti-restoration forces, who could remain morally upright and stand alone as a courageous individual? As far as Gao Jialin is concerned, what is tragic is the closed social structure, the constraints imposed by outdated traditional morals and customs, the irrational personnel appointment and talent promotion mechanisms, and the inertia represented by figures such as Gao Minglou, who oppresses those beneath him while flattering superiors, and Ma Zhanshan, who constantly shifts allegiances according to circumstances—these factors collectively serve as stumbling blocks obstructing destiny. Both characters are dissatisfied with the status quo; both are ambitious individuals infused with heroic elements, attempting to alter the fate predetermined by their forebears through personal struggle [1].

III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO AMBITIOUS FIGURES

Influenced by factors such as ideology, internal logic, and the cultural ethos of their respective nations, the 2 figures

exhibit clear distinctions.

A. Causes of Ambition

An exploration of the motivations behind the ambitions of the two individuals reveals that, influenced by different national systems and regional cultures, they were stimulated by distinct factors that fostered the continuous expansion of their desires and ambitions. Due to differences in motivating factors, their final postures also varied. Engels pointed out: “The principal characters are representatives of certain classes and tendencies, and thus representatives of the ideas of their times. Their motives do not arise from trivial personal desires, but precisely from the historical currents in which they find themselves. [3]”

Individualism lies at the core of Western bourgeois ideology; it affirms that personal interests constitute the value orientation and fundamental driving force behind human actions, emphasizing that each person possesses the right to pursue happiness and enjoy its benefits. It serves both as a reflection of capitalist production relations and as an ideological weapon used by the bourgeoisie in their struggle against feudalism and theology. Julien Sorel, who represents the image of a petty-bourgeois striver, loses the equality and freedom he once gained under the restored monarchy, and his yearning for liberty intensifies under repeated oppression by the regime. Inspired by the heroic spirit of the Napoleonic era—wherein concepts of class, family background, and heredity held no sway, and implicit rules such as seniority-based hierarchies disappeared—he was motivated by the belief that anyone could achieve fame and success through personal intelligence and bravery, which ignited his vision of accomplishing Napoleonic greatness and a sense of heroism and responsibility [2]. Unfortunately, the opportunities and courage once offered by the Napoleonic-era belief that military achievements determined destiny had already vanished. However, the democratic beliefs and humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment, along with the foundational logic within individualism that pursues personal equality and resists the enslavement of monetary power, drove him to strive to prove his own personal worth. In the various whirlpools of the restoration dynasty, he seeks ways to realize his self-worth.

As a confused rural intellectual youth, Gao Jialin is more profoundly influenced by the Confucian culture in traditional Chinese culture, which holds that “all other pursuits are inferior; only scholarship is exalted” [4]. He carries beautiful aspirations for future life and, under the intense material and spiritual temptations released within the urban-rural conflict, seeks opportunities to break free from the constraints of land and resist fate’s arrangements. While striving to struggle against his destiny with honesty, diligence, and personal ideals, Gao repeatedly encounters setbacks due to social injustice and irrational talent evaluation mechanisms and personnel systems. In the clash between traditional Chinese moral concepts and the evolving ideologies of the reform era, he becomes overly eager for quick success. Under the influence of a unilateral interpreted core of the traditional Chinese literati heritage—namely, the one-sided Confucian notion of active engagement in worldly affairs and the traditional scholar-official mentality—he blindly pursues the realization of his self-worth.

B. Attitudes of the Surrounding People

First, let us examine the overall historical context. Julien Sorel represents the impact and resistance brought upon by the rigid hierarchical system under the Restoration monarchy. In such an era, the system aimed to suppress individuals like Julien, who possessed talent yet refused to comply with institutional order, maintaining instead their independent personality and dignity. The theological seminary regarded the person who ranked first as merely vain; the French Church desired ignorant and docile citizens rather than knowledgeable, individualistic people—with knowledge itself being viewed as an enemy [5]. The nobility appreciated Julien solely for his utilitarian value—as a fierce hound—but simultaneously sought to eliminate his individuality. In such an era, whether in Verrières, the seminary, or Paris, hostility was ubiquitous; Julien was a man at odds with the entire society. A young man of the petite bourgeoisie, equipped with knowledge and confronted by unjust social structures and class restrictions, developed a negative rebellious mentality seeking revenge against the system.

In contrast, Gao symbolizes only the fate of rural youth during the reform period, with relatively less antagonism involved. His motivations stem more from a pursuit of poetic and idealized living. Awakening from a prolonged period of turmoil, the country is just beginning to experience conceptual transformation. The seemingly relaxed personnel environment and avenues for striving create an illusion—that this is a golden age for changing one’s destiny. Yet in reality, opportunities for genuine change remain slim. The narrowness of academic success and the irrational talent management mechanism block the paths of many young people. In the novel, figures such as Ma Zhansheng and Gao Minglou, who engage in corruption, and party members like Zhang Kenan’s mother, who abuse public power for personal vendettas, all represent forces that exclude ambitious rural intellectuals like Gao Jialin [6]. After all legitimate paths were blocked, he, under the stimulus of significant urban-rural disparity and eager for quick success, embarked upon an improper path.

Regarding family background, Julien Sorel was even more skeptical. Born into a carpenter’s family with low productivity, he suffered from long-term contempt and bullying, causing him to grow up in an environment filled with negative emotions. Devoid of genuine warmth, his ambition emerged as an accumulation of negativity [4]. Psychological resentment rendered him subconsciously more destructive and confrontational. In contrast, Gao Jialin, as the only son in his family, received considerable care and affection. His ambition mainly originated from positive motivations such as repaying his parents’ love and support.

1) Choices and Outcomes

At the beginning of the novel, Lu Yao quotes Liu Qing: “Although the path of life is long, crucial moments often occur at just a few critical steps, especially when one is young. No one’s life path is straight without any forks; at certain crossroads—political, career-related, or personal—one wrong step can affect not only a particular period of life but even one’s entire destiny” [7]. The protagonists of both novels, confronted with hardships of fate and the tides of their era, make different choices. Julien Sorel, faced with the decision between life and death, chooses to forgo the chance

to live. To choose life would mean accepting the patronage and charity of the nobility, sacrificing his dignity and individuality to live under their sympathy and pity, ultimately becoming a servant of the aristocracy and turning into precisely the kind of person he despises [8]. This clearly contradicts his beliefs and fundamental principles. During his courtroom trial, we can clearly see his determination to face death resolutely: “I do not have the honor of belonging to your class; in your eyes I am merely a peasant who dares to resist his lowly fate.” [9] He has already clearly recognized his position—no matter how excellent he may be, any attempt to cross boundaries and enter high society with independence and dignity will inevitably result in suppression and annihilation. Having perceived the intentions of the nobility, he firmly declares that he will never beg for mercy, nor harbor any illusions—the death awaiting him is just [10]. He absolutely refuses to become an example of the nobility’s warning to others. It deprives well-educated young people like him of courage forever, keeping them trapped in a low social class and suffering from poverty throughout their lives. His death serves as a verdict against the injustice of the entire society and demonstrates a determination to resist to the end. At the same time, it grants infinite courage to youth like him to continue struggling, to express themselves, affirm themselves, and explore new life values. We can say that Julien’s tragic fate is an inevitable outcome caused by the broader socio-historical context.

Gao Jialin, on the other hand, is more profoundly influenced by rural culture. Unlike Julien, he cannot completely rebel and leave his hometown behind; instead, he pursues personal fulfillment driven by aspirations for a better and modern life. His inner self has not lost reverence for traditional rural culture, which clearly results from cultural differences between East and West [11]. As a peasant’s son raised on the loess land, he inevitably remains bound and influenced by deep-rooted familial ties and local cultural traditions. Julien embodies greater revolutionary significance, demonstrating determination and courage to fight relentlessly against a decaying monarchy, whereas Gao Jialin represents the dilemma faced by educated youths in rural China regarding future development. Therefore, when encountering another life setback, Gao Jialin still maintains the possibility of returning to his rural roots.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Both Julien and Gao Jialin are controversial figures in literary history; however, it is precisely their morally complex personalities and experiences that establish them as valuable and compelling literary characters. They differ from the purely virtuous protagonists typically found in novels, nor are they villains devoid of redeeming qualities. Rather, they represent ordinary individuals among the masses—imperfect young people struggling against fate. This is the very essence of realism in literature. As Lu Yao once stated, “The author merely aims to authentically record what occurred within a specific socio-historical context, without any intention of prescribing solutions for what individuals like Gao Jialin should do afterward. The author truthfully depicts life without fabrication, and simultaneously expresses personal insights into life. That alone suffices.”

These characters bear marks of their era, yet also exhibit

distinctive and indelible individuality. Upon finishing these novels, readers inevitably experience a sense of resonance. We may have encountered seemingly insurmountable obstacles similar to those faced by Gao Jialin or Julien, suffered significant setbacks due to social injustice, or experienced discouragement and despair following major failures. However, these characters embody an upward striving vitality—a fearless determination to overcome adversity and grow—that remains essential in our contemporary society. In recent years, there has been an increasing trend among young people toward apathy and resignation, even treating such guiltless self-indulgence as a subject of humor, which is clearly inappropriate.

The endless anxiety caused by hyper-competition and subsequent self-neglect has led many youths to develop negative attitudes such as world-weariness and disengagement. At times like these, correct guidance regarding values and outlook on life becomes indispensable. What we need is precisely the spirit of resistance exemplified by Gao Jialin and Julien Sorel—their ability to “bounce back from rock bottom” and their fearless spirit of growing against all odds. This quality has always been rare and valuable, both in the past and today. Of course, due to limitations imposed by their respective times and the lack of proper guidance regarding outlooks on life and values, they inevitably attempted to take shortcuts to some extent, which was the main reason for their failures. Both were skilled at leveraging their own strengths to showcase themselves (Julien’s exceptional memory and Gao Jialin’s literary talent), and they seized every opportunity fate presented. In real life, identifying one’s position, accurately positioning oneself, and standing out by utilizing one’s unique characteristics and advantages are equally important lessons we must learn.

Their tragedies also demonstrate that personal talent and value can only be realized solidly and steadily through legitimate means. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the professional dedication they displayed. Julien fulfilled his duties conscientiously as a Latin teacher in Mayor de Rênal’s household, earning Madame de Rênal’s favor; his intelligence and eagerness to learn won him recognition from the director of the theological seminary; and in Paris, he diligently performed his role as a secretary, even receiving a medal for his conscientious work. Similarly, Gao Jialin was the most outstanding and respected private schoolteacher, and later as a correspondent in the county town, his high literary competence earned him recognition from his superiors and attracted Huang Yaping’s attention. These examples sharply contrast with those who slack off at work and hold positions without fulfilling their duties in contemporary society.

We are luckier than Julien and Gao Jialin because the era we live in no longer suffers from the class antagonism and social instability that Julien experienced, nor does it contain the widespread malpractices, irrational talent management systems, and institutional barriers that constrained Gao Jialin. The era into which we were born. It is a relatively fairer era, one that better enables the realization of personal value; therefore, why not engage in a profound reflection to accurately identify your position and grow in alignment with the prevailing trends?

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

YanJun Guo wrote the manuscript and carried out the comparative analyses; Huiying Yang proposed the research direction and reviewed the final draft; all authors had approved the final version.

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