

Symbolic Meanings of *Red and Black*

Na Li

Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China

Abstract—Stendhal is regarded as “Father of the modern novel”, his masterpiece *Le Rouge et le Noir* (Red and Black), is the foundation of critical realism literature. In novel *Julien Sorel* deeps up his true feeling in order to pursue fame and fortune, to squeeze into the upper class, and he covers up his original face with hypocrisy to adapt to the society. Stendhal's creation and contribution lies in the creative use of symbolic description, depicting the 1830 French Bourbon Restoration of social life truthfully and artistically. In this novel, he ingeniously uses a variety of color description techniques, showing his artistic effect. Attempts have been made to solve the riddle of the title Stendhal chose for his novel, none has proved totally satisfactory. This paper analyses the symbolic meaning of “red” and “black” from different angles on the basis of deeply understanding author's intention. This paper states that the influence of his writing is universal and connected to humans, while studying the meaningful symbolism is a absolutely good beginning for understanding Stendhal.

Index Terms—Stendhal, *Julien Sorel*, symbolism, symbolic meaning of red and black

I. INTRODUCTION

Le Rouge et le Noir (Red and Black) is Stendhal's first masterpiece and a major work of realist literature. The novel's full title, *Le Rouge et le Noir: A Chronicle of the 19th Century*, explains two kinds of literary purposes, one is psychological portrait of the romantic protagonist, Julien Sorel, and the other analytic, sociological satire of the French social order under the Bourbon Restoration (1814-1830); in literature, it is considered the first realist novel.

Nowadays, as many new ideas and new thoughts come out one after another, more and more scholars in China and abroad have put forward questions on the color symbolic significance of Red and Black. Therefore, this paper takes the color “red” and “black” as an example to analyze the unique skills of symbolism by Stendhal. The author makes effort to explore the strength and depth of its symbolic meaning of the novel's title.

The most common explanation of the title is that red and black is the contrasting color of the army uniform of the times and of the robes of priests, respectively. However, the symbolic resonances of the colors in the title including red for love, and black for death and mourning; or red and black as the colors of the roulette wheel may indicate the unexpected changes in the hero's career. This article tries to make a systematic study of the symbolic meaning of color “red” and “black”. It will be analyzed from several aspects of social background, artistic value, plot, the novel's creative intent and humanity. By a further exploration of the theory, we can get a deeper understanding of Stendhal's representative work.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition of Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of multiple symbols representing differentiated terms in a system which conveys meaning. The human mind is functioning symbolically some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, other components are the “symbols” and the latter constitute the “meaning” of the symbols. The organic functioning is transition from the symbol to the meaning is called “symbolic reference”. The symbolic reference is the active synthetic element contributed by the nature of the percipient. It requires some community between the natures and meaning of symbol. Symbolism was usually produced by allegory giving the literal event and its allegorical counterpart a one-to-one correspondence.

B. Development of Symbolism

Symbolism later was a nineteenth-century art movement of French and Belgian origin in poetry. In literature, the movement had its roots in *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil, 1857) by Charles Baudelaire. The works of Edgar Allan Poe, admired and translated into French, were a significant influence and the source of many stock tropes and images.

C. The Use of Symbolism in Other Works

Some have argued that *Macbeth* provides a possible source of symbolism: black and red stand for night (evil) and blood (ambition, violence). Symbolism is not hard to find in Shakespeare's “*Hamlet*”. The most important symbol is the ghost of Hamlet's father, who makes his appearance at the beginning of the play. As T.S. Eliot once described, “*Hamlet* this character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is

naturally of the creative order, but through weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead" (Sacred Wood, p 83). As that observation implies, it is not so much that Hamlet cannot make up his mind about the symbolic significance of the ghost and what exactly he should do to avenge his father's death; it is just that he continually second-guesses himself.

III. SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE ANALYSIS OF –“RED” AND “BLACK”

A. *Historical Review*

There are three recent articles to which reference should be made: in the first by D. Diono, *Le Rouge et le Noir: The Enigma of a Title* (West Virginia University Philological Papers, 19 (1972), pp.12), a figurative interpretation of the colors red and black is proposed to show the hero's passion and melancholy, with an appeal to Stendhal's probable knowledge of the relevant articles on color in the Encyclopedia. Although this attempts to establish a possible source for the symbolism, the article is mainly valuable for the summary of the views of other critics which it presents. We are, however, still left without a truly coherent picture. The second article is by S. Bokobza, *Rouge et Noir: le blason de Julie* (Stendhal Club, 85 (1979), pp. 37-41). Here the emphasis is on the symbolic colors of the coat of arms which Stendhal is thought of as inventing for Julien. Red stands for courage, etc., black for various aspects of melancholy, and the whole can again be documented from the Encyclopedia and *L'Armorial universel*, not to mention Stendhal's own liking for inventing coats of arms. The third article, by B. Reizov, He convincingly rejects the frequent assertion that red refers to Napoleon's army, and indeed black and red are shown not to be political colors at all. For Reizov, the truth of the symbols lies in two prophetic passages: the red of the Church scene at Verrieres and the black of Mathilde's first appearance in mourning. These are perceived as two aspects of Julien's love affairs, both pointing forward to elements in the final portion of the novel. Reizov seeks to show that the ambition and criminality of the hero are Stendhal's true subject matter.

This work, from beginning to end, run through the following three sets of mainlines of “red” and “black”.

B. *"Red" and "Black" -- A Symbol of Uniforms of Army and Church*

This is Stendhal's explanation in answer to a friend's inquiry. At the beginning of the novel, he shows people a young man, Julien, who looks frail but has some kind of enterprising spirit in his soul.

However, he was born unfortunately at the wrong time. In the Restoration period, the civilian even has no opportunity to wear the military uniform, so the best way toward the upper class is to be a priest. When he saw a venerable old judge in a silly dispute was defeated by a little priest, he was no longer mention the name of Napoleon while strenuously pursued the theology. Here, “red” and “black” is parallel; they are the road of Julien rocketing to success.

C. *"Red" and "Black" - A Symbol of Fame and Death*

1. **The angle of the novel's creative intent**

Why did Stendhal create a young man full of ideals and doing things carefully and prudently, while ended it in tragedy? This is the figurative meaning that Stendhal did not explain completely. That is, “red” symbolizes the pursuit of fame of Julien, “black” symbolizes the death. Here “red” and “black” is not parallel, but antagonistic contradiction. Stendhal regarded this set of red and black as Julien's pursuit of his dream, it is not only because Stendhal joined the army at the age of 17, crusaded in Europe three times with Napoleon, he is the only contemporary writer who really understands the Napoleonic era. While at that time, priest is a career that ambitions can be achieved.

2. **The angle of the novel's plot**

At the beginning of this novel, for Julien began his journey with such a description:

He found it dark and empty. When there was a holy day to be celebrated, all the casement windows were covered with crimson cloth. When the rays of the sun shone through, this produced a dazzling light, deeply impressive and profoundly religious. Julien shivered. All alone in the church, he seated himself in a strikingly attractive pew. It bore Monsieur de Renal's coat of arms.

Kneeling on the prayer stool, Julien noticed a scrap of printed paper, flattened out as if for reading. He leaned forward and read:

Circumstances attending the execution and the last moments of Louis Jenrel, executed at Besancon on the ... (This odd-sounding name is an anagram of Julien Sorel. Stendhal was very fond of anagrams, which frequently figure in the ludic threads that run through his fiction.)

The paper had been ripped. On the back could be made out the first words of a line, which read: The first step.

"Who could have put this bit of paper here?" thought Julien. "Poor wretch," he added with a sigh, "his name ends just like mine..." – and then he crumpled the paper. (Stendhal Club, 85 (1979), pp. 56). Leaving the church, Julien thought he saw blood near the basin of holy water, but it was only sanctified liquid that someone had spilled. The play of light through the red curtains over the windows made the water seem like blood.

Now Julien was ashamed of his secret terror.

"Am I turning into a coward!" he exclaimed to himself. "Forward March!"

These words, so often recited during the old surgeon-major's battle stories, were heroic to Julien. He walked rapidly

toward Monsieur de Renal's house.

From this, the novel began to have foreshadowed the outcome of the hero: Julien departed from the church to Monsieur de Renal's be a tutor and began to run to the battlefield to pursue his career, to be a secretary of Monsieur de La Moles; back to the church to shoot his lover, Madame de Renal; sentenced to death, indicate the result that his pursuit of "red" must be bound to be a failure or death-that is "black".

3. The angle of lexicology

Through the French, English and Chinese dictionary, we can see, the explanation for "red" and "black" are almost the same. "Red": (1)the colour of blood of fire; (2)informal communist or extremely left-wing political views--used to show disapproval; (3) revolutionary; (4)success; (5)smooth; "black": (1)the very darkest colour, like night or coal, (2)without light; completely dark; (3)very dirty; covered with dirt; (4)sad and without hope for the future; (5)full of feelings of anger or hate; (6)death (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Pearson ESL, 2003; Oxford

Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. Oxford University Press, 2004; 精选法汉法词典. 商务印书馆, 2003).

We must distinguish three major aspects with which we will have to deal in providing an interpretation: (1) the literal meaning (a curtain is red because that is its colour), (2) the ethical meaning (the redness of the cathedral curtain symbolizes the glory and the power of the Church); (3) an allegorical meaning (the red colour reminds us of other-emotional-levels of the narrative. The remaining examples of the use of red are the most important and are connected with the Church; they fall into two groups.

First, the ceremonial use of red: in the church at Verrieres, in the cathedral for the Corpus Christi celebrations, and again at Verrieres. There is a link, which has often been remarked upon, joining the first and last of these occurrences by a bond of Fate, sealed by the repetition of colour as well as the details of the newspaper cutting.

However, more can be said: Madame de Renal appears in all three episodes and this forms a further important link between them. The presence of her love runs parallel to the colour and we therefore have a correspondence of elements which allows us to see, on the three interpretative levels mentioned above, ambition and religion (the Church), plus passion (love of Madame de Renal). The narrative itself will show how Julien's ambition is destroyed by his passion.

The second group of instances concerns high ecclesiastical office and power. We may provisionally read equation as black = the humble dress of tutor/priest, and red =the high peaks of success in this same segment of society. For there is no doubt—the only way to success in 1830 is through the Church, and even the aristocratic and military 'blues' are subject to it. This is our second meaning for red.

The most obvious other use is to denote the "soutane- and the "tutor--. This, however, has another level of meaning for it denotes low caste. The soutane is also contrasted with mufti; it is sorrowful, indicating melancholy, poverty, and social inferiority. The black of death gives us a secondary level of interpretation for it is doubtless as an intentional reminder of melancholy and Fate that Stendhal chose that there should be a funeral service at the church before the feast day. Similarly,

Mathilde appears in mourning for a character of whom Julien seems a nineteenth-century avatar; the significance of this is appreciated because she will take his head as Marguerite de Navarre took that of Boniface de la Mole. Black has a more sinister political meaning too, albeit one still associated with the clergy, for the postal spies and the conspirators on both sides are distinguished by this colour.

Therefore, from the perspective of lexicology, the author's allegory is clear: red army uniforms and black robes-pursued success with the enthusiasm (red) is bound to death (black).

D. "Red" and "Black" - A Symbol of Womb, Rebirth of Julien and Church, Death, Cavern

1. View from the plot

Looking back on his four-year pursuit of fortune, Julien repeated "success", "gain of fame and fortune", "to make a rapid career advance", and always envied "happiness" of the rich everywhere, actually he has never been clear about what he wants. In short, it is more accurate to say that Julien is a misguided young man when he pursues his happiness than an individualistic careerist. What he did and thought is contradictory in nature with his mind Red and Black actually described a young man how changed from lost to clear when he pursued happiness. This is also the place which this novel has a great impact. So he found his belongs and was given a rebirth. In this sense, he is a winner and realizes his errors and mends his ways. Here the "red" and "black" are the unity of opposites.

2. View from the Implication

"Red" and "black" make up the relationship of dialectical unity. One symbols of "black" is beyond the existence of chains of linguistic signs. Its token is trauma and death; while the symbols of "red" obviously associated with blood and death. Thus, "red" and "black" had merged.

Analyzing from psychology, cavern and the church may symbolize the womb. They all offer the promise of rebirth in symbolic significance. Through contradiction, protest, practice, he finally got regeneration. Here, "red" is symbolizing the blood, the womb, the church and the and Julien's rebirth. "Black" is symbolizing the church a cave of death. "Red" and "black" here again melt into a parallel.

The transcendence of *Red and Black* lies in the multiple hidden symbolic meaning. It is not only a symbol of the historical existence, but also a symbol of the survival of human spirit. "Red" and "black" shows the relationship

between coexistence and confrontation, which expressed Stendhal's acute observation of history and human nature. It represents the difficulty and contradiction of human spirit. The following respects can formulate another kind of symbolic meaning of the colour-"red" and "black" from humanity.

E. "Red" and "Black"- A Symbol of Ideal and Reality

Life experience is a process of enduring the temptation of interest, money, power, beauty and so on. Julien is an idealist, not a simple, single image of the individual striver and careerist. His performance in the novel is one kind of process that individualism and idealism synchronism, repress, transit, and soar. It can be said that in this tortuous process of ups and downs, all of his personal struggle behavior of Julien paves the way for the final outbreak of his idealism.

Julien can give up the rational death to pursue the perceptual survival, but he does not. "Idealist" has become an important symbol of Julien, while individualist is exactly the opposite of idealists, the two rebels against each other but they are simultaneous in Red and Black. It shows the theme spirit of Stendhal: he confused in the dark reality and light bright ideal which coexists at the same time, however, he also firmly believe the sublimation and guidance for mankind of idealism. "Black" represents the reality's power of darkness; "red" represents the athanasia of idealism. Starting from the primitive human spirit, Julien is a prodigal son returns to idealism that people happy to see, even a hero.

F. "Red" and "Black" -- A Symbol of Love and Conspiracy

Red and Black is certainly a great love story, its greatness lies in the combination of history and love. Whereas, it seems that conspiracy hidden in history, so, love and conspiracy have not been individualized in the novel. Julien's love start with conspiracy, this includes both Julien's own conspiracy. The love began with conspiracy, eventually evolving into true love, whether Julien or Mathilde are all like this, this is not only contrary to their own surprise, but also confirmed that love is invincible to conspiracy.

In *Red and Black*, Julien, Madame de Renal, Mademoiselle Mathilde, represents three kinds of different purity separately. But the purity are surrounded and corrupted by conspiracy and hypocrisy. Julien painfully realizes that innocence will make people never come to anything in the end, but hypocrisy can make a person a fortune overnight with instant fame. Julien pursues status for his honor, and even gives up money and love. Julien really falls in love with Madame de Renal for his first love; second love, Mathilde really loves him, when Julien learns he did not kill Madame de Renal, that resurrects his intemperate love for her. Emotional nature of human purified their souls. It can be proved that love cannot be destroyed when Julien pour out everything in his heart to Madame de Renal, when Mathilde herself buried the head of Julien.

G. "Red" and "Black" - The Most Basic Symbol of Justice and Evil

The justice of human is struggled gradually in this kind of complex chaos, various factors converge together and form some kind of tenacious and dim tendency of justice. The justice mixes with many factors and turns to a complex process of interaction. The composite image is the unique understanding of Stendhal on justice and evil instead of telling it at once. He intends to construct one kind of blended image of red and black; such as the revolutions, history, and love and so on are also the performances of mixed image.

In *Red and Black*, justice and evil are not simple concepts but two complex tendencies of humanity with distinct boundaries. "Red" and "black" combines crime and virtue. It is consistent with Stendhal's longing of human ideal. The suggestibility of the scene that mentioned above typically represents the combination of justice and evil, the combination of humanization:

The play of light through the red curtains over the windows made the water seem like blood...The paper had been ripped. On the back could be made out the first words of a line, which read: The first step...

Red becomes the symbol for life, love, justice, passion and blood. "Black" shadow of the paper announced the death; to pursue the first step "red" means the inevitable ending of "black". The moderate exterior of "red" contains "black" violence, "black" evil highlights justice. Mathilde de la Mole said to Julien that, Republican era is the time of hero; people at that time were not so selfish. Here blood and black cassocks, ideal and reality, nobility and humbleness appear again in the indication.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the major colours provide the reader with a message on three separate but interrelated levels of interpretation. These may be stated schematically:

Red	Black
1. the colour of objects connected with the church	1. the colour of a priest's frock (and similar items)
2. ecclesiastical preferment	2. ecclesiastical and social subordination
3. a) energy and ambition b) passion (including love)	3. a) melancholy b) intelligence

These are connected in such a way that the opposition between low (black) and high (red), between melancholy and passion, is constantly present. And we are left with the following hypothesis: Stendhal may well have changed his title

from Julien in order to catch the eye of his prospective reader, but he would have done so in accordance with the structure which he had already imposed upon his nearly-completed novel. The structure of *Red and Black* is complex, but deliberate; even allowing that Julien's dreams were of Napoleon's army, the novel's title must surely be interpreted as referring to the particular ecclesiastical and emotional levels of the hero's experience in the society of 1830.

The processing of symbolic art skill in *Red and Black* shows excellent literature attainments of Stendhal. Analysis of symbolic significance makes readers step further toward real sense from the "confusing" feeling; understand ideological significance better of this monumental work; and make the analysis of the image more scientific. So, *Red and Black* is not only a symbol of the pursuit of life, but also a symbol of the theme of human spirit. By a further exploration of the theory, we can get a deeper understanding of Stendhal's representative work.

As many articles are increasing rapidly, more and more scholars in China and abroad have put forward questions on the symbolism of the "red" and "black". We hope that this research will help to consolidate our endeavor to formulate new theoretical studies and find answers to many questions in the field that demand answers.

REFERENCES

- [1] Li Zongjie & Pashtoon Cove & Sheng Chenghua. (1958). *A Brief History of French Literature*. Shanghai: Yiling Press.
- [2] *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (sixth edition). (2004). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Rene Preval. (1993). Symbolic Art on the "Red". *Sichuan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*. 39-46.
- [4] *Selected French-Chinese and Chinese-French Dictionary*. (2003). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- [5] Stendhal. (2000). *Red and Black* translated by Zou Xinsheng, Haikou: Hainan Publishing House.
- [6] Stendhal. (2001). *World Literature* translated by Cao Jingang. Beijing: World Literature Magazine.
- [7] Wang Yan. (2004). Discussion on the "Red" metaphor and Symbol. *Social Studies and Science* (fourth edition). Liaoning: Liaoning Teachers College. 30-31.
- [8] Willie Shen & Yang Deyan (Eds). (2001). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- [9] Xu Jun. (1996). Style of Forensic and Reproduction in "Red" *J. Sichuan International Studies University*. 1, 77 -79.
- [10] Zhang Mingde. (2002). Desire Subject and Narrative Structure of "Red". Beijing: Renmin University of China Resources Heart.

Na Li was born in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, China in 1982. She received her bachelor degree in linguistics from Guilin Industrial College China in 2006. She has been teaching English for 5 year in Watercraft College, Zhenjiang. Her research interests include English Linguistic and Literature Translation.