

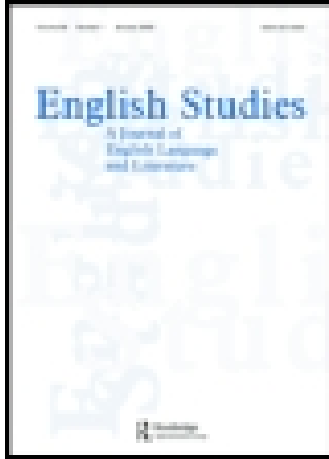
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John Braine's room at the top: The Stendhal connection

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JOHN BRAINE'S *ROOM AT THE TOP*: THE STENDHAL CONNECTION

When the thirty-five year old Bingley librarian John Braine published his first novel, *Room at the Top*, in 1957, it was immediately hailed by readers and critics alike as a powerful and realistic description of life in modern, post-war Britain, seen from the point of view of the large and by now politically dominant working class. The book's spectacular sales figures – more than a million paperback copies were sold within ten years of its publication – came second only at the time to those of the republished *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the ban on which was lifted in 1960. Joe Lampton, the hero of the novel, has been described as 'the original angry young man', typical of the late fifties and early sixties, and often associated with other writers such as Kingsley Amis, Colin Henry Wilson, John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe and Stan Barstow. Regardless of the justification for this association, it is obvious that *Room at the Top* was read almost like a documentary, and that thousands of young people in Britain saw their own reflection in the portrait of Joe Lampton.

Against this background it may seem surprising to find that the novel contains many and close similarities to a French novel from 1830, namely *Scarlet and Black* (*Le Rouge et le Noir*) by Stendhal. The main purpose of this article is first of all to show that these similarities are bound to be more than coincidental; indeed, it will be argued that Braine has borrowed from Stendhal structural elements as well as a number of incidents and details.¹ Secondly, the article will show how two historical periods respond differently to situations and dilemmas which, viewed in isolation, appear to be similar. As will be seen from the following, it seems almost as if two different writers, living in two different countries more than a century apart, have given themselves similar tasks. Thus, from the point of view of the history of ideas, these two novels offer themselves

¹ In some of the first reviews of Braine's book, the similarities to *Scarlet and Black* were noted. Peter Quennell in the *Daily Mail* (3 April 1957) and two unsigned reviews in the *Tribune* (12 April 1957) and the *New Statesman and Nation* (16 March 1957) all mention Julien Sorel, the hero of Stendhal's novel, and so does Maurice Nadeau in an undated review in *L'Observateur littéraire*. But this is mentioned only in passing, and neither of the critics implies that there is anything but a general resemblance between the two novels. In addition to this, it is interesting to note that a new English translation of Stendhal's work (that of Margaret R.B. Shaw; ref. note 3) was published by Penguin only four years prior to Braine's novel. His notebooks (currently in the West Yorkshire Archive Service in Bradford), containing drafts and plans of the novel going back to 1951, also seem to indicate that those elements of the novel most reminiscent of *Scarlet and Black* do not appear until 1954, i.e. after the publication of Shaw's new translation. Because of this probable connection, all quotes in the following are from Shaw's translation rather than C. K. Scott Moncrieff's 1925 translation (ref. note 2). Also it is more than probable that Braine, both as a librarian and as a voracious reader, must have come across Stendhal's haunting classic about the enigmatic climber Julien Sorel.

as case studies of two periods whose values are different but at the same time part of the same historical process towards an increasingly more egalitarian society.

First of all, a discussion of the similarities between the two novels needs to take into account the historical context in which they were written, and here it should be kept in mind that both take place in what could be termed post-cataclysmic societies. The France of 1830 had just been through a period of unprecedented upheaval: first the Great Revolution and its aftermath from 1789 onwards, and then the Napoleonic era which was brought to a disastrous conclusion in 1815. During the decade and a half that followed, French society still found itself balancing precariously between Liberal and Royalist forces, only to be caught in another round of revolutionary fervour in July 1830, while Stendhal was finishing his novel. It is this society, which has yet to find its footing, which is described in *Scarlet and Black*. In *Room at the Top*, similarly, the reader is faced with a society which is only just beginning to return to peace-time activities. The Second World War is still very much present (the novel is actually set in the late 1940s), and it is obvious that these six years in the immediate past have caused social changes which are of fundamental importance to the main theme of the book. Thus, in both novels we are faced with societies in which traditional structures ensuring a status quo have been severely ruptured and which, as a consequence, leave themselves open to the attempts of outsiders to secure positions which have previously been unattainable. Another aspect of the historical contexts in which the two novels were written is the very obvious focus on the 'generation gap'. In her introduction to the Everyman edition of Stendhal's novel, Ann Jefferson quotes the article that Stendhal wrote about *Scarlet and Black*. Here he says: 'The fact is, that in Paris a man of sixty entertains, on all subjects, ideas totally the reverse of those which regulate the conduct of his son, a young man of thirty. The Revolution formed the character of the latter, but the father is still the man of 1785'.² There is no doubt that the hero of *Room at the Top* represents a similarly new breed of young people whose ideas and ideals are radically different from those of their parents.

As regards the physical settings of the two novels, it should be noted that both clearly contain a journey motif, and in a double sense of the word: Julien Sorel and Joe Lampton both perform a journey, in geographical as well as social terms, and both of them are eager to get away from their home towns and the world into which they were born. Julien 'loathed the place in which he had been born; his imagination was frozen stiff by everything he saw there'³; and Joe more than willingly heeds his friend Charlie's advice: 'There's nothing in Dufton, Joe. Leave it before you become a zombie too ...'.⁴ Stendhal's hero

² Ann Jefferson, Introd., *The Red and the Black: A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*, by Stendhal, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (London, 1997), p. xxxi.

³ Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black: A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*, transl. Margaret R. B. Shaw (Harmondsworth, no year), p. 43. All subsequent page references are given in the text.

⁴ John Braine, *Room at the Top* (1957; London, 1992), p. 17. All subsequent page references are given in the text.

starts his career as a carpenter's son in the provincial town of Verrières. He then in turn becomes the tutor of the mayor's children; a student of theology at the seminary in Besançon (the provincial capital); and the private secretary – or rather 'chief of staff' (279) – of the Marquis de la Mole in Paris. Before the final tragedy strikes, this carpenter's son, now M. le Chevalier Julien Sorel de la Vernaye, is also given a commission as a Lieutenant of Hussars by M. de la Mole. Joe Lampton's rather more simplified itinerary starts in his home town, Dufton – an area which is apparently exclusively working class. He then moves on to Warley, where he finds lodgings with the Thompsons, a middle-class couple, and from this base he then later gets into contact with the upper strata of Warley society, represented above all by the Brown family. Thus there is also an element of the *Bildungsroman* in the two novels: both heroes go through radical and dramatic changes, although within a much shorter period of time than would normally be the case in more traditional versions of the genre.

In very broad and general terms, the similarities of plot between the two novels could be summarized as follows: in both novels there is a main character from the lower classes who goes through a process of moral degradation as a result of his social ambition. The main character makes use of two women as a means of achieving his goal, and these women are largely left behind on the battlefield as victims of the main character's ambition. In both cases there is an older, married and somewhat motherly mistress who helps him up the first step of the social ladder, and who is then abandoned for a younger and more wealthy woman. In both novels this second relationship becomes explosive precisely because of the class difference between the lovers. The woman's family and society at large do their best to prevent the relationship from developing further, and in both cases the relationship leads to a highly qualified victory for the two lovers, simply because the hero has sacrificed too much to be able to enjoy the fruits of his conquest.

Thus, the two male protagonists are very much the driving force in both of the novels. Also, both Julien Sorel and Joe Lampton exhibit some rather strikingly similar character traits. Mixing with people of higher stations, both are painfully sensitive about their undistinguished origins, and as a result the element of vulgarity is presented as closely connected with the theme of climbing the social ladder. They develop different strategies to remedy the problem, but it is important for an understanding of both heroes to realize how – because of the social structures that surround them – they are ultimately forced to conceive themselves as vulgar; they inherit, in other words, the view which their surroundings have of them. In both novels the mothers of the heroes' young lovers (i.e. Madame de la Mole and Mrs. Brown respectively) are particularly careful to remind the two heroes of this handicap.

Furthermore, both Julien and Joe are – in a social sense – cast adrift from their natural environment and their families. Julien describes himself as 'a sort of foundling, hated as I am by my father, my brothers, and my whole family' (53). His mother is never mentioned. On another occasion, he dreams of a friend: 'What a treasure a friend would have been! But, thought Julien, is there anywhere in the world a heart that beats for me?' (398). Joe, an only child, has

similarly lost his parents. Having just arrived in Warley, he describes his feeling: 'I suddenly felt entirely lonely' (15), and later, at the Civic Ball, having had a humiliating encounter with Jack Wales and the Browns: 'I've never in all my life felt so completely friendless' (163). Also, the love life of both Julien and Joe may easily be interpreted as an expression of and an attempt to remove this essential sense of loneliness.

Ambition is another crucial quality in both Julien and Joe. Both seem from a very early stage to have set their minds on achieving success, cost what it may. The following description of Julien equally applies to Joe:

Who would have guessed that his girlish face, so pale and so gentle, concealed an unshakeable determination to undergo a thousand deaths rather than fail to achieve success? For Julien, achieving success meant first and foremost getting away from Verrières. ... [H]e revelled in dreams of being one day introduced to beautiful Parisian women, whose attention he would manage to attract by some remarkable feat or other. Why should he not be loved by one of them, just as Bonaparte, when still poor, had been loved by that distinguished lady, Madame de Beauharnais? (43)

Also, there is no doubt that his ambition to become a priest is based exclusively on selfish motives. Joe, similarly, speaks in terms of a selfish vocation:

I was going to enjoy all the luxuries which that young man [in the Aston Martin] enjoyed. I was going to collect that legacy. It was as clear and compelling as the sense of vocation which doctors and missionaries are supposed to experience, though in my instance, of course, *the call ordered me to do good to myself not others* (29; my italics).

In their relationship to their lovers, Julien's and Joe's ultimate objectives are precisely the same. Julien's 'love was still another name for ambition. It meant for him the joy of possessing so beautiful a woman, when he himself was a poor, unhappy creature whom men despised' (107). And during his first meeting with Mathilde in her room: 'There was not a trace of tenderness in his feelings at this first moment of love. It was the keen happiness of gratified ambition, and Julien was above all things ambitious' (351). The same attitude is reflected in Joe's answer to Susan's question of how much he loves her: "'A hundred thousand pounds' worth," I said. "A hundred thousand pounds' worth"' (140)⁵; in his rather blunt statement about Susan to his aunt Emily: 'If I want her, I'll have her' (90); and in his similarly blunt response to Eva Storr: 'I always go straight for what I want' (42).

Closely related to the heroes' ambition is the rather cool and calculating way in which they pursue their goals. Madame Derville, Madame de Rênal's friend, is quick to observe this element in Julien's character, and comments: 'He seems

⁵ An interesting source of this particular passage is found in one of the diaries which Braine wrote during his convalescence from TB in Grassington Hospital: 'Jeff just in, reading passionate letter from A., whom he fucked [sic] last night. She took out 9 1/2d. from her pocket and said to him "How much do you love me?" He said "9 1/2d. worth". She said: "I love you more than that"' (1D75/21/8).

to me to be always turning things over in his mind and never doing anything without some ulterior motive. He's a sly sort of fellow' (98). And during the above mentioned encounter between Julien and Mathilde in her room, he is again only half concerned with making love: 'As he spoke he was thinking how best to take advantage of this victory' (351). The same military terminology, so prevalent in both novels, is used by Joe, who during one of their outings feels a certain tenderness for Susan, 'but the most important part of me was continuing the operation according to plan' (139). Similarly, at the Carstairs's party, he happily realizes that Susan is in love with him, but: 'In the back of my mind a calculating machine rang up success and began to compose a triumphant letter to Charles ...' (128).

Finally, Julien and Joe both combine a calculating and almost cruel streak in their character with a charm which women find hard to resist. In Braine this is given considerable emphasis as one of the means by which it is possible to get to the top. Joe and his friend Charles philosophise a great deal about this, and the conclusion is clear: 'we had the notion that if only we could learn how to use it [i.e. charm] our careers would be much benefited. The possession of charm wasn't in itself a guarantee of success, but it seemed to follow ambition like a pilot fish' (18). This is also his most effective weapon in his conquest of both Alice and Susan. Madame de Rênal is equally 'struck by Julien's extraordinary good looks' (48), and it is obvious from the way in which she unwittingly falls prey to him that his charm provides him with the decisive advantage. The court scenes at the end of the novel, in which the audience mainly consists of secretly admiring women, point in the same direction.

Thus, there are several obvious parallels between the personalities of the two main characters. However, the remaining gallery of important characters is no less similar in the two novels. As indicated already, Julien's and Joe's first serious love affairs are with mature, married women. Both Madame de Rênal and Alice Aisgill are married to successful businessmen, both of whom have a slight *nouveau-riche* touch to them. They are concerned, above all, with making money. Their houses are described accordingly: Stendhal depicts with thinly disguised irony M. de Rênal's new and rather ostentatious house, designed to reflect his position as mayor and leading local businessman. The Aisgill's house, similarly, 'looked expensive, built-to-order, but out of place, like a Piccadilly tart walking the moors in high heels and nylons' (67). Like Alice, 'Madame de Rênal was about thirty, but she was still a rather pretty woman' (29). The relationships start and develop with the respective husbands apparently unsuspecting. Both relationships are furthermore soon enveloped by rumours which become potentially dangerous to the two lovers. And finally, both of these relationships have dramatic and violent conclusions: Madame de Rênal is nearly killed by Julien after she sends a letter to Mathilde's father, the underlying motive of which is clearly her burning jealousy of Mathilde; Alice, probably suspecting Joe's betrayal of their love, wishes her own death: 'I wish you'd kill me. ... If you wanted to now, I'd let you' (185). And ultimately, both women die – although in different ways – because of their younger lovers.

Julien's relationship to Mathilde and Joe's to Susan have already been

touched upon. It should be added, however, that deep down neither of the two young men is in love, or to be more precise: their love is overshadowed by other and more material considerations. When Julien observes Mathilde for the first time, he admires her genius, but this quality is significantly '[c]ombined with noble birth and a considerable fortune' (299). Joe, equally impressed, sees Susan as 'the princess in the fairy stories, the girl in old songs, the heroine of musical comedies. She naturally belonged to it [sic] because she possessed the necessary face and figure and the right income group' (57). Thus, both heroes are fundamentally concerned with the future of their own careers, and are cynically using their lovers as a means to this end. Joe's abrupt 'If I want her, I'll have her' (90) has already been quoted. Earlier in the novel, his objective is equally clear: 'I was moving into the attack, and no one had better try to stop me' (30). Julien, having discovered that Mathilde is in love with him, draws a very similar conclusion: 'Anyhow, she's a pretty creature! Julien added, with a tigerish glare. I'll get her, and then be off – and bad luck to the man who hinders me in my flight!' (317). Also, both women are being observed by their suitors at parties where the latter feel themselves socially out of place, and where the two women are seen as 'top girls', in a category of their own (Stendhal 295ff.; Braine 127-8).

Another significant feature, which is connected with the overall theme of class conflict, is that both Mathilde's and Susan's relationships to their family histories are emphasised. Julien is told by the academician in the chapter entitled 'Queen Marguerite' (311-18) of Mathilde's obsession with the family's heroic past and with her ancestor Boniface de la Mole's relationship with Queen Marguerite of Navarre.⁶ Susan, similarly, had a forefather called Peregrine St Clair, who 'used to be a friend of Byron's' (155). Admittedly, this information has different functions in the two novels, but in both cases it serves to underline the social gulf between the lovers.

A further parallel between the two couples appears when their relationships get underway but are brought to a standstill by various circumstances. Both Julien and Joe are then advised by their male friends – Prince Korasoff and Charles respectively – to secure their game by appearing to be uninterested, and in both cases the trick works. Finally, in both novels the two young women, both *nineteen, become pregnant, and in both cases this event triggers further incidents* which are similar. These similarities become apparent in a comparison between Mathilde's and Susan's parents, the Marquis and Marquise de la Mole, and Mr. and Mrs. Brown. The mothers of the two girls both have in common a highly distinguished family background. The Marquise de la Mole 'is a tall, fair woman, pious, arrogant, extremely polite She is the daughter of the old duc de Chaulnes, so famous for his aristocratic prejudices. This great lady is a kind of epitome, in high relief, of the main characteristics of women of her rank' (250). Mrs. Brown had similarly 'a well-shaped face with large eyes and a pale clear skin which accentuated the soft blackness of her hair' (163); she is '[t]he

⁶ Just as Marguerite of Navarre buried the head of her lover Boniface de la Mole with her own hands after he had been beheaded in 1574 (pp. 312-13), so does Mathilde bury Julien's head after his execution (p. 509).

last of the St Clairs and stinking with money. She's an old tough too; a place for everyone and everyone in their place' (127); and 'she had a face which I felt could set like stone with the pride of caste' (161).

What is even more striking, however, is the way in which both of these women seem to look at the world from a higher social position than their husbands. This is particularly obvious in Mr. Brown, who – as is implied by his name and his accent – is an altogether self-made man: 'He rose from nothing, absolutely nothing' (143). This is not true to the same extent of the Marquis de la Mole, but he too is aware of another life than that of security and wealth:

After enjoying for two years an immense fortune and the highest honours at court, he had been thrust forth in 1793 into the midst of the frightful miseries of the Emigration. This hard school had wrought changes in a twenty-two-year-old heart. In reality he was encamped amid his present wealth rather than dominated by it. But this same imagination which had saved his soul from the deadly canker of gold had made him the helpless victim of a mad desire to see his daughter honoured with a high-sounding title (445).

The wives of these men play only a small part in the drama. It is their husbands, i.e. the fathers of the two disobedient young women, who are first informed of their pregnancies. And their reactions are virtually identical: fury, soon accompanied by an understanding which borders on sympathy and even admiration for the young and connectionless men. Both Marquis de la Mole and Mr. Brown send a short and abrupt message to their prospective sons-in-law, telling them to come immediately for an interview. When Julien enters the room he is met with a shower of insults. However, he stays calm, and it soon emerges that the Marquis's volcanic temper is not quite as bad as it seems. '[O]vercome with grief, [the Marquis] flung himself into an armchair', but: 'Julien heard him murmur to himself: "The fellow's not really a scoundrel"' (438). And later, the emotionally somewhat unstable Marquis, having considered buying Julien out of the whole affair, 'was dreaming of building up a brilliant career for him. He was making him take the name of one of his estates; and why should he not get his own peerage passed down to him?... It cannot be denied, the Marquis said to himself, that Julien shows a singular aptitude for business, a daring spirit, even *brilliance* perhaps' (445-6). Julien is already the Marquis's chief of staff, and now the Marquis speculates about the possibility of taking his career considerably further, even to the point of placing him before his own 'madcap' son (249).

Room at the Top follows a very similar pattern. Mr. Brown *appears* to want Joe out of town and out of his life, and he proposes to buy him out by setting him up in business. But when Joe, like Julien, shows both courage and steadfastness, Mr. Brown quickly comes to see him as an interesting business partner. Thus both the Marquis and Mr. Brown realise that these highly unsuitable matches may very conveniently offer them an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: they will allow their daughters to marry the men they love, and they are good for business. What Mr. Brown needs is also a chief of staff, a good administrator, 'someone to reorganize the office. ... I'm an engineer. I'm not interested in the administrative side' (210). And just as the Marquis considers

passing down his peerage to Julien, Mr. Brown knows perfectly well that the marriage between Susan, his only child, and Joe Lampton, will eventually make Joe the heir to his entire business empire.⁷

As has been shown above, there are striking similarities between a number of characters in the two novels, but there are also other and more particular images and incidents which deserve to be compared, some of which will be discussed in the following.

First of all, in both novels there is a close connection between clothes and clothing, on the one hand, and change of identity, on the other. When Julien comes to the de Rênal household, which marks the first stage towards a new identity, he is given new clothes, and 'the feeling of pride awakened in him by contact with clothes so different from those he was accustomed to wear, made him so beside himself with joy, and yet so anxious to hide the joy he felt, that there was something fantastically brusque in all his movements' (50). Later, when he comes to Paris and the Hôtel de la Mole, he is dressed up again. Having ordered two shirts from the tailor to whom the Marquis had sent him, the Marquis says: 'Very good! Get twenty-two more' (255). Soon the transformation is complete: 'Julien was now a dandy, and understood the art of life in Paris. ... Nothing of the provincial remained, in his figure or in his dress' (293). This external change is accompanied by Marquis de la Mole's deliberate orchestration of a new identity for Julien, who is one day told by his employer: 'so now you are the natural son of a rich gentleman of Franche-Comté, who's an intimate friend of mine!' (285). In *Room at the Top*, a very similar process takes place. When Joe enters the Thompson household, it is very clearly suggested that he is taking over the role of the Thompsons' son, who was killed in the war. The Thompsons have lost their only son, and Joe, an only child, has lost both his parents, and both of Joe's 'new' parents are struck by the similar appearances of Joe and their son. There is, in other words, a kind of Cinderella transformation taking place the moment Joe arrives in Warley. Again, this is connected with a change in Joe's material surroundings, especially his clothes. Having been shown his room, he spends a long time ruminating on the contents of his suitcase:

... I opened my suitcase and unfolded my dressing-gown. I'd never had one before; Aunt Emily thought not only that they were extravagant ... but that they were the livery of idleness and decadence. ... I shall never be able to recapture that sensation of leisure and opulence and sophistication which came over me that first afternoon in Warley when I took off my jacket and collar and went into the bathroom wearing a real dressing-gown (13).

⁷ This incident, strikingly similar in the two novels, is a pretty strong indication that Braine must have read Stendhal, and – because of the time element – most likely the new translation of 1953. In a notebook dated 15 March 1953 (1D75/21/8), the incident has far less edge. When Joe meets his prospective father-in-law, the tense drama of the final version is completely absent. Mr. Brown, in a relatively friendly atmosphere, offers Joe a job, and Susan's pregnancy is not mentioned at all (at this stage in the composition of the novel it is still Alice who becomes pregnant, ref. 1D75/1/1). The same notebook also suggests considerable uncertainty about which direction the novel is taking. Some of this uncertainty may have been alleviated by Braine's reading of *Scarlet and Black*.

Thus the inner or mental process of a change of identity is confirmed by the external change of dress. Identity depends not only on how one sees oneself, but also on how one is seen by others.

Second, both novels are characterised by an extensive use of military imagery. As suggested already, wars form the immediate background to both novels. But there are also intimations of war in a less literal sense. Julien, having just concluded that he must become a priest in order to make a career, suddenly thinks to himself: '*To arms!*' This phrase, so frequently recurring in the old surgeon's tales of battle, had heroic associations for Julien' (45). And later: 'Under Napoleon, I'd have been a sergeant; amongst all these future parish priests, I'll be a Vicar-general' (191). How these passages should be interpreted is suggested by another passage later on in the novel: Julien 'was the type of the unhappy wretch at war with the whole of society. "*To arms!*" cried Julien, leaping at one bound down the steps in front of the house' (336). Thus, the military imagery is primarily an indication of *class* war, rather than conventional war. Precisely the same use is found in *Room at the Top*. Joe's reflections in chapter 3 on how to reach the top are concluded with the following passage:

I was like an officer fresh from training-school, unable for the moment to translate the untidiness of fear and cordite and corpses into the obvious and irresistible attack. I was going to take the position, though, I was sure of that. I was moving into the attack, and no one had better try to stop me. General Joe Lampton, you might say, had opened hostilities (30).

Both Julien and Joe, in other words, are very clearly individuals who challenge traditional class differences and make efficient use of the somewhat more flexible structures which the recent political upheavals have created.

Thirdly, as indicated already, the love life of the two heroes plays a crucial role in their attack on the bastions of class and privilege. This throws some interesting light on the role of love in nineteenth and twentieth century fiction generally. During the last two centuries, the novel has consistently used love as the main key to open the door between incompatible classes. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is an interesting case in point. Mr. Darcy, representing a pre-Romantic upper class view, behaves in a perfectly legitimate manner when he tries to prevent the match between Jane and Mr. Bingley. He does not initially see the love between the two as a sufficiently good reason for giving his blessing to the match, and as if to prove the point he is himself engaged to the daughter of Lady Catherine de Bourgh – a relationship which is socially impeccable but emotionally dead. It is only through the painful process of his struggle with Elizabeth that he comes to accept love as a decisive factor, the consequence of which for Elizabeth means a spectacular leap across otherwise insurmountable class barriers. This is the Romantic or sentimental version of love's ability to transgress social boundaries.

Both Julien and Joe have moved a very decisive step beyond this sentimental position. In both novels there is nothing but an apparent love where one would expect to find genuine love. Love is being used as a coolly calculated instrument in securing entry into the holy of holies. Julien does not love Mathilde, and Joe

does not love Susan. Thus they achieve an almost forced entry to the treasure they are seeking. They have both learnt that money and power are everything. Love is just a sentimental façade, and women are simply the keys they need to open the doors. If Julien and Joe are at all capable of true love, it is only for the women who happen *not* to hold the right keys.⁸ In one of Stendhal's narratorial intrusions, he says: 'It is not love ... that has a chief hand in the career of young men who, like Julien, are endowed with a certain degree of talent; these attach themselves with obstinate tenacity to some particular set, and if that set "makes good", all the best things society can give are showered upon them' (365). Joe, similarly, eventually takes Susan when he loves her the least; his aggressive assertion during his meeting with Mr. Brown in the Conservative Club that 'I love her' (207) is very far from the truth, and he knows it. Again, she is reduced to a door-opener to the promised land.

A fourth element playing an important role in the two novels is money. To an almost extreme degree money is the measure of success; it is the air which both of the heroes breathe. In Stendhal this is apparent from the very first description of life in Verrières. The narrator stresses how 'petty financial interests poison the air' (24), and: '*Bringing in money* – that is the magic phrase determining everything in Verrières. ... *Bringing in money* is the decisive reason for everything in this little town you thought so pretty' (28). A crucial point here is the way in which Julien is treated in accordance with this dominant philosophy. The negotiations between Julien's father and M. de Rênal about Julien's working conditions as a tutor for the latter's children are exclusively concerned with money. Julien is already a commodity whose fate becomes the subject of a rather intense bartering. Similarly, the deal having been closed, M. de Rênal describes Julien to his wife as 'our new acquisition' (51). Julien quickly realises the coldness of the system surrounding him. During the dinner at the Valenods' (ch. 22) he witnesses the 'vulgar self-indulgence' of the *nouveau-riche* superintendent of the workhouse, and gives the following warning to himself: 'Possibly you'll get a post worth twenty thousand francs; but then, while you are gorging yourself with meat, you'll have to stop some wretched prisoner singing; you'll give dinners with the money you've stolen from his miserable pittance – and while you dine he'll be unhappier still!' (156). The decisive importance of money seems to play an equally important role in the chapters about the de la Moles in Paris.

Joe Lampton, in the crucial chapter 18, similarly sees himself as caught in and by the system. During this soul-searching examination of his own situation, he is significantly in the middle of studying *economics*, the science of money, and his conclusion, written in a cool and objective third person narrative, is similar to that of Julien: 'Prospects: he might be the Treasurer of Warley one day. Shall

⁸ Another parallel between Madame de Rênal and Alice is that both of them in the early stages of their relationships try to convince themselves that the element of friendship is more important than that of love. Madame de Rênal happily buries her moral qualms by insisting that Julien will be 'just a friend' (97), whereas Alice, slightly less confident, asks Joe: 'Please don't fall in love with me, Joe. We will be friends, won't we? Loving friends?' (84).

we say a thousand a year at the age of forty if he's very fortunate?' (148). Just as Julien went to the Valenods' dinner, Joe goes to the Carstairs's birthday party, and he too is faced with the vulgar brashness of the *nouveaux riches*. And while Julien thought of the petty rations for the prisoners next door while he and the other guests were served the most sumptuous meal – a powerful image of a class-ridden society – Joe thinks back to the rationing of the war years while enjoying the endless catalogue of delicacies provided by the Carstairs, who are 'in the business, of course' (129).

Another parallel with respect to money is that neither Julien nor Joe has any illusions about the basic mechanism of the game they are playing. They both take it for granted that the struggle in which they are involved is that of a purely money-based materialism. Thus, when Julien encounters the 'austere piety' of the Jansenists, he 'was astonished; the idea of religion was linked in his mind with that of hypocrisy and the hope of making money' (277). Religion, then, is no longer associated in Julien's mind with the question of spiritual salvation, but exclusively with the benefits of a highly this-worldly career.

Scarlet and Black and *Room at the Top* also contain a number of more specific incidents which deserve a closer examination. Early in Stendhal's novel, the curé Chélan strongly admonishes Julien to marry Elisa, the maid in the de Rênal household who had 'come into some money'. The motivation for the curé's advice is obvious: Julien and Elisa are socially suitable for each other, and he takes it for granted that Julien, like most people, will immediately accept his station in life and avoid the very obvious problems of challenging the system. For this reason, he is 'intensely surprised when Julien resolutely declared that he could not possibly think of accepting Mademoiselle Elisa's offer' (63). A similar incident is found in chapter 17 of *Room at the Top*, where Hoylake – Joe's superior as curé Chélan is Julien's – explains to Joe the ways of the world and strongly advises him to accept his place in Warley and marry someone suitable.

In another passage, Julien arrives in Besançon to start a new life at the seminary (Part I, ch. 24). As he passes over the drawbridge he is full of thoughts about the siege of the town in 1674, and he eagerly studies the fortifications. 'Motionless with admiration' he enters a café: 'Everything seemed magic to him that day' (177). Arriving in Warley, Joe also goes to a café, and from here he admires the genuine Elizabethan architecture and a 'bridge of wrought iron and glass' (27). For him, too, this is a new and powerful experience. For a second it is as though his perceptions have been jarred 'into a different focus. It was as if some barrier had been removed: everything seemed intensely real ...' (26). Thus, in both books the main characters encounter a new and as yet unknown world, which also makes them painfully aware of their own insignificance.

A final similarity between the two novels is the way in which moustaches are used as indications of social status. In the chapter entitled 'What Kind of Decoration confers Honour?' (Stendhal, vol. II, ch. 8), the word 'decoration' may be interpreted as referring to the fact that several of the young noblemen who are at the ball at Hôtel de la Mole wear moustaches. The significance of this seems to be underlined by passages such as '[t]he young men with moustaches

were scandalized' (297), and '[a] surging mob of young men with moustaches had descended on Mathilde' (300). All these young suitors are thus given a uniform characteristic which makes them serve as a foil to Julien, who, despite his lack of a moustache, still exerts a greater impact on the young girl. In *Room at the Top* there is a similar emphasis on Jack Wales's moustache, and here the connection with class and status is made explicit: 'The big R.A.F. moustache was worn with the right degree of nonchalance; he'd been an officer, it was an officer's adornment. I never grew one myself for precisely that reason: if you wear one and haven't been commissioned people look upon you as if you were wearing a uniform or decorations you weren't entitled to' (40).

So far this study has focused on the parallels between the two novels. Turning now to a number of obvious and striking differences, the focus of attention will again be on the two main characters, Julien and Joe, and on their young lovers, Mathilde and Susan.

First of all, there is no doubt that Stendhal's hero is far more complex than Braine's. His thoughts and actions are highly unpredictable and irrational. To the reader, Julien's true self remains a mystery which he takes with him to his grave. It should also be noted that his ambition is not primarily directed towards money, but towards that which usually accompanies the possession of money, namely honour, respect and recognition. In a typical nineteenth century fashion, he falls prey to an inflated sense of honour and pride which eventually takes him to the gallows. Still, most readers would agree that Julien grows in stature throughout the novel, and in the final chapters he acquires a quality which is both tragic and moving. Joe, in comparison, is almost embarrassingly simple. There is hardly any soul-searching agony in his character, and he very rarely experiences the pendular swings between hope and despair, love and hatred. He says himself that he never looks back, and his focus on the future is narrow and changeless. A true child of the modern consumer society, he has only one major concern: that of acquiring money and wealth. In a sense, he does not even seem to be interested in such an immaterial dimension as honour and respect. Instead there is an almost exclusive focus on *things*; nothing else seems to be worthy of his attention. Still, despite his insistence on not looking back, there *are* moments when Joe Lampton seems to be on the point of admitting his own failure. In the final chapter this is quite obvious in his immediate reactions to Alice's violent death, but also in the calmer and more reflective passages where the mature Joe Lampton looks back on his past, there is a touch of the same. In one of these passages he says:

What has happened to me is exactly what I willed to happen. I am my own draughtsman. Destiny, force of events, fate, good or bad fortune – all that battered repertory company can be thrown right out of my story But somewhere along the line ... I could have been a different person. ... I suppose that I had my chance to be a real person [my italics]. 'You're always in contact,' Alice said to me once. 'You're there as a person, you're warm and human. It's as though everyone else were wearing rubber gloves.' She couldn't say that now (124).

This passage effectively expresses the tragedy of Joe Lampton. With the benefit of hindsight, he realises that he is not 'a real person'; perhaps he even realises

that he has been deceived by the lure of what he took to be a life of happiness. He seems implicitly to admit that he has been a hungry rather than an angry young man, suffering from a primitive, elemental appetite which ignored everything else. He admits during the party at the Carstairs's that he is 'hungry for profusion, hungry for more than enough, hungry for cream and pineapples and roast pork and chocolate' (129). If this is correct, Joe comes across as a rather simple and naive young man, who will be happy as soon as he has been given a bellyful of calories and a houseful of modern gadgets. A brief glance at Susan appears to confirm this suspicion; she is also a simple soul, who seems to have no thought for anything but a life of material comfort. Her only cards are youth, beauty and wealth, all of them highly material qualities, which she uses to the best of her ability to secure her catch.

Thus there is something mechanical and profoundly unexciting about both Joe and Susan. Their primitivism may seem frank and honest and straightforward, but there is very little behind their successful exterior. There is in this wonder couple, who so admirably transgress the apartheid of class, a total insensitivity to other and less material qualities. On the other hand, they are perhaps what we all are: products of a society where increasingly being equal and being identical mean more or less the same. Susan, as a member of the upper class, represents no sophistication, nothing worth admiring; she is essentially just as soulless and idealless as Joe himself, which is also the reason why Joe's fascination with her wears off so quickly. Also, it should be remembered that she is a half-breed, with a mother from the upper class and a father from the masses. But then again, maybe this is precisely Braine's point: the society of the 1950s was rapidly marching towards a social democratic dream world – or nightmare – depending on one's viewpoint. Joe and Susan are no longer from different worlds, and the class conflict between them is no longer as bitter as it used to be; when all is said and done, both of them have been socially adjusted in such a way that they are now suitable for each other.

A similar glance at Mathilde shows the contrast. Like Julien, she is a deeply divided character, whose sense of pride and honour is so intense that it eventually brings about her ruin. In a strange, paradoxical way she wants Julien *not* to love her, because it is only by not being loved that she can properly admire and worship him. Mathilde scorns love; she wants passion rather than sentimentality, but all her suitors worship her in the sentimental way which she deeply resents. Only Julien appears to ignore her, and thus she immediately endows him with the role of hero and master, the only male role with which she can sympathise. Consequently, as soon as he confesses his love for her, she turns cold, and the moment she herself – desperately in love – confesses her love for him, her social conscience immediately causes a violent swing back to the deepest contempt. In this way their entire relationship is transformed into a power struggle which very clearly reflects the very real struggle between the different classes to which they belong.

Thus Mathilde and Susan succumb to their socially inferior lovers for very different reasons. Mathilde's ideals are deeply rooted in the medieval heritage, which was still of major significance to the French nobility of 1830. The new

contender for power and influence, the rapidly growing and business-based bourgeoisie, still had no significant impact on Mathilde's choice. Oddly enough it is a man from the very bottom of the scale who kindles the flame of worship in her heart. In Braine's novel, on the other hand, the nobility is virtually extinct; it has been subsumed within the steadily growing bourgeoisie, reducing the social distance between Joe and Susan considerably. Titles and noble birth have become largely unimportant; the cash nexus is the only thing that counts.

Despite this contrast, however, the fact remains that both novels must be read as voicing the ideal of egalitarianism. Ironically, both Mathilde and Susan seek their lower class lovers precisely because they seem to represent an alternative to the staleness of the social environment in which they themselves live. Julien and Joe, by representing the vigour, the energy and the courage which are vanishing from the upper classes, are clearly identified with the future; they are the inheritors of the earth. Knowing 'a man of merit' when she sees one, Mathilde concludes that it is not Julien's exterior qualities which have seduced her,

but his profound discussions of the future awaiting France, his ideas on the possible resemblance between the events about to swoop down upon us and the Revolution of 1688 in England. I've been seduced, ... I'm a weak woman, but at least I haven't been led astray like a flibbertigibbet by external advantages. If there should be a Revolution, why should not Julien Sorel play Roland's part, and I the part of Madame Roland? (363).

Mathilde, in other words, foresees the direction of the political process, and by accepting Julien as her master, she jumps on the democratic bandwagon which will eventually remove the power base of her own class. In a sense she inverts the traditional relationship between the classes. Using the class jargon of suppression and rebellion, master and slave, she pleads with Julien: 'Reign over me for ever, punish your slave severely, whenever she seeks to rebel' (368). And Julien, having effectively been asked to rule over his superior, quickly grabs the opportunity:

Make her afraid, he cried all of a sudden, flinging his book right away. An enemy will only obey me in so far as I make him fear me, then he will not dare to despise me. He paced up and down his little room, wild with joy, though his happiness, in truth, was rather one of pride than of love. Make her afraid! he repeated proudly to himself, and he had reason to be proud. Even in moments of greatest happiness, he thought, Madame de Rénal always doubted whether my love was equal to her own. Here, I have a demon to subdue, therefore subduing must be my task (429).

Only a few pages earlier, Marquis de la Mole – happily unaware of his daughter's escapades – complains about the prospects for the future in a speech to the secret Royalist meeting to which he has taken Julien: 'I see nothing any more but *candidates* paying court to unwashed *majorities*' (389). As has been shown, Julien takes the opportunity to *discipline* Mathilde, thereby exemplifying the class war which is already underway. A similar incident is found in *Room at the Top*, when Susan demands that Joe should not meet Alice to tell her face to face that their relationship is over. Susan bursts into tears:

'I'm going. I don't want to see you again. You never loved me –'. I took hold of her roughly, then slapped her hard on the face. She gave a little cry of surprise, then flew at me with her nails. I held her off easily.

'You're not going,' I said. 'I'm not going to do what you asked me either. I love you, you silly bitch, and I'm the one who says what's to be done. Now and in the future' (198).

This element of violence leads on to a final point which needs to be considered. Most readers of the two novels would agree that both Julien and Joe go through a process involving an element of moral degradation, or a fall from grace. Through their selfish and cynical behaviour they both inflict a considerable amount of suffering on people around them, and especially on the women who love them. Both may be said to commit a number of rather grave moral offences; and Julien, in addition, commits a serious crime, that is his attempted murder of Madame de Rênal. This raises the question: who is to blame? Are they born into a society in which the road towards moral degradation is the only route by which they can achieve that which would otherwise be unattainable? Are they, in other words, forced to choose between remaining, on the one hand, morally impeccable and thereby getting nowhere, and, on the other, acting immorally and getting somewhere? This moral dilemma seems to be present in both of the novels. There are people around both Julien and Joe who advise them to accept their place and refrain from challenging the system, but it can hardly be denied that it is precisely by *not* heeding this advice that they eventually do get to the top. Clearly, this interpretation favours a radical if not revolutionary political attitude: it is only by breaking the rules, and by being disobedient to the system, that you can get a share of the cake. Also, this interpretation firmly implies that Julien and Joe are victims who claim what may be said to be rightfully theirs.⁹

Still, this does not provide the victim – morally speaking – with a *carte blanche*. Julien's status as a victim cannot be used as an excuse for his attempted murder of Madame de Rênal; neither can Joe's be used as an excuse for the way in which he ditches Alice at the worst possible moment, nor for the way in which he effectively rapes Susan in order to make sure that she will not leave him (ch. 27). In a later novel by John Braine, *The Queen of a Distant Country*, the main character – a writer – looks back on his first novel, which is very clearly *Room at the Top*, and says: 'The moral – and a subsidiary theme in my first novel and the primary theme in my second – was that we're not rewarded according to our merits, that the wicked – or at any rate the reckless and sensual and selfish – shall flourish like the green bay tree'.¹⁰

Surely, this is a conclusion which most readers would intuitively find both uncomfortable and unsatisfactory, simply because it does not conform to our

⁹ As to *Room at the Top*, this of course does not imply that Joe's struggle to reach the top is politically motivated. In one of Braine's notebooks containing early drafts of the novel, he says explicitly: 'I hardly need add that this isn't a political novel. Joe isn't very interested in politics' (1D75/1/1).

¹⁰ John Braine, *Queen of a Distant Country* (1972; London, 1975), pp.168-9.

sense of justice. But Joe appears to regard himself as a citizen of a godless universe, and justice in a godless universe will have to be confined to life on earth and nowhere else. Joe seems, in other words, in his typically cynical and opportunist way, to conclude that he has got away with whatever sin he has committed. He has, in a sense, fooled the system, and come out on top. This reading may seem to be undermined by the very last lines in the novel, in which Eva Storr tries to calm Joe by saying that nobody blames him for Alice's tragedy: 'I pulled myself away from her abruptly. "Oh my God," I said, "that's the trouble"' (235). But the moral qualm indicated here is very clearly a transitory stage. As has been shown above, the passages in which the mature Joe Lampton looks back on his first months in Warley, very clearly suggest that he feels very little remorse indeed. All in all, Joe does not seem to be very much concerned with the moral implications of his actions. Just as he is willing to sell himself for money – 'the game was worth the candle; if I sold my independence, at least I'd get a decent price for it' (113) – he also seems willing – with a slight Faustian touch – to sell his soul.

This is all radically different from the conclusion of *Scarlet and Black*. There is no doubt that Julien – at least in the early stages of the novel – feels a profound hatred of people above him: 'Julien found Madame de Rênal very beautiful, but he hated her for her beauty' (54); and: 'The bitter hatred of the rich now filling Julien's heart was on the verge of showing itself in a violent outburst' (75). This hatred is obviously an important driving force in his struggle to reach the top, but he is also painfully aware that neither hatred nor envy will be particularly constructive:

When shall I acquire the sensible habit of selling just so much of my soul to people of this sort as their money warrants? If I wish to be respected by them and by myself, I must show them that, while I barter my poverty for their wealth, my soul is a thousand leagues out of reach of their insolence, in a sphere too high for their petty marks of favour or contempt to affect it (88).

It may well be argued that this is simply an attempt on Julien's part to explain away his own inferiority complex, and that, like Joe, he prefers to ignore the moral implications of his actions. Still, by the time of his trial, Julien has sobered up considerably. His selfish megalomania is gone, and he admits without further ado: 'My crime is atrocious, and it was *premeditated*. I have therefore, Gentlemen of the Jury, deserved death' (484). And only then, after having taken full responsibility for his actions, and accepted his punishment as fair and just, does he add a complaint, which in the circumstances also serves as a powerful and moving explanation of his behaviour:

But, even were I less guilty, I see before me men who, without pausing to consider what pity my youth may deserve, will wish to punish in my person and forever discourage that body of young men who, born in an inferior station, and in some degree oppressed by poverty, have the good fortune to secure for themselves a sound education, and the audacity to mingle with what the pride of rich men calls society (484).

Thus in the final chapters, Julien comes across as a man very much aware of the personal and social mechanisms which have brought him to where he is, and he accepts the eventually fatal outcome as largely just. This balanced attitude is largely absent from Joe Lampton, and the effect is a fundamental uncertainty on the part of the reader as to how he should be rightfully judged.

1830, the year in which *Scarlet and Black* was published, is frequently regarded as a literary watershed; a transitional stage from Romanticism to Realism. Moreover, in French literary history, this novel has itself been seen as a milestone marking this very transition. Despite the very obvious Realist elements, however, it is difficult to read Stendhal's novel without feeling that the overall emphasis is on the great Romantic tradition with its focus on the unique and obsessively self-centred ego. Against this background, and coupled with the element of material ambition, one would logically expect Julien Sorel, more so than his social democratic counterpart Joe Lampton, to represent the very essence of greed and selfishness. However, it seems that *Scarlet and Black* still retains a controlling mechanism, in the form of a set of traditional moral values, which conquers the vulgar self-interest of the hero just in time for him to preserve a crucial element of human decency, and for the reader to develop a profound sympathy with his ambitious attack on the bastions of class.

Joe Lampton, on the other hand, does not possess this saving grace, and here lies some of the paradox of the relationship between the two novels. *Room at the Top*, read from the point of view of cultural history, would normally be seen as representing a movement in which Everyman, or the man in the street, gets an opportunity to rise to prominence, himself being an individual representative of a tidal wave of social justice which will eventually produce a new and fairer society, no longer scarred by the excessive selfishness of the privileged few. But this is not what happens. When Joe Lampton leaves Dufton, he does not take with him a sense of solidarity and social justice. On the contrary, and typical of the novel's emphasis on *things*, Joe takes with him a dressing-gown, the very image of upper-class 'opulence and sophistication', which his aunt regards not just as an extravagance, but as 'the livery of idleness and decadence' (13). She may not be right in this, but at the end of the day it still seems that Joe adopts the very qualities and attitudes which for centuries have ensured that people of his background were prevented from improving their lot. Thus, if one sees the old ruling minority as excessively and selfishly preoccupied with material possessions, then Joe Lampton himself is no less determined to acquire this very same position. And to make matters worse, in his eagerness to satisfy his material hunger, he drops along the wayside that controlling mechanism which the ruling classes of the past may only have paid lip-service to, but which was still applied as a measure of human decency. Joe Lampton, in other words, lives his life in a moral void which proves fatal to his personal integrity and which greatly reduces the reader's sympathy with his relatively smooth passage to the top. This may of course imply that Joe Lampton, when seen as a typical representative of the social and political climate of the post-war years, presents a rather grim picture of the moral standards underlying the ruling social democratic philosophy of the period. No attempt will be made to resolve that issue here,

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but more than forty years after its publication *Room at the Top* keeps asking the question.

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