

On Julie, Empathy, and Human Rights

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Abstract

This paper challenges the common interpretation of Rousseau's "Julie, or the New Heloise" as a feminist work, arguing instead that the novel actually reinforces patriarchal values. While the epistolary novel creates emotional connections with its female characters, it ultimately celebrates women's sacrifices within the patriarchal system rather than critiquing it. The analysis focuses on the protagonist Julie's character development, particularly examining her roles as a daughter and mother, where her supposedly virtuous decisions consistently align with patriarchal expectations. The paper contests Lynn Hunt's argument in "Inventing Human Rights" that such epistolary novels contributed to human rights development through empathy. Instead, it argues that while "Julie" may have evoked empathy, this empathy was superficial and did not lead readers to question the patriarchal structures causing the character's suffering. Rather, the novel presents Julie's sacrifices as noble necessities, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging existing gender hierarchies. This reexamination of "Julie" suggests that emotional resonance with characters' suffering does not automatically translate into criticism of the social structures causing that suffering.

Keywords: Human Rights, Maternal Sacrifice, Empathy, Social Contract

The most common impression people have of Rousseau is his monumental coinage of the phrase “social contract”¹, as it was his most significant contribution to the progress of human civilization and ideology. Despite eloquent essays that marked Rousseau’s indispensable role in human history, he also wrote novels that achieved great popularity during his time, such as *Julie, or the New Heloise*. This epistolary novel told the story of a young lady named Julie unvirtuously falling in love with her teacher, but, in the end, chose to give up her love for virtue and married a man favored by her father; for the resolution, Julie died as she drowned in a lake saving her son. Because the book is centered on this female character and meticulously records her struggles and experiences in marriage, paternal control, and motherhood, it is common for people to interpret it as a work that indirectly advocates feminism. However, if *Julie* indeed is a feminist work, how would it be that this character with a high level of education ended up serving her family for her entire life? The incongruence between the expressions of Julie and the perception of the book as a feminist work raises the question: does the book intend to advocate for women’s rights or not? I argue that *Julie* purports to illustrate perspectives completely opposite to the ideologies of feminism, let alone the emancipation of women from patriarchal confinements. Despite the emotional relationship that the book establishes between its readers and its female characters, *Julie* celebrates wholeheartedly the sacrifices of women who serve the patriarchs, marking this book to be far from empathetic to women’s sufferings in the traditional gender hierarchy.

Julie was published in an age when Enlightenment intellectual innovations proposed new concepts related to human rights and equality, as it was released in the year right before Rousseau's renowned essay *The Social Contract* was published. During that time period, the genre of epistolary novels, to which Julie belongs, was as novel as the concept of human rights, fueling discussions among scholars from preceding time periods regarding the relationship between the two emergences. For Lynn Hunt, the timing of the popularization of Julie and other epistolary novels must have had a causal effect on the invention of the concept of human rights, as she recognized how these first-person narrative novels would provoke empathy in readers for the characters.² In her book *Inventing Human Rights*, she stated: "... Julie encouraged a highly charged identification with the characters and in so doing enabled readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines."³ To expand on this point, she also explained that the cause of the phenomenon in which heroines were often the center of these novels was the fact that "their quest for autonomy could never fully succeed."⁴ She specifically pointed to the tragedy of Julie as she said: "While Julie seems to accept being forced by her father to renounce the man she loves, she too dies in the final scene."⁵ By these remarks, Hunt implied that the oppression of patriarchy under which women like Julie lived was presented in these novels, thus provoking readers to empathize with these women who were deprived of their freedom.

However, this explanation would apply poorly to Julie compared to the other novels that Hunt mentioned in the book, which were *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In Julie, Rousseau established an emotional connection between the reader and

his characters by exquisitely expressing their emotions, but he never positioned patriarchal and paternal control as the source of the female characters' pain. On the contrary, he honored the women's submission to patriarchy, neglecting the damages that their submission produced for them.

To derive such a conclusion about the purport of Julie, we must first analyze two questions: firstly, how did Rousseau intend to present Julie? Secondly, what concept does Julie, as a character, symbolize and express? After answering these questions, only then will we be able to understand the impact of the book on its contemporary environment. Such reexamination will be done by looking more closely at the relationship of Julie with other characters, as well as her motivation when making the critical choices that greatly affect the plot of the story.

Although this fact may be obvious from the title of the book, I will reemphasize it: Julie is the center of the whole novel. Knowing this, it is intuitive that understanding the nature of this character will help readers understand the implicit message of the novel. A question derived from this acknowledgment would be: does the author generally intend for the readers to praise her or criticize her? To answer this question, a crude scale of good or bad will be used in order to offer a concise answer. This would then lead to the deduction that Julie is undoubtedly the good lady in the novel. Bearing the identity of a friend and a wife, she was depicted as morally faithful and noble in both of these aspects.

Firstly, in Julie's friendship with Claire, her very intimate cousin, Julie's loyal and dear affections for Claire were clearly illustrated. This bond is clearly illustrated in Letter I of Part Four: in this letter, Julie extensively addressed her purest love for Claire and invited her to live with her; in addition to that, concerning how moving may be troublesome for Claire, she even proposed moving her whole family to reside in Claire's current location.⁶ Julie adds to this generous proposal with a sincere confession: "...my heart, my duty, my happiness, my honor preserved, my reason recovered, my condition, my husband, my children, myself, I owe everything to you [Claire]; everything good I possess comes from you..."⁷ This offering and confession reveals Julie's willingness to help her friend without hesitation. Presenting this powerful bond between Julie and her friend, Rousseau characterizes Julie as a grateful and loving lady.

Moreover, Julie's guilt in marriage also illustrates her fidelity in an unusual way. As said above, Julie married an amiable man whom she never loved. Although this may declare her to be deceitful as a wife, she felt heavily culpable toward this man whom she failed to love. She admitted mournfully to Claire about this feeling in a letter, writing: "For having deceived him once, I have to deceive him every day, and feel forever unworthy of all his kindness toward me. My heart dares accept no token of his esteem..."⁸ Instead of feeling satisfied and content with the benefits she obtained from lying, she was wounded even by the mere idea that she was lying; this proves her to be an upright person, trying to be as honest and sincere as possible.

Combining all her commendable traits playing these essential roles, Julie is certainly constructed as a positive figure. Such positivity will then further pronounce her undiminished significance for the impact of the whole book, making it obvious that Rousseau designed the character intending her to be a praiseworthy lady whom the readers should support.

After acknowledging Julie's positivity in the nature of her characterization, we should examine the underlying concept of this character that serves as the basis for her actions and thoughts. While Julie is kind, devout, and sincere, many of these traits are actually molded into a form that meets the expectations of patriarchy, revealing that Rousseau made this particular ideology the foundation of Julie's character when designing her. To confirm this view, we will analyze the character's major actions in this book.

If we summarize the whole story in two sentences, we will discover that the most important plot points are twofold: Julie marrying a man she doesn't love, and Julie dying for the life of her child. Both of these plot points show Julie taking on typical women's roles in patriarchal tradition: in the first, she was a virtuous daughter, and in the second, she was a noble mother. To dive into details about these two plot points, let me explain them one at a time.

Firstly, Julie always remained a filial daughter, and her refusal of her lover was purely based on her father's request. In a farewell letter to her lover, she stated unswervingly: "I will never marry you without my father's consent[.]"⁹ This attitude contradicts the sentiment she expressed in other parts of the novel, in which she wrote many sentimental letters to her lover,

expressing her deepest love for him. “My beloved, my sweet friend,” she said in the farewell letter right before she stated her refusal, “oh, if ever you forget me... alas! I will merely die of it...”¹⁰ This line intuitively suggests how critical her lover is to her, yet she still decided to leave him because contemporary patriarchy considered it a sin for a daughter to resist her father's will. The virtue of obedience to her father is central to her beliefs, as she inquired rhetorically: “Is there a death more cruel than outliving honor?”¹¹ Additionally, her father rejected Julie's lover simply because of his lower social status.¹² Her father's disapproval of him had always manipulated Julie, making her hesitate about her pursuit of love. In one of her letters to Claire, describing her feelings when her lover pleaded with her to run away with him, she wrote: “[running away with him] would have meant distressing a most excellent father...”¹³ These thoughts and confessions show that Julie willingly accepted being controlled by the paternal and patriarchal order, as she made her romance dependent on her father's choice.

Secondly, although it's challenging to condemn anything associated with the portrayal of Julie's motherhood, since the sacrifices of mothers seem so naturally benevolent, Julie's experiences as a mother were indeed accompanied by pain under the pressure of patriarchy. Julie was a young lady of sensibility and intellectual talents,¹⁴ but her duties as a mother, in the view of herself as well as all the people around her, outweighed the value of her own spirit and mind. Her attention and love became so centered on her children that the only entertainment she demanded was “[to talk] endlessly about [her] children, without boring anybody.”¹⁵ In the closure of the book, Julie died while saving

her son who fell into a lake. As recorded by a servant, Julie jumped into the lake without hesitation for her son.¹⁶ When she died in that incident, she had not only ennobled herself with her selfless sacrifice but also considered herself of lesser value than her children. A death is a tragedy, and she was made a tragedy because of her identity as a mother. She completed the mission of a nurturer assigned by patriarchy so thoroughly that the price was her very life.

When the author left her dead, her virtue was lifted to an unprecedented height. The novel concluded with a letter from Claire, in which she expressed her sorrow for the death of Julie. She wrote: “May her spirit inspire us: may her heart unite all of ours; let us live continually under her eyes.”¹⁷ Death transformed her into a goddess-like figure, who embodied all virtue and would dispense all love and kindness. Thus, because of her innocence and righteousness, it was natural for the book’s contemporary readers to take Julie’s choices as the flawless path. This would mean supporting women in giving up their love because of paternal coercion, in abandoning their wisdom to fulfill the role of mothers, in depending on their husbands or fathers for any sort of decision making, and in sacrificing whatever they have for their children as mothers. Julie was characterized as a woman of virtue—virtue according to patriarchal standards—and readers loved her.¹⁸ So, along with her, they loved the concept of patriarchy inside and behind her.

There are rarely any records of responses to Julie from its contemporary readers associated with the role of Julie, or any woman, in a family. However, the kinds of responses they would have had are already vaguely indicated by the development of history: it wouldn’t be until a hundred years after Julie’s

first publication that society started to progress in the path of abolishing those patriarchal expectations placed on women. In order to understand the detailed mechanism producing human rights when incorporating the roles of epistolary novels like *Julie*, scholars could only hypothesize by deducing logically. As Lynn Hunt analyzed in her book *Inventing Human Rights*, she continually emphasized the effects of *Julie* and other epistolary novels on the Enlightenment and the invention of human rights, stating that these books were the most popular trend at the time, so people read them extensively, learning empathy more profoundly than ever before.¹⁹ However, *Julie* only provoked empathy in an incomplete form. It occurred that *Julie*, although exquisite in its expression of painful emotions, never mentioned these pains as being the product of patriarchy. Therefore, the results of these novels were progress in human emotions, but stagnation in society's poisoned hierarchy.

When telling the dramatic romance story of *Julie* and her teacher, *Julie*, like other epistolary novels that first arose in Europe in the 18th century, pioneered preaching (although very likely unintentionally) the concept of equality by provoking sincere empathy in readers.²⁰ However, this empathy, at least for *Julie*'s readers, extended only to a shallow level in their hearts. Readers, for the first time, felt the sentiments of people who were entirely unknown to them and different from them, but they could not realize the sources of these sentiments, as the author had no intention of explaining them. Instead of feeling pity for *Julie*'s tragedy and indignation for the social order that made her into a tragedy, they only understood the pains of *Julie* as the investiture necessary for a woman to preserve her honor. The empathy was not

based on the phenomena that produced tragedy, but simply the occurrence of such tragedy.

There is sound reasoning in Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, when the book analyzed epistolary novels' causation for the emergence of the concept of human rights. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify a fact that Hunt neglected in her book: empathizing with a character suffering under patriarchy does not necessarily lead to the result of criticizing patriarchy. The truth is, regardless of epistolary novels other than *Julie*, the empathy *Julie* induced was far from deep enough to directly produce the concept of gender equality in its time.

Since the 18th century, empathetic sentiments have continued to develop throughout history, so that in our age, it is natural to take empathy as the equivalent of support for eliminating the pain that the one empathized with is tortured by. This phenomenon is a privilege bestowed upon us, the people of the 21st century. Meanwhile, it is important for us not to forget to utilize our sentiments and sensibilities when confronting other people's sufferings. However entertaining this experience of emotions can be, it is always essential to think critically about the sources of these emotions, especially those that are negative, in order to progress toward a better world with refined human rights.

Reference

1. The concept was first proposed in Rousseau's book *The Social Contract* (1762), referring to a method of society and government, with which ordinary people would give up certain rights to gain protection from the government. This concept, along with many other concepts brought by other Enlightenment philosophes, shaped current politics as they were widely adopted as ideologies.
2. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 36-38.
3. Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 38.
4. *Ibid*, 59.
5. *Ibid*.
6. Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Philip Stewart, and Jean Vaché, *Julie, Or, the New Heloise, Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1997), 332.
7. Rousseau, Stewart, and Vaché, *Julie*, 332.
8. *Ibid*, 329.
9. *Ibid*, 186.
10. *Ibid*, 186.

11. Ibid, 31.

12. Ibid, 84.

13. Ibid, 79.

14. Ibid, 26.

15. Ibid, 328.

16. Ibid, 577.

17. Ibid, 612.

18. There are no citations I can make for this point, but this conclusion is derived from the fan letters written to Rousseau that Lynn Hunt quoted in her book *Inventing Human Rights*. There is one particular comment that explicitly proves this conclusion: “You have driven me crazy about her [Julie]. Imagine then the tears that her death must have wrung from me... Never have I wept so many delicious tears. The reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment.”

19. Hunt, Lynn, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

20. Ibid.