

# ***The Multifaceted Interpretation of the Napoleon Image in European Literature***

**Lanqing Liu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Liaoning University, 66 Chongshan Middle Road, Huanggu District, Shenyang, Liaoning, China  
a. 1663998700@qq.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The developmental process of the Napoleonic Wars and their impact across different countries and levels find expression in popular literary creations, particularly highlighting the influence of the Napoleonic Wars on literary production. Novels, serving as keen observers of life and meticulous recorders of history, embed their narratives within a macro-historical context, employing highly flexible and multidimensional narrative tones. In doing so, these novels illuminate historical events and characters, allowing them to radiate the brilliance of their lives once again. This paper takes "The Red and the Black" and "War and Peace" as case studies, using the events and impact of the Napoleonic Wars as examples to discuss the multifaceted interpretations of the same historical events in different European literary works.

**Keywords:** Napoleonic Wars, European literature, "The Red and the Black", "War and Peace"

## **1. Introduction**

The Napoleonic Wars profoundly influenced 19th-century Europe and the world. On the one hand, these wars had a positive significance in defending the achievements of the French bourgeois revolution, exerting a profound impact on Europe's political system, political landscape, and national awakening. On the other hand, Napoleon's conquests subjected the people of invaded territories to cruel enslavement and exploitation, bringing profound suffering to the people of many European countries. Historians have varied opinions on the evaluation of the Napoleonic Wars. Some view Napoleon's downfall as the culmination of his genius in battling and resisting the whims of fate, while others see him as a sacrificial pawn manipulated by historical determinism, arguing that the French Revolution inevitably led to dictatorship, and France's natural boundaries destined it for perpetual warfare. Regardless of the perspective, the massive impact of the Napoleonic Wars on political, social, and economic dimensions is reflected in the reshaping of historical images in literary works. This is evident in works of various themes, such as "War and Peace," "The Red and the Black," "Les Misérables," "The Siege of Berlin," "To the Great Sea," and others. In essence, the developmental process of the Napoleonic Wars and their impact on contemporary and future generations point to their influence on literary creation. This paper will use "The Red and the Black" and "War and Peace" as prototypes to compare and analyze the portrayal of the Napoleonic Wars in literary works.

## 2. The Post-Napoleonic Era in "The Red and the Black"

Julien Sorel is a prominent character created by the 19th-century French writer Stendhal in the novel "The Red and the Black." Born into a lower-class carpenter family, Julien, as an aspirant seeking self-worth and dignity, desires to challenge the social injustice under aristocratic rule. Driven by his sharp intellect and exceptional talent, he aspires to become a figure akin to Napoleon and rise above societal norms. However, this young man from the countryside, immersed in romantic hero fantasies, ultimately treads the path of tragedy by challenging the interests of the aristocracy.

"The Red and the Black" carries a subtitle: "Chronicle of 1830." Preceding this period are the French Revolution (1789-1794), the Napoleonic era (1799-1815), and the Bourbon Restoration period (1815-1830). Considering this, the preceding two periods are collectively referred to as the "Napoleonic era," while the subsequent Bourbon Restoration period is termed the "Post-Napoleonic era." Julien's life spans these two eras, growing up during the Napoleonic Wars, and transitioning into adolescence and adulthood during the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Napoleon earned Europe's acclaim for revolutionary France and created possibilities for talented individuals from humble backgrounds to achieve brilliance through their own efforts. From this perspective, the achievements of the Napoleonic Wars, the adventurous spirit of exploration, and the sense of responsibility for a great cause easily influenced the youth coming of age during that era.

As the monarchy was restored, the reestablished class system once again blocked the upward mobility of lower-class intellectuals, as if everything returned to the past, and all ambitious hopes turned to bubbles. In the novel, Julien repeatedly expresses sentiments like "Napoleon! In your era..." The fundamental characteristics of the "Post-Napoleonic era" are described by Zhang Guanyao, the translator of "The Red and the Black," in the "Preface": "The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy brought back the fallen aristocrats, who, hand in hand with the church, plunged France back into the dark days before the revolution. The bourgeoisie, especially the petite bourgeoisie, suppressed after the revolution," and "common youth had no way out and could only aspire to become priests." The stark differences between the two eras are evident in the novel, with even a bricklayer remarking, "In the era of 'that one,' it would be interesting! A bricklayer could become an officer, even a general; I've seen it happen!" [1]

Opinions on Julien's character are mixed, with some viewing him as an unscrupulous conspirator, an ambitious individual lacking moral constraints, and a Rastignac-style figure corrupted by society. However, to analyze literary works and their characters from a more objective standpoint, it is necessary to examine typical characters in typical environments. This involves considering how Napoleon's territorial adjustments and reforms prompted awakenings, such as the spread of Romanticism, the declaration of popular sovereignty, and the flourishing development of culture. These societal and cultural influences at the broader level inevitably reflect on individual personalities.

## 3. "War and Peace" and the Macroscopic Grasp of the Napoleonic Wars

Differing from "The Red and the Black," which focuses on the French people's remembrance of war heroes and glorious eras, "War and Peace" centers on the historical fate of the Russian people as they rallied in a nationwide struggle to defend their homeland during times of crisis. Often hailed as "if God were to write, it would be 'War and Peace,'" many consider "War and Peace" a combination of China's "Dream of the Red Chamber" and "Romance of the Three Kingdoms." The novel not only uses an epic narrative style to vividly recount the world upheaval caused by Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 but also skillfully portrays the fate and choices of individuals, particularly those in the aristocratic class, interwoven within the war.

The entire era depicted in "War and Peace," marked by Napoleon's dominance in Europe and concluding with his tragic defeat, revolves around the central theme of war. The novel skillfully

depicts major battles such as the famous battles of Borodino, Austerlitz, and Polotsk. It also brings to life historical scenes like the bombardment of Smolensk, the bloody conflict at Polotsk, the great fire in Moscow, and the comical spectacle of Napoleon and the Russian Tsar observing a military parade together. The author's profound narrative skills and character portrayal techniques breathe life into these significant battles and events, involving more than fifty named participants, including Napoleon and his generals like Murat, as well as the Russian Tsar Alexander and his commanders Kutuzov, Bagration, Dolokhov, and Rostov.

The conflict between Napoleon and Russia is, in fact, a clash between two systems and two eras. In the book, Napoleon appears to be a figure feared by the European feudal monarchs. On one hand, legal systems such as the "Code Civil" aimed at protecting bourgeois interests created an environment conducive to the development of bourgeois society on the European continent, [2] fostering the growth of national liberation movements. Engels remarked, "The retreat and annihilation of Napoleon's grand army after Moscow became the signal for a general uprising against French rule in Western Europe." [3] On the other hand, as a representative of the bourgeoisie in the era of primitive accumulation, Napoleon also exemplifies the ruthless exploitation of weaker nations and conquered peoples. Therefore, this imperialistic war nature inevitably incited resistance from the invaded nations.

#### **4. From the Multifaceted Nature of History to the Multifaceted Interpretation of the Napoleon Image in Literary Works**

Lenin once pointed out: "In analyzing any social issue, the absolute requirement of Marxist theory is to place the issue within a certain historical scope." [4] Different individuals, standing from various perspectives and positions, perceive character images differently. When authors shape character images amidst intricate narratives, they can only strive to adhere as closely as possible to historical truths and endeavor to restore the appearance of historical figures. As Leo Tolstoy said, "History is the biography of humanity and nations." Despite being a literary figure, Tolstoy possessed the perspective, insights, and responsibility of a historian. This is why Leo Tolstoy could provide a macroscopic grasp of numerous historical events in literary works, thus revealing the historical reality of an era and the inherent factors of national spirit.

In Hugo's works, a collective unconscious hero worship is evident, showcasing the French people's conscious imagination and collective choice of an ideal state where their nation has an impact on the world. The contradictory nature of the Napoleon figure is also reflected in Hugo's ambivalent mindset. The French people both adore Napoleon and embrace democracy. Napoleon is not only viewed as a tyrant by his enemies but also as the destroyer of the old feudal society, representing and disseminating revolutionary principles. In Pushkin's political lyrical poem "To the Great Sea," lines like "There, Napoleon disappeared" and "There, he lies in eternal sleep amid suffering" express sympathy and regret for a life of struggle and unfulfilled aspirations.

#### **5. Conclusion**

"All history is contemporary history," [5] as someone once remarked. The true face of history is diverse, and all history is continuously retold. Questions have been raised about the fairness of an author's evaluation of Napoleon in literary works, but from the author's perspective, such inquiries are inherently invalid. Firstly, all literary works are subjective, and the notion of fairness does not apply. Secondly, history is composed of multiple facets, and historical events are made up of countless complex elements. Therefore, historical figures are inherently complex and subject to multiple interpretations, possessing both greatness and comedic aspects.

## References

- [1] Stendhal. (1999). *The Red and the Black* (G. Zhang, Trans.). People's Literature Publishing House.
- [2] *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 8, p. 122.
- [3] Cited in *World History*, Volume 6, Upper Volume, edited by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, p. 145.
- [4] *Selected Works of Lenin*, Vol. 2, p. 512.
- [5] Croce, B. (1986). *Theory and Practice of Historiography* (R. Fu, Trans.). Commercial Press.