

# Comparison of Narrative Styles and Historical background's effect on characters between the "The Dream of the Red Chambers" and "La Nouvelle Heloise"

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## Abstract:

The characteristics between Western and non-Western literary works and pieces have long been the subject of debate and comparison in the scholarly field. The differences and similarities between the works of art are examined and scrutinized in great depth and length. History has a high responsibility as a major influence and factor in shaping different literary works. This article is purposed to discuss and compare the narrative styles and characterization of plots and characters in the renowned Western work "La Nouvelle Heloise" by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the non-Western work "The Dream of Red Chambers" by Xueqin Cao, based on the historical context and background in which these two works are situated. Both works are significantly noted to be celebrated and appreciated literary works in their own cultures. The aesthetics of the plot and the formation of concrete characters help make them notable pieces in history. These elements add up to present a unique and distinctive narrative style and description of plots between the two works. The following article aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between "La Nouvelle Heloise" and "The Dream of Red Chambers" in terms of narrative styles and the historical background's effect on characterization.

**Keywords:** Narrative Styles; Historical background; "The Dream of the Red Chambers"; "La Nouvelle Heloise".

## 1. Introduction:

"La Nouvelle Héloïse" by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and "The Dream of Red Chambers" by Xueqin Cao are masterpieces and fundamental literary texts in world literature. Both works portray and shape complex relationships, plots, aesthetic symbolisms, and moral values of their respective time periods. The use of narrative technique and characterization will be examined in further depth. Even though the two works were not published in the same time periods or cultures—one from China in the Eastern world and the other from France in the Western world—they share notable similarities in their texts.

In Rousseau's "La Nouvelle Héloïse," the story unfolds against the historical backdrop of the Enlightenment era and just before the French Revolution in the 18th century [1]. It is written in the form of an epistolary narrative, as the storyline is delivered through the exchange of letters between Julie and her lover. Rousseau emphasizes the sentimental and emotional aspect of love between separated lovers amidst social expectations and realities [2].

The love story of the characters reveals the challenging historical background of 18th-century France, where visible lines act as barriers between the aristocracy and lower classes. The historical context and narrative techniques serve as important tools for delicately representing the concrete characters in the literature.

Cao's "Dream of the Red Chambers" portrays the life of a family in the 18th-century Qing Dynasty in China. Through the eyes of Jia Baoyu, the main character, the life and historical background of the noble house are vividly depicted. Cao explores themes of fate and class struggles in his writing. Through the form of epistolary literature, the plot of the family's daily life and struggles is portrayed vividly.

Both "La Nouvelle Héloïse" and "Dream of the Red Chambers" are significant literary texts throughout time. They are studied, discussed, and examined in great depth. This article will examine the similarities and differences in the use of narrative techniques and their connection to the historical time periods they represent.

## 2. Similarities

### 2.1 .Reflection and Links to Historical Contexts in Themes

Focusing on the historical context of the two written literary works, both derived and took in themes from the historical background they are in their respective society to create vivid and concrete characters. In “La Nouvelle Heloise,” there are themes of social hierarchy and fate. This is a reflection of the historical context of late 18th-century French society, where individuals of the empire were divided due to their historical backgrounds and identities. This contributes to the divide between Julie and her lover, her governess. The same can be said about “Dream of the Red Chambers,” where the main storyline, Baoyu and Daiyu’s love triangle, is prohibited and challenged by the feudal system of the Qing dynasty of China at the time. The other line of the novel, such as the connecting and intertwining relationships between the four families, is under the broad historical background of 18th-century China.

In “La Nouvelle Heloise,” the historical background of late 18th-century France is symbolized in its politics, religions, classes, and economics [1]. The idea of “classes in society” is highly emphasized; specific people should stick to the cultural norms put on their specific classes. The aristocracies belong to the higher classes, and the lower classes belong to their specific community. The feudal system limits and prohibits chances of crossing classes, interactions, or social mobility [1]. The historical background depicts the theme of fate and social expectations. Julie, the main character in “La Nouvelle Heloise,” poses as a noblewoman, and her love affair with her teacher is forbidden. Even Julie herself expressed her concern when she stated that “maxims of love so severe, that the purest love seemed...the height of dishonor.”[1]. This forbidden love ends tragically as Julie passes in an illness married to another man within the same hierarchy as herself, and Saint-Preux never crosses with social mobility. The tragedy of the characters and a reflection of the historical society they are restricted in. Moreover, the plot reflects the central theme of fate from the social restrictions placed on the characters due to the historical setting of the literary work.

Similarly, in “Dream of the Red Chamber,” the same tragic ending occurs with the love affair between Baoyu and Daiyu. 18th-century feudal Chinese families revolved around the patriarchal and leading figure. The patriarch arranges and manages affairs in their family, whether it is economic or relations; they assign sons to specific careers conforming to their social status and daughters to marriag-

es that resemble their hierarchy [2]. This contributed to the result of the tragedy of the separation between Baoyu and Daiyu, where Daiyu ended up in death from tears of intense grief at Baoyu’s engagement to another woman. Furthermore, aligning with the similar theme of fate from social pressure and expectation as “La Nouvelle Heloise.” Both works build their plot and characterization based on the historical background of the age of their construction and share similar themes as a result of history. The feudal system of both Western and non-Western cultures at the time emphasizes highly the societal background of individuals, which resulted in similar tragedies of both characters in the literary works.

### 2.2 . Narration of Introduction between the Two Works

Focused on the narration between the two literary works, one could find the idea of time and space of the plot obscured easily. There is no specific chronological order in “La Nouvelle Heloise”; the idea of time is changed and blurred by the genre of epistolary fiction. The audience could merely understand the plot of the novel through the exchange of letters from Julie to Claire and Saint-Preux. There seems to be no idea of any knowledge of the historical background of the time period told, the current situation of the characters and how they came to be, nor are there any words or mentions of the current environment that the author has dropped the characters into. This is similar to the start of “Dream of the Red Chambers”. Even though Cao’s novel is more specific and detailed in terms of the chronological time of the events in the novel, the start is still obscured when it mentions that all the stories have already happened, and all of this is told and started from a magic stone [3]. The later development of the novel also contains elements of flashbacks to events and plots happening in another setting with different characters or different characters in the same period of time but still goes along with chronology. Overall, both works contain an atypical narrative structure of chronology at the start of their storyline.

“Dreams of the Red Chamber” starts by declaring that what has happened in the plot has already happened, and it is merely recalled from the memory of a magic stone; this places the narrative as an “illusion of a succession of events”. Such an act differs from many other non-western works like “The Journey to the West”, where the order of the universe and formation of humanity is already told before unveiling the plot of the story [3]. The introduction already hints at the tragic ending of the novel and creates a distance between the start and end of the novel, allowing the readers to depict the narrative on their own accord.

In “La Nouvelle Heloise”, however, it does not have the

same form as foreshadowing the ending of the story ahead of time, nor does it share the same form of the novel as “Dreams of the Red Chamber” (this would be discussed later), but it does have the same effect of obscuring the time of events like in “Dreams of the Red Chamber”. The novel starts with an earnest letter of love and demand from Saint-Preux to Julie, talking about the future of their relationship that has already happened. In the context of the first letter, Saint-Preux stated that he should keep his distance from Julie and that their love affair may be reaching its end. The novel does not start with a historical background, but through the conversations and exchange of letters between characters, the audience can unveil the time and space of the plots. The time is after the characters have encountered and fallen in love, now separated in different places. Saint-Preux’s statement of time plus distance has led to his unhappiness, linking space and time together [4]. In “La Nouvelle Héloïse”, time is blurred through the epistolary form, and the introduction of the novel does not lead to a typical starting to literary form, similar to “Dream of the Red Chamber”.

### **3. Differences**

#### **3.1 .Forms of Writing: Epistolary and Chapter Novels**

Comparing the two literary works, the most notable difference is their literary style. “La Nouvelle Héloïse” is an epistolary novel written in the form of letters. On the other hand, “Dream of the Red Chamber” is a chapter novel, a “zhanghuiti” novel in Chinese. The two differing literary forms result in differences in the development of characters throughout the novel and in time.

In “La Nouvelle Héloïse”, the letters always have a circular structure. Saint-Preux writes to Julie, Julie replies, Julie expresses her emotions to Claire, and Claire gives suggestions. The author also provides footnotes to express his own opinions or to point out specific contexts. Saint-Preux seems to enter and exit the plot, only resurfacing when entering society and then disappearing again. The dramatic and unstable changes in his relationship with Julie are not specifically noted over time. The audience can only learn about the development of their feelings from their letters [5]. At the very start, Saint-Preux expresses his desire and confusion about their relationship, his insecurity, and his wish to end it due to their separation and misunderstanding due to Julie’s turbulent emotions. Julie then responds, asking him to stay and confirming the stability and loyalty of her love. Later on in the novel, starting from Part 3, the relationship hits a low after Julie’s marriage to another nobleman, arranged by her family. The separation of the two lovers and the confusion caused by the lack of consistency

and speed of conversations are also reflected in the letters. The epistolary style allows the reader to experience and be introduced to the multiperspective and inner workings of all the characters, but through this, the communication of plot and information, along with the spatial concept and time, is unclear.

For “Dream of the Red Chambers”, it is written in the chapter novel form. The storyline and plot develop chronologically after the beginning of the novel. As mentioned before in the text, the events are recounted from the memory of a magic stone, which tells the story in chronological order. The perspective of the novel is also limited omniscient, focusing on only a few minds, not the first-person view of characters writing letters in an epistolary format. Zhanghui novel forms are characterized by their lengthy narratives and coherence in plots; they retain the main parts of the plot but also incorporate oratory storytelling [6].

The two forms of novels differ from each other in terms of their spatial and temporal concepts. The Zhanghui novel form used in “Dream of the Red Chambers” offers a more coherent plot and a chronological structure that is easier to follow, whereas “La Nouvelle Héloïse” is constructed in the epistolary form, using the exchange of letters to unfold the storyline. This may lack a logical structure and chronological order in its plots, but it offers more insights into the psychological world of its characters.

#### **3.2 .Characterization**

The major notable differences between the two literary works are their forms of characterization; although it is pointed out that both the “Dream of the Red Chamber” and “La Nouvelle Héloïse” derive their characters from similar historical settings and backgrounds of their respective cultures. Moreover, both works adopt a certain degree of pathetic fallacy, exerting their emotions and feelings into a certain object or environment [7]. However, the form of description used for characterization between the two literary works differs highly.

In “La Nouvelle Héloïse,” Rousseau turns to a more sophisticated and detailed expression and description of the characters’ mental state and “inner nature” through his words [8,9]. A Naturalistic approach embellishes the characters by adding their emotions to the nature and environment around them; a certain degree of imagination is also added to the context. For example, in her letters, when Julie describes her complicated relationship with Saint-Preux, Rousseau uses vivid descriptions of the thunderstorm. Differently, “Dream of the Red Chambers” adopts a more diverse group of people, depicting the life of family struggles and relationships in the Big noble houses of the Qing Dynasty [10]. Cao interprets pathetic fallacy in a

slightly different way, focusing on the depiction of normal everyday life events to emphasize the characters in his story. A more realistic approach of detailed descriptions of the things happening around the chambers and houses is used to build on the characters.

#### 4. Conclusion

“Dreams of the Red Chambers” and “La Nouvelle Heloise” share certain similarities and differences in their narrative techniques, historical context, and ways of characterization. While “La Nouvelle Heloise” emphasized a naturalistic approach to portray and establish their characters’ emotions, “Dreams of the Red Chambers” chose to use normal events and everyday life of the complicated noble houses to convey their characters’ self-expressions. Furthermore, “La Nouvelle Heloise” and “Dreams of the Red Chambers” also differ in their written forms, Epistolary novel and Zhanghui Novel respectively.

Though sharing differences, the two literary works have notable similarities. Both works chose a similar spatial concept in their introduction; an untraditional start to both stories as a memory and an extension of an event that has already occurred blurred the time and space relevance in both literary works. Furthermore, both works derive their plots and characterization from their respective historical backgrounds. La Nouvelle Heloise is highly influenced by the French feudal system and strict class system between nobility and normality; Dreams of the Red Chamber also contains reflections of the Chinese feudal system of patriarchy between the noble houses. Both historical backgrounds influence the development and building of characters in the two works.

Overall, La Nouvelle Heloise and Dreams of the Red Chamber reflect historical and cultural contexts influencing the literary production of two differing cultures. They share similarities and differences in their literary technique

and narrative portrayal for characterization, combining elements from their respective divergent cultures. Though La Nouvelle Heloise and Dream of the Red Chambers are notable and celebrated works in their respective cultures, they themselves are not qualified to represent the essence of the whole genre. The two literary works could neither identify nor symbolize the universal experience or the cultural experience in China nor France and other Western cultures. Further examination and comparison of more works from the Western and Non-Western world would prove to be more beneficial and reliable in comparison.

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