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Between Narcissism and Self-Hatred: Self-Dramatization in Julien Sorel and the Underground Man

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Abstract: Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and the Underground Man in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* exemplify two characteristic dilemmas of modern self-consciousness in nineteenth-century European literature. Taking self-dramatization as its analytical framework, this article examines their contrasting yet interconnected modes of self-identification. Julien's overt narcissism is underpinned by self-hatred: he imitates heroic models, lives under the gaze of others, and seeks social recognition as a means of escaping his humble origins. The Underground Man's overt self-hatred, by contrast, conceals narcissism: he withdraws from the social stage, internalizes the external gaze, and sustains a hidden sense of superiority through repeated acts of self-humiliation. Their relationship reveals a movement of alienation from the social gaze to the self-directed gaze. It also shows how narcissism and self-hatred, as interdependent dimensions of modern identity, persist in contemporary experiences of ruminative self-exhaustion, trapping individuals in recurrent cycles of self-justification and self-doubt.

Keywords: Julien Sorel, Underground Man, Self-dramatization, Narcissism and Self-hatred, Modern Subjectivity.

1. Introduction: The Inability to Live Naturally

As traditional social orders were destabilized during the nineteenth century, individuals became increasingly conscious of their own existence as selves. This awakening, however, did not necessarily bring freedom. Instead, it repeatedly subjected the modern individual to self-scrutiny, doubt, and negation. Literary characters likewise came to exhibit contradictory and divided states of mind. The question of how to establish who one is became a central concern of nineteenth-century European literature.

Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black* and the Underground Man in *Notes from Underground* exemplify this predicament of the modern subject. Julien continually judges himself through the imagined gaze of the aristocracy, while the Underground Man subjects himself to relentless analysis, humiliation, and dissection. Each is both the protagonist of his life and a spectator watching it unfold.

This condition can be described as *self-dramatization* [1]. Here, the term refers to the individual's tendency to cast himself as the protagonist on the stage of life, understand and present himself under the imagined gaze of others, and invest his actions and emotions with exceptional significance. Julien repeatedly performs the role of a Napoleonic hero; the Underground Man becomes absorbed in exposing his own ugliness and failures. Despite their contrasting forms of expression, both are caught in a performance of the self that they cannot bring to an end.

At the same time, the two characters display inverse psychological structures. Julien's apparent narcissism and ambition conceal profound shame and hostility toward his social origins. The Underground Man continually repudiates and humiliates himself, yet his extreme self-abasement conceals a sense of superiority. In Julien, outward narcissism is sustained by inward self-hatred; in the Underground Man, outward self-hatred is sustained by inward narcissism. This relationship gives the article its title: narcissism and self-hatred are not separate emotions but mutually dependent expressions of the same predicament.

2. Julien's Heroic Self and the Self-Hatred beneath His Narcissism

Julien's self-dramatization centers on his continual existence under the gaze of others. His emotions, actions, and even internal monologues almost invariably presuppose an imagined audience. This dependence produces conspicuous narcissism and ambition, beneath which lies a more fundamental hatred of, and desire to escape from, his social origins.

(1) Imagining Himself Being Watched

Julien's acute sensitivity to the gaze of others runs throughout the novel. Before entering the household of Monsieur de Rênal, the mayor, he hesitates at the gate because he does not know how to present himself. He imagines how the servants will regard him and what judgment Madame de Rênal will form at first sight. Such anticipation is habitual: Julien repeatedly places himself under the scrutiny of others and adjusts his words and conduct accordingly.

Julien's initial feelings for Madame de Rênal are strongly theatrical. He pursues her largely because doing so conforms to his imagined script of a hero conquering an aristocratic woman. When he takes her hand late at night, he repeatedly asks himself whether he has shown courage and acted as a hero should. Through the narrator, Stendhal remarks ironically: "In short, our hero lacked none of life's pleasures, not even the comforting, moist warmth of the woman he had just conquered" [2, p. 78]. What excites Julien is his successful completion of a performance of conquest.

This pattern becomes more pronounced in his relationship with Mathilde in Paris. Julien constantly speculates about her opinion of him and shifts his manner in response to the judgments he imagines, alternating between coldness and ardor. He is always performing a version of Julien who

deserves to be held in high regard.

(2) Heroic Models and Imitation

Before examining Julien's heroic self-image, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a hero. Sebastian Faulks describes the hero as one who "impresses his qualities upon society and thereby overcomes its misguided or stifling restrictions" [3, pp. 5–6]. This definition closely corresponds to Julien's heroic aspirations: he hopes to break through social constraints and transform his destiny through his personal qualities.

In the cultural context of nineteenth-century Europe, Napoleon embodies this heroic paradigm. Julien's narcissism is directed less toward his actual self than toward an imagined heroic figure: "Napoleon was indeed the messenger Heaven once sent to the youth of France! Who could take his place?" [2, p. 83]. Napoleon provides the model for his inner life. Julien secretly conceals Napoleon's portrait, repeatedly reads accounts of his military campaigns, memorizes their glorious details, and constructs his own code of conduct on this basis. Duty, courage, and the refusal to retreat recur in his internal dialogue. These terms, however, derive from the heroic narratives he has read rather than from his own lived experience.

Julien's subjectivity is thus founded on imitation. Rather than becoming himself, he strives to become Napoleon. He depends not only on the heroic model but also on the imagined experience of being admired. Imitation gives him the power to act, yet it also establishes the conditions of his inner division: each successful performance takes him further from his actual self.

Ultimately, Julien does more than pursue Napoleonic glory. He borrows Napoleon's eyes to look at himself, forfeiting the possibility of judging the world from a perspective of his own.

(3) The Self-Hatred beneath Narcissism

In Julien, narcissism and self-hatred are two aspects of the same psychological structure. He appears ambitious and holds himself in high esteem, but beneath this heroic image lies a profound aversion to the person he actually is.

The closer Julien approaches his heroic ideal, the less he can accept his original identity. He is ashamed of being a carpenter's son, an uncultivated young man from the provinces, and he recoils from the coarseness of his father and brothers. Even after acquiring honor and status, he cannot face his past without shame. The love and recognition he has long desired fail to dispel his underlying insecurity and anxiety, so happiness remains accompanied by unease. When Mathilde proposes abandoning everything to elope with him, he thinks: "With a character such as hers, what assurance can she give me? Alas, I have only my own inadequacy to blame. My appearance lacks elegance; my conversation is heavy and monotonous. My God, why must I be who I am?" [2, p. 380].

Self-hatred does not oppose narcissism; it fuels it. Unable to tolerate his actual self, Julien devotes himself to performing another identity. Yet the more intensely he performs, the greater the emptiness that follows. He remains caught in a cycle of narcissism and self-hatred.

(4) The End of the Performance

Julien's performance changes after his imprisonment. Facing execution, he ceases, for the first time, to please an imagined audience or seek validation from others. In his courtroom speech, he no longer tries to make the aristocracy admire or fear him; instead, he directly indicts the social order they represent: "For in truth, none of those who judge me belongs to my own class. Among the jurors there is not a single peasant who has made his fortune; they are all men of property who resent me" [2, p. 442]. He refuses to seek a pardon or continue playing the ambitious Julien who longs for social advancement. At this moment, his need for an audience subsides, and the performance collapses.

At the end of his life, he permits himself, for the first time, simply to be Julien: a carpenter's son and a provincial young man judged by the class order. His composure signifies acceptance of his actual self rather than surrender to defeat. He never becomes Napoleon. Death does not make him a hero, but it ends his prolonged flight from himself.

3. The Underground Man's Antiheroic Performance and the Narcissism beneath His Self-Hatred

Whereas Julien continually seeks social recognition, the Underground Man appears to withdraw from society of his own accord. He rejects ordinary interpersonal relationships and repeatedly retreats into his own consciousness. This withdrawal, however, brings no freedom; it intensifies his inner division. Transferring the stage from the external world to the depths of his mind, he observes, dissects, and humiliates himself, sustaining a pathological sense of subjectivity through incessant self-analysis.

(1) An Absent Audience

The Underground Man's audience is more abstract than Julien's. It shifts from identifiable others toward the rational world and the modern order as a whole. Although he remains secluded in his underground retreat for long periods, he cannot escape the gaze he imagines.

The episode involving the officer provides a particularly revealing example [4, pp. 68–72]. The Underground Man cannot forget being casually moved aside by an officer, an act that makes him feel he has not been recognized as a person at all. He subsequently plans his route, clothing, and bearing with meticulous care, fantasizing at length about colliding with the officer on equal terms. The absurdity of this conduct exposes a deeply theatrical consciousness. More than seeking revenge on a particular officer, he repeatedly constructs a dramatic scene in which his own existence might be acknowledged.

What ultimately matters to the Underground Man is recognition from the entire social order represented by the officer. He endlessly imagines the different ways in which the world oppresses him. His apparent escape from society therefore leaves him living under an imagined gaze. The underground is less a refuge than a mental prison produced by the modern individual's excessive self-consciousness.

(2) Performing Self-Humiliation

The Underground Man's distinctive tendency is to produce suffering actively and become absorbed in it, rather than merely endure it. He appears deliberately to place himself in humiliating, unsuccessful, and embarrassing situations, deriving a peculiar pleasure from the resulting self-torment.

In the episode involving a dinner with former schoolmates, the Underground Man insists on attending despite knowing that he is unwelcome:

In despair, I imagined how that scoundrel Zverkov would receive me with haughty, icy disdain; how the fool Trudolyubov would look at me with an unyielding, invincible contempt; how that little insect Ferfichkin would shamelessly and viciously ridicule me to curry favor with Zverkov... [4, p. 97].

Before attending, he has already rehearsed the entire scene

of humiliation in his mind. He imagines the contempt of others while desperately craving their attention. At the dinner, he repeatedly behaves in an agitated, uncontrolled, and incongruous manner, as though absorbed in the experience of being humiliated [4, pp. 105–106].

His account of toothache is equally revealing. In his view, ordinary people simply suffer when they have toothache, whereas a conscious person deliberately groans, makes others aware of his suffering, and may even derive satisfaction from doing so [4, pp. 17–19]. Pain exceeds its physiological character and becomes a form of performance.

The Underground Man repeatedly persuades himself that he has chosen to humiliate himself rather than allowed the world to humiliate him. This reasoning converts an initially passive position into a distorted form of agency. Self-humiliation thus becomes a mode of resistance through which he continually asserts his possession of free will. Yet this freedom remains closed and pathological: he never changes the external world but instead exhausts himself internally, turning resistance into another performance.

(3) The Narcissism beneath Self-Hatred

The Underground Man regards himself with relentless severity, repeatedly describing his own baseness, cowardice, and morbidity, as though he despised himself more than anyone else could. Closer attention to this persistent self-deprecation, however, reveals a concealed sense of superiority.

He calls his excessive consciousness an illness [4, p. 6], yet also treats it as the quality that distinguishes him from ordinary people. Those who live and act spontaneously appear to him merely to lack consciousness. They may function within society, but he considers them mechanisms driven by established laws. He envies their capacity for action while despising their insensitivity and dullness.

His discussion of "twice two makes four" expresses his hostility toward absolute rationality and necessary laws [4, p. 15]. To him, this formula implies a world in which everything has already been determined and human free will has lost its meaning. He would therefore rather remain immersed in pain, disorder, and irrationality than accept a rational world whose possibilities have been fixed in advance.

The Underground Man's self-deprecation consequently has a conspicuous theatrical dimension. By repeatedly exposing his own ugliness, he seeks less to negate himself than to address an imagined audience, as if declaring that no one else could attain such profound self-knowledge. He even makes suffering itself a means of asserting his psychological superiority. He does not truly wish to relinquish it, because abandoning excessive consciousness would deprive him of a central source of superiority.

(4) An Endless Cycle

The Underground Man's self-dramatization follows an inescapable sequence: self-hatred produces concealed narcissism, which leads to greater isolation, further self-humiliation, and renewed self-hatred.

The cycle begins in self-hatred. Feeling contemptible because he cannot act as ordinary people do, he repeatedly humiliates himself. Yet each act of self-abasement becomes an occasion for concealed narcissism, as if he were assuring himself that only someone of his exceptional lucidity could endure such suffering. This sense of superiority brings no release. It further obstructs his participation in everyday life and drives him back underground. Isolation then compels him to construct new scenes of humiliation in order to sustain his pathological sense of subjectivity.

The episode with Liza brings this cycle into particularly clear focus [4, pp. 135–180]. He first exposes his soul to her and gains a momentary sense of moral superiority, convinced that he alone dares to confront ugliness. As soon as she responds with tenderness, however, he drives her away by humiliating her. He cannot receive an affection free from calculation; in his understanding, love means domination, cruelty, and psychological superiority. After retreating underground, he resumes his self-exposure, treating his coldness toward Liza as further evidence of both his degradation and his exceptional character. Each repetition deepens his suffering without leading toward an exit. His performance has no ending: it continues within the closed cycle of narcissism and self-hatred.

4. Narcissism and Self-Hatred in Modern Identity

The preceding sections have examined the structures of self-dramatization in Julien and the Underground Man. Their predicaments exceed questions of individual temperament and point toward changes in the formation of modern identity. As traditional orders disintegrate, modern individuals become increasingly dependent on the gaze of others to affirm their existence. Self-consciousness consequently develops into an incessant gaze directed at the self.

(1) From Tragic Hero to Nihilistic Antihero

Julien and the Underground Man occupy two different moments in the development of the modern individual's inner life.

Julien remains at the closing edge of the Romantic tradition. He believes in individual struggle, in the power of the will to change one's destiny, and in sublime values worth dying for. These convictions give meaning to his failure. His courtroom speech provides a point of resolution, and death brings his performance to a sublime conclusion. His tragedy is classical in form: the protagonist achieves a kind of spiritual redemption through destruction.

The Underground Man has already crossed beyond this threshold. He no longer believes in grand narratives, in the capacity of action to change anything, or even in the meaningfulness of suffering. Napoleon has disappeared; his adversaries are "twice two makes four" and the Crystal Palace, which represent an entire system of human reason. This adversary has no face and cannot be conquered. His predicament has no terminus and no death sentence to conclude it. Instead, successive acts of self-analysis recur in an indefinite postponement. This is the characteristic condition of the antihero. In the terms of Western literary criticism, the antihero is a protagonist who lacks traditional heroic qualities and is detached from sublime values [5, p. 103]. Passive, estranged, and powerless, such figures cannot translate action into meaning and remain suspended within absurdity and the torment of self-consciousness.

This trajectory from hero to antihero does not mean that one condition simply replaces the other. Julien's predicament persists among those who seek social recognition and strive to perform the role of the successful individual. The Underground Man reveals the destination of the same logic when it develops into excessive self-consciousness.

Both conditions coexist and together constitute the predicament of modern identity. The following subsections examine its social origins, the internalization of the gaze, and the mutual reinforcement of narcissism and self-hatred.

(2) The Stage under the Gaze

Julien's and the Underground Man's tendencies toward self-dramatization are closely connected to changes in the formation of identity in modern society. In traditional societies, identity was often directly prescribed by family, religion, and hierarchical order. In modern society, identity increasingly becomes something to be achieved rather than something given, and individuals must seek recognition from others to establish their worth.

As Shakespeare writes, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players..." [6, p. 45]. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman similarly emphasizes the dramaturgical character of social interaction [7, pp. 1–6]. Like actors, individuals adjust their behavior to different situations in order to construct and sustain particular images of themselves.

Julien moves within a recognizable dramaturgical structure. The salons of high society form the frontstage on which he carefully performs to obtain social recognition, while his insecurity and self-hatred occupy a concealed backstage. In the Underground Man, the distinction between frontstage and backstage collapses. He leaves the public frontstage and retreats underground into what appears to be an entirely private backstage. Yet this backstage offers no rest from disguise. It becomes an inwardly turned, virtual frontstage on which self-judgment and humiliating performances continue without interruption. Although both characters inhabit this theatrical predicament, the sources of the gaze they confront differ.

(3) From the Gaze of Others to the Self-Directed Gaze

Although Julien and the Underground Man are both caught in self-dramatization, they confront different forms of the gaze.

Julien lives under the gaze of others, but that gaze still originates in the external social world. His predicament therefore remains fundamentally social: obtaining recognition allows him momentarily to affirm his worth. In the Underground Man, the external gaze has been internalized as an unceasing scrutiny of the self. The subject divides into the one who observes and the one who is observed. He continually analyzes, doubts, and humiliates himself; even the act of self-analysis becomes an object of further analysis. His predicament is consequently more encompassing than Julien's. An external social gaze may still be escaped, whereas the self-directed gaze becomes almost inescapable.

From this perspective, the modern individual's predicament moves beyond social oppression toward self-oppression. What is now commonly experienced as ruminative self-exhaustion reproduces the Underground Man's self-directed gaze in everyday life. Alone, a person may repeatedly replay a recent conversation and worry about having performed inadequately. Before making a decision, that person may imagine everyone else's judgment and remain unable to act. Even the question of why one habitually ruminates may become the object of further exhausting self-analysis. Individuals actively scrutinize, adjust, and perform themselves, depleting their psychological energy in the process. The Underground Man's self-directed gaze thus extends beyond a literary character to describe a widespread condition of modern life.

(4) The Interdependence of Narcissism and Self-Hatred

Narcissism and self-hatred are often treated as opposing states, yet they frequently become entangled in the modern individual.

Julien seeks to conquer the world, while the Underground Man repeatedly humiliates himself. Examining these behaviors reveals narcissism and self-hatred as interdependent dimensions of modern identity. In Freud's account, narcissism is more than simple self-adoration: through the construction of an ego ideal, individuals attempt to compensate for the distance between their actual selves and an ideal condition [8, p. 85].

Their mutual reinforcement is especially apparent in modern society. Individuals often pursue an outward appearance of self-improvement by posting study updates on social media and consuming products that promise success, imagining themselves as exemplary strivers. Such performative effort cannot fill the emptiness of the actual self. When practical efforts fail, it may instead intensify self-disgust. The more a person becomes absorbed in an exalted ideal image, the more painful the encounter with ordinary limitations becomes. To conceal the resulting self-hatred, the person initiates yet another performance of self-justification.

Narcissism and self-hatred therefore tend to reinforce each other rather than cancel each other out. The modern individual remains caught in an inner cycle of repeatedly asserting personal worth and repeatedly doubting it.

5. Conclusion

Julien and the Underground Man pursue heroic and antiheroic versions of the self, respectively. Both repeatedly perform in order to affirm their existence, yet both progressively lose themselves through performance. Julien cannot tolerate the humbleness of his origins; the Underground Man cannot tolerate his own ordinariness. Their difficulties exceed social status, class oppression, and worldly failure. They reveal a deeper psychological predicament: the more intensely individuals become conscious of the self, the harder they find it to become themselves.

This predicament of self-dramatization persists in the present, amplified by social media throughout everyday life. Julien and the Underground Man therefore resist reductive judgments of vanity or weakness. They embody tendencies against which modern individuals must remain vigilant, but also a shared vulnerability that makes simple ridicule inadequate. How might authentic relations with the world and with others be recovered in an age of heightened self-consciousness? Perhaps these characters should be approached as mirrors in which to examine the problem rather than as two ready-made answers.

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