

ROUSSEAU'S *NEW HELOISE*, A PHILOSOPHICAL AND SENTIMENTAL EPISTOLARY NOVEL

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Part 1 – Storyline of *The New Heloise*

Rousseau published in 1761 this novel entitled *Julie or the New Heloise or Letters From Two Lovers, Living in a Small Town at the Foot of The Alps* collected and published by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which has transfixed generations of readers and marked the entire evolution of the genre. People at the time saw themselves in its hesitations, troubles and impasses, and saw the prospect of overcoming their own contradictions.

Let us try to understand comprehensively the reasons for its success as well as its characteristics. First of all, we will review the plot of this key work of the 18th century. *The New Heloise* tells the story of an impossible love, replaced by sensible love. Rousseau wanted to transcend righteous passion and rehabilitate it by presenting it in a less austere light. In his correspondence, Voltaire explained that it is a novel, I quote "whose hero goes to brothels and whose heroine has a child with his preceptor". It's malicious and it's a bit short. We can try to summarise it differently. The novel is divided into six parts.

In the first part, Julie d'Etanges, a young aristocrat living on the shores of Lake Geneva, falls in love with her young and poor tutor. Her father, a baron infatuated with nobility, pledged his daughter in marriage to one of his friends, Monsieur de Wolmar. Desperate, Julie gives herself to her lover. Learning the feelings of his daughter, the baron goes into a terrible rage and the young tutor must move away.

The second part allows Julie's lover, exiled in Paris, to critically depict the capital's habits and customs.

Julie's mother discovers the correspondence between the two young people, and her death marks the beginning of the third part. Forced by her father to marry, fearing to have caused her mother's death, Julie admits her commitment to her former preceptor. Her father asks that the commitment be broken. But when Julie falls seriously ill from smallpox, her lover returns and voluntarily contracts the disease. Overwhelmed by this proof of love, Julie plans to continue their relationship. But during the celebration of her marriage with Monsieur de Wolmar she has a change of heart, followed by a period of appeasement and marital happiness. After thinking about suicide, her lover leaves for England.

In the fourth part, Julie lives happily with her husband, her children and her cousin Claire in the small community of Clarens. When her lover finally returns, she confesses her past to Monsieur de Wolmar, which nonetheless invites the young man, to whom Claire gave the nickname of Saint-Preux, to come and settle under the family roof.

The fifth part describes Clarens' perfect home economics.

In the last part, after one of her children has nearly drowned and she has had to run to their rescue, Julie contracts a fatal disease. During her long agony, she admits to the persistence of her love for Saint-Preux and her disappointment at not being able to convert her atheist husband.

Let us now see the reasons for this emblematic epistolary novel's success.

Part 2 – Reasons for its success

The novel's success was immediate and tremendous. Exploiting once more the well-known methods of epistolary novels and Memoir-Novels, Rousseau convinced readers of the veracity of his fiction, presenting himself as only the editor of the correspondence. Many anonymous readers wrote him to share their reactions and feelings. Sometimes they identified with Julie, sometimes with Claire, sometimes with Saint-Preux. For the first time in literature's history, the author and his audience entered an ongoing discussion. Rousseau became a kind of keeper of conscience for readers finding in his novel not a theoretical morality but a desire to live away from the world and its vanities, seeking to reconcile happiness and virtue at any cost.

Madame de Stael described Rousseau thus, I quote: "he who knew how to turn virtue into passion, who devoted eloquence to morality, and persuaded by enthusiasm". Before being an unfinished utopia, the small community of Clarens is first and foremost the fiction of simple happiness. It embodies a form of philosophical ideal through perfect beings that are still human and sensitive. It allows, according to the Rousseau's very word in the *Confessions*, to live, I quote: "in the land of chimeras".

Part 3 – Different interpretations of the novel

We find that *The New Heloise* is scarcely read today, except by specialists or curious people. How can we explain this paradox, which holds true for other best-sellers of the Age of Enlightenment? The modern reader may indeed be put off, not so much by the novel's length as by the dialogues' artificiality or the letters overly logical style, sometimes taking the form of long dissertations.

However, *The New Heloise* should be read. Some excerpts resemble Roland Barthes' fragments of amorous speech, although Rousseau's work is anything but fragmentary. When Saint-Preux returns to Clarens after a two-year exile to find Julie married, he writes, I quote: "The world is divided for me in two regions, one where she is and one where she is not. The first stretches when I go away and tightens as I near, like a place that I could never reach, and is now bounded to the walls of her room. Alas! Only this place is inhabited, the rest of the universe is empty".

All the high points of passionate love, all the doubts, all the uncertainties, all the anxieties are found in this novel, transposed in a universe that is both real, the Swiss campaign, Paris, Geneva, and dreamed, the utopian community of Clarens. Caught between Wolmar's cold atheism and her ardent Christian faith, between her duties as a wife and her affection for Saint-Preux, Julie seems shrouded in holiness. Her renunciation and her death, like a final apotheosis, serve as moral edification.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that *The New Heloise* was read both as a philosophical novel and as an apologetic lesson. Atheism dialogues with religion, rational concerns dialogue with the heart's logic, piety dialogues with passionate love. Julie affects all readers and lends herself to all interpretation, which has contributed to the book's astonishing success. Ultimately, we can be sensitive to the Marquis de Sade's interpretation, which extrapolates from the novel's constitutive tension between what is and what ought to be, one of human existence's major issues.

Quoting Sade: "One cannot reflect on the precepts of morality without being astonished to see them all at once esteemed and neglected, and one wonders the reason for this oddity of the human race, which makes it taste ideas of good and perfection and move away from them in practice". Sade understood that *The New Heloise's* heroes were not models of virtue, even if they strived to speak its language. They are all that man wants to be, everything he is and is not.