

A narrative study of the cross-media adaptation of the musical *The Red and the Black*

Lingyun Xu

Lu Xun College of Humanities, Shaoxing University, Shaoxing, China

69630076@qq.com

Abstract. Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is a representative work of 19th-century French realist literature. In its cross-media adaptation into a French rock musical of the same name, plots involving the church and aristocratic politics are substantially cut, and the love narrative is elevated to the structural backbone. Existing studies mostly focus on the appreciation of stage style, lacking systematic analysis from the perspectives of narratology and adaptation theory. Taking Genette's narrative theory and Linda Hutcheon's theory of cross-media adaptation as the theoretical framework, this paper compares the original novel with the musical text to examine the shift of narrative focus and the reconstruction of narrative authority in the adaptation. The study finds that although the musical does not change the ambition-driven nature of Julien, it enables the love narrative to acquire an expression system independent of the main political storyline by reducing political narratives, splitting independent female perspectives, and adding the trans-level narrator Geronimo. Meanwhile, Julien's class-based personality and rebellious traits are transferred into emotional scenarios, achieving a balance between the simplification of surface narrative and the inheritance of deep spiritual connotation. This adaptation provides a referable practical paradigm for the contemporary stage transformation of classic literature.

Keywords: *The Red and the Black*, French rock musical *The Red and the Black*, narrative study, cross-media adaptation

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1830, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* has always been regarded as a benchmark work of 19th-century French realist literature. Centering on the personal fate of the protagonist Julien Sorel, the novel compresses the grand landscape of class rigidity, church intrigue and aristocratic politics during the Bourbon Restoration into the spiritual history of a young man from the lower class through a sophisticated internal focalization narrative structure. In this work, "red" and "black" are not only the symbolic opposition between the military uniform of the Napoleonic era and the black robe of clergymen in the Restoration period, but also symbols of the irreconcilable conflict between social systems and individual desires. Its highly concentrated narrative authority and gradual unfolding of social criticism make it an insurmountable classic in literary history.

In 2016, the French rock musical *The Red and the Black* premiered in France as a rock musical production, which quickly attracted attention. It launched its China tour in 2019 and gained extensive market response. However, this adaptation does not pursue a faithful reproduction of the original plot, but makes substantial adjustments to the narrative focus: explicit social criticism threads such as church struggles and aristocratic politics are extensively cut, while the romantic entanglements between Julien, Madame de Rênal and Mathilde are elevated to the backbone of the narrative structure. While winning the favor of young audiences, this adaptation strategy has also triggered discussions on whether it deviates from the spirit of the original work.

Notably, existing comments on *The Red and the Black* the musical mostly remain at the level of appreciating stage style, musical appeal or actors' performances, and there is a lack of systematic analysis of the internal logic of this adaptation from the perspectives of narratology and cross-media adaptation theory. Adaptation is not simply deletion or addition, but a holistic reconstruction of the distribution of narrative authority, perspective structure and thematic focus. Taking Genette's narrative theory and Linda Hutcheon's theory of cross-media adaptation as the main analytical tools, this paper compares the original text with the stage text of the musical, and sorts out the adaptation strategies of the musical from two dimensions: the shift of narrative focus and the split and innovation of narrative authority. The study aims to answer the following questions: How does the musical maintain the continuity of Julien's core personality while weakening political narratives? How does the introduction of multiple narrative authorities change the narrative ecology of the original work? What is the internal logic and contemporary value of this romance-oriented adaptation strategy?

Through the discussion of the above issues, this paper attempts to reveal that the cross-media adaptation of classic literature is not a binary choice between "faithfulness" and "departure", but a creative process of seeking a dynamic balance between adhering to the spiritual core and adapting to the laws of new media. The practice of *The Red and the Black* the musical may provide a thought-provoking path for the transformation of 19th-century realist classics on the contemporary stage.

2. Literature review

Under the fixed internal focalization defined by Genette, all narrative information derives from the conscious activities and sensory experiences of a single character. The narrator cannot step out of the character's cognitive scope to narrate, nor can he independently depict the inner world of other characters [1]. The whole book is dominated by Julien's fixed internal focalization, and all readers' understanding of the social structure and power game of the Bourbon Restoration is basically formed through Julien's personal experiences and inner thoughts.

The two core narrative lines, the Mayor's residence in Verrières and the Besançon Theological Seminary, are both constrained within Julien's internal focalization perspective. During his tenure, Julien witnesses Valenod exploiting the lower class and scheming for promotion, and recognizes the utilitarianism and hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie; in the harsh environment of the seminary, he observes the strife among the clergy and sorts out the interest bond between the church and royalist forces. These cognitions are presented in the form of characters' psychological activities, and the narrator does not step out of the perspective to make additional comments. Stendhal transforms the overall contradictions of French society at that time into Julien's individual desire for conquest and struggle for survival, and the character's choices are essentially the psychological externalization of class conflicts in the era [2]. The social critical value of the original work is basically realized through the internal focalization structure.

This narrative perspective determines the subordinate nature of the love narrative in the original work. There is no independent and pure love writing in the whole book; the two core romantic lines serve Julien's demand for class advancement, and love is a means for him to break class barriers and resolve identity inferiority, rather than a spiritual sustenance. During the night walk in the garden, Julien takes the initiative to approach Madame de Rênal and summons up the courage to touch her hand. His thoughts revolve around self-dignity and class game, and he regards this transgression as a victorious act to erase class humiliation and fight back against the aristocracy. The character's emotional fluctuations are attached to personal ambition: "It was his duty to make sure this hand did not withdraw. The thought of a duty to perform, and of being a laughing stock or even sinking into inferiority if he failed" [3]. "His heart was then filled with pleasure, not because he loved Madame de Rênal, but because the terrible torment was over".

Julien's emotional entanglement with Mathilde also follows a utilitarian logic of action. After receiving Mathilde's secret letter, his first reaction is not infatuation, but vigilance and suspicion. He worries that it is a deliberate trap set by aristocratic youths to humiliate him, and he goes to the appointment only to maintain his dignity, unwilling to be regarded as a cowardly commoner from the lower class. In the process of getting along with Mathilde, Julien always maintains a clear game-playing mindset. He is well aware that this relationship can bring him aristocratic status and a stable future, and marriage and love are merely bargaining chips for class advancement.

Academic studies distinguish between the two romances in the original work: Madame de Rênal represents "love of the heart", while Mathilde represents "love of the mind" [4]. However, for Julien, both types of affection are tools serving class breakthrough. It is not until he is imprisoned and on the verge of death that Julien completely breaks free from the shackles of ambition and reflects on his true feelings: "Julien said to her: 'Once, when we walked together in the woods of Verrières, I could have been very happy, but my soaring ambition led my soul to illusory realms. Your charming arm was at my lips, yet instead of holding it, I was drawn away by vague aspirations. All I could think about was how to face countless struggles to build a great fortune... No, if you had not come to visit me in prison, I would never have understood what happiness is until I died'". Love is either a tool of ambition or a remnant after ambition fails. This sufficiently proves that love narrative in the original work only functions to promote the plot, rather than being the fundamental internal cause of the character's actions, and its narrative status is secondary and subordinate.

From the perspective of internal focalization, the core symbols of "red" and "black" are rooted in political and class narratives of the era, and have no interpretive dimension of private emotion. Red refers to the military uniform of the Napoleonic era, symbolizing the struggling ideal of young people from the lower class to break through family status through military exploits; black refers to the black robe of clergymen, corresponding to the reality that the church became the only upward channel for the lower class during the Restoration period, and symbolizing the hypocritical and rigid church system. The imagistic opposition between red and black constitutes Julien's core inner contradiction, drives the character's fate, and fully serves political narrative and class criticism [5].

Overall, Stendhal constructs a complete political narrative system based on internal focalization, with narrative authority concentrated in Julien. Character relationships, psychological conflicts, symbolic imagery and plot development ultimately point to the class contradictions of the Restoration era and the breakthrough demands of young people from the lower class, while love episodes are merely extended branches of the core narrative. Such a structure centered on a single perspective and driven by class ambition is difficult to fully reproduce in the stage medium, which also leaves room for the narrative reconstruction of the musical.

3. The narrative reconstruction of musicals

Linda Hutcheon's theory of trans-medial adaptation clarifies that the theatrical adaptation of classic literature is not a simple textual reproduction. Drawing on the communicative characteristics of theatrical media and the aesthetic preferences of contemporary audiences, creators proactively reconstruct the original narrative structure and shift the narrative focus to achieve the creative transformation of the text [6]. The musical *Le Rouge et le Noir: L'Opéra Roc* adopts a differentiated narrative logic. The production cuts out overt political content from the original work, such as critiques of the class system, church conflicts, and aristocratic power struggles, and elevates the romantic narrative to the central axis of its narrative structure.

3.1. The reduction of political narrative and the highlighting of the main love line

The original work shapes Julien's tragic life through a complete social and political chain. The power strife in the seminary, political conspiracies in aristocratic circles, and class injustice in the court together constitute the historical background of the character's growth. Every life choice Julien makes has a realistic orientation to break through the predicament of the lower class. The musical drastically cuts the plot line of the seminary: the religious promotion path and church power struggles that carry the connotation of "black" in the original work basically withdraw from the stage narrative. The plots related to aristocratic political schemes at the Hôtel de la Mole are also removed, and most of the political attributes of the Marquis's role are cut, so that he no longer functions as a symbol of class power. The reduction in the proportion of political narrative frees up expressive space for the stage love narrative.

In the original work, the love narrative is attached to the main political line and only serves as a tool for Julien to achieve class breakthrough. The musical reverses the primary-secondary relationship between the two: from the early character foreshadowing, the mid-term plot turning point to the final narrative conclusion, all key nodes of the whole play are driven by romantic conflicts, and romantic entanglements become the core running through the entire work.

The musical adds daily scenes between the maid Élisabeth and Madame de Rênal, with their dialogue revolving around the romantic possibilities involving Julien:

Louise de Rênal: Julien est de votre âge, de votre condition. Vous travaillez dans la même maison, vous êtes en bonne santé... Je ne vois pas pourquoi il ne voudrait pas de vous [7]. (Julien is about your age and from a similar family background. He is in good health and works under the same roof. I can think of no reason why he would not have you.)

Élisabeth: En effet... À moins qu'il en aime une autre? (Unless he is in love with someone else?)

Louise de Rênal: Élisabeth, n'allez pas mettre d'amour là-dedans. Nous ne vivons pas dans un roman. (Élisabeth, don't be so quick to talk about love. We do not live in a novel.)

This daily dialogue between women, independent of Julien's perspective, pushes the theme of love to the forefront of the narrative in the early part of the play, establishing the central position of love content from the very beginning of the narrative.

As the plot progresses to key turning points, the feature of being driven by love becomes more prominent. In the original work, Julien leaves Verrières for Besançon at the request of Abbé Chélan; in the musical, the seminary plot is skipped, and Madame de Rênal directly proposes to send Julien to Paris, adjusting the motivation of this plot to a passive act under the obstruction of their romantic relationship. Julien expresses in his lines before the number *Dans le noir je vois rouge*:

Julien: Effacée. Oubliée. C'est fini les femmes. Fini les sentiments. (Erase her. Forget her. It is over. No more women. No more feelings.)

Julien: Mon cœur est brisé. Tant mieux. Il ne régnera plus sur moi. (My heart is broken. All the better. It will no longer control me.)

The core motivation driving the character to travel far to Paris, in addition to the contempt he suffers for his identity, emphasizes more the humiliation and heartbreak brought by the breakdown of the romantic relationship. This emotional outburst is a powerful climax at the end of the first half of the play, and directly propels the plot into the Paris segment.

In the final prison segment, the narrative focus further converges on the romantic tragedy, and the character's pain, repentance and self-identification mostly revolve around romantic entanglements. The lines and aria of *L'amour nous désarme* in prison bind the character's spiritual survival to love:

Julien: Louise morte c'est le monde qui s'écroule. Mais Louise vivante, c'est l'amour même qui me condamne. (If Louise dies, the world collapses; if Louise lives, it is love itself that condemns me.)

L'amour nous désarme / Il nous désarme. (Love disarms us / It disarms us.)

Julien's spiritual world is more dominated by gains and losses in love. The resentment from the shattering of political ideals exists but is weakened, and the narrative closes with an individual romantic tragedy. The reduction of political narrative frees up structural space for the love narrative, but for love to truly become the main axis of the narrative, one problem remains to be solved: the narrative authority of the original work is highly concentrated in Julien alone, and the love narrative lacks an independent subject of expression. Therefore, the musical completes the split and innovation of narrative authority in the following three ways, enabling the love narrative to gain independent expression.

3.2. The split of narrative authority: the independence of female perspectives

Under the internal focalization structure of the original work, all narrative information is perceived through Julien, and other characters have no independent psychological expression. The inner activities of Madame de Rênal and Mathilde can only be presented indirectly through Julien's observations, attached to the protagonist's cognitive boundaries, and readers' understanding of them is also filtered through Julien's subjective judgment. The musical designs solo numbers for the two women, handing narrative discourse power to the characters themselves, breaking Julien's narrative monopoly, and also making romantic psychology the core narrative thread on stage.

Madame de Rênal's lyrical narrative line has a high degree of independence. The love-confession number *Les maudits mots d'amour* is a duet between Julien and Madame de Rênal, in which the Madame has a complete first-person lyrical voice that interprets the anxiety and throbbing of forbidden love, without taking class identity and power game as the focus of lyricism:

Tant pis soyons pour / Les maudits mots d'amour / Disons-nous sans détour / Les mots mélos des beaux mélos. (So be it, let us surrender / To those cursed words of love / Let us speak plainly / The melodic words of beautiful romances.)

Such delicate romantic confessions can only be hidden in the gaps of Julien's observations in the original work, and readers can only guess the Madame's psychological state indirectly through Julien's behavioral responses; the musical directly grants women an independent channel of self-expression, so that characters' emotions no longer need to be relayed through the male perspective. The final solo *Je vous laisse hélas* is a lyrical segment after the Madame learns of Julien's death, with emotions centered on romantic loss:

Si seule dans ce monde là / je n'existe pas / Si tu manques à chacun de mes pas / j'arrive attends-moi. (Alone in this world / I cease to exist / If every step I take misses you / I am coming, wait for me.)

In the original work, the Madame's pain is intertwined with the dual effects of religious discipline and class public opinion. The musical does not present class criticism and religious guilt as the root of her pain, but

focuses the lyricism on the spiritual collapse of losing her lover, making love the core of the character's final emotions.

Mathilde's narrative line also completes the independent reconstruction of perspective. In the original work, Mathilde already has an independent spiritual core: she is obsessed with the legendary honor of her ancestors, tired of the mediocrity and hypocrisy of high society, craves passion with a sense of adventure, and is attracted by Julien's unique temperament, which is inherently homologous to her spiritual trait of yearning for legend. In the musical, her aristocratic background and unwillingness to be mediocre still exist as the basis of the plot; the adaptation grants her an independent narrative channel through exclusive solos, greatly increasing the weight of love content in her character narrative. In the opening solo *Quel ennui*, she judges the aristocratic youths around her in the first person, confessing that she is tired of the flashy and empty aristocratic social life, and inwardly craves a love that can ignite passion:

Oh quel ennui / quel ennui / ces gens bien gentils / qui m'aiment et me lassent / sans rien qui dépasse / Quel ennui / quel ennui / tous ces beaux partis / sous les politesses / si peu de noblesse. (Oh what a bore / what a bore / these nice gentlemen / who court me and weary me / with nothing transcendent / What a bore / what a bore / all these fine suitors / beneath their politeness / with so little nobility.)

In addition, the trio *Il aurait suffi* realizes the simultaneous expression of multiple narrative subjects. In the original work, the psychological activities of the two women are basically not presented in parallel on the same narrative dimension, while the musical allows the emotional doubts and game-playing mentality of the three narrative subjects to be voiced simultaneously in the form of a trio:

Mathilde: Tu me prends pour qui? / Je te plais pourquoi? (Who do you take me for? / Why are you attracted to me?)

Louise: Je t'aime aujourd'hui / Sans savoir pourquoi / Mon cœur est à qui / Le tien bat pour qui / Si ce n'est pour moi? (Today I love you / without knowing why / My heart belongs to whom / For whom does yours beat / If not for me?)

Ensemble: Nos folies nous dépassent / On s'aime hélas / Quand on se fuis. (Our follies overwhelm us / We love each other, alas / Even as we flee from one another.)

Ensemble: Dis moi dis moi / Que notre amour ne tiens pas / Qu'à tout ce vide entre nous / Dis moi dis moi / Que notre amour ne vient pas / De tout ce vide entre nous. (Tell me, tell me / That our love is not clinging on / To all this emptiness between us / Tell me, tell me / That our love does not spring from / All this emptiness between us.)

In the number, the three voices intertwine yet remain independent, both expressing the tug-of-war in romantic relationships and granting the three characters equal rights to psychological expression. The two women thus have a relatively complete emotional narrative arc, no longer functional characters in Julien's ambition narrative. The split of narrative authority directly pushes the love narrative to the center of the stage, breaking away from its subordinate status in the original work and becoming the core of stage expression.

3.3. The supplement of narrative authority: depoliticization of supporting characters

The expansion of supporting characters' perspectives is an important supplement to the split of narrative authority in the musical. The independence of the two female perspectives supports the main framework of the love storyline, while the depoliticized transformation of the supporting cast unifies the tone of the whole play at the level of narrative background, weakens the presence of public political narrative in the original work, and forms a closed loop for the shift of narrative focus. Most supporting characters in the original work are concrete symbols of class structure, bearing clear social critical functions and serving Julien's main line of class breakthrough. The musical carries out a systematic depoliticized reshaping of the supporting cast,

stripping away their political symbolic attributes and shifting the characters' functions to the fields of private emotion and secular life.

Mayor de Rênal is the first supporting character to complete the functional shift. In the original work, he is the representative of bourgeois power in Verrières, vain and utilitarian, with actions revolving around reputation and interests. He is the epitome of the local bourgeoisie in the Restoration era and bears the function of class criticism. The musical weakens the Mayor's political attributes, and shifts the narrative focus to emotional alienation within marriage through the husband-wife duet *Ce qui compte vraiment*. The character becomes an ordinary individual lacking emotional fulfillment in a secular marriage, and his function shifts from a stepping stone for Julien's class breakthrough to a background reference for Madame de Rênal's romantic predicament.

Valenod is a typical example of a lower-class bourgeois speculator in the original work. He accumulates wealth by exploiting the poor, seeks official positions through scheming, and eventually becomes the juror who tries Julien, serving as the core carrier of class rigidity and institutional corruption in the whole book. The musical dissolves his identity as a political speculator, retaining only his secular positioning as a member of high society. The duet *Tout se perd* by Monsieur and Madame Valenod only expresses generalized sentiments about the changes of social morals, without sharp class criticism or political satire. The character no longer bears the function of institutional reflection, and only exists to set off the flashy atmosphere of high society as a villainous element.

The character transformation of the Marquis de la Mole also follows the logic of depoliticization. In the original work, he is a royalist with core political resources in hand. Julien's core demand for attaching himself to the mansion is to achieve class advancement through the aristocratic platform. The Marquis appreciates Julien essentially to select a political tool, and even his daughter's marriage is within his political layout, making him a representative symbol of upper-class power. Through the solo *Ces peines perdues*, the musical narrows the Marquis's image to the domestic sphere, with emotions revolving around the father-daughter estrangement and his life expectations for his daughter, and his politician attribute is greatly weakened. The character's narrative function shifts from a ladder for Julien's political promotion to a paternal obstacle in the romantic relationship, retreating from the public political arena to the private domestic sphere.

The transformation direction of all supporting characters is to weaken their public political attributes and shift to the expression of private emotion and secular life. This transformation brings two core effects: first, it weakens the supporting character system of the political narrative in the original work, depriving the grand class system criticism of most concrete character carriers, and clearing the way for the centralization of the love narrative; second, multiple groups of independent supporting character perspectives further dilute Julien's absolute central position in the narrative, making the narrative perspectives more diverse and the private narrative tone of the whole play more unified.

3.4. Narrative innovation: Geronimo's trans-level narration

"Trans-level narration" refers to the phenomenon where the narrator shifts between different narrative levels, based on Genette's theory of narrative levels and the concept of narrative metalepsis. Geronimo's trans-level sliding narration is the most innovative narrative adaptation method in this play, and also a unique design that breaks through the limitation of the single internal focalization of the original work. This character is endowed with a dual narrative identity, able to switch freely between an off-stage narrator and an on-stage participant in the plot. The alternating operation of the two narrative levels not only completes the modern shift of the play's overall narrative tone, but also retains the deep-level class thinking of the text through perspective checks and balances, with narrative value far exceeding that of ordinary transition characters.

As a heterodiegetic off-stage narrator, Geronimo is not limited by the time and space of the plot, and is responsible for setting the overall tone and sublimating the theme. The opening number *Écouter son cœur* and the closing number *Le cœur est vainqueur* form a narrative closed loop from beginning to end, and the two numbers directly reconstruct the core of the original text. The opening lyrics redefine the theme of the play:

C'est le moment de plonger vers le fond / Des couleurs de l'amour aux douleurs des passions. (It is time to dive deep / From the colors of love to the pains of passion.)

In the original work, red and black are opposing paths of class advancement and concrete symbols of the politics of the era. The play frames them within the individual scope of love and passion, actively guiding the audience's interpretive perspective from social system criticism to individual emotional experience, and reshaping the overall narrative tone of the play. The core rewritten lyrics of the finale further highlight the theme:

Tout ce bonheur quand on s'aime / Voilà le cœur du problème / On court après tant d'autres choses / Tout ce bonheur quand on s'aime / Pas celui qu'ils nous imposent / Un jour il faudra bien qu'on ose / Le cœur est vainqueur. (All this happiness when we love each other / That is the heart of the problem / We chase after so many other things / All this happiness when we love each other / Not the kind they impose on us / One day we must dare / The heart is victorious.)

The original themes of political breakthrough and class liberation are replaced by emotional redemption and inner victory, and the historical tragedy is transformed into individual life lyricism, which is a key means for the musical to weaken political narrative.

As a homodiegetic on-stage participant, Geronimo actively intervenes in the development of the plot, promotes the main love storyline as a character in the play, and at the same time examines the characters' behaviors from the detached perspective of an onlooker, forming a unique narrative check-and-balance effect. *Pour qu'elles nous aiment* is the main carrier of this narrative function.

Pour qu'elles nous aiment / c'est le problème / Il faut fuir notre naturel / en s'efforçant d'être cruels / Pour qu'elles nous aiment / le vrai dilemme / C'est d'être prêt à tout donner / en évitant de le montrer. (To make them love us / that is the problem / We must flee our nature / striving to be cruel / To make them love us / the true dilemma / Is being ready to give everything / while avoiding showing it.)

This number echoes Julien's inherent political personality. The love rules taught by Geronimo are essentially utilitarian survival strategies, which are consistent with Julien's strategic thinking of class breakthrough in the original work. The play seems to depict pure romantic love between men and women, but in fact, through the plot intervention of the narrator character, it implicitly reproduces the utilitarian survival logic of the original work. Romantic game-playing is skill-based, and the character's political personality does not need to be reflected through grand political plots, but can be embodied in private emotional interactions.

Another number, *Que c'est bon d'être un bourgeois*, assists in completing the perspective check and balance. The playful singing tone weakens the sharp class criticism of the original work, retaining only superficial class examination, and balances the adaptation tone of the play that emphasizes emotion and downplays politics. Geronimo's trans-level narrative design endows the musical's narrative reconstruction with a greater sense of layers: the surface emotional narrative caters to public aesthetics, while the deep character narrative adheres to the core of the original work, with restrained and complete narrative choices.

Therefore, the cross-media adaptation of the French rock musical *The Red and the Black* is a creative reconstruction with clear layers. Based on adaptation theory and narratological principles, the play completes the shift of narrative focus from class breakthrough to romantic entanglement by cutting explicit political plots; by splitting multiple narrative perspectives and adding a trans-level sliding narrator, it builds an independent love narrative system that adapts to the communication laws of the stage medium and the

aesthetics of contemporary audiences. At the same time, the adaptation does not sever the spiritual core of the original work; Julien's class anxiety, game-playing personality and rebellious psychology are mostly preserved, and are implicitly expressed through the romantic plot. The innovation of the surface narrative and the retention of the deep core form a balance, endowing the adapted work with both ornamental value and classic quality.

4. The adaptation value and logic of shifts in romance

The musical *Le Rouge et le Noir-Rock Opera* achieves a superficial narrative shift from a politics-driven to a romance-driven storyline through systematic narrative truncation and multi-dimensional redistribution of narrative authority, while fully preserving Julien's core personality traits. Building on this observation, this section draws on cross-media adaptation theory and the context of contemporary literary and artistic communication to analyze the internal logic behind such adaptation strategies, explain why it has gained wide audience recognition despite toning down political narratives and centering romantic expression, and explore pathways for generating contemporary value in the stage adaptation of classic texts.

4.1. Thematic turn

The theme of the original *The Red and the Black* is the criticism of class rigidity during the French Restoration in the 19th century. Julien's tragedy is an inevitable product of a specific historical context, a political tragedy of the era in which feudal aristocrats and the bourgeoisie jointly suppressed young people from the lower class, and its social critical value is highly bound to the specific historical background. The musical breaks away from the heavy historical and political context, shifts the core theme to individual emotional struggle, dignity defense and self-redemption, and internalizes the grand contradictions of social system into individual life experiences perceptible to ordinary people.

Linda Hutcheon proposes in her adaptation theory that a good adaptation is never a reproduction of the original work, but enables the classic text to generate new meanings in a new era context and media field [8]. The class and political criticism of the original work has a distinct historical threshold, and it is difficult for ordinary contemporary audiences to directly empathize with the party struggles, church intrigues and aristocratic clan systems of 19th-century France. However, the dignity game in love, the inferiority and rebellion brought by class differences, and the individual's struggle within rules are universal life experiences across eras. The love narrative becomes an effective bridge connecting the classic core with contemporary audiences, endowing the two-hundred-year-old text with contemporary vitality again.

4.2. Character localization

The musical does not change the character's core for the sake of love narrative, but completes the emotional transformation of Julien's political personality. The character traits reflected in the original work through events such as seminary survival, political conspiracy and class advancement—including the sensitive self-esteem shaped by a lower-class origin, the instinct of resistance in the face of class oppression, and the utilitarian game-playing thinking that runs through his actions—are all concentrated in romantic scenarios in the musical due to the deletion of political scenes.

The humiliation and anger in *Dans le noir je vois rouge* are essentially the resistance of a lower-class individual after being crushed by the upper class; the romantic game-playing in *Sans elles* is essentially a survival strategy formed in the process of individual upward mobility. Separated from the specific 19th-century political context and placed in the scenario of romantic relationships, these psychological traits are

instead more easily perceived and empathized with by contemporary young audiences. Without understanding the promotion system of the Bourbon Restoration, contemporary audiences can see from Julien's emotional struggles the self-esteem and inferiority, temptation and guard of individuals amid class differences, and the universal psychological state of ordinary people in upward mobility. The character's political personality does not disappear, but is embodied in a more universally contemporary carrier, which not only retains the spiritual depth of the original work, but also avoids the sense of distance brought by grand narratives.

4.3. Media adaptation

The cross-media transformation from literary text to theatrical stage is essentially a process of game and integration between literariness and theatricality. Adaptation needs to complete creative transformation in line with the laws of the stage medium on the basis of retaining the spiritual core of the original work [9]. The romance-centered adaptation strategy is an inevitable choice to adapt to the characteristics of the stage medium and the genre attributes of rock musicals. The stage medium has strict time and space constraints. A novel can use hundreds of thousands of words to unfold multiple complex political threads such as factional struggles in the seminary, political conspiracies in the Marquis's mansion, and class confrontations in court, and gradually build a complete social criticism system. However, the performance duration of a musical is usually controlled within two and a half hours, and the cost of switching stage scenes is extremely high, making it impossible to carry multiple parallel political narratives. Forcibly retaining all the political threads of the original work will only lead to fragmented narrative and stereotyped characters, ultimately losing the charm of the original work. The love narrative has concentrated threads, high emotional intensity and clear dramatic conflicts, which is more compatible with the narrative rhythm and expression laws of the stage.

The genre attribute of rock musicals further strengthens this choice. The advantage of rock music lies in expressing individual emotions and amplifying inner conflicts; it excels at portraying individual desires, pains and resistance, and is weak at explaining complex institutional backgrounds and strategic logic. Musical numbers are the expression carrier of musicals, and the emotional tension of the love theme is highly consistent with the lyrical attribute of rock music, which can maximize the appeal of stage music. Conversely, class system criticism is difficult to be effectively conveyed through rock numbers, and forced adaptation will only disconnect the text from the music and weaken the artistic expression of the work.

4.4. Adaptation paradigm

Based on the principle of "unifying adherence to the spiritual core and adaptation to contemporary aesthetics" in classic adaptation, the value of the adaptation of *The Red and the Black* lies in finding a balance point for the cross-media transformation of classic texts, and forming a referable paradigm of lightweight surface narrative and classic deep core. The adaptation neither sticks to the political narrative of the original work and ignores the communication laws of the stage medium and the aesthetic differences of contemporary audiences, resulting in the classic text being too highbrow for the general public; nor does it dissolve the spirit of the original work to cater to the market, adapting the classic into an empty youthful love story and losing the ideological depth of the original work. The creators actively chose a restrained adaptation strategy: on the surface narrative level, they weaken the grand political content with historical thresholds and center the more universal love narrative to lower the acceptance threshold of classic texts; on the deep core level, they completely retain Julien's class-based personality, rebellious traits and the spiritual conflict of "red and black", guarding the value foundation of the classic text.

This adaptation logic of form adapting to the medium and core retaining the classic verifies the law of contemporary transformation of classic literature: the vitality of a classic does not lie in the unchanged

narrative shell, but in the effective inheritance of the core spirit and character core. Cross-media adaptation does not need to pursue absolute reproduction of the original work; as long as it actively adapts to the expression laws of new media and the audience aesthetics of the new era on the premise of guarding the spiritual core, it can enable the classic text to complete value regeneration in a new field.

5. Conclusion

The cross-media adaptation of the famous work *The Red and the Black* into the French rock musical is an effective practice of contemporary transformation of 19th-century realist classics. The play strengthens the narrative weight of emotional threads, splits the internal focalization perspective of the original work, weakens the political narrative with historical thresholds, and at the same time completely retains Julien's personality traits and class thinking, achieving a balance between surface form innovation and deep core adherence. This adaptation path breaks the binary misunderstanding between faithful reproduction and complete reconstruction, provides a feasible reference for the stage-oriented and youth-oriented dissemination of serious literature, and also confirms that the vitality of classics always comes from the adaptation and regeneration of the core spirit in different era contexts.

References

- [1] Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Cornell University Press.
- [2] Zhang, W. (2021). The conqueror Julien: The Red and the Black and the spiritual revolution in 19th century Europe. *Society*, 41(2), 113–137.
- [3] Stendhal. (2022). *The Red and the Black* (X. Luo, Trans.). Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House. (Original work published 1830)
- [4] Pan, D. (2021). Self, revolution, and love: 'Love of the heart' and 'love of the mind' in *The Red and the Black*. *Society*, 1(4), 156–181.
- [5] Zhang, D. (2002). The Red and the Black: The subject of desire and narrative structure. *Foreign Literature*, (1), 91–97.
- [6] Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- [7] Le trublion. (2024, December 8). French musical "Rock Red and Black" 2019 China tour version [Video]. Bilibili. <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV19XqnYmEvk>
- [8] Dong, X., & Huang, J. (2025). From literature to drama: The game and integration of literary and theatrical adaptation. *Home of Drama*, (36), 21–26.
- [9] Qin, J. (2003). Looking at the contemporary relevance of film and TV adaptations of literary classics from the four elements of adaptation. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, (6), 31–34, 47.