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Fictions of the Feminine in the 18th Century Novel

Roxana (1724), by Daniel Defoe, and The New Heloise (1761), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Ficções do feminino no romance do século XVIII

Roxana (1724), de Daniel Defoe, e *A nova Heloísa* (1761), de Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Abstract A certain tradition of literary history locates the 18th century as the turning point for research into the specifically modern delimitation of the genre of the novel and the redefinition of the status of fiction. During this period, the novel was presented and affirmed as a new narrative form, but at the same time, it was justified by its

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practitioners, in a dispute with other genres, as the most effective way of fulfilling the pedagogical purposes of the long-standing "rhetorical institution": to educate and delight. It is as part of this double movement that we intend to investigate two fictional narratives from this period, which have female chastity as their theme: an English one, *Roxana* (1724), by Daniel Defoe, in which virtue is sacrificed to need and vanity; and one by the Geneva-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who responds in his own way to the discussion about the novel , with the painting of the devout protagonist Julia in *The New Heloise* (1761). The article aims to show how the two different ways of portraying women (as paintings of vice or virtue, respectively) correspond to two opposing narrative strategies that share the same purpose: to morally improve the female audience.
Keywords Daniel Defoe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, modern novel.

Resumo Certa tradição da história literária localiza o século XVIII como ponto de inflexão para a investigação acerca da delimitação especificamente moderna do gênero romanesco e da redefinição do estatuto da ficção. Nesse período, o romance (*novel*) é apresentado e afirmado como forma narrativa nova, ao mesmo tempo que é, porém, justificado pelos seus praticantes, na disputa com outros gêneros, como maneira mais eficaz de cumprir com os propósitos pedagógicos da longeva "instituição retórica": educar e deleitar. É como parte desse duplo movimento que pretendemos investigar duas narrativas ficcionais desse período, que têm como tema a castidade feminina: uma inglesa, *Roxana* (1724), de Daniel Defoe, na qual a virtude é sacrificada à necessidade e à vaidade; e uma do genebrino Jean-Jacques Rousseau, que responde, a sua maneira, à discussão sobre o romance, com a pintura da devota protagonista Júlia em *A nova Heloísa* (1761). O artigo pretende mostrar como as duas formas distintas de retratar a mulher (como pintura do vício ou da virtude, respectivamente) correspondem a duas estratégias narrativas opostas que partilham uma mesma finalidade: a de aperfeiçoar moralmente o público feminino.
Palavras-chave Daniel Defoe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, romance moderno.

This article is about prose fiction texts, or "novels," produced in the 18th century in England and France. We follow the scholarship in considering that this type of literature experienced a particularly fertile period in the 18th century and that these linguistic-cultural spaces were the spearhead of the development of the form in the period. We also understand that the eighteenth century was a time of equally intense historical and sociological transformations and that the novel participated in these changes, not as a symptom or reflection but as a privileged means of reflecting on these transformations. We are particularly interested in discussing how the novel, as a literary form in the process of affirmation and consolidation in the period, elaborates on certain issues related to genre definitions.

In this direction, we have taken on a double theoretical perspective on the modern novelistic form, which is equally relevant, as we intend to show, to analyze the two fictional narratives considered throughout this work. The first, defended by Franco Moretti, understands the novel as a "symbolic form" (2020) and considers how modern fiction participates in the ideological clashes of reality, figuring, on the one hand, fundamental contradictions of bourgeois culture and, on the other, offering them conciliatory and pacifying resolutions. The second point of view on the modern novel coexists with, but competes with, the first: we assume that, by the very nature of the genre, that is, by its intention to stage and fictionally process the experience of reality, including its everyday temporality and its heteroglossia , the novelistic form goes beyond authorial intentionality, bringing out a critical and dissonant potential.

To do this, we are going to take a comparative look at two particularly interesting texts on these themes: *Roxana* (1724), by Daniel Defoe, and *Julia or The New Heloise* (1761), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Like many other of the first canonical novels of the 18th century, *Roxana* and The New Heloise perform what Madeleine Kahn (1991, p. 6) has called "narrative transvestism," projecting a masculine *self* into an imagined feminine voice and experience. This resource, through which "male authors explore, in the metaphorical body of the text, the

ambiguous possibilities of identity and gender [, is] an integral part of the emerging novel's radical and destabilizing investigation into how an individual creates an identity and [...] a gender identity." Written in different places and at different times, England in the 1720s and France in the 1760s, these novels bear witness to the cross-fertilization between spaces, which was so important for the development of the form in this decisive period in the history of the novel, at the same time as they deal critically with burning issues related to the construction of female identity, its attributions and spaces of action, such as marriage, motherhood, adultery, etc.

Roxana: *meer-woman* / *man-woman*

Roxana is the last of seven fictional autobiographical narratives penned between 1719 and 1724 and attributed to Daniel Defoe (1660-1731). This body of work, which includes such texts as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *A Diary of the Plague Year* (1722), and *Roxana* (1724) itself, has been assimilated into the canon of Western literature. Interestingly, at the time of their initial publication and for an extended period thereafter, these works, except for Robinson Crusoe's notable exception, did not attract critical acclaim despite achieving commercial success. Defoe himself appeared to undervalue them. Novels, increasingly popular and financially lucrative yet lacking literary prestige, were making significant inroads in the burgeoning print market of the early 18th century, aligning with the public's appetite for novelty. A professional writer *avant la lettre*, Defoe experienced perhaps more than anyone else the possibilities of making money in this market, having published copiously in the most varied genres and formats. Nevertheless, Defoe, who referred to himself as the author of the satirical poem *The True Born Englishman*, would likely have eschewed the title of 'novelist.' Notably, his novels were published anonymously — some, like *Roxana*, were only confirmed as his creations in the early 19th century. In addition to being a symptom of the low, or non-existent, literary value of

the novel at this stage of its development, the exclusion of the author's proper name is also evidence of an effort to conceal its fictionality.

All of Defoe's published novels, without exception, are presented as true stories, distinct from the "romances" or "novels" in vogue because they are based on "the truth of fact" (Defoe, 2008). Catherine Gallagher (2006) suggests that the concept of 'fiction,' as a distinct discursive category, had not yet solidified in the early 18th century; it would only emerge with the rise of credible prose fiction narratives, later termed 'realist novels,' in the latter half of the century. Manuscripts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*, challenging established genre conventions, occupied an undefined position within the literary field. They were too earnest for comedies, too grounded for tragedies and epics, and too detailed in their action and characters to be lumped with allegories, fables, fairy tales, chivalric romances, and other imaginative narratives, thus confounding contemporary reception.

Defoe skillfully exploited this ambiguity. His novels are life stories of individuals precisely circumscribed historically and socially, narrated in the first person singular — which is why he was classified by Anglo-American critics as one of the precursors of nineteenth-century "realism.". *Roxana*, narrated by a woman who is the daughter of Huguenot refugees in late 17th-century London, details her life's events in a continuous, uninterrupted monologue. The preface, however, is authored by a purported 'editor,' who validates the narrative's authenticity, describing it as 'not a *story*, but a *history*' (Defoe, 2008, p. 490). The editor claims his role was merely to refine the language and anonymize the characters to protect their identities. Presenting himself as partially acquainted with the characters, the editor seeks to ensure the narrative's credibility to the reader.

Beyond authenticating the narrative, asserting its utility was paramount. Adhering to the neoclassical edict of narrative usefulness, a story, factual or not, was expected to instruct — teaching by example, promoting virtue, and deterring vice. This pragmatic view underscored the pedagogical aim, traditionally aligning pleasure from reading or the narrative's truth with educational outcomes. The 'editor' of *Roxana*

emphasizes this, advocating for the reader's 'instruction and improvement' (Defoe, 2008, p. 49). The narrative facilitates this through the life of a prostitute, not by endorsing her actions but by advocating for mimicry of her later repentance and self-critique.

The supposed editor suggests that for the story to yield moral benefits, it must be interpreted correctly. The protagonist demonstrates this through how she narrates her experiences, neither justifying nor endorsing her past behaviors but, on the contrary, critiquing and denouncing her previous actions. *Roxana* leads the reader to "appropriate reflections" by sharing moral insights from her remorseful and repentant conscience, thus justifying the account's publication despite its depiction of a dissolute life. The editor argues that wicked deeds are featured in the tale only to be exposed and condemned. Painting vice in unattractive colors aims not to allure readers but to denounce the behavior. Should the reader misconstrue these depictions, the fault lies with them (2008, p. 51). Although perfectly aligned with the moralizing expectations of classical literary tradition, such professions of morality may sound suspicious. We understand that the story's appeal to the public was largely due to its scandalous nature. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the French seventeenth-century novel, in its varied forms, was well known to the English audience (Reed, 2016). Specifically, genres such as *nouvelles*, *chroniques scandaleuses*, and *romans à clef*, renowned for their libertine plots of seduction, illicit loves, and their cunning aristocratic heroines of questionable morality, were translated, adapted, and reinvented with considerable success by writers, including Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Eliza Haywood (Ballaster, 1992). *Roxana* is evidently inspired by these popular, though infamous, forms of the French novel. Conversely, it is accurate to say that the plot structure of the work, characterized by a dynamic of sin, guilt, and repentance, similar to that found in most of Defoe's novels, is derived from the devout genre of spiritual autobiographies that were popular in the Protestant milieu (Starr, 1965).

The question of the editor's sincerity as the *persona* of the implied author, whether interpreted as disguised venality or genuine piety,

is of interest here only as an indication of a tension between spiritual (and moral) demands and worldly appeals. This tension permeates this and other Defoe novels and his biography. Many of his characters are caught in a conflict between traditional and modern values — specifically, the typically modern, adventurous ambition to conquer the world versus traditional religious and moral values. In *Roxana*, the primary conflict is between the independence, freedom, and pleasure afforded by wealth, luxury, and social standing, and her social obligations as a wife and mother. Thus, the novel articulates a symbolic conflict emblematic of modern experience between individual freedom and societal expectations, seeking to propose a resolution favoring the latter.

Roxana's narrative chronicles the ascent and decline of a prostitute. Forsaken by a 'handsome and cheerful' yet 'foolish' husband, she and her five children quickly fall into destitution. However, through her beauty and remarkable resourcefulness, aided by Amy, her loyal maid, the protagonist eventually amasses a considerable fortune and elevates her social status to the point where she acquires a noble title by the story's end. Initially driven by necessity and subsequently by ambition and vanity, Roxana exchanges her virtue for wealth — *Fortunate Mistress* is the book's original title. Yet, her fortune eventually reverses, and haunted by her past in the form of an abandoned daughter who recognizes her, she finds herself disgraced and remorseful.

This simple narrative of virtue sacrificed for necessity and vanity, of sin and repentance, encapsulates pressing issues facing a society undergoing profound changes. It addresses England's intricate and challenging transition at the start of the 18th century, from an agrarian society defined by the Ancien Regime's hierarchical and traditional values to bourgeois modernity and its attendant corollaries: secularization, urbanization, individualism, commercialization etc. The correlation between the 'rise of the novel' and the emergence of modern bourgeois life is well-established, and Defoe, with his straightforward and unadorned prose, is often heralded by Anglo-American critics as one of the pioneers of the realist novel and as a commentator on emerging individualism and capitalism (Watt, 2010 [1957]). Without disputing

this interpretation, our interest in the novel, particularly in this novel, resides less in its role as a symptomatic record or defense of a specific condition than in its capacity to thematically engage and scrutinize its historical context. Unlike critics such as Roland Barthes (2004) or Franco Moretti (2009), we do not perceive the novel, especially the realist novel, as an inherently conservative form that merely reinforces bourgeois ideology. To suggest the opposite, i.e., the novel's inherently revolutionary character, would be equally reductive. We recognize, however, that the novel, by its specific characteristics such as its immersion in everyday temporality and its polyphony, is imbued with a significant potential for critical reflexivity, albeit with an ambivalent significance.

The ensuing discussion seeks to underscore the element of reflexivity present in *Roxana*, particularly in how the themes of marriage and female autonomy — that is, women's positions in a societal structure that, while essentially patriarchal, was undergoing a profound reevaluation of societal roles and places — are depicted in the narrative. These themes, pervasive throughout the novel, are explicitly addressed by the protagonist in specific passages. The first notable instance is a conversation between *Roxana* and her suitor, an honest Dutch merchant. This dialogue occurs in Rotterdam, shortly after the Dutchman aids her escape from peril in France, approximately midway through the book. By this juncture, Roxana has amassed a significant fortune from her previous alliances. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that her financial security, and potentially her survival, were due to her Dutch benefactor, placing her in a position of indebtedness. Roxana proposes a substantial payment to settle her debt, but the merchant declines, expressing a wish to marry her instead. Fearing the loss of control over her assets, Roxana rejects his proposals. In desperation, the Dutchman employs a tactic of lying with her to coerce her into marriage under the pretenses of honor. Roxana, having no reservations about being his mistress, yields to his sexual advances, and they spend several nights together. However, to his astonishment, she steadfastly refuses to marry. Perplexed and exasperated, the Dutchman seeks an explanation, to which she articulates:

> I told him, I had, perhaps, differing Notions of Matrimony, from what the receiv'd Custom had given us of it; that I thought a Woman was a free Agent, as well as a Man, and was born free, and cou'd she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that Liberty to as much Purpose as the Men do; that the Laws of Matrimony were indeed, otherwise, and Mankind at this time, acted quite upon other Principles; and those such, that a Woman gave herself entirely away from herself, in Marriage, and capitulated only to be, at best, but an Upper-Servant […]. That the very Nature of the Marriage-Contract was, in short, nothing but giving up Liberty, Estate, Authority, and every-thing, to the Man, and the Woman was indeed, a meer Woman ever after, that is to say, a Slave. (Defoe, 2008, p. 220).

This speech, besides its eloquence, is notable for its employment of the vocabulary of Natural Law, which was becoming increasingly significant in the political discourse of that period. The Dutchman, utterly confounded, laments the originality of Roxana's view — despite similar positions having already been publicly defended (e.g., Rovere, 2019) — while acknowledging the compelling nature of her arguments: 'He reply'd, that I had started a new thing in the World; that however I might support it by subtle reasoning, yet it was a way of arguing that was contrary to the general Practice' (Defoe, 2008, p. 227). Furthermore, "you go upon different Notions from all the World; and tho' you reason upon it so strongly, that a Man knows hardly what to answer, yet I must own, there is something in it shocking to Nature" (Defoe, 2008, p. 230). In addition to appealing to tradition and nature, the Dutchman, incapable of countering Roxana's natural law arguments, also turns to religion and societal laws (Defoe, 2008, p. 224) as forms of traditional authority. Roxana's indifference towards the child she is carrying, whose destiny, as a bastard child, "is to bear the eternal reproach of what it is not guilty of", is particularly bewildering and appalling to him. Should Roxana possess 'the common affection of a mother,' he contends, never

would she forgo the very act that could "level herself with the rest of the world." (Defoe, 2008, p. 230).

The argument concludes without a distinct victor. The Dutchman is unable to persuade Roxana to enter into marriage, nor can she convince him to remain together as lovers. Subsequently, the Dutchman departs for Paris, and she sets off for London, determined to captivate English polite society with her wealth, beauty, and skills. Having established herself in a luxurious abode in an upscale area of the city, Roxana seeks counsel from a renowned London financier, Sir Robert Clayton, on asset management. During a conversation, Sir Robert advises her to marry a "true-bred merchant," promising stability and comfort. Although the narrator, in the figure of the repentant Roxana, recognizes in retrospect the correctness of the suggestion, the imprudent young woman refuses it in the name of independence, repeating the egalitarian speech she had made to the Dutchman:

> This was certainly right; and had I taken his advice, I had been really happy; but my heart was bent upon an independency of fortune; and I told him, I knew no state of matrimony, but what was, at best, a state of inferiority, if not of bondage; that I had no notion of it; that I liv'd a life of absolute liberty now; was free as I was born, and having a plentiful fortune, I did not understand what coherence the words honour and obey had with the liberty of a free woman; that I knew no reason the men had to engross the whole liberty of the race, and make the women, notwithstanding any desparity of fortune, be subject to the laws of marriage, of their own making; that it was my misfortune to be a woman, but I was resolv'd it shou'd not be made worse by the sex; and seeing liberty seem'd to be the men's property, I wou'd be a man-woman; for as I was born free, I wou'd die so (Defoe, 2008, p. 247).

In highlighting these dialogues, our purpose is not to retroactively label the novel, or its protagonist, as 'feminist,' an action that would not

only be anachronistic but also starkly opposed to the text's explicit moral stance. Within the moral framework governing English literature and society of the era, Roxana's conduct is markedly aberrant, the eloquence with which she defends it serving only to augment its repugnance. As articulated by John Richetti, 'in early eighteenth century terms, Roxana is a libertine monster' (Richetti, 2005, p. 289). Her justifications are mere sophistic maneuvers by a guilty conscience seeking to delude itself. We must not be misled: the narrative showcases vice in its 'low-priz'd colors' This interpretation aligns with the repentant narrator's authoritative conclusion:

> Thus blinded by my own vanity, I threw away the only opportunity I then had, to have effectually settl'd my fortunes, and secur'd them for this world; and I am a memorial to all that shall read my story; a standing monument of the madness and distraction which pride and infatuations from hell runs us into; how ill our passions guide us; and how dangerously we act, when we follow the dictates of an ambitious Mind (Defoe, 2008, p. 236).

Nevertheless, herein lies our point: it is difficult for the reader not to be impacted by Roxana's egalitarian arguments, precisely because they are the arguments of the protagonist, whose life we have been following in detail since the beginning of the narrative..The centrality of individuality in the realist novel and its nature as a particular, yet "non-referential" fictional individual (Gallagher, 2006), favor a new reading practice, or engagement with the text, which would become dominant with the cultural consolidation of the novel, from the middle of the century onwards, that is, empathetic reading, which stimulates identification with the characters (cf. Watt, 2010; Gallagher, 2006; Hunt, 2009). The character's complexity, nuanced portrayal, vividness, and inherent flaws engender a deep involvement in their destiny, eliciting enthusiasm for their triumphs and empathy for their setbacks.

As the actions and circumstances of the sinful Roxana captivate the reader's attention to the detriment of the lessons from the repentant Roxana, the narrative diverges from its didactic purpose, appearing to counteract the moral intentions of the novel. In the introduction for a recent critical edition of '*Conjugal Lewdness*' — *a* treatise on sexual morality within marriage, originally published by Defoe in 1727 - Liz Bellamy comments on the fictional examples Defoe employs to demonstrate his moral precepts, noting a tension between didactic and narrative demands of the work. The text highlights the protagonist's guilt and immorality, yet the dramatic centrality attributed to her encourages readers to view her as a heroine.

> The more fictional details are provided to flesh out the illustrative accounts, the more the readers are encouraged to understand and empathise with the erring characters, thereby undermining their cautionary role. […] The dramatic evocation of the complexity of individual behaviour and motivation is in contrast to the unequivocal moral message, and this ambivalence becomes more pronounced in the extended narratives of the novels. While moral precepts may be clear and simple, individual motivation is far more difficult to disentangle and to judge. (Defoe, 2006, p. 17).

The ambivalence resulting from this tension between didacticism and narrative is reinforced by the text's abrupt and inconclusive ending. After eight years living in grand style amid elegant London society as the famous "Lady Roxana," hostess of masked balls, dancer *à la turque*, and lover of great personages — among whom, it is suggested, King Charles II himself — Roxana, already tired of her vice and considering herself sufficiently wealthy, decides to retire from her trade and undergo a "complete and perfect change of appearance and circumstances" (Defoe, 2008, p. 292). With Amy's help, she abandons her luxurious residence, her retinue, servants, and carriage and moves to a remote part of the city where no one knows her. She takes up residence incognito in the

boarding house of a Quaker widow and adopts the modest habits of that sect. She meets the Dutch merchant again in this new condition, who soon renews his marriage proposal. This time, having achieved everything she wanted, except a noble title — which marriage, conveniently, will provide —, Roxana, forgetting her previous revolutionary argument, surrenders herself to the other sex.

If that were the conclusion of the narrative, it would constitute a comedy. However, the zenith of the career of this picaresque courtesan, a master of disguise and self-fashioning, marks the commencement of her decline. On the verge of embarking to Holland with her new spouse, her loyal companion Amy, her astonishing wealth, and her newly acquired title of Countess, Roxana is recognized by one of her daughters — the same daughter she had forsaken at the story's onset, bearing the name Susan, identical to her mother's baptismal name (a detail only now disclosed to us). Despite Amy's attempts at bribery and intimidation, the girl, refusing to be disregarded by her mother, persistently pursues her, threatening to unveil Roxana's true identity and the 'secret history of [her] former life' (Defoe, 2008, p. 431). Previously unparalleled in audacity and resourcefulness, Roxana finds herself immobilized by fear and remorse. Amy, embodying a kind of Machiavellian alter ego to the protagonist, offers a solution: the murder of the bothersome daughter. Roxana, however, emphatically refuses the proposition and dismisses Amy. Mysteriously, Susan vanishes. With no way to locate her daughter or contact Amy, Roxana reluctantly proceeds with her plans to resettle in Holland, where the narrative abruptly concludes. In a final sentence, the narrator simply reports that, in Holland, a reversal of fortune would have befallen her, like a "blast of heaven", summarily described as "a dreadful course of calamities" that would have reduced her once again to misery and, finally, to repentance. (Defoe, 2008, pp. 435-436).

The conclusion of the novel is unsettling, not merely because of the implied murder, but also due to the terse manner in which it informs us of the protagonist's penance. This contrasts sharply with the verbose detailing of her sinful exploits. The fates of Susan, Amy, and even Roxana remain uncertain. What transpired in Holland to precipitate

Roxana's repentance? What calamities befell her? Moreover, the authenticity of her repentance is dubious — is it merely superficial and contingent, or the outcome of a genuine 'conversion' and '*heart-humiliation*' (Bunyan, 2008), reflective of a true spiritual autobiography, and as we recognize, for example, in Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. We do not witness the transformation of the sinful Roxana into the redeemed Roxana, so the schism between them remains open. There is no closure, no "sense of ending."

This ending is so disturbing that it ended up being modified in the various editions that were published in the 18th century. Since it was a novel without an author, the editors had no qualms about opportunistically altering it according to what they sensed to be the expectations of the reading public. In general, these modifications — which end up being a good indicator of the novel's reception — sought to show a Roxana who had truly transformed by the end, which involved detailing the "course of calamities" indicated in the original version (such as abandonment by her husband, Amy's death from venereal disease, bankruptcy and imprisonment for debt) and even narrating, with the help of a reliable witness, her death as a devout penitent. According to John Mullan (Defoe, 2008, p. 14), most of these versions of Roxana "erased the possibility that her daughter might have been murdered, and made the protagonist discover some maternal feeling that she had scandalously failed to display [...] in the course of her story." Especially from the middle of the century onwards, with the vogue for sentimental novels and the consolidation of bourgeois standards of feminine decorum, a protagonist like Roxana, masculine, ambitious and independent, and above all, lacking the "common affection of a mother," in the words of the Dutch merchant, was too disconcerting. In this sense, an expurgated edition of 1775, opportunely renamed "The New Roxana," shows the protagonist completely reconciled with her children. In contrast to the heartless adventuress of the original version - who gradually gets rid of her offspring as ambition leads her and only rarely remembers them, with some remorse and apprehension -, this version shows a sentimental character aware of her maternal duties. Instead of the dark

and inconclusive ending, the new Roxana receives a happy ending, in which five marriages are consummated: "five women in one family, each to get a good husband, is a happiness seldom to be found" (apud Defoe, 2008, p.16).

While these altered endings may have assuaged anxieties regarding female autonomy and satisfied the burgeoning bourgeois patriarchal paradigm, which increasingly associated femininity with domesticity and motherhood, they diluted the original version's ambiguity, forfeiting the opportunity to envisage a model of autonomous femininity and an egalitarian society.

The New Heloise (1761): A land of possible chimeras

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his epistolary novel, *Julia*, or *The New Heloise,* in 1761, he was already a public figure, known to a broad segment of European intellectuals as a fierce polemicist and the author of two controversial discourses in the 1750s. His debut novel thus found an audience predisposed to a specific reception of his writings. However, the novel's significant success altered his public image; Rousseau's legacy as a polemicist was nuanced, transitioning towards an almost exclusively sentimental reputation (Brix, 2001; Auerbach, 2010 [1946]). Drawing upon interpretations of Rousseau's literary impact, we argue that his oeuvre demonstrates a theoretical unity wherein his polemical and sentimental aspects coexist in a dynamic tension (Carnevali, 2012; Starobinski, 2011 [1957]; Cassirer, 2010 [1932]). Specifically, in *The New Heloise*, Rousseau stages the conflict between the individual and society —or more precisely, between the state of nature and the civil state — in a unique manner, adopting a sentimental form. While the philosophical conflict underpins his investigations, including his fictional works, his nuanced approach to feminine affections dominates his prose fiction, presenting a paradoxical contrast to his polemical aims. Despite the presence of his polemical rhetoric in his first *Discourse* (2020 [1750]) and the novel's paratext, which exhibits the radical nature of his proposals against the conventional fiction of his time, the language

of emotions that characterizes the correspondence between the lovers, Julia and Saint-Preux, mitigates the conflicts arising from eighteenth-century societal transformations. Consequently, as we will demonstrate, the work emerges as an effective 'symbolic form,' as described by Franco Moretti (2020). In contrast to *Roxana*, where fiction serves to intensify social tensions, *The New Heloise* reverses this approach. Rousseau strategically employs polemical and fictional tension to ultimately resolve it through a sentimental lens, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies.

The accolade bestowed by the Academy of Dijon in 1750 for the Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts catapulted Rousseau to fame, extricating him from the 'literary underground' where he had previously lingered (Lilti, 2017, p. 437). Contestants were asked: 'Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts had a purifying effect upon morals?' Rousseau's emphatic 'no' challenged the prevalent optimism of the era regarding the moral benefits of technical-scientific advances. For the author, advances in knowledge only stifled the true — and, therefore, morally good — dispositions of the human heart. Art and science would only have a false moral utility: to present the appearance of good.

He argued that art and science, rather than purifying morals, exacerbated human vices. Individuals utilized them for societal approval, valuing appearance over genuine virtue. Furthermore, science and art accustomed the public to conform to customs, morals, and fashion, thus encroaching upon their freedom and distracting them from what really matters. For Rousseau, the so-called progress in knowledge represented an 'alienation' of the individual from their true (good) nature. In this seminal text — which offers, for the first time, the terms of the conflict that mark Rousseau's work, namely, the opposition between human nature (good) and society (responsible for diverting natural inclinations) — the writer argues that the only way to purify customs is through voluntary ignorance. The path of individuals wishing to conduct themselves in a virtuous manner would have to be reversed: they would have to *strip* themselves of art and science, learned in the social world, in order to access the innate goodness of human nature.

Rousseau still presents in this text a reticent alternative to the dilemma concerning the role of the arts, a perspective that he would further develop and modify in his subsequent works. He posits that although science and art may mislead individuals from the path of happiness, the inherent goodness within the heart remains unchanged, merely obscured. Therefore, he suggests the possibility of utilizing 'evil' to combat evil: envisioning an art form that encourages individuals to shed the superficial social layers, thereby enabling them to introspect and adhere to the principles inherently engraved in their hearts as their moral compass.

This theme is revisited with more determination in the two prefaces Rousseau composed for his 1761 epistolary novel, *The New Heloise*. Over the decade spanning his literary debut and the publication of his first novel, Rousseau emerged as a prominent public figure, aligning his lifestyle with the ideals advocated in his philosophical system , thus embodying the exemplary life validating his philosophy (cf. Lilti, 2017). This alignment created a set of expectations among the public, who either identified with or repudiated not just his ideas but also the personification of these ideas in Rousseau himself. *The New Heloise* underscores attributes contemporarily ascribed to the writer, while simultaneously imparting a distinct significance to them.

Like Defoe, Rousseau leverages the ambiguities surrounding his work's fictionality in the narrative's paratext, albeit at a time when such ambiguity had become somewhat conventional in novelistic discourse. Diverging from Defoe's practice of concealment, Rousseau openly declares his authorship and involvement in the work's creation, thereby posing a question regarding the narrative's fictional nature, which he immediately addresses, underscoring for his readers and critics that it is unequivocally 'fiction for you' (Rousseau, 2006 [1761], p. 23). Rather than disputing or affirming the letters' authenticity within the novel, Rousseau accentuates the exceptional character of the protagonists, juxtaposing them against typical fictional characters and actual individuals of his era. This uniqueness is manifested through their distinctive communication style - sentimental, verbose, and transparent about their

genuine feelings (Rousseau, 2006, p. 23). For an audience unacquainted with such virtuous exemplars , and blinded by their own vices, these characters would appear implausible .

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau: transparency and obstruction, Starobinski (2011) discusses the transformation of the role of fiction in Rousseau's life and work. Initially, the realm of the imaginary served as a means of compensating for reality, providing an escape from experience, which was lived in a conflicted way by Roussea. This escape led him towards the depths of his heart — his inner core — as mentioned in the first *Discourse*. Over time, however, Rousseau considered the possibility of merging this imaginary with reality. To facilitate this transposition, he needed to find a compromise between the two realms: the fictional space had to be diminished to the point of being believable within the earthly realm, just as the earthly realm needed to elevate to meet the lofty standards of his imaginary ideal. Rousseau thus presaged the principle that Defoe's prose fiction established in European literature of the 18th century: the insistence on realistic verisimilitude.

Like novelists before him, particularly those from the English-speaking world, Rousseau distances his prose fiction from the fabulous and the fantastic, setting his narrative in specific locations (Vevey and Clarens, in Switzerland), thereby rendering his story consistent and plausible. His characters, however, appear as if they belong to 'another world,' not primarily because of their actions but due to their virtuous nature (Rousseau, 2006, p. 25). It seems as though the impossible (or the improbable), once expelled from eighteenth-century novels (cf. Gallagher, 2006), has found a new home within the personalities of his fictional entities. Consequently, Rousseau's novelistic world does not contradict reality; instead, it diverges so significantly from the surrounding social universe that it functions as a polemical device, serving as an 'implicit critique' (Starobinski, 2011, p. 470) of the symbolic order of reality. Through his fictional characters, the novelist introduces a purer conception of human nature, which challenges the realist principle that normalizes vices, such as pride, vanity and the wish to be superior to

others. These vices are attributed by the author, in his philosophy, to social coexistence, especially developed and intense in Parisian society.

In the second preface to the 1761 novel, Rousseau a dialogue between two characters, identified only as N and R. In this exchange, R submits the discussion about the fictionality of the letters to the purifying purpose, dismissing the relevance of establishing his narrative's veracity. Adopting a moral stance, Rousseau, echoing the question posed by the Academy of Dijon, expresses interest solely in whether his novel could serve to purify the public's morals, suggesting that through art, it might be possible to regenerate society's already corrupted readers.

Accepting the imperative of art's utility , Rousseau subjects it to his specific pedagogical objectives. He openly engages with another convention of the novel which entails integrating a series of unforeseen events, mismatches, and occurrences within the narrative. Rousseau avers that he inverts the usual principle: instead of narrating fortuitous and unusual external episodes that diverge from the chronological narrative, it is the characters, through their introspection, who imbue the mundane external world with extraordinariness and improbability. The vitality of the story does not stem from the adventures, which are, in fact, exceedingly rare in his literary works. Conversely, the prose style permeating all correspondences and the dynamism of subjective transformations afford the reader the satisfaction associated with narrative innovation.

The plot of the epistolary novel *The New Heloise* is notably straightforward: it narrates the story of the unattainable love between a young aristocrat, Julie d'Étange, and her tutor, Saint-Preux. Their love blossoms at the novel's outset, but Julie ultimately marries the man her father selects for her, Monsieur de Wolmar. Rather than contravening her father's decision and bemoaning her socially illicit passion, the character, following a quasi-mystical experience on her wedding day, opts to embrace her imposed fate as a deliberate choice. A significant transformation in the narrative occurs in letter XVIII of Book 3, where the character assumes, for the remainder of the novel, the roles of a dedicated wife and exemplary mother. In the poignant conclusion of the sixth and final book, after a desperate attempt to save her drowning son

results in her own illness and death, the story culminates with a posthumous letter to Saint-Preux. This brief missive, significantly shorter than the others and delivered through Julie's widower, reveals the protagonist's suppressed affection for her former tutor.

The narrative initiates in *media res* with the exchange of letters between the future lovers. Saint-Preux begins the correspondence by sending three letters, one after the other, declaring his love for Julie. It is quickly understood that this love is forbidden, but it is only a little later that we learn the reason: the difference in birth between the two and her father's inflexible objection to allowing her to marry a suitor of inferior social standing. Julia's initial resistance to Saint-Preux, who passionately shares all his feelings and insecurities, eventually wanes, leading to a portrayal of her internal conflict in the novel's first part between succumbing to her passion, physically and emotionally, and adhering to virtue — a dichotomy that epitomizes the modern symbolic contradiction embedded in the novel's plot: two characters inwardly grappling with the social condemnation of their mutual desire.

Despite the conflict between the protagonists' love and societal norms, the novel's atmosphere does not portray the discomfort typically found in many of Rousseau's theoretical texts regarding sociability. Instead, the characters' propensity for virtue permeates the moral ambiance; it is as though the extraordinary nature of these individuals, with their ability to resist the gravest vices and evils brought on by sociability, pervades their environment, transforming the social atmosphere into a true idyll. The setting of much of Rousseau's fictional narrative, Clarens, is depicted through its brilliance, which can brighten and define every aspect of the landscape. Colors and shapes are enhanced as if everything could be viewed in its entirety. Nature, therefore, mirrors the Rousseaunian ideal of 'transparency': the capability of individuals to reveal their truth without concealment, enabling complete and immediate communication (cf. Starobinski, 2012).

However, the characters often conceal the truth, masking their feelings due to societal pressures, akin to the initially secret romance of the two lovers. The disparity in their social origins obstructs their union

and initially divides their inner selves: while the protagonists confess their love to each other, they hide it from their families, maintaining a veil of secrecy. This dichotomy between a 'true self' and a 'social self' is recurrent in Rousseau's work, representing the damage society inflicts on the individual.

In the 1755 *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, which is foundational to his philosophy, Rousseau outlines the hypothetical transition from man's ideal state of nature to the civil state. In the natural state, an individual would exist in perfect harmony with nature, driven solely by the instinct for self-preservation. Similar to animals, humans would only seek to fulfill their basic needs, nourishment and reproduction, without experiencing any deprivation; they would be in unity with themselves and their surroundings, experiencing only the passion of love of self (amour de soi), leading to immediate satisfaction (cf. Carnevali, 2012).

However, through a sequence of chance events, humans are compelled to leave this state of nature when their needs are no longer directly met. Rousseau details this process extensively, but for our purposes, it suffices to say that in order to preserve themselves, humans gradually form groups. This communal living introduces the first perceptions of relationships. By recognizing and comparing themselves to others, individuals lose what Rousseau terms 'the sentiment of his existence' (Rousseau, 2012 [1755], p. 23), a profound and absolute self-awareness, the vital impulse for communion with nature. As a consequence of social interaction, men's self-perception becomes influenced by the 'gaze' of others. Instead of love of self (amour de soi), they are consumed by the passion of self- esteem (amour propre).

By measuring and mediating oneself by the other, the subject suffers a dispersion of his desire, an inability to look inside himself and understand his original need: he measures his interest by what he imagines to be the desire of the other, creating what Carnevali (2017) compares to a game of mirrors. This dynamic underlies the initial correspondence between Saint-Preux and Julia d'Étange: the former experiences turmoil, interpreting Julia's opinions as the essence of his existence. Unsure of

whether he will leave or be sent away or if he is unworthy in Julia's eyes, he does not know how to respond to her indifference following the first letter. It is not until Julia reciprocates his affection that they find themselves compelled to hide their love from their families, yet they remain transparent with each other - as if an extra-social form of communication exists between them.

The concealment of emotions before others profoundly affects the characters: Saint-Preux retreats, while Julia endures suffering. At a pivotal juncture in the novel, Madame d'Étange uncovers the secret affair between her daughter and a man of lower social standing. Yet, instead of condemning Julia, she conceals the truth from her husband — Julia's father — who was vehemently against the lovers' union. The subsequent death of Julia's mother instigates profound remorse within the protagonist. It is not until her father, overwhelmed by emotion, insists that Julia fulfill a marital agreement he had brokered with Mr. de Wolmar, that she consents to the marriage. On her wedding day, within the sacred confines of the church, Julia experiences a profound transformation:

> I know not what terror seized hold of my soul in that simple and august place, filled through with the majesty of the one who is served therein. [...] I thought I saw the instrument of providence and heard the voice of God in the minister's grave recitation of the holy liturgy. The purity, the dignity, the holiness of marriage, so vividly set forth in the words of Scripture, those chaste and sublime duties so important to happiness, to order, to peace, to the survival of mankind, so sweet to fulfill for their own sake; all this made such an impression on me that I thought I felt within a sudden revelation. It was as if an unknown power repaired all at once the disorder of my affections and re-established them in accordance with the law of duty and nature. The eternal eye that sees all, I said to myself, is now reading the depths of my heart; it compares my hidden will with the reply from my lips: Heaven and earth are witness to the sacred engagement

> into which I enter, as they will be as well to my faithfulness in observing it. What right can anyone respect among men who dares violate the foremost of them all?
> [...]
> I envisaged the holy union into which I was about to enter as a new state that was to purify my soul and restore it to all its duties. When the Pastor asked me if I promised obedience and absolute fidelity to the man I was taking as my husband, my mouth and my heart made the promise. I will keep it unto death. (Rousseau, 2012 [1761], p. 312-313, our emphasis).

Julia does not marry Mr. Wolmar out of obligation. The fate decreed by her father becomes a choice for the protagonist. The inner revelation that occurs deep in her heart, through a mysterious voice, brings with it the end of her suffering, the inner turmoil and conflict she has experienced since meeting Saint-Preux.

In her letter, Julia reconciles the laws of duty and nature, asserting that her genuine and deepest inclinations align with the duties of marriage — or virtue — as if, ultimately, her passionate affair with Saint-Preux had been contrary to natural laws. Nonetheless, it was not her love for Saint-Preux per se that was problematic; rather, it was the necessity to forsake virtue to experience it. Her union with Mr. de Wolmar pacifies her heart by concluding her previous way of life that was marked by moral conflict. The letter to Saint-Preux underscores that, faced with 'sudden revelation,' perceived as an act of divine grace, Julia is able to strip away societal influences to truly heed the call of her heart, her intrinsic nature, her sentiment of primal existence, thereby achieving self-concord through marriage. Moreover, this epistolary confession resolves the internal division Julia had grappled with since falling for Saint-Preux.

A paradox emerges from Rousseau's philosophical stance and Julia's expressions in her letter: society, particularly at this narrative juncture, ceases to be a barrier obstructing the sentiment of primal existence, her desire, and instead becomes a vehicle for its actualization. This narrative development, particularly noteworthy in the sequels

post-conversion, showcases that Julia does not cease to love Saint-Preux; rather, she refines her passion through marriage to another. The once concealed is made visible to all, including her husband. Especially in the fifth book, the lovers' desire is no longer confined by societal norms but is openly acknowledged by the Clarens community. This transparency facilitates a direct and unguarded communication, suggesting that the societal malaise has been overcome. At this moment, a seamless unity among individuals appears to have been achieved — as though differences and individualities had vanished, enabling access to a truly universal dialect and eradicating the unintelligibility of distinction. For a brief period within this small community, absolute trust prevails, as if Rousseau envisioned an idyllic paradise, a remedy to the alienation that has plagued mankind throughout history (cf. Starobinski, 2012).

The contradiction is evident, as the purification and overcoming of self-esteem, and the conflict between the self and society are manifested by the female protagonist rather than Saint-Preux. While the male character adheres to the social norms of the idyllic community, he does not experience a conversion. Conversely, Julia lives as a devoted wife and later as a mother, enduring the conflict and receiving letters from Saint-Preux who refuses to accept her decisions. Saint-Preux's inner turmoil and his frequent changes in opinion are evident. Despite his efforts to calm his restless subjectivity, he never embraces virtue as Julia does. For men, virtue as a social law feels unnatural; it is experienced as an imposition, an obstacle, rather than a natural path. Rousseau's works often depict the male's resolution through isolation, achieving autonomy as illustrated in the pedagogical process of Emile. This process combines Spartan education, fostering material and physical independence, with Stoic education, promoting moral autonomy (Rousseau, 2017 [1762]). In contrast, female education, as proposed in *Emil*e, does not adhere to these principles.

In his treatise on education, Rousseau seeks a wife for his adult fictional pupil, having developed the ideal education for Emile across four parts. Book V, dedicated to female education, posits that women's nature is inherently relational and mediated, dependent on men,

contrary to the self-referential and absolute nature described for men in his second *Discourse*.[1] Feminine nature, in contrast, is necessarily relative and mediated, since it naturally depends on male individuals:

> Thus, the whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet — these are the duties of women at all times and what they should be taught from childhood (Rousseau, 2017, p. 527).

At all times, a woman not only must but wants to please a man as long as he is lovable and endowed with certain merits: this is her natural inclination.

Rousseau reflects on the social and cultural shifts occurring in Europe during the transition from a aristocratic-cortesan world to a bourgeois society, where marriage evolved from a pragmatic alliance between families to an agreement made by free choice, symbolizing a social contract (Moretti, 2020, p. 53). Thus, while Rousseau in *The New Heloise* emphasizes women's choice, he also delineates their constrained social destiny. Julia's marriage to Mr. de Wolmar, prompted by her father's social prejudices, causes her distress. However, following her natural inclinations to marry a meritorious husband and bear his children aligns her with the path to happiness. Society, however, introduces confusion, leading women to desire a life akin to men's, challenging their traditional roles (Rousseau, 2017, p. 528), as seen with characters such as Defoe's Roxana.

1 In the Second *Discourse*, Rousseau equates the state of nature of men and women, establishing that individuals of both sexes are inclined to isolation. The role of women presented in *Emile* , however, is more in line with Rousseau's perspective in his epistolary novel. Both were written at a time when the thinker was trying to balance his polemical perspective with social demands.

Julia appears to exist in a state of conflict, both mental and physical, only when she acts contrary to her virtue. This is because a woman "cannot, without bad faith, refuse her approval to the inner feeling that guides her, nor be unaware of the duty in the inclination that has not yet changed" (Rousseau, 2017, p. 558). Nonetheless, she does not act in bad faith; rather, she retrospectively interprets herself as a woman who is "guilty, but not depraved" (Rousseau, 2018, p. 304). Her guilt arises from her status as a social individual who suffers from the deviations of her inner feelings due to her simultaneous dependence on her own conscience and the opinions of others. Consequently, like all virtuous women, Julia must *learn* to compare these two rules, reconcile them, and give preference to the first only when the two are in opposition. This is precisely the case with Rousseau's female protagonist: the issue is not that her love for Saint-Preux is inherently wrong, but rather that it leads her away from her virtue. To reflect and "go back to the source" is essential for cultivating her spirit and reason. The work of female education, imparted by mothers, is to engender a love for a quiet, domestic life (Rousseau, 2017, p. 559). This is also the pedagogical role of Rousseau's novel: it provides female readers with a symbolic resolution to a contradictory experience empathetically shared through its reading.

Lilti (2017) explores the impact of Rousseau's *The New Heloise* through readers' responses to its publication, demonstrating the educational effectiveness of Rousseau's narrative techniques. These reactions serve not just as evidence of the novel's remarkable success but also highlight the novel's role in modernity as a "symbolic form," as theorized by Moretti (2020). For Moretti, the novel addresses the deepest concerns of its readers, offering resolutions that alleviate the social and cultural conflicts experienced by each individual within their moral-symbolic universe. Significantly, the letters Rousseau received articulated both the emotional impact on his readers and a collective desire among women to emulate Julia, as noted by the young Princess Czartoryska (apud Lilti, 2017).

Rousseau, in fact, by conceiving that tenuous balance between imaginary and reality, subject to the imperative of the moral purification

of customs, develops an appeal to his audience: it is necessary to inhabit his language, presented in the novel, to undergo that inner revelation that occurs with Julia (cf. Starobinski, 2011). It is by opening oneself to the interiority shown in the letters of the protagonists (perceived as identification with Rousseau himself), through an unpolished, verbose, emphatic language — specifically of feelings — that art can make its readers better, providing the correct stripping away of imposed social customs. Reading the novel must, therefore, be a moral and spiritual experience: it allows the discovery of the charms of virtue, as no fiction that depicts vices could provide. Rousseau creates the right amount of identification between readers and the moral dilemmas at stake to move them emotionally (cf. Lilti, 2017), making them desire those fictional solutions.

The end of the novel, however, seems to resist this interpretation. For Starobinski (2011), the ending would prove that female conversion, and the earthly paradise resulting from this gesture, is not fully possible and that social alienation is absolutely unavoidable. Conversely, Martin (2019) interprets the ending as highlighting the parity between female and male desires, with female desire ultimately prevailing in Julia's posthumous last word (cf. Martin, 2019). The tension remains due to the need to stifle the desire created in the novel's first pages. This tension underscores the narrative's reflection on the suppression of desire introduced at the outset, with the resurgence of passion in the protagonists' minds challenging the idyllic community's attempt at unmediated, extra-social transparency. Therefore, the social impossibility of the lovers' passion resurfaces, suggesting that the novel's internal conflict is never fully resolved.

We do not seek to outright contradict these analyses but rather to offer a nuanced perspective. Our aim is to reassess the interpretative stand that views *The New Heloise* solely as an effective symbolic form for its domestication of female affections through fiction, as well as the interpretations of Starobinski and Martin that equate the female protagonist's role with male counterparts, thus making the narrative's conclusion a pivotal point for understanding its meaning — a meaning fraught with tension and controversy within the symbolic order of reality. Instead,

we endeavor to restore the novel's reflective dimension, albeit through a different avenue than those proposed by the aforementioned authors. Rather than focusing on the narrative's end, we aim to underscore the dignity of its unfolding within Rousseau's fictional construct.

Following Gabrielle Radica's interpretation (2021), we contend that the conclusion of *The New Heloise* is not the sole aspect from which the narrative derives its full meaning, though it represents one of the discursive meanings attributed to Julia's love story with Saint-Preux. The principle of reality, which degrades the imaginary, must be revisited here: it is also manifested in how everyday time intrudes upon Rousseau's narrative. Far from merely a duration external to the characters, the novel's temporality is experienced time, inducing subjective transformations such that the characters' traits evolve as the story unfolds, as does the perspective from which their decisions are viewed.

The temporal factor is particularly evident in the transformation of the female protagonist of *The New Heloise*. The novelistic form uniquely illustrates the principle that also governed the second *Discourse*: the malleability and potential for individual improvement as effects of sociability and history. In the case of the *Discourse*, however, this improvement is depicted solely in negative terms: it represents the cause and symptom of the subject's alienation from their own nature. Julia's story, by contrast — perhaps precisely because it centers on a woman — unveils the structuring conflict of Rousseau's work more compellingly. Rather than embodying his most stringent moral stances, the novel mitigates their severity, facilitating contemplation of the space for negotiation within social constraints. Confronted with societal dictates, Julia does not, unlike the male protagonist, assert her autarchic self. Instead, she assesses moral norms, establishes a reflective relationship with them, recognizes when the rules of sociability are inflexible, and opts for choices she believes will secure a comparatively happier future.

Julia's numerous decisions throughout the narrative exemplify, in effect, what Radica identifies as a constant calculation: while still believing it feasible to live with Saint-Preux, the protagonist does not forsake her desire, and even contemplates becoming pregnant by her lover to

render marriage unavoidable. Nevertheless, she evolves with the unfolding events and abandons hope, leaving only a hint at an escapade from her anguish. At this juncture, the character narratively shapes — effectively rewriting — the series of events that brought her to a pivotal moment, altering the lens through which she views her past and unveiling new possibilities for her future.

This act of shaping and reshaping is a prevalent tactic in Julia's letters. Owing to the absence of a narrator external to the story and the lack of temporal distance, memories can only be reprocessed from a discursive standpoint, which is thus invariably contingent. The conclusion, as such, can only be comprehended within its temporal frame, as one of Julia's adaptations since, in Rousseau's perspective, there appears to be no notion of order inherent to reality. It is a narrative maneuver that enables Julia to negotiate with her passions and formulate choices that will be realized for a time. Her marriage to the lord of Wolmar, her conversion, and her amorous confession in a posthumous letter to Saint-Preux are decisions in response to the transformations that Julia discerns in herself and her environment.

Conclusion

This article examines two fictional narratives purported to serve educational purposes. Both works, either in the paratext or the narrative itself, articulate the goal of morally edifying a specifically female audience through fiction, though they employ divergent strategies. Defoe relies on depicting vice at the story's forefront and narrating repentance and self-censure in the background, while Rousseau contends that exposing vice equates to encouraging desires for a sinful life. He advocates, instead, for showcasing a protagonist who remains virtuous despite temptation - flawed, undoubtedly, but never 'depraved' or beyond redemption. The moral objectives of both authors are designed to meet the societal expectations of their time, particularly among women. This period marks a transition from a hierarchical and aristocratic society to bourgeois modernity, a change characterized by tensions between

traditional values such as adventure, freedom, individuality, and self-determination, prevailing customs and religious practices, and a redefinition of gender roles and spaces.

On one level, the cases examined in this article can be interpreted, in Franco Moretti's terms, as 'symbolic forms' that function as mechanisms to mitigate the conflicts of a transforming society by fulfilling its symbolic needs. On another level, they transcend their pacifying role. Navigating the still in force poetic-rhetorical conventions and the growing demand for realistic verisimilitude within the novel genre, both works of fictional prose, each in their own way, surpass their explicit normative intentions and challenge a monological conception of discourse . Hence, rather than viewing the novelistic form as a self-contained unit with a singular meaning, we adopt Bakhtin's (2015) viewpoint, which recognizes the genre's capacity to present itself as a 'pluri-stylistic, heteroglossia, heterovocal' phenomenon, amalgamating multiple linguistic levels and relatively independent linguistic units.

In Defoe's *Roxana*, this aspect of heteroglossia is pronounced: albeit the presence of a narrating voice, distanced in time, aiming to unify the protagonist's dialogues throughout the narrative, it becomes overshadowed by divergent pronouncements that command significant independence at various plot junctures, marked by 'concrete, rich in content and distinctly individual enunciation' (Bakhtin, 2015, p. 42). Rousseau's work, however, exhibits this dimension to a lesser extent, not achieving unity merely through an explanatory narrating voice but through the language of emotions prevalent in all the letters, which standardizes the style and prevails over the concrete, heterogeneous dimensions of reality. The discursive subordination in *The New Heloise* enables the novel to perform a more effective symbolic role. Nonetheless, in all its significance, the intrusion of time provides for interpretive flexibility, allowing for a reevaluation of the more enduring aspects of Rousseau's philosophy, albeit through the constrained lens of the author's perception of women's destiny and role in that era. The contingency of Julia's discursive acts highlights, at a minimum, a skepticism regarding the power to define historical meaning. In various ways, as

mediums of conciliation or by virtue of their critical nature, both novels emerge as prime vehicles for contemplating the transformations within 18th-century society.

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Ficções do feminino no romance do século XVIII Roxana (1724), de Daniel Defoe, e A nova Heloísa (1761), de Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Fictions of the Feminine in the 18th Century Novel Roxana (1724), by Daniel Defoe, and The New Heloise (1761), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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