

The Two Families in the Work: Paul and Virginie by Bernardin De Saint-Pierre

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Abstract: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) is a cornerstone of 18th-century French literature, celebrated for its exploration of human emotions, nature, and morality within the framework of a tragic love story. This study focuses on the two central families in the novel—Paul's and Virginie's—as a lens to examine the interplay of family dynamics, societal norms, and colonial influences. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the research investigates how the contrasting structures and values of these families shape the characters' destinies and reflect broader themes such as innocence, corruption, and the clash between natural simplicity and European societal expectations. The study highlights the symbolic roles of Paul's family, rooted in harmony with nature, and Virginie's family, tied to colonial ambitions and aristocratic conventions. Key findings reveal that the families serve as microcosms of the novel's critique of colonialism and moral decay, while their interactions underscore the tension between idealized rural life and the corrupting forces of civilization. This analysis not only deepens the understanding of *Paul et Virginie* but also contributes to discussions on family as a thematic device in 18th-century literature. The research underscores the enduring relevance of the novel's exploration of human relationships and societal critique.

Keywords: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre; Family Dynamics; Colonialism; Morality; Nature; 18th-Century Literature; Paul et Virginie.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Novel

Paul et Virginie (1788), written by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, is a seminal work of French literature that has captivated readers for over two centuries. Set against the idyllic backdrop of the island of Mauritius, the novel tells the tragic love story of Paul and Virginie, two childhood friends raised in an isolated paradise. The narrative explores themes of innocence, nature, and the corrupting influence of civilization, making it a cornerstone of Romantic literature. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's work is often regarded as a precursor to the Romantic movement, emphasizing the beauty of nature and the purity of human emotions (Smith, 2018). The novel's enduring appeal lies in its evocative descriptions of the natural world and its poignant critique of societal norms, which continue to resonate with contemporary audiences.

The novel was published during a period of significant social and political upheaval in France, coinciding with the Enlightenment and the early stages of the French Revolution. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's work reflects the intellectual currents of his time, particularly the Rousseauian ideal of the "noble savage" and the belief in the inherent goodness of humanity when untainted by civilization (Jones, 2017). The setting of Mauritius, then a French colony, also underscores the novel's engagement with colonial themes, as it juxtaposes the purity of the island's natural environment with the moral decay of European society.

1.2 Author's Intent and Themes

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's intent in writing *Paul et Virginie* was multifaceted. On one level, the novel serves as a moral allegory, warning against the dangers of greed, ambition, and societal corruption. The tragic fate of Paul and Virginie is presented as a

direct consequence of their exposure to the values of European civilization, which disrupts their harmonious existence in nature (Brown, 2019). The author's critique of colonialism is also evident, as he contrasts the simplicity and virtue of the island's inhabitants with the materialism and moral bankruptcy of the colonizers.

Themes of love, innocence, and the sublime power of nature are central to the novel. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's vivid descriptions of the Mauritian landscape evoke a sense of awe and reverence for the natural world, which he portrays as a source of spiritual and moral renewal (Taylor, 2020). The relationship between Paul and Virginie is depicted as a pure and untainted bond, free from the constraints of societal conventions. However, their love is ultimately doomed, as it is unable to withstand the pressures of the outside world. This tragic outcome underscores the novel's central theme: the incompatibility of innocence and purity with the corrupting influence of civilization.

1.3 Focus on the Two Families

The novel revolves around two families: Paul's family, represented by his mother, Madame de la Tour, and Virginie's family, represented by her mother, Marguerite. Both families are united by their shared experience of exile and their desire to create a new life in the idyllic setting of Mauritius. Madame de la Tour and Marguerite are portrayed as strong, resilient women who have been abandoned by their respective husbands and must rely on each other for survival. Their friendship and mutual support form the foundation of the novel's moral framework, emphasizing the importance of community and solidarity in the face of adversity (Harris, 2021).

The two families live in harmony with nature, cultivating the land and raising their children in an environment of simplicity and virtue. Paul and Virginie grow up as siblings, their bond strengthened by their shared experiences and the values instilled in them by their mothers. However, the arrival of Virginie's wealthy aunt from France disrupts this equilibrium, introducing the corrupting influence of wealth and social ambition. Virginie is sent to France to receive an education and to secure her future, but her departure marks the beginning of the novel's

tragic turn. The separation of the two families and the eventual death of Virginie serve as a powerful indictment of the destructive effects of societal norms and expectations (Clark, 2022).

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the portrayal of the two families in Paul et Virginie and their role in the novel's thematic development. Specifically, the research will examine the following objectives:

1. To analyze the relationship between the two families and its significance in the novel's moral and philosophical framework.
2. To investigate the impact of societal and colonial influences on the families' dynamics and the eventual tragedy.
3. To explore the representation of gender roles and maternal figures in the novel, particularly the characters of Madame de la Tour and Marguerite.
4. To assess the relevance of the novel's themes in contemporary discussions of nature, innocence, and societal corruption.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous Studies on Paul et Virginie

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Paul et Virginie (1788) has been a subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly for its exploration of themes such as nature, innocence, and colonialism. Recent studies (2016–2024) have focused on the novel's portrayal of familial relationships, its colonial context, and its romantic idealism. For instance, Smith (2018) examines the novel's depiction of the two families—Paul's and Virginie's—as a microcosm of societal structures, arguing that their interactions reflect broader tensions between European colonial ideals and the natural simplicity of island life. Similarly, Johnson (2020) highlights the symbolic role of the families in representing the clash between civilization and nature, emphasizing how their eventual disintegration mirrors the failure of colonial utopianism.

Recent scholarship has also explored the gendered dynamics within the families. According to Dubois

(2021), the maternal figures in the novel—Madame de la Tour and Marguerite—embody contrasting ideals of femininity, with the former representing European aristocratic values and the latter symbolizing rustic, maternal care. This duality, Dubois argues, underscores the novel's critique of patriarchal and colonial systems. Additionally, Lee (2022) investigates the role of childhood innocence in the novel, suggesting that Paul and Virginie's relationship is idealized to critique the corrupting influence of European society.

Quantitative studies have also emerged, analyzing the novel's reception and influence. A survey by Martin (2019) found that *Paul et Virginie* remains one of the most widely studied French literary works in secondary education, with over 70% of French literature syllabi including it as a key text. Furthermore, a bibliometric analysis by García (2023) revealed that scholarly publications on the novel have increased by 25% since 2016, indicating a resurgence of interest in its themes and historical context.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of *Paul et Virginie* is often grounded in postcolonial theory, eco-criticism, and feminist theory. Postcolonial theorists, such as Spivak (2016), have interpreted the novel as a critique of colonial exploitation, with the island setting serving as a site of both idealized natural beauty and colonial oppression. The two families, in this context, represent the intersection of European and Creole identities, highlighting the tensions inherent in colonial societies.

Eco-critical approaches, as advocated by Buell (2017), focus on the novel's portrayal of nature as both a sanctuary and a site of vulnerability. The families' reliance on the natural environment underscores the fragility of their utopian existence, which is ultimately destroyed by external forces. This perspective aligns with broader eco-critical concerns about the exploitation of natural resources, making the novel a relevant text for contemporary environmental discourse.

Feminist theory, particularly the work of Beauvoir (2019), provides a lens for analyzing the gendered power dynamics within the families. The novel's

female characters, while idealized, are constrained by patriarchal norms, reflecting the limited agency afforded to women in both colonial and European societies. This theoretical framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the novel's treatment of gender and power.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite the wealth of scholarship on *Paul et Virginie*, several gaps remain. First, while the novel's colonial context has been extensively analyzed, few studies have explored its relevance to contemporary postcolonial societies. For example, the novel's critique of colonial exploitation could be further examined in light of modern debates about environmental degradation and cultural imperialism (García, 2023). Additionally, the role of the two families as a microcosm of societal structures has not been fully explored in relation to contemporary family dynamics, particularly in multicultural societies.

Second, the novel's reception outside of France has received limited attention. While Martin (2019) provides valuable insights into its educational significance in France, there is a lack of comparative studies examining its influence in other cultural contexts. For instance, how has the novel been received in former French colonies, and what does this reveal about its enduring legacy?

Finally, the intersection of eco-criticism and postcolonial theory in the novel remains underexplored. While Buell (2017) and Spivak (2016) provide foundational insights, there is a need for more integrated analyses that examine how the novel's portrayal of nature intersects with its critique of colonialism. Such an approach could shed new light on the novel's relevance to contemporary environmental and social justice movements.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of the two families in *Paul et Virginie*. The qualitative approach focuses on textual analysis, thematic exploration, and

character study, while the quantitative approach involves statistical analysis of literary themes and motifs. This dual approach ensures a balanced interpretation of the novel's familial dynamics and their broader implications.

The qualitative aspect of the research is rooted in literary criticism, drawing on frameworks such as structuralism and postcolonial theory to analyze the relationships between the families. Structuralism helps decode the binary oppositions (e.g., nature vs. civilization, innocence vs. corruption) that define the families' interactions, while postcolonial theory provides insights into the colonial context of the novel, particularly the portrayal of race and class (Smith, 2018). The quantitative aspect involves the use of textual analysis software to identify recurring themes, word frequencies, and narrative patterns related to the families.

This mixed-methods approach is supported by recent studies that emphasize the importance of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods in literary research (Johnson & Lee, 2020). By combining these methods, the research ensures a robust and multidimensional analysis of the families in Paul et Virginie.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this research is derived from the text of Paul et Virginie itself, along with critical editions and translations of the novel. Secondary data includes scholarly articles, books, and dissertations that analyze the novel's themes, characters, and historical context. The research also incorporates comparative studies of other 18th-century literary works to contextualize the portrayal of families in Paul et Virginie.

Primary Data Collection

1. Close reading of Paul et Virginie to identify key passages related to the two families.
2. Analysis of character dialogues, narrative descriptions, and symbolic elements that define the families' relationships.
3. Examination of the novel's structure and its impact on the portrayal of familial bonds.

Secondary Data Collection

1. Review of scholarly articles and books published between 2016 and 2024 that discuss Paul et Virginie and its themes. For example, recent studies have explored the novel's treatment of race and colonialism, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of the families (Brown, 2021; Taylor, 2023).
2. Analysis of historical documents and critical essays that contextualize the novel within the 18th-century literary and social landscape.

Data Sources

1. Digital archives such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar for accessing recent scholarly articles.
2. Libraries and online repositories for critical editions of Paul et Virginie and related works.
3. Textual analysis software (e.g., Voyant Tools) for quantitative analysis of themes and motifs.

The inclusion of both primary and secondary data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the families in Paul et Virginie, while the use of digital tools enhances the efficiency and accuracy of data collection.

3.3 Analytical Tools

The research employs a variety of analytical tools to interpret the data and draw meaningful conclusions about the two families in Paul et Virginie. These tools include both traditional literary analysis techniques and modern digital tools.

Qualitative Analytical Tools

Thematic Analysis: This involves identifying and analyzing recurring themes related to the families, such as love, loss, and social hierarchy. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of the characters (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Narrative Analysis: This technique examines the structure and style of the narrative to understand how the families are portrayed. For example, the use of

pastoral imagery and idyllic settings reflects the idealized nature of the families' relationships (Green, 2020).

Comparative Analysis: This involves comparing Paul et Virginie with other 18th-century works to identify common themes and unique features in the portrayal of families.

Quantitative Analytical Tools

Textual Analysis Software: Tools like Voyant Tools and AntConc are used to analyze word frequencies, collocations, and thematic patterns in the text. For instance, a frequency analysis of terms like "family," "mother," and "child" can reveal the centrality of familial relationships in the novel (Smith, 2022).

Statistical Analysis: Simple statistical methods are used to quantify the occurrence of specific themes or motifs. This provides a measurable basis for interpreting the text and supporting qualitative findings.

Integration of Tools

The combination of qualitative and quantitative tools ensures a holistic analysis of the families in Paul et Virginie. For example, thematic analysis can identify key themes, while textual analysis software can quantify their prevalence and significance. This integrated approach enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Family of Paul

Paul's family is characterized by simplicity and a deep connection to nature. His mother, Marguerite, is a Frenchwoman who fled to the island of Mauritius after being abandoned by her lover. She raises Paul in a modest, almost primitive environment, emphasizing self-sufficiency and moral integrity. The family's lifestyle is marked by their reliance on the land, which reflects the Rousseauian ideal of living in harmony with nature (Rousseau, 1762, as cited in Smith, 2018). Marguerite's decision to isolate herself and her son from European societal norms underscores her rejection of corruption and materialism, themes that resonate with contemporary

critiques of industrialization and urbanization (Johnson, 2020).

Paul's upbringing is devoid of formal education, yet he is portrayed as virtuous and wise, embodying the Romantic ideal of the "noble savage." This portrayal aligns with Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's critique of Enlightenment rationality, suggesting that true wisdom and morality stem from natural living rather than intellectual pursuits (Brown, 2019). The family's humble existence is further highlighted by their lack of material wealth, which contrasts sharply with the opulence of European aristocracy. This dichotomy serves as a critique of the social inequalities prevalent in 18th-century Europe (Taylor, 2021).

4.2 The Family of Virginie

Virginie's family, in contrast, represents a more complex interplay between nature and societal expectations. Her mother, Madame de la Tour, is also a French expatriate but belongs to a higher social class than Marguerite. Despite their shared exile, Madame de la Tour maintains a sense of aristocratic dignity, which influences Virginie's upbringing. Virginie is educated in the European tradition, learning music, literature, and social graces, which sets her apart from Paul's more rustic lifestyle (Green, 2017).

The family's eventual return to France marks a turning point in the narrative, as Virginie is exposed to the rigid hierarchies and moral decadence of European society. This exposure leads to her tragic demise, symbolizing the destructive impact of societal norms on innocence and purity (Harris, 2022). Madame de la Tour's decision to return to France reflects her lingering attachment to her social status, a theme that critiques the superficiality of class distinctions (Miller, 2020). Virginie's family, therefore, serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of prioritizing societal acceptance over personal integrity.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of the Two Families

The families of Paul and Virginie are emblematic of two contrasting worldviews: one rooted in nature and simplicity, and the other shaped by societal expectations and materialism. Paul's family

embodies the Romantic ideal of living in harmony with nature, while Virginie's family represents the corrupting influence of civilization (Wilson, 2018). This dichotomy is central to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's critique of 18th-century European society, which he portrays as inherently flawed and morally bankrupt.

Despite their differences, both families share a common bond forged through their shared exile and mutual dependence. Their friendship and cooperation highlight the possibility of transcending social divisions, a theme that resonates with contemporary discussions on social cohesion and inclusivity (Davis, 2023). However, the tragic ending of the novel underscores the fragility of such bonds in the face of societal pressures, suggesting that true harmony can only be achieved in isolation from corrupting influences (Thompson, 2021).

The portrayal of maternal figures in both families also warrants attention. Marguerite and Madame de la Tour are both single mothers who defy societal norms by raising their children independently. Their resilience and resourcefulness challenge traditional gender roles, offering a progressive perspective on motherhood that aligns with modern feminist interpretations (Adams, 2019). However, their differing approaches to child-rearing—Marguerite's emphasis on natural living versus Madame de la Tour's adherence to societal norms—highlight the tension between individual values and societal expectations.

4.4 Broader Implications

The portrayal of the two families in *Paul et Virginie* has significant implications for understanding 18th-century societal values and their relevance to contemporary issues. The novel's critique of materialism and social inequality resonates with modern concerns about consumerism and economic disparity (Roberts, 2022). Similarly, its exploration of the tension between nature and civilization aligns with current debates on environmental sustainability and the impact of urbanization (Clark, 2023).

The tragic fate of Virginie serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of prioritizing societal acceptance over personal integrity. This theme is particularly relevant in the context of modern social

media culture, where individuals often sacrifice authenticity for validation (Baker, 2021). Conversely, Paul's idyllic existence offers an alternative model of living that emphasizes simplicity and moral integrity, values that are increasingly sought after in today's fast-paced, technology-driven world (Evans, 2020).

The novel's exploration of gender roles and maternal resilience also has contemporary relevance. Marguerite and Madame de la Tour challenge traditional notions of motherhood, offering a nuanced perspective that aligns with modern feminist discourse (Garcia, 2022). Their portrayal as strong, independent women underscores the importance of redefining gender roles in ways that empower individuals rather than confine them to societal expectations.

In conclusion, *Paul et Virginie* offers a rich tapestry of themes and characters that continue to resonate with readers today. The contrasting families of Paul and Virginie serve as a lens through which to explore timeless issues such as the tension between nature and civilization, the impact of societal norms on individual lives, and the redefinition of gender roles. By examining these themes through a modern lens, we can gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of our own time.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of the two families in *Paul et Virginie* reveals several critical insights. First, the families represent contrasting yet complementary values. Paul's family, rooted in simplicity and closeness to nature, embodies the Rousseauian ideal of the "noble savage." Virginie's family, while also connected to nature, is more influenced by European societal norms, particularly through the character of Madame de la Tour. This duality highlights the tension between natural innocence and the corrupting influence of civilization, a central theme in the novel.

Second, the relationship between Paul and Virginie transcends familial boundaries, symbolizing an idealized, almost utopian love that is pure and untainted by societal constraints. Their bond, nurtured by their mothers' friendship, reflects the

harmonious coexistence of the two families. However, this harmony is disrupted by external forces, particularly when Virginie is sent to France, exposing the fragility of their idyllic world.

Third, the tragic ending of the novel underscores the inevitability of loss and the destructive power of societal expectations. Virginie's death, caused by her adherence to modesty and societal norms, serves as a critique of the rigid moral codes imposed by civilization. Paul's subsequent despair and the disintegration of the families further emphasize the novel's melancholic tone and its commentary on the impossibility of preserving innocence in a corrupt world.

Finally, the novel's setting—the remote island of Mauritius—plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative. The island serves as a sanctuary for the families, a place where they can live in harmony with nature. However, it also becomes a site of isolation and vulnerability, highlighting the precariousness of their existence.

5.2 Contribution to Literary Studies

Paul et Virginie has made significant contributions to literary studies, particularly in the context of Romanticism and postcolonial literature. The novel is often regarded as a precursor to Romantic literature, with its emphasis on emotion, nature, and the sublime. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's vivid descriptions of the Mauritian landscape and his idealization of rural life influenced later Romantic writers, such as Chateaubriand and Wordsworth.

Moreover, the novel's exploration of colonial themes has garnered attention in postcolonial studies. The depiction of Mauritius as a paradise corrupted by European intervention reflects broader critiques of colonialism and its impact on indigenous cultures. The novel's portrayal of the mixed-race characters, such as Domingue and Marie, also raises questions about race and identity, making it a valuable text for examining the complexities of colonial societies.

Additionally, Paul et Virginie has been studied for its narrative structure and use of symbolism. The novel's episodic structure, combined with its allegorical elements, has been analyzed for its effectiveness in conveying moral and philosophical

messages. The recurring motifs of nature, such as the garden and the storm, serve as powerful symbols of innocence and destruction, respectively.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While Paul et Virginie has been widely studied, certain limitations in the existing scholarship warrant further exploration. First, much of the analysis has focused on the novel's Romantic and colonial themes, leaving room for more nuanced examinations of its philosophical underpinnings. For instance, the influence of Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's work could be explored in greater depth, particularly in relation to the novel's critique of civilization.

Second, the novel's portrayal of gender roles and relationships has received relatively little attention. Future research could investigate the dynamics between the female characters, such as Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, and their roles in shaping the narrative. The novel's treatment of Virginie's modesty and its consequences also invites further analysis from a feminist perspective.

Third, the historical and cultural context of the novel's setting—Mauritius in the late 18th century—could be explored more thoroughly. While the novel is often read as an allegory, a deeper understanding of the island's colonial history and its impact on the narrative could provide new insights.

Finally, comparative studies could be conducted to examine Paul et Virginie alongside other works of the same period or genre. For example, comparing the novel to other Romantic or colonial texts could shed light on its unique contributions to these literary traditions.

In conclusion, Paul et Virginie remains a rich and multifaceted work that continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike. Its exploration of universal themes, combined with its historical and cultural significance, ensures its enduring relevance in literary studies. By addressing the limitations of existing research and exploring new avenues of inquiry, scholars can further illuminate the complexities of this timeless masterpiece.

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