

The cultural significance of romanticism english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Distinct from the importance of Beccarian ideology upon nineteenth century reform initiatives, we also need to consider the role which changing literary presentations of suicide, largely following the paradigms engendered by Goethe in his 'Sorrows of Young Werther' were to have upon cultural attitudes towards suicide in Britain. Unlike the uptake of Beccarian ideology, which stimulated rationalist appeals for practical change, the influence of new literary works was less direct in advocating change; literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sentimentalised the act, but did not encourage political debate in the manner in which discussion of penal reform did. Nonetheless the emergence of literature which forged images of the 'noble suicide' as opposed to castigated the act carried profound implications for cultural, rather than legal, attitudes towards suicide. Literary historians of the period tend to view the literature of the period which evidenced a nascent sentimentalist view of suicide as representing part of a 'romantic movement'. Yet for the purpose of this essay I am reluctant to use such terms for one can question whether romanticism holds much value as a category of analysis. The key text which was to define a movement towards an empathetic and self orientated connection with those who committed the act of suicide within literature during in the period was Goethe's *The sorrows of Young Werther*, composed in 1774 and subsequently translated and published in Britain in 1787. Lamentation for the suicide as opposed to judgement was beginning to make an appearance prior to Werther's publication, as was the case in Thomas Wharton's poem 'The Suicide' published in 1777, but the immense popularity of Goethe's novel cemented and defined this embryonic trend. Historical consensus MacDonald, who

consistently understates the importance of literature, concedes that in England, as elsewhere, the publication of Werther excited admiration and occasionally the emulation of Romantic writers and youths.[1]The positive manner in which Goethe's novel was received indicates the potential his work had to alter cultural conceptions of suicide among the reading public. In direct response to Goethe, Robert Merry wrote 'Elegy written after having read the Sorrows of Young Werther' in which he claimed that there was a class of person whose emotions were so exquisite that their suicides were excused and could even be pitied by the lord himself. By choosing to focus so extensively on Werther's fluctuating emotional state throughout the novel the suicide is presented as the result of an internal conflict more than the outcome of external factors. One can argue that as a result for readers of Goethe's work the emphasis was no longer on the act, and its supposed iniquity, but the individual committing it, and his reasoning. In an analysis of the available contemporary public reviews of Werther I have discerned an almost universally positive reception of Goethe's emotive prose. The Edinburgh Review of 1816 states that: 'He bestowed much thought upon the subject and became very perfect in the theory though he had some little repugnance for the practice. He has given us a curious dissertation on this pleasing subject.'[2]Goethe is perceived, by this author, as having undertaken something of an analysis of the subject of suicide, and although the word 'curious' is afforded to his work it is difficult to identify any specifically negative connotations attached to it; indeed the phrase 'pleasing subject' suggests a largely positive reception. As individual responses embraced Goethe's vision printed material, aimed at informing

mass readership's opinions, also endorsed this portrayal of the 'romantic suicide'. The conception of Werther as representing something akin to instruction in suicide is also found in another review of 1814 which comments that 'The author of *Stella and the Bayadere* exhibits rather caprice than conscience in condemning his first publication, if it really may be accused of painting suicide in too interesting colours, conveys at the same time to a well constituted understanding, an useful and far more obvious lesson, to repress the first instance of wandering passion and to avoid that intercourse which, however delightful it is to ourselves, is replete with danger and misery.'

[3]The work is seen first and foremost as akin to a morality tale, despite its subject matter. It warns of, misplaced adoration and youthful passions. It is perhaps this public conception of the novel as primarily a moral tale, which helps to explain the divergence between the reception of Werther and Hume's essay. The *Critical Review* of 1783 vehemently rejected Hume on the premise that 'The principles which Mr. Hume attempts to support are mean and malignant, having a tendency to loosen the bands of society, to subvert the foundation of religion and to debate human nature, to extinguish all noble emulation, to cast a gloom over the whole creation and to frustrate our subtlest views and expectations.'

[4]The principal issue here was that Hume was deemed an apologist for suicide and hence his words were viewed as directly antagonistic to the foundations of British culture and order. Conversely, in the eyes of his contemporaries Goethe is no apologist. Indeed in the review of 1814 we have just discussed the reviewer criticised Goethe himself for his own censure of his work. Rather his contribution is an examination of a personal psyche which sought to explain and to

sentimentalise suicide but neither actively supported or condoned the action. Whilst he might have addressed the same subject matter as Hume, the crucial theme in Goethe's work is suffering and an insular focus on the self. In the novel, Werther consistently describes his passions and his suffering as something, which eludes expression, it is his suffering which forms a crucial element in his self-experience. At one point Werther exclaims ' Must it ever be thus, —that the source of our happiness must also be the fountain of our misery?' The full and ardent sentiment which animated my heart with the love of nature, overwhelming me with a torrent of delight, and which brought all paradise before me, has now become an insupportable torment, a demon which perpetually pursues and harasses me.'[5]The hyperbolic language of ' love' and ' paradise' is sharply contrasted with a rapid descent into a wretched despair and Werther's insular and often overwrought examination of his own personal state is a crucial component in Goethe's work and subsequent imitations. Frederick Garber proposes that ' self awareness, a recognition of the demands and complexities of his own private being is essential to the position assumed by the romantic hero'[6]and in his intensive examination of his person Werther conforms to this trend. One can say that it is largely because of his cogent awareness and examination of his own faults and feelings that Werther is able to retain the mantle of ' hero', despite his ' rash' final action. His insular narrative enables the reader to contextualize his action among his emotional state in a way in which previous literature did not allow. Furthermore another element of Goethe's success in depicting a socially acceptable suicide lies in the manner in which Werther rationalized suicide as the ultimate ' logical' outcome to his present

distress. In many ways Werther sees suicide as a final release as he leaves his present 'illness' through his actions. When he laments 'O Wilhelm! The hermit's cell, his sackcloth, and girdle of thorns would be luxury and indulgence compared with what I suffer. Adieu! I see no end to this wretchedness except the grave....'[7]he invokes his misery and suffering as a justification for what is presented as inevitable release. For him, and the reading public, suicide is not necessarily tainted by iniquity, but instead can provide him with the peace which he so strives for. Edgar Landgraf furthers this line of argument when he proposes that suicidal tendencies of eighteenth-century lovers must be re-evaluated as suicides do not represent the ailing or failing of an individual, but rather are the logical consequences of individuals searching for self-validation in love.[8]Garber comments that suicide for the 'Romantics' was never without a sense of victory[9], and although, as previously discussed, Goethe was no apologist for suicide in the vein of Hume and earlier thinkers, it is hard to refute the idea that ultimately Werther's suicide provides him with some sort of freedom. Joyce Walker furthers this idea as she states that through his suicide Werther achieves a lasting impression, a final and formalized self, and a text, which confirms his integrity by interpreting his life as an inevitable process towards his self-annihilation.[10]Thus the Sorrows of young Werther instituted a framework which subsequent writers were to follow and was to be highly influential in encouraging the reading public to consider suicide as a tragic action by a sensitive individual as opposed to a diabolical and deeply sinful action. Through his portrayal of Werther as a sympathetic character, beleaguered by a complex series of emotions and an unattainable object of desire Goethe

successfully minimized the shock of his final action and instead presented it as the long-term culmination of a series of tragic events. Feuerlicht states: “the author’s achievement was quite remarkable. He found reasons for the irrational, lent an aura of greatness to weakness, portrayed somebody as a great sufferer who enjoyed many things, aroused sympathy for someone who could be insensitive and even cruel. His seductive rhetoric encouraged readers to see the suicide less as a separation than as a reunion, less as a sin than as a religious climax.”[11] Nevertheless Goethe’s influence lay beyond his depiction of suicide as he saw his sentiments adopted by an array of authors in the subsequent decades following publication. Werther came to define a new literary conception of suicide and one which prompted a substantial realignment in the literate public’s view of suicide. Sprott comments that Goethe was taken into account by the compilers of female courtesy books.[12] Similarly, MacDonald suggests that the phenomenal success of Goethe’s novel in England, as elsewhere, may have contributed to the growing conviction among the reading public that suicide was pathetic. [13] If we consider the novellas and other works published in periodicals throughout the period the insular focus on the self and suicide instigated by Goethe appear with increasing frequency in the nineteenth century. Sprott states that the weight of what some could term a ‘romantic sensibility’ in the years surrounding Hume’s essay is difficult to assess and consideration of it probably belongs to a study of the nineteenth century,[14] and he is almost certainly correct. Just as Beccarian and Benthamite sentiments were to reach maturity in the 1810s and 1820s in Britain sympathetic portrayals of suicide, borrowing heavily from themes elaborated in Goethe’s work, in the

press and publishing houses appear to have become firmly established only in the early decades of the nineteenth century, although their conception undeniably lies in the earlier century. By the early 1820s a heavily emotive depiction of suicide appeared a common trope in much of the literature, aimed towards women, a great degree of which was serialized in contemporary periodicals. My study of the journal 'La Belle Assemblée' showed that it contained several pieces which either discussed or involved a suicide. In 1821 as a review of a novel commented that 'As the writers of novels have life and death in their hands we feel sorry that the excellent Mr. Byngam and the young artless Emma should be consigned over to the King of terrors; and that a woman so gifted as Lady Maria Carlunaine should be the victim of suicide, especially after the death of Emma when it was too late to afford any prospect of happiness to Frederic...' [15]. The use of the word 'victim' in relation to the suicide of a character is revealing of the attitudes towards suicide now circulating among the literate reading public. The conception of an individual as a 'victim' removes criminality and guilt from their actions whilst the later comment on 'Frederic's' happiness implies that individual circumstances and relations are considered important as opposed to simple actions. Similarly an 1822 exert from a novel entitled Anna and Louise narrates 'One day the company assembled at the Ambassador's were speaking of a suicide that was then the public talk, and they were compassionating the unfortunate young man, that an unhappy passion had been brought to commit such an act; the beloved object was by some severely blamed, while others thought she merited compassion.' [16] Again it is not so much the act of suicide that is the focus, but rather the emotional

state of the individual committing it and the impact which this was to have upon those who remain. The terms 'unfortunate young man', 'unhappy passion' had by this period arguably become entrenched in the literary discourse on suicide. The distressed emotional state of the suicide was invariably described in a manner which utilised these terms along with words such as 'lamentable' and 'melancholy'; language like this was key in eliciting the sympathy of the reading public. These publications never contain any active stimulus for a change in attitudes towards suicide but if we consider the authors choice use of language and the sensibilities which they evoked one can still suggest that such works were still able to inspire a reconception of suicide among members of the reading public. Suicide was never explicitly apologized for but its sympathetic portrayal appears to have softened the previous public condemnation of the act. In the short story *Malvina*, published in *La Belle Assemblée* 1822, it is written: 'But faith once shaken, cannot be made whole again in a moment, and the impetuous nature of Malvina, bewildered with the conflict of opposing doctrines, with a heart lacerated by the contending feelings of betrayed love and bitter remorse, waited either the operation of time and reason, and having written the letter which closed this melancholy tale, terminated her existence by poison. Here let us pause a moment to contemplate the wreck of a being endowed with all that vanity could desire or virtue wish, but lost and perverted by quitting the path of duty, and worse than all, barring all possibility of return by forsaking that of heaven.' [17] Here the traditional Christian censure of suicide is employed, as it is commented that Malvina has forsaken her chance of heaven, but unlike the sermons on suicide

published throughout the period, she is not deemed an 'atheist' or an 'infidel'. Her sense of confusion and betrayal is made potent in this exert and through an elaboration of the protagonist's internal crisis her self-denial of heaven is tragic and not an assertion of theological condemnation.' Malvina' also serves as a very apt example of a trend, which Margaret Higonnet has observed in her discussion of female suicide in literature and in newspaper reports. Higonnet argues that 'the nineteenth century reorientation towards love, passive self surrender and illness seems particularly evident in the depiction of women: their self destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as a loss of self but as a surrender to illness.' [18] This is an interesting perspective and it is certainly correct that an emphatic focus on love and loss consistently appears in sympathetic depictions of suicide in this period, serving to reinforce the ideology of the self in relation to suicide. In fact one can also view 'Malvina' as evidencing another intriguing trend which we witness over the course of the period. The manner in which characters commit suicide in the literature of the period faithfully mirrors the demographic trends occurring in Great Britain 1783-1826. These serialised portrayals of suicide almost invariably depict the female suicide as resorting to poison or drowning to end her life whereas male suicides a generally shown to choose a bullet as the means to end their life, as is the case of Goethe. If we consider the statistical evidence provided by coroner's records in Suffolk 1767-1858 we can see that, despite the fact that male suicides outnumber the female suicides 153 to ninety, in the cases of death by drowning and poison, more women than men died by these means. Conversely no women committed suicide by firearms whereas seven

men did. This data indicates that the distinction employed in literature between male and female suicides reflected what was happening among the inhabitants of Great Britain over the same period. One can question whether literary depictions of suicide helped to reinforce these gendered perceptions of means of committing suicide amongst the populous or whether it simply borrowed from trends already in existence. However, as thought provoking as this question is it requires a more intensive examination and investigation than I am able to provide in this essay . Returning to the ideology of loss, love and suicide which emerged in the literature of the period, it would appear this trend was not exclusive to printed materials and was also present in the theatre as an 1806 review of a play evidences. The reviewer states that 'The subject is fine but it is evident that love is not the sole cause of these disasters: political manoeuvres form the web; and the suicide that concludes the play, is not the sole work of love but of honour and despair. If love alone had reigned in the Count's heart it would have consoled him, and he would have remained blind to every other consideration.' [19] The suicide, as in novels, is contextualised within the framework of love and honour which Goethe arguably both defined and popularised. Higonnet identifies a change in literary perspectives emerging in the nineteenth century, literary presentations of suicide shifted emphasis from function to motive.

[20] Furthermore this focus and identification with the self was, throughout the century, to transcend the realm of fiction and appeared with increasing consistency in newspaper reports of inquests and suicides. MacDonald argues that fashionable society embraced a more tolerant and even sentimental view of suicide that was expressed in tracts, periodicals and

imaginative literature[21], but by the 1820s this statement no longer reflects the reality of late Georgian Britain. Emotive depictions of suicide were, by this point in time, a staple in newspapers and as such perhaps we can argue that such sentimentalisation of the act was no longer the exclusive preserve of 'fashionable' society but was now progressively infiltrating lower orders of society as it came to define the means by which they received reports on local suicides. Houston comments on the importance of using newspaper evidence, stating that despite social historians previous scepticism of their value, newspaper evidence demonstrates how individuals constituted as well as reflected social reality.[22]Houston utilises newspaper evidence in his own analysis of suicide in the early modern period, although he sees reports of suicides in newspapers as representing an attitude among the educated elites that was more akin to judgement than sympathy .[23]Nevertheless, through conducting my own analysis of reports of suicides and inquests found in various newspapers , my own evidence suggests that whilst judgement may have been a consistent feature of reporting in the late eighteenth century by the 1820s sentimentalism had replaced this judgement. We can chart a clear change in the language used in reports of suicides from the 1780s through to the 1820s and indeed beyond. In the middle of the 1780s what is initially interesting to note is the relative absence of reports on suicide in the newspapers. Where one can find such reports the language is often highly functional, with few words devoted to the subjects and an absence of any highly emotive language. A report on the suicide on a labourer in 1783 states ' Yesterday a Labourer belonging to this yard, hung himself in one of the storehouses...He was lately discharged from

his office as watchman...this is thought to have affected him by reducing his narrow income as to have tempted to commit this act of suicide.’[24]The language is largely neutral and where we can infer a judgement on the individual in question it is surely a negative one, for ‘tempted’ brings with it connotations of biblical sin. In another case this judgement is a little more explicit as in a reported attempted suicide of a woman . The Morning Chronicle in 1784 wrote ‘ that M. B. W. in a state of despondency committed the horrid crime of suicide and was restored.’[25]Although the commentary is somewhat brief the criticism of the attempt at suicide is unambiguous and severe. Yet by the opening of the nineteenth century one can discern a clear contrast between late eighteenth-century reporting of suicide and that of the 1800s. Aside from a substantially increased frequency in the reporting of suicide in the period these reports are more considerable and detailed than previous ones. Furthermore of five examples of newspaper reports taken from 1800 across the country three utilise the word ‘ melancholy’ in relation to the suicide whilst the other two select the appellation of ‘ unhappy’. The overall effect of this commentary on the suicide’s emotional state is to echo the changes occurring in literature over the same period; the suicide as an individual and not an act is increasingly emphasised. In fact the connection between newspaper reports and developing trends in literature can be developed as two of the reports choose to detail lost love and honour in great clarity in their narrative. In 1800 it was reported that ‘ John Shermer, Esq., late of Pump Court, in the Temple...whatever influence his mind, his affection and his accomplishments might have had on the fair object who engrossed every emotion of his heart, her parents , guided by their

prudential motives which bespeak a rigid attention to the future felicity of their children, rejected young Shermer's proposals...'[26]. It is difficult not to draw a connection between this commentary on Shermer's obsession over an ultimately unobtainable female and the tales appearing in contemporary literature, which also choose to emphasise similar sentiments. Another report states ' We by no means stand forth as defenders of the wild and enervating principles inculcated by modern novels and romances; but we are not so totally devoid of feeling as not strongly to sympathise in the sensibility of this victim to ' love and duty'[27]. Despite the author's fervent disavowal of ' romantic literature' the final stress placed upon ' love and duty' heavily counters this initial assertion. A criticism of suicide is still present in a few of the reports, as ' rash action' and ' dreadful resolution' are both utilised but judgement of this kind is nowhere as explicit or as prevalent as it was less than twenty years previously. What we are observing is the infiltration of a new emphasis on the individual and feelings coming to define the manner in which suicides are reported to a mass reading public. This is a trend that is strengthened and continued into the 1820s as references to ' unfortunate' and ' unhappy' appear in almost every report. This decade also witnesses a tendency to lead reports of suicides with the phrase ' Lamentable suicide' or ' melancholy suicide' . There is no mere implication that the suicide requires sympathy, it is made explicit before the context of the act of suicide is even explained. Priority also appears to be increasingly devoted to narrating the emotional and familial consequences of the suicide, as is indicated in a Morning Post report of 1822 detailing the suicide of Mr. Slade . Here it is written ' a most affecting scene took place. Mrs S. and her

daughters, in an agony of distraction, threw themselves on the body of their unfortunate husband and father...Imagination cannot picture a more dreadful and soul harrowing catastrophe, both in the nature of its occurrence and in its melancholy consequences.’[28]The repletion of sympathetic and hyperbolic language has clear parallels with that used in the literature we have previously considered . Hence it might , in light of this evidence, be profitable to suggest a modification of Houston’s thesis: the suggestion that newspaper evidence helps to refine one’s understanding of the social constructions placed upon suicide can be revised . Newspaper evidence actually serves to reflect a wider cultural change that was developing, and one which stemmed from the influence of new depictions of suicide in literature. A nascent focus on the self and the sentiments of suicides, which was largely defined by Goethe, came to encourage a sentimentalisation of suicide not simply in literature but in the press. The fact that such ideas and language were incorporated into newspaper reports of suicides by the turn of the century is a comment on the importance and pervasiveness of Goethe and the ideas and themes he embraced. One can argue that these conceptions of the self and suicide came to define not simply presentations of suicide in literature but how real life suicides were to be received by the public. This is not to deny that a hostility towards explicit apologies for suicide was still very much established in British society in the nineteenth century. Many sympathetic depictions of suicide were well received and considered in polite society but a distinction was certainly drawn between the meditative and reflective prioritisation of the self found in the works and a direct promotion or apologies for the act. Internalised reflections on suicide

were acceptable but wider commentary on the subject remained proscribed. A review of an 1819 play described how ‘...several of the sentiments are impious and detestable. The audience reprobated with just indignation one speech in particular where an apology was made for suicide.’[29] However the literature we have analysed never sought to fundamentally counter the entrenched censure of suicide that had its origins in the preceding centuries . Therefore its importance should not be understated because it did not incite a complete reversal in conceptions of the act. It should also be noted that change in attitudes towards suicide would never be instantaneous or complete. Challenging attitudes towards suicide, in the context of a long term hostility towards suicides affirmed by the church and the law throughout much of the early modern period, was a complex process. Taking this into account one can say that it is, in fact, remarkable that this literature was able to inspire the changes that it did. The sentimentalisation of suicide and prioritisation of the motives over the act played a crucial role in palliating attitudes towards suicide. Romanticism was a crucial element in this slow evolution of attitudes. Unlike MacDonald’s thesis of one long term process of change the history of attitudes towards suicide, from the early modern to the modern period, is one of stages of change, some of which operated parallel to each other and all of which contributed to a gradual fundamental alteration in attitudes. We should employ a more complex periodization of changing attitudes towards suicide than that utilised in both MacDonald and Houston’s theses. Reflecting on attitudes towards suicide in this period one needs to appreciate and highlight the distinction between the role Beccarian thinking played in prompting changes in attitudes towards

suicide and that which the emergence of the sympathetic suicide in literature played. Both trends prompted changes but they did not work together to instil a wider change in attitudes towards suicide. Therefore both movements should not be grouped together and considered to work in combination; they worked alongside each other but interaction was, at the most, minimal. The ideas conceived by Beccaria in the mid eighteenth century and finally taken up by penal reformers in the 1810s and 1820s instigated practical changes in the political and legal spheres. Conversely the changes taking place in literary presentations of suicide, which stemmed from Goethe's portrayal of 'romantic suicide' in the late eighteenth century fostered an emotive conception of suicide which was to have wide cultural significance as it was adopted by both fiction and newspapers throughout Britain. It is difficult to identify any examples of convergence between these two trends; they operated parallel to each other and both were crucial movements for change but their impact was largely confined to two distinguishable spheres.

Conclusion

British attitudes towards suicide, or more specifically those of the reading public, underwent a substantial shift in the years 1783-1823. Although this realignment of opinion is not reflected by changing inquest data this does not mean that the early nineteenth century was a period of stasis in relation to attitudes. MacDonald presents a convincing picture of long term change but the time has come not simply to question his hypothesis of 'secularisation' but his comparative neglect of the decades directly preceding and succeeding the turn of the nineteenth century. What my study of

parliamentary debates and the commentary and literature on suicide found in periodicals and newspapers, alongside reports on suicides and inquests, demonstrates is the manner in which Beccarian ideology and the newly sympathetic portrayal of suicide first evoked by Goethe came to form and define contemporary perceptions of suicide. There was no one purposive shift in attitudes towards suicide, rather change occurred in several different spheres of society and former conceptions of suicide as a criminal offence were challenged in two distinct ways. Changing legal attitudes towards suicide, formalised in the Burial of Suicides act of 1823, were part of a more general movement towards penal reform originating in the first decade of the nineteenth century and inspired by the Beccarian ideas of rationality and humanity that emerged in the middle of the previous century. Conversely an appeal to rationality and civility was absent in literary presentations of suicide although the image of the 'romantic suicide' made popular by Goethe in the 1780s was to prove as powerful an stimulus for changing attitudes in the literary sphere as Beccarian ideology was in the legal sphere. The ideas of Beccaria, promoted by notable reformers like Romilly and later Mackintosh, provided a practical decriminalisation of suicide but literary depictions of suicide helped to decriminalise suicide in the minds of the reading public. External changes in attitudes towards suicide were the result of parliamentary debates and reforms whilst a more implicit internal reconception of suicide and those who committed it was instilled among the reading public by depictions of suicide as a tragic and sympathetic act. The eventual widespread dissemination of these ideas among the literate public is reflected by the fact that, ultimately, an emotive connection with the

suicide transcended the realm of fiction and came to define the language employed by journalists in their reports of suicides and inquests in the nineteenth century. The changes that took place in the decades under consideration did not mark a total departure from previous attitudes towards suicide; among the rural illiterate communities we can theorise that the censure of suicide that marked early modern attitudes to the act continued to some degree. However the changes that did take place did represent a substantial movement towards our modern perception of suicide. In the space of the forty years under analysis crucial and long lasting alterations towards the literate British public's conceptions of suicide occurred, as both internalised assumptions were challenged and external legal circumstances were modified.