THE REIMAGINING OF CLASSICAL TROPES: ISOLATION, IDENTITY, AND SOCIETAL JUDGMENT IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE AND HISTORICAL FICTION

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Abstract

This article compares the representation of isolation, identity, and societal judgment in Romantic literature and historical fiction. It uses qualitative close reading to examine Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847), and Walter Scott's Waverley (1814), supported by scholarship on Romantic affect and the historical novel. The analysis argues that these themes are shared across the selected works but are shaped by different narrative emphases. In Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights, isolation is closely associated with emotional alienation, disrupted relationships, and the struggle for recognition. In Waverley, identity and belonging are negotiated within competing political loyalties and the historical divisions surrounding the Jacobite rising of 1745. The article also shows that societal judgment operates through appearance, class, gender expectations, and political affiliation. Rather than treating Romantic literature and historical fiction as mutually exclusive categories, the study highlights their overlap and argues that both genres expose the tension between individual self-understanding and collective norms.

Keywords: Romantic literature; historical fiction; isolation; identity; societal judgment; social norms; individualism; Walter Scott.

Introduction

Literary texts often explore how individuals understand themselves while living within communities that define acceptable behaviour, identity, and belonging.

Isolation, identity, and societal judgment are especially persistent themes because they connect private experience with wider social structures. Although these themes appear in many genres, Romantic literature and historical fiction offer distinctive ways of representing the relationship between the individual and society.

Romantic writing is frequently associated with emotional intensity, imagination, individual consciousness, and dissatisfaction with restrictive conventions. These characteristics do not mean that every Romantic character simply rejects society; rather, Romantic works often investigate the emotional costs of social exclusion and the limits of sympathy. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), for example, asks readers to consider how a being's identity is shaped by the responses of others. Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847), meanwhile, presents identity through family relations, class distinctions, memory, and intense emotional attachment.

Historical fiction places personal experience within a recognisable past. Its characters encounter political conflicts, social hierarchies, and cultural values that influence their choices. Walter Scott's Waverley (1814), often regarded as a foundational historical novel, situates an individual's development within the Jacobite rising of 1745. As Hamnett (2006) explains, the historical novel brings historical materials and imaginative representation into a productive, but sometimes uneasy, relationship.

This article asks how isolation, identity, and societal judgment are represented in selected Romantic and historical novels, and what the comparison reveals about the relationship between individual experience and social context. It argues that the distinction between the genres is one of emphasis rather than absolute separation: Romantic texts foreground emotional and psychological conflict, while historical fiction more visibly connects personal experience to collective events and historically specific structures.

Methodology and Scope

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative method based on close reading. Three primary texts form the corpus: Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë, and Waverley by Walter Scott. The first two are examined as major works of the Romantic period, while Scott's novel is considered in relation to the development of historical fiction. The analysis focuses on characterisation, narrative situation, social relationships, and the historical or cultural settings through which the three themes are developed.

The comparison is interpretive rather than statistical. It does not claim to represent every Romantic work or every form of historical fiction. Instead, the selected novels provide contrasting examples through which recurring literary patterns can be identified. Critical studies by Hatch (2008), Chao (2019), Hamnett (2006), and Sheffer (2020) provide a scholarly framework for the discussion.

Literature Review

Critical discussion of Frankenstein has frequently examined the relationship between sympathy, appearance, and exclusion. Hatch (2008) analyses shame and disgust in the novel, showing how these emotional responses complicate the possibility of sympathy. His argument is useful for understanding why the Creature's attempts to establish relationships repeatedly fail: other characters respond to his appearance before they have an opportunity to understand his experiences or intentions.

Chao (2019) similarly interprets Frankenstein through the failure of sympathetic understanding. His study presents solitude not merely as physical separation but as the result of broken or unavailable emotional connections. This perspective supports a reading of the Creature's isolation as socially produced rather than simply self-chosen.

The historical novel has been studied through its relationship to historical evidence and imaginative reconstruction. Hamnett (2006) traces the emergence of the modern historical novel and emphasises the continuing tension between fact and imagination. This is particularly relevant to Waverley, in which a fictional

protagonist moves through a period of political upheaval. Sheffer (2020), writing about contemporary historical fiction, also demonstrates how the genre can reconsider established accounts of the past by drawing attention to perspectives that dominant historical narratives have marginalised. Although Sheffer's focus is contemporary American fiction, her discussion helps clarify the broader capacity of historical fiction to connect individual stories with collective memory.

Taken together, these studies suggest that isolation, identity, and social judgment should not be treated as purely private matters. They are shaped by the emotional responses, cultural assumptions, and historical structures that surround literary characters. The present article brings these concerns together in a comparative reading of Romantic literature and historical fiction.

Isolation: Emotional Alienation and Historical Division

In Frankenstein, isolation is central to the Creature's development. His early desire for companionship suggests that he does not begin as an enemy of human society. He observes the De Lacey family, learns language, and hopes that knowledge and kindness will allow him to establish a relationship with them. However, his appearance provokes fear and rejection. The repeated contrast between his wish for connection and society's refusal to recognise him turns loneliness into a defining part of his experience. Hatch (2008) explains how shame and disgust interfere with sympathy in the novel; this helps show that the Creature's exclusion is produced through other people's responses as much as through his physical difference.

Isolation in Wuthering Heights is more relational and psychological. The novel's characters are connected through family, property, affection, and resentment, yet these connections do not guarantee understanding or emotional security. Heathcliff's position as an outsider within the Earnshaw household is shaped by uncertain social status and unequal treatment. His later relationships continue to be affected by exclusion, resentment, and the desire to control others.

Brontë therefore presents isolation as something that can exist even when characters live in close proximity to one another.

In Waverley, separation is more clearly connected to historical and political division. Edward Waverley encounters communities whose loyalties are shaped by the conflict surrounding the Jacobite rising. His movement between different social and political groups exposes him to competing versions of belonging. The novel does not reduce these divisions to private emotion; it shows how political allegiance and historical circumstance can place individuals between communities. This reflects the historical novel's capacity to make personal experience part of a larger social landscape (Hamnett, 2006).

The comparison suggests that Romantic writing often explores the inward effects of isolation, while historical fiction more explicitly situates separation within collective conflict. Nevertheless, the distinction is not absolute: Waverley also experiences uncertainty and emotional dislocation, just as Shelley and Brontë connect private suffering to wider social attitudes.

Identity: Self-Understanding, Recognition, and Belonging

Identity in Frankenstein develops through the tension between self-understanding and external recognition. The Creature becomes aware of himself through observation, reading, and comparison with other people. He seeks to understand human behaviour and to locate himself within a social world, but others define him through his appearance. The novel thus raises a central question: can an individual establish a stable identity when society refuses to recognise that individual as worthy of sympathy? Chao (2019) argues that the novel repeatedly stages failed attempts at sympathetic connection, a pattern that makes identity inseparable from the possibility of relationship.

In Wuthering Heights, identity is influenced by family history, class, gender expectations, and emotional attachment. Characters are not presented as isolated psychological units; their sense of self is formed through their relationships and the social positions available to them. Heathcliff's uncertain status, for instance, affects

how others treat him and how he responds to them. Catherine's choices also reveal the pressure created by the relationship between personal desire and social position. Brontë's narrative suggests that identity may be divided when emotional attachment conflicts with social ambition or convention.

Waverley presents identity as something negotiated through historical experience. Edward's encounters with the Hanoverian and Jacobite sides expose him to different political cultures and forms of loyalty. His position is not simply a matter of choosing a private preference; it is shaped by family background, friendship, military involvement, and the consequences of political change. Scott's use of a fictional protagonist within a historical conflict illustrates how individual development can illuminate broader historical transformations.

Across the three novels, identity is neither entirely fixed nor wholly self-created. It emerges through interaction between personal feeling and external structures. Romantic literature tends to emphasise the inner struggle involved in self-definition, whereas historical fiction makes the influence of political and cultural belonging especially visible.

Societal Judgment: Prejudice, Class, and Political Loyalty

Societal judgment is especially visible in Frankenstein, where the Creature is evaluated according to his physical appearance. The reactions of others prevent them from recognising his capacity for language, affection, and moral reflection. Shelley thereby challenges the reliability of judgments based on outward difference. The novel's treatment of sympathy also invites readers to question the responsibility of individuals and communities toward those they regard as unfamiliar or threatening (Hatch, 2008).

In Wuthering Heights, judgment operates through class distinctions, family status, and gendered expectations. The social hierarchy of the novel influences who may marry, inherit, command respect, or move freely between social groups. Characters' decisions are evaluated according to standards that are not equally

applied to everyone. Brontë's portrayal of these pressures reveals how social convention can shape intimate relationships and intensify conflict.

In Waverley, political allegiance becomes a basis for judgment. Characters are interpreted through their association with particular groups and historical causes. The political divisions of the 1745 rising influence trust, loyalty, and social belonging. Scott's historical setting demonstrates that judgment is not merely an individual act: it can be reinforced by institutions, inherited loyalties, and collective memories. Hamnett's (2006) account of the historical novel's engagement with political transformation provides a useful context for this reading.

These novels show that societal judgment can take different forms—appearance-based prejudice, class-based exclusion, gender expectations, or political suspicion. In each case, the individual is measured against standards established by a community. The texts encourage readers to examine who creates these standards, whose interests they serve, and what happens to those who do not fit them.

Comparative Discussion

The comparison identifies three related patterns. First, isolation is represented as a consequence of failed relationships and restricted belonging. In Shelley and Brontë, the emphasis falls on emotional and psychological experience; in Scott, the historical setting foregrounds the effect of political division on personal relationships. Second, identity develops through the interaction between self-perception and external recognition. The Creature's search for acceptance, the socially constrained identities in Wuthering Heights, and Waverley's changing political awareness all demonstrate that identity is shaped in relation to others.

Third, societal judgment is shown to be historically and culturally situated. The basis of judgment differs across the novels, but each text reveals the power of shared norms to define who belongs. These similarities complicate any strict separation between Romantic literature and historical fiction. Indeed, Hamnett (2006) notes that the historical novel emerged in close interaction with Romanticism. Scott's work is therefore not simply an alternative to Romantic

literature; it also demonstrates how Romantic-era writing could use historical settings to examine social and political change.

The genres are best understood as overlapping traditions with different centres of emphasis. Romantic works often make the reader experience the inward consequences of exclusion, while historical fiction can connect those consequences to wider patterns of historical change. Both approaches, however, make the relationship between individual freedom and collective expectations a central literary problem.

Conclusion

This article has examined how isolation, identity, and societal judgment are represented in Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights, and Waverley. The comparison shows that these themes are shared across Romantic literature and historical fiction, although they are developed through different narrative priorities. Shelley and Brontë give particular attention to emotional alienation, personal relationships, and the struggle for recognition. Scott places individual experience within a specific historical conflict, demonstrating how political loyalties and social divisions shape belonging.

The selected novels also reveal that identity is formed through more than individual choice. It is influenced by the responses of others, by class and gender expectations, and by historical circumstances. Societal judgment can exclude individuals on the basis of appearance, social position, or political association, while isolation can emerge both from emotional disconnection and from wider structures of conflict.

The study therefore concludes that Romantic literature and historical fiction should not be treated as entirely separate approaches to human experience. Their shared concern with the individual and society, together with their different methods of representation, explains why these classical tropes remain relevant to literary study. Further research could extend this comparison to women's historical fiction,

postcolonial historical novels, and contemporary reworkings of Romantic characters and themes.

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