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| **British Romanticism: The Historical Novel** |

**Introduction**

Romantic Fiction in 18th and 19th centuries went hand in hand with the development of a different genre of writing, in the form of the historical novel. This was attributed by the fact that Romantics were fascinated by the past. The historical novel is a genre where fiction stories are written by contextualizing historical elements.

**I. Definition of the Historical Novel**

The historical fiction definitionin literature is a story that blends true historical facts with fictionality. People usually agree that literary texts, even if they attempt to represent reality in some form or another, are ultimately products of a writer’s imagination and that at least the characters and their conversations are fictitious. Thus, some of the characters in Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels, for example, are pure inventions although they are situated in authentic historical contexts, and they have fictitious conversations with historical figures who actually existed.

**II. Basic Characteristics of Historical Fiction**

* Historical fiction has a reasonably authentic setting, with plausible details concerning political, social and religious history, clothing, language, etc.
* Historical fiction depicts the values, virtues and prejudices of a historical era accurately, especially where these affect the plot.
* Historical fiction adheres to established history but can also make reasonable changes for the sake of character and plot.

**III. Sir Walter Scott: The Father of the Romantic British Historical Novel**

Walter Scott (1771-1832) created and popularized historical novels. Scott was the first novelist to recreate the past. They are fine pieces of imaginative recreation. His historical novels fall into two major groups. First, those set in the background of Scottish history from *Waverly* to *A Legend of Montrose*. Second, a group which takes up themes from the Middle Ages and Reformation times from *Ivanhoe* to *Talisman*. He is rightly called the father of historical novels. As a historical novelist he is higher than any other novelist.

**1. Ivanhoe (1819): Class struggles in feudal times**

With Ivanhoe, Scott reaches far back into history. The novel is set around 1194, when the Norman Richard the Lionheart, King of England, Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou, returns to England from his various adventures in the Crusades and from prisons in Austria and Germany. The Anglo-Saxon Ivanhoe, a loyal knight in Richard’s army, also appears in England in disguise.

The central historical conflict of the novel is between the Anglo-Saxons of England and the Norman conquerors. The people are largely Anglo-Saxon, the feudal upper class are Norman. Parts of the Anglo-Saxon nobility, deprived of political and material power, still retain some aristocratic privileges and form the ideological and political centre of Anglo-Saxon national resistance to the Normans. Yet, Scott shows how parts of the Anglo-Saxon nobility sink into apathy, while others await the opportunity to reach a compromise with the more moderate sections of the Norman nobility, which Richard the Lionheart represents. Ivanhoe, the title character is a supporter of this compromise. The legendary folk hero Robin Hood, however, is included as the leader of the armed resistance against Norman rule.

Scott proves himself here once again to be a defender of the middle road. The future belongs to Ivanhoe, a knight in the service of the moderate Norman King Richard the Lionheart. His marriage to the Anglo-Saxon Rowena points to this middle ground.

**2. Rob Roy:** **The defeat of clan-based society**

Published in 1817, this novel is, along with Ivanhoe, among Scott’s most famous. Written in 1816, practically 100 years after the events it describes – the first Jacobite uprising of 1715 – the aim of the Jacobite uprisings was to restore the Catholic Stuart dynasty and Scottish independence. At the same time, Scott sketches the Gaelic-speaking Highland Scots as still living in clans, especially in the character of Rob Roy MacGregor. In this character, Scott creates a genuine folk hero with a passionate humanity that lends heroic traits to this clan society. Rob Roy is nevertheless an individualised character, initially in disguise, a constant presence and also a benchmark of heroism in this novel. Not only is he a centre of passion in the novel, his language is deeply poetic. In this way the reader experiences the failure of the rising and the defeat of clan society as a tragic event. It is also important that Scott writes his extensive dialogue scenes in Scots dialect. This establishes a bond between characters and Scottish readers.

**3.** **The Heart of Midlothian: Class and ethnic conflict**

*The Heart of Midlothian*, [novel](https://www.britannica.com/art/novel) of Scottish history by [Sir Walter Scott](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walter-Scott), published in four volumes in 1818. It is often considered to be his finest novel. The Old Tolbooth prison in [Edinburgh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Edinburgh-Scotland) is called “the heart of Midlothian,” Scott unfolds a large social spectrum here, ranging from the urban underworld to the Queen. At the centre is Jeanie Deans, from a rural, puritan background who speaks in Lowland Scots. This young peasant woman is perhaps Scott’s greatest female character. Effie, the sister of Jeanie, is held on charges of having murdered her [illegitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illegitimate) son. Jeanie makes a dangerous journey through outlaw-infested regions to London to seek the queen’s pardon for Effie. Somewhat unusually for a Scott novel, the heroine, Jeanie, is not beautiful, wealthy, or of the upper class. Scott based the plot of The Heart of Midlothian on an actual legal case, and the 1736 [Porteous Riots](https://www.britannica.com/event/Porteous-Riots) provide the background for the novel’s opening chapters. Scott’s hallmark is depicting personal experience as part of history. Readers encounter an outraged people in the Porteous Riots. Scott conveys the genuine conflict between the people and the guards, as well as the bitter hostility of the Scots towards the English state.

**Conclusion**

By interweaving personal fates of people with historical upheavals, Scott’s narrative is never abstract. Ruptures run between generations, between friends and affect them deeply in their personal lives. Scott’s great strength lies in the credible narration of human relationships in the context of their historical age.