

## Romanticism in Poland

Romanticism, a Western phenomenon, began to influence the diverse genres of poetry, drama, and fiction at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reigned not only as a literary ideology, but also as a general cultural sentiment until the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Polish literary tradition shows us that Polish culture is full of paradigms; one such paradox is that of Romanticism, which lasted until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was reborn in the Neo-Romantic movement titled “Young Poland” at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Polish Realism, a.k.a. Positivism, only temporarily stifled Romanticism and was a contrast to Romanticism’s poetry in its prose-heavy canon. That period was prescribed generally as one of rational thought, but it only lasted less than thirty years as it was overtaken by Romanticist beliefs in a resurgence of the movement. Here is the so-called manifesto poem of Polish Romanticism: ["Romanticism" by Adam Mickiewicz](#) In this poem we see the clear sentiment that romantic idealism, however irrational, was to be believed over observable, provable truths.

Some might say that Romantic ideologies in Polish literature and culture still thrive to this day. This is bolstered by the fact that Poland’s literary tradition seems to go out of its way in order to present itself as an enigmatic world tradition. Romantic sentiments may have been expressed in Polish literature of the past, even during rationalistic periods, but the Polish Romanticists did not solely engender the ideology of Romanticism. In spite of the fact that the Polish Romanticists allowed the period to flourish much longer than most other cultures had, literary critic Michał J. Mikoś explains that, “Polish Romanticism was influenced by literary trends from England and Germany (Mikoś 9). With that in mind, we must not look to the super-Romanticists of Poland for a definition of what Romanticism’s main interests and concerns were, but to the movement’s founders in Western Europe.

Romanticism came as an artistic response to a world of political and ideological revolutions and instability. With the memories of the French, American, and Polish Revolutions lingering in the minds of European and American visual artists, writers, musicians, political scientists, and philosophers it would be rather naïve to deny the impact of political happenings on Romanticism (Curran 14). Here in another poem of Mickiewicz’s we can see the ambivalent call to fight for Poland’s autonomy in Adam Mickiewicz in “To a Polish Mother” translated by Michael J. Mikoś,

## To a Polish Mother

O Polish mother! If in your son's eyes  
There ever gleams the genius's greatness,  
If on his childish brow there will arise  
Of the ancient Poles pride and nobleness;

If turning his back on his playmates' crowd,  
He runs to the bard who sings of past deeds,  
If he listens heedfully, his head bowed,  
When they tell him of his forefathers' feats:

O Polish mother! Your son plays the wrong part!  
Kneel before Our Lady of Sorrows  
And look at the sword which pierces Her heart:  
The foe will strike your breast with the same blows.

For though the whole world may in peace flower,  
Though powers, peoples, minds, my join in action,  
Your son is called to fight without splendor  
And to martyrdom... without resurrection.

Soon bid him go to a solitary lair  
To ponder long... on rushes rest his head  
Breathe damp and putrid vapors in the air,  
And with the venomous serpent share his bed.

There he will learn to conceal his anger,  
Keep his thoughts unfathomed, like a deep lake,  
Poison with soft talk, as with putrid vapor,  
Cut a lowly figure like a cold snake.

A child in Nazareth, our Redeemer  
Cared for a small cross on which He saved mankind.  
I would have your child, o Polish mother,  
Play with the toys which he will later find.

Bind tight his hands with chains without delay,  
And have him harnessed to a wheelbarrow,  
So that before the headman's axe he won't pale,  
Nor when he sees the rope let his face glow.

For he will not go like the knights of old  
To plant a victorious cross in Jerusalem,  
Neither like the soldiers in the New World,  
To toll and drench soil with his blood for freedom.

A nameless spy will send him a cartel,  
A perjured court will struggle with him hence;  
A hidden pit will be the field of battle,  
A powerful foe will pass his sentence.

Dry wood of gallows for him who lost his fight  
Will be left behind as monument,  
For all his glory woman's short lament  
And his countrymen's long talks in the night.

Furthermore, we can read how the revolutions in the U.S. and Poland were present in the mind of Romanticist poets such as Cyprian Kamil Norwid. Norwid comments on the injustice of a slain African-American man and expresses hope for freedom in ["To Citizen John Brown."](#)

With anxieties high and the ideas of Hegel, Heine, Burke, and Blake rampant, all kinds of artists began to ignore parts of their rationalistic training of the Enlightenment that preceded Romanticism and came to give way to the intoxicating allure of emotion (McGann). One could even say that despair became fashionable (McGann). With this despair and other emotional displays art began to feel more than it would think. This display of despair varied from messianic beliefs in one's homeland's Christ-like suffering to the despair of unrequited love. One thing was clear: the Romanticists were never sated with what they had. Such greed is best exemplified, or rather criticized as an evil Imperialistic machination, by the Victorian Romanticist commentary of Christina Rossetti's, "Goblin Market" (Armstrong 21). [Read "Goblin Market" here!](#) However, not all countries that embraced Romanticism had the means to be Imperialistic, many, like Poland and The United States of America, were the current or former victims of Imperialism. In spite of differences in dominion many Romanticists arrogantly hailed the cult of the genius, in which of course the artist was regarded as a genius, at times to the extent of hubristic qualities.

It is important to note that Romanticism in England has been divided into two separate sections: the Romantic and the Victorian (Stabler xi). The Romantic being more of a personal emotional affair and the Victorian being a bit of that, but also a critical commentary of and sometimes praise of the Imperialist Britain of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. This can be seen in the disgusting sycophancy of Lord Alfred Tennyson's praise of the Queen's Imperialistic policies in the, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." [Read "The Charge of the Light Brigade" here!](#) A Polish example of this latter-day criticism of the nation can be seen in this contrast by Juliusz Słowacki. This poet had the temerity to criticize Poland's Romanticist frivolity as "the peacock and parrot" of nations that lost its own autonomy in this selection [from "Agamemnon's Tomb."](#) The peacock refers to Polish vanity which can also be observed in the Modernist play "The Wedding" by Stanisław Wyśpiański. The parrot suggests that Poland was too fond of emulating its Western neighbours, namely France, rather than promoting its own culture. Many in Poland's court at the time spoke much better French than Polish.

As for form, the Romantic variant of Romanticism in England, which influenced other culture's manifestations of Romanticism, began with the rebirth of the sonnet (Curran 30). The sonnet is a form of poetry that was able to express the superstitions, writhing emotions, messianic sentiments, and mysticism of Romanticism quite well. The sonnet offered the structure and logical organization of the Enlightenment period, but also gave rise to lyricism—a style in which poets could utilise a variety of rhyming and metrical patterns in order to create a kind of pleasant music of spoken words. With this pleasant music as a tool, Romanticists began addressing themes that were at times frighteningly macabre, yet presented in a whimsical manner, called a Ballade. See Mickiewicz's book *Ballads and Romances*. Other times lyricism aided in evoking folk-mysticism, ghosts and other apparitions, monsters, demons, and over exaggerated, at times melodramatic, emotions fluidly. The fluid nature of the presentation softened the sometimes-ridiculous qualities of Romanticist subject matter and expression; art could now be made out of what was once seen as sentimental kitsch.

As per its emotional ideology, Romanticism swept away and seduced a substantial amount of Western culture. Romantic tendencies, as noted above in regards to Polish culture, have never completely vanished. Certainly they have suffered through the rationalistic period of Realism and the anti-sentimentalist period of Modernism, but still endure in human mentality and will endure so long as the human condition evokes despair.

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For further reading please see Mickiewicz's play "Forefather's Eve" and his novel-in-verse *Master Thaddeus*. Dr. Michael J. Mikoś's *Polish Romantic Literature: An Anthology* is an excellent overview of the period with a great deal of the best poems highlighted.

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