ABSTRACT

RACHEL REBECCA PHILLIPS. The Canonization of Young Adult Literature: Lessons from William Wordsworth in “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (Under the direction of Professor John Morillo.)

For the second edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1802, William Wordsworth wrote a preface which serves as a manifesto wherein he defines and delineates his poetry from what had come before. Wordsworth challenged preconceptions of acceptable art forms in his day and managed to successfully situate himself and other Romantics within the canon of literary tradition. Now, almost two hundred years later, the goals of Wordsworth’s “Preface” resonate with the emergent field of young adult literature which similarly seeks to offer a new genre worthy of literary considerations. After surveying the field of young adult literature and its current challenges, I turn to Wordsworth’s “Preface” and examine the rhetorical defenses he uses in order to establish his poetry as worthy of literary consideration. Since Wordsworth successfully achieved a place of canonical distinction, I evaluate how his revolutionary ideas of literary experimentation, taste, and universality persist in contemporary young adult literature. This study also investigates how the goals and challenges of twenty-first century young adult literature differ from the principles outlined in “The Preface.” The application of Wordsworth’s ideologies to the field of young adult literature reveals that the emergent genre does not solely comprise cheap popular novels but actually includes texts worthy of literary discourse. The study also suggests a shift in the taste of literary fiction that resembles the ideals of Wordsworth and British Romanticism. By connecting patterns in young adult fiction with similar principles in an established figure of the canon, this analysis provides a sound legitimization for critical evaluations of young adult literature and encourages scholarly discussions of young adult fiction as texts worthy of analysis.