

Charlotte Smith: English Novelist and Romantic Poet (1749-1806)

Charlotte Smith, born in 1749, was a writer who was most well known for her romantic sonnets. Indeed, she can perhaps be rightly called the first of the romantic poets, influencing those who followed, including William Wordsworth. Smith wrote her first collection of poetry called *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1783. In 1788 she wrote her first novel “*Emmline*” which was considered successful for the time. Over the next few years she wrote ten more novels which were noted for including much political commentary, including about French revolution.

With her growing fame, she also fought over more rights for women and she was supported by such writing greats of the time as William Cowper. Her second collection of poetry was published in 1793 and “*Beachy Head*” and *Other Poems* followed in 1807. While many of her earlier poems in *Elegiac Sonnets* are often perceived as light fare, two works in *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head* are much more substantial and provide an insight into her complex situation, combining both the personal and the political.

Charlotte Smith as an English novelist and a Romantic poet, prompted a revival of the English sonnet, helped to set conventions for Gothic fiction and wrote political novels of sensibility. She wrote ten novels; three poetry books, four children’s books and other work, but saw herself mainly as a poet. She left her husband and began writing to support her children. Her struggles and vain efforts to gain legal protection as a woman gave themes for her poetry and novels outlined in her prefaces. Her early novels show aesthetic development in the Gothic and sentimentality. Later ones such as *The Old Manor House*, often seen as her best, praised the ideals of the French Revolution.

After separating from her husband, Smith moved to a town near Chichester and decided to write novels, as they would make more money than poetry. Her first novel, *Emmeline* (1788), was a success, selling 1500 copies within months. She wrote nine more in the next ten years: *Ethelind* (1789), *Celestina* (1791), *Desmond* (1792), *The Old Manor House* (1793), *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), *The Banished Man* (1794), *Montalbert* (1795), *Marchmont* (1796), and *The Young Philosopher* (1798).

Smith’s novels include autobiographical characters and events. For example Mr and Mrs Stafford in *Emmeline* are portraits of Charlotte and Benjamin. She suffered sorely throughout her life. Her mother died in childbirth when Charlotte was three. Charlotte’s own first child

died a day after her second child. The prefaces to Smith's novels told the story of her own struggles, including the deaths of several of her children. Smith's prefaces positioned her as both suffering sentimental heroine and a vocal critic of the laws that kept her and her children in poverty. She argued for legal reforms that would grant women more rights through her novels. Her stories showed the legal, economic, and sexual exploitation of women by marriage and property laws. Waning interest left her destitute by 1803. Barely able to hold her pen, she sold her book rights to pay debts and died in 1806. Largely forgotten by mid-19th century, she has since been seen as a major Romantic writer.