***‘Romanticism is almost impossible to define.’ Explore the validity of this statement with reference to AT LEAST TWO writers of the Romantic period.***

This essay will primarily focus on two short poems; Wordsworth’s *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* and Keats’ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. As arguably two of the most recognisable authors of the Romantic period, Wordsworth and Keats present subjective perspectives on fundamental and core elements of literature. From the formal aspects of their works to the underpinning notions of aesthetic beauty; revolutionary contexts and social unrest, Romantic authors present unique takes on their surroundings, emotions and feelings within their works. Placing an underpinning focus on the unique and subjective nature of Romantic works may well lead to one of the core difficulties in defining the movement – definitions inherently remove notions of uniqueness and individuality through creating inherent groups and categories.

To begin, it may be necessary to posit a potential definition of ‘*Romanticism’* as it stands prior to investigation. Initial thoughts of this manner may include aspects of aesthetic appreciation towards element of a landscape; or indeed of natural beauty in general and other similar notions of aestheticism. However, Aestheticism is a literary movement all of its own, and could not exist as such if the earlier Romantics were purely concerned with aesthetic interpretation. Paul Kaufman’s 1925 piece *Defining Romanticism: A Survey and A Program[[1]](#footnote-1)* presents issues concerning the definition of Romanticism, denoting several conflicting and contrasting definitions of the time. Kaufman suggests that Romanticism is not simply a ‘conciliation of life and poetry’, while simultaneously addressing the notion that individual or unique formal choices are present within Romantic texts. In addition, Kaufman brings to light the notion that Romantic works ‘draw from life’, using authors such as Defoe and Wordsworth as key examples. Kaufman’s article presents several definitions for Romanticism while suggesting that the terminology is flawed due to the movement itself constantly expanding and finding Romantic sentiments within other texts. These issues, identified as early as 1925, are seemingly still applicable to Romantic texts and to the period in general. With this being said, Kaufman seemingly agrees that Romanticism delves into issues far deeper than simple aesthetic concerns for landscapes and nature. As such, a point of departure could be made from the core focus on aesthetics to aspects of potential conflict and strife within the notable works of the period. Conflict, revolution and general unrest are seemingly synonymous within the literature of the Romantic Period. Many readings of texts denote aspects of the general social unrest of the world. Aspects of unrest seemingly permeates the works of Wordsworth and Keats, particularly within poems such as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*.

The primary focus of Wordsworth’s *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge[[2]](#footnote-2)2* is placed upon presenting an image of the London cityscape, exploring the author’s active participation in his perception of his surroundings. *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* presents an egotistical perspective of a benign or everyday occurrence, observing a landscape at a total standstill. The poet actively constructs aspects of his perception, referring to his participation in viewing the city and its aesthetic beauties in the first person alongside an evocative discussion of his emotions and ‘feel[ings]’. He describes the ‘beauty of the morning’, the ‘bright and glittering’ cityscape and the ‘splendour’ of the sun illuminating the entire world before him. Wordsworth personifies London and its beauty, proclaiming that the city wears the beauty of the morning like a ‘garment’. He compares the skyline to more natural occurrences, claiming that the sun does not coat ‘valley, rock or hill’ in the same splendour as it does London. Wordsworth’s depiction of London is not only beautiful, but iconic to a degree. It is seemingly undeniable that he holds an appreciation for the aesthetics of the city at large. However, Wordsworth presents a snapshot of a single second in time in his description. He understands that the city will change with time, and will thereby lose its beauty. Inherently alluding to the notion that beauty is fleeting and may be replaced with other, less desirable facets of perception. Keats’ *La Belle Dame Sans Merci[[3]](#footnote-3)3* presents a parallel to the presentation of time as fleeting through the use of a gap within the narrative structure of the poem. Acting as a cautionary tale concerning aspects of aesthetic beauty and perception at face value In line with other works by Keats, such as *Lamia*, La Belle Dame presents a beautiful female figure who acts as a corrupting influence over an otherwise honourable man, utilising mysterious powers in order to keep him in ‘thrall’. The outward beauty of the Dame acts as a method through which to lure and ensnare weak minded men. The ‘Belle Dame’ is, by definition alone, a beautiful woman who is also without mercy. It may also be notable that Keats utilises French as the sole indicator of the origin of the otherwise nameless figure, directly coinciding with the revolutionary context of French society. In a time of revolution, weak men are drawn into action by Romantic ideals but are then left in a bewildered state following events which they do not fully understand. This effect is seemingly achieved through the use of mysticism – the Dame is referred to as a ‘faery’s child’ who sings a ‘faery’s song’, she is ostensibly linked to nature, living in an ‘elfin grot’ and being depicted with flowers in her hair. Linking nature and beauty is, at its core, a fundamental aspect of the Romantic genre. Yet, Keats presents the Dame with a degree of mystery – perhaps suggesting that people may not truly be able to comprehend the underlying complexities of nature.

It may well be notable that aesthetic beauty and aspects of perception are not the sole concerns of many Romantic texts – readers are often treated to texts wherein critiques pertaining to political and ideological stagnation run rampant. Indeed, many texts of the period explicitly refer to issues concerning temporal and spatial dissonances as underpinning themes. London, to Wordsworth, is beautiful in its silence and stillness as he knows that the two are merely temporary states of being. He understands and accepts that the city will return to its typical bustling existence, with the ‘mighty heart’ of the city preparing itself to beat once again within the climactic line of the poem. Similarly, Keats employs the notions of stillness and time within his work ‘*La Belle Dame Sans Merci’* in which readers are immediately greeted by a contradictory account of the protagonist figure within the poem. The ‘knight-at-arms’ is ‘alone and palely loitering’ at the side of a lake where ‘no birds sing’. Immediately, these descriptions raise a feeling comparable to unease within readers – the knight is ‘at arms’, a term which typically denotes activity or at least the willingness to become active at some point. Yet the knight is an extraordinarily passive figure. This uneasy feeling is only exacerbated through the descriptions of ‘withered’ sage, the description of the knight as ‘pale’ and he eerie silences presented within the repeated epithet ‘no birds sing’. Keats seemingly presents a figure whose plight is not immediately accessible to readers, instead providing context for the disparities in nature through a recounted tale. There is no explicit action or movement within the narrative of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, thereby forcing readers into a reading substantiated by an unreliable narrator. As such, both authors provide accounts denoting stillness and stagnation which could be attributed to the political and social uneasiness of the time. The knight-at-arms could readily be observed as the archetypal bystander in a revolutionary time, unable to fully comprehend the events that have transpired and lead him to his ‘loitering’ existence, while Wordsworth’s view of London at a complete standstill can readily be seen as being in stark contrast to the tumultuous existence of the revolutions of the period. Periods of rest and solitude are seemingly fleeting within the works of the Romantic Period, reflecting the lack of stability within society at the time.

Alternatively, Romantic works such as *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* could readily be observed as projections of loneliness. Nancy Yousef’s *Romanticism, Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Silence[[4]](#footnote-4)4* posits that Romantic works hold an intrinsic crisis in consolidating feelings of isolation with the desire for ‘reciprocation’. Both Wordsworth and Keats present isolated figures attempting to come to terms with aspects of their surroundings – the knight-at-arms is ‘alone’ having been abandoned by La Belle Dame. Similarly, Wordsworth’s ego inherently separates him from other people through emphasising the inherent uniqueness of his perspective. However, Yousef suggests that Romantic texts inherently present an *‘unintrusive yet comforting presence of the other is figured as – and can be mistaken for – the dissolution of a companionate fellow subjectivity into a mere object, abstraction, environment’* thereby indicating that the Romantic author places human qualities and sensibilities upon the object of their work. The object of a Romantic text is as much a part of the composition of the text itself as the author. Additionally, Yousef discusses readers and authors engaging in a ‘dialectical dynamic’ when addressing Romantic texts. Given that Yousef is primarily concerned with isolation and silence, engaging with a Romantic text in a ‘dialectical’ manner suggests that critical and empathic engagement with a text is expected on an authorial level. Readers are expected to empathise with elements of a Romantic text, but are incapable of truly comprehending the intentions and feelings of the author.

Keats and Wordsworth present a point of contention in defining Romanticism in literature. While there are undoubtedly similarities that can be drawn between notable authors of the period, each of their works stands as its own variation on the Romantic ideology – from Keats’ apparent warnings concerning a primary focus on aesthetic beauty to Wordsworth’s presentation of perceiving beauty as an active and intellectually involved process, it is clear that individuality and subjectivity is prominent within the literature of the Romantic Period. As such, finding and constructing an ostensible definition for Romanticism is highly problematized due to the subjective nature of romantic issues. Keats would view the London cityscape from Westminster bridge in an entirely different manner to Wordsworth, finding his sense of aesthetic beauty in differing aspects of the scene. While characteristics may be shared within notable Romantic works, it is their subjective impression and unique stylistic choices that allows them to be so highly regarded. Furthermore, Michele Hanoosh’s *Romanticism: Art, Literature and History[[5]](#footnote-5)5* suggests that ‘*The means of Romantic representation, concentrated in sensuality and powerful feeling – extravagance, exaggeration, materiality, an evocative language, colourism in painting – were consistent with the idea that the representation was a creation in itself, not a derivative image of a superior original.’*, inferring that Romantic works are fundamentally grounded in aspects of feelings and emotions; aspects of human nature which are omnipresent, yet fundamentally difficult to express or fully comprehend without empathic thought. The ability to present the benign or everyday as unique or extravagant is, in itself, a driving factor in appreciating the beauty within the world. Readers are incapable of perceiving the world in exactly the same manner as Wordsworth, as he expresses within *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge.* Instead, Wordsworth’s egocentric writing style presents his words as being equally as beautiful as the scene he seeks to describe, yet fundamentally insufficient in articulating the true, underlying complexities of its beauty. Similarly, Keats’ use of oblivious male narrators blinded by beauty – such as the knight-at-arms presents aspects of the Romantic as fundamentally indescribable. Readers are never given a true description of the Belle Dame, instead being allowed to picture her beauty through allusion and mystery. The Romantic is impossible to fully define because it is, by definition, wholly unique and subjective. The perspective of the writer differs from the object of their description, and the interpretation of the reader differs from the intention of the writer.

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1. Kaufman, Paul. “Defining Romanticism: A Survey and a Program.” *Modern Language Notes* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Wordsworth, William. Composed Upon Westminster Bridge [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Keats, John. La Belle Dame Sans Merci [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Nancy Yousef. Romanticism, Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Silence, *European Romantic Review* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 Hannoosh, Michèle. "Romanticism: Art, Literature, and History." *The Cambridge History of French Literature* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)