

Talking to Peasants: Language, Place and Class in British Fiction 1800-1836

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The impact of Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800) on later English poetry has been well explored and contested during the 200 years since its publication. In this paper I will direct my attention to the relationship between the *Preface* and the representation of the language of the labouring poor in novels written in its immediate aftermath.

The Dialect in British Fiction 1800-1836 project (<http://www.dialectfiction.org>) has surveyed a representative sample of novels published during these years. Overall, the story it tells is of a gradual rise in the quantity of dialect representation, as well as a shift in function from stereotyping to greater realism, and from a small number of dialects to a wider range. In this paper I focus on the place of the English rural poor in these novels. I observe that while between 1800 and 1815, well-born young ladies in novels did not talk to the local peasantry, from around 1815 a small but significant minority of heroines started to step outside the doors of their country houses and engage with the people living on their doorstep. I explore a number of scenes from these novels, demonstrating that while the outcomes of such encounters varied, many of them express concerns with language, identity and lived experience. I argue that the issues being played out at these moments are part of a wider shift, from understanding dialect speakers only as objects of aesthetic appreciation or benevolent improvement, towards understanding them as subjects who exist and have agency within their own communities.