

The symbolic impact of natural imagery used in the poem “Der Erlkönig” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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The images of nature work as a recurring motif in Goethe’s poem “Der Erlkönig”, where it becomes a characteristic feature of Romanticism as well. Similar to most romantic poets, Goethe also appreciated the beautiful aspects of nature as well as nature’s hazardous countenance. This poem’s plot develops as a conversation between the father, child and the Elf king, where the child hallucinates the darker features of nature and he fantasizes them to be the Elf king and his daughters: presence of the supernatural creatures, which is a feature associated with Romanticism. Hence, the objective of this paper is to find the symbolic impact in the use of images of nature on the development of the poem’s main plot and the implication of the thematic aspects. By engaging in a textual analysis of the original German poem “Der Erlkönig”, it was found that the imagery of nature has been employed to develop the dramatic plot and that the particular imagery are also connected allegorically to the major theme: destruction of innocence by the cruelty of the human world. The analysis shows that Goethe has employed images of nature to characterize the ominous behavior and sinister traits of the Elf King in contradiction to the innocence of the child and the maturity of his father. The conflict begins with the intrusions of the Elf king which make the child afraid while on the other hand, they are realistically explained by the father by connecting them with natural elements. The findings of this research illustrate the presence of Romanticism within the poem and encourage the academics to study the depiction of nature in German poetry.

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