
Oscillating between Extremes: A Study on the Images of Sanity and Hallucinations in Goethe's Erlkönig

Dulanka Sachinthani Lansakara

Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education

Abstract

The poem "Erlkönig" written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe exhibits his originality and eccentric style in producing literary works incorporating human life, psychological aspects and mythological beliefs. The plot develops as a dialogue between a father, his child and the Erlkönig (Alder King), a malicious spirit who carries children towards death. Based on the poem and its dramatic plot, the study focused on analyzing the depiction of sane and unstable psychological statuses of mortal beings. Goethe's involvement with natural images, psychological portrayals, and mythological representations were addressed throughout the textual analysis. The findings reveal that the images of sanity and hallucination are particularly depicted by involving human characters in the poem, while the non-human becomes the basis of the conflict. The poet equally involves the child as an individual subject to demonstrate the oscillation between extremes, where the child shifts his mentality from sanity to hallucination. Goethe similarly refers to rationality, maturity and mythology in the portrayal of the two psychological extremes. Rationality and maturity are implicated through the father in contrast to the child's continuous reference to the mythological creature. The engagement of natural elements and mythological allusions are juxtaposed in depicting sanity and mental disparity. Moreover, the ambiguous denouement of the poem's plot presents a vagueness to the reader in deciding whether the child has died because of a physical disorder or of the continuous sinister intrusions of the Erlkönig, laying the foundation for an oscillation in the reader's mind as well: the oscillation between reality and mythology.

Keywords: *Erlkönig, Depiction, German poetry, Goethe, Sanity and hallucination*

Corresponding Author: dulanka@sliate.ac.lk