

# Romantic exaggeration: symbolism of nature in german realism

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Nature is an important feature of poetic realism, an offshoot of German realism in the late 19th century. Gottfried Keller, the author of the novel *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* (Romeo and Juliet in the Village), is a Swiss writer who belongs to this concept of poetic realism. This style tries to portray the inner truth through romantic exaggeration. In the sense of poetic realism, this novella has an immense set of emblematic natural phenomena. Throughout the course of the narrative, perceptions of nature such as the overgrown field, stones, the river, the weather, and the stars are described in detail; drawing the reader to notice connections and greater symbolisms that are pertinent to Keller's critique on 19th century society. The natural events are omnipresent and the uncertainty of nature reflects the powerlessness of the characters in regards to their destiny.

The novel *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* alludes to Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and echoes the climaxes of the plot. Instead of an Italian city, however, a village in Switzerland serves as the backdrop of the tragic love story. The narrative takes place in the fictitious town of Seldwyla and incorporates the farmers Marti and Manz and their respective children Sali and Vrenchen. At the beginning of the novella, there is an overgrown piece of land between the two farmers' fields. It is assumed that the homeless *schwarze Geiger* (Black Violinist) is the grandson of the deceased owner of the field, thusly the piece of land in fact belongs to him. The Black Violinist, however, has neither a certificate of baptism nor a citizenship certificate to prove his inheritance, and consequently the field is auctioned (Keller 38). Neither Marti nor Manz regard the Black Violinist as the true owner and, in a twist of unlucky fate, the two farmers become the only bidders on this field.

When Manz wins the bid and consequently the land, Marti tries to keep the corner of the overgrown field to which he had been tending. In this way the field sparks the conflict between the farmers. The family feud has begun; Marti and Manz go to court and their children are forbidden to interact.

Symbolism and foreshadowing of this feud can be found in the initial scene, wherein the golden cornfield reflects the friendly relationship between the farmers. In pleasant silence, Marti and Manz plow their respective fields however in the opposite direction; a reflection of their disagreement and an inkling of the feud to come (4). In addition, the field serves as the meeting place for the lost lovers, Sali and Vrenchen. The two love birds have hardly a moment for themselves in this tarnished field before the Black Violinist arrives and recognizes them as the children of the farmers who stole his land.

Very close to the theme of the field – and another, important element of nature – is the stone. Certainly, the fieldstones were involved in the dispute between Marti and Manz, given the turmoil that ensued after Manz threw stones into the disputed patch of land. In addition, the stone symbolizes the sufferings of the young love couple with Keller's phrase "and their minds became as heavy as stones," after they were reprimanded by the Black Violinist for the wrongdoings of their fathers (38). In another incident, which happens shortly after the encounter with the Black Violinist, Sali heaves a stone at Marti; resulting in Marti's mental handicap and destroying the possibility of marriage between Sali and Vrenchen (43).

In the course of the story, the river is only mentioned in passing.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps one of the most important aspects of nature in the novel. Both the river and the weather reflect the mood of the storyline and predict the conflicts ahead. Before the feud, it is a “sunny September morning” and the beautiful river flows gently past Seldwyla (3). Promptly before Marti and Manz argue on the bridge, the sky is full of thunderclouds and dark water rushes beneath them in the deep and raging stream (27). This river is a symbolic representation of misery, given that serves as the lowly fishing location for the poor people of the village. As Sali and Vrenchen watch each other from across the bridge, the “shining blue river” returns and the sky opens up with heavenly glory (36). In addition, the river serves as a symbol of death, as Sali and Vrenchen commit suicide together on a raft and it is the last symbol with which the narrative closes.

Not only is the sky often described, but also the stars are mentioned several times as symbolic nature references. The many mentions of stars in this novel play off of the Shakespearean phrase “star-crossed lovers.” At the beginning of the novella, the plowing farmers are described as “two sinking stars” and later in the text, Sali and Vrenchen are compared as being a constellation together (4). The symbol of the star has a negative meaning within the novella as well, as the Black Violinist is referred to as a black star for the way that he looks and manner which he is an outsider (36).

From the golden cornfield in the initial scene to the fluctuating moods of the river throughout the novella, Keller describes nature in *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* with figurative intentions. He uses the descriptions of the sky to

indicate the ruin of the two families and he shapes the weather in imitation of the conflicts between the farmers. Nature proves to be an omnipotent authority with which human beings are indubitably engulfed. Within the various aspects of nature, from fields to rivers, nature provides both food to preserve life as well as an outlet from which to escape life. Through the revelation of this inner truth regarding nature, Gottfried Keller embraces the importance of poetic realism.

## **Works Cited**

Keller, Gottfried. *Romeo Und Julia Auf Dem Dorfe*: Novelle. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010. Print.