

## Heinrich Heine's *Die Lorelei*: A Roland Barthes' Semiotic Perspective

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This article explores *Die Lorelei* by Heinrich Heine from the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and focuses on the poem as a system of signs, analysed through Barthes' stages of signification, including denotative meaning, mythological signification, and the naturalization of ideology. The aims of the article are to describe (1) the identification of signs at the denotative level, (2) mythological analysis, and (3) how the process of naturalization operates in Heinrich Heine's poem *Die Lorelei*. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using this approach.

The findings indicate that *Die Lorelei* constructs meaning through a mechanism of double signification, as theorized by Barthes. Signs at the primary level function as signifiers within the mythological system, which subsequently naturalizes particular meanings through poetic narrative and symbolism. Therefore, the text does not merely represent myth, but actively operates myth as an ideological system of meaning.

**Keywords:** double signification, poetic narrative, naturalization, myth

### 1. Introduction

Poetry is a literary form that functions not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a system of signs through which social, cultural, and ideological meanings are produced and reproduced (Chandler, 2017; Eagleton, 2007). Its significance extends beyond direct representation, operating through complex processes of signification (Jakobson, 1971; Lotman, 1977, 2012; Riffaterre, 1978). Through figurative language, symbols, and poetic imagery, poetry frames reality and shapes how readers perceive and interpret the world (Culler, 2015).

Heinrich Heine's *Die Lorelei* (1827) provides a particularly compelling example of this process. The figure of *Lorelei*, portrayed as an enchanting yet destructive woman, has long been interpreted as an expression of Romantic emotion. The enduring appeal of this figure cannot be separated from the literary vision of Heinrich Heine, whose poetic artistry transformed a regional legend into one of the most famous works of German Romanticism.

Heinrich Heine is widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in nineteenth-century German literature, whose poetry combines emotional intensity with a subtle critique of Romantic ideals (Robertson, 2009; Sammons, 1979). Among his best-known works, *Die Lorelei*, first published in *Buch der Lieder* in 1827, occupies a prominent place in both German literary history and popular culture. The poem tells the story of a mysterious maiden whose beauty and song captivate a boatman, ultimately leading him to destruction on the Rhine. Its enduring popularity, reinforced by numerous musical adaptations and reinterpretations, demonstrates its lasting cultural significance (Applegate, 1990).

The significance of *Die Lorelei* becomes even clearer when viewed within its historical context. Written at the height of German Romanticism, the poem reflects the period's fascination with folklore, landscape, emotion, and national identity (Leerssen, 2006; Safranski, 2014). The Rhine serves not only as a geographical setting but also as a powerful cultural symbol, closely associated with memory, belonging, and the German national imagination (Blackbourn, 2006). In this context, *Lorelei* transcends her role as a narrative character and emerges as a mythic figure that has shaped German cultural memory for nearly two centuries.

Existing scholarship on *Die Lorelei* has primarily focused on its historical, thematic, and stylistic dimensions, particularly its connections to German Romanticism, Rhine folklore, and

Heine's lyrical artistry (Perraudin, 1989; Robertson, 2009; Sammons, 1979). These studies have significantly enriched our understanding of the poem's place within the German literary canon. However, less attention has been given to the ways in which the poem constructs and sustains its cultural significance through its system of signs. Beneath its seemingly simple narrative lies a complex interplay of beauty, danger, femininity, and fatality. A closer analytical approach is therefore needed to uncover how these meanings are constructed and naturalized within the text. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize historical and stylistic aspects, the present study focuses on how the poem produces ideological meaning through an analysis based on Barthesian semiotics.

*Die Lorelei* is particularly suitable for analysis through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, as the poem clearly demonstrates the relationship between linguistic signs, cultural symbols, and meanings that appear natural within its poetic narrative. A Barthesian perspective allows the poem to be examined not merely as a romantic lyric, but also as a cultural text that produces broader ideological meanings through its symbolic structures. For this reason, Barthes' semiotic approach provides an appropriate framework for exploring how meaning operates beneath the poem's aesthetic surface.

Within this context, the article is both relevant and significant, as it positions *Die Lorelei* as a cultural text that implicitly naturalizes particular ideologies through its narrative and symbolic structures. At the same time, it demonstrates how Romantic poetry operates as a medium for the reproduction of ideological meanings that often escape conventional literary readings. Accordingly, this study aims to examine (1) the identification of signs at the denotative level, (2) mythological analysis, and (3) how the process of naturalization operates in Heinrich Heine's poem *Die Lorelei*.

To address these objectives, the article is organized into several sections. The next section introduces Roland Barthes' semiotics of myth as the theoretical framework of the study. This is followed by the research methodology and analytical approach applied to the poem. The discussion section examines *Die Lorelei* stanza by stanza through the denotative, mythological, and naturalization levels of Barthesian semiotics, followed by a synthesis of the overall findings. The final section presents the conclusion of the study.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Major traditions in semiotics

As broadly known, semiotics is not a single unified theory, but a broad field consisting of several major traditions, each offering a different understanding of signs and meaning-making processes. The two most influential foundational paradigms are commonly associated with Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, respectively. In *Saussurean semiotics*, the sign is understood as a dyadic relation between the signifier and the signified. Meaning emerges through the structural relations among signs within a system; therefore, signification is viewed as relatively stable and shaped by social convention and linguistic structure (Saussure, 2011). In contrast, *Peircean semiotics* conceptualizes the sign as a triadic relation involving the representamen, object, and interpretant. From this perspective, signification is understood as an open and dynamic process of semiosis in which meaning is continuously produced through interpretation (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Beyond these two classical traditions, *social semiotics* has emerged as a third major orientation. Drawing on M. A. K. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and later developed further by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, social semiotics shifts attention from sign systems to the ways signs are selected, designed, and interpreted within concrete social contexts (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In this approach, signs are understood not as fixed units, but as

semiotic resources whose meanings are shaped by communicative purposes, social practices, and power relations.

Understanding these differences is important because the concept of *the sign* and the process of *signification* are defined differently across semiotic traditions. Accordingly, this study consciously adopts the structuralist tradition rooted in Saussurean thought. This orientation is particularly appropriate because *Die Lorelei* is examined as a literary text whose meanings are constructed through structured relations among linguistic signs, symbols, and poetic elements. Within this structuralist line of thought, Roland Barthes provides a highly relevant analytical framework. By extending Saussure's model into the realm of cultural texts, Barthes demonstrates how denotative signs can develop into myths that naturalize ideology (Barthes, 1972). His concepts of *denotation*, *second-order signification*, and *myth* are therefore especially suitable for examining how *Die Lorelei* constructs and naturalizes cultural meanings related to femininity, desire, and destruction. The relevant principles of Barthes' semiotics are discussed in the following section.

## 2.2. Elements of Roland Barthes' semiotics

Within the structuralist tradition of semiotics, Roland Barthes extended Saussure's linguistic model to the analysis of cultural texts. For Barthes, literary works, myths, advertisements, and other cultural artifacts function as sign systems that communicate not only denotative meanings but also broader ideological meanings (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017; Eco, 1976). His approach is particularly valuable for literary analysis because it helps reveal how texts generate cultural significance beyond their literal surface.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1957) introduces the concept of *myth* as a second-order semiological system. According to Barthes, the primary function of myth is to transform historically and socially constructed meanings into forms that appear natural, self-evident, and beyond question (Barthes, 1972). Myth does not eliminate denotative meaning; rather, it shifts the reader's attention away from the constructed nature of meaning toward its acceptance as something "natural" and taken for granted.

According to the theory, at the first level, signs function denotatively, producing relatively stable and literal meanings. These signs then function as signifiers within a higher-level semiotic system, namely myth. At the mythological level, meaning is no longer neutral but becomes saturated with values, ideology, and specific cultural interests. The second stage of analysis, therefore, involves mythological reading as a second-order sign system. The third relevant concept in Barthes' theory concerns the naturalization of ideology. On this account, ideology is not presented explicitly but is concealed through images, narratives, and symbols that are received as cultural common sense. Through this process, myth transforms historically constructed meanings into representations that appear universal, timeless, and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972).

This three-level process of signification provides the main analytical framework for the present study. At the denotative level, the analysis focuses on the literal meaning of signs within the poem. At the mythological level, the study examines how these signs generate broader cultural and ideological meanings. Finally, at the level of naturalization, the analysis explores how such ideological meanings are presented as natural and self-evident within the poetic narrative.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Stages of Barthesian semiotic analysis in *Die Lorelei*

As pointed out, the study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The data consisted of the poem *Die Lorelei* (1827; 1982) by Heinrich Heine, which was examined as a cultural text characterized by layered systems of meaning (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017). The analysis was conducted through three stages. First, linguistic signs at the denotative level were identified, including figures, poetic imagery, actions, and settings. Second, these signs were examined at the mythological level as a second-order sign system in order to reveal ideological meanings, particularly those related to the construction of femininity and gender relations (Barthes, 1972). Third, the analysis focused on the process of naturalization, namely how ideological meanings are presented as natural and self-evident through narrative structures, symbols, and mythological conventions.

#### 3.2. Rationale for text selection

The poem *Die Lorelei* by Heinrich Heine was selected because of its canonical status in German literature, its enduring cultural influence, and its rich symbolic representation of femininity, desire, and destruction, all of which make it particularly suitable for Barthesian semiotic analysis. As mentioned in the Introduction, the poem occupies a central position in German literary tradition and continues to exist within the broader cultural imagination. It is recognized not only as a lyrical work, but also as a cultural representation of the Rhine myth that has been reproduced and circulated through various media, including musical adaptations and educational contexts (Applegate, 1990; Blackburn, 2006).

Furthermore, the apparent simplicity of the poem's narrative creates a productive space for semiotic inquiry. Elements such as the figure of the *Lorelei*, the Rhine River, and the fatal encounter function as signs that carry layered cultural meanings. This makes the poem particularly relevant for analysis within a Barthesian semiotic framework, which seeks to uncover multiple levels of signification beyond the surface narrative (Allen, 2003; Barthes, 1972).

#### 3.3. Text presentation and translation

For the purposes of analysis, the poem is presented in a bilingual table (see Table 1) containing both the original German text and its English translation. This presentation is intended to maintain analytical transparency while also helping international readers follow the interpretations proposed in the study in Section 4.

**Table 1.** German Text and English Translation of *Die Lorelei*. The original German text is presented alongside the authors' literal English translation for analytical purposes and transparency. Line numbering is provided to facilitate precise textual reference throughout the semiotic analysis.

Stanza	German Text (Original)	English Translation
(1)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten,</i></li> <li>2. <i>Dass ich so traurig bin;</i></li> <li>3. <i>Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,</i></li> <li>4. <i>Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I do not know what it means</li> <li>2. That I am so sorrowful;</li> <li>3. A tale from ancient times</li> <li>4. Will not leave my mind.</li> </ol>
(2)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Die Luft ist kühl und es dunkelt,</i></li> <li>2. <i>Und ruhig fließt der Rhein;</i></li> <li>3. <i>Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt</i></li> <li>4. <i>Im Abendsonnenschein.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The air is cool and darkness falls,</li> <li>2. And quietly the Rhine flows;</li> <li>3. The mountain peak glitters</li> <li>4. In the evening sunlight.</li> </ol>
(3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet</i></li> <li>2. <i>Dort oben wunderbar,</i></li> <li>3. <i>Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet,</i></li> <li>4. <i>Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The most beautiful maiden sits</li> <li>2. Up there in wonder,</li> <li>3. Her golden jewels sparkle,</li> <li>4. She combs her golden hair.</li> </ol>
(4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kämme,</i></li> <li>2. <i>Und singt ein Lied dabei;</i></li> <li>3. <i>Das hat eine wundersame,</i></li> <li>4. <i>Gewaltige Melodei.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. She combs it with a golden comb,</li> <li>2. And sings a song the while;</li> <li>3. It has a wondrous,</li> <li>4. Powerful melody.</li> </ol>
(5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Den Schiffer im kleinen Schiffe</i></li> <li>2. <i>Ergreift es mit wildem Weh;</i></li> <li>3. <i>Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe,</i></li> <li>4. <i>Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh'.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The boatman in his little boat</li> <li>2. Is seized by wild anguish;</li> <li>3. He does not see the rocky reefs,</li> <li>4. He looks only up to the heights.</li> </ol>
(6)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen</i></li> <li>2. <i>Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn;</i></li> <li>3. <i>Und das hat mit ihrem Singen</i></li> <li>4. <i>Die Lorelei getan.</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I believe the waves devour,</li> <li>2. In the end, both boatman and boat;</li> <li>3. And that, through her singing,</li> <li>4. The Lorelei has done.</li> </ol>

The English translation presented in Table 1 is our literal translation, prepared specifically for analytical purposes. However, the analysis was grounded primarily in the original German version in order to preserve lexical, symbolic, and cultural nuances that may not be fully conveyed through translation.

Particularly relevant to the present analysis is the German term *Jungfrau*, translated here as 'maiden'. Although the English word *maiden* captures the basic reference to a young woman, the German term *Jungfrau* carries additional cultural and mythological associations related to purity, innocence, virginity, and an unspoiled state of being. These semantic nuances are not fully reproduced in English translation. Therefore, the interpretation of the figure of *Lorelei* in this study remains informed by the cultural connotations embedded in the original German terminology.

The use of English translation in this study acknowledges the potential issue of loss of meaning, which is a well-recognized concern in cross-linguistic literary analysis. Differences in linguistic structure, cultural connotation, and poetic rhythm may result in shifts in meaning between the source and target texts (Bassnett, 2014). To address this issue, the analysis presented in Section 4 does not rely solely on the English translation but consistently refers back to the original German text as the primary source of interpretation. This approach allows for a more careful reading of semiotic elements that may not be fully captured in translation, including lexical nuance, cultural associations, and ambiguity. In this sense, translation is treated as an analytical aid rather than as a substitute for the source text.

### 3.4. Analytical criteria and intersubjectivity

To enhance analytical transparency, we established clear criteria for distinguishing the three levels of interpretation used in the analysis, based on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes, 1972), as summarized in Table 2.

- 1) *Denotative meaning* concerned the literal meaning directly presented in the text through descriptions, actions, objects, settings, and events.
- 2) *Mythological meaning* applied to the second level of signification, where signs become connected to broader cultural values, symbolic meanings, and ideological assumptions
- 3) *Naturalization* applied to how ideological meanings are presented as natural, normal, and unquestionable.

**Table 2.** Summary of Barthesian Semiotic Analysis in *Die Lorelei*

Stages	Level of analysis	Analytical Focus
First	The denotative level	Identification of the meanings of all linguistic signs, including figures, poetic imagery, actions, and settings.
Second	The mythological level	Examination of these signs at the mythological level as a second-order sign system in order to reveal ideological meanings, particularly those related to the construction of femininity and gender relations.
Third	Naturalization process	Analysis of how ideological meanings are presented as natural and self-evident through narrative structures, symbols, and mythological conventions.

Interpretations at each level were grounded in textual evidence and supported by relevant cultural context. This approach aimed to provide a transparent analytical procedure that can be followed and evaluated by other researchers (Chandler, 2017). Through these stages, *Die Lorelei* can be read not only as an aesthetic text but also as an ideological text that reproduces gendered meanings through semiotic mechanisms.

## 4. Barthesian Semiotic analysis of *Die Lorelei*

### 4.1. Analytical framework of the discussion

To provide a clearer and more coherent discussion, the analysis is organized stanza by stanza. Each stanza is treated as an individual unit of analysis and examined sequentially through Barthes' three interrelated semiotic levels, outlined in the previous section, and Table 2. As explained, the analysis begins with first-order signification by examining the direct relationship between signifier and signified as expressed in the denotative meaning. It then moves to the mythological level, where culturally shared meanings emerge, and finally to naturalization, where ideological assumptions are presented as natural and beyond question. This structure allows for a systematic exploration of how literal meaning develops into mythic significance and ultimately becomes naturalized within the poem. The analysis begins with the first stanza, where the poem introduces an atmosphere of uncertainty, sadness, and the emergence of a lingering legendary narrative.

#### 4.2. Stanza (1): *Uncertainty and the emergence of legend*

As shown in Table 1, the opening lines of stanza (1) establish uncertainty, sadness, and the emergence of an enduring legend. With the first line (1.1) *Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten*, the poem introduces a sense of uncertainty and confusion regarding the significance of something that remains unclear. At the literal level, it functions as a reflective statement of not knowing, an explicit admission that the meaning in question cannot yet be grasped. At the mythological level, the lyric subject's not knowing is mythologized as a natural human condition when confronting legend. This framing suspends the demand for rational explanation and gently guides the reader toward narrative acceptance. Through the process of naturalization, the lyric subject's uncertainty is naturalized as an ordinary human condition. By refusing explanation from the outset, the poem normalizes a receptive acceptance of the story that follows. The ideology embedded in the emerging legend is not presented as cultural construction, but as something that appears to require no immediate explanation.

In the second line (1.2) *Dass ich so traurig bin*, the text directly indicates an emotional condition experienced by the lyric subject: sadness. The adjective *traurig* denotes a psychological state of sorrow, signalling an affective burden that is felt inwardly rather than explained through external reasoning. At the mythological level, sadness is detached from any specific historical or social cause and reconfigured as an existential human condition. Emotion is presented as something given, rather than shaped by social structures, thereby normalizing affect as fate. Through the process of naturalization, sadness is framed as spontaneous and universal. By removing any social or structural cause, emotion is treated as an inner human given. Here ideology begins to work by distancing the reader from the possibility of a critical reading.

As shown in the third line (1.3) *Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten*, the poem introduces a fairy tale or folk narrative originating from earlier times. In its literal sense, *Märchen* denotes a traditional fictional story, often rooted in communal memory and associated with the past. At the mythological level, the fairy tale functions as a mythic marker of traditional authority. In Barthesian terms, myth operates by turning the past into ideological legitimacy. The gendered values embedded in the legend are thus presented as long-established truths, seemingly beyond dispute. Through the process of naturalization, the ancient tale is presented as a legitimate cultural inheritance. Because it originates from the past, the values it carries, including gendered representations, appear authentic and therefore not in need of questioning.

In the fourth line (1.4) *Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn*, the story remains present in the speaker's mind and cannot be dismissed or forgotten. Denotatively, it describes a persistent mental activity: the continual return of a memory or thought that lingers and resists erasure. At the mythological level, the lyric subject's uncertainty is positioned as a familiar and acceptable human response to legend. As a result, the impulse to seek rational clarification is displaced, and the reader is more likely to surrender to the narrative as it is offered. Through the process of naturalization, collective memory is naturalized as an unavoidable mental force. The subject does not choose to remember; rather, the story takes hold, making myth seem inherent to human consciousness.

#### 4.3. Stanza (2): *Nature and atmospheric construction*

In stanza (2) the poem shifts from the speaker's inner melancholy toward an external description of the surrounding landscape, where natural imagery begins to construct the atmospheric setting of the legend. The first line (2.1) *Die Luft ist kühl, und es dunkelt*, describes the surrounding atmosphere in direct, physical terms: the air is cold and darkness begins to fall. Literally, it establishes a sensory condition that frames the setting and signals a transition from daylight into twilight. At the mythological level, the shift in the atmosphere is framed as an inevitable natural process. Nature is

made to signify a cosmic order, one that quietly absorbs ideological tensions under the appearance of the *merely natural*. Through the process of naturalization, changes in time and weather are presented as purely natural processes. By situating the narrative within the rhythms of nature, the poem suggests that what is about to occur follows natural law rather than social design.

Line (2.2) *Und ruhig fließt der Rhein* offers a calm depiction of the Rhine as it flows quietly. Denotatively, the river functions as a concrete geographic element, an aspect of the natural landscape, presented through tranquil, untroubled movement. At the mythological level, the Rhine is mythologized as calm and impartial, so that the tragedy that follows is read as part of the natural world rather than as something shaped by social forces or human responsibility. Through the process of naturalization, the river's calmness conceals the possibility of danger. Nature is naturalized as peaceful and impartial, so that the later tragedy is not read as the effect of values or ideology, but as a temporary disruption in an otherwise stable order.

Line (2.3) *Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt* describes the mountain summit as glittering or shimmering, suggesting that it is reflecting light. Literally, the peak appears to sparkle, drawing visual attention upward. At the mythological level, the mountain is constructed as an elevated and almost sacral space. This vertical arrangement produces a visual hierarchy: the woman is positioned above, the man below, thereby preparing an asymmetrical relation of gaze and power. Through the process of naturalization, the elevated space where *Lorelei* appears is naturalized as a simple feature of the landscape. Her placement at the top of the cliff is not read as symbolic staging, but as an ordinary spatial arrangement.

The fourth line (2.4) *Im Abendsonnenschein* refers to the evening sunlight that illuminates the landscape. At the literal level *Abendsonnenschein* denotes the warm light of the setting sun, visually explaining the shimmering appearance of the mountain peak described in the previous line. At the mythological level, the evening sunlight is mythologized as a transitional and emotionally charged atmosphere that prepares the reader for the emergence of myth. Twilight functions symbolically as a liminal space between clarity and obscurity, reality and imagination. Within this atmosphere, nature appears aesthetically elevated, allowing the legendary figure of *Lorelei* to emerge as if she belongs naturally to the landscape itself. Through the process of naturalization, the evening light naturalizes the mythical atmosphere of the poem by presenting emotional and ideological meanings through the appearance of nature. The beauty and serenity of the sunset make the symbolic construction of the scene appear harmonious and unquestionable. As a result, the connection between femininity, beauty, and enchantment is framed not as a cultural construction, but as something seemingly inherent within the natural order itself.

#### 4.4. Stanza (3): *The representation of feminine beauty*

Stanza (3) of the poem introduces the central female figure and shifts the focus toward visual description and appearance. This stanza is examined through the denotative, mythological, and naturalizing levels as follows. In line (3.1) *Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet*, the verse introduces a seated figure, the *schönste* ('most beautiful') maiden. Denotatively, *Jungfrau* signifies a young woman or maiden, marking the character through attributes of youth and femininity. At the mythological level, womanhood is mythologized as an idealized femininity. Her identity is condensed into physical beauty, the most beautiful (*schönste*), not intellect or volition, so she appears primarily as an aesthetic object rather than a socially grounded subject. Through the process of naturalization, female beauty is naturalized as the woman's primary and essential identity. No alternative representation is offered beyond being the most beautiful, so objectification becomes a matter of apparent fact.

In the second line (3.2) *Dort oben wunderbar*, the poem specifies her location: she is positioned high above, and the scene is characterized as wondrous or striking. Denotatively, the phrase anchors her presence in an elevated place that appears visually remarkable. At the mythological level, her

placement above is naturalized as visual superiority, though not as social authority. She is admired from a distance, yet remains largely without agency within the narrative order. Through the process of naturalization, her distance and height are naturalized as self-evident. She is admired from afar rather than approached as a social subject, and the hierarchical relation of gaze is accepted without resistance.

The third line (3.3) *Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet*, describes the woman's golden jewellery as flashing or gleaming. At the literal level, it points to a tangible material object, ornamental gold whose brightness is visible and attention-grabbing. At the mythological level, gold functions as a mythic sign of purity, luxury, and irresistible attraction. Femininity is shaped as something luminous and enticing, yet also static and more display than action. Through the process of naturalization, visual luxury is naturalized as an inherent dimension of femininity. The woman appears as a shimmering ornament within the natural scene rather than as a historical individual.

In line (3.4) *Sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar*, the stanza closes with a direct action: the woman is combing her golden hair. Denotatively, this indicates a grooming gesture involving hair described as gold-coloured, reinforcing a visible feature associated with her appearance. At the mythological level, the act of combing her hair is mythologized as a ritual of passive femininity. The woman is defined through appearance-oriented gestures rather than productive or rational action, reinforcing her position as spectacle rather than agent. Through the process of naturalization, the act of combing hair is naturalized as a natural feminine practice. Womanhood is reduced to repetitive aesthetic ritual, framed as non-productive and non-discursive.

#### 4.5. Stanza (4): *Voice, song, and enchantment*

As shown in Table 1, in stanza (4) the poem intensifies the focus on the woman's actions and introduces sound as a central element of the scene. The first line (4.1) *Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme*, describes the woman combing her hair with a golden comb. At the denotative level, it shows that the woman performs a grooming action using an object made of gold. At the mythological level, the golden comb is mythologized as a sign of beauty and luxury, symbolically binding the woman to an aesthetic realm rather than to social or historical realities. Through the process of naturalization, the act of combing hair with a golden comb naturalizes femininity as something inherently connected to beauty, ornamentation, and aesthetic self-presentation. The woman's identity is constructed primarily through visual appearance and ritualized gestures of attractiveness, yet these representations are presented as ordinary and self-evident rather than culturally produced. Through this process, femininity appears naturally associated with elegance, passivity, and visual allure, while the ideological construction behind these gendered expectations remains concealed beneath the poetic imagery.

In the second line (4.2) *Und singt ein Lied dabei*, the text indicates that she sings while performing this act. The word *Lied* denotes simply a song, emphasizing that the vocal performance accompanies her movement. At the mythological level, the woman's voice is mythologized as a form of natural enchantment. She does not speak or argue; instead, she sings an expression framed as affective and non-rational rather than discursive or intellectual. Through the process of naturalization, the woman's singing is naturalized as spontaneous expression rather than rational communication. Her voice is located in emotion and aesthetics, not in discourse or argument.

In the third line (4.3) *Das hat eine wundersame*, the song is characterized as wondrous or extraordinary. Denotatively, the line points to the unusual quality of what is being heard, framing it as something remarkable. At the mythological level, the song is mythologized as something beyond ordinary human experience. The adjective *wundersame* positions the melody within a realm of mystery and enchantment, allowing the female voice to appear as a supernatural force rather than merely an ordinary human expression. In this way, femininity becomes associated with fascination,

emotional seduction, and the suspension of rational perception. Through the process of naturalization, the extraordinary quality of the song is naturalized as an inherent attribute of the woman herself. Its enchanting effect is presented as something spontaneous and unquestionable, rather than as a culturally constructed perception. As a result, the emotional influence of the female voice appears as a seemingly natural force, making attraction and enchantment seem inevitable within the narrative world of the poem.

In line (4.4) *Gewaltige Melodei*, the phrase highlights the melody as powerful and imposing in an auditory sense. The emphasis is not on physical force, but on the strength and magnitude of the sound that dominates the listener's perception. At the mythological level, the melody is mythologized as a force that exceeds ordinary human control and rational resistance. Through the expression *gewaltige Melodei*, the woman's voice is transformed into a symbolic power capable of overwhelming masculine perception and judgment. The song no longer functions merely as music, but as a mythic instrument of fascination and seduction. In this way, femininity is associated with an irresistible and potentially destructive emotional force that appears to operate beyond conscious intention. Through the process of naturalization, the power of the melody is naturalized as an inherent quality of the female voice itself. Its overwhelming effect on the listener is presented as spontaneous and inevitable rather than socially or culturally mediated. As a result, the poem frames masculine loss of control as a natural response to feminine enchantment, while the ideological assumptions underlying this representation remain concealed beneath the aesthetic beauty of the song.

#### 4.6. Stanza (5): *Masculine vulnerability and the gaze*

In stanza (5) the poem introduces the male figure and shifts the focus toward action, perception, and response. The first line (5.1) *Den Schiffer im kleinen Schiffe*, introduces a boatman (or sailor) situated in a small boat. Literally, it establishes a human figure within a modest vessel, positioned in the river setting. At the mythological level, the boatman is mythologized as a figure of masculinity moving through public space. Yet the small boat signals limitation and vulnerability, suggesting a fragile masculine subject navigating an unstable world. Through the process of naturalization, the boatman's vulnerability is naturalized through the smallness of the boat. Masculinity is presented as active and mobile, yet constrained by natural conditions.

In (5.2) *Ergreift es mit wildem Weh*, the boatman is seized by an intense and unsettling emotion. Denotatively, the phrase signals a strong affective response, one that is wild, painful, and difficult to contain. At the mythological level, the man is mythologized as an emotional subject who loses rational control when confronted with feminine allure affect displacing judgment. Through the process of naturalization, the man's loss of emotional control is naturalized as an expected response to feminine charm. Masculine rationality is not questioned; instead, it is portrayed as naturally overcome.

In the third line (5.3) *Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe*, the boatman does not notice the rocky reefs. At the literal level, this conveys a failure to attend to visible danger within the river environment. At the mythological level, masculine negligence is represented as the consequence of feminine charm, rather than as a failure of competence or responsibility. Through the process of naturalization, the boatman's professional negligence is naturalized as externally produced. Individual responsibility is effectively erased.

In the final line of the stanza (5.4) *Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh'*, instead of looking ahead, he gazes only upward toward the heights. Denotatively, this describes a change of visual focus away from the immediate surroundings and toward what is elevated above him. At the mythological level, the upward direction of the gaze reinforces a visual hierarchy: the man is positioned as the looking subject, while the woman becomes the elevated object of admiration and fixation. Through the process of naturalization, the man's upward gaze is naturalized as a spontaneous reaction to beauty. Objectifying vision is framed as instinct rather than cultural construction.

#### 4.7. Stanza (6): *Tragedy and the naturalization of fate*

Finally, in stanza (6) the poem moves toward its conclusion by presenting the outcome of the preceding events and explicitly attributing causality. In the first line (6.1) *Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen*, the speaker expresses the belief that the waves will swallow something. Literally, *verschlingen* means to devour or engulf, suggesting destruction through the movement of water. At the mythological level, the waves are mythologized as nature's final and consuming force, allowing the tragedy to appear as the work of the natural world rather than the result of human agency. Through the process of naturalization, the destructive power of the waves is naturalized as an inevitable force of nature. By shifting the source of tragedy to the river and its movements, the poem obscures the social and ideological structures operating within the narrative, particularly the gendered construction of feminine danger and masculine vulnerability. The catastrophe is therefore presented not as the result of human choices or cultural meanings, but as something fated and unavoidable within the natural order itself.

In the second line (6.2) *Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn*, both the boatman and his boat are consumed, implying that they sink or are destroyed. Denotatively, the line anticipates a fatal conclusion for the human subject and the vessel. At the mythological level, the boatman's death is mythologized as an inevitable end, seemingly determined by fate rather than by gendered relations or social choice. Through the process of naturalization, the boatman's death is naturalized as the inevitable consequence of an encounter between humanity and the forces of nature. By framing the tragedy within the logic of natural disaster, the poem obscures the ideological meanings operating beneath the narrative, particularly those related to feminine seduction and masculine vulnerability. As a result, the destruction of the boatman appears unavoidable and self-evident rather than culturally constructed.

In the third line (6.3) *Und das hat mit ihrem Singen*, the event is explicitly linked to the woman's act of singing. At the literal level, the stanza attributes the unfolding tragedy to her vocal performance as the causal trigger. At the mythological level, the woman is positioned as the cause of the tragedy without direct physical action. Femininity is mythologized as a passive yet fatal source of destruction, transforming seduction into an explanatory logic for masculine downfall. Through this mythic construction, the female voice is represented not merely as artistic expression, but as an emotionally overpowering force capable of disrupting masculine rationality and control. Through the process of naturalization, the connection between the woman's singing and the boatman's destruction is naturalized as a self-evident causal relationship. The poem presents feminine enchantment as something that naturally leads men toward loss and catastrophe, while the male figure's agency and responsibility gradually disappear from view. In this process, culturally constructed ideas about feminine danger and masculine vulnerability are transformed into meanings that appear universal, inevitable, and beyond question.

In the final line of the stanza and poem (6.4) *Die Lorelei getan*, the name *Lorelei* is explicitly introduced as the acting figure within the narrative. At the literal level, it identifies her as the agent to whom the event is attributed, positioning her as the performer responsible for what has occurred. At the mythological level, by explicitly naming *Lorelei* as the cause of the tragedy, the poem transforms her from an individual figure into a mythic embodiment of dangerous femininity. The name no longer functions merely as a character reference, but as a cultural sign associated with seduction, enchantment, and destruction. In this mythological construction, feminine beauty and male catastrophe become symbolically linked, allowing the woman to function as an explanatory figure for masculine downfall. Through the process of naturalization, the poem presents *Lorelei's* destructive influence as something inherent to her feminine identity rather than as a culturally constructed meaning. The attribution of tragedy to her presence and voice appears self-evident and

unquestionable, while the male figure's responsibility gradually disappears from the narrative. As a result, dangerous femininity is framed as an aesthetic and natural truth, making the tragedy seem inevitable and beyond human control.

#### 4.8. Synthesis of Barthesian semiotics in *Die Lorelei*

This section synthesizes the findings from the preceding analyses to provide a more comprehensive Barthesian semiotic interpretation of *Die Lorelei*. At the denotative level, *Die Lorelei* presents a sequence of linguistic signs that, in a literal sense, construct a melancholic, enigmatic, and ultimately tragic atmosphere. The poem opens with the lines (1.1) and (1.2) *Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten, Dass ich so traurig bin*. As denotative terms, these lines show the lyric subject's affective state, namely, a sadness that appears detached from any clearly identifiable rational cause. In this initial phase of sign identification (the denotative level), the analysis focuses on first-order signification: the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified as they operate in the text's literal meaning. Accordingly, the poetic language is approached as it is, prior to symbolic, ideological, or mythic interpretation.

At the denotative level, *Die Lorelei* gives expression to sadness through a spontaneous and deeply personal inner experience. It functions as a sign that establishes the poem's emotional atmosphere. The phrase (1.3) *Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten* refers, in its denotative sense, to a fairy tale or folk narrative from the past. This sign introduces the presence of an earlier story world, traditional and imaginative rather than empirically historical. At this level, the expression does not yet carry ideological meaning; it simply directs the reader toward a legendary mode of narration shaped by memory and fantasy. A particularly important aspect of this semiotic progression is the poem's opening declaration of uncertainty. Rather than functioning merely as an expression of personal confusion, the speaker's not knowing creates a discursive space in which rational explanation is suspended and myth becomes possible. From a Barthesian perspective, this initial uncertainty facilitates the movement from denotative meaning toward mythological interpretation, as the reader is encouraged to accept the legendary narrative without demanding empirical justification. Through this process, the cultural meanings embedded in the *Lorelei* legend gradually become naturalized, moving from narrative possibility to accepted cultural truth and appearing as self-evident truths rather than historically constructed representations.

The natural setting is shown through concrete descriptive signs such as *die Luft ist kühl, es dunkelt* (2.1) and *ruhig fließt der Rhein* (2.2). This situation describes a calm, cold twilight atmosphere around the Rhine. The landscape, especially the mountain summit *der Gipfel des Berges* (2.3) shimmering in the evening sunlight, *Abendsonnenschein*, has the function of a neutral visual background. On the denotative level, nature is not yet understood symbolically; it is presented as the physical space in which the narrative unfolds. The central figure, *die schönste Jungfrau* (3.1), designates a young woman described as exceptionally beautiful. The superlative "*schönste*" indicates physical aesthetic appeal as the defining attribute of her character. Her golden ornaments (*goldnes Geschmeide*), golden hair (*goldenes Haar*), and golden comb (*goldenen Kamme*) function denotatively as markers of visual richness and bodily allure. The actions of combing her hair and singing *sie kämmt* (4.1) *und singt ein Lied* (4.2) are presented as everyday gestures with an aesthetic quality, quiet, passive, and without any explicit indication of intention or destructive consequence at the literal level.

*Lorelei's* singing is also described as possessing a *wundersame, gewaltige Melodei* (4.4), which denotatively indicates a melody that is both extraordinary and powerful. The sign in this passage shows the voice's compelling auditory power, yet it does not articulate a symbolic mechanism of causality. By contrast, the figure of *der Schiffer* appears as a boatman who steers a small craft (*im kleinen Schiffe*). His response *ergreift es mit wildem Weh* (5.2) signals a profound emotional

disturbance triggered by the song. The statement *er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe* (5.3) denotes his failure to notice the hazardous rocky reefs, while *er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh'* (5.4) literally indicates that his attention is directed entirely upward, toward the woman positioned above on the cliffs.

In contrast, at the mythological level, *Die Lorelei* constructs a distinct pattern of meaning. Femininity is portrayed as beautiful and passive, yet shadowed by danger, while masculinity is imagined as rational but easily unsettled. Through the poem's lyrical language and symbolic imagery, the relationship between the two is presented as natural, that is, as something that appears self-evident rather than open to question. In line with the claims of Barthesian semiotics, this process obscures the historical contexts and social relations that underlie the narrative, allowing these meanings to emerge as if they were timeless truths: a story that feels enduring, inevitable, and simply natural.

In Barthes' framework, naturalization occurs when mythic meaning is received as though it were simply natural. Through this process, history, social construction, and relations of power fade from view, so that what is in fact ideological comes to appear neutral and beyond dispute. In *Die Lorelei*, such naturalization unfolds gradually through narrative progression, the poem's landscape imagery, and its grounding in folk tradition. Through this process, the poem presents dangerous femininity, masculine vulnerability, and tragic fate not as culturally constructed meanings, but as seemingly inevitable elements of the natural order itself.

## 5. Conclusion

Heinrich Heine's *Die Lorelei* presents the female figure not as a socially situated subject, but as a mythic presence saturated with symbolic and ideological resonance. Applying Roland Barthes' semiotics of myth reveals that, at the denotative level, we analysed how the poem foregrounds a series of recognizable images: the beautiful woman (*die schönste Jungfrau*), golden hair, singing, the river Rhein, and the boatman's death. At the mythological level, however, these signs undergo a shift in meaning. The woman is constructed as a dangerous form of attraction, the female voice as a destructive force, and the boatman's tragedy as the outcome of masculine desire. Through the process of naturalization, particularly through the fairy-tale framing (*Märchen*) and the dominance of natural imagery, patriarchal ideology is translated into the language of romantic fate. The woman is reduced to an aesthetic object without agency, while the man is positioned as a victim of feminine enchantment (Barthes, 1972; Butler, 1990). Viewed within the context of early nineteenth-century Germany, these mythological constructions resonate with Romantic-era cultural values that associated women with beauty, emotion, and moral influence, while men were more commonly linked to rationality and public action. Our Barthesian reading therefore reveals how such historically situated gender assumptions are transformed into seemingly universal truths through poetic representation. In this sense, the poem naturalizes not only gendered meanings, but also broader cultural tensions surrounding femininity, desire, and social order within the Romantic imagination.

Overall, the presented Barthesian semiotic reading of *Die Lorelei* demonstrates that the poem functions as a layered sign system that produces ideological meaning beneath its poetic surface. At the mythological level, the interweaving of feminine beauty, nature, and male tragedy serves to naturalize femininity as a passive yet perilous charm, while masculinity is imagined as rational but vulnerable to desire. Through this naturalizing process, patriarchal assumptions are presented as poetic truth, appearing neutral rather than constructed. More importantly, our study demonstrates the semiotic mechanism through which these gendered meanings are transformed from cultural constructions into seemingly natural and self-evident truths. In this way, *Die Lorelei* reproduces a myth of dangerous femininity, one that conceals the historical and social dimensions of gendered power relations behind a narrative that seems timeless and self-evident. The poem therefore should

not be read only as romantic lyricism, but also as a cultural discourse that sustains and circulates gender mythologies through aesthetic form (Hall, 1997; Tyson, 2015).

This study also contributes to previous literary and semiotic studies on *Die Lorelei* by demonstrating how Barthesian semiotics can reveal the ideological transformation of gender representation within poetic language. While earlier studies have frequently approached *Die Lorelei* from romantic, historical, or stylistic perspectives, the present analysis has highlighted how the poem naturalizes patriarchal assumptions through aesthetic and mythological structures. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on the poem's themes, symbolism, or historical significance, the present study reveals the semiotic processes through which cultural meanings are transformed into myth and subsequently naturalized as common sense. The novelty of this study therefore lies in its stanza-by-stanza Barthesian analysis, which systematically traces the movement from denotative meaning to myth and finally to naturalization. Through this approach, the poem can be understood not only as a canonical Romantic text, but also as a cultural discourse that reproduces ideological constructions of femininity and masculinity through poetic and symbolic representation (Belsey, 2002).

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