

The Aesthetic Function of the Grotesque in E.T.A. Hoffmann's „The Sandman”

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Abstract

This article explores the aesthetic intricacies of E.T.A. Hoffmann's „The Sandman,” through the lenses of Kantian and Burkean philosophy, examining the profound implications of the grotesque within the narrative. Drawing from Kant's notion of the sublime and Burke's concepts of terror and delight, the article analyzes how Hoffmann masterfully intertwines elements of the grotesque to evoke a sense of astonishment and transcendence in the reader. Through an analysis of the protagonist Nathaniel's tumultuous journey and his fraught relationship with the grotesque figure of Coppélius, we aim to elucidate how Hoffmann addresses themes of trauma, obsession, and existential dread. Furthermore, the article delves into the broader implications of the grotesque within Romantic literature, highlighting its role as a means of approaching complex psychological and societal phenomena. Ultimately, by unravelling the enigmatic connection between the narrator and Nathaniel, the article underscores how „The Sandman” emerges as a haunting enquiry into human frailty and the elusive nature of reality.

Keywords: aesthetic, sublime, grotesque, Romanticism, imagination

Rezumat

Acest articol explorează complexitatea estetică a nuvelei „Moș Ene,” semnată de E.T.A. Hoffmann, prin prisma filosofiei kantiene și burkeene, examinând implicațiile profunde ale grotescului în cadrul narațiunii. Bazându-ne pe conceptul kantian al sublimului și pe conceptele burkeene ale terorii și bucuriei, articolul analizează modul în care Hoffmann îmbină cu măiestrie elemente ale grotescului pentru a uimi și a ajuta cititorul să depășească orizonturile propriilor experiențe. Prin analiza călătoriei tumultuoase a protagonistului Nathaniel și a relației sale tensionate cu figura grotescă reprezentată de Coppélius, ne propunem să ilustrăm modul în care Hoffmann abordează teme precum traumele, obsesiile și teama existențială. Mai mult decât atât, articolul investighează implicațiile grotescului în literatura romantică, evidențiindu-i rolul de mediu propice pentru explorarea fenomenelor psihologice și sociale complexe. În cele din urmă, dezvăluind conexiunea enigmatică dintre narator și Nathaniel, articolul subliniază modul în care „Moș Ene” se conturează ca o investigație tulburătoare ale cărei obiective sunt fragilitatea umană și natura evazivă a realității.

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From the Kantian viewpoint, the sublime entails a mental process facilitated by imagination, aiming either at our cognitive faculties or desires, which manifests in two distinct ways. First of all, it takes the form of the mathematical sublime, which arises from the aesthetic evaluation of magnitude, and whose encountering elicits a dual response: an initial discomfort stemming from the limitations of our imagination in grasping vast phenomena, followed by a sense of pleasure upon acknowledging the boundaries of our mental capacity. Secondly, there is the dynamical sublime which results from an aesthetic evaluation centred on nature, one which emerges when, despite acknowledging our physical limitations, we understand that our essential human qualities – practical reason and free will – remain intact even when faced with potentially destructive forces. (*apud* Kant 2000: 140-150)

If, however, Kant presents our limitations as just another path to achieving moral and intellectual superiority over external forces, Edmund Burke introduces a notion of the sublime which encompasses anything capable of profoundly affecting the imagination, and which resides in „whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, [...] whatever is any sort terrible,” (Burke 1990:36) while also preserving our physical integrity. Thus, Kant contends that the sublime is inherent to human nature, deeply rooted in our ability to reason with the challenges we face, attributing the sublime to the subject making an aesthetic judgment, whereas Burke identifies the sublime in the impact an external object has on the subject making an aesthetic judgment, and in the terror often associated with it.

Hence, two contrasting viewpoints on the sublime emerge, yet certain phenomena possess the power to evoke it regardless of the perspective from which we analyze it. The grotesque, as portrayed in literature and art, serves as a prime example of such a phenomenon. Through a Kantian lens, the grotesque can be the focus of an aesthetic assessment and may provoke a sublime reaction when examined from a moral standpoint, whereas according to Burkean philosophy, the grotesque itself acts as a source of the sublime. Its presence is evident in various forms, spanning from the intricate arabesques of ancient Rome to the detailed works of Renaissance painters, continuing through engravings from the sixteenth century to contemporary times, and permeating literary compositions as well, making them transcend conventional boundaries established by aesthetics and the history of art.

The grotesque as an aesthetic category has served to depict a diverse array of concepts across centuries. During the Middle Ages, it conveyed notions of „earthiness, fertility, darkness, and death,” whereas in more recent times, particularly in the last two centuries, it has been employed



to portray something „horrible or horribly exaggerated,” often associated with terms like „arabesque, abject, informe, uncanny, bricolage, carnivalesque, convulsive beauty, and dystopia.” (Connely 2003: 5) These varied aspects have been extensively explored in literary works, particularly gaining prominence in the literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, when the aesthetic theories introduced by Kant and the ideas put forth by Edmund Burke in his *Enquiry* sparked writers' fascination with the aesthetic potential of the grotesque. Notable authors such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Leo Tolstoy, William Faulkner, and numerous others, addressed controversial themes in their works, with a prevalent focus on feelings of inadequacy and alienation, physical deformity, death, pain, terror, demonic forces taking over human consciousness, and many others, their collective objective being that of rendering the essence of an era in which the grotesque, in its myriad forms, pervaded every aspect of existence.

Nineteenth century Europe provided the ideal setting for the rise of Romanticism, which subsequently led to the emergence of the grotesque as a prevailing theme in European literature. Romanticism, characterized by its inclination towards delicate subjects, towards the irrational and the incomprehensible, as well as by its preference for aesthetic experiences generated by intense emotions such as terror and pain, served as „a reaction on the part of chivalrous enthusiasm against the icy water of rational calculation and against the [Disenchantment of the World] – leading to an often desperate attempt to re-enchant the world.” (Ferber 2005: 436) Romanticism itself defies the idea of an accurate definition, as it encompasses a multitude of ideas and positions itself against numerous others, making summarization in just a few lines nearly impossible. And yet, it encapsulates Shakespeare's juxtaposition of melancholy and obsession, madness and intellectualism, sublime goodness and grotesque evil found in his works, Byron's boldness and defiance of convention, Scott's vivid portrayal of human nature in its rawest form, Pushkin's irony and critique of societal norms, Goethe's challenge of the status quo and advocacy of freedom and change, Schiller's rejection of excessive rationality, Poe's preference for mysteries unfolding in an eerie atmosphere, at the crossroad between the supernatural and the occult, Hoffmann's exploration of the darker aspects of human existence and the uncanny, and so forth. (*apud* Ferber 2005: 29-124)

Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, known as E.T.A. Hoffmann, stands as a towering figure in the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century. Despite a tumultuous upbringing marked by parental divorce and a yearning for paternal guidance, Hoffmann displayed a burgeoning passion for music, literature, and the visual arts, one which eventually materialized



into a career as a composer and conductor interspersed with literary aspirations fuelled by his independent exploration of the works of Goethe, Schiller, and Rousseau. Throughout his academic journey at the University of Königsberg, Hoffmann formed enduring friendships, indulged in a passionate affair, and navigated personal and professional challenges, continuing to vacillate between bureaucratic duties and artistic pursuits his entire life, yet garnering acclaim for both his dedication to his administrative duties and his creative flair. Constantly navigating between accepting reality and embracing a bohemian lifestyle devoted to artistic endeavours, Hoffmann often found himself caught in personal scandals, financial struggles and political upheaval, which determined significant ruptures in his life trajectory, making it impossible for him to completely escape his past misfortunes. After a relatively peaceful period in Warsaw, Hoffmann lost his job due to political changes and was forced to move to Berlin where he faced extreme poverty, dissatisfaction with societal norms, and the tragic loss of his daughter, followed by an attempt to seek solace in alcohol while grappling with the tension between reality and fantasy. Taking into consideration his grim prospects, along with his Romantic sensibilities (as demonstrated by his affinity for the enigmatic and the bizarre), it is somehow easier to understand his inclination towards the irrational and the grotesque.

Hoffmann's creative genius stems from a profound existential despair that he sought to transmute into art, echoing the profound sensibilities of other celebrated writers of the Romantic period. „The Sandman” stands as a prime illustration of this transformative process, the author intertwining fragments of his own life with supernatural elements while crafting a narrative that follows the tragic fate of Nathaniel, a young man consumed by a lifelong dread of a „hideous sandman, who is perhaps an evil genius, perhaps the soul's own weakness viewed objectively.” (Canby:228) Narrated through a series of revealing letters, the story intricately charts Nathaniel's complex personal history, ominously foretelling his tragic end. Right from the first lines of the short story, the reader is invited to contemplate Nathaniel's fate along with the narrator's evocative insights into the complexities of the human condition and the blurred lines between reality and fantasy:

„Nothing more strange and chimerical can be imagined than the fate of my poor friend, the young student Nathaniel, which I, gracious reader, have undertaken to tell you. Have you ever known something that has completely filled your heart, thoughts and senses, to the exclusion of every other object? There was a burning fermentation within you; your blood seethed like a molten glow through your veins, sending a higher color to



your cheeks. Your glance was strange, as if you were seeking in empty space forms invisible to all other eyes, and your speech flowed away into dark sighs. Then your friends asked you: 'What is it, my dear sir?' 'What is the matter?' And you wanted to draw the picture in your mind in all its glowing tints, in all its light and shade, and labored hard to find words only to begin. You thought that you should crowd together in the very first sentence all those wonderful, exalted, horrible, comical, frightful events, so as to strike every hearer at once as with an electric shock. But every word, every thing that takes the form of speech, appeared to you colorless, cold and dead." (Hoffmann 2008: 17-18)

As soon as the story begins, the reader is drawn into the Romantic atmosphere that permeates the whole story. Nathaniel, the protagonist, seemingly an intimate of the narrator, is tormented by a deeply unsettling memory from his childhood. In his first letter to Lothaire, his fiancée's brother, Nathaniel confesses the return of a haunting figure from his past – the mythical Sandman, a source of unspeakable fear in his younger years. Through his detailed account of his early experiences with both the legend and the 'actual' encounter with the Sandman, the reader catches a glimpse of an individual whose life precariously balances between reality and fantasy, painting a compelling picture of the misunderstood artist of the nineteenth century, striving to adhere to the conventional demands of bourgeois life while passionately clinging to his true artistic calling.

Romantic aesthetics emphasizes individualism, emotion, and the sublime, seeking to transcend rational understanding and the conventional boundaries between imagination and reality in order to „capture the Ideal more fully, thereby bringing the individual closer to the Absolute." (Röder: 11) For the artist, this Ideal is often pursued through the medium of art, leading them to dedicate their entire existence to the creation of a flawless masterpiece that serves as a bridge between the individual pursuing the Absolute and his target, risking however to find themselves trapped at the crossroad between the tangible world and the lofty sphere of the Ideal, which can only exist in one's imagination.

Nathaniel, the protagonist, embodies the archetype of the Romantic artist who unwittingly falls into the trap of believing that the mundane reality and the Ideal can be harmoniously reconciled across all aspects of life. Nathaniel, however, is not exactly the artist in pursuit of artistic perfection, but rather a man who possesses and is being possessed by an insatiable imagination which makes him reject the idea that there is nothing beyond the superficial layer of the tangible world, becoming thus ensnared in the web of his own grand aspirations. His defiance of his mother's simplistic narrative of the Sandman in his early years, followed



by his delving deeper into the mystery, captivated by a more macabre version of the story offered by his nanny, despite recognizing its implausibility, suggests Nathaniel's willingness to explore the darker and more complex aspects of existence:

"[The Sandman] is a wicked man, who comes to children when they will not go to bed, and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they start out bleeding from their heads. These eyes he puts in a bag and carries them to the half-moon to feed his own children, who sit in the nest up yonder, and have crooked beaks like owls so that they can pick up the eyes of naughty human children." (Hoffmann 2008: 5)

As the story advances, we learn of Nathaniel's childhood fear of the Sandman, instilled by his mother's warnings and fuelled by his encounter with Coppelius, a lawyer who used to visit his father quite often, whom he associates with the mythical figure. Despite understanding the truth behind Coppelius's identity, Nathaniel's fierce aversion towards him persists into adulthood, shaping his perception of Coppelius as a grotesque harbinger of fear and destruction. The complex psychological phenomenon that determines Nathaniel to maintain his childhood perception of Coppelius throughout his entire life is explained by Freud in his exploration of the uncanny through Hoffmann's narrative, the former suggesting that Nathaniel's perception of Coppelius as a threat to his and his father's well-being may stem from the „first delirium of the panic-stricken boy" (Freud: 203). As Nathaniel observes his father collaborating with Coppelius on mysterious experiments, he begins to project his loathing onto the lawyer, perceiving him as the embodiment of his deepest fears. Thus, every gesture and word uttered by Coppelius becomes tinged with menace, gradually unravelling into a grotesque spectacle that mirrors the young boy's internal struggle:

"Some convulsive pain seemed to have distorted his mild features into a repulsive, diabolical countenance. He looked like Coppelius, whom I saw brandishing red-hot tongs, which he used to take glowing masses out of the thick smoke; which objects he afterwards hammered. I seemed to catch a glimpse of human faces lying around without any eyes – but with deep holes instead." (Hoffmann 2008: 9)

Nathaniel's imagination spirals out of control when he believes he is about to endure a gruesome ordeal at the hands of Coppelius, fearing for the safety of his eyes and enduring a violent examination at the hands of the menacing figure, with his limbs seemingly removed and reattached in



an unnatural way. Although later revealed to be a product of fever-induced delirium, Nathaniel remains haunted by the trauma, never fully shaking off his terror of the Sandman. The impression this episode makes on him is so profound that, a year later, when Coppelius's return coincides with a tragic explosion in which Nathaniel's father dies, Nathaniel's fear and suspicion towards Coppelius intensify, cementing the traumatic association between the sinister figure and his father's untimely demise, a belief which continues to torment him throughout his life.

While Freud suggests that Nathaniel's obsession with the Sandman may originate from a deeper psychological conflict related to the Oedipus complex according to which unresolved issues can lead to neurosis, with Nathaniel's fixation on the Sandman being nothing more than a reflection of his own feelings of guilt and unresolved emotions surrounding his relationship with a „dreaded father,” substituted by the Sandman (Freud: 207), it is also plausible to consider Nathaniel's obsession with the Sandman as a coping mechanism for his inability to accept his father's death. As time, memory, and circumstance shape his recollection of the past, Nathaniel's adult retelling of the Sandman tale could be viewed as a means of grappling with his traumatic childhood experiences, seeking temporary refuge in the realm of imagination. Furthermore, considering Hoffmann's own strained relationship with his father, it is conceivable that this narrative serves as the author's personal endeavour to come to terms with his own past

After years of peacefulness, the haunting memory of the Sandman resurfaces in Nathaniel's life, sparked by his identification of an optician named Coppola as the dreaded figure from his childhood. Initially convinced of Coppola's true identity, Nathaniel's beliefs are challenged by his fiancée's rational argument that supernatural forces exist only within the human mind.

If there is a dark and hostile power, laying its treacherous toils within us, by which it holds us fast and draws us along the path of peril and destruction, which we should not otherwise have trod; if, I say there is such a power, it must form itself inside us and out of ourselves, indeed; it must become identical with ourselves. For it is only in this condition that we can believe in it, and grant it the room which it requires to accomplish its secret work. Now, if we have a mind which is sufficiently firm, sufficiently strengthened by the joy of life, always to recognize this strange enemy as such, and calmly to follow the path of our own inclination and calling, then the dark power will fail in its attempt to gain a form that shall be a reflection of ourselves.” (Hoffmann 2008: 14-15)



Despite initially accepting Clara's rational explanation, his fascination is reignited by Olympia, his professor's daughter, whose peculiar eyes remind him of the Sandman. This rekindled obsession leads Nathaniel down a path of increasing estrangement from Clara and a descent into a dark mysticism, as his mind becomes increasingly consumed by the belief that evil exists and that Coppelius / Coppola is the embodiment of some diabolical forces that obstruct his happiness. To prove his point, he pens a grim poem in which he presents a grotesque vision of Coppola threatening Clara on their wedding day, pulling out her eyes and throwing them into a circle of fire:

„Can't you see me then? Coppelius has deceived you. Those, indeed, were not my eyes which so burned in your breast – they were glowing drops of your own heart's blood. I have my eyes still – only look at them!' Nathaniel reflects: 'That is Clara, and I am hers for ever!' Then it seems to him as though this thought has forcibly entered the fiery circle, which stands still, while the noise dully ceases in the dark abyss. Nathaniel looks into Clara's eyes, but it is death that, with Clara's eyes, kindly looks on him.” (Hoffmann 2008: 23)

The Burkean concept of the sublime, which emphasizes the aesthetic experience that activates man's instincts of self-preservation (Burke 1990: 35-37), finds resonance in the grotesque imagery described earlier. Despite the appalling nature of the imagery, its ability to evoke a sense of astonishment, combining terror and delight, aligns with the sublime. This aesthetic effect, although defying Kant's idea regarding „the interest of the senses” (Kant 2000: 150), compels the readers to acknowledge the superiority of their own rational faculties when presented with a scene that transcends the boundaries of imagination.

Coming back to Nathaniel and Clara, we are entitled to say that their reactions to the terrifying images described by Nathaniel also reflect different perspectives on the sublime. While Nathaniel perceives the terrifying images themselves as sublime, Clara's manifests a more rational response to them, being able to regard them as products of a disturbed imagination. However, her response in the face of sublimity, incites Nathaniel's frustration and anger, leading him to denounce her as an „inanimate, accursed automaton.” (Hoffmann 2008: 25) This epithet resonates with the Romantic fascination and horror regarding automata, symbolic of humanity's potential mechanization and loss of individuality and its presence in Hoffmann's story can be considered a protest against the artificiality of the modern, the automaton also symbolizing a corrupted, artificial mechanism controlled by dark forces from within.



In Hoffmann's story, however, the automaton seems to symbolize societal norms above anything else. Nathaniel's initial rejection of automata reflects a rejection of the excessive rationalization and societal norms embodied by Clara, whom he initially accuses of being one. However, his encounter with Olympia, a real automaton devoid of personal aspirations, allows him to project his own desires onto her without resistance, fulfilling his need for acceptance:

„He now sat down to finish his letter to Clara; but a glance through the window convinced him that Olympia was still sitting there, and he instantly sprang out, as if impelled by an irresistible power, seized Coppola's glass, and could not tear himself from the seductive view of Olympia.” (Hoffmann 2008: 29)

In spite of his attraction to Olympia, Nathaniel ultimately desires the stability offered by Clara, and yet, his self-destructive impulses, exemplified by his outburst towards Clara, lead to a confrontation between him and Lothaire. Clara's intervention draws Nathaniel back to reality, but his obsession resurfaces when he is forced to move closer to Olympia and becomes enamoured with her perfection, despite her mechanical nature, his increasing fixation on Olympia symbolizing his descent into madness and his inability to resist his own destructive impulses.

The story takes a dramatic turn when Nathaniel overhears a violent argument between Spalanzani, the professor who introduced Olympia as his daughter, and Coppola, both of whom are claiming ownership of Olympia. Upon entering the room, Nathaniel sees her lifeless appearance, with empty eye sockets and detached eyes on the ground, a revelation which drives him into madness, leading him to attempt to strangle Spalanzani. After this incident, he is temporarily confined to a madhouse, only to be soon reunited with Clara, who is once again willing to help him regain his grip on reality. Their reunion is short-lived though, as Nathaniel's sanity slips away when he sees Coppelius out of nowhere and starts to believe that Clara is in fact a wooden doll and attempts to harm her.

The ending of the story leaves readers contemplating the possibility that Nathaniel and the narrator may be one and the same, blurring even further the lines between reality and fiction. This ambiguity adds depth to the narrative, inviting interpretations of the story as an allegory of societal alienation, and addressing the problems of an individual who cannot find peace in a world to which he feels he does not belong. The narrator's intimate knowledge of the characters and lingering emotions for Clara suggest a personal connection to Nathaniel's experiences. Yet, conclusive



evidence remains elusive, leaving room for speculation. Regardless, this ambiguity elevates Hoffmann's story to a masterpiece of nineteenth-century fiction, showcasing his skill in intertwining the supernatural with the tangible in a socially conventional environment. Through complex characters, vivid imagery, and thematic depth, „The Sandman” offers a haunting exploration of human frailty and of the enigmatic nature of the human psyche.

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