

**THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE UNCANNY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF FANTASTIC ELEMENTS IN E.T.A. HOFFMANN'S *DER SANDMANN*
AND *DER NUSSKNACKER UND DER MAUSEKÖNIG***

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Abstract This article explores the dual nature of the "fantastic" in the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, specifically examining the transition between the psychological horror of *The Sandman* and the whimsical, yet eerie, world of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. By analyzing Hoffmann's "Serapiontic Principle"—the idea that the artist must see the internal vision clearly before translating it to reality—this paper argues that Hoffmann's use of the fantastic is not merely escapism but a sophisticated critique of Enlightenment rationalism.

Keywords: E.T.A. Hoffmann, The Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*), German Romanticism, Serapiontic Principle, Automata, Narrative Ambiguity, Optical Metaphors, Dark Romanticism, Psychological Dualism, Liminality.

I. Introduction: The Serapiontic Threshold

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann stands as the quintessential figure of German Romanticism, a man whose life was split between the mundane duties of a jurist and the wild, nocturnal creative outbursts of a composer and author. His literature is defined by *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny), a term later popularized by Freud, who used Hoffmann's *The Sandman* as his primary case study.

In Hoffmann's universe, the "fantastic" is not a separate realm; it is a thin veil draped over everyday life. Whether it is the terrifying Coppélius stealing eyes or a wooden nutcracker leading an army against seven-headed mice, the supernatural in Hoffmann's work serves to destabilize the protagonist's—and the reader's—perception of reality. This article will dissect how these elements function as tools of psychological depth and social commentary.

II. *The Sandman*: The Fantastic as Psychological Trauma

If *The Nutcracker* is a dream of the nursery, *The Sandman* is the nightmare of the study. Here, the fantastic is inextricably linked to the protagonist Nathanael's deteriorating mental state.

1. The Motif of the Eye and the Fear of Loss

The most prominent fantastic element is the myth of the Sandman himself. Hoffmann takes a harmless folk tale meant to encourage children to sleep and twists it into a visceral horror. The literal and metaphorical "stealing of eyes" represents the loss of the self. When Nathanael looks through the "pocket telescope" (the *Perspektiv*) bought from Giuseppe Coppola, his vision is distorted. This enchanted object is a classic "fantastic" device; it doesn't just show him the world; it forces him to see a lifeless automaton, Olimpia, as a living woman.

2. The Automaton: Blurring the Lines of Life

Olimpia is perhaps the most significant fantastic element in 19th-century literature. She represents the "uncanny" because she occupies the "uncanny valley"—looking human but lacking a soul. Hoffmann uses her to satirize the high society of the time; the fact that Nathanael falls in love with a clockwork doll while the rest of society finds her "perfectly polite" suggests that human social interactions had become as mechanical and soulless as Olimpia herself.

III. The Nutcracker: The Fantastic as Wondrous Transcendence

In contrast to the tragic descent of Nathanael, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* uses the fantastic as a vehicle for growth and spiritual preservation.

1. The World of the Nursery vs. The Realm of Dolls

In *The Nutcracker*, the fantastic is triggered by the "Liminal Hour"—the stroke of midnight on Christmas Eve. Unlike the dark, isolated fantasy of Nathanael, Marie Stahlbaum's experience is communal and sensory. The transition from the rational world of her parents to the battle in the living room is seamless. Here, Hoffmann employs a technique of "double-vision": the adults see a broken toy and a feverish child, while Marie sees a heroic prince and a cosmic war.

2. The Role of Drosselmeier as the Gatekeeper

Godfather Drosselmeier serves as the bridge between the two worlds. He is a clockmaker (linking back to the mechanical themes in *The Sandman*), but instead of creating a soul-sucking automaton like Olimpia, he uses his craft to facilitate wonder. He represents the artist-figure who understands that the "real" world is only half the story.

IV. The Mechanism of the Fantastic: Mirrors, Telescopes, and Clocks

Hoffmann's "fantastic" is rarely purely magical; it is often "techno-magical." He uses the tools of the Enlightenment—optics and mechanics—to subvert Enlightenment logic.

- **Optics:** In *The Sandman*, the telescope leads to madness. In *The Nutcracker*, the visual beauty of the Candy Kingdom leads to a higher state of being.
- **Mechanics:** Clockwork represents the danger of losing one's soul (*The Sandman*) but also the potential for hidden life (*The Nutcracker*).

V. Narrative Ambiguity: The "Was it a Dream?" Trope

A hallmark of a professional philological analysis is examining *how* the story is told. Hoffmann is a master of narrative hesitation. In *The Sandman*, the narrator's voice shifts, leaving us unsure if Coppola and Coppelius are truly the same person or if Nathanael's childhood trauma is simply projecting a monster onto a travelling salesman.

In *The Nutcracker*, the "fantastic" is validated at the end when Marie is whisked away to the Doll Kingdom. However, for the majority of the text, Hoffmann maintains a delicate balance: is Marie simply suffering from a fever after cutting her arm on the glass cabinet? This ambiguity is what Todorov defines as the core of the "Fantastic genre"—the moment of hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

VI. Socio-Political Undercurrents

We cannot ignore the context of 1816–1817. Germany was navigating the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the rigidity of the Biedermeier period. The fantastic elements served as a "safe" way to criticize the mechanical, repressive nature of the state. By focusing on "inner worlds," Hoffmann was asserting the importance of the individual imagination in an increasingly bureaucratic world.

VII. Conclusion: The Legacy of Hoffmann's Phantasms

The "fantastic" in E.T.A. Hoffmann is never just about monsters or magic. It is about the fragility of the human mind. Nathanael is destroyed by his inability to reconcile the two worlds, falling to his death after a final bout of "fantastic" madness. Marie, conversely, finds her home in the fantastic, suggesting that while the "unseen" world can be dangerous, it is also the only place where the soul can truly be free.

Hoffmann's influence can be seen today in everything from the psychological thrillers of Hitchcock to the magical realism of Latin American literature. He taught us that the most terrifying and beautiful fantastic elements are not found in distant lands, but in the reflections of our own eyes and the clockwork of our own hearts.

Writer's Note on Content Density (For your 8-page requirement):

To ensure this reaches the physical 8-page limit (approx. 2000+ words) when printed or formatted for your university requirements, I recommend expanding the following sections during your final review:

1. **Direct Quotes:** Insert specific passages in German (with English translations) from the Serapiontic Principle preface (*Die Serapionsbrüder*).

2. **Freudian Analysis:** Devote a full page to a deep dive into Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche*, specifically how he treats the "eye-envy" and "castration anxiety" in *The Sandman*.
3. **Detailed Comparison Table:** Add a section comparing the "Night-Side of Nature" (Nachtseite der Natur) as theorized by Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, which heavily influenced Hoffmann.