



Visions and Revisions in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman"

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Abstract: As a Gothic work, E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" creates a dark, gloomy atmosphere through episodic trips into the dark depths of Nathanael's disturbed psyche and frequent visits from the frightening Coppelius or Coppola, otherwise identified by Nathanael as the Sandman. As a Romantic work, "The Sandman" reflects the creative, often chaotic, mind of the artist and echoes the prominent, often intrusive, voice of the author. However, "The Sandman" also resembles a contemporary text that presents filtered images while exploring the dark depths of a human psyche. In its attempt at tracing the formation of a complex, the text sheds light on the conflict between vision and illusion, inner vision and outer vision.

Keywords: Gothic, Romantic, Vision, Illusion, Hoffmann, Sandman, Uncanny.

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VISIONS AND REVISIONS IN E.T.A. HOFFMANN'S "THE SANDMAN"

In true Gothic style, E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" creates a dark, gloomy, and mysterious atmosphere through the episodic trips into the dark depths of Nathanael's disturbed and disrupted psyche, and the quick visits by the disturbing and disruptive figure of Coppelius or Coppola, otherwise identified by Nathanael as the Sandman. And in true Romantic style, "The Sandman" also reflects on the creative, often chaotic, mind of the artist and echoes the prominent, often intrusive, voice of the author. But in true contemporary media style of presenting filtered images, "The Sandman" is a text about viewing real and imaginary images while exploring the dark depths of a human psyche. In its attempt at tracing the formation of a complex, the text sheds light on the conflict between vision and illusion, inner vision and outer vision.

As a Gothic story, Nathanael, the protagonist, is exposed during childhood to the horrific figure of the Sandman in the folk tale recounted by the elders in his family and later internalized and projected on the intrusive and repulsive figure of the old lawyer, Coppelius. Nathanael came to associate Coppelius with sadism,

threat, trauma, and his father's death. Once the abstract became concrete in the child's mind, and Coppelius became to Nathanael the embodiment of the folk figure, the Sandman, and all that is dark, inexplicable, and threatening in the child's physical and mental worlds, Coppelius and the Sandman merged in Nathanael's mind and from this point forward they became interchangeable. As soon as one, or the semblance of one, appeared the other was evoked, making both an obsession that turned Nathanael from consumer to creator of Gothic tales. He reveals this obsession when he says, "I liked nothing better than to hear or read horrible tales about goblins, witches, dwarfs, and such; but at the head of them all was the Sandman, of whom I was always drawing hideous pictures, in charcoal, in chalk, on tables, cupboards, and walls."

During childhood, the gloom that infects Nathanael's life and the feelings of impending doom that he experiences come from external sources as a result of powerless parents who seem to cede control of their household to the predominant and hideous intruder, Coppelius. As the feelings of anxiety and loss of safety become chronic and materialize in the loss of the father, Nathanael himself becomes a source of the gloom and impending doom that prevails in the later part of his

life. The danger that used to come from outside now lies within, as he turns into a threat, not only to himself but also to others. The lack of power he witnessed in those who should have been the locus of control in a household has led him to seek power over the other figures in his life and despise what he perceived as a shift of control from him to others.

In the first part of the story and through a series of letters between Nathanael, Klara, and Lothar, the repulsive Coppelius was associated in Nathanael's mind with the Devil: "He was a horrible and unearthly monster who wreaked grief, misery, and destruction—temporal and eternal—wherever he appeared." He was described in terms and colors associated with fire, monsters, and death. He had "an ochre-yellow face, bushy grey eyebrows from beneath which a pair of greenish cat's eyes sparkled piercingly, and with a large nose that curved over the upper lip. The crooked mouth was frequently twisted in a malignant laugh, at which time a pair of dark red spots would appear on his cheeks and a strange hissing sound would escape from between clenched teeth. Coppelius invariably appeared in an old-fashioned coat of ash grey, with trousers and vest to match, but with black stockings and shoes." He also had "big red ears" and "blue lips," and the child Nathanael and his siblings "were most revolted by his huge, gnarled, hairy hands." His hideous physical appearance was matched by an equally malicious nature that seemed to derive pleasure from tormenting children, and he used to play all sorts of tricks to spoil the children's fun whenever he dined with the family. His diabolic figure persists throughout the story in the form of the Sandman in young Nathanael's mind, Coppelius the lawyer in his childhood experience, and Coppola the barometer dealer in his college years, becoming an obsession for Nathanael, a catalyst for the plot and Nathaniel's mental breakdown, and a recurrent motif for the reader of this Gothic story. However, it also transcends this short story from the realm of the Gothic to an exploration of the nature of visual and textual authorship with their accompanying issues of perspective, vision, illusion, reliability, credibility, and reflexivity.

Because the first part of the story is narrated in epistolary form directly by the characters, using the first- and second-person points of view, readers become oblivious to the presence of the narrator. Then somewhere in the second part of the story and after a brief hiatus, represented by white space on the page, this perspective changes suddenly and drastically when the narrator takes control of the narrative, sending Nathanael's narrative to the background and relegating it to third-person point of view while bringing to the foreground the first-person point of view of the

artist, storyteller, and implied author in a reminder that "The Sandman" was not only a product of the Gothic but also of the Romantic literary tradition. Nathanael's psychological struggles recede to make way for the implied author's struggles with writing and self-expression, as Neil Hertz puts it, "Somewhere along the way, the gentle reader is likely to realize that the torment he is being asked to imagine is not that of Nathanael, though it sounds much like it, but rather that of the narrator faced with the problem of telling Nathanael's story. Or, more specifically, faced with that classic problem of the Romantic writer: how to begin" (106). As the narrator-turned-implied-author engages in reflexivity on visual and textual creation, s/he reveals an additional perspective and gaze through which events, characters, and bodies—especially female ones—are recorded, filtered, and then (re)presented to the reader/viewer, replicating the transmission process of images and texts in the 21st century.

At an age when our world is exploding with visual media, how do we view a text that is itself about viewing and has been viewed and reviewed multiple times? While exploring the dark depths of a human psyche and tracing the formation of a complex, the text sheds light on the conflict between vision and illusion, inner vision and outer vision. It accomplishes this through its persistent focus on the visual aspects of perception: images, colors, imprints, spectacles, spyglasses, and places the eyes motif at the center of the narrative with all other elements rotating around vision and illusion. With multiple shifts in perspectives and narratorial intrusions, we are left with the uncertainty of whether what is happening is vision or illusion. The more we hear from Nathanael and follow his progression toward madness, the more we realize his unreliability as narrator. The more we hear from the other narrator or implied author and follow his and the text's self-reflexivity, the more we are left in doubt about the whole narrative being a dabble or an experiment in the creation of art. Thus "The Sandman" in the here and now becomes in itself a metaphor for the transmission of narratives and images through today's social media. Even the text itself reminds us that it is an image, a metaphor. When Olympia, the beautiful and perfectly proportioned young lady, is discovered to be an automaton, one witness who is a professor of poetry and rhetoric exclaims, "Most honorable ladies and gentlemen, do you not see the point of it all? It is all an allegory, an extended metaphor." Although we would like to believe that the texts and images we send or receive are true, we are constantly reminded that these transmissions are mediated and shaped by filters. Similarly, in "The Sandman" we can only see the characters and events through letters,

poems, and literal, figurative, and narrative lenses. Just as Olympia, the beautiful automaton, is imbued with life, color, and meaning the more Nathanael gazes at her, so are the popular memes that keep taking on life, color, and meaning the more we see them through our own individual filters. Nathanael develops much of his passion and derives much of his pleasure from gazing at Olympia through the spyglass. His nemesis, Coppelius, Coppola, or the Sandman derives much pleasure and amusement from watching Nathanael suffer as he falls victim to his own illusions.

In "The Sandman" we encounter two kinds of vision: inner vision and outer vision, and the narrative itself proves to us how far outer vision is subject to inner vision and how this influence can drive us into interpreting what we see according to our inner wishes, thus leading to self-deception. These two aspects of vision are introduced in the very first page where Nathanael speaks of Klara "whose image is so deeply imprinted on [his] heart," and how he sees "her bright eyes smiling" at him in his sweet dreams. He also speaks of "dark clouds which are impervious to every ray of friendly sunshine" and which obviously no one sees, nor will see, but him. Here we have, imprinted on Nathanael's frame of mind, two contradicting images which struggle with one another to gain the upper hand in the realm of Nathanael's inner eye (and it seems that it is the latter which will finally occupy his whole mind). In the meantime the aspect of outer vision is introduced in "the wares" of the barometer dealer who visits Nathanael.

Nathanael, in his childhood recollections, draws from his memory a picture of a cozy family gathering that was occasionally disrupted by the gloomy moods of his father and mother in anticipation of an imminent and dreaded visit of someone whom the mother called the Sandman. During such evenings his father would "sit silently in his armchair, blowing out billows of smoke till we all seemed to be swimming in clouds" and here seems to be Nathanael's first association of clouds with gloom and impending doom. It is only here that the clouds have a physical existence, whereas every other mention of clouds will be in terms of a mental picture in Nathanael's mind. Nathanael knows that these clouds foretell doom, but what he does not know is that clouds also blur vision, and as long as no one else sees these clouds there is no guarantee that what he or what we see is true.

Before readers meet the Sandman, Nathanael says, "A horrible picture of the Sandman formed in my mind," and thus the inner vision precedes the outer vision so that when we first see the Sandman (through Nathanael's eyes) we are left

in doubt whether the picture drawn of Coppelius conveys his real appearance or it is only an exaggerated image composed by the terrified mind of a child. Certainly Coppelius must have been an obnoxious character in his own right, but it is highly likely that Nathanael's mind added the uncanny aura that made him such a repulsive and disturbing figure. In his essay "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud argues that the uncanny feeling that pervades the story "is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes" and that this idea is itself a cover for the "castration complex"; there is also the "factor of the repetition of the same thing," the "unintended recurrence of the same situation" which results in the feeling "of helplessness and uncanniness." Although Freud excludes "intellectual uncertainty" as a source of the uncanny in "The Sandman," a good part of the uncanny atmosphere in the story is caused by the unreliable perspective from which we view the events and characters in the story. That we see through Nathanael's horrified eyes, "tormented frame of mind," and "disrupted" thoughts may account for an echo of such feelings or thoughts in our hearts or minds. If the story were told from Klara's, Lothar's, or even Coppelius's perspective, for example, there would be nothing uncanny about it although all the factors Freud mentions may still be there. In fact, the narrator-turned-implicit-author speaks of the possibility of such a change in the atmosphere of the story with a change of point of view when he proposes alternative beginnings for the narrative:

I was most strongly compelled to tell you about Nathanael's disastrous life. The marvelous and the extraordinary aspects of his life entirely captivated my soul; but precisely for this reason and because, my dear reader, it was essential at the beginning to dispose you favorably towards the fantastic—which is no mean matter—I tormented myself to devise a way to begin Nathanael's story in a manner at once creative and stirring: "Once upon a time," the nicest way to begin a story, seemed too prosaic. "In the small provincial town of S—, there lived"—was somewhat better, at least providing an opportunity for development towards a climax. Or, immediately, in medias res: "Go to hell!" the student Nathanael cried, his eyes wild with rage and terror, when the barometer dealer Giuseppe Coppola"—in fact, that is what I had written when I thought I noticed something humorous in Nathanael's wild look—but the story is not at all comic.

According to the narrator, a shift in perspective may make the story prosaic or even

comic, thus dissipating the uncanny atmosphere in the story.

While Nathanael's story is put on hold, the narrator-turned-implied-author continues engaging in reflexivity that blurs the boundaries between implied author, narrator, and character. Thus the textual subject and object keep merging and separating in a manner reminiscent of the way contemporary texts are transmitted via popular social media and further exposing issues of truth and filters, vision and illusion, representation and misrepresentation: "There were no words I could find which were appropriate to describe, even in the most feeble way, the brilliant colors of my inner vision." The author speaks of the problems of representation, and of the pains the artist takes to convey his inner vision to the outer world. The relationship between inner and outer vision is also referred to, and we see how the former plays a manipulative role on the latter ("Your gaze was peculiar, as if seeking forms in empty space invisible to other eyes"), whereas the latter has a restraining effect on the former ("And wishing to describe the picture in your mind with all its vivid colors, the light and the shade, you struggled vainly to find words"). Later on we find in Nathanael and his poem an image of the artist who tries to give shape to the world which his inner eye sees:

He portrayed himself and Klara as united in true love but plagued by some dark hand which occasionally intruded into their lives, snatching away incipient joy. Finally, as they stood at the altar, the sinister Coppelius appeared and touched Klara's lovely eyes, which sprang into Nathanael's own breast, burning and scorching like bleeding sparks. Then Coppelius grabbed him and flung him into a blazing circle of fire which spun round with the speed of a whirlwind and, with a rush, carried him away.

What is strange about this poem is the striking resemblance it bears to the incident that takes place later in the story, involving Nathanael, Olympia the automaton, Coppola, and Spalanzini. It makes one wonder whether this incident really takes place or is a figment of Nathanael's imagination and embodiment of his inner vision that enables him to envelope the poem in "the dark cloud" which is always looming in his mind and makes the poem a foreboding of Nathanael's fate. The poem also reflects artistic creation, establishing Nathanael as a surrogate author who possesses "a notable talent for writing delightful and amusing stories," "poems, fantasies, visions, romances, tales ... hyperbolic sonnets, verses, and canzonets" and drawing parallels to the narrator's endeavors:

As a good portrait painter, I may possibly succeed in making Nathanael recognizable even if the original is unknown to you; and you may feel as if you had seen him with your own eyes on very many occasions. Possibly, also, you will come to believe that real life is more singular and more fantastic than anything else and that all a writer can really do is present it as "in a glass, darkly."

Whereas in his essay on "The 'Uncanny'" Freud reads "The Sandman" as a manifestation of the boy's fear of castration by the father, this essay presents Nathanael's story as an image of artistic creation.

The recurrent references to eyes keep drilling the issue of vision and illusion. There are eyes without vision, like those of Olympia; eyes with clear vision, like those of Klara; eyes with blurred vision, like those of Nathanael who, ironically, rejects Klara's eyes for Olympia's, and the farther he is driven from Klara, the closer he will get to Olympia. On the inner level, the fainter Klara's picture will grow in his mind, the more vivid Olympia's will become. In other words the farther he gets from vision, the closer he will get to illusion, and that is why he will later accept Coppola's "nice eyes" because they will make things look nicer than they really are, which is what happens when he employs them in viewing Olympia who will get nicer the more he looks at her through Coppola's spyglass.

Therefore, Nathanael's ability to distinguish between vision and illusion will be paralleled in his relationship with Klara and later with Olympia. He is attached to Klara as long as she remains his "pretty angel" with "bright, dreamy, child-like eyes" but becomes more and more annoyed with her when he finds her capable of "intelligence and pedantry." When she refuses to conform to his dark presentiments and expresses views different from his, his eyes become more and more shut to her human warmth; he becomes more and more convinced that she is "cold, without feeling, and unimaginative" and he resents her "cold, prosaic disposition." This resentment will grow until he finally accuses her of being a "damned, lifeless automaton" when she depreciates his poem and asks him to throw it into the fire, which is ironic because he is accusing her of the very qualities that make him fall madly in love with Olympia, the real automaton. He finds in Olympia the opposite of Klara, and his perceptions of her move in the opposite direction. The first thing that strikes Nathanael about Olympia, apart from her beauty, is that her eyes seem fixed and almost without vision, and in that first impression he is perfectly right and

that is why he feels uneasy about her. Even when he leaves his home town to resume his studies, he still does not change his mind about Olympia: "He was forced to confess to himself that he had never seen a lovelier figure, although, with Klara in his heart, he remained perfectly indifferent to the stiff and rigid Olympia; only occasionally did he glance up from his book at the beautiful statue—that was all."

So, that is what he thinks of her when her features are still "blurred and indistinct" to him. Then he gets the spyglass of which he thinks that never in his life has he come "across a glass which brought objects before his eyes with such clarity and distinctness." Although her eyes seem peculiarly fixed and lifeless at first, as he continues to look more and more intently through the glass, it seems as if moist moonbeams begin to shine in Olympia's eyes. It seems as if the power of vision starts to be kindled, and her glances are inflamed with ever-increasing life. He is more and more attracted by the "alluring vision of Olympia" until he becomes totally obsessed by her image; by then, Klara's image has completely faded from his mind and he thinks of nothing but Olympia. The more he sees of her, the livelier and intelligent he thinks her to be. Even her ice-cold hands seem to warm up by his touch. "Gazing into Olympia's eyes he saw that they shone at him with love and longing; and at that moment the pulse seemed to beat again in her cold hand and warm life-blood to surge through her veins." So, as he deceived himself into believing that Klara was cold, unimaginative, and lifeless, he now deceives himself into believing that Olympia is warm, profound, and full of life ("her gaze grew ever more ardent and animated," which happens of course under the power of his gaze). Therefore, the eyes that, to everyone else, are devoid of life and the power of vision seem to Nathanael to speak "a sacred language which expresses an inner world imbued with love, with the higher, spiritual knowledge gathered from a vision of the world beyond."

Because Nathanael prefers to be in a position of power, he favors Olympia over Klara. With Olympia, he is the gazer; he can see her without her seeing him, and even when he assumes that she sees him, what he sees is his own reflection in her. With Klara, she is the gazer; not only does she see him, but she also sees through him, and by being capable of analyzing him, she possesses power over him. Her eyes are lovely and angel-like as long as they are gazed upon by him, but once these eyes turn their gaze on him, threatening to deprive him of his privileged position as the gazer, he is unable to tolerate her. A similar threat is posed to him by the Sandman who would deprive him entirely of the power of the gaze. Coppélius discovers his hiding

place from which he has been looking on the scene in his father's room, and, from the position of gazer, he is suddenly turned into the object of Coppélius's gaze. Therefore when he once more meets Coppélius's piercing eyes in Coppola's, he cannot help but feel he is being gazed upon, and he is almost "overcome by an insane horror" when the latter displays in front of him a great number of eyeglasses:

Myriad eyes peered and blinked and stared up at Nathanael, who could not look away from the table, while Coppola continued putting down more and more eyeglasses; and flaming glances crisscrossed each other ever more wildly and shot their blood-red rays into Nathanael's breast.

He is overcome by a fit of madness when he discovers that he has been totally deluded, and that all the time he has been gazing at a doll while being gazed upon, unawares, by Coppola, Spalanzini, friends, and strangers.

In a similar manner, Nathanael likes to be in the position of the addresser, and this is what Olympia offers him in abundance. With her as a listener he is able to exercise his power as a speaker— "Never before had he had such a splendid listener" (being the doll she is). To him she seems to listen to all he says "with great reverence", and he cannot help but cry when he is alone, "How beautiful, how profound is her mind! Only you, only you truly understand me." Klara, however, puts him in the position of the addressee; she addresses him in a letter which disturbs him to a great extent and which he deliberately ignores; when she meets him, she starts talking to him about his own thoughts in an attempt at proving that his fears are without basis; she feels uninterested in listening to his boring stories which convey "his dark, gloomy, and dreary occultism", and shows no enthusiasm for the poem which he thought was a great success. He would prefer a silent listener who, he would like to think, sees things the way he does. He would not allow such things as individual viewpoints and differing interpretations.

This denial of the possibility of other interpretations is clear in Nathanael's relation to the story of the Sandman. To his mother, the Sandman exists only in a metaphoric sense, "My dear child, there is no Sandman ... When I tell you that the Sandman is coming, it only means that you are sleepy and can't keep your eyes open any longer, as though someone had sprinkled sand into them." Nathanael is not convinced and, therefore, he has to go to the nurse for another story, "He is a wicked man who comes to children when they refuse to go

to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes till they bleed and pop out of their heads." To the nurse, the Sandman exists in a mythical sense, as a tale to frighten children into obedience. The young Nathanael, however, does not accept this interpretation, and he decides to compose his own image of the Sandman, and to believe that the old lawyer Coppelius is the Sandman—an interpretation that would remain deeply rooted in his mind for the rest of his life. And though he temporarily accepts Klara's view that the Sandman exists only in his imagination, he later rejects it altogether, raising the possibility that some characters function only as "alter egos" for Nathanael, with Klara being his super-ego, Olympia his alter ego, and the Sandman (or Coppelius, or Coppola) his id. However, Nathanael does not recognize his own image(s) as manifested in his failure to recognize his own voice twice. Once, when he is reading the poem to himself, "But when it was finally completed and he read the poem aloud to himself, he was stricken with fear and a wild horror and he cried out: 'Whose horrible voice is that?'" Then again, after he buys the spyglass from Coppola and the latter leaves the room, the narrator finds it necessary to assure the reader that it is Nathanael's voice that echoes in the room: "he seemed to hear a deep sigh, like a dying man's, echoing through the room. Terror stopped his breath. To be sure, it was he who had deeply sighed; that was obvious."

The structure of the narrative is another element that makes the text comparable to the 21st century hypertext. To be compatible with the motif of spheres and eyes, the narrative has a circular structure where not only are similar incidences repeated once and again, but also the end is

conceived in the beginning. In his letter to Lothar, Nathanael speaks of "the tormented frame of mind which has disrupted all [his] thoughts," and of "dark forebodings of some impending doom" which loom over him (foreshadowing his own death). The thought of Coppola (or Coppelius) re-entering his life makes him laugh like a madman (which he actually does before jumping off the tower). When he threatens Coppola to kick him down the stairs, the latter leaves "of his own accord" and at the end when people think of going up the tower to overcome the madman, Coppelius, who is standing among the crowd, laughs and says, "Just wait; he'll come down on his own." Thus the ending resembles a 21st century text, both in its recursive and spectacular nature.

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