Am I a Human Being or Something Worse: Freud on the Uncanny in Hoffman’s “The Sandman”

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This is not how you wanted to spend your weekend. You are fifteen and you have a life to live, but your parents are both forty-seven and have an out-of-state conference to attend. As you pull the quilted sheets above your shoulders, you remember why you weasel out of staying at grandma’s house so often: the wall of dolls in the guest bedroom. They stare at you as you sleep. You feel every glass eye. You remind yourself that you are a big girl and close your eyes. In the morning, you leap from your bed in terror; a blank-faced doll sleeps beside you. You scream for your grandmother like a baby. She calmly explains that you were stirring in your sleep, and she thought you needed a friend. That night, you place the doll back among its comrades on the wall. You pull the sheets above your shoulders and close your eyes. You awaken in the middle of the night and realize that the same doll is missing from the wall. A feeling of dread washes over you, but you close your eyes like a big girl. You awake once more to find that five more dolls are missing from the wall. A strange feeling floods your senses, something different yet innately grotesque and foreboding, not quite pure fear, yet nor unadulterated anxiety – what is that feeling? More importantly, is that your grandma brushing your hair in the dark . . . or is it something more . . . plastic?

Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, referred to this unique feeling as *Das Unheimliche* or “The Uncanny.” While uncanniness can appear in many distinct forms, both in reality and in literature, Freud believed no author conveyed the uncanny more adeptly than German author E.T.A. Hoffman, specifically in his noted work “The Sandman.” While Sigmund Freud posited that his concept of *Das Unheimliche*, or “The Uncanny,” seemed to be expressed best in the animatronic Olympia and the horrific Sandman of E.T.A Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” the true uncanny nature of this work lies not only in the overtly artificial Olympia or grotesque Sandman, but more so in Hoffman’s subtle suggestions which call the humanity of his assumed-human protagonist, Nathaniel, into question.

While Freud speculated a great deal concerning what actually constitutes the uncanny, he seems to settle on one definition. According to Freud, every emotional impulse, when repressed, becomes an anxiety. Yet anxieties can be further repressed. When this repressed anxiety is dragged to the forefront of the mind through a sudden image or action which calls upon that initial emotional impulse, the anxiety is thus legitimized, constituting the uncanny (Freud 17). In this sense, uncanniness is nothing otherwise unknown or foreign, but something that is, in all actuality, all-too-familiar, which has become seemingly separated from the individual through repression. As such, Freud recognizes the four main modes by which the uncanny appears in nature:

[1] Uncanniness is often the result of magic, an animistic understanding of nature, and a belief in the “omnipotence of thoughts” (Freud 16).

[2] Uncanniness can often result from coincidence, such as an individual seeing a person he or she was just thinking of, or wishing a person dead who then dies soon after, and specific premonitions in which an individual has a “feeling” that something bad will happen and something bad does occur (Freud 16).

[3] Uncanniness can often result from incidents involving strenuous repetition; for instance, walking north for an hour but feeling as though one is walking in circles because he or she keeps seeing the same house (Freud 14).

[4] Uncanniness can occur when the human-ness of an individual is in question or proven to be false or lacking (Freud 14).

Through the utilization of these four producers of the uncanny, this work will prove that rather than the animatronic Olympia or the spectral Sandman, it is the deranged Nathaniel who conjures the most profound sense of the uncanny.

Based on Freud’s definition of the uncanny and his examples of what produce the uncanny, one might come to understand why he believes that Olympia constitutes one of the most apparent sources of the uncanny in “The Sandman.” Olympia is an android, a robot made to look and act like a human. When Nathaniel first describes the oddly-perfect woman, he states, “A very tall and slender lady, extremely well-proportioned . . . She did not appear to see me, and indeed there was something fixed about her eyes as if . . . she had no power of sight. It seemed to me that she was sleeping with her eyes open” (Hoffman 8). Olympia is presented as a human and thus, when revealed to be a robot, produces a sense of the uncanny as [4] the humanity of an individual is in question and consequently proven to be lacking. Furthermore, Nathaniel states that Olympia plays the harpsicord and can sing beautifully, but neither the reader nor Nathaniel is ever informed as to how a wooden android can accomplish such feats (Hoffman 15). As such, Olympia constitutes another form of the uncanny in that [1] it seems as though animistic forces are powering this machine. Yet Olympia similarly conjures the uncanny in that, despite her notably stiff and artificial nature, Nathaniel pursues her for her artificial beauty, thus attributing his own desires on to her and masking his own reality. According to Julie Wosk, a professor of English and art history at the State University of New York, “(Olympia) evokes many of the central features found in men’s tales about female simulacra: men’s idealization of the artificial female, their longing for a woman who will validate and complement them” (56). As such, Olympia not only conjures the uncanny within the text, but also casts the uncanny into reality, where male readers must now consider if they are pursuing women as Nathaniel did the wooden Olympia, and [2] have developed a certain premonition that the person they are pursuing is not quite as they seem. This premonition is further embodied in the text when, after Olympia is discovered to be artificial, “Many lovers, to be quite convinced that they were not enamored of wooden dolls, would request their mistresses to sing and dance a little out of time” (Hoffman 20). Thus, while Olympia certainly constitutes a pervasive conduit of the uncanny in “The Sandman,” Freud believes that the Sandman himself is the most striking example of the uncanny within the text.

The Sandman, also identified as the advocate Coppelius and the barometer-dealer Coppola, embodies Nathaniel’s most intense fears and anxieties. Freud’s analysis is astute in that the Sandman certainly constitutes a vivid conduit of the uncanny. The Sandman appears over and over and over again throughout the text – thus conjuring a sense of the uncanny through [3] repetition. The Sandman first appears as Coppelius, the strange advocate of Nathaniel’s father. Every night at 9 o’clock, Nathaniel’s parents would will him to bed with the excuse that the Sandman was coming, a demon who throws sand in the eyes of children and then harvests their eyes. At this time Coppelius would arrive and retreat into Nathaniel’s father’s study and work on strange projects (Hoffman 2). Yet when Nathaniel waits in his father’s study to uncover their activities, he sees Coppelius performing strange acts, thus legitimizing all of his fears. According to Nathaniel, “The Sandman was no longer the bogy of a nurse’s tale . . . No, he was a hideous, spectral monster, who brought with him grief, misery, and destruction – temporal and eternal – wherever he appeared (Hoffman 3). Yet even after this strange encounter, the Sandman reenters Nathaniel’s life, and in different forms. In fact, the Sandman appears later in Nathaniel’s life as Coppola, a strange barometer salesman, who seeks out Nathaniel in order to sell him a telescope (Hoffman 14). While Nathaniel’s close friends and fiancée attempt to convince him that Coppola and Coppelius are not the same person, thus establishing a sense of the uncanny, thus causing Nathaniel to repress his fear of Coppelius, the Sandman appears again as Coppola when he steals Olympia from her creator, Spalanzani, as Nathaniel watches in horror. This repetition constitutes a poignant instance of the uncanny as both Nathaniel and the reader are invited to question the existence of the mystical Sandman, just for him to rear his ugly head again and confirm their anxieties. Nathaniel’s premonitions about the Sandman, for instance, believing Coppola to be Coppelius although Coppola looks completely different, constitute another instance of the uncanny as [3] Nathaniel must consider whether or not his natural instincts are leading him astray. The Sandman also conveys a sense of the uncanny through his use of magic. For instance, when Nathaniel’s father is killed by Coppelius, he describes his father’s body as, “On the floor of the smoking hearth lay my father dead, with his face burned, blackened, and hideously distorted” (Hoffman 5). Coppelius also has an uncanny ability to track down Nathaniel and in different forms, which one could easily attribute to magic. Yet the Sandman’s most sinister trick is the cursed telescope, which causes Nathaniel to become delusional every time he looks through it. As such, Coppelius conjures a vivid sense of the uncanny through [1] his use of magic. Therefore, while Freud is correct in stating that the Sandman and Olympia both constitute causes of the sense of the uncanny, it is Nathaniel who truly embodies the pervasive horror of the uncanny.

While Olympia and the Sandman both constitute poignant conduits of the uncanny, it is Hoffman’s subtle suggestions that pick away at the humanity of the work’s protagonist that ultimately produce the sense of the uncanny that characterizes “The Sandman.” Nathaniel’s humanity is called into question at the very beginning of the work. When Coppelius finds the young boy hiding in his father’s study, Coppelius “Screwed off (Nathaniel’s) hands and feet, afterwards putting them back again, one after the other. ‘There’s something wrong here,’ he mumbled. ‘But now it’s as good as ever’” (Hoffman 4). As such, we have one instance of the uncanny in that human hands cannot be unscrewed, thus [4] calling Nathaniel’s humanity into question. Yet this scene produces a further sense of the uncanny as the Sandman, a demonic sorcerer of sorts, notes that the fact that he can unscrew Nathaniel’s hands constitutes cause for concern. Nathaniel’s questionable humanity thus manifests itself in his interactions with other characters in the work. For instance, Nathaniel calls his fiancé Clara an “automaton” when she tells him to give up his fanatical obsession with Coppelius (Hoffman 12). Nathaniel seems to question his own humanity such that he can no longer distinguish the humanities in others, and he begins to behave very robotically. For instance, Nathaniel initially agrees to duel his closest friend and his fiancé’s brother, Lothaire, after he learns that Nathaniel has upset her. Nathaniel does not consider the emotional toll that such an action would take upon him, thus suggesting that he has become increasingly devoid of emotion, an essentially human quality. Nathaniel seems to lose all emotion when, at the end of the work, driven to madness by Coppelius’ cursed telescope, he attempts to throw Clara from the highest gallery of the town hall, shouting, “Spin ‘round wooden doll! – spin ‘round!” (Hoffman 21). Such suggests that Nathaniel is no longer able to differentiate between animate and inanimate beings, indicating his own humanity to be in question. Perhaps he has become aware of his inhumanity and, realizing that he is limited to the “life” of a machine (“spinning ‘round” in a cyclical, unending form of life), wants to take life from human beings. In the end, when Nathaniel fails to cast his fiancé from the tower, he ultimately jumps off himself and, in the words of the narrator, “Nathaniel lay on the stone on the pavement with his head shattered” (Hoffman 21). This description is of particular importance to the question of Nathaniel’s humanity, as human beings do not shatter – dolls, robots, and other inanimate objects shatter. As such, it seems as though the narrator established Nathaniel’s humanity, or rather lack thereof, in a rather uncanny manner, as no human being wants to believe that an individual could masquerade as a human being for so long without being caught. As such, readers will repress this uncanny notion, hoping that it will never find cause to resurface.

Nathaniel’s humanity as a conduit of the uncanny can be further realized through his interactions with the animatronic Olympia. As discussed earlier, Olympia is aesthetically beautiful but is nonetheless rigid, unfeeling, and replies to all of Nathaniel’s ravings with a simple “Ah, ah” (Hoffman 16). Yet Nathaniel feels as though Olympia completes him and fosters a sense of creativity that he has never before experienced. For instance, after spending a great deal of time with Olympia, “He trembled with inward rapture, when he considered the wonderful harmony that was revealed more and more every day between his own mind and that of Olympia . . . for it seemed to him as if her voice has actually sounded from within himself” (Hoffman 18). The fact that Nathaniel can experience such a rewarding relationship with such an unfeeling machine is highly suggestive of his own humanity. According to Professor Julie Wosk, “In Nathaniel’s distorted vision, the inanimate woman seems sensate, and the real woman, Clara, seems artificial. As he looks at Olympia through his spyglass, he projects onto her his own wishes, and, to him, she appears to have a “loving glance” while Clara seems to have a “cold, prosaic disposition” (57). Wosk posits that Nathaniel’s vision is “distorted,” because no human being in his or her right mind would consider a robot to be more human than an actual human being. Yet what if Nathaniel is not a human being? If such were the case, a relationship with another non-human being would undoubtedly be more fulfilling. One could certainly argue that perhaps Olympia was so realistically-constructed that Nathaniel cannot be blamed for falling for the ruse and, hence, his response is not indicative of his humanity or lack thereof. In fact, one could argue that many of the other students at the university that Nathaniel attended were similarly fooled by Olympia’s physical appearance. Yet the other students at the university make a very clear resolution that they will not interact with her on account of her “strange peculiarity,” and as such they never spend enough time with the machine to unbiasedly assess its humanity (Hoffman 17). Nathaniel, however, spends hours upon hours just staring into Olympia’s eyes, having “conversations” with her, and even kissing and holding her (Hoffman 19). Even Olympia’s inventor, Professor Spalanzani, is surprised and even amused by how duped Nathaniel becomes after spending so much time with Olympia. Observing Olympia and Nathaniel spending time together, Spalanzani says, “You have had a very animated conversation with my daughter” (Hoffman 16). If Nathaniel is more fulfilled by a conversation with an outwardly inanimate machine than a conversation shared with a human being, it would seem as though Nathaniel’s humanity should similarly be called into question. While the reader automatically (robotically, in fact) assumes that the protagonist of a work is human unless otherwise stated, this assumption can be easily displaced by a sense of the uncanny. According to Freud, “An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (19). While a robot masquerading as a human being seems like an imaginary, childish notion, the discrepancies in Nathaniel’s own humanity bring this childish notion further and further into reality, thus creating a pervasive and overwhelming sense of the uncanny.

*Das Unheimliche* can be found in many forms throughout literature and reality, but the most intense form of the uncanny is embodied in questioning the humanity of an individual. While the use of magic can certainly be a cause for concern, one could easily explain a seeming act of magic as a result of slight-of-hand tactics or crafty illusion. Similarly, it is easy enough for an individual to discount certain premonitions and coincidences as simple, laughable flukes. The same can be said of repetition, as one can simply assure oneself that his or her eyes are playing tricks on him or her and move on. Yet there is something about questioning the humanity of an individual that cannot just be reasoned away. Pondering as to whether or not your dolls come alive whilst you sleep creates a certain unshakeable horror; you can never truly know. Considering if your significant other’s movements are too streamlined, his words too well-thought-out, her demeanor too robotic, can cause your stomach to lurch and never quite sit right again. The uncanny nature of questioning the humanity of an individual hinders the mind and terrorizes the soul to an extent which no other form of *Das Unheimliche* can match. As Nathaniel seems to best represent this most pervasive form of the uncanny in this work, it is Nathaniel who constitutes the most pervasive conduit of the uncanny in E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman.”

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