

# From Supernatural to Psychological: A Historical Study of the Concept of the 'Fantastic' in Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' and Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart'

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**Abstract—** This research paper explores how and why the existing tradition of supernatural stories about ghosts and other fantastical creatures, which located terror as an external factor in these unnatural and malignant beings, was transformed in the early to mid-Nineteenth Century into tales that are instead focused on fear in terms of the internal psychology of the narrator and the protagonist. It investigates two well-known examples of psychological horror, E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843).

The research paper deploys a contextual historical approach examining the impact of Romanticism as a philosophy focusing on the individual's mental state and extreme psychological situations, as well as developing scientific ideas about psychology in the period. In my argument it is "madness" (which could affect anyone in society) that became the new fear that haunted and fascinated society, replacing the explicitly external supernatural. I also use Tzvetan Todorov's structuralist theory and model of "the fantastic" and suggest it is possible for a psychological tale to be fantastic in a different way than he envisages, insofar as madness is itself an experience where the victim is never sure if what they experience is real or unreal.

**Index Terms—** Edgar Allan Poe, Psychology, E.T.A. Hoffmann, The Fantastic, The Sandman, The Tell-Tale Heart.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) is often regarded by readers as an unusual, singular and unprecedented figure, one whose work originates the tradition of psychological horror, as opposed to traditional supernatural horror, within the existing genre of the gothic. For example, Benjamin F. Fisher (2004, p. 83) remarks of Poe's fiction in terms of its relationship to the gothic genre: "Haunting is grounded in human psychology instead of vengeful spectres, scary noises, and dilapidated architecture". While I do not disagree with Fischer, this research paper argues that Poe's work is indebted to a significant change in the

historical and cultural context of his literary milieu caused principally by the advent of the Romantic movement. I attempt to outline the reason why the existing tradition of supernatural stories about ghosts and other fantastical creatures, which located shock as an external factor in these unnatural and malicious beings, was transformed in the early to mid-Nineteenth Century into tales that are instead focused on fear in terms of the interior psychology of the narrator and the protagonist. This is not to undermine Poe's very significant achievement but to try to contextualise and historicise his remarkable work.

A significant aspect of this effort in the present research paper is to locate Poe within a broader European tradition of fantastic (rather than Gothic) stories, deeply informed by Romanticism and this would emphasise the psychological dimension of horror. To these ends I examine one of the most well-known and most influential instances of the Romantic fantastic: E.T.A. Hoffmann's celebrated novella "The Sandman" (1816). I argue there are important parallels between "The Sandman" and the short story by Poe that I focus on in this essay, "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). In such stories we move from the outer to the inner world of the protagonist, from psychological normality to abnormality and to what Italo Calvino calls a "hovering between irreconcilable levels of reality" (2009, p. vii), in terms of the primacy of the subjective as opposed to a usually taken-for-granted objective view of reality.

Todorov's model of "the fantastic" and his structuralist exploration thereof which was established in his *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970) has been extremely useful to literary critics. It was originally published in 1970 in French as *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. However, it is synchronic rather than diachronic and thus tends to avoid both questions of literary history and the question of the independent value of the

psychological fantastic as opposed to its place within the genre of the fantastic as a whole. According to Todorov the fantastic is not the same as the traditional supernatural story, which he terms the “marvellous”, because it depends upon cognitive hesitation for the character in the story and perhaps the reader as well, as they struggle to accommodate supernatural events within their understanding of “normal” world and the laws of nature. The character and reader must decide whether a series of events is part of the accepted laws of nature or whether it is a supernatural event. He calls this fantastic a short period of uncertainty. Todorov argues (1975, p. 25), the “fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event”. Todorov (1975, p. 31) continues his explanation by stating that: “[e]ither total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life”.

The problem that this presents to the psychological tale of horror is that in the case of works such as those of Hoffmann or Poe and many others, the supernatural barely enters into the possible realm of explanation as regards the departure from normalcy. Instead, it is madness which takes the place of the supernatural. However, this does not mean these tales are not fantastic as such but rather that the hesitation is between whether the protagonist or characters actions and thought processes can be explained as the work of an extreme imagination or psychological disturbance, or whether they have any standing in the realm of ordinary events. The question is not: are these inexplicable events caused by supernatural or unnatural events? Rather it becomes: are these events the result of an extreme mental state or a disordered imagination? The question the protagonist asks themselves is not whether the events may be the result of the supernatural but whether they are themselves mad? The psychological tale is fantastic in a different way than Todorov envisages, insofar as madness is itself an experience where the victim is never sure if what they experience is real or unreal, although it is not outside of normal events in the way than a genuine supernatural occurrence would be. Some form of mental instability which threatens and dislocates the protagonist’s sense of identity, as well as the normal world of everyday life, is a recurrent feature and plausible explanation in certain stories and frequently serves as an appropriate alternative explanation to that of otherworldly events. Madness has always been an interior and largely contingent threat to the individual, though sometimes in earlier historical periods it was seen as a supernatural event of an exterior nature (for example, as spirit possession). As Andrew Scull (2011, p. 1) suggests: “[m]adness is something that fascinates and frightens us all. It is [...] a condition that haunts the human imagination”. In that respect, it is much like ghosts once were. Significantly the nineteenth century also saw the founding of modern psychology and during the romantic period, a cultural turn towards the value of inner experience, particularly as regards heightened states of emotion and insight (see Rylance, 2002; Richardson, 2001). Madness remains one

of the best examples where inner, subjective experience overwhelms the normal sense of socially established conventions about what is legitimately possible in the world. The change is within a threat that is internal (madness) rather than one that is external (demonic possession or the world of the dead). Madness or as we would now call it, mental illness, remains mysterious and contingent and in many cases is largely untreatable or inexplicable as to why it develops in a particular individual.

## II. THE ROMANTIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXTS FOR READING POE AND HOFFMANN

Literary Romanticism, as a reaction and explicit challenge to the formal order of Eighteenth-Century classicism began in Britain in the shape of William Wordsworth’s and S.T. Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which he later combined with *Songs of Experience* (1794) to form *Songs of Innocence and Experience* is often considered contiguous with the movement but lacked the mainstream impact of *Lyrical Ballads*. It was little read at the time while *Lyrical Ballads* in contrast was a very influential work of poetry. However, the philosophical antecedents of Romanticism include Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712 – 1778), whose extremely influential ideas emphasised the importance of nature over society and the belief that human beings were born innocent and were only subsequently corrupted by society. Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s title to the volume suggests that these experimental poems are hybrid in genre: “lyrics” driven by the need to express and explore a speaker’s experiences and thoughts, and narrative ballads that are drawn from folklore and oral tradition, which like the fairy story which had been revived in France and Germany, often focus on supernatural themes and bizarre adventures. *Lyrical Ballads* shows too that Romantic writing places a renewed emphasis on the individual as the originator of meaning, often in terms of visions or dreams, that focus attention on the immense psychological interiority of the subject, the overwhelming power of imagination and creativity and the value of the autobiographical.

Wordsworth’s epic *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (begun in 1798, but published posthumously in 1850), dramatizes how Wordsworth’s mind is created by experiencing the world but also shows that his imagination can transform that same world. In the famous sequence in Book I of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth recalls himself as a child stealing a small boat, and his imaginative vision and guilty conscience, (“an act of stealth and troubled pleasure”), creates the vivid illusion of a mountain, like a giant, chasing after him across the water (Wordsworth, 2001, pp. 11-12, ll. 375-430).

One evening (surely I was led by her)  
375  
I went alone into a Shepherd’s Boat,  
A Skiff that to a Willow tree was tied  
Within a rocky Cave, its usual home.  
'Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a Vale

Wherein I was a Stranger, thither come  
380

[...]

Discover'd thus by unexpected chance,  
Than I unloos'd her tether and embark'd.  
385

The moon was up, the Lake was shining clear  
Among the hoary mountains; from the Shore  
I push'd, and struck the oars and struck again  
In cadence, and my little Boat mov'd on  
Even like a Man who walks with stately step  
390

Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth  
And troubled pleasure; not without the voice  
Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on,

[...]

With his best skill, I fix'd a steady view  
400

Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,  
The bound of the horizon, for behind  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.  
She was an elfin Pinnacle; lustily  
I dipp'd my oars into the silent Lake,  
405

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat  
Went heaving through the water, like a Swan;  
When from behind that craggy Steep, till then  
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
410

Uprear'd its head. I struck, and struck again  
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,  
With measur'd motion, like a living thing,  
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turn'd,  
415

And through the silent water stole my way  
Back to the Cavern of the Willow tree.

[...]

That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense  
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts  
There was a darkness, call it solitude,  
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes  
425

Of hourly objects, images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live  
Like living men mov'd slowly through the mind  
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.  
430

The young poet's guilty conscience summons up the sense of the sublime, as an encounter with something of infinite greatness compared to

himself and which exceeds any means of apprehension he might have to understand these "unknown modes of being". (See Shaw [2017] for an introduction to the concept of the sublime.) However, it does so through the language of the supernatural. The mountain is "elfin" (like an Elf) and the peaks that seem to threaten him are like animated supernatural giants, "that do not live/Like living men". This fantastical vision haunts his dreams just as seeing a ghost or supernatural entity might do; yet it is unequivocally a product of his own interior consciousness. The reciprocity between the language used to try to denote the sublime's overpowering effect on the individual and the traditional language of the supernatural is one important aspect of Romantic writing which is found in many diverse poems, from Blake's daemonic "The Tyger" (1794), "burning bright, in the forests of the night" (Blake, 2012, p. 203. ll 1-2) to Percy Bysshe Shelley's incantatory "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), where the wind is personified and apostrophized as a "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere/ Destroyer and preserver, hear oh, hear" (Shelley, 2012, p. 1132. ll 13-14). Blake saw literal visions of supernatural beings (Vernon, 2020) and Shelley was a haunted poet fixated on demons and the occult (Shepherd, 2016). As M.H. Abrams argues (1973, pp. 14-15) in *Natural Supernaturalism* even the most anti-religious, naturalistic Romantic writer (and some such as Blake were extremely, if unconventionally, religious) could not shake off the inheritance of supernatural vocabulary and tropes derived from Christianity because it allowed them to talk about the new obsession with individual subjectivity. As Vallins (1999) suggests, romanticism as a cultural movement brought a new interest in the psychology of the individual, while it in turn was affected by the emergence of medical and scientific psychological ideas about the individual and the unconscious as being integral to understanding human beings.

If we turn to Lyrical Ballads then we can see how what Wordsworth referred to as poetic "experiments" often focus on extreme mental states, as well as show a sympathetic interest in those individuals (whom medical doctors at the time) deemed insane or lunatic. Such poems by Wordsworth in Lyrical Ballads include: "The Mad Mother"; "The Idiot Boy"; "Old Man Travelling"; "The Old Cumberland Beggar"; "Resolution and Independence"; "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Female Vagrant". Jonathan Kerr (2014) remarks that Wordsworth was not only interested in ordinary lives but "abnormal" lives and lifestyles: "[...] the uncommon, for lives lived on the other side of 'ordinary'." Wordsworth often explores these characters with a compassionate attention to the social and psychological dimension of their illness such as loss, trauma and destitution and these poems parallel work in the nascent science of psychology of the period.

However, it is arguably Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), included in Lyrical Ballads, which brings Romantic poetry's fascination with the relationship between supernatural and psychological factors at work in abnormal mental states into clearest focus. The poem investigates how the speaker's tormented mind works under extreme and extraordinary circumstances, trapped on a ship haunted by ghosts of his former crew and pursued by retributive

supernatural entities. It is equally possible to read this as an entirely Gothic supernatural story, or as something that only occurs in the mind of the Mariner himself. Is the speaker of the poem punished for killing the “harmless albatross” (Coleridge, 2011, p. 17, l. 123) with a crossbow by the forces of a personified nature, or is it his own guilty conscience that has driven him to madness? His shipmates blame him for having cursed the ship and unable to speak, due to thirst, they hang the albatross silently around the mariner’s neck as a symbol of his guilt. The mariner is the only survivor of the ship because according to his own story he deserves to suffer and he believes this to be the case, but he is also compelled to tell his tale to others and has an uncanny magnetism which compels the wedding guest to listen to him even though he does not wish to (Coleridge, 2011, p.2, ll. 13-20.). There are many examples of supernatural events and characters in the poem; almost too many to list in the space available. Such supernatural events include: the sea snakes from the bottom of the sea; the abrupt materialisation of the enigmatic skeleton ship; the spectre-woman “Life-In- Death” and her skeleton partner, the crew returning to life as zombies and the polar spirits conversing. As the ship becomes becalmed it is more like a two-dimensional painting rather than a live ship with its crew and the sun itself becomes inflamed with the colour of blood (Coleridge, 2011, p. 5, ll. 27-34).

All in a hot and copper sky            27  
The bloody sun at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the moon.            30

Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breathe nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean            34

As Tim Fulford (2002, p. 52) points out, Coleridge deliberately makes the first person narrator unreliable, so we cannot tell whether he is sane or insane: “[h]e may be imagining everything, his guilt making him superstitiously project a supernatural drama onto the natural world. [...] [W]e come to experience the world as the mariner sees and tells it. We plunge deeper and deeper into his mental journey whether or not he is as mad as his glittering eye suggests”. In Coleridge’s poem the mariner does penance for his misdeed and continues to do so by telling his cautionary tale to all those he meets. The poem is a tale of Christian redemption in the way that psychological horror stories are not (Coleridge, 2011, p. 27, ll. 101-104).

He prayeth best who loveth best, 101  
All things both great and small:  
For the dear God, who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.            104

However, in terms of the move towards an emphasis on the voice from within the inner world of the subject, the poem points forward to the idea of psychological horror, which surely the mariner has suffered more than most have. The wedding guest to whom he tells his story (and whom could be said to stand for the reader or listener of the poem) is visibly stunned and dazed (“of sense forlorn”) by the horror of the story, rather than cheered by the idea of Christian redemption and we feel the Mariner is condemned to repeat the story to others that he meets like a kind of aged, wandering spirit rather than a man (Coleridge, 2011, p. 27, ll. 105-112).

The Marinere, whose eye is bright,            105  
Whose beard with age is hoar,  
Is gone; and now the wedding-guest  
Turn’d from the bridegroom’s door.  
He went, like one that hath been stunn’d  
And is of sense forlorn:            110  
A sadder and a wiser man  
He rose the morrow morn.            112

### III. THE EUROPEAN ROMANTIC TRADITION AND E. T. A. HOFFMANN’S “THE SANDMAN”

One difficulty in situating Poe in Romantic literary tradition is that his work, while it is certainly congruent with aspects of the Anglo-American tradition of the Gothic, seems equally informed by the development of the fantastical Romantic short story in France and Germany, epitomised by Hoffmann, as well as by British Romantic poetry. There is little of a Romantic short story tradition in English prose, but in France and Germany the case was different and fantastic narratives that derived from a mixture of folklore, fairy stories and gothic horror were all quite central in the period in terms of the elaboration of Romantic philosophy. Some of these texts were certainly regarded as sophisticated and part of high culture and Romantic thinking, rather than the somewhat scorned popular culture of the Gothic novel (where Poe’s work is typically located by readers), and it is partly for this reason that Poe’s often admittedly sensationalist stories have not been considered part of this larger Romantic tradition. We know Poe was fluent in French and a gifted linguist, and Charles Lombard (1970) argues he was intrigued by the French Romantic tradition, though there is a more mixed critical view as regards Poe’s knowledge of German. Gustav Gruener (1904) argues Poe’s work shows he was most probably a highly competent reader of German and could deal with philosophical and other texts with ease. This helps to explain why there are certain explicit comparisons with Hoffmann either through a direct influence or via Hoffmann’s influence on French writers that Poe had read.

An important aspect of the genealogy of the psychological tale lies in the variety of French and German Romantic stories and novels, which while often ostensibly supernatural in terms of their setting and plot, they also feature a significant exploration of dark Romantic themes (see . Phelan, 2010; Bridgewater, 2013.) Ludwieg Tieck’s “Der blonde Eckbert”

(1797), for example was one of the earliest “dark” fairy tales in German Romantic prose. Mathäs (2001) argues it explores such aspects of individual psychology as narcissism and paranoia and Ripper (1970) shows how it relates to psychological thinking of the time. Jack Zipes (1977) contends these fairy tales are revolutionary in the sense they represent an attempt to make sense of new aspects of society and especially the impact of the reorientations towards Romantic ways of approaching society and the individual. In this regard they are closer to British Romantic poetry in many ways as they deal with similar impulses in their characters and speak to similar concerns about the value of extreme and unusual states of consciousness.

The German Romantic tradition exemplified by Hoffmann also influenced French romantic fiction. Charles Nodier’s “The Crumb Fairy” (“La Fée aux miettes”), written in 1832 is an example of the supernatural fantastic set in Scotland, which as the title suggests was strongly influenced by the Romantic fairy tale tradition, although its target audience is clearly adults not children. Italo Calvino (2009, p. x) argues that it was influenced by Hoffmann’s own fantastic tales. There is also a definite debt to French fairy stories such as those by the influential Charles Perrault (1628 – 1703) who is mentioned at the beginning of the story itself as an author the narrator wishes to emulate (Nodier, 2015, p. 22). Furthermore, it is a story that Poe, as a fluent French reader and speaker, may well have known.

In Nodier’s fantastic tale, a young carpenter, Michael, tells his story while confined to an asylum for lunatics where he has been sent for being deranged. He fell in love and married the physically repellent dwarfish, ancient and fanged “crumb fairy”, so called because she is so impoverished that she must beg for crumbs from the townsfolk. Michael befriended her as a young man when she claimed to be Belkiss, Queen of Saba and after marrying her, he lives with two women – the crumb fairy by day and the beautiful Belkiss by night, who is restored to her full physical glory and radiance according to Michael in his dreams. He is considered mad and possibly dangerous by his fellow townspeople because his internal vision of transcendence is impossible (to them) and wholly subjective based as it is only on his dreams, that is to say society sees it as a false narrative, that bears no relationship to reality. His Enlightened doctors keep him subdued with straightjackets, thumbscrews, mustard baths and other forms of what the narrator considers torments. In this sense the story pits the subjective psychological against the literal and realistic as we are asked to compare the truth of Michael’s view of his love of the “crumb fairy” to that of how the world sees the situation. Is this a supernatural or psychological situation or perhaps both? The text does not clarify the situation and arguably the supernatural has become psychological due to the power accorded Michael’s dreams and visions as having primacy within his role as an individual. Michael is given solace by his imagination and while society judges him mad and confines him to an asylum, he believes he is a visionary rather than a madman. The story itself invites us to side with Michael’s visions rather than society at large, they are harmless and give him a sense of fulfilment.

The story ends with Michael’s mysterious, incomprehensible

escape from imprisonment in the asylum. The story’s third person narrator is shown a strange book in Venice, where Michael, freed by the Princess Mandragore from his torments in the asylum, weds his Queen of Sheba and lives in joy and happiness. With no place in life for Michael’s fantasy he can only become a character in a book about the myth of the crumb fairy. Michael is transformed into a piece of narrative and legend. If the inexplicable disappearance of Michael recalls the similar vanishing of Keat’s star-crossed lovers in “The Eve of St Agnes” (1820), obscured by a raging, icy storm never to be seen again, then it points to the valuing of dreams and legends over rational thought within the romantic tradition. However, Michael’s happy ending seen in more mundane terms suggests that idealised, romantic love is more important and lasting than its earthly equivalent.

“The Sandman” is mainly told by an anonymous but limited third- person narrator rather than the method of an unreliable first-person narrator, which “The Tell-Tale Heart” uses. The narrator (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 99) claims to have known Nathaniel whom he calls “my poor friend, the young student Nathaniel”. However, it also makes use of epistolary narration as it is framed by three letters that the narrator cites in sequence and which act as first-person narratives. The first letter is from Nathaniel to Lothario, the brother of his childhood sweetheart Clara. This letter describes Nathaniel’s childhood trauma when a lawyer called Coppelius, whom he identified with the legendary figure of the Sandman, visited his house and both terrified him and caused, Nathaniel believes, the death of his father during alchemical experiments. The Sandman in folklore was believed to steal disobedient children’s eyes from those children who refused to go to bed and subsequently fed them to his own moon-dwelling children. Nathaniel, when a child is caught peeping from a hiding place by Coppelius and Nathaniel’s father saves his son’s eyes, Nathaniel believes, by pleading for them. One year later, another night of mysterious experiments between Nathaniel’s father and Coppelius causes a fiery explosion in which Nathaniel’s father dies; the mysterious lawyer Coppelius subsequently disappears from the area. Nathaniel tells Lothario in the letter that he believes a barometer-seller who came to his rooms using the name Giuseppe Coppola is really Coppelius, the Sandman in disguise, and intends him harm. The second letter is from Clara to Nathaniel as he inadvertently addressed the letter to Lothario and she sympathises with her conscious but urges him to put what she believes in fantasies to one side: “all the ghastly and terrible things that you spoke of took place only within you, and that real outer world had little part in it (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 95)”. The third letter is from Nathaniel to Lothario where he regrets Clara opened the letter but says (though it is hard to know if he is entirely convinced): “she proves at length that Coppelius and Coppola exist only within me and are phantoms of my ego” (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 98). Nathaniel adds that Spallanzani has a daughter, Olympia, a brief glimpse of whom has made a considerable impression upon Nathaniel. These framing letters serve to give us a first hand insight into Nathaniel’s mind and the trauma that he suffered as a child, but Clara’s comments in the second letter also suggests that the

story we read is that of obsessive mental processes rather than of any supernatural events. This is reinforced by what the narrator who addresses the reader directly subsequently declares (Hoffmann, 1982, p.99):

Have you ever, kind friend, experienced anything which completely filled your heart and mind and drove everything else out of them? [...] Which transfigured your gaze, as if it were seeking out forms and shapes invisible to other eyes, and dissolved your speech into glowing sighing? [...] And you wanted to express your inner vision in all its colours and light and shade and wearied yourself to find words with which even to begin.

It is clear from this that Nathaniel is determined as an obsessive and “The Sandman” is the story of a protagonist in the grip of a psychological compulsion rather than of supernatural events. The scene of horror has shifted decisively into a romantic frame in which it is Nathaniel’s “inner vision”, a characteristically romantic concept, which situates how we as readers should understand the story. We are closer to romantic poems such as those of Coleridge and Wordsworth than to the world of the ghost story. What might seem like supernatural events in the story as the narrator suggests a result of how Nathaniel’s inner vision are at odds with the reality of the world. He quarrels with Clara over the reality of what she regards as these “gloomy” inner visions, Clara responds to Nathaniel’s exhortation as to Coppelius’ objective reality as an “evil force” (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 103):

Coppelius is an evil, inimical force, he can do terrible things, he is like as demonic power that has stepped visibly into life – but only so long as you fail to banish him from your mind. As long as you believe in him he continues to exist and his power is only your belief in him.

Coppola’s talk of offering “pretty eyes” for sale which convinces Nathaniel that he is related to the advocate Coppelius is, for example, shown to be simply the offer of telescopes (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 109). However, it is through this telescope that Nathaniel sees and falls in love with Spalanzani’s daughter Olympia and decides to propose to her, forgetting all about the women he intended to marry, Clara. His friend, Siegmund, tries to warn Nathaniel against his infatuation with Olympia and that something is not right with her (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 116): “[S]he has appeared to us in a strange way rigid and soulless. [...] [I]t seems to us that she is only acting like a living creature, and yet there is some reason for that which we cannot fathom”. Olympia who is uncannily beautiful, but has strange, stiff movements turns out to be an automaton rather than a real person. Nathaniel overhears Coppola and Professor Spalanzani fighting over Olympia as regards who made her. Bursting in, he sees the struggle and that Olympia has no eyes, and is a lifeless doll, as in the conflict they have been removed by Coppola (Hoffmann, 1982, pp. 119-

120). Coppola, who Nathaniel now believes once again is really Coppelius, takes the doll and disappears. Nathaniel, driven mad by the discovery that Olympia is really a doll, tries to strangle Spalanzani in a “hideous frenzy” but is restrained and taken away to an asylum as he starts to spin and dance while intoning the following (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 120):

Then madness gripped him with hot glowing claws, tore its way into him and blasted his mind. “Ha, ha, ha! Circle of fire, circle of fire! Spin, spin, circle of fire! Merrily, merrily! Puppet, ha, lovely puppet, spin, spin!”

Though Nathaniel recovers in the asylum or “madhouse” and is reunited when he recovers with Clara, Lothario and his friend Sigmund and then convalesces under Clara’s kindly care, it is questionable if the obsessions and madness have really left him. Climbing the tower of the town hall in the small town to which he, Clara and Lothario have all moved, Nathaniel and Clara see a small grey moving bush in the distance, which he uses the telescope he bought from Coppola to examine. At the point the madness returns and Nathaniel mistakes Clara for Olympia and tries to throw her off the clock-tower, while spinning and repeating the lines (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 123): “Spin, puppet, spin!” Clara is saved from death by her brother Lothario who breaks down the door to the tower parapet but Nathaniel is still reciting his strange lines. Spying the mysterious advocate Coppelius, who has at the point turned up in the town, Nathaniel throws himself to his death (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 124). “Nathaniel suddenly stopped as if frozen; then he stopped, recognised Coppelius, and with the piercing cry: ‘Ha! Lov-ely occe! Lov-ely occe!’ he jumped over the parapet”. “Lov-ely occe!” is a repetition of what the salesman and barometer maker Coppola cried when selling his spectacles and suggests Nathaniel still believes Coppola and Coppelius are one and the same. While it is uncanny that Coppelius should suddenly turn up in the town and then disappear again afterwards there is nothing to suggest anything particularly supernatural, it is just an odd coincidence. It is Nathaniel’s own madness that leads to both the threat to Clara’s life and Nathaniel’s own death.

Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” [“Das Unheimliche”] (1919) used Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman” in order to elaborate a theory of the how childhood trauma affects later life and produces the effect of the uncanny for the subject. The first part of Freud’s essay is an etymological analysis of the term uncanny while the second part uses Hoffmann’s story as a paradigmatic example of the uncanny. The uncanny is not horrible but nonetheless unsettling and includes examples such as inanimate objects that suddenly become alive (such as the doll Olympia in “The Sandman” ), thoughts causing actions to happen in the real world, meeting one’s double in real life (the *doppelgänger*), the discovery of ghosts and spirits which breaks down the absolute duality between life and death and repetitions over which we have no control ( such as the recurring presence of Coppelius in Hoffmann’s story) and *déjà vu* which means we think we have been somewhere before which we have never visited. As *Jamie*

*Ruers* (2019) remarks: “The uncanny arises when childhood beliefs we have grown out of suddenly seem real. Freud called it “the return of the repressed”. While I do not have space to consider the essay in any detail, it is worth saying that in the “return of the repressed” in this case is that of castration anxiety (the Oedipal fear that the father wishes to castrate the male child whom he sees as a rival). Freud (1955, p. 232) believes Nathaniel has created a dual version of the father in terms of his real “good” father and an “evil”, castrating father in the shape of Coppelius and that the fear of Nathaniel’s eyes being taken away (eyes recur throughout the story as a theme) stands for castration and removal of the testicles. As Freud (1955, p. 231) remarks: “We know from psychoanalytic experience, however, that this fear of damaging or losing one’s eyes is a terrible fear of childhood. Many adults still retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no bodily injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye”. The repressed that returns in the case of Nathaniel is therefore the repressed of castration anxiety which he cannot master and which haunts his ordinary life. What is important about Freud’s argument here is not whether he is right or wrong in his analysis but that the story seems to lend itself to a psychological reading so easily. There seems to be nothing which requires a supernatural explanation as even the doll, Olympia, is not alive as Nathaniel thinks but is just a clockwork-powered simulacrum of a human woman. Freud’s is one such explanation of the source of the horror in the story as the uncanniness of an unresolved castration complex located in childhood which repeats itself in adulthood, but whether we prefer a different explanation, it is to the potential psychological horrors of the mind and how our inner world as an individual affects the outer world to which the story leads us.

#### IV. “THE TELL-TALE HEART” AND MADNESS

Edgar Allan Poe wrote the “The Tell-Tale Heart” in 1843. It is a grisly tale told by a first-person narrator who murders an old man. The terror is both internal (the probable madness of the narrator) and external (the murder itself). It is unclear whether the relationship between the murderer and victim is familial or whether the protagonist works for the old man in some capacity. The narrator commits the murder because of the way the old man’s eye looks at them:

I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – [...] Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees --very gradually --I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (Poe, 1998, p. 193)

According to Lennard J. Davis (2008, pp. 13-15) obsession was traditionally linked to beliefs about demonic possession but came to be seen as mental illness as the Enlightenment unfolded. To the modern reader it is an example of a dangerous but enigmatic obsession as the narrator remarks, “it haunted me day and night”, (using a word that deliberately recalls the supernatural action of a ghost).

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. (Poe, 1998, p. 193)

The pale blueness of the old man’s eye suggests the film of a cataract, but to the narrator it is horrifying and dangerous. However, it can also be interpreted as demonstrating the narrator is superstitious, referring to atavistic discourses of magic and suggesting that they believe the old man possesses “the evil eye”. While explaining why he could not murder the old man until he could see the eye open and awake (Poe, 1998, p. 193) the narrator remarks: “[f]or it was not the old man who vexed me, but this Evil Eye” (capitalisation in Poe’s original). B.D Tucker (1981) suggests this kind of explanation using the superstition of the evil eye seems unlikely, as the narrator does not claim the eye harms him. Tucker prefers the idea that the old man’s eye might reflect the omniscient eye of a higher being who supervises the narrator. However, the curse of the evil eye is about undoing the good fortune of someone who has had great success and arises from envy rather than deliberate hate (see Elworthy, 2003; Dundes, 1992). For those who believe in it, the effects of “the evil eye” is something that could always happen in the future, a potential for harm rather than its actuality. The evil eye does not require the one who possess it to be conscious of its effects, and envy at good fortune could mean nothing here more than a presumed jealousy at the protagonist’s relative youth. The evil eye is a social normalisation of paranoia as it suggests unknown others are always trying to be harmful (thereby projecting internal fears on to the outside world) and significantly the ever-watchful vulture associated by the narrator with the old man’s eye is a bird of ill-omen that waits for potential disaster and misfortune. The narrative in the tale then deliberately slows down and become deliberately repetitious. The narrator visits the old man every night for a whole week, before he murders him and watches the victim in his bedroom painstakingly for hours at a time, using a lantern in those seven days, as the narrator says they need to see the evil eye before deciding to kill the old man (Poe, 1998, p. 194).

The protagonist subsequently dismembers the corpse, secreting it under three floorboards within the house and when the police arrive subsequently to investigate the screaming heard by a neighbour, the protagonist nonchalantly placed their own chair, “upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim” (Poe, 1998, p. 196). However, the unnamed narrator hears the heart of his murder victim beating while talking to the visiting police and this leads to confessing the murder to the authorities.

They heard! – they suspected - they knew! – they were making a mockery of my horror! this I thought, and this I think. [...]

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed! -tear up the planks! – here, here! – i. t is the beating of his hideous heart!” (Poe, 1998, p. 197).

While a ghostly explanation of Poe’s tale is possible, (the spirit of the old man wishes to see his murderer caught and punished), a form of acute paranoia based on an obsession seems rather more likely. The narrator begins his story by asking the reader to not judge him insane, which means the reader is expected to consider this and in fact the narrator denies their actions should be interpreted as madness:

TRUE! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses - -not destroyed --not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? (Poe, 1998, p. 193)

However, the narrator’s interpretation of events (and ambiguity is always about a problem of interpretation), makes us aware from the start that madness is an overarching interpretation of their actions, albeit one they deny. According to Jocelyn Dupont (2010), this occurs at the linguistic level of the text, for example, in the fragmentation caused by the frequent use of dashes, repetitions, exclamations and addresses to the reader which represents madness. Madness is mentioned as a possible explanation from the very beginning by this highly unreliable narrator, (“but why will you say that I am mad?”), if only to deny it, but this address means we are directed to read their story to confirm if it is a story of madness rather than a traditional haunting. The form of madness is not easy to deduce. Brett Zimmerman (1992) argues it is paranoid schizophrenia (which was called “moral insanity” in Poe’s period), and that the protagonist meets contemporary medical definitions of schizophrenia such as creating a false narrative. Kevin J. Hayes and William Giraldi (2015, p. 59) say while the disease “may suggest paranoid schizophrenia” it does not need too precise an identification. The presence of auditory hallucinations, if we interpret the beating of the dead man’s heart that the narrator hears in this way, and the sense of persecution, if we accept there is nothing supernatural in the story, and the lack of the protagonist’s insight into their situation would all lead credence to this retrospective diagnosis. (It is worth saying at this point that most schizophrenics are primarily a danger to themselves and do not commit violent acts against others.) However, none of this is to gainsay that interpretation is not still at stake in the story, as whatever story the narrator tells still shows a surprisingly coherent sense of self and a comprehensible narrative that attempts to explain the strange events, he has been involved in which draws on existing supernatural contexts.

The fact that the narrator is anonymous, we do not even know their gender for certain and there is hardly any referential detail in the text, means the reader knows nothing about them, which

means everything is the narrative becomes potentially more unreliable. We may clarify any uncertainty we have as readers by accepting the narrator is a psychotic who suffers auditory hallucinations after he murders the harmless old man with whom he gets on very well, but this does not mean we can understand his/her motives. The narrator claims it is a ghost story insofar as they hear the still-beating heart and therefore his/her interpretation is at odds with ours, if we read this as a tale of insanity. Christopher Benfey (1993, p. 28), remarks the story aims to show that: “people are themselves enigmas to one another” and arguably even as a story of madness the narrator remains inexplicable to the reader because madness is fundamentally inexplicable. Everything in the story is about reading for interpretation; the narrator’s interpretation of the old man is a form of reading, as is the narrator’s attempt to interpret the reasons for his own actions and finally the reader of “The Tell-Tale Heart” must attempt to interpret the protagonist’s account of his inexplicable actions. While as a ghost story it has a phantom according to the narrator, it appears far more the story of a disturbed paranoiac whose acutely transfigured state leads him to mistake his experiences for something which exists in the real world. We can interpret the narrator’s actions but we can never be finally certain because the narrator’s motivation seems so obscure. Poe’s central achievement in the ghost story of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, is to begin to put ambiguity of interpretation at the centre rather than to simply replace it with a psychological explanation, recognising the potential usefulness of the inherent unreliability of first-person narration. In the end though it is a fantastic story because while the narrator claims that they are not insane and there was an evil eye that menaced them, it is we the reader who instead see this as a tale of madness in which madness functions as an inner threat that challenges our sense of what is everyday life.

#### CONCLUSION

Poe’s and Hoffmann’s stories exemplify the development of the psychological tale of terror, a transformation of the traditional supernatural story. Although the case of Hoffmann’s Nathaniel in “The Sandman” is uncanny and discomfiting rather than gory and grisly when compared to that of Poe’s unnamed narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, both stories are shocking, sharing a focus upon the estranged interiority of the subject or protagonist rather than on the normal order of the everyday, outer world. In Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” the demons that haunt the protagonist could come from inside his own mind rather than from the outside, in the old-fashioned shape of ghosts or supernatural beings. The Mariner’s unnecessary killing of the albatross is as inexplicable in certain respects as Nathaniel’s hostile actions towards his beloved Clara in “The Sandman” or the killing of the old man in “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Both stories appear to ask the question to some degree: what makes a normal, apparently sane person become insane and dangerous to themselves and to others? Madness is random, contingent, and inexplicable; at once fearful and fascinating. Madness speaks to the other side of Romantic creativity where the individual’s mind is



transforming the world in a dangerous and disastrous fashion, rather than in a noble and exalted way. Hoffmann's and Poe's protagonists seem clearly in the grip of overwhelming obsession and the creation of false and confused narratives. While in the case of "The Sandman" the narrator tells us this in so many words (Hoffmann p.99), in the case of Poe's unreliable first-person narration we draw this impression from what the narrator tells us. In Hoffmann's story, Nathaniel becomes so deranged he tries to murder the woman he loves, Clara, seemingly mistaking her for the clockwork doll he had also once loved, Olympia. Nathaniel ends the story with his own death, as he jumps spinning and screaming like a lunatic from the town-hall tower. While, in Poe's story, the narrator is led by his own imagination to murder the harmless old man that he cares for.

The asylum or sanatorium often serves as location and frame for such stories about madness (Nathaniel is confined in one for recovery after the incident with Olympia and Spalanzani) and madness is suggested to explain the protagonist's bizarre behaviour. This indicates the growth of medical psychology as a subject at the time and registers the pioneering work of those such as Dr. Phillipe Pinel (1745 -1826) who recognised that Enlightenment values could lead to more successful treatment in the asylum (see Weiner, 2008). The treatment of the mentally ill was being transformed at the beginning of the nineteenth century compared to older views of madness, but it was also becoming a subject of public discourse and dialogue. While Poe's narrator is not explicitly said to be confined to an asylum, the reader feels his bizarre justification of the murder he has committed and his efforts to prove his sanity are likely to be coming from an asylum, or else in prison awaiting a judicial decision that will surely send him to one. It is such aspects of the two stories that drew psychoanalysts to view them as case studies of mental illness and the psychological structure of the Oedipus complex. Freud's influential analysis of "The Sandman" argues the uncanniness demonstrated the repetition compulsion of childhood castration anxiety writ large, with the advocate Coppelius standing for the symbolic Father. Marie Bonaparte, another psychoanalyst, sees "The Tell-Tale Heart" in her seminal psycho-biographical reading of Poe as a psychodrama of symbolic Oedipal murder, the old man resembling Poe's foster father John Allan with whom he had a very difficult relationship (Bonaparte, 1949, pp. 549-565). Though unlike Oedipus who mistakenly commits parricide against his biological father Laius, there is no desire for atonement through self-punishment in "The Tell-Tale Heart".

Focusing on Poe's stories alone can obscure the historical context that explains this transformation of the traditional supernatural tale and reading "The Tell-Tale Heart" in conjunction with Hoffmann's "The Sandman" allows us to see more easily the significant impact of Romanticism (in the German and French setting as well as the British) and the developments of psychology within the period. In this case the fairy-tale and the gothic are equally important as influences. Reading Poe as a solitary figure and decontextualised tends to dislocate his admittedly populist and lowbrow cultural

productions from the highbrow, literary discourse of Romanticism. The reader of both Hoffmann's and Poe's tales is directed towards the internal potentiality of the subjective and the way that the subject's view of the world can seem to determine what is objective reality, making the invisible visible, treating the imaginary as reality: all fundamental themes of Romanticism. Therein lies the possibility of false narrative and extreme mental situations as Calvino (2009 p. vii) regards this nineteenth century 'visionary fantastic genre': 'its main theme the relationship of the reality of the world that we inhabit [...] and the reality of the world of thought which lives in us and controls us'. As readers of Poe and Hoffmann we are much like the Wedding-Guest who is forced to hear Coleridge's Ancient Mariner's hellish story of perdition and suffering. The Wedding-Guest wants to refuse to listen to the "grey-beard loon" but is held captivated like a child by the Mariner's tale, and "cannot choose but hear" (Coleridge, 2011, p.2, ll. 13-20).

What we fear to hear is the world inside of us and how it can change so quickly from calm to storm, from sanity to madness. In Todorov's structuralist terms neither Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" nor Hoffmann's "The Sandman" are tales of the marvellous, nor do they show the obvious hesitancy between the real and the supernatural inexplicable which Todorov claims is essential for the genre of the fantastic. Yet, madness is at once real but makes the real potentially unreal for its victim. Read in psychological terms they become the psychological fantastic where the protagonists are unable to distinguish between the impossibility of madness and reality and they play to our fear as readers that at any point that we may be suddenly overwhelmed by the tumult of madness and unable, like the protagonists of these two stories, to distinguish the world of reality from startling visions that arise within ourselves. "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Sandman" in the context of the onslaught of madness suggest Friedrich Nietzsche's alarming comment in *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* (2003, p.1): that "of necessity we remain strangers to ourselves".

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