

ETA Hoffman's The Sandman- the Uncanny in Narrative Fiction

Maisnam Arnapal

Gargi College, Delhi University, New Delhi, India

Email: m.arnapal@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper will explain the production of the uncanny effect in fiction and how it is far different from the uncanny that we experience in reality. The argument begins with Freud's explanation of the differences and his own psychoanalytic interpretation of the uncanny in E.T.A. Hoffmann's gothic tale, "The Sandman" (1815). The paper will look at the complex narrative structure of the story and explain the insufficiency of Freud's argument as well as re-affirm his claim that the uncanny in fiction is indeed far more complex and fiction has the authorial license and the privileges which can arouse or inhibit the uncanny effect.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, uncanny, E.T.A. Hoffmann, The Sandman, Kenan, narrative structure.

In his work, *The Uncanny* (1919), Sigmund Freud dons the hat of a literary critic by distinguishing the notion of 'uncanny' in reality and in fiction. According to him, the uncanny cannot be simply defined as something that is unusual and is thus horrible, grotesque and fearful. He explains this by giving examples of the two German

words – *heimlich* (meaning homely and secret) and *unheimlich* (which is unhomely and revealed). He says that the two words overlap their meanings and even reverse their meanings according to the context. Likewise, the uncanny in reality and in fiction operate in different ways and hence careful examination is required to study each of them. In fact, the uncanny in fiction is far more complex. As Freud puts it, "many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature, and that in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life" (155-6). He gives an example that "in the world of fairy tale, feelings of fear, and therefore of the uncanny, are totally ruled out" (158). Therefore, a close study of the unique narrative structure of a work of fiction can reveal the production of the uncanny effects as we will see in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story, "The Sandman" (1815).

It should be noted that Freud's study on the uncanny was a response to Ernst Jentsch's "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906) and both of them gave different analytical studies of the uncanny in "The Sandman". Jentsch attributes the uncanny to what he calls as 'intellectual uncertainty' – the doubt or confusion



regarding an object is animate or inanimate. He (Jentsch) considers the automaton (Olympia, the robotic doll) of the story as the cause behind the fear psychosis of Nathanael and is the source of the uncanny element in the story. However, this intellectual uncertainty, Freud says, is not enough to explain the uncanny phenomenon in the story. For Freud, as usual, the past history of the character is of extreme importance and he says, “[the] uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148). He further explains that the uncanny in “The Sandman” is less to do with the robotic doll, but it is actually the ‘castration fear’ Nathanael has towards the alter-ego of his father in the form of an evil father, Coppelius. The motif of doppelganger or doubling in the story; that is, Spalanzani and Coppola representing Nathanael’s father and the evil Coppelius respectively also aggrandizes the uncanny effect in the story. The fear of losing eyes which Freud equates with the fear of castration was developed during Nathanael’s early childhood only to be materialized once again when he enters adulthood and encounters Professor Spalanzani and Coppola. This unintended repetition and the castration fear owing largely to the figure of the ‘Sandman’, a mythical character from the folklore, which Nathanael has been frightened of since his early childhood, are what Freud posits as the forces behind the uncanny element in the story.

Are these psychoanalytic paradigms given by Jentsch and Freud at all convincing enough to explain the production of the uncanny effect in the story? A close look, beside the psyche of the character, will

otherwise tell a complex story behind the uncanny. In other words, we shall see the authorial skills by closely examining the narrative structure of the story.

Michiel Schrape in his essay, “A Trail of Disorientation” (2003), examines Freud’s (mis)use of literary texts (“The Sandman” in this case) to assert the latter’s theory on the uncanny. In his brief summary of “The Sandman”, Freud has failed to acknowledge the different perspectives that Hoffman uses in his story. His analysis is purely based on one perspective: that is, of Nathanael. According to Neil Hertz (“Freud and Sandman,” 1979):

Freud retells his story, what is remarkable is that everything he includes within quotation marks has already appeared within quotation marks in “The Sandman”: that is, he quotes nothing but dialogue, things said by Nathanael or by some other character, the words of the narrator have completely disappeared, replaced by Freud’s own, and we have illusion of watching Nathanael’s actions through a medium considerably more transparent than Hoffmann’s text (qtd. in Schrape).

The above argument beckons us to the claim made by Freud in *The Uncanny* that “the writer can intensify and multiply the uncanny effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience” and his belief in “the possibilities of authorial license and the privileges that fiction enjoys in arousing and inhibiting a sense of the uncanny” (157).

“The Sandman” begins in an epistolary form with multiple perspectives through Nathanael and his fiancée Klara as the intra-homodiegetic narrators. Kenan in her *Narrative Fiction* (1983) defines intradiegetic narrators as narrators who are characters in the first narrative told by



extradiegetic narrator (that is, the third person narrator introduced in the story after the three letters in the story) (97). The epistolary narratives in the beginning give us a first person narrative which is more immediate than the third person narrative of the omniscient narrator. The reason being, as already mentioned, both Nathanael and Klara are homodiegetic narrators too; that is, they also take part in the story. Epistolary narratives are neither subsequent nor prior narrative but they are interpolated or intercalated. As Kenan says, “the writing of letters serves both to narrate an event of the recent past and to trigger an even of the near future” (93).

The third person narrator in the story is a heterodiegetic narrator (he does not take part in the story) and hence he has a ‘limited omniscience’ - his narrative is limited only to the present life of Nathanael. This ‘limited omniscience’ serves as the compromise between the immediacy of the first person narrative and the mobility of the third person narrative. This objective point of view in the story does not delve much into the mind of the characters and thus represent a minimal interpretation of their psyche. In the words of Kenan:

A covert extradiegetic narrator, especially when he is also heterodiegetic, is likely to be reliable. [...] when an extradiegetic narrator becomes more overt, his chances of being fully reliable are diminished, since his interpretations, judgements, generalizations are not always compatible with the norms of the implied author (106).

The multiple perspectives in the story illustrate how the ‘truth’ behind Nathanael’s post-traumatic stress disorder is relative to the way it is witnessed. For Nathanael, “the Sandman was no longer the

hobgoblin of the nurse’s tale” (281) but rather the wicked lawyer Coppelius who disappeared after his (Nathanael’s) father’s death and now re-appears as the barometer dealer, Giuseppe Coppola. Whereas Klara writes that the fear associated with Coppola/Coppelius is due to the fear Nathanael developed during his childhood with the nurse’s tale about the dreadful Sandman (much similar to Freud’s explanation as the primitive fear in the case of repressed childhood complexes). In addition to all these, there is also the mother’s tale about the Sandman, “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 any longer, as though someone had sprinkled sand into them” (278). According to Kenan,

Intradiegetic narrators, especially when they are also homodiegetic, are on the whole more fallible than extradiegetic ones, because they are also characters in the fictional world. As such, they are subject to limited knowledge, personal involvement, and problematic value-schemes, often giving rise to the possibility of unreliability (106).

E.T.A. Hoffmann plays with various narrative levels to question the borderline between reality and fiction or to suggest that there may be no reality apart from its narration (Kenan, 96-7). We will pick up two points from Kenan’s study of the relations between narrative levels in a story and apply them to Hoffmann’s “The Sandman”.

First, the narratives from Nathanael’s point of view are hypodiegetic narratives which are embedded within the diegetic narrative of the third person narrator of the story. The hypodiegetic level offers an

explanation of the diegetic level and here the story narrated is of primary importance rather than the act of narration (also known as ‘explicative function’; Kenan, 95). The letters exchanged between Nathanael and Klara, and Nathanael and Lothar give us an account of the various incidents happened in Nathanael’s childhood which he links to his present state of fear psychosis. It is Hoffmann’s ingenuity as a writer that the extradiegetic narrator appears later in the story and says,

“So, gentle reader, do accept the three letters, which my friend Lothar has been kind enough to communicate, as the outline of the picture to which I will endeavour to add ever more colour as I continue with the story...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” (289-90).

This is indicative of the German Romantic association with the gothic - the dark and the supernatural and the extraordinary. Hoffmann and other German Romantic writers turn to the Medieval age and the German fairy tales represent ‘the uncanny, the mysterious, the horrible, the grotesque and the prosaic merge and juxtapose with startling and deceptively simple ease’ (“E.T.A. Hoffmann”, *The Literary Link*).

The second is that of ‘thematic function’, where the relations between the hypodiegetic and diegetic levels are that of analogy (similarity and contrast). The motif of doppelganger in the story-Coppelius/Coppola, Klara/Olympia, and so on- verges on identity making the various narrative levels mirror of each other which recur infinitely (Kenan invokes *mise en abyme* in French).

This close study of the narrative structure re-affirms Freud’s claim that the uncanny in fiction is far more complex than the uncanny we experience in reality. The ingenuity of the storytellers, their play with the narrative structures, the authorial license and so on account for what is uncanny or not irrespective of their counterparts in real life. Hence, the psychoanalytic theories prescribed by Jentsch and Freud are incomplete to explain the uncanny effect in fiction. The seductive power of fiction lies in its narrative which could be as complex as the human psyche. To quote Kenan, “there may be no reality apart from its narration” and each storyteller knows that he/she has the power to seduce their reader by blurring the borderline between fiction and reality.

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