

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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E.T.A.Hoffman

The achievement of E.T.A. Hoffman. Ernest Theodor William Hoffman (1776-1822) was one of the most influential and multi sided Romantic artists. He was a writer of fantasy and horror stories—of great sophistication and charm; delights to children—a music critic, a distinguished jurist, and a composer. It was through his influence on the classical music of his period that he most firmly fixed his reputation: the ballet *Coppelia* is based on two stories by Hoffman, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Ballet* is based on Hoffman's story, 'The Nutcracker and the Mouse King,' and Robert Schumann's Kreisleriana is based on a character in a Hoffman story; Jacques Offenbach's suite, *The Tales of Hoffman*, is centered around a reshaped hero, who is basically E.T.A. Hoffman. To speak of these influences is to indicate the kind of popular but fine legacy Hoffman left behind.

The Life of E.T.A. Hoffman. The author, born in Koenigsberg in 1776 was child to two barristers, and though they divorced, and he spent his formative years with his mother and her family, including his sisters, he remained imprinted by the earlier exposure to the culture of the law, to which he would turn as the most stable grounding of his career life. Educated at the Burgschule in Koenigsberg, Hoffman established a firm foundation for his multifaceted life. (Already in gymnasium he proved his high level of versatility, in piano playing, drawing, drafting, and sketch writing. His gift for caricature/cartooning was marked from the outset.) From that point he moved through a series of artistic related jobs, and romantic attractions—the most intense to Dora Hart, a married woman ten years his age—and yet despite the instability of his personal life managed to sustain an ever active creative process. That process was jumpstarted, in the midst of financial difficulties, by a visit to the Dresden Art Gallery in 1798, where his experience of the paintings of Correggio and Raphael was hugely inspiring. By 1804 Hoffman acquired a post as artistic director in Warsaw, where he found himself for a while in highly congenial artistic company, which was welcome, for throughout the surrounding years he and his family had been buffeted by the storms of Napoleonic War, its conflicts with Prussia, and the gradual dismantling of the Holy Roman Empire. By 1814 Hoffman was once again back at the practice of law, his security. He died at the age of forty six, after a life of brilliant but fragmentary achievement.

Kater Murr. *The Life and Opinions of Murr the Cat* (1820-1822) is one of Hoffman's most careful and deeply expressive stories, and a few words on it may be the easiest portal into Hoffman's imaginative trend. Murr is a cat, who has written his autobiography, to enlighten children. He is naïve and full of himself. However the editor of the autobiography, 'E.T.A. Hoffman,' has made the story complex by (mistakenly) using the proof sheets of another volume, a biography of the Romantic composer Kreisler, as scrap paper, and in the process of printing—during which the cat has clawed into tatters much of the book on the composer-- the autobiography of the cat and the biography of the composer have been randomly mixed up together. The result is a counterpoint and confusion of tales, from which emerges a blend of the seamlessly readable cat story with the shredded and tortured tale of the composer. The self-reflective observation, on the turmoil of the Romantic sensibility, could not have been more cunningly put before us.

Reading

Primary source reading

Wittkop-Menardeau, Gabrielle, *E.T.A.Hoffman*, 1991.

Secondary source reading

Ruprecht, L., *Dances of the Self in Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffman and Heinrich Heine*, 2006.

Further reading

Peters, U.H., *Studies in German Romantic Psychology: Justinus Kerner as Psychiatric Practitioner, E.T.A. Hoffman as a Psychiatric Theorist*, 1990.

Original language reading

Feldges, Brigitte; Stadler, Ulrich, *E.T.A. Hoffman, Epoche-Werk-Wirkung*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Does *Kater Murr* seem to you an extraordinarily 'modern' literary construction? Are you familiar with any such structural complexities and play, in literature prior to 1800? What kind of critical and philosophical mindset seems to be implied, by being able to see the world and fiction in that way?

Hoffman is well known for his mystery stories, ghost stories, and tales of the occult. (Edgar Allen Poe is one of those writers most indebted to him.) Do you see this literary genre as an organic element in the Romantic sensibility? We know that the Romantics were concerned with 'spiritual issues,' but do you understand the genesis, in Romanticism, of fascination with the supernatural?

Excerpt <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/46447/>

THE JESUITS' CHURCH IN G——.

BY E. T. A. HOFFMANN.

Packed up in a wretched post-chaise, which the moths had left from instinct—as the rats left Prospero's vessel—I at last, after a break-neck journey, stopped half dislocated, at the inn in the G—— market-place. All the possible misfortune that might have befallen me had lighted on my carriage, which lay, shattered, with the postmaster at the last stage. Four skinny, jaded horses, after a lapse of many hours, dragged up the crazy vehicle, with the help of several peasants and my own servant; knowing folks came up, shook their heads, and thought that a thorough repair, which might occupy two, or even three days would be necessary. The place seemed to me agreeable, the country pretty, and yet I felt not a little horror-struck at the delay with which I was threatened. If, gentle reader, you were ever compelled to stop three days in a little town, where you did not know a soul, but were forced to remain a stranger to every body, and if some deep pain did not destroy the inclination for social converse, you will be able to appreciate my annoyance. In words alone does the spirit of life manifest itself in all around us; but the inhabitants of your small towns are like a secluded orchestra, which has worked into its own way of playing and singing by hard practice, so that the tone of the foreigner is discordant to their ears, and at once puts them to silence. I was walking up and down my room, in a thorough ill-humour, when it at once struck me that a friend at home, who had once passed two years at G——, had often spoken of a learned, clever man, with whom he had been intimate. His name, I recollected, was Aloysius Walter, professor at the Jesuits' college. I now resolved to set out, and turn my friend's acquaintance to my own advantage. They told me at the college that Professor Walter was lecturing, but would soon have finished, and as they gave me the choice of calling again or waiting in the outer rooms, I chose the latter. The cloisters, colleges, and churches of the Jesuits are everywhere built in that Italian style which, based upon the antique form and manner, prefers splendour and elegance to holy solemnity and religious dignity. In this case the lofty, light, airy halls were adorned with rich architecture and the images of saints, which were here placed against the walls, between Ionic pillars, were singularly contrasted by the carving over the doorways, which invariably represented a dance of genii, or fruit and the dainties of the kitchen. The professor entered—I reminded him of my friend, and claimed his hospitality for the period of my forced sojourn in the place. I found him just as my friend had described him; clear in his discourse, acquainted with the world, in short, quite in the style of the higher class priest, who has been scientifically educated, and peeping over his breviary into life, has often sought to know what is going on there. When I found his room furnished with modern elegance, I returned to my former reflections in the halls, and uttered them to the professor aloud.

"You are right," said he, "we have banished from our edifices that gloomy solemnity, that strange majesty of the crushing tyrant, who oppresses our bosoms in Gothic architecture, and causes a certain

unpleasant sensation, and we have very properly endowed our works with the lively cheerfulness of the ancients."

"But," said I, "does not that sacred dignity, that lofty majesty of Gothic architecture which seems, as it were, striving after Heaven, proceed from the true spirit of Christianity, which, supersensual itself, is directly opposed to that sensual spirit of the antique world which remains in the circle of the earthly?"