

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

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“The Sand-Man”

The stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776 – 1822) have often been adapted for the stage. Tchaikovsky’s beloved ballet, the perennially performed *Nutcracker*, is based on Hoffmann’s short story “Nutcracker and the King of Mice”; another indelible adaptation is Offenbach’s opera *Tales of Hoffmann*.



Coppola, for the Incurable Theater production, *The Sandman*.

One of Hoffmann’s eeriest and most beloved stories is “The Sand-Man.” Chicago’s Incurable Theater brought this classic tale to life with eye-popping puppetry for the 2002 Children’s Humanities Festival.

Mine the mysteries of “The Sand-Man” with your students, using the classroom suggestions on the next pages.



Illustration by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

“The Sand-Man”: A Lesson Plan

E.T.A. Hoffmann’s characteristic stories deal with doppelgangers and automata, with the descent into madness, and with the boundaries between reality and fantasy. They coerce a reader’s conviction, even if just for a moment, that there is something mysterious and horrible about the mundane world. He reminds us that the supernatural lurks uncomfortably close at hand.

“The Sand-Man” can be a point of departure for discussion of a number of evocative themes. The tale lends itself to more than just literary examination: it opens doors onto the fields of psychology, the history of science, and artificial intelligence. The background information and classroom suggestions that follow are a springboard for further exploration.

The Sand-Man is anthologized in *The Best Tales of Hoffmann*, edited by E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967). The complete text of “The Sand-Man” can also be accessed electronically at: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/7207/sand1.html>.



Nathaniel, for the Incurable Theater production, *The Sandman*.

Background

About the Author

Ernst Theodor Amadeus (originally Wilhelm) Hoffmann was born in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia) in 1776. He studied law, and in 1800 took a post as a Prussian Law officer. His passion, however, was music, and in his spare time he pursued a career as a composer. When he lost his job as a public official in 1806, he joined a theater in Bamberg. He held positions as conductor, critic, and music director in Bamberg and Dresden until 1814. Though he composed the ballet *Arlequin* (1811) and the opera *Undine* (1816), Hoffmann never achieved greatness as a composer. His creative pursuits shifted, therefore, to writing, the métier in which he would achieve lasting fame. He wrote two novels and more than fifty short stories, many of them collected in *Nachtstücke*, or *Strange Stories*. Still, he earned his living as a legal official in Berlin, and an ambivalence about his roles as bureaucrat and artist underlies many of his writings. In 1819 he was named to a commission investigating treasonous activities, which he later resigned in protest. He died of a debilitating illness in 1822.



Self-portrait of E.T.A. Hoffmann

In 1827, Walter Scott wrote of E.T.A. Hoffmann:

He appears to have been a man of rare talent,—a poet, an artist, and a musician, but unhappily of a hypochondriac and whimsical disposition, which carried him to extremes in all his undertakings; so his music became capricious,—his drawings caricatures,—and his tales, as he himself termed them, fantastic extravagances. . . . We do not mean to say that the imagination of Hoffmann was either wicked or corrupt, but only that it was ill-regulated and had an undue tendency to the horrible and the distressing. Thus he was followed, especially in his hours of solitude and study, by the apprehension of mysterious danger to which he conceived himself exposed; and the whole tribe of demi-gorgons, apparitions, and fanciful spectres and goblins of all kinds with which he has filled his pages, although in fact the children of his own imagination, were no less discomposing to him than if they had had a real existence and actual influence on him.¹

A Synopsis of "The Sand-Man"

Freud, in his essay "The Uncanny," gives an excellent synopsis of the story:

This fantastic tale opens with the childhood recollections of the student Nathaniel. In spite of his present unhappiness, he cannot banish the memories associated with the mysterious and terrifying death of his beloved father. On certain evenings his mother used to send the children to bed early, warning them that "the Sand-Man was coming"; and, sure enough, Nathaniel would not fail to hear the heavy tread of a visitor, with whom his father would then be occupied for the evening. When questioned about the Sand-Man, his mother, it is true, denied that such a person existed as a figure of speech; but his nurse could give him more definite information: "He's a wicked man who comes when children won't go to bed, and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of the heads all bleeding. Then he puts the eyes in a sack and carries them off to the half-moon to feed his children. They sit up there in their nest, and their beaks are hooked like owls' beaks, and they use them to peck up naughty boys' and girls' eyes with."

Although little Nathaniel was sensible and old enough not to credit the figure of the Sand-Man with such gruesome attributes, yet the dread of him became fixed in his heart. He determined to find out what the Sand-Man looked like; and one evening, when the Sand-Man was expected again, he hid in his father's study. He recognized the visitor as the lawyer Coppelius, a repulsive person whom the children were frightened of when he occasionally came to a meal; and he now identified this Coppelius with the dreaded Sand-Man. As regards the rest of the scene, Hoffmann already leaves us in doubt whether what we are witnessing is the first delirium of the panic-stricken boy, or a succession of events which are to be regarded in the story as being real. His father and the guest are at work at a brazier with glowing flames. The little eavesdropper hears Coppelius call out: "Eyes here! Eyes here!" and betrays himself by screaming aloud. Coppelius seizes him and is on the point of dropping bits of red-hot coal from the fire into his eyes, and then of throwing them into the brazier, but his father begs him off and saves his eyes. After this the boy falls into a deep swoon; and a long illness brings his experience to an end. Those who decide in favor of the rationalistic interpretation of the Sand-Man will not fail to recognize in the child's fantasy the persisting influence of his nurse's story. The bits of sand that are to be thrown into the child's eyes turn into bits of red-hot coal from the flames; and in both cases they are intended to make his eyes jump out. In the course of another visit of the Sand-Man's, a year later, his father is killed in his study by an explosion. The lawyer Coppelius disappears from the place without leaving a trace behind.

Nathaniel, now a student, believes that he has recognized this phantom of horror from his childhood in an itinerant optician, an Italian called Giuseppe Coppola, who at his university town, offers him weather-glasses for sale. When Nathaniel refuses, the man goes on: "Not weather-glasses? not weather-glasses? also fine eyes, fine eyes!" The student's terror is allayed when he finds that the proffered eyes are only harmless spectacles, and he buys a pocket spy-glass from Coppola. With its aid he looks across into Professor Spalanzani's house opposite and there spies Spalanzani's beautiful, but strangely silent and motionless daughter, Olympia. He soon falls in love with her so

violently that, because of her, he quite forgets the clever and sensible girl to whom he is betrothed. But Olympia is an automaton whose clock-work has been made by Spalanzani, and whose eyes have been put in by Coppola, the Sand-Man. The student surprises the two Masters quarrelling over their handiwork. The optician carries off the wooden eyeless doll; and the mechanic, Spalanzani, picks up Olympia's bleeding eyes from the ground and throws them at Nathaniels' breast, saying that Coppola had stolen them from the student. Nathaniel succumbs to a fresh attack of madness, and in his delirium his recollection of his father's death is mingled with this new experience. "Hurry up! hurry up! ring of fire!" he cries. "Spin about, ring of fire—Hurrah! Hurry up, wooden doll! lovely wooden doll, spin about—" He then falls upon the professor, Olympia's "father," and tries to strangle him.

Rallying from a long and serious illness, Nathaniel seems at last to have recovered. He intends to marry his betrothed, with whom he has become reconciled. One day he and she are walking through the city market-place, over which the high tower of the Town Hall throws its huge shadow. On the girl's suggestion, they climb the tower, leaving her brother, who is walking with them, down below. From the top, Clara's attention is drawn to a curious object moving along the street. Nathaniel looks at this thing through Coppola's spy-glass, which he finds in his pocket, and falls into a new attack of madness. Shouting "Spin about, wooden doll!" he tries to throw the girl into the gulf below. Her brother, brought to her side by her cries, rescues her and hastens down with her to safety. On the tower above, the madman rushes round, shrieking "Ring of fire, spin about!"—and we know the origin of the words. Among the people who begin to gather below there comes forward the figure of the lawyer Coppelius, who has suddenly returned. We may suppose that it was his approach, seen through the spy-glass, which threw Nathaniel into his fit of madness. As the onlookers prepare to go up and overpower the madman, Coppelius laughs and says: "Wait a bit; he'll come down of himself." Nathaniel suddenly stands still, catches sight of Coppelius, and with a wild shriek "Yes! 'Fine eyes—fine eyes!'" flings himself over the parapet. While he lies on the paving-stones with a shattered skull the Sand-Man vanishes in the throng.²

Classroom Ideas

Automata

- Ask the students to pick one notable, historical automaton, and write a “biography” of its “life.” The chess-playing Turk created by Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen is one excellent example, though the automaton selected need not be human in form. Many automated animals were produced in the 15th to 18th centuries, notably Leonardo da Vinci’s lion, as well as automata that replicated the human and animal voice. Edgar Allen Poe witnessed the Turk, and wrote an article attempting to explain how the chess playing automaton worked.³ If the students choose the Turk, ask them to try to explain how it works before they research the answer.⁴



The Turk

- Jacques de Vaucanson (1709-1782), a celebrated inventor of automata, once created a life-sized replica of a duck. It cackled, swam, drank, ate, and—to the delight and amazement of onlookers—excreted.⁵



Vaucanson's Duck

Have the students analyze and explain what differentiates an automaton from the thing on which it was modeled. What criteria would they use? If it sounds like a duck

and walks like a duck, why isn't it a duck? What really differentiates Vaucanson's invented duck from a "natural" duck?

- In 1950, Alan Turing conceived a test consisting of a person asking questions via keyboard to another person and to a machine. Turing believed that if the person administering the test could not distinguish between the machine and the human after a reasonable amount of time, the machine was somewhat intelligent. Devising a computer that can pass the Turing Test has become the "holy grail" of artificial intelligence. Can your students think of another way to detect machine intelligence?
- Have students compare "The Sand-Man" to one of the following: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Golem*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (and the movie version *Blade Runner*), Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*, or the recent movie *A.I.*
- Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* is expressly concerned with the demarcation between human and human artifact, and the rules that should apply to intelligent machines. Ask students what rules they would impose on their creations.

Psychology and the Uncanny

- Is Nathaniel mad? Is the story of Coppélius/Coppola a projection of Nathaniel's labored mind, influenced by a traumatic childhood experience? Is the story thus a story of the growth of mental illness and a descent into madness? Or did Nathaniel actually have these experiences? Can both interpretations be true? What is the evidence for either of them in the story?
- Ask the students to find all the references to eyes in the story. (These include: Coppélius's threat to destroy Nathaniel's eyes, the destruction of the dancing doll's eyes, the fact that "coppola" in Italian means eye-socket.) Ask students to formulate an explanation as to the significance of those references.
- Freud, in the essay mentioned above, uses "The Sand-Man" to analyze the nature of the uncanny. Have them read an excerpt from Freud's essay. How would they describe what the "uncanny" is? Have they ever experienced it? What do they think of Freud's explanation of its genesis? If they agree or disagree, why?
- The students could read any of a number of "classic" horror stories or novels: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *The Tell-Tale Heart*, or Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* are several examples. Have them compare the kind of horror in the novel or story with that found in "The Sand-Man." How does each author treat the theme?

Notes

1. Walter Scott, "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition" in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* 1, no. 1 (July 1827): 74, 81.
2. From: Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 227-230.
3. For the text of Edgar Allen Poe's review of the chess-playing Turk, see: <http://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/maelzel.htm>.
4. See: Tom Standage, *The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine* (New York: Walker & Company, 2002).
5. For more on this and other automata, see: http://access.tucson.org/~michael/cb_2.html.

ILLINOIS LEARNING GOALS

- 1.B.4b** Analyze, interpret and compare a variety of texts for purpose, structure, content, detail and effect.
- 1.C.5b** Analyze and defend an interpretation of text.
- 1.C.5c** Critically evaluate information from multiple sources.
- 2.A.3a** Identify and analyze a variety of literary techniques (e.g., figurative language, allusion, dialogue, description, word choice, dialect) within classical and contemporary works representing a variety of genres.