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## George MacDonald and E.T.A. Hoffmann

Raphael Shaberman

**T**he influence of the German Romantic writers of the latter 18th and early 19th centuries on the work of George MacDonald has long been acknowledged, not least by MacDonald himself. The most important of these was Novalis: George MacDonald's first book was a small collection of translations from Novalis, an interest which MacDonald maintained until the end of his creative life. This reflected MacDonald's mystical side. However, as to the construction of his fantasies and fairy tales, the influence of Hoffmann was considerable, and it is doubtful whether they would have taken the form they did had it not been for Hoffmann's example. Though well-known in his own day—and not only in his native Germany—Hoffmann is today remembered for a handful of his tales, the inspirer of the ballets “Nutcracker” and “Coppelia,” and Offenbach's opera “Tales of Hoffmann.” Thus he remains largely unread, as to his greater output, and unrecognised for the pioneer he was. Indeed he is often mistaken for Heinrich Hoffmann, author of the notorious “Struwwelpeter,” or even for Professor Hoffmann, the conjurer. His achievements in music were many-sided; he was one of the earliest and finest of music critics, he influenced Schumann, who named one of his suites for piano “Kreisleriana” (“Johannes Kreisler” was a pseudonym of Hoffmann). He was also a conductor, teacher, composer, producer of opera, designer and painter of scenery, etc. His opera “Undine” is a nice link with MacDonald, for the story on which it was based was the latter's favourite fairy tale: the author, Fonqué, was known to Hoffmann.

Fascinating though it would be to deal more fully with the extraordinary range of Hoffmann's talents and achievements, we must turn now to his writings. His stories combine a high degree of originality and complexity. We will here summarise certain basic elements (not presented in order of importance):—

(i) Use of actual locations (Dresden, Paris, Rome, Venice) and actual people (the composer Gluck, Mile de Scudéry). Hoffmann achieved authenticity in his locations by a thorough study of **[end of page 31]** guide books (he never realised a life-long ambition to visit Italy but could speak Italian and met Carlo Gozzi, remembered today for inspiring the plots of the operas “Turandot” and “Love for Three Oranges.”

(ii) Intimate author/reader relationship. Hoffmann takes us into his

confidence to make us think more about what is really happening.

(iii) Deliberate use of ambiguity (re: time, place, state of mind).

(iv) Use of the fairy tale as a vehicle for personal expression, transforming it into psychological fantasy. The traditional fairy tale is simple in structure and meaning.

(v) The multi-dimensional, in which two dimensions, differing in time and place, are superimposed. This is linked with the use of ambiguity, so that we are uncertain as to which is “real” and which is “imaginary.” From the point of view of the Romantic, *both* are real, being different aspects of reality. In “Nutcracker and Mouse-King,” the Nutcracker, revealed as a fairy prince, takes Marie to his kingdom. Does this kingdom exist? Yes, answers Hoffmann, “for those who have eyes to see.” Likewise, in “The Golden Pot,” Lindhorst is both a citizen of Dresden *and* the owner of an estate in Atlantis”

(vi) The invention of new literary forms. His novel, “The Life and Opinions of Tom-Cat Murr” is unique: it is highly complex and impossible to summarise. (Hoffmann had a tom-cat named Murr of which he was very fond.) The story oscillates abruptly between Murr’s autobiography and that of Johannes Kreisler (see above). The only other work which bears comparison (but very remotely) is Lewis Carroll’s “Sylvie and Bruno.” Hoffmann invented the detective story (it was not E.A. Poe)—“Mlle de Scudery” is the complete thing, with amateur sleuth (an aristocratic spinster of 73!), false clues, an innocent suspect, an incompetent police inspector—and a psychopathic killer. **[32]**

(vii) Revelation of the Unconscious and its formidable power. Hoffmann reveals for the first time the Psychopath (see above) and the Paranoid (Nathaniel, in “The Sandman”). This prompted research which laid the foundations of modern Psychiatry. Hoffmann looked deeply into human thought and motivation.

(viii) The omnipotence of Child-Vision. Hoffmann shared this with his fellow Romantics—we find this too in Hans Andersen, Lewis Carroll, E. Nesbit, George MacDonald and others. The Romantics sought to see through the eyes of a child, since this vision is fresh, intense, free of prejudice, and ready to enter naturally into the world of the imagination: adult vision, on the other hand, is narrow, inflexible, and filtered through preconceptions. The romantic Imagination, by its very nature, rejects stultified orthodoxy, pre-ordained patterns repeated mechanically. It is fascinating to see the Romantic impulse, which is based on emotion, feeling and individual expression, growing throughout the 18th century as a prelude to its full

flowering in the following century. Hoffmann recognised Mozart and Haydn as prophets of Romanticism in music and Beethoven as the first fully-fledged Romantic composer—indeed he was the first to appreciate the true depth of Beethoven’s genius, at a time when the latter was not highly regarded as a composer.

The influence on George MacDonald of some of the elements outlined above are self-evident, though one could point specifically to “The Gold Pot” and “Princess Brambilla” as being particularly significant. Hoffmann wrote only two “Kindermärchen”—”Nutmacker and Mouse-King” (1816) and “The Strange Child” (1817), but he made no sharp distinction, believing that children could read “The Golden Pot,” for instance, and get something out of it. Hoffmann’s influence also extended to Lewis Carroll, E. Nesbit, and C.S. Lewis, in his “Narnia” cycle. Is it mere chance that the children in “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” and those in “Nutmacker and Mouse-King,” enter fairyland in the same manner, namely through *fur coats* in a *wardrobe*?

Hoffmann and MacDonald are placed schematically in the accompanying [33] diagram, “Fantasy Literature, 1800-1950.” 1800 is an approximate date, but useful for demarcation. Previously the fairy tale was largely oral, and followed a basic and simple pattern. These began to be assembled in book form, and soon the fairy tale took off as a literary form in its own right. The “composed” fairy tale, as we may call it, became a vehicle for individual expression. Other parallel forms of fantasy are indicated quintessentially.

After enjoying a vogue in his own day, interest in Hoffmann gradually waned. Perhaps he was—and is—too original; certainly he is difficult to read. Today only a handful of his stories are in print, his musical compositions and criticism are virtually forgotten. George MacDonald has fared rather better—at least his stories are more accessible. Nevertheless it would be fair to say that the achievements of both these gifted writers have yet to be accorded their true worth. [34]

### **E.T.A. Hoffman: A Biographical Sketch**

Born in Königsberg in 1776, he was christened Ernst Theodor Wilhelm: later he dropped Wilhelm in favour of Amadeus in honour of his idol Mozart. However, this change was never made formal, and his initials are given as E.T.W. on his tomb, and also in the British Library Catalogue. His parents separated when he was 2 or 3 years old. He was brought up by

a bachelor uncle and maiden aunt. Uncle Otto was not unkind but extremely rigid in demarcating the patterns of daily life—he did not understand at all the gifted precocious child in his care. The boy determined to become independent at the earliest opportunity (this concern for independence [sic] and for individual human rights remained with him for the whole of his life) and he took up law, becoming one of the finest legal minds in Prussia. He also studied art, music, and, in the last twelve years of his life, became famous for his fantasy tales. In 1802 married a Polish girl, Maria Trzinska; their only child died aged 2 in an epidemic. Eventually he settled in Berlin, where died after a long debilitating illness in 1822 at the age of 46.

### Notes

The best biography of Hoffmann in English is “Hoffmann: Author of the Tales” by Harvey Hewett-Thayer, Princeton University Press, 1948. An excellent essay on his music appears in the current edition of Grove’s Dictionary of Music. Hoffmann’s influence on George MacDonald is referred to in Greville MacDonald’s “George MacDonald and his Wife” (1924), Robert Lee Wolff’s “The Golden Key” (1961) and William Raeper’s “George MacDonald” (1987). Greville quotes from a letter by his father dated 1856 in praise of “The Golden Pot”: according to Greville, its faculty of “bi-local existing,” as he calls it, “is suggested better by George MacDonald in ‘Phantastes,’ ‘The Princess and the Goblin,’ ‘The Back of the North Wind’ [sic] . . . and ‘Lilith.’” (pp 297, 298). **[35]**