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The idea of harmony in E. T. A. Hoffmann's fairy tales

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Abstract. E. T. A. Hoffmann, often labeled as "ghost Hoffmann", also embodies the feature of harmony and unity, which is particularly prominent in his fairy-tale writings. The idea of harmony permeating his fairy-tales is illustrated in the harmonious spirit of his fairy-tale protagonists with sensitivity and kindness, the free and idyllic harmonious realm as their final destination, as well as Hoffmann's inclusive view on fairy tales. The fairy tales also reflect the writer's positive outlook on life—observing reality through literary mirroring—and his eclectic, all-embracing aesthetic inclination. Deeply influenced by Novalis, Hoffmann's idea of harmony offers meaningful inspiration for the development of cultural-ethical progress in contemporary China and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords: E. T. A. Hoffmann, harmony, Novalis, community with a shared future for mankind

1. Introduction

E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), a German writer, has repeatedly been ranked alongside Goethe and Schiller among Germany's most renowned and influential authors. He is also hailed as the German writer with the greatest global impact between Goethe and Heine [1]. Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Alexander Herzen and Fyodor Dostoevsky were among his admirers. Hoffmann's writings have become an indispensable part of textbooks the secondary schools and universities in contemporary Germany, especially his classic short stories such as *The Sand-Man* and *The Golden Pot*. He is frequently known as "the spectral Hoffmann", for many of his works feature phantoms, ghosts and mysterious terrifying forces. Moreover, he authored the collection *Night Pieces*, which assembles tales of night, mystery and horror. Nevertheless, in his writings "filled with ghost narrative" [2], ideas of harmony flourish, especially within his fairy-tales.

Renowned Hoffmann scholar Steinecke offers the following comment: "What constitutes the unique style that keeps Hoffmann's works being read, interpreted and inspiring artists nearly two hundred years after his time? The core lies in the comprehensive breadth of his writing… Hoffmann excels at combining apparent light-heartedness with artistic sophistication, delighting a broad readership, stirring their curiosity and captivating fellow artists" [3]. This quotation testifies to the multi-faceted nature of Hoffmann's oeuvre. To date, abundant scholarship has focused on his magic, grotesquery and absurdity, while few studies have explored his dimension of harmony. Yet the idea of harmony stands out distinctly in Hoffmann's fairy-tales.

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2. Manifestations of the idea of harmony

From the perspective of creation, protagonists in Hoffmann's fairy-tales usually are artists. Among them, there are musicians, poets, university students and the like. They share clumsy demeanour alongside virtuous, upright dispositions. Endowed with a sensitive, benevolent harmonious spirit, they hear the call of a free, blissful harmonious realm and ultimately become the fortunate dwellers of Atlantis, the paradise of supreme bliss. Theoretically, the practice of his inclusive vision of fairy-tales transcends the literary propositions of Romanticism, securing his place in the history of fairy-tale literature.

2.1. The sensitive and benevolent harmonious spirit

Most characters in Hoffmann's fairy-tales are ordinary citizens from real-world society, especially artist-types. These figures with civilian backgrounds represent the emerging bourgeoisie of Germany in that era. They tend to possess sensitive yet fragile temperaments. Unwilling to be confined by social conventions and yearning for an unrestrained life, they notice things overlooked by ordinary people. For this very reason, they encounter extraordinary occurrences far more often than others and become protagonists in Hoffmann's fairy-tales.

The contrast between Anselmus and philistine townsfolk is clearly laid out in *Chapter X of The Golden Pot*. Under the spell of evil magic, Anselmus makes copying errors and gets trapped into a crystal glass bottle: "His limbs were immobile; yet his thoughts crashed against the glass, producing shrill reverberations that dizzied his brain. He could not hear the inner voice of his soul, but only incoherent gibberish" [4]. By contrast, five other young students being confined in identical glass bottles experience the situation entirely differently. They do not think they are being confinned in the narrow space; they even declare: "Never have I felt so comfortable as today" [4]. Why do people perceive the same predicament so divergently? Through Anselmus, the author reveals the root cause: "They know nothing of freedom, nor a life filled with faith and love, and so they cannot feel the pressure of the shackles" [4]. Here Hoffmann explicitly juxtaposes the artistic temperament against the mentality of philistine burghers, highlighting the distinctive traits of the former group.

More crucially, these artist-figures possess "the child-like temperament of the poet". They are lack of polished social tact, and are inherently pure, sincere and kind-hearted. Archivist Lindhorst chooses Anselmus to transcribe his symbols and scripts chiefly out of trust in his "diligence and good-will", rather than his technical skill. In solemn tones, the old archivist tells the young man: "Only through struggle can one attain happiness beyond mortal existence… only inner spiritual power can fend off corruption… Persevere, and faith and knowledge shall guide you toward your immediate goal" [5].

Like children, these artists prioritize inner feeling, resist rigid rationality and sometimes stubbornly stand their ground. Such qualities embody core Romantic attributes. Romantics prioritized the expression of individual sentiment and subjectivity above all else; in literary creation, they defied formal rules, blurred generic boundaries and strove for all-encompassing works. Hoffmann's child-like poetic protagonists perfectly embody these Romantic tenets. They detest rigid social conventions and champion freedom and harmony. For instance, Balthasar in *Little Zaches, Called Cinnabar* holds deep disdain for conceited, pedantic professors. Unlike folk fairy-tales, Hoffmann's works are complex fairy-tale novels, or Kunstmärchen (art-fairy-tales), populated largely by these pure-hearted artist-characters. His fairy-tales are written for readers who retain a child-like soul. Only equipped with such a sensitive and benevolent harmonious spirit can artists perceive supernatural summons and enter Atlantis, the free and blissful harmonious realm.

2.2. The free and blissful harmonious realm

Though Hoffmann's writings are frequently set amid dark, menacing environments shrouded in nocturnal mystery and horror, his fairy-tales repeatedly evoke a paradise—Atlantis. According to legend, Atlantis lay near the Strait of Gibraltar in the Atlantic Ocean. It is said to be an island with extraordinary advancement in civilization. Plato's dialogues *Timaios* and *Kritias* contain some of the earliest surviving accounts of Atlantis. The fabled land was submerged beneath the ocean. Its inhabitants once built a highly developed civilization and amassed immeasurable treasures. Its people were virtuous, honest, endowed with transcendent wisdom and courage, thus leading carefree, joyful lives. Within Western imagination, Atlantis symbolizes wisdom, prosperity, freedom and wonder. However, it was destroyed by catastrophic floods triggered by earthquakes.

Hoffmann repeatedly states in his works that miracles, freedom and blessed life exist solely on the poetic land of Atlantis. His depicts its splendor in his fair tales: "Slender crystal pillars of the palace soar toward the azure firmament, forming lofty vaults. Glimmering clouds drift by on golden wings; crimson dawns and sunsets alternate. Circling, glittering stars seem to dance to music…" [6]. Atlantis symbolizes natural beauty and harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. In Hoffmann's writing, only pure-hearted, virtuous artists are worthy of dwelling on this fairy-tale land.

Atlantis also represents Hoffmann's own ideal utopia. He earnestly wished for the reality being as good as this paradise. Regrettably, Germany in his time was fraught with corruption, warfare, bloodshed and slaughter. Its populace endured hardship; the state remained conservative and backward. Hoffmann lived through a turbulent period across continental Europe, as the rising bourgeoisie clashed for power against feudal aristocracy. Artists of civilian origin formed part of this emerging bourgeois class. They aspired to earn artistic renown and stable livelihoods through personal striving. Yet political fragmentation, rigid feudal hierarchies and the inherent weakness of the bourgeoisie frustrated their ambitions. They were deprived of support in the historical context; their artistic pursuits were obstructed. Thus Hoffmann resorts to his protagonists' longing for Atlantis to voice his own yearning for a unified, harmonious nation. Simultaneously, this motif conveys his critique and discontent with the harsh reality.

2.3. The inclusive view of harmonious fairy-tales

The fairy-tale genre affords unparalleled scope for imaginative writing. Hoffmann re-defined traditional fairy-tale conventions, embodying what August Schlegel termed the boundless quality that transcends limits and embraces everything. This inclusive conception grants Hoffmann a prominent position in the history of fairy-tale literature in Europe, even the whole world. He added the subtitle "*A Modern Fairy-Tale*" to his most celebrated fairy-tale *The Golden Pot*. In a letter to a friend while composing this work, he revealed his creation idea: "To let all that is absurd and fantastical effortlessly seep into reality is a bold idea. To my knowledge, no German writer has attempted this before" [7]. Clearly, in his "modern fairy-tale", the fantastical was merged with the everyday reality. Retaining the Romantic imagination inherent to fairy-tales, his vision establishes intimate ties with real-world life—a feature that distinguishes him from other fairy-tale authors.

Novalis, known as "the formulator of fairy-tale poetics", maintained that fairy-tales ought to "abolish all logical connections, erase all boundaries and conjure powerful illusion" [8]. He emphasized primal innocence and child-likeness, viewing magical fairy-tales as evocations of humanity's primordial past. He argued that "the true fairy-tale poet" should also be "a foreseer of the future" [9]. Novalis theoretically validated the literary value of fairy-tales and laid foundational principles for Romantic fairy-tale writing. Ludwig Tieck is regarded as "the founder of modern art-fairy-tales" [10]. His "gloomy disposition, fearing ghosts yet being delighted by them, a melancholy verging on madness, paired with lucid, sober reason asserting the rights of light" [11] made his fairy-tales filled with absurdity, frenzy and "mysterious profound sentiment" [2].

While inheriting Novalis's principles of fairy-tale fantasy, Hoffmann insisted on grounding fairy-tales in lived reality. He criticized the fairy-tales imitating the oriental style: "They conjure rootless, weightless worlds set against vaguely Oriental backdrops, worlds that fade away before our eyes. Such fairy-tales may make people feel cold and lifeless; they cannot ignite the soul nor stir the imagination" [12]. Hoffmann admired tales such as *One Thousand and One Nights*: "Cobblers, porters, monks and merchants populate these stories. They are figures you might encounter on city streets. Essential human life transcends particular epochs and customs; Its core remains eternally constant" [13]. His choice of artists as central characters powerfully exemplifies this commitment to "truth in real life". Stories of civilian artists hold greater aesthetic appeal for general readers than narratives with monarchs, beasts or supernatural monsters.

Furthermore, other writers tended to erase concrete contextual markers. Characters, time-frames, locations and events are set in vague, fictional realms. Whether in Goethe or Novalis' writings, fairy-tale kingdoms remain coherently fantastical and mysterious. By contrast, Hoffmann fearlessly integrates real-world elements. His artists inhabit in the ordinary bourgeois society, plunge abruptly into magical dimensions, then return to the mundane world again. So Scholar Steinecke comments:

"All of Hoffmann's artistic output is infused with meticulous imagination. Daily life and fantasy interpenetrate and transform one another; boundaries dissolve between reality, dream and the unconscious. From this emerges an extraordinarily unique world, forming the core of his art-works. In this sense, his writing constitutes the all-inclusive work-of-art" [3].

Some contemporary critics disapproved of Hoffmann's violation of established fairy-tale conventions. Through Theodor, one of the Serapion Brethren, Hoffmann countered that these texts were not intended for young children: "Children cannot follow the subtle threads unifying the seemingly disparate narrative strands". Lothar, another character in his fairy tales, extended "children's fairy-tales" as literature for "children endowed with imagination" [3].

In summary, Hoffmann's idea of harmony is underpinned by dialectical and systematic thinking. Contrasts between artists and philistines, together with contrasts between Atlantis and secular society manifest his dialectical vision. Atlantis as an ideal society demonstrates systematic thinking, constructing an organic whole where humanity and nature coexist harmoniously. Rejecting rigid pre-existing literary formulas, Hoffmann built an original fairy-tale poetics anchored in real-world experience, displaying systematic openness.

3. Theoretical sources of the idea of harmony

Scholarly debate persists over whether Hoffmann ought to be categorized as a Late-Romantic. Nonetheless, his inheritance and creative transformation of Early-Romantic ideas are widely acknowledged.

3.1. The schlegel brothers

Though Hoffmann had no personal contact with the Schlegel brothers, he endorsed and practiced their Romantic theories. While employed in Warsaw, Hoffmann befriended his judicial colleague Itzig. "Born into a Jewish household, Itzig knew many writers and attended August Wilhelm Schlegel's famous aesthetic lectures" [3]. The two had frequent contacts. Through Itzig's extensive library, Hoffmann gained access to literary works in that era, notably Romantic texts. As demonstrated by his fairy-tale aesthetics, his creative practice was deeply shaped by Romantic theory.

Besides fairy-tale poetics, Hoffmann's "Serapion Principle" bears strong Romantic characteristics. Saint Serapion was a religious hermit. In his short-story collection *The Serapion Brothers*, Hoffmann depicts a hermit named Serapion who dwells in a forest near a city yet believes he inhabits a desert and identifies

himself as the historical saint. He immerses himself fully in fantasies others deem absurd, yet leads an extraordinarily peaceful, harmonious life. Four literary friends who comment on each other in the collection are captivated by his imaginative power; they argue that artistic creation demands this same visionary spirit. Naming themselves the Serapion Brothers after the hermit, they formulate the "Serapion Principle", which champions subjective free imagination. This constitutes a continuation and practical realization of Early-Romantic literary theory.

3.2. Novalis

Early-Romantic thinkers advocated for the full development of human potential. In Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, cultivating "complete human beings" equipped with rational thought, moral judgment, imagination and emotional depth was called for. Early-Romantic writers possessed far-reaching erudition, surpassing Enlightenment predecessors. Accordingly, they held poets in high esteem.

Novalis emphasized the poet's vital role: "Poets are a group who manifest themselves through language. Poets maintain an innate harmonious bond with nature; only poets can perceive the essence of humanity and the natural world most profoundly, serving as a bridge uniting the two" [14]. In Novalis's novel *Henry of Ofterdingen*, Klingsohr describes the poet's soul: "An innocent soul resembles light. It is equally serene, sensitive, supple and piercing, equally powerful and quietly pervasive. Like this precious element, it spreads evenly across all things, revealing their enchanting manifold forms" [15]. Novalis's poets correspond closely to Hoffmann's artist-protagonists. They are kind-hearted, sensitive and sincere, capable of understanding realities unperceivable to ordinary people and expressing them through art or words.

Hoffmann's Atlantis follows Novalis's "Golden Age". The concept of the Golden Age originates in Hesiod's epic *Works and Days* in 8th-century BC, describing an era when gods walked among humans. And the temperatures were mild, societies being stable, and humanity dwelt in harmony with nature.

Novalis narrates this Golden Age in *Hymns to the Night* and *Henry of Ofterdingen*, picturing "plants and trees flourishing luxuriantly; all beings seem animated, speaking and singing" [15]. Chapter Three of *Henry of Ofterdingen* is a fairy-tale recounting the island of Atlantis. Novalis's works do not appear in Hoffmann's library inventory. Hoffmann only noted briefly in his diary entry of 17 February 1812: "Read Novalis; greatly inspired" [16]. Even so, textual parallels confirm their affinities in conceptualizing ideal societies. Both of them envision Atlantis as a realm of harmony between humans and nature, benevolent interpersonal relations and all-round human development.

Building upon Novalis and Tieck, Hoffmann formulated his distinctive fairy-tale aesthetics through artist-protagonists and precise narrative craft: "If you wish to climb a ladder toward higher realms, its feet must be firmly anchored in real life, then every person may ascend" [12]. Despite harsh critical reception in his era, Hoffmann's fairy-tales won immense popular favor. In Berlin, "he became a beloved author, especially among women. He quickly grew into one of Berlin's most magnetic figures; for culturally inclined travellers, catching a glimpse of or visiting Hoffmann became an indispensable part of their itinerary" [3]. This popularity probably stems precisely from his inclusive harmonious fairy-tale vision. His writing neither floats detached from mortal existence nor reduces entirely to straightforward realism. Building extensively upon Romanticism, he merges Romantic self-expression with social critique. As works in a transitional literary period, they carry rich connotations and broad appeal, winning over countless readers and eminent authors alike.

4. Practical significance of the idea of harmony

Hoffmann's fairy-tales reveal his inclusive harmonious outlook, which offers valuable insights for advancing cultural-ethical civilization in contemporary China.

4.1. Implications for individuals and families

Artists in Hoffmann's works are perceptive, sincere and benevolent, preserving child-like qualities that many contemporary Chinese people are lack of. Chinese education encourages children to acquire social etiquette and become "sophisticated" from an early age. Though it is reasonable for personal growth, emphasis on maturity at an early age may suppress genuine individual needs. The unmet reasonable developmental needs can hinder the formation of independent personalities, preventing young people from growing into self-reliant, socially productive citizens. For adults, retaining child-like imagination remains equally vital. Child-like wonder fuels imaginative capacity. Against the backdrop of China's economic growth and industrial restructuring, the nation advocates mass entrepreneurship and innovation. Innovation presupposes creativity and imagination. Heavy reliance on standardized answers within school curricula impedes the cultivation of innovative talent. Genuine innovation requires recognizing the value of child-like imagination in educational philosophy alongside institutional safeguards for creative thinking.

The core of the "poetic temperament" embodies sincerity, kindness and mutual trust. These are qualities conducive to harmonious family-life. Many modern families suffer from mistrust or excessive expectations between parents and children, or between spouses, generating domestic friction. Open-hearted communication and mutual trust among family members naturally foster domestic peace and happiness.

4.2. Implications for nation and society

Core Socialist Values articulate national-level goals of prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony; social-level orientations of freedom, equality, justice and rule-of-law; and civic-level norms of patriotism, dedication, integrity and amity. Multiple points of convergence exist between Hoffmann's idea of harmony and values promoted in present-day China, testifying to universal human aspirations for ideal societies, albeit with shifting emphases across historical contexts. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Germany remained politically fragmented as industrialisation commenced. Intellectuals including Hoffmann yearned for a unified, strong homeland. Today, China advances toward building a modern-socialist nation, prioritizing national unity and comprehensive social progress.

Atlantis's vision of harmonious human-nature relations and amicable social intercourse represents both Hoffmann's utopian fantasy and modern humanity's collective longing. Xi Jinping has pointed out: "The modernization we pursue is one characterized by harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature". Ongoing industrialization and modernization worldwide encroach upon natural habitats and degrade ecological systems. Global society recognizes the urgency of environmental protection, yet restoration proves far harder than destruction. International collaboration is required to utilize natural resources rationally. Only by living in balance with nature can human societies achieve sustainable development. Harmonious relations with the natural world lay foundations for positive interpersonal dynamics and a progressive social ethos.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, capitalism emerged in Germany. While other Western European nations forged ahead with the Industrial Revolution, Germany remained dominated by

feudal power. It was politically fragmented and its populace afflicted by hardship. Intellectuals in that era strove to envision their ideal homeland through diverse literary endeavors. Yet given the intellectuals' inherent weakness and monarchical authority, their attempts at national renewal ended in failure. Amid war-turbulent times, Hoffmann's ability to retain his sensitive benevolent spirit and keep yearning for a free harmonious realm deserves high admiration. His inclusive harmonious fairy-tale aesthetics — tolerant, broad-minded and all-embracing—remain instructive for modern literary and artistic creation. Only through open-minded reception of diverse works can contemporary arts sustain innovative vitality. The idea of harmony embedded in Hoffmann's fairy-tales bears witness to his enduring hopefulness. It also deepens our textual understanding, enabling us to draw upon his aesthetic vision to approach literary works, and indeed everyday-life, with greater tolerance and compassion.

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