

# Essentialist feminism in the sandman



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" could easily be read as a satire that rails against meek, docile women. However, when looking at the form of feminism in this story, one finds that the protagonist Nathaniel seems to struggle with an abstract mind, while the women who surround him are focused on the material world. The women he grew up with, namely his mother and fiancée Clara, clearly show materialistic principles, leaving Nathaniel alone with his more philosophically-inclined thoughts until he is able to project a similar mindset on the automaton, Olympia.

Essentialism states that men are more attracted to abstract thinking while women, whose unimaginative minds cannot comprehend the abstract, are drawn to the materialistic. For the purposes of this argument, "material thought" will be defined as Nathaniel's idea of the prosaic: unimaginative, factual, and lacking deeper emotions. This definition arises when Clara writes to her fiancé and all but diagnoses him of derangement, and is promptly discounted and ignored. The letter is described as "sensible," but it does not satisfy Nathaniel's preference for the mysterious. Meanwhile, abstract can be described as Nathaniel's idea of the poetic: mystical, deeper thinking. This concept emerges in Nathaniel's reaction to Clara's letter when he tries to "initiate her into the mysteries" by reading her books with much more imagination than she would have been used to. Nathaniel is trying to draw her in to something a little less logical and practical and more fanciful. In other words, he is trying to show Clara the abstract, but she resists him.

Nathaniel's inclination towards the abstract can be seen in his insistence of his mysticisms. When he tries to explain to Clara his idea of "dark powers," he starts to read "all sorts of mystical books" to her in an attempt to

persuade her to understand. After being rejected, he goes on to write a dark poem about their relationship and how Coppelius destroys it (Hoffman 10). Rather than viewing Coppelius as something in his own mind to be conquered, or taking some other practical approach (as an essentialist woman would), he allows his dark imagination to take over his childhood memories. In doing this, he is thinking in the abstract, as essentialism ordains men do.

The very first material-abstract struggle Nathaniel faced occurred with his mother. When Nathaniel, having been sent to bed early, asked who the Sandman was, her only answer was that the Sandman wasn't real (Hoffman 1). Unsatisfied, he turned to his sister's nurse for a much more gruesome tale of torn-out eyes. Nathaniel, in his abstract thinking, was unable to accept his mother's practical explanation of the childhood story and sought out reasoning from a mind that operated more similarly to his own. The mother, meanwhile, is much more materialistic-minded. She rejects the information that isn't realistic and pragmatic. In neglecting to comply with her son's imagination the mother fulfills the essentialist woman's role. Clara is described as being clear-headed, practical, and clever. Yet Nathaniel eventually rejects her, claiming she is "cold, unreceptive" and "prosaic" (Hoffman 9-10). What Clara calls intellect, Nathaniel sees as closed-minded and unaccepting. Clara is always reaching for the practical explanation, as seen in the letter and again when Nathaniel returns home to her with his stories. She refuses to be convinced of things she can't feel or experience for herself, and so tells herself that they don't exist. This pattern can be seen all throughout the story, with Nathaniel stressing his preference for the "

poetic” mind rather than the “ prosaic.” In accordance with essentialist ideas, Clara is concerned with materialistic convictions, while Nathaniel thrives in the realm of the abstract.

Clara is also ladylike to a fault. In a letter to Nathaniel, she explains that “ even if the house were about to fall in, I should smooth down a wrong fold in the window curtain in a most ladylike manner” before escaping (Hoffman 5). She is so concerned about being feminine and gentle that she would put these characteristics before her own life. She fits perfectly into the essentialist mold of a woman: materialistic and, until Nathaniel goes mad, docile. Her attraction to the materialistic puts her at odds with Nathaniel’s love for the abstract.

After becoming thoroughly disappointed with Clara’s resistance to the mysterious, Nathaniel instead turns to Olympia. As a lifeless doll, Olympia proved to be the perfect canvas on to which Nathaniel could project his poetic, abstract mind, even saying that it seemed “ as if [Olympia’s] voice had actually sounded from within himself” (Hoffman p. 16). The automaton was not capable of thought on her own—she needed Nathaniel’s projections to come to life, and for him, she did so convincingly. Olympia became a silent echo of Nathaniel’s abstract mind. Only in her could he find the comfort of a person who had the ability to think more deeply than materialism would allow. Most people would describe Olympia as being the epitome of the silent, obedient woman. However, in Nathaniel’s eyes, Olympia was strong and beautiful; in her, he found what Clara lacked: an understanding of the abstract. This is exemplified when he praises her “ deep, noble mind” (Hoffman p. 15). Unlike Clara, Olympia has the ability to

understand the abstract, rendering her the more attractive woman to Nathaniel. The fact that Nathaniel prefers her because of her poetic mind lends credence to this; if he loved her for her yielding nature, he wouldn't glorify her " deep knowledge of the spiritual life" (Hoffman p. 15). With Olympia, he doesn't have to fight the prosaic. Instead he finds the comfort of his own abstract way of thinking. Unlike the other women he's known, Olympia is not confined by essentialism's womanly guidelines. In that, Nathaniel finds someone to love and someone who understands him. The struggle for the abstract can also be seen in the public reaction to the discovery of Olympia as an automaton. Society in the story was once satisfied with silent women who did not respond to much of anything. After the fear inspired by the lifeless doll, people began to favor women who showed signs of life through various tests, such as knitting or yawning. This could be seen as a sort of awakening into Nathaniel's abstract. In requiring women to participate in conversations rather than sit idly, this conception begins to break essentialism's idea of women. If women can speak, perhaps they might even learn to think or imagine things beyond those which they can touch.

Taken together, the characters in this story fit into the mentality prescribed by essentialism: abstract-thinking males and materialistic women.

Nathaniel's mother and Clara both show signs of material thought in the ways they interact with him. Nathaniel, Olympia, and general members of society are all abstract thinkers.