Lacan’s series of diagrams known as the ‘L-scheme’ related the subject to the object-cause of desire, the Other, and to the ego. Mladen Dolar adopts the L-scheme to the theme of the uncanny in the story of ‘The Sandman’, which is our source.

1. the sandman characters

Hoffman’s story of ‘The Sandman’ involves Nathanael, father/Sandman (a good/evil oppositional pair reflected in the characters Coppellius/Spalanzani), and Spalanzani’s beautiful daughter Olimpia. Olimpia is an ‘empty set’ — an automata whose function it is to reflect Nathanael’s imaginary projection of human qualities. Dolar arranges the characters according to (roughly) Lacan’s L-scheme. Within this arrangement there is, significantly, a criss-cross of an optical-anamorphic thematic (Olimpia’s fascinating eyes; Nathaniel’s fear of the Sandman’s theft of children’s eyes) and an identity thematic played out in terms of the ‘contractual’ relationships with the lawyer, Coppellius.

The uncanny is structured by a two-step process. ‘The concealed’ is a component of the homely and safe, but it is a silent component. When it ‘comes to light’, its vector ‘collapses’ on to the vector of the homely, erupting within the center of the ‘home location’.

The uncanny is replicated in ‘The Sandman’ by Nathanael’s fascination with Olimpia. Olimpia is the ‘representative’ woman who never leaves home. Nathanael, by projecting his own fantasy on to the automata, is her hidden consciousness, and when Olimpia is dismembered during a fight, this ‘uncanny’ relation comes to light. Similarly, the Sandman as a story in the story is a concealed component that comes to light when the ‘good father motif’ is destroyed by Coppellius, the bad father.


2. ‘operators’

The normative that is the basis for the uncanny begins with a revealed/representational vector and a concealed vector. In the case of Olimpia, Nathanael is her concealed consciousness. He projects her beauty, wit, and inscrutability; his role is collapsed when Olimpia is discovered to be a mechanical doll, represented by the collapse of the concealed vector on to the level of the representational (as an ‘event’, materializing the object-cause of desire, in Lacan’s terms).

The story itself has concealed within it the ‘Sandman’ working at a number of levels. At first it is a bedtime story that Nathanael ‘violates’ as a child when he spies on his father’s and Coppelius’s alchemical experiments. The Sandman is a ‘bad father’ materialized as Copellius and Coppolo, whose optical qualities are emphasized (Coppolo deals in spyglasses and spectacles and has made Olimpia’s glass eyes).

3. opening up the L-scheme

The operators permit a revision of the L-scheme. The uncanny is present in the transfer of Nathanael’s humanity to the ‘remote’ doll and the reciprocal piracy of his soul by Olimpia. On the side of the two fathers, nice and nasty are exchanged in a literal alchemy, where the doll ‘catches Nathanael’s eye’ with her beauty and silence, Coppellius is out for Nathanael’s eye in payment of the debt for spying.

Revising Dolar’s original L-scheme involves recognizing distinctive object and subjective operators separated by an ‘anamorphic gap’ that fuels Nathanael’s fantasy projections and insulates the symbolic (the father-Coppolo structure) from the a-symbolic (Olimpia/Sandman). The artifact is represented by the ‘fictim’ imaginatively projected by Nathanael, which includes his own consciousness, projected as the wit of the doll Olimpia.

4. the Möbius twist

The Möbius quality requires a twist to combine the ‘purely contractual’ aspect of Nathanael’s relation to Coppellius as well as the ‘anamorphic’ theme of the doll, spying, and other eye references. Reorganizing the L-Scheme anticipates Lacan’s own revision of the quadrangular diagram into a zig-zag, but it goes further by locating the object-cause of desire, Olimpia, within the strategy set up by the contractual and anamorphic aspects of the story.