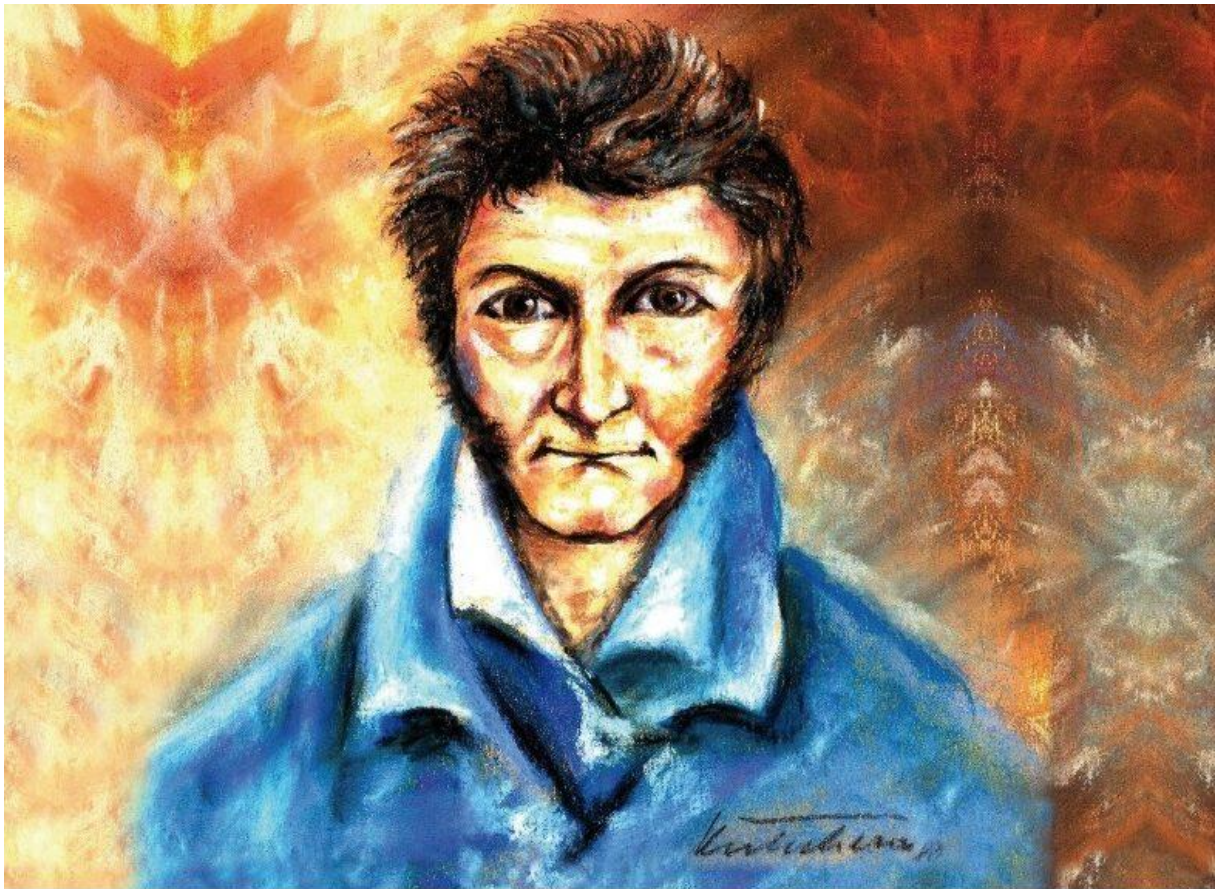


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The life of a tormented genius of the Romantic era shows the impact of father absence

Would ETA Hoffmann's life have been happier if he had a close relationship with his parents?

by [Ulrich Kutschera](#) Jun 23, 2022



Portrait of E.T.A. Hoffmann, painted by Alfred Kutschera (1928–2004), the father of the author.

One of the great literary figures of the 19th century, Ernst Theodor Amadeus (E.T.A.) Hoffmann (1776–1822), may be best known in the English-speaking world as the subject of Offenbach’s opera, *Tales of Hoffmann*, with its ethereal “[barcarolle](#)”, “Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour”. This year is the 200th anniversary of his death.

Hoffmann (in the US: Hoff-man) was a paradigm of the tormented geniuses of the Romantic era – obscure toilers neglected by their contemporaries, outsiders who live in poverty and illness and die young. But in the judgement of posterity, he was not only a talented writer of compelling fiction, but a composer, music critic, artist and caricaturist.

His bizarre fantasies are acknowledged as an influence on writers like Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Nicolai Gogol, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, composers like Peter Tchaikovsky, and even the film auteur Alfred Hitchcock.

The life of Hoffmann has always interested me – [I recently composed](#) a “[Requiem for E.T.A. Hoffmann](#)” – because it seems a paradigmatic case of a man condemned to a life full of calamities due to the absence of a father and a dedicated mother in his life.

Hoffmann was born on January 24, 1776, in Königsberg, a city in the highly bureaucratic and authoritarian kingdom of Prussia. His father was a lawyer and his mother was mentally unstable. Two of her four children died as infants, the oldest was a talented wastrel and the last was Ernst Theodor Wilhelm, who, in 1805, changed his last name in “Amadeus”.

When Ernst was two years old, his mother separated from her husband and went to live with her mother. His father disappeared entirely when he was about six and the only father-figure in his life became his mother’s brother Otto, whom Ernst despised and ridiculed. However, Otto did foster his nephew’s musical talent, and also made sure that he received a good education as a jurist.

In private conversations and in later writings, Hoffmann complained about this “father absence”. For instance, in one of his novels he wrote that: “A bad father is much better than a good educator”.

Throughout his career as a lawyer, composer, artist and conductor, Hoffmann remarked that he had missed his father as a guide and as a devoted, true educator. Specifically, Hoffmann complained about his sad childhood, with little inspiration and freedom. He even wrote that he did not receive a real education at all.

Initially, Hoffmann planned to be a composer, but like many before and since, he found that artistic genius did not put bread on the table. He worked as a lawyer while continuing to compose and write. In 1802, he married his Polish wife Mischa in the city of Posen. The happy couple had one daughter, Caecilia, who died in infancy.

In Posen he had an active social life involving much drinking and smoking. He did not fit easily into the militaristic Prussian society. In fact, he dared to sketch caricatures of officers; these were deemed offensive, and he was punished with two years of internal exile. After that, he moved to what is now Warsaw. His three years there were the best of his life, he later wrote. But in 1806, Napoleon invaded and dismissed all Prussian officials. Hoffmann became an unemployed – and hungry – artist. He moved to Berlin trying to find a position as a musician or painter.

Eventually he was hired as music director by a theatre in [Bamberg](#), where he spent about five unhappy years, conducting, giving music lessons, drawing pictures nobody wanted to buy, publishing his first short stories, composing music, and writing musical criticism.

Life in Germany was tough during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1813, Hoffmann and his wife moved to Dresden, where he worked as a music director. Artistically, he was very productive, but he ended up unemployed.

Once again, he moved to Berlin and worked there as a judge for almost nine years. He finished his most famous opera, "[Undine](#)", and wrote some very influential stories and novels, including the [The Devil's Elixirs](#). Then he was reckless enough to caricature his boss, who was a judge and the head of police. As a result, Hoffmann was again punished by the Prussian Government, this time via disciplinary proceedings that were only suspended when he died five months later.

His death at the early age of 46 was painful – he literally became a tormented genius. Being a heavy pipe-smoker Hoffmann probably had oesophageal cancer, which spread to his spinal column and caused progressive paralysis. A doctor friend decided to experiment on him. This involved burning a series of holes on either side of his spine to re-energise his vital spirits. This quackery, called "cauterisation", was excruciating and it was of no use whatsoever. Hoffmann died not long after on June 25, 1822, in his apartment in Berlin.

For lack of funds, he was buried in an unmarked grave. A few months later, friends paid for a headstone, which was later destroyed and replaced by a copy.

At one stage, Hoffmann complained in a letter to a friend that he had "talents, but no money". But how was this possible? Why was E.T.A. Hoffmann, who was not only an artistic genius but also a judge with a sharp, clear, analytical mind, unable to support himself and his wife? In his later years, he even depended upon hand-outs from friends and his wife's family.

What explains Hoffmann's self-destructive behaviour – his drinking, his smoking, his roistering, his reckless satire of officialdom?

My explanation is "father absence". Numerous studies have shown that, for boys (and for girls), the biological father is a key figure in the transmission of moral values and as a deterrent to anti-social or unlawful activities, including substance abuse.

Boys who are raised with a single mother in a fatherless home usually develop "father hunger" and often display disrespect or aggression. Fatherless boys tend to consume drugs, alcohol and tobacco at higher rates than male children grown up in an intact family. Based

on these insights, we can now understand Hoffmann's life-long drive to drink wine and punch, smoke pipes, and to challenge the Prussian authorities (a form of intellectual aggression).

Furthermore, the only father-figure that he did have, his uncle Otto, failed to teach his step-child how to manage a household. Hoffmann was unable to manage daily life, notably in financial terms. Although this must always remain a matter of speculation, I suspect that the chaotic, unsteady life of this tormented universal genius, who published more than 50 novels and short stories, composed numerous operas, chamber music etc., and was a gifted painter-caricaturist, would have been far happier, and possibly even more productive, if his father had not abandoned his son.



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References: This article is based on the work of the historian Friedrich Schnapp (1900–1983), notably his collection of documents about E.T.A. Hoffmann, published in 1974.

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