
A PETRIFIED UNION: ELIS'S SEARCH FOR FAMILY IN "THE MINES OF FALUN"

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Abstract

E. T. A. Hoffmann's (1819/1982) "The Mines of Falun" (hereafter "Mines") closes with an arresting image of union: the protagonist's petrified body turns to dust as his beloved embraces him after a 50-year separation. Elis, who died in a mine accident on his wedding day, reunites with his would-have-been wife Ulla. Her love for Elis seems to symbolize their eternal bond that lasts beyond the fragility of corporeal existence. But this reading places too much emphasis on these final, albeit striking, paragraphs. By focusing on Elis's reunion with Ulla, one could overlook the youth's interactions with other women for the preceding 25 pages of the story. Surprisingly, few scholars have discussed Elis's multiple love interests in a comprehensive manner. For this reason, none has considered how Elis tries to regain a family similar to the one he lost, first above ground with Ulla and her father, Pehrson Dahlsjö, and then below ground with two almost mythical figures, the so-called Earth Queen and miner Torbern. Comparing Elis's longing to enter these two realms reveals the youth's hope for reintegration into a familial structure. Indeed, Elis's petrification represents his liminal state between the two families. Therefore, the closing episode draws attention away from the fact that Ulla's desires lie beyond the surface world. The prospect of family, rather than any one woman, allures him most. This essay interprets Elis as a character longing for domestic unity. It conducts a close reading of two scenes of Elis's ascent and descent from the mines, showing how the attraction of both families changes his mental state. To conclude, this article will consider Elis's petrification as a marriage between the underground and the above, life and death, the human and the nonhuman.

Keywords: E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Mines of Falun", German studies

Beginning with the end

E. T. A. Hoffmann's (1819/1982) "The Mines of Falun" (hereafter "Mines") closes with an arresting image of union: the protagonist Elis's petrified body turns to dust as his beloved, Ulla, caresses him. Notably, this embrace doubles as a reunion because Elis perished in a mine accident on their wedding day. After a 50-year separation from her would-have-been husband, Ulla's heart burns "like a holy naphtha flame" (p. 187) against his inert flesh. Upon first glance, this scene signifies that the pair's bond transcends the fragility of

corporeal existence. But this reading places too much emphasis on these final, albeit striking, paragraphs. By focusing on this conclusion, one could overlook the youth's interactions with other women for the preceding 25 pages of the story. Surprisingly few scholars have discussed Elis's multiple romantic interests in a comprehensive manner. For this reason, none has considered how Elis tries to regain a family redolent of his own, first above ground with Ulla and her father, Pehrson Dahlsjö, and then below ground with two near mythical characters, the so-called Earth Queen, an enigmatic yet tempting figure, and Torbern, a miner.¹ Indeed, Elis's petrification represents his liminal, unresolved position between the two families. Though preserved for Ulla, Elis is also a stone of sorts, part of the Queen's realm. Therefore, even as Elis's corpse disintegrates, he remains in a convoluted petrified union.

This essay interprets Elis's journey as an ongoing search for domestic unity. After supplying background on the legend of Falun and then Hoffmann's writing of the tale, I review the literature on "Mines" and situate myself within wider academic conversations. Next, this article explores how the passing of Elis's mother spurs his yearnings for familial wholeness. Then, I conduct a close reading of two scenes of Elis's ascent and descent from the mines, evincing how he shifts alliances between the families. To conclude, this piece considers Elis's petrification as a marriage between the above and below ground, life and death, human and nonhuman.

Surveying the territory: context and a brief literature review

In 1719, a miner's fossilized body was discovered in Falun, Sweden. Although buried alive during an explosion, the laborer's figure did not decompose; instead, he suspended in a solution much like a prehistoric creature in amber (Wegraeus, 2001). Making this already spectacular incident verge closer toward fantasy, an elderly woman rushed to the spot and claimed him as her long-lost love. This sensational episode spurred Hoffmann to expand it into fiction in 1818/1819. Due to its psychological nuance and rich rendering of the fantastic, Hoffmann's story has attracted a host of scholarly conversations.² Though by no means exhaustive, the following survey endeavors to chart the ways critics have interpreted this short story. In overviewing the existing debates, I distinguish my approach to the motif of family in "Mines".

Katherine Arens and Sandra Ballif Straubhaar (2014) argued that "Mines" allegorizes the geopolitical panorama of early nineteenth century Europe. Through an inspection of key historical plot details, Arens and Straubhaar contended that Elis's journey doubles as a political commentary on contemporary events. Admittedly, the authors acknowledged how "family-like this culture of miners had seemed to Elis" (p. 336). That being said, they primarily explored how these personal dynamics symbolized Baltic geopolitical tensions in the wake of Napoleon's Russian invasion. Historicizing "Mines" remains valuable, but Arens and Straubhaar underappreciated the weight of these family structures in Elis's psychological maturation.

Moreover, Ronald M. James (1992) labelled Elis as the embodiment of mining spirits present in the folkloric tradition. The author classified Elis as an "expert miner and uncanny personification of

1. Torbern straddles between the living and the dead. Torbern died in a mining accident 100 years ago, a collapse that resembles Elis's, but still looms around Falun like a ghost. Elis, in a certain sense, seems to be Torbern's son-in-law – not by blood but by their connection to the ground. Unsurprisingly, Elis appears to be the human who has the most direct contact with Torbern, an intermediary between the two worlds, Ulla and the Queen.

2. Scholars have investigated the topic of alchemy in this work. To name one, Angela Ann Chi Chung (2013) read "Mines" alongside *The Golden Pot* and Tieck's *Der Runenberg*. Chung (2013) suggested that Hoffmann (1819/1982) fits within this literary tradition of the alchemical. In her estimation, "Elis not only sees but that he fully understands the most fundamental maxim and doctrine of the alchemists" (p. 130).

the underground" (p. 155). James was correct to interpret that Elis's attachment to the mines extends beyond his profession. However, James did not adequately explain the fluidity of Elis's bonds to the surface and subterranean worlds. Thus, James's analysis overlooked how Elis's interlaced impulses above ground and below stem from his hopes for domestic stability.

In addition, John T. Hamilton (2014) used Elis's petrification as a springboard for reflections on the hazy boundary between life and death (p. 190). At base, Hamilton (2014) contended that Hoffmann "resists the fatal reassertion of the difference between the organic and the inorganic" (p. 189). For Hamilton, the final scenes of "Mines" epitomize this fusion of the animate and the inanimate (p. 196). Thus, Elis and Ulla "have triumphed over death" (p. 198) even if they never wed. Notably, Hamilton ruminated further on Elis's complex emotional ties. In fact, Hamilton (2014) reached, but did not develop, an insight that undergirds my paper: "Both the queen, who offers untold secrets, and Ulla, who offers untold marital bliss, are replicated in the figure of the once living and now dead mother" (p. 196). Like other scholars, Hamilton (2014) mentioned Elis's companionship with his mother and other women in passing. Hamilton, thus, discounted an alternative way to interpret Elis's petrification.³

In his article, "The Downward Transcendence: Hoffmann's 'Bergwerke zu Falun'", Lee B. Jennings (1985) examined Elis's loves through a psychological lens, reflecting particularly on the association between the abnormal psychology of Elis and Hoffmann. Even though Jennings (1985) centered his essay around the nexus of the normal and the supernormal, he interrupted this examination with a fleeting remark on the women in Elis's life. Jennings took it as a "fact that the Earth Queen (with whom Elis now tends to identify) is to some extent paired off against Ulla as a love-object" (p. 287). Unfortunately, Jennings did not delve further into the meaning of this pairing, thus failing to expound upon this astute observation.

To my knowledge, no one has fully explored Elis's intent to regain his original family through surrogates in Falun. As this section has shown, scholars usually take these ties among characters as fact or neglect them. Thus, instrumental as other academics' writings have been to my own approach to "Mines", lacunae exist in the scholarship. This essay seeks to expand upon the observations others have made about Elis's yearning for a new home. But this is not simply an extended commentary on a point others have taken for granted. Instead, by emphasizing the family as a key theme, it promotes a novel interpretation of Elis and "Mines".

Losing a mother and finding a mine: Elis's transition from sea to land

Growing up with a father in the Swedish East India Company, Elis was near the ocean since his childhood. Once mature, Elis followed his father into the East Indies. However, tragedy brought them apart; a storm ravaged a ship the two traveled on and drowned Elis's father. Although this calamity left a scarred Elis remorseful for not rescuing others, he kept his job. Elis continued assisting these remunerative journeys to support his mother, his last living family member. With little affinity for his shipmates or the sea, Elis felt an obligation to his kin above all. Beyond repenting – and repaying – for the loss of his

3. Like Hamilton (2014), Luis Montiel (2014) recognized the apparent unity among these three figures in this oneiric scene but did not go beyond mentioning it to the reader. Montiel (2014) just observed that the characters hold a particular unity but did not expound upon it. For instance, Montiel claimed that "[f]or the moment we have already discovered in the depth of the 'mine' – or rather, in the underworld of dream – three images of the feminine: the mother, the girlfriend and the Queen; the first two being protective, while all three are possessive, each in their own way. Two of them offer the security of life in the outside, while the other exhibits the dangerous riches that hide in the depth" (pp. 171-172).

father, Elis developed a complete devotion to his mother through this work. Interestingly, their interdependence became more and more reciprocal; Elis received emotional value commensurate with the checks he gave his mother. In fact, the pair helped each other find meaning in their work and life through storytelling. Recounting adventures allowed both to share memories and rekindle the familial atmosphere they once enjoyed. For this reason, when Elis loses his mother while out at sea, he, broken again, Elis seeks a similar relationship on land. As a result, he turns to a prostitute and then a miner for consolation, taking his initial steps in his quest for a new replacement family.

Elis's nostalgic descriptions of his homecomings exhibit that he enjoyed sailing because it allowed him to relive the experience with his mother afterward. When on deck, Elis finds solace in the "thought of the return home and of my good, old mother" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 166), anticipating their exchange of tales. Recounting undertakings allows Elis to relive them with his mother and thus imbue value in them. Elis and his mother trade stories: Elis from his trips and his mother from her spouse's, creating the ambience of a familial gathering. Interestingly, Elis conflates his descriptions of the "marvelous things" and "strange objects from foreign lands" (p. 167). This fusion demonstrates how the young sailor required the warm environment that his mother offered to find his far-flung travels.

Elis's mother's death leaves him stranded once again, now alienated and without any family to commiserate with; for this reason, he seeks a prostitute to help fill the space of his loved ones. Elis enters this story as a lonely, melancholic outsider because he missed his mother's final days. Arriving on land too late, Elis could not greet his mother as he was accustomed, much less share stories. For this reason, he feels "alone as if shipwrecked on a desolate reef – helpless, wretched" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 166). This language of nautical disaster juxtaposes the East India Company ship's safe arrival and Elis's internal torment. Moreover, the phrase "shipwrecked on a desolate reef" conjures the image of a solitary, floundering sailor abandoned by his crew to perish. Interestingly, this portrayal echoes Elis's father's death, displaying how the sea swallowed his family and happiness again. Although not literally stranded on open waters, Elis, if safely on land, feels as if he were marooned. As festivities abound after this successful landing, the young man grieves by himself. In a space of a few paragraphs, adjectives such as "gloomy", "melancholy", and "alone" depict the protagonist (pp. 164-165). Desperate for the same comfort he found in his former arrival celebrations, he shuns the boisterous public feast and cavorting around him. Instead, Elis befriends a young prostitute, entering a quiet, private discussion. As with his mother, Elis seeks platonic conversation, not carnal pleasure. After all, she speaks to Elis not with sensuality, but instead in "a soft, gentle" (p. 165) voice, providing comfort rather than libidinal excitement.

Viewed in relief, Elis's interaction with the prostitute marks his first attempt to replace his lost family.⁴ Eager to fill the space his now parted family has left, he speaks with the escort about "the terrible dangers of the treacherous ocean" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p.

4. Elis seeks not simply a group of individuals to fill the roles that his dead family members previously occupied. The group of sailors, although offer a form of union, offer not what Elis desires. The sailors enter a carnivalesque scene of revelry. They share drinks, prostitutes, and raunchy conversations. But they are a family of sons, a brotherhood similar to the *Serapion Brethren* or even the monks and fraternities in *Tomcat Murr*. Without a parental figure who brings order and tranquility, the sailors' band no longer appeals to the youth.

165), a truth he has learned all too well. Notably, this phrase revives Elis's previous conversations with his mother on the "frightening sailors' legends" (p. 167). In bonding over the ocean's dangers, the two replay, if not fully recapture, Elis's talks with his mother. For this reason, "the girl's sweet whisperings had found an echo in his heart" (p. 165). Interestingly, her whisperings take on an agency of their own in this syntactical construction; the woman's words, rather than her being, strike a chord in Elis. Unfortunately, the reader cannot eavesdrop on those consoling phrases. That being said, one can only guess that her words offered to Elis a semblance of the joy his mother brought him before. She offers the possibility of companionship, a potential that he finds later with more intensity in Ulla and the Queen. For this reason, Elis gives her a parting gift of two ducats and an East Indian scarf, reminiscent of his earlier gifts to his mother. If not maternal, the prostitute seems to fill in Elis's need for a sister, a sibling that could soothe him after a long journey.

After recovering a glimmer of his lost family through the prostitute, Elis meets Torbern, an old miner who offers himself as a paternal figure for Elis. Indeed, Torbern listens to Elis's complaints like a patient father. Similar to Elis's biological father, Torbern implores that the young man follows him into his own profession of mining. According to Torbern, this work would lift his despondent temperament. Interestingly, words associated with the German verb "treiben," drift, appear often in these sections, capturing Elis's personality as well as Torbern's appeal. Before long, Torbern "opened up to him an unknown world ... revealed to him in his earliest boyhood" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 168). This prospect of ventures into the Earth's extremes – much like his trips to the depths of the ocean – intrigues Elis. In this sense, Torbern's proposal allures Elis for its mysteriousness and familiarity. Although not yet articulated as a union with the Queen, the miner implicitly offers Elis a return to the familial structure he craves. The Queen, only referred to by this noble title, offers a return to motherly protection. Notably, she resides in the dark, damp underground, a setting akin to a womb. Thus, even if vague, Torbern's promise of a familial structure tempts Elis enough to lead him to the mines.

A x of two entrances: Elis's first encounters with falun

When Elis first visits the mine, he encounters a hellish pit that exceeds the sea in its inhospitality. Language of darkness and decay fill Elis's account, conveying his unease in this vacuum of time and life. Petrified animals, poisonous fumes, and jagged rocks abound, exuding a menacing appearance. At first, this veritable graveyard makes Elis regret leaving the ocean – the locus of his troubles – and consider returning to Göteborg. Upon peering into the abyss, Elis ascribes malignant, quasi-supernatural powers to the rocks: "the black minerals and the bluish-red metallic slag seemed like revolting monsters that were stretching out their tentacles toward him" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, pp. 172-173). However, Elis committed a volte-face upon discovering that these once diabolical mines offered a potential pathway to domestic bliss.

Even if the mines first appear infernal to Elis, he ultimately signs up as an apprentice because he glimpses the possibility of finding fa-

miliar surrogates in Falun. Indeed, Pehrson Dahlsjö, the mine owner, literally turns Elis's head. Just as Elis prepared to return to Göteborg, he ran into Dahlsjö and found an arresting relief in his blue eyes. Entranced by his soothing gaze, Elis forgot about his previous ordeal. Unable to resist this man's fatherly bearing, Elis even drifted into a party Dahlsjö was hosting in his home at that time (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 173). Upon stepping inside Dahlsjö's residence, Elis also symbolically reentered the patriarch's other property, the mines. In doing so, Elis opened himself to finding a family in Falun. Elis's expectations grow as he mingles through the congenial domestic scene. The miners' refined manners and convivial conversation stand in stark contrast to the rude Swedish East India Company sailors; pleasantly surprised, Elis begins to feel more at ease within this milieu. As a consequence, Elis slips into a form of amnesia; "no longer able to recall those earthworms at the great entrance" (p. 174), he viewed the mines in much amenable terms.

So enamored by the event – and especially Dahlsjö's daughter Ulla – Elis convinces himself that the mine will provide him a household and by extension happiness. In an instance of love at first sight, Elis cannot draw himself away from the radiant Ulla. Mesmerized by Ulla's beauty, Elis feels like he has entered "a blissful dream" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 175). Drunk on the euphoric atmosphere, Elis acts as if he were sleepwalking. He drinks a glass of ale that Ulla hands him "mechanically" (p. 175) and without a second thought. Once inebriated/drunken, Elis sheds any lingering sober inhibitions; in doing so, his subliminal wants for a family to surface even more directly. Thus, and despite their mechanical diction, Elis's intoxicated movements are deliberate. For this reason, Elis exclaims that he will become a miner for Dahlsjö so he can fulfill this familial fantasy. Even if this was "just the opposite of everything he had decided to do a few minutes before, [it] came out quite automatically" (p. 175) because he had found a new home.

Elis's characterization of the mines as heavenly indicates his anticipation of entering the Dahlsjö household. If the mines at first appeared to be an inferno, then the Dahlsjö's house transformed it into a paradise. Without doubt, Elis's ascent from the mines to the party facilitates his dramatic shift. Rather than the gloom and shadows of before, Elis sees only brightness and life above ground. In particular, Elis waxes lyrical about the angelic Ulla. Ulla, "this lovely, innocent child of heaven" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 174) is "glowing" (p. 174), "her charming face [is] aglow with the radiant innocence of heaven" (p. 174), and she floats "like a shining angel above him" (p. 177). Ulla is Elis's celestial savior, his guiding love and light. Words like "glowing", "aglow", "radiant", and "shining" ascribe to Ulla a heavenly quality. Although Elis does not describe Pehrson with as angelic language, Elis nonetheless ascribes a divine aura to her father as well, portraying Pehrson as a noble patriarchal protector. He singles out Pehrson's inviting demeanor to elevate his noble aspects; his "gentle smile", "easy manners", and "open expression" complement Pehrson's "cordial" and "friendly" gestures (p. 173). These compassionate qualities insinuate Pehrson's suitability as a mentor and father. For this reason, Elis judges not only the surface, but also the underground "paradise" (p. 175). Transported into a reverie, Elis dispels his fears

of the mines because they will grant him access to his beloved. Forgetting "the horrors of that frightful hellish abyss" (p. 176), Elis now fuses the two in this rosy lens. The "great entrance" of the mines and the house have merged into a single entryway to union with Pehrson and Ulla.

From one house to another: Elis's descent

After becoming a miner to gain favor with the Dahlsjös, Elis grows accustomed to working underground while courting Ulla in his free time. All progresses smoothly for the new laborer until he hears that Pehrson offered Ulla's hand to another man. In truth, Pehrson only pretends to give Ulla to another man to test Elis's devotion. But Elis, not privy to the scheme, believes that he lost his chance. Not content to simply be the adopted son in this family, Elis allies himself with the Queen and Torbern. This shift indicates how Elis's wish to obtain a new family overrides his bonds to any individual, even Ulla.

Assuming that Ulla found another bachelor, Elis returns to the mines; this physical descent represents his reversed mental state and submission to Torbern and the Queen as his guardians. When Elis sees Ulla with a supposed suitor, he falls into a fit of madness. Convinced that he has lost a spot in the Dahlsjö household, Elis feels depressed, so distraught that he returns to the "huge entrance" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 180), the mine. In a reversal of the earlier scene where Elis flees from the mine to the house, he now moves from the surface to the underground. Unlike before, he welcomes the vile creatures lurking below as well as the perilous drop. Calling out to Torbern, Elis offers himself to the darkness in a Faustian tenor: "My treasure, my life, my all lies below" (p. 181). Goes far beyond monetary value. He gives his identity over. This repetition of the adjective "my" accentuates his devotion to the underground. Interestingly, as the youth weasels his way down the rocky path, he sees not the netherworld of before but instead "fields of paradise" replete with "maidens", "gems flashing fire", and "the lofty face of the majestic Queen" (p. 181). Notably, this language of light and beauty recalls Elis's descriptions of the party. With the "flashing" colors, the beautiful "maidens", and the heavenly Queen, this hell becomes a "paradise" to Elis.⁵ The Queen meets Elis with a matched passion as he burrows into the ground. In an erotic moment, she presses against his body, shooting "through his soul a glowing ray" (p. 181). Phallic in its connotation, this represents Elis's entryway into the familial structure of the mines. If not a formal consummation, it serves as a potent emblem of his sexual and emotional tie to the underworld. In this sense, the Queen serves as a replacement mother and lover and Torbern as a father.

Albeit brief, Elis's rendezvous with the Queen evinces his hope to find a home regardless of its location. Of course, Elis still loves Ulla and feels relieved upon learning that Pehrson staged Ulla's engagement. Yet that realization comes after his underground foray. Though committed to Ulla, Elis "surrendered himself" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 183) to the Queen before. Therefore, when Elis gains Ulla's hand in marriage he does not extricate himself from the Queen.

5. It is worth noting the connection between E. T. A. Hoffmann and Richard Wagner. In his youth, Wagner grew fond of Hoffmann's literary forays into the fantastic. As Marc A. Weiner (1982) related, Wagner felt a particular connection with "Mines". Although not published until the 20th century, Wagner even wrote a prose sketch in 1842 that adapted "Mines". For Weiner (1982), "Wagner, in writing the prose sketch, experimented here with some major ideas – utterly new for him at the time – which he incorporated in his later operas" (p. 202). For this reason, the similarities among the plot of "Mines" and operas such as the "Flying Dutchman", "Parsifal", and "Tannhäuser" are not coincidental. Wagner's interest in "Mines" suggests its literary-historical importance in Hoffmann's oeuvre.

Between families and petrified in one union

Even on his wedding day, Elis wavers between his loyalty to his bride-to-be and the Queen on his wedding day. In fact, Elis's nominally unambiguous expression of devotion to Ulla betrays his ambivalence. On one side, his decision to obtain almandine as a token of his love is sincere. But at the same time, Elis must return to the mines to retrieve this stone. Therefore, this deed for Ulla brings him closer to the Queen as well. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Elis's action reveals his liminal position between the above ground and below.

Elis's fixation on fetching a stone for Ulla implies his difficulty in choosing between his two possible homes. When Elis reenters the mines on his wedding day, he straddles between pleasing his two amorous interests, the Queen and Ulla. In fact, he even wonders about binding them all together through the almandine. As Elis remarks, this object would allow them to be "intertwined with the marvelous branch that is growing from the Queen's heart" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 185). As this image connotes, Elis melds his affinities to the women and the futures they offer. Understood in this manner, it is almost fitting that Elis ends up petrified, confined in a moment before definitively choosing either fate. This physical restriction traps Elis in time and space, embodying his inability to decide between the two women.

But perhaps Elis finds a form of unity between the two families by the end.⁶ Granted, Elis never recaptures the same familial environment he once cherished. That being said, the miner satisfies both women's wishes to a certain extent. Through his transformation into an inanimate object outside of human time, Elis becomes part of the Queen's domain, similar to one of her jewels. If ironic, Elis becomes an artifact alongside the "cherry red sparkling almandine" (Hoffmann, 1819/1982, p. 185) that he failed to reach; questing for Ulla's gift turned him into one of the Queen's treasures. But of course, Elis was not solely under the Queen's control. After all, the story ends above ground and with Elis's reunion with Ulla. Although Elis remains unaware of his return to the site of his aborted marriage, it signals his return to Ulla. Therefore, Ulla's embrace with Elis represents a long-delayed fulfillment of their love as well as a confirmation of his connection to the Queen. In a tangential way, this instance also links Elis back to his mother. Once set on providing his mother jewels, he became one himself for his beloved. In this sense, he achieves his aims for a conjoined family, forming a petrified union not of two, but four.

6. The specifics of Elis's "union" remains an ambiguous one. This essay has framed Elis's relationships both as an instance of divided loyalties between two competing families and also as a love triangle. This hesitancy to choose between the two might stem from the intricacy of the story itself. In one sense, the Queen serves as a reincarnation of Elis's mother. But she remains a unique, not quite human character. After all, she is the Earth Queen. At times, she seems more like a force that guides the plot, an embodiment of immortal Nature that triumphs over human actors.

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