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The Golden Pot

E. T. A. Hoffmann · *1814 · Thomas Carlyle translation (1827)*

A clumsy, good-hearted student, Anselmus, knocks over an old woman's apple basket in Dresden on Ascension Day and is cursed. Soon after, he hears bells in an elder tree and sees three small gold-green snakes, one with deep blue eyes. Hoffmann's 'modern fairy tale' sets a marvelous world within the ordinary city, and the student must choose between the real girl and the magic one.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Is a poetic life, with its risks and its strange realities, better than a safe and ordinary one?

Hoffmann does not answer in a single line, and he plays with the question. Anselmus is drawn to the library of Archivarius Lindhorst and to the snake Serpentina, and he is also drawn to the very real Veronica. The witch tries to win him for Veronica, and the struggle ends in a battle and a marriage in the land of Atlantis. The story laughs at the sensible middle-class world and celebrates imagination, while also showing how easily imagination can be taken for madness.

KEY CHARACTERS

Anselmus
A clumsy student who has poetry in him.

Serpentina
A gold-green snake with deep blue eyes.

Archivarius Lindhorst
A librarian who is also a salamander prince.

Veronica
The Conrector's daughter, sensible and loving.

the apple-woman
An old woman who is a witch.

Conrector Paulmann
Veronica's father.

Registrator Heerbrand
A clerk who is part of the town's world.

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Ascension Day
FIRST–THIRD VIGILS

Anselmus overturns the apple-woman's basket, hears the snakes under the elder-tree, and meets Archivarius Lindhorst.

- The old woman's curse sets the plot.
- The three snakes are a first vision.
- Lindhorst is a strange and impressive figure.

02
Veronica and the Library
FOURTH–SIXTH VIGILS

Anselmus is drawn between Veronica and the memory of Serpentina. He begins copying manuscripts in the library.

- Veronica is sensible and loving.
- Serpentina is a dream.
- The copying work is itself a test.

03
The Witch and the Bottle
SEVENTH–TENTH VIGILS

The witch tries to win Anselmus for Veronica. He spills ink and is shut in a glass bottle.

- The witch is the old apple-woman.
- The glass bottle is a comic image of confinement.
- Anselmus's doubt is the main danger.

04
The Battle
ELEVENTH VIGIL

Lindhorst defeats the witch and frees Anselmus.

- The battle is of magic and will.
- Lindhorst is revealed as a salamander prince.
- The ordinary world and the marvelous overlap.

05
Atlantis
TWELFTH VIGIL

Anselmus marries Serpentina, and the narrator is invited to finish the tale in the library.

- The marriage places Anselmus in a poetic realm.
- The narrator is asked to finish the story himself.
- The ending is both a fairy tale and a joke.

Imagination | Dream and Reality | Love | Magic

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Hoffmann calls each chapter a 'vigil.' Ask what that adds.
2. Watch how the marvelous appears in ordinary Dresden.
3. The narrator speaks to the reader. Notice when he does and why.
4. Compare Veronica and Serpentina as two kinds of future.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Thomas Carlyle translation (1827) (Wikisource, The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Volume 22 (proofread transcription of the Centenary Edition)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/hoffmann-the-golden-pot/.