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4-2023

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#### Recommended Citation

Adams, Faith, "Neil Gaiman's Elevated Fairy Tale: Childhood Trauma Through the Lens of Postmodernism" (2023). *Student Works*. 1.

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## Neil Gaiman's Elevated Fairy Tale: Childhood Trauma Through the Lens of Postmodernism

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Neil Gaiman explores the influence of trauma on identity formation. In the sinister world of his liminal fantasy, Gaiman's nameless narrator strives to assemble a comforting sense of identity in the midst of traumatic chaos. Viewed through a postmodern lens, Gaiman's use of hypertextuality and non-linear storytelling undermines idealized views of objective truth and reality, ultimately suggesting that nothing in life can be reduced to a binary.

In style and substance, Neil Gaiman's writing adheres to traditionally observed tenants of postmodernism, a theoretical approach known for its rejection of absolutes and distortion of time. Through their manipulation of the chronotope, postmodern pieces present a version of reality that marries past, present, and future into a singular, disorienting experience that portrays change as "fundamental," flux as "normal," and time as a "construction."

In addition to a non-linear chronology, postmodern writing embraces intertextuality and hypertextuality. According to postmodern critic Sandor Klapcsik, the term intertextuality denotes "a text directly quoting from or alluding to another text," while "the foremost characteristic of hypertextuality is that the hypertext does not (only) quote, but transforms and imitates the hypotext" (Klapcsik 320). Intertextuality merely nods to the contributions of another work, while hypertextuality integrates one work into another. Through parallelism or thematic contributions, the incorporated text enriches the meaning of the original text, inspiring what scholar, Michael Riffaterre terms "open-ended" and "ever-developing" analysis. Hypertextuality fosters a tongue-in-cheek, self-referential tone that challenges the confines of reality.

Neil Gaiman's postmodern approach is complimented by liminal fantasy, his genre of choice. Liminal fantasy, known for exploring interstitial spaces in fantastical settings, complements and bolsters the postmodern assertion that binaries do not exist. As theorist

Klapcsik explains in his work, “The Double-Edged Nature of Neil Gaiman’s Ironic Perspectives and Liminal Fantasies,” unacknowledged absurdity in liminal fantasy “hides the threshold, suggesting that the boundaries between fantasy and reality are elusive or insignificant, evoking humorous and surreal overtones,” and allowing “reality and the fantastic world [to] overlap in a playful or 'blasé' manner” (Klapcsik 195).

Situated at the crossroads of postmodernism and liminal fantasy, Neil Gaiman’s novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, combines tenants from both approaches. The novel embraces the “playful” overlap between reality and fantasy described by Klapcsik, through Gaiman’s insinuation that processing trauma rejects linear storytelling. The story begins at a “narrative now” point when the nameless narrator returns to his hometown for a funeral. Grief-stricken and desperate for something familiar to combat the uncertainty of loss, he drives through the setting of his childhood “randomly, without a plan.” The narrator feels compelled to reaffirm his identity by reminding himself of the formative childhood experiences that shaped it. The narrator’s longing for groundedness leads him to the home of Lettie Hempstock, his childhood friend. Nearing the house, he remarks, “It felt like I had driven back in time. The lane was how I remembered it when nothing else was” (Gaiman 5).

The sense of fulfillment and stability the old Hempstock home provides is significant, because, as flashbacks later reveal, some of the narrator’s most traumatic, repressed memories are associated with the house. The unexpected comfort gleaned from the Hempstock home contributes to Gaiman’s suggestion that, in the midst of mourning a loved one, the narrator is drawn to a site of childhood pain because he subconsciously knows trauma is a part of his identity, even though it is excruciating to re-live.

The narrator explores the grounds of the Hempstock Farm and begins unearthing his previously-repressed pain. As the narrator sees more artifacts from his childhood, he is able to recall more repressed memories, a phenomenon described in memory studies as “cued recall.” Prominent memory theorist, Irina Rata, posits that cued recall “portrays the essential role of memory as a coping mechanism, necessary for survival, and the ways in which childhood occurrences ultimately shape the adult's identity.” Rata goes on to assert that cued recall is most likely to occur when “the senses are incited by stimuli similar to the traumatic events” (Rata 205).

Gaiman’s narrator satisfies the requirements necessary for cued recall when he returns to the Hempstock’s land. The farm serves as a backdrop for the narrator’s childhood trauma and functions as a “stimulus” for him as an adult, triggering the period of cued recall. While the narrator’s recollection allows him to understand how trauma has impacted his identity, the process of cued recall is so overwhelming, that it prompts his description of memory as a living entity, “waiting at the edges of things, beckoning to me” (Gaiman 8). Gaiman’s personification of memory, coupled with a postmodern, surreal tone, emphasizes the disconcerting effect of memory on the human mind. Additionally, Gaiman’s disorienting portrayal of trauma utilizes the interstitial space between remembering and forgetting, blurring the lines of perceived reality.

The narrator’s trauma-triggered cued recall culminates into one overwhelming realization when he stumbles across a pond on the Hempstock’s land. Standing at the edge of the water, the narrator recalls, “It was the ocean. Lettie Hempstock’s ocean. I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything” (Gaiman 10). Upon remembering “everything” about his painful past, the story's chronology suddenly fractures from the “narrative now” point into the extended flashback, where the narrator re-lives the formative childhood trauma that

shaped his identity. Gaiman uses cued recall as a catalyst for the narrator's chronological and psychological fracturing and suggests that life's inherent trauma prevents linear storytelling, and rips perceived reality apart.

After departing from the "narrative now" point, the narrator's extended flashback begins with his first recollection of trauma: A suicide. Struggling to make ends meet, the narrator's family rents out a room in their home to a local opal miner. Shortly thereafter, while looking for his comic book, the young narrator finds the tenant dead in his family's car at the end of the lane. The narrator is taken in by Lettie Hempstock, her mother, and grandmother, who care for him in their home while the police conduct an investigation outside.

In addition to sheltering the narrator from the traumatic event unfolding, the Hempstocks serve as the novel's first introduction to the liminal fantastic. Almost immediately, the boy notices that the three Hempstock women are strange, but, as he explains, "I did not ask, any more than I dared to ask how they knew about the suicide note or what the opal miner had thought as he died. They were perfectly matter-of-fact about it" (Gaiman 29). The effect of this "matter-of-fact" depiction of the fantastic creates a sense of dissonance between the audience and the world of the novel. The audience expects the narrator to be more surprised by the Hempstock women's clairvoyance and supernatural ability to manipulate time than he is. So, their expectations of truth and reality are subverted.

As traumatic events continue to unfold in the narrator's memory, Gaiman uses hypertextuality to characterize the narrator's reaction to trauma and subvert ideas of objective reality. During the narrator's terrifying childhood encounter with hunger birds (malicious monsters from another dimension), he reflexively quotes memorized lines from a frightening scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a coping mechanism that reveals his imminent need

to suppress trauma and further challenges the distinction between fantasy and reality. As the hunger birds close in, threatening to destroy him, the narrator mechanically recites an entire scene, beginning with, "*Fury said to a mouse that he met in the house let us both go to law I will persecute you,*" and finishing with the "inevitable end" of the passage, "*I'll be the judge said cunning old Fury I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death*" (Gaiman 176).

Gaiman's hypertextual incorporation of Lewis Carroll's classic work is impactful. The narrator's anxious recitation of Carroll's madcap poem becomes eerie within the confines of Gaiman's world. The absurdity of Wonderland amplifies the dreamlike quality of the narrator's experiences, and it hints that the narrator's traumatic childhood is as overwhelming and strange to him as Wonderland was to Alice.

Gaiman's specificity is also notable. The narrator chooses to recite the scene in Lewis Carroll's novel when the Mouse, caught in a river of Alice's tears, recalls his harrowing encounter with "Fury," a character determined to persecute, convict, and ultimately kill the Mouse. Like the Mouse, the young narrator is small, innocent, and condemned to death by mythical forces. Gaiman's use of hypertextuality contextualizes the narrator's trauma response in a way that links truth and fantasy, suggesting that reality cannot be separated into one or the other. Instead, lived experience and accompanying trauma occupy a liminal space between the two.

To set the scene for the novel's climactic confrontation, Gaiman demolishes remaining perceptions of absolute truth, as the hunger birds literally rip the world apart and expose what lies "beneath the thinly painted scrim of reality," which the narrator describes as "a perfect nothing, only a color that reminded me of gray...Not blackness, not nothingness" (Gaiman 206).

By portraying reality as a flimsy, unconvincing, “scrim,” Gaiman parodies any ideals of absolute truth the audience holds and reinforces his postmodern suggestion that reality is a construct.

After puncturing reality, the hunger birds swoop in to finish off the narrator, only for the narrative chronology to fracture once again, leaving the narrator with only “a ghost memory” of the hunger birds eating him alive. The narrator’s death becomes a “phantom moment” then “snips and rips, neatly” into an alternate reality, where Lettie uses her ability to manipulate time, save the narrator, and allow the hunger birds to destroy her, instead (Gaiman 209). Overwhelmed with regret and confusion, the traumatized narrator allows Old Mrs. Hempstock to convince him that Lettie is not dead, but simply on holiday with her father in Australia.

Gaiman’s bleak resolution assumes heightened meaning. As memory and identity scholar Rata explains, the survival of victims like the narrator depends “on the ability of the human brain to forget certain traumatic events,” because, “memory loss is the brain’s way to cope with trauma” (Rata 204). The Hempstocks use their mythical abilities to manipulate the narrator’s memory of Lettie’s disappearance. They exonerate him from any destructive “survivor’s guilt,” and allow him to exist in a liminal state of repression, somewhere between forgetting and remembering, real and imagined.

After the young narrator’s memory has been successfully repressed, the extended flashback comes to an abrupt end, and the novel’s chronology fractures back to the narrative now-point where it began, completing a chronological “strange loop.” As the adult narrator stands at the edge of Lettie’s “ocean” in the novel’s final scene, he wrestles with the weight of uncovering his childhood trauma, leading the audience to question whether or not the narrator’s repression was really in his best interest. The narrator asks Mrs. Hempstock whether or not his life was “worth” Letti’s sacrifice, to which she replies, "You don't pass or fail at being a person,

dear" (Gaiman 232). Through Mrs. Hempstock's refusal to pass any absolute judgment, Gaiman leaves the audience with an extension of postmodern ideology that posits, trauma and its victims cannot be separated into binaries like "good" or "bad." They simply *are*.

Even as the narrator drives away from the Hempstock's land, the recollection of his childhood trauma recedes "back into the past like a memory forgotten, or a shadow into the dusk" (Gaiman 237). And, though the narrator represses his trauma once more, the short period of time he spends unearthing childhood wounds at the Hempstock's farm offers a strange solace, implying that, though painful, trauma can be a grounding source of identity.



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