

Memory and Identity in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman

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Abstract

In his novel The Ocean at the End of the Lane (2013), Neil Gaiman has succeeded in telling another spellbinding “fairy-tale” for adults. It is unique among Gaiman’s novels, as it features a child protagonist and his specific worldview. Despite being a fantasy novel, with a narrative filled with magic and wonder, it tells the traumatic tale of memory, identity, self-sacrifice, and survival. It 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. This article aims to address and analyse the identity formation and the role of the memory in this process in The Ocean at the End of the Lane, through the lens of memory studies, and structuralist theory.

Keywords: *Fantasy Literature, memory studies, subjectivity, personality, identity, myth.*

The Ocean at the End of the Lane is often referred to as a “fairy-tale for adults” (Meloan 2013), or as a “modern day fairy-tale” (Hamm 2014). *It is widely praised, seen as “an overpowering work of the imagination, a quietly devastating masterpiece, and Gaiman’s most personal novel to date”* (Rothman 2013). The novel takes the form of a frame narrative, where the outer story, a modern day homecoming of the protagonist, frames the subjective recounting from memory of a childhood experience. This process of remembering long forgotten memories of the narrator’s childhood is located in the consensus-reality mnemonic chronotope. The inset is conceived as a “memorate”, or “a first-person story about a personal supernatural experience” (Langlois 2008: 615). The past is accessed through the chronotopic motif of “mnemotope”, which is the “chronotopic motif that manifests the presence of the past, the conscious or unconscious memory traces of a more or less distant period in the life of a culture or an individual” (Purdy 2002: 447). *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is marketed

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as a book for adults, despite featuring for most part of the book a child protagonist, due to its treatment of such difficult subjects as: suicide, abuse, adultery, vices, etc. The novel contains numerous scenes not intended for young audiences, which however are toned down and less explicit, mostly because they are seen through the eyes of a child. Since, the child seeing them, does not entirely understand them, they are not overtly explicit, which makes some of them even more gripping. The novel belongs to the Fantasy genre, as it contains magic, supernatural elements embedded in the everyday reality of an unspecified Sussex small town.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane starts with the protagonist's return to his hometown to attend a funeral. After the funeral, he drives randomly around town, and suddenly realizes he has arrived in his old neighbourhood. After slowing down to examine his old childhood house, he drives to the end of the narrow country lane. The road, now a black tarmac that progressively becomes narrower, and windier, "packed earth and knobbly bone-like black flints" (Gaiman 2013: 5), is still how the protagonist remembers it, "when nothing else" is any longer (Gaiman 2013: 5). Driving down the lane feels like he has "driven back in time" (Gaiman 2013: 5). During this revisiting of his childhood neighbourhood, the protagonist is able to retrieve specific memories that became part of the associative context of his childhood space. It can be explained through the memory process called "cued recall" (Tulving 1983: 93). Seeing that every memory formation consists of an encoding of a bundle of features, specific to the encoded event, called engrams (Tulving 1983: 151-160), its retrieval process begins with the perception of a retrieval cue, leading to the activation of a latent engram, and the transformation of the cue and of the engram into ecphoric information (retrieving a memory) (Tulving 1983: 175-176). The process ends with the recoding of the information for later use, which brings changes to engram, thus explaining why memories of events change (Tulving 1983: 164-165).

In the novel, seeing the flint lane, and then the Caraway farm, unlocks specific memories related to these places, but what takes the protagonist by surprise, is seeing the Hempstocks farm, as he has completely forgotten it, despite the fact that "the flint lane always ended there" (Gaiman 2013: 5). When the protagonist gets out of the car, all his senses are aroused by the visual and olfactory cues: the stench of cow muck, the smell of bread baking and wax furniture polish and old wood

(Gaiman 2013: 6). A memory resurfaces slowly, and he is convinced that he has been there before, but fails to remember more, as the protagonist states: "Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good" (Gaiman 2013: 5). Entering the house, meeting Mrs Hempstock, remembering Lettie, the narrator realizes that everything is slowly coming back to him, that "memories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning" (Gaiman 2013: 7). So, he asks for the duck pond, and is directed to it. Getting to the duck pond, seeing how small it is, he remembers that Lettie used to call it her "ocean", which unlocks a torrent of memories that the protagonist is unable and unwilling to stop: "I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything" (Gaiman 2013: 7).

The focus in memory studies has shifted lately from science to philosophy and social sciences, because "memory is a crucial component in creating and maintaining individual and communal identity" (Van Dyke, Alcock 2003: 3). As a result, the interest in narrative accounts of personality and identity within in the field of memory research developed as well (Rathbone, Moulin, and Conway 2008: 1403). Personal narratives play an important role not only in identity formation, but also in survival. According to Rosenfield, "identity" and personality represent "the brain's abstraction of the totality of our "memories" and "experiences" (1995: 202). These suggest that our personality is closely related to the recall of personal history, as it is constituted from "self-defining memories" (Rathbone, Moulin, Conway 2008: 1403). It is comprised of a "self schemata, including cognitive representations developed from specific autobiographical events, as well as general representations" (Rathbone, Moulin, Conway 2008: 1404). These general representations are related to age, sex, nationality, relationships, etc., while the autobiographical events are remembered depending on what is important, or what is relevant to our personality and preferences. This way not only our personality depends on our memories, but our memories depend on our personality as well. This accounts for the different perception and recollection of the same event in different subjects.

When it comes to the image of the individual in literature, the latter is considered to be dialogically constructed, in relation with other individuals or characters. Subjectivity, which is the "sense of a personal identity an individual has of her/his self as distinct from other selves, as

occupying a position within society and in relation to other selves, and as being capable of deliberate thought and action" (McCallum 1999: 3), is characterised by its "internal dialogism", formed through interaction (Bakhtin 2008: 350). The consciousness or identity formation is an ongoing process, shaped through dialogue with society, language, culture, and is subject to rapid and radical changes (McCallum 1999: 3-10). The novel is also dialogic, as is its discourse (Bakhtin 2008: 284), and therefore subjectivity is an integrated part of any discourse, including the novelistic one. It is especially true of children's and young adult fiction, but also of all the narratives written from a child's point of view, as "subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction" (McCallum 1999: 3). This subjectivity is affected by language, society, culture, and ideology, and it enters in a dialogic interaction with the above mentioned: language, society, ideology or conflicting ideologies, as well as with other textual voices. In the novel, the protagonist is a seven-year old, whose personality and subjectivity are influenced, formed and defined by his relation with his family, his nanny, his relationship with the Hempstocks, and the culture and society he inhabits.

In *The Needs of Children*, Kellmer Pringle proposes a classification of a child's needs into four categories, "the need for love and security; for new experiences; for praise and recognition; and for responsibility" (1986: 34). The need for love and security "is met by the child experiencing from birth onwards a stable, continuous, dependable and loving relationship with his parents" (Kellmer Pringle 1986: 34). In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the child protagonist benefits from such a relationship until his family faces financial troubles. Despite having no friends, the child is content by his family's relationships and does not seek others. However, when his parents start worrying more about finances, it brings their implicit absence from home and a string of nannies to care for children. So, when the things get tough he finds himself in a world where he has nobody, whom he can ask for help. Since they are not around to form a dependable relationship, the child is used to rely on himself, "I do not know why I did not ask an adult about it. I do not remember asking adults about anything, except as a last resort" (Gaiman 2013: 47). It is also reflected in the following instance, "I knew enough about adults to know that if I did tell them what happened, I would not be believed. Adults rarely seemed to believe me when I told the truth anyway. Why would they believe me about something so unlikely?"

(Gaiman 2013: 28). The protagonist does not trust the adults to be around when he needs them, but he also fears them, because they tend to spin the truth, “‘just go with it. It won’t hurt’” I stared at him. Adults only ever said that when it, whatever it happened to be, was going to hurt so much” (Gaiman 2013: 132). And they usually seem to notice children only when they misbehave, as the protagonist’s father does, “I was terrified of him when he was angry. His face (angular and usually affable) would grow red, and he would shout, shout so loudly and furiously that it would, literally, paralyse me. I would not be able to think. He never hit me” (Gaiman 2013: 67). Although his father does not hit him, the effect of his shouting on the protagonist is traumatic, as “in the school stories I read, misbehaviour often resulted in a caning, or the slipper, and then was forgiven and done, and I would sometimes envy those fictional children the cleanness of their lives” (Gaiman 2013: 67). The imbalance of power between adults and children scares the protagonist, as in the following instance, “She was also an adult, and when adults fight children, adults always win” (Gaiman 2013: 87).

When his family denies him affection and understanding (his father becomes intolerant, his mother is absent, his sister mocks and taunts him), and the nanny threatens his existence, the Hempstock women are the ones that save him from annihilation, and restore the order of things. They feed, dress, encourage, protect him, and provide emotional care, thus replacing the child’s absent mother and offering him a safe medium. The three women represent the feminine archetype: the crone, the mother and the maiden, introduced by Graves in *The White Goddess*, as the “triple-goddess” (1971). They could be seen as the Greek Moirai or Roman Parcae, or even as Norns. These triple goddesses appear throughout Gaiman’s works: as both Erinyes and Moirai they appear in *Sandman*, as Norns they appear in *American Gods*, and in *Stardust* as the three witch queens. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* they can be seen as incarnations of the triple goddesses of fate, the Moirai, due to Old Mrs. Hempstock snipping and stitching parts of the protagonist’s dressing gown, in order to remove the traumatic event from the past, and the boy’s parents’ memory: “just a little snipping, then a little sewing, and it’ll all be good as gold” (Gaiman 2013: 97). Moreover, this is supported by the fact that the Moirai are also seen as the representation of the triple moon-goddess in her death aspect (Coulter, Turner 2000: 177). In the novel, they are constantly associated with the phases of the moon. For example, when the protagonist is intrigued by the

constant, full moon at the farm, Lettie tells the protagonist that, "Gran likes the full moon to shine on this side of the house. She says it's restful, and it reminds her of when she was a girl" (Gaiman 2013: 105). The triple moon-goddess is characterised by her changing aspect, as well, which can be seen in the novel in the protagonist's confusion when returning to the Hempstocks' farm as an adult. Initially, he meets Old Mrs. Hempstock, and then Lettie's mother Mrs. Hempstock joins them, however when he leaves, he is under the impression that he only saw Old Mrs. Hempstock: "'It's funny. For a moment, I thought there were two of you. Isn't that odd?' 'It's just me', said the old woman. 'It's only ever just me'" (Gaiman 2013: 177). The association of the past, memory and fate altering with the Hempstocks is consistent with another allusion to Greek mythology in the protagonist's friend's name is Lettie, which can be seen as one of the possible spellings of Lethe, the river of oblivion, one of the rivers of the Greek underworld (Coulter, Turner 2000: 289). Interpreted this way her name is an allusion to the protagonist's difficulty to remember Lettie and a part of his childhood, as memory and forgetfulness are some of the novel's main themes. This combination between the actual working of memory and trauma effects on human psyche with mythological and fantastic characters and settings can be interpreted either literally, as an "adult fairy tale", or metaphorically, as an allegory filled with biographical elements.

In the novel, when the narrator doubts his recollections, he asks the old Mrs Hempstock: "Is it true? [...] Old Mrs Hempstock shrugged. What you remembered? Probably. More or less. Different people remember things differently, and you'll not get any two people to remember anything the same, whether they were there or not. You stand two of you lot next to each other, and they could be continents away for all it means anything" (Gaiman 2013: 173). The above statement reflects the current views on the links existing between memory and identity in psychology and neuropsychiatry. An important role in identity related memories plays the formation of individual memories, because their formation also depends on our personality. However, remembering the past can be also unwanted, and certain events and recollections may be buried deep in our consciousness and forgotten, especially when these are traumatic. In the novel, the inset is based on such traumatic events. It is introduced by, "I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything" (Gaiman 2013: 7), which serves as the beginning of the memorate. It is

organised around crisis and rebirth of the protagonist, and it is written in the first person, as a recounting/confession, enumerating the trials that have led to the hero's transformation. One of the themes of the novel is the search for personal identity through forgotten places, people, memories, as in, "I stared at the house, remembering less than I had expected about my teenage years: no good times, no bad times. I'd lived in that place, for a while, as a teenager. It didn't seem to be any part of who I was now" (Gaiman 2013: 4); and another important theme is the relationship and disconnectedness between adulthood and childhood, as in "I thought about adults. I wondered if that was true: if they were all really children wrapped in adult bodies, like children's books hidden in the middle of dull, long books. The kind with no pictures or conversations" (Gaiman 2013: 113). The return home (in the novel) frames the inset of narratives of trauma, which start with seemingly insignificant episodes that progressively escalate leading to protagonist's amnesia. The notion of trauma "refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm" (Gilmore 2001: 6). For an event to be considered traumatic, it has to determine the experience of an event outside the range of human experience (Brown 1995: 100). Usually traumatic experiences are characterised by "a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic" (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart 1995: 175).

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the protagonist's problems start with his family financial troubles. Initially, he lives in a safe, loving environment, but when his family finances diminish, the boy loses his room and has to share his sister's bedroom, as his parents rent it to various tenants. His birthday comes and nobody attends it, which at first does not appear to affect the boy, except for his sister's taunting about it. He finds consolation in books and his pet, as he sees himself as fairy tale Dick Wittington with his cat, in his imaginary world. The lack of finances determines his mother's employment, as she cannot afford to stay at home any more. This entails a number of nannies, and distancing from his parents, which make the boy feel even lonelier. Then the opal miner, who is the family's tenant, kills the boy's pet. And one morning, while his father prepares breakfast, they get a call from the police, about their car being abandoned at the end of the lane. Suspecting the neighbourhood's kids, the boy and his father go there, only to discover that their tenant, the opal

miner, had committed suicide in the back of the car. The boy is the one that finds him, as he wants to retrieve his comic from the back seat. He is so shocked by the dead man's face that it subsequently keeps resurfacing in his nightmares.

The opal miner's visceral longing for money, as he killed himself over gambling away all of his and his friends' money, wakes a primeval monster. It starts providing people money, except it does it with a twist, as a neighbour goes mad upon finding her mattress full of money, and does not want to leave the bed over the fear of losing it. Another neighbour gets accused of prostitution, when her husband finds bills stashed in her purse. The protagonist chokes on an antique silver shilling, and his sister accuses him of throwing coins at her. Lettie, whom the boy befriends when she takes him home from the suicide investigation, tries to prevent the monster from further harming people. So, she takes the boy and together they try to bind the monster, but in sensing the boy's loneliness, and when he lets go of Lettie's hand, the monster gains access to the human world through the boy's foot and travels with him home.

There, it transforms into a hired nanny and takes over the boy's house. Since it is afraid the boy could call for help, it punishes the boy, and prevents him from exiting the house, while it also takes over the boy's family. Gradually, it works its way into their hearts by cooking their meals, offering presents and attention. As the protagonist refuses its meals and attempts to control him, the monster punishes the boy, first, by locking him up, and second, by demonstrating its power over his family members. Under its influence, the boy's father loses his temper, punishes his son, and almost drowns him in the bathtub:

I was horrified, but it was initially the horror of something happening against the established order of things. I was fully dressed. That was wrong. I had my sandals on. That was wrong. The bath water was cold, so cold and so wrong. That was what I thought, initially, as he pushed me into the water, and then he pushed further, pushing my head and shoulders beneath the chilly water, and the horror changed its nature. I thought, *I'm going to die* (emphasis original) (Gaiman 2013: 72).

The scene is perceived through the eyes of the seven-year old protagonist, who cannot understand how his father can act so "unfatherly". The boy's horror is accentuated by the violation of the well-established order of

family relationships. And when the boy finally escapes the house, he witnesses his father's adultery with the nanny, which adds to his feelings of despair, uncertainty and loss: "my parents were a unit, inviolate. The future had suddenly become unknowable: anything could happen; the train of my life had jumped the rails and headed off across the fields and was coming down the lane with me, then" (Gaiman 2013: 80).

As if these were not enough, while the boy makes an escape for Lettie's house, the monster catches up on him, and the boy literally wets himself. He is saved by Lettie, however all these lead to a final showdown with the monster, and the hunger birds, where out of gratefulness for friendship and love when he literally lost everything, seeing that the hunger birds start devouring our world, the boy decides to sacrifice himself. The hunger birds attack him, Lettie tries to prevent them from harming him, and gets hurt instead. Here the protagonist's memory duplicates, because he literally remembers two versions of the same events:

A ghost memory rises here: a phantom moment, a shaky reflection in the pool of remembrance. I know how it would have felt when they took my heart. How it felt as the hunger birds, all mouth, tore into my chest and snatched out my heart, still pumping, and devoured it to get at what was hidden inside it. I know how that feels, as if it was truly a part of my life, of my death. And then the memory snips and rips, neatly (Gaiman 2013: 157).

The reader might interpret it as a suggestion that the boy might have died after all, either literally, or figuratively, as his new personality was reborn out of the ashes of the previous one. When the boy recovered, seeing his friend Lettie unresponsive makes him feel "the survivor's guilt", so he starts humming to himself a children's tune, clearly affected by what has happened to him. The Hempstocks take care of him, and when finally Mrs Hempstock takes him home, she convinces him that Lettie has gone to Australia to be with her dad, and that he attended her "going away" party. It helps him forget and repress all the instances of trauma, thus allowing him to cope with the guilt, fear, pain, loss and despair. On the ability of the human brain to forget certain traumatic events depends the victim's survival, as memory loss is the brain's way to cope with trauma.

The effects of trauma on memory depend on "victim's age, personality, emotional history, rearing environment, predisposing factors,

and the nature of the trauma may differentially contribute to the stress response including any disturbances of memory" (Joseph 1998: 172-173). Since, as stated by Joseph, "under excessive and prolonged conditions of stress, excitation, and arousal, learning and memory may be completely eclipsed, inducing a profound amnesia, and abnormal activity and injury to the hippocampus" (1998: 169-170). It is called adaptive forgetting, and "is a matter of inhibiting information as opposed to discarding it entirely" (Freyd 1994: 317). For example, the boy's memory of his father's attempt to drown him in the bathtub is a traumatic event. Its forgetting is triggered by the brain's self-protection mechanism vital to the subject's survival. Seeing as, "amnesia enables the child to maintain an attachment with a figure vital to survival, development, and thriving" (Freyd 1994: 307), it explains the adaptive forgetting, as a means of coping and survival.

When it comes to the effects of trauma on identity, "if there are predisposing factors, an emotional shock may induce an amnesia so profound even personal identity may be forgotten" (Joseph 1998: 172). When it is not completely forgotten, it can be altered, so that "extreme trauma creates a second self" (Caruth 1995: 137). This second self can store the traumatic events and completely isolate them from the other personality. Certain "chronic amnesias tend to occur after repeated traumatization in childhood" (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart 1995: 173). These traumatic events however, are not lost for good, as certain stimuli can evoke the repressed memory. Seeing that "traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions, and it occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation" (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart 1995: 164), the narrator's return to the Hempstocks' farm represents such a circumstance. The conditions for recollection are satisfied through "cued recall", when the senses are incited by stimuli similar to those related to the traumatic events. The fact that the protagonist seems not to be aware of these memories before arriving at the farm can be explained through dissociative amnesia. For the people suffering from it, some of these experiences exist in memory, without victim's knowledge or awareness of them. The subjects with personality dissociation, or hypermnesia, are not aware of what exactly is missing, sometimes they are not even aware that they have forgotten something (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart 1995: 175-176). In life-threatening situations or any other traumatic situations, the brain focuses on survival and self-protection. The subjects "experience a mixture

of numbness, withdrawal, confusion, shock, and speechless terror" (Van Der Kolk 2000: 9). All of these can be identified in the novel, in such instances as, "I was terrified of him when he was angry. His face (angular and usually affable) would grow red, and he would shout, shout so loudly and furiously that it would, literally, paralyse me. I would not be able to think" (Gaiman 2013: 67); "I was a seven-year-old boy, and my feet were scratched and bleeding. I had just wet myself. And the thing that floated above me was huge and greedy, and it wanted to take me to the attic, and, when it tired of me, it would make my daddy kill me" (Gaiman 2013: 86); and "I was pulled up with him, soaked and spluttering and angry and crying and scared" (Gaiman 2013: 73). The risks of not dealing with the trauma can have dramatic effects on the subject's personality, leading to psychiatric disorders. The recovery from posttraumatic effects, or from survivor conflicts, cannot really occur until that traumatized self is reintegrated, because these traumatic events are unassimilated overwhelming experiences that need to be integrated into the mental schemes and to be transformed into narrative language for the subject to recover from them (Van Der Kolk, Van Der Hart 1995: 175-176).

Lately, as suggested by Gilmore, trauma has been central in contemporary self-representation (Gilmore 2001: 3). As a result, narrating the trauma is another way of dealing with it, especially since, as stated by Douglas, "the autobiography has become a mechanism for mediating between the past and the present, between the child and the adult self, and between trauma and healing" (1974: 110-111). Nevertheless, not all writers prefer working with autobiography, as it implies "baring one's soul". They choose to write any genre allowing disguising their personal knowledge and history, because, as stated by Bakhtin, at the novel core lays "personal experience and free creative imagination" (2008: 39). As it was stated above, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is the most personal of Gaiman's novels, as the author admits it has some autobiographical elements, which makes us wonder, as the book's adult narrator does, how much of this story is imagined and how much is actually a narration of the adult writer's repressed memories. The fact that Gaiman has chosen to write the account as a fantasy novel or an "adult fairytale", as some critics consider, does not make it less personal and does not reduce its influence on its readers. Similarly to fairy tales, fantasy novels allow their readers to deal with their repressed feelings and fears, by offering them the protagonist's place and

helping with the integration and assimilation of overwhelming experiences. Since, unlike the myth hero, "once the fairy-tale hero has achieved his true identity at the story's ending (and with it inner security about himself, his body, his life, his position in society), he is happy the way he is, and no longer unusual in any respect" (Bettelheim 2010: 57), which makes him/her easy to identify with.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane exhibits realistic functioning of the memory and recollection, through "cued retrieval"; it depicts trauma, induced by prolonged stress, feelings of terror, powerlessness, loneliness, and betrayal. It features a traumatic recollection of past traumatic events, induced by the setting, which is reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. The novel can be seen as an example of writing as means of therapy, displaying an instance of art used as a relief valve for the "overflowing" psyche, transforming traumatic events into narrative language. It is the only Gaiman's novel written from the point of view of a first person narrator. The narrator's name is unspecified, although it is mentioned in the novel that he had a "silly pet name" – "Handsome George" (Gaiman 2013: 135), which does not necessarily mean that his real name is George. The reader can only assume that the unknown narrator is the writer himself, as certain events in the book coincide with biographical events in Gaiman's life. For example, in the novel, the death of the unknown narrator's father mirrors the death of Neil Gaiman's father. The death of a loved one is a traumatic event in itself, which resurfaces unresolved issues and situations, and oftentimes memories. Written in the aftermath of his father's death, the novel deals with such unresolved issues, some of them probably described literally, while others being most likely just metaphorical reflections of the real issues behind them. Another such event is the suicide of a tenant in the family's car, which actually happened during Gaiman's childhood. According to Apgar, "writing provides the survivor with a psychological distance that allows her the possibility of analyzing her past" (1998: 48), as she writes about women victims; however, the quote can be applied to the male survivors of trauma, as well. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, narrative recounting allows the reintegration of the protagonist's traumatic memories, and the reassessment of the self schemata of his personality, through their recollection.

The novel is dedicated to Gaiman's wife, Amanda Palmer, and the dedication states: "For Amanda, who wanted to know". It implies a sort of confession, and while Gaiman admits to be inspired by the landscapes and laces of his childhood, and his seven-year old bookish self, it might be tempting to look for other parallels between his childhood and the events depicted in the novel. Although, it is a work of fiction, and a fantasy novel, as stated by his wife, "*it's unlike anything i've ever read...it's an explosive combination of dark and light, and it's incredibly intimate. and the most important thing i can tell you (that maybe neil can't) is that it was hard for him to write, and while he's insanely excited for its release [...] it's also scary for him to put out into the world. he doesn't usually write things that are so personal [sic]*" (Palmer 2013). As a result, the reader might be tempted to read it as a fantastic, metaphoric reinterpretation of a traumatic, autobiographical narrative, and a recollection of the writer's childhood.

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