





The Aftermath of Childhood Trauma: The Hyperreal veracities in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

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Abstract

Children are the product of the environment they grow up in. An individual who has a healthy childhood is more likely to develop into a well-adjusted and responsible adult. Children who grow up in trauma-inducing environments often withdraw into themselves, attempting to form a protective shield around themselves. They have trouble distinguishing between the tangible and the imaginative. Hyperreality is a postmodern concept coined by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Hyperreality refers to the condition where reality and representations of reality are indistinguishable.

*This article aims to study the long-enduring effects of the trauma the narrator faced during his childhood in the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman through the lens of hyperrealism. This study also probes into the harmful effects of growing up in a prison-like environment on a child's psyche. Moreover, the paper also seeks to establish that the narrator's narration in the novel is unreliable given that he has not yet extricated himself from the prison in his mind and has not yet come to terms with the severe trauma that he faced in his childhood and, hence, finds it difficult to distinguish the truth from his imagination, thus leading to a distortion of reality.*

Keywords: Hyperreality, Trauma, Childhood, Mind as a Prison, Unreliable Narration, Reality, Distorted Reality

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Mankind's desperate need for meaning is what separates him from the other species present around him. He searches for a reason to be happy. He gives meaning to his sorrow. And what he is unable to comprehend terrifies him. From this terror comes the awe of the unknown. This awe is not to be mistaken for admiration. Rather, it is more similar to horror. In childhood, however, the world seems vast and expansive. Magic can be found in the ordinary. Children, unencumbered by any preconceived notions, explore their world with wild abandon. Their minds, not yet tarnished by the cruelty the world has to offer, remain open to every new adventure with no hint of fear or judgment. Neil Gaiman captures the essence of childhood when he writes, "Small children believe themselves to be gods, or some of them do, and they can only be satisfied when the rest of the world goes along with their way of seeing things" (*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* 89) [Hereafter referred to as TOATEOTL]. Children who have a carefree childhood with no exposure to traumatic incidents generally grow up into mentally well-adjusted and healthy individuals. They are able to establish meaningful relationships that last long into adulthood.

However, children who are not fortunate enough to have a safe and joyful childhood feel the effects of their stolen innocence long after they have escaped from their abusive circumstances. Trauma, which arises from extremely difficult events, wreaks havoc on children's mental health. In their fight for survival, such children become imprisoned in their own minds and end up distracted from reality. Such children "often have difficulty paying attention and concentrating because they are distracted by intrusive thoughts" (Osofsky 37).

Trauma in children often leads to the blurring of memories. This is because, in their attempts to fend for their own selves, they focus only on the aspects of their lives over which they have a semblance of control. These occur because "school-age children are more likely to understand the intentionality of the violence and worry about what they could have done to prevent or stop it" (Osofsky 37). The unnamed narrator in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* hyper fixates on people and emotions, which he thinks he can control, and thus ends up being caged in his mind all his life. The narrator's description of how he navigates his life and the interactions that he has with the other characters in the novel makes one realise that his mind remains in a hyper realistic state all his life.

Hyperrealism is a postmodern concept that was first introduced by Jean Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation*. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 3). In other words, it is the inability to distinguish between what is real and a copy of the real. When we consider this concept in relation to matters of the mind, the consequences can be quite destructive if an individual is unable to distinguish between reality and their own imaginings. It is observed that the narrator's mind is always either in a state of hyperreality when he is reminded of his trauma or he has selective amnesia surrounding the incidents related to his trauma. Due to his trauma, he compartmentalises his mind, cages it, and never tries to recover from it. He lets the

wound fester, which leads him to live a life of detachment. His reaction is expected of trauma victims, who usually try to repress their trauma.

The narrator experienced a normal childhood up until he was seven. He clearly remembers how old he was when he experienced many life-altering events. "I was seven. I had been fearless, but now I was a frightened child" (TOATEOTL, 89). At the age of seven, the narrator experiences a series of unfortunate events. He is forced to endure a prison-like situation where he is physically tortured, not allowed to go out of his own house, and ends up fearing for his own life. Such incidents alter his mental buildup. Dr. Breuer and Dr. Freud state in *On the Physical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena* that for a person to actively repress memories of their trauma, the trauma "must be severe—that is, it must be of a kind involving the idea of mortal danger, of a threat to life" (1). Due to severe trials, the narrator also represses the memory of his trauma, and when reminded, he tends to recall it in a hyperrealistic state. Thus, it is apparent that the narrator's narration of the events surrounding his trauma, while filled with snippets of truth, is quite unreliable. Moreover, multiple elements of eldritch horror can be found in the narrator's narration, which most certainly contributed to his trauma. The narrator's incomprehension of the horrors around him and his abysmal understanding of the concept of death and human relationships all come together and manifest themselves as the horror of the darkness and fear of the uncertainties of life and of the unknown around him, which can succinctly be referred to as 'cosmic horror'. The narrator's friend Lettie tells him:

Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them are things people are scared of. Some of them are things that look like things people used to be scared of a long time ago. Sometimes monsters are things people should be scared of, but aren't. (TOATEOTL 201)

While the narrator does not dwell much on the words of his friend, one is made aware of the impact of this statement on his psyche later on. Throughout his life, the narrator struggles to form meaningful bonds or enjoy the relationships he has already established. All of this stems from the childlike fear that there might be monsters hiding beneath a kind face. The inability to distinguish the good from the evil and the overwhelming fear of being ensnared in someone's illness will make the narrator live a very watered-down life, lacking any emotions, both good and bad. Thus, the unresolved traumas he faced as a very young child determined the quality of his life.

The first trauma the narrator faces is the death of his cat. It was a gift from his parents for his seventh birthday. A stranger, an opal miner from South Africa, informs him that an "accident is coming here. Not to worry. Disposed of the corpse" (TOATEOTL 16). The nonchalance with which the news of the cat's death is delivered to the narrator and the replacement of his old cat with a new one leads to the narrator being unable to express his emotions. "I wanted to cry for my kitten, but I could not" (17). The narrator swallows his grief out of fear of appearing ungrateful.

This is the first instance of when he imprisons his own feelings. It is highly likely that the narrator also blamed himself for the death of his cat. This is made apparent by the fact that when the 'varmint' who call themselves the 'cleaners' come to dispose of Ursula Monkton, the new caretaker, they also try to dispose of him along with the caretaker. They say, "IT IS INSIDE HIM. IT IS NOT A TUNNEL. NOT ANY LONGER. IT IS A DOOR. IT IS A GATE" (226). One can be certain that the 'varmint' are a mere figment of the narrator's imagination. The narrator associates his caretaker, Ursula Monkton, with the stench of death, but only because she came into his life after he had witnessed the cruelty of death for the first time in his life. Furthermore, she marked the end of his parents' relationship, and her cold behaviour towards the narrator further confirms her evil nature. However, because the caretaker was harsh only with him and not his sister, he internalises the trauma meted out to him and comes to the conclusion that it was his own actions that brought death as well as his new caretaker to his home.

The second instance is the death of a stranger. The stranger leaves with their family car, and the narrator and his father go in search of it. At the end of the lane, they find their car, and in it, they find the body of the stranger. "It was an it, the thing I was looking at, not a him" (29). The repercussions of seeing a dead body take a toll on the mental health of the narrator. The police, as well as his father, sent him to a nearby house to shelter him from the gruesome sight in front of them. Inside the house, he meets his friend Lettie for the first time. Lettie, along with her mother and grandmother, discuss the incident surrounding the stranger's death. Although the stranger had committed suicide, the ladies argue that someone else must have been responsible. They try to infuse the gruesome affair with a bit of magic to take the narrator's mind off the morbid image of death.

Lettie also tells the narrator, after pointing to a pond, "It's not a pond. It's an ocean" (TOATEOTL 37). Their comfort does no good; rather, it opens up the child's mind to the vast expanse of the yet-to-be-explored world. Because the narrator is not clearly acquainted with the concept of death, the first-hand experience of the dead body tarnishes his imagination's purity. His mind derails at being exposed to something he cannot comprehend and is still fearful of. This leads to a fanciful imagining in which the narrator travels to a new land within the compound of Lettie's house and engages in combat with ancient, malevolent entities. It is possible that he was plagued by nightmares after witnessing the dead body. However, later that night, the narrator dreams of being choked by a coin and wakes up to find a coin lodged in his throat, which he spits out with difficulty. It is believable that he swallowed the coin unknowingly. However, he chooses to believe that whatever he saw in Lettie's house was what lodged the coin in his throat.

The third incident that traumatises him is his new caretaker, Ursula Monkton. The caretaker treats him like a criminal from the get-go, as she treats him like a prisoner in his own house, and because of that, he comes to the conclusion that she is the malevolent entity he had encountered earlier in the vast expanse of Lettie's compound. She forbids the narrator from leaving their property, thus creating both

a physical and psychological prison. The narrator, severely distrustful of the new caretaker, informs his father during dinner that he won't eat anything that she has made, the reason being, "I don't like her" (TOATEOTL 121). The narrator's father, however, is angered by his son's frank display of disobedience and perceived disrespect. Instead of trying to comfort him, he decides to punish his son physically. This horrifies the young mind of the narrator because, as far as the narrator could recall, "He never hit me. He did not believe in hitting" (TOATEOTL 117). The narrator's father tries to drown him. Such violence coming from a man who never hit him astounds him. The new violence makes him question the fabric of reality. The naïve mind of the narrator is unable to comprehend the fact that the father was acting strangely only because he was having an affair with the caretaker. His guilt, combined with his need to impress the caretaker, makes him lash out. He recalls, "I was horrified, but it was initially the horror of something happening against the established order of things" (TOATEOTL 127). His physical punishment and being left alone in a cold room heighten his sense of hyperreality. His newfound fear of his father forces him to run out of the house alone on a rainy night, and he imagines himself being chased by his caretaker. This incident leaves a lasting effect on the narrator's mind.

The narrator, made to feel like a criminal in his home, runs to Lettie's house, where he is treated like a child. Lettie's death, however, is the one that leaves him shaken the most. The narrator says that the varmints were on their way to attack him. But before they could get their claws on him, Lettie jumped in and saved him. "I felt them crash into her. She was holding me down, making herself a barrier between me and the world" (284). The narrator, even after seeing the limp and lifeless body of Lettie, does not accept that she is dead. The narrator's belief that Lettie is no more is reinforced by the fact that Lettie's mother and grandmother both assure him that she is only hurt and not dead. Still, he feels responsible for the hurt caused, and he says, "It was my fault. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry" (291).

The narrator's habit of blaming himself for any harm caused to his loved ones makes it harder for him to come to terms with his past and look beyond his trauma. The narrator is also unable to find any meaning in the sorrows and losses that he endured. None of the deaths had any purpose. His loss is meaningless and serves as a reminder of the world's indifference. This suppresses his memory of the events that took place when he was a child, and because of this, he remains unable to remember the good memories of his childhood as well as savour the important moments of his adult life.

As an adult, when his feet lead him to Lettie's house, he is suddenly made aware of all his trauma, both imagined and real. "Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later" (TOATEOTL 7-8). However, the most important thing to note here is that, despite being an adult, his mind still remains in a hyperreal state. It remains unable to separate reality from imagined reality. The novel concludes with the narrator once again repressing his memory as he drives away from the place where he grew up.

When children are forced to struggle by their own caretakers and their idols dehumanize and treat them as criminals in their own home, they detach from reality and imagine fantastical things. Therefore, the narrator is a prime example of how a caged environment, inadequate knowledge of the world, and the absence of a loving parental figure can be harmful for a child's psyche, as well as the long-lasting effects of unresolved trauma and fear.

Gaiman employs hyperrealism to ground his narrative in a sense of believability despite its fantastical elements. The protagonist, reflecting on his childhood, recounts events that occur in his early life, which becomes a focal point of mysterious and supernatural occurrences. Despite the magical and surreal aspects of the novel, Gaiman's meticulous attention to detail in describing the characters, settings, and emotions of the protagonist creates a sense of immediacy and authenticity. This blend of hyper realistic descriptions with fantastical elements along with the severe trauma, makes the fantastic elements feel plausible within the framework of the narrative. It also underscores the contrast between the innocence and wonder of childhood perceptions and the darker, more complex realities of adulthood. Hyperreal notions enrich the plot by bridging the gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary, thereby heightening the impact of the novel's focus on trauma, memory, magic, and the power of imagination.

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