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Defeating the Dragon: In Defense of Reading Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* as a Work of Children's Gothic Horror

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Horror, for many people, seems to be a genre antithetical to the realm of children's literature. Some critics have gone so far as to, in the words of Kimberley Reynolds, "vilify high-profile examples of frightening fiction, calling them 'vile and truly pernicious'" (140). However, horror has been a part of children's literature since the advent of the fairy tale. One well-known example of this is the story of Red Riding Hood. Little Red Riding Hood is told not to talk to any wolves (read: strangers) while she goes through the woods alone to her grandmother's house. When she breaks that rule and tells the Big Bad Wolf of her destination, the wolf swindles her, eventually swallowing her and her grandmother whole. They are only saved by the intervention of the hunter, who slices the wolf open, revealing the two women alive and unharmed. Together with the hunter, they kill the wolf. This cautionary tale uses horror in order to teach young girls not to talk to strangers, exemplifying the common, traditional purpose of fear as a control mechanism. But, as seen in a wide range of modern fiction, fear can also be used as a subversive or empowering tool. This use of empowering fear is the backbone of contemporary children's gothic horror and the crux of Neil Gaiman's novels *Coraline* and *Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

Gaiman is a contemporary author of children's gothic horror who uses fear as a tool of empowerment. A brief, conventional definition of children's gothic horror is emotional, frightening fiction concerned with the childhood psyche. Childhood, here, is being used to describe the period from elementary age through adolescence. For the purposes of this study, the term children's literature encompasses children from fourth through twelfth grade, adapted from literary scholar Jack Zipes's definition of children's literature.¹ Though a prominent author of children's gothic horror, Gaiman is a predominantly Science Fiction and Fantasy author working in a variety of mediums, who is well-known for his *Sandman* series of comics (among others),

¹ "Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence" (Zipes ix).

his short fiction, and his fiction for readers of all ages--from his picture book *Chu's Day* to his novel *American Gods*. Gaiman's 2002 novel *Coraline*, about a young girl who is forced to save her family from her Other Mother's doppelganger world, is a seminal work of children's gothic horror, which teaches young readers to question people's intentions and how to have courage in the most frightening times. Though considered a beloved scary story today, *Coraline* was almost not published for children because Gaiman's editor feared the story might be too scary for young readers. In Gaiman's own words, "*Coraline* was only published as a children's book because Morgan DeFiore lied" ("[Very Bad Swearword]" 18). Morgan was the daughter of Gaiman's editor. Her mother read *Coraline* aloud to Morgan and her sister to judge whether the content was too frightening for them. Enraptured by *Coraline*'s adventures, Morgan lied, saying that she was not scared, even though she later admitted that she very much was. Thus, *Coraline* was placed in the children's market and has become much beloved, despite, or perhaps because of, its horrific content.

Curiously, despite its gothic horror themes and parallels to *Coraline*, Gaiman's 2013 novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is not being marketed as a work of children's gothic horror, or children's literature at all. *Ocean* tells the story of a seven-year-old's traumatic encounter with a fantastic world just beyond the veil of the real, the uncanny women who help him², and the problem of memory. Though the narrator is seven-years-old for the majority of the novel, there are many who do not consider *Ocean* to be a story "for kids." *USA Today* described the novel as "a fairy tale for adults," with *People Magazine* calling it Gaiman's "first [novel] for adults since 2005's *Anansi Boys*," and the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* lauding *Ocean* as "wrenchingly, gorgeously elegiac" (Truitt, Hubbard, Alexander). Meanwhile, the New York

² The Hempstocks, who resemble the Tripartite Goddess (Mother, Maiden, Crone), of whom eleven-year-old Lettie is the Maiden.

Daily News regards *Ocean* as "a compelling tale for all ages," and the *Wall Street Journal* praises the novel, saying it is "'for all ages,' which is exactly right. It has grief, fear and regret, as well as love and awe--adult emotions, but children feel them too" (Connelly, Shippey). The conflicting views of the reviewers are further complicated by the fact that they are all featured reviews in the front matter of the novel. Even Gaiman himself has admitted to being unsure of the intended age of *Ocean's* readership.³ This contestation needs to be examined because labeling *Ocean* as an "adult" novel limits its readership and, by extension, its zone of impact. Besides the fact the children tend to be put off by books marketed for adults ("What interest could I, a child, possibly have in a boring adult book?" one might posit), the label "for adults" prevents adults from allowing children to read it. This is an issue because, as critic Kimberley Reynolds states, "the main purchasers of children's fiction [are] librarians, parents, and teachers" (4). Adults control much of the material that children have access to and are responsible, especially in the case of librarians, for recommending reading to them.

While this study aims to defend *Ocean* as a work of children's gothic horror, in order to argue that position effectively, it is pertinent to examine why some parties do not believe the novel could or should be considered a work of children's literature. The main issue seems to be that these individuals believe *Ocean* is too frightening or mature for young readers. The following quotation is from one of the more terrifying scenes in the book that may make people consider *Ocean* unsuitable for kids. It details a moment of near victory for the monster of the story--part-time homewrecker, full-time eldritch, shapeshifting monstrosity, Ursula Monkton:

Ursula Monkton smiled [...] She was power incarnate [...] she was the adult world with all its power and all its secrets and all its foolish casual cruelty. She winked at me.

³ "I reached the end of the book and realized I was as clueless as when I began. Was it a children's book? an adult book? a young adult book? a crossover book? a...book?" ("[Very Bad Swearword]" 22)

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. (86)

This passage is chilling. The child narrator is powerless; death and torture at the hands of Ursula Monkton, who has been disguised as a live-in babysitter for the narrator's family, seem imminent. This powerlessness and the high-stakes threats to the seven-year-old narrator can be seen as too suspenseful or horrific for children. However, through his own resourcefulness and the help of his friend, Lettie, one of the uncanny Hempstock women, the narrator is saved. The incident, though horrific, is quickly ended. The brevity of the suspense is a boon to the young reader, different from horror obviously meant for adults. Furthermore, the association between the monster and the adult world also lends the work to the realm of children's literature. Ursula Monkton represents the adult world, with all its secrets and "casual cruelty," and children's anxieties about their own powerlessness in relation to adults who can wield power indiscriminately. This encounter with Ursula Monkton is a dramatized, fantastical realist embodiment of childhood anxieties. How is this not supposed to resonate with children? Childhood is a scary, confusing time and many suggest (as noted later in this paper) that so-called "frightening fiction" helps children cope with their own fears and anxieties. *Ocean*, then, should be considered a work of children's gothic horror for the comfort and guidance it can give children who are struggling to cope with trauma and anxieties surrounding their own powerlessness, allowing them to grow into well-adjusted individuals. The benefits for adults also advocate this way of reading the novel. Reading *Ocean* through the lens of children's gothic horror prevents adults from relegating *Ocean* to being a book about nostalgia for innocence lost, or a bildungsroman, or a book about memory, or any number of readings that discount the

emotional core of the novel and relegate it to the realm of art. This way of reading allows adults to more highly empathize with children by recognizing that children, like the narrator, go through trauma (or at the very least, recognize that childhood is a frightening time), and improves relationships between children and adults.

In order to understand the significance of children's gothic horror, it is important to provide a precise, detailed definition of the genre and children's literature. Children's literature, as established earlier, here means literature for children from late elementary school age through adolescence. The purpose of this age range is to include teenagers and to avoid the suggestion that *Ocean* would be suitable for, say, a five-year-old. There are varying opinions on what, exactly, constitutes children's literature and its function. Critical and theoretical approaches suggest that children's literature is: 1) an ideological or educational vehicle, 2) "a reflection of the status of childhood in the culture that produced it," 3) a manifestation of adult nostalgia toward childhood memories, 4) a therapeutic revisiting of childhood traumas for adults, or 5) nonexistent (Nikolajeva 6). Literary theorist Maria Nikolajeva is of the opinion that children's literature is a "literary-didactic blend," as, she claims, "all literature is 'both,' that is, both an art form and a didactic, or rather ideological vehicle" (Nikolajeva 7). While both children's and adult literature serve to educate and please, the pedagogical intention tends to be more explicit in children's literature. Children's gothic horror serves both the pedagogical and pleasurable functions of children's literature, with the genre's didacticism ranging from providing social lessons to insights into one's own psychological landscape. There are a few factors which distinguish gothic horror from other types of horror. Critic Teresa Goddu lists a few of the material elements and effects of the gothic, including "haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror" (266). In *Coraline* and *Ocean* specifically,

the prominent gothic elements are the inescapable haunted house (expanded in *Ocean* to include the narrator's lane), the presence of the monster (Coraline's Other Mother and *Ocean's* Ursula Monkton), and gloomy landscapes. The most prevalent gothic element, though, is the isolation of the two young narrators. This is evidenced in the lack of attention and affection from their parents, the characters' lack of friends, and the unbelief of adults when they try to explain the fantastical events they experience.

Beyond these physical markers of gothic horror, other critics offer qualifiers for defining the genre. Such claims assert that the gothic serves to illuminate the possibility of human failure (McGillis 227); it is a place where the archaic and modern are forced to occupy the same territory (Gelder 3); it is "a subtle reminder that life is not always the fairy tale we hope it will be" (Howarth 4). These elements are apparent in *Coraline* and *Ocean*, with their emotionally distant parents and ancient monsters. The subset of children's gothic horror is placed under unique stipulations. Greg Ruth claims that "[w]ith kids, one must land on safer ground sooner than would be the case with adults" (Ruth). This differs from horror meant for adults, which thrives on sustained suspense. The suspense in *Coraline* is broken up through humor and short reprieves, while *Ocean* gives the narrator episodes of respite between horrific encounters with Ursula Monkton and the hunger birds, which he is either rescued from or rescues himself from. Robert Hood suggests that one of the major differences is that children's gothic horror is "likely to be less realistic," containing more fantasy elements in order to provide "a necessary degree of distance" (Hood). This fantastic realism is evident in both *Coraline* and *Ocean*. The two novels take place in the real, contemporary world, but have fantastical creatures and elements that only the protagonists interact with or are aware of. Michael Howarth also presents the genre as one which "deals predominantly with emotions and feelings," which Teresa Goddu expands on,

claiming that the gothic "remains first and foremost an expression of psychological states" (Howarth 12, Goddu 269). These assertions present an understanding of the role of the children's gothic horror as a fictional embodiment of children's psychological landscape. Broadly, then, children's gothic horror is a fantastical realist, emotional genre, which plays with the intersection of the ancient and modern, human fallibility, and the psychological implications of fear on children.

The implications and uses of fear in children's gothic horror are manifold. Literary critic Jerry Griswold posits that there are "two different traditions in the uses of scariness: one meant to intimidate children into being good and the other meant to encourage their mastery of fears" (Griswold 40). The first type uses horror as a way to define, as Ken Gelder explains, "what is evil (and what is good) in societies, what is monstrous (and what is 'normal'), what should be seen (and what should remain hidden), and so on" (Gelder 1). Fear has often been used in fairy tales to enforce and teach children about societal rules and norms. As mentioned earlier, though, modern horror stories for children are more concerned with teaching children how to master their fears. These modern stories serve to "defuse frightening incidents and ideas by encouraging children to talk about them" (Reynolds 153); they "deliver subversive possibility" rather than "demand the safety of conformity" (Jackson, et al. 13). As Greg Ruth notes, fear is ever-present in our lives, and refusing to talk about or deal with that fear "only provides more fertile ground for fear to take root. Worse yet, denying it robs us of our agency to meet and overcome it. The more we ignore scary things, the bigger and scarier those things become" (Ruth). It is necessary for children to read frightening fiction in order to open a dialogue about their own fear and anxieties, so that they may deal with those fears rather than trying to ignore them until they become too big to ignore. Paul Allen offers another defense for frightening fiction, asserting that

"[a]fter reading about a kid who travels into another shadowy dimension and has to battle his way through all kinds of nasty creepy crawlies in order to get home, having to brush your teeth before bedtime isn't really that bad, is it" (Allen)? Allen's defense is facile and unnuanced in its assumption that children's greatest problems are not wanting to brush their teeth. Children's lives are not always (or often, perhaps) the sunny, happy affairs they are made out to be in non-frightening children's literature. Even children who do not experience horrific instances in their own lives have real fears and anxieties that manifest later in mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. Children's gothic horror offers a space where young readers can receive solace and guidance for those fears and anxieties that go unaddressed in other genres of children's literature.

Children's gothic horror serves as a psychological and emotional aid to children experiencing fears and anxieties in several ways. As Jerry Griswold claims, frightening stories "acknowledge that evil exists in the world;" they "directly present and address" children's fears; and they "present models and lessons suggesting that (with pluck and courage and cleverness) children, themselves, can become heroes and heroines who can master evildoers and their own fears" (Griswold 44-5). As stated earlier, it is important to acknowledge the existence of evil and address children's fears because, instead of belittling children's fears, doing so allows children to deal with those fears in a constructive way, working toward release and growth rather than repression and stagnation. The goal of children's gothic horror is to grapple with children's fears in a concrete context and give them guidance for mastering those fears. This is certainly evident in *Ocean* and *Coraline*: young readers are in control (they can close the book at any time), and, particularly in *Coraline*, "they are able to learn from her mistakes and also to relate her predicaments to those same dilemmas they often experience in their own lives" (Howarth 84). In *Ocean*, the narrator makes the mistake of letting go of Lettie's hand, which allows Ursula

Monkton to use him as a portal into the "real" world. This makes the narrator culpable in the atrocities he and others are made to face at the monster's hands. However, the narrator is not left to wallow in guilt about his mistake. Instead, when he apologizes to Lettie for letting go of her hand, she says, "It's always too late for sorries, but I appreciate the sentiment. And next time, you'll keep hold of my hand no matter what she throws at us" (103). In this instance, Lettie turns the narrator's failure into a teaching moment, allowing the narrator, and by extension the young reader, to overcome the fear of failure and disappointing others through understanding that their failure does not have to lead them down the path of despair. Fear, here, is addressed and used as a tool to guide the child toward a path of growth and optimism. The fantastic elements of the two novels are also imperative to the guidance they offer.

In children's gothic horror, fantasy serves to construct a controllable, slightly distanced realm that gives "concrete expression to abstract psychic processes" (Coats 91). Nikolajeva asserts the utility of the fantastic as "a metaphor for reality," in order to "deal with important psychological, ethical, and existential questions in a slightly detached manner, which frequently proves more effective with young readers than straightforward realism" (42). The fantasy elements in *Coraline* and *Ocean* are most evident in the novels' antagonists. The antagonists in these fantastical realist environments are, on the surface, a spider-like, doppelganger mother and an ancient shape-shifting monster. Upon closer inspection, however, these monsters embody fears about the adult world, the possibility of failure, betrayal, abandonment, and other anxieties. The psychological implications of the fantastic elements and monsters in *Ocean* and *Coraline* transform the novels into stories that are not simply about slaying a monster, but about survival and overcoming crises. The real-world application of these fantastical journeys are hinted at in *Ocean*, when the narrator stands up to his father: "I had stood up to worse things than him in the

last few hours. And suddenly, I didn't care anymore. I looked up at the dark shape behind and above the torch beam, and I said, 'Does it make you feel big to make a little boy cry'" (136)? Before this incident, the narrator has helped to defeat Ursula Monkton and escaped the hunger birds. Because of his experiences with these fantastical monsters, the narrator is finally able to stand up for himself against his father's abuse. Greg Ruth claims, "horror provides a playground in which kids can dance with their fears in a safe way that can teach them how to survive monsters and be powerful, too" (Ruth). While the narrator is by no means safe when he fights the fantastical monsters in *Ocean*, his experiences with them were what enabled him to overcome the more realistic issue of being abused by his father. In the context of the "real" world, children who are given the safe playground of children's gothic horror are prepared to face real challenges in their own lives because they have vicariously defeated much more vicious fantastical monsters.

Power dynamics and privileging the adult v. empowering children as they are

The fantastical elements of children's gothic horror also serve to empower children. However, children's literature is susceptible to falling in the trap of privileging the adult. Nikolajeva describes this pitfall as "*aetonnormativity*...adult normativity that governs the way children's literature has been patterned from its emergence until the present day" (8). This manifests itself in children's literature and its analysis. For example, in her study on children's gothic horror, Karen Coats claims that the genre serves to make readers laugh at the grotesque and its absurdity, allowing them to overthrow magical thinking so they can mature into rational beings (Coats 79). This kind of analysis privileges maturing as the ultimate goal of children's gothic horror. While the genre can be used in that way, it is more pertinent to examine the ways children's gothic horror empowers children in their current state of childhood. Nikolajeva

examines the use of the fantastic in terms of the *carnavalesque*, wherein children are allowed to become "strong, brave, rich, powerful, and independent--*on certain conditions and for a limited time*" (10). The *carnavalesque* has often, as Nikolajeva hints at here, been used to temporarily empower a group of oppressed people (children) so that they can release their aggression and frustration toward their oppressors (adults). However, Nikolajeva notes that this convention can also be used to "interrogate the existing power relationships, including those between child and adult, without necessarily shattering the real order of the world" (42). The child reader may not be supernaturally empowered in the real world, but by being given a space where aetnormativity is questioned and subverted, they are empowered to question and subvert aetnormativity and its conventions in the real world. This is apparent in *Ocean*, when the narrator does not confide in or ask for help from the adults in his life. He says:

I wanted to tell someone about the shilling, but I did not know who to tell. 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? (28)

Because the reader knows that the narrator is being truthful, the authority of the adults in the novel becomes questionable. It is clear that the adults are of little use because of their disbelief in the fantastic and their easy discounting of the narrator's experience. This is easy for the young reader to relate to. After all, how many hundreds of times have they not been believed by adults in their lives? The adult reader is also called on to question the authority and competence of the adults in this novel. No responsible adult would allow the child narrator is to face horrific encounters with only the help of his eleven-year-old friend. No responsible parent would choose to believe an abusive monster over their own child. And yet, these instances echo ones that occur

in the real world all too frequently. Children are neglected and their testimonies pushed aside as too fantastical all the time. The *carnavalesque* elements in *Ocean* force adult readers to experience the negative consequences of adult disbelief and arrogance, and feel horrified at their implications. Children, on the other hand, are afforded some distance by the fantastical elements of *Ocean*. The novel's horrific episodes are caused by fictional monsters, not the monstrosity in the adults themselves. While adults are made to face these implications head-on, the fantastical elements allow young readers some distance from the reality of the horror in *Ocean*.

Even though the fantasy elements in *Ocean* allow the reader some distance from the traumatic events taking place, there are still those who argue that the traumatic elements are too mature for young readers, including Gaiman himself. In the following excerpt from a 2013 interview with the BBC's Mariella Frostrup, Gaiman explains why he decided that *Ocean* was a novel for adults:

Frostrup: "So when the kid gets drowned in the bath, was that when you decided this wasn't a story for children?"

Gaiman: "Up until that point I had been keeping a balance. [...] I got to the point when things were getting scarier and scarier. There was...sex in it; there was a certain amount of...very unpleasant violence [...] More than anything, there was helplessness. And I thought, 'I do not want to put helplessness in a book that I'm giving to kids.'" ("The Ocean at the End of the Lane Interview")

Gaiman's assertions that the sex and violence are too much for young readers and that the narrator's helplessness precludes *Ocean*'s ability to be considered a work of children's literature are questionable. While there are instances of sex in *Ocean*, the narrator's reactions to those instances reveal a childlike ignorance and apathy to the subject. For example, in the only explicit

reference to sex in the novel, the narrator sneaks out of his house and sees, through the window, his father having sex with Ursula Monkton: "He was hugging her from behind. Her midi skirt was hiked up around her waist. [...] I did not know exactly what they were doing, and I did not really care, not at that moment" (79). It is clear that the seven-year-old narrator is not affected by seeing his father and Ursula Monkton having sex. Typically, when children read about things they have not experienced or do not understand, their lack of comprehension enables them to not be bothered by those things. For those young readers who are aware of sex, critic Michael Howarth asserts, "sexual awakening is a normal part of life and should not be repressed by adults" (Howarth 19). The mention of sex seems to only really bother adults, who do not want children to be exposed to sex. Besides the slew of issues that accompany adults sheltering children from learning about sex, it is unrealistic to try to avoid the subject altogether. In *Ocean*, the mention of sex solidifies Ursula Monkton's control over the narrator's father and provides a tangible reason for his father's devotion to her. This adds to the realism of the novel.

Gaiman also expresses concern about exposing young readers to "a certain amount of very unpleasant violence⁴." Though the scenes where the hunger birds devour Ursula Monkton and where they nearly succeed in destroying the narrator are graphic, they are no less graphic than violent scenes from other popular children's works (for example, *The Hunger Games*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, or *The Outsiders*). Taking that into consideration, by "unpleasant violence," Gaiman is most likely referring to the scene wherein the narrator's father nearly drowns the narrator in the bath for insulting Ursula Monkton. The narrator's thoughts during that episode are as follows: "...he pushed further, pushing my head and shoulders beneath the chilly

⁴ By unpleasant violence, he means violence against the protagonist. Regarding pleasant violence, Gaiman asserts in the Julius Schwartz Lecture at MIT that violence against antagonists is preferable in children's literature: "Kids are a lot crueller than adults. [...] They want the bad people to die. Preferably in pain. You know, you don't want to get to a story with a bad queen or an evil wizard and say, 'And then he died in his sleep.' It's not--no! Adults, we are fallen in nature. We are forgiving and we can see our own imperfections. We do not demand painful justice. Kids do."

water, and the horror changed its nature. I thought, *I'm going to die*. [...] And, thinking that, I was determined to live" (72). The act itself, of a father drowning his son, is horrifying and visceral. The narrator sincerely believes he is going to die. That may be too traumatic for some young readers. However, contrary to Gaiman's assertions, the narrator is far from helpless in this scene. He is "determined to live" and fights his way out of the water by grabbing onto his father's tie with his teeth, so his father "could not break his grip on them without hitting me" (73). The narrator grabs onto a lifeline and uses his knowledge about his father's aversion to hitting his children ("My father did not hit me" (73)) to save his own life. While, the narrator does not receive any outside help here, he is not helpless because he acts on his knowledge and survival impulse to get his father to stop drowning him.

There are other instances, as well, which showcase the narrator's sense of helplessness and how he manages to overcome that helplessness. For instance, when the narrator is confined to his room after the bathtub incident and Ursula Monkton threatens to lock him up in the attic and repeat the near drowning until she is ready to kill him, the narrator escapes by shimmying down the drainpipe (a trick he learned from one of his many books) and runs for miles toward the Hempstocks' farm, only to become lost trying to navigate fields. This is where the passage from the beginning of this paper takes place. When Ursula Monkton almost recaptures him, Lettie Hempstock arrives to rescue him, yet the narrator nearly sinks below his helplessness: "But Lettie was just a girl [...] Ursula Monkton was an adult. It did not matter, at that moment, that she was every monster, every witch, every nightmare made flesh. She was also an adult, and when adults fight children, adults always win" (86-7). As it turns out, adults do not always win. Lettie successfully eschews Ursula Monkton from her property and leads the narrator to the safety of the Hempstocks' farm. This enforces Ruth's assertion that "[w]ith kids, one must land

on safer ground sooner than would be the case with adults" (Ruth). The suspense and sense of impending doom are not prolonged so as to seem inevitable--help comes in a timely manner. The reader is not left to dwell in a sense of hopeless helplessness. Yes, the helplessness is present and real, but it is not sustained enough to define the narrative as one of helplessness.

Further, the narrator receives help from the Hempstocks in his final struggle against Ursula Monkton, thus subverting the idea of *Ocean* being a narrative of helplessness. The morning after the aforementioned scene, the narrator is helped in his preparation to face Ursula Monkton once and for all, with Lettie taking charge of the endeavor. He is not made to face the monster alone. This is echoed earlier in the novel and to its end--the narrator, through his own resourcefulness and the help of the Hempstocks, rises above helplessness. It undercuts his own efforts and those of the Hempstocks to reduce his story to one about helplessness. *Ocean* is largely a narrative about overcoming helplessness, even if the one facing it is just a child in a much too grown-up world. The narrator's own resilience and his trust in Lettie are viable models for young people facing helplessness and disenfranchisement in their own lives. It teaches them how they can help themselves, and also how to trust and rely on other people, and what sorts of people to trust in and rely on. In this respect, *Ocean* is parallel to *Coraline*: the adults in Coraline's life are unconcerned about her missing parents, so she is forced to rescue them herself. The argument could be made that Coraline is never as helpless as the narrator in *Ocean* is, and that is why *Ocean* is a narrative about helplessness. However, Coraline and the unnamed narrator are only helpless in different ways or degrees: Coraline receives very little outside help and must face her challenges on her own, though in a clearly fantastical other world, while the narrator of *Ocean* is forced to find his way out of traumatic and life-threatening situations in a more realistic realm (with fantasy elements), but is aided by the Hempstocks, especially Lettie. In this way,

Ocean is less centered around helplessness than *Coraline* is because of the outward help the narrator receives. Furthermore, as Michael Howarth claims, children already experience these "intense feelings of helplessness and incompetence" (Howarth 85). Since children experience helplessness already, being given fictional exemplars who are similarly helpless, yet survive, can only serve to build young readers' confidence and ability to overcome their own helplessness.

Along with the sense of helplessness, Gaiman is also concerned with the high stakes sacrifice and resulting despair in *Ocean*. In the previously mentioned interview, Gaiman quotes the epigraph from *Coraline*, paraphrased from children's author G.K. Chesterton: "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten"⁵ (*Coraline*). Relating back to *Ocean*, Gaiman states that after the bathtub scene, "the cost of defeating the dragons in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is very, very high [...] At that point, I knew it wasn't for kids" ("The Ocean at the End of the Lane Interview"). Gaiman makes an excellent point, the cost of defeating the dragons *is* very high: Lettie sacrifices her life⁶ for the narrator's and the narrator suffers from the repression (or magical suppression) of these traumatic memories. However, Lettie's sacrifice does not preclude *Ocean* from being a book "for kids." Literary critic Kimberley Reynolds, who is on the forefront of advocating for radical children's literature⁷, suggests in her book *Radical Children's Literature* that the inclusion of trauma in children's literature is essential for the child's psychological and spiritual growth, as well as being a coping tool for traumatic lived experiences. Reynolds claims, "Adults do not

⁵ The original G.K. Chesterton quote is as follows: "Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."— G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*

⁶ Though Lettie "sacrifices her life" for the narrator's, she does not die because she is immortal. She is simply in an extended coma until she eventually heals.

⁷ Radical children's literature meaning literature meant for children which deals with pressing social and personal issues which are widely considered too daunting or "mature" for children to handle. This includes narratives surrounding war, suicide, self-harming, social inequality, abuse, and psychological terror, among others.

have the monopoly on powerful negative emotions or suffering. Indeed, often the things that lead to destructive and overwhelming feelings in maturity have their roots in childhood experience" (89). Children are not solely exposed to feelings of helplessness and despair in the safe realm of fiction; they experience these negative emotions in their own lives and witness them in the adults in their lives.

Additionally, misunderstanding children's literature as a territory with no room for these strong negative emotions has dangerous implications. Reynolds asserts, "mistaking an ideal of childhood for reality can lead to a sense of crisis, for believing that one has been or should have been the ideal is likely to make unhappiness, anxiety, and other less-than ideal emotions seem illegitimate" (91). In attempting to not expose children to strong negative emotions, adults may actually allow those strong negative emotions to perpetuate in children. If children are not allowed or encouraged to read stories with characters who suffer from these afflictions, children are liable to believe that they are completely isolated when they experience those negative emotions. If they are not given instances and characters to relate to, children are led to believe that there is something wrong with them for feeling that way, that they are broken, that they are alone. Having those traumatic instances in fiction allows children to see that they are not alone in their suffering, and sometimes there are ways to overcome those strong negative emotions.

In *Ocean*, the narrator feels culpable for Lettie losing her life, and he is partially correct. However, the older Hempstocks keep the narrator from sinking below his feelings of guilt and grief. The older Mrs. Hempstock tells the narrator, "'She's not dead. You didn't kill her, nor did the hunger birds, although they did their best to get to you through her. She's been given to her ocean. One day, in its own time, the ocean will give her back'" (164). Old Mrs. Hempstock gives the narrator something to hope for. She assures him that the consequences of his actions are not

permanent and allows the narrator, and the reader, to hope for Lettie's return. While this assertion is optimistic, it is later revealed to not be entirely truthful. When she drives the narrator home, Ginny Hempstock informs him of the uncertainty of Lettie's return. This passage shows the gravity of the narrator's failure. However, the epilogue of the novel ends on an optimistic note. The narrator, back to his fifty-year-old self, apologizes again for causing Lettie to sacrifice herself. However, Old Mrs. Hempstock clears him of culpability:

"'She should've never taken you with her in the first place, when she went off to find the start of it all,' sniffed Old Mrs. Hempstock. 'Nothing to stop her sorting it all out on her own. Didn't need to take you along for company, silly thing. Well, that'll learn her for next time.'" (176)

The blame is shifted onto Lettie, who, being thousands of years old, should have known better than to involve the young narrator in such a dangerous mission. The narrator's fault only lies in his childhood and inexperience. The fault of Lettie's sacrifice lies on her own shoulders, which is fitting since she was the one who decided to sacrifice herself in the first place. This shifting of blame allows the reader to understand Lettie's sacrifice as a learning experience and a warning against overconfident carelessness, rather than a paralyzing incident about the extreme consequences of a child's failure. Consequently, because the narrator is cleared from blame, the young reader is permitted to excuse themselves from blame "both for what happens to them and for the way they feel" (Reynolds 91). It would be detrimental to exclude children from reading *Ocean* simply because the trauma might be too much for some of them to handle.

But shouldn't young readers make their own decisions about what they read? Aren't they their own best censors?

Even though *Ocean* may indeed be too traumatic or frightening for some children, children should be allowed and encouraged to read the novel. In a lecture on children's literature, Gaiman himself asserts, "[c]hildren tend to be really good at self-censorship. They have a pretty good sense of what they are ready for and what they are not, and they walk the line wisely" ("[Very Bad Swearword]" 13). Children should be entrusted to make their own decisions about what they read, whether it is traumatic or frightening or neither. Adults should aid in the spread of *Ocean's* readership and influence by recommending the novel to children in their lives, within reason. When answering a question about whether *Coraline* is too scary for children, Gaiman claims, "I think it's too scary for some 9 year olds. But I also think it's too scary for some 35 year olds" (neil-gaiman). It would be supercilious to relegate *Ocean* to the territory of adult literature simply because some children are unprepared to handle some of its contents.

Reading Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* as a work of children's gothic horror is not only plausible--it is necessary. Children must be exposed to horror and trauma in the safe playground of fiction, cushioned by fantastical elements, in order to guard themselves against fear. Greg Ruth notes, "[t]he parents that find this [children's horror] so inappropriate are under the illusion that if they don't ever let their kids know any of this stuff, they won't have bad dreams or be afraid—not knowing that, tragically, they are just making them more vulnerable to fear" (Ruth). Attempting to shelter children from horror and trauma only enables fear to go unchecked in their own lives. Children's gothic horror offers a secure, fictional environment for children to experience and grapple with the darker side of humanity, so they may be equipped to handle the horror and trauma they experience in their own lives. Reading *Ocean* in that light opens a dialogue between adults and children about their own fears and anxieties and allows for

greater empathy in those relationships; instead of repression or disbelief, children's fears are addressed as real and they are able to cope in a world that is, oftentimes, much too grown up.

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