

A Phenomenological Approach in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

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Abstract

The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman revolves around an unnamed protagonist who attends a funeral while visiting his birthplace and recalls happenings that started forty years previously. The novel delves into themes such as the quest for identity, the gap between childhood and adulthood, and memory and perception. This research aims to phenomenologically study the effects of subjective experience and its effects on perceptions and memories in Neil Gaiman's novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Perception, Memory, Lived Experience, Magical Phenomena.

Introduction

According to M. H. Abrams, "Phenomenology is the analysis of human consciousness, describing the concrete Lebenswelt (lived experience) as experienced independently of any prior suppositions" (Abrams 220). The novel's first-person point of view allows the reader to experience the story's events directly through the protagonist's consciousness. This perspective highlights the phenomenological understanding of consciousness as a subjective and personal experience and the importance of individual perception in shaping one's understanding of the world. "Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view" (Smith).

The subjective nature of the protagonist's experience is also emphasised through sensory language and vivid imagery. The reader is transported into the protagonist's world, experiencing his memories, perceptions, and emotions in a very personal way. When the protagonist speaks about his love for reading, the readers are also able to empathize with him. He states "Growing up, I took so many cues from books. They taught me most of what I knew about what people did, about how to behave. They were my teachers and my advisers" (Gaiman 102). He makes the readers empathise by helping them recollect their personal experiences of reading.

The novel also explores the idea of memory as a subjective and personal experience. The protagonist's memories are portrayed as fragmented and subjective, highlighting the way that one's personal experiences shape their memories and understanding of the past. The readers are allowed to immerse themselves in the protagonist's

consciousness and experience his world in a deeply personal and intimate way, emphasizing the richness and complexity of subjective experience.

The novel explores the themes of memory, childhood, and perception. The protagonist is a middle-aged man who returns to his childhood home and reflects on his past experiences. Throughout the novel, the protagonist's perception of reality is challenged, and the story explores the phenomenology of perception through his experiences. One of the most significant aspects of perception explored in the novel is the role of memory in shaping the perception of reality. The protagonist's memories of his childhood experiences are fragmented and subjective, and he struggles to reconcile his memories with the reality of the present. This is exemplified by how the protagonist perceives the ocean at the end of the lane. At times, it seems like a literal ocean, while at other times it appears to be a small pond. He suddenly takes a drive because he can't take the funeral anymore. He is unaware of where he is going but his subconscious memory takes him to the end of the lane.

After reaching the Hempstocks he remembers nothing about his childhood but upon reaching the pond or the ocean he is flooded with his memories of Lettie and their adventures. The ambiguity surrounding the ocean reflects the protagonist's shifting perception of his memories. Old Mrs Hempstock said, "Different people remember things differently, and you'll not get any two people to remember anything the same, whether they were there or not" (Gaiman 229). The magical method of snip and cut takes this concept to a further level where people forget their memories or it is replaced. Due to this method, the protagonist's parents forget about the drowning incident and allow him to stay at the Hempstock's. He also forgets about Lettie's sacrifice and thinks that she is in Australia. This happens in real life too, people after trauma often forget or remember things differently, this shows that memories are subjective.

Another important aspect of perception explored in the novel is the idea of perception as a shared experience. The protagonist's experiences are shaped not only by his perception but also by the perceptions of those around him. He can perceive the evil in his world because of his friendship with Lettie whereas his family is unable to identify that something is wrong both with the opal miner and Ursula Monkton. Ursula's physical appearance is also a form of perception; she believes that people will be happy with a beautiful appearance so she takes the form of a beautiful woman.

The novel also delves into the phenomenology of lived experience through the eyes of its protagonist. The protagonist's lived experience is portrayed in a very intimate and personal way, highlighting the subjective nature of his experiences. The novel explores how the protagonist's experiences shape his sense of self, and how his memories and perceptions of the world around him are intertwined with his lived experience. One way that the novel explores the phenomenology of lived experience is through the theme of childhood. The protagonist's childhood experiences are portrayed very vividly, highlighting how his earliest experiences shaped his sense of self and his understanding of the world around them. He believed that "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 4). He doesn't remember Lettie's name upon reaching the end of the lane but as soon as he enters the house he is gradually reminded of things that he forgot. His father's early experiences with his parents make him decide that the rod is never the right punishment. The novel also explores the concept of memory, and how the memories of past experiences shape the present lived experience. Old Mrs Hempstock says "As we age, we become our parents; live long enough and we see faces repeat in time" (Gaiman 6). This concept is visible when the protagonist's father tries to drown him. Though he does not hit him, drowning is another form of violence. The son starts resembling his father.

As a child, he is unaware of what is going on between his father and Ursula Monkton. He only knew that she was detestable but his father had taken a liking towards her. Later when he grows both he and his sister understand that their father had an affair. Similarly, when his father ate all the burnt toasts he thought that his father liked them but later understands that he did not want to waste them as they had fallen on bad times. When he was a child, his lived experience was not enough for him to perceive certain things. However, his experience as an adult helps him understand many things that he never understood as a child.

The novel also explores the idea of the self as a constantly evolving entity, shaped by one's experiences and perceptions. The protagonist's sense of self is challenged and transformed throughout the novel as he confronts the mysteries and wonders of the world around him. Initially, he is portrayed as a fearful seven-year-old who would rather read books than spend time with his friends. After he meets Lettie he starts evolving. He has a friend and is happy to see that there is magic in the world just like in the books that he read. He tries to stand up for his rights. Towards the end of the novel, he becomes mature and bold. He goes against his parents and Ursula and is also ready to face death by the hunger birds. He is even ready to reconcile with his family because he understands that they were under the influence of Ursula and it was not their fault to trust her. His quest for identity shows that this process will never end till death, because as an adult he can understand a lot more about his father and himself than when he was a child.

The use of magical realism also contributes to the novel's phenomenological approach. The novel explores the subjective nature of consciousness, memory, and perception through the lens of magical realism, highlighting the way that magical phenomena can shape the understanding of the world. The snip-and-cut magic is a good example of how magical phenomena shape memories. Magic is not presented as a fixed and objective reality, but rather as a fluid and dynamic experience that is shaped by the perceptions and experiences of the characters.

Magic is used to create an immersive experience where the lines between the real world and the magical world are blurred. For example, the protagonist gets wounded by the hunger birds and Ursula Monkton. The real world also starts crumbling when the hunger birds start devouring it. The line between reality and imagination is blurred since everything is a reality. Lettie is severely wounded and is dead in the real world but she remains alive in the ocean. The ocean can be symbolically attributed to the memory. The use of magical phenomena in the novel contributes to its phenomenological approach by emphasizing the subjective nature of consciousness, memory, and perception. The magical world is presented as a fluid and dynamic experience that is shaped by the perceptions and experiences of the characters.

Symbols also play an important role in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Symbols are used in the novel to convey the protagonist's subjective experiences and understanding of the world around him. One of the most prominent symbols in the novel is the ocean itself, which serves as a powerful metaphor for the fluidity and vastness of the unconscious mind. It also represents unattainable knowledge and memory. When the protagonist is inside the ocean he gains knowledge about everything from the creation of the world to his creation and so on. But the moment he comes out of it he forgets everything. The ocean is like a wormhole that holds the keys to many secrets. The Hempstock family is another important symbol in the novel, representing the idea of a deeper wisdom and understanding of the world.

The use of food and drink as symbols in the novel highlights the importance of nourishment and sustenance in shaping his understanding of the world. For example, the protagonist's experience of the magical world is often tied to his experiences of Lettie's food, which he describes as warm and comforting. There are many instances where food is considered to be a comfort for him. For example, the protagonist's experience of the magical world is often tied to his experiences of

Lettie's food, which he describes as warm and comforting. There are many instances where food is considered to be a comfort for him. First, when he was in shock after the opal miner's death, he was comforted with warm porridge, milk honey and his favourite blackberry jam. Later when he ran away from home after the drowning incident he was again warmed with a hearty meal from the Hempstocks. His dislike for the bread that his father makes can also symbolically represent his dislike for his father.

The *Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a novel that employs a phenomenological approach to storytelling, exploring the nature of experience and perception. The novel is narrated from the perspective of a middle-aged man who returns to his childhood home and recounts a series of events that took place when he was seven years old. The subjective and the first point of view narration is the first aspect that contributes to phenomenology in the novel. Another aspect through which the novel employs a phenomenological approach is its portrayal of memory. The novel portrays that memory shapes his perception of reality. It also portrays perception as a shared experience. The protagonist's experience is shaped by his avid readings of fantasies and his friendship with Lettie. This helps him understand the truth behind the real and the magical world.

The novel also uses the phenomenological concept of lived experience to show how the protagonist perceives his memories based on his lived experience. As a child, he cannot understand many things because of his limited lived experience, but he can perceive many things differently after becoming an adult. The novel employs a phenomenological approach in its portrayal of the magical beings that inhabit the story. These beings are depicted in a way that emphasizes their otherworldly nature, while also exploring how they are perceived and understood by the human characters. Symbols are also used to convey the subjective experience of the protagonist. At different times he perceives the ocean differently. The food given to him by the Hempstocks also serves as a symbol of comfort and affection, because it was something that was denied to him at his house. The Hempstocks also act as a symbol of deeper understanding and they are also a beacon of hope to the protagonist.

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