

## THE LITERARY INFLUENCE OF HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT ON NEIL GAIMAN

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*Neil Gaiman is a contemporary writer whose works have won numerous awards including the Hugo, Nebula, and Bram Stoker awards. The article analyzes the literary influence of Howard Phillips Lovecraft on the style of Neil Gaiman on the material of the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.*

The influence of H.P. Lovecraft on N. Gaiman can be traced not only in the latter's allusions to the works of the predecessor but also in his literary style. The novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* serves as a good example of this for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the genre of this novel is typical for the writer. Researchers define it differently, remaining within the framework of fantasy literature, which is the kind of literature most represented in the books of N. Gaiman. Secondly, it should be emphasized that the novel is not devoid of properties specific to children's literature. This is also one of the hallmarks of N. Gaiman's literary works [2, p. 2]. Thirdly, the novel received acclaim from both critics and readers. In 2013 *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* reached the first position on The New York Times Best Seller list and won The British National Book Award for Book of the Year [3], [4]. A year later it won the Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel [5]. All the above mentioned considered, it seems reasonable to assume that the novel represents the most significant and demanded features of N. Gaiman's literary style.

*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was published in 2013. Initially the author intended to write a short story but eventually it became a novel. The difficulty in determining the genre of the work arises from the origin of its creation. N. Gaiman planned to write a fantasy story for his wife but as she was not a huge appreciator of the genre he had to tone down the fantastic elements that permeate most of his works [6, p. 3]. Although the plot of the novel is not related to the Cthulhu Mythos, many elements of the book indicate the literary influence of H.P. Lovecraft.

Similarities can be traced in the way both authors portray fear. Like his predecessor, N. Gaiman is concerned mainly with the psychological aspects of this emotion [7, p. 15]. For instance, the scene of the boy's encounter with the hostile creatures from another dimension called cleaners goes as follows: "Something in a tree flapped its huge wings and cried out, a shriek that mingled triumph and delight, an affirmative shout of hunger and joy. I felt something in my chest react to the scream, like the tiniest splinter of ice inside my heart" [8, p. 119]. In this passage, the writer focuses the reader's attention not on the images of the creatures causing terror, but on the reaction of the seven-year-old protagonist of the story.

Moreover, it should be noted, that the essence of the emotion described is also similar to that in the literary works of H.P. Lovecraft. Whenever the main character gets into unusual and dangerous situations, he first notices the strangeness of them. For example, in the episode where the boy's father tries to drown him, he is initially afraid of the queerness of the events happening to him, and only after a while he becomes terrified of dying: "I was horrified, but it was initially the horror of something happening against the established order of things... 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" [8, p. 61]. Like the creator of the Cthulhu Mythos, N. Gaiman portrays the paralyzing fear of the unknown [7, p. 8].

According to H.P. Lovecraft, an important element of the fear of the unknown in literature was the powerlessness and insignificance of the main character [7, p. 8]. In the novel, the protagonist's inability to resist hostile forces is emphasized by his age. As a child, he perceives even adults as deities capable of killing him at any moment. The antagonist, Ursula Monkton, attributes her power over the boy to her age: "You're just a little boy... I can do whatever I wish to you" [8, p. 71]. In the following scene, the narrator doubts whether Lettie Hempstock, a young girl who has supernatural abilities, would be able to help him: "But Lettie was just a girl... even if she was eleven, even if she had been eleven for a very long time. 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" [8, p. 71].

The main character's helplessness is also manifested in his place in the narrative. Unable to face the antagonists without the help of the Hempstocks, he is constantly forced to run away from danger: "I was not brave. I was running away from everything..." [8, p. 52]. The boy, therefore, is depicted as a passive observer who

accidentally witnesses the existence and confrontation of incomprehensible forces. A protagonist who is defenceless in the face of unfathomable powers is one of the main features of Lovecraftian horror [9].

Even when the character manages to get away from danger, he doesn't feel safe. Having escaped from the parents' house captured by supernatural powers, the narrator continues to see frightening images in the dark: "...my imagination filled the darkness with wolves and ghosts. I wanted to stop imagining, to stop thinking, but I could not" [8, p. 68]. Exposure to the unknown changes the way the character perceives reality. This is also a recurring motif in the works of H.P. Lovecraft [7, p. 39].

Another dominant idea in the artistic works of H.P. Lovecraft that can be observed in the novel is the motif of forbidden and dangerous knowledge. In H.P. Lovecraft's short stories the complete understanding of the universe is connected with madness [9]. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* the narrator gets access to that knowledge with the help of "the ocean": "The second thing I thought was that I knew everything. Lettie Hempstock's ocean flowed inside me, and it filled the entire universe..." [8, p. 111]. However, when Lettie understands the intentions of the boy to remain in the state of omniscience, she warns him of its ruinous nature: "You can't, said Lettie. It would destroy you" [8, p. 112]. Salvation from insanity comes when the character leaves "the ocean" and forgets all information it provided him with.

Despite the fact that N. Gaiman focuses mostly on the psychological aspects of fear, connection with H.P. Lovecraft can be traced in the images of the creatures that appear in the novel. Like many entities that can be found in the Cthulhu Mythos, the monsters in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are hard to describe. This is due both to the horror that the narrator experiences when he encounters them, and to the extraordinary nature of the images themselves. When the cleaners try to lure the boy out of the only safe space, the author draws attention to the intangible nature of these creatures: "No birds sang, no insects hummed or buzzed...There was nothing to scare me but shadows, and the shadows were not even properly visible when I looked at them directly" [8]. The elusiveness of the forces opposing the main character is another part of H.P. Lovecraft's concept of the fear of the unknown [7, P. 35-39].

In the few descriptions that the narrator gives to his pursuers, one can find elements of the style of H.P. Lovecraft, such as the use of unusual, often scientific vocabulary: "...there was nothing in my mind where the hunger birds had been but tearing beaks and talons, or wriggling tentacles, or hairy, chitinous mandibles. I could not keep their true faces in my head" [8, p. 118].

The similarity with the works of the creator of the Cthulhu Mythos can also be found in the artistic world of the novel. For example, the main events of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are set in an old house which is almost isolated from the rest of the world. Furthermore, while describing the location of this dilapidated building, the author mentions places that exist in reality thereby creating the effect of plausibility. Such details were an integral part of most of the stories of the writer's literary predecessor [1].

In addition, like H.P. Lovecraft, N. Gaiman pays special attention to the description of details that create a gloomy atmosphere, when creating the artistic world of the novel [7, p. 11]. An example of this is the scene of the encounter with the cleaners mentioned earlier: "There was silence in the Sussex night: only the rustle of leaves in the wind, only the call of a distant owl, only the sigh of the breeze as it passed...And in that silence I felt their eyes upon me" [8, p. 119]. In this episode, the ominousness of the situation is built on the contrast between the illusory calm environment and the sense of the presence of the otherworldly monsters.

Another important thing that connects *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and the short stories of H.P. Lovecraft is the protagonist. In the prologue, for instance, the narrator as an adult emphasizes the important role of art in his life: "I make art, sometimes I make true art, and sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. Some of them. Not all" [8, p. 13]. The introversion of the character is illustrated by the episode which describes one of his birthdays: "Nobody came to my seventh birthday party... I was sad that nobody had come to my party, but happy that I had a Batman figure, and there was a birthday present waiting to be read...I lay on the bed and lost myself in the stories. I liked that. Books were safer than other people anyway" [8, p. 16]. Thus, like a typical protagonist of Lovecraftian stories, the narrator is melancholic, highly sensitive and unsocial [7, p. 16].

One more reason to claim that the literary style of N. Gaiman in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is influenced by H.P. Lovecraft is mythology. It plays an important role in the stories comprising the Cthulhu Mythos [7, P. 6-7]. Mythological elements can also be found in the analyzed novel. For example, the Hempstocks are illustrated as primordial deities, who observed the origin of the universe. When the boy asks the question concerning their age, the oldest member of the family answers: "I remember when the moon was made" [8, p. 33]. Similarly, Ursula Monkton, who opposes them, points out to her existence before the dawn of man: "I was an adult when your world was a ball of molten rock" [8, p. 71]. Their confrontation is a struggle between good and evil that is found in many mythologies [10].

## Linguistics, Literature, Philology

The mythological perception of reality is associated with another significant feature of the literary works of H.P. Lovecraft, which is a tendency to avoid natural explanations [7, p. 11]. Likewise, N. Gaiman appeals to the reader's imagination. That explains the existence of multiple and sometimes contradictory readings of the novel. One of them, for instance, considers all magical elements as a defence mechanism protecting the child's psyche from loneliness, family problems, and the loss of a beloved pet [11]. However, the text itself doesn't limit its interpretation only to a realistic one. Another researcher views *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* as modern fairy tale [2].

The same scholar claims that the novel belongs to children's literature. The genre is characterized by a certain moral didacticism [2]. By contrast, N. Gaiman avoids explicit moralizing, which also connects his novel with the Cthulhu Mythos. Moreover, unlike a typical book for children, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* touches on the themes of suicide, cruelty, isolation, and insanity. These subjects are depicted in many artistic works of H.P. Lovecraft [7, p. 8].

Despite all the similarities listed above, the literary style of the novel cannot be considered a complete copy of the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. There are some elements that are uncommon for the Cthulhu Mythos. For example, the forces of good are not represented in most of the predecessor's stories [7, p. 15]. However, in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* the narrator is protected by the Hempstock family, who are, in their turn, a manifestation of the good forces. The difference can also be traced in the fact that the novel ends with the salvation of the boy. The creator of the Cthulhu Mythos denied the very possibility of a man being able to fight against evil. Consequently, the ending of most of his stories was tragic [7, p. 15].

It's also worth noting that some of the features of H.P. Lovecraft's style in the novel were modified. The previously mentioned fear of the unknown is experienced by the character not only during his encounters with the supernatural forces, but also during his conflict with father: "I became 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, paralyze me. I would not be able to think" [8, p. 57]. In addition, he experiences the same feeling while thinking of the future of his family after his father's infidelity: "My parents were a unit, inviolate. The future had suddenly become unknowable: anything could happen..." [8, p. 67].

In conclusion, many elements of the novel indicate the influence of the artistic works of H.P. Lovecraft on the literary style of N. Gaiman. However, this book is not devoid of unique features. Therefore, it's possible to state that the modern author not only borrows components from the writings of his predecessor, but also reinterprets and modifies them.

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