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Fantasy chronotopes and their complexity in Neil Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

Abstract: Fantasy fiction is renowned for its fantastic worlds and intricate multiverses. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* exhibits probably one of the most complex such structures identifiable in Gaiman’s works. Set as a memorate, with a frame and an inset, it has an intricate temporal and spatial scaffolding; the passage between the two being triggered by distinct recall cues and bringing forth past traumatic events. The hesitation between reality, memory, trauma and fantasy makes the reader wonder whether the events described are truly memories, if they are the main character’s way of coping with trauma or if they belong to an alternate timeline. The complexity of the novel’s chronotopic structure is mirrored by the multiple layers of the main character’s memories; their instability corresponds to the intricacy of the human psyche. This study aims to analyse and lay out the multilayered structure of the novel’s multiverse, to catalogue the alternate timelines, as well as the temporal and spatial constructs brought forth by trauma.

Keywords: *fantasy fiction; chronotope; mnemotope; trauma; Neil Gaiman.*



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Most of Neil Gaiman's novels are characterized by intricate chronotopic structures. Usually, they share a common starting point: each novel begins in a recognizable reality, or "consensus reality" chronotope. (Gomel 30) This allows readers to identify the setting and its "rules". These seemingly "real, normal" spaces are contrasted with alternate worlds or realms, typically represented by their fantastic counterparts – London Below in *Neverwhere*, "behind the scenes" in *American Gods*, Ghûlheim in *The Graveyard Book*, etc. In comparison, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* brings forth a new dimension unexplored before by Gaiman in his novels: human psyche. The novel is considered to be one of Gaiman's "most personal novels to date" (Rothman). The functioning of recollection and memory, the retrieval of long forgotten memories, their role in personality formation and coping with trauma are just some of the subjects that Gaiman explores in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. (Rata, "Memory and identity 196-211") This exploration adds depth and meaning to the narrative, but also a separate new spacetime to its chronotopic structure through the chronotope of trauma. The novel's chronotopic structure in its complexity can be compared only to *Sandman* (comic book series). In the following we will try to analyse, compare and contrast the novel's specific chronotopes, by using the notions of chronotope (Bakhtin 84), fantasy specific chronotopes (Nikolajeva 141-45), impossible chronotopes and the ontological strategies for their creation (Gomel 33-181), heterotopias (Foucault 4-9) and the chronotope of trauma (Tang 8-9).

The novel is structured with a frame and an inset. The frame is a mnemotope, a "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 447) and the inset is a memorate, "a first-person story about a personal supernatural experience" (Langlois 615). It starts with the unnamed protagonist driving aimlessly through his hometown after attending his father's funeral. Seeing his old neighbourhood and his old house brings back different recollections that beckon him to get out of the car and explore the black tarmac road. This instance is governed by the classical novelistic road chronotope (Bakhtin 98). In the novel the road chronotope in the frame narrative enables the inset story, by activating the "cued recall" of the unnamed narrator's past. The road is still how the protagonist remembers it, "when nothing else" is any longer, and driving down the lane feels like he has "driven back in time" (Gaiman 5). It facilitates the transition between recognizable reality setting and remembered space. The protagonist ends up right by the Hempstocks' farm, which in its turn brings back memories of Lettie Hempstock. In literature the road chronotope combined with the motif of meeting usually lead to adventures (Bakhtin 98). In the inset story, as the narrator remembers it, going down the road results in meeting Lettie, and later leads them both on an adventure. According to Bakhtin (91-6), adventures are governed by the adventure-time chronotope represented by a sequence of short extratemporal segments, where all adventures are governed by chance, and a number of other types of predictions, like prophetic dreams and premonitions. It "lacks any natural, everyday cyclicality" and "there are absolutely no indications of historical time, no identifying traces of the era" (Bakhtin

91). Although the inset story can be located in the past, just after narrator's seventh birthday, it is still a series of adventures governed by chance with no exact way to be pinpointed in time. The road chronotope jointly with adventure-time chronotope realizes the metaphor of "the path of life" (Bakhtin 120), and in the narrator's case the adventures lead to trauma that affects his personality and as a result determine his outlook on life. In the inset story, the space resurfacing in the narrator's memory is represented by two combined chronotopes, the chronotope of everyday life interwoven with the chronotope of adventure time. These two chronotopes are specific to "the adventure novel of everyday life" (Bakhtin 111). The novels in this category provide two or three images of man centered on crisis and rebirth. The time in this type of novel leaves profound marks on the man and his entire life (Bakhtin 116). Although *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a fantasy novel, it is also a novel centred on a child's experience in the grownups world that influences his personality formation and his personal growth. (Rata, *Transcending Genre Boundaries* 248-254) Consequently, it shares traits with the adventure novel of the everyday life: the recounting of traumatic events and the ways trauma still influences the adult with no recollection of it. Going down the memory lane is illustrated by the chronotopic motif of "mnemotope".

However, since mnemotope involves memories of the past, Gaiman expresses his opinion on the reliability of memory in the following, uttered by old Mrs. Hempstock: "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 you could be continents away for all it means anything" (173). This implies the presence of a fictional element in mnemotope, as memory is complex, subject to change every time one accesses it, and therefore unreliable. Memory constitutes a "self schemata, including cognitive representations developed from specific autobiographical events, as well as general representations" (Rathbone et al.1404). On the one hand, the space is presented through the adult narrator's eyes in the recognizable reality chronotope – an unnamed town in Sussex, on the other hand it is seen through the recollections of a seven year old – buildings that used to stand there do not exist any longer; while recollections of supernatural events that happened in the space represent the setting of a memorate. As a result, the setting is simultaneously real, unreal, and fantastic. It is real, seen through the eyes of an adult; unreal, because it is a place in the narrator's memory; and fantastic, due to its specific characteristics emerging from the story. The space, belonging to recognizable reality seems unimpressive at first, but as the memories come back, it suddenly becomes a complex multidimensional place.

Once the protagonist gets out of the car and sees the Hempstocks' farm, one can identify the motif of border interwoven with the motif of threshold. These motifs render the dichotomy of reality; allow the separation between realms and chronotopes, and the shift in protagonist's consciousness. When on the threshold, the characters are in an "in-between" space, where the spatio-temporal conditions of the two worlds or realms are interweaved. The threshold crossing into the Hempstocks' farmhouse unblocks forgotten memories, which fade away once the threshold is crossed back into the world. Another

instance of the chronotope of threshold in the novel is represented by the opening of Mini's passenger-side door, which unleashes the macabre in the boy's life, starting the series of events that ultimately lead to trauma and amnesia. Also, crossing the threshold of the farmhouse and meeting Mrs. Hempstock, makes the narrator realize that everything is coming back to him, that "memories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning" (Gaiman 7). It leads to him asking for the duck pond, and being 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 7). Unfortunately, the moment the narrator crosses the farmhouse threshold on his way out, he forgets every retrieved memory. It is illustrated in the following example: "next time Lettie writes from Australia, [...] please tell her I said hello" (Gaiman 178), despite the fact that just some minutes earlier, he remembered Lettie's sacrifice and fate.

In crossing the threshold into the farmhouse, the recognizable reality chronotope is slowly being replaced by the alternate reality of memorate, therefore by fantasy specific chronotopes. Their main characteristic is the presence of magic, or any other form of the supernatural, in an otherwise realistic, recognizable world (Nikolajeva 141). According to Nikolajeva's classification (141-45), the Hempstocks' farm in the novel belongs to the choronotope of multidimensionality. It functions by transition between chronotopes, between Primary and Secondary World, to use J. R. R. Tolkien terms in the essay "On Fairy Stories" (1947). The initial setting is reality or rather its narrative representation, the Primary World: the unnamed town in Sussex, and the alternate realm or world, which is either magical or functions abnormally in comparison with the recognizable reality chronotope, the Secondary World: the Hempstocks' farm. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* there is no transition to the alternative realm, because the farm interacts with the chronotope of reality. This interaction is enabled by the magical realm itself, which acts as a normal farm the majority of time, only glowing golden and protecting its inhabitants in case of imminent danger. This transition between Primary World and the Secondary World anchors the plot in the recognizable reality, and is one of the main traits of Fantasy, according to Nikolajeva (142). The presence of the farm in the recognizable reality is realised through the strategy of embedding, which is, according to Gomel, one of the five ontological strategies used in the creation of impossible chronotopes (*Narrative Space and Time* 35).

On the one hand, Hempstocks' farm represents a Secondary World, on the other hand, it is a part of the Primary World. Embedding is a strategy that doubles the storyworld by enclosing a separate mini-universe within the diegetic chronotope (Gomel 35). Not only does the land belong simultaneously to the reality chronotope and the fantastic realm chronotope, but it is connected to other such spaces. Since, as it is implied by Lettie Hempstock, the farm was brought "from the old country" and is older than the surrounding land, because Old Mrs. Hempstock claims to remember when the moon was made. It is populated by fantastic creatures that came together with the land, like the "flea", or the cats that grow in the field (Gaiman 44). It is also a heterotopic space, as it

stores time and creatures from other realms; it is embedded in the consensus-reality, while still preserving its connection to other realms through its “ocean”. Lettie’s ocean is a space that connects multiple dimensions, holds creation, and contains knowledge, as in the following example: “Lettie Hempstock’s ocean flowed inside me, and it filled the entire universe, from Egg to Rose. I knew that”, “Everything whispered inside me. Everything spoke to everything, and I knew it all” (Gaiman 143). Also, “if you stayed here for too long, after a while just a little of you would exist everywhere, all spread out. [...] Never enough of you all together in one place, so there wouldn’t be anything left that would think of itself as an ‘I.’ No point of view any longer, because you’d be an infinite sequence of views and of points . . .” (Gaiman 145). It is a sort of Primordial Ocean, or “creation soup” (Shu 532), which according to Meletinsky (187) is a “universal” motif, because water is considered as “the primeval element, from which all was created, therefore an archaic symbol of the womb and of fertility, also of purification and rebirth” (Hall 111). Hence, Lettie’s ocean is a heterotopia and a heterochronia, as it connects “multiple discordant universes” and multiple timelines, which “denotes the ambivalent and unstable spatial and temporal conditions in fiction” (Nikolajeva 143).

It can be argued that the entire farm is a heterotopia, “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 6). Furthermore, it is a heterochronia, as it exhibits an absolute break with traditional time (Foucault 6): allowing time to flow differently, storing memories since the world inception, and being atemporal. For instance, the farmhouse is always illuminated by full, harvest moon that never changes: “gran always 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 105). While over the farm hang two moons, unseen from the Primary World, governed by “reality” rules, the farm can be seen as an inverted utopia as well, since it is unchanged for eons, a safe place, under the Hempstocks’ control, marked by heterotopia that connects it to alternate dimensions, through the “wormholes” provided by the primordial ocean. This is realized by what Gomel calls the strategy of wormholing (117). A special usage of this strategy can be observed in the protagonist’s role as a portal for Ursula Monkton that she uses to escape the farm. The portal is an actual wormhole used by the monster to travel, hiding it in the child transforms him into a connection between dimensions. This transformation of the boy into a tunnel or a portal, and later into a door is enabled by the chronotope of heterotopia, and the strategy of wormholing, which destabilizes and distorts the utopian spacetime (Gomel 117).

Another example of a heterotopic space embedded in the reality chronotope is that of the fairy ring that protects the boy from the hunger birds in the novel. The fairy ring is located in the boy’s garden and it offers protection from otherworldly entities. Its protection is so powerful that neither hungry birds (disguised as the ghosts of the opal miner and Ursula Monkton), nor doppelgängers of his sister and father that try to lure him out of the fairy ring, cannot touch him. Lettie ultimately saves the boy by bringing him the “ocean” in a bucket, thus allowing him to “portal” to the Hempstocks farm by stepping into the bucket. As it was mentioned above, the ocean serves as a primeval

connection between dimensions. Numerous references to modern science, and especially to modern physics and cosmology, which are scattered throughout the novel, as: electrons, protons, neutrons, dark matter, Big Bang, etc., all amplify this perception of a multiverse. The discordant universes in the novel connect on multiple levels, creating a complex chronotopic structure. The three women inhabiting the farm represent the three Fates and also the triple goddesses – the Moirai: as they “snip” things from reality, and “stitch” the reality back, creating alternate timelines. 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 177), as the old Mrs. Hempstock states when told that the narrator thought he saw two women instead of one: “It’s just me ... It’s only ever just me” (Gaiman 177). The three goddesses represent the same feminine archetype: the crone, the mother and the maiden. (Graves 14) In the novel, the Hempstocks are constantly associated with the phases of the moon. The stitching and snipping of events from reality happens when the boy’s parents, under the flea’s control, come to fetch him to further punish him for his inappropriate behaviour the previous evening. The old Mrs. Hempstock alters the boy’s dressing gown, in order to remove the previous evening from reality and memory: “just a little snipping, then a little sewing and it’ll all be good as gold” (Gaiman 97). This alters the past and memory creating an alternative history chronotope¹, an alternative timeline that no longer remains in his parents’ reality. Although the boy chooses to remember what happened, thus enabling the chronotope of trauma.

In order to determine how the chronotope of trauma manifest itself, one has to look into trauma and its effects on survivors. According to Caruth, trauma is “a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world that constitutes a wound” (3). It “refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm” (Gilmore 3). It can be induced either by prolonged stress, feelings of terror, powerlessness, loneliness, betrayal, or by the fact that “the person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience” (Brown 100). In addition, “a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic” (Van Der Kolk & Van Der Hart 175). Trauma response and its processing depends on multiple factors, like – nature of trauma, individual differences, coping mechanisms etc. – “a 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 172-73). Sometimes, the victim represses emotions related to the traumatic event, and instead of processing trauma either ignores it, or entirely forgets it as a coping mechanism: “adaptive forgetting is a matter of inhibiting information as opposed to discarding it entirely” (Freyd 317). Traumatic recollection is induced by setting or situation, which is reminiscent of the original traumatic event. Where and when it happens is oftentimes interconnected with

¹ Different from alternate history or uchronia, used here to designate different versions of real and historical past in fantasy novels.

the lost self, lost identity or emotional upheaval. Trauma triggers or cues can cause mental and physical distress. Trauma processing involves acknowledging and understanding emotions related to the traumatic event itself and its integration into a narrative to help empower the victim. Trauma narrative aims to recover the lost sense of self, to “remaster” the narrative. When it comes to children, “fairy tales [...] serve an important purpose in childhood, helping our subconscious minds process events from our real lives too disturbing to confront with our conscious minds” (Bettelheim qtd. in Blasingame 332). In adults, “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” (Douglas 110-11). Trauma narrative is centred on self narrativization; it helps the survivor to externalize trauma, to become an active subject in his story instead on a passive victim (Ruti 38). Since trauma response and processing varies depending on individual factors, the representations of trauma chronotope in fiction vary as well. In the novel Gaiman plays with the workings of memory, remembering and forgetting. For instance, 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 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.

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* the trauma chronotope can be identified by the following characteristics: time slowing down, the recollection of an abundance of details related to it, like colours, sounds, patterns, sensations, as it is illustrated in the following example: “I looked at him, at the intent expression on his face. [...] He was wearing a light blue shirt and a maroon paisley tie. He pulled off his watch on its expandable strap, dropped it onto the window ledge” (Gaiman 72). The scene is recalled in painstaking detail, filling the protagonist with horror at the realization of his father’s intention:

I was fully dressed. That was wrong. I had my sandals on. That was wrong. The bathwater 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 (Gaiman 72).

While reliving his trauma the narrator is suddenly a seven year old again, in his childhood home, helpless and scared, convinced in the instance that he is going to die. The horror, fear, panic, and powerlessness permeate the moment creating a specific chronotope that returns each time the trauma is relived. It brings forth a “specific mindscape” in which the individual is powerless, hurt, lost. The trauma chronotope in the above fragment takes the protagonist back to a space and time that no longer exist: his childhood home having been replaced by newer buildings, just like the narrator’s age - having gone from seven to forty-something. It is anchoring the protagonist to an “impossible topology” – “juxtaposing in single real place several spaces ... that are in

itself incompatible” (Foucault 6), while linking it to a specific transitory moment of the past, making the trauma chronotope a heterotopia. Heterotopias are places ‘that are somehow “different”: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory and transforming’ (Michael & Donnar 73). Trauma chronotopes disturb, disrupt and transform the person reliving trauma, and their manifestation is deeply personal, thus manifesting differently from one victim to the next. The places and moments in time vary greatly, as well as the triggers that determine it, which make it heterotopic in nature. As trauma chronotopes exist just like heterotopias ‘outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality’ (Foucault 25). Furthermore, “a heterotopia is a space disturbingly open to other sites and other selves. This disturbance can be transformative: either positive or negative” (Michael & Donnar 78). Similarly, trauma takes the victim back to its former self and this can manifest both physically and psychologically. As a result, trauma as heterotopia contests and inverts the existing construct of the self.

The instances of trauma chronotope are numerous in the novel – witnessing the dead body of the opal miner, losing his kitten, being bullied by the adult that was hired to take care of the child, being almost killed by his own father, witnessing adultery, etc. Considering that “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” (Joseph 169-70), the narrator’s amnesia is illustrative of his experience. The traumatic events in the novel grow gradually in intensity. Their series starts with the fact that nobody came to the protagonist’s birthday, affecting him profoundly, although he momentarily dismisses it. Next, he loses his room in favour of a tenant, and his kitten is killed by the man who later kills himself in the family’s car. When the boy wants to recover his comic from the back seat of the car, he sees the dead man – an image that later haunts him. His mother gets a job, which keeps her away from home. It determines her to hire a nanny that bullies the boy. His father tries to drown him in the bathtub, and later during his escape from home, the boy witnesses his father’s adultery. It culminates with hunger birds coming to kill him, a memory which later is proved to be false. For, the boy actually died, and his friend Lettie sacrificed herself to bring him back. His memories are later altered by the Hempstocks, so he would be able to live, which offers reader a possible explanation for his amnesia after exiting the farmhouse.

Both fantasy and trauma chronotopes are populated by “monsters”. In the case of fantasy these are literal monsters, while in the case of trauma chronotope these are people or events at the origin of trauma. Most fantasy novels present at least two possible interpretations of the events described. They can be accepted as “real,” as having actually taken place, or they can be explained in a “rational way, as the protagonist’s dreams, visions, hallucinations, or imaginings caused, for instance, by fever, or by psychical or emotional disturbance” (Nikolajeva 153). In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* the literal and metaphorical monster is Ursula Monkton, the supernatural entity that escaped from the Hempstocks’ farm in the boy’s foot. She later becomes his nanny, bullies the child, seduces his father and threatens the child’s life, making him feel small, lost, powerless

and hurt. As a result, the boy fears her and considers her the cause of all his troubles: “She was power incarnate, standing in the crackling air. She was the storm, she was the lightning, she was the adult world with all its power and all its secrets and all its foolish casual cruelty. She winked at me” (Gaiman 86). In the boy’s eyes she represents the powerful, scary, strange, subversive adult world that invaded his home, robbing him of his safety – his family: “now I was scared by what it meant that my father was kissing the neck of Ursula Monkton, that his hands had lifted her midi skirt above her waist” (Gaiman 80). These, but also the aforementioned events broke the child’s heart, or as Ginny Hempstock put it – the hunger birds tore it out (Gaiman 174).

So far, the trauma chronotope has a lot of common traits with fantasy chronotopes: it is a heterotopia “freezing time and space” in the traumatic moment and tethering it to the present, by disrupting the linear flowing of time. It has the property to transport the victim back in time to the traumatic event, as trauma space-time co-exists with “present” space-time. It is a mindscape, just like fantasy realm is seen “as a mindscape, an externalization of the protagonist’s inner world” (Nikolajeva 152). Both, fantasy and trauma chronotopes present time distortions and space distortions, both represent more than one “reality”, more than one “truth”. However, the way trauma chronotope manifests itself in the narrative is deeply personal, as there is a pluralistic conception of trauma and its manifestation. Therefore, the unnamed narrator’s tale can be taken as literal recounting of a supernatural experience, or as self-narrativization – a stage in trauma processing.

The presence of trauma chronotope in the novel adds complexity to its chronotopic structure. Trauma chronotope adds depth and meaning to the tale of a traumatized adult trying to survive the trauma he represses. Each visit to the Hempstocks’ farm represents an intermittent alleviation of trauma, for instance: “You were here once when you were twenty-four ... You had two young children, and you were so scared. You came here before you left this part of the world: you were, what, in your thirties, then?” (Gaiman 173) Each visit occurs during the periods the unnamed narrator feels scared, uncertain, lost. His feelings in those moments, amplified by his repressed trauma, lead him to Hempstocks in the search of relief. Which makes Ginny Hempstock remark about the protagonist’s last visit: “I think you’re doing better than you were the last time we saw you. You’re growing a new heart, for a start” (Gaiman 175). Similarly, the narrator uses writing as means of therapy, as oftentimes art is seen as a relief valve for the “overflowing” psyche. The medium of fantasy is perfect for this type of exercise, as fantasy allows supernatural intervention and helps the powerless victim to rewrite his story.

The world in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a complicated multidimensional space-time structure, in which trauma chronotope just adds another layer to its multiverse.

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