Unveiling the Shadows: Patriarchal Constructions in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate School of Social Sciences and
Humanities in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in

Comparative Literature

May 27, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Unveiling the Shadows: Patriarchal Constructions in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

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This thesis provides an in-depth look at gender dynamics in various literary works of Neil Gaiman, focusing on *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. The author's narratives, encompassing novels, comic books, scripts, and short stories, have mostly gained critical acclaim, particularly for depicting strong and independent female characters. However, this study posits that the representation of women in Gaiman's works often remains tied to patriarchal frameworks, undermining the potential to portray women as powerful. To support this claim and offer a more inclusive discussion, the focus is also extended to works such as *Coraline*, The *Sleeper and the Spindle*, and "Queen of Knives". The thesis is divided into four sections, where it respectively explores the spatial limitations of patriarchy, scrutinizes the depiction of the "fame-fatale" through Ursula's dual role as both oppressor and oppressed, criticizes the perpetuation of patriarchal norms by women, and examines the stereotypical perceptions attributed to them.

Keywords: Neil Gaiman, Feminist Criticism, Gender Dynamics in Popular Culture, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Representation of Women in Fantasy Genre

ÖZETÇE

Gölgeleri Açığa Çıkarmak: Neil Gaiman'ın *Yolun Sonundaki Okyanus* Romanında Ataerkil Yapılar

Ece Kutlugün Arslan

Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat, Yüksek Lisans

May 27, 2024

Bu tez, *Yolun Sonundaki Okyanus (The Ocean at the End of the Lane)* odağında Neil Gaiman'ın çeşitli edebi eserlerindeki cinsiyet dinamiklerine derinlemesine bir bakış niteliğindedir. Yazarın, romanlar, çizgi romanlar, senaryolar ve kısa öyküleri kapsayan anlatıları, özellikle güçlü ve bağımsız kadın karakterlerin betimlenişi bakımından çoğunlukla eleştirel beğeni kazanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın temelinde ise Gaiman'ın eserlerinde kadın temsilinin sıklıkla ataerkil çerçevelere bağlı kaldığı ve bu tutumun kadınları güçlü gösterme potansiyelini baltaladığı iddiası yer almaktadır. Bu iddiayı desteklemek ve daha kapsayıcı bir tartışma sunmak amacıyla odak eserin yanı sıra *Coraline, The Sleeper and the Spindle* ve "Queen of Knives" eserleri de ele alınmaktadır. Dört bölüme ayrılan tezde sırasıyla ataerkilliğin mekânsal sınırlamalarını incelenmekte, Ursula'nın hem baskılayan hem de baskılanan ikili rolü aracılığıyla "kötü-kadın" tasviri sorgulanmakta, kadınların ataerkil normları sürdürmesi eleştirilmekte ve onlara yüklenen kalıplaşmış algılar incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Neil Gaiman, Feminist Eleştiri, Popüler Kültürde Cinsiyet

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very thankful to my advisor Dr. Nazmi Ağıl and Dr. Şima İmşir Parker for their guidance and help. I would also like to thank the jury members for taking the time to read my thesis.

Special thanks to my family and my friend Ezgi Neşe for their support.

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

Neil Gaiman, born on November 10, 1960, in Portchester, England, is revered as a towering literary figure for his multifaceted contributions to popular culture. Gaiman's novels, television and film adaptations, comic books, and scripts captivate audiences with their imaginative depth and diverse narrative. However, beneath the surface of acclaim lies a critical discourse concerning the portrayal of gender dynamics within his works, particularly in the representation of female characters. This thesis embarks on a journey to unravel the complexities surrounding gender constructions within Gaiman's narratives, shedding light on the problems and implications therein. Through in-depth analysis and contextual examination, this study mainly underscores that Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* perpetuates patriarchal norms in its representation of women characters, challenging its classification as a feminist text.

This analysis conducts a detailed feminist critique of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, chosen for its prosperous yet underexplored portrayal of women. Thus, it endeavors to address a gap in scholarship by examining patriarchal undertones within this novel. Although this book serves as the main text of the thesis, the research extends beyond it to encompass various other works by Neil Gaiman across different genres. These include the children's novel *Coraline*, the modernized fairy tale remake novella *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, and the short story “Queen of Knights”. Additionally, the thesis incorporates insights from literary critics and references to Gaiman's scripts and other works, comprehensively analyzing his diverse literary contributions.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION:

To give a closer insight into the primary text that will be analyzed, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a fantasy novel that was published in 2013 with a much-acclaimed reception through awards such as National Book Awards (British), Book of the Year and The New York Times Best Seller list, No. 1 Hardcover Fiction, and many more. It has also been made into a play and adapted into a motion picture, proving its popularity. The plot revolves around an unnamed protagonist who returns to his hometown for a funeral and reminisces about his childhood. He recalls a series of mysterious and magical events when he was seven. As a boy, he befriends a girl named Lettie Hempstock, whose family demonstrates a mysterious, magical, isolated, matrilineal household. The central conflict within the book is caused by Ursula Monkton, a sinister nanny who brings chaos into the protagonist's life. Later revelations show her as a creature from another world, arriving to cause trouble. Ultimately, the source of the evil magic, Ursula, is defeated through Hempstocks at the price of losing Lettie. Looking at the rest of the characters, the narrator's father appears as a not overtly evil figure yet implicitly betrays his family by having an affair with Ursula. On the other hand, the mother does not portray a character with many lines and references, yet she stands as a strong figure of courage for the narrator. Ultimately, the story is a poignant and imaginative exploration of the complexities of human experiences, especially childhood.

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Neil Gaiman subtly portrays certain characters as victims of patriarchy, consistently overwhelmed by its influence. The thesis chapters are divided to detail how specific characters—the mother, the son, Ursula, and the Hempstocks—are negatively influenced by patriarchy. Both the mother and the son are unsuccessful in their attempts to break free from its grasp. Additionally,

Ursula's fate is ironic; as she tries to embody the cliché of the femme fatale, she is ultimately removed from the narrative by other women, the Hempstocks. The Hempstocks, despite consisting only of women, inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal norms through their questionable lifestyle of shunning men and their reliance on magic to eliminate the femme fatale character, Ursula, from the narrative. Despite initially appearing as symbols of strong, independent female power, the Hempstocks are revealed to be bound by the same constraints of patriarchy, thus highlighting their lack of true freedom. In light of these explorations, this analysis reveals that *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* falls short of being classified as a feminist text. While it engages with themes of patriarchal oppression, it lacks a critique of systemic sexism. It does not substantially challenge traditional gender roles in portraying its characters. In line with this, Gaiman's other works are investigated within the common themes they share with *The Ocean,* such as spatial limitation and marginalization of women and problematic reflections of motherhood.

1.1 Gaiman and Feminism:

In literary fiction today, as in other media types, we see a tendency to portray female characters with more and more complexity, agency, and depth. Thus, a commitment to breaking free from traditional constraints, providing a platform for marginalized voices, and fostering a more inclusive literary canon is observed. Accordingly, Gaiman is acclaimed for his ability to portray strong and independent female characters, thus contributing to the evolving landscape of art. Regarding gender representation in his works, Gaiman addresses his portrayal of strong women with the following account:

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION:

> It is worth pointing out that people, unfortunately, misunderstand the phrase "strong women." The glory of Buffy is that it was filled with strong women. Only one of those strong women had supernatural strength and an awful lot of sharpened stakes. And people sort of go "Well yes, of course Buffy was a strong woman. She could kick her way through a door." And you go, "No, well, that's not actually what makes her a strong woman! You're missing the point." (qtd. in Czarnowsky, 26)

In this statement, Neil Gaiman argues undisclosed that the strength of one of his female characters goes beyond her physical prowess. Instead, it encompasses her resilience, intelligence, and other qualities that make her a well-rounded and empowered female character. Thus, he points out that physical abilities do not define true strength in female characters and real life but include various other qualities and characteristics. Even though what Gaiman claims here is utterly correct and logical, it is difficult to trace this situation to his portrayal of women in some of his works. Frequently overlooked or misjudged in feminist analyses, particularly in the context of Neil Gaiman's work, is the deeper exploration of what constitutes a "strong" character in a text. As Gaiman himself underscores, the strength of female characters extends beyond mere "door-kicking" or physical power, a perspective already appreciated by discerning readers and scholars. Nevertheless, delving into the complexities of representing female characters beyond their physical strength remains an inadequately examined field. Consequently, this thesis argues that the "strong" female characters in Neil Gaiman's works are less empowering than commonly perceived. Despite their apparent strength, they ultimately conform to patriarchal norms, as their identities remain defined within patriarchal boundaries. This is because elements such as women transcending borders, possessing

magical abilities, or fulfilling maternal roles do not inherently empower them within the storylines, contrary to the prevailing arguments of many Gaiman scholars.

1.2 Literature Review

In the article “Unmasking M(other)hood Third-Wave Mothering in Gaiman’s *Coraline* and *MirrorMask,"* Danielle Russell takes a positive stance towards Gaiman’s female characters. She argues that Gaiman’s works *Coraline* and *MirrorMask* challenge the traditional representations of motherhood and offer “alternative models of third-wave mothering” which is the approach that recognizes and values the diverse, intersectional experiences of mothers, challenges traditional gender roles and normative ideals, and promotes mothers' empowerment, agency, and social justice through flexible, inclusive practices and advocacy (93). Moreover, the author argues that Gaiman’s works depict mothers who are not confined by the binary oppositions of "good/evil, nurturing/abusive, or natural/artificial" but rather embrace the complexity and "diversity of maternal experiences" (91). She also mentions how Gaiman's works use fantasy, horror, and fairy tale elements to explore themes of identity, agency, and empowerment for both mothers and daughters (101). The author concludes that Gaiman's works contribute to the feminist discourse of motherhood by presenting mothers who are not passive victims or idealized figures but active agents who shape their lives and relationships. The points made by Russell in Gaiman's books mentioned above are compelling, considering how motherhood is portrayed in those texts. The concept of motherhood in *The Ocean*, however, follows a different pattern of complexity and agency by not showing itself as female empowerment. This is the case since the mothers in *The Ocean* are limited, directly through other men or through the ideology of patriarchy, both of which I will refer to within the scope of the thesis.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION:

Scholars also believe that Gaiman's female characters are complex, well-formed, and have agency, mainly because Gaiman constructs them with privileges. This idea seems problematic since if the representation of men and women is not on common ground; the resulting empowerment of one side is worthless, even degrading. The article "Power and all its secrets: Engendering Magic in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane"* by Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky analyzes feminist and ecofeminist aspects of Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean*. It focuses on the contrast between the Hempstocks, a trio of female magical beings representing the "triple goddess" and "the ecofeminist connection to the land" and Ursula Monkton (17). This monstrous creature assumes the shape of a sexualized nanny and disrupts the narrator's family (18). The text argues that the novel presents the power of magic as an "exclusively female concept" (19). Overall, the article is a rare quasi-feminist analysis of the novel, making it significant for its insights into portraying the characters. It is pivotal to my thesis primarily because it posits a contentious conclusion: that magic in *The Ocean* grants empowerment to female characters. As opposed to what is argued in Czarnowsky, I believe, and will thus investigate, that privileges that are given to women are a disguise for their oppression. A similar situation appears in the article "Gender Rebalancing in the Works of Neil Gaiman" by Gwendolyn Soden. Here, the author argues that Gaiman's women challenge myth and fantasy genres' "gender-imbalanced status quo" by mediating between the mundane and the magical realms (ii). They embody natural and cultural elements in this way and "transcend the binary oppositions that have traditionally subordinated women to men" (4). Thus, they are empowered and equal to their male counterparts and often surpass them in terms of agency and influence**.** Accordingly, they create a new balance between "magic and culture, nature and civilization, female and male, and self and other". Even though Soden argues that magic

is a source of escaping gender boundaries, this thesis claims the opposite for the case of the female characters of the novel *The Ocean* and the novella *The Sleeper and the Spindle*. This is because magic does not grant privileges; instead, it isolates the characters and prevents them from being considered equals to men.

Another questionable analysis of Gaiman's work depicts female characters opposing patriarchal norms, which endows them with strength and agency. However, the power described in the following article is similar to the supposed power of female characters in *The Ocean*; both are deceptive. In the article "Power of the Perky: Feminist Rhetoric of Death," Lanette Cadle analyzes how Neil Gaiman's character Death, "a perky and compassionate female embodiment of the end of life," challenges the phallocentric discourse and offers a feminist perspective on death and life (55). The text argues that Gaiman's Death practices a feminist reclaiming of feminine values, such as joy, empathy, and sensuality, in contrast to the traditional masculine and morose representation of death in folklore and literature. It also examines how Gaiman's Death uses her rhetorical skills to guide, comfort, and persuade the characters she encounters and critique the dominant discourse that silences and oppresses women and other marginalized groups. Even though this article portrays a densely artistic view of the character, the way Death stands up for her rights is not necessarily a sign of empowerment because of the very thing she represents: death. In a way, she is already in a hopeless bodily form, meaning her efforts float in thick air. A similar situation is apparent in *The Ocean,* where Ursula plays the patriarchal game to defeat the system with its trick. Nevertheless, she fails since, being a threat to patriarchy, she is defeated by other women who restore it. Thus, Ursula's dual role as both a victim and an

oppressor within the patriarchal framework is as ironic as Death is the *living* representative of feminist ideals.

"The Fairest of All" is an article by Elizabeth Law that analyzes the short story "Snow, Glass, Apples" by Neil Gaiman. The story retells the classic fairy tale "Snow White" from the evil queen's perspective. Law argues that Gaiman's story subverts traditional gender roles and power dynamics of the original tale by portraying the queen as a victim of patriarchal oppression and Snow White as a "monstrous and vampiric figure" (248). Law examines how Gaiman uses various literary devices, such as symbolism, imagery, and narrative structure, to challenge the binary oppositions of "good/evil, beauty/ugliness, and femininity/masculinity" and offers a feminist critique of the fairy tale genre. Similarly, *The Ocean* challenges binary oppositions, but unfortunately, it does not lead to female empowerment. In Ursula's case, the interplay of good and evil within her results in her being discarded and not empowered.

Some scholars are more distant in deeming Gaiman’s texts as feminist. In her article "More than a Companion: “'The Doctor's Wife' and Representations of Women in 'Doctor Who,'" Charlie Coile scrutinizes the episodes that Neil Gaiman writes for the series. She contends that Gaiman's portrayal of female characters fails to sufficiently challenge the patriarchal dynamics inherent in the show, wherein the Doctor typically assumes a masculine savior role surrounded by supportive female companions. While admitting the series' previously established portrayal and Gaiman's quasi-necessary adherence to it, Coile observes that many female companions are depicted primarily as love interests, "nurturers," or mere supporters of the Doctor, rather than as leading heroes or equal partners (84). This depiction of women relying on men is also evident in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, particularly with the mother's character, who is

defined by others. A similar critique is echoed in Rachel R. Martin's article "Speaking the Cacophony of Angels: Gaiman's Women and the Fracturing of Phallocentric Discourse." Here, Martin examines how Gaiman's female characters are shaped and constrained by dominant masculine language and discourse, which diminishes their agency and identity. This analysis is particularly relevant in highlighting the constraints and limitations associated with the experience of motherhood, a theme that will also be explored about Hempstocks.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

For theoretical works, I will use Julia Kristeva and Bell hooks' arguments to analyze how women are depicted in Gaiman's narratives critically. Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, articulated in her influential work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), delves into the psychological and cultural processes through which the self defines its boundaries by casting off what it perceives as horrific or disgusting. The abject is that which exists in a liminal space, neither fully subject nor object, but something that profoundly disturbs the boundaries of identity and order. This concept is vividly illustrated through examples such as bodily fluids, decay, and corpses—entities that evoke both repulsion and fascination because they challenge the clear demarcation between the self and the other. Kristeva describes the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 4).

Abjection is fundamental to the formation of the subject. Kristeva posits that the subject must expel the abject to achieve a coherent sense of self. This process begins in infancy, as the child differentiates itself from the maternal body, a critical step towards entering the symbolic order. Kristeva explains, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not

respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 10). The symbolic order, a Lacanian concept, represents "the realm of language, law, and societal norms" (Lacan, 75). Entry into this order necessitates the repression of the semiotic, the realm associated with pre-linguistic drives and the maternal. The abject represents the return of this repressed material, threatening the stability of the symbolic order and the subject's identity. According to Kristeva, "Abjection, by virtue of its origin in the maternal, threatens the symbolic with its corporeal return" (Kristeva 11). The way Kristeva defines abject as the thing that "threatens the symbolic", coincides with the descriptions of Ursula in the novel. Her bringing forth entities of gruesome quality, raising horror, and disrupting the order makes her represent the boundaries of the patriarchal order. In representing the abject, Ursula also serves as a subversive character. Ursula Monkton's capacity to disturb the domestic order, undermine authority, wield supernatural power, create moral uncertainty, defy traditional feminine roles, and confront the stabilizing influence of the Hempstocks positions her as a deeply disruptive figure. Her disregard for established boundaries forces the narrator to recognize and confront these borders, which terrifies him, as he is unprepared to engage with anything beyond the patriarchal framework. Consequently, due to her transgression of societal norms, she is ultimately vanquished by the Hempstocks, who represent the ideals of sacred motherhood.

The Hempstocks' ways of acting prove how women can be the most threatening perpetrators of patriarchy. The concept of the *patriarchal bargain*, introduced by Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay "Bargaining with Patriarchy", describes the strategic decisions women make within patriarchal systems to maximize their autonomy and life options despite the constraints imposed by these systems. This notion highlights women's agency and adaptability, demonstrating that women are not mere victims but active

participants who negotiate their roles within various cultural and historical contexts of patriarchy. Kandiyoti explains, "Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that constitute the more or less patriarchal environments in which they act" (285). bell hooks focuses on a similar concern and reveals problems within the same framework. hooks' perspective underscores that patriarchal bargains, while offering short-term benefits, ultimately sustain the structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. She writes, "By accepting the terms of patriarchy, women are complicit in perpetuating the very structures that oppress them" (hooks, 19). Thus, while Kandiyoti focuses on the tactical negotiations women make to navigate patriarchal constraints, hooks emphasizes the importance of challenging and transforming these systemic oppressions for genuine liberation.

The Hempstocks' elimination of Ursula, thereby maintaining the patriarchal order and frame can be interpreted as a means of perpetuating patriarchy. Although it is challenging to determine whether this act constitutes a "patriarchal bargain"—a strategy to secure their place within a patriarchal world—this argument is undermined by their isolated existence apart from the rest of society. As they are not integrated into the patriarchal society, they do not engage in the typical sacrifices associated with belonging to such a system, nor do they aspire to such integration. Therefore, their reinforcement of the patriarchal order through the elimination of Ursula cannot be viewed as a survival strategy and, consequently, cannot be considered innocent. Hence, I propose to critique their method of perpetuation, which I will elaborate on in further detail later in this discussion.

1.4 Structure

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION:

As for the structure of the thesis, it consists of four chapters, excluding the introduction and the conclusion. Chapter 2 focuses on the spatial limitations and unrealized escape methods that the narrator and his birth mother face in *The Ocean*. The mother and the son can be traced as victims of patriarchy through the ways that the father oppresses them. For these characters, space symbolizes patriarchal oppression, prompting their pursuit of liberation through both spiritual and physical means. While attempting to find methods of escape, the narrator faces physical torture from his father, the figure of the patriarch in the house. Additionally, books, particularly those the narrator's mother reads, reveal shared sentiments of oppression between the characters. However, the content of these books also sheds light on the challenging reality women face in attempting to break free from such oppression. Furthermore, while books represent escape, mythical books become particularly significant for the narrator. This is why the second part of this chapter is dedicated to analyzing the mythical books the narrator reads. These analyses illuminate patriarchal oppression and draw parallels with *The Ocean.*

In Chapter 3, the most prominent female figure of the book, Ursula Monkton, is examined in terms of her patriarchal victimization. Even though there is no question that this character appears as a villain, for she victimizes the narrator too, looking at this character closer from a gender equality viewpoint, we get to experience that she is also oppressed. Analyzing the similarities she shares with a mythical figure in the book, the Egyptian goddess Hathor, I point out that both are complex female figures who are simultaneously oppressors and victims. Ursula's victimization mostly appears through her destruction due to her being different and disrespectful of borders, which I will try to analyze with Kristeva's abject.

Chapter 4 is saved for Hempstocks, a family of three generations of women with magical qualities who do not age like humans. They also influence the narrator's life by saving him from Ursula and eliminating her through magic. Although they appear mysterious yet powerful creatures at first sight, they are also problematic in prolonging patriarchal ideals. Even though critics may view their magical entities as heroic and empowering, the idea is open to questioning.

The last chapter is saved for analyzing doubtful situations in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, *Coraline,* and "Queen of Knives." Building upon the non-aging of Hempstocks, the same concern appears in the short story, and *The Sleeper* raises the question of feminine beauty standards and obsession with youth. In the analysis of *Coraline*, this thesis goes beyond existing critiques since it centers on the character of the Other Father. It parallels his portrayal and the theme of men as secondary figures, mirroring the dynamics observed in *The Ocean*. A common theme across these three texts is the tendency for men to remain in the background when perpetrating evil or facing judgment for their actions. In contrast, women often take on the roles of either villains or protagonists fighting against the villains. This is particularly evident in the interactions among women, such as the Hempstocks and Ursula, where constant conflict is portrayed. This situation raises the question whether a text is feminist, if solely women fight with each other while men are left out of the picture.

Overall, the findings of this thesis aim to contribute to broader conversations on gender representation in literature, offering insights into how hardly visible yet influential signs of patriarchal oppression can be ingrained within a story and how even seemingly strong and independent women may reflect patriarchal societal norms. As previously noted, this thesis aims to offer a gender-related criticism of Gaiman's novel

The Ocean at the End of the Lane to question the portrayal of women there. This is done by drawing parallels to previously discussed gender-related themes in Gaiman's other works and addressing subjects that have received limited attention in Gaiman's analyses.

Chapter 2:

PATRIARCHAL IMPLICATIONS:

THE SON AND THE MOTHER

In an interview about the motive behind the novel *The Ocean*, Neil Gaiman says:

> It was meant to be just about looking out at the world through the kind of eyes that I had when I was 7, from the kind of landscape that I lived in when I was 7. And then it just didn't quite stop. I kept writing it, and it wasn't until I got to the end that I realized I'd actually written a novel. ... I thought — it's really not a kids' story — and one of the biggest reasons it's not a kids' story is, I feel that good kids' stories are all about hope. In the case of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, it's a book about helplessness. It's a book about family; it's a book about being in a world of people who are bigger than you, and more dangerous, and stepping into territory that you don't entirely understand.[1]

Gaiman's narrative, while initially focused on childhood experiences, resonates with the systemic oppression observed in patriarchal societies, where authority often suppresses the vulnerable. The situation is similar to the dynamic between adults and children. This parallelism extends to the portrayal of female characters in the novel since they face obstacles in achieving fulfillment, highlighting the restrictive influence of male authority. The depiction of women further underscores the theme of inequality, illustrating how the narrative serves as a medium to showcase characters and scenarios influenced by patriarchal values. Through direct and nuanced representations, the

[1] https://www.nhpr.org/2013-06-15/gaimans-new-ocean-is-no-kiddie-pool

characters embody the pervasive impact of a male-dominated society. Echoing bell hooks' assertion that "patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease," the novel portrays the characters' struggles to navigate and ultimately challenge these oppressive gender norms, albeit with limited success (1).

2.2 Spatial Oppression:

In the house where the narrator, his sister, the mother, and the father live together, the narrator's father stands as the epitome of patriarchal oppression, exerting control over both the mother and son by limiting their freedom within the confines of their home. So, the first form of patriarchal oppression that will be analyzed here is the one that exists through spatial limitations and unrealized methods of escape. The characters facing this are the narrator himself and the mother, who is a character that is strikingly overlooked by critics, while the attention is almost exclusively given to Hemstocks and Ursula. The mother is not even mentioned in some of the few published articles written on *The Ocean,* like in the ones from LM von Czarnowsky, Irina Rata, or Fabian Rocha.

Space is a powerful tool utilized in literary texts. It is not impartial but shaped by power dynamics and cultural exchanges within its borders. Accordingly, it is not just a reflection of the actual world but is actively shaped by these influential elements, as is solidified by some literary critics:

> Philosophically, contemporary geocritics are largely indebted to postmodernism's and poststructuralism's examinations of the spatial distribution of power and knowledge in social space. They suggest that space is never neutral but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the

> dominant power structures and forms of knowledge. In other words, even if a manifestation of the "real" world, space is both created and articulated through cultural discourse, including gender discourse. (Wrede, 2)

As analyzed by Wrede, space is represented as a "discursively constructed" area where meaning is filled with the emotions and thoughts of the people experiencing that place. Similarly, Frederic Jameson argues that "our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (5). In line with these views, specific spaces in the book represent ideas more significant than themselves. Judging from the accounts of the novel's first-person narration, it is clear that space tells us a lot about the narrator's experiences and thoughts. Not only is it essential for emotional reflection, but it is also a powerful source for analyzing gender imbalances.

While scrutinizing the significance of space and its loaded existence in Neil Gaiman’s fiction, Irina Rata makes use of Mikhail Bakhtin’s term chronotope, which is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (7, qtd. in Rata). In Bakhtin’s own words, once again, time is described as something that "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible," yet even more significantly, it is the space that "becomes charged and responsive to movements of time, plot and history" (84). His emphasis on the space's identity and importance is worth closer analysis. For Bakhtin, space matters in literature because it shapes the genre of the work. He says, "The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines generic distinctions” (84). In line with the genre reference here, to Rata, Gaiman’s use of space in fantasy novels "are of an utmost importance, mostly due to the fact that the

alternate world or realm functions as a character, rather than just a setting" (12). According to Rata, in Gaiman's fantasies, a reading of power dynamics might show space as powerful as a separate character. Similarly, from a feminist reading of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, space is also almost a "character," yet not necessarily for enabling magical fictive tools, but because the patriarchy-stricken characters fill it with emotions and feelings. So, the characters within the book, especially the narrator and the mother, give insights into the fullness of space with their experiences of oppression, specifically patriarchal.

The significance of the spaces within the book is heightened, mainly because they serve as poignant indicators of patriarchally imposed boundaries. As eloquently stated by Gwendolyn Soden, "Men draw boundaries, build fences, erect lookout towers, make roads, and create the rules of civilization" (1). These boundaries, manifesting as spatial enclosures, cast a profound reflection on the two pivotal characters in the narrative—the birth mother of the narrator and the narrator himself. Notably, these characters grapple with spatial constraints through distinct forms of escapism. The spatial constraints the characters face in Gaiman are explained through liminality in Soden:

> In Neil Gaiman's works, female characters often inhabit threshold spaces, doors, and liminal passageways that usher characters between worlds, landscapes, or journeys. These women create worlds and spaces of their own in an awesome display of feminine power and tend to replace the males, who tend to dominate myth and fantasy narratives, as leading protagonists (1).

Soden examines the "replacement" of males and thus victory over them through feminine fashions of manipulating space. This is per what Wrede maintains as space's

fullness with so much association and meaning that it cannot only represent gender oppression but also "offer resistance to gender hierarchies" (2). While agreeing with their claims overall, this thesis examines differently from the ones mentioned above that this "resistance" of the protagonist and the mother in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* can only be possible through escapism. And as will be anayzed, methods of escape also prove futile. Hence, in *The Ocean*, space is not a means to assert control or superiority over patriarchal forces.

In the article "More than a Companion: 'The Doctor's' and Representations of Women in Doctor Who", Charlie Coile critiques the portrayal of women in *Doctor Who*, particularly in the episode "The Doctor's Wife," by Neil Gaiman. Coile argues that despite initially depicting Idris as a powerful female character, embodying the Doctor's spaceship, the episode ultimately highlights her limited agency and the Doctor's dominance over her. Idris, who temporarily embodies the TARDIS's matrix, or soul, can only communicate verbally with the Doctor because of this temporary human form. Despite the potential for empowerment, Coile points out that Idris's physical abilities are vastly inferior to the Doctor's, describing her as merely a "box," constrained spatially and physically (90). Furthermore, Coile notes that only with the Doctor's initiative, can Idris act; thus, her agency is reactive rather than "proactive."

Coile's critique extends to the broader reception of the series, challenging the prevailing feminist approval of Gaiman's portrayal of women. Despite Gaiman's reputation as a creator of strong, independent female characters, Coile argues that this image is superficial. Still, it is worth considering that the series has certain constraints within the scope of its scrip. In *The Ocean*, however, Gaiman still portrays women within confining gender roles. Additionally, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is

dedicated to "Amanda," Gaiman's wife, who was curious about his childhood (Gaiman, *The Ocean*). This dedication hints at the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel, suggesting a personal rather than literary motive behind its creation. This connection further underscores the personal influences in Gaiman's work, hinting that it is not influenced by external script requirements

At the beginning of *The Ocean*, aside from the narrator's focus on himself, his mother becomes the first person he refers explicitly to upon visiting his childhood house (Gaiman, 7). This demonstrates the profound significance of his birth mother in his life, a bond I argue arises from their shared experience of the constraints of patriarchy. At first glance, the birth mother emerges as one of the least remarkable characters. She is rarely mentioned as a separate and influential person by herself and is never the main focus. In a similar vein, akin to Idris' predominant identification as the "Doctor's Wife," the narrator's mother is consistently labeled as "my mother," or through Ursula's perspective, as "your (the father's) wife" (Coile 87, Gaiman 64). Thus, her existence is always defined by something or someone else, and generally, that definition concerns a man's title. Adding to that, she has only a few lines throughout the book. Despite her infrequent presence and sparse mentions, however, when viewed in the broader context, her role is intertwined with subtle yet pervasive proof of a female character's powerlessness within a Gaiman novel. In analyzing Gaiman in the comic book genre, Rachel Martin says, in Gaiman's writing, "As feminist readers of Gaiman's works, we clearly see men assigning, creating, and governing the identity of woman, and whether or not the writer or speaker appears to be cognizant of the hierarchical discourse does not matter, as he is bound to it and by it" (24). Though subtle, the mother's character in *The Ocean* represents several men who assign her a role. This not only happens because

she is physically constrained but also because she is verbalized through another man, her son.

The women being unnamed or having their names misspelled, reflecting the ignorance of others in appreciating their significance, is evident in other female characters created by Gaiman. Even though a complete summary of the texts is provided in the fifth chapter, a short reference is due. Throughout the novel, *Coraline*, the protagonist, who is an adventurous young girl, consistently encounters the mispronunciation of her name as "Caroline" (1). In her struggle against the world, she must contend to establish herself as an individual who is inherently a subject, caught within the web of Althusserian interpellation[2]. Similarly, another female protagonist, one that is in *The Sleeper and the Spindle,* is always only called "the queen", without having an acknowledged name (3). Given this novella is a fairytale remake, the characters are predictably endowed with names representing their stock characters, like knights, elves, ogres, and more. The more significant issue, however, is that the use of the name "the queen" calls into mind associations with characters like the evil queen from prominent fairy tales such as Snow White. Nevertheless, the queen in *The Sleeper* is nothing like the traditional evil queen since she has no bad intentions. This labeling

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2

Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, also known as the "hailing" or "hail" theory, is presented in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses "(1970). In this concept, Althusser proposes that individuals are subjected to ideology through various social practices and institutions. Interpellation refers to the process by which individuals recognize and internalize the ideology addressed by external forces, such as societal norms, authority figures, or institutions.

In simpler terms, interpellation is like being called or hailed into a specific identity or role within the social structure. Althusser uses the example of a police officer hailing an individual on the street. When the officer shouts, "Hey, you there!" the person being addressed turns around and acknowledges that they are the one being referred to. In this moment, the person is interpellated into the subject position of a subject who must answer to authority.

engenders a bias towards this particular character in this particular story. Thus, another female character is "interpellated," and it is done as a gender-biased misrepresentation.

The Ocean begins with the narrator returning to her childhood town due to a funeral. The way the spaces of the house are described gives insights into the spatial restriction of the mother. The first page of the book is reserved for the repetitive references to the first person: "I" as in "I wore a black suit…", "I had done my duty in the morning…", "I had been driving towards a house…" and "I slowed the car as I saw the new house" (Gaiman, 13). This former home, which appears before the eyes of the narrator, becomes the starting point of the story since the speaker recites his childhood there. During this visit to the "new" and changed house, he remembers his childhood from where the frame narrative begins. As mentioned, what stands out is that the narrator introduces another family member, his mother, for the first time, referencing her as follows: "The new people had made mother's tiny balcony into a two-storey sunroom". In contrast to its prior state, the house, now under new ownership, provides insights into the mother's condition through the alterations made by the current proprietors. The fact that the "tiny balcony," which is a part of this house, is described as belonging to the mother alludes to the narrator's covert assumption that the actual owner of this property, at least of this part of the property, was the mother after all. Accordingly, the other members of their family, the two kids, the husband, and the nanny, were of second importance to him. Also, this specific place strikes the eye by giving clues as to the dynamic of the household. The balcony is a good metaphor that signals the half escape from the enclosed space of the house. The house itself is made up of walls that envelop the family from the outer world, yet a balcony is one of the rare escapes that build a connection with the external environment. Still, it is not a full

break-free since it is minimal and comprises the same house's walls and floor. The getaway the mother finds, then, is only a partial one. So, this place of quasi-escape is never fully triumphant for the mother because she cannot find a non-enclosed space to breathe or to break away.

Undoubtedly, not every female character in Gaiman's writing faces physical constraints and becomes unsuccessful in their fight against patriarchy. However, the question is whether a successful escape from patriarchal boundaries is empowerment. In the article "Outfoxed: Feminine Folklore and Agency in 'The Dream Hunters," Caroline Dupuy argues that Gaiman's novella reworks the traditional story of a fox who falls in love with a monk and sacrifices herself for him. Thus, to Dupuy, Gaiman gives "more agency and complexity" to the female characters (240). Furthermore, Dupuy explores how the fox and the Baku, a dream-eating creature who helps the fox, are portrayed as strong, intelligent, and independent women who challenge their society's patriarchal and colonial structures and subvert the passive and sacrificial female stereotypes. According to the article:

> Kitsune crosses boundaries and fights to express herself, to make her voice heard. She brings to the fore several critical themes of feminism; she struggles for self-expression, confronts oppressive masculine figures and their rules, and transcends limitations placed upon her to be heard. The story is hers, rightfully so. Her qualities and characteristics are threads woven into a tapestry of arresting beauty. The contrasting moral hues make the vision of the kitsune motif in this tapestry a rich and complex experience for the viewer (243).

Dupuy certainly interprets these challenges as opportunities for character development. Even though complexities might be forces of character progression, it is questionable to

what extent winning against patriarchal challenges can be counted as feminist. In other words, today, where the current society and feminist thinking are supposedly and hopefully somewhat evolved, we would expect feminist criticism to have progressed much more than to view patriarchal oppression as challenges that are necessarily there to be fought against in building women's character. For what if an individual lacks an inherent inclination toward combativeness or carries a disinclination for such pursuits? Or does it put the ones oppressed by patriarchy on an equal level with ones who are not, in other words, with the ones who are not obliged to suffer so that they would be free?

A similar situation occurs when a female character is forced to go against patriarchal boundaries, which happens in Neil Gaiman's novella *The Sleeper and The Spindle.* In the story, the protagonist is a queen who sets out to rescue a neighboring kingdom from a sleeping plague. Along the way, she encounters unexpected challenges, mysteries, and a unique reimagining of classic fairytale characters. The book begins with references to the oppression the Queen faces:

> "A week from today, I shall be married." It seemed both unlikely and highly final. She wondered how she would feel to be a married woman. She decided it would be the end of her life if life was a time of choices. In a week from now, she would have no choices. She would reign over her people. She would have children. Perhaps she would die in childbirth; perhaps she would die as an old woman, or in battle. But the path to her death, heartbeat by heartbeat, would be inevitable (3).

While explaining the situation she is in, the allusion to her patriarchal entrapment is not yet overtly described until she hears the carpenter who built "the seats that would allow her people to watch her marry. Each hammer blow sounded like the dull pounding of a

huge heart". Here, the "carpenters," in other words, some men, are the physical representations of the society who built her a prison with spectators. Faced with such complications, though, she manages to overcome them at the end through her courage and bravery and is no longer forced to get married or bear a child. The way she escapes from patriarchal boundaries, however, is still not a complete victory since she has to abandon the place she was born in and has to run "away from the sunset and the lands" she "knew" and "into the night" (36). In other words, to attain freedom, she still has to sacrifice the safety of the familiar and move into the dark and unknown. Once again, we observe a character building her freedom when crossing patriarchal boundaries. This leaves us with the reality that she can only build her identity within or outside the boundaries. However, boundaries are always there, just like Dupuy's interpretation of Gaiman's female characters' "transcending limitations," which I previously viewed as questionable.

2.3 Searching for an Escape

2.3.1 Monetary Escape

Turning back to *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the aforementioned escape attempts by the mother are practiced in multiple ways, one of which is through searching for monetary independence. To start with, the association of the narrator's mother and money seems intentional in his description of her sister's purse, which was like "the kind my mother kept in her handbag for her coins that fastened with a metal butterfly clip" (Gaiman, 53). Throughout the text, money surfaces as a recurrent theme, and the mother appears in a continuous attempt to deal with it, at the end of which she consistently fails in some way. It is evident from the text that the father is the only

breadwinner of this family for a very long time. Being a housewife, however, we observe the mother's silent attempts to save money as one time, the boy says, "My mother put the bottle of old coins on the mantelpiece of the dining room and said that she expected that a coin collector might pay several pounds for them" (32). This also becomes an exciting event for the narrator since he says, "I went to bed that night happy and excited. I was rich" (33). From here, we are also hinted at a common ground between the son and the mother regarding their enthusiasm for raising money.

Money appears as a means of desire and empowerment not only for the mother but also for the maternal lineage of the narrator. The following excerpt is presented after the narrator finds something mysterious in his mailbox and asks his mother what it is. The mother explains that he has won "the Premium Bonds" and explains: 'When you were born – when all of her grandchildren were born – your grandma bought you a Premium Bond. And when the number gets chosen, you can win thousands of pounds" (31). The effort of raising money, however, is once again disappointingly futile since while the narrator asks: "Did I win thousands of pounds?" The mother looks "at the slip of paper" and says, "You've won twenty-five pounds" (31). Thus, with this attempt, no triumphant monetary escape occurs.

We also observe the mother using money as a potentially figurative and physical form of escape. The mother leaves the house in the evenings for a meeting where she tries "to raise money so that people in Africa who need water could drill wells" (64). So here, ironically, she contributes to people in Africa by helping them get "money" to "escape" from their depressing lack of means. Thus, she makes a physical drawing away from the house for herself possible. By attending this meeting, she recedes from being a mother, a housewife, and a wife. Paradoxically, her continuous absence from the house

for charity work clears the path for her husband's affair with the new nanny, Ursula. Furthermore, in another scene, we learn that she did not have the money to hire a nanny; as a result, she had to find a job as an optometrist (53). While her securing employment appears empowering at first, Ursula's arrival "for room and board" effectively intrudes upon the family's physical space and disrupts the household with Ursula's seducement of the mother's husband (61). That is why the mother's departure from the house, intended as a temporary escape, ironically results in her defeat against patriarchy. It appears that as soon as the mother leaves, the man finds an opportunity to cheat on her. This situation excuses the man's infidelity as an inability to resist another woman, thereby diminishing the mother's value.

As observed so far, physical or spiritual ways of escape do not provide permanent freedom to the mother of the story. After all, the story's beginning, where the mother is first referred to with her "tiny balcony", reflects the end of the frame story, showing us the mother's fate. In this book, then, spaces do not imply the freedom and powerfulness of the oppressed, in this case, the mother, as opposed to what Wrede argues: "space itself can become a form of control, of limitation of women's mobility—but also a site of women's actualization, of breaking out of gender constraints, and of achieving power" (2). None of the empowerments mentioned thrive for the mother.

As described by bell hooks, the impact of patriarchy extends beyond women, encompassing a broader spectrum of individuals. This circumstance is not merely unfortunate; it poses an even greater danger to society: “Boys brutalized and victimized by patriarchy more often than not become patriarchal, embodying the abusive patriarchal masculinity that they once clearly recognized as evil” (3). In *The Ocean*, just like the mother, the son is also very often spatially limited, coinciding with his

patriarchal victimization. Often, the narrator has to be enclosed in a limited space he does not want to be in or belong to. In this context, the narrator's affinity for women over men stems from a shared experience of oppression, fostering a closer connection with the female characters.

The narrator's aversion to confined spaces and rooms becomes apparent through the way he depicts his house: "Our house was large and many-roomed, which was good" because back then, his father "had money" (Gaiman, 22). Later on, however, the father's financial situation becomes more limited, which makes the narrator imprisoned in his sister's room so that the space is used more efficiently. One day, he is told that his parents "were no longer affluent," so they "all need to make sacrifices," for which he "would be sacrificing" his bedroom, "the little room at the top of the stairs". While not explicitly stated, it is evident that the confinement to a smaller space is implied in its connection to the father, the family's breadwinner. This change of space, however, is described as an "exile" for the narrator since in his bedroom, he could "keep the hall door half open," allowing in enough light so that he "was not scared of the dark" (23). As observed, even closed doors cause him discomfort. He provides the following account to illustrate the same concern: "I loved that I could climb out of that bedroom window onto the long brick balcony that I could sleep with the window open and feel the wind and the rain on my face". Here, he associates anything related to the outside, like the "open" window or the "wind and rain on" his face, as peaceful. In addition, the balcony, in other words, the liminality of being both inside and outside, brings freedom to the narrator just like it did for the mother in the balcony reference.

The association between being trapped in a space and the father's influence on it is even more strongly suggested in other scenes. In the chapter where the boy refuses to

eat the "perfect" meal that Ursula prepared, the father is enraged and tries to catch and punish him (63). Excessively scared, the boy finds no choice but to "lock" himself into the room. However, the father's anger and power get the upper hand, which we understand from the following account: "The door exploded inward. The little silver bolt hung off the frame, all bent and broken, and my father stood in the doorway, filling it, his eyes huge and white, his cheeks burning with fury" (65). After breaking the door and reaching for the boy, the father attains a greater rage. He tortures him by putting him in an ice-cold bath, ignoring the little child's cries of mercy. The father's methods of abuse align with what Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, where he explores the evolution of punishment across human history and concludes that the modern ways of punishment are the most subversive, systematic, sinister, and thus hazardous ones. He says: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals as objects and instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power...it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy" (77). Considering this excerpt, what the father does is like refraining from killing his son but employing a subtle form of torture instead to maintain his role as an authoritative father figure. Just like what Foucault describes, he disciplines the son with measured and "calculated" doses of perpetual fear, like in a "permanent economy". Looking at the general picture, the father's way of approaching the kid resembles the power dynamic between a man and a woman, where physical strength is uneven. As a result, the authoritative figure, the man, seizes upon the "object," a kid or a woman, as a means to "exercise" and demonstrate his power. Consequently, we can assert that the anguish inflicted by the father is indicative of the systematic and perilous nature of patriarchal torment.

Putting aside the physical trauma of this act, the father also invades the space of safety and freedom for the boy in multiple ways. Through this, he, again, "exercises" an invisible, thus "modest" dose of punishment (77). First, the narrator's locking himself somewhere is not preferable, as we know how much he detests enclosed spaces. Nevertheless, he persists in these actions to sustain a temporary torture-free zone that will later on be broken into and ruined, both literally and metaphorically. Secondly, we infer from the text that the bath is one of the calmest places in the house for the narrator. He often eats and reads there, activities tied to his unconscious association with his mother, likely because her cooking is the only one he enjoys in the house. The "burnt toast" that his father makes with "thick loaves of heavy brown bread" is something that he especially dislikes (Gaiman, 24). Also, the narrator and his sister strongly object to the cooking of their former nanny, Gertruda, to the point where they advocate for her dismissal, partly due to this dissatisfaction (33). Finally, following the arrival of the new nanny, Ursula, the narrator begins fasting, exclusively consuming fruits and snacks while rejecting anything she prepares (47). It becomes evident that only the mother's food is edible for him. In a way, the father invades the eating corner of the narrator, performing another form of patriarchal pressure.

2.4.2 Escape through Reading

The Father's violent treatment of his son in the bathtub also infringes upon the narrator's act of reading. Reading is a source of mental escape through which he connects to his mother. The narrator openly admits the following upon the father's torturous act: "I had read many books in that bath. It was one of my safe places. And now, I had no doubt, I was going to die there" (33). As understood, reading is an activity

that provides a safe breakout to the narrator. That is why it is especially devastating when his reading space is invaded.

Reading is the narrator's passion since the book's beginning. Upon this, he gives the following account: "I was not happy as a child, although from time to time I was content. I lived in books more than I lived anywhere else" (22). Not only here but also throughout the novel, we observe books as the beloved friends of the narrator, and at times, they are his only friends. He admires books to such an extent that his mother requests the baker to "put a book" on his birthday cake making him different from all the kids of his age (18). Not only are books "safer than people" for him, but they also literally provide a break out to another world. When he faces his father's scorns or the fights with his sister, he takes refuge in the comfort of the books' alternative worlds.

It is also implied that reading is undoubtedly something that goes against the gender roles his father expects him to play. Later in his life, he realizes he "had been a disappointment" to his father because: "He did not ask for a child with a book, off in its world. He wanted a son who did what he had done: swam and boxed and played rugby, and drove cars at speed with abandon and joy, but that was not what he had wound up with" (141). According to this account, then, what the father describes is related to what Butler describes as gender performity according to which "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" that are attributed to men and women (214). Thus, the father anticipates his son to act like the man society expects, such as someone who plays football, drives cars, and so on. However, this is unimaginable to the son since things associated with women or what women experience are much more relatable. The following excerpt exemplifies this: "My father's youngest sister, my aunt, took me to see Iolanthe, a play filled with

lords and fairies. I found the existence and nature of the fairies easier to understand than the lords. My aunt had died soon after, of pneumonia, in the hospital (Gaiman, 18). Instead of the lords and the men, he identifies with fairies and women.

Aside from the books the narrator acquires for personal interest, those belonging to the mother significantly influence him. While the exact number of books in the house remains unknown, it is evident that the narrator opts to read his mother's books despite having access to his collection. To exemplify, he says, "I went to the books whenever real life was too hard or too inflexible. I pulled down a handful of my mother's old books, from when she was a girl, and I read about schoolgirls having adventures in the 1930s and 1940s" (57). Similar to her son, it is apparent that books served as the mother's mode of escape, primarily because they depict girls experiencing adventures and breaking free from the oppression surrounding them.

The mother's books are noteworthy for portraying female characters struggling to establish their identity in a patriarchal world. In essence, these characters strive to fit into a world not designed for them, employing various methods as their true selves are not accepted. The narrator gives the following account of one of the books:

> I read *Sandie Sees It Through*, another of my mother's books. Sandie was a plucky but poor schoolgirl who was accidentally sent to a posh school where everybody hated her. In the end she exposed the geography teacher as an International Bolshevik, who had tied the real geography teacher up. The climax was in the school assembly, when Sandie bravely got up and made a speech which began, 'I know I should not have been sent here. It was only an error in paperwork that sent me here and sent Sandy spelled with a Y to the town

> grammar school. But I thank Providence that I came here. Because Miss Streebling is not whom she claims to be.' In the end Sandie was embraced by the people who had hated her.

The excerpt is utterly ironic and gives clues to women's subdued identities. First, Sandy's being "accidentally misplaced" hints at her misallocation in a patriarchal world. Also, her name is misspelled, which makes her identity unacknowledged. Paradoxically, however, the woman who uncovers her real identity must also change herself and cover her identity to be a part of that society. This alludes to the fact that women must cover themselves in specific roles to be accepted, making them multifaceted and bearers of more than one identity. Looking at the overall picture, we see that Sally is initially hated yet is accepted in the community only when she tries to prove herself and succeeds.

There are also other types of books that influence the narrator: mythical ones. In his article "Reflections on Myth," Gaiman emphasizes the importance of these magical yet realistic stories since they "have their function" in helping us "make sense of the world we inhabit, a world in which there are few if any, easy answers. Every day, we attempt to understand it. And every night we close our eyes and go to sleep, and for a few hours, quietly and safely, we go stark staring mad" (79). In Gaiman's terms, myths guide us through perceiving reality. Similarly, this paper aims to unveil the significance of the selected myths in the book, shedding light on the narrator's world and guiding us to discern their implications for the broader world we, as readers, navigate, particularly in the context of gender roles.

Greek and Egyptian myths significantly influence the narrator of *The Ocean*. Regarding their importance, the boy says: "I liked myths. They weren't adult stories, and

they weren't children's stories. They were better than that. They just were. Adult stories never made sense, and they were so slow to start. They made me feel like there were secrets, masonic, mythic secrets, to adulthood" (Gaiman, 52). Examining the peculiarities inherent in the realm of "adulthood" and the adult world, he turns to myths as a means of escapism, as they offer a refuge from the harsh realities and complexities present in a world marked by unfairness and oppression. After all, “when adults fight children, adults always win” Lettie says (78). In a sense, the narrator underscores the oppressive tendencies of adults, once more highlighting the hierarchical structure of the adult world. Seeking refuge, the narrator turns to mythical tales to break from these oppressive dynamics.

The significance of these characters goes beyond the reasons they are included, reaching into the unique messages they represent. Among the mythical figures featured in the novel is Narcissus. The narrator describes this myth in the following way: "My book of Greek myths had told me that the narcissi were named after a beautiful young man, so lovely that he had fallen in love with himself. He saw his reflection in a pool of water, and would not leave it, and eventually died, so that the gods were forced to transform him into a flower" (63). Drawing from this description and its particular reference in the text, it is plausible to suggest that Narcissus serves as a compelling symbol, likely due to his representation as a poignant emblem of self-absorption and egotism.

Narcissus's profound love and admiration are solely reserved for himself. This makes him notably relevant to the thesis, as his ideals closely align with patriarchal beliefs that assert the unquestionable superiority of men over all other beings. Narcissus has unmatched affection for himself and disregards the love and presence of other

women, particularly Echo, who, upon a closer look, can be interpreted as symbolizing the voiceless and marginalized women. After all, in Ovid's text, she is the one "who cannot be silent when others have spoken, nor learn how to speak first herself" (91). This description illustrates her lack of agency, as external forces predetermine her words. Even though the reason why she was punished is inherently believed to be due to "participating in an extramarital affair," there is again an unfair treatment specific to her because Zeus, "of course," goes "unpunished" for he is a man (Dave, 3). In Ovid's account, Goddess Juno alters her speech because she "held long conversations," meaning she is penalized for speaking too much (90). We can also refer to other authors to add more layers to this interpretation. Commenting on the death of both Echo and Narcissus, Gayatri Spivak points out the differences between the graves of the two. She emphasizes how one belonging to Narcissus is an "ever-renewed natural monument" while "the lithography of Echo's bony remains merely points to the risk of response. It has no identity proper to itself. It is obliged to be imperfectly and interceptively responsive to another's desire, if only for the self-separation of speech" (27). Then, there is a drastic and even tragic difference between the two since that of Echo is merely a "bony-remain", thus lifeless and unimportant. On the other hand, that of Narcissus is an evergreen flower which will forever be remembered, and never die.

"Fool, why try to catch a fleeting image, in vain?" says the speaker in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, lamenting the death of Narcissus (93). Although Ovid's speaker expresses regret over the conclusion of Narcissus' tale, one might question whether Narcissus actually met with an unfortunate denouement. The conventional interpretation of Narcissus's fate as tragic might require reconsideration in the context of gender inequalities. Arguably, his demise does not inherently lead to unhappiness, as it aligns

with his profound self-absorption. In the waters where he meets his end, Narcissus is consumed by contemplating his reflection, thereby achieving an intimate connection with his desires and innermost self. Reaching out to his soul with death, he is finally unbothered by any abominable existence of other women around, a perfect end for his desires. Furthermore, the fact that Narcissus had a hand in determining his fate adds an intriguing layer to the story. He has the audacity and authority to bring his end in the way he wishes since he becomes his murderer while even the gods are "*forced* to transform him into a flower" even though they do not desire so. This alternative perspective challenges the traditional understanding of Narcissus's tragedy and underscores his autonomy in shaping his destiny.

Considering the symbolism of the narcissus flower as emblematic of patriarchy, more profound reflections come to light. The narrator depicts an interaction between Ursula and his father: "My father picked a handful of narcissi and gave them to Ursula Munkton, who laughed, and said something, then made a curtsey. He bowed in return and said something that made her laugh. I thought he must have proclaimed himself her Knight in Shining Armour, or something like that" (Gaiman, 63). Here, we see the patriarchal figure of the house, giving Ursula the flower that represents patriarchal authority. This scenario becomes profoundly ironic since, after this, the couple nearly starts to enact a stereotypical scene reminiscent of a medieval play where the father acts like the "Knight in Shining Armor" while Ursula plays the damsel in distress who pleasantly reciprocates the gesture with a "curtsey" Beneath these acts lies the conventional power dynamic where the knight, who is the representative of power, does the romantic act of presenting flowers to his lover. In this context, the mistress holds a significantly lower social standing and power. However, she is only elevated by this

reverential act of the man. Thus, the woman is empowered only through the mercy of a man in the name of love.

The mythic examples and acts provided above, then, implicate patriarchal ideals once again. Examining the broader context and considering the boy's attempt to escape reality through the Narcissus myth proves futile since the flower takes over an abominable role when given to Ursula because she is a "monster" that ruins their family (63). In addition, the flower's actual appearance is utterly unsatisfactory to the narrator as he says: "In my mind, when I read this, I knew that a narcissus must be the most beautiful flower in the world. I was disappointed when I learned that it was just a less impressive daffodil" (64). So, anything associated with this myth and means of escape from patriarchal oppression will be hindered by the memory of Ursula and her evilness. The significance of another mythic persona, Hathor, will be explored in the next chapter, as she shares resemblances with Ursula Munkton.

Chapter 3:

URSULA: ALL HER LIGHTS AND SHADES

3.1 Her Monstrosity

Ursula Monkton, the recently appointed nanny, functions as another oppressive presence, utilizing methods commonly associated with traditional male-dominated standards, such as alluring people in diverse ways and imposing direct limitations on the boy's freedom. In doing so, she pleases everyone around her and gives them what they need while intentionally restricting the narrator. She personifies the classic wicked woman archetype, thus sustaining the pattern of subjugation. Yet her representation is conflicting in that, even though she performs evil through which she justifies patriarchal order, she is also victimized from the very thing she represents. Thus, Ursula's nature proves the impossibility of a woman to be successful in a patriarchal world, since, even when she undertakes the role of a feminine evil, and victimizes others; she is also victimized and even eliminated.

To give details as to Ursula's first appearance within the book, when the protagonist's family faces financial difficulties, they invite Ursula Munkton to live with them and help manage the household. However, Ursula is not an ordinary housekeeper. She is, in fact, a supernatural being, a creature of dark magic sent to manipulate and control the people around her. She is a symbol of malevolence and represents the darkness that can lurk in unexpected places. She uses her seductive and manipulative powers to ensnare the protagonist's father and influence his mother, causing chaos within the family. The protagonist, along with his friend Lettie Hempstock and her family, discovers Ursula's true nature and attempts to confront and defeat her. Throughout the story, Ursula Monkton embodies the concept of evil incarnate, preying

on vulnerability and fear. Her presence in the novel serves as a catalyst for the fantastical events that unfold, highlighting the blurred lines between reality and the supernatural, as well as the struggles of childhood and the loss of innocence.

By infiltrating the narrator's life and family, Ursula embodies two contrasting facets linked to femininity: one as a repulsive and malevolent figure, and the other as a symbol of perfection and beauty. Ironically, both these personas serve to validate and prolong patriarchal ideals. The ultimate fate of Ursula, regardless of the identity she assumes, is one of destruction. This underscores the inherent impossibility for women to seamlessly integrate into a patriarchal society, irrespective of the roles and identities they may adopt. The very idea explains Soden's assumption that "Gaiman's women are firmly established in the middle of civilization and Faerie/dreamland/the paranormal. The substantiation of this magic-culture binary (with women as the fulcrum between the two) is a critical jumping off point in staging the feminine journey" (14). Put differently, Gaiman crafts characters that exist in a state of transition and are on a quest for a meaningful "journey" as a means to confront the world in order to authentically experience their true identities. Consequently, Ursula emerges as one of these resilient fighters in the ongoing struggle for self-realization.

This realization can be traced through the way she is represented, the first of which is related to her repugnance which will be examined now. As mentioned above, Ursula is a character of multiple identities. One of those identities is certainly her monstrosity. From the point of view of the narrator, she shows many implications of being abhorrent and even disgusting as a result of which she is sent back to where she came from. This proves that she is discarded because she distorts the order, trying to destroy the image of pureness associated with women. This problematic situation can be associated with Kristeva's theory of abjection which she explains in her work *Powers of*

Horror. While Kristeva does not directly adopt Lacan's mirror stage[3], which is crucial in understanding the formation of the ego, she does explore the idea of identity formation. Her concept of the *abject* refers to the experiences and elements that disrupt the boundaries of the self, and this can be seen as a way of challenging the stability of the ego. According to the theory, certain aspects of human existence that are considered taboo, repulsive, or disgusting, such as bodily fluids, waste, death, and decay somewhat become a source of discrimination and thus repression. Abject is described as a "weight of meaninglessness" "on the verge of nonexistence and hallucination" (2). "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes objection but what disturbs identity, system, order". In other words, then, abject is the thing "in -between" or the thing that does not respect "borders". Thus, the way Ursula is represented uncannily and excluded from the story by being defeated reflects the intolerance of the patriarchal society in accepting women's different identities.

To get a better grasp of the theory, in the context of feminism, Kristeva's theory of the abject has been influential[4] in understanding how women and their bodies have been historically marginalized and treated as abject. Women's bodily functions, menstruation, childbirth, and breastfeeding, for example, have often been stigmatized

[3] In this work, included in *Écrits*, Lacan investigates what he calls a turning point in a human's development; the mirror stage. To him, after the age of six months the baby begins to recognize its individuality for the first time by looking into the mirror. Here the baby recognizes its own body through its own movements, in other words it gets the "acquired control" over the "uselessness of the image". He says, only after this recognition which can be defined as the "threshold of the visible world', can it also make out what the other objects around itself are. So, the recognition of the outside world begins with the acknowledgement of one's own. It is interesting that one recognizes itself before recognizing the objectification of somebody else. Also, once this occurs it is irretrievable.

[4] The feminist works influenced by Kristeva's abject are briefly described here. Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990): Butler, a prominent feminist theorist, engages with Kristeva's ideas in her exploration of gender performativity and the construction of identity. Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975): Cixous, a French feminist theorist, incorporates Kristeva's concepts, including the abject, in her examination of women's writing and expression. Barbara Creed's "The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis" (1993): Creed examines the representation of women in horror films, drawing on Kristeva's theory of the abject to analyze the cultural construction of female monstrosity. Elizabeth Grosz's "Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism" (1994): Grosz, influenced by Kristeva, explores the corporeal dimensions of feminist theory, looking at the body and its abject aspects. Luce Irigaray's "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1977): Irigaray, another influential French feminist, engages with Kristeva's ideas as she explores issues of language, sexual difference, and the body.

and considered impure in many cultures. By analyzing the abject, feminists can deconstruct these social norms and challenge the patriarchal structures that perpetuate the marginalization of women based on their bodily experiences. In the case of *The Ocean* the abominable traits of the character Ursula are concealed by the others, and only the narrator and Hempstocks recognize them. Despite trying to expose her true nature to others, his underlying intention is to eliminate her presence to regain familial stability.

There are many instances where Ursula Munkton serves as a source of non-identifiability and revulsion. Even before her entrance into the family's life, for example, she invades the son's body as a worm (Gaiman, 49). Feeling the sensation of something off in his body he realizes he has a worm on his foot, a worm that enters through a hole it created in his skin. Evaluating this animal by itself, the mere sight of a worm can evoke feelings of repulsion due to its sliminess, diminutive size, and constant movement. Its unexpected appearance provokes an instant sense of disgust in the observer. Imagine enjoying a seemingly perfect apple, only to have your appetite spoiled abruptly by the sudden appearance of a worm. The fact that this repugnant creature hides within one of our most common sources of sustenance makes the experience even more unsettling, as it intrudes insidiously into our moments of enjoyment. Similar to the case in here, Ursula as a worm, irrupts into what is most familiar to the narrator; himself and his body.

This situation of realizing oneself through abjection is not preferable for the narrator. To Kristeva it is through the process of abjection, or rejecting the abject, that individuals establish their own identity and separateness from what is considered impure or unclean. In line with the familiarity being unfamiliar, and causing one to question oneself is stemmed from Kristeva's explanation where abject "is something

rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (13). Accordingly, the borders of the "ego" become blurred which is exactly what happens to the narrator. Moreover, while trying to remove the worm, the narrator says: "I pulled perhaps an inch of this worm – pink and grey, streaked, like something infected – out of the hole in my foot, and then felt it stop. I could feel it, inside my flesh, making itself rigid, unpullable (Gaiman, 49). As Kristeva calls abject as "death infecting life" Ursula infects him and his life (13).

In another scene, Ursula once again becomes a source of horrifying elements:

> I was holding flesh. I was fifteen feet or more above the ground, as high as a tree. I was not holding flesh. I was holding old fabric, a perished, rotting canvas, and, beneath it, I could feel wood. Not good, solid wood, but the kind of old wood I'd find where trees had crumbled, the kind that always felt wet, that I could pull apart with my fingers, soft wood with tiny beetles in it, and woodlice, all filled with threadlike fungus (106).

She is described in reprehensible terms as a flesh like that of a "fabric" that bizarrely feels as hard as a "wood". The descriptions portray obscurity and impossibility of identification. Plus, she is also associated with appalling qualities such as being "rotten" and "wet" being filled with "beetles" as well as having a sense of "fungus". All these, exemplify her wretchedness.

To sum up the overall claim, it is arguable that Kristeva's theory of the abject is important for feminism because it allows for a deeper exploration of the

intersectionality[5] of gender with other forms of oppression, such as race, sexuality, and class. By understanding how certain groups are abjected, feminists can work towards dismantling these hierarchies

and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. In short, Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a theoretical framework for feminists to critically examine and challenge the social constructs that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and oppression. The implications of patriarchal oppression in this book, then, accordingly become perpetuated through the disturbing qualities of Ursula. Yet, the way Ursula is abjected does not really reach a successful end where her odiousness is accepted and she is no longer secretly discriminated against. Instead, with her repelling abjection, she is only excluded from the scenario through the help of the narrator and his friend Lettie Hempstock. Thus, patriarchal ideals and order where women are to be perfect creatures with no repelling qualities are preserved.

3.2 Ursula and Hathor

Ursula Munkton is attributed to other names and characteristics throughout the book as well. The narrator, for example, comes to a point where he believes that she is a “monster” (65). Furthermore, the speaker says, “She was every monster, every witch, every nightmare made flesh”, in a way, she embodies everything that is abominable and evil” (77). A different appellation is made by Hempstocks where she is described as something “like a flea” who is “all puffed up with pride and power and lust, like a flea bloated with blood” (104). This association made between Ursula and blood is quite significant considering another important masonic evil reference in the book which

[5] While Kristeva's work does not explicitly engage with the term "intersectionality," her broader contributions to feminist theory and her exploration of the complexities of identity formation can be seen as laying groundwork for later theorists who delve into the interconnected nature of social categories and identities.

belongs to Hathor, an Ancient Egyptian Goddess who drinks blood. The description is given in a dream the narrator has:

> I was far away, in ancient Egypt, learning about Hathor, and how she had stalked Egypt in the form of a lioness, and killed so many people that the sands of Egypt turned red, and how they had only defeated her by mixing beer and honey and sleeping draughts, and dying this concoction red, so she thought it was blood, and she drank it, and fell asleep. Ra, the father of the gods, made her the goddess of love after that, so the wounds she had inflicted on people would now only be wounds of the heart. I wondered why the gods had done that. Why they hadn't just killed her, when they had the chance (52).

In the given example, Hathor is depicted as a character that inflicts harm upon others and engages in morally reprehensible actions. Although the book contains references to various myths, the specific connection with Hathor deserves a closer examination due to extensive similarities she shares with Ursula in terms of shape shifting, gruesomeness; and beauty. Beyond being a skillful literary device that enriches the narrative by drawing parallels from ancient myths, the striking similarity between these two characters adds depth to the story. What is striking is that, despite her divine status as a Goddess, Hathor becomes both a perpetrator and a victim of patriarchy, underscoring the intricate complexities woven into the narrative. The confrontation between Ursula and Hathor gains prominence, given its unexpected absence in feminist analyses of the novel, for example in Czarnowsky. Thus, this gap will try to be addressed in the following discussion.

Referring back to the narrator's description of Hathor, we can infer that she is explicitly portrayed as powerful, displaying a level of violence and aggression that includes acts of murder. She is symbolized as a monstrous "lion" that mercilessly kills

numerous individuals. From here we understand that, Hathor has the ability to contain more than one body form or identity. The same concept is apparent in Ursula as well, since the narrator says: “One moment she was an adult woman, naked and muddy, the next, as if she was a flesh-colored umbrella, she unfurled. And as she unfurled, she stretched out, and she grabbed me, pulled me up and high off the ground, and I reached out in fear and held her in my turn” (106). As observed once again, Ursula constantly transforms from being “an adult” to “an umbrella”, or in an instant becomes “furled” or “unfurled”. In other words, she has the ability to instantly change her appearance. Shape-shifting women characters are not uncommon for Gaiman’s writing. Upon the story “The Dream Hunters” co-written by Gaiman, Dupuy quotes from Seki, who points out how a character, like “the fox, for instance, in the Japanese cultural context, is not a mere animal, but a shapeshifter” (40). From the standpoint of shape shifting and embodying various roles and identities, Ursula closely aligns with Hathor. In outer sources, the goddess is described as having “two or even four faces”, alluding to “the four-faced images, showing Hathor in her cosmic aspect, ruling the four quarters of heaven” (Pinch, 12). Her literal manifestation of multiple faces, closely parallels Ursula's embodiment of diverse personas originating from various times and spaces.

Hathor performing repulsive and monstrous acts, align with the theory of abject, where the grotesque elements are emphasized. In line with this, Hathor embodies power, and is able to kill numerous living beings, just like Ursula who is not shown to kill, but has the capacity. Yet, the power they both have is curbed for the continuum of the traditional order of things and unwritten laws of society. As Kristeva writes the abject is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” and since society cannot accept what is ambiguous, they have to be eliminated from the picture (13). For the case of Hathor, this “disturbance” to the “system” is discarded through God Ra, a male

figure and for Ursula, Lettie eliminates her to restore “order” to the patriarchal array (Kristeva, 13).

Disturbingly, Hathor dehumanizes herself by consuming blood, the vital fluid that sustains living beings (Gaiman, 52). Despite her seemingly flawed and cruel conduct, Hathor does not face execution. Instead, the father of the gods, Ra, assigns her the role of "goddess of love" ensuring that the consequences of her actions endure in the collective memory. In this context, Hathor, while appearing to gain freedom from death, is perpetually condemned to exist as a symbol, residing as love in people's hearts. This enduring fate stems from the fact that, even though individuals may recover physically, the memory of the curse and agonies associated with love, originating from Hathor, remains etched in their minds, an experience they can never forget. Hence, her faith is also decided by other figures as in the case of Ursula.

3.3 Ursula’s Beauty

Despite their monstrosity, however, both Hathor and Ursula are irresistible figures of fascination and beauty. As is described by Geraldine Pinch, Hathor is a deity of contrasting sides. She is both “benevolent” and “destructive”, for instance (143). We are acquainted with Hathor's destructive nature through the narrator's descriptions of her fatal aspects, such as killing and blood-drinking. Nevertheless, the positive attributes linked to her, also capture attention, especially when considering their similarities to Ursula. In contrast to their shared gruesome qualities, Ursula and Hathor also exhibit similarities in the positive aspects associated with them.

Pinch's analysis of Hathor, emphasizes her dual role as the mother and nurse of the monarch, suggesting connections to both birth and rebirth. The advantages attributed to “her milk, offering stability and dominion, are qualities highly coveted in earthly life”

(Pinch, 142). Hathor emerges as a significant figure of motherhood, with her description as having "cow horns" subtly alluding to the themes of milk and nurturing (137). These parallels with Ursula become apparent, as Ursula, like Hathor, assumes the role of a nanny responsible for feeding and caring for the children at home. This resemblance extends to Ursula's success in this capacity, evident in the narrator's sister consistently enjoying Ursula's cooking, and the narrator himself acknowledging the appetizing quality of the food she prepares even though he refuses to consume it (Gaiman, 71).

Hathor is positively described in terms of her physical appearance, as "she was most commonly shown as a beautiful woman wearing a red solar disk" (Pinch, 140). The significance of the "red solar disk" imagery lies not only in its emphasis on Hathor's beauty but also in the irony of her association with the sun, a figure typically linked to masculinity in Egyptian mythology. In this portrayal, she carries the symbol of masculinity above her head, seemingly validating this epitome of patriarchy. Similarly, the novel draws images where Ursula is described somewhat associated with the sun. In a passage before her defeat, the narrator envisions Ursula's dress "flapping" "in a windless kitchen", like the mainsail of "a ship on a lonely ocean under an orange sky" (Gaiman, 53). The reference to the "orange sky" is noteworthy, as it is the sun that makes the sky appear orange. This example gains significance, when contrasted with another description of Ursula under the same orange sky: "She was a cardboard mask for the thing that had traveled inside me as a worm that had flapped and gusted in the open country under that orange sky" (59). In essence, regardless of her form or location, Ursula is perpetually under the shadow of the sun, the epitome of patriarchy and, consequently, remaining a perpetual victim.

3.3.1 Beauty: A Catalyst for Societal Reflection

As previously discussed, Ursula emerges as a figure of internal and external conflict. This intricacy is further heightened by the allusions to her beauty, a beauty constructed either through her inherent nature or artificial enhancements, both of which either conform to the falsely imposed ideals of patriarchy or expose the flaws within the patriarchal system. Ultimately, the real threat does not lie in Ursula's malicious attempts or deceptions; rather, it is the individuals who succumb to her influence that pose the true danger.

Quoting from Landis, Czarnowsky claims that “Monkton’s chosen form " problematizes the feminist potential of Gaiman’s novel” (164). This, as argued, is because “Ursula adopts a sexualized performance of femininity utilizing a pretty appearance and seductive behavior to gain a position of power within the narrator’s home” (164). This claim, I believe, leaves no question in its credibility. Czarnowsky delves into the exploration of feminism within the novel, with her primary focus centered on scrutinizing the magical elements present in the book. Given that magic is exclusively attributed to women in the narrative, a feminist analysis becomes an unavoidable aspect of her examination.

According to her article named “Engendering in Neil Gaiman” where Czarnowsky analyzes *The Ocean at the End of The Lane*, the Hempstocks and Ursula Monkton are represented as magical beings with different goals. The Hempstocks do good things quietly, while Monkton gives people what they crave, like money and sex. Both characters are complex, but their ability to change shapes, especially into traditional female roles, adds an interesting layer. The representation of Hempstocks twists the feminist aspect a bit by highlighting motherhood as a key part of being a woman. This is assumed because solely the epitomes of motherhood, Hempstock

family, are the only ones that are able to find peace in the book. Building upon this logic, Czarnowsky argues, the novel manages to justify feminism despite the obstacles the women face because the Hempstock women are living in a “safe haven” (23). Yet, she also adds that this is not to prove that a peaceful life for a woman is only attainable through being a mother, yet to prove that benevolence the Hempstocks have wins over Ursula’s evilness. With this, according to her, the novel tries to claim that good ones always win in the end, and show us a lesson.

Even though we will delve more into Hempstocks’ motherhood in the next chapter, the claims Czarnowsky has, prove significant in inferring her comments on Ursula through comparing her with Hempstocks, and thus analyzing her from a feminist perspective. Although very insightful for offering a complex and rare feminist analysis to the novel, as her ideas have been used for support in this thesis as well, the picture Czarnovsky draws for the women of the novel is problematic in some ways. First of all, it is debatable whether the novel primarily aims to demonstrate the triumph of good over evil, or, as I argue, it portrays one depiction of womanhood as inferior to another, instead. This is worth reconsideration since, viewing these characters only through the two edges they represent might make us overlook the other qualities they have, the ones that are not direct representation of the so-called femme-fatale or fairy-godmother. Looking only at Ursula, for the moment, here, she is represented as having dual, if not multiple nature. Upon Ursula she says “Monkton easily and deliberately plays into the trope of the femme fatale: always perfectly made up, she is an image of seduction” (Czarnowsky, 24). This description and many others within the article tend to fall into the mistake of looking at Ursula only from the perspective of her being “femme-fatale”, deadly beautiful. Thus, she is represented as having one layer which is solely related to seduction, evil and beauty. However, in contrast I believe that, she is multilayered.

Thus it is difficult to deem her as the oppressor or the victim. In addition, as will be explored, it is difficult to deem Hempstocks as angels. Thus, comparing these two women characters' representations through their goodness/evilness becomes insufficient in justifying the novel's feminism. Furthermore, beauty associated with Ursula, is also worth further examination since it actually surfaces itself as a catalyst to reveal the true face of the society, regarding womanhood. This is because, as opposed to what Czernowsky argues, her always appearing "perfect", is not something inherently problematic about her. It is how other people, especially other men, react to the image she portrays that surfaces the evil within the society.

Ursula is associated prominently with her aesthetic attributes, particularly her beauty. The initial impression formed by the narrator upon encountering the new nanny is fundamentally linked to her physical appearance, as evidenced by the statement: "The woman was very pretty. She had shortish honey-blond hair, huge grey-blue eyes, and pale lipstick. She seemed tall, even for an adult" (Gaiman, 53). While Ursula's beauty is a recurring theme in the narrative, it is portrayed variably, at times attributed to natural qualities, and at other times to artificial embellishments. The narrator notes instances: "her hair was perfect, and her lipstick seemed freshly applied" highlighting the meticulous attention she puts to her appearance (56). However, what stands out is Ursula's strategic use of tools to cultivate a specific allure, particularly in her pursuit of seducing the father. This intention is manifested through her application of makeup and visual tricks, as exemplified by the scene following the mother's absence, wherein Ursula is observed to "have her makeup, pale lipstick, and prominent eyelashes redone" (100). Beyond makeup, Ursula's clothing choices also strike the eye. In a distinct scene, she is described awaiting the narrator with her "grey and pink dress" "fluttering in the wind" against the backdrop of a "rusting metal fence" (55). This deliberate contrast

between Ursula's vibrant attire and the colorless fence underscores her ability to captivate attention.

There are instances where Ursula's beauty is divorced from any exterior motives, taking precedence over other aspects of her character in influencing those around her. When the narrator expresses disdain for Ursula, deeming her "not nice," his sister counters with an appreciation for Ursula's beauty: “I like her. She’s pretty” (59). Evidently, Ursula's physical attractiveness emerges as the primary factor endearing her to others. Similarly, in the aftermath of an encounter with Ursula that elicits the father's anger, the narrator, strategically employs an apology, emphasizing Ursula's physical appeal: ‘I’ll apologize,’ …‘I’ll say sorry. I didn’t mean what I said. She’s not a monster. She’s … she’s pretty’ (66). Here the boy perceives the acknowledgment of Ursula's aesthetic appeal as a strategy to ameliorate the repercussions of his transgressions.

In another instance, the narrator confesses the potentially profound impact of Ursula's appearance on him, revealing a latent fear of proving weak against her charm: “She really was pretty, for a grown-up, but when you are seven, beauty is an abstraction, not an imperative. I wonder what I would have done if she had smiled at me like that now: whether I would have handed my mind or my heart or my identity to her for the asking, as my father did” (101). This admission reveals a significant reason behind the narrator's antipathy towards Ursula—the apprehension of his own vulnerability in resisting her beauty. This idea is particularly significant in the context of a gender-focused interpretation, portraying a young boy fearful of being overtaken by a woman's attractiveness, juxtaposed with the actual defeat of the father. This fear, coupled with the father's defeat, perpetuates the conventional notion that women's beauty poses a threat, as men are recognized as inherently susceptible. However, instead

of rectifying the perceived weakness of men in this dynamic, the narration opts to remove the malevolent influence of beauty. In other words, instead of “fixing” the men in this scenario, the evil beauty is discarded from the picture.

Highlighting Ursula's role as a disruptor of order, Lettie provides the following insights that makes the reader question if her edgy evilness is pure: “I don’t hate her. She does what she does, according to her nature. She was asleep, she woke up, she’s trying to give everyone what they want” (95). Contrary to the notion of viewing Ursula as a mere disruptor of order, this perspective implies that she is driven by benevolent intentions, or at the very least, she is not someone deliberately causing harm without purpose. Almost justifying this example, towards the end, Lettie tries to win over Ursula by pointing out to the difficulty Ursula will come across in deceiving people saying: “You think this world’s like that. You think it’s easy. But it en’t” (101). In response, however, Ursula says “Of course it is. What are you saying?” In addition, the end of the book shows us that it is easy indeed. In a pivotal confrontation, Ursula states, "I NEVER MADE ANY OF THEM DO ANYTHING” (109). This declaration prompts a shocking realization in the narrator, who reflects, "for a moment I thought it was laughing at me, then the laughter became a scream, so loud it hurt my ears and my mind". He is tormented here, only because what Ursula screams is nothing but true words; it is the people that are evil, since being insatiable. Questioning Ursula's identity and motives, the narrator asks, “Who are you really? Why are you giving people money?” Ursula responds matter-of-factly, “Everybody wants money. It makes them happy. It will make you happy, if you let it.” And what she says proves right, since everyone but the narrator- though hardly resists- and Hempstocks fall into the spell of Ursula, hinting how greedy they might be.

From this perspective, Ursula transcends being merely a frightening creature disrupting a child's life. What truly instills fear is her ability to abruptly expose the harsh realities of adulthood and, by extension, patriarchal structures. Throughout the book, it is evident that the boy's greatest fear is not Ursula herself, but rather the concepts of adulthood and patriarchy. This is justified by the fearlessness he displays when confronted with the horrors surrounding him. After insisting on his parents to take them to a waxwork museum, he explains the disappointment he feels towards the scary figures:

> I had wanted to thrill to waxworks of Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster and the Wolf-man. Instead I was walked through a seemingly endless sequence of dioramas of unremarkable, glum-looking men and women who had murdered people – usually lodgers, and members of their own families – and who were then murdered in their turn: by hanging, by the electric chair, in gas chambers……none of the waxworks had looked fully convincing (25).

Considering the boy is only seven in the course of the book, and reiterating a story from an even younger age, one would expect him to feel intimidated if not terrified in the face of this scene. Yet he finds the things around him not even "convincing" enough to startle him. Similarly, he almost normalizes the first appearance of Ursula as a worm on his foot by saying: "The incident of the worm in my foot did not scare me. I did not talk about it" (51). Given that the narrator is recounting childhood events as an adult, it is irrational to anticipate him behaving like a child eager to boast about his fearlessness and prowess. Alternatively, he dismisses the event as unworthy of prolonged contemplation or creating a scene. Instead, he finds solace in reading myths with "animal-headed gods who cut each other up and then restored one another to life again"

(53). The various instances mentioned collectively point to the conclusion that the narrator does not conform to the typical expectations of a frightened or easily influenced seven-year-old child. Surprisingly, the speaker displays an unexpected fearlessness, a characteristic that is underscored at certain moments. This peculiar trait may serve as an indication that what truly alarms him are the revelations tied to Ursula—not necessarily her inherent nature, but rather the unsettling truths she discloses about the real world.

In conclusion, Ursula's characterization as "evil" in the human world, and the society's complicity in embracing this malevolence, serves as a poignant commentary on the inherent flaws within the societal structure. Within Ursula's realm, individuals yield to the allure of wealth and hedonistic pleasures without critical examination. The narrator, aware of the world's vulnerabilities, recognizes the profound sadness and unbearable nature of Ursula's revelations. Thus, the societal construct appears fundamentally flawed, creating an environment where no one can effectively resist or triumph against its bad influences. As a result, the patriarchal order is so established, it cannot be reversed. Yet, in such a world, an ironic figure, Ursula, is stuck in between. She is a victim of irretrievable evil and her only way to escape is through playing the games by the rules; victimizing other women to evade being the victim.

Chapter 4:

THE ENIGMATIC HEMPSTOCK FAMILY:

GUARDIANS OF MYSTICAL REALMS

Another important aspect of the novel belongs to that of the Hempstock family. To give a short insight to them, this family consists of three generations of powerful and enigmatic women: Old Mrs. Hempstock, her daughter Ginnie, and her granddaughter Lettie. The protagonist, an unnamed middle-aged man, recalls his childhood experiences and encounters with the Hempstocks. Lettie Hempstock, in particular, befriends the young protagonist and plays a pivotal role in the events that unfold. The Hempstocks are depicted as more than ordinary humans; they seem to have connections to ancient and magical forces. Lettie refers to the pond on their property as an "ocean" and mentions that it's connected to a larger, timeless reality (27).

Throughout the novel, the Hempstocks serve as guardians and protectors against supernatural threats. They embody a sense of wisdom, ancient knowledge, and a connection to the mystical. The pond on their farm is a symbolic gateway to other worlds and dimensions, representing the vastness and complexity of existence. Overall, the Hempstock family adds a layer of mystique and fantasy to the narrative, and their presence is integral to the novel's exploration of memory, childhood, and the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. This happens to the extent that even the area they inhabit immediately arouses a magical aura for the narrator: “I saw the lights of the Hempstocks’ farm in front of us, welcoming, and I was cheered, although I could not understand how we had got from the field we were in to the farmhouse so quickly” (80). The magical qualities these three women are bestowed with, are worthy of analysis since, even though they seem to possess power over others through their magical

abilities, they actually are hidden prolongers of patriarchal ideals. This is observed in their disrupted practices of justice, enclosed ways of living, and overly emphasized practices of ideal motherhood.

Czarnowsky says “strength in *The Ocean* has little to do with physical prowess, and everything to do with determination and magic” (5). The validity of this assertion is subject to scrutiny, as possessing supernatural abilities may not inherently confer genuine empowerment within the framework of the book. Moreover, in addition to their magical qualities, one other thing making their lives different is the way they avoid men in their lives. It is essential to critically assess the feasibility and efficacy of implementing a survival strategy that revolves around the deliberate evasion and avoidance of male interactions. In essence, the pivotal query at hand is whether adopting a survival approach centered on distancing oneself from men can be considered feminist.

Czarnowsky views the Hempstocks as significant symbols that represent distinct aspects of femininity, one being associated with motherhood. In this dual representation, Ursula embodies the darker, seductive side, while the Hempstocks exemplify a nurturing and asexual motherhood prototype. The book presents this imagery, but the interpretation of it remains open to discussion. For Czarnowsky, the emphasis on the maternal edge of femininity underscores the narrative's portrayal of the “triumph of benevolence over malevolence” (26). This victory, conveying a lesson to the reader, is constructed through the exclusive use of feminized sorcery. In support of this perspective, Czarnowsky references ecofeminist ideas, quoting Bronwyn James, who asserts that “ecofeminist strategies aim to reclaim and revive nature and women as potent forces” (21). Aligning with this, Hempstocks' utilization of magic, can be linked to ecofeminism, as they draw on nature to harness their magical abilities. From this

point of view, magic is almost considered a positive entity since it offers prowess and protection. Thus "the power remains a maternal and matrilineal concept, but it is shown as an exclusive one that is bound to a strict, desexualized presentation" (Czarnowsky, 20). This assumption reminds us, then, that no one in the novel, including the narrator, is bestowed with magic, except for Ursula and Hempstocks. Yet, the former cannot retain it even though she tries to and to some extent manages to. Thus, it can be concluded that the reason why Ursula cannot retain the magic and live peacefully might be due to her overt sexuality. In being desexualized and isolated, Hempstocks are awarded with magic which bestows them a peaceful continuum of existence. In contrast to the claim here, I argue that magical inclusion is a privilege neither for Ursula nor for Hempstocks. For the latter, the reason why they even retain magic and the way they practice it is impractical, obsolete and too utopic to the extent that it is far from being to their advantage.

4.1 Hidden Patriarchal Ideals

For Hempstocks, first of all, magic is clearly used for retaining the patriarchal order of things such as eliminating the figure of a seductive woman to keep a legal marriage intact. Through this, patriarchy is prolonged while the husband with heightened libidinal urges is not even the focus of discussion within the book. This idea coincides with what bell hooks describes as women being prolongers of patriarchy: ``Despite the contemporary visionary feminist thinking that makes clear that a patriarchal thinker need not be a male, most folks continue to see men as the problem of patriarchy. This is simply not the case. Women can be as wedded to patriarchal thinking and action as men" (2). Considering what hooks says, it is no question that Ursula commits unacceptable acts as an evil. Thus, in the end, she meets her destruction by the Hempstocks. The problem, however, is that the other evil within the book, the father, is

never punished. Just like Ursula, and sometimes even much worse than her, he tortures the narrator in both physical and psychological ways, the former of which we already observed with the ice cold shower scene. The following excerpt, however, gives an insight to the psychological torture the father practices:

> He never hit me. He did not believe in hitting. He would tell us how his father had hit him, how his mother had chased him with a broom, how he was better than that. When he got angry enough to shout at me, he would occasionally remind me that he did not hit me, as if to make me grateful. In the school stories I read, misbehaviour often resulted in a caning, or the slipper, and then was forgiven and done, and I would sometimes envy those fictional children the cleanliness of their lives. I did not want to approach Ursula Monkton: I did not want to risk making my father angry with me. (62).

What the narrator describes against his father is unquestionably in line with hook's description of ""psychological patriarchy" which is "a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation" (hooks, "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love"). What the father does is also a patriarchal example of Foucault's descriptions on how "through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action" (145). Thus, even the possibility of punishment, makes the little kid act carefully.

Overall, from this excerpt we understand that the real fear of the narrator is not even Ursula, the utterly uncanny woman who threatens to destroy her family and circumscribes him in every possible way. The truer origin of fear lies within the father, rendering him the genuine embodiment of evil. Yet, the figure of the patriarch is

unharmed, while two women, one Lettie and the other Ursula, are, in order, sacrificed and discarded. This makes Hempstocks' methods of justice and use of magic not just enough to be deemed as "non-threatening benign nurturing femininity" because they actually pose a threat to feminism by intentionally targeting the female evil, not the male (Czarnowsky, 26).

From a broader perspective, the lifestyle Hempstocks adapt is problematic in terms of its implications questionable to feminism. Czarnowsky says "while the domesticity of the Hempstocks' thus seems to communicate a surprisingly old-fashioned set of gender politics, continuously pointing to the constructed gender roles actually makes the text a postmodern meta-commentary on the performance of gender roles" (abstract). To me, however, calling this situation a "meta-commentary" does not address the problems within the Hempstocks' family structure enough.

In the farmhouse at the end of the lane, Gaiman's trio comprising a goddaughter, daughter, and grandmother dwells, void of any sons, fathers, or grandfathers. Old Mrs. Hempstock explains the lack of men as: "I dunno what blessed good a man would be! Nothing a man could do around this farm that I can't do twice as fast and five times as well" (94). As Czarnowsky also concludes, Old Mrs. Hempstock "represents the second wave of feminism in its most radical form; in her world, men are obsolete, and women can do it better anyway" (19). Lettie takes a more moderate view: "We've had men here, sometimes. They come and they go. Right now, it's just us" (95). As can be seen, the first impression Hempstocks give is that of a radical feminist one. Yet, from the perspective of today, not needing men and excluding them is not necessarily a way of defeating patriarchy. Instead, the fact that they make this choice of exclusion is problematic. What's more, Hempstocks' functioning well without men, suggests the impossibility of the two, men and women, existing together in a peaceful society. So the

farm's description as "complete, functional, and happy" without men might be considered valid within the book, yet, certainly not applicable to the real world (Czarnowsky, 20). This is because, in Hempstocks' framework, no matter what happens, men always end up discarded from the picture. Consequently, I posit that if one side is consistently elevated or diminished in comparison to the other, there exists an inherent and noteworthy distinction in their inherent natures.

4.2 Frozen Motherhood

Martin says Gaiman "crafts tales about characters other than men, stories with fully

developed female protagonists, and narratives showing those not fitting into a simplified gender binary" (24). Yet, what we observe in *The Ocean* with Hempstock women is exactly a reflection of women adopting nurturing qualities of a socially constructed mother image, thus fully serving a gender binary. As Czarnowsky also mentions Hempstocks cannot even accept the narrator into their lives and provide him the motherhood he so wishes to have (23). This shows us that within the novel there is an ideal motherhood that is untouched, untouchable and unattainable. This is because no outer force or foreigner can enter the Hempstocks' realm to disrupt motherhood there.

The idea of "frozen" motherhood is also observed in other works of Neil Gaiman. In *Sandman*, for example, a female character is literally kept "frozen in time" whilst pregnant (Martin, 14). Thus she remains "as an image or ideal of motherhood without ever allowing her to actually become the mother: for as long as she is in the Dream Dome, she will remain six months pregnant". Regarding the intensely confined concept of motherhood, Martin provides a compelling description of this character:

> Lyta thus in her frozen prenatal state embodies the patriarchal notion that "better than a mother, then is the working out of the idea of the mother, or the maternal

> ideal. Better to transform the real 'natural' mother into an ideal of the maternal function which no one can ever take away from you" (Irigaray Speculum 81). Lyta represents the patriarchal fantasy of the mother "as a volume ... as 'the support of (re)production.' ... But man needs to represent her as a closed volume, a container; his desire is to immobilize her, keep her under his control, in his possession, even in his house. He needs to believe that the container belongs to him" (Whitford, 28).

As viewed, then, in the case of Lyta, pregnancy becomes a means of submission and control for the patriarch. Closely related to this topic of irony within pregnancy, author Jacqueline Rose mentions the "primordial battle" and physical "defeat" of women in the process, referring to medical discourse: women's "seed was the weakling and, in a lethal struggle, the paternal seed had to be victorious to secure the birth of a son. In the very role by which she was defined, the best thing a mother could therefore do for her unborn infant was to defeat herself" (52). In a way, then, the mother is necessarily at loss to be able to conceive which reflects the idea in the novel.

4.3 Lettie and Motherhood

The way motherhood is practiced in the *Ocean* is not only problematic in Hemstocks' utter isolation, but also in surprising and questionable reflection on the characteristics of Lettie. Even though she is still a kid, Lettie shows motherly qualities like nurturing the narrator and always looking up for him. And at the end, she faces the risk of death, and disappears from the human land, just to be able to save the narrator from the evil of Ursula. In this sense, then, she much more appears as a sacrificing and all-caring mother, than a strong independent character.

Firstly, the dynamic between Lettie and the narrator is somewhat perplexing; rather than resembling either friends or lovers—the two likeliest roles—they seem more

akin to a parent and child. The narrator, for instance, is always sure that Lettie will be there to make him feel safe as he says "Lettie Hempstock's hand in my hand made me braver" (97). Similarly, one time he says to Lettie: "you would have come anyway,' … "you would have saved me. (46)". From here we observe the unquestionable trust which is so powerful that he knows he will be saved by Lettie no matter what. The response Lettie gives is also not necessarily a romantic one since she "squeezes" his arm and says nothing. Afterwards she asks if he is hungry, overtly showing the overprotective and almost parental side of her. In another scene where they come back from adventures, Lettie becomes protective of him by saying the following to the narrator: "You're wet through. We'll need to get you something to wear. I'll have a look in the chest of drawers in the green bedroom" (80). Looking at all of these instances, then, the portrayal of Lettie, is an example of problematic motherhood since, even though she is over a hundred years old, to the narrator and the outer world, she "was just a girl, even if she was a big girl, even if she was eleven, even if she had been eleven for a very long time" (77). In this sense, she arouses the uncanny association of a child-mother.

Lettie also becomes a problematic character from a gender-focused point of view because, even though she is strong in the sense of being able to protect the narrator, her source of power is not inherent. Since after all, she is neither powerful enough to defeat the enemy, nor able to save anyone without resorting to magic, making her utterly dependent. Czarnowsky, on the other hand, views her as a powerful character whose end is the epitome of her power: "Lettie's submersion in the pond is thus the ultimate ecofeminist fusion between women and land and further plays into the well-established "symbolism of water regarding rejuvenation, (re)birth, and life" (11). This point of view seems problematic since there is no sign of Lettie finding absolute peace though deserting the earth and submitting to the ocean. Instead, we only see her

disappearance from the novel's frame. Arguing that Lettie integrates herself with the pond to become one with the land, does hardly prove empowering to Lettie's - a woman's identity. In the end, then, Lettie becomes a lost character for the sake of saving the narrator.

In addition to the aforementioned problem in viewing Lettie as a feminist character, the concept of her and the Hempstocks' strength is similarly questionable. It proves challenging to consider Lettie or any of the Hempstocks as inherently strong and independent characters, given that Lettie's exceptional strength and fearlessness stem from her supernatural qualities. The Hempstocks, likewise, derive their power solely from magic, thereby failing to truly reinforce the notion that virtuous women triumph over the malevolent ones, as Czarnowsky underscores.

CHAPTER 5: LOOKING BEYOND *THE OCEAN*

5.1 Ageing and Women

The Hempstocks' appearance is also significant and ironic. Since they do not age, in a way, they surface the problematic ageism women may face in losing their youth and beauty. The issue of women and age is represented in some of Gaiman's other works as well. These include a short story of Gaiman and one novella *The Sleeper and the Spindle*.

Being a diverse storyteller, Gaiman has a significant amount of oeuvres in the short story genre, one of which I wish to analyze focusing on gender dynamics. In line with previous discussion, the idea of age is a significant theme that gives insights to patriarchy in a story from the *Smoke and Mirrors*. This work is a collection of short stories and poems. It was first published in 1998 and contains a diverse range of tales that showcase Gaiman's imaginative storytelling within the short story form. The stories explore various themes, including mythology, folklore, dreams, and the supernatural. Though influential, however, they are under the shadow of his more popular works and thus tend to lack scholarly attention.

5.1.2 Age in "Queen of Knives"

"Queen of Knives" recounts the narrator's childhood memories of visiting his grandparents. Here, the oppressed female figure is portrayed in the character of the grandma who is simply, revealed to be physically limited, controlled and discriminated against because of her age. In this story written in verse, the grandmother appears as a woman who is described as follows: "the kitchen was again her domain, all the pans and spoons, the mincer, all the whisks and knives, her loyal subjects. She would prepare the food with them, singing her little songs (Gaiman, 15-17). The grandfather, on the other hand, is obsessed with inventing stuff and doing experiments. One day they all go to see

a magic show at the King's Theatre where his grandmother participates in a magic act. The magician, with the help of the grandmother, performs a trick where she seemingly disappears and reappears in a box, ultimately ending with her disappearance for real. The story concludes with the narrator witnessing his grandfather, after his grandmother's disappearance, performing a similar act alone in the kitchen.

Before delving into the main event at the “King’s Theater”, it is helpful to take a look at the family dynamics between the couple, which is provided to us by the narrator’s intervening comments. It is deduced from between the lines that the grandmother is in one way or another oppressed. We see the grandma mostly in the kitchen, exemplifying physical constraint, while the grandfather invents things and solves tricks alluding to his mental prominence. The only time we observe the grandmother showing agency and maybe a quiet rebellion, is when she tries to torture her husband by overemphasizing what he lacks. After the grandpa loses all her teeth due to an accident his thoughtless adventurousness leads to, the grandmother seems to intentionally “chew hard licorice” around him, or ,”suck hard caramels” (44). One revealing instance of the grandmother's lack of agency is when her husband insists on her stepping onto the stage to aid he magicians and thus ultimately sealing her fate. Ironically, the knives she once used to assert control over her domain, the kitchen, are turned against her as the magician stabs through the box, leading to her demise (73). Thus, in her physical entrapment of the kitchen, where she supposedly is the “queen” and carries all in her control, she is victimized and eventually murdered. The end of the story, however, where the grandfather stabs himself with a knife giving the illusion of magic through hiding his body parts behind a box is also quite telling. Despite its tragic appearance, seemingly reflecting the grandfather's inability to bear the pain of losing her, it nonetheless underscores his agency in determining his own death. He retains the

power to choose how, when, and where he dies. Yet, the grandmother is subjected to death without being consulted.

The magic show they attend can be seen as a metaphor for patriarchal norms. In the "King's" theater, the male magician takes center stage, performing the tricks, while women serve merely as props, enhancing the magician's glory. The magician, akin to the ultimate patriarch, assumes the role of king, while the assistant girls resemble puppets, perpetually adorned with “glitter” and “smiles”, their identities reduced to mere adornments (74). Notably, one is even labeled as the "glitter lady," emphasizing her sole purpose of adding sparkle. Even the grandma takes up a similar role, as the narrator describes: “The conjurer applauded her once more—A good sport. That was what she was. A sport” (57).

What is more, while the beautiful girls can exist on stage, serving as support for the magician, the old lady, the grandmother, meets a tragic fate. This idea can also be traced in the way the grandson immediately feels embarrassed and thinks of the following while she is invited to the stage:” My grandmother must have been what? Sixty, then” (54)? In a sense, being an old woman, she is left with nothing desirable in the patriarch’s kingdom, thus she is to be eliminated. Returning to the story's beginning and viewing the grandmother's death through a critical lens the oppressive power dynamics of the magician come to surface. This idea is encapsulated in the striking single quote at the very beginning of the story: “The reappearance of the lady is a matter of individual taste” from Will Goldston, *Tricks and Illusions* (50). Given that the magician is invariably male, a woman's representation hinges on a man's “individual taste”. Consequently, it becomes clear that the patriarchy holds the power to determine women's destinies.

For a last note on the story, Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist explains in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", published in 1975, argues that cinema operates primarily through a male gaze, which shapes how viewers perceive and relate to the characters and narratives on screen. In short, in the social world and also in the cinematic world, women are not the makers, yet the “bearers of meaning” (111). This, she relates to Freudian principles of female sex’s lack of a penis resulting in the phallus’ natural dominance. Thus, women have no other choice but to act as a symbol of threat, and control, which is done through excessive male surveillance and sexual objectification. This idea is unquestionably apparent in the “ladies” that dance in certain costumes with makeup on, acting as props to the main “guy”, the magician, in the aforementioned story.

5.1.2 Transposed Age: The Sleeper and the Spindle

To address the specific issue of age within *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, it is necessary to take a closer look at the book’s plot. As previously mentioned, the novella begins with a young queen on the eve of her wedding, feeling a sense of restlessness and a desire for adventure. News arrives that a sleeping sickness is spreading across the land, originating from a distant castle. The queen decides to postpone her wedding and, accompanied by a group of loyal dwarfs, sets out on a journey to the castle to investigate. As the queen travels, she encounters magical creatures and reflects on her life and choices. The journey is dangerous, with animated skeletons and talking animals, but the queen remains determined. Along the way, she contemplates themes of love, duty, and destiny. Upon reaching the castle, the queen discovers that the sleeping princess is Snow White and the castle is surrounded by thorns, reminiscent of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale. The queen must overcome these obstacles to reach Snow White and break the curse on the kingdom. In a surprising twist, Gaiman subverts expectations

by revealing that the thorns and the sleeping sickness are a means of protection. Yet, the sleeping princess is kept young with the power she sucks from the cursed sleepers. The queen wakes her up with a kiss yet realizes that the sleeping princess is the real evil. After rescuing the kingdom, the queen refuses to turn back to her kingdom, and flees to wilderness.

Roses are a striking motif throughout the book, traditionally symbolizing beauty. Yet, ironically, they represent societal pressures and patriarchal ideals within the text. Specifically, the queen's adornment with a rose and the Sleeper's "rosy lips" suggest that femininity is equated with youthfulness and beauty (22). By weaving together elements from two different fairy tales, Gaiman crafts a feminist reinterpretation with his portrayal of these two protagonists in a twisted narrative. However, the female characters' fixation on age and beauty complicates this interpretation. While the narrative acknowledges the peril of associating femininity with youth through the Sleeper's character, it ultimately does not offer a profound critique of these pervasive societal norms. Thus, despite its rich symbolism, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* still does not adequately challenge patriarchal ideals regarding age and beauty.

5.2 Women against Women

Another problem we see in Gaiman's gender representation is that women carry the foreground and fight while male characters are of little importance and action. Even though Gaiman is much appreciated for portraying a vast variety of female characters in his works, and some of them are deemed strong for defeating the enemies, it is quite noticeable that female characters that appear courageous and good examples of feminist characters are the ones who mainly have conflicts with women. In *The Ocean* and *The Sleeper*, the protagonist and the antagonist are both women, so no man is defeated, yet women are put in the position of enemies. Moreover, the reason behind women's

conflict, after all, is to fulfill patriarchal ideals as in the case *of Ocean*, where Ursula is discarded for being a threat to the patriarchal family structure, and in *The Sleeper*, the Sleeping Beauty becomes a villain for retaining her youth. All these are explained in Rachel R. Martin's terms, for different Gaiman books as well:

> Gaiman's writing entices and draws in female readers through his inclusion of feminine lead characters. However, Gaiman's inclusion of women as subjects and readers highlights the extent of the masculine discourse at work. Gaiman operates within and utilizes the phallocentric discourse in his creation and depiction of women, even to the extent that he evokes some of his strongest, most popular female characters through the voices of his male characters and through dominant narrative structures, utilizing the dominant discourse to critique and problematize its own assumptive frameworks (255).

Gaiman, then, engages female readers with feminine protagonists, but his portrayal of women reveals the dominance of a masculine discourse, as he critiques phallocentric norms by depicting strong female characters through male perspectives and dominant narrative structures. As Martin also adds, this problematization happens because Gaiman's positioning of female characters "disallows two women's communicating in productive ways with one another". This is practiced through "positing two women against one another" as a result of which they cannot get a healthy means of communication. To Martin this situation:

> Reoccurs thematically in several other Gaiman's works, particularly where the one is a mother and the other is her daughter. Irigaray and other feminist scholars say a great deal about the relationships of women or rather the inaccessibility of female-to- female relationships due to the limitations of the phallocentric discourse in which society operates. Gaiman's works exemplify

> the way phallocentric discourse places women at odds with one another in ways that readers see as natural relationship strains by (re)iterating relationships in doubled binaries that fracture the phallocentric discourses of his female protagonists (77).

This analysis by Martin coincides with *Coraline* through disruption of mother daughter relationship yet the idea of men being intentionally discarded from the frame of the story is not emphasized, which I would like to focus on now.

To give a summary of the novel, the story follows Coraline Jones, a curious and adventurous young girl who moves into a new apartment with her mom and dad. Bored and feeling neglected by her busy parents, Coraline discovers a mysterious door in her flat that leads to an alternate version of her own world. This parallel world seems at first to be an idealized version of her reality, where everything is more colorful, her "Other" parents are more attentive, and her neighbors are eccentric but entertaining. However, Coraline soon realizes that this other world is not as perfect as it seems. Her Other Mother and Other Father have buttons instead of eyes and are more controlling and possessive. When Coraline decides to return to her real world, she discovers that her parents have been kidnapped by the Other Mother. To save them and the souls of other trapped children, Coraline must navigate a dark and surreal landscape, outsmart the sinister Other Mother, and confront her deepest fears. Throughout her journey, Coraline encounters strange and magical beings, including a talking cat and eccentric neighbors who assist her in her quest. The story explores themes of bravery, independence, and the importance of appreciating what one has, even in the face of challenges. In the climactic confrontation with the Other Mother, Coraline must use her wits and courage to outmaneuver the supernatural entity and free the trapped souls. The novel concludes with Coraline successfully returning to her real world, with a newfound appreciation for

her ordinary life and a sense of empowerment from overcoming the dark forces she faced in the other world.

With the character of the Other Mother, we observe that she presents herself as an idealized version of Coraline's real mother. Initially, she seems caring and attentive, offering Coraline everything she desires. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the Other Mother's intentions are far from benevolent. She kidnaps Coraline's real parents and attempts to trap Coraline in the alternate world. In this way she becomes a symbol of manipulation, control, and the dangers of succumbing to superficial and earthly comforts. The Other Mother stands out as a prominent female antagonist, underscoring the narrative's focus on women, whether virtuous or villainous, with men relegated to a secondary role. This emphasis is further illustrated by the portrayal of male characters as distinctly lacking in power. The Other Father, for instance, is just the Other Mother's puppet, and has no influence on the storyline. We observe this clearly when Coraline finds him in the basement, locked and hidden by her. He says to Coraline: "Run, child. Leave this place. She wants me to hurt you, to keep you here forever, so that you can never finish the game and she will win. She is pushing me so hard to hurt you. I cannot fight her" (Gaiman, 123). As observed, then, the other father is shown as an innocent character that even wants to help Coraline. This attitude is created so that the readers are left with no doubt that the Other Mother is the only real villain of the story.

In her article "Unmasking M(other)hood: Third-Wave Mothering in Gaiman's *Coraline* and *MirrorMask*," Danielle Russell expresses a favorable viewpoint regarding Neil Gaiman's female characters. She contends that Gaiman's creations, *Coraline* and *MirrorMask*, disrupt conventional portrayals of motherhood aligning with third-wave mothering. This, she believes, happens due to the overall message the book gives where

Coraline chooses her unimpressive, not extremely attentive yet responsible, and working mother. Thus she, as argued, envisions the concept of an unmagical yet natural and healthy motherhood. This way, Gaiman's works go beyond traditional binary notions, depicting mothers who “transcend simplistic categories of good/evil, nurturing/abusive, or natural/artificial” (265). Instead, these narratives celebrate the intricacies and diversity inherent in maternal experiences.

As much as I fully agree with Russell’s remarks about Gaiman’s touch on an effective representation of motherhood, the fact that solely motherhood tends to be the concern while fatherhood is left out of the picture is a question that these works raise. After all, “the mother-daughter motif, so common in Western literature, appears in an extreme form in *Coraline*” (Russell, 255). While this extremity between the mother and the kids are emphasized, fathers or men being of second or no importance, however, creates a problematic picture. This is the case not only in *Coraline*, but also in *The Ocean* as well, since, as mentioned, father is not even identified as a villain.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive exploration of Neil Gaiman's portrayal of female characters in their subtle victimization under patriarchy. Particularly focusing on the novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane,* the study also analyzes similar characteristics within his other texts such as *Coraline*, *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, and "the Queen of Knives". Despite the initial appearance of strong and independent female figures in *The Ocean* such as the Hempstocks, deeper scrutiny unveils their entrapment within patriarchal norms. Accordingly, when viewed in detail, an appealingly oppressive figure, Ursula, can also be considered an oppressed figure. Likewise, the mother, often overshadowed within the narrative, is depicted with subtle yet significant details that may be interpreted as indicative of her subjugation within patriarchal structures. Other texts of Gaiman bring further discussions on the topic of gender inequality. While concepts like ageism towards women can be traced in *The Ocean*, they find further exemplifications in the "Queen of Knives" and the novella *The Sleeper and the Spindle*. Additionally, the women share the foreground in conflicts while men are portrayed with an innocent appeal which is observable in *Coraline* as well as in *The Ocean.*

Through the articles this thesis brings together it is certain that some scholars argue for the appealing complexity and agency of Gaiman's female characters, while others highlight the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals and the constraints imposed upon them. By dissecting the spatial limitations, mythical symbolism, and character dynamics within Gaiman's works, this thesis uncovers the ways in which patriarchal oppression manifests and perpetuates itself. Through comparative analysis and theoretical

frameworks, it contextualizes Gaiman's portrayal of gender dynamics within broader discussions of feminist literature and representation. Overall, when analyzing Neil Gaiman's or any other author, it is necessary to avoid reducing him/them to simplistic labels instead of delving deeper into the complexities of this narratives. Thus, rather than categorizing Gaiman's work as strictly feminist or not, it's important to explore the nuances and broader themes present in his storytelling. Hence, this study intends to attract attention or to raise questions as to how certain critical details might reveal underlying anti-feminist sentiments, and promote literary language to develop for more inclusiveness through more questioning.

Regarding further research, one topic deserving deeper investigation might be how adaptations of Gaiman's works handle the portrayal of female characters across different media such as film, television, and graphic novels. These adaptations might offer opportunities to examine whether they reinforce or subvert patriarchal norms present in the original texts. Additionally, exploring how changes in medium impact the representation of gender can provide valuable insights into the adaptation process and its implications for gender dynamics. Furthermore, delving into fan communities' engagement with Gaiman's female characters through fan fiction, fan art, and online discussions can offer rich insights. This exploration might underscore the active role of readers in shaping and reshaping the meaning of texts, particularly concerning gender representation. Lastly, integrating masculinity studies into further research might provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing both male and female characters in Gaiman's works. By examining how masculinity is constructed, deconstructed, and represented in relation to patriarchal norms, researchers might be able to gain insights into the complex interplay between gender, power, and representation. This interdisciplinary approach can enrich our understanding of how gender is negotiated and

contested within Gaiman's fictional worlds, ultimately offering a more nuanced perspective on his exploration of gender dynamics.

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