

The Ocean at the End of the Lane Study Guide

The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman

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Plot Summary

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, by Neil Gaiman, the middle-aged narrator returns to his hometown to attend a funeral. While there he goes to his childhood home. The visit back to the place where he and his sister had grown up brings back memories of a girl named Lettie Hempstock. She was easy to remember because she had told everyone that the pond in back of her house was really an ocean. Now, as a grown man, the narrator decides to stop by Lettie's house. He walks to the pond, and Mrs. Hempstock comes out to greet him.

At this point in the story, the narrator goes back in time to recount events from his childhood. He remembers an opal miner who stayed as a boarder at his home. The opal miner stole his father's car. Then, he committed suicide in the back seat. It's possible that his suicide had occurred because of gambling debts. Whatever the reason for his death, shortly thereafter someone or something began leaving money for people in weird ways. For example, the narrator was almost choked to death by a coin that entered his throat while he slept. He survived with the help of Lettie.

As the flashback continues, the narrator's mother takes a new job. A lady named Ursula Monkton begins taking care of the narrator and his sister. Though his dad and sister like Ursula, the narrator strongly dislikes her; so, he spends most of his time in his bedroom avoiding Ursula. The narrator's feelings about Ursula are well grounded. Her purpose is to disturb the universe. She does this by giving people what they want, knowing that those things will cause unhappiness later.

Only Lettie knows how to get rid of Ursula by summoning hunger birds. The scavengers attack Ursula. Unfortunately, they try to harm the narrator, too. However, once again, he is saved by Lettie and her family who take him to their house. Eventually, the hunger birds try again to attack the narrator. Lettie saves him once more by jumping between him and the monsters. Finally, it is Grandmother Hempstock who is successful in getting the birds to leave. But, before the hungry birds exit, Lettie is badly injured. She is placed in the river, which she had called an ocean, to rest until she can come back to the real world. Being a child, the narrator does not connect the reality of death to Lettie's resting in the ocean. He thinks that she has gone to Australia.

The setting reverts to the present. Once again the narrator is a middle-aged man who has stopped by The Hempstocks after a funeral. They tell him that he has been back to his hometown before. He is surprised to hear this. He tells Lettie's family to tell her "hello" for him when she gets in touch from Australia.

Prologue – Chapter 3

Summary

The novel begins with a short piece, before the prologue, in which the narrator tries to describe the nature of the body of water at the end of the lane. Each of the Hempstock women describe what seems to the narrator to be a small duck pond differently.

It may not be a duck pond after all; it might actually be the ocean that connects this world to another world entirely.

Prologue: The narrator shows up at the duck pond after having attended a funeral. He recognizes the house, which has not changed, even though much of the neighborhood has been developed. He parks his car and walks to the pond. Mrs. Hempstock comes out to greet him. She offers him tea, and he starts to recall the true significance of the pond and what happened there.

Chapter 1: The narrator says no one came to his seventh birthday party. His parents give him a Gilbert and Sullivan record, in addition to a black kitten whom he names fluffy. He does not have many friends because he is a bookish and solitary child. Fluffy is his close friend. Then, one day after his parents have started to take in boarders, a man tells him that Fluffy was killed by his car. The man is an opal miner who will be staying at the narrator's parents' house, now that the narrator's parents have come down in the world and need the income from renting rooms.

The man feels guilty about killing the cat, and he gives the narrator another cat, a big ginger-colored cat with one ear missing. The cat is named Monster. The narrator thinks this must be a bad joke because you can't just replace one cat with another.

Chapter 2: After his parents rent his room to the opal miner, the narrator must share his sister's room. One day the car goes missing. After a short time, it is found at the end of the lane. The narrator and his father go to collect the car. When they get to it, they find that the opal miner has committed suicide by piping the exhaust into the car and asphyxiating himself. The boy is sent away from the scene to the Hempstock house, where Lettie, her mother, and her grandmother give him milk fresh from the cow and porridge with jam. They talk about the suicide as if they know all the details. Then, Lettie takes the boy down to the pond, which she refers to as her ocean.

Lettie tells the boy that her family is in the Domesday book, which is to say that they go back further than William the Conqueror. Lettie and the boy study a dead fish in the pond and find that the fish had choked on a sixpence piece. Lettie gives the coin to the boy and tells him to keep it. Perhaps, it will bring him luck. At home, the boy asks his father whether a pond can be as big as the ocean, but the father says that they are different sizes.



Chapter 3: Money starts to appear in the narrator's life. He gets a letter announcing that he's won 25 pounds. Then, a few days later, a neighbor finds a jar full of coins in her garden. One morning the narrator wakes up choking. After he makes himself throw up, he finds that he has been choking on a shilling piece.

When the narrator describes his dream and the shilling piece to Lettie, she knows that he has been having bad dreams. The narrator tells her that someone was throwing coins from the bushes. Lettie says that an old lady has gone mad at her house because money has appeared in her mattress.

Lettie tells the narrator that he found money because there is a spirit who wants to give people what they want. After a breakfast of pancakes, Lettie takes the narrator outside to inquire into the nature of the spirit.

Analysis

Preface: The nature of the duck pond will depend on the narrator's interpretation of events. Already, however, this novel is playing with the possibility that ordinary things are not what they seem, and the duck pond may have an enormous, even cosmic significance.

Prologue: *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a work of imagination, which has already shown the reader that reality might have more resonance than it appears to have. But, this chapter seems to be very straightforward as the narrator meets Mrs. Hempstock. He asks about Lettie, and his memory that she's gone to Australia seems, itself, to come from far away. The intersection between reality and dreams is apparent from the beginning of the novel.

Chapter 1: This chapter gives the reader some information about the narrator's parents and their situation. They are not well off, and the narrator is already somewhat haunted by the loss of the family's affluence. While the opal miner's profession seems propitious, his appearance is not a good omen for him at all. He kills the narrator's cat, and the narrator knows - if the adults do not - that the new cat is not the same at all.

Chapter 2: The opal miner's suicide is not particularly ominous, but it does bring the boy into the Hempstock household, where he experiences a different kind of life than he has known. The Hempstock women feed him deeply satisfying food, unlike his father's burned toast. The mystery of the opal miner's death is increased by the Hempstock women's familiarity with the details. The novel does not explore how they know so much. After Lettie takes the narrator to the pond, the story deepens. They find money in a dead fish's stomach. At this point, the novel is beginning to depart from reality. It is becoming a dream scape.

Chapter 3: Lettie tells the narrator why so many people are having money problems. She seems to know in advance about the problem and what kind of spirit is causing it. The narrator is a little mystified, but he is young enough to trust Lettie. Also, her mother and grandmother cook such good food for him that he is put at ease.



Discussion Question 1

What kind of novel is *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*? Where do reality and fantasy or imagination intersect?

Discussion Question 2

How does Neil Gaiman characterize the people in his novel? What types of language does he use to describe their personalities, What does he make you expect from each of them?

Discussion Question 3

What role does food play in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*? What difference is there between the food of the narrator's house and the food in the Hempstock household?

Vocabulary

vividly, randomly, grimaced, Flint, architecture, unlikely, adult, exulting, hazelnut, trifles, pneumonia, biscuits, corpse, rhododendron, truculently, opal, baffled, sacrifices, summarily, scandalized, prospect, abandoned, precipitous, diorama, churns

Chapters 4 – 7

Summary

Chapter 4: Lettie takes the narrator outside and cuts a hazel wand. She tells him to hold onto her hand and not to let go. They are going to go looking for the cause of the disturbances. They proceed by color, first following the black of a scrap of cloth; then the red of the dead vole. From there they look for a storm; and, when the winds begin to blow, they lie flat on the ground while something brown and furry races over them. Lettie said that this is a manta wolf. She tells the narrator to put his shilling point on the Y of the wand. He does, and the wand starts smoking, then bursts into flame. The sky fills with an orange color, and Lettie says that they are in the right place. They see a figure made of gray and pink canvas flapping in the wind. When Lettie speaks to it and tells it to name itself, it says that it is the lady of this place. It refuses to say its name, but it tells about something which came to it and pleaded for love and help. Lettie tells it to leave people alone, and she threatens to bind the spirit as a nameless thing. The spirit begins singing and throws a mass of cobwebs and rotting cloth at the narrator. The narrator lets go of Lettie's hand to catch it. He feels a stabbing pain in his foot. The narrator says that for the moment he held the ball, he understood the language of shaping, the words with which reality created itself. The narrator says Lettie is singing in the language of shaping and that the thing is being bound to this place by her song.

As Lettie and the narrator walk home, the narrator pulls at a fuzzy tendril from the earth and pulls up a whole kitten, black with a white spot on one ear. Lettie says that they will not be hearing any more from the spirit, but she recommends against him taking the kitten home. Lettie asks the narrator if he is okay. He says that he is a brave soldier. However, when they part, he wonders whether he said the right thing.

Chapter 5: That evening, the narrator looks at his foot and starts pulling something worm-like out of the hole. He spools it and spools it. When it does not come out easily, he runs the hot water in the bath, submerges his foot, and pulls it almost all the way out. The thing he pulls out resembles an earthworm, but in the end, some part of it had snapped off inside him. He puts the worm down the drain in the tub, and wonders whether there is any chance that it will come back. For the first time, he looks in the mirror and wonders who he is himself.

Chapter 6: The narrator says he had been a fearless child, but now he is frightened. He says his mother tells him that she has taken a job four days a week and Ursula Monkton will be coming to take care of him and his sister. When he meets Ursula, he finds that his sister has already practically fallen in love with her. He doesn't recognize her as the monster, but he is wary of her from the beginning.

Ursula tells the narrator and his sister that they will have to stay on the property from now on. Since the narrator distrusts her, he will not eat any food Ursula prepares and hides in his playroom. When no one is looking, he starts wandering through the property



in the direction of Lettie's house. When he approaches the border, Ursula is there to tell him to return home. She is not kind to him. She tells him that in the future all of this land will be sub-developments filled with identical houses. He tells her he distrusts her. He wants to know her true identity. Ursula only says that she has been inside of him. She tells him that if he shares what he knows, no one will believe him.

Back at the house, the narrator tries to call Lettie, but Ursula picks up the phone and warns him against any attempt to reach out. The narrator says that he brought her here himself and he does not know how to get rid of her. After a dinner that the narrator hardly eats, he watches his father and Ursula flirt with each other.

Chapter 7: The next day, with his parents out of the house, the narrator must do what Ursula tells him to do. She threatens to invent humiliating stories about him and to get him in trouble with his parents. His father comes home early from work and flirts with Ursula, while the narrator watches from the top of the tree. The narrator does not think Ursula will be able to keep him on the property forever, but he is afraid to think that she might only need a couple of days to do her work. At dinner that night, he refuses to eat the food Ursula has prepared. When his father demands to know why, the narrator says Ursula is a monster. The narrator runs upstairs pursued by his father. When his father catches him, he fills the tub with water and thrusts the narrator under. The narrator struggles against his father, determined to live, and soaks his father, ruining his tie. Sopping wet, he is sent to his room.

Analysis

Chapter 4: In this chapter, the power of words is used to create objects and realities. The creature and Lettie both speak the language of shaping, and the narrator says that he has understood this language in dreams. This chapter also focuses on the strange logic of the fantasy story, in which a ball of cobwebs and cloth can create a portal to other dimensions. Lettie seems to be in control of the situation with the creature/structure. While the narrator trusts her, he distrusts himself and wonders whether he has done the right thing. This apprehension is the opposite of shaping, since it precedes and follows action, and does not necessarily create anything itself.

Chapter 5: The worm that comes out of the narrator's foot makes the story more fantastic than realistic. The narrator himself is too young to know what to do with the worm, but he knows almost by instinct that he should not take his question to an adult. The only one he thinks about sharing this with is Lettie. The narrator also starts to wonder who he is, which is a question that any seven-year-old might ask. How he responds to the crisis of having a worm inside of him will provide the answer to the question.

Chapter 6: The narrator's new fear might come from his developmental stage. It might be a factor of his parents' changing fortunes. Nevertheless, in this story, his fears take the shape of the monster he saw with Lettie. Now, this monster comes to his house in the form of Ursula, the new governess. The narrator knows, somehow, that he has



brought her here. She begins persecuting him almost immediately. His movements are limited to the property, and he is isolated from his sister and his parents. Not only are his parents less well off now, but with his mother out of the house, his father is susceptible to Ursula's flirtations. The narrator, of course, is not in charge of any of this, but he will have to be resourceful to find a way off the property to get help.

Chapter 7: In this chapter, the narrator loses any authority or even affection he had in his house. The events that started with the storm and the money have become a real crisis that is personal to him. In the beginning, Ursula seems to have all the power. She doesn't seem to have any weaknesses. She succeeds in turning the narrator's father against him. The narrator will need to be cunning and very creative to outwit Ursula and protect himself.

Discussion Question 1

This story resembles many other hero myths in which a young man is challenged by a quest or an ordeal in which he has to prove himself. What elements of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are similar to other stories you know?

Discussion Question 2

Considering *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* allegorically, what does this story tell us about the nature of the unconscious, or childhood, or experience?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Lettie and the narrator. Is the narrator coming to resemble Lettie in her knowledge? Is Lettie somehow coming to resemble him?

Vocabulary

hazel, bluebottle, omnipresent, orienting, compass, canopy, repelling, amplifier, charitably, charcoal, aloes, lopsided, pleaded, bound, encounter, dominion, pagan, puzzlement, ornamental, apologized, prodded, impatient, admission, optometrist, references, placards

Chapters 8 – 9

Summary

Chapter 8: Shivering and cold, the narrator is determined to leave the property. Ursula says he is getting in her way and threatens to persecute him further. He tells her that she is still just a flea. The narrator recalls books in which heroes climbed down drainpipes, and he sees the one outside his window as his way out. As he climbs down the drainpipe though, the narrator sees his father and Ursula hugging in the study, and Ursula has her skirt around her waist. Thinking the kind of thoughts he might be thinking if he were still in his room, to set Ursula's mind off his scent, he succeeds in getting down the drainpipe and off the property. With a brief setback when he tries to handle an electric fence, he makes his way toward Lettie's house. It starts to lightning and rain, as if Ursula is pursuing him. The narrator hears Ursula's voice telling him that he is in trouble. Just as Ursula overtakes the narrator and threatens to let his father drown him in the bath, Lettie shows up and tells her to get off her land. The narrator holds Lettie's hand tightly so that nothing else can happen. Lettie tells Ursula that she can make a new door, or have Granny send her back to where she came from. Ursula says she owns the narrator. When it seems as if she will try to take him, Lettie sends her away by turning the grass and earth golden. A rising wind blows Ursula away. Lettie says she will come back. In the meantime, she takes the narrator back to her house to get him dry clothes and feed him.

Chapter 9: When the narrator comes into the Hempstock household, Old Mrs. Hempstock sends him to bathe, while Mrs. Hempstock cooks for him. The narrator is not ashamed of himself and his nakedness in front of the Hempstocks. When he gets out of his bath they serve him rich, warm soup, then roast beef with carrots for dinner. He curls with a black kitten with a white patch on its ear. Before he goes to bed, he asks whether there are any men in the Hempstock household. Mrs. Hempstock says that they have never needed men, although men come and go.

Then Old Mrs. Hempstock says the narrator's parents are coming, and they start to worry about how to handle them. They consider turning him into something and hiding him, but they decide to 'snip and cut,' which is to say to edit the evening so that certain events are cut out. Old Mrs. Hempstock takes the narrator's pajamas, and tears them apart, then stitches them back together. In the new reality she creates, the narrator's father has not come to chastise him. Instead, he has brought the narrator his toothbrush for his sleepover party. (It is not clear whether the incident with Ursula has also been cut out, although Old Mrs. Hempstock says that she snipped out the incident in the bath.) When the narrator's parents finally arrive, they seem a little confused. However, they accept the new storyline quickly and leave the narrator in peace for the evening.

The narrator tells Old Mrs. Hempstock about the worm in his foot, and she prepares to extract it all the way. With a needle, she pulls out a glistening thing that is actually a tunnel into another dimension. By the time she's done, the hole in the narrator's foot is



gone completely. But, Lettie says Ursula left her way home inside the narrator. The narrator says an ice chip in his heart seemed to warm when she said this. The Hempstocks discuss how to solve the problem of Ursula, but they say it can wait till tomorrow. The narrator sleeps in a guest bed next door to Lettie. He notices that the moon, which was only a crescent yesterday, is now full outside his window. As he falls asleep, the narrator realizes that the things that were cut out of time still live in his memory.

Analysis

Chapter 8: This confrontation between Ursula and Lettie is one of the high points of the book. Lettie shows her power, and saves the narrator from any further persecution. It is still not clear what will need to be done in order to completely contain or eradicate the threat Ursula represents; but, Lettie seems to have the knowledge that will be required. The main question for the narrator is if he will play a part in this drama.

Chapter 9: Now that the narrator is in the Hempstock women's hands, he is safe from Ursula. However, it's still not clear what will need to be done. There is an old time simplicity and beauty to the lives of the Hempstock women. If this simplicity is symbolic of primordial powers that can contain Ursula's threats, then the narrator is doubly glad to be there.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the Hempstock women and Ursula. How does the author describe their powers without getting very specific?

Discussion Question 2

What is happening to the narrator as events are unfolding around him? What developmental milestone is he reaching? What individual personality is emerging within him?

Discussion Question 3

With which forces is Ursula aligned? With which forces are the Hempstock women aligned? What kind of balance normally exists between these forces? What events disturbed this balance?

Vocabulary

convulsively, squelching, oozed, mantelpiece, counterpane, unreliable, lintel, distracted, terrified, occasions, inviolate, nettles, disobeyed, continuous, fluorescent,

malfunctioning, hedgerow, illuminated, sprawled, molten, incarnate, flailing, pronounced, essence, the luminous, frantic

Chapters 10 – 11

Summary

Chapter 10: The narrator says he dreams of betrayal while sleeping in the Hempstock house. However, he cannot remember the dream in detail. He sees the harvest moon in the sky, but he knows it is spring. In the morning, he puts on the strange, old-time clothes the Hempstock women laid out for him. The black kitten greets him with loud mewing. Lettie is not in the house, but she returns soon after the narrator wakes up. She has a basket full of things she has collected. The narrator asks if the Hempstock women are monsters, but Lettie says no. She says that monsters come in all shapes and sizes and monsters are things people fear or should fear. Lettie asks the narrator about what might frighten Ursula.

Lettie takes the narrator out of the house to start the task of sending Ursula back. Lettie places the things she has been gathering around the edge of the narrator's property. Then, she tells him that these things will not send her away. They will keep her from going away: They want her to go home. The narrator objects that she talks in mysteries, but Lettie does not explain. Together, the narrator and Lettie walk in the front door of his house and Lettie places things around his house before they go up the stairs to Ursula's room. They find Ursula naked in a room filled with ragged gray cloth strips hanging from the ceiling. Ursula does not seem to be frightened by their presence. The cloth strips pull free and bind to the narrator, putting his body to sleep where they touch him, but Lettie holds out Ursula's 'way home,' which shimmers in the jar. Now, the strips fall away from the narrator's face. Ursula runs out. Lettie says that Ursula is afraid of varmints, what Gran calls the cleaners.

Chapter 11: The narrator and Lettie find Ursula on the lawn, trying to break open the jar with her way home inside it. The jar will not break. Now that Ursula is afraid of the varmints, there is some terror inside of her. Lettie opens the jar and gives Ursula her way home. Ursula starts to go through it, but she says it is incomplete—there is still a piece inside of the narrator. Ursula picks him up, and the narrator is certain he will die. When he fights against Ursula, with his nails digging into rotting cloth and soft wood, there is something hard as bone beneath it. Ursula says that the way home is fastened too well in the narrator's heart, so she has to pull out his heart to free herself. Lettie loses patience with Ursula and calls the hunger birds. They come like crows, but the narrator says they are dinosaurs. He cannot focus clearly enough to see them. He can only see teeth and eyes. As they descend on Ursula, she screams that she was only trying to give people what they needed. The narrator objects that Ursula made his father hurt him. The hunger birds devour every last remnant of Ursula's cloth. When Lettie tries to send the birds away in turn, they say that they will not be finished cleaning things up until they have the boy as well. Lettie tells the narrator to stay in the fairy ring (a part of the garden) until she gets back, and she runs off.



Analysis

Chapter 10: Things are starting to be set right as Lettie takes the situation in hand and gathers the tools and markers that will send Ursula away. Ursula does not believe that Lettie has the upper hand; but, the idea of varmints convinces her that she should be afraid. When she runs out of the narrator's house, the tides have turned. However, it is still not clear what will have to happen before she is sent away for good.

Chapter 11: In this chapter, Ursula Monkton is sent away for good. Now Lettie and the narrator have a different problem. The hunger birds think that they deserve a piece of the narrator because there is a sliver of ice stuck in his heart. They know that this is not something in accordance with the nature of things, and they feel that they ought to devour him as well as Ursula. Lettie stands up for him and says that she will protect him. Even though the narrator knows that the fairy ring is just a childish description of the garden, Lettie leaves him in that protective circle and runs off for further assistance.

Discussion Question 1

What rules seem to apply in Neil Gaiman's fictional world? Where are these rules described? How does the novel account for a world in which the rules of physics, history, spirits, and forces are so different?

Discussion Question 2

Carl Jung has a theory that every man has an anima, which is to say a female spirit who attends him (women have an animus in turn). How does Lettie serve as a helper in a process the narrator is going through? What does she help him do? What are the effects of her help?

Discussion Question 3

If Ursula roughly correlates to nature and the Hempstock women correlate to culture and family, what do the hunger birds represent? How are their associations described?

Vocabulary

simultaneously, harvest, trousers, stockings, hereabouts, glamour, honeycomb, raffia, vinegar, bazaar, translucent, dissolved, varmints, vegetable, revolting, cereal, xylophone, petulant, raggedy, discolored, appropriate, outlandish, thrumming, accidental, fungus

Chapters 12 – 14

Summary

Chapter 12: Many people come to see the narrator in the fairy ring: The first is the opal miner, who tells the boy that the hunger birds need to clean up. The narrator starts reciting a poem from *Alice in Wonderland* to ward off the opal miner, and the man disappears. Next to come is the narrator's sister, who says that his parents want him in the house. He sees bats flying about him and is not sure whether or not they are the hunger birds. Next, the narrator's father comes to tell him to return to the house, but the boy refuses. His father grows angry and tells the boy he is acting like an animal. The boy yells back, "Does it make you feel big to make the little boy cry?" (p. 136). Last comes Ursula Monkton, who admits that she has been eaten, but "They have let me out, just for a little while, from the place inside them. It's cold in there, and very empty. But they have promised you to me, so I will have something to play with; something to keep me company in the dark." (p. 137). Even Lettie seems to come back; but, when the narrator invites her into the fairy ring, she does not enter. A voice tells the narrator that Lettie is not coming back. It asks him how he can be happy in this world. The narrator says that after the voice is finished, he is no longer afraid of the dar. He says that he is even willing to die. "If I died waiting for Lettie. Because she was my friend." (p. 139). As the chapter comes to a close, the darkness deepens and the narrator continues singing to himself.

Chapter 13: Finally, Lettie arrives with a bucket of what she calls ocean water (which is, in fact, water from the pond). She tells him to stand in it. Even though it is just a bucket, when the narrator steps in it, he finds himself underwater. Strangely, the narrator finds that he can still breathe. He finds that now he knows everything. "Lettie's insight filled me, and it filled the entire universe, from Egg to Rose. I knew what Egg was—where the universe began, to the sound of uncreated voices singing in the void—and I knew where Rose was—the peculiar crinkling of space on space into dimensions that fold like origami and blossom like strange orchids, and which would mark the last good time before the eventual end of everything and next Big Bang, which would be, I knew now, nothing of the kind." (p. 143). Lettie says she is really sorry, and the narrator returns to the world from where he came. Lettie says that he cannot stay there because it will dissolve him, so that a little of him would exist everywhere. There would no longer be, properly speaking, a him at all. Lettie says that everyone used to know everything, but it's boring, since you have to live an individual life. Lettie says, "You have to give it all up if you want to play." (p. 146). They surface at the Hempstock house, but rather than answer any more questions, Lettie takes the narrator inside and gives him food. Her mother is there cooking, and the Hempstock women discuss what they can do about the varmints. Lettie says that she cannot get any traction to push the birds around, but the women all agree that they are safe on this farm. With the hunger birds looking for him, the narrator says he is willing to die tonight, but Mrs. Hempstock says that no one is going to die. With Lettie and her mother, the narrator leaves the farmhouse, again holding tightly to Lettie's hand.



Chapter 14: Lettie, Mrs. Hempstock and the narrator leave the farmhouse and head up the lane. The hunger birds come to meet them and refuse to be governed by anything Lettie says. They say they want the boy, but Lettie says that he is under their protection. The hunger birds say that they cannot take the boy or hurt the farm, but they can destroy creation. They eat a huge oak tree in a constellation in the sky. There is nothing left but shimmering nothingness. The narrator says he does not want to die, but in the face of the destruction by the hunger birds, he is willing to give up his life if it means saving the world. He lets go of Lettie's hand and runs toward the birds. In italics, the narrator says he remembers how it felt when the hunger birds snatched out his heart. What is narrated in normal text is that Lettie pushes him down, and the hunger birds hurt her instead. Arriving out of her sleep, Old Mrs. Hempstock is upset and demands to know on whose authority the birds have injured her child. Old Mrs. Hempstock threatens to bind the birds to a dark star or to have them removed from creation. They slink away, but only after replacing the oak tree and the constellation. The narrator says he holds onto Mrs. Hempstock, who is also holding onto Lettie, and he asks whether Lettie is okay. Mrs. Hempstock says that she is not. While she will not say that Lettie is dead, it becomes clear to the narrator that she is gone. Mrs. Hempstock lays her down at the edge of the pond, and a wave washes in to take Lettie away. Mrs. Hempstock says that Lettie might be returned in another form one day.

Analysis

Chapter 12: This chapter constitutes something like a dark night of the soul for the narrator. He is confronted by familiar faces and terrifying characters who all plead with him to hand himself over to the forces that will destroy him. Any temptation or weakness would have undone him, but he chooses to live and resists them. By the time he is done and the apparitions end, the narrator is willing to die. His willingness to die is an acceptance of the limitations to his personal power. It is also a powerful insistence that life should include meaningful relationships, such as friendship. Otherwise, death is the rightful alternative.

Chapter 13: In this chapter, the narrator enters the primordial, eternal waters of knowledge. It is probably the last time in his life that he will know everything. Lettie apologizes for bringing him back to his own particular existence. In the state he entered through Lettie's ocean water, everything in the universe is simply energy and material unfolding. However, as he returns to his individual existence, he once again has fears and desires. The narrator says he might be willing to die, but everything in the story mitigates against his death, since he comes back to the property as an adult, after all. Nevertheless, the question of the hunger birds remains to be settled, and this might be a test of Lettie's powers, since they leave the farm while Old Mrs. Hempstock is sleeping.

Chapter 14: In this final confrontation, the narrator is preserved once and for all against the forces of destruction and chaos. His preservation, though, comes at the price of Lettie's life. Even though she is not dead, she is effectively removed from the narrator's life. (It seems to be the case, though, that he will preserve her as a memory so precious



that she will practically still be alive to him.) Since they stepped over the line, the hunger birds are banished. Peace has been restored.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think the rules are that keep the hunger birds from devouring the world? Why are they bound to the Hempstock women and their authority?

Discussion Question 2

Why does it make a certain kind of sense that Lettie should have to be sacrificed in order for the narrator to live?

Discussion Question 3

Where have you seen the ocean that represents all knowledge in other books or movies? How have other writers handled the powerful image? What does Neil Gaiman tell you about himself and his art? How does he handle the ocean and its potential?

Vocabulary

blotches, indistinct, waxwork, prolonging, inevitable, carrion, void, remnant, recited, definitely, imperceptibly, devour, scavenger, blurred, crumpled, glimmering, Azalea, resigned, threshold, keepsake, immortality, adjusted, emitting, origami, dimensions

Chapter 15 – Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 15: The narrator says he thinks Lettie is dead, but her mother says she has just been taken by the ocean and might come back someday. Mrs. Hempstock says Lettie does not have a father. She does not explain the origins of any of the women in the Hempstock household. She tells the narrator to stop asking questions and to get on living his life, since Lettie gave it to him; now he has to “grow up and try to be worth it.” (p. 167)

When the narrator arrives home, it seems just as though he were returning from a sleepover party. When his parents ask Mrs. Hempstock about Lettie, she says she has gone to Australia. The narrator says that he remembers a different story. However, as Mrs. Hempstock explains to his parents, that seems to be just what happened. The narrator’s mother says that Ursula had to leave, but the narrator says that he never went back to the bedroom he had first given up to the opal miner. The narrator says that his parents sold their house ten years later and that his sister told him later that Ursula was fired because she was having an affair with their father. The narrator says that his father never mentioned the events of that night. He says that Monster, the cat, disappeared, to everyone’s relief. Then, one night in May or June, the other black cat showed up with a white splotch on one ear. His parents did not notice that one cat had been replaced by another. He says that he named the black cat Ocean.

Epilogue: Returning to the present time, the narrator sits at the pond, after the funeral and before the reception. Old Mrs. Hempstock brings him a sandwich, which is just as good as the food he ate in the Hempstock house as a child. She says that he has been back to the pond more frequently than he remembers, and he describes the night when Lettie died as her going away party. Old Mrs. Hempstock says that he came back when he was 24, and then again in his 30s, although he says he does not remember. Old Mrs. Hempstock says that he comes back because Lettie wants him to return. She wants to know whether it was worth it. He asks if he can speak to Lettie; but, Old Mrs. Hempstock says that she is sleeping. The narrator asks Old Mrs. Hempstock whether he has passed Lettie’s test, and she says that he is doing better than he was the last time. She says that the next step is for him to go home. When he says that he does not know where that is, she says that he always says that. She reminds him that he is expected at the funeral reception. When he looks at her, for a moment he thinks he sees two of her. As he drives away from the farmhouse, he sees a crescent and a full moon side-by-side. Then, he decides that it must only be a hint of a memory he forgot.

Analysis

Chapter 15: This final chapter closes the story of the events that involved Lettie. She’s gone. Even though the narrator will preserve her in his memory, he must resume his life.



That means that he must return to his family. The events surrounding Ursula Monkton are reduced to childish nightmares and his father's disruptive affair. Any questions the narrator had are reserved for the mysteries of childhood, which is so imaginative by nature that the events may as well have been real.

Epilogue: In the epilogue, the narrator tries to live with questions that were raised in childhood and never settled. There is a good deal of lapsed memory; but, it also seems as if the narrative confirms the hunger birds as the reason for Lettie's death. This last chapter gives the events of the novel an allegorical and psychological resonance, as the adult man looks back at the images he may or may not have dreamed. Regardless, they got him through a difficult time and a necessary transition. The "truth" of this story is not, therefore, in its accuracy but in its poetry and symbolism. And while many of the images can be interpreted, there are definite things that can be said about the sacrifices must be made for the child to survive the transition into adulthood. A certain spirit and a certain knowledge have to be lost and grieved. If *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is any indication, the good things in childhood are really only preserved when they are lost. Adult life will only have meaning if it remains open to the deeper meanings in childhood experiences.

Discussion Question 1

Debate the proposition that Neil Gaiman's account of the events in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are a description of childhood.

Discussion Question 2

What questions are answered and settled at the end of the novel? What questions remain open and need to be answered? Which of those questions can you answer on your own? Which questions do you think might never be answered?

Discussion Question 3

How do the events of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* affect the narrator in adulthood? In what way does he carry these events through his life? How have they helped or hurt him?

Vocabulary

ignition, resentment, industriously, quilted, confusion, alternate, spattered, guilty, decade, sequence, dilapidated, awash, tomatoes, continents, stout, abide, piteously, shivered, mentioned, awkward, sauntered, afterimage, missed, nonsense, peaceful



Characters

The Narrator

This person is a seven-year-old boy who helps correct an imbalance in the forces of the universe. Later in life, he returns to the site where this takes place.

Lettie Hempstock

This person is an eleven-year-old girl who has been eleven years old for a long time. She helps the narrator restore balance to the world.

Mrs. Hempstock

This person helps maintain the balance of forces in the universe with her daughter and mother.

Old Mrs. Hempstock

This person comforts the narrator when he is a child. When he sees her again later, he cannot imagine that she comforted him.

Skarhach of the Keep/ Ursula Monkton

This person is a housekeeper who is also a force of disruption in the universe. She wants to give people what they want. She gives them things that will make them happy for a brief time. Those same things make them unhappy later.

The Narrator's Father

This person has an affair while his spouse is working late at nights.

The Opal Miner

This person commits suicide by running exhaust fumes into the narrator's father's car.

Monster

This is a mean cat with one half of one ear missing.

Fluffy

This is a kitten who is killed when a guest arrives at the narrator's house.

Hunger Birds

These creatures clean up messes by devouring people and things that don't deserve to live in time.

Symbols and Symbolism

Shilling

This is something the narrator nearly chokes on.

Jar of Coins

This is something one of the narrator's neighbors finds in her garden.

The Mini

This is the car in which the opal miner commits suicide.

The Ragged Canvas Structure

This is the spirit that calls itself the lady of the place and wants to offer its help to the people around the Hempstock homestead.

The Language of Shaping

This is what the spirits speak when they want to affect the lives of human beings.

Ball of Cobwebs and Cloth

This is the object the canvas structure throws at the narrator. When he catches it, the spirit of the structure enters into him and uses him as a vessel for its way home.

Bucket of Pond Water

Lettie brings this to the narrator in the fairy ring and uses it to take him to the ocean, where he knows all things.

Hazel Wand

This is something Lettie uses to find the source of the local disturbances.

Spotted Dick

This is a dessert the narrator eats at the Hempstock house.

Worm Hole

This is something that manifests as an opening in the narrator's foot. It is the tunnel through which an ancient force plans to return to its home dimension.

Settings

Sussex

This is the county in England where *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is set.

Australia

This is a faraway country that symbolizes death and/or distant travel.

The Ocean

This place is not just a place but also a metaphysical location, the end and origin of all things, knowledge, and personalities.

The Hempstock Land

This is a protected territory, overseen by women who know how to dispense with spirits.

The Narrator's House

This is a place where adults are in charge and children keep their questions to themselves.

Themes and Motifs

Adults vs. Children

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, children and adults are all subject to the same psychological forces of desire and regret, nostalgia and hope. The narrator is just beginning to feel an adult range of emotions and to see as far as adults can see. His vision is not very much different from his father's, since they are both subject to Ursula and her wiles. Lettie and her mother and grandmother, on the other hand, are wise beyond their years. They know about the ways of the spirits, and they know the words and gestures and actions that can control them. This knowledge, though, is not so much related to adulthood as to long experience in the world. Presumably, the narrator himself has an age-old personality as well, and he could know as much as the Hempstock women, if he only had access to his dreams.

Happiness' and Experience

One of the first signs of Ursula's presence in the narrator's neighborhood is the appearance of money in unexpected places. When Skarthach of the Keep talks to Lettie in the storm, she says that she wants to make people happy, to give them what they want. This turns against the people of Sussex, when Skarthach/ Ursula gives them the things they want that will not make them happy. Wanting, itself, is clearly not a recipe for happiness. On the other hand, Lettie and her mother and grandmother are so wise in the ways of the world, and the ways of the spirits, that they are not surprised by anything Ursula does. They have long experience and are rarely in any danger. For them, to want to create an outcome is itself a simple thing, but they are also bound to want only things that are easy because they are woven into the nature of this world. Experience is, therefore, set opposite happiness as the goal which smart people are wise to devote themselves.

Good Food, Good Family

One of the things the narrator finds most satisfying about the Hempstock household is the bounty of delicious food he is served there. In his own household, the narrator is served burnt toast when his father is too distracted to cook it correctly. The narrator is also used to white bread, which does not taste like anything. He is surprised when he gets to the Hempstock household, to find bread that is rich and delicious. As a meaningful symbol, food gives the Hempstock women a strong connection to the earth, where the good food comes from. Not only do they have mastery of the spirits, but they know how to work with the materials the earth provides. This is not, however, simply materialistic: by serving the narrator such good food, they are also subtly instructing him in a value system that is very different from his parents'. Even though the action of the novel may well be a dream, the narrator can look back at his experience and say that he



knew how food should really be prepared, presented and eaten. This is a kind of knowledge his father, with his feigned taste for burnt toast, does not have, and it makes the narrator rich by comparison.

Loss

When the narrator loses his friend Lettie, he is beside himself with grief and disbelief. He and Lettie's mother and grandmother all know that Lettie gave her life for him. When he comes back later in the novel, Old Mrs. Hempstock tells him that Lettie has wanted to know that it was worth it. Lettie is, of course, merely a face of an eternal nature; but, her loss is, nevertheless, personal to the narrator. It is also necessary: as a stage in his own development, the narrator has to lose the mystical power and all encompassing knowledge Lettie represents. He replaces this, of course, symbolically in his own experience. Lettie becomes someone he has inside of him. If the narrator lost her mystical knowledge, he gained a new sense of self, in addition to a new seriousness. He could have ended up like his father, subject to affairs and unexpected fits of rage. Instead, he is an artist who tries to be conscientious in his work and in his life. Though he doesn't realize it, the narrator returns to the pond throughout his life to subject his decisions to Lettie's gaze, merely by sitting at the pond where he last saw her alive.

The Hero's Quest

In this novel, the narrator is in the position every person occupies, the hero in his own story. In this case, the narrator has to learn how to circumvent the adults' rules in order to set an injustice right. The imbalance he is responsible for correcting is not his own, but he feels its effects and is therefore obligated to fix it. There is an implication that if he lets Ursula go on with her work, the entire universe—not just he and his family—will suffer. This gives the narrator's story a cosmic dimension that is typically the realm of myth, and it gives his accomplishment, in deserving Lettie's sacrifice for him, a spiritual dimension as well. The narrator might come back to the pond from time to time to see whether his knowledge is still legitimate, but he is merely renewing something he learned through a harrowing ordeal. He earned that knowledge with courage and persistence and wit, and now, as an adult, he has this knowledge as a resource to fall back on.

Styles

Point of View

The Ocean at the End of the Lane is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who is a middle-aged man at the beginning, and a child of seven in the events the man remembers. The narrator defines himself early on as an artist who is fairly successful, divorced, and with grown children. He does not say much more about himself or his situation. The reader learns about him more through his childhood self than his adult self. As a child, the narrator is just at the point where he is learning to be afraid of things that he used to not fear. The Ocean at the End of the Lane is the narrator's coming-of-age story. Though it uses dreamlike imagery, it follows a path of terror, courage, action, failure, and renewed action that every child follows as they make their way into adulthood. In this regard, the novel is told from the perspective of the unconscious itself, through the images it would typically give in dreams.

Language and Meaning

The Ocean at the End of the Lane uses mystical and symbolic language to describe a reality that is not merely literal, but allegorical, mythical, and even spiritual. Many aspects of this novel can be interpreted in numerous ways, according to the portraits the reader wants to make of nature and reality, the unconscious and consciousness, youth and adulthood, language and power, or creativity and materialism. While it is ostensibly presented as a Young Adult novel, The Ocean at the End of the Lane has an enduring quality that transcends childhood and resonates with adult experience. Its symbolism incorporates grief and loss and the passage of time, not just the passage from childhood into a larger awareness. Its mysterious sentences remain unsettling and unspecific, but their meaning is larger for it.

Structure

The novel begins with the narrator in middle age. Then, it flashes back to a brief period when he was seven years old. At the end, the narrator is once again a middle-age man who recalls the events of his childhood. Events are treated chronologically, although chronology itself is creative in the novel. At different points, the novel suggests that time is alternatively eternal and unchanging or cyclical and recurrent. The nature of the structure of the universe and time is left open for the reader.

Quotes

It was all coming back to me. Memories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning to me. Had you told me that I was seven again. I might have half-believed you, for a moment.

-- The Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 7)

Importance: Age and time are flexible concepts in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Memory allows characters to move back and forth, flexibly, between them.

How long have you been eleven for?

-- The Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 30)

Importance: In asking Lettie this question, the narrator glazes over the question of how old she and her family are. They are obviously not normal people, with regular lifespans, but the novel does not specify anything about the secret of their long lives.

Something came to me, and pleaded for love and help. It told me how I could make all the things like it happy.

-- The Lady of the Place (chapter 4 paragraph 43)

Importance: The creature that will be manifested as Ursula Monkton describes the call that brought it to the earth. Something human expressed a desire, and this spirit was there to answer.

I have dreamed of that song, of the strange words to that simple rhyme-song, and on several occasions I have understood what she was saying, in my dreams.

-- The Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 43)

Importance: The first time the narrator hears the language of shaping spoken, it is the canvas and orange glowing structure that is singing it. Later, he will hear Lettie speak it. When he goes into the ocean of her pond water, he will understand, himself.

Not a good idea, taking anything home from these parts.

-- Lettie (chapter 4 paragraph 45)

Importance: Lettie tells the narrator that there is a fundamental difference between things that live in the dream world outside of time and the regular world, where the narrator lives with his parents.

I thought she must have proclaimed himself her Knight in Shining Armor, or something like that.

-- The Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 67)

Importance: The narrator expresses some irony here, by imagining that his father sees



himself as a character in a romance story. This inverts the distinction between adult and child, using the child's language to describe the adult behavior of marital infidelity.

My parents were a unit, inviolate. The future had suddenly become unknowable: anything could happen: The train of my life had jumped the rails and headed off across the fields and was coming down the lane with me, then.

-- The Narrator (chapter 8 paragraph 81)

Importance: When the narrator sees his father and Ursula making love, he does not understand what he's seen. He anticipates something terrible, but he has no experience with which to give terror a shape. Ursula herself is that shape, of course, but he is only just learning to see the realities behind things.

When your people ripped the whole in Forever, I seized my chance. I could have ruled worlds, but I followed you, and I waited, and I have patience. I knew that sooner or later the bounds would loosen, that I would walk the true earth, beneath the Sun of heaven.

-- Ursula Monkton (chapter 8 paragraph 87)

Importance: Ursula, or the spirit that manifests itself in Ursula's form, is a boastful creature, full of a sense of importance. These cosmic terms are some of the only sentences in which Gaiman hints at the supernatural underpinnings of her character.

Monsters are scared, that's why they're monsters.

-- Lettie (chapter 10 paragraph 112)

Importance: The narrator does not seem to know how to combat Ursula Monkton, but Lettie knows. The narrator is going to have to trust Lettie if he wants to get rid of Ursula.

Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. They look like they did when they were your age. The truth is, there aren't any grown-ups.

-- Lettie (chapter 10 paragraph 112)

Importance: While this truth makes sense to Lettie, the narrator is too young to understand it fully. The narrator understands this better when he comes back to the pond as a grown man in his 40s or 50s.

How can you be happy in this world? You have a hole in your heart. You have a gateway inside you to lands beyond the world you know. They will call you, as you grow. There can never be a time forget them, when you are not, in your heart, questing after something you cannot have, something you cannot even properly imagine, the lack of which will spoil your sleep and your day and your life, until you close your eyes for the final time...

-- A Voice (chapter 12 paragraph 139)

Importance: This voice, which might be the voice of the spirit Ursula is, is a voice

beyond human life or knowledge. It speaks from the point of view of nature itself. It does not comprehend how an individual human being could be happy in its unique state.

I think that Lettie just wants to know if it was worth it.
-- Old Mrs. Hempstock (Epilogue paragraph 175)

Importance: Even though Lettie has effectively died, she has still been watching the narrator grow up and she has been listening to what he says when he returns to the pond. The sacrifice she made by dying in his place binds his life to hers. This sense of obligation he feels will be an essential component of the personality and the morality he develops later.