

THE IMPACT OF THE OCEAN: HOW NEIL GAIMAN BUILDS TENSION IN *THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE*

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RESUMO

O Oceano no Fim do Caminho (2013) de Gaiman rendeu ao autor, de acordo com um discurso dado na *Google* em 2013, as melhores críticas de sua vida. O escritor, curiosamente, afirma que esta obra específica se destaca entre suas demais obras em, no mínimo, duas formas: (1) ela é, de certa forma, autobiográfica e permeada por sentimentos, e (2) foi escrita "acidentalmente". O presente trabalho visa investigar como as escolhas estilísticas e narratológicas feitas por Gaiman o auxiliaram a criar tensão em *O Oceano no Fim do Caminho* e como elas contribuem para a construção de uma narrativa multicamadas que, além de ser impactante, distingue-se de seus outros romances. Para tal objetivo, realizarei uma leitura atenta da obra fazendo uso principalmente dos estudos sobre narratologia propostos por Genette (1980) e Herman e Vervaeck (2005), as teses sobre o conto de Piglia (2004), e as pesquisas de Shen (2005) a respeito de estilística. Ao aproximar os estudos desses acadêmicos da forma como o romance foi escrito e dos comentários do autor sobre a obra, sugiro possíveis interpretações para o enredo da narrativa.

Palavras-chave: Estilística. Narratologia. Neil Gaiman. Teoria Literária.

ABSTRACT

Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) rendered the author, according to a speech given at *Google* in 2013, the best reviews of his life. Interestingly enough, the writer claims that this specific work stands out among his other writings in at least two senses: (1) it is somehow autobiographical and pervaded by feelings, and (2) it was written "accidentally". The present work aims at investigating how the stylistic and narratological choices made by Gaiman helped him build tension in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, and how they contribute to the construction of a multilayered narrative that, besides being impacting, stands out among his other novels. To do so I will perform a close reading of the work while relying mainly on the studies on narratology as proposed by Genette (1980) and Herman and Vervaeck (2005), Piglia's (2004) theses on the short story, and on Shen's (2005) researches on stylistics. By approaching the studies of these scholars to the way the novel was written and the author's comments on it, I hint on the possible interpretations of the narrative plot.

Keywords: Literary Theory. Narratology. Neil Gaiman. Stylistics.

INTRODUCTION

The Ocean at the End of the Lane was peculiarly conceived: what was first meant to be a short story, to the author's utter surprise ended up becoming a novel. Gaiman's first intention was, according to a speech he gave at the program *Talks at Google* in 2013, to write a short story for his wife that was in Melbourne on business. However, it somehow had to be different book since she was not a huge appreciator of fantasy books. In that sense the author had, on one hand, to tone down the fantastic elements that permeate most of his works, and, on the other hand, write something that had to be with things she liked. Gaiman opted, then, for two specific elements: feelings and himself, a combination that turned into a very personal narrative in which the narrator is a fictional version of the author and which contains autobiographical elements. During the writing process the author realized that the book was acquiring unexpected proportions and, by its end, that it had become, as the writer claims, "accidentally" a novel. Gaiman's first impressions about his unplanned novel was that it was not anything other than a weird and personal book, however, critical response to the work rendered the author, as he states, the best reviews of his life. Besides that, the novel was awarded several prizes such as the British National Book Awards (2013) and the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel (2014), and reached the first position in The New York Times Best Seller list in the year it was released.

The present work will not focus on the author's views on his novel or on the appraisal it received, though. This research intends to focus mainly on the analysis of the narratological and stylistic features that may have helped the work acquire the status it has. In this sense I will argue that the tension built throughout the narrative that renders its end an impacting effect is intrinsically connected to the writer's choices on what concerns style and narration. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* follows the narratological pattern proposed by Piglia (2004) in which short stories (Gaiman's novel was first meant to be a short story) always tell two stories: the first one is narrated on the foreground, while story two is secretly constructed. The art of the short story writer resides, Piglia states, in:

(...) Knowing how to encode Story Two in the interstices of Story One.
A visible story hides a secret tale, narrated in an elliptical and

fragmentary manner. The effect of surprise is produced when the end of the secret story appears on the surface. (...) Working with two stories means working with two different systems of causality. The same events enter simultaneously into two antagonistic narrative logics. The essential elements of the story have a dual function, and are employed in different ways in each of the two stories. The points where they intersect are the foundations of the story's construction. (PIGLIA, 2011, p. 63).

With the aid of the studies of Genette (1980), Shen (2005), Herman and Vervaeck (2005), Piglia (2004), and other scholars, I aim at demonstrating how Gaiman intertwines "Story One" and "Story Two" to create tension, and how their merging produces impact.

MEMORIES THAT STIR

Since I intend to analyze both the narratological and stylistic elements in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, I will rely mainly on the parallel stylistic approach to narratology proposed by Shen (2005b). As one of the objectives of this work is to demonstrate how Gaiman's choices concerning narrative and style complement one another in the process of building tension and impact in his novel, an approach that allows both these aspects to be investigated seems to be a relevant choice. This method, as Shen states, proves pertinent when the narratological structuring and stylistic choices in a literary work clearly interact as it may provide one with a broader view of an author's writing techniques.

Narratology and Stylistics are two different sciences with different aims: while the first, as Shen (2005a) proposes, is more concerned with *what* is told and *how* it is told, the second focuses on *what* one has to say and *how* one says it. Despite of this implicit boundary between these two sciences, there are also overlapping areas in them: modes of speech presentation and focalization; and it is exactly on these overlapping aspects that the focus of my analysis lies.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane is a novel about memories, childhood memories to be more specific. It is a book about recollections that come to us when we are least expecting and that stirs feelings of a long gone past, bringing with them images from the back of our minds that we thought were forgotten. It is also a book about fears, the power of imagination, and how the latter can help us overcome the first.

The opening chapter (a prologue) in Gaiman's novel begins with an unnamed middle-aged man returning to his childhood home to attend a funeral. However, while he is driving through his hometown, he is drawn to a farm at the end of the lane he used to live. There he sits by a duck pond and as he looks at it, a long forgotten memory springs to his mind and he starts remembering a series of events of his infancy. And there he remains, for hours, lost in memories of a past that he claims would be better left undisturbed.

From chapter I on, however, we have the story of a seven-year-old (also unnamed) boy who lives a friendless life in rural Sussex until the day he meets Lettie Hempstock, a young girl that lives in a farm at the end of his lane. From the day they met on, the boy's life that had been sad and slow, becomes one that is, on one hand full of dangers and things he cannot explain, but that on the other hand fills his days with adventures and a feeling of safety that had slowly vanished from his house.

The paragraphs above are summaries of the two stories in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. One of the stories is told in analepsis by a homodiegetic middle-aged narrator, the narrating I. It consists of the prologue and epilogue of the book, and of a series of short intrusions and comments through the fifteen chapters of the novel, such as the one that follows:

An admission about myself: as a very small boy, perhaps three or four years old, I could be a monster. "You were a little monster," several aunts told me, on different occasions, once I had safely reached adulthood and my dreadful infant deeds could be recalled with wry amusement. But I do not actually remember being a monster. I just remember wanting my own way. (GAIMAN, 2013, p.51).

The other story in Gaiman's novel, that comprises most of the book, is also presented to the reader by a homodiegetic narrator: the childhood self of the narrating I, the experiencing I. Therefore, throughout the book we have the events presented to us by either the focalization of the narrating I, or of the experiencing I. The merging and separation of their narratives, as well as the changes in focalization are marked by the stylistic choices of the author.

Both narrating I and experiencing I are close to the story they tell, however, it is the latter that is in more consonance to it, as it can be noticed in the following passages: "I [229] GARRAFA. Vol. 16, n. 46, Outubro-Dezembro 2018. "The impact of the ocean...", p. 225 - 239. ISSN 18092586

wondered if we had ever fallen in the water. Had I pushed her into the duck pond, that strange girl who lived in the farm at the very bottom of the lane? I remembered her being in the water. Perhaps she had pushed me in too” (GAIMAN, 2013, p.8). The passages of the narrating I are often pervaded by imprecision, but when the experiencing I is the focalizer, the narrative is smoother and richer in detail:

I gazed around, taking in the grass, a reddish-brown chicken pecking at the side of the driveway, some rusty farm machinery, the wooden trestle table beside the road and the six empty metal milk churns that sat upon it. I saw the Hempstocks’ red-brick farmhouse, crouched and comfortable like an animal at rest. I saw the spring flowers; the omnipresent white and yellow daisies, the golden dandelions and do-you-like-butter buttercups, and, late in the season, a lone bluebell in the shadows beneath the milk-churn table, still glistening with dew (GAIMAN, 2013, p. 36).

Since the narratives of the narrating and experiencing I at some moments diverge and at others converge, knowing how to identify the changes in focalization in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is of considerable importance. The convergences and divergences in the work collaborate to the construction of what Piglia (2011) classifies as Story Two, or "secret tale", that is intrinsically connected to the effect of surprise, that I refer to as impact.

THE IMPACT OF THE OCEAN

One of the techniques Gaiman uses to build the background story in *The Ocean at the End of The Lane* is the change in focalization. Further aspects who assist in the devising of Story Two and your impact are related to the amount and kind of information that is known about both narrating and experiencing I, and also to how this information is presented to the reader.

There is a significant difference between the quantity of information that is known about the narrating I and the experiencing I; most of the information that is given to the readers is related to the latter. However, regardless of such disparity there are some facts that are known about both narrators, and since I believe this point of convergence is one of the key aspects to the development of Story Two, I would like to call attention to it.

One of the most important facts that is known about the narrators is given right in the beginning of the narrative and it is related to how they feel towards their lives. The readers are given first the information about the narrating I in the prologue: "(...) I make art, sometimes I make true art, and *sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. Some of them. Not all.*" (GAIMAN, 2013, p.4, my emphasis). This passage makes at least two things evident: the narrating I is an artist (a writer if the somewhat autobiographical aspect of the novel is taken into consideration), and he feels there are blank spaces in his life that he tries to fill with his creative process. It could be argued that even though the narrating I experiences a feeling of emptiness, it does not necessarily mean that he felt the same as a child. However, in the first chapter of the book we learn the following about the experiencing I:

Nobody came to my seventh birthday party.(...) I was sad that nobody had come to my party, but happy that I had a Batman figure, and there was a birthday present waiting to be read, a boxed set of the Narnia books, which I took upstairs. *I lay on the bed and lost myself in the stories. I liked that. Books were safer than other people anyway.(...) I made friends slowly, when I made them.* (GAIMAN, 2013, pp. 9-8, my emphasis).

Some of the first things learned about the experiencing I is that he is probably friendless and he fills this aspect of his life with stories, fantasy stories to be more specific. Another important information that can be apprehended from the passage above is that this seven-year-old boy sees books as people. The writer's choice of words in this passage is extremely important: books are not simply things with which the boy can distract himself, they are real humans that offer him a feeling of safety which he does not experience with "other people".

Given the passages below, it is possible to reason that both narrating and experiencing I in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* spend considerable amounts of time involved in activities related to imagination, creation, and creativity. This notion is reinforced several times throughout the narrative, however, it is in the following passage from chapter II that this idea becomes more evident: "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.*"

(GAIMAN, 2013, p.13, my emphasis). This characteristic shared by the narrators is, as it will be seen, of great importance to a broader understanding of the outcome of the novel.

The readers' crescent expectations concerning the conclusion of the narrative has to do with the way the author makes us feel sympathy towards the main character. Kennedy (1991) explains: "The authors presumably care about these imaginary people and, in order for the story to grasp and sustain our interest, have to make us see these people in such a way that we, too, will care about them". (KENNEDY, 1991, p. 109). Gaiman built his narrative in a way that one starts caring about the experiencing I very early in the novel; chapter I opens with a touching scene: it is a boy's seventh birthday party, but nobody who had been invited is there. The table is set and there are jellies, trifles, and a beautiful cake on it. The candles on the cake are blown by the boy without even the "happy birthday" song being sang. The party games that the boy's mother had prepared are not played since no one is there to play them. If one's sympathy is not aroused with this scene, the experiencing I's comment on why he believes nobody had been present on his party is very likely to produce the effect: "I do not remember ever asking any of the other children in my class at school why they had not come to my party. I did not need to ask them. They were not my friends, after all. They were just the people I went to school with." (GAIMAN, 2013, p.10).

The readers' sympathy toward the main character being won, the author starts the process of building tension. One technique he uses in this process is *anticipation*: throughout the novel the writer raises expectations by providing the readers with fragmented portions of what is to come: "The opal miner was a tall man. He wore jeans and checked shirts every time I saw him, except the last. He had a thick chain of pale gold around his neck. That was gone the last time I saw him, too." (GAIMAN, 2013, p.11). In the subsequent chapter it is learned that the opal miner has committed suicide. This technique is frequently repeated all over the narrative, always with the same pattern: a fragmented portion of future events is presented only to be fully developed in the following pages; at the end of chapter III, before the experiencing I and his friend, Lettie Hempstock, leave the girl's house to fulfil a task, she assures her grandmother that they will be fine and come to no harm. The chapter ends with the boy saying that what she had said was not

actually what had happened. Another example of this technique being applied can be witnessed in chapter VII, that opens with the boy saying that "the following day had been bad". After stating that, the experiencing I starts to comment on and talk about a series of things that appear to be just a series of trivial matters, such as how cold the weather had become, how, on one hand, terrifying his father could be when he was angry, and, on the other hand, regardless of that, how he would never hit him. The chapter culminates with his father, in a fit of anger, drowning the boy, clothes on, in a bathtub filled with chilly water, and then ordering that he go to his bedroom and remain there the rest of the night.

The order events are presented in a narrative may result in either suspense, curiosity, surprise, or a combination of the three. When Gaiman anticipates what is to come in the chapters mentioned in the paragraph above, I believe he is aiming at producing mainly suspense and curiosity since his hints on what is to come may somehow attenuate the surprise factor. When the outcome is not anticipated, however, the surprise element seems to stand out, as it may be noticed in chapter I, when it is learned not only that the experiencing I has no friends, but also that he is given a very significant present:

That evening my father arrived home from work and he brought a cardboard box with him. In the cardboard box was a soft-haired black kitten of uncertain gender, whom I immediately named Fluffy, and which I loved utterly and wholeheartedly. Fluffy slept on my bed at night. I talked to it, sometimes, when my little sister was not around, half-expecting it to answer in a human tongue. It never did. I did not mind. The kitten was affectionate and interested and a good companion for someone whose seventh birthday party had consisted of a table with iced biscuits and a blancmange and cake and fifteen empty folding chairs. (...) I had books, and now I had my kitten. We would be like Dick Whittington and his cat, I knew, or, if Fluffy proved particularly intelligent, we would be the miller's son and Puss-in-Boots. The kitten slept on my pillow, and it even waited for me to come home from school, sitting on the driveway in front of my house, by the fence, until, a month later, it was run over by the taxi that brought the opal miner to stay at my house. (GAIMAN, 2013, p. 10).

The outcome of the situation above was already known by the experiencing I, however, the author chooses to disclose the death of the kitten right after describing in

detail its importance to its owner in order to produce a sudden shock in the readers and make them feel compassion towards for the narrator.

By making use of a series of narratological and stylistic techniques, Gaiman manages to direct our attention to information in the foreground story, while causing the events that constitute the background story to be easily overlooked. In Story One we have the account of how a young boy manages to fill the empty spaces in his life and how, as an adult, he still feels incomplete. It is the eventful story of a child that has its life changed after a man commits suicide inside the boy's family car, a peculiar and tragic happening in the life of a young lad. It is the tale of how this lonely boy meets a young girl that becomes his best friend and how they manage to confront and defeat a monster that came from another world and that had been trying to ruin families' lives. It is also the sad account of the high price that had to be paid to make things come back to normal. The foreground story is filled with fantastic elements that probably only a very imaginative mind would be able to conceive. The events in Story One constitute most part of the book, while the other events appear only in the foreground story interstices.

Prior to the suicide incident that works as the starting point of the fantastic events in the foreground story, it is learned that the boy's family is having financial problems and for this reason they start receiving lodgers in one of the house's bedroom. The boy's mother has no work at this point of the narrative and she stays at home taking care of the children. When she finds a job in chapter VI, however, she hires a housekeeper, Ursula Monkton, that accepts to look after the kids for room and board. This is how the experiencing I describes the recently arrived woman:

I just looked at her, all grown-up and blonde, in her gray and pink skirt, and I was scared. Her dress wasn't ragged. It was just the fashion of the thing, I suppose, the kind of dress that it was. But when I looked at her I imagined her dress flapping, in that windless kitchen, flapping like the mainsail of a ship, on a lonely ocean, under an orange sky. (GAIMAN, 2013. p. 54).

At first his fear and description of her may sound strange and groundless, but when it is compared to the creature Lettie Hempstock and him had faced in chapter IV, a connection can be made:

I thought I was looking at a building at first: that it was some kind of tent, as high as a country church, made of gray and pink canvas that flapped in the gusts of storm wind, in that orange sky: a lopsided canvas structure aged by weather and ripped by time. (...) Its face was ragged, and its eyes were deep holes in the fabric. There was nothing behind it, just a gray canvas mask, huger than I could have imagined, all ripped and torn, blowing in the gusts of storm wind. (GAIMAN, 2013, pp. 40-41).

The experiencing I believes the monster Lettie and him had supposedly destroyed had come back in the form of his new housekeeper to haunt and harm his family and him, consequently he refuses to interact with her and they have a tempestuous relationship.

The conflict between Ursula and the experiencing I raised by the boy's imagination in the foreground story tones down the real threat the housekeeper represents, one that the boy feels, but does not seem to completely understand. This threat that is knitted in the interstices of Story One is announced in the evening of Ursula's arrival: the family is having dinner together, appreciating the food prepared by the housekeeper, but the experiencing I refuses to eat, afraid the food cooked by her may harm him. While they are eating, talking, and laughing, the boy has the impression that his father is making special jokes for Ursula. Moreover, in the night of the same day, not being able to sleep he overhears the following conversation: "Ursula Monkton said, 'So, is your wife away every evening?' My father's voice: 'No. She's gone back this evening to organize tomorrow. But from tomorrow it will be weekly' (...)." (GAIMAN, 2013, p. 63). From that night on, the vision the boy has of his parents as a "unit" starts to crumble. In the following day the experiencing I witness a scene that aggravates the situation:

I was not sure what I was looking at. My father had Ursula Monkton pressed up against the side of the big fireplace in the far wall. He had his back to me. She did too, her hands pressed against the huge, high mantelpiece. He was hugging her from behind. Her midi skirt was hiked up around her waist.(...)I was no longer scared by what had happened in the bathroom; now I was scared by what it meant that my father was kissing the neck of Ursula Monkton, that his hands had lifted her midi skirt above her waist. 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. (GAIMAN, 2013, pp. 79-80).

After this incident the boy runs away from his house, headed to Lettie Hempstock's farm. Arriving there he tells Lettie, her mother, and her grandmother the story of how the monster they had supposedly destroyed had returned and was now threatening to destroy his family. The three Hempstocks, then, formulate a strategy to permanently banish Ursula to the world she had come from. The plan is executed the following day and is successful, however, in the middle of the process Lettie has to sacrifice herself to save her friend's life. When Lettie's mother takes the boy home, what is learned from the dialogue she has with the experiencing I's mother is, however, that Lettie is travelling to Australia and that the boy had spent the day at their house taking part in the girl's going-away party. A small part of the boy's mind, though, "remembered an alternate pattern of events and then lost it, as if I had woken from a comfortable sleep and looked around, pulled the bedclothes over me, and returned to my dream." (GAIMAN, 2013, p. 168). In that same day the boy learns from his mother that Ursula had to leave due to pressing family matters.

The last chapter of the book finishes with the narrating I taking over and revealing that years later, when his sister and he were already adults, she confided to him that she believed Ursula had not left due to family issues, but that their mother had fired her because their father was having an affair with her. The narrating I, then, confesses that it was possible. He also reveals that as a consequence of the events that took place during the period Ursula lived in their house, his father and he had not been in good terms for years, and that he is certain that he had been a disappointment to him.

It is only in the final pages of the book that the end of Story Two appears on the surface, helping the reader connect the dots of what had been being hinted on throughout the narrative. When the narrating I, that had been lost in memories since the prologue of the book, finally comes back from his waking dream in the epilogue of the work and finds himself still sitting by the duck pond, he wants to know what all that meant. The answers he gets make room for seeing Lettie and all the adventures they had together as a metaphor he needed to go through the hardships of his childhood, a metaphor that helped and still seems to help him fill the empty spaces in his life, so much so that, as it is learned in the epilogue, he revisits the place from time to time whenever he has to figure things out.

When he finally stands up to leave the place, he approaches the pond and says out loud: "Lettie, (...) thank you for saving my life." (GAIMAN, 2013. p. 176).

FINAL REMARKS

Writing stories, as most things in life, is intrinsically connected to making choices. Some of the choices in the art of creating written narratives are related to narratological issues, such as the role the narrator will assume, the kind(s) of focalization to use, and in what order the events in the narrative will be presented, while others concern stylistic features: what kind of register to use with each character, sentence length, punctuation, vocabulary choice, etc. Every set of decisions an author makes while writing tends to produce different effects in the readers. In this sense, the choices one makes will depend on the effect one wants to produce. Likewise, as Edgar Allan Poe (2006) states in *The Philosophy of Composition*, an author must make their decisions concerning the writing process always having in mind the intended effect.

When Gaiman claims that *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was accidentally written, it is likely that he is referring to the unexpected length of the narrative, since what he first wanted to be a short story ended up becoming a novel. I decided to call attention to this fact only after analyzing the writer's work in order to demonstrate that if there are any unintended aspects in the book, they have to do with genre and length. The craft with which the author devises his narrative leaves little room (if any) for accidents.

By carefully choosing among the varied narratological and stylistic patterns possible, Gaiman manages to maintain the readers' attention while evoking curiosity, nostalgia, compassion, pity, amazement, and a series of other feelings in them. The author's techniques build a sad foreground story with a much darker tale in its interstices that, due to the writer's witty craft, is only fully disclosed at the narrative end. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is an ocean of memories and feelings that, when stirred, its mighty waves come crashing with a powerful impact on the readers.

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