

“People Change as Much as Oceans”: Posthumanism in Neil Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

Neil Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is a text preoccupied with the mutability of borders and forms, and the fluidity of human ontology. As such, it is a particularly fitting subject for posthumanist analysis, as a text which uses the trope of water to interrogate issues of agency, subjectivity, and ontology.

In their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, Serpil Oppermann and Iovino Serenella makes the intriguing observation that the world is composed of “intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures” (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Evoking both the biological mysteries of evolution, and the familiar dynamics of fairytale magic, this ontological perspective is unsettling to traditional anthropocentric notions of stable subjectivity and fixed being. Nevertheless, this perspective is central to *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, in which a vast magical ocean is portrayed as the evolutionary amniotic fluid from which hybrid forces of human, non-human, magic, and memory emerge and mingle. However, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is not merely a fairytale; Gaiman’s novel itself is a hybrid of forms, with magic realism and horror deployed primarily through the disruption of ontological certainties.

The Ocean at the End of the Lane takes as its focal point the memories of the narrator from the time when he was 7 years old. Made uncertain by a narrative frame situated in memory and amnesia, his story is further destabilized by a magic realism which relies on the child’s ability to slip between reality and fantasy as modes for understanding experience. At the heart of these uncertainties is the titular ocean around which the story revolves. In *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman*, Zoe Jaques explains that “Watery locales are uncomfortable sites of human dominion; they hauntingly remember human mortality and are resistant to attempts at mastery” (Jaques 17). Using mythic and fairytale tropes, Gaiman uses water to destabilize anthropocentric notions of agency, subjectivity, and ontology from the child’s perspective, emphasized by the narrator’s increasing realization that the real monsters are inseparable from his family and himself.

References:

- Gaiman, Neil. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Harper Collins, 2013.
- Jaques, Zoe. *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. Routledge, 2015.
- Oppermann, Serpil, and Iovino Serenella. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.