The Ocean at the End of the Lane

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL GAIMAN

Gaiman was born in Portchester, England, the oldest of three children. When he was five, the family moved to Sussex, where they lived in the house that eventually inspired the setting of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. His parents moved to study Scientology, a religious affiliation that caused some issues for Gaiman—one headmaster forced seven-year-old Gaiman to withdraw from school due to his father's role as a public relations official for the local Scientologist center. Like the narrator, Gaiman was a prolific reader as a child, a habit that followed him into adulthood. He initially pursued a career in journalism, but he also published several short stories, a biography of the band Duran Duran, and a book of quotations as he wrote for magazines. He began writing for comic books in the mid-1980s and was hired as a writer for DC Comics in 1987. There, he wrote the *Sandman* series, which eventually became some of DC's best-selling titles and some of Gaiman's most famous work. Gaiman's novels, like the *Sandman* series, have received mountains of praise and a number of awards. In addition to writing novels and children's picture books, Gaiman has also written for and worked in film and television; he's appeared as himself in *The Simpsons* and has written episodes for *Doctor Who*. He has been married twice—as of 2020, he's married to the musician Amanda Palmer, whom *Ocean* is dedicated to—and has four children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gaiman has said that though the novel itself isn't autobiographical, the narrator is a reasonably accurate representation of Gaiman at age seven. Given his youth, the narrator doesn't mention anything that's going on in the wider world of the late 1960s, but he does mention the *SMASH!* comic book series and related superhero television shows, as well as the show *Mission: Impossible* (which inspired the 1996 film). In describing the transformation of the lane, Gaiman alludes to the urbanization of formerly rural areas and to the 20th century rise of "bedroom communities," or suburban communities where people live but don't work. In the novel's frame story, the adult narrator notes that the lane now sports many houses that all look the same, and that everyone who lives there works in an unnamed city nearby.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like the Hempstocks who appear in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, there are also Hempstock women in Neil Gaiman's other books *Stardust* and in *The Graveyard Book*. Among Gaiman's other works, the most similar to *Ocean* are *The Graveyard Book* and *Coraline*—all three feature young characters but tackle complex themes and thus appeal to adults as well. Other books that share this kind of broad appeal include Kate DiCamillo's works like *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* and *The Tale of Desperaux*, as well as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Within the novel itself, the narrator mentions C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, as well as Lewis Carroll's children's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It's possible to read Lettie, Ginnie, and Old Mrs. Hempstock as an iteration of the archetype of the maiden, the mother, and the crone, sometimes referred to as the "triple goddess." This archetype appears famously and contentiously in Robert Graves's 1948 book-length essay *The White Goddess*, in which he proposes the existence of a "white goddess of birth, love, and death." Despite the fact that a number of scholars, historians, and modern feminists take issue with Graves's beliefs and his scholarship methods, the book has nevertheless influenced authors like Margaret Atwood, who parodies the goddess in *Lady Oracle*. Another iteration of the trio also appears in Gaiman's *Sandman* comic series.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Ocean at the End of the Lane
- **When Written:** 2012
- **Where Written:** Florida and Texas
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fantasy; Magical Realism
- **Setting:** A rural lane and the surrounding farmland in Surrey, England
- **Climax:** Lettie sacrifices herself to the hunger birds to save the narrator.
- **Antagonist:** Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep; the Hunger Birds
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Portrait of the Author as a Young Man. The narrator of *Ocean* resembles seven-year-old Gaiman in a variety of ways. They share some of the same favorite novels (*Alice in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series), and adult Gaiman has even shared a photo of himself climbing a drainpipe—which he, like the narrator, climbed because his favorite book characters did so.

Keyboard Cats. The narrator's love of cats isn't surprising, given Gaiman's love of cats. On his blog, he's chronicled the antics of several of his feline friends—though at speaking events, he disparagingly suggests that his cats have done nothing for him but add commas in his writing where they don't belong.

PLOT SUMMARY

The adult narrator drives away from a funeral service and finds himself in front of the house where he grew up. The house that's currently standing is the new house; his parents built it when the narrator was a teenager, after they knocked down their rambling old house. The narrator drives down the lane and comes to the farm at the end. He remembers that his friend Lettie lived here until she went to Australia. He greets the elderly woman in the farmhouse—she must be Mrs. Hempstock, Lettie's mother, though she looks more like Lettie's grandmother, Old Mrs. Hempstock—and heads out to the pond. As the narrator sits by this pond, he remembers that Lettie used to call it her "**ocean**." Then, suddenly, the narrator remembers everything.

When the narrator is six years old, his parents fall on hard times; to make money, they rent out the narrator's **bedroom**. The narrator is sad because the room is special to him, but he moves into his little sister's bedroom. He and his sister fight about whether the door stays open at night (the narrator is terrified of the dark). Not long after, the narrator celebrates his seventh birthday—but no one comes to his party. After this, the narrator immerses himself in the books he receives and is thrilled when his father brings home a black **kitten**. He names the kitten Fluffy and they become best friends—until the opal miner, a new tenant, arrives. His taxi runs Fluffy over, and to replace the kitten, the opal miner gives the narrator a mean tomcat named Monster.

On the first day of the spring holidays, the narrator goes downstairs, excited for the *SMASH!* comic his father brought home. But when the narrator goes to get it from the car, he finds that the car is gone. The narrator's father receives a call from the police: the stolen car was found at the end of the lane. The narrator's father puts peanut butter on disappointingly burnt **toast** for the narrator, and they head down the lane with a police officer. When they find the car, they discover that the opal miner committed suicide inside it. A girl named Lettie appears and offers to take the narrator so he'll be out of the way of the police. At the farmhouse, Lettie gives the narrator a bowl of porridge. She and Mrs. Hempstock seem to know all about the opal miner's death. Lettie then takes the narrator out to the duck pond, which she calls the ocean—according to Lettie, she and her family traveled across it when she was a baby. There's a dead fish on the water's surface, and Lettie cuts the fish open and extracts a sixpence from it. Later, when the narrator asks, his father insists that oceans can't be the size of a pond.

The next day, the narrator receives a letter in the mail informing him that he won 25 pounds through the Premium Bonds, and Mr. Wollery, the gardener, discovers a bottle of old coins. The narrator wakes the next morning from a nightmare and painfully coughs up a silver shilling, but he knows an adult won't believe this happened to him. Outside, the narrator sees Lettie at the bottom of the drive. She says that someone—or something—is trying to give people money, and that this has to do with the opal miner's death. Lettie tells the narrator about his neighbors' money troubles and makes him pancakes at the farmhouse. Old Mrs. Hempstock inspects the narrator's shilling, insists it's brand-new, and allows the narrator to help her arrange daffodils. She and Mrs. Hempstock send Lettie and the narrator off to find "her."

Lettie fashions herself a wand in the shape of a Y, and she and the narrator wander through the farmland. The narrator does as Lettie says and holds tight to her hand. He's afraid and doesn't believe they're still on the farm—the sky is orange. They finally find "her:" a huge, flapping creature that looks like a rotting tent. The creature refuses to give Lettie her name and hurls a ball of cloth at the children. The narrator lets go of Lettie to catch the ball, and as he does, he feels a sharp pain in his foot. Lettie grabs the narrator's hand and binds the creature "as a nameless thing." As Lettie and the narrator head back, they reach a field of odd, snakelike plants. Lettie tells the narrator to pull one up: it's a black kitten with a white spot on her ear. The kitten scampers away.

That night, the narrator inspects a hole in his foot that seems to have something inside it. He uses tweezers and hot water to extract a long gray and pink worm. It looks infected, and it breaks with a tiny bit still inside the narrator. He washes the worm down the drain. The next morning, the narrator's mother informs him that she just got a job, so they're getting a new nanny named Ursula. When the narrator comes to the kitchen for lunch, he finds his mother and sister with Ursula, a pretty blond woman wearing gray and pink. She's terrifying to the narrator, but his sister and mother think she's fantastic. The narrator is sure that Ursula's arrival is his fault. Later, when the narrator's parents are gone, Ursula informs the narrator that he can't leave the property without her. She thwarts his attempt to sneak away and says that no one will believe anything he says. He refuses to eat anything Ursula makes and notices at dinner that his father seems to make jokes just for Ursula. That night, when the narrator's mother is in town for a charity meeting, Ursula flirts with his father.

The next morning, the narrator's parents leave before the narrator wakes up. His father gets home early and shows Ursula around the gardens. The narrator is afraid to approach—he fears his father will be upset with him—and sees his father put a hand on Ursula's bottom. The narrator's mother

is away for dinner and again, the narrator refuses to eat Ursula's cooking. His father gets angry, so the narrator tries to lock himself in the bathroom—but his father knocks the door down, draws a cold bath, and holds the narrator underwater. After this ordeal, Ursula locks the narrator in his bedroom. Knowing that Ursula won't expect him to try to escape now, the narrator slips out the window and down the drainpipe. As he passes the drawing room, he witnesses his father and Ursula having sex, though he doesn't understand what he's seeing. He *does* understand that this means his father isn't trustworthy. The narrator runs down the lane barefoot and cuts through fields until an electric fence shocks him. Ursula appears, floating with lightning in the stormy sky, and tells the narrator that she'll make his father drown him every night—and then she'll put the narrator in the attic until she's ready to kill him. The narrator falls. Lettie appears, fearlessly tells Ursula to leave, and takes the narrator's hand. Lettie offers to send Ursula back home, but Ursula refuses. She dissolves in golden light, and Lettie takes the narrator to the farmhouse.

At the house, Mrs. Hempstock and Old Mrs. Hempstock draw the narrator a bath and give him supper. Old Mrs. Hempstock knows that the narrator's parents are coming to fetch him. To keep the narrator safe and out of Ursula's hands, they decide to use "snip and cut." Old Mrs. Hempstock cuts an irregular shape out of the narrator's dressing gown, and when she finishes sewing it back in, just as the narrator's parents enter the kitchen, the narrator's father forgets the bathtub incident. The narrator's parents agree that the narrator can stay the night and leave. Suddenly, the narrator's foot feels like it's on fire. Old Mrs. Hempstock inspects the narrator's foot and declares that the hole is Ursula's way home. She extracts the tunnel and puts it in a jam jar, though the narrator still feels like there's a chip of ice in his heart. Lettie shows the narrator to bed, and the kitten he found earlier sleeps with him.

Over breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Hempstock says that she can't hate Ursula—Ursula is just doing what her kind does. Lettie arrives with a shopping bag of broken toys and then leads the narrator to the ocean. There, Lettie asks the narrator what he thinks Ursula is afraid of and tells him a secret: adults all look like children on the inside. She says that she knows what Ursula is afraid of, and that she's afraid of them too. They head for the narrator's house, where Lettie drops broken toys around the property line. She drops a toy on each stair as they head up to the narrator's old bedroom. Ursula refuses to cooperate. She runs away from Lettie but can't leave the property; the toys keep her from doing so. Ursula begins to cry when she realizes that Lettie called "the cleaners." She insists she's ready to go home, pulls her tunnel out of the jam jar, and tries to go through—but when she realizes the end is still inside the narrator, she turns into her canvas self and lifts the narrator high above the ground. The cleaners—huge vulture-like creatures called the hunger birds—arrive and begin to eat Ursula and her tunnel. Then, they turn to the narrator and insist they must also eat his heart. Lettie leads the narrator to a protective circle called a fairy ring, instructs him to stay inside no matter what, and leaves.

The hunger birds gather around the ring. The opal miner, the narrator's sister, his father, Ursula, and Lettie all appear in turn. They tell him that he's alone and that no one loves him. The narrator feels as though he'd wait forever for Lettie; she's his friend, and he trusts her. Lettie arrives with a heavy bucket containing some of the "ocean" water and helps the narrator step into the bucket. The narrator finds himself deep underwater, where he suddenly knows everything about the world. In this place, Lettie looks like silk and candles—but the narrator realizes that he can't know what he himself looks like. Lettie pulls him out of the water, and the narrator finds himself in the pond, aware that he doesn't know everything anymore. Lettie informs him that if one wants to live in this world, one must give up on knowing everything.

As the narrator eats, Mrs. Hempstock and Lettie discuss how to deal with the hunger birds. Old Mrs. Hempstock is napping—and she might nap for the next century. The narrator is scared he's going to die, but Mrs. Hempstock assures him he'll be fine. He takes Lettie's hand and promises himself he won't let go. They walk to the edge of the property, and the hunger birds huddle on the other side of the line. They ask for the narrator, and when the Hempstocks won't give him up, they begin to eat everything in the outside world. When they eat something, only gray static remains. Terrified but certain he can't let the birds destroy the world, the narrator races to the edge of the property. Though he can almost remember the feeling of the birds tearing out his heart, Lettie throws herself on top of the narrator and screams. Old Mrs. Hempstock, suddenly young and imposing, scolds the birds as Mrs. Hempstock gathers the narrator and Lettie in her arms. When the birds are gone, Mrs. Hempstock carries Lettie's body to the pond. As the pond transforms into a true ocean, Old Mrs. Hempstock assures the narrator that Lettie is just hurt and needs to heal. A tsunami gathers and crashes down over Lettie's body. Then, Mrs. Hempstock takes the narrator home, and the narrator promptly forgets everything that just happened— thinks he had a good time at Lettie's going-away party before she moved to Australia. A month later, a black kitten with a white ear shows up. The narrator names her Ocean.

Back in the present, Old Mrs. Hempstock sits down beside the narrator. She says that what he remembers is probably true, but no two people remember the same thing—and she also says that the narrator comes here whenever life seems hard. Mrs. Hempstock appears and says that the narrator comes because Lettie, still in the ocean, wants to keep up with the narrator's life and see if her sacrifice was worth it—she couldn't allow the hunger birds to eat the narrator's heart. The narrator is also

surprised to see that Ocean is here on the farm, still alive. The narrator bids Old Mrs. Hempstock goodbye, asks her to say hi to Lettie the next time she writes from Australia, and drives away.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator is seven at the time the main plot takes place; he tells the story of what happened from the perspective of an adult in his forties or fifties. As a child, the narrator is a naturally fearful, bookish kid who has no friends. His only companion is a **kitten** that he names Fluffy. Though he insists he's not happy, per se, he does have moments when he's content—until his mother and father fall on hard times and force him to give up his **bedroom**, and Fluffy dies when an opal miner's taxi runs over her. Despite describing himself as afraid, the narrator is surprisingly nonchalant when supernatural things begin to happen to him. Since he knows that adults don't believe children when they tell stories like this, he turns to Lettie, an 11-year-old girl who lives at the end of the lane, for help. Though Lettie and her mother and grandmother, Ginnie and Old Mrs. Hempstock, are also supernatural creatures, the narrator trusts them completely. Lettie helps him understand that while things like monsters and adults might seem scary, adults are actually just children in adults' bodies—and monsters only behave monstrously because they're afraid. The narrator is mostly afraid of adults because they have outsize power over children like him, so it's extra scary when a monster that he and Lettie encounter in the supernatural world manages to enter the mortal world and takes the form of Ursula, the narrator's new nanny. As Ursula, the monster is able to make the narrator feel alone and even more afraid that adults won't believe him or care for him. However, by focusing on his friendship with Lettie, the narrator is able to escape Ursula, and later, to help Lettie do away with Ursula. Though the narrator describes himself as a normal, selfish child, he's horrified when the supernatural creatures known as hunger birds attempt to destroy his world—and so he tries to sacrifice himself to the birds. However, in the end, Lettie ends up sacrificing herself for the narrator. Though the narrator doesn't remember any of these strange experiences after the fact—Old Mrs. Hempstock's magic makes sure of this—he does return to the Hempstock farm every so often, seemingly to check up on Lettie as she heals in the pond, or "**ocean**," behind the Hempstocks' house.

Lettie Hempstock – Lettie is an 11-year-old girl who lives down the lane from the narrator. She's the narrator's first friend, Ginnie's daughter, and Old Mrs. Hempstock's granddaughter. Since she's four years older than the narrator, she looks extremely mature (and therefore trustworthy and knowledgeable), but she's also not as intimidating as an adult. Lettie's demeanor is generally quiet, thoughtful, and caring. Though she tells the narrator some things about what's going on as supernatural occurrences begin happening to him, she's more likely to smile or respond with a cryptic "yes" than she is to actually give him a straight answer. He also finds Lettie confusing because she refers to the pond behind the barns as her "**ocean**," which makes no sense to the narrator. This all leads the narrator to believe that Lettie may be 11, but she's likely been 11 for a very long time—it seems that Lettie and her mother and grandmother are supernatural beings themselves. Over the course of her friendship with the narrator, Lettie dispenses lots of advice that the narrator carries with him after their adventure is over. She suggests to him that monsters like Ursula are only monsters because they're afraid—which helps the narrator see that monsters aren't all that scary. She also tells him that all adults are actually children on the inside, and that it's important to not know everything if one wants to truly experience life. Knowing everything, she suggests, is no fun. Lettie is the only Hempstock who leaves the property, which means that she takes the lead on banishing Ursula. Regardless of the fact that she's been 11 for a long time, Lettie is still a child—and so her final (and successful) method of doing away with Ursula isn't well thought out and causes more problems than it solves. Because of her friendship with the narrator, Lettie chooses to sacrifice herself to the hunger birds so that the narrator can go on and live a long life. Her mother, Ginnie, gives Lettie to the ocean so that she can heal. This is where Lettie has remained for decades, and the novel implies that from the ocean, Lettie calls the narrator back to her every so often so she can see how he's doing—and see whether her sacrifice was worthwhile.

Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep – Ursula is a supernatural creature and the novel's antagonist. Though Old Mrs. Hempstock never explains exactly what Ursula is, she refers to creatures like Ursula as "fleas"—that is, creatures who caught rides on the Hempstocks' farmland when the Hempstocks brought their farm from the "old country" (a supernatural place that they never describe). On the Hempstocks' farm, Ursula takes the form of a giant, tent-like piece of rotting canvas; she later takes the form of a gray and pink worm that looks infected so she can bore into the narrator's foot and travel to the mortal world. Finally, she turns herself into a blond, beautiful human woman Ursula Monkton, who wears gray and pink clothes and becomes the nanny for the narrator's family. Ursula gives people money because she believes that money can buy happiness—she hopes to make the narrator's father see that he can fix all his problems by selling the family's property and allowing developers to build a dozen homes on it. As the narrator and the Hempstocks attempt to stop Ursula from "helping" people, Ursula becomes far more sinister and seeks to control the world. She does this by first taking control of the narrator's parents. Ursula specifically targets the narrator's father, who begins an affair with her. Because the narrator knows that Ursula is bad, Ursula makes

the narrator's life a living hell. Since she traveled to the mortal world inside of him—and since a piece of her tunnel remains stuck in the narrator—Ursula knows what he's thinking and can therefore prey on his fears effectively. She thus makes the narrator's father try to drown the narrator in the bathtub and threatens to kill the narrator herself when she gets bored. Lettie is finally able to do away with Ursula when she learns the monster's real name—Skarthatch of the Keep—and what Ursula is afraid of: the hunger birds. Ursula reappears briefly after the hunger birds eat her to torment the narrator, making him feel friendless and alone.

Old Mrs. Hempstock – Old Mrs. Hempstock is Lettie's grandmother and Ginnie's mother. She's an ancient, thin woman with long gray hair. According to Lettie, Old Mrs. Hempstock knows everything and is the only person who does. The narrator, attempting to flatter Old Mrs. Hempstock, asks her for her age several times. She refuses to give it, instead simply saying that she's been around so long that she remembers when the moon was made. Though this suggests that she's something otherworldly, the narrator doesn't entirely grasp this. Old Mrs. Hempstock is wise, kind, and grandmotherly. She makes the narrator feel safe and at home when he's at the farmhouse, and she's instrumental in helping Lettie figure out how to deal with the monster Ursula and the problems Ursula causes. Her age and experience mean that she has extensive knowledge of how to deal with "fleas" like Ursula and how to do things like manipulate time or perform the "snip and cut" procedure, which magically alters people's memories. She can also perform other types of magic, as when she enchants clothes that are clearly from at least a century ago so that when other people see them, they see clothes that are normal for their own time period. When the hunger birds attempt to kill the narrator and harm Lettie, Old Mrs. Hempstock shows her true form. Rather than speaking in an English country accent, Old Mrs. Hempstock speaks like an empress and stands up straight, suggesting that she only takes the form of an old woman to exist in the mortal world. When the narrator visits the Hempstock farm decades later, as an adult, it's also implied that Lettie, Ginnie, and Old Mrs. Hempstock might not even be three separate people—they may just be one being (whose primary form is Old Mrs. Hempstock) who may take three separate forms so that she can better dispense advice and guidance.

Mrs. Ginnie Hempstock – Ginnie is Lettie's mother and Old Mrs. Hempstock's daughter. She's is a stout woman with red cheeks and a demeanor that makes the narrator think she must be someone's mother. She's brisk and matter-of-fact, and she isn't surprised by much. She also makes the narrator feel loved and cared for, most often through her **cooking**. She and Old Mrs. Hempstock make delicious, rich meals that help the narrator feel secure and as though he can trust these women. Of the three Hempstocks, the narrator gets to know Ginnie the least. While Ginnie is often around, she generally lets her mother's advice take center stage and performs necessary tasks in the background. She does, however, encourage the narrator to understand that creatures like the monster Ursula shouldn't be hated—they're doing what they're supposed to do, according to their nature, and thus it's misguided to fault them for their actions. She later takes the lead when Lettie gets in too deep with the hunger birds and speaks to them in a way that reads as motherly and protective—but ultimately, Ginnie has to accept that she's not strong enough on her own to boss around creatures like the hunger birds. Unlike Old Mrs. Hempstock, Ginnie cannot forgive the narrator for what happens to Lettie. This is a reflection of her maternal loyalty to Lettie; it's impossible for her to be entirely at ease with the person who injured her child to the point that she may as well be dead. When the narrator returns as an adult, he's shocked to see that Ginnie is younger than he is and smaller than he remembers. She encourages him to live his life to make Lettie's sacrifice worthwhile. It's also possible that Ginnie might not actually be a real person; she could simply be another form that Old Mrs. Hempstock takes to dispense advice as a mother, rather than as an old woman.

The Narrator's Father – The narrator and his younger sister's father is a rather mysterious figure in the novel, as the narrator knows little about who his father really is or what he does. He works in town about an hour away and owns buildings, but the narrator is never sure exactly what this even means. The narrator finds his father somewhat trying, as he insists on purchasing heavy brown bread instead of white bread and also insists that burnt **toast** is great—when his son hates brown bread and burnt toast. He also wanted a son who was interested in sports, like he was as a kid, and so he doesn't quite know what to do with his son whose greatest love is books. The narrator mostly finds his father uninteresting and unknowable, but he also hates and fears his father when he gets angry. His father yells, screams, and makes the narrator cry, all while pointing out that he doesn't believe in physical violence as though to make the narrator thankful that he *just* yells. This all turns upside down when the monster Ursula arrives, disguised as the family's new nanny. She soon seduces the narrator's father into an affair that makes the narrator's father even more dangerous and untrustworthy. He tries to drown the narrator in the bathtub on Ursula's command and won't tolerate any of the narrator's seemingly disrespectful behavior toward Ursula. Things seemingly return to normal once Ursula disappears, though the narrator and his father don't become friends until the narrator is an adult. At this point, the narrator's father also admits that he doesn't actually like burnt toast—he just didn't want to waste any bread. This simple admission completely shakes the narrator's understanding of his childhood, highlighting the novel's argument that memory is highly subjective and fragile.

The Hunger Birds – The hunger birds are huge, predatory, bird-like creatures that act as the vultures of the supernatural universe that the Hempstocks inhabit. They mostly eat "fleas," or monsters, but they can and will eat anything—including the mortal world itself. Lettie calls the birds to do away with Ursula, but they decide they must also eat the narrator. They attempt to manipulate the narrator into believing he's alone, friendless, and unloved. Though the narrator is terrified of the hunger birds, in part because of how the birds look, in adulthood he can no longer remember what exactly they look like. They sometimes take the form of shadows, while other times they look like prehistoric birds. He also cannot tell how many of them there are; there might be a dozen and there might be several hundred. The hunger birds destroy the world with impunity until Old Mrs. Hempstock scolds them—she is likely one of the few things in the entirety of the universe that scares them.

The Opal Miner – The opal miner is a South African man who made his fortune mining opals in Australia. He comes to England and rents the narrator's **bedroom**; his reason for coming to England is never entirely clear. The narrator finds the opal miner callous—though the man does gift the narrator and his sister raw opals—as the opal miner's taxi accidentally hits and kills the narrator's **kitten**, Fluffy. He immediately replaces Fluffy with a cantankerous tomcat named Monster, who is in no way a replacement for the narrator's affectionate kitten. Things go from bad to worse when the opal miner steals the family's car and commits suicide in it after gambling away all his and his friends' money. It's implied that the opal miner is connected to the supernatural parallel universe in the novel, as his suicide somehow creates the opportunity for the monster Ursula to enter the mortal world.

The Narrator's Mother – The narrator and his younger sister's mother is a rather vague character in the book—given the narrator's lack of interest in adults as a whole, he describes his mother only in broad strokes. Like her husband, the narrator's father, the narrator's mother seems to have cared deeply for her children before the family fell on hard times—but given the family's economic situation, she's become disaffected and distant. She gets a job in an optometrist's office not long after the novel begins, which takes her away from the house and necessitates Ursula Monkton's employment as the family's housekeeper. The narrator's mother is also involved in charity work in the evenings. She loves Ursula and seems to have no idea that Ursula and the narrator's father are sexually involved, though as an adult, the narrator's sister shares with the narrator that Ursula left because of the affair.

The Narrator's Sister – The narrator's five-year-old sister is mostly unaware of the supernatural events going on around her, and she doesn't identify anything that happens as nefarious. She and the narrator fight constantly, especially once the narrator moves into her bedroom after it's rented out to the opal miner. The narrator's sister also adores Ursula and is thus clearly under Ursula's spell. The narrator's sister doesn't interest him much; her attendance at his disastrous seventh birthday party "doesn't count," and there appears to be little or no sibling camaraderie between them. Part of this has to do with the fact that as the narrator sees it, his sister leads a charmed life and never has anything bad happen to her.

Ocean – Ocean is the black **kitten** with a white ear that the narrator plucks from the ground in Lettie's bizarre parallel universe. She's named after Lettie's "**ocean**," the mysterious pond behind the Hempstocks' house. Having lost his beloved kitten, Fluffy, earlier in the story, the narrator adores Ocean and keeps her as a pet for years—though as an adult, he doesn't remember what became of her or how she died. Decades later, when the middle-aged narrator goes to visit the Hempstocks' farm, he finds that Ocean—like the elderly Old Mrs. Hempstock—is inexplicably still alive.

Monster – Monster is the mean orange **tomcat** that the opal miner gives the narrator to replace his kitten, Fluffy, after she's hit and killed by the opal miner's taxi. Given that Fluffy was a symbol of the narrator's childhood innocence, her replacement with the testy, unpredictable Monster represents the narrator's shift into the unfamiliar and often cruel world of adults.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Wollery – Mr. Wollery is the elderly man who maintains the gardens surrounding the narrator's family's house.

Fluffy – Fluffy is the narrator's beloved **kitten** who's killed when the opal miner's taxi runs her over. Fluffy's represents the narrator's innocence as a seven-year-old, so her death is a kind of symbolic death to his childhood.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CHILDHOOD VS. ADULTHOOD

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the middle-aged narrator returns to a spot that was significant to him as a child: a farmhouse down the lane from his childhood home where his friend Lettie Hempstock lived. While he's there, he's suddenly overwhelmed by a whole slew of fantastical memories from a few days when he was seven. During this time, a supernatural being entered the mortal world and disguised itself as Ursula Monkton, a nanny for the

narrator's family who turned the narrator's life into a nightmare. As the adult narrator tells his story, he pays close attention to the ways in which being a child at the time influenced how he experienced and interpreted these events. As a child, he constantly felt powerless, especially in the face of the authoritative—and sometimes outright tyrannical—adults in his life. However, as the novel unfolds, the narrator comes to see that seemingly all-powerful adults can feel helpless, lost, and scared, just like children.

The narrator makes it clear how powerless he is because of his youth in his early descriptions of his family, when his parents fell on hard times. Rather than making the whole family pitch in (for instance, by moving everyone to a home that cost less to maintain), the narrator's parents instead decide to rent out his **bedroom**. The narrator's bedroom is, importantly, something that he loves and that his parents designed just for him—in better times, they put in a miniature sink that is "just [his] size"—so as the narrator sees it, he's the one who has to take the fall for his parents' misfortune by moving into his little sister's room. While this may seem like a relatively harmless indignity and something that isn't entirely unreasonable to ask of a child, it's extremely unsettling for the narrator. He makes it clear, then, that even small things like this can make a child feel unmoored, unsafe, and alone—and that there's no real way for a child to push back when an adult authority figure makes a decision like this.

The narrator's sense of powerless next to adults increases not long after, when a supernatural creature gets a foothold in the mortal world and disguises herself as the human woman Ursula Monkton, the family's new nanny. The kind of nanny that the narrator's family attempts to employ is, by design, an authority figure who is given broad power over the narrator and his sister, but as a supernatural being, Ursula takes this many steps further. In her new form, Ursula begins a reign of terror. As she draws the narrator's parents into her web and becomes something of a cruel dictator, the narrator observes that "Ursula Monkton was an adult. It did not matter, at that moment, that she was every monster, every witch, every nightmare made flesh. She was also an adult, and when adults fight children, adults always win." In other words, Ursula's supernatural nature scares the narrator less than the fact that she's an adult, a characteristic which imbues her with outsize power over children like the narrator. It's also worth noting that, on the whole, the narrator is far more terrified of the suddenly untrustworthy adults in his life than he is of any of the supernatural occurrences he observes. To him, it's nothing to mysteriously cough up a sixpence or pull a monstrous, nefarious worm (Ursula in another form) out of the bottom of his foot. What's truly frightening is his father's sudden, unpredictable anger and the narrator's knowledge that his mother will always back up her husband, even if his behavior is cruel and out of line—as when the narrator's father tries to drown him in the bathtub.

However, even though Ursula makes the adults in the narrator's life seem scarier and more controlling than usual, other moments in the novel serve as reminders that adults aren't that different than children. Most obvious is Lettie's straightforward assertion that adults are just children in bigger, more powerful bodies, and that adults experience all the same fears and concerns that children do. Though this doesn't make much of an impression on the narrator, there are many instances in the novel when this seems to be true. For instance, when Ursula confines him to his room, the narrator spends the day reading his mother's old mystery books from when she was a child. In holding onto these books, it seems that the narrator's mother is also holding on to a little piece of her childhood, even though she's now an adult with children of her own. Similarly, it's confusing for the narrator when Ursula cries as she finally meets her demise at the beaks of the hunger birds (great dinosaur-like birds that act as the universe's vultures). The narrator, for his part, cries at several points throughout the novel, and crying in general is something he associates with children. Seeing an adult cry, even if Ursula is a monster, drives home for the reader (if not for the narrator) that adults can experience fear and react to it in the exact same ways that children do.

Through Lettie's insistence that adults and children aren't so different, it's possible to see that what she really advocates for is compassion. This idea may be beyond the seven-year-old narrator—adults like his parents, he suggests, remained unknowable until he was well into his twenties. But the novel nevertheless proposes that it's essential to treat everyone, adults and children alike, with compassion and with the understanding that although adults are have authority, they may still feel powerless, afraid, and lost just like children do.

MEMORY, PERCEPTION, AND REALITY

The Ocean at the End of the Lane consists of the unnamed adult narrator's recollection of events that happened over a few days of his child. As such, the book is naturally interested in what people remember and why. Over the course of these few days, the narrator experiences a number of supernatural events with his friend Lettie Hempstock—but when his adventure comes to an end, he mysteriously forgets everything that happened. However, when he returns as an adult to the Hempstocks' farm, he just as mysteriously remembers what happened but forgets again upon leaving the farm. As the adult narrator explores his childhood memories, the novel examines the role that perception plays in what a person deems important or real, as well as how they go about remembering that event. Ultimately, the story makes the case that reality and memory are both incredibly subjective because they both hinge on a person's individual way of seeing the world.

The narrator's movements and thought processes through the prologue make it clear that memory is far more complicated than it seems, as his long-forgotten childhood memories bubble up seemingly out of nowhere. In the frame story, the narrator finds himself driving to the Hempstock farm without knowing why or where the farm is. He finds the farm as though by instinct, suggesting that memory is primal and even beyond understanding. As he gets to the end of the lane, speaks to Old Mrs. Hempstock, and then heads for the duck pond behind the barns (the "**ocean**" from the story's title), the know-how to perform each action seems to suddenly burst forth from him. Then, it's only on the bank of the ocean that the narrator is able to remember what happened decades ago, when he was seven. This speaks to the way in which seemingly forgotten memories can be remembered with the help of something external, such as returning to a place that was meaningful in one's childhood.

In the main story, the young narrator is forced to confront the ways in which his unique perspective as a child influences how he understands what happens to him and those around him. As a child, the narrator is used to adults not taking him seriously. He understands that he can't trust adults to believe anything he has to say, real or otherwise, so it doesn't cross his mind to ask his parents for help when he coughs up the mysterious sixpence. The narrator also recognizes that he's the only one in his family who sees things for the way they are: sinister and terrifying. But although he can sense as much, he still can't fully understand what he sees. This is true both in terms of the supernatural events (which the Hempstock women understand but only cursorily explain to the narrator) and the more adult events that unfold around him. For example, the narrator witnesses his father having sex with the monster disguised as a human woman, Ursula, one night while his mother is out. While he doesn't recognize what he's seeing as sex, nor does he give any indication he even knows what sex is at this age, he still understands the implication of seeing them together: his father is now on Ursula's side and is no longer remotely trustworthy. In this way, the novel makes the case that even though one's understanding of something may be simplistic, this doesn't mean that their read of the situation is wrong. Furthermore, the narrator also shows that one's understanding can change as time goes on. As an adult, the narrator understands what he saw as a child, and this leap in understanding changes the memory for him.

All of this together shows that memory is unreliable and subject to change—but the novel takes this claim a step further when it introduces the magical concept of "snip and cut," or "snipping" an event out of time and replacing it with a different version of events. Even though "snip and cut" is a supernatural phenomenon in the novel, it speaks to the way that memories can change or even disappear altogether over time. Old Mrs. Hempstock first uses this method to protect the narrator from his father on the night that the narrator's father attempts to drown the narrator in the bathtub. She knows that cutting away the bathtub incident and the fight preceding it will mean that the narrator's father won't be upset with his son—and will therefore allow the narrator to stay the night with the Hempstocks, where he'll be safe from Ursula. However, though Old Mrs. Hempstock gives the narrator the choice to forget, he chooses to remember the bathtub incident as he experienced it—another example of how people can remember the same event in entirely different ways.

In many ways, it's impossible to tell what actually happened to the narrator, given the supernatural elements of the story and the fact that the adult narrator is telling the reader about an event that happened to him decades ago—and he's describing events that even he didn't remember until he stepped onto the Hempstock farm. However, the story suggests that the truth of what did or didn't happen is ultimately less important than what the narrator gets out of sharing his story and remembering. Lettie ultimately sacrificed herself to the hunger birds (the vultures of the story's supernatural universe) in order to save the narrator. Returning to the Hempstocks' farm thus gives the narrator a tangible connection to his past and a chance to check on Lettie's healing (Lettie can't die, per se; she's been healing in the "ocean" since her sacrifice). Memory may be fleeting and unreliable—after all, he immediately loses his memory of these visits and reverts to believing that Lettie is in Australia—but it's impossible, the novel suggests, to fully erase the memory of one's close, trusting relationship with another.

KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTITY

When, as a result of his friendship with a young girl named Lettie, the narrator discovers that there's a supernatural world alongside his mortal world on the Hempstock farmland, it's understandably unsettling for him. While 11-year-old Lettie and the other Hempstock women are something more or other than human and have an understanding of this supernatural world, the narrator is entirely mortal—and thus, he's experiencing these supernatural events and beings for the first time and lacks the vocabulary or understanding to fully describe what's happening to him. As he and Lettie navigate their quest to send the monster Ursula (who enters the narrator's world to wreak havoc) back from whence she came, the narrator gradually comes to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to learn about something—whether about oneself or about the wider world. Overwhelmingly, the novel suggests that acquiring knowledge helps a person describe and understand their lived experience in a more meaningful way—though it also suggests that it's impossible to know everything if one wants to be able to experience life to the fullest.

As a fearful child who spends much of his time reading, the seven-year-old narrator begins the story prioritizing the kind of knowledge one can get from books. This may, at first, suggest

that the narrator's imagination is expansive and spills over into his lived experience—he loves *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, and he says outright that he loves exciting children's books with adventure and magic. But the narrator nevertheless has a firm grasp on what he understands is the line between fiction and reality. Thus, when supernatural things begin to happen around the narrator, he has no way to describe or understand what's happening. Thus, the narrator seeks out Lettie Hempstock, her mother Ginnie, and her grandmother Old Mrs. Hempstock, who live on a farm at the end of the lane, to help him interpret and understand what's going on. Unlike the mortal narrator, the Hempstock women aren't entirely human. Though Lettie insists that she is, the Hempstocks are thousands of years old and clearly draw on some sort of magic that's not accessible to humans—which, importantly, allows them to understand what's going on in the narrator's world once the monster that calls itself Ursula infiltrates the mortal world and takes control of the narrator's family with the ultimate goal of taking over the world. As someone with a foot in this other world, Lettie is able to talk the narrator through what's going on and how they need to handle Ursula's antics. And to the young narrator, it seems as though Lettie knows almost everything—while Old Mrs. Hempstock, according to Lettie, actually *does* know everything.

Lettie's most meaningful lesson for the narrator is the importance of being able to identify, name, and subsequently respect other beings. This, she makes clear, is how one can begin to form a relationship with the wider world—and how one can find the power to control and banish a monster like Ursula. As a monster, Ursula thrives on scaring others and keeping them in the dark about what she's doing. Learning her name robs her of this power, as does Lettie's understanding of how monsters like Ursula work. While to the narrator—who's not versed in dealing with monsters—Ursula seems like an all-powerful adult who therefore cannot be made to go away, Lettie's experience allows her to see Ursula as a pompous, power-hungry "flea" who is just another monster to deal with despite putting up a fight. Knowing who and what Ursula is, in other words, deprives Ursula of her power in Lettie's eyes.

Despite the narrator's recognition that Lettie knows many things he doesn't, the one place he consistently struggles to trust her is in regards to the pond on the Hempstocks' farm, which Lettie refers to as her "**ocean**." To the narrator, this makes no sense—oceans, according to his father, aren't the size of ponds. His unwillingness to go along with Lettie's choice to call the pond an ocean reflects the narrator's attempt to hold onto the way he sees the world prior to meeting Lettie—a way that, to the confused and scared narrator, is comfortable and makes sense. However, when Lettie is forced to rescue the narrator from the dangerous supernatural hunger birds by putting him in a bucket of the ocean water, the brief period in which the narrator is in the ocean expands his understanding of what it means to know things at all. In the ocean, the narrator feels like he knows everything about the world around him. He knows how it works, he knows how it started, and he knows how it ends. However, he also recognizes that the one thing he cannot know, even in an ocean that represents knowledge itself, is who or what *he* is.

While the question of what identity even is hounds the narrator throughout the novel, his experience in the ocean forces him to understand that while attempting to figure out one's identity is a normal, noble cause, it's one that can never be complete. Indeed, once the narrator steps out of the ocean (and promptly forgets everything he just knew), Lettie explains that it's no fun to know everything—and for that matter, if a person wants to "muck about" in the mortal world, people *can't* know everything. Knowledge is changing all the time, as are people, and so it's foolish to think that one knows everything. With this, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* positions the quest for knowledge, both of the world and of oneself, as a process that's never over.

FEAR, BRAVERY, AND FRIENDSHIP

The adult narrator is open about the fact that as a child, he was scared of many things and, at the same time, had no friends. Adults and their power were scary, change was scary, and in many ways, the supernatural things he witnessed were scary, too. But through his budding friendship with Lettie Hempstock, the 11-year-old girl who lives at the end of the lane, the narrator discovers an important way to fight his fears: through friendship. Their relationship helps the narrator understand that it is possible for him to be brave, as friendship is a powerful force that can buoy someone in the face of their worst fears.

The novel, tellingly, opens with a description of the "bad birthday"—that is, the narrator's seventh birthday party, which not one of his classmates attends. Rather than play the party games or enjoy much of his cake, the narrator heads off on his own to read his new boxed set of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Through books like *Narnia* and the other adventure books he reads, the narrator is able to vicariously enjoy friendships and imagine being brave—but the thought of being brave himself is unthinkable until the narrator meets Lettie one Saturday morning. Lettie first approaches the narrator because scary things begin to happen: the opal miner, who was renting the narrator's bedroom, commits suicide, and the circumstances of his death somehow enable a nefarious supernatural creature to gain access to the narrator's world. But she exudes confidence, calmness, and bravery, and she thus sets an example for the narrator of what bravery in the real world looks like.

As Lettie and the narrator embark on their journey to remedy the damage done by the opal miner's suicide, Lettie shows the narrator how friendship can help him feel brave in his lived experience, not just in books. As they travel through the English countryside and dip in and out of a surreal, supernatural world

that exists alongside the neighbors' fields and farms, Lettie encourages the narrator to hold onto her hand—thus keeping him tethered to someone he trusts—and informs him calmly of how to proceed with their various tasks. Importantly, things go completely sideways when the narrator momentarily disobeys Lettie's instructions to hold tight to her hand. Letting go gives the monster the opportunity to bore into the narrator's foot and gain passage to the mortal world, suggesting that friendship isn't just a helpful tool as one faces their fears. Rather, friendship and physical markers of that—like holding someone's hand—suggest that by holding tight to the people one trusts, it's possible to protect one's world from dangerous or scary things.

Once in the narrator's world, the monster takes the form of a human woman named Ursula Monkton and installs herself as the new nanny for the narrator's family, thus preying on many of the narrator's fears—and as the nanny, Ursula is also able to forbid the narrator from seeking out Lettie. Over the course of the day that Ursula maintains her control over the narrator, she does her best to make him feel afraid and alone. She manipulates the narrator's father into trying to drown him in the bathtub, she takes grotesque forms and uses her supernatural abilities to frighten the narrator even more, and she tells him that his family doesn't love him and won't believe him. Ursula is well aware that by depriving someone of their friendships and relationships with family, a person becomes far easier to control and manipulate. Isolation and loneliness, the novel suggests, are dangerous states, while close friendships provide a person with a degree of protection from such manipulation attempts.

Indeed, once the narrator *does* manage to escape Ursula, he's able to maintain a brave face by thinking about his friendship with Lettie. Though Lettie is able to do away with Ursula by summoning the hunger birds (supernatural vultures that clean up the universe), the hunger birds then shift their sights to the narrator. When Lettie leaves the narrator in the safety of a fairy ring while she fetches help, the hunger birds, like Ursula, use the threat of friendlessness and of fear itself to try to convince the narrator to step out and allow himself to be eaten. They insist that the narrator is all alone and will live his life plagued by fear if he doesn't allow them to end it now—but because the narrator so fully trusts Lettie and the Hempstock women, and so fully believes in his friendship with Lettie, he resists the birds' attempts and stays put until Lettie returns to rescue him. Friendship, this suggests, can quite literally be life saving.

Ultimately, Lettie chooses to sacrifice herself to the hunger birds in order to save the narrator, something the novel suggests is the highest expression of bravery and friendship. In the aftermath of Lettie's sacrifice, Old Mrs. Hempstock and Ginnie Hempstock, Lettie's grandmother and mother, cause the narrator to forget what happened—but over the next several decades, the narrator returns several times to the Hempstock farm and the pond that Lettie referred to as her "**ocean**," where Lettie is healing from her sacrifice. Ginnie explains to the adult narrator that he continues to return because of his friendship with Lettie—Lettie wants to see what's happening in the narrator's life, and she wants to know if her sacrifice was worth it. Through this, the novel ultimately suggests that while sacrificing oneself for a friend is brave and meaningful, the real responsibility falls to the recipient of that sacrifice. True bravery, it implies, means going forth, living one's life, and forming relationships with others, as this is the only way to honor the people who made that life possible in the first place.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE NARRATOR'S BEDROOM

The narrator's bedroom symbolizes his idealized experience childhood before his family fell on hard times. In better times, the narrator's parents went so far as to install a yellow sink in the bathroom that was the perfect size for a child, something that made the narrator feel loved, cared for, and at home. Being evicted from his bedroom when the family falls on hard times, then, represents the way in which the narrator was suddenly and unceremoniously thrust out of childhood and into the real, terrifying, and complicated world of adults. Notably, the narrator chooses not to return to his bedroom at the end of the novel, after Ursula vacates it. This rejection of his formerly beloved room represents a kind of coming of age: the narrator's experiences with Lettie leave him wary of that idealized vision of childhood, and though not entirely at home, he's far more comfortable in the adult world.

CATS

The three kittens and cats that the narrator owns over the course of the novel represent the narrator's loss of innocence and his gradual acquisition of knowledge. The narrator's first kitten, Fluffy, represents innocence—and when she dies at only a few months old when the opal miner's taxi runs her over, she becomes a representation of the narrator's sudden loss of innocence. He must, for the first time, face death. The cat that the opal miner procures to replace Fluffy, a mean and wild tomcat named Monster, represents maturity that's far beyond what the narrator can comprehend or reach at that time. The adult world, like Monster, is unreachable and dangerous, and it isn't at all affectionate or comforting. The narrator's final kitten, whom he eventually names Ocean, indicates that he's finally come of age. He recognizes, with Lettie's help, that he can't

force the kitten to stay with him—rather, he must wait for the kitten to come to him when she's ready. And indeed, she does, about a month after the narrator's adventures with Lettie. Ocean represents a far more gradual, comfortable slide into maturity, while her name (which is, unbeknownst to the narrator, a reference to Lettie's supernatural "**ocean**") suggests that the narrator has come to some understanding of how the world works, including its most mysterious elements.

FOOD

Throughout the novel, the meals the narrator receives from adults correspond to the degree of care and love that the narrator receives from his caregivers—or the lack thereof. The narrator's father's usual offering of burnt toast reflects the narrator's sense that his parents don't care about him (he hates burnt toast and his dislike isn't a secret), as does the way in which his parents cook peas into disgusting mush. At the Hempstock farmhouse, however, every meal that Lettie, Ginnie, or Old Mrs. Hempstock serve the narrator is better and more nourishing than the last. This reflects the degree of care and concern that all three Hempstock women regard the narrator with. Unlike the narrator's parents, they genuinely care about the narrator and what he has to say, and they demonstrate this care with the food they offer him. And the monster Ursula's meals, just like Ursula in her human form, are beautiful—but the narrator's refusal to eat them reflects his fear and distrust of her.

THE OCEAN

The mysterious, supernatural pond at the Hempstocks' farm which Lettie calls her "ocean" symbolizes knowledge—specifically, a kind of knowledge that the novel suggests is unique to children. The narrator discovers this in no uncertain terms when Lettie plunges him into it to rescue him from supernatural vultures called hunger birds; in the water, he feels like he knows everything there is to know in the world. However, prior to this point, the nature of the ocean—its size, the fact that it looks like a normal duck pond, the fact that adults think it is *just* a pond—suggests that children like Lettie and the narrator, who are more willing to use their imaginations to invent complex fantasies, know more than the adults around them. Their imaginations allow them to see that things are almost always more than they might seem at first glance, a skill and a thought process that the novel suggests isn't as accessible to adults.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow edition of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* published in 2019.

Prologue Quotes

If you'd asked me an hour before, I would have said no, I did not remember the way. I do not even think I would have remembered Lettie Hempstock's name. But standing in that hallway, 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, Old Mrs. Hempstock

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator returns to the Hempstocks' farm, where his childhood friend Lettie used to live, he realizes that he suddenly remembers the way to the pond on the farm, which Lettie called her "ocean." This makes the narrator feel as though previously forgotten memories come flooding back to him, which begins to show how unreliable memory can be. Minutes ago, the narrator barely recalled that Hempstock Farm, an important place from childhood, existed. But simply being on the property, seeing the familiar barns and landscape, puts him back in a different time. Because he now has things around him to trigger these memories, the memories themselves rise to the forefront.

Feeling like he might even believe he's seven again suggests that a statement Lettie makes later in the novel—that there's no such thing as adults because adults are just children in much bigger bodies—is true. When the narrator is once again in a place that was important to him as a child, he feels much the same as he did as the seven-year-old child of his past. This suggests that people never truly leave their childhood selves behind. Though they may grow up and take on more adult responsibilities, it's entirely possible to unearth the child within—if one can access the right memories to do so.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I missed Fluffy. I knew you could not simply replace something alive, but I dared not grumble to my parents about it. They would have been baffled at my upset: after all, if my kitten had been killed, it had also been replaced. The damage had been made up.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, Monster, The Narrator's Father, The Narrator's Mother, The Opal Miner, Fluffy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator tells the horrific story of the opal miner running over his beloved kitten, Fluffy, and replacing Fluffy with a mean tomcat named Monster, he insists that he was the only one who even thought to grieve for his deceased pet. The narrator's parents read as wildly disaffected and uncaring here—they seem not to care at all that their son lost the being who was his only friend. His parents instead see what happened as a basic transaction, and one that doesn't acknowledge the fact that this is a conversation about living beings, not inanimate objects. The fact that the narrator's parents react like this makes the narrator feel even more alone and as though he can't trust the adults around him. His emotional experiences may be very real and very upsetting for him, but his parents don't take those emotions seriously—and the narrator thus feels that he has to hide his emotions to avoid getting in trouble. Being so lonely and not being able to trust the adults around him contributes to the narrator's inability to trust his parents later, when a supernatural monster named Ursula arrives and begins making things even worse.

Chapter 3 Quotes

I wanted to tell someone about the shilling, but I did not know who to tell. I knew enough about adults to know that if I did tell them what had happened, I would not be believed. Adults rarely seemed to believe me when I told the truth anyway. Why would they believe me about something so unlikely?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Old Mrs. Hempstock, Mrs. Ginnie Hempstock, The Narrator's Father, The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator wakes up from a dream choking on a real shilling, he has no idea who to tell. In his experience, adults don't take anything he has to say seriously, so they're not worth confiding in about this. This further characterizes the narrator as a lonely individual who doesn't have any friends to trust regarding the things that happen to him. In particular, it's significant that although the narrator is most likely referring to his parents, he doesn't mention them by name. This speaks to the narrator's disinterest in his parents—a feeling of disconnection and distrust that stems from the fact that his parents are adults. Adults, to the narrator, are uninteresting, unimaginative, and unfeeling. This is one of the main reasons why the narrator is so thrilled to befriend the Hempstock women. Unlike his parents, Ginnie and Old Mrs. Hempstock are adults who take a genuine interest in the narrator. They make him feel important and like he has something to say, something his parents never take the time to do.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I wondered, as I wondered so often when I was that age, who *I* was, and what exactly was looking at the face in the mirror. If the face I was looking at wasn't me, and I knew it wasn't, because I would still be me whatever happened to my face, then what *was* me? And what was watching?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

After pulling a mysterious worm out of his foot, the narrator looks in the bathroom mirror and wonders about the nature of consciousness. The narrator clearly differentiates between a person's outward appearance and their inner sense of self when he insists that he'd be the same person, even if something happened to his face. He understands that the qualities that makes him who he is are internal rather than external traits he can see. It's telling that this question is what makes the narrator so curious, as he's much less curious about all the supernatural things that have happened to him. He's not all that curious or worried

about the fact that he just pulled a huge worm, which he instinctively knows is dangerous and supernatural, out of the bottom of his foot. Instead, what concerns him is his fractured sense of self.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that while the narrator's desire to learn about himself is normal and understandable, this is the one thing that the narrator can never really know. Learning about oneself is a process that goes on for a person's entire life and is never complete, whereas it's technically possible to learn about and master nearly anything else.

Chapter 6 Quotes

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. Why didn't adults want to read about Narnia, about secret islands and smugglers and dangerous fairies?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator immerses himself in a book of Egyptian myths one afternoon, he explains to the reader why he finds myths so compelling: myths, he suggest, exist somewhere outside of the delineation between children's stories and adults' stories. He also divides narratives clearly into "interesting" (children's stories) and "boring" (adults' stories). This mindset reflects the narrator's inability to understand or empathize with adults. To him, adults are just as mysterious and unknowable as any of the supernatural things he comes across over the course of the novel—and since he's a child, they seem just as dangerous.

The narrator is well aware that adults, on the whole, have power to do what they like to children; children don't have much standing to push back or advocate for themselves. Given this power dynamic, it's easier to see why the narrator sees adults as uniformly boring: he thinks he understands the essence of adults simply by knowing that they're bigger and more powerful than he is. His children's stories, meanwhile, provide him delightful distractions from his own powerlessness. On the other hand, his interest in myths and his recognition that these tales fall between adults' and children's stories implies that on some level, he recognizes that adults and children may not be so different after all.

Adults follow paths. Children explore. Adults are content to walk the same way, hundreds of times, or thousands; perhaps it never occurs to adults to step off the paths, to creep beneath rhododendrons, to find the spaces between fences. I was a child, which meant that I knew a dozen different ways of getting out of our property and into the lane, ways that would not involve walking down our drive.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator plots a route off his property and away from the monster Ursula, he suggests that because he's a child, his thinking is more creative—and thus, he should be able to slip away unnoticed. However, the narrator makes the mistake of assuming that Ursula is a normal adult. As far as he's concerned, a normal adult would expect him to leave by waltzing down the driveway in plain sight. However, Ursula is more than just an adult—as a supernatural being who only takes the physical form of an adult, she can dip back and forth between actions that the narrator believes belong exclusively to children or to adults.

The way in which the narrator speaks about adults being oddly content to repeat the same behaviors speaks to his unwillingness to empathize with adults, and his inability to understand what adulthood is like. Certainly, some adults do take the same path every time—but others do explore and behave in ways that the narrator might identify as more childish. But as a child himself, the narrator is unable to look too far outside of himself to make these leaps. And because of this, his understanding of the world remains relatively limited throughout the novel.

"Your parents can no longer afford this place," said Ursula Monkton. "And they can't afford to keep it up. Soon enough they'll see that the way to solve their financial problems is to sell this house and its gardens to property developers. Then all of *this*"—and *this* was the tangle of brambles, the unkempt world behind the lawn—"will become a dozen identical houses and gardens. And if you are lucky, you'll get to live in one."

Related Characters: Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep (speaker), The Narrator's Mother, The Narrator's Father, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Ursula catches the narrator in his attempt to leave the property and explains to him why she's here: she wants to make the narrator's parents see that they need to sell their property to developers. It's important to consider what Ursula says about developing the wild property alongside the narrator's prior assertion that children explore, while adults stick to the path. It's possible to see that what Ursula really advocates for here is to turn a place that's ripe for childish exploration into one that leaves no room for adventure. Instead, she wants to create a place that's full of sidewalks, small gardens without fun hiding places, and lots of adults keeping an eye on whatever children are around. In short, Ursula is trying to get the landscape itself to grow up—something that, to the narrator, is understandably horrific. He takes great pride in his ability to explore and navigate his wild world (a landscape which symbolizes his whimsical, carefree childhood), so it's shocking to hear that Ursula wants to take that away from him.

"I've been inside you," she said. "So a word to the wise. If you tell anybody anything, they won't believe you. And, because I've been inside you, I'll know. And I can make it so you never say anything I don't want you to say to anybody, not ever again."

Related Characters: Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

As Ursula once again warns the narrator not to disobey her, she reminds him that he's the only one in his household who knows what she actually is (a monster)—and therefore, nobody will believe what seems to be tall tales. In saying this, Ursula tries to make the narrator doubt his reality and feel as though he's the only one in the world who knows what's going on. This keeps him feeling isolated and as though he has no one to turn to—and because Ursula is still successfully keeping the narrator from seeing Lettie, she's successful in this endeavor.

The way that Ursula goes about controlling the narrator shows that she understands the power of friendship and of having someone to take one's story seriously. She knows full well that the narrator's parents like her, and so they won't believe the narrator if he says that Ursula is a worm and a monster—they'll think he's just being an emotional, overly imaginative kid. In this sense, Ursula preys on the narrator's youth and the fact that nobody will believe him, and she uses both her role as an adult authority figure and as a monster to make the narrator feel even more alone.

Chapter 7 Quotes

I watched as my father's free hand, the one not holding my sister, went down and rested, casually, proprietarily, on the swell of Ursula Monkton's midi skirted bottom.

I would react differently to that now. At the time, I do not believe I thought anything of it at all. I was seven.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Sister, The Narrator's Father, Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

From a hidden perch, the narrator watches his father show Ursula around the gardens and put a hand on her bottom. The adult narrator is telling the story to the reader, and as an adult, he understands that there's more to touching someone like this than he understood as a child. But as a prepubescent kid who seems to have little or no concept of what sex even is, this gesture means nothing to him—and so the narrator doesn't grasp the implication of what's happening here (that Ursula and his father are becoming sexually involved). As an adult, however, the narrator recognizes that this should have been an early warning sign that simply, unfortunately, didn't register. This speaks to the

way that memories can change over time, as a person grows older and learns more about the world. As an adult, the narrator can assign more and different meaning to this moment than he could as a kid with a very limited understanding of his world.

❝ Then, swiftly, he picked me up. He put his huge hands under my armpits, swung me up with ease, so I felt like I weighed nothing at all.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

In the moment before the narrator's father plunges him into the cold bathtub and tries to drown him, he lifts his son up. Though this whole episode forces the narrator to confront head-on the physical differences between his child's strength and the strength and size of his father, a grown man, it's being picked up like this that makes the narrator feel truly helpless. He's not entirely sure yet what's going to happen—it takes him a few moments to understand, since what his father does is so far from the ordinary and so unexpected—but his father is still able to make him feel tiny, powerless, and insignificant.

Though most of the time, the narrator's parents and the other adults in his life aren't physically abusive to him like his father is here, this forces the narrator to reckon with the knowledge that the adults in his life could, at any time, hurt him without any recourse. This certainly influences the narrator's fear and distrust of adults, especially since he has to work so hard to keep himself from dying once his father has him in the bathtub. In other words, this makes the stakes even higher: rather than simply being disbelieved by adults, the narrator now knows that adults could also kill him.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ I took the box of matches from the mantelpiece, turned on the gas tap and lit the flame in the gas fire.

(I am staring at a pond, remembering things that are hard to believe. Why do I find the hardest thing for me to believe, looking back, is that a girl of five and a boy of seven had a gas fire in their bedroom?)

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Following his father trying to drown him in the bathtub, the narrator turns on the gas fireplace in his room—something that, in retrospect, the adult narrator finds difficult to wrap his head around. This again points to the way in which memories can change with time and experience. To the young narrator, it seems normal and unremarkable that he has access to a gas fireplace. He lives in a drafty old house; this is just the way things work if he's going to be able to keep himself warm. But for the adult narrator, who has since gone on to have children of his own, the supernatural elements of his story aren't nearly as shocking as the thought of small children having access to a gas fireplace. As an adult, he likely knows how dangerous gas can be and how easy it is to play with in a dangerous way, if one is interested in setting things on fire. His disbelief also suggests more generally that, on some level, he's made peace with the bizarre nature of everything that happened to him as a child. What perhaps still irks him, though, is his parents' neglect and unwillingness to care about their children in the way the narrator wanted them to.

❝ As I ran, I thought of my father, his arms around the housekeeper-who-wasn't, kissing her neck, and then I saw his face through the chilly bathwater as he held me under, and now 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105-06

Explanation and Analysis

During the narrator's mad dash to escape Ursula and head for the Hempstocks' farm, his thoughts on what should scare him begin to shift. Prior to seeing Ursula and his father having sex (though the narrator doesn't entirely

grasp what sex is), the narrator was afraid that his father would kill him if Ursula tells him to. Now, even though the narrator may not understand the mechanics of sex, he nevertheless grasps the implication of seeing his father with Ursula: he now knows that his father is even less trustworthy than he was a few hours ago. Now, he's not just willing to attempt to drown his son in the bathtub; he's also forming an emotional connection with Ursula that the narrator knows will cause problems in the future. This speaks to the fact that a person doesn't have to understand exactly what's going on to grasp the deeper implication of what something means. It's possible to know full well that one is in danger, without knowing exactly why or how.

❝ Ursula Monkton smiled, and the lightnings wreathed and writhed around her. She was power incarnate, standing in the crackling air. She was the storm, she was the lightning, she was the adult world with all its power and all its secrets and all its foolish casual cruelty. She winked at me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

When Ursula finally corners the narrator in a field as he tries to escape to Hempstock Farm, the narrator thinks that Ursula represents the terrifying, horrifying adult world. This offers insight into how, exactly he sees the adult world: it, like the storm, has outsize power over the narrator, and he happens to live in it without possessing the ability to change it. If the adult world "storms," the narrator simply has to figure out how to get through it without getting hurt.

When he mentions that the adult world has power, secrets, and casual cruelty, it speaks more to the narrator's recognition that he doesn't understand the adult world. Because he's a child, it's something unknowable. He knows about the adult world only in terms of how it affects him—and in his experience, adults are all-powerful and cruel, and they abide by rules he doesn't know about or understand. Though it's understandable that the narrator would feel this way about the adult world given his circumstances, it also suggests that he doesn't empathize much with adults on the whole. He views adults as a monolithic group of powerful, cruel people, which doesn't take into account that not all adults are like that—unbeknownst to the narrator, they do experience fear and anger, just like he does.

❝ Lettie Hempstock's hand in my hand made me braver. But Lettie 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. Ursula Monkton was an adult. It did not matter, at that moment, that she was every monster, every witch, every nightmare made flesh. She was also an adult, and when adults fight children, adults always win.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Lettie arrives to rescue the narrator from Ursula, but she's unable to entirely sooth the narrator's fears because she's a child, and therefore, in the narrator's understanding, can't really take on Ursula successfully. This reflects the narrator's grasp of what's going on here. To him, even if Lettie may actually be some sort of ancient being who isn't quite human, she's still 11—and therefore, as far as he's concerned, she's not especially powerful. Similarly, Ursula is frightening to him not because she's a supernatural monster. Instead, Ursula is scary because she's an adult, and in the narrator's experience, adults have unchallenged power over him. In other words, the narrator sees this conflict as one of children versus adults rather than human versus monsters. To Lettie and Ursula, however, this is a matter of Hempstock women—who possess immense supernatural power—versus fleas. And though Ursula may think she's powerful, fleas are much weaker than the Hempstocks. The narrator's lack of information about the supernatural world, however, keeps him from understanding this.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ "If I burn this," I asked them, "will it have really happened? Will my daddy have pushed me down into the bath? Will I forget it ever happened?"

Ginnie Hempstock was no longer smiling. Now she looked concerned. "What do *you* want?" she asked.

"I *want* to remember," I said. "Because it happened to me. And I'm still me." I threw the little scrap of cloth onto the fire.

Related Characters: Mrs. Ginnie Hempstock, The Narrator (speaker), Old Mrs. Hempstock, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

Old Mrs. Hempstock performs the magical "snip and cut" procedure, which removes the narrator's father's attempts to drown the narrator from his memory so that the narrator can stay the night with the Hempstocks. After this, Old Mrs. Hempstock gives the narrator the option to burn the memory, which has taken the form of a scrap of fabric that she cut out of his dressing gown. In a sense, the narrator is really asking how much agency he has over his memories. In this situation, his father didn't have any agency—Old Mrs. Hempstock took away his memory without permission. The narrator wants to know if he has a choice. Ginnie, for her part, suggests that the narrator does—he could forget what happened if he wanted to, or he could remember if he wanted to. This makes it clear that, to some degree, people do have some control over what they remember and how they recall it. If a person makes a point to keep something front and center in their memory, they'll likely be able to keep it there.

Then, the narrator also implies that his memories and his experiences make him who he is. This suggests that the drowning incident is a major formative moment for the narrator—after all, it's important enough to make the effort to remember. In a way, this suggests that if the narrator wants to know who he is, he needs only look to his memories—though this is certainly complicated by the fact that once the narrator leaves the Hempstock farm, both as a child and as an adult, he forgets that all of this happened. It's possible, then, that the narrator's identity is constantly changing depending upon what he remembers at any given time.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"She said, "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."

Related Characters: Mrs. Ginnie Hempstock (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Over breakfast, Ginnie tells the narrator that it's not worth it to hate Ursula—Ursula is just doing what fleas (a kind of supernatural monster) are supposed to do. With this, Ginnie tries to get the narrator to understand that it's not helpful to hate people or fault them for being human (or for being a flea, in this case). People will do what people do—and as someone on the receiving end of subpar behavior, it's important that the narrator look at Ursula and at others who do him wrong with compassion and understanding.

The narrator, for the most part, sees the world in black and white: there are kids and there are adults, who are mean, selfish, and unknowable to children. Now, he's seen that there are monsters too—and monsters are, in his opinion, much like adults. Ginnie is trying to encourage the narrator to be more open in his assessments of others—and thus, in a way, she's asking the narrator to grow up a bit and see the world through a less childish lens.

"Sometimes monsters are things people should be scared of, but they aren't."

I said, "People should be scared of Ursula Monkton."

"P'raps. What do you think Ursula Monkton is scared of?"

"Dunno. Why do you think she's scared of anything? She's a grown-up, isn't she? Grown-ups and monsters aren't scared of things."

"Oh, monsters are scared," said Lettie. "That's why they're monsters."

Related Characters: The Narrator, Lettie Hempstock (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

As Lettie and the narrator talk by Lettie's "ocean," Lettie asks the narrator to think about what Ursula might be afraid of, a request that catches the narrator by surprise. In his response, the narrator reveals how he sees both adults and monsters: as unafraid, all-powerful beings. In this sense, he also sees them as being wholly different from children and

therefore impossible to relate to. Lettie, however, encourages the narrator to draw on his compassion and to see monsters and adults as whole individuals, with fears and concerns of their own. It's this fear, she suggests, that makes them monstrous—presumably, their fear motivates them to do horrible things like that frighten the narrator. With this, the novel suggests that what separates children from adults and monsters is power, not whether or not they experience fear. Children have nothing to take their fear out on; adults and monsters, meanwhile, can take their fear out on children.

"I'm going to tell you something important. Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. The truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world."

Related Characters: Lettie Hempstock (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

During her conversation with the narrator, Lettie tells him a secret: that really, there's no such thing as an adult. Adults, in her understanding, are really just children in much bigger bodies, but with more power and control over their worlds. This, first and foremost, makes the narrator see that Lettie may look like an 11-year-old, but she's not a child. Her experiences in the world have helped her become something that knows far more than he thinks a child would or should—and her ability to see adults as real people, the novel suggests, sets her apart more than anything else. Then, Lettie's explanation also helps the narrator begin to develop a sense of empathy for the adults in his lives. Though he's seen them as unknowable and cruel individuals up until this point, Lettie wants the narrator to recognize that if he makes an effort, he could indeed get to know an adult and see that they're not so different.

Chapter 11 Quotes

She had started to cry, and I felt uncomfortable. I did not know what to do when adults cried. [...] Adults should not weep, I knew. They did not have mothers who would comfort them.

I wondered if Ursula Monkton had ever had a mother.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, The Hunger Birds, Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163-65

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator watches as Ursula realizes that Lettie called the hunger birds to do away with her—for reasons the narrator doesn't understand, this makes Ursula cry. The narrator's insistence that adults like Ursula shouldn't cry speaks to his inability to understand that adults are, as Lettie told him previously, just as frightened of things as children are. They're not all that different; they experience all the same emotions and just happen to have more power and prestige in the world.

However, it's interesting when the narrator says that adults can't cry because they don't have a mother to comfort them. Crying, he seems to suggest, is something that people do in order to get comfort. Adults, in his understanding, don't have people who care for them in the same way that children have parents. Though this is limited and in line with the narrator's belief that adults are fundamentally different than children, it's telling that he wonders if Ursula ever had a mother. If she did have a mother, that might make her into a more sympathetic figure for the narrator—it would make her seem like less of a monster to him.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"They need to finish this up. It's what they do: they're the carrion kind, the vultures of the void. Their job. Clean up the last remnants of the mess. Nice and neat. Pull you from the world and it will be as if you never existed. Just go with it. It won't hurt."

I stared at him. Adults only ever said that when it, whatever it happened to be, was going to hurt so much.

Related Characters: The Narrator, The Opal Miner (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, The Hunger Birds

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

While the narrator waits for Lettie in a supernatural protective area called a "fairy ring," the hunger birds—who

want to eat the narrator's heart but cannot enter the fairy ring—send apparitions to tempt the narrator out, the first of which is an apparition of the opal miner. Notably, the opal miner tries to impress upon the narrator that the narrator is helpless and has no choice in the matter. Stepping out and allowing the hunger birds to eat him will simply mean that he's doing what he's supposed to do—and even if he resists for a while, he can't resist forever. Even if the opal miner tries to make the narrator feel helpless and childish, however, it's the narrator's childishness and his distrust of adults that gives him what he needs to resist. He believes that when it comes to pain, adults will always lie to him—so it's nothing to ignore the opal miner and believe that he's just being a normal, predictable adult.

❝ I had stood up to worse things than him in the last few hours. And suddenly, I didn't care anymore. I looked up at the dark shape behind and above the torch beam, and I said, "Does it make you feel big to make a little boy cry?" and I knew as I said it that it was the thing I should never have said.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, The Hunger Birds, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181-82

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator's father comes down to try to get his son out of the fairy ring, the narrator finally snaps and calls his father out on his bullying behavior. To the narrator, his father is just one of many bullies he's dealt with today—and compared to confronting the hunger birds, which represent more of an unknown than his father, letting these words slip out isn't all that difficult.

The narrator's immediate sense of shame and horror comes from his belief that by calling his father out for bullying him, he's upending the natural order of how children should speak to their parents. As far as he's concerned, children just don't speak to authority figures this way—even if he may privately know that what he said is justified. In some ways then, saying this to his father represents one of the narrator's first steps into adulthood and toward seeing his father as a person and as more of an equal. It's still unsettling, though, because it makes the narrator feel like less of a child—and if he's not a child, he doesn't know how exactly to exist in the world.

❝ There was silence. The shadows seemed to have become part of the night once again. I thought over what I'd said, and I knew it was true. At that moment, for once in my childhood, I was not scared of the dark, and I was perfectly willing to die (as willing as any seven-year-old, certain of his immortality, can be) if I died waiting for Lettie. Because she was my friend.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock, The Hunger Birds

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator insists to the hunger birds that he'd rather die in the fairy ring than betray Lettie, he realizes that this is true—in his estimation, his friendship with her is worth possibly sacrificing himself for. It's important to note that the adult narrator is well aware that his childhood self didn't fully grasp what this meant. As a child—even one who's seen far too much death in the last few days—he still doesn't understand what death would mean for him. And without this understanding, it's easier for him to say he'd die. Regardless, the young narrator feels strong and capable because Lettie helps him feel more secure. Having a friend gives the narrator the strength to face his fears, stare down death, and even talk back to his father. Friendship, then, is one of the most powerful motivators in the novel and is the one thing that can help a person overcome their fears and reservations.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Lettie Hempstock looked like pale silk and candle flames. I wondered how I looked to her, in that place, and knew that even in a place that was nothing but knowledge that was the one thing I could not know. That if I looked inward I would see only infinite mirrors, staring into myself for eternity.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Lettie Hempstock

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In the ocean, the narrator takes in Lettie's strange, otherworldly appearance and understands that the one thing he can't know is what he himself looks like. With this, the narrator momentarily understands that while it's technically possible to learn everything else about the world, it's impossible to ever know everything about oneself. This positions the quest for knowledge as one that's ongoing and never-ending, no matter how much knowledge someone amasses—there's always more to know, even if it's just about oneself.

Identifying the one thing he cannot know helps the narrator make better sense of his world. It also helps to explain why the narrator feels so lost when he's an adult—on some level, thanks to this experience he had in Lettie's ocean when he was a child, he learned that there's nothing he can do to be able to know, truly and fully, who he is. This doesn't, however, mean that it's futile to continue to search. Even if this is an impossible task, the novel nevertheless suggests that it's still normal and expected for people to attempt to understand themselves in any way possible.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I said, "Will she be the same?"

The old woman guffawed, as if I had said the funniest thing in the universe. "Nothing's ever the same," she said. "Be it a second later or a hundred years. It's always churning and roiling. And people change as much as oceans."

Related Characters: Old Mrs. Hempstock, The Narrator (speaker), Mrs. Ginnie Hempstock, Lettie Hempstock

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator and Old Mrs. Hempstock watch Ginnie place Lettie's body in the ocean, the narrator asks if Lettie will be the same person when she returns from the ocean, healed. When Old Mrs. Hempstock insists that this is impossible, she introduces the narrator to the idea that even if his individual experience makes him feel as though he's the same person today that he was yesterday, in reality, this isn't true: people change all the time. They're constantly gathering new information that changes how they see themselves and the world around them—and this information, Old Mrs. Hempstock implies, makes someone entirely new. This also speaks to the idea that a person's memory of someone isn't an accurate depiction of who that person might be in the present. It doesn't matter if one's memory is from yesterday or from a few moments ago; the person they remember is still very different. In short, Old Mrs. Hempstock encourages the narrator to see that while people, like oceans, may maintain the same basic contours throughout their lives, change is inevitable—and it's part of being human.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ Old Mrs. Hempstock shrugged. "What you remembered? Probably. More or less. Different people remember things differently, and you'll not get any two people to remember anything the same, whether they were there or not. You stand two of you lot next to each other, and you could be continents away for all it means anything."

Related Characters: Old Mrs. Hempstock (speaker), Ursula Monkton / Skarthatch of the Keep, The Narrator's Father, Lettie Hempstock, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

When the adult narrator asks Old Mrs. Hempstock if what he remembers from his childhood is true, she gives him a very indirect, broad answer. Memory, she makes clear, isn't something static or even all that reliable. Multiple people can experience the exact same things, yet due to variables like who they are, what they value, and what they're afraid of, they can come away with entirely different reads on the situation. For that matter, as a person gets older their memories can change—as an adult, the narrator understands that his father and Ursula were sexually involved, while as a kid he simply understood that their closeness made his father an even more dangerous figure. In short, memory has its uses, but it's not the end-all, be-all. It's important to hang onto memories, as they're how a person constructs their identity and their understanding of the world, but it's still essential that people not assume their memories are 100 percent correct because what and how they remember something is influenced by their identity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The narrator says that "it" was just a small duck pond. But according to Lettie Hempstock, it's an **ocean** and they came across the ocean from the old country. Lettie's mother, Mrs. Hempstock, always said that Lettie was misremembering—the old country sank long ago. Old Mrs. Hempstock, meanwhile, insisted that both her daughter and granddaughter were wrong: the place that sank wasn't the "really old country," which blew up.

This introduction makes one of the novel's main points very plain: that different people can see and remember the same thing in entirely different ways. Meanwhile, the bizarre differences in how the narrator and the Hempstocks see this mysterious body of water (whether it's a pond or an ocean), sets up the story as one concerned with the supernatural—something that mortals, like the narrator, may have an even harder time interpreting.

The narrator is dressed in a black suit with shiny black shoes. Normally he'd feel uncomfortable like this, but today, the clothes are comforting. Earlier, he spoke at the service. With an hour to kill, he got in his car to drive. Now, he meanders along Sussex country roads that he barely remembers. He makes several turns and realizes where he's going: a house that hasn't existed for decades. Curious, the narrator keeps going until he reaches the place where the old house sat. The narrator lived there from age five to 12, at which point his parents knocked it down and built the new house at the bottom of the garden. They sold the new house 30 years ago. The narrator pulls into the drive and stares at the house.

Given the narrator's clothing and the mention of speaking at a service, it seems he's just attended a funeral. That the narrator finds himself heading for his childhood home when he insists he barely remembers the way there suggests that some memories, particularly those that are important from childhood, remain with a person forever. While people might seem to forget them in difficult times (such as those surrounding a funeral), high emotions may trigger those memories and make them easier to access.

Finally, the narrator backs out of the drive. He knows he needs to head back to his sister's house to talk to people about his failed marriage, the fact that he's still single, his absent adult children, his work as an artist (which he struggles to talk about), and the dead. The lane used to be narrow, but now, it's paved and separates two huge housing developments. Gradually, the street turns into a single-lane dirt road. As the narrator drives and the vegetation on each side gets wilder, he feels like he's driving back in time. He passes Caraway Farm where, at age 16, the narrator kissed a girl named Callie. The lane turns into a dirt track and the narrator comes upon the brick farmhouse where the Hempstocks lived.

The way that the narrator describes his adult life suggests that he's not entirely thrilled with adulthood and the kind of small talk he's obligated to make. The mention of the newly paved lane and the new housing developments implies that just as the narrator has grown up, so has the lane—it's gone from what he implies was wilderness and farmland to being a neat suburb. These similarities between the narrator and the lane he grew up on make it clear that this place is an important part of who the narrator is, and it might help him remember more of his childhood.

The narrator thinks it's unlikely, but he wonders if the Hempstocks still live here. He parks and knocks on the door, which isn't closed and swings open. He feels like he was here a long time ago. The narrator calls into the hallway and is about to turn away when an old woman with long, gray hair comes into the hallway. He greets her as Mrs. Hempstock, reminds her that he was here when he was seven or eight, and remembers that she gave him milk from the cows. The narrator suddenly apologizes—it must've been this woman's mother, Old Mrs. Hempstock, who gave him the milk. The younger Mrs. Hempstock used to be stout, but now, she's thin like her mother was.

The narrator believes that just as everything else on the lane has changed, the Hempstocks must also have changed in the last several decades. It's telling that the narrator believes this woman is the younger Mrs. Hempstock when she so resembles Old Mrs. Hempstock. Though the novel doesn't confirm or deny the narrator's assessment, it's possible that since he believes everything should *change, that's what he sees—when his initial assessment may be correct.*

Mrs. Hempstock asks if the narrator is here to see Lettie and notes that Lettie isn't here. She offers the narrator tea, but he asks if he can see the duck pond first, which confuses Mrs. Hempstock. The narrator doesn't remember what Lettie called the body of water, but she never called it a duck pond. Mrs. Hempstock points the narrator around the side of the house, and the narrator surprises himself when he realizes he knows the way. An hour ago, he thinks he couldn't remember Lettie's name. He winds through the farmyard to the pond, which is smaller than he remembered.

The narrator consistently observes that things look smaller than he remembers. This forces him to confront how much time has passed—and how much he's changed since he was a small child. His new recollections again suggest that the Hempstock farm is a trigger of sorts for buried memories—which would suggest that this is an important location to the narrator's childhood.

The narrator sits on the bench, tosses nuts into the pond, and tries to remember what Lettie used to call this body of water. He remembers that Lettie was 11 years old, and since they met after "the bad birthday party," the narrator would've been seven. He wonders if they pushed each other into the pond and remembers that Lettie went to Australia. Suddenly, the narrator remembers that she called the pond her "**ocean**"—and having remembered this, he suddenly remembers everything.

Remembering what Lettie called the pond is what allows the narrator to remember everything else. Thus, the novel begins to suggest that if a person is able to name something correctly, it's easier to gather information about it and to make sense of one's world. As the narrator remembers "everything," his world will start to make more sense.

CHAPTER 1

Nobody comes to the narrator's seventh birthday party. The narrator's mother sets the table with sweet treats and a birthday cake featuring a book on it. The narrator blows out his candles when it's clear that no one is coming. He, his little sister, and her friend eat slices of cake, and then the girls race to the garden. The narrator ignores the party games, since there's no one to play them with, so he unwraps the "pass-the-parcel" gift: it's a Batman figurine. His birthday gift is a boxed set of *The Chronicles of Narnia* books, which the narrator heads upstairs to read.

The descriptions of the narrator's party suggest that he's a lonely, isolated kid. He finds solace in books—to the point that he has a book on his birthday cake—and isn't particularly bothered that no one comes, since he has books to read anyway. The narrator's interest in superheroes like Batman, meanwhile, suggests that he's is interested in heroic, caring individuals—but given his friendlessness, he has no one to help or to help him.

That night, the narrator's father comes home with a cardboard box containing a **kitten**, which the narrator promptly names Fluffy. Fluffy sleeps with the narrator and listens to everything he says. With Fluffy and books, the narrator feels content. Fluffy waits for him in the driveway every day after school. But this all stops one day, about a month after the birthday party, when a man whom the narrator refers to as the opal miner comes to stay at his house. The narrator gets home to find the opal miner, a tall, tanned man, in the kitchen. In a South African accent, the opal miner said he had an accident on the way here: the taxi he took to the house hit and killed Fluffy. Cheerfully, the opal miner explains that he dealt with the body and points to a box on the table. This is the last time the narrator sees the opal miner.

Fluffy may be a cat incapable of speaking, but Fluffy nevertheless represents the narrator's first friend. The opal miner, by contrast, is a stranger—it's not clear who he is or why he's come to stay with the narrator's family. The narrator having his best friend so cruelly and senselessly taken away by a stranger speaks to his of helplessness around adults. Adults can move through world and do whatever they want—and because the narrator is a child, he has to simply accept what they do or say. This is especially true since the opal miner seems so nonchalant about the whole thing; he doesn't seem to take the narrator's grief seriously.

The narrator doesn't want to open the box; he wants to cry, mourn for, and bury Fluffy by himself at the very bottom of the garden. The opal miner motions to the box and says he always pays his debts, so the narrator opens it. He half expects to find Fluffy, but instead, the opal miner pulls out a huge orange tomcat. The **cat**, clearly angry to have been in the box, hisses at the narrator and stalks away to the far end of the room. The opal miner ruffles the narrator's hair, and as he walks away, he calls that the cat's name is Monster.

Because the narrator is a child and knows he needs to be polite, he can't run off and mourn like he wants to. In this sense, he's helpless when faced with cruel, heartless adults—especially adults like the opal miner who pretends he's doing a kind thing by "replacing" a tame kitten with a mean tomcat. Both Monster and the opal miner represent a version of the adult world: it's unknowable, cruel, and heartless.

The narrator opens the back door for Monster and then cries in his room for Fluffy. Monster hangs out for about a week before taking to the garden to kill birds. Though the narrator misses Fluffy and knows it's impossible to just replace living things, he knows his parents wouldn't understand—as far as they're concerned, the opal miner made up the damage. Presently, as the narrator recalls everything while sitting next to the pond that Lettie convinced him was an **ocean**, he knows that he won't remember this for long.

Losing Fluffy coincides with the narrator's loss of his childhood innocence. Fluffy's brief time with the narrator represents an idyllic time that the narrator cannot replicate—least not with Monster. That the narrator's parents don't care suggests that they're somewhat disaffected and absent—at the very least, they don't take their son's emotions seriously.

CHAPTER 2

The narrator explains that he wasn't a happy child, though he was "content" sometimes. He reads more than anything else. One afternoon, the narrator's parents call him into their bedroom to say that they're no longer doing well financially. They say that everyone will make sacrifices and that the narrator will sacrifice his **bedroom**. The narrator is sad: his parents put in a small sink in his room just for him, and at night, the narrator can crack the door to let in light to read by.

The narrator's bedroom, with its miniature sink, represents childish innocence—but specifically, it symbolizes the care that he once received from his parents. It's nothing to them to ask him to give up the one place that makes him feel safe and cared for, which again speaks to how disaffected and absent they are from their son's life.

The narrator's sister's bedroom isn't awful; it's big and has a window conveniently situated so the narrator can climb onto the balcony. However, the narrator and his sister fight about whether the door should be open or closed at night. The narrator's mother creates a chart for them to alternate, and the narrator is terrified every night the door is closed. The family rents the narrator's **bedroom** to characters who, to the narrator, all seem suspicious and like interlopers. The opal miner is the current renter. He's South African, though he mined opals in Australia. He gives the narrator and his sister each an opal. The narrator's sister likes the opal miner, but the narrator can't forgive him for killing Fluffy.

Because the narrator feels so strongly connected to his bedroom and the safety he felt there, having these adults staying in it feels like a personal affront and perhaps even a violation. It impresses upon the narrator yet again that since he's a child, he can't control his world. Adults can come as they please, sleep in his bed, and use his child-size sink—while he has to sleep in his sister's bedroom and be terrified in order to accommodate them.

On the first day of the spring holidays, the narrator wakes up early. He dresses and finds his father in the kitchen. The narrator asks for his *SMASH!* comic, which his father brings home on Friday nights. The narrator's father says it's in the car and offers the narrator **toast** first. As the narrator's father toasts bread in the grill, the narrator asks for toast that isn't burnt, steps into the driveway, looks around, and comes back inside. The car isn't in the driveway. The phone rings and the narrator's father answers it. While he's busy, the toast starts to burn under the grill.

The burnt toast is another piece of evidence as to how distant and uncaring the narrator's parents are. It may seem insignificant, but seeing his father answer the phone instead of attending to the toast impresses upon the narrator that he's not as important as whatever adult is calling. The missing comic makes this seem even more pronounced—the narrator can't rely on his father for much.

The narrator's father returns with news that the police called: someone stole the car, and it's been found at the bottom of the lane. He hurriedly rescues the **toast**, puts peanut butter on the burnt side, and leads the narrator out. The narrator doesn't eat his toast. As a police car drives up, the narrator wishes that his father would buy normal white bread instead of embarrassing brown bread. The officer invites the narrator and his father into the car, and they ride down the lane. The officer insists that it must be local kids who stole the car and comments that it's odd that they left it at the bottom of the lane.

The way the narrator describes his father's bread choices offers more possible explanations for why the narrator is so alone: it's possible that the bread marks him as an outsider at school. Meanwhile, the officer's analysis of what happened to the car suggests that as far as he's concerned, kids are beyond trying to understand—while their actions sometimes make sense and are predictable, it's not worth trying to make sense of their motivations.

The police car comes upon the white Mini, sunk into the mud. The narrator, his father, and the officer get out and as the narrator's father unlocks the car, he comments that there's something in the backseat. He reaches back to pull the blue blanket off the "thing" in the backseat. The narrator knows his comic is there, so he looks into the car and sees the "thing," which he believes is an "it" rather than a "him." The narrator explains that despite his frequent nightmares, he managed to persuade his parents to take him to Madame Tussauds waxworks in London. The exhibits didn't look alive—the only scary part was the plaques that all said that people murdered their families to sell the bodies to "*anatomy*." Though the narrator doesn't know what *anatomy* is, he knows it makes people kill their children.

Describing the person (the "him") in the backseat as an "it" is a way for the narrator to try to dehumanize the person to make him less scary. If he can convince himself he's not scaring at a dead person and is instead staring at a waxwork, this incident is much easier to deal with. His description of visiting the wax museum shows a more sinister angle to this: because the narrator doesn't understand what anatomy is and doesn't come up with a way to make this less scary, he sees the study of anatomy only as a motivator for murder—and not actually a quest for knowledge in its own right.

The "it" in the backseat looks like the opal miner but, like the waxworks, it isn't convincing. It's dressed in a suit with a ruffled shirt, and its face is bright red. The narrator can see his comic too. The officer sends the narrator away, but the narrator stares. He can see a garden hose running from the exhaust pipe to the window, held in place with mud. The narrator bites into his **toast** and thinks of how his father always insists that burnt toast is good. When the narrator is an adult, his father confesses that he doesn't actually like burnt toast, which makes the narrator's childhood feel like a lie. The officer invites the narrator to sit in his car again, but a girl appears and offers to take the narrator back to the farmhouse.

Again, the narrator is clearly trying to make this as easy to deal with as possible: the opal miner committed suicide in the car, but this fact is a lot for the young narrator to deal with. Again, it's easier to believe that he's staring at a waxwork and not actually a dead body. The narrator's aside about his father's eventual toast confession shows how easy it is to change how someone thinks of their childhood. All it takes is admitting one lie like this to make all of one's childhood memories seem questionable.

The narrator informs the girl that there's a dead man in the car. The girl explains that the opal miner knew that no one would find him here, and she offers the narrator fresh milk from a cow. At the farm, they stop at a barn where an old woman is milking a cow with a machine. The old woman gives the narrator a fresh cup of rich, warm milk. Suddenly, the old woman says that there's more of "them" coming, so the girl should take the narrator to the kitchen for **breakfast**. The girl introduces herself as Lettie Hempstock, leads the narrator into the kitchen, and gives him porridge with jam. The narrator eats happily.

All the food that the narrator receives here is nutritious, filling, and exciting—a stark contrast to the meals he gets at home. This helps him decide to trust the Hempstock women since, unlike his parents, they clearly care about him. It's significant that the narrator is disinterested in the fact that Lettie and this woman seem to know what's going on up the road without being there. This suggests that they have some method of seeing or interpreting that isn't available to someone like the narrator, though what differentiates the narrator from these women isn't yet clear.

A stout woman enters the kitchen and announces that there will be five officers for tea soon. When Lettie hesitates at the cupboard, the woman confirms that they will indeed need six mugs—the doctor will come too. She then sighs that they missed the note in the opal miner's breast pocket. When Lettie asks what it says, the woman tells Lettie to read it herself. The narrator figures that this woman is Lettie's mother—she looks like she has to be a mother to *someone*. According to the woman, the note says that the opal miner took all the money his friends gave him to bank in England and lost it gambling. Lettie insists that he didn't write that; the man asked for forgiveness.

Again, Lettie and this woman are somehow able to see all the way up the lane to the police investigating the opal miner's suicide and are even able to somehow read his suicide note. They must have access to other ways of knowing and seeing—likely supernatural ones. However, what's more interesting is the narrator's lack of curiosity about their abilities. Accepting this as normal may simply be a result of the narrator's loneliness (these women do seem to care about him, after all), or he may be more willing to accept the supernatural as real given his love of fantasy books.

The woman turns to the narrator and introduces herself as Mrs. Hempstock, Lettie's mother. The woman in the barn is Old Mrs. Hempstock, and this is Hempstock Farm. The farm is the oldest in the area and is even in the Domesday Book. The narrator has questions but doesn't ask any of them. Lettie announces that she's nudged an officer to look in the opal miner's breast pocket. Mrs. Hempstock suggests that Lettie take the narrator to the pond. Lettie huffs that it's her "**ocean**" and leads the narrator outside, assuring him that they're heading for a real ocean. They finally reach a duck pond with a dead fish floating on the surface. The narrator insists that it's just a pond, but Lettie insists that the Hempstocks came across this ocean from "the old country" when she was a baby.

The Domesday Book was a survey taken by King William the Conqueror in 1086 that noted all the farms and people in England. The Hempstocks' farm's inclusion in the Domesday Book therefore makes it clear that it's been around a long time, which makes the narrator think that the farm is a product of the real, mortal world. However, Lettie's insistence that her family came across the "ocean"—the pond—when she was a baby suggests that there's more to the farm than meets the eye. The narrator's unwillingness to believe that the pond is an ocean speaks to his desire to make what he's seeing make sense—and thus, he must believe all of this follows normal rules of how things work.

Lettie fetches a net and pulls the fish out as the narrator tries to argue with Lettie's origin story—he insists that the farm is in the Domesday Book. Lettie just agrees, somehow procures a knife, and cuts into the belly of the fish. She extracts a sixpence and hands it to the narrator, saying that this is what killed the fish. They agree that this isn't good and then return to the kitchen, where the narrator's father is waiting. His father thanks the Hempstock women for taking care of the narrator, and the police officer drives the narrator and his father back to the house. The narrator's father suggests that the narrator not talk about what happened, but the narrator has no interest in talking—he' made a friend. The narrator and his father discuss whether an **ocean** can be the size of a pond, but according to his father, this is impossible.

Though the narrator doesn't acknowledge the possibility, it's possible that Hempstock Farm could be both supernatural and *in the Domesday Book. The Hempstock women are clearly abnormal or supernatural in some way, so seemingly anything is possible. It's telling, though, that the narrator only fixates on the fact that he made a friend. More important than trying to figure out how Hempstock farm works is the fact that he met a person who takes him seriously, treats him kindly, and gives him gifts.*

CHAPTER 3

Two days later, the narrator receives a letter: it's confusing, so the narrator takes it to his mother. She explains that the narrator won the Premium Bonds, which his grandmother bought for him when he was born—he's won 25 pounds. Twenty-five pounds is more than enough to buy lots of candy—but the narrator's mother insists on putting the money in his account instead. That afternoon, Mr. Wollery, who attends to the gardens, discovers a bottle filled with small coins, all from before 1937. The narrator spends the day shining them and goes to sleep happy and feeling rich.

The narrator's excitement about winning the bond and about Mr. Wollery's discovery speaks to his childish innocence—his desire to buy candy is simple and youthful. His happiness can't even be compromised by his mother's insistence on putting the money in the bank, thereby shutting down his dreams of buying candy for now—the knowledge that he has the money to buy candy is enough to keep the narrator happy.

The narrator dreams that he's having a bad day in school. Kids chase him, along with his grandfather and his grandfather's friends. The tormenters catch up to the narrator, and a waxwork of his grandfather shoves something sharp and metallic into the narrator's mouth. The narrator wakes up choking. He shoves his fingers into his throat as far as he can go and pulls something out. He vomits a bit of blood and without looking at the thing in his hand, he runs to the bathroom and washes his mouth out. Then, he opens his hand and finds a silver shilling. He wants to tell someone about it, but he's not sure who to tell—adults never believe anything he says, true or not.

When the narrator's grandfather appears in his dream and is the one to shove the shilling down the narrator's throat, this alludes again to the narrator's sense that adults are all-powerful. Even in his dreams, adults can force him into something he certainly wouldn't choose to do himself. When this dream turns into reality, it then makes it clear that the narrator is dealing with something he knows nothing about. His usual way of understanding the world and how he fits into it won't help him solve this mystery.

The narrator then goes outside, and his sister accuses him of throwing coins at her from the bushes. The narrator heads down the drive and sees Lettie Hempstock. She asks if the narrator was having a nightmare and listens to what happened. She simply agrees when he says that nobody put the shilling in his mouth and that he didn't throw coins at his sister. When the narrator asks what's going on, Lettie says that someone is doing a poor job of giving people money. It's "stirring things up around here that should be asleep," which is bad. She also confirms that this has something to do with the opal miner and then invites the narrator to have **breakfast**. As they walk, Lettie tells the narrator about the bad things happening to people in houses along the lane.

Again, Lettie clearly knows more than the narrator does and far more than she's willing to let on. She seems unsurprised that the narrator found a shilling in his throat and even less surprised that this is the work of some sort of supernatural being that's "stirring up" mysterious things that should be lying dormant. This makes it clear to the narrator that Lettie is someone he needs to trust and listen to if he wants to figure out what's going on and understand this new, supernatural world that apparently exists alongside his own.

When the narrator asks why he found a shilling in his throat, Lettie says that the opal miner just wanted people to have money—but it's complicated. His death started something, and now, something *else* is wreaking havoc. Lettie says something about another neighbor and the narrator asks how she knows these things. Lettie explains that she's "been around for a bit," so she knows things. The narrator confirms her age and then asks how long she's been 11, but Lettie just smiles in response. When they pass Caraway Farm, the farmers are shouting at each other. Lettie explains worriedly that they're fighting over money and that the husband suspects his wife is "doing bad things" to earn money—he found bills in her purse that she can't account for.

In alluding to the fact that she's "been around for a while," Lettie essentially admits that she's been alive for much longer than 11 years—even if she has physically been an 11-year-old the entire time. This suggests that Lettie may be at an odd crossroads: she seems wise beyond her years and as though she's seen far more than a normal 11-year-old, but it's still possible that she has the maturity of a preteen. However, it's significant that obscures what's actually going on with the neighbors at Caraway farm. The husband likely thinks that his wife is earning money through sex work, but Lettie may think the narrator is too immature to grasp this. In this case, then, she's taking on the role of an adult to protect the narrator.

The narrator asks if all of this is really about money—but Lettie admits, in a way that makes her seem frighteningly grown-up, that she's not sure. She assures the narrator that they can fix it after they eat **pancakes**. When they're finished, the narrator admits he's afraid. Lettie insists he'll be safe and that she won't let him be harmed, but Old Mrs. Hempstock bursts in, worried that someone is hurt. Lettie tells Old Mrs. Hempstock about the narrator's shilling and about what else is happening. Old Mrs. Hempstock carefully inspects the shilling and says it's brand-new, even though it's dated 1912. She impresses the narrator by explaining that the electrons are "too smiley for 1912," so the narrator compliments her eyesight. She guffaws that it's not as good as it once was, given her age.

It's somewhat unclear if the narrator thinks Old Mrs. Hempstock is being funny when she talks about the electrons or if he takes her seriously—but given the Hempstock women's understanding of the supernatural, it's likely she's being serious. As the narrator listens and allows Old Mrs. Hempstock to tell him about this, he learns more about her and why he should trust her, and he gets more of an introduction into the way the Hempstocks see the world. Clearly, they see things that he can't.

When the narrator asks how old Old Mrs. Hempstock is (in his experience, old people like to share their ages), she simply says she's old enough and that she remembers when the moon was made. The narrator asks if a ghost is haunting them, which makes Lettie and her grandmother laugh. Lettie explains that ghosts can't make or move things and runs to get the younger Mrs. Hempstock. The narrator helps Old Mrs. Hempstock arrange her daffodils and feels very important and grown-up. Then, he accepts a lump of **honeycomb** and eats it with a spoon. Mrs. Hempstock arrives and scolds her mother for giving the narrator honey, but Old Mrs. Hempstock says she'll just scold the bacteria in the narrator's mouth.

Even if a ghost isn't to blame for this particular problem, Lettie confirms that in the Hempstocks' world, ghosts are something they must contend with. This continues to build the narrator's understanding of the world he lives in and how it interacts with the supernatural world that the Hempstocks inhabit. Old Mrs. Hempstock's choice to let the narrator help her arrange the flowers helps him see that the Hempstocks are friends who care for him. They want him to feel meaningful and as though he has friends here.

Mrs. Hempstock tells Lettie to take a hazel wand and the narrator to find "her," but Old Mrs. Hempstock says it's too dangerous to take the narrator. Lettie begs until her grandmother relents. Old Mrs. Hempstock reminds Lettie of what she must do, but Lettie brushes her off and insists they'll be fine—but presently, the narrator recalls that they *weren't* fine.

Especially since the narrator says outright that he and Lettie aren't *going to be fine, it suggests that Lettie's understanding of what she's getting into may be closer to that of a normal 11-year-old's than the ancient being she probably is. She is, like the narrator, just a child.*

CHAPTER 4

At the hazel thicket beside the lane, Lettie breaks off a small branch, strips it of bark, and splits it so it looks like a Y. She holds the two ends in her hands and says that their first target is something blue and shiny. The narrator looks around and spots a bluebell in the field. At the bluebell, Lettie holds the wand out again—next is something black and soft. They walk until they find a scrap of black cloth, and then they look for a red thing. The red turns out to be the corpse of a small animal that's covered in blood. Lettie tells the narrator to hold onto her arm; they're looking for a storm now, and they're getting closer. It begins to thunder as they come upon a clearing in the wood, and the narrator thinks he feels a pulse go through Lettie's arm. Lettie stumbles and says that "it" knows they're coming and that "it" doesn't want them around.

With the help of her wand, Lettie is seemingly able to see, feel, and understand things that the narrator isn't—another indicator that two people can experience the exact same event in wildly different ways. Though the narrator is able to follow along and help find their various targets as they go along, he, unlike Lettie, doesn't understand why they're doing this or what exactly they're looking for. Not having this information makes the experience more frightening for the narrator.

Lettie grins as the wind blows and something rumbles in the dark clouds. She pulls the narrator down and shushes him as a sort of brown, furry rug with sharp teeth flaps over them. When it's gone, Lettie tells that narrator that it's a manta wolf. Lettie spins but can't feel their target, so she asks the narrator to put the shilling on the fork of the stick. As they turn, the tip of the wand bursts into flame—but when the narrator picks his coin up, it's cold. Lettie takes the narrator's hand as they walk on and instructs him to not let go, no matter what.

Lettie asking the narrator to hold onto her hand implies that whatever they're heading for is frightening—but if the narrator remains tethered to Lettie and trusts her, they'll get through this and be okay. Casually mentioning a manta wolf (seemingly a mythical species) with no explanation makes it clear that there's far more going on here than the narrator understands—and thus, the focus of this experience is the narrator and Lettie's friendship, not the supernatural events.

When the narrator says he's afraid, Lettie explains that they're farther out than she expected and that she's not sure what's out here—though they're still on Hempstock Farm. However, the farm came from the old country, and with the farm came what Old Mrs. Hempstock calls fleas. The narrator doesn't believe that they're still on the farm *or* that he's in the real world. The coin becomes cold, and Lettie says they've arrived. Against the orange sky, the narrator sees a huge canvas thing with a face cut into it. The narrator whimpers. Lettie asks the thing for its name, but the creature refuses to tell her. Lettie's accent grows stronger as she angrily demands the creature's name, but the creature only asks who the narrator is. Lettie whispers for the narrator to say silent.

One thing that makes Lettie such a good friend is that she never minimizes the narrator's fears or lies to him. Instead, she admits when she's out of her element and tells him what she does know about what's going on—and how the narrator can stay safe. Lettie's bravery in the face of this creature speaks to how much she cares about humans as a whole. She's dealing with this creature, as Old Mrs. Hempstock told her to, so that her human neighbors can once again live in peace. Lettie is thus a friend to humanity, not just to the narrator.

The canvas creature sighs and says that something came to her and said that she could make things happy if she gave them money. Lettie says that the creature needs to "let them be," which makes the creature flap around so it's looking directly at Lettie and the narrator. Lettie squeezes the narrator's hand as the thing studies the narrator, and Lettie says she'll "bind" the creature as a "nameless thing." She begins to sing in a strange language to the tune of a child's song. Worms writhe out of the ground, and something flies at Lettie and the narrator. Though the narrator normally misses balls when he tries to catch them, he puts his hands out and catches the writhing, rotting cloth. At the same time, something stabs the narrator in the foot. Lettie knocks away the ball and grabs the narrator's hand.

Because Lettie can't extract the creature's name, she misses important information she needs to effectively "bind" it. In this case, not even Lettie has the information or the skills to navigate this situation effectively. The fact that the narrator manages to catch this flying cloth ball when he can't catch anything else suggests that this creature may have some insight into how people like the narrator function—perhaps it understands that he wants to protect Lettie and be brave for her, just as she wants to protect him.


The narrator recognizes Lettie's song as "the language of shaping" and explains that in the years after this, he often dreams in the language. He understands that Lettie is binding the creature to this specific place. As Lettie finishes her song, the narrator thinks he can hear the creature screaming in his mind—but then, everything goes quiet. Lettie begins to lead the narrator back. They reach a field planted with odd, furry, snake-like things. Lettie offers to let the narrator pull one up, and he unearths a sleek black **kitten** with a white ear. The narrator asks if he can take it home, but Lettie says that it's a "she" and that it's not good to take things home from this place.

Pulling up a kitten out of a field makes this supernatural world seem far more whimsical and significantly less frightening. This begins to help the narrator understand that just as his own world is filled with both wonder and horror, so, too, is this mirror universe. Lettie makes it very clear that it's important to properly gender something. This is how the narrator will be able to show this kitten respect—and all *creatures, the novel suggests, deserve respect.*


The narrator tells Lettie about his kitten, Fluffy's, death, and Lettie laments that living things don't last very long before they become memories and fade. When she and the narrator reach a gate, they enter onto the lane. Lettie checks that the narrator is all right, and the narrator insists he is. He hopes that this is the right answer.

What Lettie has to say about living things becoming memories again suggests that she's older than 11—and no one, no matter how magical they might be, can remember everything.

CHAPTER 5

That night, the narrator inspects the new hole in his foot. It doesn't hurt, but when he pokes it, it seems like something inside retreats. When the narrator's sister asks questions, he goes to the bathroom. In retrospect, the narrator isn't sure why he didn't call an adult—but as a kid, he only went to adults as a last resort. He pulls out tweezers and sees that something alive blocks the hole and seems disturbed by the light. The narrator covers the hole and after a minute, pokes in the tweezers and catches a worm. He tries to pull the worm out. It's pink and gray, and when about an inch of it is out, it becomes rigid. The narrator isn't afraid. He remembers that the neighbor's **cat** had worms, so this seems normal.

To a degree, the narrator doesn't believe that adults take him seriously. It's hard to say whether this is true or not—thus far, his parents seem dismissive and disinterested, but they don't ignore their children completely. However, the narrator may have good reason not to tell his parents about this worm, which is likely supernatural given that it burrowed into the narrator's foot when they were in Lettie's strange universe. The narrator may feel that adults are set in thinking that there is no magic in the world and would therefore have a hard time believing him that he has a worm that behaves like this in his foot.

The narrator winds the worm around the tweezers, but it refuses to come out further. He turns on the hot water, and when it's warm enough, he puts his foot under. The heat doesn't bother him, but the worm goes slack. The narrator is able to pull it out until he's almost at the very end. A quick tug causes the worm to snap with a tiny bit left in his foot. Once out of his body, the worm writhes. The narrator doesn't usually kill animals, but since he's sure the worm is dangerous, he washes it down the drain with scalding water and puts the plug in the drain. He puts a bandage on his foot and stares at himself in the mirror. The narrator wonders who, exactly, he is and what "me" means.

The narrator seems to understand instinctively that this worm is somehow ominous and threatening. This is likely due to what he experienced with Lettie earlier; he's had a taste of what bad supernatural beings are like and is therefore better able to identify them when they appear in his day-to-day life. This shows that the narrator is learning how to understand his world. On the other hand, self-knowledge is still eludes him at this point—a testament to the complex process of getting to know oneself and one's place in the wider world.

CHAPTER 6

According to the narrator's aunts, the narrator had been a "monster" of a toddler—but he somehow transformed into a frightened seven-year-old. Presently, the narrator muses that small children often think of themselves as gods—they want everyone else to conform to their way of seeing the world. The morning after the worm incident, the narrator's foot looks better; there's a blister where the hole was. At breakfast, the narrator's mother says she will be working as an optometrist four days per week—which means that they have a new housekeeper, Ursula. Ursula will stay in the narrator's old **bedroom** and look after the narrator and his sister. The narrator hopes Ursula is nice; the last housekeeper was not. He takes a book to the garden and reads about Egyptian gods. He explains that he likes myths because they're better than adult stories or children's stories. Adult stories are always slow and confusing, and he doesn't get why grownups don't want to read about Narnia.

The narrator's observation about children wanting everyone else to see things the way they do is significant. It suggests that people tend to feel threatened by how complex the world is and become set in their subjective perspective as a way of making sense of reality. The narrator doesn't understand how exactly he became so frightened—it's just his normal state of being when he's seven. There may be good reasons why the narrator is so frightened, however: as a child, he's powerless when it comes to dealing with adults. The prospect of having a new housekeeper around means that he has another adult to contend who has control over his life. Though it's unclear how much control Ursula is going to have, she still represents a threat to the way the narrator currently does things.

When the narrator gets hungry, he goes to the kitchen. His mother stands with a strange woman and suddenly, the narrator's heart hurts. The woman is pretty and very tall. The narrator's mother introduces the woman as Ursula Monkton. Ursula pats the narrator's sister's head, and his sister grins and says she likes Ursula and wants to be Ursula when she grows up. Ursula laughs and asks the narrator if they're friends too, but the narrator is terrified. He looks at Ursula, a grownup in her gray and pink skirt, and he imagines it flapping under an orange sky. He leaves the kitchen without **food** and returns to his book. His sister joins him to show off a gift from Ursula: a tiny gray leather purse containing half a crown. The narrator wants what half a crown can buy, but he thinks the gift is awful.

The gray and pink of Ursula's clothes is reminiscent of the color of the worm the narrator pulled out of his foot. Further, imagining her dress flapping the way the creature in the woods did suggests that this woman, the worm, and the creature the narrator saw yesterday are one and the same. It's telling, then, that the narrator still latches on to the fact that Ursula is an adult— this continues to develop the idea that adults have power over the narrator because he's a child. Because of this, adults aren't trustworthy. Ursula also represents the supernatural world, which the narrator doesn't know how to navigate either.

The narrator insists he doesn't like Ursula, but the narrator's sister says this is just because Ursula is her friend. The narrator is certain that Ursula isn't friends with *anyone* and wants to tell Lettie this, but he's not sure what to say. He's sure that Ursula is his fault: she's here because he let go of Lettie's hand, and he can't just flush Ursula down the drain. In retrospect, the narrator thinks that he should've run to the Hempstocks' farm then, but his mother takes a taxi to work, and Ursula informs the children that they can't leave the property without her. The narrator is hungry, but he's afraid to eat Ursula's **sandwiches** because they might contain worms. Instead, he secretly stuffs his pockets with fruit and hides it in his "laboratory," a shed where he keeps his chemistry set.

The narrator recognizes that to an outside observer, he's being unreasonable. To someone who doesn't know that the Hempstocks live on an enchanted, supernatural farm, it's silly to fear someone because they're the same color as a worm—and yet the narrator instinctively knows that he should fear Ursula. His suspicion that even Lettie won't believe there's something bad going on speaks to how alone he's accustomed to feeling. He's not used to having a friend believe what he has to say, especially when it's something that seems so silly.

The narrator explains that while adults follow paths and are content to do so, children explore. He knows many ways off the property that don't force him to walk down the driveway, so he creeps down the hill. Ursula waits for him at the bottom of the hill with her skirt flapping. The narrator insists he's just exploring, but Ursula sends him to his room for a nap. The narrator knows he's too young to argue and win, so he grudgingly follows Ursula up the hill. Ursula explains that the narrator's parents can't afford this property, and soon, they'll realize they can solve their problems by selling the land to developers who will turn it into a bunch of identical houses. If the narrator is lucky, he'll live in one of them. But the narrator loves the house as it is; in a way, it's a part of him.

The insistence that children explore is another nod to the novel's assertion that children are more open to seeing odd, potentially magical things than adults are. Because adults stay on the proverbial path, they don't have as many opportunities to learn about the intricacies of their world and therefore can't fully appreciate it. What Ursula essentially suggests when she proposes the housing development is that she wants to get rid of the place where kids can explore—therefore making them act more adult and less curious.

The narrator asks who Ursula really is and why she's giving people money. Ursula insists that everyone wants money and that it'll make people happy if they let it. At the edge of the lawn, the narrator runs away to the house, but inside the back door, Ursula is waiting for him. She says that she's been inside the narrator—so nobody will believe anything he says and she can make him be silent forever. The narrator lies on his bed. The hole in his foot aches, as does his heart. He tries to immerse himself in his mother's old books about girls having adventures and being brave. He wonders if the Hempstocks have a telephone and sneaks into his parents' room to call the operator. Instead, the narrator hears Ursula, saying that well-behaved children don't sneakily use the telephone.

Everything Ursula says and does here makes the narrator confront the fact that she's much more powerful than he is—both as an adult and as a supernatural being. Ursula can combine these different kinds of power to make the narrator feel totally alone, which shows that Ursula understands the power of friendship. If the narrator were able to get ahold of the Hempstocks, Ursula knows they'd believe him—and then he'd feel braver and more willing to stand up to her.

The narrator eats his emergency supply of chocolate and knows that he brought Ursula here when he let go of Lettie's hand and the worm entered his foot. He also knows that Ursula is just a mask for the flapping thing he saw. The narrator returns to his book and waits for his parents to come home. Finally, Ursula calls the narrator downstairs. His sister is watching television and triumphantly says that Ursula will let her watch whatever she wants. He tries to tell his sister that Ursula isn't nice, but his sister insists that Ursula is pretty. When the narrator's mother gets home, he asks if she'll make Ursula leave, but his mother refuses.

Cozying up to the narrator's sister deprives the narrator of another possible ally—no five-year-old is going to side with her seemingly paranoid brother when the nanny gives her money and gives her complete control of the television. This does suggest that the narrator's sister is possibly less curious or less imaginative than the narrator. She may be less interested in trying to figure out how the world around her works and is therefore unable to see that Ursula doesn't quite fit.

The narrator's father gets home and they sit down for **dinner**. Though the meal includes all the narrator's favorite foods, he eats nothing. He notices that his father seems to make jokes just for Ursula, and she laughs at all of them. They watch *Mission: Impossible* after dinner, which seems unusually unsettling, and then they go to bed. The door is closed tonight, so the narrator lies awake and hopes his parents will send Ursula away. The narrator gets up and sits at the bottom of the stairs. He hears his father tell Ursula that the narrator's mother is away some nights to raise money for a well and contraception in Africa. Ursula says she knows all about contraception and then sends the narrator back to bed.

The narrator implies that at age seven, what Ursula says to his father go right over his head—in mentioning contraception, she's suggesting that she's willing and able to have safe sex with the narrator's father. However, even if the narrator doesn't totally understand the implication, he does seem aware that their conversation has sinister implications for the narrator's relationship with his father. If his father becomes sexually involved with Ursula, it's even less likely that the narrator will find any sympathy from his parents.

CHAPTER 7

When the narrator wakes, his parents are both gone. It's a gray day. The narrator prays that Ursula is gone, but she's waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She warns the narrator that if he tries to leave, she'll lock him in his room and tell his parents he peed on the floor on purpose. The narrator eats fruit in his laboratory and then reads another of his mother's old books. His father gets home earlier than usual, and the narrator watches from a tree as his father shows Ursula around the gardens. She laughs at his jokes and he touches her shoulder.

It's odd that Ursula feels as though she can't tell the narrator's parents the truth—that the narrator tried to leave the property—when she threatens the narrator. Asking the narrator to stay put would be a perfectly reasonable, safety conscious request. This suggests that Ursula might not entirely understand how the mortal world works, just as the narrator doesn't understand how Ursula's supernatural world works.

The narrator wants to run to his father, but he's afraid his father will be angry. When he's angry, the narrator's father is terrifying. He shouts, though he doesn't hit. He talks about how his father hit him as though to make the narrator thankful he doesn't hit—but sometimes, the narrator thinks that violent punishments in his books seem clean and simple. The narrator finds a new perch when his father and Ursula move out of sight, and he watches his father give Ursula a bouquet of narcissi. The narrator thinks of the myth of Narcissus and how disappointed he was when he learned that a narcissus is "just a less impressive daffodil." The narrator's sister joins her father and Ursula. The narrator sees his father put a hand on Ursula's bottom, but he thinks nothing of it.

Again, because of the narrator's age, he doesn't entirely grasp the significance of seeing his father touch Ursula's bottom. It doesn't read as sexual to him—but seeing them together nevertheless makes the narrator afraid of his father. This suggests that Ursula is preying on the narrator's fear of adults as she worms her way into his father's life. Turning the narrator's father into a seemingly scary figure (even if he never does anything frightening) makes the narrator feel more alone and makes him easier to control.

The narrator reads another book until **dinner**. As he reads, he vows to run to the Hempstocks' farm as soon as someone takes him off the property in the next few days. Ursula makes meatloaf for dinner, but the narrator refuses to eat it. His mother is at her meeting, so it's just the narrator, his sister, his father, and Ursula. The narrator continues to refuse the meatloaf even though he's so hungry it hurts, and blurts that he won't eat anything Ursula made. Ursula sweetly insists that the narrator doesn't need to apologize, and the narrator thinks her eyes look like rotting cloth. The narrator's father grows angry and demands an explanation. When the narrator says that Ursula is a monster and a flea, his father leads him into the hallway.

Because the narrator has traveled a long ways on the Hempstocks' farm and saw Ursula in her true form, it's possible for him to deduce that she's bad news—but since his father only sees a beautiful young woman, he's unable to see the danger Ursula poses. Though the narrator may have little power here because he's a child, he does have far more information about what's going on than anyone else does. However, because he's so young and powerless, he has no way to use what he knows to help himself or his family.

The narrator's father scolds the narrator, but the narrator refuses to apologize. He races upstairs to the bathroom, the only room with a locking door, and he locks himself in. His father bangs on the door and threatens to break it down. The narrator isn't sure if his father can actually do this—closed bathroom doors mean people shouldn't come in—but his father breaks the door off the frame and grabs the narrator's arm. His father begins to run a cold bath and tells Ursula, in the doorway with the narrator's sister, to close the door. The narrator is terrified. He has no idea what his father is going to do.

When the narrator's father breaks into the bathroom, it shatters the narrator's understanding of how his world works. Something is very wrong if adults who know how to be polite suddenly start smashing down bathroom doors and start running cold baths. This sense that nothing is happening as it should makes this episode even more frightening for the narrator. He's dealing with supernatural occurrences masquerading in real life.

The narrator says he'll apologize, but his father ignores him and turns off the tap. Then, he effortlessly picks up the narrator by the armpits. Realizing what's going to happen, the narrator struggles in the moment before his father plunges him into the water. The narrator is horrified, first because he's in a cold bath fully dressed, and then because he knows he's going to die. He vows to live, so he flails and grabs onto his father's tie. The narrator pulls until his father would have to put his own face in the tub to keep the narrator in the water. Suddenly, the narrator's father straightens up, accuses his son of ruining his tie, and sends him to his room for the night.

Making it clear just how easy it is for his father to lift him up and then plunge him down into the bathtub drives home just how powerless the narrator is. He's a child, so he's small compared to a full-grown man, and he never imagined that his parent would do this to him. It recalls his visit to the wax museum, where his takeaway was that parents kill their children for anatomy—in these situations, parents have complete control over their children's lives, even deciding whether they live at all.

CHAPTER 8

The narrator feels frozen. He undresses in his sister's room and lights the gas fireplace. The adult narrator wonders why, of all things, it's hardest for him to believe that small children would have a gas fireplace in their bedroom. He pulls on his pajamas and a dressing gown as his sister comes in to fetch her nightgown; she announces that she gets to sleep in their parents' room and watch television. Ursula appears and tells the narrator that his mother won't believe the narrator, since she always stands with the narrator's father. Ursula warns the narrator that the next time he's defiant, she'll lock him in the attic next time. When the narrator insists he's not afraid, Ursula turns off the fire, confiscates the matches, and locks the narrator in.

Because the person telling the story is the adult narrator, he's looking back at his experiences with a very different perspective—and because of this, he's able to add more nuance to his childhood memories. That he finds the gas fireplace the most unbelievable part of this whole thing speaks to how real everything else must've felt; his world is being turned upside-down. Ursula's aside that the narrator's mother will stand with her husband impresses upon the narrator that he has no friends in this house—he's alone, and therefore afraid.

The narrator learned from a book how to get keys out of locks, but the key isn't in the keyhole. He cries, and it starts to rain. The narrator knows that Ursula will hurt him if he tries to leave, but she won't expect him to try to leave *now*. The narrator opens the window, turns off the light, and imagines Ursula believing that he's in his bed and falling asleep. Remembering all the book characters he's read about who climbed drainpipes, he begins to shimmy down the drainpipe. He tries not to think and hopes he can avoid the television room window, where his father and Ursula could see him. The narrator focuses on thinking that he's asleep and is surprised to find the television room empty. He drops into the flowerbed.

In the absence of any living friends, the narrator turns to his fictional friends from books to get through this frightening night. That the narrator learned he could climb down drainpipes from book characters speaks to how he's constructed his understanding of his world thus far. Though he's done his fair share of exploring, he also makes a point to pay attention to what he can learn from books and to integrate that knowledge whenever possible.

A light goes on in the drawing room. Curious, the narrator approaches the window. He's not sure what's going on—Ursula and his father both have their back to the narrator, but Ursula is pushed up against the fireplace with her skirt around her waist. The narrator doesn't care what's happening; he knows Ursula is distracted. He races out into the cloudy night, and his headache disappears as soon as he hits the lane. He imagines he's in bed, having vivid dreams. Then he thinks of his father kissing Ursula and his father's face as he held the narrator underwater. The narrator is afraid of what it means that his father is kissing Ursula. Realizing that his father and Ursula will be in a car if they chase him, the narrator cuts into the meadow.

Given the narrator's age and maturity level, he doesn't understand that his father and Ursula are having sex. However, even though he only has a cursory understanding of what's going on, he understands the deeper implication: that his father isn't trustworthy. As he races down the lane, the narrator essentially tries to live two different realities at once. In one he's racing down the lane; in the other, he's safe in bed. This kind of thought process is hard to maintain, however, when he has to think so hard about where he's going.

Thunder rumbles behind the narrator. He pushes on through a plowed field and sees a car on the lane that he recognizes as a neighbor's. Seeing the car makes the lane seem unsafe, so the narrator cuts across the meadow until he reaches a wire fence. However, when he reaches out to climb under, it shocks him. The narrator presses on, over more gates, until he has no idea where he is. Thunderclouds roll in, and he imagines wolves and ghosts. The narrator shouts for Lettie as lightning flickers oddly above. It illuminates the field, and the narrator can see that there's no way out. He thinks he sees a break in the hedge, but as he reaches it, he hears Ursula's voice: she's behind him, floating weightlessly in the sky. Her blouse is unbuttoned to reveal her white bra.

That the narrator reaches out so readily to the fence speaks to how much he trusts his world to be safe and helpful—and yet, even the fully mortal world contains nasty surprises for him. Learning that the meadow isn't as safe as he assumed makes this even more frightening. Meanwhile, Ursula's choice to float with the lightning is a careful, conscious decision to make herself look even more powerful and difficult for the narrator to understand. She's an adult and she can somehow control the sky, while the narrator is just a defenseless child.

The narrator knows that Ursula is playing with him. She wants him to run, and knowing that he has no choice, he races for the break in the hedge. He hears Ursula saying that the narrator's father will do everything she says. He'll let the narrator out of the attic and drown the narrator in a cold bath nightly until Ursula gets bored. She says that when the narrator dies, he'll be happy, because he won't like the attic—it'll be full of Ursula's friends who don't like little boys. The narrator realizes that Ursula is floating right beside him, whispering in his ear. His legs give out. He stumbles and falls and then realizes that he's wetting himself.

It's impossible to say whether Ursula really means to follow through on her threats, or whether she just wants to frighten the narrator. Mentioning both the narrator's father and her own "friends" helps her drive home that she'll make it so the narrator doesn't have any friends of his own, whether they're friends in books or friends like Lettie. Wetting himself from fear makes the narrator seem even more childlike and powerless.

Ursula begins to descend. The narrator feels something soft touch his hand and realizes it's a **kitten**. He picks it up, cuddles it, and refuses to go with Ursula. Ursula points out that she's an adult, while the narrator is a child. Lettie, unafraid, walks up behind the narrator and tells Ursula to get off her land. She takes the narrator's hand. Ursula smiles. The narrator thinks that Ursula is the powerful, cruel, adult world; he feels small and insignificant, and he knows that Ursula can make his father kill him. Lettie makes the narrator feel braver, but she's also a child—even if she's been 11 for a long time. Ursula will win since she's an adult. Ursula refuses to go back where she came from and vows to take everything she wants from this world.

Having a friend, even if it's just a kitten, makes the narrator feel braver and refuse to go with Ursula. When the narrator thinks that Ursula is the adult world as a whole, it suggests that the narrator's distrust of adults isn't just about the people—it's about the world they've built, which he inhabits, but where he has no power. Even though Lettie's friendship helps the narrator feel braver, he still sees her as more or less a normal kid. This means that in the narrator's mind, Lettie has no real standing when she argues with Ursula.

The narrator holds Lettie's hand and strokes the **kitten**. Ursula taunts Lettie and asks what Lettie is going to do now that she's used the narrator to enter the world. Thoughtfully, Lettie says that she could make Ursula a new door or have Old Mrs. Hempstock send Ursula back across the **ocean**. Ursula angrily demands the narrator, whom she insists she owns. Ursula points out that the narrator's parents belong to her and *they* can take him back. The narrator feels prickly, and the field starts to glow. Ursula explodes in golden light. Lettie confirms that Ursula isn't dead and talks about getting the narrator food and clothes. She says that the kitten is the same one that the narrator picked from the ground. The narrator tells Lettie that he doesn't want to go home, but this is a lie: he wants to go home, but to his home before the opal miner showed up.

Lettie's thoughtful, measured way of speaking to Ursula points to her maturity and the fact that she's more than just a powerless child. At the very least, Lettie has access to supportive friends and family to help her when she's unsure of what to do, which again sets her apart from the isolated narrator. Then, when Ursula talks about the narrator's parents owning the narrator, it shows that she's learning more about how the mortal world works. She knows that the law is on her side and trusts that it's going to help her get what she wants—which does suggest that she's not entirely aware of what the Hempstock women can do to get their way.

CHAPTER 9

Mrs. Hempstock and Old Mrs. Hempstock fly into action as soon as the narrator enters the kitchen. They haul a tin bath in and fill it with warm water. The narrator is horrified about being naked in front of new people, but he strips and climbs in. The Hempstocks don't seem to care that the narrator is naked. Old Mrs. Hempstock gives the narrator a mug of soup to warm him up and then some soap. She sits in a rocker as the narrator scrubs himself. Lettie returns with a huge white garment, and when the narrator realizes it's a nightgown like he's seen in book illustrations, he puts it on. Then, they have **dinner**—the best meal he's ever tasted.

The narrator feels far more excited about wearing this garment when he realizes that he's seen pictures of them in books. This again speaks to how the narrator uses books to help him figure out how his world works and how things used to be. The fact that the Hempstocks only have this old-fashioned, traditionally feminine article of clothing to offer the narrator reinforces that they're not normal people, per se. They're capable of magic and see the world in a very different way than the narrator does.

The narrator asks if there are any Hempstock men, but Old Mrs. Hempstock just laughs. Lettie and Mrs. Hempstock explain that men come sometimes, but the male Hempstocks all left to seek their fortunes. Suddenly, Old Mrs. Hempstock exclaims that the narrator's parents are on their way. Ursula isn't with them, but the narrator is convinced that they'll take him back and that his father will kill him. Mrs. Hempstock assures him that this won't happen, but the narrator doesn't believe her. The women discuss whether to manipulate time or to transform the narrator into something else, but Lettie suggests they "snip and cut." Old Mrs. Hempstock talks through what the process would be as Ginnie returns with the narrator's dressing gown. She lays out scissors, a needle, and red thread.

To the narrator, it's unthinkable that women can exist without men. He's been raised in a family with two heterosexual parents and has likely seen that his friends live in similar families, so Old Mrs. Hempstock's reaction reads as very weird to him. Though he's trying to understand how their lives work, it's difficult when he's in such unchartered territory. The same happens when they talk about "snip and cut" without explaining what they're doing. The Hempstocks clearly have access to magical power of some sort, which the narrator recognizes—but given that he's so young, he has no interest in learning exactly how it works.

Old Mrs. Hempstock examines the dressing gown and says it'd be best if the narrator's father weren't upset with him; then, he'd be happy for the narrator to stay the night. She begins to cut as Ginnie rises to answer the door. Lettie assures the narrator he'll be fine. The narrator's mother and father enter the kitchen and suddenly stop as an irregular scrap of fabric falls from the dressing gown. Ginnie points to the fabric scraps and says they're the narrator, his father, and the bathtub—his father won't be angry without the bathtub incident. Old Mrs. Hempstock begins to sew, and Lettie asks the narrator about his toothbrush. The narrator describes it, and as Old Mrs. Hempstock snips her thread, Ginnie and the narrator's parents start talking as though they've been talking for a while.

Though Old Mrs. Hempstock has seemingly cut out the bathtub incident from the narrator's father's memory, it's significant that the narrator still remembers. This makes it even clearer that no two people will remember an event the same way. Indeed, while "snip and cut" doesn't exist in the real world, it's nevertheless true that some people will forget that something ever happened—and that event will still be extremely meaningful to a person who does *remember. Not knowing how this worked means that the narrator is still a bit afraid and unwilling to trust what happened.*

The narrator's father looks confused, but he holds out the narrator's toothbrush. The narrator's mother fusses over him and greets Lettie, and Ginnie promises to bring the narrator back in the morning. She sends the narrator's parents away with scones. When they're gone, Old Mrs. Hempstock holds up the dressing gown: it looks untouched. She gives the narrator a scrap and says that it's the entirety of his evening. She suggests he burn it. The narrator picks it up and asks if it will have happened if he burns it. Ginnie looks concerned and asks what the narrator wants, and the narrator replies that he wants to remember and tosses the scrap in the fire.

Here, Old Mrs. Hempstock seems to imply that if the narrator wanted to, he could forget everything that happened this evening—but he makes a choice to remember. This shows that people can make conscious choices to shape what they remember. If someone focuses on remembering something, it's possible to do so. Getting the choice also gives the narrator agency over his evening that he didn't experience before—so in this regard, remembering feels a bit like growing up and playing at being an adult.

Suddenly, the narrator feels like he's underwater and knows his father is going to kill him. He screams. Then, he's on the floor of the kitchen and his foot feels like it's on fire. Ginnie inspects his foot, and the narrator tells her that Ursula came here in his foot. He apologizes to Lettie for letting go of her hand. Old Mrs. Hempstock inspects the hole and says that this is the door to Ursula's home; she wants to keep the narrator around so that she can use the hole again. Old Mrs. Hempstock asks the narrator to be brave and grabs her needle like she's going to stab something. She stabs the narrator's foot, but it doesn't hurt—she stabs *into* the hole. She slowly draws out the tunnel, and the narrator feels his terror leave him—but the tunnel doesn't want to come out all the way.

When the narrator has this reaction to burning the memory of his evening, it suggests that there's some connection between the narrator and Ursula that keeps him from forgetting. In particular, it's telling that the narrator finds himself immersed in the memory of his father drowning him. This suggests that what gives Ursula her power is keeping the narrator afraid and alone. This is why the narrator's terror seems to leave him as Old Mrs. Hempstock pulls the tunnel out—having someone trustworthy to help him at least partially robs Ursula of her power to terrorize him.

The narrator feels coldness in his heart, but then Old Mrs. Hempstock flicks her wrist and pulls the rest of the tunnel out. She cackles and says that this wasn't very clever as Ginnie pulls out a jam jar. Lettie, fascinated, inspects the hole that's now captured in the jar. The narrator apologizes for letting go of her hand, but Lettie insists that they'll just do better next time. Old Mrs. Hempstock insists they have more work to do—she insists that "fleas attract varmints"—but Ginnie firmly says it's time for the narrator to go to bed. The narrator grabs the **kitten** and a candlestick, and Lettie leads him into a hallway. The narrator notices that there's a full moon and it's not raining—yesterday, there was a crescent moon, and it should still be raining outside. Lettie says simply that Old Mrs. Hempstock likes it like that.

The narrator desperately wants to make Lettie feel like he's still a worthy friend who can do as he's told. He wants to be able to accompany her next time, so he needs to act as mature as he can. Lettie, however, behaves as though this isn't really a big deal. This speaks to Lettie's deeper understanding of what's going on. To her, Ursula isn't as frightening as she is for the narrator; she's just a flea, and Lettie has dealt with fleas before. Because of her perspective, none of this is quite as scary as it is to the narrator.

Lettie shows the narrator his room, points to clothes for the morning, and says she'll be right next door. The narrator crawls into bed, and the **kitten** settles on his pillow. He knows that there's a monster in his house, and he thinks of all the other things that may or may not have happened this evening.

Even if the narrator remembers the bathtub incident, he's not sure if it even happened. This again speaks to how unreliable memory can be—for all the narrator knows, he might just be imagining things.

CHAPTER 10

The narrator has unsettling dreams that make him feel as though he has "to wake up or die," but he can't remember them. He wants to go back to yesterday, before Ursula showed up. The narrator looks out the window and sees a perplexing harvest moon. Old Mrs. Hempstock is pacing outside, the sight of which comforts the narrator. He goes back to bed and wakes in the morning. The narrator puts on the strange 18th-century clothes the best he can, but the shoes don't fit. The **kitten** follows him into the hallway and then shows him the way to the kitchen. Ginnie directs the narrator to his **breakfast** and says that Lettie is out gathering supplies to send Ursula home.

It's telling that the narrator keys in on the fact that the moon looks a bit weird. This is likely one of the few obvious ways in which he can tell that the Hempstock farm is more than it seems—given what Lettie said last night about Old Mrs. Hempstock simply "liking" the moon to be full, it's possible that Old Mrs. Hempstock can control lots of things about the farm. But the narrator asks few questions, so he's never able to answer this for sure.

The narrator says he hates Ursula. Ginnie says that she doesn't—Ursula does what her nature dictates she should, and she's trying to give people what they want. When the narrator points out that she hasn't given *him* anything, Ginnie says it's "dangerous to be a door." She heads out and the narrator turns to his **porridge**. Lettie arrives a bit later with a shopping basket, dirty, scratched, and miserable. The narrator looks in the basket and sees broken toys. Lettie tosses in the jar containing the wormhole and tells the narrator he can stay here, but he insists on going with Lettie. Lettie looks unhappy and suggests they go to the **ocean**. On the bench, the narrator says that the Hempstocks aren't people, but Lettie shrugs and says that no one's appearance ever matches what they are inside.

Ginnie makes the case that they should be treating Ursula (and for that matter, everyone else in the world) with compassion. Ursula isn't really being malicious; she's just doing what fleas are supposed to do. For that matter, she's only so interested in the narrator because he was her way into this world—Ginnie rationalizes this by telling the narrator that it's always "dangerous to be a door." To Ginnie, this all makes sense. But to the narrator, who's the target of Ursula's ire, this seems far too generous. This speaks to the narrator's youth and his inability to empathize with adults at his young age.

The narrator asks if she's a monster like Ursula, but Lettie doesn't think so. She says that monsters look like all sorts of things. When the narrator suggests that people should be afraid of Ursula, Lettie asks the narrator what he thinks *Ursula* is afraid of. The narrator doesn't think Ursula is afraid of anything—she's a grownup and a monster. Lettie says that monsters are monsters *because* they're afraid and then says that while grownups might look confident on the outside, they all look like children on the inside. Really, there aren't any grownups—except for Old Mrs. Hempstock. The narrator wonders if this is true, and he points out that Lettie's **ocean** is just a pond. Lettie just says that she knows what Ursula is afraid of—and she's afraid of them too.

Again, as far as the narrator is concerned, monsters and adults aren't afraid of anything. In his experience, they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, and there are no consequences for their actions. Lettie, however, proposes that both monsters and adults are more like children than the narrator gives them credit for. Adults and monsters experience fear, just like children do. With this, she encourages the narrator to empathize with Ursula, even as she's trying to turn his life upside-down.

The narrator collects his pajamas and toothbrush in a bag. Lettie promises that Ursula won't get him and they head up the lane. They take a shortcut, and Lettie announces that there are no "varmints" yet. She won't explain what these are. She does explain sadly that the Hempstocks aren't witches and don't do spells; the things in the shopping bag are just boundary markers. Lettie puts a marble in the dirt and then walks the property line, dropping more toys. She explains that these items will keep Ursula from leaving the property—they want her to go home, not away. The narrator is confused, but he trusts Lettie.

At this point, it's somewhat unclear why Lettie won't tell the narrator what the varmints are. It's possible that she's trying to protect him from this knowledge, but if this is the case, it means that the narrator cannot effectively calculate what risks he's taking as he follows Lettie. It's also significant that Lettie specifies that they want to send Ursula home, *not just away. It's not enough to make Ursula leave the narrator's family alone—Lettie has to do what's best for Ursula and for all humans, as she has a responsibility to help others.*

Lettie and the narrator enter the house. The narrator's sister stops practicing piano and asks what's going on. The narrator introduces Lettie and Lettie drops a broken xylophone into the mess of toys. They head up the stairs to see Ursula. Lettie explains that Ursula is trying to make the world more comfortable for herself by making other people hurt. She places a toy on each step, and at the top, she promises the narrator that Ursula won't put him in the attic. Lettie pushes open the **bedroom** door. Ursula lies naked on the bed, but the room is far more interesting to the narrator than Ursula's body—strips of cloth hang everywhere. Lettie tells Ursula to leave, but Ursula sits up and says she's not going anywhere. The narrator thinks she's pretty, and the adult narrator wonders if he'd think the same now.

Because of his youth and his sexual immaturity, the narrator isn't much interested in seeing a naked woman. Because of his youth, then, it's easier for him to take note of what else is in his former bedroom. The adult narrator's musing about what he'd think now speaks to the way that time and age can change how someone tackles a situation like this. The fact that this encounter takes place in the narrator's old bedroom suggests again that in many ways, the narrator's childhood is over. The safety of childhood has been pushed out by a powerful woman and the adult world she represents.

Ursula scolds Lettie for trying to bind her without knowing her name, but Lettie holds out the jam jar. She says that they can get Ursula to a place where she'll be happy. Ursula stands and seems adult, old, and terrifying. She says she's happy here, and the strips of cloth fall toward the narrator and Lettie. The cloth sticks to the narrator's hand, and his hand bleeds when he pulls it away. Cloth attaches to him, binding him like a mummy. He stops fighting and listens to Ursula wonder what to do with Lettie. Lettie says that Ursula never wondered why there aren't other things like her in this world, and she refers to Ursula as "Skarthatch of the Keep." Lettie says that Old Mrs. Hempstock calls other creatures "varmints," which are always hungry.

Though the narrator thinks that Ursula seems particularly adult and frightening, the way that Ursula talks to Lettie and behaves in general seems a bit childish. She selfishly wants to be in this place that makes her happy and wants to make Lettie feel small and unimportant. But although Ursula has power, Lettie gains the upper hand when she pulls out Ursula's true name, Skarthatch of the Keep. With this name, Lettie is able to make Ursula see that she can't hide and can't be successful here—especially with the hungry varmints coming.

As Lettie says that she found Ursula's real name this morning, Ursula runs away, terrified. Lettie pulls the cloth strips off of the narrator—they don't hurt—and explains that "poor" Ursula is afraid and trying to run. Lettie admits she's a bit afraid too. She and the narrator leave the room, and at the top of the stairs, there's a rip of sorts where the toy was. The gray matter in the rip hurts the narrator's eyes. He asks about the varmints, but Lettie just says that she's afraid of varmints. She says she's not afraid of Ursula; fleas are prideful, not dangerous. Lettie tells the narrator about doing away with a flea in Cromwell's day—they got him out before the hunger birds arrived. The hunger birds, she says, are the varmints. They're like cleaners. The narrator doesn't understand why he should be afraid of cleaners.

Again, it's telling that Lettie describes Ursula as "poor." She pities Ursula and legitimately wants to help her; she doesn't see her as a power-hungry adult. This makes Lettie seem like even less of a child, especially in comparison to the narrator. The narrator doesn't seem to entirely buy that Ursula is worthy of pity. Then, seeing the gray rips in his reality and learning about the hunger birds makes the narrator feel even more out of his element. He doesn't have the information he needs to gauge what's going on, or why Ursula and Lettie would be afraid.

CHAPTER 11

Lettie and the narrator find Ursula on the lawn. She looks frantically at the sky and hurls the jam jar with the wormhole in it at the tree. The jar bounces. Ursula asks why Lettie would let "them" in and starts to cry. The narrator feels uncomfortable; he doesn't know what to do when adults cry, he just knows they shouldn't. He hears an odd thrumming as Lettie says that "they" only came here because there's something to eat. Ursula looks somehow inhuman as she asks Lettie to send her back. Lettie opens the jar, and Ursula takes out the translucent tunnel. She throws it on the grass, and as it grows, the narrator's chest feels frozen. He's confused: the tunnel looks simultaneously like a tiny wormhole and big enough to fit a house in.

The narrator's youth shines through again when he insists that adults shouldn't cry. Crying is, for him, unique to children—it's how they can deal with emotions and communicate in a world where they don't have any power. As far as he's concerned, adults have power and are therefore beyond having to cry to deal with their emotions. However, if the narrator were to think about it, seeing Ursula cry would support Lettie's earlier assertion that adults aren't actually that different from kids. They cry because they, too, sometimes feel afraid and powerless.

Ursula wails that the tunnel's gate isn't there. She smiles when she looks at the narrator's chest, and then she suddenly unfurls into her cloth form. Ursula snatches the narrator, lifts him high into the air, and insists that the end of the path is inside the narrator. He's certain he'll die, so he shouts for his parents and Lettie. Calmly, Lettie says they can still send Skarthatch home with the tunnel inside the narrator, but Ursula says that she just needs to reach into the narrator's chest, pull out his heart, and finish her path. Lettie whistles loudly, and suddenly, creatures that are "older than birds" descend. They're huge, sleek, and ancient. Lettie again tells Ursula to put the narrator down as a hunger bird dives and flies away with cloth in its jaws. All the birds dive and rip at the fabric.

Like an adult dealing with an obstinate child, Lettie gives Ursula many chances to do the right thing before turning to punishments—another behavior that makes Lettie seem far older than 11. To the narrator, Ursula's desire to prey on him and pull out his heart feels like an encapsulation of what the adult world wants to do to him: destroy him and deprive him of his childish sensitivity for her own gain. It's surprising that Lettie can whistle for the hunger birds even if she's afraid of them, as this suggests that they have some sort of understanding. The birds might be scary, but Lettie recognizes that they do have their place and can be allies.

Ursula laughs and screams, and then she crumples to the ground. The narrator falls, but Lettie pulls him up. The hunger birds land on the writhing, wormy cloth and eat as if they're starving. The narrator knows that Ursula is gone when she stops screaming. When the hunger birds are done with her, they turn to the tunnel. Then, they land. The narrator can't tell if there are thousands or just 20—they look like shadows. Lettie tells them to leave, but the hunger birds insist that Lettie has no power over them and that they're not done cleaning. Lettie leads the narrator down to a "fairy ring" and tells him to stay there, no matter what he hears or sees. She disappears into the rhododendrons.

When the narrator can't make sense of the hunger birds and can't figure out what or how many he sees, it suggests that the hunger birds are far beyond his understanding. In this sense, the birds may represent a more realistic and nuanced version of adulthood—one that, as a child, the narrator has no conception of. While Ursula represented adulthood as the narrator sees it from his childish perspective, the real thing is far more dangerous— and, at this point, unknowable.

CHAPTER 12

The shadows of the hunger birds gather around the edge of the fairy ring. The narrator can only see them when he looks out the corners of his eyes. He's more terrified than he's ever been, and everything is still and silent as the sun sets. Out of the darkness, the opal miner walks to the narrator. He looks like a waxwork, and his face is still bright red. The opal miner tells the narrator that the hunger birds need to do their job and eat the narrator. He promises it won't hurt, but in the narrator's experience, adults only say this when it's *definitely* going to hurt. To help himself ignore the opal miner, the narrator repeats a poem from *Alice in Wonderland*. When he opens his eyes, the opal miner is gone.

Again, it's impossible to verify if the opal miner really looks like a waxwork or not, but it's highly likely that the narrator is trying to make the opal miner seem less real so that he's less frightening. Especially given that the hunger birds symbolize some version of adulthood, it's telling that the narrator turns to a poem from Alice in Wonderland, *a children's classic. The narrator is, perhaps unwittingly, doing everything he can to hang onto his childhood.*

The narrator's sister runs from the house and stops on the edge of the fairy ring. She insists that their father wants the narrator to come to the house, but the narrator refuses. He continues to recite the poem as his sister asks where Ursula is, and he refuses to tell his sister the truth. She threatens to tell their parents the narrator was mean to her and then runs away. As it gets darker, mosquitos descend on the narrator, and bats circle overhead. Lights go on in the house. The narrator stays put and moves on to a song from *Iolanthe*. Minutes later, the narrator's father appears with a flashlight and says it's time for dinner. The narrator refuses to come, even when his father threatens to carry him back, because he'd have to step into the fairy ring to get to the narrator.

The narrator's sister poses less of a problem for the narrator, as the siblings aren't close and she comes off as a spoiled, unsympathetic figure anyway. This is especially true because she liked Ursula so much and therefore seems even less trustworthy. The narrator is able to sit here in part because he so fully trusts and believes in his friendship with Lettie. When nothing else seems to make sense, Lettie's simple instructions do—and so the narrator going to do everything in his power to follow them.

Suddenly, the fairy ring seems silly, since this is the narrator's father, not one of the hunger birds' creations. The narrator says that Ursula is gone, but he won't tell his father what happened to her. Finally, the narrator's father shouts and makes the narrator cry. The narrator asks if it makes his father feel big to make him cry and immediately regrets it. His father, at a loss for words, leaves. The narrator returns to his song until Ursula appears, still naked and smiling. She looks less solid than everyone else, and she confirms that she's been eaten. She says that the birds have let her out for a bit and have promised that she can torment the narrator once they eat him.

Even if the narrator thinks this is his father, it is, once again, impossible to say what the hunger birds are or aren't capable of doing—including shapeshifting or creating illusions. It's telling that the narrator feel so instantly horrible about calling out his father for being a bully. To an outside observer, the narrator's question is fully justified; to the narrator, it feels like the natural order of things has been upended. He's a child and so doesn't know how to talk to his father like they're equals, which makes it even harder to figure out what's going on.

Lettie steps out of the rhododendrons. She says that Old Mrs. Hempstock fixed everything, and she tells the narrator to follow her—but the narrator tells her to enter the circle if she's really Lettie. Lettie laughs, expands, and turns into another shadow. Her voice changes, and she points out that the narrator is tired, hungry, and has no friends. His family hates him and no one cares about him. The voice tells the narrator to come to the hunger birds—they'll make all his pain, present and future, go away. The voice seems like it might be two people or a hundred. It continues that the narrator can't be happy since he has a gateway in his heart, and creatures from other lands will ruin his life. In any case, the narrator will die with a hole in his heart—and when he dies here, the birds will eat him.

Just like Ursula, the hunger birds prey on the narrator's fear of being alone, unloved, and friendless. However, because of the narrator's friendship with Lettie and the fact that Lettie makes him feel whole, respected, and worthy, the narrator is able to resist the hunger birds' taunts. That the birds initially try to use an apparition of Lettie to entice the narrator drives home that they understand how powerful and meaningful a trusting friendship can be—but like Ursula, they underestimate the narrator's devotion to his friend.

The narrator says that it might happen like that, but he's still going to wait for Lettie. He knows she's coming back, and he'd rather die waiting for her than at the beaks of the hunger birds. The shadows melt into the night, and the narrator realizes that what he said is true: he's willing to die waiting for Lettie because she's his friend. The moon rises, and the narrator keeps singing.

When the narrator focuses on how much he believes in Lettie and the fact that she's coming back for him, he's able to banish his fears. Friendship, then, is shown to be something that can make a person feel brave and as safe as possible in a dangerous, confusing situation like this.

CHAPTER 13

Lettie steps into the fairy ring carrying a heavy bucket of water. She apologizes for the wait; Old Mrs. Hempstock had to help her get the **ocean** into the bucket. Old Mrs. Hempstock is napping now. The water in the bucket glows and lights Lettie's face. She assures the narrator that everything will be fine and praises him for staying put, which makes the narrator forget his fear. He takes Lettie's hand, and when she tells him to step into the bucket, he does it without question. When the narrator's second foot hits the water, his entire body drops, and he panics. Lettie still has his hand, but he doesn't know how to swim. He gulps, and though the water fills his lungs, he can breathe.

Again, Lettie's friendship, kindness, and compassion makes the narrator trust her—he feels like he can do anything. Thus, though he panics when he drops into the water, the panic isn't as severe as it might be otherwise—Lettie still has his hand, after all. With the narrator's hand, Lettie tethers him to what he knows is true and real (their friendship) and provides him an anchor. From this anchor, he can securely explore the new world around him.

The narrator thinks that there must just be a secret to breathing underwater. Then, he thinks that he knows everything. As the **ocean** flows into the narrator, it "fill[s] the entire universe, from Egg to Rose"—and the narrator knows what Egg and what Rose are (the beginning and the end of the universe). He knows that Old Mrs. Hempstock will be there for the next Big Bang, and he knows that the world is fragile. His reality is a thin layer of good over terrifying nightmares. The narrator opens his eyes and sees that he's hanging deep underwater. He turns to look at Lettie and barely understands what he sees. Lettie is made up of silk, ice-colored sheets and a hundred candles. The narrator knows that candles can burn under water, just as he understands what Dark Matter is.

The things that the narrator understands while he's in Lettie's "ocean" suggests that this body of water is a sort of ocean of knowledge. If one is in it, one can know everything—including what people really are on the inside. This chance to know everything helps the narrator momentarily make sense of things and gives him a vantage point that's very different from his own. As a child, the narrator has a very limited view of the world around him. From inside the ocean, the narrator can see the world in a way that may seem more adult to him—but really, it's more than even adults can see.

The narrator thinks that there's an **ocean** running under the entire universe, but it can fit in a bucket if Old Mrs. Hempstock helps. He wonders what he looks like to Lettie but also recognizes that this is the one thing he can't know, even in this place that is full of knowledge." The silk Lettie turns and apologizes. The narrator isn't cold or hungry, and he feels like the world is simple and easy. He vows to stay here forever, but Lettie says this would *destroy* him, not kill him; he'd eventually spread out everywhere and he'd lose his sense of self. The narrator wants to argue, but his head suddenly bursts out of the water. He finds himself standing in the pond at the Hempstocks', coughing.

When the narrator recognizes that the only thing he can't know is what he *looks like, it suggests that the real journey of life is to discover one's own identity. It's technically possible, the novel suggests, to know everything else—but discovering the essence of oneself is a lifelong, never-ending quest. Lettie adds more nuance to this, though: it's also impossible to know everything and still function in the world, as knowing everything takes attention away from oneself and deprives a person of their individuality.*

The narrator coughs, and for another moment, he still knows everything. Lettie pulls the narrator out of the pond, and he discovers that his clothes are dry. The **ocean** is back in the pond, and the narrator no longer knows everything—but he knows that moments ago, he did. He asks Lettie if that's how it is for her: if she knows everything, all the time. Lettie says it's boring to know everything—she gave that up to be in this world. She explains that everyone used to know everything, but one must give that up if they want to play. To explain what that means, she simply waves at the house and the sky. The narrator has no idea what she means.

Since the narrator is back to his immature, childish form and its associated level of understanding, Lettie's explanation eludes him. What she seems to suggest, however, is that to be human is to not *know—instead, it's to search, to discover, and to play. This also suggests that Lettie would have people behave in a way that the narrator might deem childish, given the way that the narrator described adults as boring and content to form routines, while children are explorers.*

Lettie asks the narrator if he's hungry and suddenly, he is. In the kitchen, there's a plate of **shepherd's pie** waiting for him. He digs in happily as Lettie and Ginnie discuss what to do about the hunger birds. Ginnie doesn't believe they should take the birds very seriously, while Lettie frets that there are more than she's ever seen. Lettie also points out that they've never actually had to send the hunger birds away before; they always just left. When she asks where they came from, Ginnie says it doesn't matter—the birds will get bored and go home, and they're not getting onto the farm. She serves the narrator dessert, and he eats it happily. The adult narrator says that he doesn't miss childhood, but he does miss how he could be so happy with dessert on the possible eve of his death.

The adult narrator's aside at the end of this passage suggests that his experience as an adult has been complicated to the point that he can't enjoy simple pleasures anymore. From adulthood, the narrator can say with conviction that being an adult doesn't allow for these moments of joy and contentedness. However, it's also possible that the narrator is idealizing this childhood memory; the fact still remains that the hunger birds want to destroy the narrator, just like they destroyed Ursula. He may fixate on his ability to enjoy simple pleasures because it gives him something normal to hang onto.

The narrator asks if the **kitten** is still around. Ginnie says she isn't, and the narrator realizes he wants to say goodbye. Slowly, he begins to ask Ginnie to say something to his parents if he dies tonight, but Ginnie interrupts and says firmly that no one is going to die. She changes into boots and a coat. Lettie seems less sure, but the narrator reminds himself that Lettie is just a kid. Regardless, he still trusts the Hempstocks. Ginnie explains that Old Mrs. Hempstock is still napping as the narrator takes Lettie's hand. He promises himself he won't let go.

Of course, the narrator wants to believe that everyone is going to come out of this okay—so Ginnie's insistence that everyone will be fine is naturally more comforting than Lettie's nervousness. When the narrator takes Lettie's hand, it suggests that once again, they're stepping out into the unknown—but the narrator now knows that he can tether himself to something known and safe by holding tight to his friend.

CHAPTER 14

The narrator explains that when he entered the house through the back door, the moon was full, and it felt like summer. When he, Lettie, and Ginnie leave through the front door, the moon is a sliver and the night is cool and gusty. They walk up the lane until they reach the spot where the opal miner died. The narrator suggests they wake up Old Mrs. Hempstock, but Lettie explains that her gran might sleep for 100 years and that she's impossible to wake. Ginnie shouts for the hunger birds, and the narrator feels as though all of this is his fault. He asks if they could just snip out the piece of his heart that the birds want, but Lettie reminds him that snipping is very difficult—even Old Mrs. Hempstock probably wouldn't be able to do it without hurting the narrator.

Because the narrator has such a rudimentary grasp of how the Hempstocks' world works and the rules guiding their magic, it's understandable that he'd ask about "snip and cut" in regards to what's going on. However, there are rules he doesn't understand, given that he's mortal and a child. When Lettie suggests that even Old Mrs. Hempstock isn't as all-powerful as the narrator might like to think, it also implies that there's no one in the world who can fix everything. Even people who Lettie says are true adults aren't all-powerful.

The farm begins to glow gold, and the hunger birds—which look more real when they're this close to the farm—land. Each bird is huge, but the narrator cannot remember what their faces actually look like. All he knows is that they look right at him. Ginnie tells them to leave, but the birds laugh and say that they must do what they're made to do. They ask for the narrator, but Ginnie insults them and tells them again to go. Lettie reminds the hunger birds that the narrator is safe on their land—and one step onto this land will destroy the birds. The birds huddle and confer, and then one says Lettie and Ginnie are right—they can't destroy the Hempstocks' world—but the birds *can* still destroy the other world. With this, they start to tear into vegetation. Wherever they eat things, only static gray remains.

When the narrator can't get a good look at what the hunger birds look like, it suggests again that they represent an iteration of adulthood that's entirely beyond the narrator's understanding. Even as the hunger birds represent this kind of adulthood, however, their petulant attempt to blackmail Ginnie and Lettie by destroying the narrator's world reinforces the idea that there are no real adults. No one can be entirely mature and reasonable all the time—even if one is an ancient, magical bird.

The gray, the narrator realizes, is the "void" that exists underneath reality. The hunger birds devour a tree and a fox. Lettie insists that they should wake up Old Mrs. Hempstock, but Ginnie doesn't know how. The birds begin to gulp at the sky. The adult narrator explains that he was a normal child—selfish and convinced he was the most important thing. However, he also understood that the hunger birds were going to destroy his entire world, all because of him. The narrator doesn't want to die, but he can't let the birds destroy everything. He drops Lettie's hand and races for the property line. He hates himself, but he knows he must do this. The narrator stands and waits, and then something slams him into the mud.

Ginnie's admission that she doesn't know how to wake Old Mrs. Hempstock makes it clear that adults don't know everything. She may exude maternal confidence and protectiveness, but she still has her limits. The narrator also doesn't know everything, but he knows enough to understand that he has a responsibility to help the world, just like Lettie does. This moment of selflessness suggests that despite the narrator's youth—or possibly, because of it—he's capable of making this great sacrifice without fully realizing what the consequences will be.

The adult narrator says that at this point, he remembers a "ghost-memory." He knows what it would've felt like when the hunger birds took his heart and ate it, but the memory "snips and rips, neatly." The narrator hears Lettie tell him not to move. Suddenly, she's on top of him, and the narrator feels the birds descend on Lettie. He hears her scream and feels her twitch. A voice says that this is unacceptable, but the narrator can't place the voice. The voice asks why the birds have harmed her child and the narrator realizes it's Old Mrs. Hempstock. Her voice doesn't sound right—it's more formal, the way royalty speaks. The hunger birds sound afraid as Old Mrs. Hempstock points out that the birds have violated laws.

The "ghost memory" that "snips and rips" suggests that this is possibly an instance of "snip and cut" taking place—but because the narrator wasn't given a choice in the matter, he doesn't necessarily remember what happened to him the way he remembers the incident of his father trying to drown him. When the hunger birds act as though they're afraid of Old Mrs. Hempstock, it begins to create the sense that there is order and hierarchy in the Hempstocks' world—and Old Mrs. Hempstock is at the top of that power structure.

Ginnie gathers Lettie and the narrator in her arms. The hunger birds apologize as Ginnie cries. The narrator looks up at Old Mrs. Hempstock, but she looks different. Her hair is long and white, but she shines silver and stands straight. Her face is too bright. Old Mrs. Hempstock threatens various punishments for the birds, says she must attend to her children, and tells the birds to put everything back the way it was. The narrator realizes that he's humming the song "Girls and Boys Come Out to Play" and reaches out to touch Lettie. Lettie doesn't respond. Ginnie says, as though to no one, that the birds overstepped and would've destroyed the world without a second thought—but Lettie is outside their domain. The farm stops glowing.

Ginnie reinforces the idea that there's a hierarchy and an order to the Hempstocks' world when she says that Lettie is outside of the birds' dominion. This suggests that the birds have a time, a place, and a function—but they became overzealous here and went too far. As the narrator starts to put all of this together, he begins to see that Old Mrs. Hempstock is more than her normal elderly appearance. She's something powerful and likely takes the form of an old lady so that she can function better in the narrator's world.

Old Mrs. Hempstock, back to her former appearance and voice, tells the narrator that he's safe and that the hunger birds won't come back to this world again. Old Mrs. Hempstock touches Lettie's forehead, and the narrator finally realizes that Lettie sacrificed herself for him. He feels unspeakably guilty and asks if Lettie is dead. Old Mrs. Hempstock seems almost offended and says that Hempstocks don't die. Ginnie explains that Lettie is hurt badly; she tells the narrator to get up, and she gathers Lettie's body in her arms. The narrator apologizes, and though Old Mrs. Hempstock reassures him, Ginnie says nothing. Ginnie carries Lettie to the pond, wades in, and puts Lettie in the water.

When the narrator understands that Lettie sacrificed herself for him, he's forced to reckon with the fact that he's lost his one friend. Lettie may have behaved bravely and given the narrator his life to live, but this doesn't make it any easier for the narrator to cope with. When he notices the way Ginnie treats him, he realizes that grief is difficult for adults as well. Ginnie is somewhat dismissive; as Lettie's mother, she's not entirely able to forgive the narrator for his role in what happened.

Waves rise up out of the pond and the narrator whispers an apology to Lettie. He can no longer see the other side of the pond—it's a vast **ocean**. The water glows. Old Mrs. Hempstock assures the narrator that neither he nor the hunger birds killed Lettie; she's just "been given to her ocean." Someday, the ocean will give her back. The narrator asks if she'll be the same, which makes Old Mrs. Hempstock laugh. She says that nothing is ever the same from one second to the next. The waves continue to grow and the narrator hears a rumble coming from hundreds of miles away. A huge wave appears in the distance and breaks over Lettie's body. There's no splash. When the narrator opens his eyes, there's just a pond. Old Mrs. Hempstock is gone, and Ginnie says tells the narrator that it's time for the him to go home.

Finally, the narrator understands—from his own perspective as a seven-year-old boy—why Lettie referred to the pond as an ocean: it is an ocean. Even if the narrator wasn't able to see this when he was at the ocean's edge before, he now is able to see what Lettie saw when she stood by the pond. Getting this opportunity to see what the ocean really is helps the narrator empathize with Lettie more and cements their relationship even further. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hempstock's mysterious disappearance reinforces the narrator's understanding that she's extremely powerful, even if he still doesn't fully comprehend this supernatural universe.

CHAPTER 15

The narrator is shocked that the Hempstocks own a car, and he tells Ginnie this. She sharply says that the narrator doesn't know lots of things, but then she admits that it's impossible to know everything. The narrator says he that believes Lettie is dead, but Ginnie retorts that Lettie is just badly hurt. The **ocean** might not ever give her back, but they can hope. A minute later, the narrator asks if Lettie was really Ginnie's daughter. Ginnie says she was, "more or less," and she tells him that Lettie doesn't have a daddy. The narrator offers to stay with the Hempstocks and work on the farm, but Ginnie insists that he has to live his life, since Lettie gave it to him—he has to try to be worth it. The narrator feels resentful about this, but Ginnie remarks that life isn't fair.

In this moment, Ginnie reinforces Lettie's earlier insistence that to be human is to not know but to search for knowledge anyway. In this regard, the Hempstocks are *people, given that Ginnie doesn't seem to know whether Lettie is ever going to come back out of the ocean or not. When Ginnie tells the narrator that it's his responsibility to go on and live his life, it suggests that the best way to honor one's friendships is to take note of friends' sacrifices and make sure that they weren't made in vain.*

At the narrator's house, Ginnie rings the doorbell. The narrator's mother opens the door, and Ginnie tells her that the narrator had a great time at Lettie's going-away party. The narrator thanks Ginnie for having him, and Ginnie explains that Lettie is going to Australia to be with her father. The narrator is tired; the party was fun, but he can't remember much. He knows he won't go back to the Hempstock farm unless Lettie is there, and he thinks that Australia is far across the **ocean**. A part of him seems to remember that something else happened, but those memories are gone. Ginnie drives her car back down the lane.

It seems as though the narrator has inexplicably forgotten everything that just happened, seeing as the narrator suddenly believes that he's been at a party and that Lettie is going to Australia. That he so quickly forgets what actually happened speaks again to how unreliable memory is—although there's a supernatural reason he forgets, people's memories also naturally change to protect them from traumatizing experiences. Having one's best friend sacrifice herself to supernatural creatures certainly counts as traumatizing, so it's understandable that the narrator represses his experiences.

Once Ginnie is gone, the narrator's mother says that Ursula had to leave. The narrator says nothing, but he feels somewhat guilty for irrationally disliking Ursula. Though his mother offers him his **bedroom** back, the narrator refuses and stays in his sister's bedroom until the family moves to the new house six years later. The old house is demolished. Years later, the narrator's sister shares that she thinks Ursula left because she was having an affair with their father. The narrator's father never mentions what happened on these nights. It's only years later, when the narrator is in his twenties, that he befriends his father. The narrator never goes down the lane and only thinks of the opal miner as the man who gave him a rough opal. Monster hangs around, though he never becomes the narrator's **cat**.

Refusing to return to his childhood bedroom indicates that the narrator has, to a degree, come of age and left childhood behind—even if he doesn't remember how exactly this happened. He's now more comfortable with difficult, strange things, even if that just means having to endure his fear of the dark every other night. That the narrator feels guilty for disliking Ursula suggests that over the course of his adventure, he's become somewhat more empathetic and can now feel sympathy for adults.

The narrator says that he thinks stories only matter as much as the characters change. However, he doesn't think he changed much over the course of his experiences. He doesn't think people change in general, but one thing did: about a month after this happens, the narrator arrives home to find a black **kitten** with intense green-blue eyes and a white ear greeting him at the door. The narrator's parents barely notice the new arrival. The kitten spends all her time with the narrator and sleeps on his pillow. The narrator decides to call her Ocean, though he doesn't know why.

It's unclear why the narrator thinks he didn't change—he gave up his beloved bedroom, after all, and he may still have a piece of Ursula's tunnel in his heart. His sense that he didn't change may have to do with the fact that he knows he can't remember what happened. With this, the narrator suggests that one has to remember what happened in order to change—even if this seems, on the whole, untrue.

EPILOGUE

The narrator sits on the bench by the pond and thinks of his **kitten**: he remembers that Ocean was with him for years. He doesn't remember what happened to her, but then he realizes that "death happened to her." The old woman sits down next to the narrator with a cup of tea and a **sandwich**. As he eats, the narrator studies the woman and asks if she's Old Mrs. Hempstock. She is. The narrator asks if it's true. Old Mrs. Hempstock says that whatever the narrator remembered, it's probably true—but no two people remember things the same way. The narrator asks why he came here. Old Mrs. Hempstock explains that he wanted to get away from everyone at the funeral, so he came here, as always.

As an adult, the narrator now has a cynical way of thinking about how beings grow and change. Even if he doesn't know exactly what happens to a person or an animal, he believes that everything must eventually die. Given that he's talking to the one and only Old Mrs. Hempstock right now, this clearly isn't true—she doesn't die, and if readers are to believe her, other beings from the Hempstocks' world don't die either. The narrator's insistence that everything does die reflects a new, more adult understanding of how the world works.

This confuses the narrator; he hasn't been here since Lettie went to Australia, which he understands never happened. Old Mrs. Hempstock says that the narrator was here in his early twenties, when he had two young kids and was afraid. He came back in his thirties and told her about his art. The narrator doesn't remember this, and he asks again why he came. Ginnie appears and says that Lettie wanted him to. The narrator is shocked that Ginnie looks younger than he is. She sits down on the narrator's other side and says that Lettie wants to know if her sacrifice was worth it—she wants to know what's next. Ginnie says that Lettie couldn't bear it when the hunger birds tore out the narrator's heart, but the narrator doesn't remember this. Old Mrs. Hempstock sniffs that no one remembers things the same.

As an adult, the narrator doesn't have the vocabulary or the understanding to make sense of his connection to the Hempstock farm. However, Old Mrs. Hempstock and Ginnie seem to imply that this doesn't have to make sense to the narrator—the fact remains that he continues to come back, and will continue to come back, because of his close relationship with Lettie. Her sacrifice, in a sense, binds the two together, even if they haven't seen each other for decades. Lettie seems to want to know if the narrator is still able to be brave in his adult life without her by his side.

The narrator asks if he can speak to Lettie, but Ginnie says that she's sleeping and healing. The narrator realizes that Lettie has been looking at him the entire time that he's been here remembering her. He asks if he passed her inspection, but Ginnie says that being a person isn't pass or fail. She observes that the narrator is doing better now than he was last time. The narrator looks at the full moon and asks what happens now. Old Mrs. Hempstock says that, as always, the narrator will go home. In the narrator's mind, Lettie is still a head taller, but he wonders who he'd see if she were here now. He thinks of the story of men who fished for the moon and decided its reflection in the water was easier to catch. The narrator suggests that the reflection always is easier.

When the narrator wonders how Lettie would look to him now, it shows that he understands he no longer sees the world as a child. He recognizes that his perspective has changed dramatically and has changed how he remembers his friendship with Lettie. His assertion that it's always easier to catch "the reflection" suggests that truly understanding something, whatever that may be, might not be possible. It's easier to come up with some sort of a facsimile, or to assume that one understands, even if one doesn't.

Then, the narrator steps to the edge of the pond and thanks Lettie for saving his life. Old Mrs. Hempstock sniffs that Lettie shouldn't have taken the narrator when she went out to begin with, but now she'll know for next time. Ginnie gently says that it's time for the narrator to rejoin his family. A black **cat** with a white ear comes to say hello. The narrator says she looks just like Ocean, but he doesn't remember what happened to her. Ginnie says that he brought Ocean back to them, touches the narrator's cheek, and walks away. The narrator and the old woman talk about the moon, and the narrator says that for a moment, he thought there were two women. But the old woman says that it's always just her.

Ginnie confirms that this cat is indeed Ocean—like the Hempstocks, this cat cannot die. In a sense, this makes the case that a person's friendships, whether they're with animals or other humans, never really die. They can inspire a person long after they seem to end. When Old Mrs. Hempstock reverts to the old woman and confirms that it's only ever her, it implies that Ginnie, Lettie, and Old Mrs. Hempstock as the narrator knew them might not even be three separate people—they may be one iteration of the same being, though the narrator is seldom able to see them like this.

The narrator thanks the old woman for letting him sit and asks her to say hi to Lettie next time she writes from Australia. The narrator heads back up the lane, and in his rearview mirror, he sees two moons: one is full, and one is a sliver. He turns to look back and sees a single sliver. The narrator wonders for a moment what caused the illusion, but then he decides it was just a ghost that momentarily seemed real.

As the narrator leaves, he once again forgets everything that happened. Seeing the two moons is the last indicator he gets that the Hempstock farm is truly magical—but in his mortal, adult world, this sort of thing is just an illusion. As his memories leave him, he once again loses the ability to make sense of the strange and the surreal.

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