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ONEIRIC MODALITY AS A STYLISTIC DOMINANT IN NEIL GAIMAN'S "THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE": POST-IRONIC SENSIBILITY AND NEW SINCERITY

The article examines oneiric modality as a stylistic dominant in Neil Gaiman's novel "The Ocean at the End of the Lane". Contemporary English-language fiction combines awareness of narrative construction with renewed trust in affect, vulnerability, and ethical commitment. Rather than treating dream imagery as an isolated motif, the study defines oneiricity as an organizing principle that coordinates the extralinguistic context, narrative composition, and linguistic-stylistic texture of the novel. This perspective shows how ontological uncertainty formally represents unstable access to childhood experience.

The methodology integrates contextual interpretation, close reading, narratological analysis, and linguistic-stylistic analysis. At the extralinguistic level, the study considers the adult subject's return to childhood trauma and the cultural movement beyond postmodern detachment. At the compositional-narrative level, it identifies a circular frame, retrospective first-person autodiegetic narration, dual focalization through the experiencing child and the narrating adult, and the temporal polyphony of remembered selves. At the linguistic-stylistic level, it examines epistemic and mnemonic markers, mobile deixis, paratactic syntax, sensory and somatic vocabulary, repetition, performative speech, and the pond/ocean opposition.

The analysis shows that oneiric modality turns uncertainty into an important means of creating meaning. The narrator cannot reliably confirm all the events that emerge through memory, yet this does not diminish their emotional and ethical significance. The combination of critical distance and sincere empathy creates a post-ironic sensibility in the novel that is closely related to the poetics of New Sincerity. The study's originality lies in examining this phenomenon not as a general feature of a particular literary period but through a three-level model of the stylistic dominant. The proposed model shows how memory, focalization, and bodily imagery interact to produce ethical meanings and may be applied to the analysis of other works of post-postmodern fiction.

Key words: *oneiric modality, stylistic dominant, post-ironic sensibility, New Sincerity, contemporary English-language prose, Neil Gaiman, narrator, focalization, narrative memory, linguistic-stylistic devices.*

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ОНІРИЧНА МОДАЛЬНІСТЬ ЯК СТИЛЬОВА ДОМІНАНТА РОМАНУ НІЛА ГЕЙМАНА «ОКЕАН У КІНЦІ ВУЛИЦІ»: ПОСТІРОНІЧНА ЧУТТЄВІСТЬ І НОВА ЩИРІСТЬ

У статті досліджено оніричну модальність як стильову домінанту роману Ніла Геймана «Океан у кінці вулиці». Сучасна англomовна проза поєднує усвідомлення сконструйованості наративу з поновленою довірою до афекту, вразливості й етичного зобов'язання. Сновидні образи потрактовано не як ізольований мотив, а як організаційний принцип, що узгоджує екстралінгвальний контекст, композиційно-наративну будову та мовно-стилістичну тканину твору. Такий підхід показує, як онтологічна невизначеність формально репрезентує нестійкий доступ героя до досвіду дитинства. Це дає змогу виявити системний зв'язок між пам'яттю, травмою й фантастичною образністю.

Методологія поєднує контекстуальну інтерпретацію, уважне читання, наратологічний і мовно-стилістичний аналіз. На екстралінгвальному рівні розглянуто повернення дорослого суб'єкта до дитячої травми та культурний рух за межі постмодерної відстороненості. На композиційно-наративному рівні визначено кільцеву рамку, ретроспективну автодієгетичну нарацію від першої особи, подвійну фокалізацію крізь досвід дитини й свідомість дорослого оповідача, а також часову поліфонію пам'яті «я». На мовно-стилістичному рівні проаналізовано епістемічні та мнемонічні маркери, рухомий дейксис, паратактичний синтаксис, сенсорну й соматичну лексику, повтори, перформативне мовлення та опозицію ставка й океану.

Встановлено, що онірична модальність перетворює невизначеність на важливий засіб творення смислу. Наратор не може достовірно підтвердити всі події, які постають у його пам'яті, проте це не позбавляє їх емоційного й етичного значення. Поєднання критичної дистанції зі щирим співпереживанням формує в романі постіронічну чуттєвість, близьку до поетики Нової Щирості. Наукова новизна дослідження полягає в тому, що це явище розглянуто не як загальну ознаку певного літературного періоду, а за допомогою трирівневої моделі стильової домінантності. Запропонована модель показує, як пам'ять, фокалізація та тілесні образи взаємодіють у творенні етичних смислів, і може бути застосована до аналізу інших творів постмодерної прози.

Ключові слова: онірична модальність, стильова домінанта, постіронічна чуттєвість, Нова Щирість, сучасна англomовна проза, Ніл Гейман, наратор, фокалізація, наративна пам'ять, мовно-стилістичні засоби.

Problem Statement. Contemporary English-language fiction increasingly represents subjectivity through the tension between reflexive distance and the need for affective and ethical engagement. Against the backdrop of postmodernist prose as characterized in recent scholarship (Анікіна, Мельник, 2022: 125–129), theories of post-postmodernism and metamodernism frame this shift as an oscillation: texts remain aware of mediation and contingency but no longer regard irony as the only intellectually legitimate response (Timmer, 2010: 13–48; Vermeulen, van den Akker, 2010: 1–14). Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is especially revealing

in this respect. Its adult narrator returns to the site of childhood and reconstructs events that resist empirical verification, while the narrative steadily affirms the emotional reality of fear, care, sacrifice, and loss. The critical issue is therefore not whether the fantastic events “really happened” but how their uncertain status becomes a stylistic resource for articulating a vulnerable self.

Literature Review. Ukrainian scholars define the oneiric as a mode of artistic thought that transforms conventional causal, spatial, and temporal relations and connects conscious experience with forms of imagination (Бовсунівська, 2004: 14–22; Вдович,

Конівіцька, Зельман, 2024: 115–126; Шупта-В'язовська, 2004: 161–166). An interdisciplinary account of the oneiric paradigm provides a broad theoretical basis for examining dream structures beyond a single disciplinary framework (Газуда, 2020: 58–73). Psychoanalytic approaches conceptualize the relationships among unconscious processes, linguistic disturbance, and the literary representation of trauma (Печарський, 2011: 13–24; Engels, Heynick, van der Staak, 2003: 1281–1294; Freud, 1961: 1–66), whereas studies of the fantastic examine hesitation and the unstable boundary between everyday reality and the impossible (Hoffmann, 1982: 267–364; Porter, 1993: 32–47). These approaches illuminate major aspects of the novel but do not by themselves explain how oneiricity organizes its style as a whole.

Narratological and stylistic scholarship offers the conceptual tools for such an account. The categories of narrator and focalization distinguish the narrating voice from the consciousness through which events are perceived (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 73–108); the theory of the poetic function foregrounds the organization of the message itself (Jakobson, 1987: 62–94); and conceptual metaphor theory shows how recurrent spatial and bodily images structure knowledge rather than merely embellish discourse (Lakoff, Johnson, 2003: 3–32). Studies of memory likewise show that recollection in fiction reshapes temporal and spatial relations, contributes to self-identification, and helps construct an authorial myth (Лях, 2024: 204–210). Finally, research on New Sincerity emphasizes renewed attention to vulnerability, empathy, and moral choice after postmodern detachment (Taratuta et al., 2022: 72–76; Taratuta, Melnyk, 2024: 141–169). The remaining task is to integrate these perspectives into a coherent account of Gaiman's stylistic dominant.

The article aims to establish how oneiric modality functions as a stylistic dominant in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and how it produces a local post-ironic configuration associated with New Sincerity. The object of analysis is the novel's narrative and linguistic organization, while the subject is the interplay among extralinguistic premises, compositional-narrative devices, and linguistic-stylistic means. The study combines contextual interpretation, close reading, narratological analysis, and linguistic-stylistic analysis. Its objectives are to determine the narrator's status, describe the structures of focalization and narrative memory, systematize recurrent lexico-syntactic devices, and explain how they shape the text's affective and ethical meanings.

Results and Discussion. A stylistic dominant is understood here as an organizing principle that subordinates heterogeneous textual devices to a recurrent

mode of perceiving and evaluating the world. Oneiric modality meets this criterion because it operates simultaneously on three levels. At the extralinguistic level, it relates childhood vulnerability and the adult's mnemonic return to a culturally recognizable crisis of stable identity. At the compositional-narrative level, it motivates the circular frame, temporal discontinuities, incomplete recollection, and shifts in focalization. At the linguistic-stylistic level, it governs epistemic markers, sensory images, repetition, oppositions, and abrupt syntactic rhythms. The dominant is therefore not reducible to scenes explicitly presented as dreams; it is the mode through which the narrator experiences the boundary among remembered experience, imaginative reconstruction, and affective truth.

The extralinguistic basis of this mode is established before the fantastic plot develops. The world of childhood is marked by economic insecurity, parental inattention, the intrusion of a lodger into domestic space, and a suicide that the child cannot yet conceptually assimilate. The adult's return follows a funeral, so the act of remembering is framed by another encounter with mortality. This parallel does not offer a simple causal explanation; instead, it makes memory responsive to present loss. The road, the farmhouse, and the pond serve as triggers that gradually displace socially conventional adult behavior with an embodied recollection of fear and dependence. Oneiricity thus mediates between a sociohistorical world and a psychic process without reducing either to the other.

This mediation also explains the novel's affinity with a post-ironic sensibility. The term post-irony is used neither as a totalizing label for Gaiman's oeuvre nor as evidence that the narrative abandons irony. The adult voice sometimes recognizes the disproportion, uncertainty, or apparent impossibility of childhood perceptions. Yet it does not expose them in order to assert intellectual superiority. Reflective distance coexists with a serious investment in the child's pain and Lettie Hempstock's sacrificial care. Such oscillation accords with accounts of post-postmodern writing in which skepticism and hope, knowingness and attachment, remain mutually corrective rather than mutually exclusive (Timmer, 2010: 29–43; Vermeulen, van den Akker, 2010: 5–8). The resulting sincerity is not naïve transparency but a deliberate willingness to treat affective experience as cognitively and ethically significant.

The compositional form reinforces this position. The novel begins and ends with the unnamed adult protagonist at the Hempstocks' pond, creating a circular frame in which the childhood narrative unfolds as an extended recollection. The first-person narrator is retrospective and homodiegetic; more precisely, he

is autodiegetic because he recounts a story in which his younger self is the central experiencing subject. This distinction precludes the imprecise claim that the novel contains multiple narrators. Its complexity derives instead from dual focalization: the same “I” speaks from an adult retrospective position while often limiting perception and conceptual vocabulary to those of the seven-year-old child. The mature voice can arrange the past, but it cannot fully master the child’s experience.

The alternation of these positions produces a temporal polyphony of the self. The child’s immediate certainties, the adult’s incomplete knowledge, and the bodily residue of an experience that exceeds both explanatory systems coexist within a single narrative voice. The category of polyphony therefore applies only with qualification: it designates temporally differentiated and only partly coincident selves, not autonomous narrators. This organization invites the reader to compare rather than merge their perspectives. The child accepts impossible beings and spaces as experientially real; the adult knows that memory is discontinuous but cannot dismiss what shaped him. The gap between them becomes a formal analogue of trauma: the experience is relived in fragments and remains only partly integrated even after it is narrated.

Epistemic uncertainty is encoded linguistically through recurrent verbs of remembering, knowing, forgetting, and seeming, together with clauses of uncertainty. These markers do not carry identical values. Forms of “I remember” temporarily authorize a scene; qualifications and negative constructions expose the limits of retrospective access; emphatic childhood “knowing” registers affective conviction rather than demonstrable fact. Spatial and temporal deixis performs a related function. The adult’s “now” and the child’s “then,” as well as the familiar “here” of the lane and the impossible “there” beyond ordinary space, repeatedly overlap. This deictic instability prevents the fantastic world from becoming a separate secondary universe: it penetrates ordinary geography and renders the remembered Sussex landscape epistemically mobile.

Syntactic and lexical contrasts make the two focal positions perceptible. Episodes of acute fear often use short coordinated clauses, cumulative structures, and immediate sensory detail, approximating the child’s rapid registration of events. Retrospective passages allow for more extended metaphorical and philosophical formulations. The movement between paratactic urgency and reflective density is not merely a contrast between “simple” and “complex” language; it stages the adult voice’s attempt to preserve the phenomenological intensity of childhood without claim-

ing to reproduce it transparently. Repetition likewise serves rhythmic and cognitive functions: recurring references to hunger, darkness, water, boundaries, and being “whole” form a network through which bodily sensation is transformed into a moral vocabulary of safety, damage, and restoration.

The central spatial metaphor arises from the relationship between the pond and the ocean. To an external observer, the body of water has a measurable, domestic scale; for Lettie and, eventually, the boy, it possesses oceanic depth and connects heterogeneous worlds. The opposition does not require the reader to choose one scale and reject the other. Instead, it models the novel’s post-ironic logic by holding empirical limitation and imaginative infinitude together. Conceptual metaphor explains the cognitive force of this image because scale becomes a way of understanding memory itself (Lakoff, Johnson, 2003: 3–32). A bounded childhood episode may contain an “ocean” of consequences, while an apparently small place may preserve relationships that adult consciousness has forgotten. The oneiric dominant thus converts spatial paradox into a model of subjectivity.

Somatic imagery gives material weight to uncertainty. The sequence involving the coin and the worm transforms economic intrusion and psychic violation into sensations within the body. The concise sentence “I woke and I was choking” (Gaiman, 2013: 31) associates awakening with intensified danger rather than a return to safety. This inversion is structurally oneiric: the waking world inherits the nightmare’s logic, and the body becomes the medium that attests to what ordinary discourse would dismiss as impossible. Hunger, constriction, puncture, cold, and exhaustion recur as embodied correlates of dependence and fear. Psychoanalytic interpretation is useful insofar as it distinguishes conscious narration from processes only partly accessible to the ego (Freud, 1961: 19–27), but the literary function is broader: bodily experience stabilizes affect precisely when the ontological status of events remains unstable.

Language itself is represented as a material practice. The Hempstocks’ “language of shaping” (Gaiman, 2013: 43) does not describe a pre-existing reality from a safe distance; it binds, repairs, names, and transforms. This motif metapoetically mirrors Gaiman’s own prose, in which the naming of relationships changes the reader’s perception of the familiar. Linguistically, the motif is realized through performative verbs, imperatives, repeated names, and formulaic sequences; it illustrates the capacity of cognitive metaphor to represent authorial intention (Лаврухіна, 2022: 177–182). It also clarifies the ethical distinction between manipulative and restorative speech. Ursula

Monkton's language converts desire into dependency and separates family members, whereas the Hempstocks' words acknowledge damage and work toward reintegration. The stylistic dominant is therefore inseparable from an ethics of utterance: words may violate boundaries, but they may also create the conditions for care.

The novel's treatment of forgotten dreams offers a compact model of narrative memory. The narrator observes that a dream may be "present and invisible, like the back of my head" (Gaiman, 2013: 93). The comparison replaces archival memory with an embodied relationship to absence: what cannot be directly seen or retold may still orient perception. This model helps explain why the adult repeatedly returns to the pond without retaining a continuous account of earlier visits. Forgetting is not a textual failure but part of the represented experience. At the same time, the narrative resists the opposite simplification – that every affect guarantees factual accuracy. It distinguishes ontological certainty from ethical truth: the events remain unverifiable, whereas the obligations created by vulnerability, rescue, and sacrifice retain their force.

New Sincerity emerges most clearly in this ethical asymmetry. The text neither demands an unmediated confession nor promises full self-knowledge. Instead, it makes sincerity a relational achievement: the adult narrator allows himself to be addressed by a past he cannot completely possess, and the reader is invited to respond to the child's vulnerability without reducing it to sentimentality. Research on coming-of-age narratives associates New Sincerity with renewed attention to ethical choice and affective credibility (Taratuta et al., 2022: 72–76), while recent Ukrainian scholarship contrasts it with the self-canceling dominance of post-modern irony (Taratuta, Melnyk, 2024: 145–153). Gaiman's novel participates in this tendency through its form: uncertainty remains, but it no longer serves as a reason for emotional withdrawal.

The three analytical levels consequently reinforce one another. Social and familial insecurity motivates a crisis of memory; circular composition and dual focalization render that crisis narratable; epistemic markers, deictic shifts, somatic lexis, syntactic contrasts, and recurrent metaphors give it a distinct stylistic profile. None of these devices independently establishes a post-ironic orientation. Their convergence, however, does: the novel repeatedly discloses the fragility of its own access to the past while assigning non-ironic value to care, sacrifice, and imaginative belief. Oneiric modality is therefore the mechanism that permits reflective distance without affective annulment. It organizes the text's movement from dis-

rupted memory toward a limited and provisional yet ethically consequential form of recognition.

Conclusions. The analysis establishes that oneiric modality functions in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* as a stylistic dominant rather than merely as a thematic cluster of dream episodes. At the extralinguistic level, it articulates childhood vulnerability, economic and familial instability, trauma, and the adult return to the site of that trauma. At the compositional-narrative level, it determines the circular frame, retrospective autodiegetic narration, dual focalization, mnemonic gaps, and the temporal polyphony of the protagonist's child and adult selves. At the linguistic-stylistic level, it is realized through epistemic and mnemonic markers, mobile deixis, paratactic intensity, sensory and somatic vocabulary, repetition, performative speech, and the pond/ocean metaphor.

These features jointly produce the novel's post-ironic dimension. Gaiman's narrator acknowledges mediation, incomplete memory, and the impossibility of final verification but does not turn such awareness into cynical detachment. His adult perspective neither fully validates nor dismisses childhood experience. Instead, skepticism alternates with affective trust, and uncertainty coexists with the enduring ethical meanings of care, responsibility, and sacrifice. This local configuration is compatible with the poetics of New Sincerity and metamodern oscillation. The claim, however, is confined to the analyzed novel and its textual mechanisms; it does not attempt an unrestricted periodization of the writer's entire oeuvre.

The study's scientific novelty lies in its three-level account of oneiricity as the mechanism connecting narrative memory with post-ironic sensibility. The model clarifies how a single narrator can generate internally differentiated temporal perspectives and why ontological uncertainty need not entail ethical relativism. Its practical value consists in offering a reproducible framework for analyzing stylistic dominants in contemporary English-language prose: context, compositional-narrative organization, and linguistic-stylistic realization should be examined as an integrated system. Further research may compare this configuration with Gaiman's other novels and with works by contemporary authors whose narratives similarly combine fantastic mediation, traumatic memory, and renewed affective commitment.

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