

The Doorway to Adolescence in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*

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Coraline by Neil Gaiman is a coming-of-age novella that disguises itself as a simple children’s tale while housing darkness that lurks beneath the floorboards of the story. The eponymous character, Coraline Jones, steps into a conjured world where all her wishes and desires are seemingly fulfilled, only to have that off-kilter world turn against her in the form of the Other Mother. The psychological tale prompts questions about the interconnectedness of the Other Mother, a monster, and Coraline, a human. The clash between the two characters carries with it an inevitability which serves to unearth the Other Mother’s significance in Coraline’s life. Scholars such as David Rudd (2008)¹, Chloé Germaine Buckley (2015)², Richard Gooding (2008)³ and Ildikó Limpár (2021)⁴ have devoted works with a psychoanalytical approach to *Coraline*. However, an area that has received less attention is the collaborative relationship between Coraline and the Other Mother, with an emphasis specifically on the Other Mother as a creation of Coraline and what that entails for the characters. The Other Mother and the Other World are direct reflections of Coraline’s mental development. In this paper I will analyze how the monster character of the Other Mother embodies Coraline’s placement at the threshold of childhood and adolescence.

Coraline’s circumstances, physical and mental alike, play a key role in her creation of the Other Mother. The subjectivity of the dominant perspective provides a window into Coraline’s internal transformation; she is trapped between mourning the loss of her childhood and eagerly

¹ David Rudd in his “An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* and Questions of Identity” structures his analysis on Freud’s concept of the uncanny and the Lacanian model of the Symbolic Order, specifically the Symbolic and the Real. He demonstrates how Coraline is caught between the Symbolic and the Real due to her trepidation regarding her own existence and how she eventually comes to terms with her identity.

² Chloé Germaine Buckley in “Psychoanalysis, ‘Gothic’ Children’s Literature, and the Canonization of *Coraline*” intertwines both psychoanalysis and gothic to provide a novel reading of *Coraline*. The analysis emphasizes the downsides of reducing *Coraline* to merely a psychoanalytical text and draws attention to its value as a contemporary piece of children’s fiction that can be interpreted in myriad of ways.

³ Richard Gooding in “Something Very Old and Very Slow”: *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form” highlights Gaiman’s reinvention of narrative —identifying it as psychonarration— with the uncanny. Psychoanalysis appears in conjunction with the notion of Coraline’s journey as one imbued with Freudian and Lacanian themes.

⁴ Ildikó Limpár allocates a section of her book *The Truths of Monsters: Coming of Age with Fantastic Media* to two of Neil Gaiman’s works, *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*. Regarding *Coraline* she places the unconscious, where unexplored monsters that arise from anxiety dwell, in the foreground and links it to the process of mental development.

embracing her newfound self. Through her eyes readers see how the Real World presents challenges for her in asserting herself as an individual. The green gloves that catch her eye, which would distinguish her from the throng of gray clad classmates making her the prized “only one,” demonstrate Coraline’s yearning for selfhood (Gaiman 28). Despite the color green’s association with danger early in the story —by Miss Forcible and Miss Spink who caution her not to wear that particular color—, there is no greater pull for her than being unique, the one amongst many. Moreover, Coraline’s repeated insistence on her name being pronounced correctly exhibits both her lack of certainty in herself and an inclination towards establishing herself as an individual. Her name is practically the only part of her identity that will not be discarded when she undergoes her transition, it is her sole stability. The neighbors’ preference for convenience compromises Coraline’s already vacillating selfhood; an effort is made to counteract it, but it is made “quietly” (Gaiman 12). Furthermore, the emphasis put on a name suggests that Coraline needs her name to define herself, since she, unlike the cat, does not “know” herself “without names” (38, 57). It is a name given to her by her parents which she has yet to make her own. Consequently, Coraline uses it out of habit, not out of identification. In the latter half of the narrative, when she has banished the Other Mother’s right hand as well as the key to the bottom of the well, Coraline successfully corrects how Mr. Bobo refers to her. She sheds Mr. Bobo’s insistence on calling her Caroline and fully comes into the name Coraline. Her name induces “wonderment and respect,” now she can claim to be her own person and be acknowledged as such (129). The amalgamation of these two contrasting qualities that Coraline displays throughout the story conceives the Other Mother, who is the coagulation of Coraline’s residual desire for her infantile state. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes, “monsters are our children” who “ask us why we have created them” (20). Embedded in the Other Mother’s construction is a question pertaining to her creation and what that indicates for the creator. For Coraline, it is dually a wish to return to her past self and an anxiety that she never can.

The Other World is a collaboration between the Other Mother and Coraline. The Other Mother capitalizes on Coraline’s reluctance to part with her infantile state. The signals from the external world such as another year of school starting and her parents opting for work over her implies that she must follow the natural course of maturation and yet she cannot help but cling to her childhood. The Other World is the result of Coraline projecting the wish to return to her salad days. Coraline’s Other World is “both closer and farther away” (Grant 496) from the Real World

where her impending growth resides. It is a world she can visit temporarily with the option of rejoining the Real World since she does not really want to surrender her newly acquired individuality. Coraline bestowing her wish onto the Other World does not forestall her development, the very act of entering through that doorway emboldens it. After all, “portals allow passing from one space to another, and the newly discovered world offers ample and diverse space for education and moral growth” (Limpár 129). Not even the creation of another world can dissuade the passing of time nor the process of maturation that accompanies it. Similarly to “a blank sheet of paper,” the world disintegrates when Coraline leaves the house to go exploring (Gaiman 64). Rather than this being a part that the Other Mother did not “bother[...] to create” (64), it is an illustration of Coraline’s and the Other Mother’s connection. Coraline has only ever explored the house and the garden, hence without Coraline supplying her with material the Other Mother cannot “create” nor “distort” (64, 98).

Coraline’s expedition of the Real World in the beginning mirrors her journey through the Other World. It is a “small world” precisely because Coraline’s knowledge of it is limited. In the past it was “big enough” for both Coraline and the Other Mother (Gaiman 65), but when Coraline wants to broaden her horizons, the Other World cannot accommodate her. In the Real World she “always kept in sight of the house” (22), while in the Other World the house always keeps in sight of her. The Other World is a facsimile of the Real World that originates from Coraline’s psyche and to bring it to life, the Other Mother imbues it with the children’s stolen souls. While the Real World is “dreadful,” “old,” and “rotted,” the Other World is brimming with spectacle (13). Additionally, the contrast between the two worlds comes in the form of expectations. In the Real World Coraline is surrounded by factors —such as the “men in suits” discussing “the stock market,” the rain that prevents her from pursuing her impulses, and her parents’ commitment to their work — that urge her along the path of maturation and foretell her future (14). Coraline even begins to conform to this worldview when her dreams have commercials in them. However, she is far from ready to commit to adolescence, thus the Other World makes its miraculous appearance and whisks her away. Unfortunately, the Other World houses expectations of its own, it requires her to remain a child to enjoy its revelries. That is why Coraline’s gradual acceptance of her individual state damages the Other World. Coraline declaring that she is not frightened of the Other Mother engenders “a little” shimmering that signifies the world’s eventual ruination (55).

The Other Mother's presence in the Other World constitutes her as not only a creation of Coraline, but a monster. The Real World could be categorized as Coraline's "domestic sphere" and "to step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen 12). The Other Mother dwells at the threshold of dreams and reality, determining the borders as well as fortifying them. The passage between the Other World and the Real World is the border one must not cross lest they be transformed into a monster themselves such as the ghost children. The children behind the mirror "are stuck in-between two worlds: as ghosts they belong neither to the living nor the dead" (Limpár 147). The significance of the ghost children is due to this in-between state, they are neither living nor dead, yet they are concurrently both, which marks them hybrids. Coraline's transgression of the borders primes her to become a hybrid, a monster, such as the ghost children, who are slowly fading behind the mirror. The button eyes are the beginning of a transformation, to readily sew them on is to reject reality, where humanity and human values such as freedom reside. Unlike the "bad cop[ies]" of the neighbors (Gaiman 99), if Coraline were to fall into the Other Mother's clutches, she would become half-human and half-doll, another hybrid, and eventually a shadow of the person she used to be. Ergo, to be subsumed by the Other Mother is not only to lose one's agency, but to become a monster.

The Other Mother's powers to "twist and copy and distort" (Gaiman 91) serve to categorize her as a monster. As Jean-François Staszak explains, "the creation of otherness (also called othering) consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us" (44). Instead of awaiting her subjection to the monstrous other, the Other Mother dictates her own identity, she outrightly acknowledges herself to be a mere "copy" of Coraline's Real Mother (Gaiman 99). As Cohen accentuates, "the monster is difference made flesh" (7). Without reducing the differences between her and Coraline's Real Mother that Coraline instantly perceives, the Other Mother preys on Coraline's dissatisfaction. She distorts herself to resemble Coraline's Real Mother, but totters on the edge of familiarity just enough to not completely be associated with Coraline's Real Mother and the apathy that the Real World provokes in Coraline. She utilizes the same method on everything with special attention paid to the hoard of bad copies of Coraline's neighbors, who can be linked to Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, which "is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 180). The Other Mother, and every copy she distorts

occupies the realm of the uncanny primarily due to the “big black buttons” (Gaiman 31) affixed to their faces, marking the bodies they inhabit familiar yet utterly unfamiliar to Coraline. The buttons fastened to the characters’ faces invoke the particular aspect of the uncanny of being “buried alive,” were Coraline to lose the game she would be “sutured to the mother forever” (Rudd 163). The Other Mother’s ability centers on molding the “dough” or “clay” of children’s anxieties and memories into suitable substitutes for what they want (Gaiman 92, 91), but those malformations cannot eclipse the real. Simultaneously, her powers revolve around othering and making what was once familiar, uncanny, thereby monsterizing not only herself but the world around her. The house, such as the rest of the Other World, derives from Coraline’s and the children’s minds, which begets its decomposition into a “photograph,” (100)—akin to a memory— when the souls of the children that sustained it are extracted, and Coraline becomes disillusioned.

The restoration of the Other Mother’s powers further demonstrates the collaborative nature of her and Coraline’s relationship thus to revitalize her powers the Other Mother must devour Coraline. The Other World’s landscape emulates the Real World with a couple diverging details in the form of the “dim space behind the mirror” and the empty flat (Gaiman 68). Those two may be genuine spaces that the Other Mother constructed, the empty flat is home to “dust and damp and forgetting,” a space where inept creations are sentenced, while the “dim space behind the mirror” (91, 68) is the Other Mother’s stomach. Coraline, under the guise of discipline, is physically inserted into the belly of the beast to restore the Other Mother’s power reservoir. During her time spent confined behind the mirror Coraline makes the acquaintance of withered ghost children. After taking their “secret hearts” (73), the Other Mother incarcerated them behind the mirror to sap the last of their life-force. The Other Mother cannot completely devour Coraline since she has yet to relinquish her soul, but that does not hinder her from endeavoring to. Consequently, even after consuming an apple Coraline’s hunger persists while the Other Mother retains a “healthier” appearance (77). As Joanna Henn observes, “by filling her victims up both metaphorically and literally, she provides a sense of comfort and home which tricks the children into letting down their guards, entrusting themselves to the one who seeks to control them” (59). The Other Mother ekes out vulnerability from Coraline by appealing to her starvation which she is the genesis of. The tempting feast that the Other Mother prepares is tantamount to her fattening Coraline up for slaughter and thus the cycle of entrapment, aided by her power, would continue.

The Other Mother's childish disposition reflects that she was conceived from the mind of a child. Coraline's maturation is accompanied by the Other Mother's regression to an infantile state that has been cast off by Coraline herself. Endowed with all that is no longer permissible for Coraline to indulge in, such as her puerile tendencies, the Other Mother manifests them. The more Coraline develops, the less she emulates the little girl she once was, and the more the Other Mother does. A striking example of this evolution occurs during the game when Coraline is being blown away by "a gust of wind" that the Other Mother sent (Gaiman 83). A reversal of roles occurs with Coraline occupying the role of the adult, and the Other Mother as the child thereby upending the expected mother-daughter relationship. The Other Mother "petulantly" obeys Coraline's chiding to "play fair" (83). Moreover, the cat determines that the most efficient method to combat the Other Mother is for Coraline to "challenge her" (57). Coraline, however, translates the cat's proposal into a language she was once familiar with and offers to the Other Mother that they play "games" (78). 'Games' boasts of a childish connotation, while 'challenge' denotes a graver affair since rationality and gravitas are symptoms of the Real World they have no place in the Other World. Although the Other Mother is immediately enticed by the potential of games, she further demonstrates her childishness by not being able to utter the word 'win' in association with Coraline—her adversary in the game—and instead she exchanges it for "not lose" (78).

The Other Mother's mentality resembles a child's hence she cannot regulate her impulses and desires to possess whatsoever captures her attention. Ergo, her notion of love is that of ownership. After gaining the love of the children whom she had convinced to cede their souls, she discards them. However, even after leaving the children bereft and derelict, she does not release them, they are her toys after all, they are not unlike abandoned "things" at the "bottom of the toy box" (Gaiman 72, 82). Coraline's observation about the Other World's trees dwindling into mere "idea[s]" as the world disintegrates is similarly true for the Other Mother (88). She is an "idea," existing for the simple purpose of satiating a child's wants (88). Furthermore, the gradual decay of the Other World is described in terms of creativity such as "pencil drawing," "scribble," and "flattening world" (82, 102, 89). Therefore, the wounds that the cat inflicts on the Other Mother bleed "tarry black stuff," reminiscent of the black ink or "charcoal" with which she was drawn (108, 102). Divulging the Other Mother's true nature is the final parting gift Coraline imparts on her before fleeing a world of Coraline's own creation.

The disparate approaches taken with Coraline by her real parents and the Other Mother evince why she did not succumb to the allure of the Other World's illusions. Coraline's real parents treat her as an individual, they posit activities which do not involve them — “pester[ing]” (Gaiman 14) the neighbors— or ones that are downright solitary such as reading a book and watching a video. Contrastingly, the Other Mother plans spectacles where Coraline is the focal point: the dinner is catered to her tastes and the theater production receives such riotous applause, marking it as a success, because Coraline agreed to do the knife toss. The Other Mother purposefully leans into Coraline's residual childish craving for attention. In the beginning, Coraline “finds herself cut off from her parents' desire, and not yet sure of her own” (Coats 85). However, Coraline's ability to distinguish between her childhood years and her current reality stems precisely from this newfound freedom, which consequently comes with a severing of perpetual attention. Memories from when she was “a little girl” float to the surface and are classified as occurring “a long, long time ago” (Gaiman 51). When her parents revert to treating her as a child, she instantly recognizes it and comments on, for instance, how her father has not picked her up since he asserted that she was “too old” for it (115). Coraline's Real Mother seems to spearhead Coraline's acceptance of her adolescence by purposefully opting for a “large and baggy” sweater in the hopes that she “might grow into it” (28). Due to her parents reinforcing Coraline's individuality, she does not become an easy quarry for the Other Mother to hunt. In actuality, she weaponizes the aspect they both derive comfort from —childhood which manifests as dolls Coraline does not play with “anymore” and the enactment of a tea party—, to deceive the Other Mother's severed right hand (124). Unbeknownst to Coraline, this is an ephemeral victory that keeps the body of the monster alive since “the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else” (Cohen 4). The Other Mother is not defeated, she is obscured from sight with the very means —the black key— required to continue her monstrous reign. Coraline seemingly banishes the Other Mother twice. First by locking her in the crumbling Other World, and second, by outwitting her, which causes her confinement in the well. Coraline's monster is “indestructible and from time to time she will need to overcome its effects and repress it” (Limpár 150). Similarly to the monster who embodies her shift from childhood to adolescence, Coraline undergoes a transformation. The Other Mother follows suit and fractures her body to maintain the notion that this is by no means a smooth, effortless transition with negligible consequences. The plan to seize Coraline's body and soul did

not bear fruit, but she takes up firm residence in Coraline unconscious, where her deepest fears lie dormant, waiting for the opportune moment to reemerge as monsters often do.

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* showcases how a monster narrative and a tale about the trepidations of growing up can be intricately interwoven. The novella is a winding road with the end destination being Coraline's reconciliation with herself and her identity. Throughout the story, Coraline's maturation produces reverberations not only in the Other Mother but also in the Other World. With every step taken towards acceptance of her individuality, she unveils the collaborative nature at work in the Other World and with the Other Mother. Coraline is as much a victim as she is a creator. Although the threat of the monster, the Other Mother, persists in the shadows and in the depths of the well, Coraline manages to bridge the gap between her childhood state and her impending adolescence; how stable that bridge is remains to be discovered.

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