



## Psychosocial Development in *Coraline*

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In this heavily-researched analysis, Ketia Henderson reviews scholarship on Neil Gaiman's macabre children's novella *Coraline* to argue that, despite its dark themes, the book offers young readers a healthy psychological allegory about individuality and autonomy. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Shelley Rees.

**I**N 2002, NEIL GAIMAN'S *CORALINE* was published and advertised as a book for children, although many adults reviewing the book doubted it was really child-appropriate. Some argued that because of its many Gothic elements and exploration of darker topics, which haven't become common in children's literature until recent years, the book would be too frightening for children. Scholars analyzing *Coraline* have said the opposite. While many scholars agree that the book is frightening for both children and adults, they've argued that this can actually be beneficial for children. Scholars have argued that by reading about Coraline's adventures in a Gothic fantasy world, which they have viewed as representing Coraline's desires and anxieties as she transitions into a new stage of psychosocial development, children can be prepared to deal with similarly frightening situations in their own lives in much more healthy and productive ways.

Many scholars point out Coraline's obvious boredom and desire for attention at the beginning of the story, as well as her attempts to set herself apart as an individual; they argue that these things are signs that she is in the middle of a transition from one stage of psychosocial development to another. Coraline's boredom can be seen in her dissatisfaction with having to stay inside when it rains and her repeated attempts to get her parents to pay attention to her or give her interesting things to do (Gaiman 4). Karen Coats explains that

Up to a certain point, the developing child is so entangled with the mother that his or her desires are not perceived as separate, at least on the part of the child. When a child develops the capacity to be bored, it is a signal that he or she is in a transitional state, a state where he or she is developing a separate sense of self, a need to assert his or her desires over and against the desires of the mother. (86)

Prior to this transitional state, children rely on their parents to satisfy all their needs and wants, which is why Coraline initially goes to her parents seeking relief from her boredom. Coraline's parents are clearly expecting her to be more independent, though; they give her suggestions for things to do that don't involve them, like reading, watching a movie, or playing with her toys. They even both request that she go "pester" or "bother" Miss Spink and Miss Forcible and leave them alone to work (Gaiman 4, 16). But despite her desire for attention from her parents, Coraline can also be seen trying to set herself apart as an individual with her own desires, like when she asks her mother to get her green gloves for school, saying that she "could be the only one" to have green gloves instead of the grey gloves that everyone else has (21). Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard also point to Coraline's criticism of her father's cooking and refusal to eat it as an attempt to be more independent (5), and Auba Llompart Pons points out Coraline's frustration with her neighbors repeatedly getting her name wrong, "depriving her of the originality

of her name to give her a more common one” (“Reversing the Bildungsroman” 309). These things show that, while Coraline may be upset at not getting the attention from her parents that she got when she was younger and completely dependent on them, she is also starting to move on to a stage in her life where she has the desire to make her own decisions and set herself apart from her parents and other people.

Because Coraline appears to be transitioning into a new stage of psychosocial development, most scholars agree that the other world she ends up in is a representation of her desires and anxieties about growing up. While the action of walking through the door appears to be an “act of defiance against adult prohibitions” (Gooding 397), since the old man upstairs had already warned her not to go through it (Gaiman 14), the other world that it takes her to is full of reminders of her desire to remain dependent on her parents. The other mother in particular seems to represent Coraline’s desire for her mother to satisfy all her needs and wants, and her fear that becoming independent of her mother would require losing her love and attention (Gooding 397). When Coraline first enters the other world, the other mother cooks for her and gives her interesting things to do, unlike her real mother (Gaiman 26-27). The other mother almost seems to read Coraline’s mind at some points and fulfill her wishes before she even voices them, something that Coraline may have expected of her parents as a little child. Richard Gooding points out that these are uncanny elements—things that Freud described as being unsettling because they seem to bring us back to childlike ways of thinking (392). Coraline isn’t initially bothered by these things, though. She seems happy to have parents whose attention is all on her. It isn’t until she realizes that the cost of staying in this other world would be to have buttons sewn into her eyes that she begins to be afraid (Gaiman 43). David Rudd compares the prospect of having buttons sewn into the eyes to the fear of being buried alive, which reminds us of being inside the mother’s womb, “something that was once . . . home to us all, but which in later life can seem

anything but: a smothering, threatening environment” (6). Rudd also describes this act as the other mother turning Coraline into a doll, one of her possessions (13). Coraline eventually discovers the ghosts of the dead children that the other mother has already consumed and decides to challenge the other mother to a game where she will either find her parents and the souls of the dead children or stay with the other mother forever (Gaiman 82, 90). About this, Gooding says, “The ‘exploring game’ therefore becomes a test of Coraline’s capacity to surmount an infantile desire for permanent (re)union with the mother. . . . [I]t is more fundamentally a struggle against her own desire for dependency and identification. . . . [T]o lose the game would be to accept perpetual childhood” (397-98). As Coraline looks for her parents and the souls of the other children, the other world and everything in it start to become unformed. Coraline encounters the other Miss Spink and other Miss Forcible, who have become fused together and contained in a sac, as well as the other father who is slowly losing his shape (Gaiman, 99, 108). Coats argues that these images are meant to resemble fetuses and that they represent both Coraline’s desire to be reunited with the mother and her fear of regressing to a point where she is completely one with the mother and no longer an individual (88). Later, when Coraline has rescued her parents and the souls of the dead children, she has to pass through a corridor back to the real world, and when Coraline touches the wall, it is described as being “hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody’s mouth” (Gaiman 133). Coats argues that this is meant to represent the process of being born and leaving the womb, or, in Coraline’s case, being reborn (88).

Coraline undergoes an obvious change by the end of the story, and most scholars argue that it is a positive change and a sign that she has moved forward into the next stage of psychosocial development, instead of regressing back into the former one. Because of her experiences in the other world with the other mother, Coraline realizes the dangers of remaining dependent on her parents. If her mother and father were to satisfy all her needs and wants, she would

never have the opportunity to have her own desires (Coats 87). She wouldn't be able to shape her own identity and personality by finding ways to satisfy her desires on her own like she does with exploring, trying to get her mother to buy her green gloves, or choosing her own food (Howarth 75; Gaiman 21, 8). She realizes that she can't be the only thing that her parents care about, that they can't satisfy all her desires, and that "To be totally *all* for someone, in fact, is to cease to exist, to be possessed (which is what the other mother offers)" (Rudd 9). The other mother and the unsettling Gothic elements that surround her end up serving the purpose of abjecting the mother figure for Coraline and making her want to be independent from her mother, having realized that to be independent and able to go after her own desires, she needs to be separated from her mother to a certain degree (Rudd 12). Coraline's experiences in the other world force her to think for herself and survive on her own since her parents are not there to help her, and because of this she is able to come to a better understanding of herself, as well as come to appreciate "the true and loving relationship between herself and her real parents" (Howarth 75). Gooding also points out that "Coraline's return finds her more independent, more aware of her feelings, more emotionally and physically demonstrative, and more engaged with the world" (400). This can be seen when she hugs her parents and Miss Spink and Miss Forcible and also when she takes the time to learn the name of the old man upstairs, Mr. Bobo, and have a conversation with him (Gaiman 137, 159, 158). Pons explains that "the battle between good and evil, children and adults, which takes place in Coraline's own home" is what "triggers the child's endeavor to overcome her initial feelings of alienation and understand her place in the family and the world" ("Reversing the Bildungsroman" 308). Because of her adventures in the other world, Coraline comes to appreciate her real family and her real home.

Scholars argue that this story can be beneficial to children for many reasons. Elizabeth Parsons argues that by giving children a protagonist they can relate to and then showing her facing her fears

and dealing with her problems in productive ways, *Coraline* teaches children how to be more resilient when facing their own difficult circumstances in life (130). She also argues that experiencing a variety of emotions, including fear and sadness, within the safety of a work of fiction and seeing how the protagonist deals with those emotions helps children prepare to deal with those emotions in more healthy ways in real life (132). Coats argues that *Coraline* is similar to the traditional fairy tale in that it is meant to do unconscious psychological work for children, giving them monsters and villains that they can project their fears and anxieties onto and then showing them that they can be overcome (78). Michael Howarth points out that, through *Coraline*, Gaiman teaches children that “growing up consists of many perilous moments that are threatening and risky, but are necessary nonetheless for our own maturity and personal development” (95). This message is especially obvious in the scene where Coraline must retrieve one of the marbles containing the soul of a dead child from the sac containing the other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible (Gaiman 99). Coraline almost talks herself into looking elsewhere for the marbles so she doesn’t have to go anywhere near the sac, but she then realizes that she has to face her fears and look, or she may lose the game against the other mother. Pons also points out that Gaiman makes an obvious effort to depict the child as a more psychologically complex character than most children’s writers do (*Good Seed* 117). Gaiman doesn’t narrate the story as though he knows more than Coraline (128); his knowledge is limited to what Coraline knows, and Coraline is allowed to make and fix mistakes without an adult narrator judging or admiring her (131). Because of this, children are able to read the story and make their own judgments about the events that take place in it (124).

*Coraline* gives young readers a protagonist they can relate to: someone who is the same age as them and possibly going through similar difficulties. Because Gaiman shows Coraline’s desires and anxieties, which young readers may share, through Gothic villains

and uncanny elements, children are able to relate to Coraline's experiences on a deep, psychological level. They are able to experience her fear, as well as her relief, and follow along as she overcomes her problems. In the process, they are able to learn important lessons, but the lessons they take from the text are largely left up to them, allowing them to choose for themselves and be independent as Coraline is. Despite adults' fears, *Coraline* is actually a perfect book for children who are in the process of growing up and coming to understand their own identities and place in the world. ►►

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