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ORIGINAL PAPER

An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity

David Rudd

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Abstract This paper sees Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as following a darker tradition in children's literature, most commonly found in the fairy tale. It explores some of the existential issues that concern us all: to do with identity, sex, death, ontology, evil, desire and violence. The article takes a largely psychoanalytical approach, showing how Freud's concept of the Uncanny is particularly helpful in explaining both the text's appeal, and its creepy uneasiness. Namely, our fears about existence and identity as separate beings: our worry that we will either not be noticed (being invisible and isolated), or we will be completely consumed by the attention of another. Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic and the Real provide the theoretical underpinning for this reading, together with Kristeva's notion of the abject.

Keywords Uncanny · Lacan · Psychoanalysis · Abject · Kristeva · Freud

The prolific Neil Gaiman has so far published one children's novel, *Coraline* (2003), which not only garnered a host of prestigious awards, but is also now being turned into a stop-animation film directed by Henry Selick. It is also the book of which he is most proud, taking him some 10 years to complete.[1] Certainly, it was worth waiting for: a rich and powerful work that explores areas seen by many as inappropriate for children, although other critics, such as Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), argue that children not only *want* to but

[1] Information from the Harper Teen page http://www.harperteen.com/global_scripts/product_catalog/book_xml.asp?isbn=0060528850&tc=ae. The awards are too numerous to mention but, among others, the Hugo and Nebula for Best Novella, the School Library Journal, Publishers Weekly and Children's Magazine Best Book awards, and the IRA/CBC Children's Choice Winner.

Dr. David Rudd is Professor of Children's Literature at the University of Bolton, UK. He has published about 100 articles in this and related areas and is currently working on the *Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*. He is Co-editor (UK) of *Children's Literature in Education.*

D. Rudd (✉)
School of Arts, Media and Education, University of Bolton, Chadwick Street, Bolton BL2 1JW, UK
e-mail: D.Rudd@bolton.ac.uk

need to explore matters that affect their lives, albeit in their own time and fashion (issues to do with death, sex, ontology, evil, desire, violence and so on). Bettelheim concentrates on the fairy tale, but this tradition of exploring the darker side of life is also to be found elsewhere, in nursery rhymes and jokes, let alone in some of our most celebrated children's books, like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, let alone more recent examples, from Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to Rowling's "Harry Potter" series. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* fits centrally within this tradition, invoking the fairy tale at the outset with its epigraph from G.K. Chesterton ("Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten"), besides paying homage to Carroll's *Alice* at a number of points. As I shall suggest, *Coraline* is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one's place in the world; how one is recognised in one's own right rather than being either ignored on the one hand, or stifled on the other.

Briefly, the book is about a young girl called Coraline who moves into a large old house divided into flats. Both her parents work at home and, in Coraline's eyes, ignore her. She then manages to access a mirror-like house adjoining their own, where her "other" parents live, together with "other" neighbours. They offer her far more attention, but Coraline comes to realise that this is at the expense of her individuality: she will be trapped in the "other mother's" web, and ultimately absorbed. The rest of the novel explores Coraline's battles with her, before she eventually escapes.

Early in the novel, Coraline's boredom and loneliness are beautifully captured when she represents her state on paper, for her mother. She writes the word "mist" thus (26):

M ST

I

In this subtle *mise en abyme*, the "I," significantly, has dropped out—a representation that can be read in several ways.[2] Coraline is clearly the lonely "I" which, punning on the word above, is not missed (i.e. she is overlooked). But is she refusing to be contained by the mist (insisting on her independence) or would she like to be part of it, having the mist descend and embrace, or envelop her (something the other mother—see below—offers)? Could it be that the real mist is the white space, the nothingness, around her? Whatever the case, this graphic representation shows that we are all signifiers, caught up in what Lacan terms the Symbolic; that is, a web of language, within which we must negotiate our position. The "I" is also shown to be ephemeral, only existing in terms of its relationship with other signifiers; so "I" becomes undermined. It can certainly represent the individual, but only in a fleeting, non-individual way that is open to all other humans. In other words, out of context, it is hard for the "I" to signify anything meaningfully, to ward off the abject whiteness of the page.

I'll return to this, but first the gothic appearance of Coraline's house should be noted, with its outside staircase, its cellar and attic, its dark corridors and, most strangely, the door in the drawing-room that seemingly leads nowhere: behind it there is a brick wall. In philosophical terms it is an *aporia*; literally, something "without passage." A famous example of an aporia is the Aristotelian Law of Non-Contradiction, which states that something cannot be both A and not-A at the same time: a dog cannot be a cat, a man, a woman, and so forth. Coraline's dilemma is similar, as outlined above: how can one be both an "I," an individual, and yet a mere pronoun, which is decidedly non-individual? However, as Derrida frequently showed, an aporia *can* be deconstructed, shown to operate only within certain parameters. Thus the word

[2] In the American edition, the layout is different, with the letter 'I' more caught up in a swirl of the other letters, to capture the look of a mist. While this doesn't seem to change the basic point about a loss of individuality, the English edition seems to make the point more emphatically.

"individual" itself bears traces of its undoing, as it "originally meant indivisible," the opposite of today (Williams, 161). In terms of the bricked doorway, Coraline does manage to find a way through: into a mirror image of her own house, to where her other mother and father live—alternative parents who immediately give her their full attention and love. The Law of Non-Contradiction is thus breached, seemingly, in that both the house and many of its occupants are doubled, providing versions of A alongside not-A. It is possible because Aristotle's law applies only to the everyday world—not that of the unconscious, which is the realm that Coraline has managed to enter.

More specifically, Gaiman has given us a quite overt fictional representation of the Freudian uncanny—not merely by invoking the motifs that Freud enumerates in his essay, but by animating the very etymology of the German term, *das Unheimliche*: *heimlich*, or homely, with its root in *Heim*, and its mirror counterpart, the *unheimlich*.[3] As Coraline explicitly comments when in the latter, her mirrored home, there's "something very familiar about it," although it is not "exactly the same" (37–38), one of the key points of difference being the "other" characters' eyes, which are opaque, black buttons. I'll return to these also (return, in Freudian terms, is unavoidable), but first let us be clear about Freud's definition of the phenomenon, and look at some of the features he mentions.

For Freud, the Uncanny is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 1985, p. 340). In other words, it is not concerned with such things as bug-eyed monsters or little green men but things far closer to home, which, as a consequence, are the more disturbing (it is much harder to escape that which is on your doorstep; that which can gain entry to your bedroom). What, then, are its features?

Doubling is a key one, as mentioned above, and one that directly contradicts Aristotle's Law. The double, of course, undermines our sense of individuality, and is often seen to augur death: ontology, as Derrida punningly puts it, becomes upset by "hauntology" (Derrida, 1994, p. 51). Another major feature of the uncanny is the breaching of the divide between animate and inanimate. In this particular story we see this divide breached in each direction: the inanimate comes to life, for instance when Coraline is presented with some toys that move of their own accord; and vice versa, as when the other father reverts to being a shapeless, doughy lump; moreover, the button eyes of the "other" characters also liken them to inanimate dolls. A third feature of the uncanny is what Freud calls "involuntary repetition," which not only occurs in the text, but strangely echoes Freud's own example, such that one suspects Gaiman is delighting in the added, uncanny frisson we'll experience. Thus we read about Coraline walking in a mist, arriving back at the house she's walked away from, asking, "how can you walk away from something and still come back to it?" (p. 89), recalling Freud's description of being "caught in a mist, perhaps, one has lost one's way … [and] every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot" (Freud, 1985, p. 359).

Aside from the above features, the key ones for Freud are related to what he saw as the phenomenon's underlying cause; namely, a fear of castration. Thus "dismembered limbs" feature heavily; in particular, "a hand cut off at the wrist… especially when … capable of independent activity" (p. 366), which Freud reads, rather predictably, in terms of being "dismembered." This feature, a staple of many horror films, is used most effectively by Gaiman. Hence, after Coraline, along with her charges, manages to escape the other mother's clutches,

[3] Kimberley Reynolds (2007, pp. 148–150) should be given credit for first drawing on Freud's uncanny in relation to this text. Just before going to press I also discovered a piece by Karen Coats (2008) that discusses this text, but more specifically in terms of the Gothic.

they all struggle to close the door into the passageway that links the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* realms:

> There was a final moment of resistance, as if something were caught in the door, and then, with a crash, the wooden door banged closed.
>
> Something dropped from Coraline's head height to the floor. It landed with a sort of a scuttling thump. (p. 155)

Thereafter the long white, phallic hand, "Five-footed, crimson-nailed, the colour of bone" (p. 169), scuttles around, gashing and gouging the neighbours' dog and even marking the glass of her bedroom window. This isolated limb is both castrated—a fetish object—and castrating. And for Freud, the fetish object is closely linked to the *unheimlich* nature of the female genitals, seen so because once they were the opposite: home (*Heim*) to us all. Elsewhere Freud speaks of images such as the Medusa's head representing the female genitals; that is, the head is a horrifying *vagina dentata*, the writhing snake hair adding to her phallic, fetishistic appearance. Descriptions of the other mother in Gaiman's work are clearly meant to invoke this, her hair being described as "wriggling like lazy snakes on a warm day" (p. 105) and "like the tentacles of a creature in the deep ocean" (p. 75). A final feature of the uncanny worth mentioning is one that consolidates much of the above—the fear of "being buried alive"—which Freud describes as, for many, "the most uncanny thing of all." He argues that the root of its fearful quality lies in the fact that, like the female genitals, it is connected to something that was once, during our "intra-uterine existence," (Freud, 1985, pp. 366–367) home to us all, but which in later life can seem anything but: a smothering, threatening environment.

Freud's key, literary example of the uncanny is Hoffmann's tale, "The Sandman," in which the eponymous, mythical figure of the bogeyman, who throws sand into children's eyes, making them "jump out of their heads all bleeding," is central (p. 349). Freud reasons thus: "We know from psychoanalytic experience … that the fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible one in children… often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated." However, it is not necessary to see castration in biological terms. It seems far more plausible to read it symbolically (as do both Lacan and Kristeva), where it is our entry into language that results in the world being chopped up into fragmentary signifiers, denying us access to that wholesome oneness we imagine we once experienced. Whichever way we read it, though, the other mother is without doubt a castrating figure (it is also noteworthy that Gaiman (2006) first became famous as a writer of graphic novels featuring a Sandman character). The link becomes explicit when it seems that Coraline might win a wager she has with the other mother (to find the souls of some other, imprisoned children and of her own parents):

> Something stung [Coraline's] face and hands like sand blowing on a beach on a windy day. She covered her eyes and pushed forward. […]
>
> She stepped forward in the hallway, into another gust of wind, which stung her cheeks and face with invisible sand, sharp as needles, sharp as glass. (p. 115)

Most explicitly linking the other mother with castration, though, are the button eyes, which Coraline is also required to have fitted if she is to stay in the other mother's realm (which initially looks attractive):

> "There's only one little thing we'll have to do, so you can stay here for ever and always."
>
> They went into the kitchen. On a china plate on the kitchen table were a spool of black cotton and a long silver needle and, beside them, two large black buttons.
>
> "I don't think so," said Coraline. (p. 57)

She says this earlier in the novel, but as a condition of her wager, she has to agree to it: "I'll … play Happy Families. And I'll let you sew your buttons into my eyes." (p. 108)

Aside from the associations with Oedipus, who put out his own eyes with a needle-like, brooch pin when he realised his intimacy with his mother (unwittingly returning to that homelike place), Coraline's button replacements have the related association of giving up one's soul, the eyes being its windows. Aside from paying the ferryman, this was one reason the eyes were covered with coins: to keep them shut; just as mirrors were covered when someone died, in case their soul might go into the mirrored surface and haunt the living. Something like this has already happened in the other realm, where the three, earlier child victims of the other mother are trapped as revenants behind a mirror—ghosts whom Coraline eventually manages to lay to rest. Finally, the "spool of black cotton" itself warrants mention, bringing to mind Freud's discussion of his grandson, who also associated it with a mother figure—his own—using it to symbolise her when confronted with her absence. However, whereas in this scenario the child tried to come to terms with itself as a separate, albeit lonely being, Coraline is being offered the opposite: the prospect of being sutured to the mother forever, of being "buried alive." In short, the other mother offers to replace Coraline's eye with her own I: an eye for an I, in fact.

There's even more to say though, when we consider what Slavoj Žižek, another psychoanalytically oriented critic, terms "looking awry," taking his cue from Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

> Like perspectives, which rightly gaz'd upon
> Show nothing but confusion; ey'd awry
> Distinguish form … (qtd in Žižek, 1992, p. 10)

Drawing on Lacan, this idea expresses the notion that our view is always skewed, and necessarily so, by the nature of our existence in the Symbolic. Outside this realm there is what Lacan terms the Real, which is the brute stuff of the universe, existing prior to our classifications and categorisations; hence it is, indeed, "nothing but confusion." The only time we experience the Real, therefore, is when we have some sort of crisis or accident (missing our step, for example), although even then, we are soon back on track as we turn the incident into words, into the Symbolic ("I missed my step"). If we are sometimes shocked into experiencing the Real, we can equally lose ourselves in the Symbolic, as when we are "on automatic pilot" driving a car, for example, and find we have no recollection of the last few miles, albeit we obeyed all the rules of the road. School, with its uniform "white socks, navy-blue school underpants … grey blouses and … dark grey skirt" (p. 33), to which Coraline objects, can be seen as a prime site of symbolic compliance. So, returning to the *Richard II* quotation, it is only because we are slightly out of phase with the immediacy and materiality of the world and its sensations that we have any sort of "view": we are finely balanced between the Real and the Symbolic. The other mother attempts to shift this relation, removing Coraline from the Symbolic into her own, amorphous realm of "pale nothingness, like a blank sheet of paper or an enormous, empty white room" that has "no temperature, no smell, no texture and no taste" (p. 87).

Another term for this awry look is "anamorphosis," Lacan's favourite example being Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, where a blotchy bit of paint at the bottom of the picture, if looked at from a particular angle (awry), resolves itself into a skull that appears to be looking back at us; as a consequence, the whole painting shifts its meaning, and these important, ambassadorial figures, despite all their wealth and material possessions, are seen to be at the mercy of time's ravages; they are, in short, undone by death. Lacan was fond of this example because it illustrates how our own look is always partial (awry), always caught up in our

particular desires (Žižek, 1992, p. 91). In the Real there is no such partiality: everything is on view because there is no "individual" perspective from which to distort it (even the back of one's head, invisible to the owner, is out there in the Real). However, precisely because we are beings distorted by the look, we have the uncanny feeling not only that we can be seen, but that the flimsiness of our symbolic universe (with its way of categorising and naming the world) can also be seen through.

Lacan calls this all-seeing vantage point "the gaze," and its uncanny presence is certainly something that Coraline experiences: "She walked into the drawing room and looked at the door. She had the feeling that the door was looking back at her, which she knew was silly, and knew on a deeper level was somehow true." (p. 68) Indeed, the whole house later appears to be "crouching and staring down at her" (p. 122), for the other mother, as Coraline comes to realise, is responsible for this entire uncanny realm, the rats which infest the place being "her eyes" (p. 90). But what the other mother does not have is Coraline's individual look. Thus the other mother wants to replace Coraline's eyes with uniform, black buttons not simply to deprive Coraline of her individuality (her awry look), but because "looking awry" poses a threat to this other mother: it can reveal that which the other mother wants to remain hidden. And this is where "the stone with a hole in it" (p. 30), given to Coraline by the two ex-actresses, Miss Forcible and Miss Spink, is a powerful aid; for Coraline is herself disoriented in this other realm, where the regularities of time and space don't signify. The hole in the stone allows Coraline to frame this realm, to give it the coordinates that are otherwise lacking; it allows her to see through the "nothing but confusion" to a reality coloured, or distorted, by her desire; in short, her vision is energised by her desire to retrieve her parents.

Returning to what was said earlier, then, Coraline is trying to regulate her place on this border between the Symbolic and the Real; to find her own space: she has to accept that she cannot be all to her parents, who have each other. To be totally *all* for someone, in fact, is to cease to exist, to be possessed (which is what the other mother offers). The space Coraline needs to negotiate is therefore between these two realms. The other old man, Mr Bobo (who later disintegrates into a nest of rats), taunts her with the frustration of feeling neglected: "You'll go home. You'll be bored. You'll be ignored. No one will listen to you, not really listen to you … They don't even get your name right" (p. 138). This certainly hits a nerve with Coraline, whom we have seen out shopping with her less than attentive mother:

> "Coraline? Oh, there you are. Where on earth were you?"
>
> "I was kidnapped by aliens," said Coraline. "They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped."
>
> "Yes dear. Now, I think you could do with some more hairclips, don't you?" (p. 34)

As I noted at the beginning, the fear of extraterrestrial aliens is relatively minor compared to the uncanny fears closer to home. It is of note here that Coraline begs her mother to buy some Day-Glo green gloves, to make her stand out, to be special: "But Mum, *everybody* at school's got grey blouses and everything. *Nobody's* got green gloves. I could be the only one" (p. 33). Coraline's final sentence overtly expresses her wish that the personal pronoun, "I," truly signified uniqueness, so that she could be "the only one," perhaps especially in her mother's eyes.

Hence the temptation of the other mother, offering a return to what initially appears as the *heimlich* condition of the mother–child dyad; in Lacanian terms, to the period preceding our status as desiring beings. For Lacan, to desire is always to be wanting, to be in a state of lack. We become desiring only when we find that our mother doesn't dedicate her total love and commitment to us and, as a consequence, we come to accept the Symbolic order, albeit it

seems but a poor replacement for what we feel we once had; hence our lack, and hence our desire. Prior to this, the child does not *desire* so much as *demand*: satisfaction is expected immediately, being seen as the way in which the mother can demonstrate her total devotion. Clearly, the other mother and her avatars offer a tantalising realisation of this state:

> "We will listen to you and play with you and laugh with you. … Every meal will be a thing of joy … Nothing will pass your lips that does not entirely delight you."
>
> "And could I have Day-glo green gloves to wear …?" asked Coraline.
>
> "…If you stay here, you can have whatever you want." (pp. 138–139)

It sounds like bliss, or *jouissance*, as Lacan termed it. However, *jouissance* has a double-edge: it is so pleasurable that it can be beyond endurance, painful (like needles in the eyes), even deadly. Coraline, then, although tempted, recognises that she has moved beyond this state. I say "recognises," but the phrase "on reflection" is more precise, in that the other realm mirrors, or doubles, Coraline's predicament: she stages the process by which she comes to terms with her desires, realising that the mother cannot be everything to her, nor she to her mother. Her father, the key representative of the Symbolic (the realm of language rather than things) has already broken up this oceanic state. Henceforth her own mother must always stand slightly apart from her, as the m(other). The other mother's offer to reinstate this earlier state of oneness, to remove any gap between word and thing, is alluring but it is also repulsive. And it is for this reason that Coraline so expressly acknowledges the significance of her father in her life. She does this when she bravely undertakes a return to the *unheimlich* realm, telling the cat about how her dad once protected her from some wasps; and she does it again when she recites a verse that her father once sang to her:

> *I give you lots of kisses,*
> *And I give you lots of hugs,*
> *But I never give you sandwiches*
> *with bugs*
> *in.* (p. 179)

The way this is represented, in italics, shows that Coraline has internalised the voice of her father, of the Symbolic. In contrast, we should note, the other mother positively delights in her live bugs, which she is all too willing to share:

> Expecting … a toffee or a butterscotch ball, Coraline looked down. The bag was half-filled with large shiny blackbeetles [sic], crawling over each other in their efforts to get out of the bag.
>
> "No," said Coraline. "I don't want one."
>
> "Suit yourself," said her other mother. She carefully picked out a particularly large and black beetle, pulled off its legs … and popped the beetle into her mouth. She crunched it happily. (p. 93)

As a signifying person, then, Coraline has come to terms with the necessary gap that will always prevent her from fulfilling her desires—without which she would collapse into meaninglessness, lacking the place, the very space in the Symbolic that language confers. Hence, in response to the other Mr Bobo's comment, "If you stay here, you can have whatever you want" (p. 139), Coraline retorts:

> "You really don't understand … I don't *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't mean anything. What then?" (p. 139)

It certainly couldn't "mean anything"; it couldn't, for example, be a token of love. Coraline has come to realise that this space outside the Symbolic, attractive as it sounds in some regards, is also dangerous—as both Lacan and Kristeva aver. Lacan thus describes the mother and her desire as like "a big crocodile and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down." (qtd. in Fink, 1995, pp. 56–57). Julia Kristeva takes this further, describing the maternal body as both "nourishing and murderous" (1982, p. 54), as that which needs to be abjected. The abject, then, is

> the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. … A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (p. 2)

In other words, in order for a person to take up their place in the world, distinct from the mother figure who once provided all and everything, the maternal must be set apart. In this process, the mother, associated with a time prior to the emergence of individuality, comes to represent a realm of non-being, of all that one is not. Kristeva also makes the point that, although a recognition of the order of the Symbolic might occur but once, a sense of abjection can recur at any time, being provoked by anything that revolts us and thereby seems to threaten our sense of self. Seen in these terms, this abject, other mother is what Barbara Creed (1993), in examining horror films like *Carrie* and *Alien*, has termed the "monstrous feminine"; such a being combines aspects of a womb-like, suffocating "archaic mother" with a more "phallic" incarnation. The former is apparent in Coraline's assessment that the other mother "loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold." She realises that she will be "a possession, nothing more" (p. 124). In other words, she would end up as nothing but a doll with button eyes: someone, as the song has it, who only has eyes for you. Returning to Kristeva's description, "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (1)—a statement in which we might detect the hint of a pun (not a pin!) in that "*I*," and its necessary removal, as one is stitched-up, reduced to a mere maternal possession. To put it yet another way, one could say that once the other mother fixes her "beady eye" on you, there is no escape.

The description of this world in terms of its fluidity, its plasticity, also adds to this conception of the other mother as the monstrous feminine; there are, furthermore, hints of the maternal in the house's walls being "the colour of old milk" (p. 126) and the outside having a "misty milky whiteness" (p. 88). These recall Kristeva's powerful example of the abject experienced when our lip adheres to the skin on a cup of hot milk. Coraline also experiences this in the disintegrating realm of the other, its "sticky web-stuff clinging to her arm" (p. 122). And following this, as Coraline escapes to her real parents' house, the linking passage is itself described not only in terms of a birth canal—"hot and wet"—but also with suggestions of a *vagina dentata*—"as if she had put her hand in somebody's mouth" (p. 156)—bringing the phallic side to the fore, and recalling Lacan's image of "a big crocodile," whose mouth you can "find yourself in". This monstrous mother has other phallic attributes, too: "teeth … sharp as knives" (p. 149), a "daggers" look, snake-like hair that "writhed and twined about her head," and long bony fingers; and beyond her appearance, of course, there is her wish to obliterate Coraline's individuality, her I/eye. Even the "misty milky whiteness" has this phallic edge, early on being described as hanging "like blindness around the house" (p. 31). As the cat puts it, "She wants something to love … She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that" (p. 79).

The other mother, then, incarnates all that we need to set aside in order to live, but which will continue to shadow us, and which, indeed, can at times seem appealing. In pursuing her

wish to be special, then, Coraline comes too close to realising her desires. After this realisation, Coraline spends the rest of the book trying to re-establish a distance, to rebuild the fantasmatic screen that allows her to function in the world. In these terms, Coraline has brought her unconscious fears and desires into consciousness, where they almost destroy her. But when she lures the other mother into the well, using the key as bait, we shouldn't presume that that is the end of her; like the death-drive, she will return: she has simply been put at a safe distance.

It is of note how Coraline achieves this ending; in effect by reverting to a younger self, to one that still plays with dolls. In other words, she affects an innocence she no longer possesses, performing childhood, using it as a masquerade. As she replies to her mother, when the latter queries her playing with dolls, "I don't … They're protective coloration," (p. 175) alluding to a TV programme she had watched far earlier, where "animals, birds and insects …disguised themselves as leaves or twigs or other animals to escape from things that could hurt them"(p. 15). In other words, we could say that by the end of the novel Coraline has realigned herself in the Symbolic, no longer feeling oppressed by her status (which hasn't changed—her parents are much the same). She simply sees the world in different terms, and celebrates her own artifice. True to her name, a piece of coral might not be much in itself, but it has a resilience that resists being engulfed by the sea, being reduced to that oceanic state. And she is rewarded by being properly named: "'Coraline,' said Mr Bobo, repeating her name to himself with wonderment and respect" (p. 183). Moreover, although the Real is threatening in its utter meaninglessness, Coraline now has an awareness at least of the limits of symbolisation: "The sky had never seemed so *sky*; the world had never seemed so *world*" (p. 158). And right at the end, after she has dispatched the beldam, she fancies she can hear that which is entirely beyond the Symbolic:

> She fancied she could hear sweet music on the night air: the kind of music that can only be played on the tiniest silver trombones and trumpets and bassoons, on piccolos and tubas so delicate and small that their keys could only be pressed by the tiny pink fingers of white mice. (p. 185)

The world is re-enchanted, as Chesterton's epigraph promised at the outset.

To conclude then, *Coraline*, echoing many fairy tales (*Bluebeard* especially coming to mind, with its forbidden chamber accessible by a large key), explores the problematic nature of knowing one's place in the world, which I have theorised largely in psychoanalytical terms. (The cat, which I have largely neglected, is significantly "not the other anything" and doesn't need a name, either, unlike—so it informs Coraline—"*you* people … because you don't know who you are" (pp. 47–48). Similar to the Cheshire Cat in Carroll's *Alice*, it acts like a Lacanian therapist, refusing to support anyone's fantasies.) I have suggested that the book brilliantly brings to life Freud's concept of the uncanny (animates it, in fact), although I have taken issue with Freud's explanatory principle (fear of castration). Lacan's reworking seems far more plausible; namely, that the fear turns on the fragility of one's existence, strung between the Symbolic and the Real: one wants to be loved, but not to bits! However, I'd like to finish with another observation; for, in the Freudian economy, reversals and displacements of character are forever possible. Thus, rather than seeing Coraline as threatened by this other mother, it is also plausible to read her *as* the other mother. Coraline's fantasy is then about realising that *she* is the one being overly demanding of her parents and neighbours, everyone being sucked into her orbit in her desire to be the centre of attention. In this version, Coraline finally relinquishes control of her own buttoned-up universe, burying her possessive side and coming to see the world afresh. And yet, as with most fairy tales, its dragons are never completely explained away; so this attempt will stop here.

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