

# Alluring Childhood: Vitality, Control and Cannibalistic Motherhood in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

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**Abstract---** *Depicting childhood through gothic narratives can take the form of portraying fear, curiosity, and development on a psychological level. As the concept of motherhood is usually linked with caring and nurturing actions such as feeding, motherhood in both reality and fiction tends to represent a loving person who feeds her child with food and affections. Hence, through the use of food symbolism as well as temptations and authoritative behaviors, the analysis rejects the notion of motherly possessiveness while at the same time discussing the difficulties that a child may face in the process of attaining autonomy and identity. Moreover, the discussed topic is consistent with the aim of Good Health and Well-Being since this goal is focused on promoting children's health and well-being. Through Coraline's struggles for independence and power, the author manages to demonstrate the importance of encouraging childhood development and ensuring supportive conditions for growing up. Within this wider literary context, the novel "Coraline" by Neil Gaiman creates the horrific character of the Other Mother, who employs food and affection as tools of deceit to lure Coraline into a controlling environment. It is in this context that this study examines the theme of appetite, control and cannibalistic motherhood embodied by the character of the Other Mother. Through a contrast between the real parents and the deceptively loving Other Mother, the text explores how childhood agency is acquired as a response to manipulation and deception. This study explores how Gaiman combines fantasy and horror to criticize the unrealistic notions of motherhood in order to show how children operate in power dynamics within the family setting. Childhood is therefore depicted as an age of acquiring courage and developing judgment.*

**Keywords---** *Childhood, Motherhood, Power, Control, Fantasy, Identity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE plays an integral part in human communication (Hatmi et al., 2024). The expression of human emotion, concepts, imaginations, and experiences take place using written or oral languages. This term is derived from the Latin term *littera* meaning letter or writing. The various genres that make up literature include poetry, drama, novels, essays, short stories, among others. Authors express their perceptions regarding society and life through literature

(Katadah et al., 2025). Apart from providing entertainment, literature offers people insights into various social situations, values, and historical incidents (Catherine Butler, 2006). Out of all the literary cultures around the world, British literature assumes a special position in literature.

The term British literature is used to refer to the literature that originated in the United Kingdom (Beizae & Suzani, 2019). British literature has evolved over many years, reflecting the changes undergone by the culture and society in Britain. The early period in British literature is referred to as the Old English or Anglo-Saxon period (450-1066). Literature during this era was greatly influenced by oral tradition (Gholami, 2016). Stories used to be conveyed verbally before being recorded in writing form. Among these stories is the great epic of Beowulf, where the plot revolves around a courageous warrior fighting monsters and dragons. Some of the common literary themes that can be noted in this period are heroism and bravery. The medieval period, which lasted between 1066 and 1500, followed the Norman Conquest in England. Literature from this period was largely written in Middle English. Religion was an important theme in the literature of this time. Romance and allegories were some other types of writing in this period. Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the great writers of this era. His well-known literary work is *The Canterbury Tales*, which narrates the journey undertaken by a group of pilgrims traveling to Canterbury. The work provides a vivid depiction of medieval society. This is the time in which there was great progress made in the fields of arts, education, and literature. During this period, writers paid attention to human sentiments and creativity. Some of the notable plays written by Shakespeare include *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, which discuss universal ideas such as love, ambition, envy, and conflicts. William Shakespeare was the greatest literary figure in the Renaissance period.

Children's Literature is yet another major area in the study of literature. It includes all literature specifically designed for children and young adults. This kind of literature includes fairy tales, picture books, poems, novels, and other types of writings written using imaginative and simplistic languages (Bordbar & Shirazi, 2019; Jack Zipes, 2015; Jack Zipes, 2012). Children's literature seeks to entertain children but also to impart certain values like kindness, bravery, honesty, and companionship in them. The history of children's literature dates back to folklores and stories told orally (Kimberly Reynolds, 2011). Many famous stories in the world today were written down by famous

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authors including Hans Christian Anderson and Brothers Grimm. The majority of these fairy tales contain magical elements, fantastical characters, and moral teachings (Bruno Bettelheim, 1976; Maria Tatar, 2003). The period of the nineteenth and twentieth century witnessed the advent of the genre of children's literature. Many authors penned down a series of novels that revolved entirely around the feelings of a child. Some famous books include "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll and "Peter Pan" by J.M. Barrie, which drew many young readers. Alice is fascinated by her surroundings in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland":

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice... "now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!" (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight) (Lewis Carroll, Chapter 2, p. 16.)

This term brings out the curious attitude of the child to the magical and mysterious world he encounters. This imaginary exploration of childhood inspired modern authors to explore this idea in fantasy by touching on more psychological aspects. This genre includes a combination of fantasy, imagination, and adventure along with childhood experiences (Sigmund Freud, 2003). In modern times, many novelists have incorporated psychology along with fantasy in their children's literature works (David Rudd, 2010). One such great novelist of modern times is (Neil Gaiman, 2002). He was born in 1960 in England where he became an avid reader at a young age. Initially, Neil Gaiman worked as a journalist but later became a recognized novelist, comic strip artist, and author of fantasy novels (Farah Mendlesohn, 2008). He has produced numerous books including *American Gods*, *The Graveyard Book*, and *Good Omens*. All of Neil Gaiman's works incorporate elements of fantasy, mythologies, and dark fairytales discussing issues such as identity, imagination, and individuality. Neil Gaiman's best-selling youth novel is titled *Coraline* and was published in 2002. In the book, we have the story of Coraline Jones, who is an adventurous and curious little girl that has to move with her parents to another house because of the work commitments of her parents. While exploring the house, she finds a door that takes her to an alternate world that looks just like her own. There, she encounters a more attentive "Other Mother" and "Other Father."

In the beginning, it may seem fascinating. Nevertheless, further into the story, it becomes clear for Coraline that the Other Mother is neither a loving nor benevolent character, and she poses a great danger to Coraline. To retain the child in the alternative reality, the Other Mother offers her whatever she wants. Moreover, she encourages Coraline to take out her eyes and give them to her in exchange for black buttons. This act signifies the lack of freedom and independence on part of the person being manipulated. Overall, the character of the Other Mother embodies an evil version of motherhood, which aims at manipulating the child. Childhood is one of the main topics discussed in the story written by Neil Gaiman. It touches upon such aspects as curiosity, fears, courage, and the struggle for independence. Initially, Coraline is portrayed as a lonely little girl. Later, she finds in herself the strength to resist the evil forces of the Other Mother, saves her parents, and the souls of other children from her clutches.

## II. ALLURING CHILDHOOD AND THE SEDUCTION OF CONTROL

The world of childhood is presented in *Coraline* as the world of curiosity, imagination, and the quest for attention. The protagonist's daily life seems boring and lonely because her parents are always engaged in work and thus do not pay much attention to Coraline. Boredom is another driving force that pushes Coraline to seek for something exciting and interesting. Eventually, curiosity drives Coraline towards an intriguing door that leads to a magical world – the Other World which seems brighter and more interesting than anything else in Coraline's dull reality. The Other Mother has cleverly designed the world to be fascinating for Coraline, taking into account her childhood energy. There, everything is better – from tasty treats to interesting games; moreover, Coraline receives constant attention. It is even mentioned that "the food was better than at home" (*Coraline*, Pg. 57). All such details help to present the world as an exciting environment where a person's needs can be fulfilled. In fact, such an interesting world becomes the key point of manipulation. Beneath the colorful surface of the Other World lies a deeper structure of control. The kindness of the Other Mother is conditional, and her hospitality is actually an insinuation of the need to obey and surrender. She gives away the condition for staying in this world when she remarks, "If you want to stay here, you need to have buttons sewn into your eyes". (*Coraline*, Pg. 75) The proposal for Coraline to swap her eyes for buttons signifies the point where interest becomes domination. The seemingly benign concept of liberation slowly transforms into a mechanism meant to ensnare the child's essence. By way of such an illustration, the book shows how curiosity and the desire for love during childhood may be manipulated.

"She stole our hearts," said the tallest of the ghost children.

"She took our lives away and hid them."

"She feeds on children like you."

"She takes their lives and their hearts and leaves them empty."

"We are nothing but ghosts of what we once were."

(Gaiman, P.104)

Finally, Coraline's decision not to accept the Other Mother's offer is an indication of how she has matured, along with the power of her self-sufficiency. The fate of the shadow-like children in the Other Mother's realm highlights the terrible effects of her cannibalistic maternal nature. After the children have accepted her love and sewn buttons on their eyes, they are no longer free and end up losing their lives. As one of them puts it, "We are small shadows in the darkness" (*Coraline*, Pg. 106). In such a way, the image created in this excerpt highlights that the consumption performed by the Other Mother is not only materialistic, but rather concerns the mental well-being of the children, their identity and energy. Thus, the metaphor of a cannibal becomes clear, because the mother is literally feeding off the psychological, emotional side of the little creature. Instead of providing the child with all means needed for healthy development, the mother creates an everlasting dependency from her children.

### III. CANNIBALISTIC MOTHERHOOD AND POSSESSIVE MATERNAL POWER

The other prominent theme explored in *Coraline* is that of the grotesque idea of cannibalistic mothering, as embodied by the Other Mother character. Initially, she seems to be the ideal mother, embodying everything that Coraline desires in a mother figure. As she informs Coraline, "I'll always love you and take care of you." (*Coraline* Pg. 73) She prepares scrumptious dishes, pays a lot of attention to Coraline, and offers a stimulating atmosphere. Unlike Coraline's biological mother, who tends to be occupied with her work, Other Mother appears as someone with infinite time on her hands to pay attention to Coraline. However, her excessive display of love starts to give way to. "She's bad... She's been pretending to be my mother." (*Coraline* Pg. 91) It is at this point that Coraline realizes that the love bestowed by the Other Mother is an imitation and deceptive act, exposing the threat lying beneath the veil of lovingness. The love of the Other Mother is controlling rather than caring, and her wish is not to nourish Coraline but to have her for eternity. She states, "I'll always love you and take care of you," acting as an exemplary mother. But soon after, her demands start becoming threatening as she asks Coraline to stitch buttons on her eyes to remain in the other world. In this way, her demands represent the loss of identity and freedom. As the Other Mother stitches buttons in place of the eyes, she is trying to deprive the child from seeing and thinking freely.

Here, the woman acts like a cannibal in a figurative sense, attempting to ingest the life energy of Coraline. The Other Mother is a being who feeds off the essence and presence of children by capturing their souls into her realm. "She wants something to love.....something that isn't her." (*Coraline* Pg. 118). This implies that the other mother does not actually desire true love from others as nurturing, but as something for herself to satisfy her own lustful cravings. Love becomes a parasite that feeds off the life-force of children.

"You know that I love you," said the other mother.

"I have a whole world here for you."

"Everything you could ever want."

"You can stay here forever."

"All you need to do is let me sew the buttons into your eyes." (Gaiman, p. 75)

This reinforces the image of the cannibalistic mother, wherein the female figure literally consumes the identity and freedom of the child. With this frightening representation, the novel questions the notion that motherhood is synonymous with protection and goodness. On the contrary, it reveals how the power that a mother wields may become dominance and possession once love is used for manipulation. The rejection by Coraline of being a mother under such circumstances highlights the importance of individuality and freedom. Despite its seemingly kind intentions, the act is actually motivated by an evil objective. The love offered by the Other Mother is meant to possess, rather than nourish, the young girl. The ghost children attest to this frightening fact when they say "She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away" (*Coraline*, Pg. 107). This quote sheds light on the cannibalism

of the Other Mother's power as a mother. Rather than nurturing children, she consumes their spirit and their self, keeping them prisoners within her own realm. This way, the story brings into question the widely-held assumption that the mother-child relationship is characterized by care and protection. The Other Mother symbolizes the monstrous side of maternal power; through her love and affection, she dominates her "children." Moreover, the Other Mother's obsession with holding Coraline captive within the Other World indicates that she is a highly possessive woman. She even requires Coraline to sew buttons over her eyes.

### IV. CHILDHOOD AGENCY AND THE POWER OF RESISTANCE

Even though Coraline's journey seems terrifying, she isn't shown as helpless girl. In *Coraline*, childhood can be seen as a time when bravery, intelligence, and strength may appear in the form of personality. In the beginning of Coraline's adventure in the Other World, she is amazed at all the wonderful things surrounding her. However, having discovered the truth about the Other Mother, Coraline knows for sure that she must fight against all the possible dangers in her path. While other children had no way out, Coraline does not give up her freedom and openly defies the Other Mother by saying, "You're not my mother." In Coraline's struggle for self-definition, this is a defining moment. Through her rejection of the fabricated maternal control that she has been subjected to, she starts making decisions about her future.

"I don't want whatever I want," Coraline said.

"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."

"You're not my mother." (Gaiman, pg. 92)

The strength of Coraline does not come from her physical prowess; rather, it comes from the fact that she can analyze situations, and act decisively under difficult circumstances. Coraline bargains with the Other Mother, forms a plan to liberate the other children from their captivity, and eventually manages to escape from the evil realm. Coraline's activities prove that childhood energy is not just an element of weakness; on the contrary, it is a force of resistance. Childhood energy and the strength of a child become evident in the novel through Coraline's experience. The story proves that kids can understand manipulative intentions and rebel against oppressors. As Coraline shows courage, she grows up and learns to love her own uniqueness and freedom. Another instance where we can see that Coraline has shown herself to be quite assertive and brave is during the scene in which Coraline chooses to confront the Other Mother by offering a deal through which she will rescue the trapped souls of other children. By exercising her wit and confidence, Coraline stands up to, "I'm not afraid," (*Coraline*, Pg. 90). Even though Coraline has fear inside her, she realizes that courage isn't being without fear but rather being able to confront danger when you feel fear.

This scene is evidence of how resilient children can be, as this example proves that it is possible for a child to overcome manipulation and oppression by being determined and using their ingenuity. The act of challenging the Other Mother is also indicative of the fact that Coraline refuses to give in to false authority. As she takes matters into her hands and makes plans to save the ghost children, she becomes the main protagonist of her story. In this way, the novel shows us that it is possible for children to be independent and morally courageous.

Despite her feelings of loneliness and curiosity about this strange and eerie Other World, she is transformed by the events that unfold around her into an incredibly brave and self-aware character. Coraline knows that the false promises of love and affection made by the Other Mother are nothing but lies and danger. The character's mission to rescue the children from their confinement proves her sense of morality and duty. At one moment, "When you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave" (Gaiman, *Coraline*, pg. 45). It is within this realisation that one finds the true nature of Coraline's character and the meaning of courage and strength expressed in the novel. Unlike other portrayals which view children as weak beings, here, the writer uses the child stage to illustrate how one develops the audacity to challenge any form of tyranny and oppression. It is through Coraline's bravery and intellect that the novel exalts the vigor of childhood. As Coraline asserts, "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?" (Gaiman, *Coraline*, pg. 92). Such a statement shows that she is mature and will not accept the consolation provided by the Other Mother.

## V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the story *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman suggests that in this book, the writer considers childhood as an interesting place where there is both fascination and vulnerability. Childhood does not seem to be innocent in this literary piece; on the contrary, it is rather associated with inner struggles that help form one's view of the surrounding world. For instance, through the experience of Coraline and her encounters with Other Mother, the author demonstrates the dangers that may come along with fascinating aspects that a person experiences during his/her childhood. The idea of alluring childhood seems to be one of the main concepts developed in this literary work. Initially, the life of Coraline seems to be boring because the girl does not have much attention from her parents who work very hard. Therefore, she feels deprived of love and care from their part. The Other World caters to these needs by creating an environment which seems more lively and satisfying than the mundane environment of Coraline. The Other Mother creates this environment for the express purpose of attracting Coraline's attention through appealing to her senses and making her feel comfortable. But this world is not simply an act of loving care on behalf of the Other Mother; rather, it is a well-planned strategy to trap Coraline. It shows how the innocent curiosity and desire for affection of children can be used against them in situations of abuse and manipulation. Another major theme in the book examined in the research is that of the repulsive depiction of cannibalism in the form of motherhood. The character of the Other Mother starts off with giving the impression of being a

more attentive and caring mother than Coraline's actual mother. Her actions seem motherly and loving, creating the image of a perfect mother. But slowly and steadily Love of the Other Mother is possessive instead of protective; her wish to have Coraline forever turns motherhood into an act of subjugation. By asking Coraline to change her eyes for two buttons, the Other Mother tries to destroy Coraline's personality and independent attitude. This way, motherhood becomes symbolic of cannibalism in that the Other Mother wishes to devour the energy and life of Coraline in order to remain alive herself. Thus, through this terrifying image, the book questions traditional views regarding the role of mothers who, while caring for their children, can easily abuse this natural role to gain control. Yet, the novel reveals the power of childhood that Coraline demonstrates through her bravery in fighting the monster. Even though Coraline goes to the Other World just to satisfy her curiosity, she understands quite soon that there is something wrong about everything there and that she should protect herself from being under the influence of the monster. In doing so, she defies the control of the Other Mother, frees the souls of children caught within an alternate dimension, and restores equilibrium to the world of reality and illusion. This shows that children's energy and vitality is not only an indicator of weakness but strength as well.

Moreover, Coraline's adventures help make a significant change in her understanding of family and its essence. Initially, Coraline perceives her actual parents as indifferent and boring people. Nevertheless, upon the experience of illusion in the Other World, Coraline gains insight into the importance of real human relationships. As opposed to the fake kindness and affection presented to her by the Other Mother, Coraline understands that although love of her own parents is imperfect, it is real and sincere. Thus, the novel portrays Coraline's emotional development as well as her ability to recognize the importance of authenticity. All in all, Coraline gives an excellent insight into imagination of children, their perception of their mother figure, and independence. Indeed, through Coraline's story, the author manages to demonstrate just how easy it is for attractive illusions to conceal elements of power and domination, especially if the manipulator uses the vulnerabilities and emotional weakness of a child. However, the book also illustrates the heroism that a kid can possess when faced with such challenges.

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