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THE GRASS ISN'T ALWAYS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE: CORALINE'S JOURNEY TO THE OTHER SIDE

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In life, there are always instances when we find ourselves unappreciative of the things that we are given. As a kid I would always get mad at my mom for not letting me eat sweets. The cookie jar was strategically placed on top of the highest shelf in the kitchen and one day, after hours of plotting, I ruled that getting to those cookies was impossible. I was so angry that I sat there and wished that I had a mom that would treat me with all the sweets that my heart desired. That night I went to bed with the thought of a better life filled with copious amounts of sugar. I woke up in bed with my mom, only it wasn't her. Next to me lay this scary clown with teeth as sharp as razors. Before I could scream I found myself awake with my mom lying right next to me. I reached over and put my face on her swung my arms around her chest and shut my eyes knowing I was safe and allowed myself to appreciate what I had rather than what I believed I wanted. When the main character of *Coraline* finds herself dissatisfied with her life she creates a new life as her preferred reality, at first. In Neil Gaiman's *Coraline,* the protagonist creates beauty from boredom with the formation of an alternate magical world that in the end makes her appreciate the life that she so badly wanted to change. This dark fantasy serves as a portal to the psychoanalytical thoughts that hide deep in the corners of her mind.

The entirety of the monotony that Coraline is suffering from throughout the book all starts because her family picks up and moves far away from the neighborhood she grew up in. This upheaval in her life leads to her constant feeling of boredom in their new house. In an interview by a woman named Mali Elfman, Gaiman describes the door from Coraline's reality, links it to his childhood: "We lived in the servants quarters... Another family had the posh half of the house, but we had the good front room. But, the good front room had two doors, one of which had gone to the good half of the house and one of which went to the servants' quarters" (Gaiman 2). Gaiman describes the door as an opportunity for him to expand upon it through his imagination. Because of her largely absent parents, Coraline is able to expand upon her imagination, like Gaiman. Within the beginning of the book, it becomes evident that Coraline gets very little attention from her parents. They offer her a lot of freedom, which translates in her head to being ignored. This can be seen with the mother's response to Coraline: "'I don't really mind what you do,' said Coraline's mother, 'as long as you don't make a mess'" (Gaiman 14). It is through being ignored however, that Coraline is able to create a portal into a new parallel world that represents her version of a better life. In an effort to find entertainment, Coraline went and counted all the doors in the house and that is when she found it: "The other, the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far corner of the drawing room, was locked" (Gaiman 18). This door was Coraline's way of coping with the absence of a strong parental presence because she ultimately creates it to serve as a form of escape from her disappointing reality.

Coraline uses this creation of a parallel universe to understand better where she stands in her own household. Although this world ends up being a complete disaster, the journey that she goes through trying to correct her original mistake of entering it, is what helps her realize to appreciate her real

life. In a paper entitled "An Eye For An I: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and Questions Of Identity," the writer David Rudd addresses Coraline's desire to figure out her place when he states, "As I shall suggest, Coraline is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one's place in the world; how one is recognized in one's own right rather than being either ignored on the one hand, or stifled on the other" (160). He notes Coraline's constant dissatisfaction, pointing out that she discovers her place by experiencing both family situations in her reality and fantasy. In the real world, Coraline constantly craves attention from her parents, and when she doesn't get it, her automatic response is to feel bored. This is visible in the scene of the book when she visits her dad in his office: "Coraline went to see her father. He had his back to the door as he typed. "Go away," he said cheerfully as she walked in. 'I'm bored,' she said. 'Learn how to tap-dance,' he suggested, without turning round. Coraline shook her head. 'Why don't you play with me?' she asked" (Gaiman 37). In this, Coraline attempts to spend time with her father, but her desire is ultimately rejected and therefore she no longer knows what to do with her time. While her parents are ignoring her, it is hard for Coraline to find any form of enjoyment. On the other side of the spectrum, in her alternate universe, Coraline at first is overjoyed by the attention, but she soon realizes that her wish for a better life with more attentive parents was misguided. She becomes afraid of her new world and wants her old life back. The moment and she becomes frightened is obvious: "'You don't frighten me,' said Coraline, although they did frighten her, very much. 'I want my parents back.' The world seemed to shimmer a little at the edges. 'Whatever would I have done with your old parents?'" (Gaiman 124). Although this is the world that Coraline wished for and entered willingly, she recognizes that her other parents cannot replace her real ones. She wished for this seemingly better world because all she really wants in her life is to gain a little bit of attention from her parents; without it she feels dissatisfied.

In Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, the protagonist creates beauty from boredom with the formation of an alternate magical world that in the end makes her appreciate the life that she so badly wanted to change.

As children, we all want things that we cannot have, and because Coraline's mother does not shower her with affection, she not only wants to feel important, she also wants to have things go her way. This is something that is not accomplished in her real world and it becomes obvious when Coraline and her mother go shopping: "Coraline saw some Day-glo green gloves she liked a lot. Her mother refused to get them for her... 'But Mum, everybody at school's got grey blouses and everything. Nobody's got green gloves. I could be the only one'" (Gaiman 47). The gloves symbolize Coraline's desire to stand out through her attempt to attain a uniform style unlike anyone else at her new school because she is unhappy with being ignored at home There are always instances in life where we want something because we believe it's beneficial to us; sometimes we are lucky and get them, while other times there is an obstacle in the way. When we are younger, that obstacle is usually our parents, and they bank their decisions on allowing their children to have this item depending on its practicality. The casualness with which Coraline's mother ignores makes it seems as though she just said no so she would not have to deal with it. Christine Wilkie-Stibhs, in "Imaging Fear: Inside The Worlds Of Neil Gaiman (An Anti-Oedipal Reading)," argues that Coraline's turn of events make her grow as a person:

> Gaiman's fictional worlds comprise a hyper reality of reflected and refracted images and spaces that deny readers a stable point of entry and engagement. For example, in *Coraline*, the lonely, bored, and ignored young girl protagonist, Coraline, negotiates numerous spaces and identities in her quest for parental attention and affection. (38)

Wilkie-Stubhs shows how Coraline's adventure in her twisted version of a Wonderland leaves her with a craving for the real world, where she might not receive everything she wants. When Coraline arrives in her fantasy world, she is told to play in her room. Her room in the real world is not everything she desired for she just moved in, but in her alternate reality it has exactly what she wants inside. The room is filled with things that Coraline can play with: "'books with pictures that writhed and crawled and shimmered; little dinosaur skulls that chattered their teeth as she passed. A whole toybox filled with wonderful toys. 'This is more like it'" (Gaiman 62). Her real mother did not really put in any effort into creating the perfect room for her daughter, and instead gave Coraline the freedom of setting it up herself. The other mother did the opposite and decorated the room with things that she believed Coraline would enjoy. Although Coraline liked her room in the other mother's house, in the end she still found out she identified with her life in her real home. Although she at first believed it to be perfect, later, when she realized she missed her actual parents, Coraline began to realize she no longer preferred the imaginary world. It is through the role of the other mother that she is finally able to uncover her place in her household.

Dreams teach us what we should strive for, whereas nightmares allow us to appreciate our reality.

Every child, especially when they are younger, needs a certain amount of attention from their mother. I know when I was little I would always be around my mom and want her approval and involvement in everything I did. In Coraline's life, things went a little differently. Her mother was not very attentive to or sensitive with Coraline, which made her create a second world as a coping mechanism. To help understand the role of a strong mother figure, Coraline, makes the "Other Mother" in her fantasy life. In Sawers Parsons brings this concept into perspective through the analysis of the importance of a mother's role in a child's life: "Like many other literary works of fantasy, both traditional and contemporary, Gaiman deploys the trope of the evil, powerful 'other' mother as a vehicle through which the protagonists resolve questions of identity, one's (gendered) place in the world, and the kinds of interpersonal relationships that are culturally sanctioned" (371). The Other mother represents a replacement of Coraline's real mother because at this stage in her life she feels neglected and desires a stronger mother figure. The affection Coraline desires from her real parents is quickly fulfilled through her 'other' ones. This can be seen when Coraline first arrives in the new world, "It was the best chicken that Coraline had ever eaten. Her mother sometimes made chicken, but it was always out of packets, or frozen, and was very dry, and it never tasted of anything" (Gaiman 60). Her other mother spends time on the food for Coraline to make sure that it fits her needs perfectly, which is different than what her actual mother does. This wish goes awry quickly with the presence of this secondary mom: "But, it is because these mothers make such choices and embrace this empowered status that their relationships with their daughters are haunted by the specter of a too-powerful (phallic) mother who is the source of fear and anxiety for both the girl protagonists" (Parsons 372). Through the imaginary mother, Coraline is able to experience what it is like to have a very powerful and overbearing mother. She is given the opportunity to live her life in the alternate world with the other mother's offer: "'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" (Gaiman 92). When she is pressured into sewing buttons to her eyes she realizes that this overly present and almost invasive mother is not what she desires. The button eyes represent Coraline's final step into leaving her real life behind, however when it all comes down to it she finally realizes that she values the independence her parents help create. In the end it is this other mother figure that makes Coraline realize she was wrong for not appreciating her old life.

There are so many different instances in life where we sit back and complain about the life we live because sometimes we don't have exactly what we want. In Coraline's case, she does not have very strong parental figures in her life and constantly finds herself bored. The writer Richard Gooding deals with Coraline's journey to self discovery in his essay 'Something Very Old and Very Slow': *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form":

> In its more traditional manifestations, the form offers false assurances relating to moralizing and educational tendencies inherited from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century models of writing for children: the psychological work that takes place in the fantasy world reaches closure, the protagonist returns home, and the magical effects, no longer being necessary, are suspended. (404)

Gooding's statement describes how Coraline finally figured out what she wanted in life through her other world. As she lives out her life in the fantasy realm, her reality begins to disappear when the other mother kidnaps Coraline's parents. When her parents are completely absent from her life she is able to realize that she was wrong. This becomes obvious when Coraline is confronted by the other mother about her real parents:

> If they have left you, Coraline, it must be because they became bored with you, or tired. Now, I will never become bored with you, and I will never abandon you. You will always be safe here with me."
>
> The other mother's wet-looking black hair drifted around her head, like the tentacles of a creature in the deep ocean. "They weren't bored of me," said Coraline. "You're lying. You stole them." (124-125)

This is the turning point for Coraline because she is able to finally understand that her parents actually do care about her, even though they may pay the closest attention. Once the other mother shows her a fake scene where her parents' seem ambivalent towards her well-being, she soon sees that her original assumption was false. This becomes her driving force to defeat the other mother and get her old life back with her real parents. It takes a lot of effort for Coraline to get her parents back and it is through this final game where she must complete tasks to uncover the location of her parents that she is able to overcome her fear and make it back to her reality. When she finally wakes up in her real world, it is dinnertime, and her father made pizza. Her appreciation for his cooking and not the magnificent food that she got from the other mother can be seen through this scene: "Dinner that night was pizza, and even though it was home-made by her father (so the crust was alternately thick and doughy and raw, or too thin and burnt)...Coraline ate the entire slice she had been given" (Gaiman 276). Instead of complaining about her father's cooking, which would have been routine, she eats it without any objection. This action shows how she has grown and learned to appreciate her life for what it is after the horrors she was exposed to in the alternate world she created.

When we sleep, we shut our eyes and drift off into a dreamland. Most of the time, these dreams are a better version of our reality because it is what we wish our current situation could be. However, it is the nightmares that we encounter that most often provide us a reality check. Dreams teach us what we should strive for, whereas nightmares allow us to appreciate our reality. In the book *Coraline,* Neil Gaiman uses the main character to show how a dream can turn so quickly into a nightmare through her creation of the alternate universe, thus making her grow through the realization to appreciate the life she was given. Even though, in life, we are presented with things that we do not like we must learn to appreciate things because in an instant, life as we know it could become much worse.

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