A Girl in the Dark with Monsters: The Convergence of Gothic Elements and Children's Literature in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

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Abstract

Whereas Gothic stories often question human morality, the purpose of children's literature is usually moralizing. Therefore, a literary work meant for minors and that strongly exhibits Gothic features seems, thus, a paradox: either the moralistic intention in children's literature will weaken the Gothic negativity of such work or the profound darkness of the Gothic elements will end up blurring the positive values of literary works for minors. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* is a novel for children that is deeply rooted into Gothic tradition. Some of the most notorious Gothic elements in the work are the presence of paranormal manifestations like ghosts, the common interaction with grotesque beings, and the existence of a dark, uncanny universe that provides the setting for the novel. In this context, some may argue that the apparently incompatible features of the novel would take it into two divergent directions that would finally nullify the work, either aesthetically or didactically. However, the Gothic images and content of the work actually contribute to the awakening of young readers by undermining the idealization of family love which, in the end, serves a significant didactic purpose.

Key words: children's literature, journey, family, self-discovery, values, Gothic studies, *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman

Resumen

La literatura gótica a menudo cuestiona la moralidad humana, lo que contrasta con el propósito tradicionalmente moralizante de la literatura infantil. Por tanto, una obra literaria para niños que exhiba características góticas parece una paradoja: o la intención moralizante de la literatura infantil debilitará el efecto de los elementos góticos, o éstos, por

su parte, acabarán opacando los valores positivos de la obra infantil con su oscuridad. *Coraline*, de Neil Gaiman, es una novela infantil que se encuentra firmemente afianzada en la tradición gótica y que incluye elementos como manifestaciones paranormales, interacción con seres grotescos y la existencia de un universo sobrenatural y tenebroso que provee el ambiente de la obra. En dicho contexto, algunos pueden afirmar que los elementos de la novela, aparentemente incompatibles, la condición hacia direcciones diferentes que acabarán con esta, ya sea didáctica o estéticamente. No obstante, las imágenes góticas y el contenido de *Coraline* contribuyen más bien con la madurez de los lectores jóvenes al falsear la idealización del amor familiar, lo cual se convierte en un propósito didáctico significativo.

Palabras claves: literatura infantil, viaje, familia, autodescubrimiento, valores, estudios góticos, *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman

Gothic literature and children's literature seem to possess irreconcilable positions. While the Gothic is often associated with highly negative elements, literary works directed to children are required to limit any disturbing issue in their content. Gothic fiction welcomes negative emotions; it is open to exploring the darkest corners of the human spirit. Therefore, confusion, doubt, despair, and horror frequently accompany Gothic stories, in which the unknown and the grotesque become forces that, as in *Frankenstein*, question human nature or, as in *Dracula*, place humanity as a small piece in an unseen and threatening puzzle of existence. Among the different sets of characteristics observed in the genre, the list that David Punter has offered becomes specially valuable: "an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant" (1). Henry Hughes adds other features to Gothic literature: "subversion of religious and social norms, an obsession with sex and death, and a fear of the supernatural or unknown" (60). Even morality and its religious base are subject to doubt, questioning, and transgression in Gothic fiction:

> Although all Gothic stories are not set in the distant past, most are draped in darkness, where submerged monsters may safely surface, where rape and murder may be carried out unseen. Japan and the West share this temporal and psychic doubleness.
> In both Japanese and Western Gothic literature, religious institutions are challenged and priests are often depicted as lustful, corrupt, or even murderous. Temples and churches become theaters of struggle between the flesh and spirit, desire and responsibility. (Hughes 83)

This heavy and overwhelmingly dark load of emotions in Gothic narratives seldom seems appropriate for children. Children, in fact, are provided with different kinds of works, which are especially tailored to them: children's literature. The definition of this genre, however, has been elusive:

> [Children's literature] is a distinct and definable genre of literature, with characteristics that emerge from enduring adult ideas about childhood and that have consequently remained stable over the stretch of time in which this literature has been produced. Those ideas are ambivalent inherently; therefore, the literature is ambivalent. (Nodelman 242)

Although children's literature has been difficult to define, stories for young readers are traditionally conceived as, or mainly associated with, didactic literature: «[children's literature] offers children both what adults think children will like and what adults want them to need, but it does so always in order to satisfy adults' needs in regard to children (Nodelman 242).

Whereas Gothic stories often question human morality, the purpose of children's literature is usually moralizing. Therefore, the fabric of this latter kind of literature is made by threads of several desirable social values (such as love, friendship, and honesty), which are interwoven into a didactic pattern of self-discovery and affirmation. The conception of children's literature as a means whose main purpose is transmitting values to young readers, nevertheless, causes a detrimental effect on the works as artistic manisfestations:

> Con respecto a la literatura infantil, el peligro está en emplearla con un fin utilitario, como una forma exclusiva de transmitir valores. En esta situación pueden caer quienes se desempeñan como intermediarios entre ella y el niño, como el maestro y el texto escolar. Por eso críticos como Juan Cervera advierten que ofrecer modelos, valores y actitudes a los niños para que estos los descubran y compartan está a un paso de instrumentar la literatura y manipular al niño. Esto obliga siempre a los autores a escribir sin responder a unos objetivos definidos con anticipación, porque los libros intencionalmente escritos para niños carecen de magia y de vitalidad porque excluyen voluntariamente la fantasía, en otras palabras, dejan de ser literatura para responder a fines didácticos o morales. (Vásquez 18)

Vásquez' position, however, does not represent the view of the majority, for it is commonplace to hear parents and teachers promoting the use of literature as a way of teaching children values and language. Janet L. Glass, at the beginning of her article "Everyone Loves a Good Story: Take the Time,"

> What could be a more exciting
> The first step is to choose a story, preferably in big book form, and adapt the text to a modest level . . . (295).

Glass'snumber of individuals in the world who consider children's literature little beyond a vehicle or a tool for teaching language or values. In this context, a literary work meant for minors and that strongly exhibits Gothic features seems, thus, a paradox: either the moralistic intention in children's literature will weaken the Gothic negativity of such work or the profound darkness of the Gothic elements will end up blurring the positive values of literary works for minors.

Coraline, by Neil Gaiman, is a novel for children that is deeply rooted into Gothic tradition. The work was published in 2002 by Bloomsbury and Harper Collins and received several awards, such as the 2002 Bram Stoker Award for Best Work for Young Readers ("Past Stoker Nominees & Winners, 2009"). The novel has also become a movie, directed by Henry Selick, which a number of viewers mistakenly attribute to Tim Burton, in part due to the movie's strong resemblance to Burton's animated Gothic productions aimed at children, such as *Frankenweenie* and *Corpse Bride*.   Gaiman's novel *Coraline* narrates the fantastic and terrifying adventure of Coraline Jones, a young girl whose age is not specified, after she crosses a hidden passageway to an alternative world. In this new world, the girl meets her so-called "other parents," inexact copies of her progenitors that possess buttons instead of eyes, and realizes that a dark reality lurks underneath the apparently happy surface of this world, one that her other-mother is concealing from her for an unknown reason. Some of the most prominent Gothic elements in the work are the presence of paranormal manifestations (ghosts), the common interaction with grotesque beings, and the existence of a dark, uncanny universe that provides the setting for the novel. On the other hand, being a work intended for young readers, the novel narrates the journey of self-discovery that the protagonist undergoes. In this context, some may argue that the apparently incompatible features of the novel would take it into two divergent directions that would finally nullify the work, either aesthetically or didactically. That, however, is not the case. Indeed, although some parents consider Gaiman's *Coraline* inappropriate for children because of its Gothic images and content, these elements actually contribute to the awakening of young readers by undermining the idealization of family love, which serves a significant didactic purpose in the end.

The S*tatus Quo* vs. the Fantastic Discovery

Gaiman's *Coraline* depicts a contrast of two worlds. For the protagonist, a young girl, the differences between these two worlds are so marked that she progressively sees how the other world (the one in which she met her other-parents) virtually collides with the real world (the one in which she lives with her parents). This collision becomes important because it not only fuels actions in the novel, but also is intrinsically related to Gothicism and to fantastic literature for children.

The Known World: Acceptance and Normality

As many protagonists in children's books, Coraline is an average child. She is also part of a standard family. No member of the Jones family stands out in any way. Although both her father and her mother work, their jobs allow them to stay in the house: "Both of her parents worked, doing things on computers, which meant that they were home a lot of the time. Each of them had their own study" (Gaiman 7). Coraline herself would not be different from other children except for the fact that she is especially interested in exploration and often finds amusement in observing everything in her surroundings:

> The day after they moved in, Coraline went exploring.
> She explored the garden. It was a big garden: at the very back was an old tennis court, but no one in the house played tennis and the fence around the court had holes in it and the net had mostly rotted away; there was an old rose garden, filled with stunted, flyblown rosebushes; there was a rockery that was all rocks; there was a fairy ring, made of squidgy brown toadstools which smelled dreadful if you accidentally trod on them. (Gaiman 4-5)

Coraline's love for exploration is so intense that she often wants to carry on with this activity even when the weather is an obstacle:

> "Mmph," said Coraline. "It's raining."
> "Yup," said her father. "It's bucketing down."
> "No," said Coraline."It's just raining. Can I go outside?"
> "What does your mother say?"
> "She says you're not going out in weather like that, Coraline Jones."
> "Then, no."
> "But I want to carry on exploring."
> "Then explore the flat," suggested her father. (Gaiman 7)

Unlike many would think, the girl is not reckless in her wanderings. In fact, she is singularly prudent: "There was also a well. On the first day Coraline's family moved in, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible made a point of telling Coraline how dangerous the well was, and they warned her to be sure she kept away from it. So Coraline set off to explore for it, so that she knew where it was, to keep away from it properly" (Gaiman 5).

Although Coraline likes to explore the places near her house, they are hardly part of her world for such places are almost always forbidden to her. Instead, her world mainly encompasses three areas: her family, her house, and her neighbors. Compared to the potential dangers and adventures outside the house, Coraline's world seems dull and constraining to her. Her family is imperfect and oppressive and she even feels that her parents neglect her sometimes. Her house is empty, messy, and utterly boring. Similarly, her neighbors are unappealing

and awkward. All these perceptions act as catalyzers so that Coraline starts looking for a way to escape from her reality. That action of escaping, paired with that of an alternative, unknown reality is a vital part of both children's literature and Gothic works.

The imperfection, oppressiveness, and occasional neglect of Coraline's parents becomes evident when the adults interact with the girl. The girl is annoyed at her parents' imperfection; although they mean well, their actions fail to satisfy the expectations of their daughter. She is displeased, for example, with her father's efforts to cook:

> Coraline's father stopped working and made them all dinner.
> Coraline was disgusted. "Daddy," she said, "you've made a recipe again."
> "It's leek and potato stew with a tarragon garnish and melted Gruyere cheese," he admitted.
> Coraline sighed. Then she went to the freezer and got out some microwave chips and a microwave minipizza. (Gaiman 9-10)

The girl does not hesitate to find for herself something more suitable to dine. She does not even fake politeness to disguise her disgust. In fact, she tells him immediately why she rejects the dish that he prepared for the family: "'You know I don't like recipes,' she told her father, while her dinner went around and around and the little red numbers on the microwave oven counted down to zero" (Gaiman 10). By pointing out that he *knows*, Coraline is indirectly criticizing his flaws: either he forgot her likes or he did remember them, but he still insisted on cooking something that she disliked. Either possibility places Coraline's father as imperfect, for he is absent-minded at best and stubborn at worst. Coraline's father even tries to persuade her to eat his dinner: "'If you tried it, maybe you'd like it,' said Coraline's father, but she shook her head" (Gaiman 10).

Coraline perceives her father's insistence as an imposition and feels that her parents cannot understand her needs. This is evident when the girl asks her mother for suggestions about activities to carry out in her new home. Although Coraline is constantly talking about exploring, her mother fails to perceive the girl's desire to observe her surroundings and the suggestions that she provides manifest that failure: 'What should I do?' asked Coraline. 'Read a book,' said her mother. 'Watch a video. Play with your toys.' . . . 'No,' said Coraline. 'I don't want to do those things. I want to explore'" (Gaiman 6). Her parents, to her discomfort, are completely unable to perceive Coraline's nature as an explorer and, in a total lack of understanding of her needs, keep suggesting the dullest activities for her to entertain herself. Coraline also feels that her parents do not pay enough attention to her and even neglect her sometimes. "'I don't really mind what you do,' said Coraline's mother, 'as long as you don't make a mess.'" (Gaiman 6). Although it might seem an exaggeration to view the former example as neglect on the part of Coraline's parents (after all, they are busy and the girl is distracting them), in reality they do show lack of interest toward their daughter, who perceives their attitude as neglect. In fact, Coraline's parents are straightforward in

expressing how they view their daughter's company sometimes. This is evident when Coraline asks her mother for suggestions about what to do. Her mother says: "'Go and pester Miss Spink or Miss Forcible, or the crazy old man upstairs'" (Gaiman 6). Again, some could argue that the use of the word "pester" by Coraline's mother was fortuitous. The protagonist's father, however, uses a similar expression when his daughter wants him to play with her: "'Learn how to tap-dance,' he suggested, without turning around. Coraline shook her head. 'Why don't you play with me?' she asked. 'Busy,' he said. 'Working,' he added. He still hadn't turned around to look at her. 'Why don't you go and bother Miss Spink and Miss Forcible?'" (Gaiman 18). In the example above, the fact that he did not even look at Coraline strengthens the view of the protagonist that her parents do not pay enough attention to her. She feels that she is of little importance to her progenitors and, in her view, they have abandoned her.

The protagonist's negative vision of her own parents is relevant in terms of both children's literature and Gothicism. On one hand, it creates an atmosphere of detachment and insecurity, which both genres exploit at the departing points of their narrations. On the other, the idea of abandonment leads the protagonist to self-discovery in children's literature and to questioning the world in Gothic works. In stories for children, the protagonist is often described as being alone at the beginning. Alice, who leaves her sister's side to chase the rabbit, and Harry Potter, who lives in total abandonment in the house of the Dursleys, are outstanding examples in children's literature, while Victor Frankenstein, who lives on his own and whose intelligence separates him from the others, exemplifies the idea of detachment in Gothic works. Again, abandonment leads Alice and Harry Potter to discover new, fantastic worlds while it leads Victor Frankenstein to a quest for creating life; his quest is the very challenge to the widespread belief in the human world that human beings are not gods.

Along with Coraline's family, the house in which the Joneses live is another element that the girl perceives as part of an unappealing reality. Coraline's house, since the family is still in the process of arranging their belongings after moving to the building, sometimes appears messy to the protagonist, and at other times empty and boring. Since the house is very big, it was divided into several flats. The Joneses inhabit one and share the rest of the house with other individuals. There is even an empty flat. Nothing of this seemed appealing to the girl. For her, the surroundings of the building were more interesting than the house itself, which she had already observed in detail:

> She discovered the hot water tank (it was in a cupboard in the kitchen).
> She counted everything blue (153).
> She counted the windows (21).
> She counted the doors (14).
> Of the doors that she found, thirteen opened and closed. The other—the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far corner of the drawing room—was locked. (Gaiman 8).

Coraline considered her own room as plain and dull as the rest of the house. She had toys and videos, but they did not interest her any longer: "Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she'd read all her books. which becomes a manifestation of human nature itself. This broken, incomplete house, viewed in terms of fantasy for kids, manifests the *status quo* that the protagonist must challenge in order to start his or her adventure.

Coraline's neighbors are the last embodiment of a burdensome *status quo* in the mind of the girl. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, the two elderly ladies, along with Mr. Bobo, the mouse trainer, seem awkward and dull to the girl, which increases her desire to look for a way to escape from the overwhelmingly boring reality they represent. For Coraline, the two elderly ladies and the mouse trainer, who is often referred to as "the crazy man upstairs," depict the unappealing world in which she lives. The advanced age of these people create a barrier between them and the girl, who clearly perceives how she is not understood in this adult world. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this lack of comprehension is that neither of the neighbors is able to say Coraline's name correctly:

> "You see, Caroline," Miss Spink said, getting Coraline's name wrong, "both myself and Miss Forcible were famous actresses, in our time. We trod the boards, luvvy. Oh, don't let Hamish eat the fruitcake, or he'll be up all night with his tummy."
> "It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline," said Coraline.
> "It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline," said Coraline. (Gaiman 3-4)

Mr. Bobo, her other neighbor, makes exactly the same mistake:

> In the flat above Coraline's, under the roof, was a crazy old man with a big mustache. He told Coraline that he was training a mouse circus. He wouldn't let anyone see it.
> "One day, little Caroline, when they are all ready, everyone in the whole world will see the wonders of my mouse circus. You ask me why you cannot see it now. Is that what you asked me?"
> "No," said Coraline quietly, "I asked you not to call me Caroline. It's Coraline." (Gaiman 4)

Like her parents, Coraline's neighbors fail to understand the girl's nature as an explorer. To Coraline, this lack of understanding becomes frustrating because she considers herself a real explorer and, as such, exploring is the most important activity to her. This is evident when she goes out in the mist and runs into Miss Forcible, one of her neighbors. The elderly lady tells the girl that only explorers would not lose their way in that weather. Coraline replies that she is an explorer (Gaiman 15). The lack of understanding among Coraline and her neighbors causes the girl to view her world negatively: "Coraline wondered why so few of the adults she had met made any sense. She sometimes wondered who they thought they were talking to (Gaiman 20). Since she is surrounded by adults who

do not make sense and who cannot even say her name properly, Coraline finds her world boring at best and frustrating at worst, but she knows well that she must accept it.

The neighbors, however, are important Gothic elements. They foreshadow the evil that the girl is about to face and add the first element of mystery to the novel. This is evident when the two ladies read Coraline's fortune in her tea leaves:

> "You know, Caroline," she said, after a while, "you are in terrible danger."
> Miss Forcible snorted, and put down her knitting. "Don't be silly, April. Stop scaring the girl. Your eyes are going. Pass me that cup, child."
> Coraline carried the cup over to Miss Forcible. Miss Forcible looked into it carefully, shook her head, and looked into it again.
> "Oh dear," she said. "You were right, April. She is in danger." (Gaiman 20)

Viewed from the perspective of children's literature, the two ladies also serve a very important function. Both actresses become protective figures, for they give the girl a means to overcome future obstacles:

> Miss Spink took off the top of the jar and began to pull things out of it. There was a tiny china duck, a thimble, a strange little brass coin, two paper clips and a stone with a hole in it.
> She passed Coraline the stone with a hole in it.
> "What's it for?" asked Coraline. The hole went all the way through the middle of the stone. She held it up to the window and looked through it.
> "It might help," said Miss Spink. "They're good for bad things, sometimes." (Gaiman 21)

The same is true for the old man who lives in the apartment upstairs. He gives Coraline an unusual warning:

> "The mice have a message for you," he whispered.
> Coraline didn't know what to say. "The message is this. Don't go through the door" He paused. "Does that mean anything to you?"
> "No," said Coraline. (Gaiman 16)

There is a Gothic element in the warning as well. Gothic literature plays with reality and causes readers to doubt their beliefs. The idea that the mouse trainer is talking nonsense is challenged by his next statement: "The old man shrugged. 'They are funny, the mice. They get things wrong. They got your name wrong, you know. They kept saying Coraline. Not Caroline. Not Caroline at all'" (Gaiman 16). The fact that he stresses an apparently careless mistake of the mice makes readers question their previous assumption that he is nothing but a crazy old man. Since he mentioned the correct name of the girl, readers are forced to make room in their minds for the possibility that his message is

actually true and accurate. In other words, the impossible and incredible is able to coexist with the plain and normal in Coraline's reality. This element of the impossible is at the same time linked to an undisclosed evil, which fits Gothic literature:

> One of these common elements is the particular quality of the Gothic response of fear, a fear characterized by a necessary presentiment of a somewhat vague but nevertheless real evil. It is a fear of shadows and unseen dangers in the night. Explicitness runs counter to its effectiveness, for Gothic fear is not so much what is seen but what is sensed beyond sight (Keech 132).

In this light, although Coraline's parents, her house, and her neighbors are elements of a regular and unappealing reality that the girl dislikes but must accept, they are also important elements in terms of Gothicism and fantasy for children. They create feelings of detachment and insecurity that become the catalysts for adventure to begin and for the search for an alternative reality. In addition, they add the ingredient of mystery and of the unknown to an otherwise plain world. Finally, they also point to the existence of a terrible evil lurking in an apparently normal reality.

The Other-World: Idealization and Perfection

Once Coraline crosses the door and finds an alternative world–which will be called "the Other-world" for referential purposes— she faces a reality much more to her liking. In fact, what she sees in this new world is the embodiment of her wishes: a loving, caring family, interesting neighbors, and a full, cozy house that can be called "home." To the girl, this new world is the closest approximation to perfection but, in reality, this illusion hides an inner evil secret that will put Coraline's existence into danger.

The very first person that Coraline meets in the Other-world is an inexact copy of her mother, who claims that she is the girl's "other mother": "'Who are you?' asked Coraline. 'I'm your other mother,' said the woman. 'Go and tell your other father that lunch is ready.' She opened the door of the oven. Suddenly Coraline realized how hungry she was. It smelled wonderful (Gaiman 28). After a delicious home-made lunch, Coraline is ready for fun. Unlike her real parents, these "other-parents" suggest interesting activities to her, like playing with the rats upstairs and even support her wanderings outside as an explorer:

> Her other parents stood in the kitchen doorway as she walked down the corridor, smiling identical smiles, and waving slowly. "Have a nice time outside," said her other mother.
> "We'll just wait here for you to come back," said her other father.
> When Coraline got to the front door, she turned back and looked at them. They were still watching her, and waving, and smiling. (Gaiman 32-33)

At her return, the girl realizes that her other-parents actually care for her and, unlike her real parents, keep each other company: "Her other parents were waiting for her in the garden, standing side by side. They were smiling. 'Did you have a nice time?' asked her other mother" (Gaiman 44). The former detail is highly relevant because Coraline's actual parents seem so busy with their own duties that they rarely notice the girl and ask her not to bother them most of the time. Having her other-parents waiting for her return is an expression of love and concern that she thinks her real parents lack. Children's literature often observes these basic needs of children and depicts alternative worlds in which they find a way to satisfy their needs. For example, Exupéri's Little Prince travels through space and finds solutions to his questions and problems in the middle of a desert far away from his planet. Similarly, Rowling's Harry Potter finds the family that he never had in the magic school of Hogwarts. Coraline's "other world" apparently functions similarly, for the girl finds an idealized realization of what she cannot have in reality in it.

Similarly, the neighbors in this other world seem better in the alternative reality than in the real world of Coraline. In this new world, Miss Forcible and Miss Spink are able to participate in a breath-taking show that opened with the latter riding a unicycle and juggling balls at the same time (Gaiman 40-41). The other Mr. Bobo, although scarier, is more interesting, too. This is evident when he meets Coraline while she is watching his rats sing:

> The other crazy old man upstairs was standing in the doorway, holding a tall black hat in his hands. The rats scampered up him, burrowing into his pockets, into his shirt, up his trouser legs, down his neck. [. . .] In seconds the only evidence that the rats were there at all were the restless lumps under the man's clothes, forever sliding from place to place across him. (Gaiman 31-32)

Even the dogs of the old ladies are more interesting in the other-world. They can speak and can eat what regular dogs would not:

> Coraline opened the box of chocolates. The dog looked at them longingly.
> "Would you like one?" she asked the little dog.
> "Yes, please," whispered the dog."Only not toffee ones. They make me drool."
> "I thought chocolates weren't very good for dogs," she said, remembering something Miss Forcible had once told her.
> "Maybe where you come from," whispered the little dog. "Here, it's all we eat." (Gaiman 43)

As with her other parents, the other neighbors in this alternative world seem to care more for the little girl. Unlike the ones in her real world, these new neighbors do not mistake the heroine's name. They also try to entertain her and pay attention to what she says, which the girl indeed notices and likes.

Besides her parents and her neighbors, the other house and its surroundings in this alternative world manifest Coraline's ideal of a perfect environment. She inevitably compares the other world with her actual one and concludes that the former is better, as she tells her other father: "'It's much more interesting than at home'" (Gaiman 45). Her own bedroom, for example, is much better in the other world:

> It was different from her bedroom at home. For a start it was painted in an off-putting shade of green and a peculiar shade of pink.
> Coraline decided that she wouldn't want to have to sleep in there, but that the color scheme was an awful lot more interesting than her own bedroom. (Gaiman 30)
> Even though she did not like the colors of her room completely, the girl was amazed at all the items she could see in her bedroom: There were all sorts of remarkable things in there she'd never seen before: windup angels that fluttered around the bedroom like startled sparrows; books with pictures that writhed and crawled and shimmered; little dinosaur skulls that chattered their teeth as she passed. A whole toy box filled with wonderful toys. (Gaiman 30)

Unlike the dull, empty house in her actual world, the house in the other world is much more to Coraline's liking. In addition, the other house is more like her idea of what a home should be. Coraline's other mother expresses the same thought: "'I'm glad you like it,' said Coraline's mother. 'Because we'd like to think that this is your home'" (Gaiman 45). This is important because in children's literature, the concept of home is vital. In *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, Dorothy learns that no magic world can compare to her own home. The same is true for *Heidi*, whose love for the Alps where her home is cannot be erased by the wonders of Frankfurt. *Coraline*, however, seems to portray a reversal of the motif, for the heroine prefers the new world to her real world.

Gothic Elements in *Coraline*

Ultimately, *Coraline* seems to posit a reception dilemma because of its juxtaposition of traditional motifs of children's literature and Gothic elements. Although they may appear to diverge in purpose, the novel reconciles the dark and the didactic precisely because *Coraline*, being a reversal of traditional stories for children, appropriates the Gothic to transmit positive messages to young readers. Positive messages in Gothic literature are not rare; Gothic texts often depend on a moralizing conclusion, as Hughes has noted: "And though the Gothic tends to subvert more conventional aspects of morality, justice is often served when evil forces are destroyed or accommodated" (Hughes 83-84).

Justice, as a concept, is sustained by constructs that a given society deems valid and desirable, such as those of balance, reciprocity, and retribution. Each

one of those concepts plays a significant role in Gaiman's novel. The Gothic elements in *Coraline* make it possible to establish the idea of justice in the text: After her initial fascination with the other world, Coraline must come to terms with the notion of fairness, a principle that she must understand to truly appreciate their flawed real parents as opposed to the misleading perfection of the world that the beldam offers. Therefore, Gothic elements in *Coraline*, far from ruining the story in the novel, contribute to creating the environment needed for making any perceivable didactic purpose resonate in the mind of young readers.

The Other House

There are Gothic elements in Coraline's new house. She lives with mysterious neighbors, mist and rain occasionally cover the surroundings, and the abandoned well invites her to explore this uncharted territory. However, when the child uses the key to open the door and walks down the dark hallway, she finds a world that is a perfect representation of a Gothic environment orchestrated by her other mother, whose skin was pale as white paper and her extremely long fingers exhibited dark red fingernails, which were curved and sharp. If the world that Coraline knew was inviting, this other environment was tempting: the child was fed delicious meals, had a room full of toys that could move by themselves, and was even allowed to play with rats that could sing ominous songs. There were temptations and danger everywhere, as the words of the other Mr. Bobo reveal:

> "It is time for the rats to have their dinner. But you can come up with me, if you like, and watch them feed."
> There was something hungry in the old man's buttons eyes that made Coraline uncomfortable. "No, thank you," she said. "I'm going outside to explore."
> The old man nodded, very slowly. Coraline could hear the rats whispering to each other, although she could not tell what they were saying.
> She was not certain that she wanted to know what they were saying. (Gaiman 32)

Although some may consider the threatening environment of the alternative world a harmful influence for children, this mysterious, evil setting actually contributes to the mental development of a child. Sarah Gilead has argued that the exposure of kids to fantasy followed by a return to reality may ease psychic tensions and thus contribute to children's growth:

> . . . The return completes a history of psychic growth and interprets the fantasy narrative as a salutary exposure of forbidden wishes and emotions. The exposure neutralizes antisocial impulses. Obsessive inquiry, resentment, anger, or anxiety is symbolically enacted in the fantasy and

thus reduced to an acceptable level, so that the formerly fragile or threa-
tened ego returns as a more fully formed social entity. (278)

Coraline exemplifies the former case. She is constantly exploring in a subcon-
scious attempt to get away from her "boring" reality and she is also resentful
because she feels that her parents do not pay attention to her. These potentially
negative behaviors and emotions find a release when the girl is in contact with
the Gothic fantasy of the other world and are corrected because of this interac-
tion. As a result, she returns home a more mature child: Coraline's contact with
a Gothic reality has made her understand the value of her family, her neighbors,
and her house.

Button Eyes

The journey motif becomes truly appealing when coupled with mystery and
Coraline transforms this motif into a rite of passage: once the protagonist opens
the door and steps into the parallel world, she encounters temptation disguised
as the volatile happiness that the fulfillment of her every whim provides. In this
alternate world, everything seems perfect; even the child's other parents, who
shower the girl with attention as they see her through buttons instead of eyes,
make her real mother and father look dull and flawed. The circle is an archetype
of perfection and the button eyes on the faces of the people in the dream world
are circular. Buttons, nevertheless, have holes, which highlight their symbolic
imperfection: they stand for something that falls short of perfection and, ulti-
mately, as a barrier that prevents one from seeing the true soul of the individual.
The symbolic meaning of the button eyes becomes more evident as the beldam
tempts the bedazzled girl to stay. Coraline must agree to the terrifying require-
ment of having buttons sewn onto her eyes to become part of the illusion that she
cherishes, a world that sugarcoats lurking dangers with promises of a material
love. She must abandon her humanity and embrace an uncanny existence as
human doll. However, exchanging her eyes is not her true initiation. The girl's
journey and ultimate rite of passage consists of facing the beldam in order to
rescue her imperfect parents, and to do so, she must retrieve the hidden eyes of
the children who have formerly surrendered their lives in exchange for a mirage
of happiness. Thus, eye for eye, the girl must overcome her own fear in order to
outwit her ominous other mother in a game that will define whether or not Cora-
line has the strength to challenge the other mother and undo the injustice done
to the children, liberating them from their captivity.

The Cat

Cats are no strangers to Gothic literature: with their mysteriousness, they
have become guardians of unknown worlds, perpetual symbols of wisdom who

sneer upon those unable to understand them. As Coraline ventures into the other world, she is joined by a talking feline that, faithful to his archetypal nature, scolds her and humiliates her. The child, however, does not fail to appreciate the value of her random companion and endures the words of the cat patiently, as though inferring that she can actually benefit from the company of a talking cat. Time proves Coraline right. The cat, among sarcastic comments, reveals to the girl that she is in a perilous situation:

> "And what do you think you're doing?" said a shape to one side of her. […]
> "I'm exploring," Coraline told the cat. […]
> "Bad place," said the cat. "If you want to call it a place, which I don't. What are you doing here?
> "I'm exploring."
> "Nothing to find here," said the cat. "This is just the outside, the part of the place that *she* hasn't bothered to create."
> "She?"
> "The one who says she's your other mother," said the cat.
> […]
> "Small world," said Coraline.
> "It's big enough for her," said the cat. "Spiders' webs only have to be large enough to catch flies." (Gaiman 73, 74, 75)

Coraline's erratic animal companion becomes the only figure in which the girl can trust when she crosses to the other world to look for her parents. Although he does not have any real association with Coraline, the cat decides to help her by sharing his wisdom with her:

> "Why does she want me? Coraline asked the cat. "Why does she want me to stay here with her?"
> "She wants something to love, I think," said the cat. "Something that isn't her. She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that."
> "Do you have any advice?" asked Coraline.
> The cat looked as if it were about to say something else sarcastic. Then it flicked its whiskers and said, "Challenge her. There's no guarantee she'll play fair, but her kind of thing loves games and challenges." (Gaiman 65)

In addition, even when she fails to understand it, the cat actively saves the girl by killing the rats in the place: "'It's not that I like rats at the best of times," said the cat, conversationally, as if nothing had happened, "but the rats in this place are all spies for her. She uses them as her eyes and hands...'" (Gaiman 75). The cat later helps Coraline retrieve the eye of the third ghost by killing the rat that had fled with it.

The black feline, however, is not invulnerable to the power of the beldam. When the other world is collapsing, the cat realizes that he is trapped and becomes

afraid. Here lies one of the most beautiful lessons of justice and retribution in the novel: Coraline, noticing that the cat feels defenseless, invites him to jump into her purse to take him out of the other world. In other words, the girl's magnanimous action manifests that she has learned that one should be grateful to those who provide knowledge or help even when they are not particularly sweet or gentle.

The Children Ghosts

In an act that shows her refusal to accept her other mother as her true progenitor, Coraline resists the beldam's request for an apology and, thus, is locked in a secret room inside of a mirror. She finds three ghosts in this creepy chamber, who are the trapped souls of the children that the beldam had seduced before. These three apparitions beg the child to help them escape from their confinement and, in so doing, reveal the true nature of the love of the other mother (Gaiman 84). All that the beldam wants is to eat the life of the children that, unknowingly, seal their acceptance by letting her sew buttons in their eyes.

The children ghosts stand as symbols of failed love; they went to the other world looking for the affection that they thought their parents failed to provide and naively believed that the beldam would shower upon them. The other mother used love as her bait and devoured the love-starving children instead:

> "What happened to you all?" asked Coraline. "How did you come here?"
> "She left us here," said one of the voices. "She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark."
> "You poor things," said Coraline. "How long have you been here?"
> "So very long a time," said a voice (Gaiman 84).

In a magnificent Gothic reversal, love stops being a life-giving human trait for the children, who nurture the hungry creature on the other side of the wall with their innocent lives. Needless to say, this reversal provides a valuable lesson for children, as idealized love generally consumes the person. *Coraline*, therefore, makes young readers aware of valuable principles regarding love: while a seemingly perfect love can become a trap, imperfect parents can be imperfectly loving, which is natural.

Conclusion

Gothic elements in Gaiman's *Coraline* do not nullify the didactic intention that is traditionally ascribed to novels for children. In fact, young readers discover a new Coraline after her horrific adventure, a more mature girl who is able to empathize with imperfect adults and appreciate them without having to like or understand everything about them:

> She knocked at Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's door. Miss Spink let her in and Coraline went into their parlor... Then she put her hand into her pocket and pulled out the stone with the hole in it.
> "Here you go," she said. "I don't need it anymore. I'm very grateful....". She gave them both tight hugs, although her arms barely stretched around Miss Spink, and Miss Forcible smelled like the raw garlic she had been cutting. Then Coraline picked up her box and went out.
> "What an extraordinary child," said Miss Spink. No one had hugged her like that since she had retired from the theater. (Gaiman 160, 161)

Not only did Coraline receive the admiration and respect of her neighbors, but also she found the inner strength to face school without fear: "Normally, on the night before the first day of the term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realized, there was nothing left about school that could scare her anymore" (Gaiman 161).

Children who read Gaiman's novel have the unique opportunity to embark on a harmless, fantastic trip to a land of horror and thus witness the inner growth of a young child who, like themselves, is discovering truths about life and love. Coraline grew in wisdom and courage by facing the reversal of her expectations, teaching young readers valuable lessons that will contribute to equipping their previously fragile ego with tools to face the challenges of social development. *Coraline*'s mixture of the Gothic and children's fantasy allows minors to realize that imperfection is an inherent element in life and that idealization of love is nothing but a mirage that harms oneself in the end.

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