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# Study of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as a novel that caters to a Dual Audience (Child and Adult)

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**Abstract:**

Neil Gaiman is one of the contemporary writers to explore darker psycho-emotional themes in children's literature. His one such book is *Coraline*, a dark fantasy children's novella illustrated by Dave McKean and published in 2002. This study aims to analyse how the text caters to dual audience (child and adult).

The novella is about Coraline, who traverses the real world and the "other" world and rescues her parents from the clutches of a Beldam who seeks to own her in the "other" world. Though Gaiman uses a child protagonist in *Coraline* and intended the novella for children, a dual readership is possible because of the themes and concepts he focuses on. The study analyses the concept of parallel universe as imaginary world or an alternative universe and the transcendence from innocence to maturity, which is relatable to both children and adult.

**Keywords: Dual-readership, imaginary world, dreams, wish fulfillment, Identity.**

Neil Gaiman is one of the contemporary writers to explore darker psycho-emotional themes in children's literature. His one such book that won Hugo, Nebula and Bram Stoker awards is *Coraline*, a dark fantasy children's novella illustrated by Dave McKean and published in 2002. "Gaiman's tale is inventive, scary, thrilling and finally affirmative. Readers young and old will find something to startle them" is the review of "Washington Post Book World". This study aims to analyse how the text caters to dual audience (child and adult).

The novella is about Coraline, who traverses the real world and the "other" world and rescues her parents from the clutches of a Beldam who seeks to own her in the "other" world. Since this other world is portrayed as simultaneously existing with the real world this could also be interpreted as the imaginary world that the child creates. This could be interpreted as repressed desires taking form as Lacan says "that unconscious comes into existence when we are very young through repression, expunging from consciousness unhappy psychological events". (Qazi, Khursheed Ahmad) Coraline is unhappy about the way her parents treat her. She feels that they don't pay her enough attention. Initially Coraline dreams of some rats:

> They started to sing,
>
> *We are small but we are many*
>
> *We are many we are small*

> *We were here before you rose*
>
> *We will be here when you fall.* (Gaiman 9)

According to Freud "dreams are not nonsensical but meaningful. They are composites made out of the residues…chosen by the unconscious to represent the fulfillment of a wish…"(Leith 916) The phrase "We will be here" is like a reassurance of the presence and attention to Coraline because she feels that she lacks it. At the same time Freud contents that "A Child's play is determined by wishes: in point of fact by a single wish". (Kepos 247) In the novella Coraline's deepest desires seem to be manifested not only in her dream but in her imaginary world as well. Her "other" parents are more than willing to be by her side whenever she needs them. This is evident in the scene where:

> "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." (21)

Gaiman also blurs the lines between dream and reality, imaginary world and reality by using the similar surroundings and instances. And in another instance she encounters the rats from her dream and:

> The rats began to sing, in high, whispery voices,
>
> *We have teeth and we have tails*
>
> *We have tails we have eyes*
>
> *We were here before you fell*
>
> *You will be here when we rise.*
>
> It wasn't a pretty song. Coraline was sure she'd heard it before or something like it, although she was unable to remember exactly where. (20)

Through these rhymes the reader sees that she is unable to recognise her dream that has become a similar reality. The child reader reads these are rhymes and assumes that Coraline has forgotten her dream. However, the adult reader may read it as the author blurring the lines between dream and reality. This acts, perhaps, as a hint that the character will perhaps travel into another dimension, especially since a mysterious door has been introduced.

The need for an imaginary world stems from the lack of attention Coraline thinks she receives. This gives rise to her desire for a different set of parents and this desire for different parents is common among children especially since they compare their parents to other children's parents. This process of comparison starts when the child differentiates "self" from "other" which is Lacan's "mirror stage" in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of

the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". Lacan also says in ''The Ego in Freud' and in "Technique of Psychoanalysis" that the child moves from the period of need, where child is not conscious of its body as a coherent unified whole and can hardly differentiate between *self* and *other*, between itself and mother, to the period of want where it has to separate itself from its mother in order to form its own identity which is a necessity in order to become a part of the society. (Qazi) Using this theory the other world can be interpreted as mirroring the real world and hence becoming the "other" world for Coraline where she finds a way to become a responsible person i.e. an adult. She soon realises that this is a trap and that though it is an ideal world it is not real. This realisation later initiates the unwavering urge to go to the real world and helps Coraline to tear away from the other world. This could further mean that Coraline moves from other to self where she is comfortable with the situation that was earlier uncomfortable

thereby emerging as an adult. These readings are possible only for an adult reader. To the child reader Coraline is merely traveling between two worlds in an adventurous spirit and defeats the "other mother".

The "other mother" lacks the eye (displaced by black button eyes), which depicts the lack of humaneness in her. Moreover, she also lacks the genuineness, which primarily is revealed through the eyes. The button eyes make it hard for Coraline to trust her. Therefore, the concept of self and other is constantly reiterated in the novella in various instances. The child maybe aware of this but it is possible for the adult reader to interpret further. According to Lacan the sense of otherness comes because of some lack or absence and in this case the "other mother" lack the human eye. This differentiation is also evident in Coraline's view of the adult characters in the novella. She draws a clear distinction between her and the adults every time she talks about "grown-ups". For example, in one instance, she wonders "why grown-ups gave themselves all the good programs, with all the shouting and running around in" (30). In another instance she wonders "why so few of the adults she had met made any sense." (14) The child reader can relate to this feeling well. This concept is depicted even in the conversations she has with the cat where the cat consciously draws the difference between humans and cats. When Coraline introduces herself and asks for the cat's name the cat replies "'Cats don't have names…. Now, *you* people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names.'" (23) The cat clearly says "you people" and also consciously identifies itself as the self when Coraline asks if the cat in the imaginary world is the "other cat" of the cat she saw in the real world and "The cat shook its head. "No," it said. "I'm not the other anything. I'm me.""(22)

The text also portrays a conflict within Coraline herself, which is similar to Freud's concept of superego, which functions as the voice of the conscience and censorship. "Half of her wanted to be very rude to it; the other half of her wanted to be polite and deferential. The polite half won." (23) The superego of Coraline is evident in this instance. This superego also shows her process of growing up. The adult reader who is aware of such internal conflicts will be able to relate to this.

The "other mother" locks her within the mirror, which can be viewed as Coraline being locked within an illusion and thus, it also becomes a story within a story. It can also be read as Coraline being confused about herself because of all the illusions around her and finally finding her identity. Moreover the "other" world also contains what Coraline thinks is the fulfillment of dreams of the other characters in that house. Mrs. Spink and Mrs. Forcible get to relive their glory days of being actresses while Mr. Bobo's rats are able to perform in the "other" world. The reader is told that these characters talk about such things but it is perhaps Coraline's imagination that brings such things to existence in the "other" world. The reader also understands that this "other" world is the perfect opposite of the real world and has everything that Coraline desires. It is possible for the adult reader to realise that the "other mother" herself warns Coraline against her when she says "'Mirrors … are never to be trusted.'" (44) Here the mirrors can be interpreted as illusions, imaginary world or the ideal world by the adult reader.

"'When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled" it said, doubtfully "but now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair.'"(48) Even though the reader cannot ascertain who "they" in this dialogue is the reader can read as Judith Butler's gender performativity which when stopped becomes problematic for the child to formulate its identity as male or female. Moreover, the formlessness of these ghosts also could be read as lack of identity. The ghost children claim to have lost the memory of who they were after they gave up their eyes to the beldam. "Eyes" also can be interpreted as the identity. The performance of gender is mostly physical which requires sight. Thus, the importance of the eyes for formulation of an identity is foregrounded. An adult reader perhaps will be able to decipher these implications.

"'I didn't know I had another mother," said Coraline, cautiously. "Of course you do. Everyone does," said the other mother, her black button eyes gleaming.'" (19) This instance can be read by adult reader as everyone having an imaginary mother or a desire for an ideal mother or even the voice of mother in the head reminding them or instructing them when in confused situations while a child will assume that the "other" mother is talking about other children. The ambiguity here lends the text to interpreted in many ways.

While colours conjure images for the child reader while the adult reader unconsciously skips them in instances like "Little black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth" (9), which is the description of rats in the dark room and "Coraline put on her blue coat with a hood, her red scarf, and her yellow Wellington boots" (10) because colours appeal to children than to the adult.

The black buttons for eyes ""is the kind of metaphor that allows for many interpretations," says Neil Gaiman. "They are all correct; the eyes are the windows to the soul, the Romans put coins on the eyes of the dead, and so forth.""("Based On A Novel By Neil Gaiman") Daniel when talking about the black button eyes in "Coraline, by Neil Gaiman: The First Decade" says that:

"Everyone's rag doll, once upon a time, had buttons for eyes. This should be a comforting and familiar thing, but, for modern children, it isn't. Gaiman does this so well, and nowhere better than in *Coraline*: he makes the comfortable writhe in discomfort, the familiar forced into the frame of its opposite."(Daniel, Anne Margaret.)

And only an adult reader can make all such interpretations. Instances such as a black cat appearing out of no where, tea leaves foretelling some impending danger for the protagonist may not be completely understood by the child reader but the adult reader would read it as signs of impending supernatural danger. These also cater to dual readership.

In "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming" Freud says that "The creative writer does the same as the child at play". He also says that it is similar to an adult who "instead of playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called daydreams"(247). However, while a child is not ashamed to expose his imaginary world the adult conceals it thinking that it is "childish and as being unpermissible" (247). These repressed wishes are pushed into the unconscious and can be expressed only in a distorted form, which Freud calls the "dream-distortion". "We read [fiction]…. to satisfy needs which we are largely unaware…. (since) reading can provide compensation for the limitations deprivations and discontents of our actual experience…"(268). This further aids the writer to win the reader's sympathy to the central character Coraline who enters the "other" world because she is not satisfied with her reality. The reader also identifies himself with the protagonist and thus, Freud contends that literature enables reader to enjoy the forbidden fantasies. "They do so in a safe simulator type environment…" that is presented by the novel (Griswold).

In one instance in *Coraline*, the reader's suppressed desires are exposed in a dialogue between Coraline and the "other" mother. ""I didn't know I had another mother," said Coraline, cautiously. "Of course you do. Everyone does," said the other mother, her black button eyes gleaming" (19). This instance can be read as everyone having an imaginary mother or a supressed desire for an ideal mother or even the voice of mother in the head reminding them or instructing them when in confused situations. Further more, her desire for the "other" world is in itself a repressed desire, which every reader has. The desire to escape into an imaginary world perhaps is the very reason why readers read a fantasy novel in the first place.

Dave McKean's sparse illustrations give more space for the imagination of readers. According to Gaiman "the pictures are very creepy, and very odd and very true". (95) The illustrations are placed just before the scene in the text but the reader still has the freedom to imagine the dark situations in the way that scares them the most.

Fig 1.1
Source: Gaiman, Neil, and Dave McKean. *Coraline*. New York: Harper, 2012.
Print

The illustration (Fig 1.1) above is an example where the text does not mention any shadow when Coraline opened the mysterious door but the illustrator has used that gap between the text to add meaning. To the child the illustration seems like a scary thing lurking behind the door but to an adult it could signify the danger lurking in this side of the world or (since the rat is portrayed as being scared) the shadow displays physically Coraline's fear as she enters the other world. This also shows the innocence of the protagonist Coraline, who is unaware of the shadow cast behind the door in the illustration. Another possible reading after the adult reader reads the story is the reaction of the rats when she enters the other realm because they know they will become slaves to the "other mother" when she gets acquainted with this world (considering that they are afraid of this "other mother" as much as Coraline is). Thus this text opens with an illustration that makes the adult reader anticipate some impending danger.

As Coraline starts realising that the "other" world is unreal the clarity of shapes and colours of that world diminishes into a 2D image until it completely is shut off from reality. When Coraline enters the "other" world she finds it to be perfect but later realises that it is fake. She is also at first uncomfortable in the old armchair inherited from the grandmother. Towards the end she sleeps comfortably in that very armchair. Coraline learns to be brave in face of danger and fear saying, "when you're scared but you still do it anyway, *that's* brave."(34) These are instances, which show that she has started growing up and has begun to formulate her identity. And as she realises the true nature of the "other" world it disintegrates symbolically referring to the stage where children stop believing in their imaginary world. However, traces of this world still remains in her memory even after she escapes from that world. This is similar to how adults remember their childhood imaginary world even after they have outgrown it.

Perry Nodelman in "Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction" says that children's books most often present:

> "two opposite ways in which adults like to address children, based…. on different ways of thinking about how children differ from adults. The didactic stance implies that children are weak or fallible or somehow mistaken– in need of instruction in how to be better people, that is, more like adults. The wish fufillment stance implies that children are not only just fine as they already are but that they wish for in their childlike egocentric way is exactly what they
> need to imagine and ought to be…. [and] is, in its way just as didactic as the other." (Keyser 2)

The novel seems didactic when it presents a protagonist who shows bravery in the face of fear and doesn't flinch when she has to help the three ghosts.

> "Like all good little girl protagonists in children's literature, Coraline learns some appropriate lessons; she finds an inner strength and enough courage to combat evil, she selflessly helps other children who are in need, and, most importantly, she abandons her resentful feelings about her parents…. She also accepts her parents' human limitations…" (Parsons)

Though an adult writes this children's novel it subverts the notion 'grown-ups know best' often used to control children. The "other" mother, when trying to convince Coraline to exchange her eyes for the button, says "We only want what's best for you" (27). Coraline on the other hand doesn't trust her "other" parents especially because they are adults. This is evident when the narrator says "Coraline knew that when grown-ups told you something wouldn't hurt it almost always did." (27) Thus, the reader understands that adults are not always right. Thus, he breaks the stereotype of children needing adults to decide what it good for them. Moreover, by introducing this idea in a children's novel Gaiman makes the child reader question authority.

According to Perry Nodelman in "Pleasure and Genre: Speculations on the Characteristics of Children's Fiction" says that children's books most often present protagonist who are innocent children who need to grow up.

> "Thus, what at first appears merely pleasurably innocent turns out to be dangerously ignorant in relation to a wisdom achieved later. [The] child readers…. enjoy their identification with an innocent point of view only at the expense of being forced eventually to acknowledge its limitations." (4)

Even though the text proposes that Coraline's curiosity and dissatisfaction is dangerous, it also proposes that such an adventure was much needed in order for Coraline to grow up. *Coraline* can be seen as "a movement into a pleasurably self-involved wish-fulfilling fantasy based on a relatively ignorant idea of what possible leads the child protagonist to a moment of awareness that disperses the fantasy and leads him [her] back to his [her] family." (4)

Through Coraline's point of view her parents seem to ignore her. This instigates the creation of the "other" world where she is offered another perspective of her parents and she learns to appreciate them. Hence, when she comes out of the imaginary world having seen the other perspective she is able to adjust to her reality as a mature individual. Perry Nodelman contents that "Almost every children's story that starts by describing its protagonist's childlike point of view seem to come to a triumphant climax at the moment when the child sees past the innocence, acknowledges it as ignorance, and becomes more mature." (4) Similarly, "Coraline…. adhere[s] to standard psychological and psychoanalytic imperatives for development that are often sold to implied child readers as a desired maturity in children's literature."(Parsons) The child reader therefore, undergoes some maturity along with the protagonist at the end of the novel while for the adult reader important concepts such as identity and grounding of reality are reinstated. Nodelman also says that the "readers of most ages… want to enjoy the pleasures of innocence and want also to be told of the dangers of innocence and see them lead to innocence's demise." (4) This is probably why adults also read children's books.

Though Gaiman uses a child protagonist in *Coraline* and intended the novella for children, a dual readership is possible because of the themes and concepts he focuses on. Gaiman admits that "It was a story, I learned when people began to read it, that children experienced as an adventure, but which gave adults nightmares." (90) Moreover, the concept of parallel universe as imaginary world or an alternative universe is relatable to both children and adult. In *Coraline* the alternate universe that is adventurous for kids is nightmarish for adults because an adult reads it to find similarities between the "other" world and fantasy and how being stuck in such a world is dangerous. "Maddy Gaiman comments, "It's a story that draws you in and keeps you there. You get attached to Coraline, and root for her to come out on top"." ("Based On A Novel By Neil Gaiman."). Moreover, it's a story that draws the reader into itself. In the novella the reader enters an imaginary world of the story and exits the story after completing the quest along with the protagonist. Thus "Neil Gaiman's novella *Coraline* can be read as an allegory of children reading fairy tales." (Perdigao) Because it is self-consciousness of its own fiction, *Coraline* exposes its metafictionality. According to Claudia Nelson "children's metafiction contemplates the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be" (Nelson).

This novella acts as the perfect fantasy world that draws the readers in, scares them while they linger in it and leaves them as a changed person just like the "other" world from *Coraline*. Moreover, Coraline's entry into the imaginary world and beldam's action of creating such a world can be interpreted as the process of reading and writing creative literature. Thus, "*Coraline* blurs the lines between author and reader, child and adult, becoming an experiment in liminality, transforming, twisting, and changing the world of children's fiction." (Perdigao)

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