

# Essay on courage, family and fear in coraline

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Neil Gaiman's children's novel *Coraline* is a tale of mother and child, of belonging, and of the difference between fantasy and reality. Moving into an apartment made from a divided home, Coraline finds a way to escape her boring, disinterested parents into the "Other World," a place of what appears on the surface to be Coraline's ideal world. Her Other Parents are exciting and pay attention to her, she has much more exciting toys and games, and even the elderly neighbors are exciting to be around. However, as Coraline learns, there is a heavy price to pay for being in this world. *Coraline* is a dark, fractured fairy tale that uses a dreamlike, storybook format (with a few dark embellishments) to teach the importance of loving what you have, establishing good relationships with parents, and exploring one's imagination. The book also features themes of dreaming, feminine strength and the exchange of food as power, all of which contribute to the dark fairy-tale aesthetic of the book.

Coraline Jones herself is the quintessential strong female character often found in fairy tales, whose adolescence becomes a commodity to the other characters in the book. Coraline's primary problem at the beginning of the book is her refusal to fit in with normal, everyday life - when asked to fit in, she replies, "I don't want to do those things. I want to explore" (Gaiman 6). The most central and inextricable part of her identity is exploration - like every child, she wants to learn about the world, and it is this activeness that makes her a dynamic protagonist. At the same time, she has anxieties and frustration like anyone else - she feels alone in this new environment, and her parents do not pay attention to her. To that end, she is inspired to go on this journey to enter the Other World, which is yet another new land she

would love nothing more than to explore (at least initially).

One of the things that defines Coraline as a character is her sense of courage; she is a very proactive, adventurous individual, which is a deciding factor in her ability to defeat the Other Mother and escape that world. Her entire adventure is predicated on a 'be careful what you wish for' kind of situation, where her desire to get better parents leads her into a world where more attention means greater oppression. Nonetheless, she manages to face these challenges with aplomb, proving herself as a proactive and strong individual. Her own perspective is to explore and dare herself even in spite of danger: says Coraline, " when you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave" (Gaiman 59). Despite her own fears and the terrible things that happen to her at the hands of the Other Mother, Coraline is determined to get out of the Other World. Coraline's bravery is selfless as well; she resolves herself to rescue the cat which helps guide her through the Other World: " Just stay there a few moments longer, she thought at it, wondering if it could hear her. I'll get us both home. I said I would. I promise" (Gaiman 130). All of these attributes cement her status as a brave explorer and adventurer, overcoming fear and demonstrating courage in the face of death.

Coraline's relationship with the Other Mother is the most fully-developed one in the book, and reveals notions about the traditional mother-daughter relationship that are suitably creepy and poignant. The distinctions between her mother and Other Mother are palpable; her real mother is too caught up in work to pay attention to her, while Other Mother is constantly attentive and dedicated to engaging with Coraline in very intense ways. Coraline and

her parents often speak past each other, with her parents being constantly distracted and ignorant of what she wants to do, only catering to her basic, practical needs. Other Mother's primary allure, at least at first, is her willingness to play with Coraline, and her insistence that " we knew you'd arrive one day, and then we could be a proper family" (Gaiman 29).

Of course, eventually, Coraline finds that this house is a trap - the Other Mother means to keep her there, sew buttons in her eyes, and eventually eat her. Here, the fantastical and idealized Other Mother turns out to be the full extension of what Coraline really wanted in a mother - someone who is too attentive towards her, to a dangerous degree. Coraline is then torn between the allure of the Other Mother's love towards her, and the danger that intensity carries: " It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold" (Gaiman 106). The relationship then turns from mother/daughter to kidnapper/hostage - this is ironic, because Coraline's feelings toward her real mother leaned toward feeling like a prisoner in her own home. To that end, Other Mother is truly a dark reflection of the relationship Coraline has with her mother, pointing out the anxieties she has about being parented and taking them to the nth degree.

The " Other World" is a clear manifestation of Coraline's wish-fulfillment fantasy of a better, easier childlike life. Everything looks and feels at first to be the sparkling, more 'fun' version of the drab reality Coraline lives: " The house looked exactly the same from the outside. Or almost exactly the same: around Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's door were blue and red lightbulbs that flashed on and off spelling out words, the lights chasing each

other around the door" (Gaiman 35). At the same time, the Other World is much smaller; it just consists of the house and the surrounding yard, making Coraline's scope of vision (and potential for exploration) equally tiny. The depiction of the Other World presents yet another example of Coraline's wish going terribly wrong; the Other World is more fun on its surface, but its seedy underbelly is far more nefarious and easier to fish out. Coraline eventually realizes that the Other World is also an illusion, and that Other Mother has no real power: " She could not truly make anything, decided Coraline. She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed" (Gaiman 118).

In order to grow as a character, and escape the Other World, Coraline must relearn her commitment to her parents. When she sees her parents in the mirror, they see much more sympathetic to Coraline because of her horrifying experiences in the Other World: " They stood awkwardly in the reflection of the hall. They seemed sad and alone. As Coraline watched, they waved to her, slowly, with limp hands" (Gaiman 53). Coraline later re-affirms her love for her parents in defiance of her overly clingy and needy Other parents: "'You don't frighten me,' said Coraline, although they did frighten her, very much. 'I want my parents back.'" (Gaiman 61). Coraline comes full circle as a character, as she no longer hopelessly wishes for a better family; she understands the love and affection her real parents have for her, and she wants to return to that safety and adoration.

In conclusion, Coraline is a wonderfully dark story about a little girl who learns the dark side of her own wishes, and conquers them with bravery and selflessness. The macabre is used to great effect in this book, as Other

Mother and Other Father, the cat, the ghost children she finds in the mirror, and other characters and concepts are genuinely frightening yet relatable fears for child readers. The notion of replacing one's family with one that is more fun and childlike themselves is a common wish among children; Gaiman's work takes that wish to supernatural and horrifying extremes, in order to show the dark side of parents that want to make you too much like them. The result is a book that carries a great deal of thematic weight about the importance of parental relationships, the virtue of bravery and adventure in young childrens' lives, and the choices many people have to make about how they wish to live their lives. Coraline's journey is one that many children can relate to, while also providing a streak of fairy tale terror to entertain and delight.

## **Works Cited**

Gaiman, Neil. Coraline. Harper Collins, 2002. Print.