

Uncanny: A Whimsical Element in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

JGracyNirmala

18Jan/Eng/Ph.D.,FT/03, Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore-641 021

7708231707

Gracyjoseph252@gmail.com

Dr D. Deepa Caroline

Associate Professor, Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore - 641021

9976709317

deepadavy19@gmail.com

Fantasy is generally considered as an escape from reality. As Literature fantasy is certainly a seductive subject. As this subject is partly imaginary, and also deals with the multiple dimensions of desire, defining this concept becomes quite complex. Sometimes it takes the form of a free-floating quality and in most cases, the escapist form. In literature, however, it has been free from the conventional restraints of a realistic text. One can easily figure out that Fantasy has not constrained itself to time, place, and action. Originally, Fantasy did get away with chronology, and the animate and inanimate objects are moreover indistinguishable in a fantastical realm. Theorizing fantasy can be a tricky business as it is usually perceived as a form of inclination to escape from the true routine being or simply a guiltless pleasure provoking principle.

English Literary Criticism has been very untheoretical while approaching fantasy. The growth of interdisciplinary studies has meagerly helped the genre in certain ways. On considering fantasy, it is always discerned as construction of superior reality. Writers like W.H. Auden, J.R. R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis felt fantasy "as an art form providing vicarious gratification" (Jackson 2). These fabulists, in their famous tales, have tried to recapture the lost moral and social hierarchy. Like any other text, a Literary Fantasy, by all means, is wrought from within and it is indeed shown in a social milieu.

Fantasy deals so blatantly with unconscious material and seems absurd not to include psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts. The book that is cogitated for this paper is Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*. Gaiman is irrefutably a popular fantasy writer who have received many

awards for his literary works. He has elevated fantasy to another level with his myriad stories. This paper is particularly concentrated on *Coraline*. Categorized under Children's Fantasy Fiction, *Coraline* encapsulates a dark theme. But one cannot brush it off as a novel for children as it is correlatively directed towards the adults as well. This novel is like a modern fairy tale in many aspects. The story has epitomized the customary fundamentals of every fantasy and also certain bizarre elements that are hardly ever found in Children's Fantasy. As the title of the paper suggests *Coraline* is a whimsical, bizarre tale. The elements of uncanniness are abundant in the novel.

Succinctly, there is a girl in distress and evil. She is wedged in the periphery of a chilling stepmother, helpers, and magic, which are nothing but the archetype of any fantasy novel. The child's protagonist goes from being reliant to autonomy. The novel also uses wordplay, irony and has many references to fairy tales and popular fantasy novels like *Alice in Wonderland*. This sort of borrowing of scenes and characters from other fictional worlds is the basic architecture of the fantasy world. Freud writes, "The creative imagination, indeed, is quite incapable of inventing anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another" (126). Thus, fantasy is essentially not something new-fangled, inventive, and transcendental. It is basically recombination of its constitutive features to fabricate something outlandish and unfamiliar. In other words, this is called uncanny. If this definition is agreed upon, then *Coraline* is a delightful example of fantasy.

This is due to the fact that many elements in the novel are borrowed from other fictitious works. Readers who have read such precedent works will find *Coraline* familiar. In Freud's theory, this is stated as "uncanny", meaning "what is known of old and long familiar" (220). This element of the uncanny can be traced in most of the familiar and popular fantasy novels.

In an essay, "The Uncanny" by Sigmund Freud he popularized the term. It came originally from a German text. Accentuating key ideas that reflected his work in psychoanalysis at the time; namely, ideas on repression, repetition, the unconscious and infantile complexes. All that is not conscious to the individual is considered to lie in the unconscious and may affect a person's thoughts and actions in day-to-day life without their knowledge. Material considered "repressed" may be unknown to the individual or deliberately forgotten as a means of maintaining one's psyche. Dreams and slips of the tongue allow repressed material to slip into conscious states, thus permitting an awareness of underlying beliefs, desires or fears (Frosh 23).

For a critic like Schelling, the uncanny represents the surfacing of the historical beliefs of previous epochs. The uncanny, however, is only felt within the realm of frightening and fearful when one encounters a particular experience that "leads back to what is known of old and long familiar," something he relates to childhood and the individual's past (Freud 195). This is the realm of psychological theory. But uncanny elements can be studied without the direct implications of psychological theory. Many tend to see the term's potential to represent the problematic of signification and identity as a result of difference.

In the novel *Coraline*, the elements of Uncanny can be clearly seen. *Coraline* begins with the Jones family moving to an old house which is divided into flats. The Jones family includes father, mother, and Coraline. There are other peculiar inhabitants in the house as well. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible have once been actresses. There is also an old man spends his time by training his mice for a circus. Coraline, being a curious girl, tries to explore the house and during her expeditions, she discovers a door that leads nowhere as there is only a brick wall behind it. But Coraline finds the same door opens after some days, unpredictably this time to a hallway that closely resembles Coraline's house. Inside the house, she finds a dark woman whose demeanor and locution certainly resembles her mother, but not really her mother. She has large black buttons instead of eyes in the socket and eventually, she becomes the other mother. The same residential flat is replicated on the other side of the door with black buttons as an exception.

According to Freud, this is true fantasy. Gaiman is creating a mirror world of his imaginary world. Of course, girls going through doors is not something new. It is almost an archetype. For instance, Alice enters another world through the rabbit's hole, and Lucy in *Narnia* goes through the wardrobe to another world. The door is a figurative entry to any imaginary world. Neil Gaiman, who grew up reading these stories, has certainly used the door as a symbol.

When Coraline remigrates to her real house she finds that her mother and father are missing. It dawns that the other mother had kidnapped them. Coraline meets a black cat which suggests that the only way to save her parents and the souls of the other children's is to challenge her evil mother. The 'other mother' agrees to this challenge. The black cat that gives this idea is undoubtedly a reflection of the cat in *Alice in Wonderland* where the Cheshire cat is a metaphorical genius. He favors only to suggest and never gives a concrete response. The black cat in *Coraline* is a replica of the Cheshire Cat. It never gives a straight answer but suggests, and this helps Coraline to challenge the evil mother.

The mother is an important uncanny character and the Other mother appears from the third chapter of the book. She strangely resembles Coraline's real mother but is tall and thin with white skin and "big black buttons" as eyes (34). While the button eyes are the most obvious marker of her difference and monstrosity, there are other physical distortions that create uncanny and grotesque effect. Coraline observes that "her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark-red fingernails were curved and sharp" (34). Her long, spidery fingers with the blade-like nails suggest that unlike Coraline's real mother, the Other Mother may have a dangerous and predatory nature. Despite these tell-tale indications that should arouse caution, Coraline's overriding first impression of the Other Mother is that she is the ideal image of kind, nurturing and motherly devotion. The Other Mother adds to this wholesome image by providing the primal symbol of motherly love by providing food. When Coraline arrives in the other world, she instantly prepares her a "huge, golden-brown roasted chicken, fried potatoes, tiny green peas" that Coraline says "was the best chicken that [she] had ever eaten" (35). For a child, food is not only the primary or original source of love, it is also a source of pleasure. In contrast to the Other Mother, Coraline recalls that her real mother "sometimes made chicken, but it was always

out of packets, or frozen, and was very dry, and it never tasted of anything” (35). In making this comparison and being beguiled by the tastiness of the Other Mother’s bounty, Coraline reads her gastronomical pleasure as an indicator of a mother’s love and care. Like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, the Other Mother cleverly uses food (notably nutritious food, not candy) as a lure, and as a marker of maternal care and affection. This is also a true uncanny representation of the character.

The Other Mother is the Great or Supreme Mother of the other world. Her desire for absolute sovereignty is revealed when she gaily tells Coraline of her repeated matricide: “I put [my mother] in [her grave] myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back” (111). Her resolve to keep her mother in her grave and her light-hearted tone in confessing cold-blooded murder makes everyone to have a question on her capacity to love anyone. Her relationship with the other father too, reveals her controlling personality. The other father plays a secondary role, where he is mostly hushed by his wife for revealing information. He confirms his fear on her when he tells Coraline, “[y]ou’ve put her quite out of sorts. And when she gets out of sorts, she takes it out on everybody else. It’s her way” (132). This statement is not only ominous for its allusions to the Other Mother’s vengeful personality, but it projects her role as the supreme ruler of the other world, replacing a relatively benign patriarchy with a malevolent matriarchy. As a mother she also troubles definitions of feminine domesticity, by refusing to be bound to the private sphere of hearth and home. Instead, she makes her domain the whole other world. Her feral femininity is further evident in her choice of companion animal: rats. These cunning carnivores bring terror to housewives: they are harbingers of disease and death that threaten the safety of home. She appears to have an unexplained aversion to cats (who are somewhat domesticated), but instead favours the nocturnal denizens of the home. Her fierce distaste for the nameless black cat, whom she refers to disdainfully as “vermin,” suggests her contrariness and underlying fear of him as she obsessively “fix[es] all the gates and the doors” to shut him out of the other world (153, 88).

A more recent re-assessment of the uncanny, Bernstein emphasises that the concept functions primarily as a “critique of identity” (1112) which is similar to Royle’s presupposition that the uncanny allows us to think about the ~~our~~ reality, familiar and ordinariness of everyday life, in new and thoughtful ways (6). Bernstein urges for the “ambulatory” nature of the uncanny, its capacity to disrupt or destabilise all that is assumed as fixed or natural (2003: 1119). This destabilisation occurs when the uncanny emerges from the spoken word into existence, thus confusing symbolisation or meaning through a merging of the symbol and symbolised (1130). Bernstein explains that the: “uncanny effect takes place when language is seen to produce what it speaks of” (1130). In other words, the uncanny has the strange capacity “to engender itself” (1130). This occurs as “it steps across from the level of the told to that of the telling” (1130). The Other Mother embodies the “ambulatory” uncanny when her severed right hand (the one she swears an oath to play fair by) follows Coraline into her real world. As a result, the Other Mother

becomes a figure that disrupts understanding, dis-members or ‘castrates’ naturalised beliefs or ideas (1112).

The resulting confusion, between reality and imagination, or the hypothetical and the performed, results in dislocation and terror. The uncanny effects are most evident when Coraline realises that the Other Mother has followed her into the real world.

In the similar way, the black cat reveals human prejudice against cats, made obvious by their “alleged connection with evil” and witchcraft (Nikolajeva 2009: 256). The black cat is particularly feared in contrast to other members of its species for its association with bad luck and the evil eye: like the Other Mother it is a stereotyped creature. In the novel, certain similarities are drawn between the Other Mother and black cat. The link between the Other Mother and black cat is made palpable in the novel when the cat toys with its prey before eating it and Coraline admonishes him for his cruelty.

Like the Other Mother, the cat enjoys a good challenge. This seemingly tangential little anecdote serves a purpose. The cat, as Coraline’s mentor and guides on her quest, helps her to understand the hidden ‘rules’ of playing ‘cat and mouse’. This explanation is for Coraline’s benefit, as this is the game that the Other Mother is playing with her. He points out that there is mercy in levelling out the odds between predator and prey. While the cat may derive pleasure from ‘toying’ with his prey, he is not simply a sadist, there is a hidden code of ethics in the game. Unlike humans, who never give their prey a chance to live, animals, like cats, do. The cat’s insight into the game reveals an uncanny reversal: the beast is *humane*, and the human beastly. Although the cat and the Other Mother do not see eye to eye, it seems the cat understands their shared ‘animal’ nature, and their shared ethics. Through the cat’s astute postulation, the reader is prompted to situate Coraline as the “funny little running snack” and to see the Other Mother in a similarly objective manner as the wise “merciful” cat. The Other Mother and black cat are other creatures, but in rejecting the cat, the Other Mother can conceal those aspects of herself that may render her vulnerable. It is what the Other Mother conceals that is of interest to the argument on her uncanny nature. If the above passage points to the cat’s morality – his capacity to be humane – it also points to the Other Mother’s (concealed) morality and humanity. The cat subtly points to her ambiguity and uncanniness as both monster and human.

In this way, the Other Mother’s uncanniness, much like Liza in *The Graveyard Book*, may question absolutes of good and evil in the personal and collective unconscious of individuals. Coraline, similar to Bod, must confront her Jungian shadow, where the personal and collective unconscious aspects exist, in order to make sense of her personal values and beliefs. She must find the cultural inconsistencies that may have been unknowingly adopted, and amend her prejudices against women with agency (as will be addressed in the following section). As Coraline’s idealizations of motherhood, femininity and what it means to be a girl/woman are called into question, her capacity to think independently also grows. It is the growing

independence and critical thinking that allows Coraline to return home. However, as Coraline changes so too does her concept of home. Home (prior to entering the other world) was a place where she felt that she did not quite belong. It was also a place where she was bored. After her encounter with the Other Mother, home becomes more homely, yet also more interesting; with the Other Mother's hand following her, its homeliness and safety is also troubled by potential danger. The familiar thus refuses to be boring, as it is spiced by the foreign.

Through her uncanniness, the Other Mother reconfigures the domestic, familiar space of home as dangerous, corruptible, and deceiving, thus contesting the borders that keep children safely contained, and implying a necessity for the child to learn to navigate such spaces for self-awareness. The Other Mother's duality serves as a catalyst for Coraline facing her shadow. She plays a vital role in Coraline's journey toward discovering her fears, prejudice and desires that help in the above navigation. Hennelly states that "the more deeply the shadow contents are repressed or despised, the more sinister and threatening will they appear in their projected forms in the external world,(14)" indicating how hostile environments and characters, like the Other Mother, may assist protagonists in realizing and thus overcoming obstacles to self-awareness.

Firstly, it is important to note that Coraline's family have just relocated to a new home in a new area. As a stranger in an unknown environment she is constantly having to re-assert her identity. Coraline thus experiences a divided sense of self, reflected in the repeated inability for people to remember her name: "It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline" (Gaiman 4), which she continuously has to contest. A definition of the name Cora from the Italian word "coraggio" translates to courage, bravery or heart in Italian, and it also alludes to a Spanish variant of the word "corazón" which means heart. Consequently, by the seemingly insignificant alteration of vowels in her name, people are metaphorically weakening (taking the heart out of) and rendering Coraline's identity displaced on both a psychic and outer level. The Other Mother, in her castrated and dis-membered form (severed hand) echoes Coraline's dislocated or divided sense of self at the beginning of the novel. Coraline's divided sense of self is tied to her inability to encounter the important and sometimes contradictory impulses of her shadow, most notably, her desire for adventure and excitement, but her fear of the foreign and unknown.

Coraline is a parallel universe, and the most ironic thing is that the protagonist finds the other world more interesting than the actual world. She witnesses her Other mother cook food and she really enjoys it. Her toys are amazing and her Other mother always wants to play with her. It is also noted that, remarkably, adults who read *Coraline* usually find it strangely familiar.

Coraline strives to find out the lost souls and her parents. She believes to close the door with a rusted key given by the two actresses but the soul is far from being deceased. The severed right hand of the Other mother is looking for the old keys to reinstate the passage. In many fantasy novels, just when one thinks the evil is defeated it will take another manifestation and give an astounding come back. Coraline, however, tricks the evil mother into falling in a bottomless well. This 'bottomless well' symbolizes the residence of the evil. The denouement of

the novel, however, makes Coraline a brave girl and Neil completes the novel with a didactic statement that “there [is] nothing left about school that [can] scare her anymore” (*Coraline*, 107). In most of the major fantasy novels, children turn out stronger towards the end. For example, the Pevensie children in *Narnia* emerge as much more mature and wiser, and in *Alice, in Wonderland* she turns up as a different valorous person.

Thus, the uncanny element of fiction is delineated in *Coraline* with certain instances and scenes. As mentioned, Fantasy is unquestionably a combination of realistic elements with the unfamiliar, and *Coraline* depicts the same. Like any good fairy tale, this tale evokes emotions but also instructs children to face their apprehension rationally. In an insensate and unpremeditated situation, a child will need such escapade with trepidations and anxieties to decipher life and the inevitable reality. In short, fantasy helps children to grapple the difficulties of life.

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