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<center>*Coraline* and the Horror of Maturation</center>

The 2009 stop-motion film *Coraline* follows the titular character's journey through a twisted alternate reality. The movie begins with Coraline and her parents moving into a new townhouse somewhere in rainy Oregon. They share the Pink Palace with a few eccentric neighbors. While her stressed parents ignore her, Coraline adventures around her bleak house and the surrounding woods. She meets a boy her age named Wybie, as well as his cunning cat. Wybie tells Coraline that his grandmother's sister went missing in the Pink Palace. Later, as Coraline ventures through her house, she finds a small door that is boarded up. That night, however, the door opens up to an extravagant alternate reality. Coraline finds her enthusiastic Other Mother cooking, but she is taken aback when she sees her Other Mother has buttons for eyes. Everything in the Other World is more glamorous and exciting than her normal reality. She soon discovers, however, that the Other World is a trap and that her Other Mother is a malevolent creature who steals children's souls. Coraline has to be brave and outwit her Other Mother in order to save her parents and go home. *Coraline* is a poignant film that utilizes principles of horror and folklore to symbolize maturation and fortitude.

When *Coraline* was released, the film was met with critical acclaim and success. *Coraline* is a unique story because it breaks genre expectations. The movie is based on Neil Gaiman's middle-grade novella. The book was published in 2002, and it was a creepy, yet beautiful coming-of-age tale. The story has had several different iterations, including Craig Russell's graphic novel adaptation. Russell gave the graphic novel a naturalistic art style because he believed it would better suit the story. Gaiman's novel is straightforward and realistic, hence the graphic novel depicted a more believable story of a girl facing maturation and trauma

(Harris-Fain). Henry Selick, however, leaned into the story's spectacle. The extravagance and chilling nature of stop-motion better establishes the antithesis of Coraline's mundane reality and her beautiful, treacherous trap.

Stop-motion is a film medium with a very particular mood. Many stop-motion films are inherently ominous or fantastical (*The Corpse Bride (2005), The Adventures of Mark Twain (1985)).* Selick stated in an interview that he chose to make *Coraline* a clay animation movie because stop-motion has a sense of timelessness and macabre charm ("Lessons"). The YouTube film critic "My Little Thought Tree" stated that stop-motion is disorienting and can make a movie nightmarish. In *Coraline,* this device makes sense as Coraline's mundane reality looks bleak and lifeless, whereas the Other World is vibrant and elusive. The spectacle of the Other World, however, quickly becomes oppressive and threatening. "My Little Thought Tree" also compared *Coraline* to the haunting 1991 clay-mation short film *The Sandman. The Sandman* follows a young boy on a nightmarish journey to escape a bird-like monster. The monster eventually finds the boy, claws out his eyes, and feeds the eyes to her babies.

The mise en scene and editing of *Coraline* clearly establish Coraline's coming-of-age journey. Her threatening environment grows more malicious as the story goes on. The Other World becomes oppressive and ominous. But the scene that truly utilizes elements of horror is when the Other Mother transforms into her beldam form. The first shot of the scene shows Coraline challenging the Other Mother, rising to her level. The second shot is a low angle shot of the Other Mother as she transforms. The third shot is a high angle reaction shot of Coraline. The fourth shot shows the Other Mother's grab Coraline and pull her through a narrow hallway. The Other Mother's transition is a shock cut because it is surprising and jarring. Following that, the

last shot is an example of disjunctive editing, as the audience sees obvious and stylized editing choices.

Coraline, at its core, is a modern iteration of gothic folklore. Scholar Rhonda Brock-Servais states that the boundary for what is thematically appropriate for children has become more fluid in recent years. The decision to utilize horror and folklore in a children's story is quite common. *Coraline* is a solid example of intertwining "bleak terror with metaphysical playfulness…[and] using the [weird] to reshape narratives of maturation" (Brock-Servais). Film critic Ryan Hollinger states that *Coraline* can be categorized as a fairy tale, a film with grotesques, or a ghost story. The film has several elements of a fairy tale, such as Coraline having a strained relationship with her mother, having to strike a deal with her enemy, and winning her parents back. Fairy tales often teach children a lesson or virtue, as in Coraline feeling gratitude for the mundane at the end of the film. The film is also filled with grotesques, or blurred boundaries of reality. Grotesques often switch between the comic and the terrifying, or when the beautiful becomes threatening. The Other World and the Other Mother start off in a place of spectacle and fun, yet they slowly become malevolent and dangerous. *Coraline* can also be described as a ghost story. She begins the story by moving into a haunted house with a disturbing history. When Coraline finally meets the ghost children, they want something of her. They want to be free after realizing the cost of getting what they want (Hollinger).

The real lore and myths that inspired *Coraline* are quite haunting. Neil Gaiman stated that he had no specific inspiration for the novella, minus a nightmare his daughter once had. Gaiman has admitted, though, that he reads plentiful folklore that often subconsciously inspire his writing. YouTube film analyst "StoryDive" researched the different myths related to *Coraline.* One example is the short story *The New Mother* by Victorian author Lucy Clifford. The story

follows two sisters who are abandoned by their mother and visited by a horrific "new mother" with unnatural eyes. Another example is the Japanese folklore creature, the Tsuchigumo. The Tsuchigumo were conniving spider-like creatures who would publicly mask themselves as beautiful women. The Tsuchigumo would then trap heroes in their lair and kill them ("The Creepy…").

The gothic and unsettling elements of *Coraline* symbolize how Coraline matures and finds strength through her trauma. An interesting aspect of this movie is Coraline's strained relationship with her real mother versus her Other Mother. Her real mother, although stressed and strict, loves her daughter, but Coraline does not acknowledge the beauty of the mundane. Contrastingly, her Other Mother showers her with gifts and adoration. At first, Coraline loves her alternate reality, but the Other Mother's affections soon become narcissistic and controlling. The Other Mother's "love" isn't real love, it's possessiveness. When the Other Wybie shows Coraline his sewn mouth, it symbolizes how feeling emotionally trapped takes your voice away (My Little…). By the end of the film, Coraline learns that she is strong enough to fight through any fear-inducing, horror-like environment that life throws her way.

This movie is a special piece of film that explores what it means to grow up and to find joy and life in the mundane. Scholar Chloé Germaine Buckley states that this story offers children a perfect environment to explore their fears and fantasies by facing the gothic. This film has accumulated a cult following in recent years, because this movie is timeless (wouldn't Selick be so proud). This story offers a deep psychoanalysis of children and of trauma. Coraline is a fantastically brave, yet relatable protagonist. Scholar Sara K. Day states that folklore offers the opportunity to break gender and societal limitations. She also states that *Coraline* tells viewers/readers that culturally feminine qualities (collaboration, intuition, and imagination)

make us brave and powerful. I hope more children and young women find this movie and find joy in their lives and the resilience that already lies within themselves.

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