

***Coraline* by Neil Gaiman**

by

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The author, text, characters and use of language

Author Background

Having been born and raised in England, as an adult Neil moved to the United States of America and is now based in Minneapolis in Minnesota. Much of the information about his work included in this *Bookmark* has been gleaned from his web site, particularly the 'Questions and Answers' and 'Biography' sections, as well as from interviews he has occasionally offered to book review magazines. He is an immensely popular author world wide and his web site receives more than 600,000 hits per month. He also writes an online journal.

Neil Gaiman has been a professional writer for over twenty years being first inspired by the punk movement and the idea that it was possible to do something merely because one wanted to. He is perhaps better known however for his graphic novels and comic writing work. As a TV scriptwriter he is known for *Neverwhere*, broadcast on the BBC in 1996. Neil Gaiman's foray into book publishing began in 2001 with the publication of *American Gods*, an adult novel, which also brought great success on the award front.

Coraline was published in 2002 and was Neil Gaiman's first novel for children. In 2003 he published his second, this time for a younger audience; *Wolves in the Walls* is a children's picture book which won the English Association's *English 4-11* Key Stage 2 Fiction Award. A third children's book, *Mirrorsmask*, published in 2005 has been shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway illustration award in 2006. Since its publication *Coraline* has been an international best seller as well as a critical hit. It was an international best seller for the *New Yorker* and has won at least four literary prizes in America.

Although *Coraline* is classified as a children's book it is interesting that Neil Gaiman himself does not consider it to be necessarily a children's book. When asked how it should be classified he says that he believes it would be found in the same box as J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* Trilogy. These are two other books that are widely considered to be for children yet nevertheless read and enjoyed by adults. They perhaps come into a recently created category of books known as 'cross-overs'. Each book has a young protagonist yet the story has been told in such a way that it offers enjoyment to both children and adults. It would seem that each reader finds his or her own story within these books. Gaiman says that children, as a general rule, read *Coraline* as an adventure story whilst it gives adults nightmares. On his web site it is summed up as 'a scary book for strange little girls'. Despite not knowing exactly how to classify the book Gaiman does believe that *Coraline* is probably the best book he has ever written.

When asked about his own literary taste Neil Gaiman lists his favourite books as; *Votan* by John James, *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons and *The Man Who Was Thursday* by G K Chesterton - an eclectic mix of literature, stories of simple country folk and a detective story about the search for God. When asked who his favourite authors are he provides a list but states that this could change on a daily basis. He believes the one book that everyone should read is *Lud in the Mist* by Hope Mirrlees describing it as 'the best fairy tale ever'. Gaiman has obviously been influenced by a variety of literatures yet retains the ability to write in a style and genre of his own creating.

As with many authors the writing habits of Neil Gaiman may strike the observer as somewhat odd. He uses a fountain pen with interesting coloured ink and never throws anything away because he uses nice notebooks! Other than these eccentricities he says that he is able to write on anything and in any place as long as he is interested in doing so.

The Characters

Coraline the story's protagonist is brave, resourceful, nosy, bored, spoilt, lonely, clever, young (no age is specified) but older than she looks. She is also brave and sensible when it is required of her. Neil Gaiman says that he is proud of her as a character. This is a comment and concept that could perhaps be discussed further - asking the questions; Why an author might be proud of his character? What are the qualities of Coraline that might encourage these feelings?

Coraline's **real mother and father** are sketchy characters who appear to be vague, kind, not very good cooks, neat, tidy and busy professionals.

"Both of her parents worked, doing things on computers" pg 15/16

"Coraline's father stopped working and made them all dinner.
Coraline was disgusted. 'Daddy,' she said, 'you've made a *recipe* again" pg 18

The **Other mother and father** are nightmarish creations. Creatures rather than people, they are the epitome of horror and could easily have come from the imagination of a child. With buttons for eyes and an appetite for beetles they are pure fantasy and yet have human characteristics. They are objects of curiosity for Coraline as well as her gaolers and enemy.

The **Other Mother** is a cold, tall thin woman with black button eyes, but she is a good cook (pages 38 & 105).

"Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner.
Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp Her eyes were big black buttons" pg 38

"... Coraline's other mother brought them lunch ... It tasted wonderful" pg 39

The **Other Father** is a very vague character described as looking like Coraline's father except that he also has black button eyes (pages 39 & 128).

"His eyes were buttons - big and black and shiny" pg 39

Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, Coraline's neighbours are retired actresses and dog lovers. They are described variously as elderly, kind, alert whilst at the same time they are also vague, friendly and "round".

"They were both old and round and they lived in their flat with a number of ageing Highland terriers ... once upon a time Miss Spink and Miss Forcible had been actresses" pg 11

In the Other world they are young actresses performing on stage in their own flat. Their dogs are able to talk and constitute the ushers and audience for the performances (pages 52 & 120).

"The new Miss Spink was wearing green tights and high brown boots that went most of the way up her legs. The new Miss Forcible wore a white dress and had flowers in her long yellow hair" pg 52

The '**crazy man**' who lives in the top flat is unnamed until the very end of the book. He is a scary, unapproachable character with a big moustache that Coraline imagines to be threatening.

"In the flat above Coraline's, under the roof, was a crazy old man with a big moustache. He told Coraline that he was training a mouse circus. He wouldn't let anyone see it" pg 12

It is not until the end of the story when Miss Spink explains to Coraline that the old man's name is Mr Bobo and he is from an old circus family (pg 178), that she understands perhaps why he is training mice.

"The man in the top flat. Mister Bobo. Fine old circus family I believe" pg 178

In the Other world the crazy old man has the black button eyes that characterise this place and he is training rats rather than mice – emphasising the evil nature of this place.

The **cat** has no name in either world. He is a very "haughty" (page 14) self righteous, black cat who, in the other world, is able to talk and here he acts as Coraline's guide and confidante.

The **Other children** whom Coraline meets in the mirror where she is imprisoned for bad behaviour, have been there for

"'Aye. Time beyond reckoning' ... 'I walked through the scullery door' said the voice of the one that thought it might be a boy, 'and I found myself back in the parlour. But *she* was waiting for me. She told me she was my other mamma, but I never saw my true mother again' " pg 100

There are three other children, a boy and two girls; they have no recollection of their names and only vague memories of their appearance. They are very kind but also sad and lonely. They advise Coraline to "flee" whilst she is still able to, but instead Coraline has determined to find her parents and the children's "secret hearts" page 101.

The Plot & Text: An Introduction

Coraline is not only a very short - 185 pages - easy to read children's horror story, it has also been cleverly written to provide the right mix of horror, adventure and fantasy. It is a compelling, page turning story that will frighten some readers, surprise others and fascinate everyone.

The story is very succinct, Gaiman could have embellished it with more detailed descriptions and further adventures but that is perhaps something best left to the individual teacher and the imagination of the readers. The concise nature of the book has created a gripping page-turner and the addition of a few very evocative black and white illustrations provides additional depth.

Neil Gaiman explains on his web site that he wrote the story very slowly from his own imagination. The name Coraline he says came from a spelling mistake in a letter he was writing to a 'Caroline'. He thought Coraline sounded interesting and had a feeling of

hardness, beauty and of something under its surface - he uses the imagery of a piece of coral.

The Plot

To give the story its context it should first be explained that Coraline and her parents have just moved into a new home,

“It was a very old house - it had an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground and an overgrown garden with huge trees in it. Coraline's family didn't own all of the house, it was too big for that. Instead they owned part of it” pg 11

It is the summer and Coraline is on her school holidays, however, as with many young children she is quickly bored,

“she spent her first two weeks at the house - exploring the garden and the grounds ... it was very cold summer that year; but go out she did, exploring, every day until the day it rained, when Coraline had to stay inside” pg 14

Luckily there are some interesting neighbours for Coraline to meet once the weather turns

“Miss Spink and Miss Forcible lived in the flat below Coraline's on the ground floor” pg 11

“In the flat above Coraline's, under the roof, was a crazy old man” pg 12

Furthermore in Coraline's flat there is an intriguing door that apparently lead's to nowhere. When Coraline's mother opens it with the

“oldest, biggest, blackest, rustiest key”

she explains to Coraline that

“When they turned the house into flats, they simply bricked it up. The other side is the empty flat on the other side of the house, the one that's still for sale” pg 18

Gaiman is clearly setting up the story here with intrigue and very evocative, descriptive language. How many children could fail to be intrigued by such a description as the one given to the key? There is bound to be an adventure attached and it is this clever use of language and description that compels the reader as much as Coraline.

Alongside the intriguing descriptions of objects within the house Gaiman sets up the atmosphere by describing the inclement weather that forces Coraline to stay inside

“It wasn't the kind of rain you could go out in, it was the other kind, the kind that threw itself down from the sky and splashed where it landed. It was rain that meant business” pg 15

There are toys to be played with, videos to watch and books to read, but as any typically petulant and bored child

“Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she’d read all her books” pg 15

With these descriptions Gaiman beautifully sets the scene for a mystery and an adventure. The setting of the book, an old house with intriguing neighbours, large grounds and secret doorways appeals to the imagination of all children who love adventure and mystery. Gaiman says the setting appealed to him as an author because as a child he also loved exploring old houses and grounds. It is clearly a book written from the imagination of the author but one that he enjoyed writing and was able to relate to its ultimate audience.

Coraline’s unerring sense of adventure and desire for an activity to relive the boredom lead to her adventure and feed the needs of the Other Mother and Father. Her curiosity causes her to ask her mother to explain the doorway, and when she sees that it has been left open she retrieves the key and inadvertently opens the door into a parallel world.

Initially she is not perturbed by the appearance of the people she meets, after all it is all part of her adventure. When she returns to her own world she is philosophical about the fact that nothing has changed and even when her parents go missing, although she is very sensible and telephones the police she is still pragmatic.

The Text: Imagery

Although the text throughout the book is highly evocative and imagery is used wherever possible it is when Coraline's adventures in the other world begin that imagery becomes a more explicit aspect of the text.

Initially the descriptions of the Other Mother and Father use gentle yet scary images of buttons for eyes. As the nightmare continues and Coraline becomes trapped in this other world so the imagery and horror intensify.

At first the changes are gentle and do not seem to perturb Coraline, for example having had her first meal with the Other parents she goes to her room to play with the rats

“Coraline had never seen a rat, except on television. She was quite looking forward to it. This was turning out to be a very interesting day after all” pg 40

Soon after this she meets the talking cat - one of the few characters who is actually a friend. There are also talking dogs and the numerous horrible events and circumstances that follow are enough to give chills to adult readers but to children it is likely these are a natural aspect of the adventure. Gaiman very cleverly writes this horror into the story so that it resembles something fantastical and a little bit revolting rather than the stuff of nightmares and this reveals the skill of his writing. Some comparisons could in fact be made to Roald Dahl some of whose writing was equally horrible and scary yet wonderful to children.

Further fantastic imagery used by Gaiman comes later in the story when Coraline has begun to realise that the ‘Other’ world is not a place in which she wants to stay. The true nature of the Other Mother is gradually revealed

“Expecting to be offered a toffee or a butterscotch ball Coraline looked down. The bag was half filled with large shiny blackbeetles ...”

“She carefully picked out a particularly large and black beetle, pulled off its legs ... and popped the beetle into her mouth”

“You’re sick’, said Coraline. ‘Sick and evil and weird.’” pg 93

Gaiman, when asked about this use of imagery explains that beetles from a paper bag seem right. Spiders would run away, ants would crawl out. Beetles have a crunch and are slow, providing just the right amount of unpleasantness. As well as this there are also elements of magic, with fortune telling tea leaves (page 29) and special magical stones. Finally there are also ghosts, a must have addition to any horror story (page 96).

All these elements combine together to provide some fantastic imagery for Gaiman to work with and he is able to weave the words and images together to create a captivating story.

One comment made by Gaiman that would be worth taking further if the story is being used with a class set is the idea that the Other Mother is in fact the author of her own story, however he comments that she is a bad author as her story and her world fall apart very quickly. How and why does this happen and how do good authors hold their stories together?

The Text

The text has a very dreamlike quality and it is at times difficult to differentiate or establish whether the events are actually a dream or a reality for Coraline. However it should be remembered that many children’s adventures are imaginary constructs. The fact that Coraline has a dream like quality that does not come from her dreams adds to the mystery of the story and emphasises Gaiman’s superior story telling skills. In fact there are also moments when the reader has to ask whether it is Neil Gaiman or Coraline telling the story. The differentiation lies in the fact that authors create worlds and stories to ensnare their readers. Coraline has more life about her, and acts as a real person. It is this subtle but important difference that helps the reader to realise that as far as Coraline is concerned these events are real.

The reality of the events in the story is brought home to the reader at the second climax of the story. Once Coraline has managed to escape from the ‘Other’ world she goes to bed and dreams about the ‘Other Children’ who she met in the mirror. In her dream she is able to free the children and they are able at long last to find peace. Although as readers we understand that this is a dream at the same time it is not entirely clear, even to Coraline.

“She wondered how long it would be until the sun came up, wondered whether her dream had been a true thing while knowing in her heart that it had been”
pg 169

Despite the horror story aspects of *Coraline* there is a happy ending, and life returns to normal

“Gentle, reassuring snores came from her parents’ room” pg 168

“Her new school clothes were laid out carefully on her chair” pg 184

It is a naturally happy conclusion that does not feel contrived or forced in order to suit the young audience. Coraline beats her enemy; she overcomes the evil through her own resourcefulness and determination, along with assistance from the cat and mice whom it appears are able to occupy both worlds, albeit with different personas.

Discussing individual aspects of the story further would spoil the reading for those who are unfamiliar with the text, suffice to say that Coraline’s adventure does turn - to adult eyes -

unpleasant. To children this is just one of the many adventures that they might undergo in their own imaginations which are often far more vivid than adults allow for. Because it is a children's book we know that reality will return and good will overcome evil, however we are drawn in by the spellbinding story, very much due to the superior nature of the writing.

There are elements of fantasy, horror and adventure in this story that can be drawn out and used with children to create 'what if' scenarios. The language and text are strongly evocative and could easily be used as examples of great story telling methods.

Coraline is a wonderful story; it is at once exciting, gripping and frightening. It is accessible, easy to read, short and succinct. The story is highly original and Neil Gaiman is a wonderful story teller. This story is a highly recommended read for all children.



Further Reading

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll would be an excellent text to compare to this in an exercise looking at similar pieces of children's writing

Fairy tales, particularly those written by the Grimm Brothers would also be an excellent resource for comparing and contrasting to *Coraline*.

Roald Dahl stories for example *Matilda* or *The Twits* would make useful comparative texts.

Website

Neil Gaiman's official website www.neilgaiman.com

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