

*'Food, Fear and Fairy Tales; An Analysis of the Themes of Consumption and
Personal Identity in Coraline (2009)'*

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the intricate connections between themes of consumption and personal identity within *Coraline*, adapted into film by Henry Selick in 2009. Utilising an approach that incorporates literary analysis, film studies, and cultural theory, the study explores how food, fear, and fairy tale motifs join to create a rich, layered narrative.

The thesis begins by contextualizing the analysis within the broader framework of fairy tale traditions, tracing the recurring motifs and historical roots that underpin the thematic landscape of '*Coraline*'. Cannibalism is touched upon with the addition of an analysis of the devouring mother archetype, referencing tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Little Red Riding Hood* to establish a foundation for understanding the significance of food and consumption within storytelling.

The study shifts its focus to the role of food within the film during the second chapter. Through a dual lens of narrative function and symbolism, this section analyses the contrasting portrayals of food in Coraline's interactions with her real mother and the enigmatic Other Mother. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which food serves as a potent symbol for manipulation, power and control. The Beldam's lavish feasts acting as a lure to entice Coraline. Additionally, Coraline's rejection of this seduction asserts her own personal agency and identity within the story.

Finally, an exploration of the symbolic architecture of the Pink Palace pushes the analyses further. Through examining narrative structure, visual elements, and thematic motifs, this section contends that the Pink Palace functions as a metaphorical digestive system, symbolizing Coraline's journey of self-discovery and resistance against the Beldam's insidious attempts at consumption.

Introduction

Coraline solidified itself amongst the trove of fairy tale stories when it was first published in 2002, written by Neil Gaiman. A short story about an adventurous young girl moving into a new home, bored dissatisfied with both the house and her parents, Coraline discovers a parallel world with attentive 'other' parents and interesting neighbours. In 2009, the novel was adapted into an animated film directed by Henry Selick, captivating audiences, and is largely considered as one of the best stop-motion films ever made. A modern-day fairy tale, it connected the familiar tropes with the modern world, putting a new and darker spin on the devouring mother archetype and themes of hunger and temptation, the likes of which were unseen in the well-known Disney fairy tale films such as *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*.

Coraline's introspection into the role of food in cinema and relationships is something I believe is a largely undervalued and overlooked element to the film. Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard make a similar argument in "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in *Coraline*" (*Children's Literature*, 2012), discussing the ways in which food is used to symbolise Coraline's personal autonomy, and at times a lack thereof. The authors argue that Coraline's ability to resist the Beldam's control is linked to her ability to resist the temptation of food, as well as her ability to use language and speech to assert her own agency. This argument is central to the questions I will be posing in my thesis regarding the Beldam's manipulation and luring of children through the use of food, and how I believe this tool of control and enticement is flipped on its head by Coraline and used against the Beldam to achieve and reclaim personal identity and autonomy. In this thesis I will be examining how food is used as a tool to indicate power, betrayal, and inner turmoil within the relationships of the film, the primary example being that of Coraline and the Beldam. Food and consumption are the very foundations of which the modern-day fairy-tale take place and build from, and by appealing to the audiences' own tastes and appetite, the film can convey a deeply

complex and intricate narrative, one primarily revolving around love and personal autonomy and agency.

A concluding chapter will examine the symbolism of 'The Pink Palace', the setting of the story and the place in which all characters reside. I will be analysing the film's props, lighting, set design, colours and camera movements to support my argument that the Pink Palace in which both the Beldam and Coraline reside can be viewed as a structural and metaphorical symbol for the digestive system. I will be referring to the book '*Coraline*' by Neil Gaiman in this chapter, and how the source material was adapted to portray this symbolism effectively, while also examining the differences in how it was portrayed. We know the Beldam wants to eat Coraline, but other than dialogue, how does the film show us this? I aim to answer this question through this specific analysis, as I believe it is how the film effectively portrays the themes of consumption as an adaptation. The novel had a more conspicuous way of approaching this theme, one way being providing access to Coraline's thoughts consistently.

This thesis aims to examine the moral significance of food within *Coraline* and the fairy tale genre or storytelling, specifically it's prominence in asserting the boundaries of power, betrayal, and personal agency within the film through symbolism. Food and consumption are integral to the story- it's themes, setting, characters and relationships, and through the examination of scholarly discourse and cinematic elements and techniques, a deeper understanding of these themes within *Coraline* will be reached.

Chapter One; 'Fairy Tales; Luring, Consumption and Fear'

"Above all, food is never just something to eat: even when it is mundane and everyday it carries meaning. Food events are always significant, in reality as well as in fiction. They reveal the fundamental preoccupations, ideas, and beliefs of society"

- Carolyn Daniel¹

The origin of fairy tales cannot be traced back or pinned to a particular time, place, or person. Even before the popularisation of writing and recording such tales in the 16th and 17th century, they were as prevalent as ever through oral recitings and lived on through word of mouth. Fairy tales like 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk' have been traced back thousands of years, before languages like English, French and Italian were fully formed.² However, even Biblical stories and Aesop's fables precede these tales by about 2500 years.

Fairy tales motifs, meanings and messages have long since been studied, from step mothers and magic spells to true loves and trickery/deception. Horror was evidently a primitive theme of fairy tales, such themes intended as messages of caution and an

¹ Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2006.

² "Fairy Tale Origins Thousands of Years Old, Researchers Say." *BBC News*, 20 Jan. 2016. [www.bbc.com, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35358487](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35358487). Web.

encouragement of civility for young children.³ Often these themes go hand in hand with that of food, a theme that in many tales was undoubtedly born from grievous historical periods of famine or hunger, but eventually became a story component that simply appealed to children. Such tales include that of 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Hansel and Gretel', and 'Jack and the Beanstalk', among many others.

In the 21st century, when it is not so common for children to be hungry and worrying about their next meal, food is still an alluring 'ingredient' to a children's story, as is evident in that of *Coraline* in particular. It is a story that is unquestionably a modern day gothic fairytale, carrying forward the motifs and archetypes from its preceding 16th/17th century fairy tale cousins.⁴ Its themes of food and consumption still reflect the modern day world in which the story takes place, as well as demonstrate that our relationship with food and subsequently each other goes deeper than the literal sense of hunger. Food and consumption are an integral part of our ethnic background, our personal tastes, class status, spiritual focus, gender roles and our relationships.⁵ They are deeply intimate and carry emotional weight.

The objectives of various fairy tales offer an insight into the time period of which they were told, the culture, customs and messages all painting a picture of the values these people held, but also their fears. What scared people in the past, enough to caution children with

³ *We'll Eat You Up, We Love You So: On the Changes of the Children's Horror Genre from the 17th Century Onward* - ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/ba9954e7b920f49ad65146df11deb98d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>. Accessed 7 Mar. 2023. Print.

⁴ Abbruscato, Joseph, and Tanya Jones. *The Gothic Fairy Tale in Young Adult Literature: Essays on Stories from Grimm to Gaiman*. McFarland, 2014. Print.

⁵ Baron, Cynthia. "Dinner and a Movie: Analyzing Food and Film." *Food, Culture & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 93–117. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.2752/155280106778055190>. Print.

these stories? How was food and consumption so intimately tied with relationships and betrayal?

History surrounding renowned Fairy tales and their recurring motifs and objectives.

'Little Red Riding Hood' (the first literary version known as '*Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*'), published by Charles Perrault in 1697 as part of his literary collection '*Histoires ou contes du temps passé*' (Stories or Tales of Past Times) has many variations in its story, particularly its ending.⁶ In Perrault's telling of the tale, the young girl removes her clothes upon arrival to her Grandmother's house, and burns them in the stove before subsequently climbing into bed with the wolf.⁷ She remarks on the wolf's un-grandmotherly features before she is devoured by him.

This story warns of the consequences of disobedience, promiscuous behaviour and strange men.⁸ When parents ruminated on the dangers of which to warn their children about, rape and sexual violence was a real and prominent one.⁹ During the 17th century in France, red cloaks were typically worn by prostitutes, putting forward a narrative for children that this

⁶ Zipes, Jack, editor. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern*. First issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁷ Welsh-Burke, Nicola. "All the Better to Eat You with: Sexuality, Violence, and Disgust in 'Little Red Riding Hood' Adaptations." *Literature*, vol. 3, no. 4, 4, Dec. 2023, pp. 416–29. [www.mdpi.com, https://doi.org/10.3390/literature3040028](https://doi.org/10.3390/literature3040028).

⁸ Zipes, Jack, editor. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern*. First issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁹ *We'll Eat You Up, We Love You So: On the Changes of the Children's Horror Genre from the 17th Century Onward* - ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/ba9954e7b920f49ad65146df11deb98d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>. Accessed 7 Mar. 2023.

'Little Red Riding Hood' deserved what she got by failing to listen to her Mother's warnings and to protect her virginity, purity and innocence. It is notable that in order to instil this fear and warning within children, the protagonist had to be eaten. Susanne Skubal notes this in *Word of Mouth*, saying "but the images of horror that visit the minds of children may be more telling in their single-minded explicitness: the monster has teeth. Hansel and Gretl's [sic] witch wants to fatten them for her oven, the Troll under the bridge will eat the Billy Goats Gruff, and the wolf—everybody's wolf—is licking his lips and baring his teeth. Whatever it is that is in the closet or under the bed or in the bushes of bad dreams menaces most with its mouth"¹⁰

This is a salient and recurring motif within fairy tales, particularly of this time period, as well as the conspicuous division between 'good' and 'bad' within the stories' characters. The young girl embodies the image of a perfect and doted child¹¹, whilst the wolf exudes an image of danger, malice and lust. Such black and white examples of 'good' and 'bad' within fairy tale characters created a clear picture of right and wrong for children. Villains' ugliness is emphasised in fairy tales, and it is often the case that the 'baddie' will disguise this ugliness in order to fool an innocent protagonist, as is the case in *Little Red Riding Hood*, as well as the later *Coraline*. Luring and deception was cautioned against as a fairy tale motif that is still prevalent today - "all is not what it seems".

Coraline carries this motif forward, arguably to another level. The Beldam, similar to the Wolf, dresses herself to look almost identical to Coraline's mother. In this case however, the Beldam's 'big teeth' are her button eyes, an indication to Coraline that something is not quite

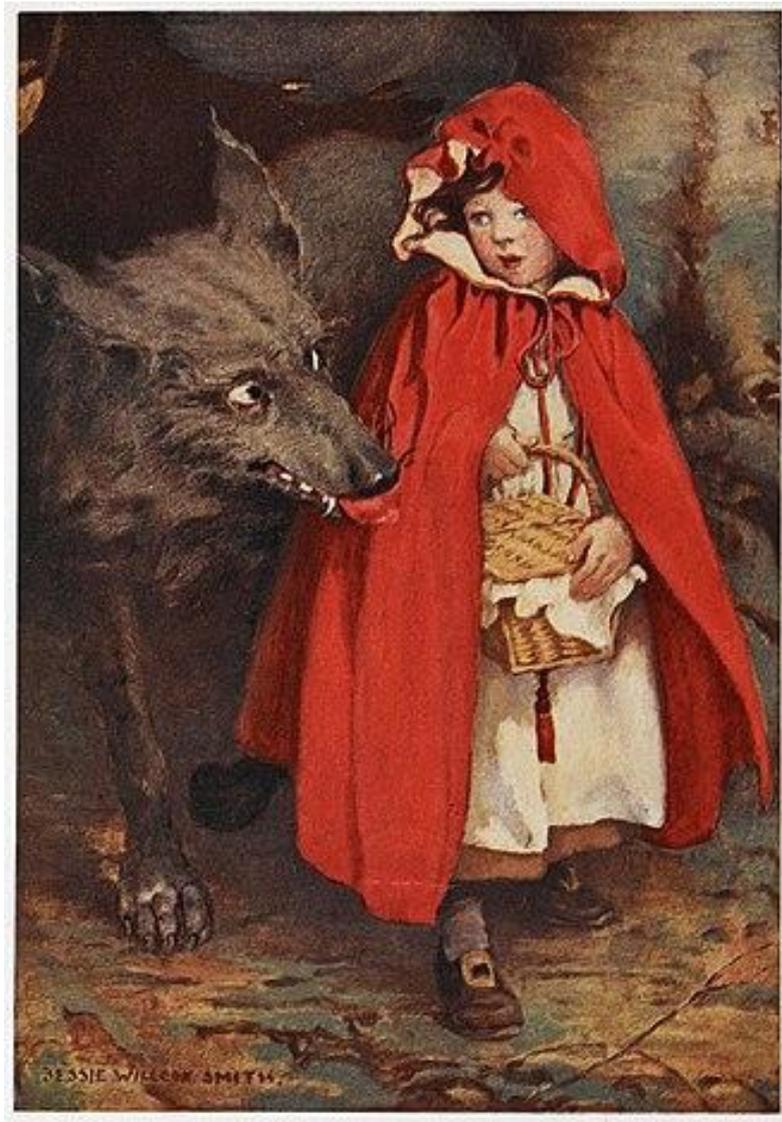
¹⁰ Skubal, Susanne M. *Word of mouth: Food and fiction after Freud*. Routledge, 2013.

¹¹ *We'll Eat You Up, We Love You So: On the Changes of the Children's Horror Genre from the 17th Century Onward* - ProQuest.

right about her, and her true form is later revealed to be that of an insect-like creature as opposed to a human. Her ugliness and monstrosity is emphasised, she is not human, but rather a predator to them, one who also preys and feeds on the most innocent, naive and pure - children. Notably, like 'Little Red Riding Hood', Coraline received several warnings from her neighbours and creatures about the Beldam, of which she ignores in order to satisfy her hunger for fun, attention and affection. In regards to the food that the Beldam feeds Coraline, it is clear that it has a malevolent purpose¹², of which the more Coraline eats her food, the more immersed she becomes in the Beldam's world (or digestive system, as I'll be analysing in this thesis), and the less personal autonomy she has.¹³

¹² Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.2012.0015>.

¹³ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*,



(Fig1.1 *Little Red Riding Hood* by J.W. Smith)

Food is also a very important element of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. In Perrault's 1697 tale, the young girl visited her Grandmother so as to bring her bread and milk. After crossing paths with the Wolf and telling him where she was going, the Wolf reached the Grandmother's cottage before her, eating her Grandmother and pouring her blood into a bottle and her flesh

on a platter.¹⁴ Upon arriving herself shortly afterwards, the young girl is told to eat the 'wine and meat', offered to her by the Wolf masquerading as her deceased Grandmother. She unknowingly begins to eat the flesh and blood of her Grandmother, to which a cat cries 'Slut!'. The act of eating her Grandmother's flesh and blood could also be viewed as a pivoting point in the tale where the child loses her innocence and purity, evident in the word 'Slut' thrown at her. Such an act of eating flesh and blood outside of the religious setting regarding the body and blood of Christ would have been viewed as greatly sinful and deplorable. She is unaware however of what she is doing. The Wolf has lured her into evil not only through eating her, but by leading her to unknowingly taste the flesh of her own family. This idea of losing one's personal autonomy through the consumption of food is a fairy tale motif that is present in *Coraline*; she commits a metaphorical betrayal, as Coraline trades the familiarity and imperfections of her real life for an unreal and dangerous ideal. Tasting the food of the Other World is her equivalent to eating the flesh of her family, a meal offered to her in an attempt to lure her and eat her.

Coraline's ability to be lured by the Beldam stems from her fragmented and turbulent relationship with her parents. She feels abandoned by them emotionally, this emotional void makes her vulnerable, prompting her to seek solace elsewhere, and therefore wander into danger. The Beldam exploits Coraline's emotional vulnerabilities. 'Hansel and Gretel' also combines some important motifs in fairy tales such as the abandoned children, the wicked stepmother and food as a method of luring children. The tale was first published by the Brothers Grimm in the first edition of their '*Kinder-und Hausmarchen*' in 1812, the historical context behind it often attributed to the recurring famines of the early 19th century, along with the common abandonment of children and mother dying young (often repositied by a

¹⁴ Harper, Matt DB. "Dark Lessons: Cannibalism in Classic Fairy Tales." *Owlcation*, 15 July 2022, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Cannibalism-in-Fairy-Tales>. Web.

stepmother).¹⁵ The tale warns children of strangers and oral greed, once again using food and the idea of being devoured by a seemingly friendly and welcoming villain as a way to achieve this. The motif of horror through cannibalism is present in this story as the Witch uses her gingerbread house to lure children with the objective of eating them. Food, let alone something as delicious as gingerbread, was unattainable for the children, abandoned due to famine. The Witch uses their own hunger and greed against them to satisfy her own. Once again, as a villain, the Witch is portrayed as an other-worldly or supernatural rather than entirely human. The Beldam in *Coraline* is similar to the Witch in her recognition and understanding of what exactly the children she is luring desire and hunger for the most. Food is the answer, but through food, what she is really giving the children is love. Grand feasts just for them, attentive to their tastes and cravings, she 'fills them up' with love and attention, and consequently leads them to believe that it is the Beldam that they belong with.¹⁶ Everything in the Beldam's world is made for Coraline, just as the Witch's house is made for Hansel and Gretel. The gingerbread house does not reflect the Witch's evil intentions, it is bright and colourful, something from a daydream. Through their respective homes and their acute awareness of the children's wants, both villains are successful in luring, betraying and devouring children. They satisfied a hunger that the children's own mothers could not, and in doing so they satisfied their own gluttony. The two tales warn against trusting strangers, no matter how welcoming or nice they may seem.

¹⁵ Zipes, Jack, editor. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern*. First issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback, Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁶ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in *Coraline*." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*,



(Fig 1.3 'Hansel And Gretel', Siblings Arrive At The Witch's Cottage. Drawing, C1891, By Henry J. Ford For The Fairy Tale By Brothers Grimm)

Coraline's warning and cautions as a modern day fairy tale do not stem from a literal threat of hunger, physical abuse or abandonment as its preceding tales did at the time of their

creation. In the modern 21st century. Coraline is emotionally starved and abandoned by her real Mother¹⁷, and being unable to form a secure attachment with her, she searches for it elsewhere. Studies have shown that individuals who experience emotional abuse or neglect in childhood are more susceptible to manipulation, abuse and harassment by others,¹⁸ as well as trying to seek out an attachment that could not be fulfilled by their own parent. In Bowlby's theory of attachment (1952), he suggests that, "the determinant of attachment is not food but care and responsiveness"¹⁹, which is evident in Coraline's relationship with her own Mother. As a fairy tale, I would argue *Coraline* is highlighting the dangers of the effects of emotional neglect, and the ease of which one can lose themselves if their own sense of self is not secure. It also warns against a cycle of further abuse, and those who may take advantage of an individuals' longing for attachment, perhaps even to fulfil a need of their own (It is suggested numerous times in the film that loving/eating children is essential for the Beldam's survival). Had Coraline felt secure and loved in her home life, she would not have been tempted by the Beldam's machinations.

The Devouring Mother

The devouring mother is an archetypal idea of a mother that 'consumes' her children, seeking fulfilment through them, with the 'feminine pathology' being centred around the over

¹⁷ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*

¹⁸ Strathearn, Lane, et al. "Long-Term Cognitive, Psychological, and Health Outcomes Associated With Child Abuse and Neglect." *Pediatrics*, vol. 146, no. 4, Oct. 2020, p. e20200438. *PubMed*, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-0438>.

¹⁹ Sabri, Nur Syafiqah Aqilah Ahmad. "Mother-Child Attachment; Exploring Freudian Denial and Aggression in Neil Gaiman's Coraline" *LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION* 6 (2019): 45. APA

infantilisation and over protection of children²⁰. This archetype has been present for centuries, ruminated on in songs, fairy tales, plays and dramas. We've seen it in Disney films such as 'Tangled', 'Cinderella', 'The Little Mermaid', and fairy tales like 'Hansel and Gretel' or 'Sleeping Beauty'. They consistently exhibit recurring patterns where the mother obstructs the child's desire to evolve into something beyond their current state. In his book '*Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*', Carl Jung posits that the 'terrible mother' may indicate "anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate"²¹. This 'terrible mother' appears as witches, evil stepmothers, wild beasts or a devouring and entwining animal in fairy tales, evident in the previously discussed 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Hansel and Gretel', but also *Coraline*. Selick focuses in on the Beldam's taste for bugs and insects found in Gaiman's book, and makes her increasingly resemble a spider in the film, specifically a black widow (of which an analogy can be made between black widows and domineering women)²² and even at one point has the Beldam attempt to capture Coraline inside a web. This appearance and shape shifting correlates with Jung's ideas of the devouring mother archetype.

Before reaching this point in the story where the Beldam becomes cruel and tyrannical, and resembles more of an insect than a human, it's crucial to take note of her progression and transformation leading to this state. Upon initially meeting Coraline, she was doting and attentive to every need, Coraline was fed her favourite foods, newly clothed with the Beldam's handmade garments and 'welcomed home'. It is only when Coraline begins to

²⁰ BigPhaze. "Oedipus Complex." *Medium*, 22 May 2023, <https://medium.com/@Bigphaze/oedipus-complex-99dd75facdb0>.

²¹ Dlih, Ouarda. "Symbolism of the Otherness in Contemporary British Children's Fantasy Fiction: The Case of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*" (2021). Print.

²² Kuersten, Erich. "Academic - Film: CinemArchetype #9: The Devouring Mother." *Academic - Film*, 27 Mar. 2012, <https://academic.blogspot.com/2012/03/cinemarchetype-9-devouring-mother.html>. Web.

disobey the Beldam, and reject her food, her games and her advances to make Coraline stay with her forever that the Beldam gradually transforms into a homicidal monster - the 'terrible mother'. It is during Coraline's first attempt at standing up to the Beldam that the first stage of her transformation takes place, as she visibly grows taller and frailer, eyes hollowing out, limbs and fingernails elongated. It is not only the shift in appearance but the shift in demeanour that make it unmistakable that the Beldam falls under the category of the devouring or terrible mother. And with this transformation, a true motive is revealed, "you cannot leave me". In fact, the Beldam screams this motive as Coraline leaves the Other World for the final time; "Don't leave me! Don't leave me! I'll die without you!"²³



(Fig1.3 *The Beldam begins to transform in a fit of rage. Her bones become more visible, limbs elongate.)*

²³ Selick, Henry. "Coraline.", performances by Dakota Fanning, Teri Hatcher, and John Hodgman, Laika Entertainment, 2009. Film.

When discussing the devouring mother archetype, clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson posits “The devouring mother archetype is one that can be described as a woman who selfishly loves her children, “protecting” them from the real world to such an extent that they become permanent infants— incompetent wards of the mother for life. She is only loving when her children do what she wants, and she is hateful, cruel, and even homicidal when they don’t.”²⁴ This can be applied to the case of the Beldam, even in her protection from the real world. She provides Coraline with an escape from the ‘truth’, that her real parents don’t love her. The Beldam reinforces this idea, trying to convince Coraline to stay, “Maybe they got bored with you and moved to France.” Her appeal and method of luring revolves around that of escape, leaving behind the hurt, isolation and boredom of the real world.²⁵ In doing so I’d argue this is her protection that she offers as a devouring mother, and subsequently she does achieve in having these children stay children forever, even if that means as ghosts. This goal is alluded to in Coraline’s conversation with the cat, during which it says; “She wants something to love, I think. Something that isn’t her. Or, maybe she’d just love something to eat.” Consumption and love are conjoined in *Coraline*, the Beldam wants children to love forever, children which will never leave her, although this ‘love’ is also suggested to be something she feeds off for her own survival.

The usage of the devouring mother archetype in *Coraline* further solidifies its position as a modern day fairy tale, one with an intimate relationship between food and betrayal, much like that of the previously mentioned ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and ‘Hansel and Gretel’. By adopting certain tropes while modifying others, *Coraline* presents a modern rendition of the

²⁴ johnsmith. “Jordan Peterson on The Devouring Mother Archetype.” Extrafilespace, 4 June 2020, <https://extrafilespace.wordpress.com/2020/06/04/jordan-peterson-on-the-devouring-mother-archetype/> Web.

²⁵ Dlih, Ouarda. "Symbolism of the Otherness in Contemporary British Children’s Fantasy Fiction: The Case of Neil Gaiman’s Coraline" (2021). Print.

age-old tale where food is used as a temptation.²⁶ It is clear that cannibalism in fairy tales transcends being a mere grotesque plot device; instead, it functions as a gateway into the collective psyche of societies, providing glimpses into human fears, desires, and relationships.²⁷ It is clear that the Beldam is a malevolent villain who uses food as a way to lure Coraline and attempt to convince her of her love for her, but how is this relationship that Coraline has with food and her parents, real and other, portrayed to the audience?

²⁶ Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

²⁷ Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2006. Print.

Chapter Two; 'Food in Coraline'

*"When a young child refuses food, or spits out something disliked, he or she is taking a first important step toward self-determination"*²⁸

- Leon Rappoport

Beyond its presence as a visual or sensory element, food serves as a significant thematic force in *Coraline*. Food in *Coraline* transcends its utilitarian use and emerges as a narrative device, and as Kara K. Keeling and Scott Pollard argue in *'The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline'*, food consistently appears at crucial points in both the plotline and Coraline's psychological narrative throughout the story.²⁹ It effectively portrays her feelings of boredom, longing and eventually fear, but also is successful in conveying Coraline's journey of self discovery through food. Acting as a tangible expression for her inner turmoil, the act of eating or rejecting food becomes a metaphor for her negotiation of her desires and fears. Throughout the story, as Coraline becomes increasingly independent and heroic, she is able to use food as a weapon instead of being controlled and manipulated by it through the Beldam.

²⁸ Rappoport, Leon. *How we eat: appetite, culture, and the psychology of food*. Ecw Press, 2010. Print.

²⁹ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.



(Fi.g2.1 *The Beldam has left Coraline an array of food to choose from)*

Food is also hugely symbolic in representing Coraline's relationship with the characters in the story, specifically her mothers, real and 'other'. Her neighbours Spink and Forcible are associated with century old taffy, and Bobinsky, also known as 'the crazy man upstairs', frequently orders smelly cheese, of which he feeds to his mice. Coraline is repulsed by both of these foods, but gladly eats what the mirrored version of her neighbours offer her in the Other World, signifying her dissatisfaction with the real world. Her relationship with food in regards to her mother and the Beldam are even more salient, as I'll be discussing in this chapter, unravelling the intricate layers of symbolism embedded within these culinary connections.

Mother and Other Mother; Motives and Manipulation

Coraline's real mother does not cook. This detail is somewhat varied in Neil Gaiman's novel, as in the source material Coraline's mother occasionally makes Coraline microwave or frozen food (which could arguably still be perceived as an inability to cook). Her Father does the cooking, usually conjuring up his own 'recipes' which Coraline detests; "Dad's planning something special (for dinner)" "Grossgusting!"

For Coraline, her meals at home are not simply an inconvenience to deal with, but it is a lens from which she sees how her parents love her, and how much they pay attention to her wants and tastes.³⁰ Coraline feels neglected by her parents, they are too busy with work and moving house to have any time to play with her or give her attention, and her efforts to engage with them are met with apathy, and an insistence that Coraline allows them to continue working. Coraline has to use persistence to get her parents to even look up from their screens, which notably they are in different rooms.³¹ The family is fractured and distanced from each other, and Coraline's dissatisfaction and insecurity manifests in their turbulent mealtimes.

The visual elements of Henry Selick's film portray Coraline's feelings effectively. As viewers we share a revulsion with Coraline when her food is plated with a slimy looking vegetable bake. It has a viscous texture, and is animated to appear to slightly bounce as it is put on her

³⁰ Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

³¹ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

plate. The set of the kitchen is purposefully made unappealing, a cold green tint coming from the kitchen light, lighting up a small table. They eat in the kitchen, not the dining room, and sit on fold-out chairs. There are stains on the surrounding kitchen cupboards, food and dirty dishes on the counter-tops, and a lonely cup sitting in the dish rack.³² The atmosphere is cold and uninviting, and there is a clear lack of unity. The kitchen does not feel homely or lived-in, probably due to the family having just moved in, we can see cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other on the right side of the screen. It results in an absence of belonging, resembling more of a motel ambience than a family kitchen, a room supposedly the 'heart' of the modern day home.³³



(Fi.g2.2 “It looks more like slime to me” - Coraline is disgusted by her fathers cooking)

³² Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

³³ Parr, Joy. “Introduction: Modern Kitchen, Good Home, Strong Nation.” *Technology and Culture*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2002, pp. 657–67. Print.

Coraline's parents in the film are both gardeners, which I believe is symbolic in regards to their relationship with Coraline. They write about plants for a catalogue, and even move across the country into a house more suited for gardening, yet they do not plant anything. Seeds remain in their packets on the kitchen windowsill, and gardening appears to be more of a burden than a vocation.³⁴ This can be seen as an analogy for Coraline's lack of nourishment from her mother, and how Coraline is generally regarded as a burden. Time, attention, and nourishment is needed for a relationship and bond to grow between Coraline and her mother, just as it is needed in order for a plant or garden to flourish. Her mother's inability to cook symbolises this lack of nourishment within their relationship. Coraline craves the conventional domestic ideals of a mother's cooking and a warm, traditional family-oriented dinner time.³⁵ Nothing grows in Coraline's home, in regards to home produce but also the family's relationship with each other, and more importantly - Coraline.

The Beldam is greatly aware of this dynamic and Coraline's discontent, through the 'little doll' she makes in order to spy on her. The difference in mealtimes in the Beldam's house is incredibly drastic. They are feasts, and Coraline is the celebration. Coraline sits at the head of the table in a warmly lit dining room, a light atmosphere present as her 'other' parents joke and laugh with each other. They eat from fancier glasses, decorated plates, and tablecloths. The food is delicious, home cooked by the Beldam, with golden roasted chicken, potatoes and gravy, corn on the cob, broccoli, steamed pears and sweet peas. The Beldam notably asks Coraline what she would like to drink, and even provides her with options of flavours to choose from. She is acutely aware of Coraline's tastes and cravings, literally and

³⁴ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

³⁵ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

figuratively.³⁶ She provides Coraline with the traditional family meal, a secure and bonded family dynamic where Coraline is the focus and centre of which it orbits around. She is made to feel like she belongs, dessert being a cake with 'Welcome Home' iced onto it. Seemingly the perfect world with perfect versions of her real parents, the sinister motive behind the Beldam's feasts is soon revealed.

The Beldam assures that delicious food is an element of every aspect of the 'Other World', in an attempt to convince Coraline to stay forever. Mr. Bobinsky in this world does not reek of cheese, but instead he has buttered popcorn and cotton candy as a part of his mouse circus showing. The orchard near her home is rich with fruit in the Other World, buckets filled to the brim with ripe apples. The Beldam wants this world to contrast with Coraline's reality. Things grow here, her neighbours aren't disgusting and don't get her name wrong, instead they perform for her and are incredibly interesting. The Beldam provides Coraline with a maternal love that she felt she was missing, and fulfils her fantasy of a traditional American family gathered together around a dining table.³⁷ This world, to put it simply, revolves around her. This is the Beldam's primary motive, and hopes to achieve her goal of luring Coraline and convincing her to stay forever, she attempts to offer Coraline everything she could possibly want. This is all in a greater effort to manipulate her into saying yes to having buttons sewn into her eyes, until at which point the Beldam seemingly will be able to feast on Coraline.

Cynthia Baron discusses the importance of food in cinema as an integral part of a film's narrative in *"Dinner and a Movie: Analyzing Food and Film"* (2006). Interestingly, she points

³⁶ Dlih, Ouarda. "Symbolism of the Otherness in Contemporary British Children's Fantasy Fiction: The Case of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*" (2021). Print.

³⁷ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in *Coraline*." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

out that scenes involving food (especially about how and with whom characters eat) can be especially useful in offering valuable insights into the power dynamics between characters.³⁸ She discussed the importance of lighting, audio and camera movements in portraying these dynamics, and how they might affect viewers' perception of characters' relationships. This lens can be applied when viewing Coraline's mealtimes with her real mother and the Beldam. Dinnertime in her real home switches between a few stationary angles, the only audio being the dialogue and the unpleasant 'wet' sound of her food being plated by her father. During the Beldam's feast however, there is a playful background melody, the camera tracks the gravy train as it circles its way around the table towards Coraline, and food in the Beldam's world is steaming and glistening, and is purposefully appetising. Coraline's reception to the Beldam's food, and the sheer mastery and quantity of it, convey to viewers the power she has over Coraline.

As cracks begin to form in the facade and tensions arise in the Other World, food that is offered to Coraline changes. The Beldam offers her live beetles, as if they were a traditional snack. They are wriggling as the Beldam takes a bite of one, a yellow substance oozing from it as she does. Coraline is visibly disgusted, and as an audience we begin to identify her with the beetle in this scene. The scene is framed to position Coraline within the space occupied by the beetle, pinched between the Beldam's fingers. The unsettling imagery persists until the moment the beetle is directed towards Coraline's mother's gaping mouth, poised to take a bite. It is here Coraline can be identified with the live bugs, trapped and looking for an escape from their fate of being consumed by the Beldam.³⁹ Since it is typically considered taboo to eat live insects in the Western world, the element of bugs being eaten by the

³⁸ Baron, Cynthia. "Dinner and a Movie: Analyzing Food and Film" *Food, Culture & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, Mar. 2006, pp. 93–117. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.2752/155280106778055190>. Print.

³⁹ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

Beldam creates a disturbing and unsettling feeling around her, one that is less human. This change in demeanour also further demonstrates my previous point that the Beldam is a devouring mother, as with Coraline's lack of compliance and growing sense of agency, she becomes a less benevolent and loving and more cruel and cold. Here she begins her transition into a monster, one that doesn't in fact consume the traditional homely foods she was using to lure and manipulate Coraline.



(Fi.g2.3 *The Beldam bites into a beetle as Coraline watches on in disgust.*)

Food and Personal Autonomy

From the very beginning of the film, Coraline is bored and restless, amidst her summer break from school and having just moved to a new house in a remote area. Karen Coats touches upon boredom in *Between Horror, Humour, and Hope: Neil Gaiman and the Psychic Work of the Gothic*, saying “When a child develops a capacity to be bored, it is a signal that he or she is in a transitional state, a state where he or she is developing a separate sense of self, a need to assert his or her desires over and against the desires of the mother” —and the father, too, we would argue.”⁴⁰ As a tween, Coraline is transitioning away from childhood, and has a growing interest in forging a personal identity and making decisions for herself. She is frustrated with her parents who seemingly ignore her tastes and interests, and her refusal to eat her parents cooking is her first act of establishing a greater sense of agency within the story.⁴¹

It has been established that the Beldam uses food as a weapon against Coraline, a way in which to lure her into her trap. Once her machinations reveal themselves to Coraline, in an act of defiance, she does not continue to eat the Beldam’s food. This is an incredibly salient detail to the film, as it tells the audience that Coraline has become aware of the power dynamic and that continuing to eat the Beldam’s food would be an acceptance and submission to her power.⁴² Thus, she begins to rebel against it, and fight for her personal autonomy. She resists the Beldam’s omelette, bacon and hot chocolate, something the

⁴⁰ Coats, Karen. “Between horror, humour, and hope: Neil Gaiman and the psychic work of the Gothic.” *The Gothic in Children’s Literature*. Routledge, 2013. 77-92.

⁴¹ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. “The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline.” *Children’s Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

⁴² Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children’s Literature*. Print.

Beldam prepares immediately upon Coraline's return as an attempt to continue tempting her.⁴³ This can be viewed as an act of desperation, or an attempt to 'backpedal'. This meal is the Beldam's final attempt at using delicious food to tempt Coraline, but the damage has already been done. Her previous outburst at Coraline's rejection of having buttons sewn in her eyes revealed her true motives, allowing Coraline to see the Other World for what it really is; a trap. The Beldam cannot afford to allow her to escape however, as Mary Stephens explains in *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*, the Beldam feeds off the love and souls of children in order to nourish herself. Without Coraline, she will starve and die.⁴⁴

In *The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline*, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard discuss the Beldam's infantilization of Coraline, a further attempt to have power over her and her autonomy, to keep her dependent forever. This aligns with the suggestion that the Beldam embodies the archetype of the devouring mother, and has a parasitic relationship with Coraline, one that requires power and control over her. As her desperation grows, so does her propensity for violence, she cannot afford to have Coraline leave, she is compelled to feed. Keeling and Pollard argue that Coraline's resistance to this infantilization is what makes her equal to the Beldam, and have the ability to fight back and reclaim her identity and soul.⁴⁵ She is able to combat the Beldam even when her increased desperation adds to the peril of the situation, and the Beldam attempts to sabotage her search for the ghost children, eventually even attempting to capture Coraline in a physical web. The latter detail specifically shows viewers the dramatic shift in the Beldam's role that Keeling and Pollard

⁴³ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

⁴⁴ Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

⁴⁵ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

emphasise; she is no longer a food preparer, but now a consumer, with Coraline as her potential meal.⁴⁶

Before returning to the Other World to save her parents and the ghost children, Coraline visits Spink and Forcible. They present her with a stone made from century old taffy, something that becomes a crucial factor in Coraline's success later on. Mihaela Mihailova mentions this particular stone in *Coraline: a closer look at Studio LAIKA's stop-motion witchcraft*, explaining that looking through the stone does not present an authentic depiction of the Other World, enabling Coraline to find the ghost children's eyes which glow in the monochrome filter.⁴⁷ The Other World appears to look more like a sketch or unfinished drawing, a visual technique that highlights the fickleness of this place, its construction incomplete when viewed through a different lens. Mihaela also delves into the historical context of the stone, traditionally known as the 'hag stone', explaining through A. W. Buckland's writing for *The Antiquary: A Magazine Devoted to the Study of the Past*, that hag stones 'are used for driving away hags or witches, especially the nightmare'.⁴⁸ The Beldam is the witch in this story, and the Other World is Coraline's nightmare. Coraline uses food to fight for her freedom, and more importantly - food from the real world. Food given to her by the neighbours she once resented and found boring and disgusting. Food is what was used to lure Coraline into the danger of Beldam, but food is what she uses to combat it.

⁴⁶ Keeling, Kara K., and Scott Pollard. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in Coraline." *Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–27. *Project MUSE*. Print.

⁴⁷ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

⁴⁸ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.



(Fi.g2.4 *Spink and Forcible give Coraline a stone they have created from taffy.*)

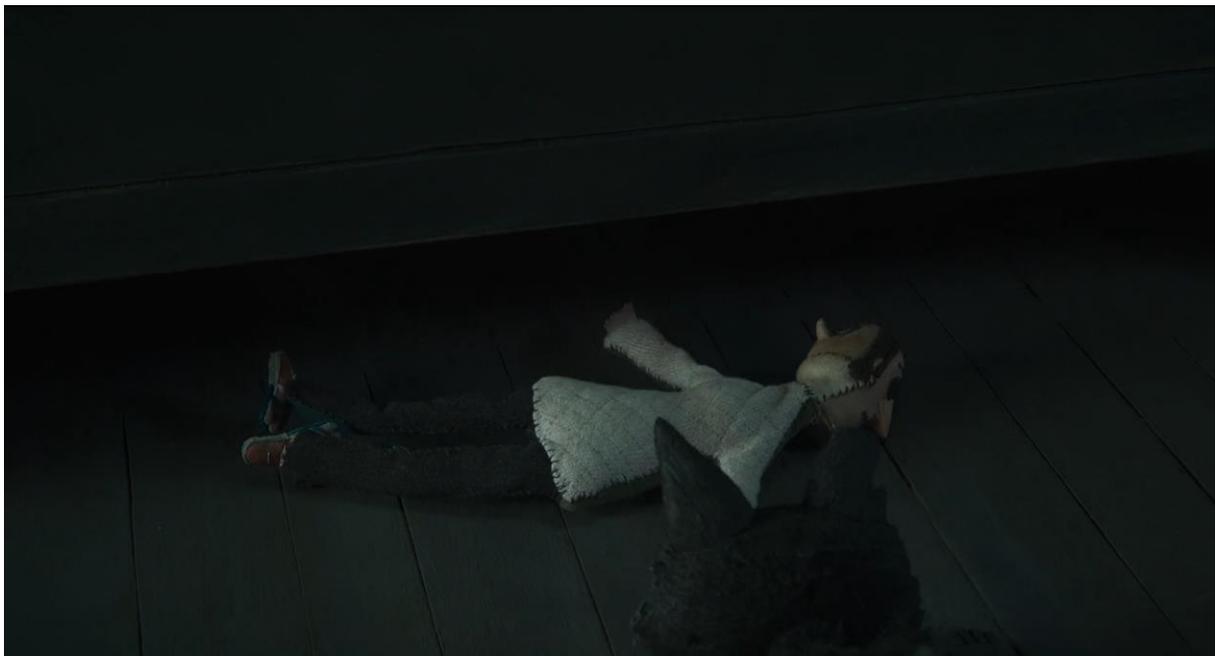
Coraline's fight is not only for her parents and the ghost children, but also for her soul. Eyes are commonly referred to as the 'window to the soul', which in this case would explain why the Beldam uses them as a way to fully control and manipulate her victims. In order for The Beldam to obtain the souls of children, they also must give up their eyes, (an eye for an 'I', as David Rudd notes in *An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and Questions of Identity*.)⁴⁹ Stephens argues that in handing over her eyes, Coraline would be attaching her entire self, soul and personal identity to the Beldam for all of eternity.⁵⁰ This detail also suggests that the Beldam herself does not possess a soul, having buttons instead of eyes, and no clear identity as she shapeshifts and morphs into different creatures. It is notable that Coraline's developing self-confidence and autonomy is shown in her willingness to put her soul on the line to save her parents and the ghost children. Her belief in herself, accompanied with food

⁴⁹ Rudd, David. "An eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and Questions of Identity." *Children's Literature in Education* 39 (2008): 159-168. Print

⁵⁰ Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

from the real world, are what allow her to make a deal with the Beldam during their 'game'. "If I lose, I'll stay here forever and let you love me...and I'll let you sew buttons into my eyes".

Had Coraline remained insecure in regard to her relationship with her parents, and her loneliness, isolation and boredom within the real world, I would argue she would have lost this final 'game' with the Beldam. It's important to acknowledge the cat's role in helping Coraline's confidence, without showing her the fogged mirror or the doll of her parents, Coraline may have been inclined to believe the Beldam's insistence that her real parents were bored of her and had abandoned her. It is the cat who is also the reason Coraline is able to find the last ghost eye, as her hag stone is captured by the Beldam. As Coraline accepts help from the real world, and places more trust in it, her sense of belonging and identity grows. As Keeling and Pollard note, it is her confidence and self-determination that allow Coraline to resist being infantilized, and battle for her personal autonomy and agency.



(**Fi.g2.5** *The cat pulls the doll from under the bed, showing Coraline that they were captured by the Beldam*)

In Gaiman's novel, Stephens draws attention to the fact that Coraline has more agency and independence as a character, and that Selicks addition of characters such as Wybie take the focus away from Coraline's growth and portray her to be more of a 'damsel in distress'⁵¹ than a self-determined heroine capable of outwitting the Beldam on her own. In the climax of the film, it is Wybie who saves Coraline from being dragged into the well by the Beldam's hand, as opposed to Gaiman's version which has Coraline lure the hand into the well with the illusion of a doll's picnic, oblivious to being followed at all. Notably the novel's defeat of the Beldam directly involves food, tying together the theme of food and personal autonomy, using the Beldam's own weapon against her. This element is lost in the climax of the film, and Stephen's posits that the focal point of the story shifts from Coraline's wants, growth and character development to the Beldam's motives, hunger and machinations.⁵² Hunger, consumption and digestion become the focal point in the film, expressed visually through the house primarily, known as the Pink Palace.

⁵¹ Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

⁵² Stephens, Mary A. *Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature*. Print.

Chapter Three: The Pink Palace; A Symbolic Digestive System

"Think of somebody walking around the world. You start out walking away from something and end up coming back to it." "Small world," said Coraline. "It's big enough for her," said the cat. "spiders' webs only have to be large enough to catch flies."

- Neil Gaiman⁵³

Digestion and Consumption are clearly integral parts of *Coraline*, in her relationship with herself but also other characters, most notably the Beldam. It is also a salient part of her environment, the setting in which her relationship with the Beldam takes place - The Pink Palace. The Pink Palace is a dilapidated mansion, sectioned off into separate apartments, of which Coraline's neighbours' dwell, while also serving as the Beldam's hunting grounds, enticing and devouring any child who takes up residence within its confines. The name of the mansion possibly correlates with the phrase 'my body is a temple', a phrase coming from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. 'Body' in this case corresponds with 'Pink', which can indicate flesh, and 'temple' corresponds with 'palace', both structures typically associated with power, authority, and wealth.

The changes made to the Pink Palace in the Other World have been briefly touched upon in relation to their success in luring Coraline and making her feel a sense of belonging and warmth when she is with the other parents, such as the lighter mealtime atmosphere upon

⁵³ Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Illustrated by Dave McKean, HarperCollins, 2002. Print

Coraline's first visit. The Beldam clearly utilises and changes the Other World to her advantage, but what if she *is* the other world, embodying the Pink Palace and the grounds surrounding it? Perhaps by tasting the food of the Beldam, Coraline is consuming her, much like Little Red Riding Hood consumed her grandmother. In this act, Coraline could be undergoing a similar metaphorical loss of autonomy and innocence, marking a symbolic betrayal facilitated through the medium of food.

But how can the Pink Palace be seen as a structure of the Beldam's own autonomy, her own digestive system of which she feeds on living children in order to survive? How does lighting, set and prop design portray this symbolism to an audience?

A Covert Structure of Digestion within the 'Other World'

To discuss the Pink Palace in relation to being a structure of digestion, we first need to look at the tunnel that Coraline crawls through to access the Other World. There have been numerous suggestions as to what this tunnel could symbolise, Karlie Herndon positing that it is a symbolic birth canal in *Food and Power in Roald Dahl's James and the Giant Peach and Neil Gaiman's Coraline*,⁵⁴ Ann Owen suggests that the tunnel is an intestine in *A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*,⁵⁵ and Sue Matheson describes the tunnel as

⁵⁴ Herndon, Karlie E. *FOOD AND POWER IN ROALD DAHL'S JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH AND NEIL GAIMAN'S CORALINE*. Print.

⁵⁵ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

resembling a 'monstrous umbilical cord' in *Abjection, the Uncanny and the Victorian feminine in Henry Selick's Coraline (2009)*⁵⁶ Notably, in the novel by Neil Gaiman, there is a suggestion that the corridor is the inside of a mouth; 'she put out her hand for the wall once more. This time what she touched felt hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody's mouth, and she pulled it back with a small wail'⁵⁷



(Fi.g3.1 *Coraline crawls through the tunnel into the Other World.*)

Using the source material of the novel as an indicator of this tunnel's symbolism, I would argue that the tunnel can be seen as a symbolic oesophagus, the passageway between the mouth and the stomach in the human digestive system. In Henry Selick's film, the tunnel extends itself, multicoloured and organic with its edges glistening slightly. It is also soft,

⁵⁶ Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. *Horror Comes Home: Essays on Hauntings, Possessions and Other Domestic Terrors in Cinema*. McFarland, 2019. Print.

⁵⁷ Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Illustrated by Dave McKean, HarperCollins, 2002. Print

gently giving way to Coraline's weight as she passes through. Visually and textually, it possesses similarities to an oesophagus, but where it leads Coraline may even be more crucial in this analysis. Exiting the passage, Coraline is led to the kitchen of the Beldam, which can be interpreted as the stomach. Similarly, to Ann Owen's discussion that Coraline's entrance to the kitchen as the first room in the Pink Palace could suggest a 'return-to-the-womb' fantasy⁵⁸ for Coraline through its warmth and welcoming atmosphere, I would argue that this atmosphere can be suggestive that this room is symbolic for the stomach. Food, ingredients, and utensils are found on the countertops and dried flowers/herbs are hung over the windows where mere seed packets were placed in the real-world kitchen. The room is suggestive of cooking, flavour, nourishment, the warm yellow lighting is as appealing as it is appetising.

The yellow wallpaper may also be symbolic for bile, a digestive fluid released into the stomach to aid digestion. In terms of digestion and the 'breaking down' of food, it is notable that Coraline is offered buttons in exchange for her to remain in the Other World forever in the two household rooms associating with food - the kitchen and the dining room. In order for the Beldam to begin to feed on Coraline, she must break her down as food would in the stomach and convince her to stay forever. The Beldam alludes to her intentions by saying; 'They say even the proudest spirit can be broken with love'. Love in this case equates to food, something that can be compared to bile in this scenario, as they share an intention to break down and digest something. The Beldam yearns to begin digesting Coraline for survival, and in the beginning, she is successful, as Coraline favours the Other World and is enthralled by the food, fun and games there is there, as well as a more maternal relationship with her 'Other Mother'. Subsequently, I would argue that the process of digesting Coraline

⁵⁸ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

began the moment she crawled through the little door. In offering Coraline the button eyes, the Beldam is attempting to reach the next stage of digestion, of which it is not possible for Coraline to escape.



(Fi.g3.2 *Coraline sees the Beldam for the first time in the kitchen of the Other World.*)

It is notable in this symbolism to identify the fact that although Coraline has entered the stomach, there is still the possibility of escape through regurgitation, in this case being an exit through the tunnel she crawled through. I believe this symbolic regurgitation, or rather Coraline's wish to be regurgitated, is portrayed effectively through the shift in the use and depiction of food in the final act of the film. Sue Matheson mentions that elements like the Zanzibar beetles offered to Coraline appeal to her stomach,⁵⁹ and her disgust makes her

⁵⁹ Matheson, Sue., Miller, Cynthia J., and A. Bowdoin Van Riper. *Horror Comes Home: Essays on Hauntings, Possessions and Other Domestic Terrors in Cinema*. McFarland, 2019. Print.

fearful, urging her to attempt to leave immediately. She becomes disgusted and repulsed by the food of the Other World instead of being captivated and eager for it. Spink and Forcible become gruesomely entwined in a giant sweet wrapper⁶⁰, the circus rats taunt Coraline by throwing candy floss at her, rolling away with her hag stone on a cheese wheel, and the traditional house decor begins to be replaced with anthropomorphic insect furniture which scuttle around independently. Each negative interaction with food creates a nauseating sensation, and for Coraline - a desire to be regurgitated.

The Beldam's Starvation

Ouarda Dlih refers to the Beldam as 'the creator, ruler, and manipulator of the Other World and its inhabitants',⁶¹ the Other World being something merely built and controlled by her as opposed to being a part of her autonomy. It is clear that everything in this world was tailored carefully for Coraline, designed to attend to every need, want and desire, a metaphorical (and then eventually literal) spider's web of which to capture her and feed on her. However, given the evidence of a symbiotic relationship between the Other World and the Beldam, I would argue they are a single entity. The Other World ceases to exist without the Beldam's creation and constant transformation of it, yet she herself will die without the utilisation of the Other World as a trap. The Other World could be perceived simply as this web or device designed to ensnare prey, however, as the Other World deteriorates and takes on an increasingly abject nature in response to the Beldam's growing aggravation, it implies a

⁶⁰ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

⁶¹ Dlih, Ouarda. "Symbolism of the Otherness in Contemporary British Children's Fantasy Fiction: The Case of Neil Gaiman's Coraline" (2021). Print.

connection suggesting that they are, in fact, conjoined—a singular organism. As the Beldam dies, so does the Other World.



(Fig.3.3 *The Other World begins to deteriorate as Coraline finds all the eyes of the ghost children. Wallpaper peels from the walls.)*

The Pink Palace being a symbol for the Beldam's digestive system can be identified through this - the Beldam's starvation. As Coraline resists and further rebels against her, her appearance gradually morphs into an insect-like creature, while still retaining human-like features, although notably all of which are skeletal. Her ribcage protrudes from her arachnid-shaped dress in sharp spikes. Her face is hollowed out, fragmented, and splitting apart. She no longer has flesh, and her human legs have been replaced with three spindly grasshopper legs. She is depleting, dying, malnourished and starving. Her declining state can be

interpreted as a lack of energy to maintain the facade, the mask of a replicated world- but better.

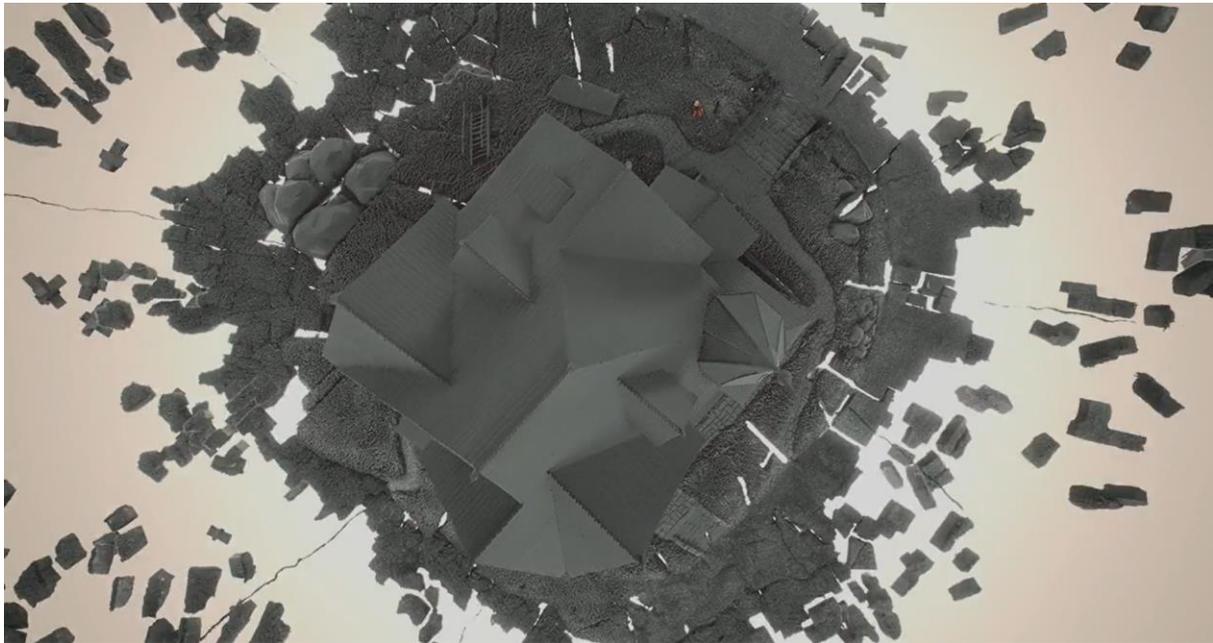


(Fi.g3.4 *The Beldam withers and wastes away with the Pink Palace as Coraline resists being eaten)*

The Beldam's starvation is alluded to in the film, we are made aware that Wybie's Grandmother refused to let the Pink Palace to anyone who had children after the 'disappearance' of her twin sister when she was a child. It is likely that this disrupted the feeding patterns of the Beldam, who we know must feed on children for her survival.⁶² The Beldam's urgency is undeniable as she screams; 'Don't leave me, don't leave me, I'll die.' She cannot afford to lose out on Coraline as her next meal. She is dying and losing her strength, her own body and the Other World stripping itself down to its bare bones in order to

⁶²Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

retain as much energy as possible. Dan Torre references this degradation and its relationship to the Beldam and her power in *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*, saying 'notably, the overall edifice of the Other World also degrades over time (signifying the Other Mother's lessening influence).'⁶³



(Fi.g3.5 *The Other World disintegrates before Coraline's eyes, grey and colourless.*)

A sequence in the film shows the outside of the Pink Palace crumbling and shredding apart, trees uprooted, pavements crumbling away, the sky disintegrating. Everything turns grey and lifeless, losing colour. Once inside, the wallpaper begins to peel, as if the house itself is rotting. This destruction of the Pink Palace and the grounds surrounding it suggest that it is not simply something that the Beldam can inhabit and manipulate, but that they are inherently connected. The rotting and deterioration of the inside of the house can be

⁶³ Mihailova, Mihaela, editor. *Coraline: A Closer Look at Studio LAIKA's Stop-Motion Witchcraft*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Print.

interpreted as the Beldam's organs beginning to fail her, the only light source in the house coming from the room in which the little door resides. The Beldam has confined herself there in order to protect it, and prevent Coraline, her food source, from leaving. In relation to love and food being conjoined for the Beldam, and argument could be made that is it Coraline's love which sustains her. This perspective would provide a rationale for the Beldam's deterioration, coinciding with Coraline's diminishing trust, suggesting that the withdrawal of love directly impacts the Beldam's well-being. This relates back to the idea of the devouring mother archetype, one which requires offspring to remain dependable and infantilized forever.

Conclusion:

This thesis explored the utilisation of food, fear, and fairy tales in developing the themes of consumption and personal identity within *Coraline* (2009), and it is clear that these themes extend beyond the scope of this examination. From identifying Coraline as a modern-day fairy tale in its themes and motifs, weighted also in consumption and personal identity, a groundwork was established in identifying the relationship between food and characters in the film- and the purpose of food from both the characters perspective and the filmmaker's perspective. Through the visual medium of storytelling that is stop-motion animation, the film was able to appeal directly to the senses and appetite of the audience through food and its colours, textures, viscosity, and presentation. For example, food shown within Coraline's family mealtime and her first meal in the 'Other World' effectively convey her inner turmoil and a desire for traditional family values, and for her needs and tastes to be attended to, something she lacks regarding her relationship with her real mother.

The narrative depth food provided within the story and structure of the film was explored, largely through a psychological lens in terms of the Beldam's maternal relationship with Coraline, one conjoined with a desire to consume her. The symbolism food had within the story in conveying the relationship between these characters was incredibly salient, from the meals the Beldam prepared for Coraline and their sinister motivations, to the eventual symbolism of Coraline as the potential meal, the prey, the Beldam's next feed. The layers of consumption within the film deepened still with the consumption of the Beldam's food being symbolic for Coraline feeding off the Beldam herself, losing autonomy and agency as she commits a betrayal of her usual way of life, culture, and morals, eating the symbolic flesh of another 'human'. Such symbolism deepens the understanding of power and betrayal within the story, depicted through the utilisation of food, aided visually through the medium of stop-

motion animation, and providing a new scope of vision to the 2002 novel. Visually, food provided an insight into the tastes and desires of both Coraline and the Beldam respectively, and revealed what it is these characters truly crave. For Coraline, among other things this craving is mainly a traditional, stable, and loving relationship with her parents, particularly her mother. For the Beldam, she desires something to love, something that won't leave her, as well as something to feed on and nourish herself.

This thesis argued the unification of both the Other World and the Beldam, proposing that they are conjoined into a single organism, one which cannot function without feeding approximately once every 50 years or so. Certain elements of the film portray this unification such as the coinciding of the deterioration of the Other World and the Beldam, withering and dying together. The ease of which the Beldam can manipulate and distort the Other World signifies she is a multi-faceted character, a creature whose autonomy extends beyond the physical mass of her body – something that in itself is ever shifting and morphing. Such an analysis aids the argument proposed in this thesis that consumption and personal autonomy are integral themes within *Coraline*, themes which portray the innermost desires and turmoil of the characters within the story, as well as their relationships with one another.

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