

NEIL GAIMAN'S 'NEW MOTHER' 1882–2002: HOW *CORALINE* 'TRANSLATES' VICTORIAN FANTASY

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Coraline, written in 2002 by Neil Gaiman, is the story of a pre-adolescent teen who discovers a portal to another reality inside her family's new flat. Coraline finds a locked door, on the other side of which is a brick wall, but, during the night, Coraline unlocks the door to find a passage to another flat in another house just like her own, yet not like her own. At first, the other apartment seems much better: the food is better, the toys more magical, and there are two parents who indulge Coraline's every whim and fancy. However, it soon becomes apparent that the 'other mother' wants Coraline to stay permanently, and the heroine is caught up in a deadly drama to save both herself and her real parents.

Gothic, subversive, macabre and intertextual, it seems at first glance that Gaiman's tale would have very little in common with a now-forgotten Victorian cautionary tale written 120 years earlier. Yet, in interviews with the Canadian Press, Neil Gaiman admits that Lucy Lane Clifford's 1882 story 'The New Mother' was the primary influence behind *Coraline*. The story tells of two perfect children and their angelic mother, living in a cottage in the woods. One day the girls meet a strange temptress — a girl from the fair — who says she will show them the miniature dancing couple who live inside her pear-drum and will tell them a great secret, if they prove they can be naughty enough. Their naughty antics drive their poor mother to distraction, and she ends up warning them that — if they continue — she will leave them forever a send a new mother in her place. It is clearly this new mother who has captured Gaiman's imagination, and he talks animatedly about the image of the 'sunlight glittering off the glass eyes of their new mother and...the swish, swish, swish of her wooden tail. And that's where the story ends' (Lackner).

Gaiman claims that the he finds the story 'haunting like a nightmare is haunting' (Ouzounian). The key symbol of the monstrous other mother, with her glass eyes, is translated in *Coraline* into the image of the other mother whose eyes are replaced with black buttons. Gaiman's 'translation' of 'The New Mother' clearly owes a debt to Freud's essay 'The Uncanny', using many other uncanny motifs, a fact which numerous critics have already explored, notably Richard Gooding and

David Rudd.¹ What has not been considered is the debt that *Coraline* owes to ‘The New Mother’, a story which has received very little critical attention in itself. Comparing Clifford’s story against Gaiman’s uncovers a series of startling similarities and inversions. Indeed, I will argue that *Coraline* — with its playful and deliberate use of Freud — is *canny* where ‘The New Mother’, which begins as a simple morality tale, becomes truly *uncanny*.

‘The New Mother’ contains at its heart the image of the boundary: the cottage in which the young girls live with their mother sits on the edge of the woods, and the wood sits between the village and the ocean. And, the young girls meet their fairground temptress whilst crossing the bridge that lies on the boundary between the village and the woods (Clifford 299). Boundaries, then, between the secure social space, and the murky wilderness beyond, becomes a focal point for the narrative. Just as in *Coraline*, at the edge of this text is a strange, dissolving mist, which swallows reality. In *Coraline*, the house and garden fade away, until nothing is left except a ‘pale nothingness’, ‘a blank sheet of paper’ as though Coraline is ‘walking into nothing’ (Gaiman 87). In ‘The New Mother’ all the characters, except for the two girls themselves, recede into the mist at the end of the story, going ‘farther and farther away, till they were separate things no more, till they were just a confused mass of faded colour, till they were a dark misty object that nothing could define’ (Clifford 313–34).

In examining these boundary spaces, it seems important to consider Lacan’s theory of the Real and the Symbolic. By the end of ‘The New Mother’, the Real — the black hole of chaos which lies behind the reality we construct — and the Symbolic — reality, language, social order — mingle and merge. Indeed, in this story symbolic reality is always something of a flimsy creation, as the opening places us in an unnamed, geographically and historically non-specific village, surrounded by a woodland whose boundary seems to stretch throughout the pages of the story, with only a distant ocean beyond. By contrast, in its use of a portal narrative, *Coraline* manages to retain a fixed boundary between the Real and the Symbolic. By taking us through this portal, the narrative points to the fragile nature of Symbolic reality, but keeps the chaos that threatens it behind a little door which can be locked with a key. Though ‘The New Mother’ opens with a boundary — the bridge — it cannot seem to prevent the boundary between Real and Symbolic collapsing, leaving us at the end, as the two girls are, trapped in the wilderness of the forest forever.

In addition to their concern with the boundary between the Real and the Symbolic, both texts allow for the transformation from ‘heimlich’ to

‘unheimlich’: though in one text this transformation is explicit, and the other it seems unconscious. In *Coraline*, Gaiman’s use of the uncanny is deliberate:

Gaiman has given us quite an overt fictional representation of the Freudian uncanny — not merely by invoking the motifs that Freud enumerates in his essay, but by animating the very etymology of the German term, das Unheimlich: heimlich, or homely, with its root in Heim and its mirror counterpart, the unheimlich. (Rudd 161)

This can be seen in Coraline’s *canny* observation that ‘there’s something very familiar about’ the other flat:

The carpet beneath her feet was the same carpet they had in their flat. The wallpaper was the same wallpaper they had. The picture hanging in the hall was the same they had hanging in their hallway at home. She knew where she was: she was in her own home. She hadn’t left. (Gaiman 37)

The repetitive structure of these observations further link them to Freud’s uncanny, and the sense of walking away from something and returning to the very place you started, likewise. The realisation that the picture isn’t exactly the same — that there is ‘something peculiar’ now about the eyes of the boy in the painting — shows Gaiman’s *canny* use of the *unheimlich* by drawing our attention to the subtly-altered familiar.

There is no ‘other’ house, however, in ‘The New Mother’, which can become *unheimlich* whilst preserving the sanctity of the original. The *unheimlich* transformation of the home happens unconsciously in the text, which seeks to represent a fairytale loving family home, but cannot avoid the *unheimlich* kernel of that very home. To begin with, the text tells us that ‘the mother and Blue-Eyes and the Turkey and the baby all lived in a lonely cottage on the edge of the forest. The forest was so near that the garden at the back seemed a part of it’ and the fir trees so close that ‘their tangled shadows were all over the white-washed walls’ (Clifford 297). Already, the perfect family home is encroached upon by the threatening shadows of the forest, lending an uneasy undertone to the subsequent description of genteel domestic bliss:

The cottage room was so cosy: the walls were as white as snow inside as well as out, and against them hung the cake tin and the baking dish, and the lid of a large saucepan that had been worn out as long as the children could remember, and the fish slice, all polished and shining bright as silver...there was a cupboard hung up high against the wall, in which the mother kept all manner of little surprises. The children often wondered how the things that came out of that cupboard had got into it, for they seldom saw them put there. (Clifford 298)

The familiar objects, which construct the image of the mother as angel-in-the-home, become *unheimlich* again in the latter part of the description with its odd inclusion of the cupboard of secret things. In her study of the *carnavalesque* in 'The New Mother', Anna Krugovoy Silver notes the similarity between this cupboard and the secret compartment in the fairground girl's pear-drum, offering this as evidence that the girl, a subversive representation of corrupt and sexualised motherhood, is the double of the mother, the secret compartments symbols of their sexuality (735). For Freud, it is this sexuality that returns in the form of the uncanny, thus the home which the text strives to retain as innocent and pure, contains within it the very thing which it wants to remain hidden, what it doesn't want to come to light: the angel-in-the-home's sexuality.

The transformation of the children's home is much more disturbing than that found in *Coraline*. The children's naughtiness renders it a 'wreck': 'The fire was out, and the water was still among the cinders; the baking dish and cake tin, the fish-slice and the saucepan lid...were all pulled down from the nails on which they had hung so long, and were lying on the floor. And there was the clock all broken and spoilt...' (Clifford 314). And, despite the children's attempts to tidy up and restore their cottage to its former homeliness, their mother does not return. Instead, the new mother comes and breaks down the door of the cottage, 'with a fearful blow', leaving the 'little painted door...cracked and splintered'. The last image of the house shows it 'when the darkness has fallen' all 'shut-up', the only inhabitant now, the lifeless new mother. The once warm and cosy cottage is now a broken and empty tomb.

Both these stories exemplify the Lacanian schema of subjective development: the subject is enamoured with the fantasy image of the mother-child dyad and wants to return to this state, but cannot avoid the

fact that the mother has always already abandoned him; he then begins to imagine the mother as a phallic mother, before she is finally replaced by the law of the father, upon the child's entry to the Symbolic order. Lacan tells us that the child subject always seeks to know what it is that the other wants, or, more accurately, what the mother wants:

The answer the child comes up with is that what the mother desires is the imaginary phallus. The child then seeks to satisfy the mother's desire by identifying with the imaginary phallus (or by identifying with the phallic mother, the mother imagined as possessing the phallus). (Evans 121)

In *Coraline* the portal allows the child access to this other desire, the lost phallus, the other mother, a phallic mother. This reading is signalled overtly by the text, with its explicit descriptions of the castrated hand of the other mother which scurries along the floor, with its 'long white fingers', and infiltrates the real world (Gaiman 75). This phallic symbol is linked to Freud's uncanny image of the female genitalia, the *vagina dentata*. Rudd reminds us that in this schema female genitalia are *unheimlich*, for once they were *heimlich* to us all, adding also that the 'medusa' snake-like appearance of the other mother's hair adds to the phallic connotations (162). Moreover, the outcome of the narrative is structured around Coraline's recognition of the other mother's desire:

It was true: the other mother loved her. But...as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. (Gaiman 124)

...it all depended on the other mother needing to gloat, needing not only to win but to show that she had won. (Gaiman 150–51)

Coraline travels through the portal, seeking a place where the mysterious desire of the (m)other can be made flesh, where it can be recognised, and, ultimately, rejected. This allows Coraline to move onto the next stage of development — identification with the law of the father. Significantly, it is the reminder of her father's courage when he had once saved her from a wasps' nest which gives her the courage to defeat the other mother.

In 'The New Mother' we have a similarly strong image of the phallic mother. Her long wooden tail is 'clearly a phallic symbol', which

breaks down the door of the children's maternal sanctuary in an act 'symbolic of brutal sexual violation and initiation' (Silver 732). But this phallic mother is summoned by the mother herself, pointing to her desire to be free of her duty to the children.² Nonetheless, the children's acts of naughtiness are a direct response to the desire of the other, this time in the form of the mother's double — the fairground girl. Of course, they cannot ever live up to her desires, with each act of misbehaviour never quite enough to satisfy her mysterious criteria. They never gain any recognition of what the (m)other wants, only its monstrous materialisation in the form of a 'new mother' and, consequently, the children cannot move on to the next stage of development. Instead, they creep up to the cottage windows 'and with beating hearts they watch and listen' (Clifford 317). The violent threat of the phallic tail, the sound of it dragging on the floor, prevents them from entering the cottage and facing what is inside. What they would find there, what the new mother wants from them, what their real mother wanted, and what the fairground girl wanted, is never made clear. The unknowable nature of the desire of the mother — and of the Other — remains unknowable, remains monstrous.

In Lacanian terms, Coraline's desire to go through the portal to the other apartment is precipitated by her lack: the perceived lack of the loss of the mother-child dyad. As Rudd notes, the Other mother 'offers a tantalising realization of this [dyadic] state', with the offer that Coraline can have 'whatever she wants' (165). What the story teaches is that this offer of *Jouissance* is deadly, and that Coraline instead must come to terms with her desires (Rudd 165). What Lacan tells us, of course, is that desire aims at reproducing itself, forever circulating around the rim of the hole at the centre of identity. This is the effect the story reproduces, by bringing Coraline back from the brink of that hole, on a circular path, back to where she started — with her father's burnt pizza dough, her mother's absent-minded neglect, and a new school term about to start. Over the psychic drama — escaping the devouring love of the *Real* mother and learning to manage your desire — Gaiman establishes a more humanistic lesson:

I don't want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really.
 What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I
 ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't mean
 anything. What then? (Gaiman 139)

In a sense, this is exactly the lesson which Clifford also seeks to teach, showing us that, in the end, doing what you want and being naughty is

hollow and unfulfilling, never living up to the promises it first offers. Desire in the new mother also works in a similarly circular way, the objet petit—a being the elusive miniature dancing couple who live inside the fairground girl’s pear-drum, and who will tell the children a secret if they prove themselves naughty enough. But, the secret is never told, and, at the end of the story, the pear-drum is empty.

The children in both stories feel overlooked, and desire the attention of their parents. The playful doodle at the beginning of *Coraline* —

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Dissolution of the self is a real threat in *Coraline*, evidenced by the children trapped behind the mirror by the other mother, long-lost ghostly revenants who have forgotten their names and even whether they were once male or female.³ However, Coraline ‘saves’ these lost children, finding their ‘souls’ and restoring their individual identities. The text reminds us of Lacan’s notion that ‘the self’s radical ex-centricity to itself’ is covered over with the fantasy of salvation and redemption (Lacan 189). On the other hand, ‘The New Mother’ offers us no such fantasy: the protagonists become the revenants, haunting the cottage that was once their home, and the anchor of their — now lost — identities.

To secure an identity for oneself involves, in *Coraline*, attempting to become the Ideal-I, derived from the image of the father whose bravery gives Coraline the courage to defeat the other mother.⁴ It is the

‘nom-du-père’ which intervenes at the end of the story and bestows upon Coraline an identity that the other mother tries so hard to take away from her. Sadly, Blue-Eyes and the Turkey neither have a real father nor an Ideal-Image to shape themselves to. The story begins with the girls setting out to the post-office to see if there will be a letter from their father — who is ‘far away at sea’ — but he has sent them no word. Without ‘*La Lettre*’, the girls flounder. They attempt to take on different identities, but each one results in alienation. Their acts of naughtiness are never enough to please the fairground girl. And their attempts to play the role of jaded cynics, claiming with confidence that mother would not of course send a new mother who had glass eyes and a wooden tail, such a thing being far too expensive to make — turns out to be horribly inaccurate (Clifford 306). Father is silent, replaced instead by the empty and nonsensical words of the fairground girl, who says she is happy as tears roll down her cheeks, and claims to be rich though she is dressed in rags. Her philosophy for these bizarre claims — that ‘there is an endless variety in language’ (Clifford 310) — only further serves to illustrate the disintegration to identity that threatens when the Symbolic order — lacking the nom-du-père to legitimise it — is revealed to be arbitrary and hollow. Coraline, in contrast, has not only the Ideal-I of the father, but his very voice present at her side throughout the narrative, in the form of a feline companion. Gooding points out that the cat ‘functions as Coraline’s interlocutor’ (399), showing that language — the law of the father — is what is shaping Coraline’s new found awareness of her identity.

In the case of *Coraline*, critics agree that:

We could say that by the end of the novel Coraline has realigned herself in the Symbolic. She simply sees the world in different terms, and celebrates her own artifice.... And she is rewarded by being properly named. (Rudd 167)

The Symbolic order is legitimised and Coraline looks forward to the new school term. Conversely, there is nothing hopeful at the end of Clifford’s story: the new mother brings only terrible consequences for transgression. Silver tells us that ‘the once happy cottage is shut up like a tomb’, bringing ‘death and darkness rather than rebirth’ (734). There is no legitimisation of the Symbolic order; the raw, open-ended, wilderness of the Real is where the children find themselves at the end of the story. They are abandoned in the darkening woods, beyond the border of the village, even shut off from the cottage itself:

There they are still, my children. All through the long weeks and months they have been there, with only green rushes for their pillows and only the brown, dead leaves to cover them...and they long, with a longing that is greater than words can say, to see their own dear mother again, just once again, to tell her that they'll be good for evermore — just once again. (Clifford 317)

Note the change into the present tense, which lends this passage an Uncanny turn. Coraline can progress forward, her place in the world secure; Blue-Eyes and the Turkey remain in an eternal never-never land.

The moral message of 'The New Mother' is also thrown into shadow by its unresolved ending and the fact that it does not seem quite sure of what genre or form it belongs to. It begins masquerading as an oral fairytale, with strong authorial intervention marking it as a morality tale. But, by the end, the unanswered questions it leaves seriously challenge the conventional morals it teaches (Moss 58). The narrator turns to her readers, but it's no longer clear what we are supposed to have learned. Everyone and everything has faded into the mist. Are we still even in the genre of the morality tale? Is this ending magical or psychological? According to Todorov's theory of the Fantastic, it is uncertainty like this — about the status of the narrative — which places a tale in the realm of the Uncanny (Todorov 36). In contrast, the message at the end of *Coraline* seems very clear: everyone will have to fight the demons of their childhood at some point, but we'll get through it and grow up.

The fact that Gaiman translates the story via the medium of the portal narrative, aids this sense of closure. The form has long been favoured by writers of children's literature, as it allows for a neat closing off of subversive fantasy elements and a secure return to the real world. As Gooding points out: 'The act of closing the door on the other mother confirms the resolution of Coraline's conflict with her parents and her successful integration into a web of social relationships' (399). Moreover, when Coraline receives a 'well done' from her real mother, enabling her to close the door on the *other* mother, parental authority is legitimised. In contrast, parental authority in 'The New Mother' turns from a certainty into something completely incomprehensible.

Of course, the end of *Coraline* is not a simple return à la *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*: the other mother is still there, lurking at the bottom of the well, more 'repressed' than defeated (Gooding 403). Nonetheless, normality does return and fantasy fades into the

background. *Coraline* does play with the notion of identity and it shows us the horror of what lies beyond our safe, secure Symbolic order. But, in the end, it reassures us. Moreover, the fact that it draws so deliberately on Freud and, arguably, from Lacan too, keeps those uncanny elements under its control. The last image in ‘The New Mother’, by contrast, is the battered cottage door and the ‘sound of the wooden tail’ as the new mother ‘drags it along the floor’. Authorial certainty and control disappears, and the meaning, which it tried so hard to fix, eludes us.⁵ Perhaps, then, we might suggest that, whereas *Coraline* is *canny*, ‘The New Mother’ is truly *Uncanny*.

NOTES

¹ David Rudd tells us that ‘Freud’s concept of the Uncanny is particularly helpful in explaining both the text’s appeal, and its creepy uneasiness’ (159).

² See Anita Moss (47–60) for more on this interpretation of ‘The New Mother’.

³ Gaiman here seems to be giving a little nod to Lacan’s essay, ‘The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud’, reminding us that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are relative signifiers understood only in relation to each other within the system of language (167–8).

⁴ Richard Gooding discusses *Coraline*’s other various attempts to conform to this ‘Ideal-I’ in his essay (398).

⁵ Indeed, we can perhaps see what Lilian H. Hayward was complaining about when she wrote to the editor of *Folklore Magazine* in 1955. Perturbed by the magazine’s printing of the tale, Hayward recalls reading it in childhood ‘with fascinated horror’, calling it a tale of ‘pure imagination’ and claiming that it ‘was far more horrifying’ than it has been described (431).

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