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Through the Portals of the Mind – a Paracosmic Study of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

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Abstract: The worlds that children build in their minds may hold the child's interest for a consistent period of time and evolve into full-fledged paracosms, or may last only for the duration of a single playtime. Studying a child's fantasy world can be compared to mapping the uncharted terrains of the child's psyche. Many parallel worlds have been recorded in the pages of fantasy literature for children. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, published in 2002, is one such book about a young protagonist's adventures in a parallel world. This paper studies the parallel world of the eponymous protagonist as a paracosm to illustrate that this imaginary world can serve as effective means to understand the budding mind of Coraline.

Keywords: paracosms, fantasy, children, pretend-play, imagination.

> *Fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It's a way of understanding it.*
>
> Lloyd Alexander

Children create new worlds in their imagination. It is common and natural for a child to create imaginary situations and enact different roles in them during the course of pretend-play. In an elaborate phase of pretend play, a child might indulge in creating a whole new cosmos, parallel to this one, by building it fragment by fragment in their mind.

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> An extension of the occurrence of pretend play mates into entire make-believe societies, usually to be seen in middle childhood, was first described by Robert Silvey and Stephen MacKeith in England. They labeled these made-up cultures or fantasylands *paracosms*, and showed how such childhood creations might be early signs of creativity, as in the Brontë sisters who went on to be fine novelists. (Singer and Singer 23)

These imaginary worlds are, in many ways, reflections of the real world. However, they vary in degrees of reflection as the child chooses the elements from the real world to incorporate into the structure of the imaginary world. There are instances when the child prefers to alter the rules of the society to suit their imaginary world better. This activity of creation is so prevalent around the world and across time that it is seen as the foundation of creativity by many psychologists. The term "paracosm" was devised by Ben Vincent, a former paracosmist and a participant in the research of Silvey and Mackeith. A child's paracosm is a product of imagination, memories, and outcomes of experiences in the real world. Therefore, it is quite logical to infer that a paracosm is a child's perception of the real world, with a dash of their imagination, fantasy, and even a few wishes included.

> Paracosms are characterized by their completeness and longevity; by the way the child incorporates real-world conventions, or invented conventions, into an often quite sophisticated alternate reality that he or she revisits periodically over years and may still retain as an adult. (Petrella 3)

Depending on their wishes, children design these imaginary worlds in ways that are in some ways similar to the real world and yet different in their details. The goings-on in a paracosm are absolutely under the control of the child who has created it.

Silvey and Mackeith studied different paracosms created spontaneously and described by 53 adult paracosmists and four child paracosmists. They describe paracosms as a "spontaneously created, but maintained and elaborated, imaginary private world" (173). They characterise their method of studying paracosms, as non-clinical; instead, they assert that it is more humanist and literary in nature, while also incorporating some psychological aspects. According to Cohen and MacKeith, "the typical age for developing paracosms is around age nine, a few years later than the typical age for the development of imaginary companions" (Becker-Blease 494). MacKeith, who published the findings of his research in "Paracosms and the Development of Fantasy in Childhood", states that despite acknowledging the fictitious nature of the imaginary world, the child maintains a persistent interest in it for a consistent period of time. The imaginary world that the child has created is systematic, and the child considers it with pride because it matters to them. There are infinite ways of imagining a parallel world and no rules limiting how children can create them. "In terms of complexity and age onset, then, Cohen and MacKeith ranked paracosm play at the apex of make-believe activity in childhood" (Root-Bernstein 419).

Paracosms and extensive imaginative play have held the interest of researchers and psychologists for a long time. However, they have also been viewed as potentially pathological. Some have feared that unmonitored paracosmic play might have serious implications for a child's development and

orientation with reality. However, numerous studies have shown that imaginative worldplay helps children's creativity flourish. Paracosms have been noted as indicators of genius during the childhoods of many highly intelligent people.

> These have included nineteenth century luminaries such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas De Quincy, the Brontë sisters, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Anthony Trollope. They also include twentieth century writers C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, Mazo de la Roche, and Jack Kerouac; actor Peter Ustinov; visual artist Claes Oldenburg; graphic artist and writer Leo Lionni; philosopher of science and science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem, physicist and science fiction author Gregory Benford, zoologist-artist Desmond Morris, and neurologist-writer Oliver Sacks. (Root-Bernstein 418)

While the existence of paracosm in childhood does not guarantee artistic success in adult life, as Michele Root-Bernstein writes, "for many children it does signal a flowering of creative imagination and, in some cases, of creative giftedness for endeavors in and well beyond the arts" (420).

Many famous fictional parallel universes – for example, J. M. Barrie's Neverland, Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, and C. S. Lewis's Narnia – have appeared in children's fantasy literature. These parallel universes are fantastic worlds, with societies, cultures, and rules of their own. They are in many ways similar to a child's paracosm. Based on this similarity, this study endeavours to view the parallel universe in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as a paracosm. The Carnegie medal-winning gothic fantasy novella relates the adventures of the young protagonist Coraline in an alternate, parallel universe. In their article "Magical Realism in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*", Hosseinpour and Shahbazi Moghadam analyse the aspects of magical realism in the novella. With its theme and narrative style, *Coraline* has also been studied as a gothic fantasy for children. Numerous studies have examined the gothic characteristics of the book (see Becher; Buckley; Gooding). Moreover, critical studies have examined view the text in the light of feminist and postfeminist theories and articles (see Parsons, Sawers, and McInally; Russell; Wehler).Psychoanalysis has also been attempted upon the book as a whole and on individual characters. Questions of clinical psychology, identity, familial bonding, and interpersonal relationships in *Coraline* have all been examined. In analysing the features and happenings in the book's parallel universe as a projection of Coraline's paracosm, this study attempts to illustrate the effective way a paracosm can serve to understand a child's mind.

The story begins when Coraline Jones and her parents move into a peculiar mansion divided into four flats. The neighbours with whom they share the house are peculiar as well: an aged man who trains mice in the flat upstairs and two ageing former actresses in the basement flat. The flat adjacent to the one into which Coraline's family has moved is still not let. With her parents perpetually busy, the little girl finds numerous ways to keep herself engaged. She has a habit of imagining herself to be an explorer and sets out to explore her new home. While doing so, she comes across a locked door in their new drawingroom. Whenever she asks about the door, she gets no clear answers from her preoccupied parents. Eventually, when Coraline finds out that the door opens only on to a brick wall, she is even more confused. The door leading nowhere is a thing of imbalance and incompleteness, according to Coraline. She

keeps repeating to herself, "It has to go somewhere" (Gaiman 9). Her imagination sets out to correct that imperfection, making the door open onto another parallel universe. This study views this parallel universe created by Coraline as her paracosm, and seeks a better understanding of the psychological landscape of the character's mind.

A paracosm is fashioned with elements from reality. "Practically all imaginary worlds begin with the template of the Primary World, the world we live in, gradually replacing its default assumptions and structures with invented material" (Wolf 67). Coraline's paracosm, too, develops from the structure of her primary world: her parents, her new house, and her neighbours. She goes a step further to rectify the lapses she notices in her primary world by making changes in her paracosm. In Walt Disney's 1951 animated movie adaptation *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice says,

> If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't, and contrariwise, what it is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. (00:03:15)

In comparison, Coraline's paracosm is not a total opposite of her real world, but a blend of her reality and her fantasies. Often, the imaginary aspects are so much in line with reality that she feels that she has not left her home at all. But still, there are a few variations that set the paracosm apart from the real world:

> She looked around the room. It was so familiar – that was what made it feel so truly strange. Everything was exactly the same as she remembered: there was all her grandmother's strange-smelling furniture, there was the painting of the bowl of fruit (a bunch of grapes, two plums, a peach and an apple) hanging on the wall, there was the low wooden table with the lion's feet, and the empty fireplace which seemed to suck heat from the room. (Gaiman 84–85)

After a closer look, however, Coraline learns to spot the differences in every object she comes across. She observes that even though the things in the parallel universe look familiar, they have taken a sinister turn. There is a gothic air about the entire place. People from Coraline's family and neighbourhood have their replicas in the imaginary world, too. However, they are not just carbon copies of their real selves. "Paracosms are a way of exploring counterfactual societies, just as imaginary companions are a way of exploring counterfactual minds" (Walker and Gopnik 354). Coraline makes the alterations in the paracosmic replica of her real world based on whatever she heard from her parents and neighbours. Her imagination supplies the details to flesh out the skeletal information she has gathered and understood in her own way.

Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein, who studied fantasy in the form of worldplay, formulated a rubric to differentiate imaginative worldplay or paracosmic play from other imaginative activities such as daydreaming:

> In its final form, the rubric established a checklist for imaginary worldplay or paracosm play that (1) required the notion of a specific "other" place, either partly or wholly imaginary; (2) might include the notion of specific persons, either partly or wholly imaginary; and (3) must include the consistent repetition over some period of time of a specific scenario, as evidenced by the naming of places and characters or the elaboration of a continuous narrative or other systematization. (Runco and Pina 383)

The parallel world in Coraline's imagination fulfills these three conditions. It is specific in its notion of the "other" place. To make the distinction of "otherness" very clear, all the people refer to themselves as "others": "Other Mother", "Other Father", and so on. This leads to the second criterion: the people are partly imaginary and partly real. They have their origins in reality but are developed by Coraline's imagination. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, the former actresses who live in the basement flat, always speak of their youthful days with nostalgia, which leads Coraline's imagination to create an image of them shedding their old bodies to regain their youthful appearances on stage: then

> they unbuttoned their fluffy round coats and opened them. But their coats weren't all that opened: their faces opened, too, like empty shells, and out of the old empty fluffy round bodies stepped two young women. They were thin, and pale, and quite pretty, and had black-button eyes. (Gaiman 48–49)

The stories narrated by Miss Forcible and Miss Spink about their theatre days spur Coraline into attaching a theatre, complete with flashing light bulbs and a large stage before a gallery of seats, to the house complex within the paracosm. The dogs that are always with the old ladies become theatre assistants and audiences.

The change in appearance is not exclusive to Miss Spink and Miss Forcible: the appearances of all the people on the other side differ startlingly from those Coraline have met in reality. The thin bodies, pale skin, and button eyes are the common features of the paracosmic counterparts. Moreover, their personalities also undergo a change. For example, in Coraline's imaginary world, her parents' replicas are not perpetually busy. The other world is perpetually foggy and ambiguous, and the people are grotesque replicas of those in real life. Their behaviour is in many ways ironic in relation to their appearances: they are exceedingly loving and amiable, to the extent of seeming suspicious.

The other parents are always ready to play with Coraline and shower their attention on her. The Other Mother especially is different from Coraline's real mother. She is "an all-powerful and sadistic Other Mother, but one, nonetheless, who plays the traditional mothering role admirably. She cooks the food Coraline loves, provides toys and clothing, and wants to play with her daughter rather than prioritize a career" (Parsons, Sawers, and McInally 373). Unlike her real parents, these parents repeatedly say aloud that they love her. This may be her unconscious desire to play with her parents and to enjoy their attention, but as time goes by, Coraline finds it abnormal and would prefer to have her busy yet real parents back. With this realisation, Coraline begins to see the evil aspects in the Other Mother in the paracosm. The sinister attributes are revealed in the appearance of the Other Mother from the beginning, but it takes Coraline some time to acknowledge them.

Silvey and Mackeith specify three criteria that determine true paracosms:

> We assumed that a "true paracosm" has three essential characteristics, as follows:
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> 1. The child distinguishes clearly between what he has imagined and what really exists.
> 2. His interest in his private world is sustained over an appreciable length of time.
> 3. His private world is important to him, and matters in his life; and he really cares about it. (174)

The parallel universe in *Coraline* fulfills these conditions. The other world keeps Coraline's attention and interest for a considerable time, allowing her to develop and understand it in many ways. She returns to play in it because it matters to her. Despite her immersion into the fantasy, she is conscious of the existence of her real home. She constantly makes comparisons between the events and people on either side of the door. She knows that she eventually has to return to her real home. This realisation is part of the reason why she refuses to accept the Other Mother's offer to sew buttons on her eyes and make her stay with them.

The uncanny passageway that Coraline takes to enter the parallel world and the feeling she gets as she moves along the dark space act as foreshadowing of what lies on the other side. Coraline, despite her young age, can understand it:

> Coraline took a deep breath and stepped into the darkness, where strange voices and distant winds howled. She became certain that there was something in the dark behind her: something very old and very slow. Her heart beat so hard and so loudly she was scared it would burst out of her chest. She closed her eyes against the dark. (Gaiman 55)

Once back in her real world, Coraline believes that she does not need to go back to the parallel world. Briefly, it appears that Coraline has stopped fantasising and has returned to reality. But the supposed kidnapping of her parents by the Other Mother reveals the lingering traces of her imagination. The remnants of the thrill she derived from the paracosm pulls her back into it, and Coraline re-enters the other world to rescue her parents. She reasons with herself that it is the right thing to do, and that is what brave people do. Coraline gets her idea of bravery from remembering that her father had gone back to the dump yard to retrieve his glasses, which had fallen as he fled a swarm of yellow wasps. "It wasn't brave because he wasn't scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again to get his glasses, when he knew the wasps were there, when he really was really scared. *That* was brave" (Gaiman 69, emphasis original).

Coraline once again sets out into the parallel world to rescue her parents. She gets help from a cat that seems to travel back and forth between the two worlds. She then meets the souls of children from different eras who have been confined in a broom cupboard. "The child ghosts that are locked away in this otherworld are former victims of this demon, also called the Beldam, who have been sucked dry of their love" (Becher 100). They urge Coraline to escape the

clutches of the Other Mother; and according to Becher, dramaturgically, they "serve as a warning; as victims, who have to be freed from the clutches of the villain. Afterwards, they serve as helpers" (100). After Coraline frees them, they aid her in her fight against the Other Mother. The resemblance to the Grimms' fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* cannot be overlooked, especially when the Beldam traps children by tempting them and feeds off them.

Coraline is both a little girl who looks to her parents for inspiration and guidance and a mature girl who knows what she wants and likes. These attributes are exhibited together in both the paracosm and the real world. Keeling and Pollard, who have studied the motif of food and its significance in the novella, conclude:

> Coraline is not moving forward into adolescent sexuality; the novel deals with her apprehension over living in a new house and attending a new school. Her response is to regress temporarily into the oral stage, not leap toward adulthood. Given how emotionally static and empty her new life is, food takes up an inordinate amount of psychic space in her mind: it is the day residue out of which she fantasizes the conflict, to reenact the ancient drama of the oral stage. (23)

Coraline continues to imagine the parallel world while, at the same time, she wants to return to reality. The things that seemed interesting in the paracosm in the beginning become less exciting and, in some cases, even disgusting and horrifying. Coraline's encounters with the ghost children and the cat heighten her desire to close the door to the other world permanently. This desire to return to the real world is reflected in the fading details of the imaginary world. The house and the Other Mother remain the only seemingly solid objects in the paracosm, while the rest takes the form of mist. The appeal of the Other Mother and the possibilities of fun she offered become colourless, and Coraline begins to refer to the Other Mother as the Beldam.

Coraline strikes a deal with the Beldam and tries to trick her way back to her real world. She manages to free the three ghost children as well as her parents, who had been trapped behind mirrors. She even locks the door that opened to the parallel universe, but is unable to forget it completely. She dreams of the three ghost children, who urge her to get rid of the Beldam completely, as they believe that the Beldam will try to capture Coraline. The persistence of the paracosmic play and its lingering effects can be seen in the projection of Coraline's dreams, which differ from pretend play or paracosms. As Taylor comments, although "dreams are private fantasies created by the children themselves, children do not have conscious control over their dreams. Unlike pretend play, dreams come unbidden to the mind and seem real while they are unfolding" (107). This sense of reality is seen in Coraline's dreams too. She feels that her encounters with the Other Mother are not over yet, and she devises a plan to cut all the possible ways for the Beldam to reach her.

Coraline's fading interest in the paracosm and desire to sever all connections with it are not uncommon. Children tend to find new things that seize their attention, and they eventually choose to stop their pretend play. Immersive play comes to an end when the child wants it to. Sometimes, children prefer to end things with a proper conclusion rather than leaving a half-developed story in their paracosm. Coraline, too, wants a proper end to her

parallel world. She tricks the Other Mother into falling into an abandoned well near her house and boards it up. With the satisfaction of defeating the Beldam, Coraline finds it much easier to sleep that night, despite it being the night before the beginning of the school year. "Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realised, there was nothing left about school that could scare her any more" (Gaiman 191–92).

Through her paracosmic play, Coraline, like many other children, learns to deal with her fears and gains confidence. All the elements of the parallel world, including the cobwebs and the Beldam, can be read as manifestations of Coraline's hidden fears that she finds a way to defeat in the course of her play. However, it should be understood that these advantages of Coraline's paracosmic play are hidden benefits. As Smith observes, children "do not do exercise play in order to develop their muscles, and they do not do pretend play in order to be more creative. These activities are done for enjoyment, for their own sake" (5). Coraline created the paracosm of the other world, with the other parents, the other neighbours, and the ghost children, just for the sake of it. The benefits, although enjoyed by the child, are recognised in isolation from the satisfaction of the play only by adults.

Studying young children's paracosms can be remarkably insightful, as they are worlds that the children know they can control and where they are their most authentic selves without external pressure to act a specific way. Children's behaviour inside their paracosms reveals how they mature. By analysing *Coraline* not just as a portal fantasy but also as one with psychological depth, and by viewing the other world as a paracosm created by the child protagonist, it is possible to derive a great deal of understanding about the character and her development. Within her paracosm, Coraline overcomes her fears, fulfils her unconscious desires, and develops her confidence. Her actions inside the paracosm reveal her mental growth, and her gradual transition from a child who lives in illusions to a young lady who can handle reality. Reading Coraline's adventures in the parallel universe as a projection of her paracosmic play therefore gives insight into the character's mindset.

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