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**NEIL GAIMAN'S *CORALINE*:**  
**A PORTRAIT OF A CHILD AS A MYTHICAL HEROINE IN A CURRENT FAMILY**

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### ABSTRACT

The novel *Coraline* written by Neil Gaiman depicts a heroine girl for whom her world is boring and whose family does not pay enough attention to her. Being faithful to her role as an explorer, she finds the ideal version of her family in a parallel and fantastic world to ultimately face the adventure of saving her real parents. This paper attempts to make an interpretation of the novel to approach the conceptions that currently we have about childhood and family. Based on theories about myths and heroes by Campbell, Caroline is portrayed as the heroine who takes on a heroic quest. Throughout Ariès, Pollock and King's notions as well as Montgomery's categories, the construction of childhood and family in history is shown. Finally, by using Paramio, Bakhtin and Mukarovsky's concepts a reading about how childhood roles are related to the ideological discourse in the novel is made. It is concluded that in *Coraline*, the turning point in the perception and conception of childhood is represented. Modern roles are redefined in opposition to the traditional ones by depicting kids as heroes and heroines in current families.

KEY WORDS: Coraline, Childhood, Heroine, Family, Ideologies.

### RESUMEN

La novela *Coraline* escrita por Neil Gaiman presenta a una niña heroína para quien su mundo resulta aburrido y su familia no le presta suficiente atención. Siendo fiel a su papel de exploradora encuentra en un mundo paralelo y fantástico la versión ideal de su familia para luego enfrentarse a la aventura de salvar a sus padres reales. Este trabajo intenta hacer una interpretación de la novela para abordar las concepciones que tenemos actualmente sobre la niñez y la familia. Con base en las teorías sobre el mito y el héroe mítico de Joseph Campbell se muestra a Coraline como la heroína que cumple con una gesta heroica. A través de las nociones de Ariès, Pollock, King y las categorías de Montgomery se muestra la construcción del concepto de la niñez y la familia en la historia y, finalmente usando conceptos de Paramio, Bakhtin y Mukarovsky se hace una lectura de la forma cómo los roles de la niñez se relacionan con el discurso ideológico de la novela. Se concluye que en *Coraline* se encuentra representado el momento coyuntural de los cambios de percepción y concepción sobre la infancia redefiniendo los roles modernos en contraposición a los tradicionales mostrando a los niños como los héroes y heroínas de las familias actuales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Coraline, infancia, niñez, heroína, familia, ideologías

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Walking through the Door*

The field of Children's Literature has been studied from different approaches. From its History to its implications for the literary and educational areas, each one looks for connections between childhood and books, finding interesting points of view that lead to different types of analysis and interpretations. Undoubtedly, these books mostly written by adults give clues about how children have been conceptualized throughout time, and foremost, they open a door to social and cultural realities.

Conceptions about childhood and family have engaged some scholars, who through the historical revision of childhood, have explained how in the course of time, concepts and therefore, practices have considerably changed according to the social and ideological realities of the moment until they came to our present times. The traces that demonstrate such changes can be found in cultural products such as literature, theater and in general terms, visual arts among others. Children's literature has been approached from different disciplines and nowadays it is acknowledged that interdisciplinary reading is much more enriching to give an account of the current social and cultural moment in History.

The writer Neil Gaiman is one of the most renowned contemporary writers in the fantastic and fiction literary genre. One of his features as a writer is that he writes both for children

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and adults covering different sub-genres including comics and graphic novels. His novel *Coraline* has won the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Novella for the year 2003, and also won the Locus Award, the 2002 Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in a Work for Young Readers and the 2002 British Science Fiction Award for short fiction, making of this novel a best-seller that has transcended to the big screen and which has been recently analyzed by some children's literature scholars.

Gaiman created a story that can be read at multiple levels. From its characterization as a fairy tale in a dark and gothic environment, to the issue of construction of identity by a young girl, or, as it is the case of this paper, to find the representation of family and childhood roles in our Western society. Probably without any intention on its author's behalf, *Coraline* opens a door for us to understand a little bit more about what we think a child must be like, and how she or he expects that we, in our roles as mothers, fathers, keepers and society should behave and interact with them.



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*“Fairy Tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”*

*- G. K. Chesterton*

## I. JUSTIFICATION

*From Dreams and Expectations*

During one of the discussions in my first Literature Seminar course, I suddenly remembered a funny anecdote that had happened 5 years before. A 10 year- old girl approached me with a trouble that kept her preoccupied; it was about *Harry Potter* and his imminent finale. I thought that the question she had in mind would be something like: ‘Who’s he going to marry?’ or a comment about how his death was a terrible thing to happen. However, she went further; she told me that she had realized that in the end, Harry Potter had no chance to escape. Either he would kill Voldermort or vice versa, and in any of the two cases, Harry would become a murder. Her way of understanding the story from a point of view that never crossed my mind, made me wonder about how children see the world nowadays and how the world sees them.

All my life I have been reading this kind of literature, the one that dances among the fantastic, the Gothic, the magical and the marvelous, invaded by vampires, elves, hobbits, dragons, fairies, witches and so on, and drawn by my favorite illustrators Yoshitaka Amano

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and Dave McKean. This fascination finally took shape during the last semesters of my major when I found that there were possible connections with teaching, and my interest in Neil's Gaiman work on children's literature grew until it became my current field of interest. The novel that I finally selected is *Coraline*.

The novel *Coraline* written by the English writer Neil Gaiman, portrays different layers of how Western culture represents childhood nowadays and how family roles are acting in society. It also presents a fairy tale with features common to many myths and tales in History but written under the current ideology of the XXI<sup>th</sup> century. The philologist and scholar, Seth Lerer in his book *Children's Literature – A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), states that "Children's books often illuminate or criticize an actual approach to life".

In *Coraline* we can find mythical elements that have been written about in the past. Myths emerge from the attempt to explain or describe natural phenomena; in that sense, one can say that 'reality' is the source of myth. This novel portrays a child heroine –Coraline– who is not happy with her family at all and attempting to find the "ideal" one, loses her real parents and must go on a quest to have them back. The voice of Coraline is direct and clear, her criticism to her parents and her family structure is articulated through her language and behavior; she does not hide her inconformity and keeps seeking for attention.

Hence, nowadays children speak and act like adults, they do not wait for the different stages of their growth to happen, but they search for action, they react to everything;



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their senses perceive as those of an adult do, neither are they subjected to passiveness nor to supposedly, appropriate children's matters. Our modern culture has been teaching generation after generation how a child must grow up faster than before, making his/her innocence become a struggling force against knowledge in a new kind of dichotomy. In 1963, Maurice Sendak published *What the Wild Things Are*; the criticism was terrible, the book talked about the intensity of a boy's anger against his mother, his escape to an imaginary world where monsters depicted the adult figures absent in his life, and stated the wonderful phrase: "Happiness isn't always the best way to be happy". Too adult for a kid in the 60's, but anyway, children loved it. He was not like Alice who accidentally fell into the rabbit hole; Max, Sendak's main character, as well as Coraline, made decisions on his own; growing up too fast to face his life before adulthood.

Historian Philippe Ariès' approach of describing childhood comes from the idea that through cultural products such as literature and art we can find traces of actual people within society in a certain time, his case of study were children. The afore-mentioned relates to this paper in the sense that I think I will be able to find a portrayal of childhood nowadays, in the characters created by Neil Gaiman.

I also think that we are in the midst of a change that is taking place as we speak. Childhood is changing, it is becoming -or returning to be- adulthood in miniature, not only children are driven to think and speak as adults by their families influence but also, by society in general. Nevertheless, I think there is a contradiction that arises here when, at the same time, society is trying to preserve the image of childhood that has been created

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since our modern era. This way, we try to preserve innocence as a very important feature of childhood and losing it before the “due date” is considered a terrible felony. We still feel that children must be tender and naïve even though reality proves to be absolutely different.

Children, in our current times, acknowledge phenomena such as violence and sex since they are very young; they also recognize cuteness and innocence as some of their ‘inherent’ characteristics and they respond to it in many different ways; for instance, most kids are not violent at home, in front of their parents or loved ones, not in the same way as they are at school or in different instances.

I believe we are going through a crucial moment where our imagery is drastically changing and I see that the perceptions and conceptions of childhood are fragmented. In the past, children’s lives were not discussed, but now we live in a world where children are discussed permanently; the line between discipline and abuse is becoming blurred and even having pictures of your baby nephew naked in the bathtub on your mobile could be a problem.

Parents are now referred to as ‘keepers’ by social psychologists in order to find a better word that fits new family structures -gay couples, single parents, foster parents, etc.- and therefore, conceptions are changing. Jean François Lyotard (1984) sees the Postmodernist era not as the end of the Modern one but as its renewal, but what is next? In the air are the words of Ariés in which he foresaw the end of childhood as we know it.

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Hopefully this work will be able to show a glance of how nowadays, in order for children's voice to be heard and understood, they must speak an adult language and therefore, leave the current models of thinking childhood behind.

The novel *Coraline* depicts current childhood. Even though it is impossible to address all its features along with their implications and extensive connections, and as I am immersed in a turning point in time where, practices and conceptions on childhood are changing, it is possible for me to go on with the discussion about how our current society is demanding of children that they be the mythical heroes of the families; that, I am sure, will be embraced and covered by future studies. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to make an interpretation of family roles, especially children's, as they are facing the current changes.



## II. OBJECTIVES

### *Following a Mouse*

#### General Objective

To interpret how Neil Gaiman reveals the current conflict of parents and children's relationships in the light of changing beliefs and concepts of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

#### Specific Objectives

- To describe how traditional and modern families are portrayed in the novel.
- To show how current society family roles relate to the ideological discourse in the novel
- To describe how Gaiman uses the features of myth and the mythical hero – heroine in this case – to characterize Coraline and the world of this novel.
- To describe the value of symbols in the novel.



### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *State of the Art*

#### *Exploring the Surroundings*

Neil Gaiman has begun to attract the attention of scholars; there are two articles where his graphic novel *Sandman* is suggested as material for teaching literature in the classroom (Versaci, 2001; Gallo & Weiner, 2004). And considering that *Coraline* is a best-seller and that the movie adaptation got an Oscar nomination, I know for sure that in a short time this novel will be treated as a classical work worth studying, following the renewed interest in authors as J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*) and Stephanie Meyer (*Twilight*) among others.

Nowadays, the topic of young literary/ media phenomena is being discussed by critics and academics all over the world. *Coraline* transcended its success as a literary bestseller and became an acclaimed movie. Gaiman was involved in all the process of making it and saw it as a “development of the story itself” (Gaiman, 2009). Thus, Lerer (2008) commented on the interesting twist that movie adaptations bring. About Rowling’s books he gives one particular example; instead of the original final comment to Harry by Sirius Black: “We’ll see each other again. You are truly your father’s son, Harry” (Rowling, 1999), the adaptation, approved by the author, shows the character of Sirius Black turning to

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Hermione and saying: “You really are the cleverest witch of your age”. Lerer sees a transformation here from “male bonding into one female affirmation” (Lerer, 2008) that was produced during the creation of a meta-text in between the literary and the media text.

On the other hand, there is a concern about how to extend social problematic into bestseller books. Versaci (2001) suggests the inclusion of social issues in the teaching practices for adolescents and teenagers that have some kind of media background, in order to engage and motivate them. In books like *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss and What I Learned* (Winick, 2000), he sees these topics as a good place to explore social issues. This book tells the story of two cast members of MTV’s *The Real World: San Francisco* and the death of one of them caused by AIDS.

Whether ‘sordid’ or ‘trendy’ topics are attractive to young people because media produces them or because young people live those experiences, the truth is that they are everywhere. Gaiman himself has been accused of using dark themes to attract young audiences for profit, or as other people have suggested, to create a certain ‘e- subculture’ by uploading to his website the full *The Graveyard Book* narrated by him as a free podcast which shuns preconceived notions of a literary canon.

Nevertheless, the interest in children’s literature and the discussions around the topic are broader today than in the past; they go beyond the discussion of the relationship between literature and media: old and new questions are permanently renewed. Foucault used to

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say that discourses never disappear but get reinvented; that is, all myths are constantly repeated, but the elements work differently, their value changes.

In *Coraline*, Coraline, a girl that suffers the isolation of her parents, makes her way from darkness into light following a journey of steps and trials similar to those of the initiation rituals described by Mircea Eliade; she also fits the description of a Hero made by Joseph Campbell. Both authors have been grounded theory for many studies since their works were published. Regarding the book *Neil Gaiman's The Sandman and Joseph Campbell: In search of the modern myth* (Rauch, 2003), Gaiman was asked during an interview in 2009, whether he had influences from Campbell in his works, he answered:

“I think I got about half way through *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and found myself thinking if this is true — I don't want to know. I really would rather not know this stuff. I'd rather do it because it's true and because I accidentally wind up creating something that falls into this pattern than be told what the pattern is.” (Gaiman interviewed by Oglie, 2009)

Thus, Gaiman as a contemporary writer is aware of his influential role in the literary field and he enjoys very much his part in current children's literature. Following the good reception of his material, Gallo & Weiner (2004) had considered previous works -comics- by Gaiman aimed at young adults, as elementary material to teach in schools and McGillis (2009) sees how even though *Coraline* has been banned from some schools, it has been voted by school children as one of the 100 top books since 2003. As Gaiman says:

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“You know — the joy of doing something like *Coraline* is creating a story for kids that, with any luck, you actually wind up hoping that kids will read when they’re little and that they will remember. That they’ll always be there and that story will sit in their heads” (Ídem)

Studies on *Coraline* have different approaches. In the article “An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* and Questions of Identity” (2008), the author, David Rudd, analyzes the psychological connections among individuals and questions about identity. Based on Freud, Kristeva and Lacan, the author states that the concern about being noticed as an individual and one’s acceptance, reside in the psychological development of individuals, and states that the appeal for the Uncanny can be explained by Freud’s theories. On the other hand, in the short article “Extraordinary Navigators: An Examination of Three Heroines in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *Coraline*, *The Wolves in the Walls*, and *MirrorMask*” (2008) by Danya David, the author acknowledges that the novel is immersed in a “dark world with such psychological and emotional complexity” and makes a brief review of the stories and how the three heroines are similar in the sense that they acted in similar way in each of the three novels.

On the mother figure, the article *The Other Mother: Neil Gaiman’s Postfeminist Fairytales* (2008) explores two novels by Neil Gaiman: *Coraline*(2002) and *Mirror Mask* (2006) in order to analyze the construct of “the Other Mother” as a metaphor of an all-powerful motherly figure against a postmodernist mother- the real one- who is no longer fulfilling the traditional family role, and seems unfit for it.



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Following that line of thought, in “The Mother with the Button Eyes: An exploration of the Story Construct of the ‘Other-Mother’ (2009), the author, Jax Goss, focuses her attention on the construction of the female role depicted by the alternate mother. She explores the similarities and differences between the 19<sup>th</sup> century story *The New Mother* by Lucy Clifford and Gaiman’s *Coraline*, finding, in the former not only, the predecessor of the latter but also the perfect example of the prototype of ‘*The Other Mother*’ in fairytales: alternate mothers, step-mothers and grandmothers as villains in many stories.

In the article, “Something Very Old and Very Slow”: *Coraline*, Uncanniness and Narrative Form (Gooding, 2008) the author explores the audience’s reception and criticism of *Coraline*. Gooding quotes Gaiman saying that there is a gap between the adult readers who considered the novel “really scary and disturbing” and children who “read it as an adventure... and they don’t find it scary”. Here, the author contradicts Gaiman stating that his own children got scared with the audio files of the novel and refers to the term “uncanny” as the key to analyze the two probable audiences and their reception of the same material that may unleash different responses. On *Coraline* he states that:

“Applied specifically to Coraline’s affective responses, the uncanny offers clues to the psychological costs of Coraline’s renegotiation of her relationship with her parents. As significantly, Gaiman’s decidedly unsettling handling of a narrative form that has traditionally offered comfort and closure to fantasy constitutes an important technical innovation that opens new pathways of

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inquiry into the relationship between maturation and repression.” (Gooding, 2008)

The author explores the novel following the narrative and analyzing Coraline’s actions and attitudes towards the events and characters following an analytical approach.

Finally, in an interesting article written by Clay Smith: "Get Gaiman?: PolyMorpheus Perversity in Works by and about Neil Gaiman", Gaiman is compared to his main character Morpheus from the *Sandman* comics in the sense, that while Morpheus can manipulate the world of dreams at his will and is therefore called the “King of Dreams”, Gaiman seems to “(re)create ‘protofiction’ because he can control textuality to an exclusive degree” gaining the nickname of “Prince of Stories”. Anyway, the author uses Derrida’s concepts to criticize Gaiman and states that the analysis and criticism of Gaiman’s graphic novels should consider the work of graphic designers who are also creating the text, and considers Gaiman a strategist of the editorial business. And, regarding *Coraline*, Smith states that it has examples of how Gaiman had been using direct and indirect quotations of Shakespeare – in the characters of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible – and that this is an example of “the sorts of disseminative Classicism that Derrida and most other postmodernists have opposed by emphasizing the textuality of all texts”.

Although these studies have little relevance to the present study, they are mentioned and briefly described to assess this paper contribution to the field. The following references and theories will support this interpretation as the depiction of parents and children’s relationships in changing times.

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## ***Theoretical Concepts***

*From Wise Men and Women*

### **About Myths, Symbols and Heroes**

In an introduction to the commemorative edition of Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004) written by Clarissa Pinkola (*Women Who Run With the Wolves*), there is an analysis of the relevance of Campbell's concepts back in 1949 up to our days. His concept "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" is to Pinkola an overall understanding of human History; according to her paraphrasing of Campbell, the starting point to understand myths is the fact that symbols of mythology are natural, not manufactured in any way; this means that they are inherent to the human psyche and therefore, its production is a spontaneous process. Nevertheless, in our contemporary world, she sees an excess of 'one-point-only' stories which she defines as those in which children just create narrowed story lines like "They lived, they died. The End" Therefore, this 'de-sacralization' of myth begins in childhood and extends to adulthood; nonetheless, Pinkola believes that a way to reestablish a balance of current children is to get them involved in more complex stories, because as she says: "The mythic is as needed as air and water". Not only does it teach but also, "nourishes and energizes" (ídem, p.22) It is important to notice that Mircea Eliade had the same point of view when he also believed

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all human beings have a mythical nature and if closely observed, it covers the greatest myths of creation to the most simple daily routines that become little rituals by which we organize our 'chaos' into a 'cosmos' (order) like micro-myths repeated over and over.

In his book, Campbell supports his theory of how the same structure can be found in all the myths that have prevailed in time. In his words, *monomyth* – a term borrowed from James Joyce – has a main character, a hero that changes his status from being a normal person to someone superior:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell & Pinkola, 2004)

A hero, in this case a heroine, must behave in such a way as to lead to the consummation of the mythical act, so once the Heroine accepts the quest she will be captured in a macro-structure where there will be a departure and initiation and a return, and she will also follow a micro-structure where: a) she will be attentive to guides along the way – this can be understood as a sense of awareness – b) she will invigorate creative life, c) the journey is complicated via ongoing perils, which include: losing the way innumerable times, refusing the first call, thinking it is only one thing when it really is quite another and entanglements and confrontations with something of greater and often frightening magnitude. Campbell also states that there are two main types of heroes:

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“Typically, the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph. Whereas the former – the youngest despised child who becomes the master of extraordinary powers – prevails over his personal oppressors, the latter brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole” (Campbell & Pinkola, 2004)

For this particular paper I will follow the type of the fairy tale heroine as it fits the story. The macrostructure that Campbell states has the following stages for separation or departure – listed for a female heroine - : 1) the Heroine is introduced in her ordinary world. In order to introduce the special world in which the story will take place it is necessary to create a contrast with the mundane world in which she lives before the adventure; 2) the call of adventure: the heroine is presented with a challenge, problem or adventure; 3) the refusal of the call: the Heroine is reluctant at first, facing the fear of the unknown, and the heroine doubts what she has to do at the threshold of adventure; 4) the supernatural aid: the hero is encouraged by a wise old man or woman, there is the presence of a mentor who gives advice, leads or provides magic objects that will help the heroine pursue her quest; 5) the crossing of the first threshold: the heroine fully enters the special world of her quest; 6) the Belly of the Whale: where the heroine will enter in the realm of night, reaching the point of surrender to the transformation. Here the author states that the stage of *trials and victories of initiation* will begin; here the heroine will be forced to make allies and enemies and to overcome certain tests or challenges in order to get prepared for the

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final confrontation, and finally, she will begin the stage of *Return* which in which the author includes the refusal to return. The most relevant for this paper are a) The Crossing of the Return Threshold: retaining the wisdom gained on the quest, trying to integrate that wisdom into a human life; b) Master of the Two Worlds: for a human heroine, it may mean achieving a balance between the material and spiritual once she achieves her quest. "The person has become comfortable and competent in both the inner and outer worlds" (idem); c) Freedom to Live: the lesson that the heroine brings to her ordinary world gives her a way to change her reality, giving her the freedom to live in her new organized world, for the moment.

The above categories are intended to help to describe Coraline's journey in the story, but it is also important to see how the novel is connected with systems of interpretation that relate myths, cultures and ideologies.

### **From Myths and Culture and Ideologies**

The relationship of myth to the natural world is obvious. In her essay, Pinkola reminds us how since ancient times like those of in Babylonia and Assyria, storytellers have understood the idea of 'mythic reverberation', a connection that takes place in a triad among the creator (narrator of the myth), an individual human being (receptor) and the larger culture. "Each one mysteriously and deeply affects and inspires the other" (Campbell & Pinkola, 2004); this way, the interconnection and permanent flow of information feeds each part of the triangle. Myth influences the lives of human beings

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as much as our personal lives, and culture influences myth; this constant current of knowledge and data places myth in the ideology where it was born. Although there are, as Campbell states, similar features in all of them, the concepts behind myth could differ.

Ludolfo Paramio (1971) also agrees that myth is present in contemporary culture. He paraphrases Dorfler who also, points out that while traditional myths become obsolete, other series of myths emerge “through irrational and subconscious processes that will have, as a consequence, a new series of myths and symbols”. This way, and following Eliade, myths tell a sacred story and in turn, Barthes states: “Myth is a system of communication, it is a message”. Moreover, Paramio finds that there is a connection between the ideology from which the myth arises and the myth itself, this ‘Mythagogy’ is visible in the mass media culture in which aesthetical phenomena acquire social meaning, not only because it reflects social issues, but because it tries to solve them in an ‘analogical’ field to reality. Thus: “myths become ideologies when they are accepted-unconsciously- as models of the contradiction” (Paramio, 1971). The contradiction mentioned is the result of operational systems within society and the outcomes for the people. This way, the deception of the ideals of the Industrial Revolution would be the basis for the myth of the monster created by science depicted in books like *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Paramio shows the 20<sup>th</sup> Century version of this in the field of cinema, the filmic representation of the Monster in Wahle’s *Frankenstein* (1931), and Shoedsack’s *King Kong* (1933) brought back the function of that myth of exorcising, individually and collectively, the contradiction

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between the new productive forces and the economical catastrophe of the late 20's and early 30's by means of supernatural forces.

Following this profound connection of mythical narratives and ideologies, literary criticism has also formulated different approaches to understand, as it is our case, a literary text. Pouliquen (1992) sees how Bakhtin approaches literary text as a Social Fact, because it comes alive within a culture and implicitly refers to social systems of interpretation. Thus, Bakhtin's concept of "architectural form" of a literary work is presented as an evaluation of a content, which is inherent to the specific work and to the individuality of an author-creator; then, the actualization of that work is made by the receiver-beholder, who is obviously permeated by the ideologies in his culture and also completes the text by means of his own interpretation of it.

The "verbally mediated culture -history, letters, religious heritage, folk legacy- is a movement through time in which one moment converses with another..." (Bagby, 1982). This intertextuality sets permanent "dialogic relationships" among the different groups within a culture. The connection between author, text and reader is dialogical and unified through the "culturally shared word". Therefore, "cultural life in historical process is most directly accessible through the enriched word penned by the writer" (idem, p.37). Thus, a literary piece is a dialogue -Dialogism-; it contains the polyphony of different discourses and levels of discourses in permanent interaction and it may even contain a "carnivalization" of reality where the world is up-side-down and where the author can show his own discourse, an antagonist icon or discourses from others



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uttered by the characters in his work. According to Bagby, there are three main categories of discourse in Bakhtin: a) *Direct Discourse*, a discourse that is focused on its referential object. This discourse belongs usually to the narrator; b) *Objectified Speech*: refers to the utterances performed by the characters created by the author. Here, the characters can present an individual discourse that differentiates them from their social environment or, they can have a *Sociotypical Speech* that is, common utterances of a group or society, c) *Double-voiced Speech*: 1) Overt and Manifest Utterances, and 2) Covert and Implicit Utterances, which in turn are divided into three types: the first one, *Unidirectional utterance*, shows clearly the author's point of view behind the utterances of the characters; secondly, *Multidirectional Discourse*, where the characters' discourses are in conflict, presenting the author's point of view in one or various characters and the counter-argument in one or several, creating a conflict, and finally, *Active Variant*, in which internal polemic, polemic confession, hidden dialogue and speech acts that state awareness of another character's point of view are included.

On the other hand, works in the same field by authors like Jan Mukařovský, give us a semiological approach. Pouliquen (1992) considers Mukařovský's proposal in *The Art as Semiological Fact*; he states that an artistic work has two semiological functions: an autonomous and a communicative one. It is in the latter that the literary text is fulfilled as "the overall context of the social phenomena: philosophy, politics, religion and economy". Here Pouliquen states how the specific referent of the artistic work is made out of the systems of interpretation of the world, that is "ideologies". We find here a

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connection with Paramio and also a basis to carefully observe the systems of interpretation that underlie a literary text.

Moreover, it will be necessary to set the text in time. Nowadays, we live in a postmodern era in which many events are happening at the same time. Guasch (2004) states that while the intellectual currents of the XVIII century gave credit to the idea of continuity – as an ongoing line- the postmodern view states otherwise. The image of the world is a vast and cryptic collage, where there are no fixed definitions and limits are blurred.

In the case of *Coraline*, a text with mythical features, where the heroine is immersed in ideological and cultural contexts that reside in postmodernity, the Ten Commandments to read a myth attributed to Campbell seem absolutely relevant:

1. Read myths with the eyes of wonder: myths transparent to their universal meaning, their meaning transparent to their mysterious source.
2. Read myths in the present tense: Eternity is now.
3. Read myths in the first person plural: the Gods and Goddesses of ancient mythology still live within you.
4. Any myth worth its salt exerts a powerful magnetism. Notice the images and stories that you are drawn to and repelled by. Investigate the field of associated images and stories.

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5. Look for patterns; do not get lost in details. What is needed is not more specialized scholarship, but more interdisciplinary vision. Make connections; break old patterns of parochial thought.
6. Resacralize the secular: even a dollar bill reveals the imprint of Eternity.
7. If God is everywhere, then myths can be generated anywhere, anytime, by anything. Don't let your Romantic aversion to science blind you to the Buddha in the computer chip.
8. Know your tribe! Myths never arise in a vacuum; they are the connective tissue of the social body which enjoys synergistic relations with dreams -private myths- and rituals -the enactment of myth.
9. Expand your horizons! Any mythology worth remembering will be global in scope. The earth is our home and humankind is our family.
10. Read between the lines! Literalism kills; imagination quickens.

These guidelines are important, not only because they help to read the intertextuality of the novel but also because the novel is about a child. Having this in mind the following section will provide theoretical support about the discourses about childhood that can be found in the novel and their relationship with the ideologies present in the Western culture.

**From Ideologies, Ancient and Modern Childhood**

Coraline is not just a heroine, she is also a child. The first scholar that faced the issue of the changes in concepts of childhood throughout time in Western society was the French historian Phillipe Ariès. Foucault's mentor, Ariès had a profound interest in seeking out the nature of the concepts that construct society. In the prologue to the New French Edition of his book *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, that first editions mistranslated as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1987), Ariès reflects on the two main topics that came up during his research of childhood. The first one is the study of what he called "Ancient traditional society" – from the XII to the XVII centuries. Here, he found that children or adolescents were not represented by any means at all, neither in Art nor in Literature. Infancy was merely the length of time when a creature was too fragile, a baby. But once the kid was physically able, he or she was included directly in the adult world. The stages of transition were from baby to young adult, without the stages of childhood that the author identified before the Middle Ages and have become important again nowadays.

The second part of his analysis is set from the XVII<sup>th</sup> century on. Here, Ariès describes how the transformation of the conception of childhood begins with school. This institution became the place for children and thus, initiated a separation from their parents. It also established what he called "quarantine", a period of time when the individual is getting ready for real life, so childhood was extended, but at the same time isolated- Ariès states:

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“like *the crazy people, the poor and the prostitutes*-(Ariès, 1987). So, the family environment acquired a different value, “home” became a place where affection was possible and thus, the family began to get organized around children. This way, childhood acquired an important role. Losing, replacing or having a child became a major issue. The author finds interesting how from this century on, demographic birth rate numbers decreased. This supports the theory of the increasing interest in preserving children’s lives, beginning to prevent early deaths and beginning to acknowledge children’s deaths.

In Art, Ariès found the best example to support the conception of childhood during the XII<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Medieval art represents children as small adults and it is not until the XIV<sup>th</sup> century that Italian art created the figure of the Baby Jesus – including cherubims and baby-like figures – linking it to the tenderness of his mother. Only after the XV<sup>th</sup> and XVI<sup>th</sup> centuries do the artistic representations of childhood separate from religion and begin to appear in typical or picturesque local scenes, not as main figures but as a part of the setting which always included adults. It is interesting to see how many of these scenes were set in places that nowadays are not considered proper for children as taverns, brothels and public executions.

Among the many scholars that have been advancing in the field of study that Ariès established, there are some contemporary scholars that are trying to identify the current concepts of childhood. Anthropologist Heather Montgomery has great interest in the representations of childhood; she finds that to scholars involved in this type of studies there are two key considerations regarding the subject: “Firstly that childhood is a social

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phenomenon and, secondly, that biological immaturity is assigned social meanings dependent on the cultural setting<sup>1</sup> (Montgomery, 2009). For her, the answer to the question: what is a child? will vary according to the culture and moment in time: for instance, in most the Western cultures the age associated to the word 'child' covers the ages from 0 to 18, and even though there are specific words like *baby*, *toddler*, *infant*, *teenager* and so on, the general term 'child' is used to talk about someone who has not reached maturity in the social sense.

Gender plays a very important role. For some cultures, girls develop the ability for home chores earlier than boys; it is expected that women develop certain home-related expertise at a very young age. Another aspect mentioned by Montgomery is whether the child is the first born or not and how that could be crucial for his/her role in the family. Nowadays, we see how it is quite different to have at least one brother or sister than being an only child.

One of the most important notions in Montgomery's book is the conception that society may have about their children. Supported by a large number of studies, she identifies the major categories of conceptions: children as Incompetent or Subordinate: children are seen as intellectually inferior by adults, their paths are similar to the evolutionary scale from apes – when babies- to *Homo Sapiens* – when adults – which relates to our Western view; Children as Equals: to these cultures children have knowledge since they are born and they can teach and guide adults; Children as Means of Forming Families and Giving

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<sup>1</sup> Underlined is mine.

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Status: this conception of children is related to the concept of what an adult should be. In this case, having children is what makes a family complete and therefore, confers adults status in society; Children as Economic Investment: in this conception, having children means having extra working hands, or in the long term, parents' keepers "thereby guaranteeing a safety net for the elderly" (Montgomery, 2009). Here the author states that this is subtle to the Western society and quotes Historian Viviana Zeilizer (1985) who states that the most noticeable conception is that Western children have changed from being producers to consumers and sees the contradiction between the legislations that prevents children from working and the reality where children have always worked to help their families and to inherit family trades; and finally, Unwanted and Non-human Children: under the Unwanted concept we find the illegitimate children that become a threat for the survival of the family or the individual and therefore may be abandoned, killed or aborted. Scrimshaw in Montgomery (idem) states that there are many forms of infanticide besides the ones mentioned above. Those forms have to do with the way society responds to issues like population control and maximizing reproductive success, among others; one would add single-parenting. On the other hand, the author includes under the concept of Non-human children "whether a newborn baby is a fetus, an angel, an unnatural child not meant for this world or a fully human being will affect its chances to survival" (idem); moreover, she states that a childhood is a status that can be assigned, manipulated, denied or revoked. Following her ideas, in Brazil, for instance, many mothers from the 'favelas' do not show sadness when their children die because they consider them angels according to Catholic beliefs. Here, beliefs as that of the 'Guardian Angel' which is a child

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in our culture and the 'imaginary friends' make many children company should also be considered. All of the conceptualizations mentioned above are definitely related to cultural ideologies and systems of interpretation of childhood.

Since the XII<sup>th</sup> century the family has revolved around children, they have become the axis of the structure. Until that moment, giving birth was indeed the purpose of having a family, but the interest was not in the children as individuals. In her book, *La niñez en el siglo XX*, the Colombian anthropologist Ximena Pachón (1991) makes a description of the family at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century in the West. The Holy Sacred Family established the model to be followed: Father, Mother and Son. The Father was the only provider and the relation to his children was one of distant authority and he did not have much influence in his children's education. The Mother was the domestic figure who administered the household and made important decisions about issues like nourishment, health, social practices and hygiene, as well as the children's education. Children were under strict discipline and were banned from adult environments until they were the proper age and had social status. Gender was very important depending on the economical status of the family; little boys would inherit land and real states and continue the heritage line, while rich little girls were seen as future links to ascend in society and poor girls as the worst condemnation.

On the other hand, the topics of affection and attention become important. According to Ariès (1987) it is not until late the XVII<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of the family as we know it began. He explains how gradually children gained importance in society until they finally



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became the central axis of the family, and therefore, affection began to be expressed in different ways. Even though children's education has been a humanistic concern throughout History, Ariès and his fellow scholars as Pollock, in her book *The Forgotten Children*, share the view that it is not until the late XVII<sup>th</sup> century when certain characteristics like Innocence, Purity, Cuteness, Tenderness and so on, were attributed to children and became essential in the way we conceptualize children and therefore, families.

Pollock (1987) quotes Buesfield in his essay "Ideologies and Reproduction" where he states that there are several reasons why parents love and want their children in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. First, he establishes that children are seen as a source of emotional satisfaction that bring variety and interest to life and they are also seen as a second chance to achieve what adults did not have. That is, like a projection of themselves. This should explain the intricate parent-child relationship that became an issue in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century. There is also a consideration about children as providers when parents reach their old age. Obviously, that is not socially explicit but what looks so calm in the surface has tremendous impact on children. At this point Pollock agrees with the above-mentioned ideas of Montgomery – under *Children as a Means of Forming Families and Giving Status* – in which both state that for the current Western societies, children define families by creating links not only inside the nuclear and extended family but in wider social relationships. This way, children are the means by which parents become ancestors

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continuing the cycle and they are also status-givers helping to form a 'proper family' and completing the roles of Adults as a man/father and a woman/mother.

According to Margaret King (2007) family roles shifted unpredictably in pre-modern times. In former and current times, they performed a range of functions: political, military, judicial, and cultural aimed at acculturation processes. This is, to nail down the current ideologies of those times. She also quotes Edward Shorter's *Making of the Modern Family* (1975), who focusing on the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, identifies the development of sacrificial maternal love as the keystone of the modern family. Issues like nourishment began to include breastfeeding by mothers of middle and upper classes. Gaining importance on 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on new medical discoveries, the concepts of nursing, nourishment and love changed. Then, roles as wet nurse and midwife are no longer as essential as they were. With the change of feminine roles in society, motherhood has been redefined. The ideas of single mothers and women that do not want to be mothers at all, have also shaped the roles of men in the family. They are no longer expected to be distant, but affectionate, towards their progeny, showing a permanent interest in their education inside and outside the household, and helping with issues like nourishment and care, as well. As a consequence, the first decade of the 21<sup>th</sup> century has the first wave of single fathers, who have decided to raise their children on their own.

Nuclear families have changed as well; the Holy Sacred Family has many versions that include parents of the same sex, single parents, adopted children, half brothers, half

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sisters, step-fathers and step-mothers going beyond the traditional trinity of roles. According to the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) every child must go to, at least the primary cycle of education, which means that there is an early separation from their homes, in comparison to that of ancient times. All of this leads to a different child, one that is aware of his social and private role from a very early age and whose literacy is compulsory. They are now children that deal with high standards of success according to Western parameters and who have been taught to grow up faster to become the heroes or heroines of their families.

Finally, we return to the beginning. In the compilation, *Myths to Live by* (1973) Campbell states that parents will wish:

“To have produced socially as well as physically healthy offspring, well enough attuned to the system of sentiments of the culture into which they are growing to be able to appraise its values rationally and align themselves constructively with its progressive, decent, life fostering, and fructifying elements.” (pag.129)

The author finds a critical problem when this fails to happen. Because what we bequeath to children is the mythology, the ideology, the concepts and the practices with which they will conceive and from which they will re-define the world, he states that it should be a point of concern:

“And I call this problem critical because, when it is badly resolved, the result for the miseducated individual is what is known, in mythological terms, as a Waste Land situation. The world does not talk to him; he does not talk to the world.” (idem)

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Thus, children need to be in contact with imagination and mythology that surrounds them in order to connect with mythical nature. Hence, taking into account the aforementioned concepts and authors, the interpretation will intend to articulate different of the mention aspects in the light of the novel.



**The Path of a Child**

The social construction of what a family and children are has changed over the years. Scholars such as Ariès, Montgomery and Pollock have proved that conceptions of the family and family roles are vulnerable and constantly changing.

In the novel, Gaiman presents a very interesting series of conceptions and practices on this subject. On the one hand, he shows Coraline's real family as a triad – father, mother and child – following the model of the Holy Family that has subconsciously prevailed as the proper prototype of a family for a long time. Coraline is a single child, bored, unattended and solitary explorer.

However, there are two models of families portrayed, the real one and the one in the upside-down world through the door. Coraline openly criticizes her real family not only with her behavior but with her language. Her parents are home-working which seems like a logical response to the harsh criticism of working parents, especially working moms, that we have heard about recently:

“Coraline's father was home. Both of her parents worked, doing things on computers, which meant that they were home a lot of the time. Each of them had their own study.

# 38:

"Hello, Coraline," he said when she came in, *without turning round*.<sup>2</sup>

"Mmph," said Coraline. "It's raining."

"Yup," said her father. "It's bucketing down."

"No," said Coraline, "it's just raining. Can I go outside?"

"What does your mother say?"

"She says, 'You're not going out in weather like that, Coraline Jones!'"

"Then, no."

"But I want to carry on exploring."

"Then explore the flat," suggested her father. "Look—here's a piece of paper and a pen. Count all the doors and windows. List everything blue. Mount an expedition to discover the hot-water tank. And *leave me alone to work*.<sup>3</sup>" (Gaiman,2002,p.7)

Coraline's parents seem to have found a way to work and stay at home in order to maintain the illusion of a close family. But that is not enough for Coraline. Her reality is shown as a conflictive relationship with her parents; they never have time for her, especially her mother with whom she has the tensest relationship:

"*What should I do?*"<sup>4</sup> asked Coraline.

"Read a book," said her mother. "Watch a video. Play with your toys. Go and pester Miss Spink or Miss Forcible, or the crazy old man upstairs."

"No," said Coraline. "I don't want to do those things. I want to explore."

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<sup>2</sup> Italics are mine

<sup>3</sup> Idem

<sup>4</sup> Idem

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*"I don't really mind what you do," said Coraline's mother, "as long as you don't make a mess."<sup>5</sup> (p.6)*

Moreover, Coraline expresses very directly how bored she feels: "'I'm bored, she said" (p.18) and again, " Coraline was bored...she was still bored" (p.25). This recurrent feeling does not change until she went through the door.

Although her relationship with her father is tender it also has attention problems. It is clear how for Coraline, as for current children, affection and attention are the same, up to the point that they can be assumed as one. Families began to revolve around children after the XVII<sup>th</sup> Century, and up to our current times it works like that. In the novel, it is clear that Coraline is aware of herself as an individual that can and must have attention. The instability of her new environment along with the feeling of emotional abandonment lead her to find something 'dangerous' that makes her feel important enough to be taken into account. Therefore, the concepts about parents' roles are crucial for the story. The character that stands out in the couple is the mother. At the beginning of the novel, she seems to be annoyed by the mere presence of her daughter in the same space. She is depicted as a working mother who struggles between her duties as a mother and as a professional, her daughter –Coraline- demands exactly the traditional chores from her: to look after children, cook elaborated meals or keep a perfect household, and that is why Coraline feels attracted to the "other mother" when she makes her appearance.

Thus, the analogical world shows us the contradiction of the family models that have already been accepted since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Apparently, the "other mother "is the

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<sup>5</sup> Idem

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opposite of Coraline's real mom, and therefore, she plays the traditional role. She is a 'good' mother because she does have time, gives her attention when the girl needs it but also, backs off when she needs to be alone and she keeps a perfect household. The "other mother" also cooks tasty meals as a traditional mother would; the link of childhood memories through the senses, especially taste, is undeniable. As society, we give a special place to those memories related to our mothers and grandmothers nourishment as female bonds of love and care. The food that tastes as good as that which our mothers cooked with so much love is special. Just like Hansel and Gretel, who starving in the middle of the forest fall in the trap of the witch's candy house, Coraline falls in the "other mother's" grip because she also lacks the essentials: food and love. Her real mother is not fulfilling the role as we as society still demands it, she is not 'cooking' affection for her daughter.

But the "other mother" has another traditional feature that is not embraced with such joy anymore. She is an all powerful figure whose authority is unquestionable; here discipline becomes an issue. During the last decades we have seen how obedience has changed: "Children must do only what parents say" sounds like a colloquial phrase of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is through this feature that Coraline's perception of her as the 'good' mother changes. The "other mother" then appears as the enemy to defeat and becomes the alternate mother of fairy tales: the witch. Now, the story puts the two mothers at a mythical level: the witch is infertile therefore, she is incomplete and needs to be wicked in order to achieve her selfish happiness, and she cannot create anything:



# 41:

“These things - even the thing in the cellar - were illusions, things made by the other mother in a *ghastly parody* of the real people and real things on the other end of the corridor. She could not truly make anything, decided Coraline. *She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed.*”<sup>6</sup> (p.117)

But the real mother is fertile therefore, complete and has goodness in her, because even though she has unsuccessful ways to express attention to her daughter daily, she does love her and that is real.

On the other hand, we have the role of the father. This is a very interesting character because the author seems to be directly criticizing through the construction of this role. Unlike the “other mother”, the “other father” is not a traditional figure. As the main conflict within Coraline’s real family structure is with her mother, in the alternate world the father is shown as a puppet of the “other mother”. His characteristics as a modern father which are to be an affectionate parent to his child, who is also able to cook or at least tries to do it, and who shares the responsibility of the financial income with his wife, are blurred to create the “other father” as someone absolutely subjected and above all: emasculated. This way, the novel portrays the conflict that current society has in reading the changes in the role of fatherhood.

Thus, just as *Frankenstein* portrayed the disappointment about the ideals of Science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Coraline* is portraying the disappointment about the ideals of modern family and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The novel shows us different discourses in conflict

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<sup>6</sup> Italics are mine

## 42:

portraying the current contradiction between the ideology and reality behind the role models. The systems of interpretation in which the novel was created are immersed in changing times, from modernity to post modernity, thus the novel is depicting reality and therefore is crucial in understanding the overall context and appraising objectively how we conceptualize childhood nowadays.

Furthermore, according to Montgomery's categories, Coraline is the perfect portrayal of the concept of childhood as Incompetent or Subordinated, she is taken as an individual who is too young to make her own decisions- her mother decides everything she wears,- and is seen as a nuisance for the working adults. This is also shown by the neighbors' attitude. Mr. Bobo –the crazy owner of the mouse circus upstairs- and Miss Spink and Miss Forcible- the two old ex-actresses downstairs- do not listen to Coraline and patronize her. It does not matter how many times she corrects them about her name: "It's Coraline. Not Caroline" they continue calling her by the wrong name and talking about their own business, even though the old actresses read her cup of tea, they do not recognize her as someone special but someone simple and normal.

Another conception that it is easily recognizable is the one in which society sees children as *Means of Forming Families and Giving Status*: Coraline is the one who completes the family. The child without whom the triad would be incomplete and therefore, the adults- her mother and father- would not be considered as such in our society. We still, see with pity, those families and individuals that cannot or have decided not to have children and

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praise those who do have them. In the novel, the “other father” and the “other mother” seem to be very aware of this:

"We've been waiting for you for a long time," said Coraline's other father.

"For me?"

"Yes," said the other mother. "It wasn't the same here without you. But we knew you'd arrive one day, and *then we could be a proper family*. Would you like some more chicken?"

(p29)

There are some characters that give Coraline supernatural aid in order to pursue her quest. Among them, there is a group of ghosts of dead children that were victims of the “other mother”. Who could be considered in Montgomery’s category of *non-human children*. Thus, the whole spectrum of concepts of childhood is portrayed in the novel.

Finally, the role of Coraline as a child begins to get clear, or doesn’t it? According to Western society, children must have an education since they are very young; they must learn very fast about many things, that is, intellectually they have to respond to high standards. They must be independent in order to be able to take care of themselves in the dangerous outside world and must have a family to take care of them providing for the basic needs to survive. Coraline has all of that, so why is she not happy? On one hand, she reads adults as society does; so, as mentioned above, there is a conflict in the parenting roles because they are changing. On the other hand, she is a current child who does not respond to the grand total of the conceptions that adults have about what she is

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supposed to be. She does fulfill the expectations as she is a very intelligent girl, who is independent and knows how to take care of herself, but when she communicates with adults she is not what they want: an obedient, submissive girl, who does what she is told and does not get in the way. But she cannot be both. Current adults do not realize that all those skills that have they been teaching their children since birth are not only meant to provide them with tools to get by as adults but as children, too. They will not begin to be independent or argumentative when current society thinks they should, but when they are able to do it, and that begins to happen since childhood.

Current parents that feel that they cannot communicate with their children do not realize that what interferes between them are the conceptions that they have about childhood. Those conceptions are not clear because they are changing, too. The ideologies and interpretation systems we have learned are transforming and that is why find that there are gaps between what we think it should be and what it really is. Ariès said before his death in 1984, that childhood was about to disappear; obviously he was talking about the change of Western conceptions on the matter, and that is obvious. We are going back to the time when children were mini-adults; they already talk and dress as such. They are the heroines and heroes of our current families in the sense that we are telling them to solve everything on their own, they have the responsibility of making a family what it is, because they are the axis of it. But, there is a paradox, because even though they give the family its identity and have to rescue adults from their paralysis in the struggle of trying to figure out who they are, how to be a family, feel successful in our society and achieve

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happiness, all at the same time, they are also abandoned and not given the proper affection and love. It is the contradiction of the current society: there is a conflict of different beliefs –traditional, modern and post-modern- that are coexisting all at the same time and contradicting each other. Children are still the ‘conceptual’ axis of families but in reality, they are left alone surrounded by media and consumerism.

Furthermore, *Coraline* is a novel that articulates all the current conflicts of family roles using a language loaded of fantasy that creates a story where a child becomes a heroine and readers become witnesses of such process.

### **The Path of a Heroine**

The magic of *Coraline* begins as abruptly as the book. Suddenly the reader enters a story where she meets a girl who, after moving to a new place, wants to explore everything around her as a way of understanding the new setting in which she has to live, making of this activity the only fun in her vacation time. Also, the psychological description of this character is unveiled in the first chapter. Coraline is a typical girl from our current times, who has a rebellious attitude towards life and who gets incredibly bored too easily and too fast. As she is the only child in the family, she spends a lot of time alone and constantly approaches her parents in search for attention. Pushed away by her home-working parents, Coraline finds in exploration, a way to find something thrilling, even dangerous to take away from her boring reality, the mundane and ordinary world where a hero traditionally is presented at the beginning of the myth.

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But Coraline is “attentive to guides along the way”; we follow Coraline in her excursions outside her house showing us her attitude towards her ordinary world:

“On the first day Coraline’s family moved in, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible made a point of telling Coraline how dangerous the well was, and they warned her to be sure she kept away from it. So Coraline set off to explore for it, so that she knew where it was, to keep away from it properly” (p. 5)

While in the common myth, the hero finds himself as the chosen main character to bring back chaos into order, and makes a decision of entering or not into that supernatural world, on this occasion Coraline finds her own adventure by herself. She is seeking for it, as fast as she finds out that something ‘weird’ is happening in her house, she jumps to get into the adventure, there is not a “refusal of the call” she finds the door that leads “nowhere” and then, once she is alone, she reaches up for the key by using a broom, enters the room and pushes the black key into the keyhole:

“Coraline stopped and listened. She knew she was doing something wrong, and she was trying to listen for her mother coming back, but she heard nothing. Then Coraline put her hand on the doorknob and turned it; and, finally, she opened the door” (p. 26)

Thus, she opens the door to the other world and accepts her call for adventure. She is attentive to the clues that lead her into the story and once in it, of course, she persisted with this behavior, following every sign without fear. So, after Coraline crosses the first threshold, her life changes forever. She finds the “other mother” and the “other father”

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who have buttons instead eyes and who show her their love and affection the way that she wants. Unfortunately, the other mother lets her know that in order to stay together, she must sew buttons in her eyes in order for Coraline to become her daughter; Coraline does not accept the deal and decides to return home, thinking that her refusal will not bring any consequence. But as she wakes up at home she discovers that her parents are missing and even though she pretends nothing is wrong for a while –now refusing the call of the real quest- suddenly she feels terribly sad and lonely, and finally accepts that she has to enter in *The Belly of the Whale*, and she comes back to rescue her parents because “when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, *that’s* brave” (p.59)

And suddenly, she starts to get the “supernatural aid” that she requires: a black cat, who can cross from the real world to the upside-down world where he can talk- or where both cat’s and girl’s perceptions are so enhanced that the communication is easy enough to understand each other- and who gives her clues about what is really going on. This expansion of consciousness begins in dreamland and extends to reality; Coraline needs to go to sleep to go from one world to the other, but gradually her awareness increases.

The test begins as the other mother makes a pact with Coraline on finding the objects that contain the souls of the three children in the closet- children that like Coraline, once got lured by the “other mother’s” enchantments and lost their souls years ago- in exchange for Coraline’s parents and the children’s souls.

Three obstacles she has to overcome. Those trials and victories, as Campbell stated, prepare her to have her final confrontation with the other mother; once she comes back,

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the supernatural aids are present again. An artifact given by her neighbors- Miss Spink and Miss Forcible- a stone with a hole in it to see the invisible in the other world and the help of the children ghosts trapped in the closet of the other house are indications of a hidden world within the other world. In other words, the upside-down world contains another one in which the clues to come back to reality are. Coraline wins using a trick and escapes in time. *The Crossing of the Return Threshold* means, for Coraline, to retain the wisdom that she gained in the other world to deal with the hand of the other mother who was able to follow her to the real world before she could lock the door. So, the fact that she has become a *Master of the Two Worlds* means that she is able to prepare a trap to get rid of the hand in such way that hand and key get lost forever at the bottom of the well giving her a *Freedom to Live* in her new organized world where she appreciates her family and nothing seems scary, for now.

Not only Coraline does go through the heroine path, but also she is characterized as one. She is a brave girl: "*I will be brave, thought Coraline. No, I am brave*" (p.61) and even when she is gets scare, she does not run away: "But there was nothing that she could think of as scary as having it look at her. Her hearth pounded in her chest. *She took another step forward*"<sup>7</sup> (p.101). Other important feature of Coraline's personality is her intuition, through the novel there are permanent indicators like: "she knew, she thought", and another similar expressions that speak about the security that her intuition brings her along the way. Moreover, the songs, the ghastly atmosphere, the rats and mice that usually make adults revolt do not have the same impact on her, she has the endurance to

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<sup>7</sup> The italics are mine.



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go on. So, Coraline has been identified with the heroine's features: bravery, to overcome obstacles; endurance, to resist the stages of her path; intuition (knowingness, she follows her feelings, she has wisdom and she listens and uses the aid that she gets); and finally she loves her parents, she is noble. At the end of the novel she is referred to as "an extraordinary child" and finally Mr. Bobo learned her name, she goes from Caroline – a common name of a current girl – to Coraline, the heroine.

This way, it is clear that Coraline turns into heroine of the *Monomyth*, in this case one that has the characteristics of *Domestic Triumph* where the child prevails over her enemy and therefore depicts a fairy tale in which, she suffers a transformation gaining knowledge and wisdom and changing the world from chaotic to organized.

Hence, Coraline has been characterized as a heroine who achieves a heroic quest. But she is also a child in our current Western society, and therefore the layers that have been re-written to re-tell this myth present the ideology of the context where it was re-created. To do this so, the novel is constructed with semiotic elements that create the mythical ambience of the tale. In the following section, darkness, a stone with a hole, buttons and a circus, will be referred in relation to the discourse of the novel.

### **The Symbols and Ideologies behind Coraline:**

Some of the symbols in the novel are key in the process of articulation of the discourse that underlies the story. One could think, for instance, of darkness as a feature of the

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setting and as an environmental characteristic but it is a vital component. Darkness is also an essential component of creation myths, and most of the time, in comparison to light, it is present in settings, objects, characters stereotypes, situations and so on, to create a 'warning mood' which people must avoid or overcome. Aspects such as physical and psychological violence towards children have entered in this process and have blended with what darkness represents: evil, secrecy, outcast individuals.

Thus, darkness with its entire meaning charge makes its way into *Coraline* and through the readers' perceptions, it acquires new meanings; they *rewrite* the text adding values derived from their own realities, that is, their ideological and value systems. At some point, children transformed the blend of darkness and violence from something that causes fear into something appealing that affects social practices and changes they way readers -children and youngsters- understand the world.

We see phenomena as the 'neo gothics' who feel absolutely identified with darkness. In the *Dictionary of Symbolism* 'Darkness' in one of its entries is identified like:

"Darkness can encompass a primitive chaos, and the powers of that chaos; it is not essentially evil, yet it is largely associated with death and destruction, captivity and spiritual darkness. The gloom which preceded the Fiat Lux traditionally represents the states that give rise to chaos. Darkness can also be linked to the time spent in the womb and seed germination, both of which take place in the dark. It is the "complementary opposite of light in a fundamental duality" (*Biederman, 90*). In the Book of Revelation, darkness

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indicates that the end of the world is forthcoming. Can be an emblem of bad judgment, misfortune and ignorance.” (Protas, Brown, Smith, & Jaffe, 2001)

So, many children around the world seem to be playing with the idea of darkness as something very attractive as an opposition of what is bright and organized. As it is in the well-known dichotomy of the apollinean and the dionysiac, some children and youngsters feel identified with what it is “wrong” in opposition to what society expects them to be. The particularity of the above-mentioned is not the rebellious condition of teenagers and adolescents of every generation, which is obvious, but the presence of it in children; their awareness about different types of violence, death and aggressiveness is an undeniable truth of our current times.

Traditionally, fairy tales have been used as tools to educate according to moral values. This type of literary discourse often passed orally from generation to generation until it encountered its materialization when the topics about children demanded special attention around the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century. But, for many years the ‘darkness’ in these fairytales did its job: it scared children to make them behave, run from it and never go into it. Coraline does exactly the opposite, she is not scared of ‘darkness’; on the contrary, it appeals to her. It does not symbolize danger but adventure, and that is exactly what she is looking for. Coraline’s quest is completed, everything is clear and bright. Order is not dark, but luminous.

Furthermore, once she meets the ‘other mother’ she is surprised but not scared, she does not run away. The “other mother” has buttons in her eyes, and Coraline finds it weird

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maybe uncomfortable, but is not until “the other mother” brings sewing Coraline’s eyes as the only way to stay permanently in the “other world”, that Coraline gets the picture. The simple idea of sewing someone’s eyes with buttons and the actions needed to accomplish such a job are very violent. First, one of the most feared objects by children and adults is required: a needle. The puncture of the tender skin around the eyes, ripping the flesh activating the sensitive nerve endings that will send electric impulses to the brain translated into pain, constitutes a terrible image for anyone. Secondly, the buttons in the eyes symbolize the absence of a soul - eyes are commonly known as the windows of the soul -in this case Coraline’s has to surrender her soul to the “other mother” who ‘feeds’ from it, as she has done before with the other children; she becomes a ‘mother’ because she finally posses them to their very essence. On other level, the use of buttons seems to be a clear questioning about whether accepting or not to walk around alive with distorted sight, blinded and unable to perceive reality, living in a delusional world where everything “seems” right. It is a consequence of a decision made willingly; the issue involves the use of Coraline’s free will, and she must accept the change to turn into something close to a doll, a hollow version of herself. In our current times this could be interpreted from an ideological point of view, where children accept to see only what the media want them to see or as a criticism to drug abuse from early age, which it is a reality in the streets, when the eyes of drug users look blurred and distorted.

Thus, the traditional opposition of fairy tales and mythical heroes is present: the confrontation of good and evil; but to overcome evil, Coraline has to become a heroine and gets one important magic instrument: the stone with a hole in it. This object allows

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her to see in the “other world” where the children’s souls are hidden so she can win the bet against “the other mother”. According to Mircea Eliade:

“As symbols of the sacred, stones acquire symbolic meaning from their intrinsic quality: a stone *is*; it *strikes*. Stones are hard, firm, permanent. They bear the mark of a spiritual force of power. They seem to come from somewhere else and so point to a power beyond themselves. Meteorites, as a prime example, are thought to come from heaven. Piercing the heavens and falling to earth, they strike a connection between heaven and earth. The place where they lodge becomes the center of the earth, an *axis mundi*. Due in part to the heavenly origin of meteorites, metallurgy assumed a sacred, symbolic significance. Not only meteorites, but all stones have the capacity to symbolize the center of the earth. Either by their unique form, place of origin, or by their association with a sacred place, time, or event, stones can assume a sacred or “hierophanic” power.” (Cave, 1993)

According to popular knowledge, in traditional Celtic mythology, stones with holes were used for protection and to bring health and also were known as ‘seeing stones’ that allow the holder to see the ‘hidden world’ -fairies, elves, goblins and so on- in the same way, the ‘hidden world’ inside the “other world” of *Coraline* contains the souls of the children that died before her: Three children’s souls as three tests that she has to overcome as three members of her family. The triad, the triangle is the shape that holds everything together. Thus, the stone with a hole in it works as a clairvoyant device; Coraline is able to see what lies beneath the world created by the “other mother” to deceive her. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible provided Coraline with an object that enables her to see beyond the pretended perfection of the “other world”, in other words, to see beyond what it is given in plain

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sight, something else is needed; the important can be found by those who want to look for them.

The “other Mr.Bobo” appears as the successful trainer of rats not mice. And these rats are the ones in charge of showing Coraline the path to the alternate world, they are trained by Mr.Bobo but they act under the “other mother’s” commands. As an interesting feature, the rats sing. Their songs are little messages that give clues about what is going on in the story, they work like the choir and Choripheus in a Greek tragedy but they are deceptive, they lie and trick:

## Song 1

“We are small but we are many  
We are many we are small  
We were here before you rose  
We will be here when you fall” (p.12)

## Song 2

“We have teeth and we have tails  
We have tails and we have eyes  
We were here before you fell  
You will be here when we rise” (p.31)

## Song 3

“We have eyes and we have nerveses  
We have tails we have teeth  
You’ll all get what you deserveses  
When we rise from underneath” (p.117)

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The songs are a thread throughout the novel. Coraline seems to forget each song after she listens to it but when she hears the next one suddenly she has the feeling of having heard that melody before and gives her clues to spark her intuition; somehow they also become aids.

Moreover, the whole Theater/Circus construction in the novel speaks about the contradiction of the appearance against the essence. Both worlds are constructed by three habitable spaces. The old house is divided in Coraline's household; the flat below, were the ex-actresses Miss Spink and Forcible's live; and the flat above, where Mr. Bobo is training a mice circus. Once Caroline is in the "other world", those two worlds change as well. On one hand, the house of the former actresses becomes a theater were they both perform incredibly acts and look far younger:

"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." (p.41)

Their dogs breed also changes. In real life the ladies have several *Highland Terriers* which appear in the "other world" as *Scotties (Scottish Terriers)*. The first thing to point here is the origin of the word *Terrier* that comes from the Latin word *Terra* that means 'earth'. While the *Highland Terriers* are popular because they are ideal for families, *Scottish Terriers* are supposed to be more temperamental and are not recommendable for little babies. In other words, the "other dogs" are far more temperamental than the real ones

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and this is shown in the fact that, when Caroline must confront them during one of the final tests, they appear as a dog/bat hybrid.

What people really are and what they show is always different. Society has certain standards about how one should be, not only as family members but as in any social role in general. One of the bourgeoisie features has to do with pretending be more sophisticated and maintaining that appearance as far it is possible. And this is exactly what is happening with childhood in our current times.

Thus, this paper has shown how *Coraline* is a construction done with multiple layers carefully blended. The main tool to articulate this amalgam is symbolism; in the novel, symbols work in two ways: first, as a socio-semiotic elements that – as it was mentioned in one section – work an ideological level and second, symbols help to create the sacred environment of myth and construct the fantastic and magical ambiance of the novel in which a current girl become a mighty heroine.





## CONCLUSION

The concepts about childhood and parenting roles are in a crossroad. The conceptions that have been common since 17<sup>th</sup> century are in confrontation with the ideologies and demands of the modern world. Family has been affected in very different ways and children's literature is a place where those consequences can be observed.

*Coraline* depicts the conflicts between conceptions and realities in current society family roles and gives us a glimpse about how they are coexisting and how they are in conflict at the same time. Children and parents seem to be very far away from each other when they try to communicate. To parents children are living in their own mass media world and they are talking languages that they, as parents, do not understand; but what parents do not realize is that this is exactly what we are demanding from children to do. That is, to grow up very fast and become independent and self-confident at an early age. By default, this includes the fact that children begin to speak as adults and demand things for themselves, they become aware of what they need and they search for it using the tools they have, they also receive information from the ideologies present in society about how a mother and a father must be and demand those same behaviors from their own parents.

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In the search for their needs, children become the heroines and heroes of their own families making them complete according to the traditional conceptions, but this quest is a lonely path where they also acquire the ability to see what is missing and realize how they are left alone. Children do not comprehend the dimension of all the ideological mess-up in which they are submersed. Adults keep pretending that nothing is really happening and get surprised when in the news , there appear teenagers and kids showing high levels of violence and rage. After the first ten years of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century it is clear that many changes are happening at the same time. To children born in 2000, growing up connected to any device 24/7 is natural and like a mirror, literature reveals this reality. Coraline has already read *all* the books, watched *all* the tv shows, surfed *all* the internet, and she is bored. What the novel is doing is portraying exactly what is happening in real life. Thus, literature makes a valuation of reality and ideology. Neil Gaiman does that. He understands the conflicts of traditional, modern and post-modern concepts and practices surrounding family roles, because he sees them in real life and shows them as a horror fairy tale.

Finally, Coraline is not a lonely child heroine among our current fairy tales. There are other discourses that portray similar characters, Chihiro, from the movie *Spirited Away (2001)* written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki, is also a girl who feels upset about her parents' decision of moving to a new place without caring about her feelings, and has to complete a quest to have them back. Along with Ofelia the main character of *El Laberinto del Fauno(2006)* also written by its director Guillermo del Toro, which portrays a raw dark

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fairy tale set at the end of the Spanish civil war, these characters are created in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and depict actual concerns and situations. *Coraline*, makes a criticism of the post-modern society in the sense that parents are not longer aware of what their children are receiving through the media: consumerism, materialism, sex, violence, death, social stereotypes and so on. In the end, society is confronting contempt for life, and as Ezra Pound put it: “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree”, so *Coraline* is a reflection of our current times and it is a call of attention to parents and society that should be more aware of the conceptions they are using to educate this and the upcoming generations.

Thus, though this paper address just one interpretation, further studies could find many other connections of this novel to other related texts – including novels, tales and movies – and fields – education, literature, children’s history and anthropology and so on – that surely should give more information to continue the study of conceptions about childhood in the developing 21<sup>th</sup> century.



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