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“Re-Negotiating Femininities and Fairy Tale Structures in  
Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*”

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Agnes Hirmann, BEd

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## Table of contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. AN ATTEMPTED GENRE CLASSIFICATION OF <i>CORALINE</i> AND ITS EFFECT ON A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1. A FAIRY TALE READING.....	5
2.1.1. <i>Femininities in fairy tales</i> .....	9
2.1.2. <i>The heroine's journey</i> .....	13
2.2. THE UNCANNY.....	17
2.3. GENRE MULTIPLICITIES .....	20
<b>3. THE ROLE OF THE READER IN THE NEGOTIATION OF FEMININITIES IN <i>CORALINE</i> .....</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1. THE IMPLIED READER OF <i>CORALINE</i> .....	28
3.2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BLANKS .....	31
<b>4. THE ROLE OF THE HEROINE .....</b>	<b>35</b>
4.1. A CHARACTERIZATION OF CORALINE .....	38
4.2. CORALINE AS A 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY HEROINE.....	42
4.3. ALICE AS A 19 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HEROINE .....	44
<b>5. RELATIONSHIPS TO THE ADULTS IN <i>CORALINE</i>.....</b>	<b>46</b>
5.1. THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY .....	48
5.1.1. <i>Symbols of motherhood</i> .....	50
5.1.2. <i>The family as a locus of misunderstanding</i> .....	53
5.2. GUIDANCE FIGURES.....	55
5.3. ANTAGONISTS .....	58
<b>6. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>ABSTRACT (ENGLISH) .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>ABSTRACT (GERMAN) .....</b>	<b>66</b>

## 1. Introduction

“‘Because’, she said, ‘when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, *that’s* brave.’” (Gaiman 57)

Since its publication at the dawn of a new millennium by Neil Gaiman in 2002, *Coraline* has continued to fascinate readers and critics alike with its heroine armed with an “abundance” of “[g]ood fortune and wisdom and courage” (Gaiman 143) and her quest in the ‘other’ world, filled with creatures and trials easily deemed too strange and frightening for its classification as children’s literature. In short, Coraline, a self-proclaimed explorer (see Gaiman 13), plagued by a persistent boredom in her summer holidays, ventures through a strange door in her apartment and arrives in a place that is almost, though not quite, the same as the one she just left. The world at the other side of the door holds other, and stranger, versions of the people living in Coraline’s house, including another mother and father. At first, they seem to provide a long awaited cure for her ennui, however, rather soon Coraline finds herself in the most challenging and frightening exploration of all – the search for the souls of her real parents and three other children, who have previously fallen victim to the deceiving charms of the other mother. Employing her wits and bravery, Coraline eventually succeeds in her quest and wins the final battle over the malevolent mother, restoring the order in her own world before the end of summer and the start of a new school year. The two interwoven worlds in *Coraline* can, following the definition by Tolkien (see *ibid.* 139-142), be classified into the primary world, which is governed by the same natural laws as the world that the reader lives in, and the secondary world, where these laws appear to be suspended and into which Coraline enters by stepping through the door in her apartment’s drawing room.

The structure as well as many of the events, adversaries and triumphs of the novella seem closely reminiscent of a fairy tale, even though this is not the genre that the text claims for itself and not its only generic influence. Nevertheless, one of the central aims of this thesis is the performing of a fairy tale reading of *Coraline* to analyze which specific structures related to the progression of the story or archetypal characters are either actively employed or subverted by the text. This generic analysis will then form the basis for the main investigation and research interest of this thesis, the distinct femininities portrayed in *Coraline*, not only through the heroine herself, but also through her main adversary, the other mother, and various secondary characters. The theoretical construct of the fairy tale genre provides an intriguing framework for this endeavor, as the feminine in the fairy tale is traditionally confined to

passivity or malevolent evil (see Wanning Harries 99-100). However, Coraline navigates her own uncanny 'fairy tale' with an agency unavailable to most females in Grimm's collection of fairy tales and seems to stake her claim to the position of a 21<sup>st</sup> century heroine in tune with the feminist perspective of her time. Due to remarkable similarities of the heroine and her journey, though first received in an entirely different societal context, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865, will serve as a secondary source of comparison and contrast throughout this thesis, specifically in relation to the agency and portrayal of the texts' female protagonists.

Thus, this paper seeks to explore the femininities presented in *Coraline*, analyzed on one hand through the generic lens of the fairy tale and on the other through the use of modern feminist theories. The concept of femininity and its generic framework in the text will further be analyzed regarding its possible effect on the reader, using seminal theories of reader-response criticism. In brief, this paper aims to answer the following research questions: How is female identity created and portrayed in *Coraline*? and How are fairy tale structures used or subverted to depict femininities in the text?

The following section begins by attempting a genre classification of *Coraline*, at first primarily on the basis of a reading of the text as a fairy tale, then by widening the scope to other genres, such as magic realism and the adventure story. A separate chapter will examine the appearance and significance of the ever-present uncanny in *Coraline*, based on the concept as established by Freud, in relation to the fairy tale elements and represented femininities. Subsequently follows a chapter delineating the role of the reader in the negotiation of femininities in the text through an analysis of *Coraline* through the lens of reader-response criticism, placing specific emphasis on the concepts of the implied reader and blanks in the text, as developed by Iser. The next section is focused on the heroine, including a characterization and discussion of her central attributes, referring back to concepts related to the fairy tale elements of the text as well as feminist theories. A subchapter will place Coraline in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of her publication, attempting to draw a connection to contemporary influential societal notions of femininity. At this point, Alice and her adventures will serve as an explicit point of contrast in relation to her distinct 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural context influencing depictions of the female. The final section of this thesis outlines the relationships between Coraline and the adults present in her explorations, with an explicit focus placed on the position and role of the two mothers and their contributions to the portrayal of femininities in the text. Further subchapters will explore the textual descriptions of the family, the guidance fig-

ures and the antagonists, before the final conclusion summarizes the main findings and attempts to provide concise answers to the research questions presented above.

Overall, this research paper aims to combine genre analysis with a reader-response approach and feminist criticism to explore the re-negotiations of femininities in *Coraline* from theoretically differing vantage points to gain a multifaceted perspective on this complex issue.

## **2. An attempted genre classification of *Coraline* and its effect on a feminist interpretation**

Although *Coraline* does not claim to be a fairy tale, there are many structural similarities to the genre that can and will be analyzed in the following sections. Additionally, the introductory quote of the text immediately transports it into the generic realm of the fairy tale: “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 qtd. in Gaiman, n.p.). Even though this quote is actually reproduced incorrectly (see Lee 561), it captures the essence that fairy tales are neither written for passive reception nor as a reproduction of reality. Instead, they can show us a way of managing reality (see *ibid.* 561). If this sentiment is indeed also true for *Coraline*, the text can guide the reader on how to manage different areas of life, such as the (de-) construction of gender, and specifically femininities, as the central characters of *Coraline* are all female. Fairy tales can be complex and multifaceted and may address both children and adult readers (see Lurie 126-127). The fantasy that is part of the fairy tale reading can be central to a negotiation and construction of femininities:

[F]antasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable. [...] Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home. (Butler, *Undoing* 28-29)

A fairy tale might therefore be a possible space for re-negotiation and establishing previously untold concepts that bypass the limits prescribed by social conventions and reality, holding the possibility of one day becoming part of that reality. Genre has an active role in the production of meaning. Thus, establishing that fairy tale structures are central to the text affect a feminist reading of *Coraline*, as their presence and recognition may lead to the activation of specific schemata linked to the role of the female in this genre (see Frow 110). However,

therein also lies the potential of the text to challenge and subvert these preexisting notions and interpretations through diverging constructions of femininities. Especially fairy tales in the postmodern frame often employ revisions or pastiche of structures and contents to challenge values and concepts typically expressed in the genre as well as in culture (see Makinen 161).

*Coraline* also belongs to the corpus of children's fiction, which, according to Nelson (223), illustrates "adult beliefs about what real children are and need" and is therefore "both mimetic and prescriptive." Children's literature thus shares with fairy tales its susceptibility to capture those truths in their texts which pertain to concepts that are perpetuated to possess general or universal legitimacy within a culture. Although the mimesis may be partly obscured through the use of fantastic elements, it is interesting to read *Coraline* as a prescriptive character, assigning a posture of "[g]ood fortune and wisdom and courage" (Gaiman 143) to young girls. Perdigao (103) argues that "*Coraline* straddles the divide between enchantment and disenchantment in the liminal space where fairy tales are re-membered as well as dis-membered", capturing how the text is positioned simultaneously in the vicinity of and distance from the fairy tale genre, and that *Coraline* has been shaped by and bears resemblance to multiple genres, needing to be interpreted in its multiformity.

An unambiguous genre classification can prove to be challenging. Frow (10) defines genre as "a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning". He further elaborates that genres "are the frames that establish appropriate ways of reading or viewing or listening to texts. They are made up of material and formal features, a particular thematic structure, a situation of address which mobilises a set of rhetorical purposes, and a more general structure of implication" (ibid. 31). Therefore, the knowledge of the genres of a text is important for its understanding in the reading process. However, modern texts often bear resemblances to more than one genre in terms of their "literary devices" and "literary purpose" (Wellek and Warren 234-235). In fact, "[t]he good writer partly conforms to the genre as it exists, partly stretches it" (ibid. 235). Genres are continuously combined and shaped in novel ways, while sharing a common core with preexisting generic conventions to maintain intelligibility and accessibility for the reader. *Coraline* provides a notable example of stretching the fairy tale genre into a combination with other frames of reference, for example magic realism or the fantastic. A thorough analysis of the generic make-up of the text and its effects on the production of meaning for the reader is the objective of the following sections.

## 2.1. A fairy tale reading

The aim of this section is to provide an analysis of the fairy tale structures prominently present or missing in *Coraline*, beginning with a discussion of general features and followed by subchapters that include a detailed discussion of the femininities in the text in comparison to those traditionally present in fairy tales as well as the structure of events of the story. Nevertheless, before beginning the analysis, a necessary delineation of concepts has to be made. Fairy tales are and always have been written and told all over the world and are inherently culturally contingent due to their encoding of specific norms, conflicts and historical events (see Benson 4-5). Nikolajeva (*Power* 139) further points out that the scope and direction of the “enormous subversive potential” of fairy tales strongly depends on their ideological and cultural background. Thus, regarding the scope of this thesis, it becomes imperative to focus on one branch of fairy tales only. As *Coraline* is a text written as part of the Western literary discourse, the fairy tale structures and contents referred to as prototypical in the following sections refer to those popularized by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.

The fairy tale is often compared to the myth, however, whereas myths delineate the grandiose adventures and heroism of an extraordinary character, often with a tragic fate, fairy tales normally feature ordinary or even disadvantaged protagonists fulfilling their quest and being rewarded with a happy ending (see Bettelheim 37, Teverson 17). Fairy tales are also an essential part of children’s literature, depicting protagonists, that “like children, grow from being the underdog to being strong and independent” (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 30). Additionally, fairy tales present the frequently extraordinary and miraculous events of the text in “casual, everyday ways” (Bettelheim 37). *Coraline* is definitely positioned towards the end of the fairy tale on this scale, as the heroine, who is “a girl who was small for her age” (Gaiman 93), defeats a “huge” adversary with teeth “sharp as knives” (Gaiman 126) as well as her own fears (see Gaiman 159).

One central and prevalent feature of the fairy tale is the abundance of magical creatures and events that always remain entirely uncontested and without any explanation within the text. “[F]airy-tale magic entails an acceptance, from the ‘once upon a time’ to the ‘happily ever after’, that magic is normative in fairy land, and that the ordinary rules are suspended. The cat just talks” (Teverson 30). This naturalization of ‘magic’ in the world of the fairy tale becomes especially noticeable in *Coraline* as she literally moves from one world into the other and back, but the cat, who like her can shift between them, only speaks in one of the realms. In her own world, Coraline can only hear the cat’s voice in her head (see Gaiman 51)

and the natural laws seem to be in place. In the world of the fairy tale, the heroine faces the magical “[n]icht als Staunender, sondern als Handelnder” (Lüthi, *Volksmärchen* 9). Similarly, the reader is led not to question any events in the fairy tale that would seem unbelievable or impossible if placed in the real world or in a realist text (see Zolkover 75). Although there is no explicit mention of magic in the text, remarkable and improbable events abound in the other world. Their origins are mostly attributed to the other mother, but never explained or questioned beyond their creator. However, a crack appears in the illusion when Coraline “decide[s]” that the other mother “could not truly make anything [...]. She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed” (Gaiman 115-116). This statement not only foregrounds the heroine’s agency through deciding herself on what the other mother can or cannot do, but also suspends the acceptance of the extraordinary that had previously remained unquestioned, and thus loosens the frame of the fairy tale.

The first words of *Coraline* are, “Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house” (Gaiman 1). Whereas other elements of the text clearly evoke central notions of the fairy tale, this beginning statement does not seem to do so. In opposition to the notorious opening line of popular Western fairy tales, ‘once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away’, the action and the characters in *Coraline* are not immediately placed in a distant temporal and spatial realm (see Zolkover 67). Instead, this beginning phrase suggests that the events about to be recounted could have happened as recently as yesterday in any conceivable neighborhood, which might suggest a closer proximity to the sphere of the reader and so allow for a greater potential of identification. Bettelheim (62) suggests that the “deliberate vagueness in the beginnings of fairy tales symbolizes that we are leaving the concrete world of ordinary reality.” This move sets the tone for a reading of the text as independent of the “normal logic and causation” (ibid. 62), central to the reception of fairy tales. By using a different, ‘medias in res’ beginning formula, *Coraline* does not yet provide a clear frame of reference in relation to the suspension or continuance of everyday logic.

Additionally, the first words of the text serve to place an immediate focus on the protagonist as an active agent rather than simply locating her in distant surroundings. The opening of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* echoes a similar structure, “Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do” (Carroll 5), even though Alice is shown to have significantly less agency over her environment than Coraline. This exemplifies the structural similarities between the journeys of the two heroines that are contrasted with their highly differing amount of agency, control and independence, which can likely be attributed in part to the number of decades that have passed between the publica-



tions of the two texts and the increased cultural impact of feminist ideas and movements. However, texts are not only shaped by societal norms but can also contribute to the discourse that re-shapes them, as will be further analyzed in the following sections, so that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* may be seen as more than a distant connection to *Coraline*, slowly paving the way for active literary heroines.

A main structural element of the fairy tale is the simplification of situations and characters by foregoing any unnecessary details to the proceeding of the main plot and presenting characters that are "typical rather than unique" (Bettelheim 8). The figures are one-dimensional, their qualities often presented in extremes and in contrast to others: "Die reiche Differenziertheit des Menschen wird im Märchen aufgelöst; statt in einem einzigen Menschen vereinigt sehen wir die verschiedenen Verhaltensmöglichkeiten, scharf voneinander getrennt, nebeneinanderstehenden Figuren zugeteilt" (Lüthi, *Volksmärchen* 16). Human complexity is reduced and left aside for the duration of the text, which allows for the presentation of good and evil as disparate qualities, impossibly present in the same character. *Coraline* is a difficult case to discuss in this regard. For example, the cat's doubts whether the main antagonist, the other mother, wants "something to love" or "something to eat as well" (Gaiman 63) remain without a definite answer. Coraline's real parents appear loving and kind but are absent not only during most of the text, but also appear absent-minded towards Coraline whenever they are mentioned. On a structural level, the psychological and physiological parental absence is an important pre-condition for the child heroine's adventure, as will be discussed in the next section. Interestingly, the only person that tells Coraline that she loves her is the other mother (see Gaiman 77). Coraline herself is presented as brave but scared at the same time, even though she herself points out that this does not have to be a contradiction (see Gaiman 57). This blurring of the binary oppositions typical for fairy tales in *Coraline* thus seems to contradict this generic reading of the text. However, Tatar ("Heroes" 97, 107) postulates that inversion of character traits is a popular move in fairy tales, suggesting that lack of stability may actually be another characteristic of the genre. Additionally, modern fairy tale heroines in contemporary popular culture, a realm especially dominated by Disney protagonists, generally establish a contrast to prototypical simplified fairy tale characters as they generally appear to be multifaceted and are shown to have complex emotional lives (see Mollet 224-225), so that the multidimensionality in *Coraline* might be a result of the apparent complexity of character as a precondition for contemporary fairy tale texts.

One central element that differentiates *Coraline* from the usual fairy tale is the heroine's name. Fairy tale protagonists, especially if they are male, tend to lack the individuality

that can be expressed through a proper name and instead are often identified by common nouns describing their position in society or relationship to others, such as ‘the prince’ or ‘the youngest brother’ (see Tatar, “Heroes” 96). However, female protagonists also often carry names which foreground their physical attributes and are not reminiscent of neither past nor present proper names, such as ‘Sleeping Beauty’ or ‘Red Riding Hood’. If names do appear in fairy tales, they are usually popular and common names, like ‘Hans’, which further establish the character as a typified, almost abstract figure rather than as an individual like the reader (see Lüthi, *Märchen* 28). This abstraction supports the idea that fairy tales do not aim to portray individual fates, but rather universal, though perhaps unconscious, concerns, fears and desires (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 11, Campbell 219). It becomes obvious that *Coraline* represents a different approach: “The name ‘Coraline’ is deliberately wrong sounding, calculated to be off-kilter, slightly unreal: obviously the name of a storybook character” (Buckley 71). Thus, the text’s heroine appears almost ‘over-individualized’ as she is unlikely to share her name with many other fictional characters or, as a matter of fact, readers. That her struggle for individuality is also important within the story is expressed by the adults with whom Coraline interacts apart from her parents, who continuously mispronounce her name as the more familiar sounding “Caroline” (Gaiman 2, 13).

Fairy tales clearly do not represent our world as it is, nor give useful instructions for actions in everyday life: “The unrealistic nature of these tales [...] is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales’ concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual” (Bettelheim 25). Similarly, *Coraline* may not only be read as an instruction on how to defeat evil other mothers, but as a story about bravery and doing the “right thing” (Gaiman xvii), an inner process inherently human and universal. Through their magical stories, fairy tales also tend to carry an ounce of universal truth: “Though they can and do entertain children, we will do well to listen seriously to what they tell us about the real world we live in” (Lurie 137). Thus, it might be possible to suggest that a reading of a text as a fairy tale entails, at least in part, a reading for information about ‘the real world’ as well. Additionally, even though the fairy tale is a genre with a long tradition and is often associated with somewhat antiquated values and definitely unrealistic events, it can hold crucial perspectives even for contemporary readers: “fairy tales embody worlds of naïve morality that can still resonate with us if their underlying dramas are re-created and re-designed to counter as well as collide with our complex social realities. Collisions do not have to end in destruction. They are necessary to disrupt and confront clichés and bad habits. They are necessary to shake up the world and sharpen our gaze” (Zipes 136).

Thus, the fairy tale can be seen as an apt choice of genre to analyze the renegotiation of critical and complex notions, such as femininities, in *Coraline*. Other concepts, such as the role of the female, may then possibly also be taken as clues for the real life outside of the text. The next chapter aims to further explore the extratextual effects of intertextual femininities and how *Coraline* may contribute to this frame.

### **2.1.1. Femininities in fairy tales**

The cultural influences of fairy tales and their structures remain present and echoed even in contemporary culture. In relation to their possible influence on the concepts of femininity, Lieberman (385) suggests that “[m]illions of women must surely have formed their psychosexual self-concepts, and their ideas of what they could or could not accomplish, what sort of behavior would be rewarded, and of the nature of reward itself, in part from their favorite fairy tales. These stories have been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes, and fantasies of generations of girls.” This sentiment gives considerable power to the representations of the female in the fairy tale and its transformational power for women. Whether the modeled female of the fairy tale is assimilated or not, it is obvious that her place within the genre is embedded in a discourse led by male agency: “By showcasing ‘women’ and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/them into man-made constructs of ‘Woman’” (Bacchilega 9). The aim of this chapter is to analyze the femininities traditionally presented in fairy tales, as part of the good or the evil forces, and compare them to their portrayal in *Coraline*, beginning with the character of the heroine.

As the male hero has traditionally received more ‘screen time’ in the fairy tale than the heroine, his traits and characteristics shall briefly be discussed here to see if and how the dichotomy between male and female is established in the fairy tale. Teverson (19) establishes cleverness as essential to the hero’s character, whereas Tatar (“Heroes” 99) highlights that at the center of his success actually lie “acquired characteristics rather than innate traits” to underscore that anyone can rise to triumph. However, she further states that, for the male heroes, “[m]erit rarely counts, luck seems to be everything” (Tatar, “Heroes” 97), as their success can often be attributed at least partly to the readily available helpers and is achieved even when their advice is ignored. If this concept is applied to *Coraline*, it becomes clear that the decisive factors of her final success are her bravery and her cleverness, which could be said to be a combination of acquired and innate traits. Although she has helpers by her side, such as the cat and the Misses Spink and Forcible, *Coraline* definitely succeeds through wit rather than luck, which shows a clear mismatch to the archetype of the male fairy tale hero, at least fol-

lowing the concept of Tatar. Alice does not seem to fit this mold either, however, as she continuously struggles in Wonderland, where both her innate traits, such as her intelligence and even her identity (see Carroll 17-18), as well as her acquired skills and knowledge, fail her; it seems difficult to characterize her as an active heroine at all.

Examples of female heroines that equal their male counterparts in Western fairy tales are few and far between, as even when a woman or girl is the protagonist, she tends to remain passive and/or is silenced, sometimes quite literally, like Sleeping Beauty in her long-lasting sleep or Snow White after taking a bite of the poisoned apple. Finally, it is often the male sphere that limits the female, like the Wolf and the Hunter shaping the story of Red Riding Hood, and the final reward for the heroine is often the marriage with a prince, or a “prize-male” (see Bacchilega 35, 58, 76). Rowe further proposes that the accordance of fairy tale patterns with cultural norms propagate female conformity with the patriarchy and the female position as a wife and mother (see *ibid.* 239). In *Coraline*, the femininity and agency of the heroine as well as that of the antagonistic other mother do not appear to be confined by male characters, thus subverting traditional fairy tale structures. Nevertheless, the text is not without masculine forces, which take up the space between the commanding agency of Coraline and the other mother and remain generally colorless. An exception might be the cat, who is gendered male (see Gaiman 33), and is arguably the character with the most agency, as he knows more about the other world than even the other mother (see Gaiman 73) and can move between the worlds at his own will.

Regarding the characteristics essential to the fairy tale heroine, “[w]hat is praiseworthy in males, however, is rejected in females; the counterpart of the energetic, aspiring boy is the scheming, ambitious woman. Some heroines show a kind of strength in their ability to endure, but they do not actively seek to change their lot” (Lieberman 392-393). The character traits of the male hero can thus rather be found in female antagonists than in heroines. Instead, “the quintessential heroine of the fairy tale” is “the helpless, imprisoned maiden” (Lieberman 389). This description seems fit for Alice, who constantly finds herself trapped, be it in a hallway of locked doors or in a pool of her own tears, which she always escapes through the help of outside forces, even if they come in the shape of foods or drinks. Coraline, however, is neither helpless nor imprisoned, except for a short confinement in the mirror of the other mother, and propels the story forward through her own actions and inside forces.

The fairy tale heroine, who fundamentally reaffirms patriarchal values, represents traits like compliance, compassion and bearing humiliations as desirable feminine virtues (see Bacchilega 78, Tatar, “Heroes” 98, 103, Lieberman 389-390). The heroines who possess these

traits are ultimately rewarded in the fairy tale. Further, the themes for female characters are developed in the relational and emotional rather than in the intellectual sphere, which is usually reserved for male fairy tale heroes (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 61). Another significant characteristic of the female heroine is that she is almost always described to be remarkably beautiful. The previously established characteristic of the fairy tale to simplify and omit details wherever they are unnecessary for the progression of the story (see Bettelheim 8) suggests that the heroine's beauty is deemed essential for the events in the text. The beautiful females featured in fairy tales also consistently exhibit the previously established desirable virtues and thus forge a connection between beauty and success for females (see Lieberman 385). The significance of beauty establishes another opposition to the male hero, as instead of the acquired traits that are ultimately responsible for his success, fairy tale beauty is an innate characteristic, reaffirming the female passivity, as their deeds do not matter as much as their appearance.

Coraline does not enact compliance, as exemplified by her knowing that "she was doing something wrong" (Gaiman 24) when she steps through the door for the first time. Further, showing compassion and bearing humiliations are not central to her character or actions. Related to the embodiment of beauty, not only is Coraline's appearance never described or assessed, she also achieves her first victory over the other mother with a scraped knee and ripped pajama pants (see Gaiman 120), attributes not usually associated with beauty. Perhaps a case could be made that Coraline is modeled along the attributes of the fairy tale hero rather than the heroine, although she does share some of the traditionally female characteristics as well. For example, even though Coraline eventually succeeds through her wit and cleverness, the main sphere of her actions is the emotional and relational one, as the motivation to begin her quest stems from the emotional negligence of her parents and she then has to escape the other mother's "love" (Gaiman 125) for her. Nevertheless, the classic fairy tale structure does not allow for grey areas but only for binary oppositions, also in respect to its hero or heroine. *Coraline* might actively subvert or perhaps simply ignore the prerequisites for its heroine established through the use of fairy tale structures. Thus, the text can move beyond and alter the thematic schema of reference of the genre in an act of distinct repetition of gendered schemata, slightly shifting the paradigm and opening the space for a displacement of the established gender norms (Butler, *Trouble* 202-203).

The contrast between good and evil females in the fairy tale is often created through an opposition of beauty and a lack thereof. Additionally, the villainesses usually seek power and are given more agency than the heroine (see Lieberman 393). These qualities are thus presented as undesirable for a female:

Because cleverness, will-power, and manipulative skill are allied with vanity, shrewishness, and ugliness, and because of their gruesome fates, odious females hardly recommend themselves as models for young readers. [...] While readers dissociate from these portrayals of feminine power, defiance, and/or self-expression, they readily identify with the prettily passive heroine whose submission to commendable roles insures her triumphant happiness. (Rowe 247-248)

The only female antagonist in *Coraline* is the other mother, whose appearance is first presented to be slightly bizarre, with fingers that are “too long” and “curved and sharp” fingernails (Gaiman 26), but turns into someone more unpleasant and off-putting at the height of her villainous acts, as “[h]er hair writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth were sharp as knives” (Gaiman 126). Although the other mother masks her acts under the guise of love for Coraline, they can be interpreted to truly stem from a desire for power, making her fit for the archetype of the fairy tale villainess. However, what is especially interesting about the other mother is that she occupies not only the position of the antagonist, but, at least by name, also the role of the mother.

The mother is another position in which females often appear in fairy tales. Rowe (242) and Bettelheim (67) point out that it is also not uncommon for the mother figure to be split in two, one of them being benevolent and protective, and the other one malignant, as it is the case in *Coraline*. The second space is usually taken up by a stepmother, who can easily be seen as an ‘other mother’ as well. This division is said to aid the child reader of the fairy tale in managing ambivalent emotions toward their own mother (see Bettelheim 69). While the stepmother is often cast in the role of the villainess, the loving mother is often very passive and lacks agency. Lundell (29) states that fairy tales provide “no role model for a strong positive mother figure” and in fact “actively discourage bonding between mother and daughter. This is in keeping with the goal of the patriarchal culture in which situations that can lead to cooperation between females are discouraged because it is potentially threatening to the ruling patriarchal powers.” Once again, the femininity in the fairy tale is limited by external masculine power dynamics. Coraline’s two mothers are depicted in a similar fashion. Her real mother neglects Coraline’s desire for individuality, as shown when she refuses to buy her the “Day-Glo green gloves” (Gaiman 21) as part of her school wardrobe, and generally seems to be too busy to spend time or build an emotional connection with her daughter. The other mother continuously performs tasks associated with a caring and active mother, such as preparing delicious meals, wanting to play games and professing her love to Coraline. However, the other nefarious actions that she carries out as part of her antagonistic position in the text inhibit not only an emotional bond between her and Coraline, but also a reception of her as a positive mother role model for the reader, a feature she shares with Coraline’s real mother.

Lundell (44) also remarks that the actions of the negative mother figure in the fairy tale often eventually lead to positive consequences for the heroine. In *Coraline*, the capture of the heroine's real parents by the other mother pushes her to truly develop her bravery, which can be said to be a beneficial outcome for Coraline. Thus, the mother roles in the text can be read to be allocated in accordance with fairy tale structures.

Other female figures in the fairy tale often take the position of guidance figures ready to help the hero or heroine. Even though they may hold a substantial amount of power, these females tend to be beings such as fairies rather than humans and thus appear almost asexual, further failing to provide powerful models of female identification (see Lieberman 391). The portrayals of femininity that appear in *Coraline*, besides the heroine and her mothers, follow that pattern as well. The Misses Spink and Forcible, but even more so the two girls that appear in the circle of children that have previously fallen victim to the other mother, fulfill their functions as guidance figures in helping Coraline along her journey and provide her with tools and hints necessary for her quest, but do not exhibit enough depth or relatability in their characters to be able to act as female role models.

Overall, Coraline herself seems to be the only female in the text to challenge fairy tale allocations of femininities, which are rather reaffirmed by the mothers and the guidance figures. This provides support for a fairy tale reading of the text, as well as a foundation for a feminist reinterpretation and renegotiation of the fairy tale heroine.

### **2.1.2. The heroine's journey**

This chapter bases its analysis on the concept of the 'hero's journey' as developed by Campbell as well as on Propp's structural approach to the fairy tale plot and aims to discuss whether the course of action of *Coraline* develops similarly. Campbell (101) claims that the "ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage" serves "as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale", a sentiment congruent with the intended codification of general human concerns in fairy tales (see Lüthi, *Märchen* 25). Even though Campbell refers to both genders in the quotation above, his discussion and exploration of the 'hero's journey' remains both implicitly and explicitly gendered male. This might partly be attributed to the societal and cultural context in 1949, when his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* was first published, and partly to the fact that most of the texts analyzed by Campbell do in fact have a male protagonist. Therefore, while the analysis in this chapter employs the author's central concepts, they will have to be adapted and transformed where necessary to be able to

describe the journey of a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century female heroine like *Coraline*. This requires a strongly adjusted re-reading and reframing of the theories established by Propp and Campbell, as the formerly fundamentally male-dominated genre and textual corpus that they have examined and analyzed has also shifted and extended to accommodate extra- and intratextual changes towards increased feminine agency. These models that have guided countless textual analyses of fairy tale texts over the last decades can still hold value for the discussion of contemporary texts, such as *Coraline*, but not without admitting the same amount of restructuring into the theoretical frames as has occurred on the level of the primary texts themselves.

In short, the passage of the hero or heroine involves the stages of “separation”, “initiation” and “return” (Campbell 23), which might also mirror the human experience of growing up, overcoming problems and seeking independence, another popular trope in fairy tales.

In the Proppian structure, the beginning of the fairy tale introduces the heroine and her family, followed by an absention of a family member, the issue of an interdiction towards the heroine, which is almost immediately violated, and a first appearance of the antagonist (see Propp 25-28). The antagonist then performs their first act of villainy, often unto a family member, and, upon this discovery, the heroine then sets out on her journey (see *ibid.* 30-38). These moves could be subsumed into the “call to adventure” (Campbell 48) of the heroine that establishes the scenery for her quest. *Coraline* accurately observes this structure, as the first pages of the text begin by presenting the heroine, then her surroundings, her neighbors and finally her parents. The absention of her parents appears both emotionally, as they refuse to engage with her when she demands entertainment, as well as literally, as Coraline finds herself alone at home when she first walks through the door. The interdiction for this act that truly begins her adventure, however, is not issued by her parents, but by Mr. Bobo, relaying a message from his mice: “*Don’t go through the door*” (Gaiman 14). The only departure from the Proppian structure can be found in Coraline entering into the other world before the misfortune, the capture of her parents by the other mother, has happened or is known to her, as she only discovers their disappearance after returning to her home from her first exploration of the other world.

After the heroine has accepted the call, she has to pass a “magical threshold” (Campbell 74) into a new realm or landscape, where she faces dangers and trials (see *ibid.* 81). Bettelheim (145) suggests that these dangers represent “how the child sees life, even when in actuality his own life proceeds in very favorable circumstances, as far as externals are concerned”, and that their eventual defeat by the heroine signifies a victory over one’s own battles (see *ibid.* 127-128). According to Propp, the heroine’s departure is followed by the intro-



duction of the donor character and the recipient of a magical agent, preparing her for the approaching direct confrontation with the villainess, where the heroine eventually triumphs and regains the object of her quest (see *ibid.* 39-43, 51-53). Coraline's journey through the door-passageway is noticeably short and the other world that she finds herself in is a "distorted version of where she began" (Zolkover 69). Thus, Zolkover (69) claims that the text uses fairy tale structures but maps them "onto the vertical axis rather than the horizontal, onto the experiential rather than the spatial." Through the spatial vicinity of the two worlds and Coraline's ability to move back and forth between them, the text can highlight inner processes rather than outward movements, foregrounding an eventual victory over the internal evils, as suggested by Bettelheim (127-128). The donor figure in *Coraline* is most prominently represented by the cat, who provides critical information to the heroine, such as the idea to 'win' back her parents through a challenge game with the other mother (see Gaiman 63). Coraline then faces various trials, which test her bravery and where she recovers the souls of the three children she has met in her short period of imprisonment in the mirror, before entering into direct confrontation with the other mother. Through her cleverness and the help of the cat, Coraline also regains her parents and thus achieves a restoration of order in her world, to which she and her parents then return. However, the text does not yet provide the happy ending expected of a fairy tale, but creates another adversity for the heroine, as the other mother's hand has followed her to her world in pursuit of the key for the door-passageway.

After the confrontation with the villainess and returning to her own world, Campbell's (196) analysis suggests that the heroine finally must "knit together [her] two worlds." Thus, a final connection is established between the primary and the magical secondary realm, expressing the notion that these two worlds are in fact one and the same (see *ibid.* 188). In the final moves of the fairy tale, pertaining to the heroine's return, Propp includes the pursuit by the antagonist, their final punishment and the rewarding of the heroine (see *ibid.* 56-57, 63). Thus, the expected happy ending of the text is created, where "one force or the other must be destroyed" because there is "no room for ambiguities at the end of fairy tales" (Bacchilega 112). *Coraline* also maps its final actions unto this structural framework, as the other mother's hand crosses the threshold so that the horrors of the other world follow Coraline into her own sphere and intimately connect the two spaces. The hand thus pursues the heroine, but she employs her bravery and trickery one last time as she imprisons the hand in a well. The final Proppian moves are less clearly present, as even though the capture and confinement of the villainess's hand might be read as a punishment, there is no ultimate external reward bestowed upon Coraline for her success over the evil forces. However, the final act of recogni-

tion again arises from Mr. Bobo's mice, as their owner declares to Coraline, "'They say that you are our savior'" (Gaiman 158) and Mr. Bobo himself, as he finally calls her Coraline instead of Caroline (see *ibid.* 158), demonstrating that her quirks are no longer overlooked, but now appreciated by the adults. Nevertheless, the greatest reward stems from within herself – the newfound bravery, when Coraline realizes that "there was nothing left about school [and perhaps many other places] that could scare her anymore" (Gaiman 159).

The formulaic happy ending of the fairy tale, according to Campbell (21), "is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man." Thus, although the fairy tale makes no claim to credibility for the actions or characters it portrays, it can show a desired inner solution of conflict that can hold valuable truths for the reader (see Lüthi, *Volksmärchen* 85). Just as there is no beginning formula like 'once upon a time' in *Coraline* that would transport the text straight into the fairy tale realm, the last words of the text are not 'and she lived happily ever after', but rather "Coraline finally allowed herself to drift into sleep, while the gentle upstairs music of the mouse circus spilled out onto the warm evening air, telling the world that the summer was almost done" (Gaiman 160). Once again, by not reproducing the expected formula or a similar one to evoke the sense of eternal peace found at the end of fairy tales, *Coraline* remains in the ambiguous space between genres and does not answer any questions about the existence or quality of the ever after.

Looking back at *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it seems dubitable whether Alice's journey follows Proppian fairy tale structures. Although the heroine moves into another magical world, the beginning of the story does not truly establish her family or surroundings, there is no interdiction issued or violated, and she does not confront one clear villainous antagonist, but rather many strange and partly rude or unpleasant characters. Upon Alice's return to her world, Wonderland is marked as clearly distinct and distant through its location in the realm of dreams, which does not allow for a combination of the two worlds. There is also no true punishment mentioned for any evil character, nor a reward for Alice. Therefore, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* cannot be read as a fairy tale in the same way as *Coraline*. However, the text might be read as an active subversion of fairy tale, depicting not only the "separation", "initiation" and "return" (Campbell 23) of a female heroine, atypical in the fairy tale realm, but also a reversal of the attributes of other characters, such as the blunt and insulting nature of creatures otherwise classifiable as donors, and Alice's only dissatisfying and short-lived final triumph over the Queen of Hearts. This element of subversion, de- and reconstruction can, on different levels, also be found in *Coraline* and might thus be one of the most significant structural similarities between the two texts.

According to Campbell (306), the final act in the story of a heroine is constituted by her “death or departure,” indicating that even the life of a heroine is subject to at least one of the most natural laws of life. Although neither *Coraline* nor *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* mentions the death of the text’s protagonist, it might be possible to argue that the ending of the story and the departure from the secondary world holds a loss of the experienced freedom and agency for both Coraline and Alice, who find themselves back in their positions as children in a system ultimately governed by adults, expressed through the return to school or just being sent off to dinner, respectively. Thus, the protagonists nevertheless experience somewhat of a departure from the localities and enabling circumstances of their heroism.

*Coraline* largely follows the Proppian fairy tale structure as well as the heroine’s journey as outlined by Campbell but remains different in its scope. The text stays in the “domestic” realm (Zolkover 68), which blurs the line to reality as the unusual and evil events do not occur in a world far away, but in a place eerily close to home. Finally, Perdigao (102) states that “[a]s the landscape of Coraline’s world is a pastiche of other stories, Gaiman’s novel can be read as the ‘other’ version of those fairy tales.” So, just as the other mother at first appears to be almost but not quite like the one in the primary world of *Coraline*, the text itself reproduces fairy tale structures as through a distortion mirror. The text’s resemblance to other genres will be further explored in the next chapter, but this structural analysis has shown that *Coraline* indeed shares much common ground with the fairy tale, even though it expands the sphere by reconstructing generic boundaries. Thus, a feminist reading of the text is not solely contingent on the interpretation of fairy tale structures but is situated in a larger generic and contextual field consisting of complementing as well as possibly conflicting paradigms, where a de- as well as a reconstruction of femininities is made possible.

## **2.2. The uncanny**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘uncanny’ refers to “1a. seeming to have a supernatural character or origin” or “1b. being beyond what is normal or expected, suggesting superhuman or supernatural powers”. The Oxford English dictionary includes several obsolete meanings of the word; those that are not, however, define ‘uncanny’ as “2. careless, incautious”, “4a. Of persons: Not quite safe to trust to, or have dealings with, as being associated with supernatural arts or powers”, “4b. Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar”. These definitions suggest a common denomination of the supernatural as well as a feeling of distress or discomfort. The uncanny as a psy-

chological and literary concept captures the same emotions and has its origins in a paper by Freud in 1919, titled “Das Unheimliche”. The concept of the uncanny is relevant to *Coraline* because many of its central motifs are used to shape the text and the other world in it (see Buckley 65-66, Rudd 161). The uncanny also influences the reading of the story as it adds a feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty that may or may not remain within the confines of the text and might introduce a general stance of questioning the familiar, including perceptions of femininity. Uncanniness further has the potential of challenging and confronting identities and even one’s own personality as well as creating a crisis for “everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’” (Royle 1).

Freud (298) describes the uncanny as “jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längstvertraute zurückgeht” and establishes it as the opposite of “heimisch” (‘to feel at home’). The similarities to *Coraline* are already apparent, as the other house on the other side of the door is “a near-literal manifestation of the unheimlich: a home that is familiar but unknown” (Gooding 394). The uncanny captures the feeling of “homeliness uprooted” (Royle 2), it goes beyond just confronting strangeness, as it describes a strangeness suddenly found in familiarity, creating a sense of insecurity around previously unquestioned concepts. Zolkover (72) elaborates that, for Coraline, “[t]he fact that [the house] is hers, that she unambiguously knows it, is a necessary prerequisite for a situation in which, when her perspective is altered, those things that are most comfortable, most tame, become alien and dangerous.” Coraline herself appears to not sense the uncanniness around her (see Gooding 394). The opposite of the uncanny is captured by the adjective ‘canny’, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, refers primarily to being “1a. knowing, wise; judicious, prudent; wary, cautious”. A. Jackson (159) suggests that ‘canny’ is oftentimes associated with the female sphere and expresses a sense of identity and self-assurance, expressed in a capability to shape surroundings and circumstances to fit individual needs. If Coraline can be said to be canny herself, perhaps this is the reason for her ample agency in the other, uncanny world.

Nonetheless, the notion of the uncanny is clearly projected onto the reader who is confronted with the idea of another world that is as alien as it is familiar. Royle (24) links the expression of the uncanny in texts to the concept of deconstruction, which “renders the most apparently unequivocal and self-assured statements uncertain”, presenting the uncanny as a possible mechanism to deconstruct what has been taken for granted. Additionally, Horstkotte (48) notes that “[t]he other that resembles the self has this strange effect precisely because of the close resemblance between the two – the other is uncanny because it is close to the known self but is distorted or changed in a certain way”. The uncanny in *Coraline* could thus be used

as a vehicle to subvert and question the schemata of femininity related to fairy tales that have been activated through the use of specific generic structures.

*Coraline* contains a number of peculiar expressions of the uncanny that mirror the examples presented by Freud, such as the removal of eyes when the other parents ask Coraline to sew buttons over them (see Freud 306, Gaiman 43), or separated and animated limbs like the other mother's severed hand, reminiscent of a spider (see Freud 316-317, Gaiman 145). Other examples of the uncanny in *Coraline* include characters with evil intentions and supernatural forces (see Freud 316), exemplified by the other mother, and getting lost in the mist (see Freud 311, Gaiman 71-72). Nonetheless, the most prominent expression of the uncanny that can be found in the text is the existence of doppelgängers and slightly altered doubles of everything that is familiar to Coraline in the other world (see Freud 309). Doubling "undermines our sense of individuality" (Rudd 161), which is a central theme in *Coraline* and even present in the heroine's own world, where she continuously has to affirm her identity as "[n]ot Caroline. Coraline" (Gaiman 2) to her neighbors. The other world, however, contains a far more eminent threat of identity loss, as it holds the "possibility (or threat)" (Perdigao 102) of the existence of another Coraline as well. Immediately after Coraline poses this question through the mode of free indirect speech, she determines that there is only one version of her (see Gaiman 67), signifying a resolution of her looming identity crisis and reaffirmation of the heroine, including all of her attributes and characteristics.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, written decades before Freud's publication of "Das Unheimliche", nevertheless induces a sense of strangeness and the supernatural. For example, the various uncontrollable bodily transformations experienced by Alice herself (see Carroll 11, 14, 50), the constant threat of dismemberment voiced by the Queen of Hearts (see *ibid.* 81, 82, 117) and the floating head of the Cheshire Cat, separated from the rest of its body (see *ibid.* 86-89), seem to echo Freud's discussion of the uncanny. Further, the uncanny in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* often results from a transformation of familiar elements that represent feelings of safety into dangerous situations, such as the kitchen with the Duchess nursing a baby next to a cook and a cat turning into a scene of violence, clamor and rudeness (see Carroll 57-60), which reflects the distortion of the "ehemals Heimische, Altvertraute" that Freud (318) suspects at the center of the uncanny.

The uncanniness inherent in the 'other' harks back to a concept explored by Waldenfels, who claims that the strange and unfamiliar is always present at the borders of the known and has the power to disconcert the sense of one's subjective identity (see *ibid.* 10-11). The other is omnipresent: "Es gibt keine Welt, in der wir je völlig zu Hause sind, und es gibt kein

Subjekt, das je Herr im eigenen Hause wäre” (Waldenfels 11). *Coraline* literally captures this unsettling by revealing another home, governed by unfamiliar entities, where Coraline is subjected to unfamiliar rules and practices. The other can only be understood to the extent that the familiar is questioned (see Waldenfels 65), which suggests that the intense presence of the other in *Coraline* is indicative of a significant renegotiation of the known.

The extensive evocation of the uncanny in *Coraline* further separates it from the genre of the fairy tale, as Freud (318) suggests that there is no text in this genre that includes uncanny elements. Even though events otherwise classified as uncanny may appear, such as the apparent death and resuscitation of Snow White, they do not have the same effect on the reader because the uncanny is presented in a fantastical world far removed from reality (see *ibid.* 319-321). The fairy tale world is relieved of the constraints of reality, so the uncanny is not understood as such, but accepted as unquestioned part of the magical realm and thus does not influence the reader’s perception of reality (see Zolkover 74). If, however, as in *Coraline*, the text is situated in an ambiguous state between a representation of reality and a fantastical world (see Gooding 393), the uncanny can successfully be created in fiction through the same mechanisms as in real life, which include the examples presented above (see Freud 322). Zolkover (70-71) adds that *Coraline* manages to evoke the uncanny in the reader because the represented surroundings and characters in the world of the heroine appear so close to the perception of their own “mundane”. This sentiment is reinforced by the text as the other mother replies to Coraline’s ““I didn’t know I had another mother”” with ““Of course you do. *Everyone* does” (Gaiman 27, emphasis added). Thus, the text opens up the space for a negotiation of the mundane in the world of the text and the reader in a manner that a fairy tale cannot. In sum, the uncanny is undeniably omnipresent in *Coraline* and expands the possibilities of a re-negotiation of femininities in the text as well as in the world of the reader by planting seeds of doubt about other preconceived and preestablished notions of the norms and the familiar.

### **2.3. Genre multiplicities**

Just as Coraline constantly explores her environment, the aim of this chapter is to provide an exploration of additional generic influences that might have shaped the text. In the spirit of contemporary and postmodern fiction, *Coraline* blurs and collapses genre boundaries (see Perdigao 120, Benson 3). As previously established, genres lend themselves to this collapsing and re-combination due to their fuzzy boundaries (see Frow 139), so that texts, more often

than not, bear resemblance to and are influenced by multiple genres. Zolkover (77-78) suggests that *Coraline* is an example of a trans-generic narrative, “ensnared in an intertextual web, deploying a combination of history, literature, prior fantasy, and legends in order to populate a landscape at the border between fantastic and uncanny”, reflecting “human worlds both as we hope they might be, and as we fear that they might become.” Thus, the generic complexity of *Coraline* notably equips the text to challenge presuppositions both on the inter- and extratextual level.

Postmodernism can be highlighted as a central influence on *Coraline*, as the apparent collapsing of genre boundaries is one of its central features (see Horstkotte 154). Hutcheon (1-2) defines postmodernism as a “commitment to doubleness”, managing to “install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge”, which finally aims to recontextualize and denaturalize cultural norms. Femininities are recontextualized in *Coraline* through a text that is at the same time a retelling and a pastiche of a fairy tale and its heroines, in a space created through its postmodern approach to genre and subversion. Postmodern fiction and fantasy, in the sentiment of deconstructionism, dismantle boundaries of identity and expose ambiguity in contents and characters of the text (see Olsen 47-49). Coraline quite literally faces the deconstruction of the other world when the house starts to resemble “only the idea of a house” (Gaiman 103). She is also confronted with an almost carnivalesque subversion of everyone she knows, from the seemingly interminable attention and dedication of the other mother compared to the emotional negligence of her own to the Misses Spink and Forcible stepping out of their aged bodies to return to the theater stage. Only Coraline herself seems immune to these changes. The schemata of questioning and restructuring what was previously established might thus be applied not only to the literal reversal of female identities, but also to the ones presupposed in the fairy tale and in the broader cultural context outside of the text.

The structure and content level of *Coraline* bear significant resemblance to the genre of the adventure story. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘adventure’ refers to “4a. A course of action which invites risk; a perilous or audacious undertaking the outcome of which is unknown; a daring feat or exploit” or “4b. A remarkable or unexpected event, or series of events, in which a person participates as a result of chance; a novel or exciting experience. Sometimes with implication that such experiences are intentionally invited or sought.” This is concurrent with the events in *Coraline*, as the heroine braves a series of dangerous trials in her confrontation with the other mother, which, due to the obvious power imbalance, appear to have an uncertain outcome. Simmel, in his essay on the adventure, states that the

defining characteristic of the adventure is “daß es aus dem Zusammenhange des Lebens herausfällt” (ibid. 39). The adventure is an episode that can stand alone, it has a clearly defined beginning and end (see ibid. 40-41), just like a text between two book covers. However, Simmel (51) further points out that the adventure is not defined through its contents, but by “eine gewisse Gespanntheit des Lebensgefühls, mit dem solche Inhalte sich verwirklichen.” This emotional prerequisite links the adventure to youth, as the predominance of emotion over events is overturned through aging (see ibid. 51), making the adventure especially suited for children’s literature and young adult fiction. *Coraline* exhibits a strong focus on the retellings of the events themselves, but key passages center around emotional tenseness, such as the heroine recalling her father’s bravery in detail to prepare for her return to the other world and confrontation of the other mother (see Gaiman 54-57). Further, adventure stories often lack background information on the protagonist, as it is not essential for the development of the text, just like the parents, who “have no function in the plot other than being absent” (Nikolaeva, *Rhetoric* 22), two characteristics that are also found in *Coraline*, where no unnecessary details are disclosed about the protagonist and her already absent-minded parents also physically disappear within the first fifty pages of the book (see Gaiman 48).

The other world and its terrors further suggest a Gothic influence on *Coraline* (see Coats 78), becoming especially visible in its various portrayals of “‘othered’ humanity” (McGillis 228). Fear and its overcoming through bravery is a central theme in the text. McGillis (229-230) argues that the Gothic remains relevant today as it showcases fear that leads to a yearning for change. Further, contemporary Gothic texts “just may suggest that we find the real monsters in positions of influence and power. And it may also suggest that we are not helpless in the face of such influence and power” (ibid. 232). As *Coraline*, the charismatic heroine of the Gothic (see McGillis 231), surmounts every trial presented to her by the other mother through bravery and wit, the text might indicate that these qualities are also relevant to imbalanced power dynamics outside of its bounds. The Gothic, similar to postmodernism, thus entails a stance of questioning hierarchically inscribed norms.

The combination of these different generic influences situates *Coraline* in the realm of the fantastic, which, according to Todorov (25-26), delineates the indeterminate and ambiguous area between the real and imaginary, when the reader of a text does not know whether the laws that govern it are the same as in the extratextual world or not. When supernatural events can eventually be explained rationally, Todorov (41, 51) suggests that the text is situated in the sphere of the uncanny, and when they are confirmed as magical events within the story, as is the fairy tale, the text belongs to the category of the marvelous. “Der uneingeschränkte



Glaube ebenso wie die absolute Ungläubigkeit würden uns aus dem Fantastischen herausführen; es ist die Unschlüssigkeit, die es ins Leben ruft” (ibid. 31). *Coraline* constructs this uncertainty through locating the beginning of the action in mundane surroundings with characters that appear familiar to the reader, a girl with her parents, a cat, and slightly strange but friendly neighbors. However, the realist paradigm becomes unsettled when Coraline, upon opening the door for the second time, finds behind it no longer a brick wall, but a corridor leading to a second version of her house, complete with second versions of its inhabitants. The two worlds might be literal representations of the two ends of the spectrum, a portrayal of reality and imagination. The ambiguity between the real and the imaginary is maintained through the repeated crossing of the boundaries between the two worlds not only by Coraline herself, but also the cat, her parents, and finally the other mother’s hand. The uncertainty in the fantastic often encompasses both the reader and the characters, even though the reader, at the latest after having read the final words, needs to choose either the perspective of the uncanny or the marvelous and thus step out of the realm of the fantastic (see Todorov 40). Therefore, finally, the reader has to reach a conclusion as to whether the events in the text are reconcilable with natural laws or otherwise explainable in the real world, or whether they need to be seen in the realm of the marvelous. This decision might impact the extent to which the concepts negotiated in the text are transferred into the world outside of the text.

As the other genres discussed above, the fantastic is characterized through the act of transcending and restructuring familiar concepts (see R. Jackson 8), it “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture” (ibid. 4), such as the versions of femininity that are subdued by patriarchal paradigms. Lee (561) argues that, in *Coraline*, “fantasy does not propound to reproduce reality, only how to deal with it”, and is “always political” in its suggestions. The fantastic is an experience of boundaries and allows their transgression (see Todorov 141). Although the fantastic resides in the ambiguous space between the real and imaginary, neither of the two connections can be severed, so that it must always exist in relation to the real world in which it is created (see R. Jackson 19-20). Concepts that are reversed and restructured in *Coraline* thus necessarily display a contested cultural space, to which femininity is no exception:

While much of fantasy can be viewed as mere entertainment, the best examples of fantasy for children use the fantastic form as a narrative device, as a metaphor for reality. The fantastic mode allows children's writers to deal with important psychological, ethical, and existential questions in a slightly detached manner, which frequently proves more effective with young readers than straightforward realism. (Nikolajeva, *Power* 42)

Therefore, the portrayal of a brave, though at times scared, heroine, a powerful other mother who is both vicious and loving, a real mother who loves her daughter but is emotionally ab-

sent and two elderly ladies, confused but caring and ultimately essential in their assistance, *Coraline* creates a multitude of spaces for femininities and challenges their presupposed limitations in the text and perhaps also in the real world, which represent the political suggestions inherent in the fantastic as argued by Lee (see *ibid.* 561).

Magic realism is a genre adjacent to the fantastic. However, supernatural events within magic realism texts are not questioned, like in the marvelous texts in Todorov's classification, and do not govern the entire story but only appear intermittently (see Mellen 59). An interesting aspect of magic realism, especially as it relates to *Coraline* and the negotiation of femininities, is that this genre has been used as a means "to break through the stultifying confines of the status quo with ideas that challenge accepted notions of politics, literature, and the nature of human existence." (*ibid.* 63) The transgression and breaking down of boundaries, as discussed above for other genres, is also a central element in magic realism. What differentiates magic realism from the previously discussed genres is the nature of its destabilized boundaries which are often concerned with identity, gender and reality, as well as their explicit reference to norms and culture outside of the text (see Zamora and Faris 5-6). *Coraline* captures that sentiment of unstable boundaries, the successful challenge of the hitherto unquestioned and seemingly ultimate powers of the other mother by the heroine, as well as the reduced presence of male characters showcasing a space governed primarily by feminine forces, indicate a reference to the challenging of cultural norms central to magic realism. Wilson (226) proposes that the "magicalness of magical realism lies in the way it makes explicit (that is, unfolds) what seems always to have been present." The brave heroine is not a new invention, but *Coraline* opens the door to portray what has often remained hidden in literary history. It might be possible to conclude that *Coraline* is not a magic realist text *per se*, but, as with the genres previously discussed in this section, it captures certain essential qualities or structures to create a cohesive whole and increase its textual impact.

Overall, through the skilled combination of structures and concepts inherent to different genres, *Coraline* evokes a questioning and challenging stance towards culturally established concepts. This allows for a (re-)negotiation of femininities that would not have been possible through the use of fairy tale structures alone.

### **3. The role of the reader in the negotiation of femininities in *Coraline***

As the previous sections have established, *Coraline* creates a plenitude of opportunities for the (re-) negotiation of femininities. However, these gaps are not only established through the

text, but further actualized by the reader. The aim of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the role of the reader in the renegotiation process, based on the theoretical foundations of reader-response criticism, particularly the works of Iser, Jauß and Rosenblatt. One central idea of this school of literary theory is the active role of the reader in the realization of textual structures, where the reader is awarded a degree of freedom “[um sich] von dem zu lösen, der man ist, bzw. das zu übersteigen, woran man im sozialen Leben gebunden bleibt” (Iser, *implizit* 9). The different contents or nuances of the text are negotiated and truly become meaningful only as they act upon the reader in their interaction with the text (see Iser, *Akt* 246). This interaction between reader and text principally develops through the use of ‘blanks’, “Leerstellen”, “die Besetzbarkeit einer bestimmten Systemstelle im Text durch die Vorstellung des Lesers” (Iser, *Akt* 284), a concept that will be explored in detail in the following sections. The interpretation and active negotiation of central themes and concepts of the text is thus contingent on the temporal, social, cultural and individual circumstances of the reader (see Jauß 29, Iser, *Akt* 65-66). Therefore, it is perhaps the reader rather than the text that truly renegotiates and restructures femininities, following *Coraline*’s exploration through spaces of indetermination.

Iser (*Implied*, 280) notes that modern texts consciously employ fragmentation and blanks to draw the attention of the reader towards the active process of establishing connections and confronting presuppositions. As every text exists and is read in interrelation with other texts, presuppositions and expectations are constructed around genre structures and cultural conventions (see Frow 113). During the reading process, signs of conformity to or deviation from the anticipated structure guide the reader to continuously revise and adapt their relationship to and expectations for the text, as well as towards a reexamination of the contested extratextual concepts (see *ibid.* 113). *Coraline*, for example, activates the fairy tale schema or an intertextual allusion to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, only to then transgress and re-frame its boundaries, so that the reader, too, realizes the confines of their own presuppositions that structure the reading. Further, Coraline witnesses the literal deconstruction of the other world (see Gaiman 103) and seemingly eradicates the possibility of her returning to it by trapping the other mother’s hand, holding the only key to the passageway, in the dangerously deep well in the primary world. Perdigao (106-107) argues that it is in fact this destructive collision of the two worlds and their navigation by the heroine that creates meaning and a “site for critical examination and re-examination” for the reader.

Nonetheless, not every text requires this kind of active confrontation. Jauß (36) proposes the term “Unterhaltungskunst” for the texts that reproduce familiar patterns and thus

fulfill the reader's horizon of expectation rather than require its restructuring. The critic places those texts on the opposite end of the spectrum that "durch den Gattungs-, Stil- oder Formkonvention geprägten Erwartungshorizont ihrer Leser erst eigens evozieren, um ihn dann Schritt für Schritt zu destruieren, was durchaus nicht nur einer kritischen Absicht dienen, sondern selbst wieder poetische Wirkungen erbringen kann" (Jauß 33). Iser (*Implied*, 278) concurs that "expectations are scarcely ever fulfilled in truly literary texts", where the interruption of the flow of reading creates gaps that must be filled by the reader (see *ibid.* 280). However, for a text to remain pleasurable for a reader, though it must involve some amount of active engagement, it should neither demand too much nor too little of the reader, and thus be located between the boundaries of overstrain and boredom (see Iser, *Akt* 176). It seems safe to state that *Coraline*, through its invocation and distinct combination of a multiplicity of genres, as well as its active restructuring of femininities within and across those generic boundaries, necessitates a critical revision of the reader's horizon of expectation and thus does not remain within the bounds of entertainment purposes only. Still, a number of familiar elements are retained, such as the progression of the story leading towards the happy ending and the defeat of the evil other mother, so that the text does not exasperate the real reader, who, in contrast to the implied reader, does not only recognize the uncanniness and contestation of familiar concepts in the text, but is also susceptible to their possibly unsettling effects.

Rosenblatt (11) suggests that the reader's interaction with the text, which generates meaning, "must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process", where individual presuppositions are recognized and potentially critically revised. Iser (*Implied*, 288) remarks that this interaction between the reader and the text is not a "smooth or continuous process" but occurs through defamiliarization and unfulfilled horizons of expectation. This process is significant for the (re-) negotiation of femininities, as their perception and conception are built on internalized and culturally perpetuated notions. This 'doing' or 'performing' of gender, naturally also present in literary texts and their receptions, is the central idea in Butler's feminist theories, which have become seminal in the field of feminist studies. She states that:

The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender. (Butler, *Trouble* 12)

Thus, the forms and limitations of femininities are, at least in part, inscribed in the texts that are produced and read in a particular culture and time period. Every text is informed by and

thus at some level negotiates current extratextual norms and those that have been previously codified in literary tradition through intertextual references (see Iser, *Akt* 132-133). These norms, however, are often not simply reproduced, but actively placed in a new context, where they can be discussed and even negated (see Iser, *implizit* 8). Fantastic texts might be the best suited to revise these preexisting paradigms because they are concerned with transgressions and collisions between two worlds on a content level, which can be transferred to a more general defiance of norms outside of the text (see Todorov 148). The deconstruction present in *Coraline* could therefore be read as an explicit reference to the dismantling of extratextual presuppositions occurring in the sphere of the reader. Rosenblatt (17) categorizes this relation between the text and the reader as a “transaction”, where both elements condition one another:

The physical signs of the text enable [the reader] to reach through himself and the verbal symbols to something sensed as outside and beyond his own personal world. The boundary between inner and outer world breaks down, and the literary work of art [...] leads us into a new world. It becomes part of the experience which we bring to our future encounters in literature and in life. (Rosenblatt 21)

The reader’s transaction with *Coraline* therefore does not only give shape to the reading process itself, but also to any subsequent readings and experiences. Consequently, the negotiations of femininities and the transgression of genre boundaries as well as the textual passageways discussed above are of paramount importance to a context broader than the text itself. Jauß (63) also notes the functional relationship of literature and society, as he states that the interaction with a text has the potential to reflect back upon the reader’s societal interactions. Iser (*Akt*, 243) echoes a similar sentiment, marking its significance in the reader-response criticism: “der Leser [wird] durch den Prozeß der Sinnkonstitution selbst in einer bestimmten Weise konstituiert [...]; durch das, was der Leser bewirkt, geschieht ihm auch immer etwas.” Fish, another central theorist in reader-response criticism, argues that the reader’s interaction with the text can be “regarded not as leading to meaning but as *having* meaning” (ibid. 158) and that the reader is “always making sense” (ibid. 162) in the literal sense of the word. The role of the reader in the negotiation of femininities in *Coraline* is thus an active one, where they must not only realize the blanks in the text, but also navigate the transactional effects on their own individual extratextual presuppositions related to the concept of femininity. The active reading process required by the text creates a space for the revision of previously uncontested concepts as “reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated” (Iser, *Implied* 294). The following sections aim to elaborate on this active role of the reader through an exploration of the concepts of the implicit reader and the blank, as established by Iser, for the context of *Coraline*.

### 3.1. The implied reader of *Coraline*

The implied reader is a concept developed by Iser to be able to discuss and analyze the active role of the reader from an abstract rather than an empirical vantage point. Iser's implied reader can be characterized as follows: "[er] besitzt [...] keine reale Existenz; denn er verkörpert die Gesamtheit der Vororientierungen, die ein fiktionaler Text seinen Lesern als Rezeptionsbedingungen anbietet. Folglich ist der implizite Leser nicht in einem empirischen Substrat verankert, sondern in der Struktur der Texte selbst fundiert" (ibid., *Akt* 60). Thus, the implied reader does not aim to reflect a 'real' reader, but rather denotes a textual structure with a pre-inscribed recipient. The reading experience of the real reader depends on the individual, temporal and cultural circumstances through which the text is received (see Rosenblatt 36). Jauß (29) also states that the literary work is "kein für sich bestehendes Objekt, das jedem Betrachter zu jeder Zeit den gleichen Anblick darbietet." However, the possibilities of variation of the perception of a text are somewhat limited by the concept of Iser's implied reader. The implied reader does not entail a completely free choice of perspective but is subject to the "perspektivierte Darstellungsweise" (Iser, *Akt* 62) of the text. Therefore, certain interpretative vantage points appear to be intersubjectively inherent in the text itself, disfavoring other possibilities. In short, it is the essential objective of the implied reader to supply an underlying malleable structure for interactions with the text, so that the implied reader can be described as: "ein Konzept, das den Beziehungshorizont für die Vielfalt historischer und individueller Aktualisierungen des Textes bereitstellt, um diese in ihrer Besonderheit analysieren zu können" (Iser, *Akt* 66).

The implied reader of *Coraline* thus represents the core of the negotiated concepts as a horizon for individual reader actualizations. With regard to the femininities in the text, the implied reader provides a wide scope of representations, as the feminine roles are cast in the positions of the heroine, the villainess, and additional supporting characters or guidance figures. Further, as outlined in the previous sections, the female characters in *Coraline* are multi-dimensional and, due to the complex combination of textual genres, perhaps appear to be as close to real life figures as to fairy tale archetypes. The perspective adopted by the real reader then, of course, is subject to the individual presuppositions and fulfilment of textual expectations, but the implied reader suggests that the coalescence of genres and structures requires some amount of renegotiation of the familiar. *Coraline's* implied reader is inter alia confronted with a text that emulates fairy tale structures but does not conform to the portrayals of femininities as strictly passive or evil (see Wanning Harries 99-100). The renegotiation may

therefore very well involve preestablished concepts of femininities, mainly related to specific texts such as fairy tales, but perhaps also in the extratextual realm, as *Coraline* awards extraordinary agency to females who are good, evil or wavering between the two posts in a space where male power generally appears to be lacking.

Additionally, Nikolajeva (*Rhetoric*, 16) posits that “[a] children’s author will probably be more explicit about characters’ traits, behavior, and motivation; the author’s construction of the implied reader is more conscious and deliberate. This makes reader-response theory in some respect more pertinent to children’s fiction.” Therefore, it seems possible to argue that the implied reader of *Coraline* provides a rather concise and guided perspective on the text due to the fact that it pertains to the genre of children’s literature. Perhaps, then, it is partly this tailoring to a younger audience that allows such an emphasis on the re-negotiation of femininities, as the implied reader, the “role a text implies and invites the reader to take on” (Nodelman and Reimer 17), can be a stronger guide than typically found in texts for adults. However, Nodelman and Reimer (21) also argue that “texts of children’s literature characteristically have two implied readers”, one for its young readers and another for any possible adult readers it may attract. These implied readers are constructed around different repertoires of literary and cultural knowledge, increasing the complexity of the text and offering to confront and reconstruct structures and concepts on two different fronts.

In general, the implied reader in a fantastic text, such as *Coraline*, is, according to Todorov (31) “dem Text mit der gleichen Präzision eingeschrieben, wie die Haltung der Personen”, since, as discussed above, the implied as well as the real reader in the fantastic genre must remain in a state of hesitation and ambivalence between the real and the imaginary. This constant indecision places a demand of active restructuring on the implied reader that persists throughout the entire navigation of the text. At the end of the text, the reader reaches a conclusion as to whether or not the supernatural events can be explained by the natural laws of the ‘real’ world and thus categorizes the text as belonging to either the uncanny or the marvelous (see Todorov 40). Hence, the implied reader offers a distinctly different actualization of the text during the first and any subsequent readings, as these are inevitably transformed into meta-readings where the fantastic elements are exposed and identified as such (see *ibid.* 81). Similar to Todorov, Perdigao draws a parallel between the reader and the protagonist of the text when she states that “[a]s Coraline attempts to figure out how to navigate this story-book world, this other world, she also begins to examine its foundations. As she attempts to gain control over the world – or text – by a mastery of its design and rules, she illustrates the ways that the reader becomes actively engaged within the text and participates in the process

of making meaning” (ibid. 115). Coraline in her vocation as an “explorer” (Gaiman 71) therefore illustrates the horizon for the implied reader and the actualization of the real reader, where textual and structural clues must be discovered and interpreted. The heroine of the text must discern and comprehend the strategies of the other mother and the mechanisms of the other world in order to finally outsmart her opponent and restore the order in her own world, just as the reading involves a navigation of the textual and structural mechanisms, leading towards a rearrangement of individual expectations.

The ample evocation of the uncanny and the deconstruction of genre boundaries in *Coraline* might also affect the implied reader of the text, as it disrupts the flow of reading through destabilizing norms and presuppositions. Anything that cannot be understood at once has an unsettling effect on the reader (see Iser, *implizit* 269). Wilkie-Stibbs suggests that the text further lacks a “narrative center” and thus “induces fear by destabilizing readerly security in the ability to identify with a single focalizer” (ibid. 38). The implied reader is confronted with an insecurity through the further invocation of a seemingly unconscious voice without a clearly fixed point of narrative engagement (see Iser, *Akt* 322). If the fantastic events are not told through the voice and perspective of the heroine herself, but through a seemingly objective narrator, they achieve a greater state of ambivalence between real and imaginary for the implied reader, as the fantastic cannot immediately be dismissed as the product of a subjective imagination (R. Jackson 30). Advancing Wilkie-Stibb’s argument, she proposes that, in *Coraline*, “the authorial voice is fixed through the character of the cat” (ibid. 45). This claim can be supported by the description of the animal’s voice as sounding “like the voice at the back of Coraline’s head, the voice she thought words in, but a man’s voice, not a girl’s” (Gaiman 33). The cat thus immediately appears gendered on the horizon of the implied reader, and its voice clearly separated from that of the heroine. Overall, the cat is an interesting character, it adopts the fairy tale position of the helper or donor (see Propp 39), guiding Coraline through her journey and is essential in her first defeat of the other mother and retrieval of the key (see Gaiman 129), but, importantly, is also the only male character in the text with a significant amount of agency. In the context of renegotiating femininities, it is remarkable that, in a text where almost all other roles are fulfilled by female characters, the heroine’s main confidant and helper, who in fact holds the most knowledge on the workings of the other world, more than Coraline and even surpassing the other mother (see Gaiman 73), is male. For the implied reader, this might suggest the existence of limitations and outlines for female agency, conforming to extratextual presuppositions of an ultimately male gaze in a patriarchic system, just as the other voice in Coraline’s head, guiding her journey, sounds like that of a man.



Finally, the text places the implied and thus also the real reader in a paradigm of active response within the reading experience: “er [bringt] durch seine von den Signalen des Textes vorkonstruierten Reaktionen den Sinn des Romans [hervor], oder besser, daß sich der Sinn des Romans erst in diesen Reaktionen ereignet, da er als solcher expressis verbis nicht gegeben ist” (Iser, *implizit* 60). Therefore, the essential (re-) negotiation of femininities does not ensue in the text itself, but rather in the actualizations of the reader, engendered by the unfulfillment of expectations and blanks created by the text, specifically where the textual femininities are confronted with inter- and extratextually created presuppositions and relevant norms. In the text, the heroine, according to Perdigao (117), intently mirrors the reader’s actions as she herself “must perform a close reading of this landscape in order to win (or not lose).” Coraline, as does the reader, encounters another world that resembles everything that is familiar to her, but where central elements and characters are out of place and the natural laws are suspended. She must ‘read’ the changes correctly to outsmart the villainess and recover her real parents, an act which helps Coraline to once again make sense of her own world, where the previous disappearance of her parents, perhaps an indicator for the suspension of governing norms, had created a profound confusion and disillusionment. The other mother is then placed at the opposite end, where the “limitations of [her] authorship” (Perdigao 118) are revealed. Even though the other mother is credited with the construction, or, at least, the occupancy of the other world and endowed with power over its inhabitants, she finally appears impotent and stripped of her agency as Coraline proves that the transformative powers are truly on her side. Ultimately, it is also significant that, in the final pages of the text, Coraline confines the other mother’s creating right hand in the deep and “dangerous” well (Gaiman 3) in the heroine’s own world, so that “Coraline has transitioned from the reader to the writer of the story, and her writing is an act of revision” (Perdigao 120). In the same way, the implied reader is a construct that views the act of reading not as a passive reception, but as an active participation in the negotiation and reconstruction of intra- and extratextual concepts, such as femininities.

### 3.2. The significance of blanks

The blank in the literary text is, as stated above, another elementary concept of Iser’s theories that has become central to reader-response criticism. Blanks are the main interface for interaction between the text and the reader as they constitute what Iser terms “dem Leser angebotenen Denkpausen. Sie geben ihm die Chance, sich so auf das Geschehen einzulassen, daß

er dessen Sinn zu konstituieren vermag” (ibid., *implizit* 87). As the reading flow is disrupted due to a critical information gap or an incongruence of structures, the attention of the reader is inevitably heightened (see ibid. 62). Consequently, blanks act as a “Reflexionsantrieb” (ibid. 71) and initiate restructurings of the horizon of expectation and familiar concepts that are negotiated in the text. In other words: “[i]mmer dort, wo Textsegmente unvermittelt aneinander stoßen, sitzen Leerstellen, die die erwartbare Geordnetheit des Textes unterbrechen” (Iser, *Akt* 302). However, not every text contains the same amount or form of blanks, as their increase is generally accompanied by a greater perceived complexity of the text. For example, the fairy tale genre tends to include fewer blanks and place a smaller demand on the reader, calling for less interaction through requiring only what Iser calls a “Kontemplationshaltung” (*Akt* 245). The fairy tale events always develop along the familiar Proppian structure and oftentimes leave little room for the unexpected. Contrarily, modern texts, according to Iser, exhibit an increase in blanks (see ibid., *Akt* 319), for instance, as discussed above, through a deletion of the narrative perspective and the ensuing lack of positional allocations in the text, removing a central point of reference for the reader (see ibid. 322). *Coraline* arguably also contains a significant number of blanks, and definitely a greater amount than a prototypical fairy tale due to its complex combination of multiple genres. This increases the interactional demand on the reader through the confrontation of various reader expectations associated with the different genres that are invoked by the text. Perdigao (117) argues that, in *Coraline*, “the world itself begins to lose its concreteness.” The disintegration of the house in the other world (see Gaiman 119) might be an adequate literary illustration of the blanks that the reader has to navigate and overcome in order to make sense of the text, just as Coraline needs to find her way back into the house to regain the key back to her own world.

Blanks are also an instrument to shape the perspective of the implied and the real reader through creating spaces for an interaction with the text, yet limiting it at the same time:

Denn es kennzeichnet die Leerstellen eines Systems, daß sie nicht durch das System selbst, sondern nur durch ein anderes System besetzt werden können. Geschieht dies, dann kommt im vorliegenden Fall die Konstitutionsaktivität in Gang, wodurch sich diese Enklaven als zentrales Umschaltelement der Interaktion von Text und Leser erweisen. Leerstellen regulieren daher die Vorstellungstätigkeit des Lesers, die nun zu Bedingungen des Textes in Anspruch genommen wird. (Iser, *Akt* 266)

The reader is faced with the task of coordinating and restructuring the perspectives and concepts presented in the text that are unsettled through the blanks; however, the text imposes a “kontrollierte Betätigung des Lesers im Text” (ibid. 267), expressing the concept of reader-response criticism that the reader is not completely unrestricted in their reaction to the text. Through the interruption of the reading flow, the reader can be separated from any relevant

habitual dispositions and led towards hitherto unfamiliar and unknown perceptions (see *ibid.* 293). Finally, Iser (*ibid.* 294) states that the blank in the fictional text is the “elementare Kommunikationsbedingung”, reiterating its significance for initiating the active interaction process between text and reader.

In *Coraline*, the extensive confrontation with the alien and unfamiliar in the other world can likewise be interpreted as an extensive blank. Not only does the uncanny produce a hesitation in the reading process, but the unknown is also in itself a demand for an interaction and response according to the theories of Waldenfels (77): “[Das Fremde] wirkt mit als Anspruch, Anruf, Anreiz, Anforderung oder Herausforderung, als Provokation im vielfältigen Sinne dieses Wortes.” Thus, just as the other mother extends a request to Coraline to join her in the other world, the text proposes a negotiation of alien and uncanny concepts to the reader as they offer an interface for interaction with the text. Similarly, the fantastic nature of *Coraline*, and thus its ambivalent collision of the ‘real’ and the imaginary, creates a number of blanks in the text. “By offering a problematic re-presentation of an empirically ‘real’ world, the fantastic raises questions of the nature of the real and unreal, foregrounding the relation between them as its central concern” (R. Jackson 37). The blanks created by the fantastic can therefore be characterized as arising from the contradiction between reality and imagination. *Coraline* first establishes a clear separation of the two poles through the existence of two parallel worlds, however, through the course of the text, this distinction is blurred as it is shown that these worlds in fact intersect, or at least the boundaries can be transcended not only by Coraline herself, but also by the cat and, most disconcertingly, by the other mother’s hand.

Further, blanks are often established through negations in the text. These do not have to be literal, but rather refer to the potential of evoking familiar or clearly defined structures, only to then cross or annul them, creating a space for reader engagement and renegotiation of familiar concepts or schemas. “Die Negationspotentiale rufen Bekanntes oder Bestimmtes auf, um es durchzustreichen; als Durchgestrichenes jedoch bleibt es im Blick und verursacht angesichts seiner gelöschten Geltung Modifizierungen in der Einstellung: die Negationspotentiale bewirken damit die Situierung des Lesers zum Text” (Iser, *Akt* 267). Through the negation, the expectations of the reader are exposed as unfulfilled and become open to a restructuring as presupposed norms and concepts can no longer be maintained in the reading (see *ibid.* 328-329). In terms of limitations on the restructuring process of the reader, Iser (*Akt* 329) notes that the text usually only negates specific aspects of a norm or expectation as opposed to an all-encompassing renunciation to be able to indicate “die Richtung der Ummotivierung der Norm.” The reader enters into an active interaction with the text and through the negations of

habitual dispositions is steered towards perceptions beyond the known and familiar (see Iser, *implizit* 63). The negations create the need for a selection of a perspective between the newly discovered concepts in the text and the force of habit (see Iser, *Akt* 337). Therefore, negations are one mode in which complex concepts such as femininities can be negotiated in the text and by the reader.

The fantastic is also full of negation potentials, as R. Jackson (43) argues that it “moves into, or opens up, a space without/outside cultural order”, where previously unseen worlds and ideas emerge, and the familiar is transformed right in front of the reader. Fantastic spaces, like the other world in *Coraline*, can express their negations through repetitions and foregrounding of “absence, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable” (ibid. 45). *Coraline* specifically involves a focus on “the non-seen” in its creation of the other world, for example, the reflection of the other mother is not shown in the mirror (see Gaiman 75) and Coraline feels the presence and hears the whispers of the ghostly children that she met behind the mirror without being able to see them (see Gaiman 95). Perhaps the most explicit example of the motif of the unseeable in the text is the lack of eyes of the other parents, which have been replaced by sewn-on buttons. These negations of the trustworthiness of vision create a blank for the reader and propose a potential weariness of things not usually perceived clearly in the extratextual world.

Although the sole focus in this chapter has so far been on *Coraline*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offers an interesting contrast in terms of blanks and the implied reader of the text. While *Coraline* presents a rather structured implied reader and enough blanks to engage, yet not to disorient the reader, Carroll's text seems to fall on the opposite side of the spectrum. The implied reader of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is “just as helpless as Alice confronted with the distorted norms of Wonderland; the events are unpredictable, the cause and effect inverted, and Alice's vulnerability is equally shared by the reader, not least the young reader. Thus, the author of the Alice books exercises just as much power toward his readers as the characters do toward the protagonist” (Nikolajeva, *Power* 30). Blanks in this text often appear in the shape of logical contradictions and linguistic paradoxes, like the response to Alice's inquiry about the identity of the Mock Turtle, “the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from” (Carroll 94), which provides no further clarification to Alice nor to the implied reader, and probably also fails to enlighten the real reader. The text clearly demands a highly active reading posture and participation in the constitution of meaning (see Iser, *Appell* 16), which supersedes the reader interaction required by *Coraline*, but might even overstrain the reader, in turn reducing the text's potential for the restructuring of norms and presuppositions. Per-

haps, the change in the societal and cultural context between the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Coraline* has also brought about a more pronounced focus on the interaction between the text and the reader for adopting a questioning stance and forging new structures that is also expressed in the deliberate use of blanks.

The final important characteristic of blanks is that they can produce a state of active participation for the reader throughout the text. Iser (*Akt* 284, 314) argues that a blank 'disappears' when it is filled by engaged acts of imagination and connections drawn by the reader. Blanks, like the ones in *Coraline*, can thus create possibilities for the active (re-) negotiation of femininities, a central concept of the text, as the reader performs a restructuring of their own presuppositions through the necessary acts of interpretation and by discovering disappointed expectations built on previously acquired inter- and extratextual norms. The exact representation of femininities in the text, and thus the basis for any new structures or suppositions, focusing especially on Coraline herself, will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### **4. The role of the heroine**

The heroine, the protagonist of her own tale and, in the case of *Coraline*, even the namesake of the entire work, is undoubtedly of utmost importance for a discussion of the negotiation of femininities of the text. Of course, a text that simply includes a female protagonist equipped with ample amounts of agency is already making a statement in itself. However, the aim of this chapter is to explore the main characteristics and functions of heroines in fairy tales and those exhibited by *Coraline* to analyze how she fits into or reconstructs the mold. Additionally, a contextualization of the heroine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will establish a contrast and comparison to Alice, who lived through her adventures over 150 years earlier, in the midst of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Victorian age, where different representations of femininities dominated popular and literary culture.

The character of the heroine is highly significant to the conceptualization of a text and its reception because it fundamentally shapes the reading experience. Further, the heroine's behavior in the literary work can contribute substantially to the renegotiation of femininities, as expressed by Lurie (121): "When we choose books for our children, do we want them to teach obedience to authority or skepticism, acceptance of the status quo or a determination to change what needs to be changed?" Thus, a female protagonist that actively renegotiates structural boundaries previously imposed upon femininities might be able to inspire the same

desire for change and agency in her extratextual context. As discussed in earlier sections, femininities in fairy tales are generally noticeably constricted, portraying to the reader that “either women are malevolent outcasts or they are good but passive married women and that marriage happily ever after is enough of a reward for a girl” (MacDonald 18). Through their repeated inscription into the literary discourse, these attributes can become a frame of reference for cultural and societal presuppositions of the female, which can in turn be perceived as notions not produced by the discourse, but predating it, and thus forming the foundation for any following cultural conceptions of gender (see Butler, *Trouble* 10). Butler (*Trouble* 12) concludes that any constraint for these conceptions is “built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.” Therefore, Coraline’s character as the heroine and her agency are necessarily limited through language, but, through her active rearrangement of femininities in the fairy tale structure, widens the scope of representing the female not only within the text, but also in the extratextual discourse that surrounds it. However, MacDonald (18) points out that “if women are to be the equals of men in fairy tales, then there must be men in the tales equal to the best and brightest of the women.” Coraline, with the exception of perhaps the large black cat whose voice sounds like that of a man (see Gaiman 33), throughout the entire text does not encounter any male characters who display any amount of comparable wit or bravery. Thus, this lack of male agency could be read as a display of female superiority due to inherent qualities of the heroine, or simply due to the circumstantial absence of a male hero. Either way, Coraline as the heroine represents an active and independent femininity that has the potential to renegotiate norms beyond the text itself through its obvious transgression of the structural boundaries of the fairy tale, a genre otherwise prominently evoked by the text through evident similarities in archetypal characters and the sequence of events.

According to Butler (*Undoing* 41-42), gender can be defined as a norm that “operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization” where it guides social and cultural practices. Butler further posits that it has been difficult to recognize and admit multiplicity and interconnections of different concepts of individual and divergent femininities, as the multidimensionality of the female is culturally underrepresented (see *ibid.*, *Trouble* 5, 19). Fairy tales provide ample evidence for this argument, as they establish a divisive “dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair, and those who are active, wicked, and ugly” (Lieberman 393), which is depicted as the only two permissible versions of femininity, with the first one being inherently superior, as these are the qualities that lead the heroine to her reward. However, “to permit women to be bad is to grant them a role useful in the repertoire of behavior necessary for everyday living” (MacDonald 18), as the extratextual reality

cannot possibly be compared to the one-dimensionality of fairy tales, though it might nonetheless be subject to the discursive impact of these texts. Coraline, opposing prototypical fairy tale structures, is presented as a round or multidimensional and dynamic character according to Nikolajeva's definition, as she is portrayed through several character traits, positive as well as negative, and undergoes a change of character throughout the text as the trials that she has to face demand a maturation process through necessitating increasing amounts of bravery and self-determination (see *ibid.*, *Rhetoric* 130-131). Campbell posits that the mythic heroine must possess "strength, cleverness and wisdom" (*ibid.* 281), qualities that are actively attributed to Coraline (see Gaiman 143) and which she has to prove and perhaps further develop to ultimately secure the defeat of the other mother and restore the order in her primary world. The dynamic characteristics of the heroine in *Coraline* appear especially marked when compared with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where the protagonist "is not allowed to go through a change within the frame of her adventures (other than superficial, of course, when she constantly grows and shrinks)" (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 131). Alice's attempts to prove herself through her wisdom or courage are repeatedly undermined by inhibiting external forces, such as the succession of height changes hindering her from unlocking and walking through the door after having arrived in Wonderland (see Carroll 9-18) or through a number of dismissive remarks made by the creatures she encounters (see for example *ibid.* 43-49). As will be discussed further in the next sections, the socio-culturally dominant perceptions of the female at the time of the texts' publication might be one of the factors responsible for this marked difference between Alice and Coraline. The heroine, through her representation and negotiation of the concept of femininity, thus is central to not only the text itself, but also to the wider social and cultural extratextual context into which she is embedded.

The maturation process that prototypically characterizes the heroine and her journey is often expedited through an episode of suffering, where the adversity is shown to facilitate necessary renewal and recognition (see Birhäuser-Oeri 79, Campbell 282, Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 273). Therefore, the emotional and physical anguish experienced by Coraline can be understood as integral to her final success. Both the emotional and physical abandonment by her real parents and the cruelty of the other mother condition the heroine's bravery and propel the text toward its eventual happy ending. Gooding (400) affirms that, undeniably, "Coraline's return finds her more independent, more aware of her feelings, more emotionally and physically demonstrative, and more engaged with the world." Further, weakness is represented as an important part of the heroine's characterization and her multidimensionality, proving that

darkness is, just as much as light, inherently a part of everyone and of the tumultuous landscape of life.

Another central aspect framing the role of the heroine is the amount of her agency. In fairy tales, female agency is regularly constricted. Bottigheimer (120-127) discusses speech acts in fairy tales and concludes that female protagonists, more often than not, barely speak at all, and if they do, their voice is usually expressed through summarizing, indirect speech or only heard in answer to another, often male, authority:

In the Fairy Tales women answer with great frequency, they almost never pose a question, and their general helplessness leads them to cry out often. This represents much more than a random assignment of verbs introducing direct speech; it expresses the weight of an entire society enjoining compliant responses in good girls and, more important, forbidding inquiry, initiative, and, most heinous of all, impertinence. (ibid. 127)

Thus, even if femininity is cast into the central role of the protagonist, fairy tales depict these characters as helplessly subjected to their circumstances and often unable to resolve difficult situations by themselves through actively silencing their speech. Alice already provides a contrast to these females, as she constantly voices her thoughts and opinions, if only to herself. Nevertheless, in the midst of her final triumph over the unpleasant Queen of Hearts in *Wonderland*, Alice is removed from the scene by being woken up by her sister, and, back in the real world, is almost immediately silenced, dismissed and sent off to tea, portraying her agency outside of *Wonderland* as highly limited (see Carroll 127-128). All of the characters in *Coraline* use almost exclusively direct speech acts, and the heroine herself is no exception. However, *Coraline* moves even farther beyond any previous limitations, independently resolving extraordinarily difficult situations in both the primary and the secondary world as she “embarks on a (literally) soul-searching, soul-salvaging expedition to shatter those specious mirrors behind which women and girls have been imprisoned by language” (Matlock 42). Thus, the role of *Coraline* as the heroine is, of course, to save the day and to ensure a happy ending, but also to adopt a pivotal position in the (re-) negotiation of femininities in the text. The aim of the following sections is to provide a thorough analysis of *Coraline*’s central characteristics and to position them in relation to social and cultural notions of femininities contextual to the text’s publication as well as in contrast to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and this heroine’s Victorian frame of reference.

#### **4.1. A characterization of Coraline**

*Coraline* is awarded the foundation of her characterization primarily through her position and role as the heroine of the text, as it has been analyzed in the previous section. However, it is



possible to identify a number of individualizing characteristics that capture the essence of the protagonist through explicit and implicit characterizations, provided by remarks made by other characters or Coraline herself as well as through their actions (see Nodelman 60). Nikolaeva (*Rhetoric* 7-8) posits that “the central question in discussion of literary characters is whether they should be perceived (and subsequently analyzed) as real, living people or as purely textual constructions.” She further proposes that this division constructs a space for two distinctive pathways for the analysis of textual characters, either as mimetic, mirror-image representations of reality and fully realized individuals, or as purely linguistic constructions without any extratextual referents (see *ibid.* 8). The inherent pitfall of mimetic analysis is that the inter- and extratextual background knowledge of the reader supersedes the information provided in the text and may lead to ascribing attributes to characters solely on the basis of experience or presuppositions, even though “literary characters do not necessarily have to behave the way real people do” (*ibid.* 9). Nevertheless, it seems impossible to prescribe a solely semiotic approach to characterization in the realm of the analysis of a (re-) negotiation of femininities, as this process is necessarily partly constructed through an interaction with reader repertoire and background knowledge. Therefore, the characterization of Coraline provided in this section will attempt to clearly separate textually founded characteristics of the protagonist from connotational constructions, yet actively acknowledging the latter.

First, an important part of Coraline’s characterization and identity is founded on her being a child and living under the guidance and guardianship of her parents. While the relationships to the adults in Coraline’s life will be discussed in the next chapter, on a mimetic level, the classification of the heroine as a child already raises expectations related to the agency, behavior and knowledge of children, and perhaps even more specifically that of young girls. In fiction, children are often implicitly characterized through their clothes and their food preferences (see Nikolaeva, *Rhetoric* 274-276). Coraline is no exception, as her preference for the “Day-Glo green gloves” over the school clothes that her mother has picked out is founded on the desire that she “could be the only one” (Gaiman 21) at school wearing them, expressing a wish for individuality and an aversion to conforming to standards. This elementary characteristic also appears in the heroine’s repeated efforts to correct her neighbors’ pronunciation of her name as the more conventional and commonplace sounding “Caroline” (see Gaiman 2, 13). Matlock (45) even argues that “Caroline” can be read as “Carol-line”, suggesting an implicit “interpellation and resistant recitation” of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* through the heroine’s rejection of this name. Thus, Coraline further insists on her

individuality and rejects the simple addition of her character to pre-established intertextual femininities. Coraline departs from a textual tradition of passive heroines who are strictly guided by outside forces, as she not only declares herself to be unlike Carroll's Alice, she also decidedly rejects Alice's inactive and submissive paradigm for female protagonists. Instead, Gaiman's heroine outlines and follows different pathways of autonomy and self-determination. This persistent struggle to assert her identity becomes heightened in the secondary world, where "she faces the obliteration of her self in more dramatic terms" (Perdigao 106) as the heroine is confronted with the possibility of losing her soul and all memories of her previous life to the other mother, becoming a reflection of the children that she meets behind the mirror, whose individuality has been obliterated to the point that they cannot even recall their own names (see Gaiman 81).

Further, Coraline repeatedly voices her distaste for the gourmet food "recipes" prepared by her father (see Gaiman 7-8, 27) and seems to prefer plain or microwavable dishes. These food preferences are consistent with those of most children and suggest that, even though Coraline is shown to be highly mature and independent in a number of ways, she is still rooted in her childhood and clearly separated from the adults in her life. However, this notion is challenged in the scene of Coraline's final plot against the other mother's nefarious right hand, where she traps both the hand and the only key to the door that bridges the two worlds in the dangerously deep well in her garden and disguises her plot behind the façade of innocent childhood, staging a tea party for her dolls (see Gaiman 155-157). Buckley (74) posits that "Coraline consciously plays the role of child, adopting artificial signifiers of 'childhood', [which] indicates that the space occupied by 'the child' is necessarily blank space, filled with the desires of the onlooker. Coraline reveals 'childhood' for the game that it is, and in doing so echoes the Alice texts." This reading suggests that the heroine is farther removed from her childhood than previously suspected and indeed subverts it in a farcical manner by exposing it as a construct or a role that she can choose to inhabit whenever it has the potential to advance her quest. Therefore, Coraline somewhat contradicts a mimetic approach of characterization, as she seems to eclipse the behaviors expected of children outside of the textual scope and thus, by surpassing possible expectations, creates blanks for the (re-) negotiation of concepts related to her, such as childhood and femininity.

Coraline is explicitly gendered female in the text, a practice which, according to the theories developed by Butler (*Trouble* 24), activates certain presuppositions related to the "asymmetrical oppositions" of gender. Butler elaborates that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (ibid., *Trouble* 34). In

this way, gender constitutes a central part of any characterization. Coraline acts and is evaluated or characterized in front of previous representations and negotiations of femininities that she can either challenge or reaffirm. As discussed in previous sections, the heroine is somewhat counterbalanced to the prototypical female protagonist in fairy tales that the textual structures of *Coraline* seem to condition. This section now wants to highlight the traits that are essential to Coraline and thus have the possibility to influence and (re-) negotiate the femininity that she enacts in the text.

Paralleling fairy tale conventions in relation to the exposition of their protagonists, no background information regarding Coraline's upbringing, previous residence or extended family is revealed (see Lüthi, *Märchen* 17-18). The characterization is thus based entirely on the present, where the strongest component of the heroine's personality appears to be her "imagined" and lived reality as an explorer (Gooding 397), which is referenced repeatedly by Coraline herself throughout the text (see Gaiman 13, 71, 113). Pertaining to this identification as an explorer are her central characteristics, bravery and intellect, which are also echoed in the ghost children's wishes for Coraline: "[g]ood fortune and wisdom and courage – although you have already shown that you have all three of these blessings, and in abundance" (Gaiman 143). Nevertheless, Coraline is not portrayed as entirely fearless, rather, her bravery is derived from her conquering her fears, as voiced by the heroine herself: "'[b]ecause', she said, 'when you're scared but you still do it anyway, *that's* brave'" (Gaiman 57). The text also depicts moments where Coraline is puzzled and disconcerted or unsure of her identity, expressed inter alia through the prominence of fog as a symbol of "the character's confused mind" (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 272) in the secondary as well as in the primary world. This correlation of characteristics prototypically associated with heroines as well as the admittance of fear and doubt captures the resentment towards the one-dimensionality of characters that is expressed in the text. Coraline thus not only crosses boundaries in a literal sense between her primary and secondary world, but also unites internal disparities between being a heroine and "nothing [...] but a girl who was small for her age" (Gaiman 93).

Relating to the (re-) negotiation of femininities, the heroine illustrates and imposes female multidimensionality (see Butler, *Trouble* 19) as well as portraying both a compliant and a more rebellious femininity as inherently positive traits rather than suppressing one or the other, as it is often shown (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 175). Coraline is not afraid to break rules and conventions, as demonstrated early on by her defying of her parents' prohibition to enter the drawing room and stepping through its mysterious door as well as by acting on her distrust in the adult statement that the door "doesn't go anywhere" (Gaiman 7). In the end, it is also

the infringement of the first interdiction issued to Coraline to avoid the well in the garden (see Gaiman 3) that ensures the final victory over the evil other mother. Thus, the heroine and her femininity can further be characterized as independent and self-determined.

Finally, Lee (556) suggests that Coraline's revolting against and eventual defeat of the other mother represents a rejection of "a projection and a construction of the cultural values of others." As the other parents in the secondary world provide the heroine with an abundance of the attention that she is missing from her real parents, only her favorite foods and new and exhilarating toys, they do not truly represent Coraline's utmost desires, as she declares: "I don't *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't *mean* anything. What then?" (Gaiman 118). Coinciding with Lee's reading of the text, Coraline finally rejects socio-cultural norms and structures, which are represented through the other mother as "constructed not only of buttons but of social norms, an assemblage that allows us to interpret the onset of adulthood as a self-annihilating act" (ibid. 556). Thus, it can be deduced for her characterization that Coraline does not particularly subject to culturally imposed presuppositions on normative desires of living and on desirable family structures, again widening the structural scope for femininities through, in opposition to prototypical fairy tales, portraying that self-determination, resistance and liberation of norms rather than compliance are the (female) virtues that are rewarded with a truly happy ending (see Bacchilega 78). Certainly, Coraline exists in an entirely different textual and cultural context than the fairy tale protagonists portrayed by the Brothers Grimm, to which some of her agency might be ascribed. Thus, the next sections aim to place *Coraline* in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and contrast the textual negotiation of femininities with that provided in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in front of their respective inter- and extratextual backgrounds.

#### **4.2. Coraline as a 21<sup>st</sup> century heroine**

The scope and agency that exists for femininities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the context of the publication of *Coraline* in 2002 definitely exceed the prospects in the cultural space for fairy tale heroines or even Carroll's Alice. Coraline's strong focus on individuality could be encouraged by what Nikolajeva (*Rhetoric* 13) terms "a notable shift in Western children's fiction, beginning in the 1960s, toward a more profound interest in character." Campbell (334) also suggests that the heroes he analyzes were established during a time when meaning was primarily found in the group or the outside world, whereas today, it is constructed solely with-

in the individual. This spotlight on character and individual development serves as a precondition for a recognition of multiple diverging identifications that refute the deterministic one-dimensional presuppositions on gender and femininities (see Butler, *Trouble* 91). Coraline, like others of her contemporary heroines, in her complexity of character, might be “too multifaceted to be a stereotype, whether of the new or the old kind” (Nikolajeva, *Power* 120). In terms of negotiating femininities, it is notable that gender is created through performances, textual or otherwise, which simultaneously serve to reaffirm its construction and conceal its cultural genesis (see Butler, *Trouble* 190). If the role of the heroine is constituted through a renegotiation of these concepts, the question is “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” (ibid. 44). *Coraline* proposes a subversion of fairy tale structural patterns and a conspicuous multidimensionality of character to align textual femininities with the female agency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, this extratextual context facilitates the reception of such a subversion in a way that would have seemed unlikely in many previous decades, demonstrating the interrelation of intra- and extratextual renegotiation of culturally constituted concepts.

Despite arguments against reading *Coraline* as a contemporary adaptation or transformation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience (see Matlock 45), it contains all of Sigler's enumerated characteristics pertaining to texts that form part of the body of works that invoke Carroll's text, including an “Alice-like protagonist [...], who is typically polite, articulate, and assertive” (ibid. xvii). Nikolajeva (“Devils” 259) indicates that *Coraline* transfers the themes of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into a more sinister context. Whereas the unpleasanties and dangers that Alice faces remain safely locked within Wonderland, the other mother crosses the threshold between the two worlds and pursues Coraline into her primary home, exposing the permeability of structural boundaries. Additionally, “[t]he other world is not merely absurd, but virtually terrifying; and while Alice in all her vulnerability is not exposed to moral choices, Coraline's life is wholly dependent on the right decisions” (ibid. 259-260). This admittance of darkness as well as the demand of moral and performative agency in *Coraline* seems to reflect a difference in cultural circumstances, specifically in terms of femininities (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 175). Further, Coraline is not only allowed, but strongly encouraged through the need to save her real parents, to deconstruct norms and socially constructed scripts of feminine compliance (see Matlock 52), mirroring those prescribed to fairy tale heroines (see Bacchilega 78), which is illustrated through the heroine's rejection of the role of the playful, obedient and well-mannered child that is envisioned for her in the other world (see Gaiman 76-77). Developments of female agency until

the 21<sup>st</sup> century have created a normalized space for heroines like Coraline, who provide a stark contrast against “their innocent Gothic foremothers, whose stock response was flight, and whose only hope lay in rescue” (A. Jackson 8). For Coraline, no outside forces are available as rescuers, so she confronts the evil herself and is successful in her endeavor, wasting no time even considering flight as a possible course of action, again embodying the changed cultural paradigm of feminine agency.

Butler (*Trouble* 191) posits that gender can be conceptualized as a “constituted social temporality” that is “instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” Therefore, Coraline in her heroism is unable to change cultural conceptualizations of femininities on her own, but her confident portrayal of agency, multidimensionality and bravery adds to an inter- and extratextual discourse through which gender norms and presuppositions are constituted. However, the same illustration of these qualities might not be permitted to help shape the prominent discourse during the time of conceptualization of the heroines of the prototypical fairy tales referenced throughout this paper, as it is contingent on the pre-existing discursive forms. Agency needs to be constructed to be articulated (see Butler, *Trouble* 201), and that is truly what Coraline represents in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, Butler (ibid. 202-203) argues that, in a (re-) negotiation of femininities, “[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.” Every gendered portrayal of a character is thus necessarily a repetition, but not every repetition serves as a reaffirmation of norms. Coraline as a 21<sup>st</sup> century heroine realizes her potential to depict female agency and a dynamic femininity, continuing to structure and establish this cultural discourse.

#### **4.3. Alice as a 19<sup>th</sup> century heroine**

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865, in the heart of the Victorian age in England. Almost 150 years before *Coraline*, the performative cultural structure of gender and femininities was entirely different, however, it was still subject to a development of renegotiation: “Terms of gender designation are [...] never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade” (Butler, *Undoing* 10). This dynamic approach suggests that femininities were continuously reaffirmed or restructured in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the inter- and extratextual context surrounding Alice just as they are in the present, even though the central characteristics of that renegotiation might have changed. Alice has been classified as the heroine of a somewhat subverted didactic text that forged the path for subsequent children’s literature (see A. Jackson 3). Nevertheless, as part of 19<sup>th</sup> century children’s literature, the strong

emphasis on character present in contemporary texts like *Coraline*, had not yet been established and the characters were prototypically rather flat in order to produce a pronounced focus on the plot (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 12-13). Indeed, Alice becomes so engrossed in navigating Wonderland and managing the truly unsettling and peculiar situations that she finds herself in, that there is hardly any time to investigate her own character, in addition to the heroine constantly doubting and questioning her identity (see Carroll 17-18, 44, 52).

Victorian femininities were often positively culturally connotated to be “sweet, shy, passive and domestic – the traditional ‘angel in the house’” (Lurie 18). However, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the feminine scope in popular culture widened to include the ‘New Woman’, whose elementary characteristics were to be “freethinking, strong willed and clearheaded” (ibid. 27) as well as “brave, active, independent, sensible, and willing to confront authority”, attributes that had previously been primarily associated with the male sphere (ibid. 31). Nonetheless, this increased agency continued to preserve the connotation of being “unfeminine” (Lundell 14). Within these paradigmatic femininities, Alice’s role of the heroine of her own text is structured around her self-reliant and active confrontation of the bizarre scenes she encounters, asserting herself against the curious and oftentimes rude or insulting creatures that she meets, both male and female (see Carroll 36, 74, 127), which places her on the spectrum of the ‘New Women’, even though she is introduced with a tendency to resort to tears and passivity when faced with particular difficult circumstances (see Carroll 18). Additionally, Alice is completely removed from the domestic sphere throughout the entire text, further contributing to her identity as a ‘New Woman’. However, it seems important to acknowledge that Alice’s agency, contrary to *Coraline*, is limited entirely to her sojourn in the secondary world, which is “consistent with the general trend that this powerful, positive female figure does not exist as a socially identifiable female figure. Female power to accomplish great deeds is acknowledged only as belonging to the mystical realm, something done during sleep by the unconscious” (Lundell 47-48). The limitations of agency outside of the fantastic secondary realm are especially marked for Alice, where “Alice herself is dismissed from the story for tea while her subjectivity is first submitted to her older sister’s musings upon Alice’s ‘dream’ and then subducted entirely to the narrator’s taxidermied tableau of ‘happy summer days’” (Matlock 46). This subversion of the heroine’s agency suggests that her heroic femininity is indeed limited to her own subjectivity and barely applicable in the primary world. Thus, whereas *Coraline* is an active and independent heroine independent of her surroundings, Alice’s heroism is restricted to the secondary sphere while she remains true to the more desirable femininity of the playful and obedient girl-child as soon as she awakens from her slumber.

Additionally, Alice is continuously confronted not only with uncertainty in terms of her identity, but also with the defiance of meaning of her own utterances (see Carroll 18, 48). This missing command of linguistic codes further emphasizes the heroine's state of confusion and fear of identity loss through undermining the possibility of a differentiation between the familiar and the grotesque, the self and the other (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 192, R. Jackson 142). R. Jackson (143) proposes that the foundation of Alice's self-doubt is a fear of change, perhaps related to the schism of her femininity between that of the idealized Victorian girl-child and the self-governing 'New Woman'. This disparity can be read to be depicted through the constant subversion of Alice's agency, independence and ingenuity through her surroundings, exposing the limits of her relative power, which is already constricted to the secondary world. Where Coraline in her (re-) negotiation of femininities might function as positive character for inspiration or identification, Alice "is hardly a role model" who can be "experienced as appointment depiction of a lonely, confused child in the perplexing and absurd adult world" or "cause a sense of discomfort, frustration and aversion, if the reader feels humiliated alongside the protagonist" (Nikolajeva, *Power* 33). Thus, Alice's position as a heroine is not devoid of conflicts and complexity, as she struggles to bridge the divide between mastering her own fate and succumbing to the dominant notions of culturally favored passive femininities. Matlock (46) argues that the ending of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* presents a final restriction to the heroine's power, as "her agency is ultimately sublimated to a domestic hierarchy wherein cards are played by children, and children quelled by adults", suggesting that her role as a heroine is also constricted to the realm of children, whereas Coraline successfully challenges adult characters and their rules or restrictions.

Overall, Alice as a 19<sup>th</sup> century heroine is significantly more constricted in her agency than Coraline, her 21<sup>st</sup> century counterpart in this analysis. However, Alice succeeds in negotiating different Victorian presuppositions of femininities and claims her position as a central agent in the lineage of female heroines in children's literature, a discourse that, since then, has transformed alongside its extratextual discursive norms and structures through their productive reciprocal interconnection.

## 5. Relationships to the adults in *Coraline*

Although thus far, Coraline, the heroine herself, has been the principal object of analysis in this paper, it is pivotal to extend the discussion to the adults presented in the text and their relationships to and interactions with the protagonist. The adult figures prototypically, inter



alia through different power relations, structure a child's agency and character, especially within family ties. Thus, the first section of this chapter will analyze the textual role of the family, which in *Coraline* solely consists of the protagonist's parental figures, both in the primary and in the secondary world, in relation to the heroine's journey and characterization. Additionally, the text continues to (re-) negotiate femininities through the different female adult characters who occupy positions of benevolent and supportive guidance figures, the maleficent antagonist and apparently phlegmatic or emotionally detached characters, illustrating a wide spectrum of female agency and identity. Especially of interest is the ambivalent role and character of the mother figures, which will be analyzed in detail in the following sections. Therefore, the primary aim of this chapter is to investigate the depictions of the adult characters in *Coraline*, the structure and parameters of their relationships to the heroine, as well as their effect on the portrayal and negotiation of femininities.

Coraline is the only living child that is presented in the text, thus, her adventure and journey lead her entirely through a space structured by adult actions and interactions. Nevertheless, the protagonist is unequivocally differentiated from the adults through characteristics primarily associated with children, such as her boundless curiosity and disdain for mundane activities. This apparent contrast facilitates a reception of the general relationships between Coraline and the adults that she encounters as a reflection of the separation of the self and the other, converting them into essential constituents of the protagonist's own identity, as they are "intimately linked through interdependency. Without the self, the other cannot exist, but, conversely, the self is not able to set itself apart from its surroundings without naming them 'other'" (Horstkotte 46). Therefore, the analysis of the adults in *Coraline* carries implications not only for the text and its (re-) negotiations of femininities, but also for Coraline herself.

In children's literature, as well as in fairy tales, adults generally occupy insignificant or negative positions, appearing negligible in their contributions to the development of the child, usually the protagonist, or even "denying the child physical and spiritual freedom and thus preventing independence and growth" (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 117), contradictory to the role adults, especially guardian figures, usually enact in the extratextual space. Therefore, it is not uncommon for adult figures to be portrayed as flat characters in the sense that they are reduced to one typical trait, rendering them predictable and one-dimensional (see *ibid.* 130). Additionally, adults are often the antagonists in adventure stories for children so that the victory of the child protagonist can be read as a triumph over the adult sphere, which appears inferior in wisdom, virtue or strength (see *ibid.* 123). Nikolajeva (*ibid.* 119) further posits that negative and unfavorable characteristics are often ascribed to parental figures featured in

“classic boys’ and adventure stories”, whereas “[i]n classic girls’ novels, adults are commonly models and idols.” In this classification, *Coraline* seems to comply with the paradigm for adventure stories, although the heroine shares a deeply rooted emotional bond with her real father that, in fact, inspires her necessary bravery for her return to and triumph in the other world (see Gaiman 56-57). Further, the adults portrayed in *Coraline* include both flat as well as round and dynamic characters, who often unite seemingly contradictory traits, such as the nefarious yet nurturing other mother, whose motivations for her actions lie in either or love or hunger (see Gaiman 63), or Coraline’s apathetic yet concerned real father, rendering them particularly interesting subjects of analysis. Thus, to summarize, the adults in *Coraline* and their relationships to the heroine, which will be discussed in the following sections that constitute the final part of this paper, are significant for a further structural analysis of the femininities illustrated in the text, including that of the protagonist.

### **5.1. The role of the family**

The adult characters that are the most significant and constitutional to *Coraline* are the parental figures of the heroine, as variants of them appear in both the primary and the secondary world and their actions and relationships to Coraline fundamentally structure her character and the progression of the story. Coraline’s real parents are introduced within the first ten pages of the text and appear distant, indifferent and inadvertent towards their daughter and her repeated call for attention and diversion (see Gaiman 4-7, 15-16, Jones 32). This pattern is commonly used in contemporary children’s fiction, where the parental figures of the protagonist are often “‘an issue’: they fail to understand the child’s needs, and they are emotionally absent” (Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 119). This emotional unavailability of Coraline’s parents is later complemented by their physical absence, which, however, fulfills the function of propelling the heroine towards crossing the threshold behind the mysterious door in the drawing room and stepping into the other world for the first time (see Gooding 401). It seems worthwhile to note that Coraline has looked behind the door before, although when opened by her mother, it only opened “onto a brick wall” (Gaiman 7), suggesting that the heroine’s solitude acts as an essential precondition for her adventure. Thus, as the parents’ negligence is a necessary constituent, allowing “the space that the fictive child needs for development and maturity, in order to test (and taste) his independence and to discover the world without adult protection” (Nikolajeva, *Power* 16), it cannot be negatively evaluated, as it serves to accomplish an imperative objective within the text (see Nikolajeva, *Rhetoric* 117). Nevertheless, Coraline’s emotional abandonment is strongly countered by the other mother in the secondary world,

who smothers her with attention and care during her first visit (see Gaiman 26-27, 42-44). However, this consideration is soon unveiled to be integrated with a desire for power, asserted control and enforced dominance over Coraline, which, on the opposite side of the spectrum, also provides a stark contrast to the primary mother figure. The protagonist is confronted with a vastly different relative power structure in the primary world, as although Coraline's real parents issue interdictions, for example that she should not go exploring in the rain or enter the drawing room that contains the mysterious door (see Gaiman 4, 7), they are not strong enough to prevail in her parents' absence. Additionally, the parents in the primary world do not physically enforce their power, unlike the other mother, and instead their relationship to Coraline seems to be structured by mutual respect. Thus, the heroine has to navigate an imbalance of emotional availabilities and power structures between the two worlds that can be read to represent the multidimensional complexity of extratextual family relationships.

Generally, parental figures in fairy tales enact a function that is "a reversal of the role they conventionally were expected to play. The father is weak and regressive, the stepmother strong and progressive. Strong mother figures, however, do not have the narrator's sympathy in folktales. Therefore, she is portrayed negatively in spite of her socially positive function" (Lundell 103). *Coraline* emulates these structures, especially in the secondary world, where the other father is unable to enact his own will and to resist the forces of the other mother to attack Coraline (see Gaiman 108-110), whereas the other mother is, excepting Coraline, undoubtedly the strongest and smartest person within the other world. However, it seems debatable whether those conventional expectations of parental roles continue to have the same foothold in the contemporary context of *Coraline*'s publication. Indeed, the heroine's real parents in the primary world appear to subvert these structures as they both work "doing things on computers" (Gaiman 5), share domestic duties and are equal in their care for Coraline (see Parsons, Sawers, and McNally 375). Nevertheless, Coraline differentiates between her parents as she seemingly shares a particularly strong emotional bond with her father, as the childhood memory that inspires her bravery features only him (see Gaiman 55-57) and after her defeat of the other mother and return to the primary world, Coraline's real mother mainly comments on her distressed appearance whereas her father picks her up and carries her into the kitchen, like he had done when she was little (see *ibid.* 137-139). Birkhäuser-Oeri (280) suggests that a deep connection to her father evokes a headstrong and determined nature in the daughter, which is constitutive to characterization of Coraline, establishing the relationship to her father as essential to the text.

Regarding the role and structure of the family, fairy tales and oedipal psychology tend to imply a rivalry between the daughter and her mother or a mother-substitute character such as a stepmother, or a literal other mother, while the fathers are often backgrounded supporting figures, a structure that can also be found in *Coraline* (see Bettelheim 114, Campbell 115, Gooding 400). The ending of *Coraline* depicts the final triumph of the heroine over the other mother's agency by trapping her right hand in a deep, dark well; however, the hand maintains a firm grasp on the only key to the other world (see Gaiman 156-157), suggesting that her powers might not remain eternally banished, so that "[t]he final ruse is less a surmounting or resolution of Coraline's oedipal rivalries than a repression of them" (Gooding 403). No sequel to *Coraline* has been written, so the fate that awaits the heroine beyond the bounds of her text is unknown and entrusted to the imagination of the reader. In sum, the femininities in *Coraline* are negotiated against the background of fairy tale family structures, providing the challenge to separate the significance of the characteristics of both the real and the other parents from their functions in the text. Further, the two mothers can be read as divergent and ambiguous models for Coraline's female identity, warranting a detailed analysis of the representations of motherhood in the text in the next section of this paper.

### 5.1.1. Symbols of motherhood

As discussed in the previous section, the two mothers in *Coraline* depict decidedly divergent femininities within the maternal frame of reference provided by inter- and extratextual norms and presuppositions. These portrayals perform a significant function in the (re-) negotiations of femininities in the text, as they illustrate a wide spectrum of viable female identities by adorning both mothers with positive as well as negative character traits. Further, the mother figure prototypically fulfills a central role in the navigation of femininities for her daughter and has long since been a highly discussed subject in the field of psychology and a popular literary motif. Bettelheim (112-113) observes that even the partition into two opposing mother figures, as it can be found in *Coraline*, is a prevalent trope in fairy tales that originates from the oedipal dilemma of the young girl, who finds her blissful life next to her father figure interrupted by an older, detestable female, yet continues to yearn for the loving attention that is provided by her mother figure. In order to process this complex motherly ambivalence, the fairy tale introduces a clear division between "the pre-oedipal wonderful good mother and the oedipal evil stepmother" (ibid. 114), where the benevolent female is often well-intentioned but reduced to helpless passivity and the malicious other mother actively works to sabotage

the heroine's happiness. This distribution of roles and agency inscribes a passive femininity as the only desirable example in the motherly paradigm and suggests a definite ceiling for female agency that operates independently from the portrayal of a possible child heroine. Within the fairy tale text, both mother figures occupy the same structural position and are in fact often only differentiated through the nature and motivation of their behavior (see Lundell 18). At first glance, *Coraline* seems to follow this exact pattern, further employing fairy tale structures as a background for the negotiation of femininities, however, the paradigm is somewhat subverted as Coraline's real mother in fact deprives the heroine of the care and attention that she would seek from the benevolent female, which she then seems to receive from the ill-intentioned other mother. Similarly, Coraline does not only confront the other mother, but also, albeit less explicitly, her mother in the primary world, when she invalidates her judgment of the mysterious door in the drawing room or on the appropriate choice of school clothes. This prevalent struggle against the motherly authority is fundamental for the maturation process of the heroine and the discovery of her own independent identity (see Lundell 89), towards which Coraline might then have made significant progress at the end of the text.

In general, the figure and role of the mother is subject to a number of culturally contingent presuppositions on the nature of her behavior, attitude and feelings towards her children. Lundell argues that, in the Western context, these notions still reflect the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian idealized portrayal of motherhood as feminine perfection, where the woman is denied and scrutinized for any possible "negative feelings of hate, anger, fear, resentment and aggressiveness as legitimate expressions of the feelings of motherhood" (ibid. 195). Thus, the negatively othered mother figure, who, in *Coraline*, is even explicitly labeled the 'other mother', might also be read as a release for the expression of female rejection of the predominant mother schemata and a reconciliation with the paradoxical and multidimensional reality of femininities that exist within the paradigm of mother figures. *Coraline* illustrates a "corruption of good mother signifiers" (Palkovich 183), where the aforementioned combination of positively and negatively connotated character traits in both of the mothers suggests an inversion of presuppositional expectations. Birkhäuser-Oeri (161) also suggests that, psychologically, the transition between the good and the evil mother figure is fluid, and both equally condition the development and maturation process of the child. However, the text finally seems to reaffirm the conventional mother schemata as it is revealed that the affection of the other mother was simply part of an elaborate façade for her malevolent intentions when it vanishes and degenerates alongside the other world itself (see Palkovich 183). In addition, the other mother physical changes until she appears completely differentiated from the real moth-

er and Coraline “wondered how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance” (Gaiman 126). The final restoration of the order in the primary world and reestablished separation of the two mother figures “may ensure that the secure-base schema is only temporarily threatened” (Palkovich 184) and suggest a renegotiation of motherly femininities that may not be substantiated by the ending of the text.

The other mother in *Coraline* is termed a “beldam” (Gaiman 79), likely referencing a ballad by Keats titled “La Belle Dame sans Merci”, which translates to ‘the beautiful woman with no mercy’ and discusses an astonishingly beautiful woman who charms her victims with false promises of love, only to then bestow upon them a terrible fate. The beldams are “as their names suggest, without mercy, and, in a sense, feed off the sacrifice of those that succumb to their temptation, destroying that which they love” (Jones 37). Similarly, the other mother displays a disingenuous and misleading version of love towards Coraline, which symbolizes an antithesis to the prototypically expected caring motherly affection. Love does not strive for power or dominance (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 275), so that the mother in the secondary world must be ascribed a different motif, although she masterfully feigns her motherly emotions. Conversely, the real mother’s expressions of love and affection towards her daughter might be hidden in her interdictions as worries for Coraline’s safety or rejection by her peers for wearing the Day-Glo green gloves that nobody else has (see Gaiman 21). Thus, the complication can once again be found in the ambiguity and multidimensionality of the characters in the text, pointing towards a complementary conception of femininities as multifaceted and reconstructing the normative frame of motherhood.

Interestingly, the other mother appears to exemplify a conservative portrayal of femininities, specifically in relation to motherhood. When she is first introduced in the text, the other mother seems happily engrossed in her role as a caregiver for Coraline and managing domestic duties, as she prepares delicious meals and hot chocolates, has a room filled with interesting toys for Coraline and wants to play board games with her daughter (see Gaiman 26-27, 59, 75), establishing a marked contrast to the emotionally distant mother in the primary world. As these conservative associations are cast unto the role of the antagonist, Parsons, Sawers and McNally (376) argue that “[t]his old-school, maternal feminine stereotype is depicted here as evil and must be decommissioned in order for Coraline to accept and love her postfeminist mother”, suggesting that the negotiation of femininities in the text finally disfavors conservatively ascribed qualities. However, Nikolajeva (*Power*, 50) proposes to regard these attributes of the other mother not “as an obsolete gender stereotype”, but rather as “the child’s view of his mother’s function in his life”, so that the other mother could be read as a

fulfilment of Coraline's parental expectations, even though this interpretation neglects the origins of the child's expectations of the mother figure, which might very well lie in the cultural transmission of the referenced stereotypes of femininity. Nonetheless, this depiction of almost overwhelming motherly care and devotion evokes the gentle femininity that fairy tales often present as the essential and desirable female quality; however, it is paired with tremendous amounts of power, a characteristic that markedly bears "unwomanly" (Lieberman 392) associations within the fairy tale structure, thus establishing a further dichotomy and ambiguity within the (re-) negotiation of femininities in the text. Power and its connotations of independence function as a negative signifier in fairy tales when awarded to a female character, which might have influenced extratextual femininities to develop an aversion to power (see Lundell 14). In *Coraline*, the power of the other mother also receives a negative connotation as she exercises it to inflict harm upon others, however, the heroine herself finally succeeds through her own unrivaled agency, independence, wits and strength, and thus demonstrates a positive connection between power and femininity. Overall, the variants of motherhood depicted in *Coraline* are central to the negotiation of femininities within the text, as they portray different presuppositions on mother figures in a field of ambiguity between the reaffirmation and subversion of fairy tale structures as well as widen the scope beyond the femininity of the heroine herself.

### **5.1.2. The family as a locus of misunderstanding**

As analyzed before, the family figures in *Coraline* cannot only be analyzed as characters in themselves but also fulfil a structural function, as their emotional and physical absence prompt the beginning of the adventure story for the heroine. One central textual function and prevalent attribute of families of child protagonists is the apparent parental misapprehension of the child's desires, ideas and identity. In regard to the focus of this paper, the (re-) negotiation of femininities, this dominant misunderstanding that also occurs in *Coraline* may be read as an intratextual struggle for the female identity of the heroine. In fairy tales, the parental figures oftentimes underestimate the abilities of the children, who disprove these assumptions through their heroic deeds in the text, a trope that is based on the extratextual reality that "[a]lmost every child is convinced that his parents know better about nearly everything, with one exception: they do not think well enough of him" (Bettelheim 135). Coraline finds herself in a similar situation, as her parents in the primary world minimize her agency and power when her father denies her request for company and entertainment, sending her away "cheer-

fully” and without so much as turning away from his computer to look at his daughter (Gaiman 16). Matlock (39) posits that this situation serves as an example of the heroine being “[e]ffectively silenced by a discourse to which she is consistently refused access.” In her fruitless pursuit of entertainment in the primary world, Coraline also attempts to draw the mist surrounding her house but abandons her task after simply scribbling the word ‘MIST’ in one corner of the blank sheet of paper, which her mother deems to be “very modern” (Gaiman 15). The text depicts the exact arrangement of Coraline’s “slightly wiggly letters” (Gaiman 15), where the ‘I’ in ‘MIST’ is notably placed below the other letters. Parsons, Sawers, and McNally (377) argue that this arrangement represents Coraline’s unsettled sense of identity, as thus far she has not been able to establish her own individuality apart from her parents yet struggles to conform to their monotonous way of life. This conflict is further implied by her first inspection of the delusive mirror, where, although she is accompanied solely by the cat, does not see her own reflection, but only that of her parents, asking her for help as they are reduced to passivity in Coraline’s self-determined quest in the other world (see Gaiman 51). Coraline’s reflection on her own identity through the ‘MIST’ yields a further connection to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, albeit to the animated film adaptation rather than the novel that is otherwise used as a source of comparison in this thesis. When Alice encounters the caterpillar in the film, her identity is questioned by the animal asking her: “Who are you?”, as the letters ‘O R U’ emerge in the form of smoke rings from its hookah, accompanying the caterpillar’s inquiry (00:32:35-00:33:30), and introducing an intriguing parallel to the misty ‘I’ that Coraline has to confront. Alice, like Coraline, struggles to find a satisfying reply and demonstrates uncertainty about her own identity. However, the decisive difference between the two heroines can, once again, be found in their self-determination, because Alice merely confronts and reacts to the caterpillar’s smoke, whereas as Coraline actively questions and investigates herself. Nevertheless, the parental misunderstanding of the heroine’s needs and her inability to establish her voice among her family push Coraline towards the autonomy that will become one of her central characteristics nearing the end of the text.

Similarly, Coraline’s mother in the primary world misunderstands the nature of what can be found behind the mysterious door in the drawing room, which only opens unto the other world once the heroine unlocks it on her own, suggesting a path and desire that Coraline “must pursue on her own” (Coats 87). Thus, the protagonist’s separation from her family, driven by the parental misunderstanding and disinterest, fuels the necessary process of differentiation from her family that leads her into the adventure, even though this structure is subverted throughout the story as the sentiment of duty towards and appreciation for her parents



becomes Coraline's motivation for returning to the other world and challenging the other mother (see Gaiman 57). Rudd (166) argues that, specifically a disassociation from the mother figure, which might be represented by both the real and the other mother, is central to the development of individuality. This journey through the individual maturation process creates a further reason for the division of the mother figure into a benevolent and a nefarious character, as the separation from the mother figure and the individualization of the child can be both a rewarding and painful process, which can be illustrated through the referenced dichotomy of mothers (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 120-121). However, the ending of the text depicts the desire and success of a restoration of order, also within the family, where only Coraline herself has notably changed, as she openly displays her affection towards her parents and even eats the dinner prepared by her father, whose creations she previously notoriously rejected (see Gaiman 137-139). Thus, the text employs the trope of the misunderstood child within the family for the structural progression of the story, but also posits that this misunderstanding can be resolved, so that Coraline's agency is sustained equally by disobedience and affection. Finally, the independence of the heroine that sprouts in part from the misapprehensions within her family is one of the essential constituents of the text (see Buckley 69), as it truly empowers Coraline's femininity through her inherent agency and inspires her success over the evil forces that she has to brave in the other world.

## **5.2. Guidance figures**

In addition to her family, Coraline encounters a number of benevolent figures that guide her throughout her adventure and towards her triumph over the nefarious other mother. Guidance figures, helpers or donors are fundamental characters within the fairy tale structure who possess the necessary characteristics, attributes or knowledge to supplement the heroine in her quest whenever her own abilities seem insufficient for the task at hand, although ultimately, the protagonist generally receives the sole credit for their success (see Tatar 99). The helpers do not constantly accompany the heroine, but rather dissipate into a backgrounded narrative level and promptly return to the foreground whenever their competencies are needed (see Lüthi, *Volksmärchen* 18-19). Campbell (59), even though his gendered character descriptions need to be taken with a grain of salt as elaborated in an earlier section, posits that, frequently, "the supernatural helper is masculine in form", whereas the female guidance figures represent "a benign, protective power of destiny", extending emotional support rather than practical deeds towards the heroine as acts of assistance.

*Coraline*, once again, seems to follow these structural conventions of the fairy tale, as the principal active helper and guidance figure is the cat, who Coraline perceives to be speaking in a male voice (see Gaiman 33) and who shifts effortlessly and seemingly at his own will between the two worlds and the narrative levels, yet never fails to be present in any critical moments for the heroine. The mischievous, self-satisfied and sometimes brusque behavior of the animal casts it into the popular role of the “male trickster cat”, who occupies a “superior position towards humans” (Nikolajeva, “Devils” 252-253), even towards the other mother, as he travels along pathways between the two worlds that “even *she* doesn’t know about” (Gaiman 73) and thus is equipped to assist the heroine in all of her endeavors. In general, the “haughty black cat” (Gaiman 3) fulfills “numerous functions as Coraline’s main interlocutor; as a device that allows Coraline to articulate her thoughts on identity, naming, bravery, and parents; as the one stable indicator of which world Coraline is in; and, crucially, as the projection of the untapped resources that allow Coraline to retrieve the last soul” (Gooding 399). Indeed, the cat serves as the primary addressee of the heroine, creating a space upon which she can cast her voice in expressing her thoughts and fears, and thus uniting the functions of male and female guidance figures in fairy tales as outlined by Campbell (see *ibid.* 59). Interestingly, although other secondary characters principally obstruct an intertextual comparison, the cat appears reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat that guides and advises the heroine in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, where “instead of a Wise Old Woman in feline shape we meet a trickster more suitable for a masculine, patricidal story” (Nikolajeva, “Devils” 257). In both texts, the cats appear to function as gatekeepers to the secondary world as they are privy to essential information on the workings of their wondrous surroundings and its inhabitants that they share with the heroine. Regarding the negotiation of femininities in the text, the male cat as an indispensable guidance figure might raise doubts as to why Coraline cannot simply surmount the adversities in the other world on her own, as she is otherwise awarded with significant amounts of agency. However, in structural terms, a donor or helper appears almost as significant to evoke a prototypical fairy tale frame of reference as the heroine or the antagonist and the feline rather than human nature of the guiding character perhaps weakens the impact of its masculine gender attribution. Additionally, in *Coraline*, the cat finally finds itself at the mercy of the other mother, and it is the heroine who, in the ultimate critical moment, devises a plan that saves them both (see Nikolajeva, “Devils” 260, Gaiman 125-129). Thus, Coraline ultimately proves her self-sufficiency and independence through helping not only herself but also her primary guidance figure.

Although significantly less frequent in appearance, the Misses Spink and Forcible, Coraline's neighbors and "old and round" former actresses, who are always surrounded by dogs (Gaiman 1), additionally function as guidance figures for the heroine. They are donors in the literal sense of the word, as they supply Coraline with "a stone with a hole in it" that is "good for bad things, sometimes" (ibid. 19), which ultimately proves to be her essential advantage in the literal soul-searching challenge against the other mother. However, while the elderly actresses may provide the necessary tool for her success, it is Coraline herself who actively employs it in her quest, overturning the prototypical fairy tale structure where "external powers rather than self-initiative" (Rowe 248-249) lead the heroine towards her success. The Misses Spink and Forcible are also shown to be caring, wise and intuitive in their interactions with the protagonist, although their guidance is less clear and direct than that of the cat, as their words of wisdom lead Coraline to wonder "why so few of the adults she had met made any sense" (Gaiman 18). This query also evokes Alice's journey through Wonderland, where she almost exclusively meets creatures who she expects to be older and wiser than herself, like the adults in *Coraline*, but who repeatedly disappoint her confidence in their rationality through their absurd or illogical statements and behavior. Once again, what differentiates the two heroines is their independence and autonomy, as Coraline reaches her conclusion on the lack of reason of the adults in her life on her own while Alice needs to be told by the Cheshire Cat that everyone in Wonderland is "mad" (Carroll 63).

In *Coraline*, while the cat does not appear to be affected by his boundary transgressions between the two worlds, the heroine encounters other, uncanny versions of all of her neighbors in the secondary world. These other neighbors include the two elderly actresses, who, in an eerie manner, live out their dream of returning to the stage and regaining their youthful bodies, before reappearing as fragmentary, ghastly creatures, exposing their complete subjugation to the works of the other mother (see Gaiman 38-39, 99-100). In fairy tales, women who are both powerful and benevolent are rare, and if they do appear in the text, they are often represented as old, superhuman and asexual beings: "They are not examples of powerful women with whom children can identify as role models; they do not provide meaningful alternatives to the stereotype of the younger, passive heroine. A girl may hope to become a princess, but can she ever become a fairy?" (Lieberman 391). The Misses Spink and Forcible are similarly impassible role models, even disregarding their uncanny doubles in the other world, and while their spiritual inclinations might evoke notions of a fairy world, their wistful and constantly nostalgic lives hardly seem desirable (see Parsons, Sawers, and McNally 379). However, these two women depict yet another femininity, as they are presented neither as

mothers nor daughters, but as formerly career-driven, now elderly, self-sufficient females, who take care of themselves as well as everybody else, adding another puzzle piece to the (re-) negotiation of femininities in *Coraline*.

Overall, the guidance figures in *Coraline* serve to amplify the invocation of fairy tale structures in the text, shape the heroine and her actions through their interactions and add to the framework of femininities within the text. Indubitably, these functions and processes are also fulfilled by the antagonists, which will be explored in the next section.

### 5.3. Antagonists

The principal antagonist in *Coraline* is the other mother, and virtually all of the other characters who exhibit ill-willed behavior towards the heroine are beings of her creation or distortion and under her control, such as the other father or the other Mr. Bobo (see Gaiman 109, 116). Thus, this section will place a strong emphasis on the character and functions of the other mother and her relationship with Coraline. As discussed in previous chapters of this paper, a malevolent and antagonistic mother figure is not uncommon in fairy tales (see Bettelheim 112-114, Lundell 18), and usually exhibits constraining and suppressing behavior towards the heroine (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 127). Nevertheless, these villainesses can also fulfill the essential function of guiding the protagonist in the discovery of her own identity and independence, a quest and triumph almost as significant as the struggles against any outside forces that the heroine must endure, through creating situations where she must overcome boundaries previously thought untraversable, navigating the heroine towards an inner transformation (see Radulescu 1088). The other mother confronts Coraline with numerous situations where she is challenged to overcome her fears, trust her instincts and prove her strength, wisdom and endurance not only for herself, but the many souls of those who depend on her success, so that she leaves the other world different to when she found it. Parsons, Sawers, and McNally (371) further posit that the other mother serves as an exemplification of the antagonist as “a vehicle through which the protagonists resolve questions of identity, one’s (gendered) place in the world, and the kinds of interpersonal relationships that are culturally sanctioned.” Thus, the villainess cannot be read as a purely negatively connotated character but rather as the structural catalyst for a necessary development or inner growth in the protagonist that engenders the final happy resolution of the text.

The other mother, as mentioned before, is described as a beldam, creatures that first engulf their victims in love and then relish in their destruction (see Jones 37), as she lures in

unsuspecting children under the guise of exceptionally affectionate motherhood to then take their life, heart and joy, leaving them “with nothing but mist and fog” (Gaiman 84), condemning them to hollow existences. Gooding (397) argues that this “language of consumption [...] suggests assimilation, and taken as a projection of Coraline’s fantasy, it reflects a childish misapprehension of the nature and possibilities of parental love.” Therefore, the real danger that the heroine finds herself in is again related to the imminent undermining of her individuality, apart from her parents, expressed through the possibility of literally being consumed by a second mother figure after accepting the role of the “most dutiful daughter” (Gaiman 89) that the secondary world and the other mother prescribe for Coraline. The ultimate loss of independence and unique identity is represented by the looming threat of the replacement of Coraline’s eyes, which may be read as the homophone loss of the ‘I’ or the self, with the same black buttons that all of the other characters in the secondary world have already received (see Matlock 41). Ultimately, however, Coraline triumphs over the impending assimilation as she employs the traits that compose her individuality, such as her wits, bravery and compassion, to outplay the other mother in her own challenge game. The prototypical weakness of the tyrannical antagonists in fairy tales is their pride and erroneous supposition of their own invincibility (see Campbell 289). Similarly, it is the hubris of the other mother that leads her to play directly into Coraline’s hands and allows the heroine to succeed in her quest (see Gaiman 129). Nevertheless, the other characters of her creation appear to contrast this prideful behavior as they even admit to their own weakness (see Gaiman 110, 118), suggesting that the text in fact depicts only one true antagonist. Finally, the fairy tale structure entails the elimination or death of the malevolent mother figure after she has fulfilled her function in the identity formation process of the heroine (see Birkhäuser-Oeri 202). However, *Coraline* does not disclose the final destiny of the other mother apart from the confinement of her right hand, which remains in possession of the only key that connects the two worlds, in the deep well in the heroine’s backyard. This might allow for a reading that something awaits the heroine beyond the bounds of the text and that her quest of establishing her own individuality has not yet been entirely completed, representing the dynamic nature of personal identities that also prevails in the extratextual realm.

The negotiations of femininity that pertain to the antagonistic other mother figure have already been partially discussed in the chapter on the symbols of motherhood. However, by casting female characters into both negative and positive spheres, the text creates a multifaceted representation of feminine agency that illustrates a wide spectrum of behaviors, motivations and emotions, all of which are somehow established as valid and thus creating an posi-

tion to the prototypical portrayal of femininities in fairy tales (see MacDonald 18), although the other mother hardly functions as a canvas for possible reader identification due to her structural position as the villainess that must be defeated to restore the desirable order in the primary world. In total, the other mother masterfully showcases as well as condemns overbearing parental love and demonstrates her extensive agency in the structural position of the villainess, where she also fulfills her implicit function of guiding Coraline towards successfully completing her quests, so that the malevolent deeds of the antagonist need to be read and evaluated against this contextual background.

## 6. Conclusion

*Coraline* undeniably is an intriguing text that navigates traditional structural fairy tale conventions as well as female characters, representing contemporary negotiations on feminine agency and identity. Although the analysis in this paper has shown that the fairy tale is certainly not the only generic influence of the text, it is arguably the most immediately recognizable schema, and by juxtaposing fairy tale structures and an extensive female agency unbeknownst to the genre, *Coraline* constructs a significant blank for the implied reader. Further, the discussion in this thesis has highlighted the interrelations of intra-, inter- and extratextual representations of femininity, as the dominant socio-cultural discourse shapes and is at the same time inter alia constructed by the contemporary textual publications (see Rowe 239, Nikolaeva, *Power* 139). This interconnection also affects negotiations and representations of femininity, which Butler has subsumed into the “performative structure of gender” (ibid., *Undoing* 10), where the discursive repetitions and revisions establish the culturally perceived limitations of gender. Thus, the agency awarded to Coraline or to the other mother may be read and analyzed not only on a strictly textual level, but also in connection with its surrounding inter- and extratextual discourses.

In summary, this thesis has aimed to provide a thorough analysis of the use or transformation of prototypical Western fairy tale structures as well as a discussion of their effect on the representation and re-negotiation of femininities in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*. Through employing fairy tale genre theories, feminist critiques and reader-response criticism, this paper has been framed by the research questions: How is female identity created and portrayed in *Coraline*? and How are fairy tale structures used or subverted to depict femininities in the text? In fact, identity and individuality are central themes of the text. These concepts are depicted through Coraline’s quest led by remarkable agency, self-sufficiency and independence,

unusual qualities for fairy tale heroines, as well as through the ambiguous division of the mother figure into a benevolent and a nefarious character, creating a dissonance of established schemata, before the order and the separation into good and evil is finally restored (see Palkovich 183-184). Further, the multiplicity of detectable genre influences and the heavy invocation of the uncanny incite numerous blanks that serve to heighten the engagement of the implied reader; creating a space for adapted or restructured negotiations of textual concepts, including the represented femininities, which encompass depictions of an active heroine, a beautiful and charming villainess, an apathic but loving mother and elderly, intuitive yet self-centered dames, establishing a wide, though of course not nearly exhaustive, spectrum of feminine agency and identity. The comparative analysis of these aspects in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has shown that the heroine possesses significantly less agency, as she is often belittled and silenced by the creatures that surround her. Additionally, Alice's place in the primary world is clearly marked as that of the little girl, whose adventures are immediately reduced to daydreams whereas Coraline finds confirmation of her curious experiences in her primary home. Thus, overall, *Coraline* achieves a more successful re-negotiation of femininities in a fairy tale framework towards their increased agency, albeit partly due to the different extra-textual context.

Of course, there are several aspects related to the representations and (re-) negotiations of femininities in the texts that this paper has not been able to address, but which nonetheless warrant further research. For example, a close analysis of the visual elements, illustrations and arrangements of words and letters on the pages of the text, which prominently feature in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but also structure *Coraline*, could hold several compelling insights. Additionally, in a study across mediatic boundaries, an analysis of the representation of femininities in the texts' respective film adaptations could explore significant audio-visual aspects of characterization.

Finally, the research presented in this paper aims to contribute to the feminist discourse on children's literature and fairy tales by (re-) negotiating femininities and fairy tale structures in *Coraline*, establishing further that bravery is not a gendered male trait and female agency can transcend any pre-imposed structural boundaries, inside as well as outside of the text.

(28,847 words)

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## Abstract (English)

The representation of femininities and the generally limited female agency in Western fairy tales in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm as well as their extratextual implications is an extensively researched topic. Nonetheless, these fairy tale structures continue to influence texts written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as *Coraline*, a novel published by Neil Gaiman in 2002, even though these structures may be subverted or contorted in order to illustrate different perspectives and contexts in an interrelationship with contemporary extra- and intertextual femininities. The present thesis aims to analyze and discuss the (re-) negotiations of femininities in *Coraline* through its varied round and dynamic female characters, with a specific emphasis placed on the heroine. The theoretical lenses of fairy tale genre theories and feminist critiques are employed to discover and discuss how the text employs or subverts structural fairy tale elements, specifically regarding the creation of female identities. Additionally, this paper applies the theoretical perspective of reader-response criticism to be able to analyze the effects of the aforementioned recontextualized fairy tale elements and the negotiations of femininities in the text on the implied reader of *Coraline*. Due to notable similarities in structure, yet significant discrepancies in its inter- and extratextual context of publication, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published by Lewis Carroll in 1865, is used as source of comparison and contrast throughout this thesis in the discussion of *Coraline*. Overall, the analysis indicates that *Coraline* embraces the prototypical fairy tale structure, including its sequence of events and archetypal characters, but subverts its depictions of femininities, which is especially noticeable in the significant amount of agency that is awarded to the heroine. This creates a critical blank for the implied reader as a result of the juxtaposition of the familiar fairy tale structures and unexpected feminine representation within this framework, thus introducing a space for the re-negotiation of femininities that goes beyond the text itself.

## Abstract (German)

Die Repräsentation von Weiblichkeiten und die allgemein begrenzte weibliche Handlungsmacht in westlichen Märchen in der Tradition der Gebrüder Grimm, sowie deren extratextuelle Implikationen ist ein umfassend erforschtes Thema. Nichtsdestotrotz beeinflussen diese Märchenstrukturen auch weiterhin Texte, die im 21. Jahrhundert geschrieben wurden, wie beispielsweise *Coraline*, ein Roman, der 2002 von Neil Gaiman veröffentlicht wurde, auch wenn diese Strukturen verändert oder verzerrt werden können, um verschiedene Perspektiven und Kontexte in einer Wechselbeziehung mit zeitgenössischen extra- und intertextuellen Weiblichkeiten zu illustrieren. Die vorliegende Arbeit zielt darauf ab, die Darstellungen von Weiblichkeiten in *Coraline* durch die vielfältigen runden und dynamischen weiblichen Charaktere im Text zu analysieren und zu diskutieren, wobei ein besonderer Schwerpunkt auf die Heldin selbst gelegt wird. Der theoretische Fokus liegt auf einer genre-theoretischen Betrachtung des Märchens, ergänzt um feministische Theorien, um zu entdecken und zu diskutieren, wie der Text strukturelle Märchenelemente verwendet oder abändert, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Konzeption weiblicher Identitäten. Zusätzlich wird in dieser Arbeit die theoretische Perspektive der Rezeptionsästhetik angewandt, um die Auswirkungen der oben erwähnten re-kontextualisierten Märchenelemente und den Repräsentationen von Weiblichkeiten im Text auf den impliziten Leser von *Coraline* analysieren zu können. Aufgrund bemerkenswerter Ähnlichkeiten in der Struktur, jedoch signifikanter Diskrepanzen im inter- und extratextuellen Kontext der Veröffentlichung, wird *Alice im Wunderland*, veröffentlicht 1865 von Lewis Carroll, in dieser Arbeit in der Diskussion von *Coraline* als Vergleichs- und Kontrastquelle verwendet. Insgesamt deutet die Analyse darauf hin, dass *Coraline* die prototypische Märchenstruktur, einschließlich ihrer Abfolge von Ereignissen und archetypischen Charakteren, annimmt, aber nahezu gegensätzliche Darstellungen von Weiblichkeiten verwendet, was sich besonders in der beträchtlichen Menge an Handlungsfähigkeit bemerkbar macht, die der Heldin zuerkannt wird. Durch die Gegenüberstellung der vertrauten Märchenstrukturen und den innerhalb dieses Rahmens unerwarteten Darstellungen von Weiblichkeit entsteht eine kritische Leerstelle für den impliziten Leser, wodurch ein Raum für die Neuverhandlung und Neugestaltung von Weiblichkeiten geschaffen wird, die über den Text selbst hinausgeht.