



5-2014

## **The Liminal Mirror: The Impact of Mirror Images and Reflections on Identity in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline***

Staci Poston Conner

University of Tennessee - Knoxville, [sposton2@utk.edu](mailto:sposton2@utk.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_gradthes](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes)



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Conner, Staci Poston, "The Liminal Mirror: The Impact of Mirror Images and Reflections on Identity in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline*." Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2014.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_gradthes/2770](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/2770)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Staci Poston Conner entitled "The Liminal Mirror: The Impact of Mirror Images and Reflections on Identity in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline*." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Amy C. Billone, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary E. Papke, Allen R. Dunn

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**The Liminal Mirror: The Impact of Mirror Images and Reflections on Identity in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline***

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Staci Poston Conner  
May 2014

Copyright © 2014 by Staci Poston Conner  
All rights reserved.

## **DEDICATION**

To my Mom (never “mother”) for her unwavering support and unconditional love.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank my thesis committee members, without whom this certainly would not have been possible. Dr. Amy Billone showed me how excited a professor can be about ideas, encouraging me to focus on what I enjoy and not give up. Dr. Mary Papke provided excellent commentary that helped me refocus and reconsider ideas throughout the writing process. Dr. Allen Dunn patiently guided my understanding of theoretical concepts in order to allow me to write the thesis that I envisioned, or at least something close to it.

I also wish to thank every one of my undergraduate professors who gave me the encouragement and criticism that helped me get where I am today.

Lastly, my husband deserves thanks for his continued support of my passion for studying literature, even though he often does not understand what I am doing or why I am doing it.

## ABSTRACT

In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), mirrors play a large role in the development of the female protagonist's identity. Tracing the motif of physical mirrors and mirrored realities in these texts offers a deeper understanding of each protagonist's coming of age and coming to terms with her own identity. Though Angela Carter's short stories are for an adult audience, they are remakes of fairy tales, which are often viewed as children's literature, or at least literature about the child. Though the appropriate reading age for *Coraline* is debatable, it can tentatively be categorized as children's or young adult's literature. Both of these texts have darker, more Gothic undertones than what one expects from "children's literature," and both of these texts follow a young girl on her path of sexual awakening and self-discovery. These female protagonists have an interaction—or multiple interactions—with a mirror that changes them in some way, guiding their concepts of self-perception, self-deception, and acting as a liminal space in which their transitions into new identities take place. I will demonstrate how, in the texts discussed in this thesis, the mirror offers a unique space of liminality in which reflection and identification occur despite its offering of a skewed perception of reality, a flipped depiction of displayed images.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: “The rational glass, the master of the visible”: Reflections and the Lack Thereof in Angela Carter’s Fairy Tale Revisions .....	11
CHAPTER 2: “Mirrors . . . are never to be trusted”: <i>Coraline</i> ’s Mirror and Mirrored Reality ....	39
CONCLUSION: Gothicizing the Female Coming-of-Age Story in “Children’s” Literature .....	60
REFERENCES .....	65
VITA.....	73



## INTRODUCTION

First, she tried to nuzzle her reflection; then, nosing it industriously, she soon realized it gave off no smell. She bruised her muzzle on the cold glass and broke her claws trying to tussle with this stranger. She saw, with irritation, then amusement, how it mimicked every gesture of hers when she raised her forepaw to scratch herself or dragged her bum along the dusty carpet to rid herself of a slight discomfort in her hindquarters. She rubbed her head against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cold, solid, immovable surface between herself and she—some kind, possibly, of invisible cage? (Carter, “Wolf-Alice,” 123)

In Angela Carter’s short story “Wolf-Alice” (1979), the title character—a young girl raised by wolves, found by nuns and finally marginalized to the position of caretaker for an outcast vampire/werewolf—sees herself in the mirror for the first time as a direct result of her first menstrual cycle; she stumbles upon the mirror in her search for rags to use to clean herself. Her interaction with the mirror occurs due to her physical maturation and coming of age, but her lack of recognition of the image in the mirror displays her underdeveloped sense of self. This key moment of misrecognition demonstrates her lack of self-awareness and self-identification; at this point, as evidenced by the animalistic diction, she still identifies herself more with wolves than with humans. She does not even completely move from the wolf world to the human world; she is briefly taken in by nuns but quickly reassigned to the world of Other when sent to live with the decidedly non-human Duke. Wolf-Alice, as the narrator calls her, goes through Lacan’s mirror stage of identification with her own image not as a toddler but as a pubescent young girl lacking previous socialization. This instance marks the beginning of her ability to self-identify and

develop her own identity that remains distinct from others yet still dependent on them for definition.

Over the course of this thesis, I will demonstrate how mirrors function in two different texts that usually are not grouped together but do rub against each other in interesting ways. In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), mirrors play a critical role in the development of the protagonist's identity. It is interesting that both of these texts draw heavily from source texts in their utilization of fairy tales, mythical concepts, psychoanalytic theories, and previous children's literature. I maintain that tracing the motif of physical mirrors and mirrored realities in these texts offers a deeper understanding of each protagonist's coming of age and coming to terms with her own identity. In Carter's story from which the opening example is taken, Wolf-Alice goes from having a wolf-mother to no mother to becoming the mother/wife of the supernatural (or at least somewhat monstrous) being to whose care/service she is assigned. In this story, we see the transition from animalistic childhood to feminine adulthood as Wolf-Alice recognizes herself first as human in the mirror and then as female in a wedding dress and finally as caretaker as she licks the Duke's wounds. I want to stress that although different characters in different texts I will cover by no means have the *same* interactions with mirrors, many are similar, and all are relevant in an examination of the characters' self-identification.

Mirrors are strange and somewhat disturbing objects, and have therefore been the study of much psychoanalytic debate. They reflect what appears to be the most familiar face of all—the viewer's own—yet it is not quite right. It is an image, flipped, of the viewer's face. It is familiar, but it is not quite how it looks in pictures or even how it looks to other people. To reflect something is to change it, flip it, redisplay it. In this way, an image is created that is

similar to but distinct from its source. This trick of mirrors—this physical property—lends itself to many functions. With all of this in mind, it becomes easy to see how the mirror can function as a liminal or transitional space. It shows up as a symbolic object in everything from urban legends and horror movies to children's literature and everyday life. In this thesis, I address how the mirror functions as a liminal space in a selection of literary works, and I argue that by examining the mirrors in these works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the changes in identity that the characters go through. In order to accomplish this, I rely on psychoanalytic theories of D.W. Winnicott, specifically his concepts of transitional phenomena in “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” and his insight on mirrors in “Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development.” In discussing psychoanalytic concepts of mirrors, I am, of course, also drawing from Jacques Lacan’s theories of the mirror as it relates to the concept of the self in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.”

I want to clarify that my view of the self differs from that of Lacan; while I agree that people identify themselves according to mirror images and mirroring in others in order to attempt to form a more coherent vision of the self, I do not view this process in such a necessarily negative or destructive manner as he does. In the instances of development of self in the texts that I will discuss, I largely see these transitions and the attempt to gain a concept of selfhood as a positive process whereby one can grow and develop and become more aware of the self even though never completely or necessarily forming a coherent “ideal ego.” Largely due to the strange properties of mirrors mentioned earlier, an individual’s interactions with mirrors are examples of what Lacan terms *méconnaissance*, or misrecognition. These misrecognitions actually allow the viewer to grow closer to recognition of herself, continuously approaching

definition of self (much like a mathematical limit approaches an upper bound). I view the interactions that the characters have with mirrors, whether they function negatively or positively in that moment, as ultimately leading to a more positive, secure, and affirmative concept of self.

Additionally, I want to clarify that though Winnicott's concept of transitional space traditionally refers to a space of potential development existing between a mother and infant, and his transitional objects are typically teddy bears, blankets, and so on deemed as such by the child, I wish to apply his ideas to the coming of age of young female protagonists rather than self-conceptualization of infants. Adam Phillips provides a clear explanation of the function of transitional phenomena as a "bridge"—an in-between space—whereby the child is both linked to and separate from the mother: "The Transitional Phenomena that provided a bridge between the inner and outer worlds gave continuity to a process where previously, there seemed to be only mutually exclusive options: either subjectivity or objectivity, either unity with the mother or separateness, either invention or discovery" (114). By moving beyond these mutually exclusive options, the importance of the space of potential development between subject and object becomes more apparent and more significant. In the texts I will discuss, I see transitional phenomena occurring during the mirror scenes, when characters exist in a liminal space of uncertainty that necessitates definition and development.

From the evil queen asking, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" (Grimm 244) to Alice travelling to an alternate, mirrored looking-glass world, the motif of the mirror plays a key role in numerous texts and revision of texts concerning children. The mirror appears in so many different contexts that, while it almost always literally reflects, it does not always signify the same ideas. The mirrors with which characters interact function in a variety of ways, including relating to self-perception, self-deception, identity, and alternate realities. By

examining the mirror as an object that creates a transitional space in which characters develop a sense of selfhood, I hope to gain deeper insight into the characters in the texts I will discuss. I would like to make it clear that I am not assuming that the self is self-sufficient in these developments. In these coming-of-age stories, the characters (and their mirrors) do not exist in isolation; in all cases, other people are participants in self-building, whether it be positive or negative. By attempting to see themselves as others see them and continuously defining themselves by/against others, other characters greatly affect the self-perception of our young female protagonists.

In addition to their treatment of mirrors, *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline* share a number of similarities, including drawing from earlier stories, being loosely definable as “children’s literature,” and chronicling the distinct coming-age-stories of their young, female protagonists. Though Angela Carter’s short stories are unquestionably for an adult audience, they are remakes of fairy tales, which in spite of their history as tales for and by adults are now often viewed as children’s literature, or at least literature about the child. Gaiman’s *Coraline* can tentatively be categorized as children’s or young adult’s literature, though the appropriate reading age is often debated. In “Crossing Boundaries with Wise Girls: Angela Carter’s Fairy Tales for Children,” prominent children’s literature critic Jack Zipes examines how two fairy tales that Carter wrote for children<sup>1</sup> influenced her later fairy tales that she wrote for adults (including *The Bloody Chamber*). He calls these “crossover tales,” arguing that Carter merges “conflicting voices that appeal to both children and adult readers” in her fairy tales for adults and

---

<sup>1</sup> Carter’s two fairy tales that Zipes focuses on in his article are *Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady* (1970) and *The Donkey Prince* (1970), both published as picture books nine years before *The Bloody Chamber*.

children. In this way, Zipes makes a point that helps explain how *The Bloody Chamber* can be linked to children's literature and examined alongside works such as *Coraline*:

If we begin with the premise that children's literature has never really been written for children but primarily for the author herself or himself and then for adult editors with children as implicit readers, the notion of crossing over can be better grasped. The best writers of children's literature seek to bring out the child in themselves, to cross back and forth in memory and emotion and to regain what they imagine childhood was and is. Crossing boundaries of time and sound to achieve a mix of voice and style, writers do not set limits on who their audience will be. Nor do they designate audiences. Their writings cross over market categories that are socially constructed. Crossover tales such as Carter's expose false differentiation: they break down accepted definitions, norms, values, types, and forms to create an open space in which the child and adult reader can wander to reflect upon the representations of the author and to make sense of those representations in ways that will be new to the reader and unknown to the author.

(153)

Thought of in this way, *The Bloody Chamber* clearly fits into the category of "children's literature" in that it merges the voices of adults and children in order to present stories applicable to both (but that should probably only be read by adults due to the language and graphic sexual content). Carter clearly breaks down traditional boundaries and assumptions by revising these fairy tales in order to present them in a manner that is completely new but still seems somewhat familiar. In doing so, she charts her protagonists on a course from innocence to experience as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Additionally, though both *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline* also have darker, more Gothic undertones than what one expects from “children’s literature” or “young adult literature,” each of these texts follows a young person on his or her path of sexual awakening and self-discovery. Even if the definition of children’s literature can seem, at times, a bit shaky, both of these text *can* clearly be linked as coming-of-age stories, a selection of the mirror-type of *bildungsroman* chronicling the protagonist’s identification and/or interaction with his or her own mirror image and potentially mirrored realities that ultimately develop and determine his or her own self-perception. In “Children’s Literature,” Maria Nikolajeva claims, “Both realism and fantasy can contain substantial psychological dimensions. Therefore, fantasy within children’s literature is a narrative mode rather than a genre, and there is no radical difference between realism and non-realism in terms of character development. All children’s literature is generically a Bildungsroman” (320). If, as Nikolajeva claims, all children’s literature is a *bildungsroman*, then these two texts that clearly fit that description can also be better linked to children’s literature. Indeed, by definition, the *bildungsroman* relates a character’s coming of age and self-discovery, which is often exactly the focus of children’s literature whether obviously or more subtly. In this thesis, I plan to examine these self-discoveries that occur during or are fostered by interactions with mirrors. Rather than focusing on the intended or potential audience and their reaction as children’s literature studies often do, I will instead focus on the transitions that the characters go through during or as a result of their interactions with mirrors.

As I will show, Carter’s two Beauty and the Beast stories and her Bluebeard retelling all explicitly follow an innocent virgin discovering her own sexuality while viewing uncanny and misrecognized images of herself in mirrors before, during, and/or after their first sexual experiences. The animalistic, femme fatale vampire in “The Lady of the House of Love”

demonstrates the other side of these texts; this protagonist lacks a reflection and assumes the role of virgin-devourer rather than virgin-being-devoured. Carter's Alice tale demonstrates a young girl's self-recognition during physical and mental development that prompts her transition from a more animalistic to a more human world but never places her completely in either; similarly, the femme fatale vampire in "The Lady of the House of Love" also moves from animalistic to human, though she notably lacks a reflection while doing so. Coraline's coming-of-age experience draws on ideas from *Through the Looking-Glass* and *Harry Potter*. Like Alice, she travels into an uncanny, somewhat grotesque mirrored reality as she struggles to come to terms with the dissolution of the line between her original reality and this other reality. And like Harry, she sees false images of her parents in a mirror that tempts and threatens her return to the real world.

I find it important to examine how mirrors in the source texts influence but are markedly different from mirrors in *Coraline*. By exploring this, we can gain insight into the function of mirrors in the text and how exactly Gaiman manipulates those mirrors to serve as a successful symbol in the story. Interestingly, the protagonists in these works all have an interaction—or multiple interactions—with a mirror or mirrored reality that changes them in some way, guiding their concepts of self-perception, self-deception, and acting as a liminal space in which their transition into new identities occurs.

I will demonstrate how, in the texts discussed in this thesis, the mirror offers a unique space of liminality in which reflection and identification occur despite its offering of a skewed perception of reality, a flipped depiction of displayed images. The mirror provides a space of liminality, change, transition, immersion, and emersion. The liminal space of the mirror fosters the literal and figurative reflections leading to the self-conception (including self-identification



and self-deception) of various protagonists in short stories in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline* in *Coraline*. This thesis will examine how the characters interact with and are significantly affected by mirrors in these texts—specifically, Coraline’s interaction with mirrors and a mirrored world (that pulls from Rowling and Carroll) and Angela Carter’s use of mirrors in her various revisions of fairy tales and Carroll.

In Chapter 1, “‘The rational glass, the master of the visible’: Reflections and the Lack Thereof in Angela Carter’s Fairy Tale Revisions,” I examine five short stories from *The Bloody Chamber*, focusing on the function of mirrors and reflections. For each story, I explain the way that the protagonist interacts with mirror(s) and provide interpretations of how her identity develops. It is important to point out that I am not claiming that all of Carter’s stories use mirrors in the same way—on the contrary, her use of the mirror as a motif and symbol is as varied as it is insightful, and Carter’s text as a whole generally resists any single reading. By looking at each example separately, we are able to investigate the multiplicity of ways that Carter rewrites fairy tales in order to offer revisionary depictions of these coming-of-age stories.

While Carter’s protagonists all interact with mirrors without passing *through* them, Gaiman places Coraline in the role of Alice, physically crossing the boundary between reality and a mirrored world. In Chapter 2, “‘Mirrors . . . are never to be trusted’: *Coraline*’s Mirror and Mirrored Reality,” I address seven key instances of Coraline interacting with physical mirrors or mirrored entities in both world. In the process of analyzing these mirror interactions, I trace Coraline’s development of her own identity. Like Carter, Gaiman’s use of the mirror defies a single reading; the mirror functions in both positive and negative ways, displaying both true and false images that lead Coraline on her path of self-discovery.

Throughout this thesis, I attempt to address issues of psychoanalytic criticism in order to further the discussion of mirrors and their functions in relation to the female protagonists' development of identity. Though Winnicott himself attributes his reluctance to provide examples of transitional space to the fact that "examples can start to pin down specimens and begin a process of classification of an unnatural and arbitrary kind" (xii), he does realize the importance of using examples to illustrate and explain his concepts. Likewise, my reading of literary texts through Winnicottian theory by no means attempts to "pin down" or provide a limiting reading of his ideas about transitional phenomena, which, as he points out, "is universal and has infinite variety" (xii). With this in mind, I hope that the analysis that I provide in this thesis offers a new understanding of the texts in an exploration of their uses of transitional spaces, but I by no means intend for these limited examples to model the perfect or even originally intended concept of transitional phenomena. I argue that exploring mirrors and mirroring in these texts fosters a deeper understanding of the development of the character's identities in terms of both self-perception and self-deception, allowing readers to understand better the process occurring. Furthermore, I claim that the mirrors provide liminal spaces in which these developments occur; in each interaction with a mirror or reflection, characters enter transitory states and undergo some transformation, whether large or small, that ultimately influences their identity.

## CHAPTER 1

### **“The rational glass, the master of the visible”: Reflections and the Lack Thereof in Angela**

#### **Carter’s Fairy Tale Revisions**

This chapter will discuss how mirrors function in five of Angela Carter’s short stories from *The Bloody Chamber* (1979): “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” “The Tiger’s Bride,” “Wolf-Alice,” and “The Lady of the House of Love.” In my examination of these short stories, I will pull in issues of psychoanalytic and gender criticism at appropriate points to further the discussion of mirrors and reflections in Carter’s work.<sup>2</sup> I argue that exploring the function of the mirrors in these texts allows readers to develop a deeper understanding of characters’ identities, both as the characters see themselves and as other characters see them. As outlined in the introduction, I draw from psychoanalyst and pediatrician D.W. Winnicott’s concept of transitional phenomena in my readings of these texts. Mirrors and reflections occupy an important position in many of Angela Carter’s short stories, usually demonstrating either the protagonist’s path to self-identification and self-definition or fostering the protagonist’s development of a sexual identity. Carter uses an abundance of mirrors in her texts, perhaps more mirrors than even in the fairy tale source texts from which she draws. These short stories are largely but loosely based on Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection of fairy tales, along with a number of other sources. It is important to consider that Carter published her own translation of Perrault, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, in 1977, two years before she published *The*

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the same themes of coming of age and discovery of sexuality certainly exist in Carter’s other stories—not repeated, but presented in a different manner. Additionally, the same concepts that I will demonstrate and apply to *The Bloody Chamber* could also be applied to many of Carter’s other works, most notably “Reflections” and “Flesh and the Mirror” from *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974) and “Alice in Prague or The Curious Room” in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993).

*Bloody Chamber*.<sup>3</sup> Different critics and scholars have different terms for what exactly Angela Carter does to fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*: deconstructing, revising, revisioning, reworking.<sup>4</sup> Carter herself simply calls *The Bloody Chamber* “stories about fairy stories” (“Notes from the Front Line” 25). The themes of coming of age and self-conscious development remain and are often presented through a character’s interactions with a mirror. In this way, mirrors in these stories serve as liminal spaces—spaces of transition and change where the line between the real and the image becomes blurred.

I argue that in each of these five stories the female protagonist undergoes a major identity change as a result of her interactions (or lack thereof) with a mirror and a potential (or actual) sexual relationship. In an article about juridical issues and contracts in Angela Carter’s work, Sidia Fiorato claims that “[i]n Carter’s tales, the establishment of women’s subjectivity takes place in mirror scenes. They have to have the patriarchal image of themselves, their own submission and passive acceptance of the terms of the contract before managing to rebel against it” (670). In this way, the characters first see themselves in terms of how specifically male others view them before recognizing themselves and revolting against this defining male gaze. In “The

---

<sup>3</sup> Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Ute Heidmann provide excellent explorations of Carter’s translation of Perrault and how it potentially influenced her own writing.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in “The Fiction of Angela Carter: The Woman Who Loved to Retell Stories,” Robert Eaglestone offers an explanation of Carter as a deconstructive materialist who aims to retell stories focusing on absences or gaps. Patricia Brooke also defines Carter’s work as deconstructive, adding that it is also feminist and revisionary. Kimberly J. Lau refers specifically to Carter’s wolf trilogy as “eroticized” and “unfaithful” representations of her source texts (78). Kari E. Lokke interestingly claims that “Carter’s writings bring the vitality of what Bakhtin calls ‘popular culture’ into contemporary British literature by translating the motifs of myth and folklore into the language of the sophisticated aesthete” (8). Joyce Carol Oates calls Carter a “postmodern fantasist . . . experimenter” who writes “revisionist-feminist themes” (106). Rebecca Munford offers a survey of critical interpretation of Carter’s use of allusions, references, and sources in “Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality.”

Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” these contracts that Fiorato mentions take the form of marriage; the female protagonists in these three stories find their own identities in the process of navigating a potentially sexual relationship with a man and also rebelling against societal expectations of gender role fulfillment. Fiorato’s apt description of the three stories that she examines does not, however, work with all of Carter’s tales in *The Bloody Chamber*. In fact, I contend that two of the stories she does not mention specifically include interactions (or a noticeable lack of interactions) with mirrors demonstrate the opposite of her claim.

In “Wolf-Alice” and “The Lady of the House of Love,” the female characters begin operating outside of the patriarchy. Instead of coming to terms with the patriarchy and then rebelling, as Fiorato points out the protagonists do in the previous three stories, these women move from more animalistic positions of power to more human positions of subjectivity and patriarchal compliance. In a complicated and interesting twist, though, this transition from lone self to female counterpart *is* strengthening and empowering in the unique ways the two protagonists of these stories grow and discover themselves in the process of learning to care for others. “Wolf-Alice” provides a story of a woman discovering her own identity—similarly to the three previously discussed—but not through marriage or sex. As a child raised by wolves, “rescued” by nuns, and placed to live with a vampire/werewolf Duke, Wolf-Alice undercuts societal expectations in her every action. She plays the role of “only his [the Duke’s] kitchen maid” (Carter, “Wolf-Alice” 121), but her relationship with the Duke remains largely non-interactive until he becomes injured and she assumes the position of caretaker and healer. Wolf-Alice has begun the process of discovering herself in the mirror long before this happens; in many ways, she presents the figure of an independent woman unhindered by gender and social

constructs as opposed to the protagonists in Carter's other stories discussed here. "The Lady of the House of Love" presents a reversal of mirror function in terms of the other stories because, as a vampire, the title protagonist casts no reflection. Here the absence of a reflection in the mirror becomes more significant than the presence of an image. Similarly, the gender roles are also reversed in this story, with the female protagonist taking on the role of virgin-devourer and her male counterpart becoming the innocent-yet-redemptive human.

"The Bloody Chamber," the title story in the collection, in turn, provides Carter's version or revision of the story of Bluebeard, told by a protagonist remembering and coming to accept her developing identity. In this story, a young, unnamed female protagonist marries a much older, wealthy, infamous widower known only as the Marquis. The protagonist tells the story in the first-person, reflecting back on her past and the story of her changing identity due to her marriage: "And, in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (7). She moves from defining herself in terms of her mother to terms of her husband—from child and daughter to wife and sexual being. The first instance of the narrator having a meaningful interaction with her reflected self in a mirror occurs the night before her wedding, while she is still innocent but sees the potential changes about to take place:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. . . . When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me . . . And, for the first time in my innocent and

confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (Carter, "The Bloody Chamber" 11)

She sees herself and her changing identity reflected; looking at herself from this semi-objective viewpoint, she sees herself as she thinks the Marquis does. This begins an awakening of both sexuality and vanity in the narrator. Soon after this, she discusses all of her expensive gifts from the Marquis, claiming that she had not been vain until she met him. Her interactions with the Marquis are changing her, and she realizes exactly how when she sees herself differently in the mirror.

"The Bloody Chamber" provides one of the most memorable and forceful mirror scenes in the book when the narrator watches herself lose her virginity in the Marquis' bedchamber, which is lined with mirrors: "Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before" (Carter, "The Bloody Chamber" 14). The narrator describes herself as becoming a "multitude of girls" in this bedchamber on her wedding night (14); the Marquis rephrases this notion, saying that he now has "a whole harem" for himself (14). She then watches "a dozen husbands approach [her] in a dozen mirrors" and undress her. She views him stripping off her clothes in the mirrors and thinks it the "[m]ost pornographic of all confrontations" (15). Later, when they finally consummate their marriage, the narrator comments on the visibility of the act because it takes place in broad daylight. Further, the mirrors multiply the consummation: "A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swing on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside" (17). Aiden Day argues that the sheer number of mirrors functions as a means of dividing the narrator into so many reflections that she loses her individuality and identity: "The multitude of mirrors and hence of girls emphasises her objectification: she loses individuality and becomes an item in a

series of multiply reproduced items, a specimen of female sex in the Marquis' harem" (154). Indeed, each mirror and reflection represents her fracturing identity; split into so many images, she becomes unable to align her own identity with the array of images of a different, sexual self whom she does not recognize. Veronica Schanoes claims that this scene functions in a manner opposite of Lacan's mirror stage: "Unlike Lacan's formulation, in which the (male) subject's sense of self is formed by the coherent image of himself that he sees in the mirror, here the female subject's sense of self is undermined by the reducing effect of that image, a comment perhaps on how often women have been reduced to objects of the gaze, rather than subjects in their own right" (8). I would like to clarify Schanoes's reading by pointing out that Lacan would claim the image of this coherent body does not match the fragmented reality experienced by the subject; with that in mind, the already-fragmented vision of herself that the protagonist sees serves to further confuse her conception of self. Instead of seeing one reflection to identify with/against, the narrator sees many confusing versions of herself in an identity-defining situation. Dani Cavallaro also comments on this scene, taking the negative function of the mirrors a step further and claiming that the narrator's use of these mirrors places her in a solely passive role: "The girl is also aware that she only ever succeeds in stealing a look at the truth behind the Marquis' actions through the many mirrors surrounding his bed—at which point, however, she is also reduced to her most passive function by being forced to act as a 'multitude of girls' intended to satisfy her husband's desire to possess, albeit specularly, an entire 'harem'" (130). Clearly Day, Schanoes, and Cavallaro regard the mirrors in "The Bloody Chamber" as destructive, objectifying, and perhaps corrosive to the narrator's identity. Though I agree that this experience meets all of those criteria, I contend that these mirrors also paradoxically allow the narrator to assume the agency of viewing and evaluating herself while being objectified and split



apart. Without the realization of this objectification and possession as being “pornographic,” the narrator would not develop and eventually discover her new identity—and manage to stay alive—like she does.

Staying true to the Bluebeard story, the narrator becomes marked—a stain that she notices and examines in the mirror—after disobeying her husband. The Bluebeard folktale has many variations depending on the location in which it was told. According to Kari E. Lokke, the husband (our Marquis) has been a troll, a devil, and death himself in different versions of the story (8). The linking factor in all of the tales, though, is the transgression, or the entrance into a “bloody chamber,” due to disobeying explicit orders. Lokke points out that Perrault’s version furthers this motif when the first moral warns young wives against curiosity, but Carter flips the blame by still depicting the young wife as a transgressor but clearly placing the murderous Marquis in the role of wrongdoer (8). After the narrator uses one of the Marquis’ keys to go into the one room forbidden to her, the key becomes stained with blood. This represents the narrator’s transgression and her fate. Upon seeing the stained key, her husband knows what she has done. He plans to kill her, but first he marks her with the stained key by pressing it to her forehead: “I felt a faint tingling of the skin and, when I involuntarily glanced at myself in the mirror, I saw the heart-shaped stain had transferred itself to my forehead to the space between the eyebrows, like the caste mark of a brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain” (Carter, “The Bloody Chamber” 36). She again sees herself in a mirror, this time as a different, marked woman. Even after being rescued by her mother, who kills the Marquis and saves her life, the narrator’s forehead and her identity remain stained by the Marquis’ mark. Notably, her new husband, Jean-Yves the piano tuner, is blind and cannot see the mark. The narrator has thus gone through a three-fold transformation from a child into a woman being multiplied into a “harem” for the pleasure of her

husband's gaze into a woman whose new husband cannot see her at all. Though she retains the mark, she is now free to interact with mirrors in any way she pleases in order to form her own identity to replace the identity ascribed to her by the Marquis and his mark. Additionally, though she seems to view this mark as a stigma—referring to it as shameful and attempting to cover it with makeup—it recalls what she has learned about herself during this defining moment of her life.

Another of Carter's stories of transformation and identity in which a mirror functions as both a means of discovering and changing oneself is "The Tiger's Bride," one of her re-workings of Beauty and the Beast. The narrator—again, an unnamed young girl—goes to live with The Beast<sup>5</sup> after her father loses her in a game of cards. The first time in the text that she sees a mirror occurs during the fateful card game: "the mirror above the table gave me back his frenzy, my impassivity, the withering candles, the emptying bottles, the coloured tide of the cards as they rose and fell, the still mask that concealed all the features of The Beast but for the yellow eyes that strayed, now and then, from his unfurled hand towards myself" (Carter, "The Tiger's Bride" 52). Instead of seeing herself, the narrator uses the mirror to look at The Beast. She examines his disposition and his actions without looking directly at him. This indirect gaze that she uses to initially define him as best she can is later contrasted with a direct gaze that he forces on her. In this same mirror, she watches her father bet and lose her at cards: "He fanned them out; in the mirror, I saw wild hope light up his eyes. . . . A queen, a king, an ace. I saw them in

---

<sup>5</sup> I would like to clarify my seemingly inconsistent capitalization when discussing "The Tiger's Bride" and "The Courtship of Mr Lyon." In Carter's stories, the character in "The Tiger's Bride" is referred to as "The Beast," with a capital 'T' and a capital 'B'. The character in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" is referred to as "the Beast," with only the 'B' capitalized.

the mirror” (54). The narrator is commodified, wagered by her father, and lost to the Beast in a skewed exaggeration of courtship, dowry, and marriage.

Once she arrives at the Beast’s house, the narrator meets her maid, a mechanized version of herself who serves as a mirror of sorts. This maidservant, which the narrator calls a “clockwork twin” of herself—“my double” (60)—, puts makeup on the narrator and then shows her herself in the mirror. The soubrette’s description—“glossy, nut-brown curls, rosy cheeks, blue, rolling eyes” (59)—closely parallels the early description of the narrator—“glossy, nut-brown curls, my rosy cheeks” (52). Although the narrator eventually recognizes the soubrette as her double, the recognition is not immediate because of how the maid is clothed: “it takes me a moment to recognize her, in her little cap, her white stockings, her frilled petticoats” (59). This mechanized version of the narrator “carries a looking glass in one hand and a powder puff in the other” (59). Whether this mirror is magic or she is imagining things remains unclear, but in it the narrator sees her obviously drunk and upset father. When she takes a second look, she sees herself, “haggard from a sleepless night, pale enough to need [her] maid’s supply of rouge” (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride” 60). Seeing her father instead of herself when she first looks in the mirror highlights the manner in which the narrator has been commodified, used as property and lost in a game of cards; she sees the emotional and physical effect this has on her father, defining herself in terms of him instead of in terms of herself.

The narrator soon discovers that the Beast’s only wish is to see her naked; not surprisingly, his desire for a vision of her body increases her sense of commodification. When she reacts to this, threatening to kill herself or run away, the valet ironically reminds her that she will not do either because she is “a woman of honour” (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride” 59, 61). Here, the valet defines her as he perceives her; she does not argue with this definition, but neither

does she apply it to herself. So far, all of the men in the text—her father, The Beast, and the valet—have defined her identity by ascribing different sorts of values to her. Their definitions create their own version of the narrator that may or may not really be her; her “twin,” the mechanized maidservant, serves as a symbol of this false construction of identity.

Refusing to back down and strip for The Beast under his terms, the narrator begins to define herself by using what she thinks he wants in order to establish her own terms of negotiation. She realizes that her body functions as a commodity at this point, and she utilizes this, framing herself as a prostitute with her own demands who must be paid for services rendered:

You may put me in a windowless room, sir, and I promise you that I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to hide it; though the sheet must be laid over me so lightly that it will not choke me. So I shall be covered from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once. . . . If you wish to give me money, then I should be pleased to receive it. But I must stress that you should give me only the same amount of money that you would give to any other woman in such circumstances.

(Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride” 59)

Though there is not a mirror in this scene, it is a key moment in the narrator’s developing self-awareness and self-identification. She casts herself as a prostitute bartering with her body; by assuming this role, she becomes both the barterer and the commodity, taking some control over her body and life.

However, in a reversal that results in both the narrator and The Beast transitioning into new identities, The Beast simultaneously objectifies himself and the narrator by forcing the

narrator to see him naked. He offers his own body as a sort of commodity, revealing his somewhat-more-pure-than-expected intentions, but he still forces her to watch. At this point, the narrator reaches another defining moment in the formation of her identity; she notes, “I felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvelous wound” (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride”). Seeing The Beast reveal himself triggers something in her, and she reciprocates. Sylvia Bryant names this as a key point in the development of the narrator’s new identity: “In both bearing her gaze and forcing her to look upon his natural nakedness, The Beast consequently brings her to a clear seeing of herself—or at least, a clear seeing of her desire to better ‘see,’ to know, herself” (92). In effect, the narrator and The Beast use each other as mirrors, looking at their own otherness in the other’s exposed form. Revealing their shared otherness leads to the biggest transformation of all: The Beast eventually licking off “skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world” at the end of the story until the narrator becomes more like him (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride” 67). Unlike the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber,” who is saved from a murderous transgressor by her mother, this narrator abandons her past life and her father in order to assume a new, more unconventional identity with The Beast.

After beginning to use The Beast as a mirror into herself, the narrator again sees her father in an actual mirror—notably, the same one held by her mechanized maid twin—and begins to stop defining herself according to him. This time, instead of being drunk and upset, he is cleaned up and obviously prospering. Though he is waiting for her return, his actions upset the narrator. Now she no longer defines herself according to her father; her interaction with The Beast changes her in that regard. When she takes a second look in the mirror, she sees herself, now “a pale, hollow-eyed girl whom [she] scarcely recognized” (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride” 65). She scarcely recognizes herself because so much has happened and her identity has changed

since the last time she looked in that mirror. Now that she and The Beast have looked upon each other's nakedness, she is no longer the same person and has no desire to return to her life with her father. Instead, she sends her maid, "whose face was no longer the spit of [her] own," to her father: "I will dress her up in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter" (Carter, "The Tiger's Bride" 65). The narrator literally replaces herself and her role as her father's daughter with the caricatured, mechanized version of herself so that she may continue pursuing and discovering her new identity with The Beast.

Carter's other Beauty and the Beast retelling, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," stays truer to the traditional story than "The Tiger's Bride" but also offers many interesting twists as the main character gains volition and builds her identity. In this story, the female protagonist is actually named Beauty, and the suitor/monster is, once again, defined as an other and actually called the Beast. Again, in this story, the Beast holds some sort of power over the father through which he gains possession of the daughter; the daughter, our young female protagonist, initially resists this exchange but goes through with it out of obligation to her father as both a daughter and property. However, as time passes and the daughter learns more about herself and the Beast, she becomes her own person who willingly takes on a new life.

This story starts in a similar manner, with a father bargaining his daughter's beauty for his own safety; this introduces the importance of Beauty's physical image, which she later interacts with in a mirror, and demonstrates how she initially defines herself as an obedient daughter. Her father seeks refuge from a snowstorm and steals a white rose from his gracious host in the process. Only a picture of his daughter—her image—saves him from the Beast's anger: "The Beast rudely snatched the photograph her father drew from his wallet and inspected it, first brusquely, then with a strange kind of wonder, almost the dawning of surmise. The

camera had captured a certain look she had, sometimes, of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity, as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul” (44). Again, the father in this story uses his daughter’s innocence, humanness, and beauty to pay for his own bad decision. The narrator tells us that though the father is at fault, Beauty accepts the Beast’s offer to stay with him because of her warped sense of volition and responsibility: “Do not think she had no will of her own; only, she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree and, besides, she would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly” (45-6). Though she supposedly acts of her own free will (instead of passively being wagered and lost by a gambling father like the narrator in the previously discussed story), she still defines herself as a daughter with specific duties and obligations to help and potentially redeem her father.

I want to stress that although the first time Beauty sees a reflection of herself in this story seems like a minor occurrence, the significance of this reflection becomes more apparent as the story progresses. After being amazed by the luxury of her treatment and awed by the Beast’s intimidating presence, Beauty gradually becomes more comfortable with the Beast as they talk into the night. They connect and she “chatter[s] away to him as if she ha[s] known him all her life” (Carter, “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 47). At the end of their conversation, the Beast nuzzles and kisses her hands in an intimate display of affection. When they look at each other, Beauty sees herself in his eyes: “He drew back his head and gazed at her with his green, inscrutable eyes, in which she saw her face repeated twice, as small as if it were in bud” (47). This scene can be read in relation to D. W. Winnicott’s theories of the role of mirroring in psychoanalytic development. Winnicott claims that when an infant looks at its mother’s face, “ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there” (qtd. in Tuber 78). While the

mirroring in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” deals more with an actual reflection and takes place between two adults rather than a mother and infant, the psychoanalytical concept can be a helpful framework for understanding the interaction in this scene. Additionally, I argue that this first reflection in the story reveals several key points. Beauty’s seeing the image of her face twice recalls the earlier fracturing of the narrator in “The Bloody Chamber” into a multitude of girls. Here, Beauty is doubled in the Beast’s eyes; she is herself and two images because at this point her identity is in flux. She has become more comfortable with the Beast and moved from performing her daughterly duties to making an intimate connection on her own accord. Additionally, the smallness of her reflected face, “as if it were in bud,” also presents the narrator as one in a state of change, similar to a plant yet to bloom. This doubling and size both reinforce the significance of her reflection—this time in another’s eyes instead of in a mirror—as a liminal space that fosters change and development.

Whereas Beauty’s first interaction with her reflection reveals the potential for her changing identity, her first interaction with an actual mirror demonstrates how she has transitioned into a more self-centered, narcissistic character. This interaction with a mirror occurs after she has already stayed with the Beast for a while, grown happy, and then left to visit her father. While away, she vaguely remembers the Beast, but she loses track of time and neglects her promise to return to him. The extent of interest in herself rather than anyone else becomes evident when she examines her image in the mirror one night:

She smiled at herself with satisfaction. She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments. . . . You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often,



these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast's agate eyes. (Carter, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" 48-9)

The narrator's explicit comparison between Beauty's current reflection in the mirror and her previous reflection in the Beast's eyes shows how she has changed in the time she has been away. Living on the Beast's generosity, she has become spoiled and rather narcissistic, focusing more on her own "high living and compliments" than on her promise to return to the Beast. In this instance, the image in the mirror shows how Beauty has changed for the worse, not developing into a self-defining adult but becoming a self-absorbed adolescent. She has moved from defining herself in terms of her father to defining herself in terms of her beauty, neglecting the compassionate human underneath only to misrecognize herself in the mirror. She does not see the same face from her earlier reflection, and she also does not see that her "freshness" is "fading"; instead of fostering her self-recognition and development of identity, this mirror fosters her self-deception about herself and her beauty.

I argue that this is the only instance in *The Bloody Chamber* where a mirror functions in a completely negative manner. Here, Beauty's reflection absorbs her, holding her back rather than allowing her to develop a positive identity. In "The Bloody Chamber," the narrator's interactions with mirrors do affect her self-perception in negative ways, but these interactions ultimately foster her development into a strong, surviving female character. Likewise, in "The Tiger's Bride," the mirror prompts the protagonist to take certain actions that lead to a positive development of her identity. In both of these stories, the mirror helps the female character become more self-aware of her potential and transition into a new identity. In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," though, Beauty's mirror serves as more of a trap wherein she forgets herself, ignores

her responsibilities and her potential, and does not quite recognize the negative qualities of the image she spends her time gazing upon.

Whereas Carter makes it very clear to the reader that Beauty has undergone a negative transition in her first interaction with a mirror since she has left the Beast, Beauty does not realize the transition that has occurred until her trance in front of the mirror breaks. Unlike the case with the other protagonists, the mirror has absorbed Beauty and negatively affected her self-perception rather than helping her grow into an independent woman. At this point in the story, the Beast's only living companion, a King Charles spaniel, shows up outside of Beauty's door. The dog's arrival and shocking appearance breaks her out of her revelry: "Her trance before the mirror broke; all at once, she remembered everything perfectly. Spring was here and she had broken her promise" (49). Like Beauty, the dog has transformed for the worse: "Yet where was the well-brushed, jewelled dog . . . This one's fringed ears were matted with mud, her coat was dusty and snarled, she was thin as a dog that has walked a long way and, if she had not been a dog, she would have been in tears" (49). While Beauty has become complacent and spoiled, the spaniel has lost her previous luxurious existence, becoming matted, dirty, and starved instead of pampered and jeweled. This juxtaposition emphasizes the changes that Beauty has undergone while her forgetful narcissism has been negatively affecting others. Whereas before she was a completely self-sacrificing character, staying with the Beast out of duty to save her father, now she is a character who loses herself in the mirror and forgets promises that she previously made. It is interesting that out of all of the mirrors Carter uses in *The Bloody Chamber*, this is the one occurrence in which the character does not realize that she is misperceiving her reflection. In this instance, instead of recognition and self-realization, the mirror fosters her self-deception. This

demonstrates the multifaceted potential of the function of mirrors and indicates why each individual mirror scene deserves specific attention rather than general acknowledgement.

Importantly, Beauty becomes aware of her identity only when she looks not into an actual mirror but into the Beast's eyes again. The maltreated spaniel leads Beauty back to the Beast, where she looks into the Beast's eyes again and remembers her previous reflection that she saw there. When she enters, she finds that the house has been uncared for like the spaniel; the previously luxurious house is overtaken by death, decay, and general neglect: "Dust, everywhere; and it was cold. There was an air of exhaustion, of despair in the house and, worse, a kind of physical disillusion" (50). Likewise, she finds the Beast "sadly diminished" (50) and near death because he has been unable to hunt or eat since Beauty left. When she looks into his dying eyes, she recognizes his humanness and her own selfishness: "His eyelids flickered. How was it that she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?" (50). This time she looks into his eyes and sees him instead of herself, marking what I find is a turning point in the narrator's developing identity. She has moved from seemingly self-sacrificing to narcissistic to becoming an actually compassionate and caring individual who values the Beast's existence.

In many ways, Carter's two versions of Beauty and the Beast function as mirrors of each other, highlighting different aspects of the same source tale. Patricia Brooke argues that "The Tiger's Bride" and "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" both rely on and undercut each other, revealing "possible backgrounds and motivations behind this romantic opposition" while "destabiliz[ing] the artificially restrictive categories of 'Beauty' and 'the Beast', disrupting the binary 'Beauty/Beast' to undermine the lingering presence in contemporary cultural presumptions" (69). In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," Beauty becomes the beast in her narcissistic and neglectful

mirror gazing, and the Beast becomes beautiful in his tragic, withered, near-death state. The physical nature of the binary is also undercut by the transformations between “Beauty” and “Beast” in the two stories. In an inversion of the ending of “The Tiger’s Bride,” Beauty’s compassion—specifically her tears—physically transforms her Beast into a human. Whereas in “The Tiger’s Bride” the Beast licks off the protagonist’s skins until she becomes more like him, in this story, Beauty cries—similarly using her body to enact a physical transformation—and her tears transform the Beast into a human. With her help, he heals and becomes stronger; with his help, she moves from viewing herself as a dutiful daughter or being an narcissistic adolescent to becoming a compassionate adult with her own identity independent of her other’s expectations. Margaret Atwood reads *The Bloody Chamber* in terms of carnivores and herbivores, or those-who-eat and those-who-are-eaten. She argues that Carter attempts narratively to explore “ways in which the tiger and the lamb, or the tiger and lamb parts of the psyche, can reach some sort of accommodation” (120) because, she claims, “It is Carter’s contention that a certain amount of tigerishness may be necessary if women are to achieve an independent as opposed to dependent existence; if they are to avoid—at the extreme end of passivity—becoming meat” (121). Both stories present alternate outcomes of the beast-and-human marriage, and both end with the couple on an equal footing—whether it is two feet or four paws.

While the unnamed narrators of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Tiger’s Bride” and Beauty from “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” usually interact with mirrors as a result of their relationships with the Marquis or their respective Beasts, Wolf-Alice, on the other hand, discovers and investigates a mirror without any male guidance or interference. It seems to me that though Carter’s previously discussed stories were clearly drawing from Bluebeard and Beauty and the Beast source material, “Wolf-Alice” draws from multiple stories, including Little

Red Riding Hood, Alice in Wonderland, and perhaps Romulus and Remus. Wolf-Alice, who is raised by wolves and largely un-socialized except for some basic lessons from nuns, is placed in the role of housekeeper or kitchen maid for a vampire/werewolf duke. Unlike the previous protagonists who assume the role of innocent virgin at odds with an animalistic male counterpart, Wolf-Alice takes on the role of the animal in this story. However, she is not “the Wolf” (like “the Marquis” or “the Beast”), but “Wolf-Alice.” Her name links her to both the animal and human world, but she does not completely belong in either: “Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf” (119). She therefore exists in a liminal space between that of animal and human, simultaneously belonging in neither and both. As Kimberly J. Lau aptly points out, in this text, “Carter more explicitly engages and critiques psychoanalytic theories of language, the senses, and desire” (89). Wolf-Alice importantly cannot speak; she lacks the language to identify herself as either human or wolf (although the narrator tells us in the opening line that she would have chosen wolf), and because of this lack of language she also cannot initially identify her reflection in the mirror.

Like the protagonists in the previously mentioned stories, Wolf-Alice uses a mirror to come to terms with her own identity; or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that a mirror forces Wolf-Alice to come to terms with her own identity. Unlike the previous protagonists, however, Wolf-Alice makes the transition from more animalistic to more human. This is slightly different from the protagonists of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” who grow from naïve and powerless girls into knowledgeable and powerful women, and this is starkly different from the protagonist of “The Tiger’s Bride,” who morphs *from* human *into* animal. Wolf-Alice’s interactions with a mirror guide her transition from a liminal space of existence to eventual identification as human. After beginning to menstruate for the first time,

the bewildered and confused girl literally bumps into a mirror while looking for fabric with which to clean herself. This is the same mirror in which the Duke notably does not cast a reflection. The entity with whom she has been sent to live is not even human; she therefore cannot form her own concept of identity from a comparison to him in the same way that her comparison to wolves must also fail. When she sees the mirror, her confusion moves from her new bodily function to the unrecognized entity in the mirror—an image she can finally identify with but does not yet realize:

First, she tried to nuzzle her reflection; then, nosing it industriously, she soon realized it gave out no smell. She bruised her muzzle on the cold glass and broke her claws trying to tussle with this stranger. She saw, with irritation, then amusement, how it mimicked every gesture of hers when she raised her forepaw to scratch herself or dragged her bum along the dusty carpet to rid herself of a slight discomfort in her hindquarters. She rubbed her head against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cool, solid, immovable surface between herself and she—some kind, possibly, of invisible cage? (Carter, “Wolf-Alice” 123)

This is Wolf-Alice’s first interaction with a mirror—and her own reflection—and it confuses her. Like Beauty in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” Wolf-Alice misrecognizes herself. However, while Beauty becomes lost in her own reflection without seeing the evidence of her own decay, Wolf-Alice is simply intrigued by an image she in no way equates with herself. Instead of recognizing herself in the glass, she sees a potential playmate. Her curious interaction with the mirror highlights her lack of human socialization and lack of self-conscious identity. She sees her reflection as an other, not herself, but she still treats it as a friend.

Wolf-Alice bonds with her reflection before recognizing it as her own image, drawing comfort from the similarities between her own body and the body of what she perceives as her friend. Because she is so different from her wolf-mother, her nun-“rescuers,” and her vampire/werewolf-“guardian,” she has been unable to identify with any of them. Now, the mirror marks the first time that she has an interaction with an image or other with which she is able to identify. During this time, she also starts seeing “an essential difference between herself and her surroundings” (124) and becomes introspective, beginning to develop her own concept of self and identity. Aiden Day argues that at this point, “She slowly discovers her own self through seeing her reflection in the mirror” (164). Indeed, Wolf-Alice begins spending more and more time investigating her body’s changes, “examining the new skin that had been born, it seemed to her, of her bleeding” (Carter, “Wolf-Alice” 124). Not only does she become absorbed in looking at, licking, and grooming herself, but she also shows these changes to “her mirror littermate” (124), comparing her body to the body of her reflection and gaining reassurance from seeing the similarities between herself and her image.

Though Wolf-Alice spends much of her time investigating herself and the image in the mirror, she does not fall into the same negative, narcissistic trap as Beauty does in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” because she does not immediately recognize the image as herself. Though the mirror captures her attention in a similar manner as it does Beauty’s, Wolf-Alice’s interaction with the mirror functions in a more positive, identity-building manner in this example. Beauty’s captivation with the mirror causes her to break promises and neglect others, almost leading to the death of the Beast; Wolf-Alice’s fascination with the mirror, on the other hand, eventually leads her to transition of becoming not only more human but also more humane

in her life-saving assistance of the Duke. Without her interactions with the mirror, Wolf-Alice would not be able to begin developing a necessary and distinct concept of self.

After interacting with her reflection on a regular basis, Wolf-Alice eventually reaches a stage of self-recognition. Lau reads this point in the story as Carter's critique of Lacanian theory: "Wolf-Alice recognizes herself in the mirror not as the ideal coherent self of Lacan's mirror stage (for Lacan, a misrecognition) but rather as shadow, as reflection, and it is this different recognition that keeps her from entering into the symbolic, maintains her subjectivity outside of language" (91). While I see Lau as partially correct that this can be read as a critique of Lacan, I would like to clarify that Lacan does not pose an ideal, coherent self that can actually be obtained, and Lacan himself would not claim the mirror stage can help us reach unity. Rather, the mirror stage prompts a fragmented vision of the self. The turning point in the story occurs when Wolf-Alice recognizes that she sees a reflection of herself instead of some other person (or "littermate") in the mirror:

This habitual, at last boring, fidelity to her every movement finally woke her up to the regretful possibility that her companion was, in fact, no more than a particularly ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass. . . . She poked her agile nose around the back of the mirror; she found only dust, a spider stuck in his web, a heap of rags. A little moisture leaked from the corners of her eyes, yet her relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it. (Carter, "Wolf-Alice" 124)

Though the loss of what she has come to think of as a friend saddens her, she actually gains a sense of self from this experience. Aiden Day claims that Wolf-Alice now becomes somewhat freed: "The regret at finding there is nothing substantial behind the mirror is also a liberation.



There is no essential, patriarchal authority to dictate what form the self so constituted must take. Wolf-Alice's emergent subjectivity precipitates her into the realm of subject-object relations that characterises the human condition" (165). Alone with her own reflection, Wolf-Alice is able to start developing her own identity and exploring what she now identifies as an image of herself instead of a separate, completely different entity.

While Day claims that Wolf-Alice is liberated and outside of patriarchal constrictions, I want to argue that the wedding dress she finds behind the mirror suggests the opposite.<sup>6</sup> Looking behind the mirror, still searching for answers, Wolf-Alice finds an old, torn, dusty wedding dress, but "[i]n the mirror, she saw how this white dress made her shine" (Carter, "Wolf-Alice" 125). In other words, though she may initially be freed and able to become conscious of herself in the mirror, behind the mirror she finds a symbol of cultural commodification: the white wedding dress. This very dress saves the Duke's life; the peasants who are hunting him give up when they see Wolf-Alice wearing the dress, thinking that "the Duke's dearest victim had come back to take matters into her own hands" and enact "a ghostly vengeance" of her own (126). At this point in the story, Wolf-Alice begins to assume more human—and notably female—qualities, but by putting on this symbol of femininity and patriarchy, she becomes marginalized

---

<sup>6</sup> In "'Isn't it Every Girl's Dream to be Married in White?': Angela Carter's Bridal Gothic," Sarah Gamble provides an astute exploration of Carter's specifically gothic use of wedding dresses. Though Gamble provides an in-depth analysis of the wedding dress in Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Wise Children* (1991), and a selection of interviews and essays, she neglects to acknowledge or address the presence of the wedding dress in "Wolf-Alice."

Additionally, the wedding dress that Wolf-Alice puts on was notably the burial attire of one of the Duke's most recent meals; the husband of the gown's previous wearer actually leads the attack that wounds the Duke. In this way, the dress serves as a paradoxical representation of femininity, adulthood, and sexual awakening while also remaining a symbol of death. This theme of blurred distinctions between death and youthfulness reoccurs in the last story I discuss in this chapter, "The Lady of the House of Love."

and dehumanized in a new, different way because the townspeople mistake her for a ghost. She continues in her transformation from an animal-like child to a woman in the role of caretaker, but the definitions that others apply to her continuously fail to reflect this.

Like the protagonist in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” Wolf-Alice helps her new partner—although not necessarily in a sexual manner—transition from monster/beast to human (or at least human-like entity). Interestingly, the Duke actually gains a reflection in this process. In addition to inadvertently saving his life, Wolf-Alice also helps the Duke symbolically and perhaps physically change who he is. While she spends hours examining herself (and being reassured by her “friend” in the mirror whose body changes in the same ways), the text repeatedly points out that the Duke does not have a reflection, and, moreover, “nothing can hurt him since he ceased to cast an image in the mirror” (Carter, “Wolf-Alice” 120). He is described in mixed terms of vampire and werewolf: he lacks a reflection, does not mind garlic or holy water, howls in the moonlight, and eats corpses (121). He is more literally animalistic than Wolf-Alice, howling, eating corpses, and leaving “paw-prints in the hoar-frost” (121). Unlike the men in the previously discussed stories, though, he has little to no interest in his innocent, young housemate.

Whereas in the previously discussed stories there is a potential conflict and sexual tension between the protagonist and her male counterpart, in this story Wolf-Alice and the Duke are more similar than at odds; both are animalistic and marginalized by society, and together they begin to change and assume more human qualities. Wolf-Alice licks the Duke into a new identity or new form of being much in the same way that The Beast does to the narrator of “The Tiger’s Bride.” While The Beast removes some of the narrator’s humanness in order to make her more like him, Wolf-Alice makes the Duke—and herself in the process—more human with her licking. When some townspeople shoot the Duke, Wolf-Alice tends him by licking the blood and

dirt off of him. When she does this, he gradually develops a reflection in the mirror: “Little by little, there appeared within it, like the image on a photographic paper that emerges, first, a formless web of tracery, the prey caught in its own fishing net, then in firmer yet still shadowed outline until at last as vivid as real life itself, as if brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue, finally, the face of the Duke” (126). Wolf-Alice symbolically transitions from girl to woman by getting her first period, from woman to wife by putting on the white wedding dress, and from wife to mother by licking the wounded Duke (albeit in the manner of a mother wolf) and caring for him—even giving birth to his image in the mirror in a way.

Though this story focuses on Wolf-Alice, it is ultimately about both her and the Duke’s identities developing and transforming in the mirror. Together, they move from being wolf-like and other to somewhat more human. Further, Day claims that the two ultimately become more humane than those in the society around them: “The rational humaneness that both Wolf-Alice and Duke reach by virtue of Wolf-Alice’s caring is identified in this tale as a genuine humanity that is to be contrasted with what is, in fact, the complete inhumanity of the people who have shunned and persecuted them” (166). Wolf-Alice learns to recognize her own reflection, and then she helps the Duke physically regain his. While they both become more human, it is important to remember that they remain ostracized from the rest of society and left to develop their own identities with just each other, the mirror, and still no concept of language.

Like “Wolf-Alice,” “The Lady of the House of Love” also reverses the gender expectations in the monster/virgin or beast/beauty dichotomy of the stories that I have previously mentioned; here, the female protagonist is the one who catches and wants to consume the young, innocent virgin. This protagonist is interesting because, like the Duke in “Wolf-Alice,” she lacks a reflection. As a vampire, the Countess does not cast an image in the mirror. We learn this in the

first paragraph of the story, which describes the uneasy, slightly off-kilter environment in which she lives, “where a cracked mirror suspended from a wall does not reflect a presence” (Carter, “The Lady of the House of Love” 93). Though she lacks a reflection and is, in a way, frozen in time as an unaging supernatural creature, The Countess interestingly embodies “both death and the maiden” (93). In her article on Angela Carter, Sarah Gamble aptly refers to this protagonist in a similar manner as “both a murderous victim and a virginal rapist” (37). The Countess is described contradictorily as someone who needs a governess, “a girl with the fragility of the skeleton of a moth, so thin, so frail” (Carter, “The Lady of the House of Love” 100) and as vampire royalty, wearing “an antique bridal gown” (93), with “a whore’s mouth” (101), and whose “claws and teeth have been sharpened on centuries of corpses” (94). These seemingly inconsistent terms of youth and experience merge in a vampire—one who is frozen in age but not experience.

Though mirrors have been previously used as liminal spaces in Carter’s stories, here the Countess herself functions as a liminal space:

She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking, behind the hedge of spiked flowers, Nosferatu’s sanguinary rosebud. The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions. (103)

She is haunted, then, with ghostly repetition, constantly changing and in flux because she is stuck in between states of being. Though her ancestors can look out of her eyes, she lacks a reflection and therefore cannot look into her own eyes. Her concept of self-identity is constantly infringed

upon by her ancestral heritage and her liminal status as a not-living, not-dead, not-old, not-young vampire.

Like the Beast from “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” Wolf-Alice, and the Duke, the Countess literally becomes humanized in this story. In a reversal of the usual transformation *into* a vampire, we witness the Countess transform *from* vampire:

When she kneels to try to gather the fragments of glass together, a sharp sliver pierces deeply into the pad of her thumb; she cries out, sharp, real. She kneels among the broken glass and watches the bright bead of blood form a drop. She has never seen her own blood before, not her *own* blood. . . . In this vile and murderous room, the handsome bicyclist brings the innocent remedies of the nursery; in himself, he is an exorcism. He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. (Carter, “The Lady of the House of Love” 106)

The innocent young man assumes the role of vampire by sucking the actual vampire’s blood; however, instead of doing this selfishly like a real vampire would, he does it for her—not to feed by consuming blood, but to comfort and heal by staunching bleeding. By doing this, he becomes an “exorcism” (106); his action changes the Countess, beginning her transformation from a vampire into a human.

The transition from vampire to human brings the Countess out of limbo; she is no longer stuck between living and dead, youth and age. Instead of starting a new life with a new identity like our previous protagonists, this change in the Countess causes her death. Unable to “bear the pain of becoming human,” she dies during the night at her Tarot card table, leaving her transitional state to become one “far older, less beautiful . . . and fully human” (Carter, “The

Lady of the House of Love” 107). Though this ending seems less satisfying than those in the previously discussed stories—she does not have a sexual awakening, fall in love, or find herself, in the usual sense of the phrase—the Countess’s transformation from vampire to human does move her from existing in an uncertain yet repetitive flux to a certain state of rest where she will, ostensibly, regain her reflection.

In this chapter, I have traced the motif of the mirror through *The Bloody Chamber*, examining the five out of ten stories in which an interaction with a mirror plays a significant role in developing a character’s identity. As I have shown, Carter uses the mirror in both positive and negative manners in order to foster her depictions of women recognizing and coming to terms with themselves as they break out of the patriarchal expectations of society. As I will go on to show in the following chapter on Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002), mirrors often play a key role in the development of a young adult’s identity, either fostering their self-perception or causing their self-deception. I will explore parallels in each character’s interactions with mirrors and reflections in order to investigate how each occurrence functions on its own and how the occurrences in different texts share similarities with those I have already discussed, continuing to draw from Winnicott’s theory of transitional space and phenomena. In this way, I hope to map the motif of the mirror in this selection of coming-of-age stories in order to demonstrate the often multifaceted but always significant role of the mirror on identity.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“Mirrors . . . are never to be trusted”: *Coraline*’s Mirror and Mirrored Reality**

This chapter will focus on the role of mirrors in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002). Though *Coraline* has been adapted into a graphic novel, a musical, and a film, this chapter deals only with the original novella. Like the previous chapter on Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), this chapter will utilize psychoanalytic and gender criticism at certain points in order to discuss instances in the text which foster the development of the female protagonist’s identity. I argue that the mirrors and mirroring in this text play a key role in the development of Coraline’s identity; by exploring the instances in which Coraline interacts with a mirror, readers can develop a deeper understanding of her identity as it changes throughout the work both in terms of how she sees herself and how others see her. Like Carter, Gaiman often purposefully uses mirrors in his texts.<sup>7</sup> As in the previous chapter, I will draw from psychoanalyst and pediatrician D.W. Winnicott’s concept of transitional phenomena in my reading of these examples. I will also reference Jacques Lacan’s and Sigmund Freud’s relevant theories regarding mirrors, identity,

---

<sup>7</sup> Gaiman’s film *MirrorMask* (2005) deals with alternate, dream-based reality in which reality becomes blurred and characters are doubled. In “Extraordinary Navigators: An Examination of Three Heroines in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *Coraline*, *The Wolves in the Walls*, and *MirrorMask*,” Danya David offers an analysis of the “wildly courageous, loyal, resourceful, and emotionally strong female protagonists” in these works. Danielle Russell also links these two works in her article “Unmasking M(other)hood: Third-Wave Mothering in Gaiman’s *Coraline* and *MirrorMask*.” Though these two critics deal more with navigation of reality and depictions of mothering, respectively, they both offer helpful analyses of these stories.

Additionally, Gaiman’s short story and poetry collection *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998) explicitly plays with the function of mirrors in terms of their potential for deception. In the introduction, he states, “Mirrors are wonderful things. They appear to tell the truth, to reflect life back out at us; but set a mirror correctly and it will lie so convincingly you’ll believe that something has vanished into thin air, that a box filled with doves and flags and spiders is actually empty, that people hidden in the wings or the pit are floating ghosts upon the stage” (1-2).

and the uncanny at appropriate points in the chapter. The theme of coming of age and identity development serves as the heart of this story, and by examining the mirror and mirrored reality as a liminal space of potential change and transition, readers can better understand Coraline's process of identity change. Additionally, viewing the mirror as a transitional, liminal space opens up other opportunities to explore where lines become blurred between reality and images.

Like Carter, Gaiman pulls from a tradition of darker literature and Gothicized children's literature. Also like Carter, Gaiman writes many works in various genres, and *Coraline*, which is categorized as children's or young adult literature, has provoked much contention over its appropriate reading age. Richard Gooding points out that "[a]nxiety that the book might prove too frightening for younger readers appears among customer reviews on both sides of the Atlantic . . . Almost from the moment of *Coraline*'s publication, Gaiman can be detected guiding the reception of his novel and deflecting criticism that the novel is too scary for youngsters" (390). The "official rating" for the book, according to the back cover, is ages eight and up. Gaiman recognizes that both children and adults can enjoy his book, though he claims that the two audiences tend to have completely different reactions to it:

Reading audience number one is adults. Adults completely love it and they tell me it gave them nightmares. They found it really scary and disturbing, and they're not sure it's a good book for kids, but they loved it. Reading audience number two are kids who read it as an adventure and they love it. They don't get nightmares, and they don't find it scary. I think part of that is that kids don't realize how much trouble Coraline is in—she is in *big* trouble—and adults read it and think, 'I know how much trouble you're in. (Gaiman, Interview by Gavin J. Grant)



Though it is enjoyed by adults, the novella is technically children's literature, and it chronicles a distinct coming-of-age story that both adult and children readers can enjoy. Richard Gooding briefly explains that though the concept of "the uncanny" has been extensively explored in many literary genres, very few critics have applied it to the field of children's literature. Gooding claims that this exploration is necessary, and he argues that *Coraline*'s double audience can exist because of uncanny aspects of the text: "At the immediate level of style, uncanny effects disclose narratorial techniques that encourage the divergent responses upon which any double readership might rest" (391). Adult audiences recognize and are bothered by the uncanny aspects of the text, but children readers "are theoretically less sensitive to them" (394) because of their age.

This chapter will examine seven different types of mirroring in *Coraline*. The first, most wide-ranging of these examples is the alternate, mirrored world—seemingly behind a brick wall in Coraline's apartment—into which Coraline goes. In direct relation to this, the second example of mirroring is the mirrored characters that exist in slightly (or vastly) different forms in this alternative world. With the key exception of the cat, which I will discuss later, each character has a mirrored double in the alternate world. The third instance that will be discussed is Coraline's interaction with a physical mirror in her reality; the fourth is her interaction with a physical mirror in the alternate world. At this point, I will also discuss the Other Mother's<sup>8</sup> interaction with the same mirror—notably, her lack of a reflection—as my fifth example. Coraline's "time-out" *behind* the mirror (and in a sort of alternate world within an alternate world) serves as the sixth point of discussion. Lastly, the chapter will end with an analysis of the mirroring that takes

---

<sup>8</sup> This phrase will be used throughout the chapter to refer to Coraline's mother figure in the alternate, or "other," world.

place with Coraline's name—a marker of her identity—by her neighbor's common mistake of inverting letters and calling her "Caroline."

I argue that each of these examples demonstrates Coraline's entering a transitional, liminal space where she makes choices and develops her identity as a result of interactions with these physical mirrors or mirrored characters and worlds. *Coraline* is, at its core, a tale about a young girl forming her identity. As in the previously discussed Angela Carter short stories, these interactions with mirrors both blur the line between the real and the image, forcing Coraline to make distinctions and develop her concept and definition of herself. Many times Coraline does experience mirror images that are less than positive, but these interactions still help her develop her identity. As Vivienne Muller points out, "Coraline's encounters with the family in the world on the other side of the brick wall have drawn considerable interest from critics . . . interpreting the text as a Freudian/Lacanian psychodrama of identity formation (most notably the oedipal crisis and its resolution) in which conscious and unconscious desires are in constant tension especially around mother/child relationships." I find much of the current scholarship discussing *Coraline* in strictly Freudian or Lacanian terms problematic due to what seems like over-reading, stretching, or ignoring certain aspects of the text in order to make it fit some predetermined paradigm; in an attempt to address this concern, this chapter will provide an alternate discussion of Coraline's identity formation, often drawing from psychoanalytic theory, but with more of a focus on the role of the mirror than the Oedipal crisis or sexual symbols. In this way, I hope to address the clear psychoanalytic concerns that this text raises while not over-reading it to sexualize every symbol or force it to fit into a clear Freudian pattern.

Mirrors and inversions surround Coraline, beginning with people constantly mistaking her name for "Caroline." After moving into a new house with parents who largely ignore her,

Coraline goes exploring and ends up traveling into an alternate, mirror-like “other” world that contains a house and people that match those from the real world but are strangely “other” in important ways. Among other strange and uncanny changes, her old neighbors become young women, her other neighbor’s pet mice are instead rats, animals can talk, toys become animated, and her other mother and other father have buttons instead of eyes. In navigating this world and the dangers that come with it, Coraline comes to terms with aspects of herself, including her bravery and the paradoxical notion that things that make her unhappy—such as not always getting her way—are necessary in order for her to be happy. She finally realizes, as she tells “the other crazy old man upstairs,” that she must lack certain things in order for what she does have to be important: “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). In this moment, Coraline comes to a key understanding of herself and her desires; she must *want* in order to appreciate, in order for receiving or not receiving to have any meaning to her. Coraline feels ignored by her mother and father, who spend their time busily working and not really listening to her, but when she encounters her smothering Other Mother, she begins to appreciate her real world and the true identities of those in it as opposed to the grotesque versions of them from the other world.

Many critics claim that Coraline’s sense of being ignored leads her to the other world and causes her problems and discoveries. It is easy to apply this idea to a psychoanalytic analysis of the problematic interactions that Coraline has with her parents.<sup>9</sup> For example, In “The Other

---

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Martin discusses Gaiman’s tendency to position two women against each other in his texts, most often in mother/daughter relationships. She cites Coraline and the Other Mother as “the most clear formation of the iteration” (22) and uses theories of Luce Irigaray and

Mother: Neil Gaiman's Postfeminist Fairytales," Parsons, Sawers, and McNally apply a heavily psychosexual reading to the text, claiming that the Other Mother, representing the phallus, must be overthrown in order for Coraline to assume a "normative and consolidated" female, heterosexual identity (371).<sup>10</sup> The authors argue that both "traditional mothering," which they attribute to the Other Mother, and "a more contemporary alternative" of parental labor sharing are negatively depicted in the story (376). While many of their points are valuable considerations, it is necessary to remember that this "traditional mothering" is not actually traditional—the Other Mother performs a warped parody of overbearing motherhood. And while the "contemporary alternative" does lead to Coraline's parents often ignoring her for their work, it also fosters her development of an independent identity.

In "Between Horror, Humour, and Hope: Neil Gaiman and the Psychic Work of the Gothic," Karen Coats presents a compelling argument that somewhat answers these problematic

---

Jacques Derrida to explore the importance of parallels in the Mother/Other Mother dichotomy. Though this article is largely a discussion of phallogocentric discourse in Gaiman's graphic novels and this chapter focuses on the actual novella, this brief mention of *Coraline* clearly illustrates how Coraline depends on her mother to define herself and to define her Other Mother: "Without the mother, there could be no Other Mother and thereby Coraline knows her mother is her mother because of the existence of her Other Mother" (Martin 25).

Similarly, In "Unmasking M(other)hood: Third-Wave Mothering in Gaiman's *Coraline* and *MirrorMask*," Danielle Russell claims that the novella contains an "extreme form" of the mother-daughter motif, wherein daughters must navigate but not destroy bonds with their mothers in order to assume feminine agency.

<sup>10</sup> Much of this psychosexual analysis is problematic, exhibiting the characteristics of over-reading that I previously mentioned. In their examination of female bonds, the authors present Coraline's interactions with the Other Miss Spinks and Other Miss Forcible as an allegorical rendering of lesbian desires by likening a curtain to the labia and the marble/soul to the clitoris. Furthermore, they read the cat as a phallus that Coraline wields as a weapon when it has an erection (or when its fur stands up for defensive purposes). While I agree that these are all interesting considerations, I argue that viewing the text solely in this way leads to a reading that is, as the authors claim of Gaiman's postfeminism, "as unwholesome as frozen pizza" (387). These readings neglect the positive aspects of the text in order to force it into a Freudian psychosexual model.

readings of parent/child relationships. She claims that it is not the parental “neglect” that many critics cite but actually Coraline’s boredom that serves as a catalyst for her adventure of identity:

Up to a certain point, the developing child is so entangled with the mother that his and her desires are not perceived as separate, at least on the part of the child. When a child develops the capacity to be bored, it is a signal that he or she is in a transitional state, a state where he or she is developing a separate sense of self, a need to assert his or her desires over and against the desires of the mother. . . . Hence we see Coraline caught in that liminal moment when she finds herself cut off from her parents’ desire, and not yet sure of her own. (Coats 86-87)

Reading Coraline’s main problem as boredom rather than parental neglect allows for a much more positive understanding of her relationship with her parents. Her boredom allows her to begin exploring her own desires and discover her own sense of self that is separate from, yet still connected to, that of her parents. Coraline can begin to separate herself from her parents and identify herself in a manner not completely dependent on their views and expectations of her.

The first act of mirroring in *Coraline* that I will discuss is the mirroring that exists between the real world and the alternate world of the Other Mother. Though the worlds are separated by a door (and sometimes bricks) instead of a mirror, a sort of inverted reflection or doubling exists much in the same way that it does in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*. Several critics have noted the similarities between Gaiman’s and Carroll’s stories, drawing connections between Coraline and Alice in both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Notably, children’s literature scholar Maria Nikolajeva pairs the two works in her article “Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats”:

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) is in every respect a dialogical response to *Alice in Wonderland*, with every indication of postmodern literature present. In this novel, we meet, similarly to *Alice*, doors and keys, mirrors, pretty gardens, murky passages, and bizarre creatures. While *Alice* may be considered dark, *Coraline* is darker, and while Alice comfortably wakes up from her nightmare, nightmare pursues Coraline into her reality. (259)

Both of these texts involve a young female protagonist entering a different, mirrored reality, and beginning to learn about herself in the process of navigating her new surroundings. As Nikolajeva points out, though, Alice's boundaries are defined—her alternate realities exist in a dream and behind a mirror—but Coraline's boundaries blur when the dismembered hand of the Other Mother comes into her reality.

In many ways, Coraline's exploration of the other world functions as an inversion of Alice's. Because this text clearly draws from older source material, specifically mythology, fairy tales, and previous children's literature, it is important to examine the figure of the cat as it functions in the text and as it potentially relates to the Cheshire Cat from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. When Alice wanders about Wonderland and attempts to get directions from the Cheshire cat, he "practices verbal equilibristic" with her (Nikolajeva 258):

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"—so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

(Carroll 51)

Though it seems that the Cat is being purposefully confusing, Nikolajeva claims that he is actually offering Alice “spiritual guidance” and “great wisdom” by making her understand that “you are sure to get somewhere if you only walk long enough” (258). Coraline, in a similar situation, struggles to get clear answers from a seemingly deliberately ambiguous cat. While exploring outside the other house, she engages in a conversation with the black cat in an attempt to figure out where she is:

“Please, what is this place?”

The cat glanced around briefly. “It’s here,” said the cat.

“I can see that. Well, how did you get here?”

“Like you did. I walked,” said the cat. “Like this.”

Coraline watched as the cat walked slowly across the lawn. It walked behind a tree, but didn’t come out the other side. Coraline went over to the tree and looked behind it. The cat was gone. (Gaiman 35-36)

Both the Cheshire Cat and the black cat function as guides of a sort, though not of the most obviously helpful variety. Alice learns that she must walk in the direction opposite of where she wants to go in her alternate world, and Coraline discovers that her alternate world fades away as she gets further from the Other Mother because this entire other world has been created by her. As the cat (who notably does not have an “other” version and is, like Coraline, the same being in both worlds) explains when Coraline discovers a “blank” area, “This is just the outside, the part of the place *she* hasn’t bothered to create” (Gaiman 72). The more Coraline explores and the more she resists the Other Mother’s desires, the more the world falls apart. Eventually, the world

outside turns into “a formless, swirling mist with no shapes or shadows behind it,” and the house seems “as if it were not really a house but only the idea of a house” (103). Though the other world is mimicking and drawing from Coraline’s reality, it is more than apparent that it is a falsely constructed world made to serve the purpose of helping the Other Mother consume Coraline. By navigating these confusing and potentially hostile spaces, Alice and Coraline are able to develop a clearer sense of their own identities.

Similarly to the story of Bluebeard (and Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” discussed in the previous chapter), Coraline uses a key to explore a space that she is not supposed to enter. She carefully obtains the “old black key” from on top of the refrigerator and unlocks the door, remaining conscious of her transgression: “Coraline stopped and listened. She knew she was doing something wrong, and she was trying to listen for her mother coming back, but she heard nothing” (Gaiman 24). Though she realizes that she is not supposed to—and perhaps she *should* not—open this door, Coraline’s boredom, curiosity, and sense of adventure drive her to explore the area behind this locked door, which she quickly realizes has “something very familiar about it” (Gaiman 25). Here, Coraline enters her own “bloody chamber” of sorts—she enters a grotesque parody of her reality that forces her to come to terms with her own identity. While the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber” finds her husband’s previous dead wives whom she then identifies with/against, Coraline finds an alternate world that she similarly uses to identify with/against by “trying to figure out exactly what was different” (Gaiman 25) and defining her reality in that way.

This alternate, mirrored world has many characteristics of Freud’s concept of the uncanny. Jackson, Coats, and McGillis claim that the uncanny elements “are particularly apt for the metaphorical exploration of the vicissitudes of adolescent identity. The uncanny emerges in



the adolescent novels they explore both to highlight change and trigger it. It becomes a complex metaphor for the transition the characters undergo with respect to their place in their families and family history” (4). Coraline’s experience in the other world is fraught with the uncanny; as she begins exploring this “very familiar” (Gaiman 25) place, she is described as behaving “uneasily” (25) because of feeling “confused” (25) and “uncomfortable” (30). Richard Gooding claims that her alternate reality functions as “a near literal manifestation of the *unheimlich*: a home that is familiar but unknown” (394). David Rudd also addresses the uncanny in this text, pointing out “the breaching of the divide between animate and inanimate” (161). Indeed, in addition to Coraline’s immediate wish fulfillment in terms of food and attention, in this world animals carry on conversations (or sing songs), toys exhibit emotions while moving and playing on their own, and the dead might reanimate—or not be completely dead. Freud described the uneasiness surrounding human’s relation to death as “perhaps the most striking of all” (833) of the examples of the uncanny. In one of the creepier moments of the text, the Other Mother provides an example of this when she reveals that her mother transgressed the boundaries between living and dead, or at least between the grave and the world:

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?” asked Coraline.

“I swear it,” said the other mother. “I swear it on my own mother’s grave.”

“Does she have a grave?” asked Coraline.

“Oh yes,” said the other mother. “I put her in there myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back.” (Gaiman 90-91)

Here, the Other Mother’s mother is breaking critical boundaries by removing herself from the grave. It is unclear whether she is alive, dead, or perhaps undead. This figure has literally been

repressed, or placed in the grave, and then attempted to return from it. This example depicts something that should be inanimate—a dead body—reanimating and moving on its own accord.

Additionally, blindness or mutilation, a key component to the uncanny, is a constant threat in Coraline's mirrored world. It is interesting that in Freud's essay on the uncanny, he uses E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sand-Man" as an example, exploring the fear of blindness or losing eyes. According to Freud's summary, the story is about the "Sand-Man" throwing sand into the eyes of children who will not sleep in order to remove their eyeballs and feed them to his own children (829). This idea of removing or replacing eyeballs appears in *Coraline*. When Coraline first meets the Other Mother, she defines her against her real mother: "It sounded like her mother. . . . She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only . . . Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner. Only her fingers were too long . . . And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons" (Gaiman 25-26). She soon discovers that her other father's eyes are the same. The button eyes make them resemble dolls—large, animated, and grotesque doll-versions of her parents. Vivienne Muller analyzes Coraline's initial vision of her Other Mother, claiming that it reinforces her sense of self instead of pushing her to create a new identity: "By initially projecting an idealised version of her real mother, Coraline casts her in a new symbolic order, narcissistically motivated, that confirms rather than abolishes her sense of self. In this respect, unlike her perception of her real mother, the other mother is, at least initially, the idealised nurturing mother, the pre-Oedipal mother who satisfies all needs." The other world and its contents seem very interesting to Coraline at first, providing an answer to her previous boredom. However, she soon realizes the danger of this world when the Other Mother tells her that she can stay with them "for ever and always" if she will let them do "just a little thing"—replace her eyes with black buttons (Gaiman 43). Though they assure Coraline that "[i]t won't

hurt” (43) and it’s “what’s best” (44), Coraline resists, maintaining her vision, humanity, and identity.

Kristine Larsen’s article “Doors, Vortices and the In-Between: Quantum Cosmological Goddesses in the Gaiman Multiverse” addresses Gaiman’s creation of parallel universes, specifically the recasting of familiar goddess figures within these universes, in terms of quantum physics. She briefly discusses the powers of the Other Mother from *Coraline*: “Coraline discovers that the Other Mother has created her own world, one designed specifically to entice and trap children like Coraline. The girl tries to escape, but finds that if she walks too far, she just comes back to the place she started” (267-8). Larsen likens this universe that the Other Mother has created to a smaller-scale Einsteinian model where “light rays sent off toward infinity would, after a very long time, return to their starting place. Such a universe is bounded but without an end, since the ‘end’ is just the beginning again” (268). Because the Other Mother is a villain in this text, her “goddess powers” are limited—the world she creates is warped and ultimately cannot be maintained.

The second example of mirroring in the text is the mirrored characters in each world. These characters are still a creation of the Other Mother, and they decompose like the world itself. As previously mentioned, much has been written about the Other Mother in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis. In “Same Old ‘Other’ Mother?: Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*,” Vivienne Muller reads Coraline’s interactions with the Other Mother as a journey towards resolution of the Oedipal crisis, “an allegorical rendition of unconscious emotions at play in this process,” positing that *Coraline* is ultimately limiting in its reinforcement of gendered stereotypes. While many of her points are interesting, clever applications of Freudian concepts to a text that openly welcomes them, I think that focusing solely on the text as an Oedipal crisis and chronicling

examples of potentially sexualized symbols largely neglects the possible positive message of Coraline's developing identity that can appeal to both adult and children readers. All of the Freudian connections that Muller makes are interesting on their own, but by placing them all together in an article that neglects any other potential reading, Muller provides a somewhat negative, limiting reading to a very rich text that provides much more than an allegorical Oedipal conflict.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that Coraline and the black cat are the only two characters not mirrored between the worlds. Because of this, they both assume very important roles in the story—Coraline as the main character, and the black cat as a knowledgeable yet confusing guide who helps Coraline begin to understand this new environment and the Other Mother. Like the Cheshire Cat, the black cat provides helpful but also somewhat ambiguous and confusing advice. Perhaps one of the creepiest moments in the text (and there are many) occurs when Coraline asks the cat what the Other Mother wants from her. The cat answers, “She wants something to love, I think . . . Something that isn’t her. She might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that” (Gaiman 63). As previously mentioned, the cat often offers somewhat confusing advice, but here, the cat’s meaning is clear. Karen Coats calls the Other Mother’s desire to consume “the true horror of the other mother”: “for her, love is a regressive desire to consume Coraline. The ghost children that Coraline finds in the closet are mere husks because

---

<sup>11</sup> Karen Coats offers a brief Freudian analysis of the womb imagery in the text. Unlike Muller, Coats’s use of psychoanalytic theory and her examples of this imagery come across as helpful and informative rather than overbearing/overreading, as she uses it in the context of a larger argument about the nature of Gothic conventions in children’s literature (which I will discuss further in the concluding chapter). Coats’s claims that the creatures Coraline encounters in the other world—alternate versions of Miss Spink, Miss Forcible, and her father—regress in form until they resemble various stages of fetus development. She also mentions Coraline’s passage “through a long, dark, undulating tunnel,” a point many critics discuss.

they didn't learn the paradoxical lesson that Coraline does, that desire doesn't work by getting everything you want" (88). The Other Mother has created (or captured/consumed in terms of the ghost children) everything in this world, and her desires drive it. While in this world, all of Coraline's desires are immediately fulfilled; the boredom that initially prompted this adventure is negated in this way. She can no longer explore her own desires, much like she cannot explore the world itself without wandering back to where she started.

Because the cat is the same in both worlds, I argue that he can be viewed as a stabilizing center by which Coraline can define herself and her surroundings. When Coraline first sees the cat in the other world, she identifies it as "a large black cat, identical to the large black cat she'd seen in the grounds at home" (Gaiman 33). However, when she asks the cat if he is the "other cat," he replies, "I'm not the other anything. I'm me" (33-34). Though the human characters have mirrored counterparts, the cat does not. He attributes this, in a condescending manner, to being a cat, the only identity marker that he definitely assumes: "You people are spread out all over the place. Cats, on the other hand, keep ourselves together. If you see what I mean" (34). Because he is a cat and he "keeps himself together," he claims that he (and other cats) do not have names: "Now, *you* people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names" (35). Though he does not have a name, he has a definite sense of identity about himself and his cat-ness. Because he moves between both worlds and maintains a clear sense of his identity, even without a name, the cat serves as a center by which Coraline and readers can define and better understand both worlds.

Conversely, Wilkie-Stibbs argues that neither Coraline's reality nor the other world offers a stabilizing location for the reader or for the young protagonist:

Coraline negotiates numerous spaces and identities in her quest for parental attention and affection. However, her movement between the parental house and its negative mirror image in the house of the other parents does not mark out either sets of parents or houses, or indeed Coraline, as the anchoring point of narrative engagement because all the narrative locations she inhabits are unquestionably as grotesque and unstable as the other. (38)

Additionally, she claims that *Coraline* “lays claims to points of stability,” but there is really “no actual or single locus of centrality” (38). She continues, “This absence of narrative center is just one of the ways in which Gaiman induces fear by destabilizing readerly security in the ability to identify with a single focalizer” (38). She claims that this “flaw, or at least a disappointment” is that though Gaiman seems to have good intentions and attempts to write progressive narratives regarding female liberation, he fails. While I agree with many points of Wilkie-Stibbs’s reading, I do not find both worlds equally unstable, and I argue that the figure of the cat can be read as a stabilizing center of the text, operating as a positive force in both worlds. The location of the primary narrative—Coraline’s reality—remains stable despite her boredom and restlessness. Though the boundary between these two worlds blur when the hand follows Coraline home, the reality maintains its stability by providing Coraline with an outlet—the well—by which she can get rid of the hand. I read the black cat as a positive force that guides, comforts, and ultimately provides Coraline with the necessary distraction to rescue her parents and return home. However, Wilkie-Stibbs claims that Coraline’s defeat of the Other Mother is “pyrrhic” because it “is achieved under the power and surveillance, collusion and approval of the ever-present, all-seeing, all-male, authorial gaze through the eyes of the cat” (50) which serves only to reinstate previously destabilized gender roles, leaving Coraline “(re)placed in the role of domesticated,

nurturing female in the grip of male power” (50). While the cat does have a male voice, he is ultimately a *cat*, not a male human; though he does help Coraline and center the text, I do not agree that the gender of an animal serves such a destructive role in the text. Yes, the cat is a male, but he is also a cat, a friend (though he would disagree), a guide, a transgressor of boundaries, and a stabilizing means of regulating the two worlds.

In addition to this mirrored world, a physical mirror itself also plays a vital role in this story. There are four important instances of Coraline’s interacting with this mirror both in her real world and in the other world, and in each case, the mirror does not quite perform like one would expect. That is, Coraline’s mirror does not simply reflect reality. The first time anything out of the ordinary happens with the mirror, Coraline is in her real house trying to sleep. The cat wakes her up and leads her to a full-length mirror hanging in the hall, in which her parents are visible: “The mirror showed the corridor behind her; that was only to be expected. But reflected in the mirror were her parents. They stood awkwardly in the reflection of the hall. They seemed sad and alone. As Coraline watched, they waved to her, slowly, with limp hands” (Gaiman 51). Coraline’s parents, or at least the image of her parents, call out to her for help. Her mother writes “HELP US” in mirror writing, “Jabberwocky” style, making it clear that they are imprisoned in or on the other side of the mirror.

Coraline soon sees her parents in the mirror again, but this time while she is in the other world. The Other Mother appears to have some sort of control over mirrors, at least the one in her created universe, and she attempts to use her mirror to convince Coraline that her parents have abandoned her. By brushing the mirror with her fingers, the Other Mother reveals an illusion depicting Coraline’s parents discussing how happy they are about getting rid of their daughter. Coraline again sees her parents in the mirror, but this time it is a false image

constructed by the Other Mother. This example is reminiscent of Harry Potter's experience with the Mirror of Erised in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997). Harry sees his parents happy, smiling and waving (Rowling 209). He begins spending every night pining away in front of the mirror, absorbed with an image that he cannot obtain. Dumbledore eventually explains that the mirror does not reflect the past or any alternate reality: "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, more desperate desire of our hearts" (Rowling 213). Once Harry knows this, he is able to use the mirror in order to trick Voldemort with a false image. Coraline is not seeing her deepest desire, but she is viewing a false image of which she is skeptical: "She hoped that what she had seen was not real, but she was not as certain as she sounded" (Gaiman 61). She realizes, like Harry, that the mirror is showing an illusion, not reality; Harry is able to manipulate his mirror with his desires, and Coraline comes to recognize that her mirror is being manipulated by the Other Mother.

Interestingly, later in the text, the Other Mother does not cast a reflection in this same mirror that she manipulates. When Coraline points this out, the Other Mother tells her, "Mirrors . . . are never to be trusted" (Gaiman 75), undercutting her previous attempt to fool Coraline with an image in the mirror. The fact that she does not cast a reflection presents the Other Mother as a non-human creature—potentially vampiric in nature—without a reflection or clear identity. Her consuming, vampiric nature is reinforced when Coraline later discovers ghost-like shells of children whom the Other Mother has consumed. The Other Mother's monstrous nature, first evidenced by her lack of a reflection, is soon underscored when she begins nonchalantly eating live beetles. Coraline begins to resist the Other Mother more vocally at this point, declining to eat these beetles and asserting that the Other Mother is not, in fact, her mother.



Because of her voiced insurrection—which the Other Mother considers a refusal to be a loving daughter—Coraline is locked into a time-out space that constitutes the fourth example of a physical mirror playing a key role in the story. The Other Mother actually opens the mirrors and locks Coraline in the space behind it: “She pulled Coraline back into the hallway and advanced upon the mirror at the end of the hall. Then she pushed the tiny key into the fabric of the mirror, and she *twisted* it. It opened like a door, revealing a dark space behind it. . . . She picked Coraline up and pushed her into the dim space behind the mirror” (Gaiman 77-8). This time-out space reinforces the Other Mother’s control over mirrors, and really all physical objects, in her world. It also prevents Coraline from looking at her reflection anymore, thereby blocking the development of her identity and her search for her parents.

Behind the mirror, Coraline encounters three children, or what remains of them. The Other Mother has taken their souls, and with that, their identities. This is best demonstrated by their lack of names and genders. One child says, “When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled, . . . But now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair” (Gaiman 82). Another simply tells Coraline that gender “‘Tain’t something we give a mind to” (82). The Other Mother has succeeded in consuming these children in the way that she is currently trying to consume Coraline. They no longer know who or even what they are; they remain trapped behind the mirror, unable to go into the light and rediscover themselves, at least until Coraline finds and returns their souls. The three children exist in a liminal space without names—which they say “are the first things to go” (Gaiman 81)—or definition. It is important to note that, in this case, the lack of a name functions in a very negative manner. Not having a name indicates that they also do not have an individual identity; the Other Mother has consumed it. This is very different from the black cat’s not having

a name. The children once had names that were taken from them; the black cat defies the need for a name because of the essence of his identity as a cat.

Coraline's neighbors' inversion of the vowels in her name serves as my final example of mirroring; though it does not deal with a physical mirror, it does directly relate to the development of Coraline's identity. As previously noted, Coraline often has her name mistaken for "Caroline" by her neighbors. Though she repeatedly corrects them, they ignore her and talk over her. Mr. Bobo, the man from upstairs, even tells her that his mice called her Coraline instead of Caroline, which he thinks is wrong. Even when his mice are correct, he assumes they are mistaken. This inversion of the "o" and "a" in Coraline's name represents confusion about her identity. Danya David points out that Coraline shows volition and attempts to stabilize her identity in her continued assertion of her correct name, which others just ignore in the beginning of the work:

Coraline is presented at the onset as a child plagued by mirrors. The Other Mother attempts to weaken Coraline by destabilizing her in a world of blurred boundaries. She is thus challenged to navigate through unstable territory. But Coraline learns quickly that she must be adamant in her assertion of her own boundaries. This is evident from the start, as she insists on correcting adults who misname her.

In this way, she insistently maintains her nascent identity even when others continuously call it into question. Near the end of the book, after all is done and she has gotten rid of the Other Mother and locked the door, other characters finally stop mistaking Coraline's name. She corrects Mr. Bobo one last time, and he "repeat[s] her name to himself with wonderment and respect" before beginning to use it correctly (Gaiman 158). Her adventures not only form her own vision of her identity in a coming-of-age story, but they also help others identify her

correctly as “Coraline” and not “Caroline.” The name “Caroline” serves as a sort of Winnicottian transitional object in that she uses it as “not me” and defines herself by differentiating herself from it. This inversion of her name that eventually gets straightened out parallels the inversions of the other world from which she eventually escapes.

As I have shown in this chapter, Coraline’s interactions with mirrors—both positive and negative—drive her development of a sense of self. She has to “find a way to assert her identity apart from her parents” while ensuring that they remain “part of her without being all of her” (Coats 91). In this way, she defines herself by her parents and against her parents; this is similar to how she defines herself by/against the images that she sees in the mirrors and the alternate realities that she experiences in the other world. By examining these seven examples of Coraline’s interactions with mirrors and mirrored realities, I have demonstrated the importance of the mirror in this text in the way that it functions in both plot and character development. By pairing this text with several by Angela Carter, discussed in the previous chapter, I have explored parallels in these contemporary coming-of-age stories that draw from source texts, especially fairy tales, blur the lines of genre, and depict young, female protagonists interacting with a mirror in a significant and defining way.

## CONCLUSION

### Gothicizing the Female Coming-of-Age Story in “Children’s” Literature

Mirroring can occur through reflections in actual mirrors, eyes, glass, or other reflective surfaces, or it can occur through interactions with alternate and inverse worlds. Regardless of the medium, mirroring ultimately relates to the development or exploration of a self-conscious definition of identity in these texts. Though there are key differences in how children and adults interact with mirrors as this relates to their own identities, both of the texts I have discussed are related in the use of mirrors as a tool or marker of the development of a sense of changing identity. Drawing from and revising fairy tales, Carter uses mirrors more in the vein of self-discovery or sexual awakening in *The Bloody Chamber*. The mirror’s symbolic function in *Coraline* seems to draw from two other well-known and loved children’s texts: Alice’s journey into an inverted world in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* and Harry Potter’s discovery of the importance and trickery of the Mirror of Erised in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

Over the course of this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of the function of mirrors in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Coraline* because of their effect on the characters’ developing identities. This argument certainly has a wider application to a variety of texts. Specifically, children’s literature, young adult literature, and coming-of-age stories dealing with mirrors are well suited for similar analysis. In this thesis, I have paired two seemingly incompatible texts in order to explore their examples while showing how similar they actually are. In conclusion, I would like to argue that the mirrors in the two texts that I have worked with often have a specifically Gothic function. It is important to attempt to define the gothic, even though the genre is often noted for its fluidity and resistance to definition. In *The Gothic*

*Sublime*, Vijay Mishra explains this problem of defining the gothic: “Words, by definition, cannot be tied down to specific meanings, and even the citation of historical instantiations are no more than an attempt to prevent excess of meaning from spilling over into the totally inaccessible realm of chaos” (48). Most definitions of gothic literature, specifically, tend to skirt around attempting to nail down a meaning and instead list elements common (but not absolutely necessary) to the gothic nature of a text. Perhaps this is the best method for defining the gothic; countless reference works—*The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (1998), *A Companion to the Gothic* (2000), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), *The Gothic* (2004), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007), and so on—attempt to chronicle, map out, and order the gothic by examining these common characteristics or motifs. For my purposes, perhaps it is best to use Marie Mulvey-Robert’s explanation of gothic literature:

Associated with the traditional Gothic Novel is an ivy-covered haunted ruin, a swooning heroine replete with sensibility, and a tyrannical villain, bequeathed with a lock, a key and a castle. Constituting and constitutive of anachronism and counterfeit, the Gothic plot, the proverbial textual folly, is a mirror diverting us from the Gorgon’s gaze, that is, at least once removed from the source of trauma and taboo. (xxi)

Each of these characteristics that she mentions can clearly be found in the works discussed in this thesis. Interestingly, Mulvey-Roberts likens the plot to a mirror; while our characters are looking into mirrors and coming to terms with images of themselves, we as readers are using the text as a mirror to reflect—not look directly at—troublesome aspects of the world.

I am continuing to use my loose definition of children’s literature from the introduction as stories about young protagonists coming of age—stories *about* young adults and children

rather than necessarily *for an audience of* young adults and children. Indeed, as I explained in the introduction, *The Bloody Chamber* is by no means children's literature, and the appropriate reading age for *Coraline* is much debated. What these two texts do have in common, though, is their link to the child due to subject matter and source material. The theme of the *bildungsroman*, the topic of identity, and the subject of the child are not gothic in and of themselves, but they are very conducive to creating a gothic text, as Carter and Gaiman do in these two works.

Much has been written about gothic literature throughout the ages, and children's literature has also become an increasingly explored field of scholarship. Interestingly, both genres had key milestones at around the same time in the mid-eighteenth century: the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) marked the first gothic novel and Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) arguably functions as the first novel written for children (Sage 146; Clark and Shankar 17). Recently, critics have started examining these two genres together.<sup>12</sup> In "Another Turn of the Screw: From Henry James's Gothic Children to Neil Gaiman's Children's Gothic," Auba Llompart Pons claims that texts about childhood and texts about horror have been merging with each other: "Not only is childhood one of the most prominent topics of twentieth and early twenty-first-century horror fiction, but the reverse process is also taking place: horror is creeping back into children's texts after having been wiped out of respectable

---

<sup>12</sup> Auba Llompart Pons's "Another Turn of the Screw: From Henry James's Gothic Children to Neil Gaiman's Children's Gothic" (2012) offers an examination of the transitions in the role of the child in gothic literature. In the introduction to *Children's Literature and Culture: Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature* (2011), Holly Blackford outlines the repetition of the myth of Persephone and Demeter as representative of a girls' gothic literature with Persephone occupying a liminal position between world/underworld, daughter/wife, and girl/woman. In "Alice and Mowgli Revisited: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*" (2012), Franziska Burstyn reads Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* as contemporary gothic novels drawing largely from Victorian works.

children's literature in the eighteenth century" (171). At its core, children's literature deals with a child developing an understanding of his or her own identity. Children's literature chronicles the child's existence in a liminal, transitional state, moving from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience. Similarly, gothic literature also often deals with liminality or blurred boundaries; gothic literature subverts conventions by playing with uncertainties, ambiguities, and expectations.<sup>13</sup>

With this concept in mind, I would like to offer an explanation of why adults read texts that fall into this overlapping genre of children's gothic literature. The liminal space that the child inhabits interests adult readers. Pons argues that the uncertainty in this space of transition draws in the adult reader while changing the trajectory of the gothic:

Fear is the result not only of the reader's sympathy for the child hero(ine), but also of the uncertainty that surrounds these preadolescent characters. A great part of the tension these narratives create has to do with not knowing what the child will turn out to be like. In conclusion, seeing horror through the child's eyes, an important gothic convention is reversed: children's gothic emphasizes the haunting, not of the past, as it is conventional in gothic, but of the future, and acknowledges the adult fear of not being in control of what is yet to come. (183)

Because the child is in a liminal space with infinite possibilities for change, the sheer amount of possible outcomes is terrifying to an adult reader. Instead of being haunted by past actions, family curses, or lurking monsters, the children's gothic moves the location of fear from decisions made and deeds done to the realm of the potential, the uncertain, and the future.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Burkholder-Mosco for a discussion of children as a liminal space in three gothic works that are not children's literature.

It is also important to remember the liminal function of the mirror. As I have shown in this thesis, the mirror functions as a liminal space in which protagonists develop a sense of self. In each interaction with a mirror, the characters have realizations and undergo changes. In this way, the mirror itself contributes to the gothic nature of these texts by fostering the liminal experience of the characters and often blurring the lines between reality and image, furthering the liminal characteristics and uncertainties driving the gothic characteristics of the text itself.

As Mulvey-Roberts indicated in the earlier description of the gothic, the gothic plot—the text itself—serves as a mirror for the reader.<sup>14</sup> As a mirror, this text distances the reader from the horrors depicted; the reader can experience them from the safety of the page. In this way, reading a gothic text is similar to going to battle against the mythological figure of Medusa or J.K. Rowling’s basilisk in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*—looking directly at the monster will kill you, but viewing an *image* of it reflected in a mirror allows you to (somewhat) safely interact with it in order to defeat it.

---

<sup>14</sup> Veronica Schanoes offers a brief discussion of this idea in “Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: The Significance of the Looking-glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales” (2009).



## REFERENCES

## Introduction

Carter, Angela. "Wolf-Alice." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 119-26. Print.

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. "Snow White." *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*. Ed. and

Trans. Maria Tatar. New York: Norton, 2004. 240-255. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in

Psychoanalytic Experience." Trans. Alan Sheridan. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and*

*Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. 2nd edition. New York: Norton, 2010. 1163-9. Print.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Children's Literature." *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western*

*World*. Ed. Paula S. Fass. New York: Routledge, 2013. 313-327. Print.

Phillips, Adam. *Winnicott*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. Print.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Tavistock, 1982. Print.

---. Introduction. *Playing and Reality*. By Winnicott. xi-xiii.

---. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena." *Playing and Reality*. 1-25.

---. "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development." *Playing and Reality*. 111-118.

Zipes, Jack. "Crossing Boundaries with Wise Girls: Angela Carter's Fairy Tales for Children."

*Marvels & Tales* 12.1 (1998): 147-154. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Jan. 2014.

## Chapter 1

Atwood, Margaret. "Running with the Tigers." *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of*

*Angela Carter*. Ed. Lorna Sage. Camden Town, London: Virago, 1994. 115-135. Print.

Brooke, Patricia. "Lyons and Tigers and Wolves—Oh My! Revisionary Fairy Tales in the Work

of Angela Carter." *Critical Survey* 16.1 (2004): 67-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.

Bryant, Sylvia. "Re-Constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast.'" *Critical Essays on*

*Angela Carter*. Ed. Lindsey Tucker. New York: Hall-Macmillan, 1998. 83-95. Print.

- Carter, Angela. "The Bloody Chamber." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 7-41. Print.
- . "Notes from the Front Line." *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*. Ed. Lindsey Tucker. New York: Hall-Macmillan, 1998. 24-30. Print.
- . "The Lady of the House of Love." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 93-108. Print.
- . "The Courtship of Mr Lyon." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 41-51. Print.
- . "The Tiger's Bride." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 51-67. Print.
- . "Wolf-Alice." *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. 119-26. Print.
- Cavallaro, Dani. *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2011. Print.
- Day, Aiden. "The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories." *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*. New York: Manchester UP, 1998. 132-166. Print.
- Eaglestone, Robert. "The Fiction of Angela Carter: The Woman Who Loved to Retell Stories." *Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. 195-209. Print.
- Fiorato, Sidia. "Juridical Issues in Contemporary Fairy Tales: The Case of Angela Carter." *Textus: English Studies in Italy* 21.3 (2008): 647-674. *EBSCO Humanities International Complete*. Web. 20 Oct. 2012.
- Gamble, Sarah. "'Isn't it Every Girl's Dream to be Married in White?': Angela Carter's Bridal Gothic." *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*. Ed. Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips. New York: Continuum International, 2012. 23-32. Ebook.

- Gamble, Sarah. "Penetrating to the Heart of the Bloody Chamber: Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale." *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*. Ed. Stephen Benson. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2008. 20-46. Print.
- Lau, Kimberly J. "Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy." *Marvels & Tales* 22.1 (2008): 77-94. *Project MUSE*. Web. 30 Oct. 2013.
- Lokke, Kari E. "'Bluebeard' and 'The Bloody Chamber': The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10.1 (1988): 7-12. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.
- Munford, Rebecca. "Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality." *Re-visiting Angela Carter*. Ed. Rebecca Munford. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 1-20. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having... Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales." *The Kenyon Review* 19.3-4 (1997): 98-110. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.
- de la Rochère, Martine Hennard Dutheil. "'But marriage itself is no party': Angela Carter's Translation of Charles Perrault's 'La Belle au bois dormant'; or, Pitting the Politics of Experience against the Sleeping Beauty Myth." *Marvels & Tales* 24.1 (2010): 131-151. *Project MUSE*. Web. 03 Jan. 2014.
- de la Rochère, Martine Hennard Dutheil and Ute Heidmann. "'New Wine in Old Bottles': Angela Carter's Translation of Perrault's 'La barbe bleue.'" *Marvels & Tales* 23.1 (2009): 40-58. *Project MUSE*. Web. 03 Jan. 2014.
- Schanoes, Veronica L. "Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: The Significance of the Looking-glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20.1 (2009): 5-23. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

Tuber, Steven. *Attachment, Play, and Authenticity: A Winnicott Primer*. New York: Jason Aronson, 2008. Print.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Tavistock, 1982. Print.

---. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena." *Playing and Reality*. 1-25.

---. "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development." *Playing and Reality*. 111-118.

## **Chapter 2**

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland: A Norton Critical Edition*. 2nd edition. Ed. Donald J. Gray. New York: Norton, 1992.

Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin, 1979. Print.

Coats, Karen. "Between Horror, Humour, and Hope: Neil Gaiman and the Psychic Work of the Gothic." *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*. Ed. Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis. New York: Routledge, 2008. 77-92. Print.

David, Danya. "Extraordinary Navigators: An Examination of Three Heroines in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *Coraline*, *The Wolves in the Wall*, and *MirrorMask*." *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature* 12.1 (2008): n.p. *Google Scholar*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" Trans. Alix Strachey. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. 2nd edition. New York: Norton, 2010. 824-841. Print.

Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Illus. Dave McKean. New York: Harper-HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

Gaiman, Neil. Interview by Gavin J. Grant. May 2002. *Indiebound*. American Booksellers Association, 2008. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

Gaiman, Neil. *Smoke and Mirrors*. New York: Harper, 1998. Print.

- Gooding, Richard. "'Something Very Old and Very Slow': *Coraline*, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33.4 (2008): 390-407. *Project MUSE*. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Jackson, Anna, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis. Introduction. *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*. Ed. Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis. New York: Routledge, 2008. 1-14. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Trans. Alan Sheridan. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. 2nd edition. New York: Norton, 2010. 1163-9. Print.
- Larsen, Kristine. "Doors, Vortices and the In-Between: Quantum Cosmological Goddesses in the Gaiman Multiverse." *Neil Gaiman and Feminism: Essays on the Comics and Other Works*. Ed. Tara Lynn Prescott and Aaron Drucker. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 261-279. Ebook.
- Martin, Rachel R. "Speaking the Cacophony of Angels: Gaiman's Women and the Fracturing of Phallogocentric Discourse." *Neil Gaiman and Feminism: Essays on the Comics and Other Works*. Ed. Tara Lynn Prescott and Aaron Drucker. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 11-31. Ebook.
- Muller, Vivienne. "Same Old 'Other' Mother?: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*." *Outskirts: Feminisms Along the Edge* 26: (May 2012): n.p. *Google Scholar*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats." *Marvels & Tales* 23.2 (2009): 248-267. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 Mar. 2014.

- Parsons, Elizabeth, Naarah Sawers, and Kate McNally. "The Other Mother: Neil Gaiman's Postfeminist Fairytales." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33.4 (Winter 2008): 371-89. *Project MUSE*. Web. 12 Nov. 2013.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.
- Rudd, David. "An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity." *Children's Literature in Education* 39 (2008): 159-68. *EBSCO Humanities International Complete*. Web. 13 Nov. 2013.
- Russell, Danielle. "Unmasking M(other)hood: Third-Wave Mothering in Gaiman's *Coraline* and *Mirrormask*." *Neil Gaiman and Feminism: Essays on the Comics and Other Works*. Ed. Tara Lynn Prescott and Aaron Drucker. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 161-176. Ebook.
- Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine. "Imagining Fear: Inside the Worlds of Neil Gaiman (An Anti-Oedipal Reading)." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37.1 (January 2013): 37-53. *Project MUSE*. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Tavistock, 1982. Print.
- . Introduction. *Playing and Reality*. By Winnicott. xi-xiii.
- . "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena." *Playing and Reality*. 1-25.
- . "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development." *Playing and Reality*. 111-118.

## **Conclusion**

- Blackford, Holly. "Introduction: Reaching for the Narcissus: Byronic Boys, Toys, and the Plight of Persephone." *Children's Literature and Culture: Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*. Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis, 2011. Ebook.

- Burstyn, Franziska. "Alice and Mowgli Revisited: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*." *Inklings* 30 (2012): 72-86. Print.
- Clark, Beverly Lyon, and Lavina Dhingra Shankar. "When Women Tell Tales about School." *Studies in Popular Culture* 17.1 (1994): 17-28. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Gothic Sublime*. New York: State U of New York P, 1994. Print.
- Mulvey-Roberts, Marie. "Introduction to the First Edition." *The Handbook of the Gothic*. 2nd ed. Ed. Mulvey-Roberts. New York: New York UP, 2009. xx-xxiii. Print.
- Pons, Auba Llompart. "Another Turn of the Screw: From Henry James's Gothic Children to Neil Gaiman's Children's Gothic." *Weaving New Perspectives Together: Some Reflections on Literary Studies*. Ed. María Alonso Alonso, Jeanette Bello Mota, Alba de Bejar Muinos, and Laura Torrado Mariñas. England: Cambridge Scholars, 2012. 171-184. Print.
- Sage, Victor. "Gothic Novel." *The Handbook of the Gothic*. 2nd ed. Ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. New York: New York UP, 2009. 146-154. Print.
- Schanoes, Veronica L. "Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: The Significance of the Looking-glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20.1 (2009): 5-23. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.



## VITA

Staci Poston Conner was born in Florence, South Carolina. Before pursuing a M.A. in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, she graduated *summa cum laude* and with University Honors with a B.A. in English from Francis Marion University, where she served as editor of the university's literary journal, managing editor of the student newspaper, and held a variety of tutoring positions. As an undergraduate, she completed an honors thesis titled "'They Listen to Patsy Cline Everywhere': Allusions as Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces in *Lost*." She is a member of Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Tau Delta, Omicron Delta Kappa, Kappa Mu Epsilon, and SEASECS. She has presented at conferences on works by Toni Morrison and Sarah Fielding and published a book review in *XVIII: New Perspectives on the Eighteenth Century*.