Gender Identity

Gender stereotypes are constantly being brought out in different forms of story telling: in novels, journalism, television and film. This is very evident in the novel and film adaptation of the story of *Coraline*. Coraline, the protagonist, identifies herself as a girl: an adventurous, strong, risk-taking girl. She loves to explore and fight off evil versions of her mother. Neil Gaiman, the author of the novel, *Coraline*, seems to not even know any sort of gender role because none of them take place in his piece of literature. The father cooks, the mother works and the old man upstairs does ballet. The movie, *Coraline*, directed by Henry Selick, is littered with gender stereotypes. How could two works with supposedly the same story in different mediums be so different? The two adaptations are leave the audience with different perceptions of Coraline’s identity. Both the novel and the movie bring out different views on gender that are very relevant in America today. They deal with how Coraline views herself and her abilities.

With two sets of worlds, naturally Coraline has two sets of parents. Coraline’s parents are four very interesting people. There is her real mother: a workaholic, bland and introverted creature. Next there is her real father: a caring, workaholic with no personality. Her other mother
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is a fun, loving, fake and evil person with a passion for stealing souls. Finally, her other father who is a weak character who is literally controlled by the other mother. In both the book and the movie, the mother is the dominant character. In the ‘typical’ American household, the father is the bread winner while the mother wears tight dresses and makes peanut-butter sandwiches for the children. However, this is not the case for the parents in Coraline’s house. Both the real mother and the other mother make the rules. She is a fighting force that makes the decisions in the household. In the article "Imaging Fear: Inside the Worlds of Neil Gaiman (An Anti-Oedipal Reading)", Christine Wilkie-Stibbs discusses the power struggle between the parents in the household. "All the males in these narratives are ineffective and weak against the powers of the mother.” This power struggle clearly states the feminist ideology behind the novel. Coraline’s mother is the strong one. She controls everything and does not let anyone get in her way. Her father is the complete opposite. He is passive and lets her mother take control. This is particularly clear with the other set of parents. When Coraline is trapped in the basement while looking for the souls of lost children with her other father trying to kill her, he states that the other mother is the one making him do this. He ignores his own responsibility and blames the other mother’s power. The other mother is so strong that she can make a man almost commit murder against his very own child. One of the most spectacular things about Gaiman’s work and its absence of gender roles is that the mother’s anger and power is not seen as her being an angry woman. She is a powerful, scary monster. The other mother is not seen as some emotional, manipulative roller coaster on her period. She is an evil creature. As the story goes on during the film, other mother becomes less human and more spider like. She developed a skeletal body and
long, thin bug like legs. It was all hidden underneath her human-like, kind, loving disguise. Coraline’s parents and their polar gender roles are true examples of Gaiman’s excellent job of eliminating stereotypes.

In the movie, Selick takes a different approach than Gaiman. He brings back some old fashioned values and stereotypes when it comes to gender that affect Coraline’s identity. Coraline in the novel is a lone soldier who does everything herself. She sees herself as a warrior who rides alone and does not need anyone to hold her hand. This is evident in both the film and the novel. Coraline is left up to her own devices in the novel. Despite a few hints from a cat, she must solve the mystery of her missing parents and defeat the evil other mother. In the novel and film, Coraline must work hard to escape other mother’s deathly grasp. Coraline is a strong, independent girl who can defeat monsters all on her own. Coraline is also incredibly confident in herself. She challenges the all powerful other mother to game, risking her livelihood in order to escape, rescue her parents and save the souls of children who came before her. There was a strong possibility Coraline could loose, but she believed in herself enough to try. Coraline’s confidence and self assurance are two factors that apply to how she identifies with herself. These are especially evident in the novel. Gaiman does not create anyone to assist Coraline in her adventure. She does it all on her own.

The Coraline that everyone loves and admires is very different in the movie adaptation. A new character was created who went by the name of Wybie. Wybie is the root of most of the problems. In the novel, Coraline always saves herself in others. In the movie, Wybie takes some
of her fame and glory. For example, the other mother traps Coraline behind the mirror in both the movie and novel. Coraline misbehaves and is confined behind a mirror left with only this line by the other mother, “You may come out when you’ve learned some manners […] and when you’re ready to be a loving daughter” (Gaiman 79). Coraline saves herself by breaking out of the mirror in the novel. In the movie however, good old Wybie comes and saves Coraline. Apparently, Coraline is too weak to save herself, so the big strong boy must save her. In the online article, “Doing Damage to the Text: Gender in Neil Gaiman’s Coraline(s)” Brit Mandelo discusses this topic. After stating that Wybie saves Coraline, she says, “(Coraline is) Faceless and nameless as most of the rescued girls in coming-of-age narratives are, at this point her strength and independence are nonexistent.” Since Wybie rescues Coraline, he is stripping some of her identity as being an independent, strong girl away from her. The viewer loses a sense of Coraline in the movie adaptation. Another example of this is the conclusion of the film. In the original, novel version, Coraline saves herself from the evil hand of the other mother that followed her back into the world. However, in the movie version, Wybie comes to the rescue. This has a very similar effect as the mirror rescue. It makes Coraline less of a person and more of a prize to be won by a boy. By saving her, Wybie finally earns Coraline’s affection that her never had and always desired. In return, Coraline loses herself.

People often identify themselves with a former career or lifestyle. This is very true when it comes to Coraline’s neighbors, Mrs. Spink and Mrs. Forcible. These two ladies are former actresses and broadway performers. In both the book and the movie, in the other world, the
neighbors are not former actresses, they are still putting on shows. In the movie adaptation, their performance is comical and not at all sexualized. In the movie, it is very different. Spink and Forcible are wearing very little clothing and singing pretty songs. The two old women are sexualized greatly - in a children’s animated film. At the end of their performance, they even turn into their younger, former selves. Women are often told in society that the younger they are, the more beautiful and desirable they are. In the movie, Spink and Forcible are stripped of their talents as actresses and are turned into sexual objects. In the novel, Spink and Forcible’s worth is based on how much they can make their audience laugh. In the movie, their worth is based on how nice their body is. This also relates to how the two actresses think of themselves. In the novel, it is clear that Spink and Forcible rely on their wits. They make jokes, preform skits and love what they are doing. The sea shell bikini and thirty year age reduction give the viewer a very different impression in the movie. Coraline also looks up to her elderly neighbors. She may think that they are a little crazy, but she admires their passion and love for the art of theatre. Their very different performances influence Coraline differently in each adaptation of the story. Coraline gets one message that her brains are all that matters and another is how little clothes you can get away with wearing. Yes, if Spink and Forcible enjoy their small wardrobe in the movie it is their choice, but is it Coraline’s choice to be influenced that that is the only way to be successful? The movie and the novel obviously have very different views on women’s worth.

Gender roles, identity and stereotypes play big factors in both the movie and the film adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s Coraline. Whether the story is smashing the patriarchy in print or
abiding by traditional values of women in film, gender is always relevant. Coraline’s gender identity changes with each medium of storytelling. She is always a girl, but her strength is determined by secondary characters and fighting off monster versions of her mother. Regardless, Coraline is a role model for all young girls. She tells everyone that she does not need anyone to help her whether it is her mother, her father or the neighbor boy. Gender stereotypes in the story, *Coraline*, will always be relevant.
Works Cited


