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## Button Eyes and Themes

By Addie Neuman

The eerie stop-motion film *Coraline* was the first horror film I saw as a child, and it ignited my love for the strange and macabre. *Coraline* is a thriller based on the children's book *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman and is directed by Henry Selick. The story follows a young girl with striking blue hair and an unquenchable curiosity mixed with a passion for adventure, throughout her and her family's new move. The plot leaves the audience on the edge of their seats, as Coraline uncovers the secrets of her new home, all while trying to escape her family problems. Unfortunately, Coraline's escape turns sinister and creates much larger problems. *Coraline* is much more than a children's movie, it is a warning tale. The film explores strained family dynamics, themes of deception, and uses symbolism and setting to convey the message "some things are too good to be true."

At the beginning of the movie, we are introduced to Coraline, her mother, father, and her eccentric neighbors, only one of which is her age, Wyborn. Wyborn lives with his grandmother, who owns the housing complex Coraline has moved into. His grandmother once lived in the house with her family, until her sister was stolen away by the house and forever disappeared. Wyborn plays an important role in the film, especially in the exposition when he hands Coraline the doll version of herself. What he does not know is that doll is evil and a foreboding gift from the film's antagonist.

The audience does not meet the antagonist until halfway into the film, as the exposition focuses on Coraline and her family's dynamics. Coraline's parents are constantly bickering, busy, and pushing her aside. They do not make time for their child and ignore her needs. A prime example of the neglect is when Coraline came home from exploring the woods surrounding their house with a poison oak rash and neither parent noticed. Another example would be when Coraline almost fell down the abyss of a well and died, and her mother only responded to the event by saying, "That's nice."

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Throughout the film, the audience becomes more aware of the parents' neglect through seemingly minuscule actions. By doing this the film subtly compares Coraline's real parents and the Other Parents, which makes the audience just as susceptible as Coraline to the charms of the Other Mother and Father. For example, Coraline's real parents do not know her favorite color or remember to restock the fridge and provide for Coraline due to their focus remaining on themselves and business. Meanwhile, the Other Parents know Coraline like the backs of their hands and always have treats and meals prepared for her.

Before Coraline is introduced to her new parents, her real parents send her on a quest to examine the new house to keep her out of their hair. While trudging through the home, Coraline with the help of her new doll discover a tiny door that was painted over. The small door was locked and could only be opened by the sleek, slender, black button key which was buried in a junk drawer. Once unlocked, the door was barricaded; however, in the middle of the night the door transforms into a portal to a new world.

In the middle of the night, Coraline is greeted by a white mouse that leads her to the tiny door, which has now transformed into a portal to a new world. Her curiosity gets the best of her, leading Coraline down the dark passage into a mirrored reality, except this one is better than her real life. In this world, Coraline is greeted by a loving mother and father who want to feed and nurture her. Her Other Mother listens to her and treats Coraline's poison oak and even tucks Coraline in for bed. Her Other Parents serenade her, plant a garden that resembles Coraline's face, create wonders for her enjoyment, and build her a friend. Everything in this alternate world was built to feed Coraline's desires, but the catch is everyone there has buttons for eyes. This is where the theme of deception comes into play.

The theme of deception is seen throughout the movie but can be specifically pointed out in a few scenes. Before Coraline figures out she has been deceived, the audience is able to catch on quicker. The first warning of deceit comes from the white mouse that led her to the door, telling her that she should never return there. In addition to this warning, while in the alternate world the audience can see the Other Mother controls the Other Father and pieces of their world are falling apart behind Coraline's back. This

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conveys the theme of deception because when there are cracks in the foundation a lie crumbles apart quicker than a house.

Before moving onto the climax and resolution of the film, it is important to note the various uses of symbolism throughout the story. The most prominent use of symbolism was the use of buttons for eyes. The eyes are known to be the windows to the soul and are often a symbol of morality or truth. However, in the film buttons cover the eyes of each character in alternate world, which makes it difficult to decipher their emotions or intentions. Additionally, the buttons for eyes also signify the Beldam's control. As previously stated, all characters in the other universe have buttons for eyes, which alludes to the power and control the Beldman has over each creation.

Along with button motifs, the Beldam herself is a symbol. In the final faceoff between the Beldam and Coraline, the Other Mother transforms into her actual form; in this form the Beldam has long, spider-like limbs and is made out of needles. She uses this thin and pointy form to create a spiderweb to entrap Coraline, this part of the film quite literally spells out the theme of deception for the viewers. Coraline is quite literally caught in the Beldam's web, or world, of lies.

Continuing with the rising action, Coraline ignores all warnings and signs of danger and returns to her fantasy world. She visits the parallel universe three times. The third visit kickstarts the beginning of the end. During this part of the film, Coraline is told that in order to stay in this world she must get buttons for eyes. This causes chaos to erupt and the truth of the Other Mother to be revealed. The Other Mother turns out to be the antagonist of the movie and transforms into the Beldam. The Beldam is spider-like, has wired claws, and towers over all by miles. In order to survive, the beldam feeds off the souls of the children she had lured into her world. To buy herself time, Coraline makes a deal with the beldam, in which Coraline must free the souls of the three children the beldam has killed to escape from this alternate world. If Coraline fails, she will let them sew buttons into her eyes.

Once the game between Coraline and the Other Mother begins, the beautiful world made just for Coraline begins to fade and fall apart. It is a race against time and a physical race against the weapons the

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beldam uses to delay Coraline's quest. It is during this part of the film, that it finally clicks for Coraline that she has been deceived and that not everything is as it seems. The overall lesson of the film is "some things are too good to be true," a lesson Coraline learned too late.

As Coraline battles to defeat the Other Mother, the audience is able to learn valuable lessons from the film and take a moment to fully digest all that Neil Gaiman and Henry Selick have done to portray this story so well. They go in depth on the strained mother-daughter relationship Coraline and her mother share, which teaches parents to listen and acknowledge their children, and children to have patience with their parents. The film also has such thematic depth that the audience could drown in it. There are themes of deceit, deception and fear, family, love, there are so many messages in this film. Lastly, the film teaches the audience that the grass is not always greener on the other side, that life is meant to be mundane and imperfect, because truly some things are too good to be true.

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