

# The Construction of Space and the Breakthrough of Growth: A Hyperreal Exploration of *Coraline*

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As a master of fantasy literature, Neil Gaiman has advanced the development of fantasy literature through his award-winning works. This paper focuses on his work *Coraline*, employing liminality theory, spatial theory, and Baudrillard's hyperreality to examine the story of Coraline, an adolescent girl who explores a door leading to a dangerous other world, accompanied by her growth and self-discovery. This study explores the spatial construction and hyperreal representation through liminal elements and spatial metaphors. The interweaving and mutual transgression between the Other World and the real world in the work demonstrate a surreal chaos and complexity, highlighting Coraline's predicament and courage when confronting the other world. As an individual existing in a liminal state, Coraline navigates between two worlds where the virtual and real intersect. Through this process, she not only achieves personal growth but also seeks self-integrity through continuous questioning and exploration. The blurring and overlapping of these spaces make *Coraline* a typical hyperreal text, endowing this fantasy work with new depths and meanings of interpretation.

*Keywords:* *Coraline*, fantasy literature, liminality, space, hyperreality

## Introduction

*Coraline* is a story focusing on the adventures of 11-year-old Coraline, who accidentally discovers a mysterious door leading to a parallel family world that is strikingly similar to the real world yet harbors hidden dangers. In this story, Coraline's new home becomes the bridge connecting two worlds. By chance, Coraline discovers that inconspicuous door, behind which lies a world that initially appears as a mirror image of the real world, with an almost identical layout to her own home, yet possessing a more glamorous and alluring exterior. There exists an Other Mother who is gentle to the point of near perfection, along with a series of seemingly perfect life scenarios, all of which fill Coraline with novelty and excitement upon her first entry. However, as the story deepens, Coraline gradually realizes that this seemingly perfect world is actually fraught with danger. The true intention of the Other Mother and her parallel family is to permanently separate Coraline from this world filled with love and authenticity, imprisoning her in that false yet enticing parallel world. Faced with this sudden challenge, Coraline is forced to embark on a journey of testing courage and wisdom. She must rely on her own strength to uncover the truth of the parallel world, overcome inner fears and doubts, and ultimately find her way

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home, protecting the irreplaceable bond with her family. Coraline devotes all her wisdom and courage solely to return to reality and reunite with her loved ones.

In the work, the transitional nature of space, the ambiguity of characters, and the unsettling force confronting Coraline are often examined through the lens of deep psychological analysis. While these early interpretations have acknowledged the boundaries implied by these elements, they have regrettably fallen short of fully exploring their potential. This paper intends to employ Baudrillard's hyperreality theory to examine *Coraline* within the broad context of fantasy literature, deeply analyzing the spatial construction in *Coraline*, exploring the presentation of parallel worlds, the simulation of character identities, and the blurring of boundaries between reality and illusion. Through such analysis, we can not only better understand the artistic value of *Coraline*, but also gain insight into the unique contribution of children's fantasy literature in exploring the complex emotions and cognitive boundaries in the depths of the human psyche.

### Literature Review

For early critics of *Coraline*, here specifically referring to Richard Gooding (2008), David Rudd (2008), Karen Coats (2008), the text and Coraline's movement through the other world offer a near-literal quotation of Sigmund Freud's the uncanny or Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and entrance into the symbolic and identity. While these earlier readings of *Coraline* are undoubtedly pivotal, they assume Coraline's absolute readability and ability to be constructed in such a way as to fulfill expectations of psychoanalyzed child subject, their readings dependent upon fixed, knowable term of that which constitutes "the child" and "childhood".

The majority of the current research on *Coraline* is still focusing on psychoanalysis. Ahmad Sabri (2019) utilizes psychoanalytic approach to analyze Coraline's family relationship, her feelings of denial as well as her aggressive behavior towards the Other Mother. Through Freud's defense mechanism and Bowlby's theory of attachment, this study focuses on the scope of Coraline's relationship with her real mother and Other Mother. Grace A. Prasanana's study (2018) also applies Freud's theory and Lacan's "mirror stage" to analyze how Coraline caters to dual audience (child and adult). Though Gaiman uses a child protagonist in *Coraline* and intends the novella for children, a dual readership is possible because of the themes and concepts he focuses on. The study analyses the concept of parallel universe as imaginary world or an alternative universe and the transcendence from innocence to maturity, which is relatable to both children and adults.

In addition to psychoanalysis, another perspective takes advantage of (heroic) fantasy to unpack *Coraline*. Tuğçe Alkiş (2021) aims to show how contemporary children's fantasy fiction offers alternative methods to children and teenagers for confronting self-discovery. This paper argues that fantasy is an effective device for explaining the complexities and dilemmas of the self and examining a child's quest for self-discovery in the process of maturation and individuation. Likewise, Zvonimir Prtenjača (2019) retraces the Coraline's adventure by applying Joseph Campbell's theoretical framework offered in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (2008), and ultimately aspires to decode Coraline's process of maturation by examining several developmental stages of her sense of self. Gaiman uses an unconventional hero embodied in a little girl to provide voice for all the children in search of themselves, allowing them to find their "I's in their own respective M STs".

Finally, there are articles studying *Coraline* from the perspective of Gothic novels. For example, Torres Fernandez (2021) compared the novel with its animated adaptation *Coraline* (2009). The Gothic elements in both the book and film jointly weaken the idealization of Coraline's family while also reflecting the contradictions in her growth process and her coping methods after moving to a completely unfamiliar place. Meanwhile, this

analysis also highlighted some significant differences: In the novel, the Gothic atmosphere is more reinforced through linguistic description, delicate psychological portrayal, and gradually revealed horrifying plots, while the animated version creates Gothic atmosphere through visual symbols and sound effects processing. This difference makes the film more prominently highlight her isolation and alienation in the other world.

Since 2008, papers on *Coraline* have begun to be published successively. Although these studies unfold from different perspectives, current research can be roughly divided into three main areas: psychoanalytic criticism, fantasy criticism, and Gothic criticism. Despite these valuable contributions, early interpretations have largely overlooked *Coraline* from a spatial perspective. In light of this gap, this paper undertakes a close textual reading to examine the liminal elements and spatial metaphors embedded in the story, investigating how *Coraline* constructs its uncanny spaces and how these spatial configurations participate in a hyperreal presentation of reality and fantasy. By situating the narrative within the framework of spatial and liminal theory, this study aims to reveal new insights into the novella's engagement with fear, identity, and the blurred thresholds between worlds.

### Theoretical Framework

The concept of liminality was initially proposed by Western anthropologists and has gradually become a topic in literary studies. Its etymology can be traced back to the Latin word "limen", meaning "threshold". This term was popularized by French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century. His seminal work *The Rites of Passage* (1960) divided rituals into three stages: preliminal rites (separation rites), liminal rites (transition rites), and postliminal (incorporation rites). Victor Turner further refined and expanded the concept of "liminality" in his works *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), making it encompass social, cultural, and individual psychological phenomena. Turner described the liminal period as an "inter-structural stage" where individuals or groups have departed from one social state but have not yet entered a new social state with its accompanying responsibilities and perspectives. Therefore, these individuals exist "betwixt and between" social positions. For Turner, liminality is "the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions" (1974, p. 237). Thus, liminal space becomes a space that simultaneously accommodates destruction and creation, life and death. Liminal individuals (liminal persons) possess inevitable ambiguity.

Doreen Massey (2005; 1994), a prominent figure in the field of human geography, develops a highly influential spatial theory that reconceptualizes the nature of space beyond its traditional understanding as a mere physical container. She argues that space is not a fixed or passive backdrop for human activity; rather, it is actively produced through the interweaving and interaction of multiple social, cultural, historical, and material forces. In this view, space is not static but fluid, constantly being imbued with meaning and reshaped. She (Christophers, 2018) argues that space possesses "multiplicity" and "dynamism". By "multiplicity", she highlights that different elements, events, and trajectories coexist within space simultaneously, creating a complex network of relations. Meanwhile, the "dynamism" of space refers to its constant state of flux. This understanding of space relational and processual has significant implications for literary studies, as it allows scholars to analyze how narratives construct spatial meaning and how characters inhabit, negotiate, and transform the spaces around them.

Baudrillard claims that current society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality. Moreover, these simulacra are not merely mediation of reality, nor even deceptive mediations of reality; they are not based in a reality nor do they hide a reality; they simply hide that nothing like reality is relevant to people's current understanding of their lives (Kellner, 1987). The simulacra

that Baudrillard refers to are the significations and symbolism of culture and media that construct perceived reality, the acquired understanding by which human life and shared existence are rendered legible. At the end of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 94). People live in the hyperreality of simulations in which images, spectacles, and the play of signs replace the concepts of production. Reality has already incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation so that we are now living within the aesthetic hallucination of reality. Through this multi-theoretical lens, the study reveals how Gaiman constructs hyperreal spaces that facilitate both spatial meaning-making and Coraline's transformative growth.

### Personalized Construction of Liminal Space

The very first line of the book is about the door in the drawing room: "Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house" (Gaiman, 2013, p. 3). This sentence reminds readers that this door holds significant importance in the narrative, and it is through this door that Coraline enters her liminal space. Regarding the door she discovered, 13 of them could be opened and closed. But the other, the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far corner was locked.

...[Coraline's mother] reached up and took a string of keys from the top of the kitchen doorframe. She sorted through them carefully and selected the oldest, biggest, blackest, rustiest key. ...She unlocked the door with the key. ... the door didn't go anywhere. It opened on to a brick wall. (p. 9)

Coraline was filled with intense curiosity about this door, with a sense of destiny driving her to find her world through this door. Her curiosity is natural and utterly in alignment with Tolkien's comment from his essay *On Fairy Stories* when he states, "the Locked Door stands as Eternal Temptation" (2008, p. 11). Coraline's parents showed complete disinterest in this door and seemed equally indifferent to Coraline herself. When Coraline was alone, she again attempted to open that door. This time, she did not see the brick wall but discovered a dark tunnel. The empty room behind this door exists within the real world and it is part of the history of this apartment building since its construction centuries ago. When the girl secretly passes through that door, Gaiman constructs a double-sided house that appears strikingly similar to her real home. The familiar furnishings, wallpaper, and hallway create an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*, blurring the line between the known and the unknown, and subtly signaling that she has entered a space that mirrors reality while concealing something more sinister beneath its surface.

When Coraline reaches the end of the corridor, she discovers another flat mirroring her own, down to the same carpet, wallpaper, and parent. Coraline's liminal space displays many traditional qualities, such as the feelings of unease that are often associated with liminality. As a co-existing space for children and adults, home is an organism of ethical relationship. The internal space of a house is divided into various areas by thresholds, passages, windows, rooms, roofs, attics, basements, stairs, etc. These areas have their own unique functions, and there are different power operation mechanisms from the center to the edge. During the passage of rites, to "cross the threshold" is to unite oneself with the new world. The existence of boundaries divides the distinction between public and private, family and community, self and others, and crossing the threshold is a dangerous choice for children. But Coraline chose to cross the border and start the search for "another home". There is no strange world behind the passage, and there are no ghosts with blue faces and fangs, but it is this everyday space that should not exist that brings weird horror. Another familiar-yet-unfamiliar element in the home attempts to suggest a sense of disunity, of an exploration deeper into the unconsciousness. Liminal space is a place to discover new

aspects of character's identities. Coraline not only learns to be self-reliant and to make others see her, but also that "I don't want whatever I want, nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I wanted? Just like that, it didn't mean anything" (Gaiman, 2013, p. 143). These discoveries happen from the simple act of opening a door and stepping through.

In *Coraline*, Coraline enters a seemingly familiar yet anomalous space through that mysterious door. This space is not singular; it is woven from elements of reality and the other world, presenting a kind of multiplicity as Massey (2005, p. 23) describes. When Coraline walks into that mirror-like "home", she finds that everything within it, the carpet, wallpaper, even her parents' appearance, is identical to her home in the real world. However, this familiarity is simultaneously accompanied by a deep unease. As Coraline experiences, this space is both part of her family and harbors other unrevealed potential meanings. Space itself does not have fixed meaning but is constantly changing and reshaped through individuals' interactions with it (Massey, 2005, p. 23). In Coraline's exploration, this space serves as both the venue for her self-discovery and the stage where she faces challenges and difficulties. By crossing this "threshold", she enters a realm full of unknowns. Everything in this space is both familiar and strange, symbolizing her more mature transformation and her continuous exploration of self-identity. Furthermore, in *Coraline*, the space acquires a new meaning as Coraline crosses the door and ventures into the mirrored world, her actions actively shaping and redefining it. She not only learns independence but also develops new understanding of herself through continuous discovery. Her journey from curiosity about the "other home" to ultimately understand its potential dangers and meanings reflects Massey's concept of space's fluidity and dynamism. This space is not a fixed place but continuously transforms with Coraline's growth and cognition, becoming a vehicle for her self-awareness and the shaping of her identity.

Overall, the liminal space in *Coraline* is not only a transitional area in the physical sense but also a place full of multiple cultural, historical, and emotional interweavings. Through Massey's spatial theory, we can see the deeper complexity behind this space—it is not only the background for Coraline's growth but also the key to her self-discovery and identity formation.

### **The Adventure and Quest of Liminal Characters**

The basic characteristics of liminal characters are ambiguity (being betwixt and between) and "nothingness" (having nothing). That is to say, protagonists in the liminal stage are officially "invisible" in a formal sense, although they are physically visible; they are neither classified nor classifiable. This identity substitution relationship reflects the metaphorical literary connotations in Gaiman's work—namely, the mixture of consistency and antagonism among multiple selves triggered by spiritual transition.

In *Coraline*, the most convincing example of liminal characters is the ghost children. When the other mother punitively pushes Coraline into the space behind the mirror in the dark passage, Coraline encounters "three shapes, each as faint and pale as the moon in the daytime sky" (Gaiman, 2013, p. 99), who are the souls of children previously trapped by the other mother. As liminal characters, the ghost children are the materialization of nothingness. Interestingly, this theme of nothingness echoes Turner's view that liminal entities "have nothing. They have no status... no kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally" (Turner, 1967, p. 98). The Other Mother in *Coraline* is also complicated. Coraline is afraid of being stitched with dark button eyes, but is satisfied with the responsive care of the Other Mother. With the Other Mother, Coraline has received enough attention a substitute for her father and neighbors. Everything here is more perfect. When the Other Mother asks Coraline to sew up her button eyes, the girl realizes that unconditional love comes at the expense of her

personality and growth, and she will be trapped in another mother's web and eventually be swallowed. The image of the Other Mother projected the love and inexplicable terrible temptation that Coraline wanted from her parents as a child. Coraline had a false sense of security because her self-identity had not been replicated. "Was there another Coraline? No, she decided, there wasn't. There was just her" (Gaiman, 2013, p. 82). Coraline is not aware of the liminal characteristics of her own thoughts at the early stage, but sinks into the liminal world deeper and deeper instead.

Coraline met close companions in a desperate situation. The three ghost children are imprisoned by the button mother, and their lives are long gone, and they can never escape. These ghost children share the button mother with Coraline and have more experience. They are pale and fragile, telling their own death, providing courage and important direction for Coraline's plan to resist the Other Mother. Coraline has established an intimacy that has never existed in the real world with them, thus dispelling the discomfort and fear caused by the weird approximation of the two worlds. The horror and mystery of the apartment behind the wall are finally undercut by the shelter of camaraderie. It is through the communication with others and the equal dialogue between the subjects that Coraline and the ghost children can establish a complete self-identity. In this case, the individuality develops out of an incomplete persona, which is richly rewarded and thus provides a comprehensive overview of social life.

In *Coraline*, Coraline's interaction with the ghost children is not merely an emotional connection but a profound reshaping of spatial relationships. According to Doreen Massey's spatial theory, space is not a static physical background but is continuously shaped through human interactions and relationships. In the "other world", the interaction between Coraline and the ghost children is actually a joint construction of spatial meaning. The existence of the ghost children themselves is a challenge to the definition of space. Although they are "departed" souls, they still exist in some form within this space, establishing profound emotional bonds with Coraline. This interaction breaks through traditional spatial boundaries and redefines Coraline's self. In this space, Coraline is not merely a passive individual but actively participates in the construction of space and the attribution of meaning through communication and cooperation with the ghost children. Through this interaction, she gradually discovers that space is not a single entity but a multidimensional structure that changes and reshapes itself through constant interaction.

On the other hand, the Other Mother in *Coraline* is a symbol of control and power within space. She attempts to change Coraline's cognition through spatial control and tries to limit her freedom. The Other Mother sets up the temptation of "home" in the other world, providing seemingly unconditional love and attention, but this love is actually based on depriving self-identity. She hopes Coraline will completely submit to her control, stripping away her personality and freedom—this is precisely a form of oppression over Coraline's identity and spatial control. However, Coraline does not completely submit. As Massey mentions, power relationships in space are complexly interwoven, and space itself is not unchanging but full of social forces and interactions. In Coraline's communication with the ghost children, she gradually recovers her freedom. The ghost children, as liminal characters, also have no clear identity or position and their existence is precisely a resistance to the Other Mother's forcible shaping of spatial meaning. By establishing connections with the ghost children, Coraline not only understands the true nature of the "other world" but also realizes that she can break through the limitations of this world and reshape her self-identity.

Through Doreen Massey's spatial theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the spatial fluidity in *Coraline*, the identity construction of liminal characters, and the process by which these characters continuously

reshape their self-identity between two worlds. Massey's theory helps us see that space is not merely physical but also carries the interaction of culture, history, and power, and is dynamic and multiple.

### **The Construction of Hyperreal Worlds**

In *Coraline*, Coraline enters a "mirror world" through that door—a world that appears to be her familiar home on the surface, yet contains certain uncanny transformations. According to Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, this "other home" is not merely a simple replica but a symbolized space. The sense of reality and falsity in this space are intertwined because Coraline both identifies with its familiarity and feels profound unease. Her home has been symbolized and is not the fully existing real world, but rather a world controlled and reconstructed by the Other Mother. This is precisely what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal—space is no longer actually existing, but is represented through the operation of culture and symbols. Baudrillard argues that the production of simulation and symbols blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion. In *Coraline*, the "other home" reflects Coraline's inner world through simulation, ultimately becoming a "more real" existence that is even more seductive than reality. This spatial construction breaks down the boundaries of reality, making it impossible for Coraline to clearly distinguish what is the real home and what is the fantastic home.

The Other Mother, as a key figure in Coraline's hyperreal world, does not represent a complete reversal of the original mother, but rather a hyperreal form of "maternal love". Baudrillard believes that in the hyperreal world, simulation and simulacra can produce effects that are more real than reality itself. In this sense, the Other Mother's love is not simply a distortion of original maternal love. Rather, it creates an emotional structure more attractive than real maternal love through specific symbolic means. The Other Mother's love becomes an overly idealized and visualized symbol, full of seductive power, and to Coraline, it seems more perfect than her real mother's love. However, this maternal love is not simply hollow or false, but a carefully designed symbol that transcends reality. It represents an emotional trap for Coraline, creating deeper dependency as she cannot clearly judge its authenticity or falsity. Baudrillard's hyperreal theory does not view this maternal love as illusion, but rather considers it a transcendence of "real" maternal love. Its purpose is not to replace original maternal love, but through symbolic and virtual construction, to create a more symbolic and attractive emotional experience that traps Coraline in dependency on the Other Mother, unable to distinguish between authenticity and artifice in emotional experience.

### **Conclusion**

Through Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, we can better understand the spatial and character construction in *Coraline*. The "other home" that Coraline enters, as well as her interactions with the ghost children and the Other Mother, all demonstrates the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion. Space is no longer a fixed physical existence, but a constantly changing hyperreal field woven from symbols, memories, and personal emotions. The ghost children and the Other Mother are no longer complete individuals, but exist through simulation and symbolism. Therefore, Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal provides us with a way to interpret the space and characters, emphasizing how virtual reality constructed through symbols and simulation shapes characters' self-identity and growth breakthrough. This hyperreal construction is intimately connected with the liminal nature of the narrative, as both theories illuminate how Coraline navigates spaces of uncertainty and transformation. In *Coraline*, the author depicts liminal figures in crisis, yet they simultaneously contain infinite hope and future possibilities. Through wandering and journeying in the interweaving of liminal spaces, Coraline

gradually finds her own path of growth. Gaiman treats the transitional growth of humanity as an extremely important and serious theme throughout his writing career. The liminal writing he employs in his works not only embodies the fluidity, mutability, and transitional nature of fantasy, but also creates hyperreal spaces where readers can safely explore the ambiguities in human growth and self-understanding.

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