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Looking into the Marbles: An Analysis of the Hidden Marbles-Soul Correlations in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

Meiven Yang

In Neil Gaiman's book *Coraline*, our protagonist Coraline Jones finds a mysterious door in her new home which leads her to a replica world – in it she finds her own family members, yet they are somehow “other”. At first the other family seems ideal, but Coraline quickly realizes this is not the case and the other mother intends to steal her soul and keep her in this other world forever. Coraline realizes her parents are also trapped in this other world and goes on a quest to free them. Near the end of the tale, Coraline plays a game with the other mother in the other dimension (where every adult is titled with *other* in front of their name). This game is described as “an exploring game,” “a findings-things game,” and a “hide-and-go-seek game” (90). A bet is made with the stipulation that Coraline could be set free if she finds her trapped parents and all the souls of the children formerly captured in this other world (90). Soon, we realize the form of the three souls is structured into three glass marbles (95, 99, 118). The soul-containing marbles symbolizes an unfulfilled desire of the children. This paper's purpose is to analyze the correlated locations of where the marbles were hidden -- by the other mother and by our author Gaiman – which reflect the desires of children and reveal the deeper themes of parenting, presented in the three flats, throughout the novel. As we enter this other world, it is this trail of Coraline finding the three marbles that guides our voyage into this eerie and dark atmospheric realm.

Marbles, made of glass, undergo high temperatures to transform them from sand to glass. Their glass structure emphasizes their characteristic of preciousness and fragility; their spherical shape demonstrates strength, although it also makes them easily rolled away – “the kind of things you find in the bottom of toy boxes in the real world: forgotten objects, abandoned and unloved” (94). The three marbles are located on different floors and in different flats in the house: Miss Spink and Miss Forcible live in the ground flat, Coraline's family lives in the middle flat, and the crazy old man Mr. Bobo lives in the top flat.

The first marble was found in the middle flat, where Coraline's other family lived, in the toy box. It was stuffed around with other toys, and “[n]one of the toys [including the marble] looked particularly soul-like” (94). It was colored gray when looked at with the human eye, but appeared “burned and flickered with a red fire” if looked at through a special stone (95). The marble here can be seen as the forgotten, abandoned, and unloved soul, like the toys the other Mr. Bobo mentioned, “Remember the toy box? How much better would a world be built just like that, and all for you?” (117) Although Coraline refused the offer to live in a toy box and talked about her wishes to not have the trouble of “[I] don't know what to do and there's nothing to read or to watch and nowhere to go

and the day drags on forever,” we may question if this living in the toy box world was a wish from another child. Thus, the first soul lived in the toy box forgotten and with no playmates to come.

The second marble was found in the ground flat, where the other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible lived: at the “abandoned theater,” “one of the hands of the thing on the wall” held the marble with “a brown glow, as rich and bright as polished cherrywood, coming from inside the sac” (99). While the challenge here was not just noticing the marble as previously, but also being quiet and then taking the marble from the creature on the wall. Coraline is “[a]fraid that, if she disturbed the thing in the sac, it would open its eyes, and see her, and then...” (99) Relating Coraline’s description of her fear here with her interaction between the real world Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, she was informed about her fortune of being in danger – “you are in terrible danger” – with the advice of “Don’t wear green in your dressing room” and don’t “mention the Scottish play” (18). The first piece of advice urged Coraline not to wear the clothes in the other world (even though they were not green) and not to be attractive by way of the “Day-Glo green gloves” that she wished to own (67, 96, 117). The second piece of advice was known as the theatrical superstition of mentioning Macbeth in a theater, which relates to how Coraline chose to be silent as she headed toward the play, “*I must be extra quiet*” while facing the monster that the other father transformed into, the wall creature, as well as not speaking her real intention to the other mother when she tries to grab the snow globe on the mantelpiece and escape from the other world (99, 129). The second soul lived in the theater with words that could not be mentioned and movements that could not be completed.

The third marble was found at the top flat, where the other Mr. Bobo lived. The raincoat pocket on the other Mr. Bobo, at about chest height, the region near the heart, contained the marble. It was hidden between the fabric, and always moving among the other Mr. Bobo. By looking “through the hole in the stone the glow twinkled and shone blue-white as any star” (118). The challenge given by the other Mr. Bobo was to face the lure of being given anything and everything one might want, an ideal world built just for oneself, with neither obstacles nor ever any unsatisfied wants. Coraline successfully faced the lure as mentioned in the paragraphs above, with “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?” (118) She questioned the other Mr. Bobo to doubt his purpose and identity: “You’re just a bad copy” (118). Because the other Mr. Bobo mirrors the experiences of Mr. Bobo in the real world, Mr. Bobo had his dream of training mice to perform in the circus, even though he had not made any accomplishment nor had anyone believe him yet of his plans (2). He didn’t care about the opinion of the outside world, just as Coraline did not. When Mr. Bobo translated the advice from the mouse, “*Don’t go through the door,*” she answered with a “no.” That line did not mean anything to her, although this could be because Coraline did not understand what it meant, still, later we see she ended up entering the mysterious door in her home, as a great explorer (14). The third soul lived in a world of dreams formed by the voices of the outside world.

What Coraline is seeking, what the stone allowed her to see, is the children left behind and the lack of care and attention from their parents. The marbles store souls, much like the eyes of humans and animals. When Coraline tries asking the other mother for clues about what the souls look like, “How big are souls anyway?, ” the other mother does not answer but “[taps] the finger, gently, tap-tap-tap against the polished black surface of her black button eyes.” (92) The silence of the surroundings emphasizes the movement to the created sound of tapping as pointing toward the answer. While this tapping sound transitions into the tapping sound of “water droplets from the faucet into the sink,” a leakage of the pipe exposures the information, the connection between the soul and the button eyes had been already established even earlier by its significant differentiation between the real world and the other world: “[the other mother’s] eyes [are] big black buttons” (92, 26). In addition, we can determine the connection between the human eyes and marble, which are both human soul-

containing, in contrast to those human soul-lacking button eyes. The locations where the marbles were hidden reveal the ideal area for the children once imagined and belonged to. If the Coraline marble must find a place to live, it might be outside or in a place that best fits her exploring spirits. The soul-containing marbles represent the eyes of children, their perspective of the world, as well as a misinterpretation of their desires: the fun from playing with toys, the escape from punishment by words and actions not allowed and getting everything they think they want. It is a game of bets made by the children; even though they might be wrong initially, it would always be an adventure for them.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Illustrated by Dave McKean, First edition, HarperCollins, 2002.