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Buttons for Eyes: Emotional Abuse in *Coraline*

Joanna Henn

“They say even the proudest spirit can be broken, with love,” smiles the Other Mother (57:19). In a sense, she is right, but the sinister Beldam / Other Mother from the children’s horror movie, *Coraline* (2009), provides a perverted affection that is not love but something much darker. The film’s protagonist, Coraline Jones, moves with her loving yet distant parents to the Pink Palace Apartments. Crawling through a cupboard-sized door, she discovers a Doppelgänger version of her family in a parallel world. Drawn in by the apparent love and affection from her Other Mother, Coraline is tempted to remain in this vibrant, entertaining world. As the audience follows Coraline into this new family, they soon see this bond means the loss of her own family. The Other Mother seeks to trick Coraline into remaining with her for eternity. Using this twisted warmth, she affects Coraline’s perception of reality, yet her kindness is always tinged with hints of malevolence that could easily pass unnoticed beneath the surface. To incorporate the visual side of this malevolence, director Henry Selick creates a unique physical version of this cruelty to emphasize its effect on the main character and the other victims of the bloodthirsty Beldam. Throughout the film, *Coraline* uses the symbolism of body parts as a physical representation of emotional manipulation, revealing the unseen trauma caused by emotional abuse.

Hands, the most repeated symbol throughout the film, are used as the Other Mother’s physical manipulators. A specific emblem of the Beldam’s clutches, a claw like hand can be seen in multiple scenes, for example the warning of danger found in Coraline’s tea leaves or the lightning claw that appears during the tempting offer of a game in the rain. As the Other Mother spins a web to ensnare the girl, the hand shows up to reveal her true intentions. However, this symbol serves as more than just a visual alarm; the specific actions of the villainess’ own hands bely her methods of manipulation. The film opens with her needlelike fingers gutting and reassembling the doll she uses to spy on her victims. More than just a scene to show the doll becoming a Coraline lookalike, this scene also shows how the Beldam ensnares her prey. She takes out the old stuffing, and replaces it with her own sawdust stuffing, just as she seeks to fully and completely make the children that she tempts her own. This is reflected in her method of cooking and feeding Coraline delicious foods to keep her enthralled. By filling her victims up both metaphorically and literally, she provides a sense of comfort and home which tricks the children into letting down their guards, entrusting themselves to the one who seeks to control them.

In addition to manipulating her victims behind the scenes, the Other Mother physically controls her closest target, the Other Father, with her hands. When Coraline is first introduced to her Other Father, he plays her a

lovely song, exclaiming, “This piano plays me” (17:42). The piano moves his hands using a pair of gloves which in turn are controlled by the same needles as the Other Mother’s hands. His actions are completely dictated by his wife, by which, essentially, she becomes a puppet master and he the puppet. By the end of the film, the Other Father is being entirely manipulated against his will as the needles and gloves force him to attack Coraline, while he cries monotonously, “So sorry! Mother making me” (1:14:40). As the Beldam assumes control of his body, she takes away his autonomy, preventing him from being his own entity. This trauma takes a toll on his body as he transforms from the duplicate of Coraline’s real father to a shrunken, deformed man, literally withering along with his independence. By demonstrating the effect of the abuse externally, the audience can see the Beldam’s abuse leaving the Other Father sad and hollow like the pumpkin she affectionately nicknames him.

In addition to the Other Mother’s manipulations of the Other Father’s overall bodily movements, she also hones her attention on the faces of individuals to manipulate that most direct method of transmitting emotion: the mouth. As Coraline realizes she may be stuck in the alternate world, she confronts the Other Father asking where the Other Mother is. However, as he begins to explain, he is stopped by the gloves of the Other Mother, which cover his mouth. Frustrated, Coraline cries that she will get her friend Wybie to help her, when the Other Father says, “He pulled a long face. And Mother didn’t like it.” (54:40). At this moment, the gloves grab his face, squishing his mouth closed to silence him. As Coraline flees, she finds Other Wybie, now forcibly muted, with his mouth pulled into a smile with stitches to stop his long face. These two characters are prevented from expressing themselves by the Other Mother’s manipulation of their mouths. Neither can speak their mind nor even use facial expressions to communicate. As they fight to reveal their thoughts and emotions, she hurts them, twisting their mouths to reflect the perfect world she designs. This emotional exploitation and degradation leave the pair melancholy and depressed despite their forced smiles.

The Other Mother makes her final and most vicious attack on the souls of those trapped within her web by controlling their eyes. The eyes are considered the windows to the soul, and the Beldam uses this to her advantage. For Coraline to remain in the world, she must allow her eyes to be stitched over with buttons. Once she refuses, though, the world begins to twist and become darker, as Coraline sees it for the trap it is. Had she allowed the Beldam to cover her eyes, she would have lost herself to stay within the “perfect” world, something the audience can see has happened to the three children before Coraline, who are stuck as ghosts without their eyes or souls to free them. In an article about the film, “Romping with Freud in the Pink Palace,” author Sue Matheson explains the significance of the loss of eyes, stating: “Loving the Other Mother means obliterating one’s self” (22).

Matheson relates the eyes of the children to their individuality, or I's. The Other Mother's goal is to consume her victims, and while the film expresses that as a physical devouring, it demonstrates that the ultimate, terrible fate caused by the malicious machinations of the Other Mother is one where the victim's identity is consumed to conform to her every whim.

The film's use of hands, mouths, and eyes demonstrates how, by violating her victims' trust and autonomy, the Other Mother eliminates emotional expression and personal identity, the only two things that threaten her utter control. As Coraline maintains these parts of herself, she has the strength to defeat the Beldam by, ironically, removing her button eyes and crushing her manipulative hand. Coraline's actions declare that she will no longer be manipulated, and as a result, she returns strengthened in both her emotion and identity. However, the film shows in clear visuals that, had the Other Mother succeeded, her emotional manipulation would have had a devastating effect on those aspects of Coraline's psyche. Emotional abuse can often be dismissed due to the lack of physical wounds indicative of the trauma experienced. While it may be invisible, Selick brings the seriousness of this form of abuse into the spotlight by providing the physicality so conducive to understanding it. With this blatant affront to the old proverb: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," Selick promotes the importance of understanding the effect of the lesser-known forms of abuse, hopefully leading to a future where those who are victims of their own Other Mothers will not be ignored in their cries for help. Without this understanding, it is hard to tell who secretly has buttons for eyes.

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