

# Coraline



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL GAIMAN

Neil Gaiman is renowned the world over for his darkly fanciful fantasy and sci-fi works, which range from graphic novels to children's books to literature for adults. Born in Portsmouth to Jewish parents who, shortly after Neil's birth, converted to Scientology, Gaiman's early influences included C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Because Gaiman's father David, the head of the UK branch of the Church of Scientology, was often embroiled in public relations scandals tied to the church's controversial practices, Gaiman bounced from school to school as a child and has described himself as interviews as a "feral child who was raised in libraries." He has also noted that he himself is not a Scientologist. Gaiman began his writing career in the 1980s as a journalist and biographer, penning books about the band Duran Duran and Douglas Adams, the author of [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#). After his breakout series *Sandman*, published by DC Comics, gained worldwide renown in the early 1990s, Gaiman's literary career took off in earnest. Gaiman's most famous titles include *Stardust*, *Good Omens* (cowritten with Terry Pratchett), [American Gods](#), and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. [American Gods](#) and *Coraline* have been recognized by the Hugo Awards, the Nebula Awards, and the Bram Stoker Awards, while 2008's *The Graveyard Book* earned Gaiman the British Carnegie Medal and the American Newbery Medal for excellence in children's literature. Gaiman's work has been widely adapted for film, radio, and television, garnering nominations at the Academy Awards, the BAFTAs, the Primetime Emmy Awards, and the Saturn Awards.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While *Coraline* isn't tied to any specific town or time, Gaiman writes in the novella's foreword that much of the book's spooky setting—a large manor house divided up into several smaller flats, or apartments, bricked off from one another and rented out—is inspired by a mixture of several real-life places from Gaiman's life. In 1987, he, his wife, and their three small children moved into a house similar to the one Coraline and her parents share. He also took inspiration from an "oak-paneled door that opened onto a brick wall" in the drawing room in the large, old house in which he himself grew up. Coraline's timeless atmosphere and vague geographical setting nonetheless suggest the present day, while the souls of the lost children she encounters in the house of the other mother—or the beldam, as the children call her—seem to all be from different time periods throughout British history. One boy

wears velvet-trimmed breeches, perhaps suggesting he was born into a well-to-do family sometime in the 17th or 18th century, while one girl is plainly dressed in peasant's clothes and speaks an archaic form of English, using words such as "thou" and "doth."

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Coraline* is a thematically rich work whose dark, uncanny plot has garnered comparisons to such wide-ranging titles as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Shirley Jackson's [The Haunting of Hill House](#), Angela Carter's short story "The Erl-King" from the collection [The Bloody Chamber](#), and Sigmund Freud's writings on the concept of the uncanny, or the *Unheimlich*. Coraline's journey through a long, narrow tunnel—which may or may not be sentient—mirrors Alice's fall through a tunnel to Wonderland, where she encounters a hostile and murderous mother figure (who nonetheless loves a good challenge), The Queen of Hearts. In [The Haunting of Hill House](#), several individuals gather at a haunted house to study the strange force which possesses it—Coraline's own home, while not possessed itself, is nonetheless a gateway to another world which does indeed change around Coraline more and more the longer she stays there, just as Hill House often seems to do around its temporary inhabitants. "The Erl-King" follows a young heroine who must rescue a collection of caged birds—birds she learns were once girls themselves—from a strange, shadowy figure she meets in the woods.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Coraline
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** England and Wisconsin
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children's literature; novella; horror; fantasy
- **Setting:** England
- **Climax:** After rescuing her parents, saving the souls of the lost children, and outwitting her mysterious "other mother," Coraline makes a mad dash home from the other mother's realm.
- **Antagonist:** The Other Mother
- **Point of View:** Third-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Born of a Typo.** Throughout the novel, Coraline grows increasingly frustrated as her new neighbors repeatedly call

her “Caroline.” In fact, when Gaiman sat down to draft the story that would become *Coraline*, he meant to type the name Caroline but spelled it incorrectly. Rather than changing the name back, Gaiman found himself charmed by the misspelling, and decided to tell the story of a little girl with a peculiar name.

**Highly Adaptable.** Though *Coraline*’s most well-known adaptation is no doubt the 2009 feature film produced by stop-motion studio Laika and starring Dakota Fanning and Teri Hatcher, Gaiman’s seminal children’s novella has been adapted for several other mediums in the years since its publication. In 2008, a comic illustrated by *Sandman* artist P. Craig Russell and lettered by Todd Klein was published. In 2009, a musical penned by The Magnetic Fields frontman Stephin Merritt premiered in New York City—the production has gone on to have premieres in San Francisco, Chicago, and Edmonton, Canada. In 2017, *The Simpsons* even spoofed *Coraline* in the “Coralisa” segment of the episode “Treehouse of Horror XXVIII”—Neil Gaiman himself provided the voice of the Simpsons’ cat in the episode.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Coraline Jones and her mother and father have just moved to a new town. Their new flat is part of a larger house which has been parceled up into individual units. The house’s other tenants include Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, two aging former actresses who own several Highland terriers, and an individual Coraline knows only as the crazy old man upstairs—a man who claims to be training a “mouse circus” to play tiny instruments. Coraline’s parents are often busy working in their studies, and, since it’s the end of the summer, Coraline is left to her own devices much of the time. One afternoon, exploring the yard, Coraline meets a black cat who runs away when she tries to pet it; another afternoon, stuck inside during a rainstorm, Coraline becomes curious about a large wooden door in the corner of the drawing room. Coraline’s mother opens the door with a black key to show her that it opens up onto a brick wall and explains that the door goes nowhere. As Coraline falls asleep that night, she hears a scuttling noise outside her door. She gets out of bed and follows the noise through the house toward the drawing room—when she flicks on the light, she sees that the door is open. Coraline returns to bed and tries to fall asleep, but she is disturbed by a nightmare about a chorus of rats singing a threatening song. The next day, the rain has given way to a thick mist. Coraline visits with her neighbors, since exploring is too hard in the fog. The man upstairs says that his mice have a message for Coraline: “Don’t go through the door.” At Miss Spink and Miss Forcible’s, Miss Spink reads Coraline’s tea leaves and warns her that she is in danger. She gives Coraline a pebble with a hole in it to carry as a talisman.

The next day, Coraline is bored and antsy when her mother

heads out for groceries. Coraline uses the black key to open the door and finds that the brick wall has become a hallway. She walks through the hall and finds herself in another version of her home. In the kitchen there is a woman who looks like Coraline’s mother—but the “other mother” has **black buttons** for eyes. The other mother is happy to see Coraline and says she’s been waiting for her a long time. Coraline’s “other father” joins them for dinner and serves a **sumptuous meal** which stands in stark contrast to the fancy, nasty “recipes” Coraline’s real father often serves. After dinner, Coraline’s other parents urge her to go play in her bedroom. Coraline finds a pack of rats living under her bed—they sing her another ominous song. Perturbed, Coraline leaves her room and tells her other parents she’s going for a walk. Outside, Coraline encounters the same black cat from the “real” world—here, it’s able to talk to her, and its voice sounds like the voice at the back of her head. Coraline asks the cat about where she is, what she’s doing there, and who her other parents really are, but the cat doesn’t give Coraline any answers and instead darts off into the woods. Coraline decides to go visit the other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible. In this world, the two of them are beautiful young women who perform a never-ending show that combines Shakespearean soliloquy and circus acts to a rapt audience of talking terriers. Coraline leaves the performance and returns to her own flat, where her other parents tell her they’d like for her to stay with them forever. All she has to do, they tell her, is let them remove her eyes and replace them with buttons. Coraline refuses. Her other mother begrudgingly agrees to let Coraline return to her own world.

Back at home, Coraline locks the door tight behind her—but discovers that her mother still hasn’t returned home from the store and her father is nowhere to be found. Coraline visits with Misses Spink and Forcible, makes herself dinner, and gets into bed, where she cries herself to sleep. She’s awoken in the middle of the night by the cat batting her face with its paws. She asks the cat to take her to her parents, and the cat leads her to the hall mirror—Coraline sees her parents standing inside. They fog up the glass and write “HELP US.” Coraline dresses in slippers and a robe and uses the key to open the door once more. As she and the cat walk down the hall, Coraline tells the cat a story about a time when she and her father were chased by wasps. Her father got badly stung—but knew he had to go back for his glasses, which he’d dropped near their nest. True bravery, Coraline says, is going back into a scary situation even knowing how scary it is. At the other end of the hallway, Coraline finds her other mother waiting with open arms. Coraline asks where her parents are, and the other mother tells Coraline that they have abandoned her. Coraline refuses to believe the other mother’s lies. The other mother has one of her rats retrieve the black key, and Coraline asks why there isn’t a matching one in this world. The other father states that there’s only one key. The other mother, enraged, tells the other father to hush up and orders Coraline to bed. Coraline, afraid to

sleep in her other room, asks the cat what the other mother wants with her. The cat supposes the other mother wants “something to love” or perhaps just “something to eat.” Coraline asks the cat how she can escape—the cat says that “creatures” like the other mother love games and suggests Coraline challenge her to one.

In the morning, Coraline goes into the kitchen to find her other father waiting for her. His face has become vague and doughy, and when Coraline asks him questions about the other mother, he refuses—or is unable—to answer. Coraline tries to explore the grounds around the house but finds that the farther she walks, the less there is. Coraline returns to the house and encounters the other mother. She asks what the other mother has done with her parents. The other mother, frustrated with Coraline’s impudence, pulls her down the hall, opens the mirror, and throws Coraline into a cupboard. Inside the dark of the cupboard, Coraline hears voices and feels shapes around her. She soon realizes that there are three children in the cupboard with her. The children explain that the other mother—whom they refer to as “the beldam,” another word for witch—lured them all here as she lured Coraline. Some of the children seem to have been trapped for centuries, and have become shells of their former selves. The other children beg Coraline to find their souls, which are scattered through the other mother’s world, and rescue them. As Coraline falls asleep, one of the children entreats her to “look through the stone.”

The next morning, the other mother releases Coraline from the cupboard and makes her a sumptuous breakfast. Coraline reluctantly eats. After breakfast, she challenges the other mother to a game. If Coraline wins the “finding-things” game and locates the souls of the three children—as well as her parents—the other mother must let them all leave; if Coraline loses, she’ll stay forever and let the other mother put buttons on her eyes. The other mother gleefully agrees to the challenge. Coraline goes to her bedroom and searches it top-to-bottom but is unable to find anything resembling a soul. Coraline then remembers the lost children’s advice—she lifts Miss Spink’s stone to her eye and looks through the hole. The stone renders the world black-and-white save for a small marble which glows bright red—Coraline realizes that the lost children’s souls are trapped in marbles. After securing the marble, Coraline heads to Miss Spink and Miss Forcible’s flat to search for the second. The theater inside looks as if it has been abandoned for centuries. All of the dogs have transformed into hairless, bat-like creatures, and Misses Spink and Forcible have turned into a waxy, double-headed thing suspended in an egg-like sac. Coraline spots a soul inside the sac, retrieves it, and escapes the theater as the creature wakes and the bat-dogs descend upon her. Outside, the other mother offers Coraline a key to the empty flat around the corner. Coraline takes it, though she knows the other mother might be leading her into a trap. In the empty flat, Coraline encounters a reeking, grub-like creature

that she realizes is the other father. The grub apologizes for what Coraline is going through—but admits it can’t defy the other mother, and then attacks Coraline. She narrowly escapes its clutches. Next, Coraline heads to the flat belonging to the other crazy old man upstairs. Inside, she finds the other crazy old man in his bedroom and realizes that he is made entirely of rats. After spotting a marble in the paws of the largest rat, she lunges at it, but the rats flee the apartment, tripping Coraline as she chases them down the stairs. Coraline fears all is lost—but soon the cat brings her the decapitated giant rat, the third and final soul still in its paws. As Coraline looks around, she sees that the world has become covered in mist and the house has lost its shape. The cat becomes nervous and states that the other mother, angry that Coraline has found all three souls, has sealed off all the ways in and out of her world. Coraline picks up the frightened cat and carries it inside. She encounters the other mother in the parlor and notices a snow globe with two figures inside it on the mantelpiece—Coraline realizes it must contain her parents, as there is no snow globe on the mantelpiece in her own home. Coraline tricks the other mother into opening the hall door—then throws the cat at her face, seizes the globe from the mantel, and runs down the hall. She attempts to shut the door behind her, but hears something fall to the ground with a sickening thump as she does. Coraline runs home through the hall, locking the door from the other side before falling asleep, exhausted, on the sofa in the drawing room.

Coraline wakes to find that her parents are home. They seem to have no knowledge or memory of being entrapped in the other mother’s world. Coraline is relieved to have them back. She happily lets them work undisturbed throughout the afternoon, then eats the “recipe” her father cooks for dinner. That night, Coraline has a dream in which she and the three lost children enjoy a picnic in a meadow. The children thank Coraline for saving them—but warn her that “the beldam” is not done with her. Coraline awakens from the dream to hear a familiar scuttling in the hall. She gets up, follows the scuttling to the front door, and opens it to look outside. Coraline is horrified when the other mother’s hand—searching for the black key, no doubt—rushes between her legs and out into the yard. As the days go by, Coraline takes to carrying the black key around her neck. The hand attacks one of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible’s dogs, makes an appearance at Coraline’s bedroom window, and perturbs the crazy old man’s mouse circus. Coraline knows she needs to vanquish the other mother once and for all. She devises a plan to trap the hand in a deep well at the edge of the woods near her house. After setting up a fake tea party with some old dolls, Coraline lures the hand onto a thin paper tablecloth concealing the well—then drops both the hand and the key into its depths before covering it with heavy wooden boards. The cat, watching from a distance, winks at Coraline in approval. Coraline returns home, enjoys an evening with her parents, and falls asleep peacefully to the sounds of the mouse

circus practicing their instruments. Coraline is starting a new year at a new school the next day—but knows nothing she'll encounter there could possibly scare her anymore.



## CHARACTERS

**Coraline Jones** – Coraline Jones is the novel's protagonist and namesake. An intrepid, clever girl who is described as being small for her age, Coraline is a devoted explorer who loves going on long walks and watching nature programs to learn more about the world around her. Coraline's restless nature contrasts with her boring, workaholic mother and father, who refuse to play with her or indulge her whims. Coraline's parents have recently brought the family to a new town, where they've moved into a large house that's been parceled up into several smaller flats. As Coraline struggles to make friends with her eccentric neighbors, Coraline feels more and more isolated in her new surroundings. When Coraline becomes curious about a mysterious door in the corner of her new home's drawing room, she opens it one night and finds herself plunged into a parallel world which closely mirrors her own. In this other world—which looks just like Coraline's house—she finds that she has an “other mother” and an “other father,” entities which look just like her parents but for one major difference: they have **shiny black buttons** where their eyes should be. Coraline tries to leave the off-putting alternate world, but when she realizes that her other mother has, out of spite, kidnapped her real parents, Coraline is determined to return to the other world and rescue them. As Coraline goes head-to-head with the strange, shapeshifting other mother—a cruel, voracious “beldam,” or witch, whose true form is more horrifying than Coraline ever could have imagined—the limits of her bravery are tested. With the help of a talking cat and a trio of lost children imprisoned by the other mother for centuries, Coraline is able to face down her fears and do what's right—even though it means encountering twisted, perverted versions of her house, her neighbors, and even her brave, loving father. Coraline's journey is a lesson in the need to be brave even when doing so feels difficult, and her comically deadpan demeanor, stoic but smart nature, and fearless resourcefulness make her a heroine for the ages.

**The Other Mother** – Coraline's other mother is an evil shapeshifting entity and the novel's main antagonist. She is sometimes referred to by the trio of lost children she keeps captive as “the beldam,” another word for witch. The other mother, as her name suggests, appears at first as a copy of Coraline's real mother, Mrs. Jones. When Coraline uses an old key to open a mysterious door in her family's new home, Coraline finds herself in a parallel world that mirrors her own—a world of which the other mother is, without a doubt, the ruler. Coraline recognizes a few differences between the other mother and her real mother—the other mother's fingers

are longer and thinner than her real mother's fingers, and the other mother has **black buttons** where her eyes should be—but the other mother has created a convincing-enough facsimile of Mrs. Jones in order to make Coraline feel safe. The other mother wants to keep Coraline in her world forever and tries to entice her with delicious **food**, remarkable toys, and the promise that Coraline can live by her own rules. When Coraline refuses to stay, however, the other mother becomes incensed, kidnapping Coraline's parents and locking Coraline in a closet with the ghosts of the other children she's kidnapped. Taking the advice of her new friend the cat, Coraline challenges the other mother to a game. As Coraline begins winning the hunt to collect the lost children's souls, the other mother begins tearing the world she's created apart out of anger—and her own appearance changes, too. The other mother becomes spiderlike, and the cat even refers to her world as a kind of “web.” As the other mother's appearance and behavior become more and more horrific, Coraline becomes determined to vanquish her. Tricky, seductive, and yet fatally unable to resist a challenge, the other mother's origins and motives are never explained, but the narrative suggests that along with her minions, the rats, she seeks to possess and feed upon the souls of all the children who come to live in the house.

**The Cat** – Upon moving into her new home, Coraline explores the grounds surrounding it and comes upon a large, “haughty”-looking black cat. The cat sees Coraline, but avoids her and runs away from her, not wishing to be petted. To her great surprise, Coraline encounters the cat again after stumbling upon the other mother's world. While Coraline is exploring the grounds surrounding the other mother's approximation of her house, the cat approaches Coraline—and this time, it speaks to her clearly, in English. The cat's voice, Coraline observes, sounds oddly like the one at the back of her own head. The cat is clearly knowledgeable as to the other mother's origins and intentions, but it is just as “haughty” as Coraline believed it to be when she first saw it—it cryptically refuses to answer almost all of her questions about the other mother, and instead offers Coraline only the most basic advice and information she absolutely needs to survive (such as when it tells her that the other mother loves games and challenges.) The cat seems contemptuous of the other mother and sure that she can be defeated, and but when the other mother seals off the entrances and exits to her world—which the cat has, for time untold, used to pass between the two worlds with ease—the cat becomes deeply afraid of being trapped in the other mother's “web.” Wise, mercurial, stealthy, and proud, the cat is Coraline's companion in both worlds—though the cat never seems particularly attached to Coraline or desirous of her affection. The cat is, like the rats, perhaps an ancient entity simply taking the form of a cat for the time being—but whereas the rats are the other mother's minions, the cat seems to be her opponent. The novel leaves interpretation of the cat's past, motives, and mysteries up to the reader, just as it does in the case of the rats,

the other mother, and Coraline's house itself.

**Coraline's Mother/Mrs. Jones** – Coraline's mother is, like Coraline's father, a busy and hardworking person who, at the start of the novel, seems to have had very little time for Coraline lately. Coraline's mother keeps an intense focus on her work and on housekeeping, which leads her to seem more flighty and easily distracted about other aspects of her life—for example, she's shown to be unable to keep fresh **food** in the kitchen, not realizing that the grocery shopping needs to be done until food is literally rotting on the shelves. Coraline's mother seems invested in making sure that their family's new home is kept in tip-top shape, in keeping up with her work, and in helping Coraline pick out sensible, practical clothes for the new school year—but Coraline misreads her mother's intentions at every turn. By the end of the novel—after her frightening, miserable encounters with the deceptive other mother—Coraline comes to understand that her real mother honestly does want what's best for her and loves her in a way that only a true mother ever could.

**Coraline's Father/Mr. Jones** – Coraline's father is an intensely busy and hardworking man who appears to work as a writer of some sort. Like Coraline's mother, he's often too involved in his work to play with Coraline or even pay her much attention—but in spite of his aloofness, there is a warmth and a closeness between him and his daughter. Coraline's father is always trying to cook **fancy new recipes** for dinner, dishes that Coraline balks at and refuses to eat because of their obscure ingredients. While Coraline feels that her father doesn't understand her—and isn't really interested in learning to do so—she also loves him very much, and one of her most potent memories of him becomes vitally important to Coraline as she sets out to retrieve both her parents from the other mother's clutches. Coraline remembers her father saving her from a swarm of wasps while exploring together one day years ago—and then returning to the site of the wasps' nest again to retrieve his glasses, which he dropped while outrunning them. This memory helps Coraline to understand what true bravery is—it's not the absence of fear, but rather the willingness to soldier on in spite of one's fear in order to do what's right.

**The Other Father** – Coraline's other father is the version of her real father who exists in the other mother's realm. Coraline's other father is, at first, a sunnier, warmer version of her own father whose presence Coraline enjoys. However, when the other father offers Coraline the chance to stay in their world forever—if she sews **black buttons** onto her face in place of her eyes—Coraline balks at the offer and returns to her own world. After she realizes her parents are missing, she goes back to the other mother's world once more in hopes of finding them—and, upon her return, realizes that things there are deteriorating quickly. The other father has, by Coraline's second morning in the other mother's world, begun to look vague and dough-like; he reveals answers to the questions she asks about the other

mother's whereabouts and her construction of the world parallel to Coraline's, but upon realizing he's said too much, his face goes blank and he shuts down. The next time Coraline sees the other father, he is all but unrecognizable—as she goes into the empty flat next door to search for one of the lost children's souls, she encounters a terrible grublike creature in the flat's cellar whom she soon recognizes as the other father, returned to his original state. The other father apologizes to Coraline for being unable to help her—and unable to resist the other mother's directive to harm Coraline. Coraline escapes the other father—or what's left of him—just as he turns on her. A miserable, spineless creature completely under the other mother's control, the other father is an example of just how powerful the other mother truly is.

**Miss April Spink** – Miss Spink is one of Coraline's neighbors. She lives in another flat in Coraline's house with Miss Forcible. The two women once “trod the boards” in the big city as famous actresses, but now they live in the country with one another and their passel of aging Highland terriers for company. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible are both skilled readers of tea leaves and highly superstitious women. When Miss Spink, after reading Coraline's tea leaves one afternoon, believes Coraline to be in great danger, she gives Coraline a special stone with a hole through it to carry as a talisman.

**Miss Miriam Forcible** – Miss Forcible is one of Coraline's neighbors. She is Miss Spink's best friend and roommate (or perhaps partner, though the novel never delves into the specifics of their relationship.) The two women both claim that they used to be famous, well-loved actresses who performed Shakespeare and other classic plays—now, however, they live far from the city with several aging Highland terriers. Miss Forcible is, like Miss Spink, highly superstitious—but also generous and caring, even if she and Miss Spink both call Coraline “Caroline” on occasion.

**The Other Miss April Spink** – The other Miss Spink is the other mother's approximation of the real Miss Spink. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible have both been transformed, apparently, into beautiful young women who perform an elaborate, never-ending theater piece for a rapt audience of Highland terriers. Coraline soon realizes, however, that the other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible are not what they seem—instead, they're grotesque, fleshy creatures who live together in an egg sac attached to the back wall of their “theater.”

**The Other Miss Miriam Forcible** – The other Miss Forcible is the other mother's version of Miss Forcible. Like the other Miss Spink, the other Miss Forcible is, at first glance, a beautiful young woman who is engaged in a never-ending performance that combines Shakespearean soliloquies, circus arts, and magic tricks. Once the other mother becomes angry with Coraline and starts tearing her creations apart, however, Coraline realizes that the other Misses Spink and Forcible are little more than waxy, fleshy blobs who hibernate together in a

grotesque egg sac, like that of a female spider.

**The Crazy Old Man Upstairs/Mr. Bobo** – This is an eccentric old man who lives upstairs from Coraline and her family. The crazy old man refers to Coraline as “Caroline,” even when she corrects him—he is too busy preparing his mouse circus for a big performance to pay Coraline much attention. Though Coraline dismisses the old man as “crazy,” the story implies that his mice are actually capable of talking and performing music: they warn the old man that Coraline is in danger, and, at the end of the novel, can be heard performing delightful, tinkling music. The crazy old man upstairs teaches Coraline about the necessities of building a home—she learns that she must form relationships with her neighbors, even the “crazy” ones, and that sometimes, people are more delightful than one initially thinks.

**The Other Crazy Old Man Upstairs** – The other crazy old man upstairs is an alternate-universe approximation of the “real” crazy old man upstairs—but, as with everything in the other mother’s world, her version of the man has been twisted and perverted. Whereas the crazy old man upstairs in Coraline’s world is an eccentric loner who is excitedly training a mouse circus, the crazy old man in the other mother’s world is a shut-in whose body is made entirely of malevolent rats.

**The Lost Children** – The three lost children have been trapped in the other mother’s world for a long time—centuries, in some cases. The trio consists of a boy, a tall girl, and a small girl. While the children are largely indistinguishable from one another when Coraline first meets them after being thrown into a cupboard behind the hall mirror in the other mother’s house, as she collects their souls from the places the other mother has hidden them, the children regain some of their confidence and memories and become more distinct. After escaping the other mother’s world with the trio’s souls—encased in brightly-glowing marbles—safe and intact, Coraline has a vivid dream in which she and the three lost children are at a picnic together. She sees them in their corporeal forms at last: the boy is a young man in velveteen pants, suggesting an upper-class upbringing; the tall girl is dressed in simple peasant’s clothes, perhaps from as far back as Medieval times; and the smallest girl is dressed in strange, ethereal, silky robes and wears wings on her back and a crown on her head. The children’s different appearances illustrate the fact that the other mother has been alive for centuries, perhaps even for eternity—and that she always tries to lure children to her by pretending to be their other mother. The lost children are friends to Coraline and help her muster up the confidence to challenge the other mother. They encourage her every step of the way, and, when she’s completed her task, congratulate her happily—though they warn her that her journey is not yet complete.

**The Rats** – The rats are a creepy, vaguely malevolent presence throughout *Coraline* who can seemingly traverse the barrier between the “real” world and the other mother’s world with

ease. Shortly after moving into her new house, Coraline can hear them singing at night—their song is an ominous one, and its lyrics suggest that the rats are an eternal, immortal presence waiting for the “fall” of the real world, humanity, or both. While the rats’ history, intent, and purpose are never explained, they are clearly minions of the other mother—scouts, props, and soldiers all at once, the rats may be many individual animals or one single entity able to shift its shape. The rats are one of *Coraline*’s greatest, most sinister mysteries, and they add tremendously to the book’s horror elements.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### COMING OF AGE AND FINDING ONESELF

*Coraline*, Neil Gaiman’s best-known book for children, spans many genres. At once a work of children’s literature, fantasy, and horror, *Coraline* is also a coming-of-age tale. As the young Coraline Jones traverses a twisted, terrifying realm which mirrors—and corrupts—her own world, her skills as a self-proclaimed “explorer” are put to the ultimate test. Throughout the book, Gaiman positions Coraline’s journey through the world of her “other mother”—an evil entity in disguise as Coraline’s mother which lives in a parallel realm connected to Coraline’s new house—as an allegory for the often-frightening process of coming into one’s own. Through Coraline’s experiences in this world, the novel ultimately suggesting that the endeavor to find one’s true self throughout the years of adolescence is, at times, a horror as dark as any nightmare.

The story of *Coraline*, dark but simple, lends itself easily to an allegorical interpretation of Coraline’s travails—and her skills as an explorer of unknown places and a finder of lost things—as a metaphor for the uncertainties and trials of adolescence. From the very beginning of the book, Gaiman positions Coraline as an intrepid explorer who spends the days before the start of the new school year roaming around in search of new things. She loves exploring her new house and its grounds, and even whines to her father that she wants to “carry on exploring” when stuck inside on a rainy day. Coraline is even the one to open the mysterious door in her family’s new flat that leads her to the other mother’s world—her insatiable curiosity about the world around her and her desire to understand her place in it are clear from the start.

Coraline’s skills as an explorer are about to come in handy in

ways she never could have foreseen. Coraline has a desire to explore the world around her, which translates to a desire to understand herself, as well. Once Coraline visits the other mother's world and sees what it has in store for her—twisted, strange versions of her own house, parents, and neighbors—she begins to feel apprehensive about staying and returns home. The other mother, incensed by Coraline's betrayal, kidnaps her parents, forcing Coraline to return to the other world and conquer her fears of it. When confronted with a place that is difficult and unsettling to explore—the other mother's world, or, in a more allegorical reading of the tale, the realm of adolescence—Coraline initially backs away. There's something about this realm that repels her, and she wants to return to her own world and to the realm of innocence. Because Coraline is about to start a new school year, Gaiman positions her as being on the cusp of some big changes in her “real” life—changes related to growing older, maturing, and finding out who she really is. These changes frighten Coraline and she tries to retreat, but soon realizes she must confront them head-on.

Coraline's companion in both her own world and the other mother's world is a “haughty” black cat, knowledgeable but cryptic about the other mother's origins and desires. The cat suggests Coraline win the freedom of herself, her parents, and the lost children the other mother has collected over the years by challenging the other mother to a game. Coraline then sets out to find the souls of the lost children (contained in the form of brightly-colored marbles scattered throughout the other mother's world) and, as she does, must face a series of increasingly horrifying traps laid by the other mother herself. Coraline knows that in order to save herself, she must journey through uncomfortable and even frightening spaces. Gaiman suggests that Coraline's journey through the other mother's world and all its attendant horrors is similar to the journey all children must make through adolescence. Most of the terrors Coraline encounters, tellingly, involve the putrefaction, corruption, or alteration of a body or multiple bodies—from the black **button** eyes on all the creatures within the other mother's world to the lost children's transformation into wispy husks to the odious transformation of the other father, the other Miss Spink, and the other Miss Forcible into gelatinous, grublike creatures. The other mother's world is full of body horror. This reflects the common association of adolescence as a time during which bodies are permanently in flux—as children grow older, they grow, their bodies change, and eruptions of hair and acne can strike at any moment. Coraline's journey through the body horror of her other mother's world reflects her own anxieties about the trials of adolescence, and the fear of never finding who she's supposed to be amidst all the change and confusion.

Upon returning home, Coraline's trials are not yet over—she still has to trap the other mother's roving right hand, which was

severed when Coraline slammed the door between her world and the other mother's world on it and which seeks to possess the old black key to the door between the two worlds. However, once this task is completed, Gaiman shows Coraline at peace at last in her new home. As Coraline falls asleep on the night before the new school year begins, she's full of peace and calm. She's not worried about making new friends, struggling in her classes, or even dealing with the physical and emotional changes that lie in store for her as her adolescence begins. She has conquered the other mother's world, found herself in the process, and now feels ready to conquer the challenges the real world presents—even challenges related to the painful process of coming of age.

Coraline's journey through the other mother's world contains many potent lessons, but it can also be viewed as an overarching allegory for the disorientation and discomfort of growing up. As Coraline's particularly frightening reckoning with the demands of adulthood unfolds, Gaiman shows his young readers that their fears, apprehensions, and uncertainties about growing up are normal. Ultimately, Gaiman's suggestion that the process of finding oneself in the years of one's adolescence is difficult—and, at times, even frightening—is an empathetic and optimistic one. Though coming of age presents challenges and difficulties, they can be conquered through bravery, compassion, and determination.



## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

When Coraline Jones finds herself frustrated with her parents and yearning for their attention, she is, at the height of her unhappiness, presented with a world in which a set of “other” parents has been waiting to lavish her with attention, cook her all her favorite **foods**, and cater to her every whim. Coraline's other parents are also, however, evil entities with black **buttons** for eyes who “kidnap” her real parents and hold them hostage. Coraline suddenly finds herself tasked with being the one to save her family and hold them together. Ultimately, Neil Gaiman argues that sometimes, children must be the ones to help or even save their parents; the love and responsibility between parents and children must, he suggests, be a two-way street.

At the start of the novel, Coraline believes that her mother and father exist to provide for her, entertain her, and, in effect, worship her. Over the course of the novel, though, she comes to realize that just as parents have an obligation to keep their children safe and healthy, children have certain obligations to their parents, as well. The early pages of the novel follow Coraline closely as she explores her and her parents' new flat (which is part of a large mansion that has been converted into four individual units) and the grounds surrounding it. Her parents are barely a part of the narrative—Coraline knows that their jobs involve “doing things on computers,” but doesn't seem to take their work or responsibilities seriously and pesters

them constantly when she grows bored of exploring or is kept inside by the weather. In Coraline's view, her parents are uninteresting and exist only to move her around the country; dictate what she eats and what she wears; and impose rules, regulations, and chores upon her life. Because of this, and because Gaiman's narrative follows Coraline's perspective, Coraline's parents aren't really developed as people early on in the novel. Coraline is so detached from them that after they first disappear, she doesn't quite seem to mind until they've been gone for a full day. Coraline's contentious relationship with her parents shows that she feels if she could be free of them, she'd be happier—a notion that will soon be questioned as a strange turn of events takes place.

When Coraline defies her mother by stealing the house keys and going into the drawing room in order to enter the mysterious door, she's motivated by two things: curiosity and rebellion. She believes her parents are boring, and she is frustrated with them for imposing rules and regulations upon her. In the other mother's world, which lies through a strange dark hall on the other side of the door, Coraline's "other" parents are waiting for her. The two of them are overjoyed to see Coraline and attempt to woo her into staying by cooking her delicious meals, letting her shirk her chores, and spend all her time playing with toys. The other mother is constantly reminding Coraline of how much she loves her—and constantly trying to touch or even grope Coraline with her thin, restless hands, her long fingers, and her strange, wriggling hair. At first Coraline is entranced by the other mother and other father's doting treatment of her, but she soon grows creeped out by their strange obsession with her and begins longing for her old parents. She returns to her world to find they've gone—and when she returns to the other mother's world again is told they've abandoned her forever.

Coraline, however, refuses to believe the other mother's tricks and lies about how Coraline's parents have abandoned her and would be better off without her. She is determined to get her parents back. She knows that she's the one who's landed them in this predicament in the first place, and, as she searches the other mother's world to see where they've been hidden, she's reminded of pleasant memories of her parents which illustrate how much they really do love her—even if their relationships with her are far from perfect. Coraline recalls her father saving her from a swarm of wasps and fondly misses the way her mother used to carry her when she was small. Her pleasant memories of her parents subsume her resentment of their attachment to their work and their disinterest in playing games with her. Coraline learns, through her dealings with the other mother, that when parents behave like children—and don't respect the boundaries and demands of parenthood, even the difficult parts—things are just not quite right. Ultimately, Coraline realizes that if her real parents gave her everything she asked for whenever she asked for it, doted on her

constantly, and never gave her any rules or responsibilities, she'd be unhappy. What she wants, she's learned, is the relationship she had with her parents before—imperfect, sure, but built on a strong foundation of love, respect, and the pursuit of what's right (even when what's right isn't what's easy).

Neil Gaiman uses *Coraline* to create a portrait of a family in flux. In their new surroundings, Coraline and her parents are uncomfortable with and slightly resentful of one another—they're all trying to adjust to their new home and test the boundaries of their relationships with one another. All of this, Gaiman ultimately suggests, is normal. A child's expectation that parents will always behave perfectly, adoringly, and dotingly is unfair and impossible, as is the idea that children will be as self-sufficient, responsible, and mature as their parents might like them to be. Ultimately, Gaiman shows that parents and children have a series of responsibilities to one another in spite of their imperfections—and that to dream of a conflict-free parent-child relationship is to erase all the struggles and hardships that create a strong bond.



## HOME AND THE FAMILIAR

When Coraline Jones and her parents move to a new house in a new town, Coraline finds herself bored, unimpressed, and perhaps even a bit scared by her new surroundings. When Coraline is, however, plunged into a twisted alternate version of her new house—a kind of “web” created by the other mother in hopes of ensnaring her—she refuses to be fooled by a cheap imitation of the place she is learning to call home. As Neil Gaiman interrogates what “home” means, he ultimately ends up suggesting that home is not necessarily a place that feels familiar or safe right away. Instead, home is the place one makes that way by building relationships, forming memories, and actively working to understand and inhabit fully.

Over the course of the novel, Gaiman plays with the idea of what “home” really is. As the story unfolds, Coraline goes from looking down on her new surroundings as strange and inhospitable to really loving and appreciating the place she gets the opportunity to call home. As Coraline explores the physical (and metaphysical) realm of her home, forms relationships with her neighbors, and has her own adventures inside her new house, what was once unknown becomes familiar—and the place that once intimidated and irritated her becomes an important touchstone. When Coraline first arrives at the new house her parents have bought—a flat that is part of a much-larger building bricked up into four separate apartments—she doesn't particularly like the place. She's curious about its grounds and she's nice enough to her new neighbors, but there's a definite part of Coraline that doesn't feel at home. From the mysterious door in the drawing room to the fact that

Coraline's new neighbors call her "Caroline," overlooking or misunderstanding her real name, the young Coraline feels distinctly disoriented and out of place in her new surroundings. She explores all she can and subjects herself to uncomfortable visits with Miss Spink and Miss Forcible (and the crazy old man upstairs, whose name Coraline never bothers to learn), but can't make herself feel quite right about her new surroundings. Coraline doesn't yet understand that home isn't a place one moves into, ready-made—a true sense of home must be cultivated and honed.

In an attempt to understand her own house better, Coraline goes through a mysterious door in the drawing room late one night—and finds another world on the other side. An other mother and an other father are waiting for her happily, and tell her they hope she'll stay in the home they've built for her. Though the other home is lavishly decorated, warm, and full of good **food** and unique toys, there's something about it that seems off to Coraline. From the upsetting colors of her other bedroom to the peculiar, overzealous ways in which her other parents dote upon her, Coraline knows that for all their claims that this is her true home, the place in which she's found herself isn't any kind of home at all. As Coraline investigates the other mother's world, she realizes that everything in it is a kind of perversion of her own world. The other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible enjoy happy careers as actresses, and the other crazy old man upstairs has command of an army of rats (unlike the "real" crazy old man, who longs to train a whimsical mouse circus) and yet there is something twisted and automated about them. The house that is ostensibly Coraline's "home" grows flatter and vaguer each time Coraline does something to anguish or irritate the other mother—suggesting that her welcome is conditional, and that this "home" could evaporate right under Coraline's feet at any moment. Coraline knows the place in which she's found herself, whatever or wherever it may be, is not a real home because it's lacking in the efforts required to turn a house into a home. There are no uncomfortable interactions with neighbors, there's no settling in—and most sinisterly, there's no option to leave.

After vanquishing the other mother, freeing her parents, and finding the souls of the lost children she's imprisoned there—other children who, like Coraline, found themselves searching for an ideal set of parents and an ideal home after moving into a new place—Coraline returns to her real home. She is grateful to be back, and her behavior reflects that fact. She visits with her neighbors and, whereas before she only sat and endured their talk, she now asks them questions about their lives and learns more about them. She gives her parents the space they need to do their work, feel secure, and turn the house into a home on their own time. She understands now that home is a place that she must create for herself and those around her out of goodwill, love, and patience.

By the end of the novel, Coraline has been through a whirlwind

journey and has reached a newfound appreciation for the idea of what makes a home. Creating a place where one feels at home is uncomfortable at first: one must make new friendships, shed old habits, and investigate and understand the physical structure and emotional soul of a place. In order to feel comfortable and at peace in her new surroundings, Coraline has had to break through her own discomfort—but after all she's been through, Coraline now knows that somewhere that is truly home can't be imitated or cheaply manufactured. A real home, *Coraline* suggests, is a place that must be slowly, carefully, and lovingly made.



## FEAR AND BRAVERY

When Coraline Jones finds herself trapped in the alternate realm created by her sinister other mother, she is very scared indeed. As the world the other mother has created twists, shifts, and grows more and more horrific by the hour, Coraline's fear mounts—but so, too, does her belief that what she most needs to do is be brave, even if she doesn't feel particularly courageous in the face of the other mother's arsenal of terrors. As Coraline wrestles with her fear time and time again in order to save herself, her parents, and the three lost children the other mother has imprisoned for centuries, Neil Gaiman argues that true bravery is not an absence of fear, but rather one's capacity for persisting onward in the face of their fears.

Though Coraline is, at the beginning of the novel, described as "small for her age," new in town, and often misunderstood by the adults around her, there is no doubt that she is an exceptionally brave little girl. For example, when she hears an unsettling noise outside her bedroom door on one of her first nights in her family's new house, she doesn't cower under the covers or run to her parents' room for comfort—she gets up, follows the noise down the hall, and investigates it herself, prepared to face the unknown. When Coraline's neighbors Miss Spink and Miss Forcible read her tea leaves and suggest that Coraline is in danger, Coraline feels a bit excited by the prospect of running into trouble. In these early anecdotes, Gaiman establishes Coraline as an intrepid explorer who has a very high threshold for fear. Curiosity rules Coraline's world, and even as she encounters more and more unsettling things on her journey, she is able to maintain a calm exterior, think rationally, and persevere. As the novel unfolds, however, Gaiman will show that being impervious or even just resistant to fear is not the mark of bravery—bravery is something much deeper.

When Coraline finds herself in the other mother's world, she's entranced at first, but very quickly grows unsettled by the other mother and other father's strange behavior and their shared desire for Coraline to replace her eyes with black **buttons** and stay with them forever. Though Coraline is frightened, she maintains her cool and gets out as quickly as

she can. Back in her own world, however, she discovers that her parents are missing, and realizes that she must return to the other mother's world to find them. With this, Gaiman begins to unravel the novel's central theory: that true bravery is not just enduring scares or frights, but rather facing those things voluntarily and head-on, sometimes multiple times—even when the easier thing would be to steer clear of one's fears. When Coraline returns to the other mother's world with her unlikely companion—an occasionally-talking black cat—by her side, she recounts an anecdote about herself and her father being chased by wasps one afternoon. As they ran, her father dropped his glasses and had to return to the site of the attack to retrieve them: "It wasn't brave because he wasn't scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again [...] when he was really scared. That was brave. [...] When you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave." In this brief passage, Gaiman articulates his central theory about fear and bravery. Fear, he suggests, doesn't negate bravery—rather, fear creates more room for bravery, and even makes bravery more meaningful. Doing the right thing isn't necessarily brave in and of itself: true bravery, rather, comes from acknowledging one's fear of a person, a thing, or a situation and facing it down anyway.

At the end of the novel, as Coraline prepares to start a new school year, she falls asleep the night before the first day of the term feeling safe and sound. She has a renewed sense of her own bravery and knows that nothing she could encounter at school will scare her anymore. Coraline has been on quite a journey, but it's not just that her time in the other mother's realm has prepared her to face scary images or brave dark places. Coraline's journey has taught her that even when she's scared, she's still capable of steering her own destiny and doing the right thing. It's not that nothing will ever scare, frighten, or deter her now that she's been through a terrifying experience—it's that she has the power now to know that she can take on her own fears and uncertainties and conquer them, even if she doesn't feel brave in the moment. As Coraline has reoriented her perception of what constitutes true bravery, Gaiman does the same for his readers.

*Coraline* plumbs the depths of the meaning of bravery. Bravery, in Gaiman's view, is not just withstanding, surviving, or attempting to eradicate one's fear—it's walking into dark and scary flats, reasoning with ugly monsters, and plotting against powerful enemies even when fear is present. As Coraline, time and time again, plunges herself headlong into terrifying situations, frustrating puzzles, and twisted games, she comes to understand that to be brave is to admit to one's fears, accept that they're a necessary part of life, and stare them down anyway.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## BUTTONS

Perhaps the most iconic symbol from Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* are the large, shiny black buttons which the other mother—and all the creatures she's created to populate her parallel world—wear instead of eyes. This eerie feature symbolizes the other mother's desire for control, and specifically her desire to limit Coraline's freedom. Coraline is quite perturbed by the buttons once she notices them, but things in the other mother's world are so lovely that Coraline is willing to push down her fear of the buttons. When the other mother and other father, however, present Coraline with a pair of buttons of her own and tell her that if she wants to stay in their perfect fantasy world, she'll have to let them remove her eyes and sew buttons on instead, Coraline realizes that she has come to an evil place indeed. The buttons symbolize the fact that the other mother sees Coraline as a doll or a plaything—she wants to keep Coraline in her world and do with her what she wishes. Though the other mother's motivation for luring Coraline (and a trio of lost children who have been in her clutches for centuries) to her world is never revealed, the cat suggests that the other mother draws her ancient power from having "something to love"—or perhaps just "something to eat." The cat's characterization of the other mother as an entity who must live vicariously through the individuals she brings into her world further suggests that she sees Coraline as a plaything under her control.

The symbol of the buttons, however, also goes the other way. As Coraline grows stronger, braver, and decides to conquer her fears and challenge the other mother to a game whose prize is Coraline's own freedom, the button eyes the creatures in the other mother's world suggests that they have become *Coraline's* playthings now—she is in control of herself, of them, and of her own destiny.



## FOOD AND DRINK

Coraline Jones has a difficult relationship to food. Her father is an amateur chef who is always cooking fancy concoctions—which Coraline condescendingly refers to as "recipes"—and urging Coraline to try new dishes and new foods. Coraline ignores her father's advice and subsists largely on microwave pizzas, frozen bread and jarred jam, and the occasional apple. Coraline's hesitancy to try new foods symbolizes her petulance about having been moved to a new place and forced to do new things by her parents, who she feels don't understand her. Food is, in Coraline's view, a symbol

of being misunderstood, unappreciated, and condescended to by the adults in her life. In the other mother's realm, however, Coraline's relationship to food mutates and morphs. The other mother and the other father prepare food for Coraline—but it's food she's excited to eat because it's simple and delicious. Coraline's other parents appear not to be foisting anything upon her—but in reality, they're simply buttering her up and pampering her in an attempt to get her to stay in their twisted, dangerous realm forever. Once Coraline catches wise to the other mother's evil, she begins avoiding the food the other mother serves as best she can—though she can't resist a cheese omelet the other mother makes for her, she stops herself from drinking the hot chocolate the other mother brews, perhaps afraid of its power over her. Food is still a symbol of being misunderstood and condescended to—but in a very different way than it is in the "real" world. Ultimately, when Coraline rescues her parents and returns home, she finds herself eating even her father's zaniest "recipes" with hunger and zeal. Coraline has learned that prepared food is an expression of love—when it's prepared in the right way by the right people with the right intentions—and she wants to show her parents how much she appreciates them, and how much she has come to realize that they do, after all, appreciate her.

rats during one of her first nights sleeping in her family's new home. Coraline and her parents have just moved to a house in the country, a large manse bricked up into several individual flats, and Coraline is feeling apprehensive and uncertain about her new surroundings. Her vision of the rats, however, is not merely the anxiety dream of a nervous little girl—it's a warning directly from the ancient presence that lurks in the house's walls. The rats' song suggests that they are waiting for the "fall" of the humans who live in the house they inhabit, and it darkly foreshadows the trials Coraline will soon go through. When reading Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* as an allegory for the struggles and fears of coming of age and growing up, this passage seems to represent the foreboding arrival of adolescence—a period of time during which unseen forces lurking just out of sight will bring about the "fall" of one period of one's life and the rise of another, more tumultuous era in one's growth and personal development.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ The mist hung like blindness around the house. She walked slowly to the stairs up to her family's flat, and then stopped and looked around.

In the mist, it was a ghost-world. *In danger?* thought Coraline to herself. It sounded exciting. It didn't sound like a bad thing. Not really.

Coraline went back upstairs, her fist closed tightly around her new stone.

**Related Characters:** Miss April Spink, Miss Miriam Forcible, Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Coraline has just been to visit her eccentric downstairs neighbors Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, a pair of aging actresses who are proficient in reciting Shakespeare and reading tea leaves. After reading Coraline's leaves, the women have told Coraline that she is in grave danger. As Coraline departs her neighbor's flat, she finds herself mildly excited by the idea of being in danger. This suggests that Coraline is braver than most children—when she hears that trouble is on the horizon she reacts not with fear or apprehension, but a kind of anticipation. Coraline fancies herself an intrepid explorer, and her restlessness and curiosity will serve her well as the



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Coraline* published in 2002.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ [Coraline] dreamed of black shapes that slid from place to place, avoiding the light, until they were all gathered together under the moon. Little black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth.

They started to sing,

*We are small but we are many*

*We are many we are small*

*We were here before you rose*

*We will be here when you fall.*

**Related Characters:** The Rats (speaker), Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 9-10

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from the end of the novel's first chapter, shows Coraline perturbed by frightening dreams of singing

very real danger her neighbors have predicted descends upon her. Though Coraline feels out-of-place in her new surroundings, disoriented by the thick mist that has fallen over the neighborhood, and uncertain of what lies ahead, she isn't going to hide away or cower in fear—she's going to greet whatever comes her way with grace and capability.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ “Coraline?” the woman said. “Is that you?”

And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons.

“Lunchtime, Coraline,” said the woman.

“Who are you?” asked Coraline.

“I’m your other mother,” said the woman. “Go and tell your other father that lunch is ready,” She opened the door of the oven. Suddenly Coraline realized how hungry she was. It smelled wonderful.

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones, The Other Mother (speaker), The Other Father

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

When Coraline goes through a mysterious, previously-locked door in the corner of her new flat’s drawing room, she finds herself traversing a long dark hallway which leads to another flat—a flat that is an exact mirror of her own home. Inside there is an “other mother” and an “other father” who closely resemble Coraline’s own parents but for one major difference: the “other” parents have large black buttons for eyes. As Coraline adjusts to this strange new parallel world she’s uncovered, Gaiman introduces several of the novel’s major symbols and themes. Coraline, who has been uncomfortable in and uncertain about her new home, finds herself transported to an even more uncanny place that’s even harder to recognize as home. Her parents—whose intense focus on their work has lately been making Coraline feel excluded and unloved—are replaced by individuals who may or may not be human, but who nonetheless dote upon Coraline and cook her favorite foods. Coraline’s new circumstances are unsettling and bizarre—but undoubtedly and obviously engineered to make Coraline lower her defenses and stay forever. This world will challenge Coraline, test her bravery, force her to

examine the depths of her allegiances to her family and her neighbors, and, perhaps most profoundly, reorient her idea of what home really means.

☞ [Coraline’s] other parents stood in the kitchen doorway as she walked down the corridor, smiling identical smiles, and waving slowly. “Have a nice time outside,” said her other mother.

“We’ll just wait here for you to come back,” said her other father.

When Coraline got to the front door, she turned back and looked at them. They were still watching her, and waving, and smiling.

**Related Characters:** The Other Father, The Other Mother (speaker), Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 30-31

### Explanation and Analysis

In the real world, Coraline’s parents are frequently busy with work and have little time to play with her or even pay her much passing attention at all. In this realm, however, her other mother and other father are downright obsessed with her. They’re constantly talking to Coraline, touching her, or observing her from afar. In this passage, as Coraline grows increasingly uncomfortable with the atmosphere in her other house and decides to go out exploring to escape for a while, her other parents watch her head into the woods. Coraline is beginning to realize that while she thought she wanted her parents’ undying attention and devotion, she certainly doesn’t want these strange, hypervigilant versions of them—creatures who stare at her constantly with their uncanny, unseeing button eyes. Coraline’s journey through the other mother’s world will force her to have several of these kinds of reckonings as she reevaluates who she is, what she wants out of her relationships with her family and her neighbors, and whether she’s brave enough to fight for the people she loves.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ The three of them walked back up to Coraline's other house together. Coraline's other mother stroked Coraline's hair with her long white fingers. Coraline shook her head.

"Don't do that," said Coraline.

Her other mother took her hand away.

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones (speaker), The Other Father, The Other Mother

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage expands upon the ideas introduced in the previous chapter by showing how the longer Coraline stays in the other mother's world, the more physically and emotionally possessive the other mother becomes. Though the other mother claims to be a benevolent presence who loves Coraline and exists only to dote upon her, the other mother's behavior is rapidly demonstrating that her real intentions are contrary to the ones she professes. The other mother wants to possess and perhaps even feed upon Coraline—her predatory body language, hypervigilance, and repeated insistence that Coraline verbalize her love for and loyalty to her other mother all demonstrate that what she really wants is to bring Coraline under her control. This passage also shows, however, that Coraline is growing more and more resistant to the other mother's clutches though she's only been in her realm a short time. Coraline is already learning more about who she is and what she wants—and unknowingly preparing to engage in a battle of wits with the other mother, a battle that will decide both their fates.

☞☞ "If you want to stay," said her other father, "there's only one little thing we'll have to do, so you can stay here for ever and always."

They went into the kitchen. On a china plate on the kitchen table was a spool of black cotton, and a long silver needle, and, beside them, two large black buttons.

"I don't think so," said Coraline.

"Oh, but we want you to," said her other mother. "We want you to stay. And it's just a little thing."

**Related Characters:** The Other Mother, Coraline Jones, The Other Father (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the other mother and other father attempt to coerce—or entice—Coraline into replacing her eyes with black buttons. The buttons that the other mother and all the creatures that populate her world wear instead of eyes are the novel's central—and perhaps creepiest—symbol. The buttons' practical use is never revealed. They may be hastily applied eyes meant to cover up the fact that the creatures who populate this world are unseeing and inhuman, or they may be devices of control. Because Coraline detects a presence in this world that is older and more powerful than the other mother, it's possible that the other mother, too, is controlled by use of the buttons—even as she seems to be able to bring all the other entities who wear the buttons under her own control, too. The buttons also bring to mind ragdolls and homemade playthings, suggesting that if Coraline does don the button eyes, she too will become another plaything for whoever the master of this realm truly is. No matter what the buttons ultimately symbolize, they radiate emptiness and terror in Coraline's view, and ultimately repel her. Coraline knows that if she does sew on the buttons, she'll lose sight of and control over who she is.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☞☞ "And he said that wasn't brave of him, doing that, just standing there and being stung," said Coraline to the cat. "It wasn't brave because he wasn't scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again to get his glasses, when he knew the wasps were there, when he was really scared. *That* was brave."

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones (speaker), The Cat, Coraline's Father/Mr. Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 56-57

### Explanation and Analysis

As Coraline prepares to return to the other mother's world to retrieve her parents after the other mother kidnaps them, she is nervous and hesitant even as she dresses,

packs, and prepares for the journey back. In this passage, she stands on the precipice of the door between the two worlds and talks to the cat about her motivation and inspiration for plunging headfirst once more into the other mother's frightening realm. Coraline knows that true bravery isn't defying fear or ignoring it—it's facing one's fear, embracing it, and doing the brave or right thing in spite of it. Coraline has learned this lesson from witnessing her father enact it years ago—and though her relationship with her father has been less than perfect as of late, this passage shows that Coraline takes the things her parents have done for her and taught her to heart. Coraline is determined to get her parents back, even if it means encountering her deepest fears. Gaiman's theory on the true nature of bravery is one of the novel's central thematic and narrative linchpins, and a concept of which Coraline will have to remind herself again and again as she traverses the other mother's increasingly terrifying traps.

“Why does she want me?” Coraline asked the cat. “Why does she want me to stay here with her?”

“She wants something to love, I think,” said the cat. “Something that isn't her. She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that.”

**Related Characters:** The Cat, Coraline Jones (speaker), The Other Mother

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

Back in the other mother's world, Coraline takes a walk on the grounds beyond the house. The cat accompanies her and, in this passage, begins to explain just a little bit more about the other mother's true origins and true desire. The cat never reveals the full truth about the other mother, and her exact history and purpose remains unclear throughout the novel, even at the very end. Yet in this passage, the cat does suggest that the other mother is a “creature” which feeds on the love—or the life force—of children. As Coraline continues to gather information about the other mother from the creatures and souls that populate her world, Coraline will understand just how serious the danger she's in truly is—and how, if she wants to avoid being consumed, body and soul, by the other mother (or whatever the

creature's true form is), she must resist giving in to her physically and emotionally with all the strength she has.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

“Coraline was woken by the midmorning sun, full on her face.

For a moment she felt utterly dislocated. She did not know where she was; she was not entirely sure *who* she was.

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 65

### Explanation and Analysis

After spending her first full night in the other mother's world, Coraline awakes in her other bedroom feeling “dislocated” and disoriented. This passage speaks to the confusion Coraline feels as a result of being in another world—but it also suggests a larger spiritual or emotional confusion as Coraline wrestles with the twinned temptations and terrors she keeps finding in this strange new world which parallels her own. Coraline has only ever seen the other mother's world in the dark of night—now, in daylight, Coraline must reorient her understanding of this place, but knows she can't let herself be dulled to the other mother's powers by the reassuring light of a false day. The longer Coraline stays in the other mother's world, this passage suggests, the more in danger she is of losing her wits, succumbing to the other mother's power, and forgetting who she is, why she's here, and what she wants.

“If you won't even talk to me,” said Coraline, “I am going exploring.”

“No point,” said the other father. “There isn't anywhere but here. This is all she made: the house, the grounds, and the people in the house. She made it and she waited.” Then he looked embarrassed and he put one finger to his lips again, as if he had just said too much.

**Related Characters:** The Other Father, Coraline Jones (speaker), The Other Mother

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Coraline speaks with her other father—who gives her some illicit information about the other mother’s motives and actions. The other father previously said something the other mother didn’t want him to about the key to the door between worlds the night before, and, in this passage, seems to have been punished for doing so by being transformed into a dulled, “doughy” version of himself. Even so, the other father seems unable to stop himself from offering Coraline helpful information in direct defiance of the other mother—to a certain point. This passage demonstrates several important things. It shows that while the creatures in this world are not under the other mother’s complete control, they are afraid of her. It also suggests that the other mother, like a spider, created a small version of Coraline’s world as a kind of web in which to trap her. The other mother only worked as hard as she needed to convince Coraline that the immediate world around her was safe—but the other mother, failing to realize that Coraline was an intrepid explorer, has underestimated her prey.

☛ The cat dropped the rat between its two front paws. “There are those,” it said with a sigh, in tones as smooth as oiled silk, “who have suggested that the tendency of a cat to play with its prey is a merciful one—after all, it permits the occasional funny little running snack to escape, from time to time. How often does your dinner get to escape?”

**Related Characters:** The Cat (speaker), The Other Mother, Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 74

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as the cat traps and plays with a sinister black rat—one of the other mother’s minions and spies—it talks to Coraline about playing with its food. This passage suggests that the other mother, too, is playing with her food—and Coraline is what she’s planning on eating. The cat seems either unable or unwilling to give Coraline direct information about this place or the other mother’s powers or origins, but in this brief monologue, he gives Coraline a major clue about the other mother’s motivations and Coraline’s own role in her world. The cat suggests that Coraline can indeed escape the other mother’s clutches if

she distracts her long enough or makes her enjoy the “game” of playing with her meal too much to see Coraline’s exit plan unfolding right under her nose. The cat suggests that Coraline must be brave—and must, possibly, even cede herself more fully to the other mother’s clutches before she can escape them once and for all.

### Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ And then [Coraline’s] hand touched something that felt for all the world like somebody’s cheek and lips, small and cold; and a voice whispered in her ear, “Hush! And shush! Say nothing, for the beldam might be listening!”

Coraline said nothing.

She felt a cold hand touch her face, fingers running over it like the gentle beat of a moth’s wings.

Another voice, hesitant and so faint Coraline wondered if she were imagining it, said, “Art thou—art thou alive?”

“Yes,” whispered Coraline.

“Poor child,” said the first voice.

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones, The Lost Children (speaker), The Other Mother

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 81

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Coraline is thrown into a cupboard behind the hall mirror in the other mother’s house as punishment for rejecting the other mother’s love. Here, she meets a trio of “lost children” who have been trapped in this room for centuries in some cases. The lost children are the first real human entities Coraline has encountered in the other mother’s world, and the first individuals other than the cat to show her any measure of support or sympathy. The lost children sometimes refer to the other mother as “the beldam”—another word for a witchy old woman—even though they’ll confirm later on in this passage that she appeared to them all as twisted versions of their own mothers. The existence of the lost children provides yet another example of the other mother’s power, and serves as a warning to Coraline about what her fate could be if she isn’t quick or brave enough to outsmart and escape the other mother. The lost children, disconnected from their hearts and souls after years in the dark, pity the living Coraline—they know what she must go through if she wants to escape, but, as the novel progresses, will become staunch

friends and allies as they lend her the hope, support, and belief she needs to escape the other mother for good.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ [The other mother] picked Coraline up, just as Coraline's real mother had when Coraline was much younger, cradling the half-sleeping child as if she were a baby.

The other mother carried Coraline into the kitchen and put her down very gently upon the countertop.

Coraline struggled to wake herself up, conscious only for the moment of having been cuddled and loved, and wanting more of it, then realizing where she was and who she was with.

**Related Characters:** Coraline's Mother/Mrs. Jones, Coraline Jones, The Other Mother

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the other mother retrieves Coraline from the cupboard behind the mirror after sending her there to teach her about manners and respect. As the other mother carries Coraline into the kitchen, Coraline is, in her drowsy, dreamy state, reminded of the love, care, and affection her real mother used to show her. Coraline feels betrayed by her own body and her own memories once the other mother sets her down—she longs for the other mother to hold her some more and show her more of that affection, even as she knows that any displays of warmth or love the other mother makes are false, deceitful, and even dangerous. Coraline is learning to differentiate between fake and real ideas of the comforts of home, and between the imperfect but genuine parental love and its perfected—but inherently dishonest—facsimile. This passage also has a dark undertone as it suggests that Coraline is not invincible to the other mother's tricks—and shows that the longer Coraline is away from her parents and trapped in the other mother's world, the more susceptible she'll be to falling for them.

☝☝ “I think I like this game. But what kind of game shall it be? A riddle game? A test of knowledge or of skill?”

“An exploring game,” suggested Coraline. “A finding-things game.”

“And what is it you think you should be finding in this hide-and-go-seek game, Coraline Jones?”

Coraline hesitated. Then, “My parents,” said Coraline. “And the souls of the children behind the mirror.”

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones, The Other Mother (speaker), The Lost Children, Coraline's Father/Mr. Jones, Coraline's Mother/Mrs. Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 90

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, inspired by the cat's suggestion and the lost children's encouragement, Coraline decides to challenge the other mother to a game in which she might win her freedom. The other mother loves a challenge and can't resist Coraline's suggestion of a game. The game Coraline suggests is a “finding-things” game—a game selected to highlight her strengths as an intrepid explorer, but also a kind of central metaphor for the journey Coraline is already on. Coraline's entire time in the other mother's world has been a kind of finding-things game—as Coraline has wrestled fear, doubt, and despair to the ground during her captivity here, she's already found out several important things about herself. Since Neil Gaiman uses Coraline's journey as a larger symbol of the exhausting and extended finding-things game that is the journey through adolescence, it makes sense that Coraline's salvation is promised by a harrowing but necessary challenge to face her fears in pursuit of the things and people most important to her.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Outside, the world had become a formless, swirling mist with no shapes or shadows behind it, while the house itself seemed to have twisted and stretched. [...]

The other mother was waiting for [Coraline], standing on the grass with her arms folded. Her black button eyes were expressionless, but her lips were pressed tightly together in a cold fury.

**Related Characters:** The Other Mother, Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

As Coraline continues to succeed at the other mother's treasure hunt, the other mother grows increasingly angry and threatening. After Coraline finds the first soul, she sends a swift, biting wind to hurt Coraline, and, now, after she finds the second, she emerges from the other Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat to find that the other mother has begun to "twist" and transform the world out of anger. The other mother's "cold fury" confirms that the other mother is attempting to twist and pervert the world she herself constructed originally as a paradise for Coraline. As the other mother's idea of "home" deteriorates and warps, Coraline realizes that she was never truly at home in this false, manufactured place at all. The other mother's increasing cruelty toward Coraline each time Coraline defies her further adds to the realization that this place is not anything like home—a real, loving parent would never seek to make their child so frightened, uncomfortable, and disoriented.

☝ Coraline nodded. It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more. A tolerated pet, whose behavior was no longer amusing.

**Related Characters:** The Other Mother, Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 104

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the other mother tries to dissuade Coraline from struggling against her and from continuing in her search for her real parents and the souls of the lost children. The other mother's tactic is to tell Coraline how much she loves her—but Coraline is wise enough now to know that the other mother doesn't truly love her, not in the way a good parent loves his or her child. Coraline believed, prior to beginning this terrifying adventure, that her parents' love

for her was insufficient—they were aloof, distracted, and insistent upon rules and traditions that didn't appeal to her. Now, though, Coraline can see that compared to the other mother's "miserly," possessive, false love, her parents' love—however imperfect it felt at the time—can't be replicated or replaced. Coraline believed that she wanted "other" parents who indulged her every whim and devoted their lives and selves to adoring her—now, Coraline has seen the dark side of that obsessive kind of love, and has a greater appreciation for the healthy albeit imperfect relationship she has with her real parents.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Coraline sighed. "You really don't understand, do you?" she said. "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?"

"I don't understand," said the whispery voice.

"Of course you don't understand," she said, raising the stone with the hole in it to her eye. "You're just a bad copy she made of the crazy old man upstairs."

"Not even that anymore," said the dead, whispery voice.

**Related Characters:** The Other Crazy Old Man Upstairs, Coraline Jones (speaker), The Rats

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

During an encounter with the other crazy old man upstairs—a frightening "copy" of the real crazy old man upstairs made entirely of rats stacked upon one another in the shape of a person—the other crazy old man, doing the other mother's bidding, tries to get Coraline to stay in the other mother's world. He entices her with the promise that she'll be able to wear what she likes, eat what she likes, and do what she likes whenever she likes. As Coraline listens to the creature's promises, however, she finds herself completely unentranced by them. Coraline thought that what she wanted was the undivided attention of two perfect parents, the ability to have her every whim satisfied, and the permission to pursue only her own dreams and interests to the exclusion of anyone else's feelings or priorities. Now, though, Coraline has learned that if she had everything she wanted and was able to do whatever she pleased, she'd be miserable. Life, home, and happiness, she's learned, are not about selfishness but instead about

community, friendship, and love. The other mother—and the creatures she bends to her will—can never understand such things, and this fact makes Coraline feel brave, self-possessed, and capable of conquering the evil forces she's found in this world.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "Help me, please," she said. "All of you."

The other people in the corridor—three children, two adults—were somehow too insubstantial to touch the door. But their hands closed about hers, as she pulled on the big iron door handle, and suddenly she felt strong.

"Never let up, Miss! Hold strong! Hold strong!" whispered a voice in her mind.

"Pull, girl, pull!" whispered another.

And then a voice that sounded like her mother's—her own mother, her real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother—just said, "Well done, Coraline," and that was enough.

**Related Characters:** Coraline's Mother/Mrs. Jones, The Lost Children, Coraline Jones (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 131-132

### Explanation and Analysis

Toward the very end of her journey through the other mother's realm, Coraline is on the verge of escape. As she wrestles with the other mother from the other side of the door between the other mother's world and her own, Coraline fears she'll lose just as she seemed about to win. In this moment of desperation, she summons the strength of those who love her and those she's saved. The lost children and her own parents come to Coraline's aid in the moment she needs them most. Coraline has saved all these people from the other mother's clutches all by herself—now, they return the favor and repay Coraline for her hard work on their behalf. Coraline is bolstered by the love and support of those she's saved and finds herself able to physically and emotionally conquer her worst fears through the strength they lend her. This represents all that Coraline has learned during her frightening escapades: the importance of the bond between parents and children, the lessons of resolve and self-determination, and the importance of bravery and courage even in the face of one's worst fears.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realized, there was nothing left about school that could scare her anymore.

**Related Characters:** Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

Toward the very end of the novel, Coraline has vanquished the other mother once and for all by trapping both the other mother's severed, roving hand and the key to unlock the door between the "real" world and the other mother's realm. After defeating the other mother, Coraline settles into bed to fall asleep on the night before her first day of a new term at a new school. Coraline had been feeling anxious about starting school in a new place earlier on in the book before her travails through the other mother's world. Now, in light of all she's been through—and all she's learned about herself and her capacity for bravery in the face of fear—Coraline feels prepared to encounter the new school year with poise. Coraline believes that nothing at school can "scare her anymore"—this doesn't mean, though, that she won't encounter anything scary or intimidating. It simply means that Coraline has learned to believe in her ability to power through her fears, choose bravery over cowardice, and triumph in the face of forces that would subdue or threaten her.

☝☝ [Coraline] fancied she could hear sweet music on the night air: the kind of music that can only be played on the tiniest silver trombones and trumpets and bassoons, on piccolos and tubas so delicate and small that their keys could only be pressed by the tiny pink fingers of white mice.

**Related Characters:** The Rats, The Crazy Old Man Upstairs/Mr. Bobo, Coraline Jones

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 160

### Explanation and Analysis

The novel ends on a happy and hopeful note as Coraline drifts off to sleep listening to the real or imagined sounds of the crazy old man upstairs' mice circus practicing for their

big debut. While the fearsome black rats who function as the other mother's spies and minions once populated Coraline's dreams, her nighttime "fancie[s]" now take the shape of Mr. Bobo's sweet white mice. This represents the fact that Coraline has vanquished the evil that recently pervaded her house—but it also speaks to the strides she's made in coming to call the house a home and her neighbors

her friends and allies. Once the crazy old man upstairs' ramblings about his mouse circus intimidated and frightened Coraline—now, though, she's able to see the gentle sweetness the mouse circus represents, and the benevolence of the mice's music contrasted against the ominous, threatening darkness of the other mother's rats' creepy chant.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Coraline Jones and her parents have just moved into a new flat in a very old house. The large manor has been divided up into several individual flats—on the ground floor, below Coraline and her parents, live Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, two aging former actresses who own a large number of Highland terriers. Above Coraline lives a crazy old man with a mustache who has told Coraline that he is in the process of training a circus of mice. All of Coraline’s eccentric new neighbors call her “Caroline,” even as she repeatedly reminds them they’re saying her name wrong. Coraline is frequently bored, and so she passes the time by visiting her bizarre neighbors or exploring the grounds.

Outside the large house is a big garden and an old tennis court which has fallen into disrepair. Coraline has also discovered a large, deep well covered by wooden boards in a meadow on the property—Miss Spink and Miss Forcible have told her the well is dangerous and urged her to stay away from it. One afternoon, Coraline discovers a “haughty” black cat playing near the tennis courts. Though she tries to approach the cat and play with it, it runs away.

One afternoon, Coraline is forbidden from exploring when a heavy rain begins to fall. Her mother and father tell her she must stay inside, and Coraline is cross with her parents for getting in the way of her exploring. She tries playing with her toys and channel-surfing on the TV, entertaining herself briefly with a nature program about protective coloration—a phenomenon in which animals, birds, and insects disguise themselves to avoid predators.

Bored with the television, Coraline goes into her father’s office to talk to him. She asks him if she can go outside—he asks what her mother has told her, and Coraline admits that her mother has forbidden her from going exploring. Her father suggests she explore the flat, and gives her a list of scavenger-hunt-type activities to do around the house. Her father tells her that she can even explore the drawing room, where the family keeps all their expensive furniture and china.

*The opening passage of the book illustrates Coraline’s discomfort in her new home. She doesn’t understand her eccentric neighbors or feel understood by them, and she is disappointed in how often she’s left to her own devices while her parents are busy with work.*



*Coraline tries to adjust to her new home and neighborhood by exploring and figuring the place out. Her attempts to make new friends, though, don’t necessarily go according to plan.*



*This passage foreshadows the resourcefulness Coraline will soon need to adopt as her restless, exploration-hungry nature gets her into some difficult and dangerous situations.*



*Coraline’s parents are clearly busy working—perhaps to pay for their new home or maintain their jobs from a new location. Coraline can’t see the reasoning behind her parents’ preoccupation with their work—she’s only focused on her own loneliness and boredom.*



While exploring the drawing room, Coraline realizes that a large wooden door in the wall of it is locked. When Coraline asks her mother where the door goes, her mother retrieves a key ring from the top of a cupboard, selects a large old rusty black key, and opens the door. The door opens onto a brick wall, and Coraline's mother explains that when the house was turned into separate flats, different rooms were bricked off from one another. Coraline asks what's on the other side of the brick wall, and her mother tells her there's one empty flat in the house that's still for sale. Coraline's mother leaves the drawing room. Coraline calls after her, asking her to lock the door—Coraline's mother calls back that there's no sense in locking it since it doesn't go anywhere.

That night for dinner, Coraline's father makes one of his gourmet "recipes"—a **fancy stew** which Coraline snubs in favor of a microwaveable pizza. Coraline's father begs her to try the dish, but she turns her nose up and refuses.

That night, as she is falling asleep, Coraline hears a strange noise. She gets out of bed to investigate—in the hall, she sees a strange spider-like object scuttle quickly out of sight into the drawing room. Coraline follows it and watches as it quickly hurries towards the door on the far side of the room. Coraline, scared and nervous, turns the light on—she sees that the large old door is now cracked open.

Coraline returns to bed and has unpleasant dreams of a chorus of rats singing an ominous song: "We are small but we are many / We are many we are small / We were here before you rose / We will be here when you fall."

## CHAPTER 2

The next day the rain has stopped and a dense white mist has taken its place. Coraline puts on her raincoat and boots and goes out for a walk. Out in the yard she runs into Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, who are walking their dogs. The women tell Coraline more about their illustrious former acting careers, but Coraline, bored with their stories, wanders off as soon as she gets a chance.

*Coraline's preliminary investigation of an ominous-looking door—with an ominous-looking key to match—foreshadows the existence of another world that lies just beyond the door. Coraline, as Gaiman has already established, is an explorer through and through—and her curiosity about the mysterious door will not be sated by her mother's boring explanation.*



*Coraline's rejection of the fancy, carefully-prepared food her father makes in favor of unhealthy but popular pre-packaged meals shows that she doesn't yet understand or feel gratitude for the love and care her parents show her.*



*Even though Coraline is afraid, she gets out of bed and follows the noise anyway—this illustrates her bravery in the face of unpleasant or frightening situations. The mysterious door still has a hold on Coraline—and clearly there's some force within the house that opening the door has unleashed.*



*Caroline's foreboding dream about the rats introduces them as a malevolent, threatening presence which seems to long for the "fall" of Coraline specifically or any human residents of the house more broadly.*



*The mist makes Coraline's new neighborhood seem even more unknowable and mysterious. Meanwhile, Coraline is still uncomfortable around her neighbors. This passage shows that she's reluctant in her adjustment to her new home.*



The fog is thick, and Coraline finds herself walking in circles—she soon arrives back at the house, where she encounters the crazy old man from upstairs. He tells her that his mice don't enjoy the fog—but they do have a message for Coraline. The crazy old man tells Coraline his mice have asked him to tell her: "Don't go through the door." The man asks Coraline if the message means anything to her, and she says it doesn't.

Coraline goes inside and tells her mother that she's grown bored again. Her mother laments that there is still a whole week left until the summer holidays are over and Coraline's school year begins, then suggests that Coraline busy herself by making some artwork. Coraline quickly gets bored of drawing. She checks the door in the drawing room again and finds that it is locked. She goes to visit her father in his study, but he is too busy writing to talk or play with her.

Coraline goes down to Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat and rings the doorbell. They invite her in for tea. The women are discussing how much they miss life on the stage and brainstorming roles they could play in their old age. When Coraline finishes her tea, Miss Spink offers to read the leaves for her—but as she looks into Coraline's cup, her face changes. Miss Spink tells Coraline that she is in "terrible danger." Miss Forcible double-checks the leaves and agrees with Miss Spink. They warn Coraline to be careful, and Miss Spink gives Coraline a little talisman—a smooth stone with a small hole in it. As Coraline heads back to her own flat, she thinks to herself that the idea of being in danger sounds a little bit exciting.

## CHAPTER 3

The next day is sunny, and Coraline's mother takes Coraline into town to buy some new school clothes while Coraline's father goes into London for the day. At the shop, however, Coraline's mother won't buy her any of the things she wants, like Day-Glo green gloves and animal-shaped Wellington boots. Coraline is upset when her mother insists on buying her boring clothes that are too big for her so that one day she will grow into them.

On the way home, Coraline asks her mother whether there's anyone (or anything) in the empty flat, and whether the apartment somehow connects to theirs. Coraline's mother insists it doesn't. Back at the house, Coraline and her mother discover that there are no groceries for lunch. Coraline's mother heads back out to shop for **food**.

*Again, Coraline rebuffs help and attention from a neighbor—even though she is aware that this person may be in a position to help or guide her. Coraline feels unsafe in and uncertain about her new home, and doesn't realize that accepting help and attention from people like the old man upstairs might benefit her.*



*Coraline has no regard for her parents' responsibilities—all she can see or understand is the fact that they don't prioritize her, every moment of every day, above everything else.*



*The early pages of the novel have been essential in establishing Coraline's headstrong nature and the pride she takes in being an explorer. Even though Miss Spink and Miss Forcible suggest she's in danger—compounding the crazy old man upstairs' earlier warning about staying away from the door—Coraline feels up for the challenge.*



*Coraline wishes that her mother would indulge her whims and wishes rather than insisting on practicality. Coraline doesn't feel understood by her parents and wishes that they'd treat her differently—or perhaps be different people themselves.*



*This passage shows that while Coraline is fed up and frustrated with her mother, she still relies on her for comfort—Coraline is clearly perturbed by the existence of the door, contrary to her previous excitement about being in danger, and wants her mother to assure her that everything will be all right.*



As soon as her mother leaves, Coraline retrieves the key ring from on top of the cupboard and goes into the drawing room. She uses the old black key—which strangely feels “colder than any of the others”—to open the door. Something inside Coraline tells her that what she’s doing is wrong, but she ignores the voice inside her and opens the door. Behind it there is no longer a brick wall, but instead a long dark hallway. Coraline senses a presence that is “very old and very slow” inside the hall—but goes through the door anyway.

As Coraline walks through the hall and emerges on the other side, she realizes that she is still in her own home—or at least a version of it. Small details are different, such as the expression on the face of a boy in a painting hanging on the wall. As Coraline looks at the boy’s eyes, trying to figure out what’s different about them, a voice calls out to her—it is a voice that sounds like her mother’s.

Coraline goes into the kitchen to find a woman standing there. She looks very much like Coraline’s mother but is different in several ways. She is tall and thin, with extremely pale skin and long fingers. Where her eyes should be there are instead two large shiny black **buttons**. Coraline asks the woman who she is, and she explains that she’s Coraline’s “other mother.” She urges Coraline to fetch her “other father” for lunch. Coraline goes down the familiar hall towards her father’s study—the man she finds inside looks just like her father but has the same large black buttons for eyes as the other mother. The other father greets Coraline cheerfully and follows her down the hall for lunch.

At the kitchen table, the other mother serves a huge roasted chicken with delicious sides. Coraline eats hungrily. As Coraline shovels **food** into her mouth, her other parents explain that they’ve been waiting for her for a long time—now that she’s here, they say, they can finally be a “proper family.” When lunch is finished, Coraline’s other parents volunteer to do all the dishes and urge her go to her room and play with her toys—and the rats “from upstairs.”

*Coraline’s curiosity is ultimately greater than her sense of apprehension and fear. Even when faced with a mysterious presence in a long, dark hallway, Coraline presses on—she wants, perhaps, to prove herself as an explorer.*



*Coraline’s journey through a long, dark passage into a world which resembles her own closely but not perfectly is reminiscent of other literary heroines’ journeys to find themselves—most notably, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.*



*The introduction of the other mother is a dense, peculiar passage in the novel. Coraline recognizes immediately that the other mother is not her mother—and yet the other mother, for all her off-putting features, has clearly worked to transform herself into a convincing-enough facsimile of Coraline’s real mother. The other mother clearly has designs on Coraline—and the fact that she’s altered herself to be more enticing to Coraline suggests that she’s altered everything of her world that Coraline can see for the same purpose.*



*Whereas Coraline’s real father and mother are constantly fed up with her—and forever cooking her icky recipes—her other mother and her other father pamper and dote on her, granting her wishes before she can even articulate them. Still, there’s an underpinning of darkness—such as the other parents’ button eyes, and the presence of rats in the house.*



Coraline's other bedroom is painted in strange shades of green and pink. Coraline doesn't quite like the colors but admits that the bedroom is much more "interesting" than her own. The toys in Coraline's other bedroom are enchanted and move on their own. Coraline enjoys playing with them until a rat runs across the floor and under her bed. Unsettled, Coraline peeks under the bed and finds over fifty small red eyes staring at her. Coraline invites the rats out from under the bed and tries to talk nicely to them. She asks if they can speak—in response, they form a circle around her. The largest of the rats smiles unpleasantly at Coraline, and then they all begin to sing a song similar to the one Coraline heard the other night in her dreams.

The rats scamper towards the door. Coraline turns to look at where they're running to and sees that the other crazy old man from upstairs has materialized in the doorway—the rats scamper up into his clothes, and the largest one sits atop his head. The other old man invites Coraline upstairs to watch the rats "feed"—uncomfortable, she says she'd like to explore outside instead. As the other crazy old man walks away, Coraline believes she can hear the rats whispering to one another.

Coraline walks down the hall towards the front door, where she finds her other mother and other father waiting for her. They smile and wave at her and tell her to have a nice time outside—they promise they'll be waiting by the door for her to return. As Coraline heads outside, she turns around for a second—her other parents are still smiling and waving from the door.

*The rats continue singing their threatening song to Coraline—suggesting that they are still anticipating her fall or failure. Coraline has found herself in a world which has all the trappings of paradise—parents who dote upon her, a brightly-colored bedroom, delicious food—but there is a terribly dark undercurrent suggesting that all of the pleasantries of this world are simply meant to trap Coraline.*



*The rats are a decidedly sinister presence—they seem to want to lure Coraline somewhere where they can harm her. The other mother's love for them shows that they're her devoted minions—and that Coraline can't trust them, however much the other mother tries to frame them as friends or playmates.*



*Coraline is disconcerted by the amount of attention her other parents are giving her. In her own world, all she wanted was her parents' attention—now, though, she's disturbed by the way the other mother and other father seem to watch her unceasingly. Coraline is learning some empathy for her real parents—and an important lesson about expectations and responsibilities between parents and children.*



## CHAPTER 4

Outside, Coraline begins walking. She hears a noise behind her and turns around to see the black cat from home sitting on the garden wall. The cat speaks to Coraline, wishing her a good afternoon. The cat's voice sounds, to Coraline, a bit like the voice at the back of her head, though she notes the cat has a man's voice. Coraline asks the cat if it is the "other" cat—the cat, however, insists it is the same cat from Coraline's real home. People are "spread all over the place," the cat says—but cats are able to keep themselves together in one piece.

*The cat is the one being—other than Coraline—who has no "other" version. While the cat's origins are unknown and its intentions and allegiances are mysterious, Coraline will soon find an ally in the cat. The cat is often cryptic and seemingly unhelpful, but over the course of the novel, it will slowly prove its loyalty to Coraline.*



The cat begins to walk away. Coraline asks the cat if it wants to be friends—the cat says it doesn't. Coraline pleads with the cat, asking it its name, but it insists that cats don't need names—they know who they are without them. Coraline finds the cat irritating, but she decides to be as polite as she can to it in hopes that it will help her. Coraline asks where she is and how she got here—but the cat offers only maddening half-answers that don't satisfy Coraline's curiosity. The cat tells Coraline she was wise to bring "protection" with her to this world—but just as Coraline asks what's protecting her, the cat seems to sense something and darts off into the woods nearby.

*The cat isn't there to be Coraline's friend or comfort her with easy answers. Coraline is frustrated by the cat's aloofness—but ultimately, her relationship with the cat will teach her that there is more than one way to be devoted to another individual.*



Coraline decides to visit Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. The door to their flat is different than the one at home—it is covered in flashing blue and red marquee lights advertising a sensational theatrical production. Coraline goes inside to find that the flat has been transformed into a cavernous theater. One of the ladies' terriers approaches Coraline with a flashlight in its mouth—it begins to speak, asking to see her ticket. Coraline says she doesn't have one, and the dog begrudgingly seats her anyway. As Coraline shuffles into her seat, she realizes the seats all around her are filled—with other terriers.

*In the other mother's world, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible have gotten their dreams. They are actresses again and have a built-in audience of their beloved dogs. Again, while things in the other mother's world often appear to be perfect or ideal, the novel will come to show how each "perfection" of a real-world dynamic eventually proves sick and twisted.*



The other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible appear onstage. They perform a circus routine, and then, as the dogs applaud their antics, they unzip their elderly bodies to reveal beautiful young women inside. The other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible begin performing Shakespearean scenes to the dogs' applause before announcing that they have a new part of their act they'd like to perform. They request a volunteer from the audience, and one of the dogs urges Coraline to go up on stage. The other Miss Forcible produces a knife from a box while Miss Spink directs Coraline to a board at the corner of the stage. She places a balloon over Coraline's head and steps away. Miss Forcible throws the knife at Coraline—it pops the balloon on her head and the dogs applaud.

*Gaiman uses this scene to show, once again, how in the other mother's world, characters may appear to have their wildest dreams come true—but in reality, there is a dark undercurrent of malice and foreboding running through everything that happens.*

The other Miss Spink gives Coraline a box of chocolates as a prize. When Coraline returns to her seat, one of the dogs begs her for a chocolate. Coraline says she thought that dogs couldn't eat chocolates, but the dog insists that in this world, it's all they eat. The other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible continue performing scenes from Shakespeare. Coraline asks how much longer the performance is, and the dog next to her tells her it never ends. Coraline stands up and leaves the theater.

*The other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible seem to be living out the dreams of their real-world counterparts—but the idea that their performance is never-ending starts to make it seem like more of a prison sentence than wish fulfillment.*



Out on the lawn in front of the house, Coraline finds her other parents waiting for her with large smiles on their faces. They bring her back up to the house, and as they walk, Coraline's other mother strokes Coraline's hair. Coraline tells her to stop, and she does. Coraline's other father asks if Coraline likes it in their world—Coraline says she does. Coraline's other mother tells her that she can stay here forever if she'd like. Coraline considers the question, shifting her hands around in her pockets—as she does, she feels the stone with the hole in it.

Coraline's other father tells her that if she wants to stay, she has to do one small, simple thing. He brings her into the kitchen—on a nice plate, he and Coraline's other mother have laid out a set of black **buttons**. They insist her that changing her eyes won't hurt a bit—but Coraline knows they're lying. Coraline says she wants to leave. Her other mother seems upset, but tells Coraline she can go if she wants. Her other father tells her he looks forward to seeing her when she comes back. Coraline hurriedly returns to the hall and begins walking down the long, dark corridor back to her own home. She senses the "very old and very slow" thing in the dark behind her but doesn't dare turn back.

## CHAPTER 5

Coraline uses the old black key to lock the drawing room door tight, then puts the key ring on the kitchen counter. She is surprised to find that her mother still isn't home. Coraline makes herself some **toast** using frozen bread and waits for her parents to return from their errands—but even as dark falls, they haven't come home yet. Coraline microwaves another pizza for dinner and goes to bed. In the morning, Coraline's parents are still missing.

That afternoon, Coraline goes down to see Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. They serve her some tea and ask how her mother and father are doing. Coraline explains that her parents are missing—she says they've "vanished under mysterious circumstances," but Misses Spink and Forcible don't seem to register what Coraline is saying and instead tell her that they're going to visit Miss Spink's niece the following day.

Coraline returns home and uses money from her piggy bank to go out and buy herself some groceries. When she returns home, she busies herself by writing a story on her father's computer—something she's normally not allowed to do—and taking a long bubble bath. Coraline puts herself to bed when she gets sleepy but wakes in the middle of the night. Frightened, she goes into her parents' bedroom, climbs under their covers, and cries herself back to sleep alone.

*The other mother's constant dotting and physical touching makes Coraline uncomfortable. In the real world, she wants more attention and affection from her parents—but here, as her other parents live a life that seemingly revolves only around Coraline, she finds herself distinctly uncomfortable.*



*The black buttons that the other mother and other father want Coraline to sew on in place of her eyes suggest that they want to transform her into a kind of ragdoll. Homemade dolls and playthings often have buttons for eyes—and Coraline is wary of allowing herself to be made into such a commodity for these "new" parents whose motives she can't discern and whose world makes her uncomfortable.*



*As Coraline returns home to the real world, she does so with a sense of relief—but quickly realizes that something has gone wrong. She tries to deny the truth and go about her business, but the next day, Coraline must face the fact that something has happened to her parents.*



*Coraline is learning that to feel at home, one must feel part of a community. She seeks help from her neighbors—but unfortunately, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible are too caught up in their own concerns to be there for Coraline in the way she needs them to be. Coraline will have to fend for herself.*



*Coraline attempts to be strong and self-sufficient—but eventually becomes emotional as she realizes that her parents are gone and she has no idea how to get them back. Coraline misses her parents—imperfectly as they treated her—and wants them, rather than her "other" parents, back in her life.*



Coraline wakes with a start to find the cat batting at her face with its paws. Coraline asks the cat if it knows where her parents are—it blinks in response. Coraline asks the cat to take her to them, and the cat leads Coraline down the hall to a large mirror that has been hanging on the wall since the Joneses moved in. Coraline turns on the light and looks in the mirror. She sees not only her reflection in it, but those of her mother and her father as well—they look “sad and alone,” and wave at her dejectedly. Coraline watches as her mother breathes on the mirror to fog it up, then writes “HELP US” in the steam with her finger. Soon, Coraline’s parents fade away.

Coraline calls the local police and explains that her parents have been kidnapped “into a world on the other side of the mirror.” The dispatcher, believing Coraline is joking or having a nightmare, urges her to go back to sleep. Instead, Coraline dons slippers and a robe, fills her pockets with **apples**, and lights up a candle when her flashlight refuses to work. Dressed and prepared, Coraline pulls the old black key off the key ring and heads for the drawing room—but when she looks at the door, she becomes scared. She runs back to her bedroom to retrieve the stone from Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. With the talisman in her pocket, she returns to the drawing room once more.

As Coraline prepares to open the door, she tells the cat a story about how, when she was younger, her father used to take her exploring at an old dump between their house and the shops. One day, while exploring, Coraline heard her father urge her to run away up a nearby hill. Coraline obeyed—and when she got to the top, she turned back to see that her father had disturbed a wasp’s nest. Coraline only got stung once, but her father was covered in welts. When they returned home, her father realized he’d dropped his glasses—and went back to the dump to retrieve them. Coraline says that she realized her father’s bravery didn’t come from absorbing the stings for Coraline: it came from going back even after he’d been stung. “When you’re scared but you still do it anyway,” she tells the cat, “that’s brave.”

As Coraline and the cat open the door and walk back through the dark hall to the other version of Coraline’s house, the cat begins to speak. He warns Coraline that returning to the other house is, perhaps, stupid—but before Coraline can snap back at the cat, her candle goes out. Frightened, Coraline runs down the hall and right into the waiting arms of the other mother.

*The cat shows Coraline an ominous vision of her parents in grave danger. It’s clear that they have been trapped in the other mother’s realm. Coraline realizes that she is being threatened—or perhaps simply lured back through the dark hallway—but she knows that she must do whatever she can to get her parents back.*



*When the adults in Coraline’s life don’t listen to her or take her seriously, she doesn’t get frustrated, wallow, or give up. Coraline is learning to take matters into her own hands. Even though she’s afraid, Coraline does all she can to make herself feel brave before returning to the other mother’s world to try to get her parents back. Even though Coraline’s journey has, in a sense, barely begun, she’s already learning more about herself, about her family, and about the true meaning of bravery.*



*The story Coraline tells in this passage thematically illustrates one of the novel’s central concerns. By having Coraline share this story, Neil Gaiman offers his theory on the truth behind bravery. Bravery, in both Gaiman and Coraline’s estimation, is not shoving aside or ignoring one’s fears—it’s accepting and honoring them, then doing the scary thing anyway. Coraline, inspired by her father, is attempting to model the kind of genuine bravery he showed her in a moment of need. She is learning about the reciprocal relationships that must exist between parents and children.*



*Coraline is frightened of returning to the other mother—but seems even more frightened of whatever strange presence lives in the tunnel between the two “homes” she’s come to know.*



Coraline asks where her parents are—the other mother, gesturing towards the other father sitting in a nearby chair, insists Coraline has already found her parents. The other father offers to make Coraline a **midnight snack**. Determined to be brave, Coraline says that she doesn't need a snack and pulls an apple from her pocket. The other mother gives Coraline a sinister smile. Coraline tells the other mother that she wants her parents back—the other mother says she doesn't have Coraline's parents, and adds that if they've left, it must be because they grew “bored” of her. The other mother promises Coraline that if she stays here, she'll never be abandoned again.

Coraline tells the other mother she doesn't believe her. In response, the other mother bewitches the hall mirror to play a scene which shows Coraline's real mother and father, relieved to be free of her, heading out on a summer holiday and saying how grateful they are to “her other mother” for taking Coraline in. Coraline tells the other mother she doesn't believe what she's just shown her—but admits privately that there's a tiny bit of doubt in her heart.

The other mother summons a rat to her side and orders it to retrieve the black key from the door in Coraline's world. The rat quickly does so. Coraline asks why the other mother doesn't have her own key—the other father answers her, explaining that there is only one key for only one door. The other mother hushes him up, then locks the door from her side and tucks the key into her pocket. The other mother tells Coraline rather coldly that she and the other father are going to bed—and she urges Coraline to do the same.

Coraline is afraid to go to sleep in her strange other bedroom, so she walks out the front door and sits on the stoop. The cat approaches Coraline and rubs against her. Coraline asks why the other mother wants her to stay—the cat replies that the other mother “wants something to love” or perhaps just “something to eat.” It's hard to tell what “creatures” like the other mother, the cat says, really want.

Coraline asks the cat what he suggests she do. The cat tells Coraline to challenge the other mother to a game—“her kind of thing,” he says, “loves games.” Coraline asks the cat what “kind of thing” the other mother is, but the cat refuses to answer her. The cat suggests Coraline get some sleep—she has a long day ahead of her. Coraline goes back inside, sneaks to her room, and pushes her heavy toy box in front of the door. She gets into bed and falls asleep as she ponders the cat's suggestion.

*Coraline knows, on some level, that the food she's served in the other mother's world is a tool of seduction. She doesn't know what effect the food might have on her, but she is determined to resist falling prey to both the other mother and the other father's attempts to get her to feel comfortable and safe in their twisted world.*



*Coraline knows better than to believe the other mother's lies—but there's still a part of her that knows she's been petulant and difficult lately and feels guilty for pushing her parents away.*



*Every time Coraline gets a little bit closer to learning the history and rules of the other mother's world, her source of information either cuts itself off or is silenced. It's clear that the other father knows the other mother's true identity and true motivations—but the other mother is determined to keep those things guarded and hidden.*



*The cat, again, inches toward giving Coraline some answers as to why she's become entangled in the other mother's world—but, true to its slippery form, the cat never gives Coraline a definitive answer (or even opinion) on exactly what the other mother is or what she wants.*



*The cat only ever gives Coraline as much information as she needs to survive. He seems unable—or unwilling—to divulge the whole truth about the other mother, but he does share with Coraline a suggestion that might just save her life. It's unclear whether the cat himself is just as in the dark as Coraline when it comes to certain aspects of the other mother's origins and her desires, or if he's forbidden by some ancient code or magic from revealing her secrets.*



## CHAPTER 6

Coraline wakes up feeling disoriented and displaced—it takes her a moment to remember who and where she is. She climbs out of bed and opens the closet to get dressed. The clothes in her other closet are all fancy costumes save for a dark pair of velvet jeans and a gray sweater with tiny twinkling stars sewn into the fabric. Coraline is hesitant to wear the clothes, but she puts them on anyway—and makes sure to transfer the stone with the hole in it from her robe pocket to the pocket of her new jeans.

Coraline goes into the kitchen to find it empty. She walks down the hall to her other father's study and finds him sitting inert at the desk. Coraline asks where the other mother is, and the other father says she's dealing with a "vermin problem." When Coraline asks if there's trouble with the rats, the other father says that the cat is the problem. Coraline notices that her other father's face looks strange—it has grown "vague" and doughy. Coraline says she's going to go exploring, but the other father tells her there's no point in doing so—the house and the grounds are all the other mother "made" before resting and waiting for Coraline. Realizing he's said too much, the other father tells Coraline he isn't allowed to talk to her anymore.

Coraline wanders through the house. She tries the hall door, but it is locked, as she suspected it would be. She looks around the drawing room and is stunned to find that it is an exact replica of her own home's drawing room except for one detail: a snow globe with two little people in it on the mantelpiece. Coraline shakes the snow globe once, then heads out the front door to explore the woods.

As Coraline wanders through the woods, the trees become more shapeless with each step—Coraline realizes that the other mother didn't "bother" with this part of the world, since she assumed it would never be used. Coraline keeps walking until she finds herself in a mist—but the mist is not like regular fog, and instead feels like "walking into nothing." Coraline keeps walking until there is nothing but whiteness all around her.

The cat appears beside Coraline and tells her she's wasting her time, as the other mother didn't fill in this part of the world. Coraline again asks the cat what the other mother really is—again, the cat won't answer her. Coraline and the cat keep walking along and soon arrive back at the front of the house. Coraline wonders aloud how one could possibly "walk away from something and still come back to it." The cat explains they've walked all the way around the other mother's tiny world—spiders' webs, he says, need only be big enough to catch their prey.

*Even though Coraline thought she didn't quite feel at home in her new house, waking up here—in her strange, green-and-pink bedroom infested with rats—makes her realize just how familiar her new home had become to her already before she was forced to leave it.*



*Something about the other father is changing quickly—and this passage implies that the more he reveals to Coraline, the more he will deteriorate. This passage also suggests that the other mother has—or is seeking—complete control over this world and all the objects in it except for the cat.*



*The snow globe represents a major clue as to her parents' whereabouts—but Coraline doesn't yet see how everything is adding up. She's too distracted by her need to figure out the other mother's world, her intentions, and her weaknesses—if she has any.*



*Coraline is beginning to understand that the other mother has created this entire world solely to entrap Coraline—and didn't bother with any details she didn't think Coraline would miss.*



*The cat, in this passage, confirms that the other mother—whatever kind of creature she may be—has created the "world" of Coraline's home as a kind of web meant to make Coraline comfortable and more easily entrapped. Coraline realizes that she is in grave danger—and that the other mother has been studying ways in which she might manipulate Coraline.*



Coraline says the other father told her that the other mother is trying to keep the cat out—the cat laughs at the other mother’s attempts to try to keep him away, insisting that there are ways in and out of this world even the other mother doesn’t know of. Coraline asks more about the place they’re in, but the cat says only that the other mother has been here a long time. The cat pounces suddenly and lands on a large black rat—it explains that all the rats in this world are the other mother’s spies. The cat plays with the rat cruelly until Coraline tells it to stop. In response, the cat takes the rat in its mouth and walks off into the woods.

Coraline returns to the house and wanders to the hall mirror. She looks in it and sees only herself—but she soon feels the other mother’s hand on her shoulder. She is shocked to realize the other mother’s reflection does not register in the mirror. The other mother asks brightly if Coraline would like to play a game. Coraline says she doesn’t want to play with the other mother—she wants to find her parents and go home. The other mother insists she’ll break Coraline’s “proud” spirit with her love. Coraline says she’ll never love the other mother. The other mother asks Coraline to follow her so that they can negotiate.

In the living room, the other mother sits on the sofa and takes out a paper bag. She extends it to Coraline—believing it’s candy, Coraline takes a peek, but instead discovers that the bag is full of beetles. Coraline refuses them, but the other mother begins munching happily on the beetles. The other mother asks if Coraline wants to enjoy a nice, quiet evening together eating delicious food and playing with the rats. Coraline is perturbed by the other mother’s long white fingers, which flutter endlessly as she talks. When Coraline refuses the other mother’s offer, the other mother pulls Coraline into the hallway, pulls a silver key from her pocket, and opens the hall mirror. She throws Coraline inside the dim closet behind it and tells her she can come out when she’s learned her manners.

## CHAPTER 7

Coraline begins crying but quickly stops herself, knowing she needs to figure out where she is. She begins feeling her way around the tiny dark room and, soon, her hands pass over a small, warm face. Coraline is about to scream, but a voice whispers in her ear and tells her to be quiet—“the beldam might be listening.” Another voice asks if Coraline is alive, and Coraline says she is. Coraline asks who the voices belong to—a third voice says that the three of them have been imprisoned so long they no longer remember their names.

*This passage suggests that while the other mother has been at work doing what she does for a long time, the cat has been alive—and perhaps, the narrative suggests, at work against her—for just as long. There are forces at work greater than Coraline realizes, and she must be very brave indeed in order to surmount them.*



*The other mother doesn’t just want to possess or trap Coraline—she wants, or needs, Coraline’s love. Coraline, however, refuses to give it to her, knowing that there’s no way she could ever love someone so false, controlling, and cruel. Coraline is learning more about herself, about the love she’s been shown by her real parents, and about what she wants out of a parent-child relationship.*



*The other mother is growing more and more grotesque as time goes by. She seems to be dropping her façade little by little—either out of laziness or out of an inability to control the decay of the illusions she created to lure Coraline in in the first place.*



*As Coraline encounters three other children who have similarly been trapped by the other mother, she realizes that she might not make it out of the other mother’s world entirely alive. The children refer to the other mother as “the beldam”—an antiquated word for a witch or an evil old woman. Coraline is learning more and more about the other mother’s true nature.*



Coraline's eyes adjust to the dark. She is able to see three shapes before her—children just about the same size as Coraline herself. Coraline reaches out for the hand of the voice who just lamented forgetting its name and squeezes it. She asks the child if it's a boy or a girl—the child says it isn't sure but believes itself to be a boy. Coraline asks how the three children ended up here—one of them says that "she" stole their hearts and souls and imprisoned them in the dark. The three children all have similar stories of finding their other mother waiting for them on the other side of a door in their house. One of the voices urges Coraline to flee, but she says she can't until she's rescued her parents.

One of the voices, speaking in a strange, antiquated tongue, suggests that if Coraline is planning on winning her parents back from "the beldam," she could also win back the lost children's souls—the other mother has hidden them throughout her little world. Coraline asks what will happen to her if she fails, and one of the voices says the other mother will turn Coraline into a "husk." Another voice urges Coraline, again, to simply flee, but Coraline insists running away won't work.

Coraline offers to bring the children with her when the other mother lets her out of the mirror-room, but the others reply that they'd shrivel in the light without their souls. Coraline closes her eyes, feeling defeated. As she falls asleep, she hears one of the children whisper to her: "Look through the stone."

## CHAPTER 8

Coraline wakes to find herself being carried—the other mother is carrying her to the kitchen as Coraline struggles to rouse herself fully. The other mother sits Coraline down on the countertop, and Coraline resents the feeling of having been "cuddled and loved" by her for just a moment as she carried her in the same way Coraline's real mother used to. Coraline notices that the other mother looks happier and "healthier"—her hair is floating around her face, wriggling like snakes, and her **button** eyes seem brighter.

*As Coraline talks with the lonely lost children, she learns even more about how the other mother lures her prey. Coraline now understands that all of these children have, throughout history, been tempted into the other mother's clutches when she appeared to them disguised as other versions of their mothers. This seems to imply that the other mother feeds on the hearts and souls of young children—and that the ones who love her nourish her the most.*



*Coraline realizes that while she can't run away, she can't stay too long, either—or risk withering away into nothingness like the poor, forgotten lost children who have been trapped in the dark for years or even centuries.*



*The lost children know that Coraline is, perhaps, their last hope, and they give her a piece of advice that will aid her in finding their souls—and, in the process, finding herself too.*



*Coraline realizes that even as the other mother loses control over maintaining her physical resemblance to Coraline's mother, she's still able to prey upon Coraline's emotional attachment to her real mother—and this frightens and upsets Coraline deeply.*



Coraline asks the other mother if she is planning on turning Coraline into a “dead shell” like the other children in the closet—the other mother, though, plays dumb, and starts cooking Coraline a lavish **breakfast**. She insists that she loves Coraline and that ghosts aren’t real. Coraline says she knows the other mother likes games and asks if the other mother would like to win Coraline, “fair and square.” The other mother, clearly intrigued, asks Coraline what she means. Coraline explains that she wants to propose a challenge. If she loses, she’ll stay in the other mother’s world forever and replace her eyes with **buttons**. If she wins, however, then the other mother has to let Coraline, her parents, and the dead children go.

The other mother sets Coraline’s **breakfast** down on the kitchen table and asks what kind of game Coraline would like to play. Coraline says she’d like to play a “finding-things game” and search for her parents and the souls of the lost children who live behind the mirror. The other mother declares Coraline’s challenge a deal. Coraline asks the other mother to swear. The other mother swears on her mother’s grave. Coraline asks if the other mother’s mother has a grave—the other mother says that she “put her in there [herself.]” Coraline, perturbed, asks the other mother to swear on something else. Wagging her fingers, the other mother swears on her right hand. Coraline agrees to the deal and hungrily scarfs her breakfast.

When Coraline finishes eating, she begins her exploring game. She starts searching the house for the souls of the lost children, but she doesn’t really know what souls look like, how big they are, or where they might be hidden. The other mother smilingly watches Coraline search for a while, then vanishes. Coraline leaves the kitchen and wanders into the hallway. She takes the stone from her pocket and holds it in her hand—in the mirror, she sees, the stone glows like a gem rather than a plain old pebble.

Coraline goes into her bedroom and looks around for the souls under the bed and in the toy box. She’s frustrated when she can’t find anything that looks like a soul—or something a soul might be hiding in—but then she remembers the voice telling her to look through the hole in the stone. Coraline lifts the stone to her eye—through the hole, the world appears gray and colorless. The only thing that has any color at all is a glass marble at the bottom of the toy box—it glows red and fiery, and Coraline picks it up. As she does, she hears one of the lost children’s voices congratulating her on a job well done and nervously urging her to hurry up and find the other two.

*Coraline goes out on a limb and tries to entice the other mother into a game. She knows her plan could backfire, but she is determined to bravely challenge the other mother for her life, even having seen the terrible fate that could befall her if she loses to the other mother “fair and square.” Coraline is scared, but (like her dad did with the bees) she’s doing the courageous thing anyway.*



*The “finding-things game” that Coraline proposes functions as a kind of metaphor from this point on throughout the novel. Even though Coraline is tasked with finding other people—her parents and the souls of the lost children—the places her frightful journey takes her will ultimately teach her more about herself. Coraline is putting her bravery to the ultimate test, determined to escape the increasingly terrifying other mother’s clutches or die trying.*



*The other mother delights in Coraline’s ignorance and struggle, but Coraline quickly discovers that she may have the key to finding the souls with her. The stone given to her by her neighbors holds the answer to her and her parents’ salvation—it is an emblem of the strength and warmth of her new home, which has provided her with the resources and courage she needs to carry on.*



*Coraline finds the first soul and secures her first small victory over the other mother—and yet her joy is not complete, as she knows she still has a long journey ahead and will surely anger the other mother the more she succeeds.*



Coraline feels uncomfortable in her “other” clothes and changes back into her pajamas and robe. As she puts the marble and the stone in the pocket of the robe and steps into the hall, she feels a strong wind stinging her face. One of the lost children’s voices is in her ear warning her that the other mother is angry. Coraline shouts out, calling for the other mother and ordering her to play fair—the wind quickly dies down.

Coraline decides to look in the other Miss Spink and the other Miss Forcible’s flat for another soul. When she approaches the door, however, she finds that the marquee is nearly out. Inside the theater, the stage is dark, and the seats are empty. She finds a flashlight on the ground and uses it to take a look around—the theater looks as if it has been abandoned for years, and there are “hairless, jellyfish” things hanging from the ceiling. They have strange shapes that remind Coraline of dogs, bats, and spiders all at once.

Coraline shines her light on the stage—up on the back wall there is a huge, “grayish white” creature that seems to be gestating in some sort of sac. As Coraline approaches the sac, she sees that it contains a two-headed, many-limbed creature. Coraline looks around the theater through the stone, half-hoping that there are no souls to be found so that she can leave—but, to her horror, she realizes that the creature in the sac is holding yet another glowing marble.

Coraline approaches the creature in the sac, pushes her hand inside, and wrestles the marble from one of the creature’s many hands. Coraline looks at the creature’s faces—they appear to be versions of the other, younger Misses Spink and Forcible, but their faces have melted like candlewax. Suddenly a hand tries to grab at Coraline and one of the creature’s heads begins wailing, but Coraline turns and runs. The horrible dog-bat-spider creatures from the ceiling chase Coraline, but she outruns them and hears the voice of a second lost child congratulating her once again and urging her to hurry up and find the last remaining soul.

*Before she can continue her search, Coraline needs to dress herself in the clothes that are truly her own. She wants to feel connected to herself, her home, and her family as the other mother’s cruelties mount.*



*The other mother’s world is changing and decaying—seemingly as a punishment for Coraline’s having succeeded in the finding-things game. The horrors waiting for Coraline in the theater foreshadow deeper horrors still to come.*



*Coraline spoke earlier about diving head-first into a scary situation even when frightened, and how doing so constitutes true bravery. Coraline showed her bravery just by returning to the other mother’s realm, and now she must prove it again and again as she throws herself into increasingly horrific situations.*



*Coraline is terrified to anger the abominable creature that is the true form of the other Misses Spink and Forcible, but she knows that she must if she wants to see her home again. Coraline is facing terrible things—but each step of the journey she conquers makes her feel braver and more capable.*



## CHAPTER 9

Outside, Coraline realizes that the world has become covered in mist. The other mother is on the lawn wearing a cross expression on her face. When Coraline tells the other mother that she's collected two souls, the other mother replies, simply, that she loves Coraline. Coraline realizes that while the other mother probably does love her on some level, she loves her as "a dragon loves its gold." The other mother offers to help Coraline get into the extra flat in the house—the empty one—then opens her mouth. She pulls a small brass key from her tongue and hands it to Coraline, then disappears.

Coraline heads around to the empty flat. A voice in her ear warns her not to go in—the lost children try to tell Coraline that the other mother would never help her. Coraline agrees with them but goes inside anyway. The apartment looks as if it has been moved out of in a hurry—there is no furniture inside or pictures on the walls. In the apartment's bedroom, she finds a trap door in the floor—though she's frightened, she opens it, descends, and turns on the cellar light.

At the bottom of the steps, Coraline finds a heap of curtains and notices a bad smell in the air. She sees a foot sticking out from the curtains and pulls them aside. On the ground is a "pale and swollen" grub-like creature with **buttons** for eyes. Coraline is revolted, but when the creature opens its mouth and says her name, she becomes full of pity—she realizes this creature is what used to be her other father. Coraline asks the creature if her parents are down here, or perhaps one of the lost children's souls. The creature, however, says that nothing is here but him. One of his button eyes falls out. Coraline apologizes to the creature, realizing that the other mother must have punished him for telling Coraline too much by placing him down here to die.

The creature tells Coraline she needs to run—the other mother is "pushing" it to hurt Coraline. Coraline begs the thing to be strong and brave and resist the other mother's orders, but the grublike creature lunges at her. Coraline reaches for its face and pulls its remaining button out, then takes advantage of the creature's diminished senses to creep toward the exit. As Coraline mounts the stairs the grub hears her and gives chase—but Coraline outruns it and slams the trap door on its head. Coraline, stunned, walks out of the flat as fast as she can and locks the door behind her. Coraline tries to tell herself that she's brave, but she isn't so sure how much longer she can keep her spirits up.

*This passage demonstrates Coraline's ability to feel a kind of empathy even for a creature determined to make her miserable and scared—and possibly even take her life. Coraline knows that the other mother's love for her is genuine in some way, but she also knows that real love isn't destructive or possessive or hungry.*



*Even though Coraline knows that the other mother is probably tricking her by sending her into the empty flat, she's determined to find the final lost soul—and perhaps sate her curiosity about what the empty flat looks like after all.*



*Coraline realizes that she's not the only one the other mother is punishing—the other mother is meting out cruelty to anything or anyone that defies her or stands in her way, even her own allies or creations. Coraline, again, feels a startling empathy for these creatures—even as they threaten her very life.*



*Coraline believes that with each new horror she encounters, her resolve is weakening—but Neil Gaiman will continue to show, as Coraline's journey unfolds, that in fact each deliberate encounter with her own fear makes Coraline braver, stronger, wiser, and more capable.*



## CHAPTER 10

Coraline heads up the stairs on the side of the building to the other crazy old man's flat. She is full of fear as she ascends but reminds herself that she's an explorer—and that if she made it out of the empty flat alive, she can do anything. Still, Coraline fears that whatever lies in store for her upstairs will be worse even than the creature in the empty flat.

At the top of the stairs, Coraline opens the door and lets herself in. She immediately hears the rats singing their creepy, threatening song and can see their red eyes staring at her through the dark. A voice in another room calls to Coraline, and she follows it into a bedroom around the corner. Coraline tries to calm her mounting fear by reminding herself that everything in this world is either an illusion or a copy of something from her own world. She stops suddenly for a second, remembering the snow globe on the mantelpiece and wondering why there is something in this world that doesn't exist in her own.

The voice rings out again, beckoning Coraline to the bedroom. Coraline makes her way to the door of the room and peers in—she sees the other crazy old man upstairs sitting in the dark, bundled in his coat. He speaks to Coraline and urges her to stay in this world where she'll be loved and appreciated, and never bored or ignored. Coraline asks the other crazy old man if she will be able to have anything she wants if she stays in this world, and he assures her she'll have “whatever [she] desire[s].” Coraline tells the other old man that life would be no fun if she got everything she wanted—and he can't understand that because he's just a “bad copy” of a person.

The other crazy old man sadly states that he's “not even [a copy] anymore.” Coraline looks through the stone and sees a blue glow coming from the other crazy old man's chest. She doesn't want to get any closer to him, but she knows she must. As soon as she takes a step into the room, however, the man falls apart—he is not a man after all, but rather hundreds of rats in the shape of a man. The rats scatter and flee, and Coraline realizes that the largest of them is carrying the marble.

Coraline follows the rats out the front door and down the stairs, but at the bottom of the steps she falls to the ground and skins her knee and her palms on the concrete. Coraline is miserable—she has lost track of the rat and knows she'll never recover the third marble. Coraline believes she has failed not only the lost children, but her parents and herself, as well. She closes her eyes and begins crying, but soon she hears a sound just in front of her. She opens her eyes to see that the cat has brought her the decapitated rat—which is still clutching the marble in its paws.

*Coraline knows she must complete her journey through the house if she wants to be free—and given the horrors she's encountered so far, she's feeling almost numb to the idea of what terrors might still be waiting for her.*



*As Coraline faces her fears time and time again, she not only grows braver, but also sharper as she understands the world she's in better and better. Conquering one's fears by being brave—or even by simply affecting bravery to make it through—is, in Gaiman's estimation, sometimes the only way to fully understand a complicated situation, or even to understand oneself.*



*Coraline has learned an important lesson in visiting the other mother's realm. At the start of the book, Coraline was bored, petulant, and whiny, constantly dissatisfied with her relationships and possessions. Now, Coraline has come to understand something huge and profound: that the point of life is not accumulation and material satisfaction, but cultivating relationships and building a deeper understanding of oneself.*



*Coraline is realizing that all of the other mother's creatures are, while often frightening and horrifying to behold, utterly powerless to resist the other mother's orders and demands. They clearly live in fear of her and seem to even dread the existences to which they're resigned.*



*The cat comes to Coraline's rescue just when she needs him most. Coraline is able to triumph over the other mother, then, because of the goodwill she inspires in those who know her and the friendships she's made in this difficult time.*



Coraline picks up the marble and hears one of the lost children call to her—the child warns Coraline that the other mother is furious and will never let her leave. Coraline, however, is determined to complete the game—she has all three souls, and she knows where her parents are at last. Because the other mother can't create—she can only twist and corrupt—something new in the house has caught Coraline's eye. Whereas the mantelpiece at home is empty of trinkets, the one here has a snow globe on it, and Coraline must get to it quickly.

Coraline notices that the cat has gone stiff and its fur is sticking up. The cat warns Coraline that the world has gone “flat” all of a sudden—the other mother has sealed up the ways in and out of her world. Coraline promises she'll get the cat home. Coraline picks the frightened cat up and feels it trembling in her arms. Coraline carries the cat inside as it gently licks her wounds. As Coraline approaches the front door, she sees that the house has changed—it looks flat, sketchy, and barely-formed. Still, when Coraline pushes at the door, it opens and lets her through.

## CHAPTER 11

Coraline is surprised but relieved to find her “other” flat more or less the same as when she left it earlier that morning. The other mother, seeing the cat in Coraline's arms, chides Coraline for bringing “vermin” into the house, but reminds Coraline once again that she loves her. Coraline tells the other mother she has a “funny” way of showing love, and she walks wordlessly toward the drawing room, carrying the cat the whole way. Coraline knows that “the moment of truth” is upon her.

The other mother follows Coraline into the drawing room and stands between her and the mantelpiece. Coraline notices that the other mother's appearance has changed—she's grown taller and paler, her hair has turned to writhing vines, and her teeth are sharper and longer. The other mother asks Coraline to produce the marbles from her pocket, and Coraline does so—but points out that she still has to find her parents. She urges herself privately not to even look at the mantelpiece—she wants to deceive the other mother for as long as she can.

*Coraline has figured out the key to returning home. She knows that the snow globe must contain her parents—there's nothing like it in her home, and the other mother can't create anything original. Coraline knows her real home well and takes comfort and pleasure in its small details, even though she felt apprehensive about living there just a day or two ago.*



*The cat is afraid for the first time, signaling that whatever the other mother is cooking up for Coraline must be bad. This passage seems to further suggest that the cat and the other mother have long been locked in some kind of battle—while she seems to have finally trapped the cat in her world, she hasn't counted on Coraline to be able to find them both a way out.*



*Coraline's other mother insists to the very end that she loves Coraline. Her empty words are like an incantation—but the spell doesn't work on Coraline, who has come to understand what love really is throughout her terrifying journey in the other mother's realm.*



*Coraline knows that she has to be braver and cleverer than she ever has been before if she's going to outsmart the powerful other mother—who seems closer than ever to revealing her true form and, it would seem, reaching the height of her powers.*



The other mother asks where Coraline thinks her parents are. Coraline says she doesn't believe they're hidden in the house—they must be, she says, in the passageway between the houses. The other mother smiles and offers to open the door. Coraline is pleased—she has been counting on the other mother's need to gloat. Coraline holds the cat tight, and, as the other mother makes her way to the door, unlocks it, and pulls it open, Coraline begins stepping backwards toward the mantelpiece. The other mother flings the door open and gleefully tells Coraline that she's wrong—and that now she'll have to stay forever.

Coraline declares she isn't wrong. In one swift motion, she throws the cat at the other mother's head. The cat lands on her and claws at her face. While the cat distracts the other mother Coraline grabs the snow globe from the mantelpiece, runs towards the door, pulls the key from the lock, and calls for the cat to run behind her down the hallway. Together they hurry inside, pulling the door shut behind them. The other mother slips a hand in through the door, however, and pulls. Coraline can feel the presence of her parents and the lost children in the hall with her, and she begs them to help her shut the door. They lend Coraline strength, and she yanks the door shut. She hears something drop to the floor as she does.

Without stopping to investigate, Coraline turns and begins to run down the hall toward her own world. A strong wind pushes against her, and she senses the old, slow presence in the hall—she realizes it is much older and more powerful than the other mother. Coraline continues running until she reaches the end of the hall, re-enters her flat, and locks the door behind her. Exhausted, Coraline gathers the cat in her arms and lies down on one of the fancy sofas in the drawing room, ignoring her parents' rule about sitting on the old furniture. Soon, she falls into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER 12

Coraline is awakened by her mother gently shaking her and chiding her for sitting on the nice furniture in the drawing room. Coraline apologizes. Her mother tells her that **dinner** is in fifteen minutes—she seems to have no recollection of being trapped in the other mother's world. Coraline goes to the bathroom to wash her scrapes and change out of her pajamas. In the pocket of her robe, she finds three marbles, the stone with the hole in it, the black key, and the snow globe, now empty. Coraline strings the key around her neck using some twine from her toy box, then goes to the kitchen and enjoys dinner with her parents. She is grateful to have them back and eats her father's entire home-cooked meal.

*Coraline knows that the other mother loves a game—and she also knows that she's not motivated to keep Coraline because of her love for her, but because she wants to win her as a prize. Coraline is able to prey upon the other mother in this passage and use her as a plaything rather than the other way around because she's done the difficult work of coming to understand herself—whereas the other mother can't even understand her prey.*



*Coraline has made this entire long and harrowing journey herself—and though she's had help from the cat and the lost children along the way, her own bravery and cleverness have helped her get through. Now, though, Coraline realizes the most important lesson of all—that she needs the help of those who love her to truly win the day.*



*The novel never explains the source of the old and slow presence Coraline senses each time she steps into the hallway—but part of the horror of the book comes from just how much is left up to interpretation. What is clear is that while the other mother has had access to Coraline's home in all its various incarnations for years and years, Coraline and the cat have cut off that access—or at least they believe they have.*



*Back in the "real" world, Coraline's life hasn't changed very much at all. Her mother is still yelling at her for sitting on the nice furniture and her father is still cooking his bizarre recipes—but the difference is that Coraline has come to appreciate her parents for who they are and feel grateful for all they've done for her. She appreciates the difficulty of their roles a bit better now, and she is finally grateful for their faults, rules, and eccentricities.*



That night, as she gets into bed, Coraline keeps the key around her neck. As she falls asleep, she has a dream in which she is at a picnic with the three lost children. She can see each of them clearly now. The smallest is a boy with red velvet breeches and a fine white shirt. The second is a tall girl in brown, shapeless peasant's clothes. The third is a pale girl dressed in shimmering clothes—she appears to have wings, but Coraline can't tell if they're part of a costume or not. The three children eat hungrily and thank Coraline for saving them. After the meal, the four of them play in the meadow together, and then sit down to bowls of ice cream as dark falls.

The lost children thank Coraline again for saving them and offer to do anything they can for her. Coraline says there's nothing she needs from them—"it's all over." All three children's faces darken with sadness for a moment, and then the winged girl says that Coraline's trials aren't yet finished. The tall girl states that even though the other mother swore to let Coraline go, she lied. The children can't tell Coraline what's coming for her but they assure her she'll be able to handle it. Coraline watches as the three children stand from the picnic and depart into the moonlight.

Coraline wakes in the middle of the night, aroused from sleep by the sound of something scuttling outside her door. Coraline tells whatever it is to leave her alone—she thinks it sounds like "a rat with an extra leg" as it hustles away. Coraline gets out of bed and opens the door, tiptoeing through the house in search of the thing. When she can't find it, she goes to the front door and opens it, standing alone in the gray light of dawn. Soon, the thing scuttles past Coraline—it is, to her horror, the other mother's right hand, severed when Coraline slammed the door on it on her way back to her own world. Coraline realizes that the hand is after her key.

## CHAPTER 13

As the days go by, it seems to Coraline that her parents have no recollection of being trapped in the other mother's world—she isn't even sure if they are aware that they lost two days of their lives. The same night that she discovered the other mother's hand roaming about the house, Coraline realized that the lost children's marbles, which she'd tucked under her pillow for safekeeping, had been crushed like eggshells—she quickly realized their souls had departed the world and moved on.

*The three children seem to all be from different times—confirming that, whoever the other mother is, she's been living at the end of that dark hallway for a very long time. Coraline and the children celebrate their victory over their shared antagonist, and yet the revelry is bittersweet. While Coraline is alive, after all, her new friends are not.*



*Coraline has helped the three lost children find peace—and yet they are unable to help her find hers, as they've moved on from their prison. Coraline is apprehensive about the trials still ahead of her, but she doesn't begrudge the children their long-awaited chance to rest in peace. This story is, in a way, the lost children's coming-of-age story, too—though they never got to grow up, Coraline has helped them realize themselves and find happiness again after being lost and alone for so long.*



*Just as the lost children warned her, Coraline's troubles with the other mother are not yet at their end. When Coraline slammed the door between their worlds, she severed the other mother's hand—and it has found a way through the hall. Coraline knows exactly what the hand wants and why, but she is determined to prevent the other mother from ever fully traversing the two worlds again.*



*While the other mother's hand is still on the move—a sign that she isn't done with Coraline yet—Coraline at least finds some peace in knowing that she successfully helped the lost children attain their freedom and move on. At the same time, Coraline realizes that this means she's more alone than ever in her fight against the other mother.*



With just a couple of days left until the start of the school year, Coraline goes to visit Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. They read her tea leaves again and are confused by the message they contain. The women conclude that the leaves are clumped in the shape of an outstretched hand. Coraline also notices that one of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's dogs has a long scratch on his side. As Coraline leaves Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's, the crazy old man upstairs calls out to Coraline and says hello. She asks him how his mice are, and he replies that they're acting frightened—there is something about the house at nights, perhaps a weasel, which is keeping them from playing their tiny instruments.

That night, after Coraline gets into bed, the hand scratches at her window. Coraline leaps out of bed and frightens it off—but realizes that even if she keeps the key around her neck, she's still in danger.

In the morning, Coraline asks her mother if she can borrow a sheet—she explains that she wants to have a picnic with her dolls. Her mother finds a spare paper tablecloth, but says she didn't think Coraline played with dolls anymore. Coraline says she doesn't—the dolls are “protective coloration.” Coraline fills a box with teacups and dolls and a jug of water, then takes a roundabout journey to the meadow to ensure she is not followed. Coraline arrives at the well at the edge of the meadow and painstakingly lifts the planks off the top. She spreads the tablecloth over the top of the well and weighs its four corners down with dolls and cups of water. Once the trap is set, Coraline hurries back home.

Coraline takes the key from around her neck and dangles it carelessly as she knocks on the door of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat. She asks them how their dog is doing, and they say that after a vet visit, he's fine. Mister Bobo, they say, thinks the dog might've had a tussle with a weasel. Coraline asks who Mister Bobo is—Miss Spink and Miss Forcible tell Coraline that Mister Bobo is the name of the man upstairs. He comes from a “fine old circus family” from Eastern Europe. Coraline loudly tells the women, swinging her key as she does, that she's off to play with her dolls in the meadow.

*As Coraline visits her neighbors, she realizes that other people are starting to notice both spiritual omens and physical signs of the hand's pursuit. Coraline knows that she's the one who has to save everyone from the other mother's relentless search—even if doing so means confronting fears she thought she'd put to rest.*



*Coraline knows that the other mother isn't done with her. Coraline will have to be brave again and confront her lingering fears if she wants to have any peace of mind at all.*



*Coraline hasn't been changed or scared off by her experiences in the other mother's realm—rather, the things she's gone through have helped her to hone more sharply the best parts of herself. Coraline is an explorer through and through, and she is determined to use all the lessons she's learned—both from the “real” world and the other mother's—to vanquish her foe.*



*Coraline keeps learning more and more about her neighbors. Looking past their eccentric exteriors, she's coming to see them as real, complicated people—and even though there's a part of her that's still only largely concerned with their problems as they relate to her own, she's getting better at being a good and thoughtful neighbor.*



Coraline is nervous as she heads back to the meadow but remains determined to get rid of the other mother once and for all. She sits down with her dolls, announces she's brought her "lucky key" with her, and sets it down in the middle of the tablecloth. Coraline loudly makes a show of enjoying a picnic—after several minutes, she hears the telltale scuttling of the other mother's hand coming toward her. The hand leaps onto the tablecloth, and though it closes around the key, it pulls the cloth, the dolls, and the cups down into the well as it falls all the way down. Coraline hears it splash into the water below and quickly gets to work sealing the well with the heavy planks.

As Coraline picks up her remaining dolls and starts heading back toward the house, she notices the cat watching her from the bushes. The cat jumps onto the planks covering the well and winks at Coraline, seemingly congratulating her on her handiwork. Coraline gives the cat a belly rub, then watches as it hurries off again into the woods.

Coraline returns to the house—Mister Bobo is standing outside. He tells Coraline that the mice have told him Coraline has saved them all. He then invites her to come watch their performance soon—the mouse circus is nearly ready to make their debut. Coraline goes to visit Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. She returns the stone and thanks them for letting her borrow it. Coraline hugs the women tightly, then leaves.

That night, Coraline gets into bed feeling relieved that the hand is gone at last. She sleeps with her bedroom window open, no longer afraid of its threat. Tomorrow is the first day of school in a new place—but Coraline knows that nothing waiting for her at school could ever seem scary to her anymore. As she falls asleep, she believes she can hear the pleasant tinkles of the mouse circus' instruments wafting down to her on the warm late-summer breeze.

*Coraline's plan goes off without a hitch, and the other mother's hand—and the key which has the potential to bring the other mother's realm and the "real" world clashing together once more—are gone forever, or at least for a long while. Though Coraline has trapped the hand, she hasn't killed or finished the other mother. This fittingly foreboding ending to Coraline's tale suggests that while people can learn to be brave, resourceful, and good, the evil in the world can never be truly vanquished forever. All one can do is their best.*



*Coraline knows that the cat will never be her pet—but it is her ally and her protector, and that's more than enough. Coraline respects the cat's aloof, untamable nature. In learning more about herself, she's learned a great deal about how to respect others, too.*



*Coraline once thought her neighbors were peculiar, annoying, or rude. Now, she appreciates and even loves them in all their eccentricities. They have helped her and she has helped them—in finding the meaning of being a good neighbor, Coraline has too discovered the meaning of home.*



*Whereas Coraline's dreams were once haunted by the rats' terrible song, she now drifts off to sleep comforted by the mouse circus' rehearsals. Mr. Bobo's little white mice have triumphed over the other mother's terrifying rats, and the world of the good has subsumed the realm of the evil. Coraline knows that she can be brave in any situation now, no matter how scary, and she feels at peace with encountering the unknowns of adolescence.*





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