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## The Mother with the Button Eyes: An Exploration of the Story Construct of the ‘Other-Mother’

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Neil Gaiman’s (2002) children’s novel, *Coraline*, which has recently been made into a stop motion movie, introduces its readers to a truly frightening figure: the Other-mother. This Other-mother comes out of a long tradition of stories in which the villain is a mother (or grandmother) figure, starting with the evil stepmothers so prevalent in fairy tales, and continuing in recent books such as Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series in which the protagonist’s mother is a major villain for most of the story. Gaiman drew this character partially from an obscure 19<sup>th</sup> century story by Lucy Clifford called ‘The New Mother’, in which a pair of naughty children lose their kind, loving mother, who is replaced by a monstrous one with glass eyes and a wooden tail. In this paper I will examine the parallels between Clifford’s ‘New Mother’ and Gaiman’s ‘Other-mother’. I also consider briefly another example of this nightmare mother in *Ginny* in order to explain the pervasive and persistent presence of this figure in children’s stories.

In Gaiman’s dark story, Coraline finds a door which leads to an Other home, complete with Other-mother and Other-father. As the story progresses, it is revealed that the entire Other-world is created and controlled by the Other-mother who lures children into her realm and then sucks the life-force out of them, leaving them (literally) as broken wisps of soul in a cupboard. Coraline sets out to rescue her real parents from the Other-mother, as well as release the souls of the previously trapped children, and eventually escapes the Other-world herself. She does this with the help of a talking cat and a lot of ingenuity, and in the end, manages to save the day. It is a

wonderfully crafted tale, but the thing that really makes it so engaging is how terrifying Gaiman’s Other-mother is:

*It sounded like her mother. Coraline went into the kitchen, where the voice had come from. A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline’s mother. Only...*

*Only her skin was as white as paper.*

*Only she was taller and thinner.*

*Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark-red fingernails were curved and sharp.*

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

*And then she turned round. Her eyes were big black buttons.*

(Gaiman, 2002, p.34)

In an interview for *Booklist* (2002), Gaiman identified two major influences for this book. The first, perhaps unsurprisingly, was *Alice in Wonderland*. The second was the little known 19<sup>th</sup> century story ‘The New Mother’ by Lucy Clifford. In the interview, Gaiman says:

*There are other very odd influences. The most forgotten is a lady named Lucy Clifford. . . . One [of her stories], “The New Mother,” [is] about these children who... behave badly because they want something another kid has, a pear [drum]. Their mother keeps saying, “Please, please, please, don’t misbehave, or I’ll have to go away, and your new mother will*

*have to come.” But they do misbehave, and when they go home, their mother’s not there. They look down at the end of the road, in the dark, where they see coming toward them the flames of their new mother’s eyes and hear the swish, swish, swishing of her wooden tail. That definitely stuck with me. Here was somebody writing children’s fiction, at the same time Alice was written, who was willing to go all the way, into something really disturbing and primal.*

(Olsen, 2002)

The Clifford story is truly frightening. Here we encounter an “Other mother” figure who is quite possibly even more terrifying than Gaiman’s, not least because she is never overcome. The children’s first sight of the new mother is described as follows:

*[They] could just see a black satin poke bonnet with a frill round the edge, and a long bony arm carrying a black leather bag. From beneath the bonnet there flashed a strange bright light and [their] heart[s] sank and [their] cheeks turned pale, for [they] knew it was the flashing of two glass eyes.*

(Clifford, 1882)

A further contrast between the two texts is in their endings. *Coraline* ends with a note of triumph and peace: ‘As the first stars came out Coraline finally allowed herself to drift into sleep, while the gentle upstairs music of the mouse circus spilled out on to the warm evening air, telling the world that summer was almost over’ (p.171). ‘The New Mother’ ends with fear and loneliness:

*Now and then, when the darkness has fallen and the night is still, hand in hand [the children] creep up near the home in which they once were so happy, and with beating hearts they watch and listen; sometimes a blinding flash comes through*

*the window, and they know it is the light from the new mother’s glass eyes, or they hear a strange muffled noise and they know it is the sound of her wooden tail as she drags it along the floor.*

(unpaged)

The differences between Gaiman’s Other mother and Clifford’s new mother are interesting as much for their similarities, as for their differences, particularly, in the way the protagonists deal with their respective monsters. The Other-mother seems, at first, to not be entirely awful – she cooks a wonderful roast chicken, for one thing – and it is only as time passes that her true colours are revealed. Coraline does not seem to be afraid of her until she realizes that she has captured Coraline’s real parents and entrapped them. Despite her fear, she is willing to face up to the Other-Mother, and eventually overcome her. By contrast, Clifford’s new mother remains very much a monster ‘out there’. The children never interact directly with her, and she is used simply as a means to get the message across that bad things happen to naughty children. The children make no effort whatsoever to fight the New Mother, or to get their old, loving one back. They simply run away into the woods and live there in the dark, scared and alone, forever (or at least until the end of the story). The connection between the Other-mother and Coraline’s real mother is clear. They look more or less alike, and the Other-Mother lives in a world, which is a copy, albeit a twisted one, of Coraline’s real world. In ‘The New Mother’, it is very clear that the real mother has left, with great sadness, and, the text implies that this is not of her own free will, but as a direct result of the children’s behavior. Coraline discovers the world of the Other-mother because she is curious and a little bored, but she is able to escape it using the very quality that got her into it in the first place: her penchant for exploring. In the Clifford story the children get themselves into the situation by being curious (which is, the story implies, a very naughty way to be!)

and, at the end of the story, are left homeless and alone.

The differences in ideology are clear: the 19<sup>th</sup> century moralistic notions of listening to your parents and doing what you are told, and the idea of ‘curiosity killing the cat’ are intrinsically different from Gaiman’s humanistic ideologies of overcoming your fears by facing them, valuing curiosity, or ‘exploring’ as a strength. It is precisely her curiosity and independence that makes it possible for Coraline to fight and, ultimately, overcome the Other Mother. Her reluctant ally is a cat, an animal generally attributed with qualities of independence and curiosity. Coraline’s story is one of growing up, and using her strengths to overcome the nightmare mother figure with which she is faced. At the end of the story, she has come into herself – even the characters who used to get her name wrong, now get it right. There is an obvious humanist message here about the value of independence, courage and wit. Clifford’s children on the other hand show no such fortitude. They are ‘led astray’ by a naughty gypsy girl, and, once they have lost their mother, do nothing but flee into the woods while their nightmare New Mother takes control of their home. They are unable to rise to the challenge of defeating the monster, and are left cold and alone. Here, curiosity is an evil, their downfall, and there is no redemption.

But why is this ‘Other-mother’ so compelling as a figure of terror? Like so many truly terrifying monsters, the really scary thing about the Other-mother is her similarity to the loved human mother. As many a horror writer has discovered, there is nothing quite so frightening as a monster dressed up as an ordinary person, and if that ordinary person is someone we know, then all the better. Such a monster implies that monsters are not always easy to spot, identifiable by their claws, fangs and slime. Monsters can come in different shapes and sizes which disguise their monstrous

intentions. In fact, these are the scariest monsters of all. David Rudd links this notion with that of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ which he sees as ‘not concerned with such things as bug-eyed monsters or little green men but things far closer to home, which, as a consequence, are the more disturbing’ (Rudd, 2008, p.161). This is a good point, and, as Gaiman is a master of his craft, it is to be expected that he has tapped into this simple truth. But he is not by any means the first to do so. The notion of a ‘monster’ dressed up as one of our own is as old as Aesop and his wolf in sheep’s clothing. The realms of story abound with characters who appear to be good, but betray the hero, or turn out to be working for the enemy all along, or are simply changed by greed or power. And many of the best of these stories involve a monstrous mother figure of some kind.

Clifford’s tale is clearly meant as a cautionary one: the children behave badly, and as a result their kind, loving mother goes away, and is replaced by something out of a nightmare. Clifford’s tale sends the message that the readers should be good little boys and girls and listen to their parents, or else the monster will come and get them – not a particularly original notion. Karen Coats suggests that ‘The New Mother’ is about the very real fears which children have. She says, “It’s a spooky cautionary tale that works by playing on very real childhood fears: What if my desires become too much for my mother? What if she withdraws her love? What if she is replaced by an ogress who will devour me? Which is worse — giving up what I want, or giving up her love?” (Coats, 2008, p.86). If Coats is correct, then Clifford’s answers to these questions are not very comforting. Gaiman’s story, on the other hand has a far more humanistic undertone. Coraline triumphs because of her ingenuity and bravery, as well as for her loyalty and friendship to the somewhat prickly cat. At the end of the story her parents have no memory of what has happened, and while Coraline has certainly learnt to appreciate them

more, and become more forgiving of their flaws (such as her mother's lack of cooking prowess), she has triumphed as a result of her own intelligence and values, rather than because of any sort of obedience. These differences perhaps tell us more about the times in which the two stories were written than anything else, but what is interesting is what links them: the other-figure as the nightmare mother.

I'd like briefly to touch on the one similarity between the two nightmare mothers which is extremely telling for me, and presumably also for Rudd: their eyes. Gaiman's other-mother has buttons for eyes, and seeks to replace Coraline's real eyes with buttons too. Clifford's other mother has glass eyes, and a very animalistic wooden tail. This is telling because eyes are so often used in literature as quite literal 'windows on the soul'. We are constantly barraged with eyes welling up, smiling eyes, soft eyes, cold hard eyes and so on. Eyes are important. So the lack of real eyes in these characters shows a lack of humanity which reveals their monstrosity in a way that the aforementioned fangs and claws could never do. They do not have real eyes, and this makes them somehow soulless. Furthermore, in wanting to replace Coraline's real eyes with buttons; in other words, Other-mother wishes to rob Coraline of her humanity. This is something Rudd discusses at length, and connecting it to the idea of mirrors having the power to steal the soul. He says:

*Coraline's button replacements have the related association of giving up one's soul, the eyes being its windows. Aside from paying the ferryman, this was one reason the eyes were covered with coins: to keep them shut; just as mirrors were covered when someone died, in case their soul might go into the mirrored surface and haunt the living.*  
(p.163).

Rudd connects the mirror idea to the souls of the children stuck in the cupboard, hidden behind the mirror in the other-mother's house.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim (1976) would have us believe that the evil stepmother motif, which is, in essence the same as the nightmare Other-mother, denotes some hidden Freudian agenda. Much of Bettelheim's work has been justifiably discredited, but he does say something here which I think has an element of truth in it: that a child will devise a fantasy of a perfect good mother who is different to the actual mother. In the child's fantasy, the actual mother really is an imposter of some kind, and if the child can find a way to reveal the imposter, the fantasy good mother will come back (Bettelheim, 1976, p.66). Who didn't, at some point as a child while angry at one's parents, imagine that they were really adopted and that some other perfect family was out there waiting, perhaps searching, for them? Who hasn't occasionally wondered if the terribly sweet, but infuriatingly difficult great aunt was actually a robot from outer space? The latter may seem a tad far-fetched, but it is exactly this premise from which Nicholas Fisk builds his delightful story *Grinny* (1973).

*Grinny* is the story of a family who receive a visit from 'Great Aunt Emma'. GAE, as the narrator calls her, is a somewhat infuriating old lady, who, at least at the beginning of the book, is infuriating in all the usual ways a great aunt is stereotypically infuriating to a child: she makes remarks about their age and manners, and generally is embarrassing and weird in the ways adults so often are to children. But as the book progresses the narrator begins to notice that she does things which are not just weird for an adult, but also weird for a human. Eventually, they establish that she is actually an alien robot bent on world-domination, overcome her and save humanity. While this may sound like something out of a B-grade horror movie, Fisk's use of a diary style narration, and the sheer humour of his narrator

make for an entertaining read. But, again, what is particularly interesting to me is this notion that an elderly female relative who is strange and embarrassing actually turns out to be an alien robot. This certainly seems to fit with Bettelheim's ideas of a fantasy monster as an explanation for an adult whom the child, for whatever reason, dislikes. A child is likely to feel some guilt over disliking an adult who they feel they 'ought' to like, such as an elderly aunt or indeed, a mother, and a story like *Grinny* does seem to cater for a fantastical possibility which would vindicate the child's dislike.

One of the things that is particularly interesting about the descriptions of 'Grinny' (as the younger sister Beth calls Great Aunt Emma), is that one of Beth's primary objections to the alleged Great Aunt is that she has no smell.

*"Later I asked what she had been pulling faces for and she said, 'Ugh! I hate kissing her, kissing Aunt Emma makes me want to puke!' I said, was it the feeling of her skin (which is a bit odd, I must admit – much too smooth and soft – but that's old age for you, one cannot help getting pouchy). Beth said Poo, ugh, no it wasn't that, it was because GAE does not smell !!! [...]"*

*"You say she does not smell?"*

*"Yes, that's right, it's all wrong." [...]"*

*"But she smokes all the time so she must smell."*

*"Oh yes, but that's only her ciggies, that's not what I mean."*

*"But French ciggies have a very strong smell."*

*"Oh yes, I quite like the smell of French ciggies. It's her smell I can't stand."*

*"But you just said she doesn't smell."*

*"Yes, it's disgusting, ugh, poo, that's why I can't stand kissing her good night, stupid!"*

*"But you didn't like that babysitter, Winnie What's-her-name because she did smell."*

*"Well, that's not as bad as not smelling, how could it be?"*

(Fisk, 1973, p.20)

While Timothy, the narrator, seems to think that Beth is 'weathercocking', or creating reasons out of nothing not to like Great Aunt Emma, Beth is actually on to something very important. Much like the glass and button eyes in "The New Mother" and *Coraline* respectively, Aunt Emma's lack of smell denotes her lack of humanity. It is the first real clue that she is, as Beth will go on to insist in the following chapters, not 'real'.

It is worth noting that, despite several decades between them, Fisk's protagonists share with *Coraline* the ability to overcome the monster on their own. While Great Aunt Emma seems to have complete control over the adults, the children remain immune to her mind-control, and ultimately outwit her and her entire robot race, saving the world and humanity from robot domination. They are able to do this using the same weapons *Coraline* uses: wit, courage and a desire to find out the truth. The humanist qualities of courage and intelligence are once again rewarded with victory.

In her aforementioned article, Karen Coats suggests that the current upsurge in Gothic children's literature, of which *Coraline* is an example is a result of the sanitisation of fairy tales. She claims that because much of the darkness of fairy tales has been removed, and, in the case of Disney, replaced with singing cutlery and dancing mice, fairy tales no longer 'pack the unconscious punch needed for the tales to be psychically effective' (p.79). She says, 'These circumstances create the conditions for the Gothic in contemporary children's literature to fill the gap that the loss of traditional fairy tale has created' (p.79). I

mention this because I think that the nightmare mother motif is so engaging precisely because she does 'pack the required punch'.

The characters I have discussed all share some very basic characteristics. They all at least start out by pretending to have the best interest of the child or children protagonists at heart. Coraline's other-mother makes a big show of giving Coraline the choice of whether she wishes to stay or not, and frequently makes stereotypical 'mother-knows-best' type comments, such as 'sharper than a serpent's tooth is a daughter's ingratitude' (p.85) and 'Is that any way to talk to your mother?' (p.86). She only fully reveals her monstrous side when it becomes clear that Coraline is likely to win their bet and escape. Similarly, the New Mother does not ever threaten the children directly, and, it must be noted, arrives only because their actual mother leaves. Her monstrousness is limited entirely to the physical characteristics of her glass eyes and wooden tail. Grinny also seems to be a pretty ordinary, frustrating elderly aunt at first, and it is only when Beth's suspicions that she is not 'real' begin to seem well-founded that Grinny starts to behave in threatening ways.

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These characters are interesting because of what they reveal about ourselves as humans, especially about children. The things that truly scare us are not monsters under the bed, or wolves in the forest (the most famous of which, it should be noted, dressed up like a grandmother, in a lacey nightcap, in order to trap the child, instead of just mauling her in the forest, like any self-respecting wolf ought to do). Instead the things that truly scare us are the things that disguise their monstrousness as love – most particularly motherly love. That motherly love can be false is a truly terrifying prospect to a child, and indeed, to many a grown up too. And it is that simple fact which makes this Other-mother motif such a powerful and enduring one. At the end of the day, we all like to be frightened a little sometimes. The Other-mother is the epitome of all our deepest fears: that someone we love and trust, could turn out to be monstrous, or could be exchanged for a monstrous version. And, perhaps as importantly, that she can be overcome with a little wit and courage. As the G K Chesterton quote which serves as an epigram to *Coraline* tells us, 'Fairy Tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten'.

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Jax Goss is currently a distance Masters student in children's literature at Macquarie University. She started out with an undergrad degree in Drama and Philosophy, and now works in IT at the University of Otago. She is hoping to continue with a PhD in the future.