

The Real, the Imaginary, and Childhood Anxiety in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Analysis

Sri Saraswati¹

***Sastra Inggris, Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing LIA Yogyakarta, Indonesia
sri.saraswati@stbalia-yk.ac.id***

Yudhanita Pertiwi²

D3 Nautika, Sekolah Tinggi Maritim Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Arroyo, Estrelle T. ³

University of Saint Anthony, Phillipines

Received 2026-06-16; Revised 2025-06-19; Accepted 2026-06-26

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of childhood anxiety in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Drawing upon Lacan's triadic model of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the research explores how Coraline's journey through the alternate world reflects a process of psychological maturation and subject formation. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the study investigates the relationship between fantasy, desire, anxiety, and identity construction in the novel. The findings reveal that the alternate world functions as the Imaginary Order, offering an illusion of completeness and fulfillment that initially satisfies Coraline's desires. The Other Mother embodies the fantasy of perfect maternal care while simultaneously concealing a predatory desire for possession and control. As Coraline uncovers the hidden truths of the alternate world, she encounters manifestations of the Real that disrupt the coherence of fantasy and generate anxiety. These encounters force Coraline to confront the limitations of desire and the impossibility of complete satisfaction. In conclusion, the novel portrays anxiety not as a destructive force but as a necessary condition for psychological growth. Through her confrontation with the Real, Coraline develops a more mature understanding of herself and her relationship to reality. This study contributes to children's literature scholarship by demonstrating how Lacanian psychoanalysis provides valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of fantasy narratives and the role of anxiety in childhood development.

Key words: *Coraline*, Lacan, childhood anxiety, fantasy literature, psychoanalysis

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi kecemasan masa kanak-kanak dalam novel Coraline karya Neil Gaiman melalui perspektif teori psikoanalisis Jacques Lacan. Dengan menggunakan model triadik Lacan yang mencakup Tatahan Imajiner (Imaginary), Tatahan Simbolik (Symbolic), dan Yang Riil (Real), penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana perjalanan Coraline di dunia alternatif mencerminkan proses pematangan psikologis dan pembentukan subjektivitas. Melalui analisis tekstual kualitatif, penelitian ini menelaah hubungan antara fantasi, hasrat, kecemasan, dan konstruksi identitas dalam novel tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dunia alternatif berfungsi sebagai Tatahan Imajiner yang menawarkan ilusi keutuhan dan pemenuhan yang pada awalnya memuaskan hasrat Coraline. Sosok Ibu Lain (Other Mother) merepresentasikan fantasi tentang figur ibu yang sempurna, sekaligus menyembunyikan hasrat predatoris untuk memiliki dan mengendalikan. Ketika Coraline mulai mengungkap kebenaran tersembunyi di balik dunia alternatif tersebut, ia berhadapan dengan manifestasi Yang Riil yang mengganggu koherensi fantasi dan memunculkan kecemasan. Pengalaman-pengalaman tersebut memaksanya menghadapi keterbatasan hasrat dan ketidakmungkinan mencapai kepuasan yang sepenuhnya utuh. Dapat disimpulkan, novel ini menggambarkan kecemasan bukan sebagai kekuatan yang destruktif, melainkan sebagai kondisi yang diperlukan bagi pertumbuhan psikologis. Melalui konfrontasinya dengan Yang Riil, Coraline mengembangkan pemahaman yang lebih matang tentang dirinya sendiri dan hubungannya dengan realitas. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian sastra anak dengan menunjukkan bahwa psikoanalisis Lacanian memberikan wawasan yang berharga mengenai dimensi psikologis narasi fantasi serta peran kecemasan dalam perkembangan masa kanak-kanak.

Key words: *Coraline, Lacan, kecemasan anak-anak, sastra fantasi, psikoanalisis*

PENDAHULUAN

Background of Study

Children's literature has increasingly been recognized as a significant medium through which young readers explore complex emotional, psychological, and social experiences. Contemporary scholars argue that children's narratives do more than entertain; they provide symbolic spaces in which children can negotiate fears, desires, and identity formation. Maria Nikolajeva emphasizes that children's literature serves as a site where young protagonists experience processes of self-discovery and subjectivity, allowing readers to engage with the psychological realities of childhood (Nikolajeva 2019). Likewise, recent studies suggest that fantasy literature occupies a particularly important position in children's psychological development because fantasy worlds enable children to confront emotional conflicts in imaginative and indirect ways. Carrick argues that fantasy narratives contribute significantly to children's engagement with imaginative experiences and emotional understanding, highlighting fantasy as a crucial mechanism through which children interpret reality and personal experience (Carrick 2024).

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the growing significance of anxiety as a theme within children's literature. A systematic review conducted by researchers in *Behavior Therapy* found that children's literature increasingly functions as a tool for helping young readers understand and cope with anxiety through narrative representation and emotional modeling. The study demonstrates that literary texts provide children with opportunities to recognize fears, confront uncertainties, and develop coping mechanisms through identification with fictional characters. Consequently, the representation of childhood anxiety has become an important area of inquiry within contemporary children's literature studies.

Among contemporary fantasy novels for young readers, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) stands as one of the most influential works exploring childhood fear, desire, and psychological growth. The novel follows Coraline Jones, a curious young girl who moves into a new apartment with her parents. Feeling neglected by her busy family and dissatisfied with her monotonous surroundings, Coraline discovers a mysterious door leading to an alternate world. At first, this parallel reality appears ideal. The Other Mother and Other Father seem more attentive, affectionate, and entertaining than her real parents. The alternate world offers delicious food, endless amusement, and the fulfillment of Coraline's wishes. However, as the narrative unfolds, Coraline discovers that this seemingly perfect environment conceals a terrifying reality. The Other Mother is revealed as a predatory figure who seeks to imprison Coraline permanently, transforming fantasy into a space of fear, control, and loss of identity.

The psychological complexity of *Coraline* has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Previous studies have examined the novel from various perspectives, including gothic criticism, feminist criticism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and childhood development studies. Scholars investigating the gothic dimension of the novel focus on the uncanny atmosphere, doubles, hidden spaces, and monstrous maternal figures. Feminist studies frequently analyze the representation of motherhood through the contrast between Coraline's biological mother and the Other Mother. Meanwhile, psychoanalytic studies often employ Freudian concepts such as repression, fear, and the uncanny to explain the novel's psychological tension. Other researchers have interpreted Coraline's journey as a coming-of-age narrative emphasizing courage, resilience, and personal growth.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing scholarship demonstrates several limitations. First, many studies focus primarily on external manifestations of fear while paying less attention to the underlying structures of desire that generate anxiety. Second, Freudian analyses tend to emphasize repression and the uncanny but do not fully explain the relationship between fantasy, desire, and subject formation. Third, although researchers frequently discuss Coraline's psychological growth, they often overlook how her identity is reconstructed through the collapse of fantasy and confrontation with reality. As a result, the psychological significance of the alternate world remains underexplored beyond its function as a frightening setting.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory offers a productive framework for addressing these limitations. Lacan conceptualizes human subjectivity through the interaction of three psychic registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary is associated with fantasy, images, and idealized self-perceptions; the Symbolic encompasses language, social structures, and cultural norms; while the Real refers to experiences that resist symbolization and disrupt stable meanings (Fink 1995; Lacan 1977). These concepts are particularly relevant to *Coraline* because the novel revolves around the tension between fantasy and reality. The alternate world may be understood as an embodiment of the Imaginary Order, where Coraline's desires appear fully satisfied. However, the emergence of the ghost children, the button eyes, and the monstrous transformation of the Other Mother reveal manifestations of the Real that destabilize fantasy and generate profound anxiety.

Contemporary fantasy narratives often employ supernatural settings and uncanny experiences as symbolic representations of children's internal conflicts rather than merely as sources of entertainment (Carrick 2024). Existing scholarship has examined *Coraline* from various perspectives, including Gothic literature, fantasy, cognitive narratology, and archetypal criticism. In his article, Torres-Fernandez argues that the novel's Gothic elements function as metaphors for Coraline's emotional maturation (Torres-Fernández 2021), while Kérchy demonstrates how the narrative represents uncertainty and unconscious emotional responses through cognitive narration (Kérchy 2022). Similarly, Putera and Rudianto (2023) analyze the novel's archetypal symbolism (Putera, G. S., & Rudianto 2023), and Amajida et al. emphasize its dark fantasy conventions as reflections of broader cultural anxieties (Amajida, T. B., Setiawan, I., & Wahyuningsih 2025). Collectively, these studies confirm that *Coraline* portrays childhood development through encounters with fear, fantasy, and identity formation.

Despite the growing body of research, relatively few studies investigate *Coraline* using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, particularly the dynamic relationship among the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in constructing childhood anxiety. Although Rudd discusses Lacanian identity in the novel (Rudd 2013), the interaction of the three psychic registers as a process of subject formation remains underexplored. According to Lacan, anxiety emerges when the subject confronts the Real, which disrupts the illusion of wholeness established by the Imaginary and mediated through the Symbolic order (Lacan 2006). Supported by the interpretations of Evans (1996), Fink (1995), Homer (2005), Žižek (2006), and Nikolajeva (2019), this theoretical perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Coraline's psychological journey. Therefore, this study examines how the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real interact to construct childhood anxiety and facilitate Coraline's subject formation, thereby contributing a more integrated Lacanian interpretation to children's literature studies.

Problem Statement

The research has two questions

1. How are the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real represented in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and how do they construct childhood anxiety?

2. How do fantasy, desire, and anxiety contribute to Coraline's process of subject formation from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective?

Objective of Research

1. To analyze the representation of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and to examine how these Lacanian orders construct the experience of childhood anxiety within the narrative.
2. To investigate the relationship between fantasy, desire, and anxiety in *Coraline* and to explain how these elements contribute to Coraline's process of subject formation and psychological maturation.

Literary Review

Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Subject Formation

This study employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory as the primary framework for analyzing childhood anxiety in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*. Unlike Sigmund Freud, who emphasizes repression and unconscious drives, Lacan focuses on the role of language, desire, and symbolic structures in the formation of human subjectivity. According to Lacan, identity is not innate or stable but is continuously constructed through an individual's relationship with images, language, and social structures. Human beings do not possess a unified self; rather, subjectivity emerges through a process of identification and misrecognition that remains incomplete throughout life.

Lacan's theory is particularly relevant to children's literature because childhood is a period during which identity, desire, and self-perception are actively developing. As Evans explains, Lacanian psychoanalysis views the subject as fundamentally divided, continuously seeking a sense of wholeness that can never be fully achieved (Evans 1996). This perpetual incompleteness generates desire and anxiety, both of which play crucial roles in psychological development. In fantasy narratives such as *Coraline*, these psychological processes are frequently externalized through symbolic spaces, supernatural figures, and imaginary worlds. Consequently, Lacan's concepts provide an effective framework for examining how fantasy functions as a representation of psychological realities.

Central to Lacan's theory are three interconnected psychic registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. These registers are not developmental stages that replace one another but dimensions of human experience that continually interact throughout life. According to Homer, the relationship between these three orders forms the foundation of Lacan's understanding of subjectivity because identity is produced through the dynamic tensions among fantasy, language, and reality (Homer 2005).

The Imaginary Order

The Imaginary Order originates from Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, one of his most influential contributions to psychoanalytic theory. In his seminal essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*, Lacan describes the moment when an infant first identifies with an external image of itself. He defines the mirror stage as: "The transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2006). For Lacan, this identification produces an illusion of unity because the child perceives a coherent image despite experiencing bodily fragmentation and dependency. The resulting sense of self is therefore based on what Lacan calls *méconnaissance* or misrecognition. The individual mistakenly believes that the reflected image represents a complete and stable identity.

Lacan further explains that: "The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation" (Lacan 2006). This statement suggests that the Imaginary emerges from a desire to overcome feelings of insufficiency and fragmentation. The subject seeks an idealized image capable of providing completeness and certainty.

According to Evans, the Imaginary is characterized by identification, illusion, and idealized self-images (Evans 1996). It is a realm where subjects pursue fantasies of wholeness while overlooking the contradictions inherent in their identities. Similarly, Fink argues that the Imaginary functions as a domain of idealized coherence that conceals the fragmented nature of human subjectivity (Fink 1995).

In *Coraline*, the alternate world functions as a manifestation of the Imaginary Order. The parallel universe initially appears as a perfected version of reality in which Coraline's desires are completely fulfilled. The Other Mother provides attention, affection, and excitement absent from Coraline's ordinary life. Consequently, the alternate world embodies Coraline's fantasy of an ideal existence, reflecting the Imaginary's promise of completeness and satisfaction.

The Symbolic Order

Among Lacan's three psychic registers, the Symbolic Order occupies a central position because it is through the Symbolic that individuals become social subjects. While the Imaginary is associated with images, fantasy, and identification, the Symbolic encompasses language, cultural norms, laws, social institutions, and systems of meaning that structure human experience. According to Lacan, individuals are not born with a fully formed identity; rather, they acquire subjectivity through their entry into language and social structures. Consequently, the Symbolic Order is the realm in which individuals learn to understand themselves and others through signification and social relationships.

Lacan emphasizes the importance of language in the formation of subjectivity. In one of his most frequently cited statements, he argues that: “The unconscious is structured like a language” (Lacan 2006). This assertion reflects Lacan's belief that human identity is inseparable from linguistic systems. Unlike traditional psychoanalytic perspectives that view the unconscious as a reservoir of hidden instincts, Lacan proposes that unconscious desires are organized through the structures of language. Human beings interpret reality, communicate desires, and construct identities through symbolic systems that exist prior to their birth. Thus, individuals do not create language; rather, they enter a pre-existing symbolic network that shapes their perception of themselves and the world.

For Lacan, entry into the Symbolic Order occurs when the child moves beyond the imaginary unity experienced during the mirror stage and begins to recognize social rules, differences, and limitations. This transition is often associated with what Lacan terms the *Name-of-the-Father* (*Nom du Père*), a concept referring not merely to the biological father but to the broader system of law, authority, and cultural regulation that introduces the child into society. Through this process, the child learns that desires cannot be immediately fulfilled and that individual wishes must be negotiated within social structures. Evans explains that the Symbolic Order functions as a network of signifiers that regulates human relationships and organizes social reality (Evans 1996). Consequently, subjectivity is always shaped by external structures rather than originating solely from personal experience.

A fundamental characteristic of the Symbolic Order is the introduction of lack. Before entering the symbolic realm, the child imagines a state of completeness and unity. However, language inevitably reveals absence and difference. Once individuals become subjects within language, they recognize that no object, relationship, or experience can provide complete satisfaction. Fink argues that entry into the Symbolic Order separates the individual from the fantasy of wholeness and introduces a permanent sense of incompleteness that becomes the foundation of desire (Fink 1995). Human beings continue to pursue various objects of desire, yet none can fully eliminate this lack because the absence itself is produced by the symbolic structure of subjectivity.

Lacan further emphasizes that desire is not directed toward specific objects but is shaped by the symbolic network in which individuals are embedded. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, he states: “Man's desire is the desire of the Other” (Lacan 1977). This statement suggests that desire is socially mediated rather than purely individual. People learn what to desire through their interactions with others and through the values embedded within culture, language, and social institutions. The “Other” in Lacanian theory refers not simply to another person but to the symbolic system itself. Consequently, human desires are always influenced by external structures of meaning.

The Symbolic Order also establishes boundaries that regulate behavior and identity. Through language and social norms, individuals learn distinctions such as self and other, right and wrong, permissible and forbidden. These distinctions make social life possible but simultaneously limit personal freedom. Homer notes that the Symbolic Order provides stability and meaning while also constraining the subject within predetermined systems of signification (Homer 2005). Therefore, the Symbolic functions both as a source of identity and as a reminder of the impossibility of complete autonomy.

Within literary studies, the Symbolic Order is frequently employed to analyze how characters negotiate social expectations, cultural norms, and linguistic structures. Literary characters become subjects through their relationships with family, society, and institutional authority. Their psychological development often involves learning to navigate symbolic systems while confronting the limitations those systems impose. Children's literature is particularly suitable for such analysis because childhood represents a period during which individuals gradually acquire language, social knowledge, and cultural identity.

The Real

Among Lacan's three psychic registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—the Real is generally considered the most difficult and elusive concept. Unlike everyday notions of reality, the Real does not refer to objective existence or material facts. Instead, the Real designates that which lies beyond language, representation, and symbolic meaning. It is the dimension of human experience that cannot be fully articulated, interpreted, or integrated into systems of signification. Whereas the Imaginary provides images of coherence and the Symbolic organizes experience through language and social structures, the Real represents what escapes both systems.

Lacan repeatedly emphasizes that the Real is not synonymous with reality. Reality is already mediated by language, culture, and symbolic structures. Human beings do not experience the world directly; rather, they understand it through systems of meaning. Consequently, what people commonly refer to as reality is actually symbolic reality. The Real exists beyond this symbolic mediation and emerges whenever language fails to provide coherent explanations. In Seminar XI, Lacan famously defines the Real as: “That which always returns to the same place” (Lacan 1977). This statement suggests that the Real cannot be eliminated or permanently repressed. Although symbolic systems attempt to organize and domesticate experience, certain aspects of existence continually resist such efforts. The Real repeatedly returns in forms that disrupt established meanings and challenge the subject's sense of stability.

Lacan further distinguishes the Real from both the Imaginary and the Symbolic by emphasizing its resistance to representation. Unlike fantasies, images, or linguistic signs, the Real cannot be fully captured within discourse. As Evans explains, the Real is “outside language and resistant to symbolization” (Evans 1996). Because language necessarily transforms experience into signifiers, there always remains a dimension that escapes representation. This remainder constitutes the Real.

The relationship between the Real and language is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Lacan, language structures human subjectivity, yet language is inherently incomplete. No system of signification can fully account for human experience. Consequently, the Real appears as the limit of language itself. It is what cannot be said, represented, or understood completely.

Fink argues that the Real should not be understood as a hidden reality waiting to be discovered (Fink 1995). Rather, it is the point at which meaning breaks down. He writes that the Real emerges whenever individuals encounter experiences that exceed their symbolic capacities to interpret and organize reality. Such experiences often produce feelings of confusion, terror, or anxiety because they expose the limitations of language and understanding.

Similarly, Homer notes that the Real represents “the impossible” within human experience because it cannot be assimilated into existing structures of meaning (Homer 2005). Unlike ordinary objects, the Real cannot be mastered through knowledge or interpretation. It remains fundamentally inaccessible, appearing only through disruptions, gaps, and traumatic encounters.

The Real is therefore closely associated with trauma. Lacanian scholars frequently describe trauma as an encounter with something that cannot be fully processed or symbolized. Whereas ordinary experiences can be incorporated into personal narratives, traumatic events resist integration. The subject struggles to assign meaning to them because they exceed the explanatory power of symbolic systems.

Lacan suggests that encounters with the Real frequently occur through experiences of death, loss, bodily fragmentation, violence, and existential uncertainty. Such experiences confront individuals with aspects of existence that challenge their assumptions about coherence and stability. Consequently, the Real often appears frightening because it undermines the symbolic frameworks through which people understand themselves and the world.

Žižek further explains that the Real emerges when fantasy structures collapse (Žižek, 2006). Fantasy functions as a protective mechanism that organizes desire and shields individuals from unsettling truths. Human beings rely on fantasies to maintain a coherent sense of reality. However, when these fantasies fail, the Real becomes visible. For this reason, encounters with the Real are often accompanied by anxiety and psychological disorientation. According to Žižek : “The Real is not the reality behind reality but the void around which reality is structured” (Žižek, 2006).

This interpretation highlights the paradoxical nature of the Real. Rather than existing as a hidden truth beneath appearances, the Real is the absence or impossibility that symbolic reality attempts to conceal. Human beings construct fantasies precisely because the Real is too disruptive to confront directly. The relationship between the Real and anxiety occupies a particularly important place in Lacanian theory. In Seminar X, Lacan challenges conventional understandings of anxiety by arguing: “Anxiety is not without an object” (Lacan 2014). Unlike fear, which is directed toward identifiable threats, anxiety emerges when individuals confront the instability of the symbolic structures that support their identities. Anxiety signals proximity to the Real because it reveals the inadequacy of fantasy and symbolic explanations.

For Lacan, anxiety arises when subjects encounter something that cannot be fully understood or controlled. It is therefore one of the most direct indicators of the Real's presence. Evans notes that anxiety occupies a privileged position in Lacanian psychoanalysis because it reveals moments when the subject confronts the limits of representation and meaning.

The significance of the Real extends beyond psychoanalysis and has become particularly influential in literary studies. Literary texts often represent the Real through moments of rupture, horror, monstrosity, silence, trauma, or the collapse of narrative coherence. Such moments expose tensions that cannot be resolved through conventional explanations. Consequently, the Real provides a valuable framework for analyzing texts that explore fear, uncertainty, and psychological disturbance.

In children's literature, the Real frequently emerges through encounters with the uncanny, the monstrous, or the traumatic. Fantasy narratives are especially productive sites for examining the Real because they often juxtapose comforting imaginary worlds with disturbing truths that undermine those fantasies. The transition from fantasy to confrontation with reality mirrors the subject's movement from the Imaginary toward encounters with the Real.

Anxiety and Subject Formation

Anxiety occupies a central position in Lacanian psychoanalysis because it reveals the relationship between desire, lack, and subjectivity. Unlike traditional psychological approaches that often conceptualize anxiety as a pathological condition or emotional disturbance, Lacan regards anxiety as a structurally significant experience that provides insight into the formation of the subject. Rather than viewing anxiety merely as a symptom to be eliminated, Lacan considers it a productive phenomenon that emerges when individuals confront the instability of their identities and the limitations of the symbolic structures that organize their reality. Consequently, anxiety functions as a crucial mechanism through which subjects come to recognize the nature of their desires and their position within the symbolic order.

Lacan's understanding of anxiety differs significantly from conventional notions of fear. Fear generally involves a specific and identifiable object or threat, such as danger, violence, or physical harm. Anxiety, however, arises under more complex psychological conditions. In Seminar X, Lacan famously declares: "Anxiety is not without an object" (Lacan, 2014, p.89). This statement challenges the common assumption that anxiety is objectless. For Lacan, anxiety does indeed have an object, but that object is not easily identifiable. Rather than being directed toward a concrete threat, anxiety emerges when subjects encounter something that destabilizes their symbolic understanding of themselves and the world. Anxiety therefore signals the proximity of what Lacan calls the Real—the dimension of experience that cannot be fully represented or integrated into language.

According to Evans, anxiety occupies a privileged status in Lacanian psychoanalysis because it indicates moments when the subject confronts the limits of symbolic meaning (Evans 1996). Human beings ordinarily rely on language, cultural norms, and social identities to create a coherent sense of self. These symbolic structures provide stability by organizing experience and regulating desire. However, there are moments when these structures begin to fail. When subjects realize that their identities are not as stable as they previously believed, anxiety emerges. In this sense, anxiety is not simply an emotional response but an indication that the symbolic order can no longer fully contain or explain experience.

The relationship between anxiety and desire is particularly important in Lacan's theory. Lacan argues that human desire is structured around lack. Individuals continuously seek objects, relationships, and experiences that they believe will provide fulfillment. However, because desire is generated by absence rather than presence, complete satisfaction is impossible. The subject remains trapped within an endless pursuit of fulfillment that can never be fully achieved. Fink explains that anxiety arises when individuals come too close to the object they believe will satisfy their desire (Fink 1995). Rather than producing happiness, proximity to the desired object reveals the illusion underlying fantasy. Anxiety emerges because the subject recognizes that even the attainment of desire cannot eliminate lack.

This paradox distinguishes anxiety from ordinary dissatisfaction. Individuals often believe that obtaining a desired object will resolve their problems and provide a sense of completeness. Yet Lacan argues that such completeness is impossible because lack is a fundamental condition of subjectivity. Consequently, anxiety appears when fantasy begins to collapse and subjects recognize that the object of desire cannot deliver the wholeness they imagined. Anxiety therefore exposes the gap between fantasy and reality.

The concept of fantasy is essential for understanding anxiety in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Fantasy functions as a protective structure that organizes desire and shields subjects from the disruptive effects of the Real. Through fantasy, individuals create narratives that provide coherence and meaning to their experiences. These narratives allow them to believe that fulfillment is attainable and that their identities are stable. However, fantasy can never completely conceal the Real. When fantasy structures break down, subjects are confronted with unsettling truths regarding their desires, limitations, and vulnerabilities. At this point, anxiety emerges.

Žižek argues that fantasy serves as a screen protecting subjects from the traumatic dimension of the Real (Žižek, 2006). Human beings depend upon fantasy not because it distances them from reality but because it enables reality itself to remain meaningful. When this protective screen collapses, individuals encounter aspects of existence that resist symbolic explanation. Anxiety is therefore a response to the dissolution of fantasy and the exposure of the Real.

Within Lacanian theory, anxiety is closely connected to the process of subject formation. Subjectivity is not a fixed or unified essence but an ongoing process of negotiation between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The subject is continually shaped by language, social structures, desires, and encounters with experiences that challenge established meanings. Consequently, identity remains unstable and incomplete throughout life.

Lacan's theory of subject formation begins with the mirror stage, during which the child identifies with an image of bodily unity. This identification produces an illusion of coherence that becomes the foundation of the ego. However, this sense of unity is fundamentally imaginary because it conceals the fragmented nature of human experience. As the child enters the Symbolic Order through language and socialization, this imaginary unity becomes increasingly challenged by the realities of difference, limitation, and lack.

The subject therefore develops through a series of confrontations with absence and incompleteness. Rather than achieving a final and stable identity, individuals continually renegotiate their relationship to desire and symbolic structures. Homer argues that subject formation in Lacanian psychoanalysis involves learning to accept the impossibility of complete fulfillment (Homer 2005). Maturity emerges not through the elimination of desire but through recognition of its perpetual incompleteness.

Anxiety plays a crucial role in this developmental process because it signals moments of transformation. When existing fantasies become unsustainable, subjects are forced to reevaluate their assumptions about themselves and their desires. These moments are often uncomfortable because they involve uncertainty and instability. However, they also create opportunities for psychological growth. Anxiety compels individuals to confront aspects of reality that fantasy previously concealed.

In literary narratives, subject formation frequently occurs through experiences of fear, loss, trauma, or uncertainty. Such experiences disrupt the protagonist's previous understanding of the world and require the development of new forms of self-understanding. Children's literature often portrays this process through journeys, adventures, or encounters with fantastical beings. Although these narratives appear external, they frequently symbolize internal psychological transformations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the representation of childhood anxiety in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* through the perspective of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Qualitative research is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, symbols, narrative structures, and psychological representations embedded within the literary text rather than measuring numerical data. The primary source of data is Neil Gaiman's novel *Coraline* (2002), while secondary sources include books, journal articles, and scholarly publications related to children's literature, psychoanalysis, Lacanian theory, fantasy literature, and childhood anxiety. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. Relevant passages, dialogues, narrative descriptions, and character interactions that reflect the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Real, desire, and anxiety were identified, categorized, and documented as textual evidence for analysis.

The data were analyzed using a psychoanalytic literary approach based on Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, passages representing Coraline's desires, fantasies, fears, and psychological development were selected from the novel. Second, these textual data were classified according to Lacan's three psychic registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Third, the relationship between these registers and the emergence of childhood anxiety was examined to reveal how Coraline's encounters with fantasy and reality contribute to her process of subject formation. Finally, the findings were interpreted by relating the textual evidence to relevant scholarly discussions on children's literature and psychoanalysis. Through this approach, the study seeks to demonstrate how anxiety functions not merely as an emotional response to fear but as a crucial mechanism in Coraline's psychological maturation and construction of identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Alternate World as the Manifestation of the Imaginary Order

One of the most significant representations of Lacan's Imaginary Order in *Coraline* is the construction of the alternate world, a seemingly perfect reality designed to satisfy Coraline's desires. According to Lacan, the Imaginary Order is associated with images, identification, fantasy, and the illusion of completeness. Originating in the mirror stage, the Imaginary emerges when the child identifies with an idealized image of itself and mistakenly perceives this image as whole and coherent. Lacan argues that this process produces a form of misrecognition because the subject identifies with an illusion rather than reality. Consequently, the Imaginary is characterized by fantasies of unity and fulfillment that conceal the fragmented nature of human subjectivity.

At the beginning of the novel, Coraline experiences dissatisfaction with her ordinary life. Her parents are frequently occupied with work, leaving her feeling ignored and isolated. She complains about the monotony of her environment and seeks excitement beyond the limitations of everyday reality. Her boredom can be seen in the quote:

Nothing's changed. You'll go home. You'll be bored. You'll be ignored. No one will listen to you, really listen to you. You're too clever and too quiet for them to understand. They don't even get your name right (Gaiman 2002, p. 116).

This dissatisfaction creates a sense of lack that becomes the foundation of desire. From a Lacanian perspective, desire emerges because the subject perceives itself as incomplete and therefore seeks objects or experiences that promise fulfillment. Coraline's boredom and frustration prepare her psychologically for the attraction of the alternate world.

The first indication that the alternate world functions according to the logic of the Imaginary appears when Coraline discovers that everything beyond the mysterious door seems better than reality. Upon entering the parallel world, she immediately notices similarities to her ordinary environment, yet these similarities are accompanied by improvements specifically tailored to her wishes. The narrator explains: "The food tasted better than anything she had ever eaten" (Gaiman, 2002, p.26). This description is significant because it reveals how the alternate world caters directly to Coraline's desires. Food, one of the most basic forms of satisfaction, becomes symbolically linked to the promise of complete fulfillment. Unlike her real parents, who often provide simple meals while focusing on their work, the Other Mother offers elaborate dishes designed to delight Coraline. The alternate world thus presents itself as a space where dissatisfaction appears to disappear.

Lacan argues that the Imaginary is sustained by idealized images that promise wholeness. Similarly, Coraline perceives the alternate world not as a separate reality but as an improved version of her own. Everything appears familiar yet more attractive, creating the illusion that reality's imperfections have been eliminated. This process resembles the mirror stage, in which the child identifies with an image of completeness that compensates for feelings of insufficiency. Coraline's fascination with the alternate world reflects her identification with a fantasy that appears capable of resolving her frustrations.

The most important embodiment of this fantasy is the Other Mother. Unlike Coraline's biological mother, who is often busy and occasionally impatient, the Other Mother appears endlessly attentive and affectionate. Upon their first meeting, she cheerfully declares: "I'm your other mother, silly" (Gaiman 2002, p. 26). This statement introduces the central logic of the Imaginary. The Other Mother is not entirely different from Coraline's real mother; rather, she is an idealized duplicate. She functions as a perfected image that reflects Coraline's desires for greater attention, affection, and understanding. Lacan emphasizes that identification in the Imaginary is based on idealized images rather than reality. Coraline therefore becomes attached not to the Other Mother herself but to what the Other Mother represents: the fantasy of perfect maternal love.

The alternate world further reinforces this fantasy through its apparent responsiveness to Coraline's wishes. Unlike the real world, where she often encounters restrictions and disappointments, the alternate world seems designed exclusively for her enjoyment. The garden outside the apartment, for example, is transformed into a spectacular display shaped in Coraline's likeness:

"A huge garden, with flowers growing beneath the windows. In the center of the lawn was a sculpture of Coraline herself, made entirely of flowers" (Gaiman 2002)

This image illustrates the narcissistic structure of the Imaginary Order. The world literally reflects Coraline's image back to her, positioning her as the center of attention and admiration. Lacan argues that the Imaginary is fundamentally linked to narcissistic identification because the subject becomes captivated by images that appear to confirm its importance and coherence. The floral representation of Coraline symbolizes this process of idealized self-recognition.

Moreover, the alternate world continually offers spectacles and entertainments intended to satisfy Coraline's curiosity and desire for adventure. The performances of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible become magical displays involving impossible transformations, while the Other Father entertains her with songs specifically composed in her honor. At one point, he sings:

"Making up a song about Coraline, she's a peach, she's a pal, she's a friend of mine."

“Oh- my twitchy witchy girl
I think you are so nice,
I give you bowls of porridge
And I give you bowls of ice
Cream.
I give you lots of kisses,
And I give lots of hugs,
But I never give you sandwiches
With bugs in. (Gaiman 2002)

This song demonstrates how the alternate world functions as a fantasy constructed around Coraline's desires. Unlike reality, where attention must be shared with others, the Imaginary world positions Coraline as the exclusive focus of admiration. Such experiences reinforce the illusion that she has finally found a place where all her needs can be satisfied.

However, Lacan insists that the Imaginary is inherently deceptive because it conceals the lack at the center of human existence. The apparent perfection of the alternate world cannot eliminate absence or incompleteness; it can only disguise them temporarily. As Coraline spends more time in the fantasy realm, subtle signs begin to reveal its instability. The perfection of the world becomes increasingly artificial, suggesting that it depends upon constant maintenance rather than genuine harmony.

The first major crack in the fantasy appears when the Other Mother proposes that Coraline remain in the alternate world permanently. She explains that staying forever requires a disturbing sacrifice:

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. (Gaiman 2002, p.26)

When Coraline asks what this condition entails, she discovers that she must replace her eyes with black buttons. This moment is crucial because it exposes the hidden cost of the Imaginary fantasy. The promise of complete fulfillment requires the loss of individuality and autonomy. What initially appeared as unconditional love is revealed to be a form of possession and control.

From a Lacanian perspective, this revelation illustrates the impossibility of achieving the completeness promised by the Imaginary. The fantasy world can only sustain its illusion by demanding that Coraline abandon her subjectivity. The black buttons symbolize the reduction of the subject into an object within the Other Mother's fantasy. Consequently, the Imaginary's promise of wholeness proves to be fundamentally destructive.

The collapse of the Imaginary becomes even more apparent as Coraline learns the truth about the ghost children imprisoned by the Other Mother. Their existence reveals that the alternate world is not a paradise but a trap. One of the ghost children explains:

She will take your life and all you are and all you care'st

for, and she will leave you with nothing but mist and fog.

She'll take your joy (Gaiman 2002).

This statement exposes the violence concealed beneath the fantasy structure. The alternate world, which initially appeared as an idealized reality, is revealed as a mechanism of domination that consumes the identities of its victims. The ghost children represent previous subjects who surrendered to the fantasy of complete fulfillment and consequently lost themselves.

As the narrative progresses, the Other Mother's physical appearance also begins to change. The attractive and nurturing figure gradually transforms into a monstrous creature, revealing the instability of the fantasy image. This transformation symbolizes the disintegration of the Imaginary itself. The idealized image can no longer conceal the lack and violence that sustain it. In this quote, the illustration of the alternate world as a hollow and empty is visible.

The world she was walking through was a pale nothingness, like a blank sheet of paper or an enormous, empty white room. It had no temperature, no smell, no texture and no taste. (Gaiman 2002)

Coraline's journey through the alternate world illustrates Lacan's argument that fantasies of completeness are inherently deceptive. The Imaginary offers the illusion that desire can be fully satisfied, but such satisfaction remains impossible because lack is a fundamental condition of subjectivity. The alternate world initially appears to resolve Coraline's frustrations by providing attention, affection, and excitement. However, its apparent perfection ultimately reveals itself as a dangerous illusion that threatens her autonomy and identity.

Through the construction and eventual collapse of the alternate world, *Coraline* demonstrates how the Imaginary Order operates as a seductive but unstable realm of fantasy. The novel suggests that psychological maturity requires moving beyond fantasies of perfect fulfillment and recognizing the limitations inherent in human existence. Coraline's eventual rejection of the alternate world therefore marks the beginning of her transition from the Imaginary toward a more mature engagement with reality, setting the stage for her encounters with the Real and the process of subject formation.

The Other Mother as the Embodiment of Desire and the Illusion of Fulfillment

One of the most important manifestations of Lacanian desire in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* is the character of the Other Mother. Throughout the novel, the Other Mother functions not merely as an antagonist but as a symbolic representation of desire itself. According to Lacan, desire originates from a fundamental lack at the center of human subjectivity. Since individuals can never achieve complete wholeness, they continuously seek objects that appear capable of providing fulfillment. However, these objects never truly satisfy desire because desire is structured around absence rather than possession. Consequently, the object of desire serves primarily as a fantasy that promises completeness while simultaneously ensuring its impossibility. From this perspective, the Other Mother embodies the illusion that all desires can be fulfilled, making her a powerful representation of what Lacan terms the *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire.

At the beginning of the novel, Coraline experiences emotional dissatisfaction within her ordinary life. Her parents are frequently occupied with work and unable to devote all their attention to her. Although they genuinely care for her, their affection is mediated by responsibilities and practical concerns. Coraline perceives this situation as neglect and develops a longing for greater recognition and emotional intimacy. This longing reflects what Lacan describes as lack, the condition that generates desire. Coraline does not simply desire attention; she desires an idealized form of love that appears unrestricted, unconditional, and entirely centered on her needs.

The Other Mother emerges precisely at this moment of dissatisfaction. She appears as a figure capable of fulfilling everything Coraline believes is missing from her life. Upon entering the alternate world, Coraline encounters a maternal figure who immediately offers affection, entertainment, and attention. Unlike her biological mother, who often appears distracted by work, the Other Mother seems entirely devoted to Coraline's happiness. The narrator describes her as attentive and welcoming, creating the impression that Coraline has finally discovered the perfect parent.

The Other Mother's seductive power lies in her ability to transform desire into apparent reality. She tells Coraline:

“You can stay here forever and always. We will love you.

We want to love you. We want to be who you want.

We want you to stay forever. (Gaiman, 2002, p.43)

This promise encapsulates the fantasy of complete fulfillment. The statement suggests a world free from disappointment, absence, and limitation. The Other Mother offers not merely affection but permanence. Coraline is invited to inhabit a reality in which love never diminishes and every desire can be satisfied. From a Lacanian perspective, this promise represents the ultimate fantasy of the Imaginary Order: the belief that lack can be eliminated and completeness achieved.

Lacan argues that desire is fundamentally sustained by fantasy. Fantasy provides the illusion that a particular object or relationship can finally resolve the subject's sense of incompleteness. In *Coraline*, the Other Mother functions as precisely such a fantasy object. She appears capable of providing the emotional satisfaction Coraline believes she lacks. As long as the fantasy remains intact, Coraline perceives the Other Mother as desirable and trustworthy.

The alternate world reinforces this fantasy through numerous forms of gratification. The Other Mother prepares elaborate meals, creates magical spectacles, and transforms ordinary experiences into extraordinary adventures. Coraline observes:

“Every day will be better and brighter
than the one that went before. Remember the toy box?
How much better would a world be built just like that, and
all for you?” (Gaiman 2002).

This observation reflects Coraline's initial acceptance of the fantasy. The alternate world appears superior because it is structured around her desires. Every aspect of the environment confirms the illusion that fulfillment is possible. The Other Mother becomes the central figure responsible for sustaining this illusion.

However, Lacan insists that desire cannot be permanently satisfied because it is generated by lack itself. If desire were completely fulfilled, it would cease to exist. Consequently, fantasies of total satisfaction inevitably conceal contradictions. The object of desire appears attractive only because it remains partially inaccessible. Once subjects approach the realization of their desires, anxiety emerges because they begin to recognize the instability of the fantasy.

This dynamic becomes evident when the Other Mother proposes that Coraline remain in the alternate world permanently. She explains:

“We only need to do one thing to make you stay here forever” (Gaiman 2002, p.121)

At first glance, this proposal appears to represent the fulfillment of Coraline's wishes. She could remain in a world where she receives constant attention and affection. Yet the condition attached to this offer reveals the darker reality underlying the fantasy. Coraline must allow buttons to be sewn over her eyes:

You know that I love you.

And despite herself, 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 the other mother loved her as a possession, nothing more, a tolerated pet whose behavior was no longer amusing (Gaiman 2002).

The symbolism of the button eyes is crucial from a Lacanian perspective. Eyes traditionally signify perception, individuality, and subjectivity. By replacing Coraline's eyes with buttons, the Other Mother seeks to transform her from a subject into an object. The promised fulfillment therefore requires the sacrifice of autonomy and identity. What initially appeared as unconditional love is exposed as a desire for possession and control.

This revelation reflects Lacan's argument that the fantasy of complete satisfaction conceals a more troubling reality. The Other Mother's love is not genuine affection but a mechanism of domination. She does not desire Coraline as an independent subject but as an object belonging exclusively to her. The fantasy collapses when Coraline realizes that the Other Mother's affection is conditional upon obedience and submission.

As the narrative progresses, Coraline increasingly recognizes the possessive nature of the Other Mother's desire. One of the most significant moments occurs when she understands her position within the alternate world:

In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more (Gaiman 2002).

This realization marks a decisive shift in Coraline's understanding of desire. She recognizes that the Other Mother's apparent generosity conceals a desire to consume and control. From a Lacanian perspective, this moment represents the exposure of fantasy's underlying structure. The object that once seemed capable of providing fulfillment is revealed as fundamentally incompatible with subjectivity and freedom.

The experiences of the ghost children further reinforce this revelation. The children explain that they too were once attracted by the Other Mother's promises. Like Coraline, they believed that the alternate world offered love, happiness, and fulfillment. However, they eventually lost their identities and became trapped within the Other Mother's domain. One of the ghost children explains:

"She stole our hearts, and she stole our souls"(Gaiman 2002, p.82).

The ghost children function as warnings about the consequences of surrendering to fantasies of complete fulfillment. Their fate illustrates Lacan's assertion that the pursuit of impossible wholeness ultimately results in loss rather than satisfaction. Instead of achieving completeness, they become fragmented and powerless.

The gradual transformation of the Other Mother's physical appearance also symbolizes the collapse of fantasy. Initially, she appears attractive, nurturing, and comforting. However, as Coraline resists her control, her appearance becomes increasingly grotesque and monstrous. The beautiful image that once sustained desire can no longer conceal its underlying reality. The fantasy object reveals its true nature.

Lacan argues that desire is sustained by a misrecognition of the object's nature. Subjects attribute extraordinary qualities to desired objects, imagining that these objects possess the power to eliminate lack. Yet this power exists only within fantasy. Once the fantasy collapses, the object loses its idealized status. The Other Mother's transformation dramatizes this process. She becomes terrifying not because she changes entirely but because Coraline begins to perceive what was previously hidden beneath the fantasy.

This confrontation ultimately leads Coraline toward psychological maturity. Rather than continuing to pursue the illusion of perfect fulfillment, she learns to accept the imperfections of reality. She recognizes that genuine relationships involve limitations, frustrations, and mutual recognition rather than total gratification. Her biological parents may be imperfect, but their love respects her individuality and autonomy. From a Lacanian perspective, Coraline's rejection of the Other Mother signifies a rejection of the fantasy that desire can ever be completely satisfied. She comes to understand that lack is not a defect that must be eliminated but a fundamental aspect of human existence. By abandoning the illusion of perfect fulfillment, she develops a more mature relationship to desire and identity.

Therefore, the Other Mother serves as a powerful embodiment of Lacanian desire and fantasy. She represents the seductive promise that all needs can be satisfied and all absences overcome. Yet the novel demonstrates that such promises are inherently deceptive. The apparent fulfillment offered by the Other Mother conceals domination, loss of identity, and psychological imprisonment. Through Coraline's confrontation with this illusion, *Coraline* illustrates Lacan's central insight that desire persists precisely because complete fulfillment is impossible. The Other Mother thus functions not only as a villain but as a symbolic representation of the fantasies through which subjects attempt to escape lack, and the dangers that arise when those fantasies are mistaken for reality.

Anxiety and Subject Formation

The most significant aspect of Coraline's psychological journey is her experience of anxiety and its role in the formation of her subjectivity. While the novel is often interpreted as a story about courage and childhood adventure, a Lacanian reading reveals that Coraline's development is fundamentally structured through anxiety. Rather than functioning merely as an emotional response to danger, anxiety becomes the mechanism through which Coraline confronts the limitations of fantasy, recognizes the impossibility of complete fulfillment, and develops a more mature understanding of herself and reality. In this sense, *Coraline* exemplifies Lacan's argument that anxiety is not simply a negative emotion but a productive force in the formation of the subject.

According to Lacan, anxiety occupies a privileged position among human emotions because it reveals the instability of the symbolic structures that organize experience. At the beginning of the novel, Coraline experiences dissatisfaction rather than anxiety. She feels bored, lonely, and neglected by her busy parents. These feelings generate a desire for something more exciting and fulfilling. Consequently, she becomes attracted to the alternate world, which appears capable of satisfying all her wishes. At this stage, Coraline remains firmly invested in the Imaginary Order. The alternate world functions as a fantasy space where lack seems absent and desire appears fully satisfiable.

Initially, the fantasy world protects Coraline from anxiety because it offers a coherent narrative of fulfillment. The Other Mother provides affection, entertainment, and attention, creating the illusion that Coraline has discovered the perfect environment. However, Lacan argues that fantasy can never eliminate lack permanently. Fantasy merely conceals the contradictions and absences that structure human existence. As a result, anxiety inevitably emerges when the fantasy begins to break down.

The first significant moment of anxiety occurs when Coraline encounters evidence that the alternate world is not what it appears to be. The discovery of the ghost children introduces a traumatic truth that cannot be reconciled with the fantasy of perfection. One of the ghost children tells her:

“She does not mean you well,” whispered a ghost voice in her ear.

“We do not believe that she would help you. It must be a trick. (Gaiman, 2002, p.105)

This revelation fundamentally destabilizes Coraline's understanding of the alternate world. Until this point, she has interpreted the world through the logic of desire and fulfillment. The ghost children expose a hidden reality that contradicts this interpretation. From a Lacanian perspective, the appearance of the ghost children represents an encounter with the Real. They reveal the violence concealed beneath the fantasy structure and force Coraline to recognize that the alternate world is not a paradise but a predatory system.

This encounter generates anxiety because it disrupts Coraline's symbolic framework. The meanings that previously organized her experience can no longer adequately explain what she sees. The ghost children occupy a liminal position between life and death, presence and absence, making them difficult to integrate into ordinary symbolic categories. Consequently, Coraline experiences uncertainty and psychological disorientation.

Anxiety intensifies when the Other Mother reveals the true condition for remaining in the alternate world. She proposes that Coraline replace her eyes with black buttons:

“Little black buttons through your eyes. It will hurt only for a moment.” (Gaiman 2002, p. 126)

This moment is crucial because it transforms the fantasy of fulfillment into a threat to subjectivity itself. Throughout the novel, eyes symbolize individuality, perception, and selfhood. The replacement of eyes with buttons signifies the loss of personal identity and autonomy. Coraline is no longer being offered happiness; she is being asked to surrender her status as a subject.

According to Lacan, anxiety emerges when the subject comes into direct contact with the object that appears capable of fulfilling desire. Rather than producing satisfaction, this encounter exposes the impossibility of complete fulfillment. The button eyes symbolize precisely such an encounter. Coraline realizes that obtaining everything she desires would require sacrificing the very identity that makes desire possible. Thus, anxiety emerges from the recognition that fulfillment and selfhood are fundamentally incompatible.

The Other Mother's increasingly monstrous appearance further intensifies Coraline's anxiety. Initially, the Other Mother appears warm, beautiful, and nurturing. However, as Coraline resists her authority, this image begins to deteriorate. The narrator describes her transformation:

“Her face was white and thin and very, very angry.”

There was a scrabbling and a pattering, and Coraline
could feel her heart pounding against her ribs. She put out
one hand . . . and felt something wispy, like a spider's web,
brush her hands and her face.. (Gaiman, 2002, p. 58).

This transformation symbolizes the collapse of the Imaginary image that originally attracted Coraline. The idealized maternal figure can no longer conceal the predatory reality beneath the fantasy. From a Lacanian perspective, this moment illustrates the breakdown of identification. The image that once promised fulfillment now becomes a source of horror and anxiety.

Importantly, Coraline's anxiety is not limited to fear of physical harm. The deeper source of her anxiety lies in the destabilization of her desires. The alternate world initially functioned as a solution to her dissatisfaction. Once this solution proves illusory, Coraline is forced to confront the persistence of lack. She realizes that no world, relationship, or object can provide the complete satisfaction she imagined. This realization corresponds to Lacan's assertion that anxiety emerges when fantasy ceases to protect the subject from the truth of desire.

However, anxiety in *Coraline* is not purely destructive. On the contrary, it becomes the catalyst for psychological growth. Lacan argues that subject formation occurs through encounters with lack, absence, and impossibility. Individuals develop as subjects not by achieving fulfillment but by learning to negotiate the limitations imposed by reality. Anxiety plays a crucial role in this process because it exposes the inadequacy of fantasy and compels subjects to construct new forms of understanding.

Coraline's development becomes particularly evident in her decision to resist the Other Mother rather than submit to her promises. Instead of seeking comfort within fantasy, she chooses to confront uncertainty and danger. This decision demonstrates a significant transformation in her relationship to desire. Earlier in the novel, Coraline sought immediate gratification and escape from boredom. By the conclusion of the narrative, she recognizes that genuine freedom requires accepting limitation rather than denying it.

One of the most revealing moments occurs when Coraline rejects the fantasy of unrestricted fulfillment and declares:

You really don't understand, do you? 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 (Gaiman, 2002, p.118)

This statement represents a profound Lacanian insight. Coraline acknowledges that desire itself is unstable and potentially deceptive. Human beings often believe they want complete satisfaction, but such satisfaction would ultimately destroy the dynamic structure of desire. By rejecting the fantasy of total fulfillment, Coraline accepts the fundamental lack that characterizes human subjectivity.

Her eventual return to the real world symbolizes her acceptance of the Symbolic Order. The real world remains imperfect. Her parents continue to work, responsibilities continue to exist, and frustrations remain unavoidable. Nevertheless, Coraline now understands that these imperfections are not deficiencies to be eliminated but conditions of authentic existence. This can be considered as an internal conflict. Alwi states that internal conflict is a clash inside character's mind that give impacts on his/her action (in Devi and Sagita 2025). Here, the conflict occurs when Coraline realizes that unlike the alternate world, the real world allows for genuine relationships because it recognizes individuality and difference.

The contrast between Coraline's attitude at the beginning and end of the novel demonstrates the process of subject formation. Initially, she perceives herself primarily through the lens of desire and fantasy. She believes that happiness depends upon finding a world capable of satisfying all her wishes. Through her encounters with anxiety, however, she learns that identity is not achieved through fulfillment but through the acceptance of incompleteness. This transition reflects Lacan's conception of subjectivity as an ongoing negotiation between desire, lack, and symbolic reality. Coraline said:

That being brave didn't mean you weren't scared. Being brave meant you were scared, really scared, badly scared, and you did the right thing anyway. (Gaiman 2002, p.56)

All in all, Coraline's encounters with anxiety enable her to develop autonomy. Rather than relying upon external figures to define her identity, she begins to assume responsibility for her own decisions. She rescues her parents, outwits the Other Mother, and confronts dangers independently. These actions indicate not merely increased bravery but a transformation in her understanding of herself as a subject. She no longer seeks validation through fantasy but derives confidence from her ability to navigate uncertainty.

Coraline illustrates Lacan's argument that anxiety is an essential component of subject formation. The novel demonstrates that psychological maturity does not emerge through the elimination of fear or the attainment of complete satisfaction. Instead, maturity develops through encounters with the Real that expose the limitations of fantasy and reveal the inevitability of lack. Coraline's anxiety serves as the catalyst for this process, compelling her to abandon illusions of completeness and embrace a more complex understanding of reality.

Therefore, from a Lacanian perspective, anxiety functions as a transformative force rather than a pathological condition. By confronting anxiety, Coraline moves beyond the Imaginary fantasy of perfect fulfillment and enters a more mature relationship with the Symbolic Order. Her journey suggests that the development of subjectivity requires not the avoidance of anxiety but the willingness to confront it. Through this process, *Coraline* portrays childhood anxiety as a necessary stage in psychological growth, demonstrating how encounters with uncertainty, loss, and limitation contribute to the formation of an autonomous and resilient subject.

CLOSING

Conclusion

This study explores Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, focusing on the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Real, and anxiety in the process of subject formation. The findings reveal that the alternate world represents the Imaginary Order, a realm of fantasy and idealized images that promises the fulfillment of Coraline's desires. Through the figure of the Other Mother, Coraline encounters an apparently perfect reality that offers attention, affection, and happiness absent from her everyday life. However, this fantasy ultimately conceals the fundamental lack that, according to Lacan, structures human subjectivity.

The analysis further demonstrates that the Other Mother embodies the illusion of fulfillment and functions as a representation of Lacanian desire. While she appears to satisfy Coraline's emotional needs, her affection is revealed to be possessive and controlling. The requirement that Coraline replace her eyes with buttons symbolizes the loss of individuality and autonomy necessary to maintain the fantasy of completeness. This finding supports Lacan's argument that desire can never be fully satisfied because the object of desire merely sustains the illusion of wholeness rather than eliminating lack.

The study also finds that anxiety emerges when Coraline encounters manifestations of the Real, including the ghost children, the button eyes, and the monstrous transformation of the Other Mother. These elements disrupt the coherence of the fantasy world and expose truths that cannot be fully explained through the Imaginary or the Symbolic. As a result, Coraline experiences anxiety not simply as fear but as a confrontation with the collapse of fantasy and the impossibility of complete fulfillment. In Lacanian terms, anxiety signals her encounter with the Real and the instability of the desires that previously shaped her understanding of reality.

Finally, Coraline's psychological growth occurs through her willingness to confront anxiety and reject the illusion of perfect satisfaction. By returning to the real world and accepting its imperfections, she moves beyond the Imaginary fantasy of completeness and develops a more mature relationship with reality. Therefore, the novel portrays anxiety as a necessary stage in subject formation, demonstrating that identity is constructed not through the fulfillment of desire but through the recognition of lack, the acceptance of limitation, and the confrontation with reality. Through this perspective, *Coraline* offers a profound representation of childhood psychological development and the formation of subjectivity.

REFERENCES

- Amajida, T. B., Setiawan, I., & Wahyuningsih, I. 2025. "Dark Fantasy in Neil Gaiman's Coraline: An Analysis of Formulaic Structure." *Lakon: Jurnal Kajian Sastra Dan Budaya*, 14(1) 14(1)(1).
- Carrick, N. 2024. "A Tale of Fantasy Use in Children's Picture Books. Early Child Development and Care." *Early Child Development and Care* 194(15–16):1497–1510.
- Devi, Redita, and and Gisella Tyara Sagita. 2025. "Konflik Batin Tokoh Seongsam dalam Cerita Pendek Hak Karya Hwang Sun-Won: Psikologi Sastra." *Jurnal Pujangga Volume 11, Nomor 2* 11(2):107–18.
- Evans, D. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- Fink, B. 1995. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton University Press.
- Gaiman, N. 2002. *Coraline*. Harper Collins.
- Homer, S. 2005. *Jacques Lacan*. Routledge.
- Kérchy, A. 2022. "'Nothing, She Thought, Had Ever Been so Interesting': Psychonarration and the Embodied Cognition of Uncertainty in Coraline, a Children's Gothic Novella by Neil Gaiman." *NCOGNITO: Papers in Cognitive Cultural Studies*, 1(2), 60–71 1(2):60–71.
- Lacan, J. 1977. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). W. W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. 2006. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton.
- Lacan, J. 2014. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety* (A. R. Price, Trans.). Polity Press.
- Nikolajeva, M. 2019. *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. Routledge.
- Putera, G. S., & Rudianto, G. 2023. "The Archetypal Images in Coraline Novel by Neil Gaiman (2002)." *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 11(1) 11(1).
- Rudd, D. 2013. *Reading the Child in Children's Literature: An Heretical Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Torres-Fernández, J. J. 2021. "The Story of Coraline(s): A Gothic Coming of Age."
REDEN. Revista Española De Estudios Norteamericanos 3(1):20–40.

Žižek, S. n.d. *How to Read Lacan*. W. W. Norton.