

# THE 'OTHER' NARNIA: MANIFESTATIONS AND MUTATIONS OF C.S. LEWIS'S *THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE* IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *CORALINE*

**Carole Godfrey**

Department of English Language and Literature

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa

carie.godfrey@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Between 2003 and 2004, Neil Gaiman wrote a short story called 'The problem of Susan'. In it, a young journalist has a dream in which she is Susan Pevensie and the world of Narnia has become dark and terrifying. In this article, the author argues that Gaiman's preoccupation with and intertextual re-envisioning of Narnia goes beyond 'The problem of Susan', and that his children's book, *Coraline* (2002), can be viewed partly as a rewriting of C.S. Lewis's *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* ([1950] 2001). The author further shows that the two books have many shared aspects, but that Gaiman transforms these aspects to make the fantasy world in *Coraline* an unsteady, threatening and even horrifying version of the bright and inviting world of Narnia. The author also argues that Gaiman's purpose in so doing is to defy and subtly criticise what he views as Lewis's attempts to encourage children to remain innocent and childlike.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2003 and 2004, Neil Gaiman (2010, 8) wrote a short story called 'The problem of Susan' for an anthology of fantasy stories entitled *Flights*. When the story was published again in *Fragile things*, an anthology of his stories, Gaiman (2010, 8) stated:

I read the Narnia books to myself hundreds of times as a boy, and then aloud as an adult, twice, to my children. There is so much in the books that I love, but each time I found the disposal of Susan to be intensely problematic and deeply irritating. I suppose I wanted to write a story that would be equally problematic, and just as much of an irritant, if from a different direction, and to talk about the remarkable power of children's literature.<sup>1</sup>

I plan to argue that Gaiman's interest in C.S. Lewis' Narnia books manifests not only in 'The problem of Susan', but also in his children's book, *Coraline*,<sup>2</sup> published in 2002. I will show that *Coraline* can perhaps be regarded as either a conscious or an unconscious rewriting of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*<sup>3</sup> in a world far darker and more disturbing than the world stumbled into by the Pevensie children of Narnia.

In 'The problem of Susan', a young journalist has a dream in which she is Susan Pevensie and inhabits a dark and terrifying version of Narnia. In the dream, Aslan the lion and the Witch make a pact that Aslan will take the girls and she the boys. Aslan '*eats all of [Susan] except her head, in her dream. He leaves the head, and one of her hands, just as a housecat leaves the parts of a mouse it has no desire for, for later, or as a gift*' [author's italics] (Gaiman 2010, 113). Susan's decapitated head is forced to watch as her brothers become deformed, as Aslan eats Lucy, slowly, because she is his favourite, and Aslan and the Witch fornicate. After this is over, Aslan returns to eat Susan's head. When the journalist wakes, she thinks about the professor of children's literature she met earlier that day. She imagines the professor

waking in the night and listening to the noises coming from the old applewood wardrobe in the corner: to the rustlings of all these gliding ghosts, which might be mistaken for the scurrings of mice or rats, to the padding of enormous velvet paws, and the distant, dangerous music of a hunting horn. She knows she is being ridiculous, although she will not be surprised when she reads of the professor's demise. *Death comes in the night*, she thinks, before she returns to sleep. *Like a lion* [author's italics]. (Gaiman 2010, 113–114)

Pullman (2002) notes in his review in *The Guardian* that *Coraline* 'occupies a territory somewhere between Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and Catherine Storr's classic fantasy of warning and healing, *Marianne dreams*'. Nikolajeva (2009, 259) writes that:

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) is in every respect a dialogical response to *Alice in Wonderland*, with every indication of postmodern literature present. In this novel, we meet, similarly to Alice, doors and keys, mirrors, pretty gardens, murky passages, and bizarre creatures. While Alice may be considered dark, Coraline is darker, and while Alice comfortably wakes up from her nightmare, nightmare pursues Coraline into her reality.

Thus, the similarities between *Coraline* and *Alice in Wonderland* have been noted, and it appears that there is a strong tendency amongst Gaiman's readers to link his work to older influential texts. This tendency suggests that readings of Gaiman's work have been influenced by theories, such as Kristeva's (1966, 1980, 66) theory of intertextuality, which posits that each text is 'a mosaic of quotations [and that] any text is the absorption and transformation of another', or Bloom's (1997) theory of *the anxiety of influence* which posits that poets are all indebted to those poets who came before them, and the weaker poets copy and idealise their predecessors, while the stronger poets question and adapt their predecessors' work. Despite the influence of these theories, however, few have noticed how closely Gaiman's (2009, 17) description of the transformed world of Narnia inside the professor's wardrobe parallels the description of the world behind the 'big, carved, brown wooden door at the far end of the drawing room' in *Coraline*. It is difficult to say whether the 'intertextual processes through which children take ownership of a particular text' (Wilkie-Stibbs 1999, 169) are usually part of the experience of reading *Coraline* for children, since many of the children who read *Coraline* will not have read *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. In addition to this, adults who have read both books seem to notice a parallel between *Alice in Wonderland* and *Coraline* far more readily than they notice a similarity between *Coraline* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. It thus seems likely that Wilkie-Stibbs's (1999, 169) statements that 'books read in childhood and childhood experiences have a profound bearing on adult perceptions' and 'numerous adults, many of whom are themselves writers of children's books, ... refer to the influences on them of their childhood reading matter' are true for Gaiman. Furthermore, Gaiman has either consciously or unconsciously woven *Coraline* out of the fabric of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* to reflect on the book's impact on his mind and childhood, rather than to create an intertextual experience for his child readers. The similarities between the frightening Narnia inside the applewood wardrobe in 'The problem of Susan' and the other world of *Coraline* are definitely present, however, whether noticed or not. Both places are filled with threats, mice, rats and ghosts, and Narnia and the fantasy world in *Coraline* have many other shared aspects which suggest their kinship. However, in *Coraline*, these shared aspects appear in ways that suggest they are mutated aspects of the world of Narnia, and that these mutations show the dark side of childhood that Gaiman seems to be suggesting Lewis sublimates or ignores.

## 2. SHARED ASPECTS OF THE BOOKS

### 2.1. Portals between two worlds

One of these shared aspects is, as has been suggested, that both books have portals between the real and fantasy worlds. The world of Narnia is accessed through a wardrobe, and the world Coraline goes to is on the other side of a large old door. Both portals shut themselves occasionally. But while Coraline's first entry into her world is associated with guilt and is conscious, Lucy's first entry into Narnia, like that of her siblings, is innocent and accidental. When Coraline goes into her world for the first time, she stops and listens before going, and she knows that she is 'doing something wrong' (Gaiman 2009, 37). When Lucy enters Narnia for the first time, she does it with no guilt, and behaves like a good girl, leaving the door open because she knows that 'it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe' (Lewis 2001, 13). After leaving her fantasy world for the first time, Coraline locks the door of the drawing room with a cold black key (Gaiman 2009, 61), suggesting that she wants to stay out of the world and keep it away from her. When Coraline enters the corridor that takes her to the other world, she can smell 'dust and damp and mustiness' (72). The corridor is a place where 'strange voices' whisper and 'distant winds' howl (59). When the portal to the other world is not open, it is 'blocked by rough red bricks' (59), suggesting that somebody besides Coraline has tried to keep the other world contained. By contrast, when Lucy goes into the wardrobe, she gets in amongst the coats and rubs her face against them because there is nothing Lucy likes so much as 'the smell and feel of fur' (Lewis 2001, 13). This suggests that Narnia is much more warm and welcoming than the world Coraline visits. Lucy also happily invites all of her siblings to accompany her into Narnia when she comes out of the wardrobe (31). The Pevensie children thus go into and leave Narnia freely if accidentally (13, 34, 62).

Coraline, on the other hand, has to force herself to go into the other world a second time, to rescue her parents from a witch-like figure called the 'other mother'. When she does this, her movement is described as very slow and reluctant. First, she picks up a ring of keys and takes the old black key off the ring. Then she walks into the drawing room and looks at the door. Almost three pages later, she is still hesitating. She finally turns the key in the door but she makes no move to walk through the door until the end of the page. She also cannot leave freely, because her 'other mother' locks the portal door, takes away the key, and keeps Coraline captive by refusing to reveal where she is keeping her parents (Gaiman 2009, 68–77). In addition to this, whereas Narnia has a name, Coraline's other world does not. Similarly, Lewis's wardrobe seems to be a wardrobe but is actually a portal into another world, while Gaiman's door seems to lead somewhere at first, because it is a door, but then does not, because the door is bricked up. But ultimately the bricks too are shown to be an illusion, because they disappear.

The similarities and differences between the portals leading to Coraline's world and Narnia suggest that, while both *Coraline* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* have portals which open into alternative worlds, Narnia is a reliable world for fairly innocent children where real life becomes sparkling, exciting and brilliant, whereas Coraline's other world is an unreliable place for children who are less innocent and more aware of their own dark inner selves, where real life becomes horrifying and dark. In the world of the 'other mother', the characters do not move from normal reality to what Frye (1976, 97–98) calls a higher world, as they do in Narnia, but rather to what he calls a lower world, a world very much like hell. In addition to this, *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* is what Mendlesohn (2008, xix) calls 'The classic portal fantasy' in which 'Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not', but the two worlds of *Coraline* are less distinct. Gooding (2008, 404), in comparing *Coraline* to *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, states that *Coraline* makes use of 'refinements of the "portal" narrative pattern', but *Coraline* can also be described as what Mendlesohn (2008, xxiii) calls 'liminal fantasy', in which 'we are invited to cross the threshold into the fantastic, but *choose not to do so*. The result is that the fantastic leaks back through the portal' [author's italics]. *Coraline* combines portal and liminal fantasy as fantasy does leak into her world in the form of the amputated hand of the 'other mother', but Coraline also does choose to go back into her fantasy world, albeit reluctantly.

Furthermore, *Coraline* could also be described as what Mendlesohn (2008, xxi–xxii) calls 'intrusion fantasy', in which 'the fantastic is the bringer of chaos', arouses 'horror and amazement', 'takes us out of safety without taking us from our place' and 'has at its base the assumption that normality is organized'. In intrusion fantasy, 'those set apart from the protagonist may not be able to perceive the fantastic even though they experience its effects' and the magic that escapes into the real world 'must be defeated' (Mendlesohn 2008, xxi–xxii). Coraline also does not fit this description perfectly, however, as, although her parents are stolen by the 'other mother' and have no recollection of this when they return, and although her fantasy world is definitely a bearer of horror which she must destroy, it can be argued that fantasy does draw her out of her place, as she goes into a twisted version of reality that is not her true world during the story. The similarities and differences between the portals of both books, as well as the fact that *Coraline* is much harder to classify in terms of genre than *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, imply that Coraline's world can perhaps be regarded as a kind of unsteady, suspicious, confusing, perverted version of Narnia.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2. Aslan and the cat

Other indications that the world of *Coraline* could be seen as an unstable and unpredictable version of the reliable and stable world of *The lion, the witch and the*

*wardrobe* are the differences and similarities between Aslan, the lion, and the cat that accompanies and helps Coraline throughout most of her adventure. As stated above, the idea that this cat is perhaps intended to come across as a perverse version of Aslan is suggested by Gaiman's (2010, 113) comparison between Aslan and a cat that '*leaves the parts of a mouse it has no desire for, for later, or as a gift*' [author's italics] in 'The problem of Susan'. The differences and similarities between Aslan and the cat are plain from their first appearances in the fantasy worlds of each text. When Aslan first appears, the Beavers and the children do not know what to do or say when they see him (Lewis 2001, 13). Aslan is described as 'good and terrible at the same time' (137), but when the children finally gather the courage to speak to him, he says welcome to each of them in turn. After this, they feel glad and quiet and it does not seem awkward to them to stand and say nothing (139). When Peter states that it is partly his fault that Edmund has run away and betrayed Aslan and his brothers and sisters, Aslan says nothing either to excuse Peter or to blame him but merely stands looking at him, and it seems to all of them that there is 'nothing to be said' (140). When Lucy asks Aslan if anything can be done to save Edmund, he says, "'All shall be done ... But it may be harder than you think'" (140). Aslan does not elaborate.

When Coraline first encounters the cat in the other world, Coraline's feelings towards the cat are described thus: 'Half of her wanted to be very rude to it; the other half wanted to be polite and deferential' (Gaiman 2009, 48–49). When Coraline says to the cat, "'We ... we could be friends, you know'" (48), the cat says, "'We *could* be rare specimens of an exotic breed of African dancing elephants ... But we're not'" [author's italics] (48). She asks the cat, "'But if you're the same cat I saw at home, how can you talk?'" The cat shrugs (47). When Coraline asks the cat "'How did you get here?'" (49) it says, "'Like this'" (49) and walks slowly across the lawn. It walks behind a tree, but does not come out on the other side. Coraline goes over to the tree and looks behind it. The cat is gone, and Coraline is left to wonder what it meant (49–50).

Thus, both Aslan and the cat evoke conflicting emotions. Each evokes some degree of awe, which is why Aslan is described as 'good and terrible' (Lewis 2001, 137) and why Coraline wishes to be polite to the cat. Both Aslan and the cat tend to refuse to give expected responses, which is why the cat simply shrugs at Coraline's questions and Aslan neither condemns nor forgives Peter. Both give answers that are mysterious, such as the cat's answer as to how it got to the other world and Aslan's answer to Lucy's question about whether or not Edmund can be saved. However, while Aslan is welcoming to the children and creates a feeling of closeness and trust between him and them, the cat creates a sense of distance and coldness between itself and Coraline. Similarly, while Aslan's answer about Edmund is mysterious, it is also quite comforting, whereas the cat's answer is deliberately unhelpful. In addition to this, while Aslan has a name, the cat insists that "'cats don't have names'" (Gaiman

2009, 48). This makes it much harder to identify the meaning of the cat or to see it as something stable and easily identifiable. By contrast, Aslan's identity as a symbol for Jesus is always quite apparent. This shows that, though both Narnia and the world of *Coraline* are places with guiding figures, the world of Narnia is a place where these figures can certainly be depended on, while the world of *Coraline* is a place where the dependability and trustworthiness of everyone, even those who seem to be there to guide or help, is far less certain.

### 2.3. The White Witch and the 'other mother'

It is not only the guiding characters in *Coraline* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* who have interesting similarities and differences; so do the threatening ones, such as the White Witch in *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* and the 'other mother' in *Coraline*. When readers first encounter the Witch, she is described as a great lady who is taller than any woman Edmund has ever seen (Lewis 2001, 37). She also is covered in white fur up to her throat and her face is 'not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing-sugar, except for her very red mouth' (37). It is 'a beautiful face in other respects', but is 'cold and stern' (37). When the Witch sees Edmund, she asks, "'And what, pray, are you?'" (39). Edmund does not like the way she looks at him and feels sure that she is going to do something dreadful to him, but he seems unable to move. Then, just as he gives himself up for lost, she appears to change her mind. The Witch suddenly begins to show sympathy towards Edmund and offers him a hot drink, which he has never tasted before, which is very sweet and foamy and creamy and warms him right down to his toes. She also gives him Turkish Delight which is sweet and light to the very centre, and Edmund has never tasted anything more delicious. The Witch knows that it is enchanted Turkish Delight and anyone who has once tasted it will want more and more of it and will, if they are allowed, go on eating it until they kill themselves (39–44). The Witch says to Edmund:

'I want a nice boy whom I could bring up as a Prince and who would be King of Narnia when I am gone. While he was Prince he would wear a golden crown and eat Turkish Delight all day long; and you are much the cleverest and handsomest young man I've ever met. I think I would like to make you the Prince.' (45)

The Witch imagines herself a queen (153). She suppresses everyone in Narnia and uses them as spies so that 'even some of the trees are on her side' (26). Eventually, the Witch becomes openly disdainful towards Edmund, and all the things he has said to himself to make himself believe that she is good and kind and that her side is really the right side sound silly to him (124). She eventually tries to kill Edmund, whom she says belongs to her as her 'lawful prey' (153), because for every treachery she has a right to kill. She will not give Edmund up until Aslan agrees to die in Edmund's place (153–156).

When Coraline first sees the 'other mother', she

[looks] a little like Coraline's mother. Only ...

Only her skin [is] white as paper.

Only she [is] much taller and thinner.

Only her fingers [are] too long, and they never [stop] moving, and her dark-red fingernails [are] curved and sharp. (Gaiman 2009, 38)

When the 'other mother' sees Coraline, she says, "'Coraline ... Is that you?'" (38) and then she turns around. Her eyes are big black buttons. She tells Coraline, 'we knew you'd arrive one day, and then we could be a proper family' (39), and looks at her with her eyes 'gleaming' (40). She feeds Coraline the best chicken that Coraline has ever tasted. After eating, Coraline goes exploring, and comes across a creation of the 'other mother's', called 'the other old man upstairs'. She finds that there is something hungry in the old man's button eyes that makes her feel 'uncomfortable' (41–43). The 'other mother' wishes desperately to keep Coraline, so she steals her parents to lure her back into the other world (67). When Coraline comes back to the other world to retrieve her stolen parents, the 'other mother' says that she and the other father are "'ready to love you and play with you and feed you and make your life interesting'" (73). Coraline is promised that every day will be "'better and brighter than before'" (138). The other father, who was also created by the 'other mother' and is one of her minions, offers Coraline hot chocolate, but this time she refuses, and will only eat an apple that she brought with her from her real world (74). She stubbornly refuses to eat the black beetles that the 'other mother' eats with relish (93). The other father says that the 'other mother' made the house, the grounds, and the people in the house (85) and controls them all, but Coraline knows she can 'only transform, and twist, and change' (144), and thus cannot create in her own right. She has had the other world a very long time and the rats in it are all spies for her (90). The 'other mother' is dangerous, and Coraline is warned that "'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'" (101–103). The other father also says: "'She wants me to hurt you, to keep you here for ever'" (131) and Coraline is warned that she "'will never give you up, now she has you. She will no more give any of us up than she can change her nature'" (143).

Thus, both the 'other mother' and the White Witch are unnaturally tall and white, and both of them look at children in ways that make them uncomfortable. Both offer delicious food, exciting lives and attention to lure children into traps. Both have spies, and both are willing or even eager to hurt the children. Both seem to possess power which has been perverted or usurped by them, and both are tenacious about keeping whatever they want or believe is theirs. However, while it takes the Witch some time to realise who and what Edmund is, the 'other mother' knows who Coraline is before Coraline even steps into the other world, which suggests either that she is more

capable of sneaking into or seeing reality than the Witch, or that she is simply far more eager for the coming of Coraline than the Witch is for the entrance of Edmund. In addition to this, while the Witch's attitude towards Edmund is quite clearly one of hatred and animosity thinly disguised by a show of affection designed to persuade Edmund to bring his siblings to her, the 'other mother's' behaviour towards Coraline is much more ambiguous. When the 'other mother' tells Coraline, "“You know that I love you”" (124), despite herself, Coraline nods. It is true: the 'other mother' loves her. But she loves Coraline 'as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold' (124). When Coraline asks the cat, "“Why does she want me?”" (79) the cat tells her: "“She wants something to love ... Something that isn't her. She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that”" (79).

This creates a strong parallel between the 'other mother' and the Aslan in 'The problem of Susan', who eats Lucy because she is his favourite. Parsons (2008, 373) states that 'the "other mother" is "all-powerful and sadistic ... but ... plays the traditional mothering role admirably. She cooks the food Coraline loves, provides toys and clothing, and wants to play with her daughter rather than prioritize a career"'. Thus, while in Narnia, love and hatred are clearly divided between the Witch and Aslan, in *Coraline*, love and hatred are much more ambiguous: there, a dangerous stranger can wear the face of a trusted loved one, animosity and cruelty can exist together with a kind of love, and love can come from those who mean you harm. This makes the world of *Coraline* highly similar to, but much more undependable, unsteady, unclear and unsafe than the world of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*.

## 2.4. Other figures

There are other figures in the worlds of *Coraline* and Narnia that have telling similarities to and differences from one another. Two of these are the professor in *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* and 'the crazy old man upstairs' (Gaiman 2001, 25) in *Coraline*. The professor is 'a very old man with shaggy white hair which [grows] over most of his face as well as on his head' (Lewis 2001, 9) and the children like him almost at once. He is described as 'odd-looking' (9) and, when he is told of Lucy's story about Narnia by Peter and Susan, he sits listening to them with the tips of his fingers pressed together and never interrupting, till they have finished the whole story. He does not tell them not to be silly or tell lies, but believes the whole story and believes that nothing is more probable than the existence of other worlds (54–57). The professor seems to know the world of Narnia well, as he says, "“No ... You won't get back into Narnia again by *that* route”" and, "“Yes, of course you'll get back to Narnia again some day. Once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia”" (203) in answer to the children's questions. This suggests a detailed knowledge of Narnia and its workings.

In *Coraline*, there is a description close to the beginning of the book of a 'crazy old man with a big moustache' (Gaiman 2009, 12). He tells Coraline that he is training a mouse circus, but he will not allow anyone to see it. Coraline does not really believe that there is a mouse circus, and thinks that the old man is probably making it up. The first time the old man speaks to Coraline, he says:

'One day, little Caroline, when they are all ready, everyone in the whole world will see the wonders of my mouse circus. You ask me you cannot see it now. Is that what you asked me?'  
'No,' [says] Coraline quietly, 'I asked you not to call me Caroline. It's Coraline.' (12)

The crazy old man continues with his story regardless of what Coraline says. The next time Coraline meets the old man, he tells her: "'The mice have a message for you ... The message is this. *Don't go through the door*'" [author's italics] (25). He pauses and asks: "'Does that mean anything to you?'" (25). When Coraline says no, he responds by saying: "'They are funny, the mice. They get things wrong. They got your name wrong, you know. They kept saying Coraline. Not Caroline. Not Caroline at all'" (26). Though both the professor and Mr Bobo, the crazy old man, are old and eccentric and have excessive facial hair, Mr Bobo, unlike the professor, does not listen to what Coraline says. He also does not seem to know anything about the book's fantasy world, nor does he seem to believe in it. In fact, his mice seem to have more wisdom and insight into the other world than he does. In addition to this, despite being old, he has strange ideas that the young Coraline disbelieves.

This contrasts with *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, in which the ideas of the young, such as Lucy, are more likely to be disbelieved by those who are older, such as her brothers and sisters. Not only does Coraline disbelieve Mr Bobo's stories about his mice, but Mr Bobo also does not believe his mice when they impart strange wisdom to Coraline. In contrast to this, the professor is always ready to believe the improbable. This shows that *Coraline* presents a world in which there are many similarities to the world of Narnia, but in which the adult characters are less knowledgeable, reliable, dependable and open to forming connections with children; while the child character is more cynical and sophisticated than the children of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*.

## 2.5. Shared symbols

Not only characters, but also symbols in the fantasy worlds of *Coraline* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* betray both their similarities and their telling differences. Some of these symbols are the talismans that the children and Coraline carry. In Narnia, Peter receives from Father Christmas a shield and a sword; Susan receives a bow and arrow as well as a 'little ivory horn'; and Lucy receives a small dagger and a bottle carrying a magic cordial (Lewis 2001, 118–119). Susan uses her horn to call Peter when attacked by Maugrim, the wolf captain of the White Witch's secret

police, and Peter uses his gifts to slay Maugrim (144). He also uses them to fight against the Witch and her army, while Lucy uses her cordial to heal those hurt in the final battle with the Witch (190–193). This makes it clear that these talismans are tools with a clear use and are intended to protect the children from tangible threats while they are in Narnia.

Coraline, however, receives no tool with an obvious use. She receives instead, while in her real world, a stone with a hole in it from Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, two former actresses who live in her building. They give her the stone because they decide after reading her tea leaves that she is in danger, though they cannot tell her what danger this is. Coraline asks what the stone is for, but is only told that 'it might help' and that it is 'good for bad things, sometimes' (Gaiman 2009, 30–31). When the cat speaks to Coraline in the other world, it tells her, "'it was sensible of you to bring protection'" (49), but when Coraline asks it what it means, it does not clarify, so she remains uncertain of the stone's purpose. She only finds out what the stone is for after she is shut in a cupboard with a group of ghost children, for then she can hear the ghost children in her head, and one whispers to her: "'Look through the stone'" (103). Through the stone the fantasy world is 'grey and colourless, like a pencil drawing' (114), but occasionally things glint with very bright colours, like a marble 'the colour of a scarlet-and-orange tulip nodding in the May sun' (114), which seems to have belonged to one of the ghost children once, as it reminds him that he was a boy (114). Such things have 'a hidden soul' (117) in them. This confirms Coraline's suspicion that the other world and everything in it except for the souls does not exist and is not real (110). It is in fact a world of lies created by the 'other mother'. This idea is reinforced by the fact that all the people in the other world have no eyes to see real things with, but only two large black buttons (38). The 'other mother' tries to persuade Coraline to replace her own eyes with these, probably so that Coraline will no longer be able to distinguish between lies and reality (57). All of this also suggests that the stone enables Coraline to see what is real and what is fantasy, and protects her from becoming convinced that the other world is real and from becoming part of it. The stone's abilities are highly unusual, as such stones usually enable people to see magical creatures in fairytales, not to avoid seeing them.

Thus, unlike the talismans in Narnia, which have clear purposes and defend the children from tangible threats, the purpose of Coraline's talisman is an inversion of its expected purpose and its use is not immediately clear. It also does not protect her against any tangible, solid threat. It only helps her against the subtle threat of being made unable to distinguish between lies and truth or fiction and reality. In addition to this, while Lucy, Peter and Susan have talismans that come from Narnia, function in it and do not leave it with them, Coraline's talisman comes from the real world and goes into and leaves the fantasy world with her, and it seems that its realness is what imbues it with its usefulness. This shows that, while the world of Narnia is

intrinsically good and can be relied upon to exist, the other world that Coraline goes into is flimsy, built on lies, and thus intrinsically bad.

## 2.6. The castle and the cupboard

Two more aspects of the books which have interesting similarities and differences are the White Witch's castle in *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, where many creatures that she has turned into stone stand, and the cupboard in the house of the 'other mother' in *Coraline* with the ghost children it. When Edmund goes into the Witch's castle, he sees an enormous lion 'crouched as if it were ready to spring' (Lewis 2001, 103). He stands and stares at it for a long time before he at last begins to wonder why the lion is standing so still. Even when he approaches it he hardly dares to touch it, but at last he puts out his hand, very quickly, and does. It is cold stone. Edmund crosses a vast courtyard full of stone creatures, and eventually comes to a huge stone giant that still looks so alive that Edmund does not like going past it (104–106). He later mistakes a real wolf for a stone one, and, at this stage, readers are told:

Across the threshold lay a great wolf. 'It's all right, it's all right,' he kept saying to himself; 'it's only a stone wolf. It can't hurt me,' and raised his leg to step over it. Instantly the huge creature rose, with all the hair bristling along its back. (107)

Towards the end of the book, Aslan brings the stone creatures back to life by breathing on them, and the effect is like seeing someone

put a lighted match to a bit of newspaper which is propped up in a grate against an unlit fire ... for a second nothing seems to have happened, and then you notice a tiny streak of flame creeping along the edge of the newspaper. (180–181)

For a second after Aslan breathes on him, the stone lion looks just the same. Then a tiny streak of gold begins to run along his white marble back. The courtyard starts to blaze with colours and instead of the deadly silence the whole place rings with the sound of happy roaring. When the giant comes back to life, he yawns and says: "Bless me! I must have been asleep. Now where's that dratted little Witch that was running about on the ground? Somewhere just by my feet it was" (181–182). When Lucy finds Mr Tumnus, a faun who is a friend of hers, in the castle, he too is 'none the worse for having been a statue' (184–185). After this all the freed creatures ride off to help Peter and the rest of his army finish the battle against the Witch. All the dogs and lions and wolves and other hunting animals go 'at full speed with their noses to the ground' (189) and the next day they begin marching eastward down the side of the great river. And the next day after that, they reach the mouth of the river and see the castle of Cair Paravel, where the children are crowned and have a great feast with revelry and dancing, where gold flashes and wine flows (194–196).

When Coraline is shut inside a cupboard with the ghost children, she tries, like Edmund in the Witch's castle, to touch what she sees, and, like him, finds it cold and lifeless. However, unlike him, she does not for a moment mistake what she sees for something that is living and breathing. When she hears a voice in the cupboard it sounds so sad that she puts out a hand to the place where it is coming from, and she finds a cold hand and squeezes it tightly. When she turns to look for the sources of the voices, she sees things that do not look solid, like the lion, but look like 'shapes of children about her own size ... faint and pale as the moon in the daytime sky' (Gaiman 2009, 99).

The lion, the giant and the other creatures that are brought back to life in Narnia are solid and firm and remember exactly who and what they are; have no recollection of having been stone; and are left undamaged by the experience. However, the ghost children in *Coraline* say that they have been stuck in the cupboard for a "time beyond reckoning" (100) and that their "names are the first to go, after the breath has gone, and the beating of the heart" (97). When Coraline asks a ghost if it is a boy or girl, it replies: "'Tain't something we give a mind to'" (99). The ghosts also say that they are dead, but could not leave the other world when they died. When Coraline is curious about why they are dead and cannot leave, the children say that the 'other mother' 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. And one day you'll awake and your heart and soul will have gone. A husk you'll be, a wisp you'll be, and a thing no more than a dream on waking, or a memory of something forgotten' (101–102)

if you stay in her world too long.

Thus, like most things in Coraline's world, the children are not stable and firm and easy to comprehend, like the lion and giant of Narnia, for they have neither names nor genders. Eventually, they ask that Coraline find the 'hidden hearts' (101) that are their souls. To find one of these souls, she has to search a toy box. One of the objects in the box is a silver charm bracelet from which hang tiny animal charms which chase one another around the perimeter of the bracelet, 'the fox never catching the rabbit, the bear never gaining on the fox' (113). This is perhaps an illustration that, unlike the creatures in Narnia, the children are frozen in time, and will never be restored to their former state of life and action. Coraline eventually looks at the toys through her stone and finds a soul in a marble that burns and flickers with 'a red fire' (140), like the lion in Narnia when it comes back to life.

However, whereas Aslan, as a Jesus figure, fully restores the temporarily dead creatures in Narnia to life, Coraline finds that she cannot do the same for the children. Once Coraline has all the children's souls and has escaped from the other world, she dreams of the children having a picnic with her and eating and playing, in a celebration akin to the one that takes place in Narnia after the crowning at

Cair Paravel. However, unlike the happy giant who has forgotten being stone, the children still remember the other world, though Coraline's parents do not (171) and, when Coraline mentions it in the dream, she thinks she sees 'a shadow cross the faces of the other children' (165), indicating their fear, trauma and sorrow. One of the children is a very pale child, dressed in what seems to be spiders' webs, who eats not food, but flowers. She smiles as if it has been a very long time since she has smiled and she has 'almost, but not quite, forgotten how', and has 'a glittering silver set in her blonde hair' and 'dusty silver butterfly wings' (164). This suggests that she has ceased to be human and can never really recover from having been fed on and reduced to "snakeskins and spiderhusks" (101) in the cupboard. When the picnic in the dream is over, the girl says: "It is over and done with for *us* ... This is our staging post. From here, we three will set out for uncharted lands, and what comes after no one alive can say" (166). After this, the three children cross a bridge and wave goodbye, and what comes after in the dream is darkness (167). Thus, unlike the cheerful crossing to Cair Paravel in Narnia, which may be a crossing to a higher part of heaven, the ghost children in Coraline have nowhere to cross over to but the world of death, which is not bright, like Narnia, but quite possibly dark. Unlike the stone creatures of Narnia, they can never be fully restored to the lives and childhoods they once had, and suffering does not leave them unscathed. They are instead what they say they are to Coraline, who will soon awake and forget the memory of the picnic, "a thing no more than a dream on waking, or a memory of something forgotten" (102). This suggests that the world of *Coraline* is a version of Narnia in which terrible things cannot be reversed and life does not remain innocent and unscathed.

## 2.7. The final battles

Finally, what are possibly the most exciting echoes and inversions in the two narratives occur during the climaxes or final battles of each book. In *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, Aslan promises the White Witch, who states that she has a right to kill Edmund, that he will trade his own life for Edmund's (Lewis 2001, 155–156). As Aslan goes to sacrifice his life to save Edmund, his tail and his head hang low and he walks slowly as if he is very tired. He walks 'into dark shadows and out into pale moonlight' (161). When he sees Lucy and Susan following him, he allows them to go with him, and presently gives a long, low moan. In response, Lucy says: "Aslan! Dear Aslan! ... What is wrong? Can't you tell us?" "No," [says] Aslan. "I am sad and lonely. Lay your hands on my mane so that I can feel you are there and let us walk like that" (162). And so the girls do. When Aslan leaves, both the girls cry bitterly and cling to him and kiss his mane, his nose, his paws and his eyes before he leaves. The Witch shaves Aslan and kills him, but he comes back to life (163–175), and when he does, he and the girls roll over together in a 'happy laughing heap of

fur and arms and legs' (177). It is described as 'such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia' and whether it is 'more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten' (177), Lucy can never make up her mind. Aslan finally attacks the Witch on the battlefield, and the attack is described as follows:

Then with a roar that shook all Narnia from the western lamp-post to the shores of the eastern sea the great beast flung himself upon the White Witch. Lucy saw her face lifted towards him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement. The Lion and the Witch had rolled over together but with the Witch underneath. (190–191)

The Witch is killed and does not rise again during the book.

In *Coraline*, it is not a protector like Aslan, but Coraline herself who must go forth and face darkness. When Coraline realises that the 'other mother' is holding her parents captive, she decides to go back into the other world to save them. She takes her first step down the dark corridor, a cold wind blows down the passageway and she can 'smell dust and damp and mustiness' (Gamain 2009, 72). Like Aslan, Coraline is afraid: she hugs herself, and tells herself that she is brave, and she almost believes herself (133). Coraline, like Aslan, has company in the cat that pads along beside her, but unlike Lucy and Susan, who cry for Aslan and kiss him before he leaves, the cat sounds barely interested when she speaks to it about her fear and its tone remains sarcastic (72). Later, it is Coraline who has to comfort the cat, even though it is she who must battle the 'other mother'. It also does not go with her voluntarily, as Lucy and Susan go with Aslan. She has to go back to the cat, bend down and pick it up (145). It is also Coraline who has to offer herself as a sacrifice to the 'other mother' to try to regain others' souls. She puts herself forward to the 'other mother' in a bet, saying that if she finds the lost souls, then the 'other mother' will have to let her, her real father and mother, the dead children and everyone she has trapped go. She says:

'If I lose I'll stay here with you for ever and I'll let you love me. I'll be a most dutiful daughter. I'll eat your food, and play Happy Families. And I'll let you sew your buttons into my eyes.' (107–108)

The 'other mother' swears on her right hand that she will let Coraline go if Coraline succeeds (109). Coraline does not have to stay as she does find the other souls, but she always suspects that the 'other mother' is deceiving her, and readies herself for confrontation. When she thinks the 'other mother' is about to betray her, she throws the cat towards the 'other mother' as hard as she can. It yowls and lands on the other mother's head, 'claws flailing, teeth bared, fierce and angry' (153). With its fur on end, it looks as big as it is in real life (153). While this happens, Coraline flees. Thus, the cat, like Aslan, attacks the witch figure, but, unlike Aslan, it does not do so of its own accord. Coraline in fact has to say to the cat: "'I'm sorry I threw you at her. But it was the only way to distract her enough to get us all out. She would never have kept her word, would she?'" (157). After Coraline defeats the 'other mother', she

dreams of playing a game with the ghost children which is 'partly tag, partly piggy-in-the-middle, and partly just a magnificent romp' in which 'none of them ever [get] tired or winded or out of breath' (164). This is very much like the happy romp of Aslan's triumph, after which the girls no longer feel 'in the least hungry or tired or thirsty' (Lewis 2001, 177). But the 'other mother' does not go away or die once the cat attacks her and once Coraline escapes her world. Instead, her right hand escapes the other world and searches for the key to open the door again. This hand serves as a strong link to 'The problem of Susan', in which Aslan eats all of Susan except her hand and her head (Gaiman 2010, 113). When Coraline realises that the hand is free, she says: "I got Mum and Dad back. I shut the door. I locked it. What more was I meant to do?" (Gaiman 2009, 166) and: "But it's not *fair* ... It's just not fair. It should be over" [author's italics] (167). Though Coraline does find a way to get rid of the hand eventually, it is clear from this that the 'other mother' does not have to keep her promises. She is not bound by the 'deep magic from the dawn of time' (145) that ensures that Aslan keeps his promise to the White Witch. Coraline has to accept this and has to defeat the darkness that Aslan defeats for the children on her own, with very little help or guidance, for her fantasy world has none of the safety of Narnia.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In *Tree and leaf*, Tolkien (1992, 58–59) writes that human beings require some 'road of escape from such weariness' as the world causes, and he states that this

road of escape ... is not to be found in the wilfully awkward, clumsy or misshapen, not in making things dark or unremittingly violent, and the fantastical complication of shapes to the point of silliness and on towards delirium. Before we reach such states we need recovery. We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. In that sense only a taste for them may make us, or keep us, childish.

In *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, Lewis (2001) tries to do what Tolkien (1992, 58–59) advocates and 'recover' the world or make it seem better by creating Narnia, a more exciting and idyllic version of reality. By doing so, it seems that he tries to keep people childish or child-like, as the Pevensie children are still children when they leave the wardrobe. Lewis' vivid and believable Narnia is also in line with Tolkien's (1992, 58–59) beliefs, as he states that it is important for a fantasy world to be believable and not a "thumbnail sketch" or a "transcript of life" for recovery to work. By contrast, Gaiman (2009) deliberately creates in *Coraline* a fantasy world that is 'awkward, clumsy' and 'misshapen' (Tolkien 1992, 58) and looks like a "thumbnail sketch" (51). I could argue that he does this to achieve recovery by the means that Tolkien said it could not be achieved. Indeed, when Coraline returns

to the real world, she finds that nothing has ever been so interesting and gets 'caught up in the interestingness of the world' (Gaiman 2009, 158). But it seems that Gaiman does not only invert aspects of Narnia in *Coraline* for this purpose. I would argue that Gaiman shows through Coraline's wise cynicism and the disturbing image of the once overly vulnerable and innocent ghost children that remaining a child is not to be desired. The tormented ghost children speak in the 'different style' (199) the Narnia children use when they leave the wardrobe. It consists of archaisms, such as: "'Th'art alive. Thou livest'" (167). In addition to this, they, like the Narnia children, remain in a cupboard for what seems like, "'So very long a time'" (100). Their permanent state of childhood is something terrible to Coraline, something that 'threatens Coraline's very Existence' because 'By providing "all" for Coraline', the 'other mother' 'traps Coraline in a pre-Oedipal state where she is not allowed to desire because all her needs are met' (Parsons 2008, 373). The 'other mother' plans to keep Coraline because she wishes to 'trap a daughter in the limbo of an eternal childhood, for no other purpose ... than the pleasure she takes in the subjugation of children' (373). This suggests that Gaiman wishes to show that remaining childish is terrible, and causing it is the last thing he wishes to do.

In 'The problem of Susan', the professor, whose siblings are killed in a train crash, as Susan Pevensie's are in Lewis's *The last battle*, says, while referring to Susan:

'My younger brother was decapitated, you know. A god who would punish me for liking nylons and parties by making me walk through that school dining room, with the flies, to identify Ed, well ... he's enjoying himself a bit too much, isn't he? Like a cat, getting the last ounce of enjoyment out of a mouse. Or a gram of enjoyment, I suppose it must be these days. I don't know, really.' (Gaiman 2010, 112)

Is the jaded and scarred professor in 'The problem of Susan' what the cheerful and eccentric professor of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* would have been if his eyes had been less dazzled by the bright and innocent world of Narnia and had taken in the darker shadows that creep around the edges of a child's existence? And did Gaiman write *Coraline* to suggest that Lewis runs the risk of trapping his readers in childishness through denying the darkness of life, and through having 'a bit too much' fun? *Coraline* can perhaps be viewed as a postmodern re-envisioning of Narnia in which adults are often absent, unreliable or even menacing, and there is no grand, safe and stabilising narrative such as Christianity for children to rely on. This lack of safety may mean that children's worlds become much more menacing places, but it also means that children can create their own narratives within their worlds which allow them to face their demons alone, achieve independence and forge individuality.

## NOTES

1. Susan is the only one of the four siblings left alive after a train crashes in *The last battle*. This means that Susan's siblings go back to Narnia, or to heaven, but Susan cannot follow. The book states that this is because Susan is too interested in lipstick and nylons and parties to be a friend of Narnia (Lewis 1956, 168).
2. All references to *Coraline* are to the 2009 edition which is fully referenced in the reference list.
3. All references to *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* are to the 2001 edition which is fully referenced in the reference list.
4. Other books in the Narnia series are less clearly definable as portal fantasies. In *The silver chair*, for example, Aslan erupts from Narnia into a progressive school (Lewis 1953, 264–265) and in *The magician's nephew*, the Witch appears in London (Lewis, 1955, 106). This article, however, focuses on a comparison between *Coraline* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* alone.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CAROLE GODFREY** is a graduate assistant in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Pretoria. She spent her early childhood in the small town of Welkom in the Free State and escaped the unremarkable nature of daily life by reading fantasy books. After leaving Welkom, her family lived in Zambia and travelled around Africa for a while before moving to Pretoria. She is currently pursuing her interest in children's literature and fantasy through her master's dissertation on the nature of Voldemort's evil, trauma and the hyperreal in the *Harry Potter* books by J. K. Rowling.