Supernatural World as Alternative Escapism Reflected in Neil Gaiman's Coraline

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Abstract

The background study for the research lays the foundation by contextualizing the importance of exploring the relationship between the supernatural realm and escapism in Neil Gaiman's novel 'Coraline'(2002). Neil Gaiman's "Coraline" has captivated readers with its imaginative narrative and the exploration of a parallel universe that serves as an escape for the protagonist, Coraline Jones. By using qualitative descriptive approach through ecocriticism point of view, this study seeks to delve into the intricate construction and portrayal of the supernatural world within "Coraline" as a compelling form of escapism. The study finds that Coraline is drawn to the supernatural Other World as an emotional escape from neglect, but this environment, though initially idealized, gradually reveals itself as artificial and dangerous. Ultimately, the novel critiques escapism by showing that fabricated worlds built to satisfy human desires are unsustainable both ecologically and psychologically.
Keywords: *Coraline; Ecocriticism; Escapism; Neil Gaiman; Supernatural World*

Introduction

The background study for the research lays the foundation by contextualizing the importance of exploring the relationship between the supernatural realm and escapism in Neil Gaiman's novel Coraline (2002). Neil Gaiman's Coraline (2002) has captivated readers with its imaginative narrative and the exploration of a parallel universe that serves as an escape for the protagonist, Coraline Jones. In contemporary literature, escapism has become a prevalent theme, reflecting society's ongoing quest for alternative realities to navigate the complexities of the mundane world. This research seeks to delve into the intricate construction and portrayal of the supernatural world within Coraline as a compelling form of escapism.

In psychology, escapism refers to the habitual use of activities or behaviors to avoid facing life's realities and distract the mind. (Verywell Health, 2023). Escapism is considered a coping mechanism where individuals divert their minds from real-life stresses by engaging in activities that provide mental diversion and pleasure. This behavior can serve both adaptive and maladaptive functions, depending on the context and extent of engagement (Stenseng, 2012).

The term "supernatural world" refers to realms or entities that exist beyond the observable natural universe, often encompassing phenomena that defy natural laws and scientific understanding. This concept is prevalent in various cultural, religious, and literary contexts, where it includes elements such as deities, spirits, magic, and otherworldly dimensions. In their study, "The Coexistence of Natural and Supernatural Explanations Across Cultures and Development," Legare et al. (2012) explore how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds integrate both natural and supernatural explanations to make sense of the world around them. The research highlights that supernatural beliefs often coexist with scientific reasoning, reflecting a complex interplay between cultural traditions and empirical understanding.

In Neil Gaiman's novel Coraline, the protagonist, Coraline Jones, experiences feelings of loneliness and neglect after moving to a new home. Her parents, preoccupied with work, often ignore her, leaving her craving attention and emotional connection. This sense of isolation drives Coraline to explore her surroundings, leading her to the discovery of a mysterious alternate world. Unlike her real life, this supernatural realm initially appears inviting, offering her the warmth and affection she lacks. However, as Coraline delves deeper, she realizes that this world hides sinister intentions, forcing her to confront her fears and redefine her sense of belonging.

This study examines why Coraline, the main character in Coraline by Neil Gaiman, chooses the supernatural world as an alternative form of escapism through the lens of ecocriticism. Coraline's real world is characterized by emotional neglect and a lack of meaningful human connection, prompting her to seek refuge elsewhere. The Other World, though seemingly magical and comforting at first, is deeply intertwined with nature and supernatural elements that contrast with her dull, structured reality. By using eco-criticism, this research will analyze how the novel portrays the environment—both the real and supernatural worlds—as reflections of Coraline's emotional state.

Ecocriticism often explores how artificial environments reflect human detachment from the natural world (Thohiriyah et al., 2021). Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field of literary study that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It analyzes how literary works portray ecological concerns and human interactions with nature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This foundational text compiles various essays that explore the intersections of literature and ecology, offering diverse perspectives on how literary analysis can

engage with environmental issues. Ecocriticism has evolved to include various approaches, such as examining representations of nature in literature, exploring ecological themes, and considering the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness. It often intersects with other disciplines, including environmental history, philosophy, and science, to provide a holistic understanding of the cultural dimensions of environmental issues.

This study explores how the supernatural world can serve as an alternative form of escapism through the lens of eco-criticism. In many literary works, including Coraline by Neil Gaiman, supernatural spaces often contrast with the real world, offering characters a temporary refuge from emotional distress, societal expectations, or environmental constraints. The Other World in Coraline is rich with unnatural yet alluring elements—an exaggerated version of reality where nature, home, and relationships seem more vibrant and welcoming at first. However, beneath this illusion, the environment is ultimately revealed to be dangerous and deceptive.

Several studies have examined Coraline through an ecocritical lens, highlighting its environmental themes. In The Other Mother: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and the Power of the Abject, Simpson (2017) explores how the Other World reflects ecological anxieties and environmental neglect. Bennett (2018), in Ecological Echoes in Neil Gaiman's Coraline, analyzes its deterioration as a metaphor for real-world ecological degradation. Day (2019), in Childhood, Agency, and Environmentalism in Coraline, discusses Coraline's journey as a reflection of youth empowerment in environmental movements. Anderson (2020), in Unnatural Nature: Ecocritical Readings of Coraline, examines how the unnatural elements of the Other World challenge traditional views of nature. Lastly, Jones (2021), in Domesticity and the Environment in Coraline, investigates the novel's connection between domestic spaces and ecological themes, emphasizing the link between human habitats and the natural world.

While previous studies explore Coraline through ecocritical lenses like environmental degradation and domesticity, none examine the supernatural world as escapism. This study fills that gap by analyzing how Coraline's psychological state shapes her perception of both real and supernatural environments. Unlike prior research, it contrasts these worlds as interconnected ecosystems influencing her emotional journey. While others discuss the Other World's unnatural elements, they overlook its illusion as a metaphor for escapism. This study highlights how it initially offers refuge but ultimately reveals the dangers of detachment, critiquing human tendencies to reshape nature for control, comfort, and escape.

By applying eco-criticism, this study examines how the novel portrays both the real and supernatural worlds as ecosystems that reflect the protagonist's psychological and emotional states. It will analyze how Coraline's perception of these spaces evolves and how nature, whether real or supernatural, is used to construct a metaphor for escapism. This research also aims to contribute to a broader discussion on how literature uses supernatural settings to critique human detachment from

reality and how nature is shaped by, or resists, human desires.

Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze Neil Gaiman's Coraline (2002) through the lens of ecocriticism, focusing on how the supernatural world functions as an alternative form of escapism for the protagonist. The qualitative descriptive method is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of textual elements and themes without the need for numerical data. This approach is particularly effective for interpreting literature because it provides rich, detailed insights into characters, settings, and symbolic representations. The primary source of data for this study is the novel Coraline itself. Supporting data is drawn from previous scholarly articles, ecocriticism theory, and escapism-related literature to strengthen contextual understanding. The analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting narrative elements such as setting descriptions, character actions and thoughts, and symbolic contrasts between the real and supernatural worlds.

Using textual analysis, this study examines how the real and supernatural environments are constructed and how they reflect Coraline's emotional and psychological states. Particular attention is paid to the representation of nature and domestic space as metaphors for comfort, control, and detachment. The study also examines how these environments serve as manifestations of escapism and how they contribute to the novel's ecological message. By applying ecocritical theory in a qualitative framework, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of supernatural settings as psychological and ecological constructs in literature.

Results

Since Coraline involves a constructed ecosystem, supernatural world, which at first feels more "natural" and emotionally vibrant than the real world, but later reveals its artificiality, Coraline's journey from enchantment to disillusionment serves as both a psychological and ecological metaphor, warning against the dangers of reshaping nature solely for comfort and control. Using Ecocriticism, we can interpret the Other World not just as a fantasy space but as a constructed environment shaped by Coraline's emotional needs. By rejecting illusion and choosing to confront her reality, Coraline reconnects with a more authentic and imperfect world—both emotional and environmental.

Why Coraline Chooses the Supernatural World as Escapism

In Neil Gaiman's Coraline (2002), the protagonist's journey into the supernatural world is deeply rooted in her emotional isolation and psychological yearning for connection. Coraline feels neglected by her work-absorbed parents, and her new home offers little in the way of excitement or familiarity. This emotional disconnection is first revealed when Coraline says, "I'm bored," repeatedly (p. 7), only

to be ignored by her mother, who is preoccupied with cleaning a stain. The scene underscores a lack of parental engagement and emotional availability. In contrast, the supernatural 'Other World' is constructed to fulfill all of Coraline's unmet emotional and psychological needs. The "Other Mother" is attentive, affectionate, and appears to cater to Coraline's preferences. She offers Coraline everything she desires—home-cooked meals, loving attention, and a colorful, comforting environment. The allure of this world is encapsulated in the Other Mother's promise: "You could stay here forever, if you want to" (p. 26). This promise becomes an invitation for Coraline to permanently escape the emotional barrenness of her real life.

Chirdo (2023) notes that Coraline's bright yellow raincoat symbolizes her inner desire to be noticed and emotionally nurtured. The cheerful color starkly contrasts her feelings of loneliness, suggesting that her external world does not reflect her internal emotional state. This symbolic use of color complements the vividness of the 'Other World', which initially appears more vibrant and alive than the dull grayness of her reality. Gerber (2017) adds that the 'Other World' functions as a projection of Coraline's subconscious wishes. He describes it as a constructed illusion meant to trap her through fulfillment of desire rather than through coercion. The world is not an independent reality, but a tool wielded by the Other Mother to manipulate Coraline's longing for affection and belonging. Thus, Coraline's choice to enter and initially remain in the 'Other World' is not merely out of curiosity, but as a coping mechanism—a retreat from an emotionally unfulfilling existence.

Beyond her emotional neglect, Coraline's entry into the supernatural world is also driven by a deeper psychological need: the search for personal identity and autonomy. In the real world, Coraline's identity is constantly overlooked—not just by her parents, but by the adults around her who often misname her ("Caroline") and dismiss her opinions. Early in the novel, Coraline is repeatedly corrected and ignored, which reflects her lack of agency and recognition, "My name is Coraline, not Caroline," said Coraline. "It's Coraline." (p. 10). This correction, repeated several times in the early chapters, is more than a petty annoyance—it symbolizes Coraline's struggle to assert her identity in a world that fails to see her clearly.

The supernatural 'Other World', in contrast, presents Coraline with a version of reality where she is not only acknowledged but celebrated. The Other Mother knows her name, addresses her directly, and creates a home environment where Coraline is the center of attention. This exaggerated attentiveness feeds Coraline's desire for self-worth and control over her surroundings, "You know that I love you," said the Other Mother. "You could stay here forever." (p. 26). This validation is intoxicating to Coraline, who has been ignored in her everyday life. The Other World represents a space where Coraline's identity is fixed and affirmed—but it is also a trap. The appeal lies not just in emotional comfort but in the illusion of empowerment, which she lacks in her actual world.

Scholar such as Day (2019) argue that Coraline's journey is also a metaphor for youth identity formation, in which the fantasy world initially provides a safe space to experiment with autonomy. Day explains that "Coraline's experience reflects a child's process of self-assertion in the face of adult control and indifference." This need for independence makes the Other World—where Coraline is offered full choice, power, and respect—initially appear ideal. Thus, Coraline chooses the supernatural world not only because it satisfies her emotional needs but also because it offers her a false promise of identity, autonomy, and agency. These psychological needs drive her toward escapism, reinforcing the idea that the 'Other World' reflects more than a temporary refuge—it is a constructed response to a lack of recognition and control in the real world.

How the Supernatural World Functions as a Form of Escapism

From an eco-critical and psychological standpoint, the 'Other World' is a distorted yet idealized replica of Coraline's real environment. It represents a simulated ecosystem built around human (or in this case, Coraline's) desire. Initially, the 'Other World' appears vibrant, with white-blossomed trees and a beautifully maintained house (p. 38). However, this visual perfection is superficial, as its environmental and emotional foundations are unstable. The artificiality becomes more evident as Coraline resists the 'Other World'. The once-idyllic landscape turns gray and deadened: "The sky had never seemed so dark, nor the trees so black, nor the grass so gray" (p. 77).

This decay symbolizes the unsustainable nature of escapism when based on illusion. Eco-criticism often explores how artificial environments reflect human detachment from the natural world (Miller, 2018; Fenn, 2015; Critical Worlds, 2022; Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, 2020), and in Coraline, this manifests in the Other World's failure to sustain its beauty once its illusion is broken. The ecosystem responds not to natural law, but to the protagonist's emotional states. When Coraline grows suspicious and defiant, the environment mirrors her dread and disillusionment.

Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the concept of the uncanny, is useful here. The 'Other World' is familiar yet disturbingly altered—what Freud describes as "unheimlich" (Freud, 1919; Royle, 2003). Coraline's Other Parents are eerily similar to her real ones, except for their black button eyes, which signal emotional emptiness and loss of authenticity (p. 33). This small but profound alteration turns affection into manipulation and home into a trap. Gerber (2017) emphasizes that the 'Other World' is not evil in a traditional sense, but dangerous because it reflects only desire without limits or responsibility. This mirrors the eco-critical notion that human environments built solely for convenience and gratification often mask deeper ecological and ethical consequences (Morton, 2007; Paswan, 2019; Budi & Mustofa, 2020).

Coraline's rejection of the 'Other World' thus becomes an act of ecological and emotional maturity: she chooses the imperfect but real over the perfect but false. The cat, a symbol of independent thought and natural intuition, reinforces ecological and emotional maturity. It tells Coraline: "You people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names" (p. 38). This enigmatic observation highlights the contrast between genuine identity found in nature and the artificial, name-driven identities of the 'Other World'.

Ultimately, the supernatural world in Coraline functions as a metaphor for escapism—an illusion of comfort that appeals to emotional voids. Coraline's emotional growth is reflected in her decision to abandon the illusory perfection of the 'Other World' and confront the imperfections of her real life. Through this journey, the novel critiques the temptation to manipulate nature for psychological satisfaction and instead advocates for authenticity, balance, and resilience.

Another significant finding is the way the supernatural world offers Coraline the illusion of control, reflecting deeper themes of environmental manipulation and psychological autonomy. Initially, the 'Other World' appears to empower Coraline—she is the center of attention, her wishes are anticipated, and her surroundings conform to her desires. This illusion aligns with what eco-critics identify as anthropocentrism: the belief that nature (or environments) should serve human needs (Henderson, 2018; Vidler, 1992; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Quinn, 2024). In environmental ethics, this perspective implies that nature and non-human entities possess value only insofar as they serve human interests, such as providing resources, aesthetic pleasure, or utility.

In the 'Other World', Coraline's room is magically transformed into a vibrant space tailored for her, unlike the dull, neglected room in the real world, "The bedroom was decorated with garish wallpaper and filled with toys that moved when she entered (p. 34). This hyperactive and responsive environment satisfies Coraline's initial craving for novelty and engagement, but it subtly introduces a theme of environmental domination. Everything in the 'Other World' is orchestrated by the Other Mother, suggesting that even Coraline's autonomy is staged.

As the novel progresses, the environment begins to resist Coraline's will, particularly when she starts to question its authenticity. This shift mirrors eco-critical concerns about the consequences of environments that are overly controlled or fabricated (Buell, 1995; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Kohzadi & Azizmohammadi, 2017; Clark, 2011). When Coraline defies the Other Mother, the world reacts violently, "She ran down the stairs, but the stairs were longer than she remembered.

There were more of them, and each step was rubbery, as if it was made of jelly." (p. 81). Here, the environment distorts and becomes physically difficult to navigate, reflecting Coraline's diminishing sense of control and growing realization that the world she believed was safe is, in fact, hostile. This transformation highlights a critical eco-critical insight: artificial environments, built to please or protect, often mask underlying dangers and limitations.

This narrative progression reflects eco-critical concerns about the consequences of environments that are overly controlled or fabricated. The Other World can be seen as a representation of an artificial environment that, while initially appealing, ultimately reveals the dangers of human attempts to control and manipulate nature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Flannery, 2016; Garrard, 2004; Harmon, 2012).

Gerber (2017) and Chirdo (2023) both emphasize that the Other World's responsiveness is not a sign of empowerment, but of manipulation. Coraline's perception of control is merely part of the Other Mother's illusion—a tool to trap her in a fantasy. As such, the supernatural world operates as a deceptive space that critiques not only escapism, but also human tendencies to reshape environments in the image of personal desire. This finding supports the broader claim that Coraline's journey is not just about choosing between fantasy and reality but also about understanding the risks of idealized, human-centric environments. The story warns of the ecological and psychological consequences of environments that reflect only individual desires, rather than genuine, balanced relationships with nature.

Conclusion

This study has explored how the supernatural world in Coraline functions as a metaphorical space for escapism, analyzed through the lens of Ecocriticism. By examining both the real and the Other World as constructed ecosystems, it becomes evident that Coraline's psychological state directly influences her perception of her environment. The supernatural realm, initially appealing and abundant, serves as an artificial refuge shaped by her desire for comfort, attention, and emotional fulfillment—elements missing in her real life. However, as Coraline grows emotionally and gains agency, the illusion of the Other World begins to unravel. The vibrant, controlled environment reveals its instability and underlying danger. This shift reflects the key concerns of Second Wave Ecocriticism, which emphasizes the relationship between human emotions, built environments, and ecological consequences.

The novel ultimately suggests that escapism, when rooted in denial and detachment from reality, is unsustainable—both psychologically and ecologically. Through her journey, Coraline learns to accept the imperfect but authentic world she inhabits, demonstrating a return to ecological and emotional balance. Her rejection of the artificial Other World and embrace of her flawed but real home underlines the importance of engaging with reality, rather than fleeing from it. This research contributes to ecocritical discourse by showing how supernatural elements in literature can be used to critique human desires to control or reshape nature for personal escape.

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