Reimagining the Strong Female Character: On the Fantastic Journeys of Cinema’s Young Heroines

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Prospectus

For my undergraduate honors thesis, I propose a study into the idea of the strong female character as exemplified by girl heroes in modern cinematic fantasy through the exploration of two different films: Henry Selick’s Coraline (2009) and Hayao Miyazaki’s Spirited Away (2001).

Though the industry is constantly evolving, cinema has consistently painted a rigid picture of how women and girls should see themselves. From near infancy, female children are fed images of passive princesses in desperate need of a male savior, and are constantly taught that deviating from the acceptably feminine will only cause them trouble. Young girls find their heroes in the media they consume, and when the media they consume is about weak women needing saving, they emulate these women. In fact, psychologists have studied “princess syndrome,” the name for the phenomenon where little girls develop insecurities and petty obsessions after being bombarded with the media targeted at them. Representation matters, and the portrayal of strong young heroines on-screen is imperative to the development of not only real-life female children, but their adult counterparts as well. Children are naturally curious, inquisitive, and imaginative; and the fantastic settings of Coraline and Spirited Away weave childhood imagination with heroic female strength. When ordinary girls without magical powers are able to defeat supernatural antagonists, female audience members are shown that they too can exhibit courage, hope, bravery, and love in the face of adversity.

When little girls grow into women, they continue to consume mainstream representations of women in cinema. The female protagonists of today’s most popular movies are often either hope-
lessly boy-crazy or tough, rugged, stoics who are strong only because they emulate traditionally
male characteristics. The latter of these two is often referred to as the ‘strong female character.’
Through my thesis, I plan on turning this trope on its head by overturning notions of masculinity
as the pinnacle of heroism and showing that the strongest of heroes is the young girl in fantasy
who is creative, brave, and completely capable of rescuing herself. This version of the ultimate
heroine is important for not only female children, but for grown women as well.

I plan on beginning my study with Coraline, a coming of age story about an imaginative young
girl who embarks on a life-changing adventure and insists of being in charge of her own fate.
Unhappy with the reality she’s presented with, Coraline enters the flawlessly crafted world creat-
ed for her by the other mother, an evil entity bent on consuming Coraline’s soul. Coraline uses
her intelligence, wit, and bravery to save not only herself, but the souls of the children that came
before her and the lives of the parents she formally regarded as boring and inattentive. Coraline
is undoubtedly the hero of her own world, and her incredible displays of strength are the result of
her intuition and capacity for personal growth.

Like Coraline, Spirited Away is about an ordinary girl without any superhuman abilities who is
suddenly thrust into a dangerous, fantastic world. The film’s protagonist, Chihiro, is forced to
quickly adapt to life in the spirit realm after her parents are turned into pigs by Yubaba, the evil
witch who rules the bathhouse. Throughout the course of the film, Chihiro’s capacity for com-
passion and courage constantly push her to overcome tasks that seem nearly impossible. For ex-
ample, when none of the powerful spirits who work in the bath house will deal with a difficult
guest, ten-year-old Chihiro musters up all of her strength pacify him herself. Chihiro can’t use
magic or brute force, so she uses her politeness and compassion to reason with a man-eating
monster and rescue a powerful river spirit. At the end of the film, Chihiro is able to save the lives
of not only her parents, but the film’s male protagonist as well.

Women are not passive figures, and strong women are shaped not by their ability to suppress
their femininity, but by their displays of courage, kindness, and character growth in the face of
adversity. This study will delve into the idea that strongest of cinema’s female characters are the
young heroines who become the masters of the fantastic worlds around them.


**Introduction**

When I was a little girl, I fell in love with movies. Between the love stories, the epic battles, and the imaginative characters, film allowed for the brief possibility of escape into something wonderful, and the stories that came to life on screen painted a picture of a world more interesting than my own. With going to the movies comes the inevitable experience of identifying with the film’s main characters. Whether we are aware of it or not, the characters that we see in movies, the characters that we laugh, cry, and embark on adventures with, have an impact in shaping who we are, who we grow to be, and who we admire. Human beings live their lives in stories, and the protagonists of the stories we see on screen no doubt shape our views of the world around us. Like all children, I was both imaginative and impressionable, and I grew to look up to the heroes of children’s films, believing that, if I were to be as brave as they were, I could conquer anything. Childhood culture, of course, is saturated with cinema; kids carry stuffed animals, wear T-shirts, and play with toys molded after whichever film is most popular at the time. On Halloween, children flood the streets in movie-related costumes, taking on the identity of whichever character they want to be most like. The lives of children are complicated; childhood is not a state of passive innocence, but full of growth, adventure, and life. Children strive to see their lives as important and themselves as heroes capable of defeating any problem that comes their way. There was a problem, however, that nobody seemed to talk about. While boys at the costume store had an endless array of superhero outfits to choose from, I and all the other girls were condemned to pastel tulle gowns, different only in the color corresponding to the princess that it represented. While little boys watch themselves as valiant warriors, girls are
forced to identify with the passive beauty in need of saving. Lacking decent on-screen female role models, girls are confined to live as princesses, constantly waiting on the sidelines while the brave male protagonist saves the day. Often without realizing it, the female children that consume cinema are taught, little by little, that heroism is something for boys.

It is no secret that children’s media is saturated with images of men. After all, Hollywood is known for being a particularly male-dominated industry, and it is not uncommon for screenwriters, producers, and directors to want to create characters with whom they can identify (Brand, 3). As a result, the female characters that exist are often crafted in the eyes of adult men, and when the statistics are broken down, the implications of this transform from obvious to disturbing. Of the characters in the 129 children and family films released between 2006 and 2012, only 26.5% were female (Smith, et al, 3). Though this number might not seem astronomically terrible on the surface, it is important to recognize just how these female characters are portrayed. Even when female characters exist in children’s films, for instance, they are seldom the film’s primary protagonists. In fact, between 1937 and 2005, a span of 68 years, there were only 13 children’s films that featured a sole female protagonist. Of the protagonists in these 13, 12 had the aspiration of finding romance (Newsom, Miss Representation). Whether she is the film’s leading lady or just a side character, a girl in cinema between the ages of 13 and 20 has a 31.6% chance of wearing sexy or revealing attire, and a 49.6% chance of having a thin, “attractive” body (Smith, et al, 3). With the rise of Disney came the rise of the princess film, and these princess films are almost always marketed exclusively toward little girls. Upon closer examination, however, even princess films are less girl-centric than they first appear. All 12 of the Disney princess films made before 2014 had more male characters than female ones, and in only 4 of
these films did female characters have more than 50% of the dialogue (Guo, 4). So, female protagonists in children’s films rarely exist, and when they do, they are silent, sexualized, and outnumbered by men. When a little girl watches a movie, she internalizes these messages. She is taught the importance of being passive and good-looking, and that even in a story about her, she will need a man by her side. Girls are not minorities; they are not special interest characters or afterthoughts. Girls make up half of the population, and the fact that there are so few strong role models for this demographic is abysmal.

Little girls deserve to see themselves as heroes, and it is a problem that the majority of the heroes in cinema are not only men, and it is also a problem that cinema offers only a male-centric model of what heroism is. From super-powered crime-fighters to brave adventurers, heroes are often depicted as physically fit, handsome, and incredibly masculine. Male heroes never cry, never cower in the face of danger, and often rely on brute force to combat their enemies. Through dazzling displays of magical powers and incredible weapon-wielding abilities, male heroes teach those that look up to them that heroism is inexorably tied to the picture of hyper-masculinity. Male heroes not only defeat terrifying monsters, but are rewarded with a princess as well, teaching women and girls that they are objects to be won. When the male hero is truly examined, however, he is more limited than he first appears. Male heroes rely on their masculine characteristics, and it is because of this that what they are, not who they are, is often most important. While boys have characters like King Arthur, Indiana Jones, and Superman to draw upon, there exists no real mythological framework for the heroic girl, and because of this, girl heroes are able to transcend stereotypes and exhibit bravery and strength in ways that their male counterparts often cannot (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2). Little girls are not affected by hyper-masculinity,
and they have not yet succumbed to the expectations thrust upon them by society in early adolescence. The girl hero is not skilled in combat and cannot rely on brute force. Instead, she uses her intelligence, empathy, and courage to combat her monsters. With everything that they are, little girls provide an excellent framework for the makings of a hero and in this thesis, I plan on foregrounding two progressive models of heroism in children’s films. Chihiro of Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001) and Coraline of Coraline (Selick, 2009) are brave, valiant, and creative little girls who exemplify everything that a hero should be. They have no magic powers, and are characters that little girls in the audience can see themselves in. With their existence comes an important brand of representation, a brand of representation that provides a new definition of what it means to be a hero.

Since 1984, Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki has specialized in crafting rich, fantastic animated stories. More often than not, the protagonists of these stories are ambitious, adventurous, intelligent girls. In 2001, Miyazaki released Spirited Away, a film that became popular across cultures because of its beautiful design, multi-faceted characters, and fantastic storyline lead by the heroic, ten-year-old Chihiro. At the beginning of the film, Chihiro is the pinnacle of a stubborn, ordinary little girl. Distraught at being forced to move to a new town, Chihiro sits, whiny and sullen, in the back seat of her parents’ car. When her father takes a wrong turn, the family arrives at a mysterious tunnel, and though Chihiro is insistent on waiting in the car, she follows her family into a strange, abandoned theme park so that she is not left alone. Despite their daughter’s warning, Chihiro’s parents greedily consume the food that had been left out for the spirits, and are subsequently tuned into pigs, leaving Chihiro on her own. Trapped in a strange world filled with terrifying spirits, Chihiro is visibly frightened. A young man named
Haku, however, discovers her and gives her instructions on how to find a job before leaving her to her own devices. After speaking to the spider-like boiler man, Kamaji, Chihiro learns that she must make a deal with Yubaba, the evil ruler of the bathhouse, in order to stay alive. Though she is petrified in Yubaba’s presence, Chihiro is determined to do whatever it takes to save the lives of her parents, and agrees to take on any job, no matter how difficult, though she had never worked a day in her life. In her time at the bathhouse, Chihiro grows from a timid little girl into a brave, active hero. Far from a damsel in distress, Chihiro uses her feminine character traits to her advantage, and her capacity for empathy drives her to free a river god from his form as a massive, putrid, horrifying stink spirit. While everybody else in the bathhouse cowers in the presence of the monstrous No Face, Chihiro sees him for what he is — a lonely, confused spirit in desperate need of medicine and a change of environment. Chihiro stands up to Yubaba though she has no magical powers of her own, and goes out of her way to save Haku’s life while freeing him from Yubaba’s evil spell. At the end of the film, Chihiro succeeds in rescuing her parents who, after returning to the human world, do not remember anything that had happened. Chihiro’s reward at the end of the film is not a love interest or glory, but a newfound confidence in herself and the knowledge that she was able to defeat her monsters all on her own.

Before Coraline was a film, it was a fantasy novel by Neil Gaiman. Gaiman, who believed his daughters wanted to see themselves as something other than passive princesses, crafted Coraline in their image, and the result was a story about a spunky, intelligent little girl who defies all odds and defeats an impossibly frightening antagonist at her own game. Thanks to director Henry Selick, Coraline made her on-screen debut in 2009, captivating audiences with the help of stop-motion animation. At the beginning of the film, Coraline moves to a new town away
from the friends she had loved, and occupies herself by embarking on an adventure to find a secret well before meeting Wybie, an annoying boy her age. Wybie discovers a doll that looks just like Coraline, and the next day leaves it on her front porch. At eleven years old, Coraline is brimming with desire to befriend and hang out with her parents, but each of her attempts is met with annoyance and rejection. Instead of paying attention to their daughter, Coraline’s parents repeatedly hoist her off onto their strange, eccentric neighbors. With the her look-alike doll in tow, Coraline takes note of the parents that ignore her, the disgusting food on the table, and the drab, dull interior of her boring home, the only interesting aspect being a tiny secret door hidden behind the wallpaper. One night, however, Coraline is awakened by the sound of mice, and rushes downstairs to discover that the tiny door in fact contains a colorful tunnel to another world. When she gets there, she meets her Other Mother and Other Father, two copies of her parents who sport buttons for eyes. Unlike her real parents, Coraline’s Other Mother and Father cook her delicious meals, pay attention to her, and even create a beautiful garden in her image. Instead of getting her name wrong or boring her, Coraline’s Other Neighbors put on spectacular shows just for her and treat her with love. As she grows increasingly frustrated with her regular parents, Coraline finds the idea of staying in the other world appealing. When the Other Mother tries to sew buttons in her eyes, however, Coraline realizes that the other world is a terrifying trap, and the Other Mother reveals herself to be a gaunt, spindly, terrifying spider-like creature that had crafted the world in order to consume her. With no magical powers of her own, Coraline is forced to navigate the other world and stand up to the terrifying beldam all by herself. Though the beldam is smart, Coraline is smarter, and uses her intelligence, knack for games, and adventurous nature to her advantage. At the end of the film, Coraline defeats the beldam, rescues her
kidnapped parents, and saves the souls of the ghost children that had already fallen prey to the 
other world. Coraline was crafted in the image of an ordinary girl, and she shows the children in 
the audience, just like her, that they too can be brave.

Coraline and Chihiro are progressive models for heroism not only because they are girls, 
but also because they are children. Kids movies rarely feature female stars, and when they do, 
the protagonists are typically women in their late teens or adults. Hollywood assumes that little 
girls are ‘aspirational,’ and while younger female audiences are willing to look up to sexualized older women, it is assumed that teenage girls will not “watch down” (Jaremko-Greenwold, 3). Having on-screen representations of girl children is important, and the ability for a female child 
to go to the movies and see herself represented positively is imperative in teaching her that she is strong and worthy of recognition just the way she is. As a society, we often cast children aside, teaching them that they will only be important when they get older. This attitude leads children, especially little girls, to strive to grow out of their childhoods as quick as possible. Worse, they are taught that they will only be worthy once they are physically sexy or beautiful (Newsom, Miss Representation). Coraline and Chihiro, though they are cartoons, behave the way real-life girls often do. Coraline, for example, is adventurous and imaginative; she is not perfect, and her stubbornness and frustration at being cast aside by her parents is reflexive of the reactions real children have when being dismissed. When a mysterious figure in a skeletal mask charges to- 
ward her on a motorbike, she is appropriately afraid, screaming and swinging a stick at him in self-defense. At the end of the film, Coraline defeats the beldam with her creativity, bravery, and adventurous spirit; she shows female children that, with everything that they are, they are capa-
ble of being heroes without growing up or appealing to boys. Not only is it important for female
children to see representations of their strength on-screen, is it important that their parents do as well. Children’s films, particularly western animated films, often have split-level, adult jokes designed to fly over children’s heads in order to keep their parents entertained, and this inadvertently shows adults that children are not worthy of watching in and of themselves (Osmond, 8). Of this, Miyazaki says that “he made the film specifically for 10-year-old girls. That is why it plays so powerfully for adult viewers. Movies made for ‘everybody’ are actually made for nobody in particular. Movies about specific characters in a detailed world are spellbinding because they make no attempt to cater to us; they are defiantly, triumphantly, themselves” (Ebert, 2). Audience members, no matter the age, are designed to identify with media characters, forming empathetic and cognitive ties as they imagine themselves through the eyes of a film’s protagonist (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 192). *Coraline* and *Spirited Away* have no jokes or themes designed exclusively for adults, and the two films thus force their audience members to experience a heroic adventure exclusively through the eyes of a child. In doing this, adults are thus forced to recognize the personhood and capacity for bravery within their own children. For example, though Chihiro of *Spirited Away* sticks her tongue out at her parents and complains to them at the beginning of the film, she is later depicted as a brave and empathetic hero when she risks her own life to save the life of Haku. When a parent sees this, they see a representation of an imperfect child, just like their own, who is strong by nature of who she is. To children and adults, having coming of age stories that feature girls as courageous, intelligent, and capable of problem solving truly matters.

Though *Coraline* is an American film, *Spirited Away* is from Japan, and by examining films from two very different countries, this thesis aims to examine the universal nature of the
lack of appropriate female representation. Moreover, it aims to acknowledge that the struggles and characteristics of girl children are not exclusive to their geographic or cultural background. As they stand, *Coraline* and *Spirited away* are two of the only films that depict little girls as heroic, and it is important to note that their plot lines often mirror one another. Both films open with the common childhood struggle of being uprooted and moving to a new town away from the friends and lives they had known. Both girls find themselves in an unfamiliar, fantastic world full of beings with magical powers that they themselves do not possess, and must stand up to a terrifying, supernatural antagonist using the strength that children are capable of. A child sees her parents as her primary protector and caretaker, and it is important that Chihiro and Coraline are both tasked with rescuing the people whom they had relied on their entire lives. In the United States, the saturation of passive princesses and sexualized women in American culture routinely robs girls of their self-esteem. As they come of age, girls are taught, through media, that they must submit to the notion of American patriarchy in order to fit in (Pipher, 23). Likewise, Japanese attitudes toward women are shaped from the cultural idea of male superiority. Based on the dead of Confucius, Japanese society is family oriented, and though times are slowly changing, women are routinely taught that it is important for them to form romantic relationships, produce children, and perform housework (Kincaid, 3). While Japanese media with female protagonists are better at depicting strong, fleshed out woman than their American counterparts, girl children are still left out of the equation. In fact, even strong Japanese female characters are sexualized, infantilized, and obsessed with romance (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 191). Chihiro and Coraline go against the grain of their respective cultures by rejecting patriarchal notions of female weakness and submission. Their stories mirror one another, and because of this, they
create a mythological framework for a young, female heroine that children across cultures can identify with.

*Coraline* and *Spirited Away* are films of the fantasy genre. While it might seem more obvious to depict little girls as heroes in the real world, the existence of the fantastic in these stories adds another layer to the idea of the girls’ heroism. Little girls, of course, are raised on fairytales, and these fairytales often depict fantastic worlds filled with talking animals, powerful dragons, and magic weapons. A child’s imagination is formative of their sense of being, and fantasy stories thus succeed in placing children in settings reflexive of their own creativity. For children, fantasy is necessary. In a world where children often feel powerless, fantasy provides a form of salvation in a world filled with the enchantments and wonders, showing children that even the most powerful of antagonists can be beaten. Children love it when somebody they can identify is able to stand up to something truly monstrous and win. Across cultures, women and girls in fairytales are condemned to specific roles; a woman in a fairytale has little hope of being anything but a victimized beauty who must wait in a tower until her knight and shining armor comes to rescue her (Neikirk, 39). Men in fairytales have all of the fun, and because of this, women are often excluded from the narrative present throughout much of their childhoods. *Coraline* and *Spirited Away* are different in that they foreground girl children as the heroes of a fantastic narrative, successfully rejecting the framework of the traditional fairytale. It is also important, however, that these films do not exist exclusively in fantasy; both films, in fact, begin and end in the real world. In doing this, the films take ordinary female children out of their normal environments and force them to adapt to a world full of beings with powers that surpass their own, ordinary abilities. This conveys the powerful message that little girls are not only capable of agency
in the real world, but can defeat powerful monsters using only the gifts they possess. Fantasy is an important part of childhood, and it is thus important that these strong female characters are capable of conquering a fantastic world.

In its examination of Spirited Away and Coraline, this thesis aims to subvert common notions of masculinity as a prerequisite to heroism. Moreover, I will explain why these brave, intelligent, creative girl-heroes provide a more significant, powerful model of heroism than their male counterparts. By virtue of who they are, Chihiro and Coraline are positive role models that boys and girls of all ages are able to admire. Chihiro and Coraline defeat their monsters using abilities that little girls possess, and reject the popular myth of the strong female character as a sexualized, older woman with male characteristics. Through the analysis of their respective journeys, this thesis will outline exactly why these girls are the pinnacles of everything that the strong female character should be. The existence of on-screen representations of heroic female children are important cross-culturally, and changing the ways in which the media represents girls is imperative to the real-life development of the way that girls see themselves. In fact, it changes the ways in which boys and adults view female children as well. In subverting stereotypes and changing the male-centric image of heroism, Coraline and Spirited Away help little girls take off their princess gowns, look in the mirror, and whisper, “I can save myself.”
On Spirited Away

“For those who were once ten years old, and those who are going to be ten years old” - Hayao Miyazaki

For a number of summers, the young daughter of one of Miyazaki’s friends came to stay with him in his mountain cabin. When the girl turned ten, she began bringing her friends around as well, and the great director even grew to affectionately refer to these girls as his “young friends.” In the first stages of adolescence, the girls were just beginning to grow out of their childhoods, and their displays of playfulness, boredom, and bravery had become tinged with the slight pressures of growing up (Ewens, 2). Though not quite teenagers, the girls had begun to become affected by the messages of romance, sex, and crushes marketed toward them by the Japanese media, and it was exceedingly rare to see a girl of their age as the hero of her own story. In his spare time, Miyazaki combed through the manga the girls left around the house, and came to learn that they were really only presented with vacuous, big-eyed school girls or hopeless romantics to emulate. When he watched his young friends, Miyazaki knew secretly that, in their hearts, crushes and romance were not what was truly important to them. In fact, he knew that the girls not only yearned, but deserved to see themselves as heroines (Toyama, 1). With these girls in mind, Miyazaki created Chihiro, and with her, Spirited Away: “I wanted to make a movie,’ the Japanese director […] told Roger Ebert in 2002, ‘especially for the daughters of my friends’” (Bellot, 1). The star of the top grossing film in Japanese history, Chihiro is not a brave
male swordsman or a damsel in distress, but a brutally honest portrayal of what it is like to be a
ten-year-old-girl (Reider, 4). Though she is the film’s primary protagonist, Chihiro is not particu-
larly pretty or remarkable; she has no magical powers to speak of, and is far from the image of
the picture-perfect Disney princess which often dominates children’s media. Miyazaki wanted to
be sure that young girls watching the film would be able to identify with her, and in creating
Chihiro, created a heroine who was a real girl, just like them.

True to Miyazaki’s style, Spirited Away is, of course, an animated film, and it is important
to note that Chihiro’s is made from pen and paper instead of flesh and blood. Still, the conven-
tions of realness hold true in Miyazaki’s animated world, and he took special care to draw thou-
sands upon thousands of frames by hand in order to escape the tropes of present-day children’s
animation (Ebert, 1). Though Chihiro is not “real” the way that Miyazaki’s young friends were,
she still embodies the important factors of realism as they apply to animation. First and foremost,
Chihiro is visually real in that she is understood by the audience as looking, moving, and sub-
scribing to the laws of her physical world the way that is true of our reality (Rowley, 3). Not only
does Chihiro trip, stumble, breathe, and run the way a real girl does, she also displays realistic
moments of hesitation and thoughtfulness, often staring out at the world around her instead of
rushing headfirst into her next challenge. Miyazaki describes these realistic moments as “ma,”
or, the moments of emptiness between the action that are present throughout our daily lives (Bel-
lot, 3). Of Miyazaki’s technique, Ebert says “instead of every movement being dictated by the
story, sometimes people will just sit for a moment, or sigh, or gaze at a running stream, or do
something extra, not to advance the story but only to give the sense of time and place and who
they are.” Not only does Chihiro move and behave the way a real girl might, she is also a part of
a story holding narrative and social realism. Though audience members are cognitively aware that witches and sludge monsters do not exist in the real world, they are able to follow Chihiro’s story because the film in constructed to make the audience believe that Chihiro’s behavior within her fictitious world is as complex, varied, and natural as it would be in reality (Rowley, 2).

Though much of her story is colored with elements of the fantastic, Chihiro is as close to a real girl as animation allows her to be, and this was of upmost importance to Miyazaki. He says, that “[he] created a heroine who is an ordinary girl, someone with whom the audience can sympathize, someone about whom they can say, ‘yes, it's like that.’ It's very important to make it plain and unexaggerated” (Toyama, 1).

To give the animation a richer sense of realness, Miyazaki pours an incredible amount of movement and life into every corner of every hand-drawn frame. In scene after scene, beautiful, lifelike, images of the bathhouse come to life through the movement of seemingly unimportant details. When Lin first leads Chihiro through the Bathhouse, for example, Miyazaki took care to make sure that his animated representation of a bathhouse was as full of detail as it would be if the film were live action. As Lin speaks to the enormous radish spirit in the center of the frame, we can see a group of oversized yellow chicks playing together in one room and two red-robed ghostly spirits conversing in another. In the bathhouse around them, each panel, gold knob, and decorative flower is drawn with so much care and detail that the foregrounded action feels all the more lifelike, and its easier to see Chihiro as a real girl as she cautiously steps around the radish spirit when so much realness is injected into the world around her. This scene is tremendously brief, and only includes a single line of dialogue where Lin tells the radish spirit he’ll have to take another elevator, but Miyazaki treats it with as much care and respect as more important
scenes where, for instance, Haku writhes in the air while being attached by hundreds of paper birds. True to the constructs of reality, movement in *Spirited Away* exists everywhere, and “it isn't the repetitive motion of much animation, in which the only idea is simply to show a figure moving. It is realistic, changing, detailed motion. Most people watching the movie will simply read those areas of the screen as "movement." But if we happen to look, things are really happening there” (Ebert, 2). In another scene, Chihiro sits underneath a green bush dotted with purple flowers after seeing her parents in the pigpen. When Haku offers her a few balls of onigiri (Japanese rice balls) to eat, she gobbles them up, tears rolling down her face because she’s so overwhelmed with emotion. Miyazaki doesn’t try to make Chihiro look attractive, and the girl sobs with food in her mouth as tears fall into it. The audience feels Chihiro’s emotion not only because she behaves the way a real girl might, but also because the scene around her is painted in a way akin to life. Each life, blade of grass, and flower is its own entity, and it is these details that make *Spirited Away* feel like so much more than an animated film.

The first time we see Chihiro, she is lying on her back in her father’s car, her face awash with boredom. Her family’s move to a new town is upsetting for her the way it might be upsetting to any young girl, and Chihiro sticks her little tongue defiantly out the window in protest. She is not excited and optimistic about the move, but sullen and apprehensive, and combats every one of her parents’ attempts to cheer her up with all of the charm of an old sneaker. She clutches her goodbye-bouquet so hard that the they begin to die, whines about it, and moans, “the only time I got a bouquet and it’s a goodbye present, that’s depressing,” only to be reminded that her father bought her a rose for her birthday. “Yeah, one. Just one rose isn’t a bouquet,” she retorts, sinking back into her seat. Later, when her parents insist on entering the ominous tunnel
before them, Chihiro first insists she is not going, no doubt hoping to sway them. When her mother really *does* tell her to wait in the car without them, Chihiro chooses to instead cling annoyingly to her mother’s arm the entire way through, too terrified on the creepy statue at the tunnel’s entrance to wait by herself. In fact, Miyazaki made Chihiro so realistic that he himself admitted he didn’t like her much at first. He says,

“I didn't want to make the heroine a pretty girl, but even I was frustrated at the beginning of the movie: I thought, ‘What a dull girl she is.’ When I saw the rushes, I thought, ‘She isn't cute. Isn't there something we can do?’ But as the film neared the end, I was a bit relieved to feel, ‘Oh, she will be a charming woman’” (Toyama, 1).

Miyazaki is right, of course. Throughout the film, Chihiro exhibits an incredible capacity for character development, and becomes a heroine any ten-year-old girl would be proud to transform into. Though she is whiny, her behavior echoes that of a real-life adolescent, and the existence of the Chihiro at the beginning of the film makes the journey of her transformation that much more remarkable. In direct contrast to so much of the media aimed at young audiences, Chihiro survives not because she is saved by a prince, but because the lessons she learns along the way enable her to save herself.

Founded on the ideas of Confucius, Japanese society has always been family oriented. Men are expected to be the providers of their households, and women are expected to follow them by marrying, completing housework, and raising children. Though women were once considered completely subservient, a cultural shift after the second world war granted them personhood through the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to marry and divorce freely (Kincaid, 4). A woman living in contemporary Japan can be the head of her own household, and it is no longer frowned upon for women to marry later in life. Married women often
hold part and full-time jobs, and the number of Japanese women completing a college-level education has recently surpassed the number of men. While the times are changing, women are still taught that their femininity is important. Women are expected to be the primary caretakers of their children, and in 2007, it was revealed that Japanese men “only average about 30 minutes of housework, child care, and elder care each day” (Kincaid, 3). Motherhood was, and still is, considered to be one of the primary defining characteristics of Japanese women, and because masculinity has always been considered completely separate from motherhood, Japanese girls are taught to be sweet, nurturing, and feminine from a young age. Kincaid explains that “Japanese women struggle to form their own sense of identity apart from this cultural expectation,” partially because so much of the media fed to Japanese girls emphasizes femininity and preparation for womanhood above all else.

The manga Miyazaki’s young friends left scattered around his house were primarily of the Shojo genre, a type of manga written primarily by female authors for young girls (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 190). Shojo heroines are typically fleshed out, and unlike female characters geared toward western audiences, Shojo heroines have thorough backstories, motives, and an array of interests. When the Shojo genre first emerged, it caused a small controversy. With a focus on high-school and adolescent girls, Shojo defined a period which existed between girlhood and motherhood, a period that had, to that point, remained relatively unexplored (Kincaid, 2). In western cinema, the “strong female character” is often androgynous and boyish. The *Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) protagonist Katniss Everdeen is able to win because she can skillfully wield a bow-and-arrow, and even Pixar’s first female lead, Merida of *Brave* (Andrews, 2012), was only considered strong when she rejected the feminine expectations forced upon her.
Shojo protagonists, however, are almost always proudly and extraordinarily feminine. So feminine, in fact, that nearly all of the girls within the genre are drawn with round, innocent eyes and don outfits adorned with fluffy pastel colors, flowers, and sparkles. Shojo heroines take pride in their feminine attributes, and no doubt encourage the girls who read about them to embody a new sort of infantile, adorable hero. Though the autonomous Shojo girls are quick to make decisions and protect their friends, these actions are often overshadowed by their feminine weaknesses. In the first episode of the popular shojo anime *Sailor Moon*, for example, Usagi heroically rescues a cat from some neighborhood boys who are beating it up. Immediately after she saves it, however, the cat startles her by leaping out of her arms, causing her to tremble, burst into tears and flee. So while shojo heroines are strong in some ways, they are still depicted as bare-legged teenagers who flail around like toddlers, are utterly obsessed with romance, and wail epically at minor inconveniences (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 191). When Miyazaki created Chihiro, he did it with Shojo heroines in mind; instead of modeling her after them, he wanted to create an image of a pre-adolescent girl who was strong not in spite of, but because of her feminine characteristics. The girls and women in Miyazaki’s films are vulnerable, yet independent, girlish, yet brave, and the heroes of their own stories despite not fitting a particular image of how Japanese women should traditionally behave (Bellot, 2). Unlike the Shojo heroines which dominate the market, Miyazaki’s girls teach that being female is not about fitting into any specific stereotype, but about being who you are.

*Spirited Away* is a story about heroism, a concept so antonymous with the idea of a ten-year-old girl that films consistently ensure that the heroes are men and boys. Even when girls manage to land powerful, leading roles, they often fall victim to feminine tropes. After all,
Frozen’s (Lee, 2013), Elsa, while strong in her own right, is still portrayed as an “icy bitch queen” (Beck). However, Miyazaki didn’t choose to focus on a female hero merely because there weren’t enough of them. In fact, he believed that female protagonists were actually better for examining the idea of heroism than their male counterparts. Across cultures, we expect our heroes to be men, and we invariably tie the idea of heroism to the concept of masculinity the same way that we equate feminine character traits to helpless damsels in distress. Rose explains that “by making the hero a girl, he took all […] the macho stuff out of the equation, and that gave him the freedom to examine heroism. His career has been a very beautiful building of an idea that the feminine doesn’t preclude the heroic,” (2). Throughout the film, the character traits that are so seldom associated with heroism are what help ensure Chihiro’s success. It is often said that empathy and emotional intelligence are characteristics synonymous with the feminine, and Chihiro’s capacity for these traits aid her far more than brute strength ever could. After all, even an extraordinarily powerful man is often no match for a being with magical powers. In an early scene, Chihiro enters Kamaji’s boiler room after being told that she must find a job in order to survive. Through the animation, we read the apprehension on her face and the terror when she sees the massive, eight-legged kamaji. The boiler room is drawn with great detail, and the deep browns, blacks, and reds create a sense of foreboding. Visibly afraid, Chihiro meekly asks Kamaji for work, and is discouraged when he sternly insists he already has all the help he needs. When she witnesses a soot sprite struggle helplessly after being crushed by a lump of coal, her empathy for the creature motivates her to come to its aid. She lifts the lump of coal, struggles along the path, and tosses it into the boiler, rescuing the poor thing from its fate. In a moment of humor, the rest of the soot sprites begin dropping their own lumps of coal, writhing helplessly in hopes that
Chihiro might help them as well. Instead of thanking her, however, the terrifying Kamaji angrily bangs his hammer, threatening to turn his helpers back into soot and, while raising his voice, explains that he does not need her help and that she better try somewhere else. Upset by the old man’s unfairness, the soot sprites chatter angrily and rush to protect Chihiro, piling themselves at her feet and abandoning their work, no doubt indebted to her for caring for one of their own. Though he hides it at first, Kamaji is moved by Chihiro’s empathy, enough to refer to her as his “granddaughter” and, instead of exposing her, insist that Lin take her to find a job in order to ensure her survival. Chihiro befriends the eight-legged, terrifying slave to the boiler not by sheer force or a display of masculinity, but by being the sweet, caring girl that she is.

It is no secret that children are influenced by the media they consume. Though having strong female protagonists to idolize is important to a young girl, the point is somewhat moot if the heroine is inhibited by her feminine character traits. While Shojo heroines bring meaningful representation to the market, many of them are too weighed down by feminine “weaknesses” to truly convey a meaningful message on the power of women (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 191). In Spirited Away, Chihiro’s love for Haku is not the center of the story, nor does it serve as an obstacle to the eventual savior of her parents. It does not reflect a hopeless romance or petty crush, but the platonic desire to save a person with whom she had developed a deep mutual respect, a respect that grew from the fact that Haku had not only saved Chihiro’s life when she was a child, but was the first person to help her when she arrived at the bathhouse. When the media boils love down to obsession and crushes, it assumes that adolescents aren’t capable of feeling a deep, powerful love beyond shallow romance. In making Spirited Away, Miyazaki constantly compared to Chihiro to his young female friends; he never made Chihiro do, feel, or say some-
thing without being absolutely certain it was something a real life ten-year-old would be capable
of (Ewens, 1). Chihiro connects so deeply with audiences young and old because her emotional
intelligence, a feminine character trait, is rooted in reality. Miyazaki not only acknowledges that
children are capable of deep, profound feelings, but foregrounds these feelings as strengths, not
weaknesses.

A powerful motif in *Spirited Away* is man’s destruction of nature, and it speaks volumes
to Chihiro’s character that she not only saves her parents, but takes the time to care for the envi-
ronment as well. After all, Chihiro helps Haku realize that he was once the spirit of a river that
had since been destroyed and filled in with apartments. In one scene, a massive, terrifying pile of
sludge creeps slowly through the rain toward the bathhouse. Most of the staff immediately rush
to block the gate, insisting that they are closed with the intention of refusing to serve him. If it
weren’t for his money, Yubaba would have also refused to let him in, but instead assigns him to
her youngest and newest employee, Chihiro, who she had at this point renamed “Sen.” While the
other staff members gasp and shy away from the especially filthy guest, later revealed to be the
powerful spirit of a polluted river, Chihiro politely leads him to the tub and uses not one, but two
of her bath tokens to help him. It is the little moments in this scene as well as the details in
the animation that make us feel for Chihiro. For example, while the river spirit climbs into the
tub, Chihiro stares at him, eyes wide terror, before gasping and yanking her basket of tokens out
of the way of the oncoming hideous, purple wave of slime. A few minutes later, brown sludge
from the river spirit completely coats the floor, and Chihiro grits her teeth, hikes up her pants,
and wades slowly and determinedly toward the bathtub in order to help the creature, the beauti-
ful, water-colored panels of the room serving as a contrast behind her. From the slow, disgusting
movement of the sludge to the slight changes in Chihiro’s facial expression, the little details lav-
ishly placed by Miyazaki color the scene with a type of realness which makes the audience feel
just how difficult and transformative this challenge is for Chihiro. In his 2008 article, “Spirited
Away,” Osmond says that,

Chihiro makes the Stink god’s toil her own. She suffers every indignity in this scene. She
trips, stumbles, bangs her head umpteen times. She trudges through fecal slime, braving
the god’s fetid breath. Her determination is shown not as a cowed, robotic labour but as
high heroism, taking every knock and standing tall (19).

Chihiro’s compassion for the creature leads her to not only wade through the mountains of dis-
gusting sludge and slime, but realize that he is badly hurt. Without hearing it speak, Chihiro un-
derstands that the river spirit is in pain by reading the helpless expression on its face and feeling
around its body after the creature picks her up and draws her closer to it. Face-deep in filthy wa-
ter, Chihiro grasps for the foreign object protruding from the creature’s grotesque body and ex-
claims “I think he has a thorn in his side!” Yubaba is surprised by this, and immediately appears
by Chihiro’s side, creating a rope between her hands and handing it to the girl. “That’s no stink
spirit we have on our hands,” says Yubaba, having figured out the mystery thanks to Chihiro’s
intuition. Though she is still partially submerged in water, Chihiro is able to tie the rope tightly
around the object, later revealed to be a bicycle handle, and the rest of the staff rushes to help
pull it out, freeing the river god from the prison of filth in which he was trapped. Without Chihi-
ro’s nurturing feminine nature, the river spirit would not have survived. More importantly, he
would not have gifted Chihiro the powerful medicine which she would later need to save Haku
and No Face (Emerson, 4). After the river spirit is cleaned, it murmurs a mysterious and power-
ful “Well done,” a message meant for Chihiro and Chihiro alone. It is thus Chihiro’s so-called
feminine characteristics that save not only nature, but a slew of other characters, including herself.

Though much of Chihiro’s strength comes from the fact that she is female, it is also important that *Spirited Away*’s protagonist is a child. Even in Miyazaki films, adult Japanese women are still somewhat bound by society’s expectations. In his 2009 film *Ponyo*, for example, Miyazaki portrays Sauske’s mother as a loving homemaker who, even outside of motherhood, works a part-time job caring for the elderly. Although not quite true to the feminist line of thinking, it is a hard fact that Japanese men and women have established roles within their social order. While a grown adult might have trouble stepping outside this role, anything is possible for a child, especially in a fantasy film (Rose, 1). In a 2005 interview recorded by Reider in his essay “*Spirited Away: Film Of The Fantastic And Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols,*” Miyazaki says that,

> Fantasy is necessary. During childhood when children don't have much power but feel angst, fantasy gives some kind of salvation. When children face difficult and complicated problems, they will be beaten if they tackle them directly. You don't need to use a dubious phrase like ‘escape from reality’ (7).

The antagonists in *Spirited Away* are fearsome, powerful, and mysterious; it might seem strange for a child to be able to conquer them herself, but to be a child is to be imaginative and brave, garnering sympathy through innocence and the earnest desire to succeed. Chihiro works within the established system of the bathhouse to gain respect, become courageous, and save the lives of her loved ones. As is true for the masculine hero, certain things are expected of adult protagonists; they usually either use brute strength or attempt to outsmart their opponent, a strategy which might have failed miserably against the terrifying Yubaba. While the audience oftentimes
expects these things from adult characters, children are truly capable of anything (Rose, 3). Though Chihiro’s fear of the tunnel into the train station made her appear weak and infantile, it was her childish intuition for the presence of danger that caused her instinctual fear. Chihiro’s instincts, of course, turned out to be totally valid; had her parents listened to her, they would not have gotten themselves into this mess in the first place. As children, people tend to have a stronger respect for rules and authority. After all, children live under their parents’ roofs and are usually bound by their rules. When Chihiro’s parents begin to eat the food left out for the spirits at the beginning of the film, Chihiro abstains. When her parents insist that she has to try some, she says “No, I don’t want any; we’re going to get in trouble!” Though her parents don’t listen, she stands her ground, desperately pleading, “c’mon guys, you can’t!” Chihiro’s innate respect for the rules of society told her that, instinctually, she and her family were not meant to take what didn’t belong to them (Emerson, 4). It is Chihiro’s childlike intuition which saves her from meeting the same fate as her adult parents who, after eating the food of the spirits, were transformed into pigs.

With the concept of heroism undoubtedly comes the idea of the hero’s journey, a term coined by Joseph Campbell for the transformative quest that a hero must embark on in order to achieve his ultimate goal (Emerson, 1). The traditional hero, of course, is typically male, and the hero’s journey thus revolves around the concept of masculinity. Emerson says that “we generally consider such traits as physical strength, courage, independence and self-reliance, and the tendency to use force as ‘masculine’ traits, as opposed to traits identified as ‘feminine’ such as empathy, nurturance, connection with community, and negotiation.” For this reason, a truly feminine version of the hero’s journey, one which does not rely on the presence of masculinity, is
nearly nonexistent from most narratives. Perhaps the only positive side to these so-called missing women is, as I have mentioned before, the lack of real expectations for heroic female girl-characters. Grown men are expected to fight valiantly without shedding a tear or succumbing to feminine emotions, and even little boys it seems are subject to the pressures of masculinity. While adult women are expected to act as damsels in distress, female children often escape this narrative, and can thus be used to examine heroism with absolute freedom. Ironic as it may seem, the so-called weakest members of society, physically, at least, become the greatest heroes (Rose, 1). With the image of the male hero comes the image of a big, tough, sword-wielding superman capable of smiting anything in his path. With her scrawny legs and short stature, Chihiro is not exactly the picture of the tough, traditional hero, and she does not even have a spec of magical ability with which to combat her monsters. In one scene, she even has difficulty climbing over a series of rocks to cross a riverbed, scrambling on all fours and telling her parents to “wait a minute.” Throughout the film, Chihiro is animated as she is: a ten year old girl, and this serves to showcase that she is strong not in spite of, but alongside her identity as such. Paramount to the feminine hero is the capacity for change and the simultaneous reliance on intuition, compassion, and intelligence, traits that Chihiro exhibits with excellence. It is worth noting that in modern life, most of our most difficult challenges are not physical, but social and emotional, and this makes the female hero’s journey often more relevant to day to day life than the one traditional of men (Emerson, 2). Fantastic stories starring female children are not clouded by the protagonist’s ability to fight, and instead the audience is able to examine what it really, truly means to be a hero.
It is worth noting that in making the protagonist a child, Miyazaki is able to appeal to a multifaceted audience. Within the construct of her animated world, Chihiro is realistic; she is somebody that adults knew that they once were, somebody ten-year olds see in themselves, and somebody young children might one day hope to be. The film is completely dominated by Chihiro’s perspective — aside from a few exceptionally short snippets, Chihiro is in every scene. We never see her through somebody else’s eyes, and we experience the new and mysterious world which surrounds her completely from her point of view (Osmond, 20). Identifying with the lead protagonist is important to truly understanding a specific film. Ramasubramanian says that “The process of identification is understood as a natural merging of the self with the media character, thereby sharing the character’s perspective and ‘internalizing their view of the world’” (193). When an adult is forced to identify with a child, especially a child within fantasy, this concept becomes even more powerful. As an adult, especially a western adult, views the fantastic world of *Spirited Away*, they are thrust into the same newness and confusion as the protagonist herself. When Chihiro’s parents are first transformed into pigs, she rushes through the lamp-lit streets of the theme park, crying for her mother as she stands in a crowd of near-identical, shadowy spirits. To Chihiro and to the viewer, the blurred mystery of this scene is completely haunting; we are just as confused and frightened as she is. The ability to not only sympathize, but identify with a child is powerful for an adult viewer. In this way, Chihiro becomes as much of a role model to grown men and women as she is for children. When she uses her empathy, emotional intelligence, and capacity for bravery to succeed against her antagonists, Chihiro is appealing not only to children, but to the desire within all of us to see justice invariably prevail (Reider, 8). By creat-
ing a girl-child protagonist whom even adults can look up to, Miyazaki changes societal norms of who can be a hero.

To a child, her parents are figures of wisdom and love. It is a parent’s duty to care and provide for their children to the best of their ability, and children thus look to their parents as their primary protectors. Children reasonably expect their parents to shelter them from harm, and seldom expect to be put in the opposite position. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro’s parents aren’t around to shield her from the dangerous world of witches, spirits, and monsters which she has entered because it is Chihiro’s parents who caused the entire mess in the first place. When Chihiro’s parents insisted on exploring the tunnel, they gave their daughter the ultimatum of either coming with them or staying in the car by herself, essentially spooking her into following their orders. Though she is only a ten-year-old girl, Chihiro’s instincts are sharp, and the audience is able to read the fear and apprehension on her face as she clings to her mother’s arm. Her instincts are so strong, in fact, that she disobeys her parents when they tell her to try the food left out for the spirits, and subsequently escapes her fated transformation into a pig. Though her disobedience saved her, Chihiro finds herself in a situation where the people she has always trusted to decide the right thing make a near-fatal mistake, and this is no doubt confusing and terrifying for her. Perhaps for the first time in her life, Chihiro is without her mother and father during a time of extreme peril, and it is both telling and powerful that she herself is instead in charge of saving them. At first, Chihiro’s desire to rescue her parents is more or less motivated by her deep need to be cared for; by saving her parents, they might save her in return. Throughout her journey, however, Chihiro’s need to be taken care of dissolves into a determination to rescue the people whom she loves most from an untimely doom. At the end of the film, Yubaba stands before Chi-
hiro with a heard of pigs and tells her that her final test is to identify which two are her parents. The world around her is in motion, and the pigs writhe in their pen, almost in anticipation, as Chihiro approaches them. With calm intuition, Chihiro steps forward to examine the group of identical, noisy pigs before her, and it is here that Chihiro sees something that the audience does not, and turns to Yubaba to say, “there must be some mistake, none of these pigs are my mom or dad,” and even affirms her answer after Yubaba tries to make her second guess herself. Chihiro, of course, is correct, and her contract vanishes from Yubaba’s hand with the knowledge that she and her family may now go free (Emerson, 5). The image of a child saving her parents is simple, but its a powerful one. Chihiro is not tasked with saving an entire village or valiantly slaying a dragon, but developing the courage and confidence to rescue her own caretakers. To young audiences, the notion that they themselves are capable of anything, even rescuing the people who had cared for them their entire lives, is possible. To parents in the audience, Chihiro represents their children’s strength. In either case, her heroism sends a message heard by everyone.

Another powerful reason why Spirited Away resonates so deeply with Japanese audiences is because much of it is based upon folklore popular in the country. When Chihiro first arrives in the spirit realm, she begins to disappear, and is only saved when she is forced by Haku to eat a small, red berry. “You have to eat some food from this world or else you’ll disappear,” he says, forcing the berry into her mouth. This is an allusion to the famous Japanese myth of Izanagi and Izanimi, the ancient creators of Japan. When Izanimi, the female creator of Japan, dies in childbirth, she is forced to take residence in the spirit realm. When Izanagi, her lover and male counterpart, decides he cannot bear to part with her, he enters the spirit realm to retrieve her. Izanimi, however, informs him that returning to the world of the living would be exceedingly difficult be-
cause she had already eaten some of the food from the other world (Reider, 6). The film’s primary protagonist, Yubaba, is also representative of a popular character from Japanese folklore. In Japan, tales of the mountain-dwelling Yamauba, a mountain-dwelling, cannibalistic witch. In fact, Spirited Away’s Yubaba is not only a powerful, controlling witch, but makes several references to eating humans, especially after she transforms them into animals. The allusion is made even more clear with the fact that Yubaba lives on the very top floor of the bathhouse, a clear parallel to the Yamauba’s preference to take residence on the top of a mountain (Reider, 12). It is also worth noting that Kamaji, the old man who acts as the self-identified “slave to the boiler,” bears strong similarities to the Japanese spirit of the spider. With his long limbs, horizontal posture, and hard-working nature, Kamaji is no doubt representative of the pit-dwelling tschuchigumo of Japanese legend. In Japan, spiders are symbols of industry and ability, and throughout the film Kamaji illustrates that he is not only works diligently, but has been doing so for the forty years he has been at the bathhouse (Reider, 15). Though the two fables have nothing to do with each other, it is also curious that Kamaji makes use of soot spirits, called susuwatari, as helpers. In fact, Miyazaki alludes to the susuwatari in not only Spirited Away, but his beloved children’s film My Neighbor Totoro as well.

Allusions to Japanese folklore can be found not only in the story, but in the mere examination of the title of the film. While the film’s Japanese title “Sen to Chihiro no Kamukakushi,” roughly translates to “the spiriting away of Sen and Chihiro,” the words actually carry a much deeper meaning. In fact, the phrase “kamikakushi” actually means “hidden by deities,” an allusion to an old Japanese folk belief. It used to be said that when people, especially women and children, suddenly vanished for long periods of time, it was presumed that a spirit had stolen the
person away to the spirit world. After being away for a long period of time, these missing women and children were often presumed dead. However, should they eventually turn up, it was said that they had experienced both a social death and a social resurrection having learned from their horrible and frightening experiences among the spirits. After experiencing the life of the “other world,” the returned person would emerge a new social being (Reider, 9). When Chihiro is spirited away, her experiences in the spirit realm push her far past her comfort zone and force her to transform into a stronger version of herself. Trial after trial, Chihiro grows as a person, and though her experience with “kamikakushi” is a difficult one, she eventually emerges triumphant.

At the beginning of the film, Chihiro is reluctant to pass through the tunnel and even insists that her parents return to the car; she is only truly persuaded to enter the tunnel because she is too terrified to be alone with the statue at its entrance. After she passes back through the tunnel at the end of the film, it is exceedingly clear that time has passed; the family car is covered with leaves and debris, and Chihiro’s confused parents wonder if the scene is “some kind of joke,” confused because they have no real memory of being transformed into pigs. Thanks to Chihiro’s hard work, her family is able to appear back in the real world after a long period of time. Not only is this reflexive of the old Japanese folk belief, but it proves that it is exceedingly difficult to return to the human realm once one has been spirited away (Osmond, 12). At the beginning of the film, Chihiro was terrified and reluctant to start a new life at a new school. At the end, however, Chihiro proudly states that “[she] thinks she can handle it.” After spending time in the spirit realm, she is longer afraid of the road ahead of her.

Also important to Japanese culture is the symbolic meaning of a person’s name. In a popular Japanese story, the Tomb of Atuan, it is said that “who knows a man’s name, holds that
man’s life in his keeping. In the story, when a girl remembers her human name, her memories of the human world gradually rush back to her and strengthen her ability to fight dark, spiritual forces (Reider, 10). Reider says that, “the act of depriving a person of one's name has far more reaching consequences and implications than simply affecting how one person addresses another; the very act implies total control over the person whose name is being withheld” (9). The name “Chihiro” literally means “a thousand” or “searching/seeking,” a clear nod to Chihiro’s search for not only her parents, but her way home. When Chihiro signs Yubaba’s contract, her name is taken from her, and she is instead called “Sen,” literally meaning “thousand” (Ewens, 3). As Chihiro’s powerful overlord, Yubaba exhibits strong control over her, even forcing her to briefly forget the name she has had her entire life. When Haku meets with her to give her the card with her name on it, she is confused at first. “Chihiro, that’s my name isn’t it?” she says. “I can’t believe I forgot it. She almost took it from me.” Haku warns Chihiro that should she ever completely forget her name, she will never be able to return to the real world. It is perhaps because Chihiro is able to remember her true name that she is able to blatantly defy Yubaba’s wishes, skipping out on work in order to find her parents and save Haku. In fact, it is partially because Yubaba had completely stolen Haku’s name that he worked as her apprentice for so long, quitting only when Chihiro helped him remember it. Though Haku gifts her the card with her name on it, Chihiro’s ability to remember her name reflects a deep strength to resist Yubaba’s magic, a strength that even one of the bathhouse’s strongest sorcerers did not possess without her help. By representing, conquering, and defying a series of Japanese legends, Chihiro becomes a heroine and champion of the Japanese narrative, succeeding where so many before her had failed.
The capacity for transformation is as important to a hero as her ability to destroy her enemies. Though a hero who displays strength from beginning to end might be admirable, he is not truly a role model unless his strife is transformative. After all, there is a stunning difference between a person who has always been tough and a person who was forced through trial to become that way, and the latter serves as a far better metaphor for the necessity of transformation to real-life survival. Throughout the film, Chihiro’s capacity to not only change, but to do so under dire circumstances is striking. Like the “kamikakushi” of Japanese folklore, Chihiro’s experience in the spirit world changes her, and she is forced to transform from a sullen, whiny adolescent into a daring heroine under the most dire of circumstances. When Chihiro first realizes she has entered a terrifying new world, she panics. She tries to convince herself she has slipped into a nightmare, and huddles in a corner as her body disappears. When Haku discovers her, she at first tries to reject his help, but agrees to follow him once she realizes that she is simply out of options. Here, Chihiro proceeds out of necessity, and when she fails at her first task - holding her breath as she crosses the bridge to avoid being seen — Haku tells her she must proceed on her own. “Don’t leave me, I don’t want to be alone!” she says to him, but Haku makes it clear that she has no other choice. In order to avoid being killed and eaten, Chihiro must find work. A few hours prior, Chihiro’s greatest challenge had been adapting to a new school and making new friends. When Haku abandons her, her greatest challenge becomes staying alive. To any person, being suddenly thrust into a life-or-death situation brings upon a life-changing form of terror, and Chihiro exhibits this terror the way any ten year old girl would have. She proceeds because the alternative is not an option, and with this shift of events comes the beginning of a startling transformation, (Emerson, 4).
After Haku leaves Chihiro, her first lone task is simple - descend a steep flight of stairs and access the boiler room while remaining as quiet and inconspicuous as possible. Instead of simply walking down the stairs, Chihiro gets down on all fours and lowers herself slowly one step at a time. The moment is heavy with anticipation, and Miyazaki’s animation makes clear that this experience is as horrifying for the audience as it is for Chihiro. The long, creaky staircase all but dwarfs Chihiro’s child sized frame, and the staircase itself is depicted as twice as wide as she is. The gaps between the stairs are so large, in fact, that the audience is able to realize just how daunting the task of simply walking down them truly is. At the beginning of her careful descent, a weak, creaky stair breaks under her foot with a thunderous CRACK, causing Chihiro to scream, fall on her bottom, and slip quickly down the stairs before leaping to her feet and running as fast as she can in order to keep her balance. All the while Chihiro’s face is awash with terror, her arms raised high in the air while tears form in the corners of her eyes. In fact, Chihiro stops screaming only because she smacks right into a concrete wall, panting and gasping for air as she peels herself off of it, no doubt feeling lucky to be alive. To the audience, Chihiro’s screams are justified, and the so-called simple task of descending a flight of stairs becomes monumental and terrifying in and of itself; a necessary step for her survival. As the film progresses, the trials she faces become more and more difficult, and her agency in completing these tasks grows. Later in the film, the staircase scene is paralleled when Chihiro races across a particularly rusty pipe in order to save Haku. Though Chihiro was forced to descend the stairs for her survival, her decision to save Haku is completely her own, and there is tremendous power in the agency behind this task. In her attempt to rescue the enormous, bleeding dragon from certain death, Chihiro notices that the only way to reach the ladder up to him is to shimmy across a rusty
water pipe. In contrast to her slow, deliberate movements down the stairs to Kamaji’s lair, Chihiro puts on a brave face, tightens her pants, and races as fast as she can across the old pipe without so much as screaming, and even takes a leap of faith in jumping toward the ladder once the pipe begins to give way. These two scenes not only serve as an example of Chihiro’s capacity for change, but an example for the transformative nature of bravery through decision, action, and autonomy.

As if losing her parents and being left on her own in a magical world weren’t enough, Chihiro is told that she must find a job in order to stay alive. Though this task might seem inconsequential, it is admittedly daunting for a previously spoiled ten-year-old-girl to take on. Desperate to save her parents, Chihiro walks alone toward Yubaba’s office to ask for a job. The top floor of the bathhouse, Yubaba’s lair, is drawn with rich detail, and everything around Chihiro served to dwarf her. The hallways are enormous, and even the yellow, ornate pottery stands twice as tall as she does. Not only does this set the stage for Yubaba’s character, a greedy, money-obsessed witch, but it also shows just how childlike Chihiro is, making the task at hand even more monumental. When Yubaba draws Chihiro into her office, she stands shaking before her, begging for work. The monstrous witch not only towers over Chihiro, but has access to terrifying magical powers as well. After Chihiro asks for a job, the Yubaba quickly zips her mouth shut with a flick of her finger, causing Chihiro to claw desperately at her face. Yubaba laughs, exhales smoke out of her long, grotesque nose, and says, “I don’t want to hear such a stupid request.” Though Yubaba tried to discourage her, Chihiro doesn’t back down, and stands her ground while her body begins to tremble with fear. Again, Yubaba laughs, saying “I can see you’re shaking, but you didn’t come all this way on your own. Who helped you, dear? Why don’t you tell me.” The
second Yubaba unzips Chihiro’s mouth, however, Chihiro takes the opportunity to stand up for herself, screaming “please, I just want to work!” Yubaba grows frustrated, and tells Chihiro not to ask her anymore, but Chihiro insists. With desperation in her voice, she screams again for work, causing Yubaba to barrel toward the terrified little girl, berating her while prodding her stomach with her long, sharp fingernail. “Why in the world should I give you a job?” she shouts. “Anybody can see you’re a lazy, spoiled, crybaby and you have no manners.” After wrapping her finger around Chihiro’s delicate throat, Yubaba changes her mind, and teases the little girl the way a cat might play with a mouse before devouring it. “Or maybe, I’ll give you the most difficult job I’ve got and work you until you breathe your very last breath,” Yubaba says, causing Chihiro to quake with fear, inhaling sharply and closing her eyes in preparation for her destruction. Yubaba, however, is interrupted by the screams of her massive infant Bo, and hastily agrees to set Chihiro up with a contract so that she can quiet her child. In the face of not only monstrosity, but magic as well, Chihiro stands her ground and signs away her name, becoming ‘Sen’ in the process. Sen is given work as Lin’s assistant, and after witnessing her lack of skill during her first morning on the job, Lin says “jeez, Sen, haven’t you ever worked a day in your life?” Chihiro has not, and this makes her transformation as a hard worker all the more poignant. Not only does Chihiro work hard, she does it with agency and bravery. After rescuing the river spirit from his slimy prison, Yubaba praises Chihiro’s work, and even insists that the rest of the staff learn from her. Here, Chihiro goes from a “lazy, spoiled, crybaby,” to an example for the rest of the staff. It is important to note, however, that under the thread of hardship Chihiro does not merely become a little adult. She transforms within the realm of possibility for a child, teaching young girls watching that they too might be capable of anything. Osmond says that “in Spirited Away,
Chihiro grows from a weak child into a strong one, but Miyazaki stresses she is still a child at the film’s end, more potential than realized” (20).

It was important to Miyazaki that Chihiro be created in the image of an ordinary girl. Children watching the film don’t have to pretend to have magical powers or superhuman strength in order to imagine themselves conquering Chihiro’s monsters, and this serves as a powerful reminder that children are capable of exhibiting bravery within the realm of skills they already possess. It is even more powerful, however, when an ordinary child must conquer that which has a supernatural advantage over her. Spirited Away’s existence as a film of the fantastic is thus imperative of Chihiro’s power as a heroine. “According to Todorov, ‘the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’” (Reider, 5). While Todorov’s definition of the fantastic is not perfect, it is important that it outlines that the viewer, not just the protagonist, experience a degree of uncertainty when viewing the material before them. When Chihiro witnesses a hoard of spirits arrive on a boat, she repeatedly hits her head, insisting that she must be reading. Both the audience and Chihiro understand that what she is witnessing is against natural law, and the stakes rise tenfold. Not only must Chihiro manage to survive, she must do it without the powers that the beings in the world around her possess while figuring out just how this magical world works. Instead of matching the magical ability of her antagonists, she must be crafty, quick-witted, and flexible, and Chihiro’s ability to do this reflect a sort of childhood desire to prevail despite their powerlessness. Reider explains that,

In the traditional fairy tale, the hero is rewarded and the evil person meets his well-deserved fate, thus satisfying the child's deep-seated need for justice. How else can a child hope that justice will be done to him, when he feels unfairly treated? And how else can he
convince himself that he must act correctly, when he is so sorely tempted to give in to the asocial prodding of his desires? (7).

*Spirited Away* not only satisfies a child’s need for justice, but does it by creating a circumstance where winning seems almost impossible. Miyazaki’s exploration of heroism in the realm of fantasy is powerful in that it creates a world where a child can conquer no matter how high the stakes may be. To a child, the fantastic reality of *Spirited Away* becomes more reflexive of her imagination, her desire for justice, and her spirit than a challenge set in the real world ever could (Reider, 8).

Western media often assumes that children are only able to root against villains when they are presented without any ambiguity. Villains are typically evil, unattractive, and conniving; their motives are too selfish for any child to garner even the slightest bit of sympathy for them. Drained of any capacity for good, Disney villains are free to slaughter anybody that stands in the way of their goal of becoming the fairest of them all or ruling over a kingdom of powerful lions, and children are thus given a black and white portrait of what it means to be right or wrong. For Miyazaki, however, the antagonists typically have as many redeeming qualities as they do bad ones, and typically have well thought out and understandable motives behind their actions. In reality, people are almost never totally good or totally evil, and the way that Miyazaki frames his villains more closely mirrors the dynamic of goodness often found in reality. Animated films lack flesh and blood representations of life, so in order to contain ‘realness,’ characters must follow the same complex and multi-faceted conventions as people who exist in the real world. It is rare to find someone who embodies complete goodness or evil without any other real motives, and in this way the intricate characters created by Miyazaki are more realistic than even some
characters in live-action children’s films (Rowley, 1). “Life—and good art—tends to include more shades of gray and Miyazaki’s films prepare children for this, while also offering them a vision of life that can be powered by creativity, kindness, and an independence of spirit” (Rick- ett, 11). In Spirited Away, the most daunting example of this dynamic can be found in No Face. When Chihiro first meets the character, she takes him for a homeless, lonely spirit caught out in the rain. She leaves the door to the bathhouse open for him, and in return, No Face does his best to help her. When the foreman refuses to give Chihiro the bath tokens she needs to wash her tub, No Face appears and gifts her more than enough to complete her task. At the base of No Face’s character lies a creature with no true sense of self who is only able to take on the personality of somebody that he has swallowed (Reider, 19). In fact, it is only after No Face consumes the greedy spirit of a frog searching for gold that he begins developing into an evil character, and the longer he stays in the bathhouse, the more evil he becomes. Encouraged by the greed of the bathhouse employees, he creates handfuls of fake gold to ensure his every whim is catered to, and No Face happily gobbles up entire plates of food while swelling to an enormous size. When the massive monster encounters Chihiro again, he insists on sharing his wealth with her, perhaps to repay her for the good deed she had done at the beginning of the film by providing him shelter from the storm. When she refuses, however, he goes on a monstrous rampage, eating two people and destroying everything in sight.

After No Face’s terrifying display, it becomes easy for the other members of the bathhouse to regard him as a monster and nothing more. Instead of using magic or brute force to try to stop him, however, Chihiro sees the creature’s humanity and instead tries to reason with him. Though she was once afraid of merely looking at a spirit, Chihiro sits calmly in front of the mon-
strous No Face and politely tells him that he is no longer welcome in the bathhouse. Just as she did for the river god, Chihiro notices that No Face is not merely a terrifying monster, but a sick spirit in need of help, and even feeds him the medicine she was saving for her parents in order to cure him. After violently purging everything he has eaten, including the spirits, No Face once again becomes the harmless spirit Chihiro first met at the beginning of the film. In fact, it is Chihiro who is able to identify that No Face’s monstrous transgressions weren’t totally his fault. “I think the bathhouse makes him crazy,” she says, and even allows No Face to follow her on her journey to return Zeniba’s golden seal. Indeed, one of the most iconic moments of the film includes an image of the once monstrous No Face, now a benign spirit, sitting calmly beside Chihiro after being told to behave himself. By recognizing that even the monstrous No Face wasn't totally evil, Chihiro was able to aid and control him by appealing to the good within him and recognizing his humanity. At the end of the film, Zeniba recognizes No Face’s affinity for hard work, and offers him a permanent role as her own personal helper, a lesson that it often takes kindness and understanding to uncover somebody’s capacity for good.

Though No Face often serves as an obstacle, it is obvious that the primary antagonist of Spirited Away is none other than Yubaba, the powerful sorceress who rules the bathhouse. When Chihiro first meets Yubaba, she is a menacing, all-powerful witch who not only turns her parents into pigs, but taunts her afterward, insisting that the two got what they deserved. Between threatening to eat her parents and holding custody over her name, Yubaba consistently stands in the way of Chihiro’s path home, and it is Yubaba who even forces Chihiro to complete one final test before she is allowed to return to the human world. Like No Face, however, Yubaba is not totally evil. In fact, she has her own slew of problems to worry about. Not only must Yubaba manage
the bath house, she must do it while caring for her needy, over-sized infant as well, (Toyama, 2). After all, Yubaba does not transform Chihiro’s parents into pigs because she feels like it, but because they greedily consumed the food that her employees carefully prepared for the spirits.

While Yubaba is still the film’s primary antagonist, it is also important that she has a kinder, less cruel twin sister, Zeniba. In meeting Zeniba, Chihiro is better able to understand Yubaba’s humanity. In his 2009 essay “Innocence as a super-power: little girls on the Hero's Journey,” Emerson says

> The twin aspect of Yubaba/Zeniba serves as a metaphor for positive and negative aspects within a single person; after Chihiro has had a positive experience with Zeniba, she is more likely to be able to see Yubaba as a person rather than as a demon. Because of these two new developments, she is no longer afraid of Yubaba, and can address the pig puzzle calmly without emotional stress, which could interfere with her intuition (5).

Through No Face and Yubaba, Miyazaki teaches young audiences that, in reality, people are very seldom totally good or totally evil. More often than not, the capacity for cruelty is bred by the nature of one’s surroundings. Unlike her antagonists, Chihiro refuses to allow herself to be hardened or insidiously transformed by the chaotic bathhouse. In fact, it is her presence in the bathhouse that fuel her strength, her bravery, and her compassion.

It is no secret that the primary role of women in western films is often as the damsel in distress. In Spirited Away, however, it is the damsel who saves the prince. While some critics argue that Chihiro might not have survived without Haku’s initial help, this is dwarfed by the fact that, without the deliberate, dangerous, and time-consuming steps taken by Chihiro, Haku would have certainly bled to death (Emerson, 4). When Chihiro first meets Haku, he offers his aid by telling her how to reach the boiler room to inquire for a job, and later takes her to the pig pen
where her parents are kept so that she’ll be able to remember what they look like. It is worth noting, however, that the rest is up to Chihiro. It is Chihiro alone who faces Yubaba, rescues the stink spirit, and remembers what her parents look like, and it is Chihiro alone who puts her own mission on hold in order to save her friend. When she sees Haku in his dragon-state beating brutally beaten by a swarm of paper birds, she scales the bathhouse in order to reach the tower where he is kept. A fairy-tale in reverse, Spirited Away presents the audience with an image of a princess climbing the tower in order to rescue the prince, unafraid of the terrifying, bleeding dragon that the prince has transformed into. As it turns out, Haku needs rescuing in more ways than one, and Chihiro is able to not only destroy the curse Yubaba had over Haku, but heal him with he power of her platonic love. Worried for her friend, Chihiro takes it upon herself to apologize to Zeniba and return the golden seal Haku had stolen from her. At the beginning of the film, Haku helps Chihiro remember who she truly is by giving her a card with her name written on it, a card Chihiro had forgotten she had in her pocket. In the end, however, Chihiro is able to use the power of her memory alone to help Haku get his name back, recalling that he was the spirit of the Kohaku river that once carried her to safety as a little girl (Reider, 17). Haku started out as Chihiro’s guardian and helper, yes, but without Chihiro, Haku would not have survived at all. Most importantly, Chihiro does not reject the image of the damsel in distress for the sake of glory, but for the sake of caring for a friend whom she loves.

Western media and those who consume it hold the popular belief that a film starring a young girl cannot possibly become successful, and it is assumed that while young girls will watch films starring boys, boys will not watch films starring girls (Jarmeko-Greenwold). It is curious, however, that the highest grossing Japanese film of all time is Spirited Away. In fact, Spir-
Spirited Away was nearly totally critically acclaimed and went onto win a slew of awards, including the Academy Award for best animated feature, after its release in 2001 (Reider, 4). For years, children and parents alike have come to marvel at not a powerful masculine superhero or a woman in spandex, but ten-year-old Chihiro as she embarks on a journey to rescue her parents in the strange spirit world in which she becomes suddenly submerged. Without patronizing storylines or snippets of adult humor, Miyazaki’s films are able to speak to both children and adults by being imaginative, immersive, and encompassing of themes present in the lives of audience members of any age (Rickett, 3). Spirited Away is particularly treasured in Japan not only because it is a Japanese film, but also because it is reflexive of old Japanese landscapes, traditions, and cultures that newer generations might not be accustomed to. “For example, there is a brief scene in the film […] where Chihiro performs a quick purification hand-ritual after stepping on a worm. It is a reminder of Japan’s animist Shinto traditions, along with the mini-shrines, wooden gateway, and statues in the early scenes” (Osmond, 13). Japanese adults are not only touched upon seeing an almost “forgotten” version of Japan, but touched to share the experience with their own children. Across cultures, landscapes, and backgrounds, Spirited Away is a popular film beloved by Japanese and western audiences alike. Most importantly, it thrives not in spite of, but because its protagonist is a plucky, ordinary, ten-year-old girl. Spirited Away teaches young audiences that yes, they can defeat their demons without any special powers and no, being a boy is not a necessary prerequisite to being a hero.
On Coraline

“Fairies are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” —G. K. Chesterton, Quote at the beginning of Neil Gaiman’s “Coraline”

Though Neil Gaiman is a beloved fantasy writer, he is first and foremost a father, and he inevitably encountered the same problem all American fathers do when raising his daughters. Upon visiting the book store, Neil Gaiman saw that the only stories available for and marketed to young girls were about princesses, princes, and the importance of looking demure and beautiful. Neil Gaiman’s first daughter, Holly, had no interest in these sorts of stories. In fact, she would often come home from kindergarten, climb into his lap, and start weaving her own horror tales about witches, demons and the young female heroes who would jump in to save the day, (Nico, 1). Discouraged that there were not any gothic horror books for young girls, a subject that his own daughter had a great interest in, Neil Gaiman decided that he would write one especially for her, and this desire eventually gave birth to Coraline, his 2002 novel that would later be adapted into a popular Henry Selick stop-motion film of the same name in 2009. Though Coraline took quite a bit of time to complete, Gaiman knew that his daughters — and all young girls — deserved to see themselves as the brave heroes he knew that they could be, and the dedication in the novel proudly reads “I started this for Holly, I finished this for Maddie” (Gaiman). It was imperative to him that Coraline was a real girl, just like his daughters and just like so many
young American girls who have the capacity for bravery within them that so often goes unacknowledged by adults who market toward them. Though she was first made of pen and paper and later, stop-motion puppetry, Coraline speaks, thinks, laughs, and cries the way Gaiman knew that real girls do, and this makes her ability to fight and defeat the horrors of the other world all the more magnificent. “She’s a smart kid and she doesn’t have magic powers. She is not the chosen one. There’s nothing cool and magical going on. She’s just like you, and she’s going to fight this thing and she’s going to win. That, for me, is the important thing” (Gaiman, Interview). Despite going against everything the media says that little girls should enjoy, Coraline quickly became a New York Times best seller and later, an Academy Award and Golden Globe nominated animated feature. Around the world, girls were finally able to see a heroine just like them, and they looked up at the spunky, witch fighting, blue haired little girl on screen and thought, “yes, that is me. I can be a hero too.”

While Coraline exhibits the characteristics of a real eleven-year-old girl, it is important to note that, like the rest of the film, she is animated. Though cartoons are cartoons, they are still able to serve as accurate representations of the world in which they are based, and the behavior of the animated Coraline often more closely mirrors the behavior of adolescent girls than some of the live-action films for or about them. In Catherine Hardwicke’s popular 2008 film Twilight, for example, Bella Swan is a weak, vapid, sixteen year old girl who becomes so hopelessly obsessed with a cute vampire at her school that she puts the lives of the people she loves in danger in order to pursue a romance with him. In her stop-motion animated world, Coraline more closely follows the conventions of not only narrative realism, but social realism as well. Through her hesitation, defiance, boredom, and bravery, Coraline is able to make the audience believe that,
narratively, she is a girl character who might actually exist in the real world, and the way that she interacts with other characters in the film closely mirror the real-life interactions of a young adolescent. For an animated film to pass the realism test, its characters also must subscribe to the laws of motion as they exist in the real world, and through the film Coraline trips, runs, and moves the way real-life children do (Rowley, 2). In a scene toward the end of the film, Coraline is running through the garden that her Other Mother made for her while trying to escape her Other Father as he attacks her atop a terrifying grasshopper-machine. Instead of running in one fluid, animated motion, Coraline falls on her bottom, uses her hands for balance, and stumbles as she tries to protect herself. Here, Coraline shows that even in an animated world, she reacts the way that a real child her age would in the same situation, cementing her realness and making her easy for young audiences to relate to.

Stop motion animation is a painstakingly long and detail-oriented process involving puppetry, patience, and above all, precision. The making of a stop-motion film involves setting up a scene, taking a photograph of the characters, moving them slightly, and so on. The result is a film composed of years of work and hundreds of thousands of photographs, and director Henry Selick’s animators labored over the tiniest details in order to not only bring Coraline to life, but to make her look as real as possible. On the set of Coraline, there were more than 28 animators working at any given time, rehearsing, designing, and shooting round the clock only to create about 90-100 seconds of finished animation each week. Coraline herself had 28 different puppets with backup pairs of hands and clothes, identical right down to where the design broke at the seams, in order to avoid wear and tear and to allow for the greatest possible combination of movement and expression (McLean). Coraline sets itself apart from so many stop motion films
which came before it because of the brand-new 3D printing technology available at the time.

“Previous stop-motion films like Selick’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) used a few hundred hand-sculpted faces. But with a 3D printer now turning them out, Coraline used 6,333 printed faces, which could be combined to make 207,000 possible facial expressions,” (Giardina). Young adolescents, of course, have a wide range of facial expressions to convey an even wider range of emotions, and the use of thousands of faces for Coraline’s expressions pays off. When Coraline first opens the door to the other world, for example, her face contorts from joy, to confusion, to curiosity, to wonder in a matter of two seconds, her emotions reading the way that a child’s her in position would. It is not just the puppets who are crafted with detail, however, every part of every bit of the set that has to move, from the grass to the hair to the trees, is made animatable (McLean). Though the *Coraline* took years to complete, the care with which every detail was given is evident, and the result is a film that accurately represents the colorful, extraordinary, nightmarish world of Neil Gaiman’s imagination.

Henry Selick directed Coraline the way that Neil Gaiman wrote her: to be as reflexive of the real female adolescents that would be watching her as possible. It is telling, however, just how unique *Coraline* is in comparison to so much of American media directed at little girls. From book to screen, *Coraline* is one of a kind, and it is disturbing just how long it took for Hollywood to produce a film for and about young girls that escapes the classic princess narrative. From near infancy, American girls are molded in the image of “princess syndrome,” a name coined by child psychologist Jennifer Hartstein for the inevitable obsessions and insecurities that little girls develop after being forced to consume the media marketed toward them. After years of watching Disney princesses that need saving and being told that the most important thing is the
way you look, little girls take these messages to heart and apply them to their day to day lives (Teitel, 1). In her 2011 documentary *Miss Representation*, Siebel Newsom talks about the terror she felt for her future daughter when she would inevitably become bombarded with the media’s messages about what it means to be a girl. During a talking head interview, Siebel says that,

“There are moments in life when you begin to see things more clearly. When I found out I was pregnant with a girl, everything came into focus. But I looked around me, and I was really frightened for her. I couldn't imagine that my daughter could grow up to be emotionally healthy and fulfilled given our modern culture.”

Newsom had a right to feel afraid, and it all starts with the fairytales that Americans read their daughters when they are young. Fairytales, which convey the message that women should be beautiful, youthful, and submissive in order to be rescued by the man of their dreams, are a toxic message in conforming to harmful gender stereotypes that little girls quickly internalize (Neikirk, 39). Stories that deviate from this norm, stories like *Coraline*, are important in that they help girls see themselves as the well-rounded heroes they are; heroes capable of problem-solving, bravery, and adventure.

As a culture, American women are raised to be fundamentally insecure from childhood, and inevitably experience a death of character in adolescence (Pipher, 19). Though they are constantly bombarded with princess culture, American girl children find pleasure in a variety of interest, and often embrace androgyny. Little girls go on adventures, play sports, and read books about solving mysteries, and haven’t yet fully taken in their established gender roles in society (Pipher, 18). In adolescence, however, everything changes. In her 1994 book, *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher says,

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves.
They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resilience and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic, and “tomboyish” personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed, (19).

As American girls grow into adolescents, the culture that surrounds them teaches them that the most important things for a woman are to be pleasing, demure, and physically attractive. They are discouraged not by their parents, but by society from indulging in the activities they once enjoyed in childhood, and abandon their senses of self in order to fit the mold of what American culture expects them to be. When young girls grow into adolescents, the messages worsen. Teen magazines geared toward girls contain no articles on politics, academics, or careers, but instead are choice full of messages on how to appear physically attractive to boys and just what to wear and say on a date, (Pipher, 40). When they go to the movies or watch music videos, girls see themselves sexualized from a young age as props or objects for the objectification of men, and are told that being physically beautiful and sexy is more important than being intelligent, kind, or fulfilled (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2). When these messages are compounded by lack of representation in cinema, or worse, representation that revolves around obsession with boys and being rescued, adolescent girls internalize the message that they are less important than their male peers in the eyes of society, and the result is anger, confusion, and withdrawal. Media consumption in adolescence is inevitable, and it is not until adolescent girls see themselves as something other than weak, sexual objects that they will stop losing themselves and start being who they are.

Hollywood teaches girls that society does not care whether or not they exist on screen, and this is even reflected in the way films are titled. In 2012, there were 21 movie posters marketed toward children. Of these, only four featured a female character while sixteen featured
boys. Of these, ten were named for the male star (Beck). The problem begins with the Hollywood notion that, while girls will watch films about boys, boys will not watch films about girls (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2). Even films featuring girls, *Frozen* (Lee, 2013) and *Tangled* (Greno, 2010) for example, are not named for the female star so as to not scare away potential male viewers, and the implications of this are disturbing. When boys do not see on-screen images of strong girl characters, they start to see real-life girls as weak, and this notion is part of the reason why female children begin to sacrifice their senses of self in adolescence. Even worse, “if the only representations of women they see plastered all over town are pristine princesses, untouchable crazies, or obliging cheerleaders — what are they supposed to think?” (Beck). It is no secret that the situation in Hollywood for girls is bleak, and even stories about supposedly strong women are tainted with patriarchal messages about what it means to be a girl. The strong female character is never an adolescent on a journey to find herself, but a sexualized, adult woman who is only strong because she exhibits masculine traits like fighting skills or the inability to get caught up in emotion (Emerson, 2). Even female superheroes exist for the male viewer. In *Miss Representation*, Heidman describes the “fighting fuck toy” syndrome, or, the realization that almost all female action heroes wear revealing clothing and are subject to sexual objectification, (Newsom, *Miss Representation*). In *Sucker Punch* (Snyder, 2011), a film chock full of female heroes, all of the girls are loud mouthed, conventionally beautiful, dressed in revealing clothing, and exhibit fighting skills while falling under the “crazy woman” stereotype. This is why *Coraline* is so important.

Unlike so many films that had come before it, *Coraline* is not only titled for the female protagonist, but both versions of the movie poster proudly sport her image as well. In one ver-
sion, Coraline is peering through the open door to the other world. She is bathed in a sick, yellow light, and her face is awash with curiosity and wonder. In another version, she is standing alone and unafraid, her arms crossed across her chest while she stares at the viewer with a look that reads “I got this,” a slight smile playing on her lips. Behind her, a terrifying tree branch in the shape of the Other Mother’s hand curls around her head. The reason why these movie posters are important is because that they are often the first things people see when they are deciding to buy tickets to a film. Instead of including the male supporting role, Wybie, in the poster to make the film attractive to boys, the studio took a Hollywood risk, telling audiences that the film is first and foremost about a strong, brave little girl who will no doubt face supernatural peril. From the title and the advertising alone, *Coraline* is one of a kind and perhaps one of the only American animated films depicting a strong girl in early adolescence who personifies exactly what it means to be a hero. Coraline is not sexualized, and she is not androgynous for the sake of showing that there’s only strength in male character traits. Coraline is an adolescent girl who goes against the grain of everything adolescent girls are taught to be. Most of all, Coraline is important because she is completely and utterly herself.

Film depicts the ideas of the dominant culture, and has a heavy hand in shaping how young girls see themselves and what roles they are allowed to step into. The existence of a coming-of-age story about an adolescent girl who not only exhibits tremendous bravery, but wins, really matters (Mandelo, 1). “Coraline offers young readers, both male and female, child and adult, a progressive model for heroism” (Wehler, 98). At its core, *Coraline* is a film about an adventurous young girl who, after feeling neglected by her parents, becomes enamored with the perfection of an alternate world created for her by the evil Other Mother. With courage and intu-
Coraline fights the Other Mother, rescues her parents, and emerges victorious. In almost every traditional hero narrative, the protagonist is a man or boy who conquers his enemies without fear using brute force or magical ability. In life and in film, we tend to equate masculine traits like physical strength, bravery, and independence with heroism. Seldom do we see a hero, male or female, with “feminine” traits like empathy, negotiation, nurturance, or the capacity to display emotion (Emerson, 2). Though we typically associate the word “hero” with masculinity, a young girl who is able to use her feminine qualities to her advantage is, perhaps, a stronger example of a hero than most knights in shining armor. When heroes are masculine, we typically focus on a hero’s masculine traits, fighting skills and physical strength, for example, instead of who the hero actually is, what they have accomplished, and their motives for accomplishing it. In traditional children’s tales, male heroes are distractingly handsome and are constantly fighting monsters to prove themselves and save princesses for personal gain while the female characters sit, alone and afraid, weeping in a tower (Neikirk, 39). Free of much of the tropes of heroism, Coraline is not physically powerful, nor is she capable of wielding a sword. Her bravery, creativity, intelligence, and capacity for love are fore grounded above all else, and this gives children and adults a new, positive idea of what it means to be a hero, and her heroism is in fact more relevant to the challenges that real life people face than the traditional hero’s journey (Rich, 2). In his 2009 essay, “Innocence as a super-power: little girls on the Hero’s Journey...,” Emerson says,

The Hero's Journey can be seen as a template for the coming of age of the protagonist. We have all been through this; we have all felt vulnerable like the innocent female child, and we have all had to face difficulties of many kinds. Some may require masculine types of solutions, like physical combat, but in modern life more and more of our challenges are social and emotional. Fantasy stories like these may actually be more relevant to what our psyches go through in the real world than any super-hero slugfest could ever be. And
among bewildering and threatening complex forces, whether in fantasy or reality, the innocence of these little girls may indeed be a super-power (7).

When Coraline embarks on a journey to save her parents, she is also tasked with saving three ghost children. In one scene, the Beldam’s gaunt, terrifying figure drags Coraline through the hallway and, with the help of CGI, pushes her through a mirrored wall into a cold, green dungeon. Coraline grunts, rises quickly, and pounds of the wall in frustration, the minute details of the stop-motion animation causing her chest to rise and fall with exhaustion. After hearing a deep, ghostly moan, she turns quickly and asks who else is there only to be greeted by three glowing shapes underneath a blanket in the corner. After telling her to “hush and shush,” Coraline approaches them, removing the thin blanket to reveal the huddled shapes of three terrified, translucent ghost children. Unlike Coraline, the ghosts are created with the help of computer animation rather than being real, physical puppets, and this makes their limpid faces and melancholy, button-eyed expressions all the more eerie in contrast. Her face awash with worry, Coraline asks their names. With sad, thin voices, the ghosts reply that they do not know their names, but they remember their true parents. Here, the theme that a person’s name is closely tied to their identity is reiterated, and the ghosts go onto describe that, just like Coraline, the Other Mother captured them, convinced them to sew buttons into their eyes, and locked them away and ate up their lives. “She can’t keep me in the dark forever,” Coraline says. “Not if she wants to win my life.” The ghosts ask Coraline that, should she win her freedom, she find their eyes and free their souls, and Coraline accepts. She is under no real obligation to save them and will gain nothing by doing so, but her empathy, a traditionally female characteristic, drives her to risk her life while taking on a new, more difficult slew of challenges in order to rescue them, and emerges victori-
ous in the end. Here, Coraline puts her life on the line just to free the souls of children who are already dead. Putting yourself before others not out of obligation or personal fulfillment, but because it is the right thing to do, is a more positive picture of heroism than that which is so often fed to children through film and fairytales. Coraline is strong not in spite of, but because of the fact that she is a little girl.

When Neil Gaiman wrote Coraline, he did it so that young girls would be able to look up to a character who was just like them. When Coraline became a film, mainstream cinema finally had a movie with an young, active, female protagonist. Coraline is not particularly beautiful or extraordinary, but she is a character that young adolescents can no doubt identify with. When we first meet Coraline, she is skipping down the stairs of her new home in preparation for an adventure. At age eleven, she is at the beginning of her adolescent life, and contrary to the way American culture would have it, she still has the spark of adventure within her. With her blue hair and yellow rain coat, Coraline sticks out like a sore thumb against the grey and brown toned world around her. skips down the steps of her home before pausing by a dying, red bush. She regards the bush with a look of curiosity, reaches between the branches to snap off a branch, and uses her hand to swiftly strip it of its leaves. She closes her eyes, holds onto the tree branch, and walks with a series of dizzy, fluid motions, allowing the tree branch to lead her out the gate and through her parents grey, dying garden. Caught up in the world of her imagination, Coraline moves off her parents property through a path lined with dying yellow grass, only pausing when she hears a strange noise. “Hello? Who’s there?” she says, her eyebrows raised with curiosity. When nobody answers, she takes matters into her own hands, scowling as she picks up a stone to throw it in the
direction of the sound. When she hears something cry out, she runs deep into the woods, kicking up grey dirt and taking cover in the center of a thicket of dead, black trees.

The something she ran from was a black cat, and she exaggerates a frown as she confronts it as if it were a human, her imagination still at work. “You scared me half to death you mangey thing!” she says, visibly annoyed. She furrows her eyebrows and tells the animal “I’m just looking for an old well. Know it?” She knows the cat will not answer, but her face is awash with skepticism. “Not talkin’ huh?” She turns away from the cat and closes her eyes, spinning around with her stick in hand as the wind howls behind her, chanting, “magic dowser, magic dowser, show me the well!” In just the first few minutes of the film, Coraline introduces us to her sense of adventure and her vivid imagination, and shows little girls watching that she is just like them. However, it is also true that we are also immediately introduced to Coraline’s capacity for fear. Not only does the cat frighten her when it appears, Wybie, Coraline’s male companion, does as well. Accompanied by the horn on his motorbike and the crack of thunder, Wybie races down a ditch wearing a terrifying skeletal mask and gloves. While critics of the film condemn this scene for framing Coraline as cowardly, it is important to note that any child would have been terrified in her situation (Mandelo, 4). In fact, when Coraline sees the terrifying figure, it is important she does not run. Though she screams, she bends her knees and takes an offensive stance, shouting “get away from me!” as she winds up and hits her assailant with a stick, proving her agency and bravery in an extraordinarily stressful situation. In fact, after Wybie reveals himself to be a hunched over, awkward boy, Coraline is more upset that he doubts her sense of imagination and her belief in her magic tree branch than she is that he frightened her. With a stamp of her foot and a look of defiance, Coraline hits Wybie in the arm. “It’s a dowsing rod!” she insists “and
I don’t like being stalked! Not by psycho-nerds or their cats!” Real children identify best with heroes whom they can see themselves reflected in, and children are often afraid. Despite her fear, Coraline persists and proves that her agency and sense of imagination are important to her. More importantly, she teaches children that being afraid does not negate the heroic. Though the line did not make the film, Gaiman’s Coraline says “Because, when you’re scared and you still do it anyway, that’s brave,” teaching audiences young and old that being brave is not the absence of fear, but the ability to overcome it (Gaiman, 59).

One of the reasons why Coraline is such a strong female character is because she has an incredible sense of identity and, even before her journey, knows exactly who she is. This, of course, can be traced back to the uniqueness of her name, which people in her life either mispronounce or get wrong completely. When Wybie introduces himself to Coraline, he asks her what she “got saddled with.” Coraline crosses her arms and says, “I wasn’t saddled with anything. It's Coraline.” Wybie shoots back with “Caroline what?” and Coraline grows angry, clearly tired of explaining her name. “It’s Cor-aline. Coraline Jones,” with a tone that indicates that she is proud of the uniqueness of her name. While Coraline stands straight and tall and stares proudly at him, Wybie refuses to make eye contact and begins shying away, saying “you know, an ordinary name like Caroline can lead someone to have ordinary expectations about a person.” Through body language, it is clear that Coraline is the one who is in power, though she is of course frustrated at what Wybie said; she is anything but ordinary, and wants everybody else to see it too. In one scene, Coraline is at a clothing shop with her mother shopping for her school uniform. She spots a pair of rainbow-striped gloves, and her eyes light up. When her mother sees her gallivanting around the store wearing them, she deadpans "put them back," to which Coraline responds "but
mom, the whole school is going to be wearing boring, grey clothes. Nobody will have these."
Coraline's mother refuses to give in, and this upsets her. Nobody, save for her Other Mother, can
see how unique she is, and even adults regularly get her name wrong. While “getting someone’s
name wrong” might seem like a petty or unimportant issue, Coraline’s name is who she is, and it
is important that it is unique, just like she is. Coraline is, of course, a coming of age film about
finding one’s identity, and though Coraline knows who she is, it is important to her that others do
as well. When she goes downstairs to visit Ms. Spink and Ms. Forcible, two eccentric, British
actresses, they call her “Caroline” even though it is apparent she is met them before. “It’s Cor-
aline,” she says, exhausted at having to make the correction. Her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Bobin-
sky, a fat, blue, Russian acrobat, makes the same mistake. With his protruding belly and skinny,
blue limbs, Mr. Bobinsky looks almost inhuman, and his Russian accent and expressive anima-
tion define him as one of the most eccentric characters in the film. Though he is capable of leap-
ing into the air, carrying on a conversation while balancing upside-down, and disappearing im-
possibly quickly over the side of the railing, he just cannot get Coraline’s name right, and this
causes her to scowl and walk away in frustration. After she leaves, however, Bobinsky shouts
“Caroline, wait!” and launches himself over the top of the balcony before landing right above a
startled Coraline as she holds her shears above her head in self defense, missing him by an inch.
Bobinsky leans into Coraline and says “the mice ask me to give you message. Do not go through
little door.” “The one behind the wallpaper?” Coraline says, and Bobinsky shrugs, believing that
the mice must be crazy, especially because they got her name wrong. “They call you Coraline
instead of Caroline, not Caroline at all!” When the Other Mother created her version of a world
that Coraline would love, she made sure that each and every character remembered her name and
said it correctly (Wehler). When Coraline goes to see the other Mr. Bobinsky’s mouse circus, for example, she and Wybie sit side by side on the brightly lit floor while the jumping mice come together to spell out her name with their tails and bodies. When Coraline sees this, her face is a beacon of wonder. “My name!” she says, grinning and pointing, happy that, for once, somebody was paying enough attention to get it right. The world that Coraline finds herself in is, of course, a sinister trap, a trap Coraline fell for only because she felt like she was finally understood.

From the beginning of the film, Coraline makes her identity as an adventurous child known. However, the governing emotion throughout is not only boredom, but the glum realization that her parents have no interest in exploring with her. Contrary to most adolescent, American girls, it is not Coraline who wishes to separate from her parents, but her parents who wish to separate from her (Pipher, 24). In fact, it is evident that Coraline not only loves her parents, but craves their attention, and this deviation from the norm shows children watching that companionship with ones parents is nothing to shy away from. The day after she sets out to find the well with her makeshift dowsing rod, she stands in her dull, rainy kitchen, her huge, round eyes half closed with a look of indifference. Coraline is fore grounded, organizing packets of seeds while her mother works diligently at her laptop. Coraline’s hand is now covered with exaggerated, irritated bumps from poison oak, and she scratches them while she deadpans “I almost fell down a well yesterday, mom. I could have DIED,” to which her mother responds with a neutral “that’s nice.” When that does not rouse her mother’s attention, she spins quickly and perks up. “So, can I go out? I think its perfect weather for gardening.” Coraline is excited, and grins from ear to ear while making a series of dramatic, enthusiastic gestures. In contrast, Coraline’s mother is rigid at her computer, and without looking up, says that she cannot go out because the mud will make a
mess in the house. Still, Coraline insists. By showing interest in going out and gardening, Coraline is trying to connect with her mother, an editor of a gardening magazine, and grows frustrated when she is cast aside, her mother scowling and telling her point blank that she does not have time for her. The way most children do, Coraline immediately goes to her father, a thin man with tired, deep purple eyelids, and tries to get him to pay attention to her. Coraline’s bright yellow raincoat and blue hair stand out against her father’s grey-toned office, and she uses her little hand to shove the door open before smiling at her father and asking him earnestly how his writing is going. He ignores her at first, his bored face reflected in his computer screen, and only turns around when Coraline calls out to him a second time. Even then, it is only for a brief moment, and Coraline’s father continues to stare blankly at his work instead of interacting with his daughter. In fact, he only speaks to her to tell her that it is too rainy to play outside, and that she better obey her mother. Again, Coraline is animated with exaggerated, fluid motion and childlike excitement while her parent remains, rigid and uninterested, in the corner of the frame. Coraline, however, doesn’t give up and she begins rocking back and forth on the squeaky door, partially out of boredom, but also in an attempt to get her father to turn around and look at her. With an eye roll and an exasperated sigh, he finally caves, and tells his daughter to explore the house. While playing to his daughter’s sense of adventure might seem nice, it is actually just a thinly veiled attempt to get her to leave him alone. In a matter for seconds, Coraline’s face moves from sadness, to disappointment, to anger, and she throws her raincoat on the floor in frustration. Coraline’s parents are not absent figures, but constantly home, and instead of talking to her, they try to foist her off onto each other or their strange adult neighbors as a way of keeping her out of their hair (Gooding, 396).
In one scene, Coraline sits excitedly in the kitchen beside her mother, describing her journey to the other world as if it had happened in a dream. In contrast to the colorful, lively world of the Other Mother, Coraline’s kitchen is painted in peeling yellow paint complete with a bland, chipped grey table. In her orange pajamas, Coraline waves her arms around describing her dream to her mother, her excited, expressive face standing in stark contrast to her mother’s indifferent expression. When her father enters the frame in his dirty green sweatshirt, she tries instead to capture his attention, only to be laughed at. Coraline’s mother places her hands on her hips, and tells her to pay her neighbors a visit because they would love to hear her dream. “Ms. Spink and Forcible?” Coraline says, scowling and dropping her spoon on the table and banging on her head with one hand. “But you said they were dingbats!” Coraline’s mother raises her eyebrows and gives a knowing expression, confirming that she thinks her daughter is crazy with a smug “mm-hmm.” Coraline’s call to adventure is not about winning the man of her dreams or proving her strength, but the desire to be understood, paid attention to, and loved. Her plight touches upon feelings of boredom and neglect that most children face, and it is because of this that she becomes a hero in her own right, embarking on a journey to find herself while refusing to change so that she is more appealing to others.

Through the doll delivered to her by Wybie, Coraline’s Other Mother spied on Coraline to figure out exactly what was wrong with her life. Aside from parental neglect, Coraline wished for a world as colorful and unique as she was. Whenever Coraline is in the real world, it is accompanied by a color palette of drab greens, browns, and yellows. When she goes to explore her home out of boredom, she takes note of everything she finds wrong with it. With her yellow boots, she stops on a lump in the dull, green carpet in frustration, and with an expression of
boredum, talks to herself as she accounts for the twelve leaky windows out of which she can see the pouring rain, longing to play outside. She enters a room by swinging on top of an open door, opens the shower curtain, and recoils quickly with disgust upon discovering a swarm of impossible huge bugs, squashing them with her hands and leaving exaggerated brown stains on the pink tile. In an effort to wash them off, she turns on the faucet only to be immediately doused in a gush of disgusting, yellowish water. She hops down the stairs two at a time in an attempt to entertain herself, and accidentally cuts the power, accidentally destroying the document her father was working on when he refused to acknowledge her. When she hears him cry out, she tip-toes away with her hands behind her back, headed for her next adventure. Though she’s bored with the activity, Coraline’s facial expressions are constantly moving and changing, and she dramatically bends her body to the side in search of the missing Coraline doll. Here, she discovers the rigid outline of a little door, just her size, hidden behind the wallpaper, and calls loudly to her bored, disinterested mother in an effort to share her discovery. Her mother storms into the room and, placing her hands on her hips, confronts Coraline. “Will you stop pestering me if I do this for you?” she says, annoyed, and Coraline clasps her hands together and whimpers like a puppy in a moment of silliness. We see Coraline’s mother’s hand as it rummages through a drawer filled with keys, pausing to grab a particularly large black one with a button on the handle. Moments later, we again see her mother’s hand as it uses the key to dig into the wallpaper, and unlock the door, Coraline’s face awash with excitement the entire time. After her mother pries open the door to reveal a dusty, brick wall, Coraline reacts with extreme disappointment, and as promised, her mother swiftly rises and tells her daughter to leave her alone. At dinner that night, her father sings an off-key song while serving her a plate of slimey, grey and green goop that Coraline
quickly pushes away. “Why don’t you ever cook, mom?” she says, to which her mother responds “Your father cooks, I clean, and you stay out of the way.”

That night, when Coraline chases the mice down the stairs, she discovers that the door behind the wallpaper is not bricked up, but a long, winding corridor glowing with bright blues and purples, and she can not help but be attracted to the first real splash of color she sees in the dull world she moved to. After she crawls through the tunnel, the first thing she notices about the other world is the smell, and she soon runs into the Other Mother cooking dinner on the stove. With a cheerful smile and buttons for eyes, Coraline’s Other Mother stands in contrast to the rigid, pale real mother, and her fluid, animated movements more closely mirror that of the twelve-year-old girl. Briefly spooked by the uncanniness of the situation, Coraline is visibly thrown off by her Other Mother’s button eyes, and even points to her own, large, real eyes in comparison. Still, she is not afraid enough to run away, and is indeed happy to see a ‘mother’ who readily cooks for her, pays attention to her, and wants her around. When she goes to her Other Father’s study, the room is not dull, messy, and piled high with cardboard boxes, but colored in bright oranges and warm reds, and Coraline’s orange pajamas fit right into this new world, almost as if she had always belonged. Unlike her regular father, Coraline’s Other Father turns quickly, moves fluidly, and is visibly open and excited to interact with her. “Hell-o-o Coraline!” he says, and two enormous, white-gloved hands emerge from his piano, place themselves on his hands, and pound out a cheerful tune with exaggerated motion. Not only does this father pay attention to Coraline, he had written a song just for her, and sings through the entire thing with a smile on his face with almost inhuman bodily excitement. The song is, of course, all about eyes, the act of seeing, and the importance of paying attention to his “daughter,” leaving Coraline
with a slight smile on her lips as she takes the whole thing in. When the three sit down for dinner, Coraline is not served a plate of slime, but is faced with a table full of golden chicken, roasted corn, mashed potatoes, and even an array of colorful milkshakes to choose from, complete with a magic cake that spells out “Welcome Home” before her very eyes. Throughout the entire scene, Coraline is skeptical, but she smiles, widens her eyes, and looks at her other parents in wonder. It is also important that her Other Mother not only readily asks Coraline to play a game with her, but suggests playing hide in seek in the rainstorm that she conjures up with the knowledge that her real parents would not let her out in it. These contrasts are important because the other world, by definition, is a reflection of everything Coraline desires. On the surface, it may look like she is enamored with the other world because it is a more perfect version of her own, but because in this world, she is granted things that she, as an adolescent, had felt were missing from her life (Rich, 2). Coraline is not a passive, innocent child who falls for the Other Mother’s trap, but an active agent who reasonably wanted her desire to be listened to and loved by her parents to be fulfilled. Her imagination is a wondrous thing worthy of celebration, and falling for a world, trap or not, that caters to her imagination does not make her a weak or foolish person, but a person with complex interests and desires (Scott, 2). She is a lesson to female children that it is okay to want things other than makeup and the attention of boys, and that girls deserved to be heard.

Though her parents often ignore her or even forget that she is in the room, Coraline still embarks on a journey to save them when they are captured by the Other Mother, even if it means losing her own life. The first time Coraline escapes the Other Mother, it is by the skin of her teeth, sneaking through the Other Mother’s home and crawling through a dirty tunnel covered in cobwebs in order to reach the safety of her real home. She immediately calls out to her parents,
happy to be home even though they had neglected her. As Coraline searches, however, she dis-
covers her parents are missing, and her first clue is her mother’s bag of groceries, rotting, swarm-
ing with flies, and abandoned on the kitchen table. That night, Coraline crawls into her parents’
bed and re-creates them out of a pile of pillows, even adding a pair of glasses on her father’s
makeshift head. She kisses them, tucks them into bed, and immediately starts sobbing. Coraline’s
ability to display emotion, even toward the people who had caused her to search for a better
world in the first place through their unwillingness to pay her any attention, is a lesson in the im-
portance of an emotional hero. Coraline harbors no ill will toward her parents, and when Wybie’s
black cat breaks into the house to lead her toward the mirror in which her parents her trapped,
she decides to take matters into her own hands. When she sees her parents, shivering and terri-
fied, her mother using her finger to write “help us” from the other side of the glass, she pounds
on the mirror as hard as she can, shattering it into pieces. Her sadness and frustration cause her to
pack her bags, sport a look of determination, and crawl back through the treacherous tunnel to
rescue them. “You know, you’re walking right into her trap,” the cat says, but Coraline does not
care. “I have to go back, they are my parents.” Here, Coraline sets out to save the very people
who, all her life, she had expected to protect her. At eleven years old, she is emotionally and
mentally mature enough to accomplish this, and this is an impressive feat in and of itself. In the
traditional hero’s journey, the striking male protagonist emerges victorious and is usually re-
warded with a beautiful princess or eternal glory (Emerson, 1). Coraline is unique in that it takes
the notion of what a hero is and what they deserve and flips it around. Being a hero is not about
what you gain in the end, but the tremendous strength and courage it takes to accomplish an im-
pressive or terrifying goal. After Coraline rescues her parents, for example, they do not remem-
ber a thing, and are in fact angry with her because she broke the snow globe in which they were trapped. Coraline does not care, nor does she expect any sort of praise or reward the way traditional heroes do. “Coraline’s reward is not fame, status, or acclaim— her parents do not even remember being adult-napped— but the quiet contentment of feeling safe, accepted, and loved in a world that now seems less scary (Wehler 111).”

In the United States, fairytales are often a necessary part of childhood. In their homes and schools, children cannot escape references to classic tales like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and the legend of the powerful King Arthur who was able to pull a sword from a stone. When children consume fairytales, they consume stories where women are only validated through submissive beauty while men remain active, courageous, and often violent (Neikirk, 38). Even when women do have powers in fantastic fairytales, they either have difficulty controlling them or completely rely on them to succeed instead of exhibiting any real agency. In Disney’s Frozen (Lee, 2013), for example, Elsa, a sexy, blond, magical ice queen, is the main protagonist. Though she has special powers with which to defeat her enemies, she winds up freezing the village and nearly killing her sister. As she cowers beneath Hans’ blade, she is only saved when her sister, Ana, makes the last minute decision to stand in front of her, sacrificing her life in order to save her incompetent sister. Coraline, however, is not only caught up in a fantasy world with supernatural protagonists, she must persist without anything but her intuition and courage to rely on. When Coraline rescues her parents, she already begins to subvert the stereotypical fairytale. As a young girl rescuing the people who should, in theory, be rescuing her, Coraline displays power and courage that girls and women in fairytales are almost never afforded. It is also worth mentioning that, in fairytales, the only women worth anything in fairytales are often extraordinarily
beautiful objects that exist only as prizes for the male hero in order to affirm patriarchal gender stereotypes (Neikirk, 38). Coraline, however, is just a regular adolescent girl. With her blue hair, pointed nose, small eyes, and baggy coat, Coraline looks just like a regular child who wanted to stand out by dying her hair, and becomes a positive role model for adolescent girls who can look up to an on screen hero that looks just like they do. Coraline’s worth and moral character are not based on her physical appearance, but her courage and willingness to act, and this alone sets her apart from so many fantastic children’s tales that came before her.

Like all children, Coraline has an active imagination, and her imagination is a powerful tool in navigating and conquering the challenges of not only the other world, but the world she lives in. It is Coraline’s imagination that drives her to go out in search for the magic well when her parents will not pay attention to her, and it is Coraline’s imagination that ultimately helps her heroically rescue her parents, the ghost children, and herself at the end of the film. In Coraline’s possession, ordinary objects become special tools with which to conquer her desires and rescue others. When she first discovers the door behind the wallpaper, her face is aglow with curiosity. To Coraline, the world behind the door holds infinite possibilities for adventure, and she loudly calls to her mother to find the key. When the key is in her mother’s hand, an adult, the door opens to an ordinary brick wall, revealing that there is nothing of interest behind it. In Coraline’s hand, however, the key transforms into an object capable of opening up another world filled to the brim with everything she could possibly desire. When Ms. Spink and Forcible create a green stone with a hole in it out of some old taffy, it appears to be a useless object whose purpose neither can quite agree on. Once Coraline possesses it, she is able to use it as a finding stone to find the eyes of the ghost children. When Coraline looks through the stone, the world around her be-
comes black and white with the objects of her desire glowing a bright reddish yellow. Without her imaginative power and childlike curiosity, these two objects would have been useless. In Melissa Wehler’s 2014 essay, she speaks to Coraline’s ability to transform ordinary objects, saying:

In Coraline’s hands, however, these (seemingly) broken tools become the two most powerful objects in the world, capable of creating, destroying, trapping, and freeing beings from another realm. Like Coraline, these items have been discarded by the adult world. She feels a unique kinship with these so-called useless trinkets and sees the value in them much as she wishes the adult world, and more specifically her mother, would see the value in her. Thus, while Other Mother certainly plays a part in creating the alternate world, it is Coraline’s imaginative ability that transforms these useless objects into these extraordinary totems capable of unleashing the only other creature in the story whose creativity rivals her own (101).

Though the Other Mother is the one who creates the perfect world for Coraline, she cannot do this without Coraline’s own imagination. In the opening title sequence, the audience watches the Other Mother’s creepy, needlelike hand create a Coraline doll by copying the real-life version. The hand takes a doll fashioned to look like another girl and carefully pulls the hair out of its scalp, cutting its clothes off and ripping its mouth open. The hand pulls out the stuffing until he doll is a deflated, lifeless sack, and proceeds to give it new life by stitching on blue hair and carefully choosing a pair of black buttons for its eyes. After the doll is finished, the two hands release it into the sky, and it floats ominously out the window into a sky full of stars. This scene is an extraordinarily creepy way to open the film, but it is necessary, and it successfully makes the appearance of the doll all the more eerie. When Coraline is first given the doll, her face is full of curiosity, and though she nonchalantly claims to be too old to play with it, she brings it along wherever she goes. Accompanied by this Coraline copy, Coraline traipses through the ordinary reality of the gloomy and grey ‘real world,’ imagining better food and parents who pay attention.
to her, and the Other Mother feeds off of this imaginative power. While Coraline’s imagination is capable of transforming ordinary objects into magic dowsing rods and item finders, the Other Mother can only copy and recopy. Through the Other Mother’s eyes, the Coraline doll watches through the window at Coraline’s dissatisfaction with the grey, dead garden in her parents’ yard. When Coraline arrives in the other world, she is hence presented with a garden filled to the brim with bright, colorful flowers that breathe life. The snap dragons tickle Coraline excitedly, and her Other Father, more than willing to pay attention to her, even takes her upon his flying grasshopper to reveal that the garden looks just like her, with blue flowers for hair and pumpkin fountains for eyes. When the Other Mother watches Coraline’s dissatisfaction with the slimey, inedible food on the table, it conjures up a meal with every imaginable delicacy complete with a little train programmed to bring her gravy. In both cases, the Other Mother was only capable of creating a wonder because Coraline imagined it to be so (Wehler, 102). Coraline’s imagination is more powerful than the Other Mother’s, and she demonstrates the importance of holding onto this childlike power, proving that this quality serves her better than wielding a sword every could. Moreover, her imagination is able to defeat an all-powerful, supernatural antagonist in the world that this antagonist creates and controls. Her imaginative power is a necessarily attribute to her heroism.

Male or female, a quintessential trait of a hero is that they are brave, and Coraline teaches children that bravery does not and cannot come from nothing. Coraline is not timid and passive, but assertive, and defies the Other Mother despite the tremendous danger that doing so will put her in. When she wakes up in the other world after expecting to be transported back home, Coraline immediately goes to her Other Father’s study. Unlike the study at the beginning of the film,
this scene is bathed in blue and covered with ominous shadows, the slumped figure of the Other Father motionless and rigid as his arms slowly rise and fall to beat out a few creepy, arbitrary notes on the piano. Coraline’s face is apprehensive at first, but quickly slams into a scowl, and she stands with confidence as she shouts “Hey you, Where’s the Other Mother, I want to go home!” her hands balled into fists and her eyes full of determination. When the Other Father tries to give Coraline a weak explanation, the mechanical hands that had once helped him play a song for her emerge quickly from the piano, cover his mouth, and shake a finger at his disobedience. Despite the terrifying scene, Coraline persists. “If you won’t talk to me, I’m going to find the other Wybie,” she says, to which the Other Father responds “no point, he pulled a long face, and mother didn’t like it,” his fingers contorting his once sharp-edged, doll-like face into a grimace languid and inhuman enough to terrify even the bravest of girls. Later, when Coraline is nose to nose with the beldam, she leans in as close as she can and says “I want do be with my real mom and dad. I want you to let me go.” When the Other Mother grows angry and insists that she apologize, Coraline leans in even closer and shouts “No!” The way that parents often do, the Other Mother gives Coraline to the count of three. As she counts down, the friendly, motherly puppet grows and contorts as it is replaced with the puppet of the monstrous beldam. With each stop-motion moment, the Other Mother’s neck stretches, her face sharpens, and her figure lengthens until it towers gaunt and threatening over the shocked Coraline. Through this terrifying transformation, Coraline refuses to run or back down, and defiantly cries “what are you doing!?” as the Beldam reaches a thin arm toward her and grabs her nose in one quick, fluid motion. Even in the face of danger, Coraline refuses to back down. After Coraline manages to escape to the real world, she makes the conscious choice to go back and rescue not only her parents, but the ghost
children as well even though she is technically safe. More importantly than defiance, however, Coraline teaches that being brave means accepting the help of others. She accepts the protective stone from Ms. Spin and Forcible, heads the advice of the black cat, and asks for the assistance of the ghost children when she needs help pulling the door between the two worlds shut (Wehler, 110). Her empathy, charm, and bravery attract the attention of the other Wybie and the Other Father, who, while puppets under the Other Mother’s control, readily help Coraline because of how likable she is. Had Coraline not made an effort to befriend the other Wybie, he would not have contested the Other Mother’s plan to trap her with a sheepish frown, nor would he have pulled her out of the dungeon where the other forced her. When Coraline is exploring the garden for the eyes of the ghost children, the Other Father appears on the same robotic grasshopper that he had used to fly her around the garden created in the shape of her face earlier in the film. This time, however, the Other Father is a fat, monstrous figure and the grasshopper’s glowing, yellow eyes and sharp, fearsome claws are absolutely terrifying as it lashes out in an attempt to kill her. The Other Father, having grown to like Coraline, drones in a broken voice that he is sorry and the Other Mother is making him do it. “Don’t wanna hurt you,” he says, reaching for the ghost eye she needs to win the game, throwing it to her. Though Coraline is terrified, she accepts. To Coraline, bravery is not something you accomplish on your own, but by pushing past fear and accepting the help of others.

Coraline is a hero not only because she is brave, but because she is intelligent, and the active presence of female intelligence in American cinema is something that is rarely seen, especially in films about young girls (Newsom, Miss Representation). After visiting the dazzling display put on by the other Ms. Spink and Ms Forcible, Coraline returns to sit at the table with her
other parents. “You could stay here forever, if you want to.” her Other Mother says. “There’s one tiny little thing we need to do.” Coraline, thrilled with the joys of the other world and upset with her real parents for misunderstanding her, smiles and asks what it is. The Other Mother sits Coraline down at the table and presents her with a cute, pink box with a pair of shiny black buttons and a long, pointed needle nested inside it. Coraline’s face immediately changed from excited to shocked, and with her syrupy, motherly voice, the Other Mother tries to sell the idea of sewing buttons into her face as if it were a special privilege. “Black is traditional, but if you’d prefer pink or chartreuse, though you might make me jealous,” she says, tapping her own eyes to make them magically change color. In Coraline’s mind, the magic of the Other World immediately transforms from wondrous, to dangerous, and without giving it a second thought she cries “No way! You’re not sewing buttons into my eyes!” as she shoves the box across the table as hard as she can. While Coraline’s of this trap might seem obvious, it is important to note that all three of the children who came before her failed where Coraline succeeded. Coraline immediately realized that, while her other parents were seemingly inadequate, they had her best interests at heart. In letting the Other Mother sew buttons into her eyes, she would become nothing more than one of the Other Mother’s possessions (Rudd, 13). She senses that the price for having her wishes immediately fulfilled is much too high, and begins planning her escape, feigning sleepiness in order to go to bed and wake up back where she belongs (Gooding, 397). After Coraline decides to re-enter the other world in order to save her parents and the ghost children, her feline companion tells her that she is walking right into the Other Mother’s trap, and that the only way to beat her is to challenge her to a game. “She might not play fair, but she won’t refuse. She has a thing for games,” he says, and Coraline considers this. Just like the first time she sees her, Coraline
walks into the kitchen to find the Other Mother happily cooking breakfast. This time, however, the Other Mother is tall, pointed, and gaunt, a terrifying skeleton of her former self. Still, she hums to herself, cracks eggs into the sizzling skillet, and carries on like any loving mother would. In her head, Coraline tells herself to be strong before sitting at the kitchen table, the fat beads of sweat dripping nervously down her forehead mirroring the grease in the pan as the Other Mother flips bacon. Looking up from the table, Coraline says “Why don’t we play a game? I know you like them,” and the Other Mother’s buttons flash. “Everyone likes games,” the Other Mother says without turning around, her voice signaling that she has fallen for Coraline’s trick. Coraline, of course, outlines the rules of the game, and says that she would have to find not only her parents, but the eyes of the ghost children. The Other Mother agrees, and Coraline sets out to free herself and rescue the others on the terms that she created.

When Coraline is in the process of finding the ghost eyes, she continuously uses her intelligence and quick wit to get herself out of tricky situations. When she first enters the garden, a grey stone well opens behind her to reveal an ominous blue light. While her back is turned, a horde of monstrous blue flowers tangle themselves around her ankles and pull her toward her doom — an open-mouthed, stone well ready to devour her. Coraline acts quickly, however, and is able to reach for her sheers and cut the vines off of her legs, killing the writhing flowers and freeing herself. Fresh out of her escape, Coraline notices three yellow, long-nosed insects buzzing loudly as they carry her green seeing stone away. Again, Coraline acts quickly, and throws her explorers hat at the insects, aiming carefully so that they fall out of the sky and onto the ground. The second of the ghost eyes is hidden in the other Ms. Spink and Ms Forcible’s theater, and when Coraline enters it, she notices hundreds of terrifying, bat-like dogs sleeping on the
ceiling. The dog’s eyes are bright red, and they snarl with suspicion as Coraline passes underway, pausing before a white, amniotic sac like chamber on the stage. Looking through her stone, she sees a glowing ball of light nestled in its midst, and reaches into the disgusting thing to find the eye, a pearl ring, nestled between two tangled pink and green hands. The hands, of course, belong to the other Ms. Spink and Ms. Forcible in the form of two sharp-toothed, pink and green mermaids, and they immediately latch onto Coraline, hissing at her to leave with their shrieking, snakelike voices. In order to get them off of her, Coraline uses her flashlight to attract the attention of the dogs on the ceiling, and quickly ducks so that they attack Ms. Spink and Forcible instead of her, once again using her quick wit to get herself out of a tricky situation. Later, when she confronts the beldam inside the creepy, neon, bug-infested living room, one of the ghost children tells her to “be tricky,” for even if she wins the game, the Other Mother will never let her go. Wearing a knowing expression, Coraline smugly says that she already knows where the beldam has hidden her parents, and tells her that they are behind the passage to the other world. Coraline knows that the beldam is too arrogant to pass up the opportunity to prove her wrong, and knowing that she will have to cough up the key in order to show her that her parents are not where she thought they were, Coraline successfully tricks the beldam into giving her what she wants. Once the she places the key in the lock to the other door, revealing that Coraline’s parents are not, in fact, behind it, Coraline takes the opportunity to scan the room for her real parents, discovering them inside a snow globe. When the beldam turns around, Coraline takes an offensive stance, waits for the beldam to draw near, and launches the cat at her face in a successful attempt to blind her. The beldam, of course, is the master of traps, having created a world four times over and successfully tricking three children into falling for it. Coraline is trickier even
than she is, and this strength comes from the fact that her intelligence is grounded in her creativi-
ty and drive to rescue those she cares about instead of a blind desire to deceive (Wehler, 109).

As it stands, *Coraline* is a scary film. With its terrifying, spider-like antagonist and jump
scares involving evil, hissing mermaids and dogs with bat wings, the movie is admittedly more
than just creepy, and *Coraline* plays on the idea that being afraid at the movies is one of the plea-
sures of childhood (Scott, 2). Though it is common for American culture to shield children from
terror, Neil Gaiman insists that being scared and facing real monsters are an important part of
being a kid. In a 2009 interview with Shawn Levy, Gaiman says

> I believe that you need your bad guy to be bad. You need your monster to be monstrous, you
need something for a kid to go up against. [Disney channel fiction with no conflict] is not what
you want to send people out into the world with! You arm them with the idea that yes, there are
monsters out there, but you can defeat them. In my experience, "Cora-
line" is so much more scary for adults. Adults are watching a film about a child in danger, kids are watching a film about somebody brave doing something cool” (Levy, 2).

To children watching the movie, *Coraline* is a film about a child, just like them, standing up to a
real monster and emerging victorious (Rich, 1). To adults, however, it is a little more complicated
than that, and many parents watching the film found themselves not only horrified at the implica-
tions, but even had nightmares about the film days after watching it. One theory is that, because
children see Coraline as an adventurous kid, they assume she will be able to conquer anything
while parents, on the other hand, know exactly how much trouble she is really in, (Grant, 2). On
a psychoanalytical level, however, *Coraline* in a film riddled with examples of the uncanny, or,
Freud’s theory of that which resembles the familiar, but is not quite right, will evoke a sense of
uneasiness in the viewer (Rudd, 4). In *Coraline*, another world is present filled with uncanny
doubles of “real” characters whose buttons for eyes not only unnerve the viewer, but bring about
an unconscious fear of being replaced or killed by a replicated version of the self. According to Freud, seeing oneself doubled, particularly when seeing ones eyes replaced or removed, brings about an unconscious fear of castration and thus powerlessness that had been repressed since childhood (Freud, 349). When an adult viewer sees these doubles with buttons for eyes, and watches Coraline under the threat of having her eyes gouged out and replaced, they subconsciously become afraid. Children, however are not affected by the film in this way. In his 2008 essay "'Something Very Old and Very Slow': Coraline, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form," Richard Gooding explains this.

While many adult readers undoubtedly perceive such moments as uncanny, children are theoretically less sensitive to them. With some notable exceptions [...] Coraline, with whom younger readers are likely to identify, generally seems immune to feelings of uncanniness. Elements related to animism—the living toys in the other (394).

There is arguably a type of strength in a child taking pleasure in something that scares his parents, and it is perhaps for this reason why Coraline transfixes young viewers the way that it does. Small doses of terror in moviegoing give children a sense of power, particularly when they see someone just like them standing up to a frightening monster and winning (Scott, 1).

Like all books that are made into films, there are quite a few noticeable differences between Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and the stop motion feature Henry Selick directed years later. When Selick first wrote the *Coraline* screenplay, it was incredibly faithful to the novel. Neil Gaiman, however, did not like it, and admitted that having a story about a lonesome little girl who talks to herself might make the movie clock in at about 45 minutes (Rich). To rectify this problem, Wybie's character was introduced. Timid and awkward, Wybie defies the typical definition of a masculine hero, and in fact admittedly only exists so that Coraline has somebody to in-
teract with. Though both versions of *Coraline* are about a brave young girl who is capable of rescuing herself, the addition of Wybie was met with extraordinary critical backlash by those who did not want a boy in the film, and matters become especially tricky when Wybie winds up "saving" Coraline from the Other Mother's fearsome hand at the end of the film. In the novel, Coraline realizes that the other hand is after her after hearing it scratch at her windows and frighten the mouse circus upstairs, so she sets off to solve this problem on her own. She tricks the hand into following her by talking about having a tea party by herself at the old well, giving it the opportunity to catch her alone and steal back the key it needs to re-open the door to the other world.

Coraline lays the picnic blanket over the well and "as carefully as she could, she leaned over and, gently, placed the key on the tablecloth. [...] hoping that the cups of water at the edge of the well would weigh the cloth down, letting it take the weight of the key without collapsing into the well" (Gaiman, 157). The hand, of course, falls for Coraline's trap, and she rids her world of the evil Other Mother once and for all. At the end of the film, however, the ghost children appear to Coraline in a dream and tell her that she is in terrible danger. Upon waking up, Coraline decides that she has to find the key somewhere where the Other Mother can never find it. In her pajamas, she walks alone to the old well with the Other Mother's hand trailing close behind. Coraline grunts, pushes the boards off the well, wipes the sweat from her brow, and prepares to get rid of the key once and for all. The moment she takes the key off her neck, however, the Other Mother acts, grabbing onto it and crawling desperately back toward the house. Critics believe that the film cannot be saved for feminism because Wybie appears and smashes the Other Mother's hand, "saving" Coraline.
In one interview, Neil Gaiman explains the widespread, negative reaction to Wybie's character. “People got very upset. They were saying, ‘Why did you let Henry put a boy in it? Does he come in and save her?’ No, he really doesn’t. Don’t worry. He’s the irritating kid next door, but he’s there and she can talk to him, and it’s great,” (Wehler, 127). Indeed, the final rescue scene looks terrible on the surface, but when it is actually unpacked, it is a lot more complicated than it appears. For instance, when the Other Mother's hand drags Coraline toward her home, there is a quick, winding shot of just how far the door to the other world is from the well. Knowing Coraline, it is not unfair to assume that she would have been able to get herself out of the situation. When Wybie appears on his motorbike with a pear of tongs, he plucks the hand off of Coraline and rides out of the dish. The hand is tricky, however, and crawls in front of Wybie's mask, effectively blinding him and causing him to cry out just before he nearly falls down the well himself. Hanging on to the edge with one gloved hand, Wybie's face is a picture of terror, and he is not quite the night in shining armor critics make him out to be. The hand uses Wybie's body as a ladder, and with its spiny, needle-like fingers, hacks away at the hand Wybie was using to hang on. Coraline acts quickly, however, and brilliantly uses a blanket on the ground to trap the hand, wrestle it to the ground, and save Wybie's life. Only then is Wybie able to crawl out of the well and smash it with a rock, proving that the final rescue was actually a joint effort. In fact, in each part of the film where Wybie is assumed to be Coraline's protector, quite the opposite is true. When Coraline is trapped in the Other Mother's dungeon, for example, she does not break or cry, but stands completely ready to wait the Other Mother out the way she does in the novel. Unlike the novel, however, Coraline is pulled out of the dungeon by the other Wybie, who, even though he is a puppet of the Other Mother, felt compelled to help Coraline because of her
kindess and willingness to befriend him. Coraline, believing she is under attack, grabs the other Wybie and slams him into a wall, proving her agency and strength. To Coraline, Wybie is not a savior, nor is he the love interests critics insist he is despite the fact that these children are eleven years old (Mandelo, 2). Wybie is Coraline's companion and friend, somebody whom she talks to, learns with, and even throws a shoe at when he refuses to believe her about the dangers of the other world. Though it is true that Henry Selick could have very easily made Wybie a girl or excluded him from this final scene, one of the pitfalls of making a film in contemporary Hollywood is the unfortunate need to include male characters in films, subconsciously or otherwise, for fear that they will not get made (Beck). While the cinematic version of Coraline admittedly falls victim to this notion to some degree, the critical backlash proves that there is indeed an ever-growing need for strong female roles in fantasy films.
Conclusion

In a world filled with passive princesses and a lack of positive female representation, *Coraline* and *Spirited Away* are defiant beacons of hope for little girls who strive to see on-screen representations of themselves as heroes. The female hero narrative has traditionally been non-existent in the media, and by providing a rich, detailed storyline centered around powerful girl heroes, *Coraline* and *Spirited Away* successfully pave the way for a future filled with positive representations of girls in media. Chihiro and Coraline were modeled after real little girls, and because of their unexaggerated nature, they teach female audience members just like them that they are capable of being heroes by virtue of who they are. In fact, it is because of their exhibition of characteristics commonly associated with girl children that Chihiro and Coraline are successful in defeating their monsters and saving themselves. Heroism is, first and foremost, about courage and the ability to help others, characteristics that both of the girls exhibit in excess. When Chihiro is tasked with giving a bath to the monstrous sludge beast, it is her feminine capacity for empathy that drives her to perform an incredible rescue. While the other residents of the bathhouse cower in fear and react with revulsion, Chihiro realizes that the sludge beast is badly hurt, and enlists the help of the other residents to free it from its polluted prison. Likewise, though Coraline is already tasked with saving herself and her parents, her empathetic nature cause her to take on the additional responsibility of saving the souls of the ghost children. Chihiro and Coraline differ from traditional masculine heroes because, though they know they will not be rewarded with neither glory nor the promise of a love interest, they still strive to save those in desperate need. They are heroes not because of brute strength or blind bravery, but because they are kind,
adventurous, and courageous in the ways that little girls are capable of. In their respective films, Coraline and Chihiro embark on journeys of tremendous personal growth, and teach the importance of friendship, self-confidence, and love.

Despite being thrust into terrifying, unknown fantasy worlds, the girls are able to adapt in the face of tremendous danger. Unlike traditional masculine heroes who are unquestionably unafraid, Coraline and Chihiro teach their viewers that fear is healthy, and the ability to conquer this fear is more indicative of heroism than hyper-masculine bravery ever is. Without fear, bravery cannot exist, and the heroines of these two films exemplify bravery by showing that they are afraid, but pushing onward anyway. When Coraline confronts the beldam, for example, she sweats out of nervousness. With the knowledge that she must defeat a supernatural being in order to save her parents, Coraline tells herself to be strong before pushing forward. With Coraline’s fear in mind, the audience then watches as she puts on a brave face and asks the beldam to play a game with her with the knowledge that beating this powerful, supernatural antagonist is the only way that she can rescue her mother and father. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro is appropriately terrified and overwhelmed at having to rescue her parents that had been turned into pigs. She sits on the ground, weeps out of sadness and frustration, and in the next scene is able to pick herself up and face her fears, knowing that working hard in the bathhouse will be her only way out. Though these girls are animated, they are honest depictions of the fear and frustration felt by real children, and because of this, the young female audiences watching them are able to see themselves as capable of anything despite their justifiable fears. It is also important that the monsters that Coraline and Chihiro must defeat are not black and white models of good and evil, but complicated characters with complicated motives. After all, people are seldom exclusively good or bad,
and this is an important in shaping the way that children see the world. *Spirited Away*'s Yubaba is not a purely evil villain, but a stressed-out woman who must juggle motherhood while running a bathhouse for spirits, and drives her to control others without while being consumed by her own greed. It is easy to defeat a monster who is totally evil, but being able to understand an antagonist’s motives and using this to defeat them through non-violent means is more difficult. Chihiro and Coraline do not have any special powers with which to combat their monsters, and are thus forced to rely on their capacity for understanding and intelligence to perform their rescues. In doing this, they outline a more positive, progressive version of heroism than the classic male-centric hero narrative ever does.

In an interview during the film *Miss Representation*, Steyer brings to light an important point about the nature of film in our culture. She says that “if you think about media and technology, they're delivering content that is shaping our society. They're shaping our politics. They're shaping our national discourse. And most of all, they're shaping our children's brains and lives and emotions,” (Newsom, *Miss Representation*). As an art form, film is something that people across cultures are consistently exposed to. When we watch a film, we internalize not only its meaning, but the way that characters are portrayed, and we carry these messages out into the world with us often without even realizing it. Cinema, of course, is about story, and when we watch films we interpret the stories on screen through the eyes of the main character, emphasizing with them on the course of their journey (Ramasubramanian and Kornfield, 192). Hollywood, by nature, is a male dominated industry, and the women and girls are who go to the movies inadvertently notice when most of the films with positive role models must be lived through the eyes of boys and men (Jaremko-Greenwold, 2). Children by nature are both mal-
leable and impressionable, and the media that someone consumes in their childhood has a heavy hand in shaping who they become and how they see themselves. A little girl who is androgynous, daring, and adventurous in spirit will inevitably begin to see herself differently when the media sends her messages of whom she ought to be. Through the constant bombardment of princess culture and messages about being sexually attractive, a girl’s sense of self is slowly killed off and replaced with an artificial presentation meant to appeal to patriarchal society (Pipher, 21). In fact, even films with strong female characters often depict them as hopelessly sexualized or masculine in nature; female superheroes in American media often wear tight or unnecessarily revealing clothing, and the teenage girls of the Japanese Shojo genre are often completely obsessed with boys and romance. Girls who consume media are taught that, even when they are not passive damsels in distress, any strength that they do have is conditional. Worse, these films and television programs send a negative message to boys and adults about who girls are and what they are capable of. Having films like Coraline and Spirited Away, films with tough, headstrong little girls, really matters. Coraline and Chihiro are multi-faceted and intelligent, and their existence allowed those who watched them to form empathetic and cognitive ties to a strong female child. By going against the grain, Coraline and Spirited Away teach their audiences that strength does not come from appealing to society, but through hard work, bravery, and motivation. More importantly, they send the message that little girls are just as capable of these qualities as anybody else. The journeys that Chihiro and Coraline embark on are not born of a desire for fame or fortune, but of necessity. These girls have no particular training, yet they are capable of saving their parents and themselves by virtue of the gifts that they already possess and the willingness to learn and grow.
As a child, I fell in love with cinema, and I in fact had the privilege of seeing *Spirited Away* in theaters when I was just six years old. I would watch the DVD whenever I was able, and this was because, somehow, I knew that the film was different. When *Coraline* came out when I was a teenager, my awareness of just why these films were so important to me became even more apparent. When the success of these two films is examined, it is obvious that I was not alone. The popular notion in Hollywood is that girls will watch films about boys, but boys will not watch films about girls, yet these two films about strong female children not only did exceedingly well at the box office, but were nominated for the Academy Award for best animated feature, an award that *Spirited Away* went on to win. In fact, *Spirited Away*, a story about the heroic journey of the ordinary 10-year-old Chihiro remains the highest grossing film in Japan to this day, making audiences young and old weep at the beauty of its message each time it is re-released in theaters (Reider, 4). While both Hollywood and Japanese anime remain male dominated industries, people are starting to take notice, and demands for positive representations of women and girls in film are at an all time high (Zurko, 2). Just last year, Disney released *Moana* (Clements, 2016), a film about a Polynesian girl who embarks on a journey to cross the ocean, defeat a vicious lava-demon, and save her island from destruction. It is clear that times are changing, and the increasing introduction of heroes like Chihiro and Coraline is indicative of the growing realization that girls need heroes, just like them, to look up to and emulate. Strong women grow from strong girls, and the on-screen representation of girls who have the capacity of heroism within them is important to not only how they are seen by society, but how they see themselves.
Works Cited


