FEED ME! INSATIABLE CHILDREN AND THE MONSTERS WHO WANT TO DEVOUR THEM: FAIRY TALES AND CONSUMPTION IN CLIVE BARKER’S *THE THIEF OF ALWAYS* AND NEIL GAIMAN’S *CORALINE*

Brandi J. Venable

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Committee:

Marilyn Motz, Advisor

Esther Clinton

Kristen Rudisill
ABSTRACT

Marilyn Motz, Advisor

British authors Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman make an important contribution to children’s literature through the thematic usage of food and the structural employment of fairy tales in *The Thief of Always* (Barker) and *Coraline* (Gaiman). Drawing from the writings of Philippe Ariès, this thesis traces the rise of childhood as a category distinct from adulthood and focuses on the didactic nature of fairy tales and literature in childhood. By utilizing the works of Vladimir Propp, Max Lüthi, and Mary Douglas, I demonstrate how the authors of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* use fairy tale structure and motifs, as well as cultural binaries such as purity and pollution, in order to make a statement about the role of food in childhood today. Contemporary childhood is a site of restricted agency where adults approach children as socially inept beings in need of protection and guidance. However, since adults are often preoccupied with their work and other responsibilities, they also expect children to demonstrate maturity and independence. In these books, food is the vehicle through which adult agendas are manifested. Ultimately, it is my assertion that adults coerce children through food and use fairy tales and works of fiction like *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* to teach children about proper consumption habits.
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INTRODUCTION

British fiction for children and young adults is not only rich in fantastical settings that delight and intrigue readers, but it also enjoys a tantalizing history of food and feasting themes. From Lewis Carroll to C. S. Lewis to Roald Dahl, child characters existing in the works of these authors are either constantly lured by the appeal of food (for example, Edmund’s indulgence in the Turkish Delight offered to him by the White Witch), or they find themselves the object of consumption by ravenous monsters intent on devouring them (the BFG’s fellow giants). There is also an important dynamic that exists between adults and children in these works, and is most obvious in the way that food is used as an item of barter by adults in order to coerce children into behaving in a desired manner. This is further complicated by the fact that it is not only the adult villain luring child characters via food, but also the adult authors teaching child readers about proper modes of consumption through their stories about food. British authors Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman add to this fascinating tradition of other-worldly settings, children, adults, food, and monsters in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, respectively.

In crafting the analysis in the chapters that follow, the determination to pair these two books together is based on the following shared criteria: (1) they have relatively close publication dates (being published only a decade apart); (2) they are written by British authors who now both reside in the United States, thereby allowing for a historical analysis (and comparison) of childhood in both cultures; (3) protagonists Harvey Swick (*The Thief of Always*) and Coraline (*Coraline*) both follow a fairy tale hero progression as outlined by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale*; (4) each protagonist faces a villain who wants to consume him or her, thus establishing cultural binaries of what is and is not proper food for consumption (purity vs. pollution), and what is/is not the proper amount to consume; (5) each protagonist’s adventure
is a derivative of boredom, which will be explored further in relation to the rise of childhood, to consumerism in and of childhood, and to middle-class sentiments about acceptable behaviors for consumption.

For the reasons outlined above, these two books can and should be examined together. Structurally, they both rely on the already established and popular fairy tale format in terms of plot and heroic progression. This gives the relationship between food and childhood in these stories even more impact, considering the long history of food in fairy tales. Thematically, the books serve as modern day parables about the dangers of consumption and greed, teaching children moderation in consumption, specifically in relation to food.

The main questions addressed throughout the body of the thesis are: (1) what can the history of childhood tell us about the relationship of childhood to adulthood? What do histories of childhood in Britain and the United States tell us about the importance of food and feasting as a theme in literature for children and young adults? How are these histories and topics informed by adult agendas? (2) How does the use of fairy tale structure help reinforce the theme of food? How does it inform the relationship between childhood and adulthood? (3) How can issues of food and consumption be explored through cultural binaries? What functions do food and consumption serve in each of these books, specifically? (4) How are food and fairy tales utilized in these two books to update themes of consumption in order to serve as modern day parables about proper behavior and consumptive patterns in today’s construction of childhood? These questions articulate the concerns that will be explored in each of the four chapters outlined below.

Chapter One: Crafting the Complicit Child provides a historical overview of childhood as it developed in the Western World (particularly in Britain, and to a lesser extent the United
States), considering that both Neil Gaiman and Clive Barker were born and raised in England and now reside in the United States. Overall, chapter one seeks to lay the foundation for the creation of childhood as a site of inquiry. In his book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, Philippe Ariès—a twentieth century French author and historian—offers an extensive and valuable history of the rise of childhood as a distinctive category in Europe. The major scope of his research explores the periods between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, when childhood became a recognizable state of being and inquiry. The critical contribution of his work, both in the scheme of literature about childhood, and to this thesis more specifically, is that Ariès proposes that childhood is a social construction and not a biological fact. He explains the rise of childhood due to changing social and economic factors, and therefore provides a solid foundation for the analysis of childhood as a space created by adult agendas, and linked heavily to social expectations, particularly as they relate to economic class.

Ariès’ proposition about the social construction of childhood is valuable not only for the study of childhood in Europe, but also in America. Notably, Daniel Thomas Cook, Associate Professor of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University-Camden, uses Ariès’ premise to analyze the rise of children as consumers, as well as the commodification of childhood, in his book *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*. In drawing from the works of scholars of childhood, such as Ariès and Cook, chapter one is devoted to explaining the historical rise of childhood as a site of inquiry, both in Britain and the United States, and the economic and social factors that contribute to consumerism in, and of, childhood.

Additionally, chapter one will establish the idea that the construction of childhood is directly informed by adult agendas. *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are intended for younger
audiences, but this chapter suggests that the image of childhood developed in both books is an adult perception of childhood, and that the moral message of moderation implicit in both *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* is a message deemed important for children by adults. Although it is the child audience that these books address, it is not through a child’s voice that this occurs. Hence, one of the justifications for pairing these works is the fact that both Barker and Gaiman write fiction for adults and for children, but it is their status as adults themselves that informs the way these books should be read and analyzed. *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* succeed in projecting an adult-mediated image of childhood to child consumers. The proximity of the publication dates (*The Thief of Always* in 1992 and *Coraline* in 2002) also suggests that these books are informed by similar notions of childhood, and proper modes of consumption, developing during this same time period. It also situates childhood as a space that is, to channel Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation, “always-already” (345) informed by adult agendas surrounding food and proper consumption habits, to which the child (as subject, literary character, or reader) consents, or rebels against.

Chapter Two: Playing in Propp’s Playground provides a structural analysis of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, with the purpose of rooting these stories within the fairy tale tradition. The majority of this analysis hinges on the structural outline provided by Russian scholar and formalist Vladimir Propp in his study *Morphology of the Folktale*. Although Propp focuses specifically on Russian folktales, his analysis is derived from Russian formalism more generally. Just as Russian formalism is useful to literary criticism beyond Russia, so too is Propp’s analysis of the folktale applicable to works originating elsewhere. As the title of the work (*Morphology*) indicates, Propp concerns himself with the smallest structural units of effective folktale narrative, and therefore arguably focuses on functionality more than regional specificity. Moreover, since
fairy tales originated as oral stories and later transitioned into written format, tracking down and confirming an ur-text is problematic. Their lack of clearly identifiable origin, their ease of transmission, and their adaptability to local context suggests that fairy tales (and thus their narrative structure) were, and still are, easy to exchange across national borders and are adaptable to various cultural traditions (hence the documentation of international tale types). Thus, it is not surprising that many of the Russian fairy tale features described by Propp are apparent in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, despite the British roots of their authors.

Complementing the structural layout provided by Propp is the book *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* by Max Lüthi. Not only does Lüthi address formatting of fairy tales, but he also focuses on the conventions of fairy tales, and, more importantly, their social meanings. Although he admits in his preface that “the folktale is to be interpreted historically,” he goes on to say, “I have preferred to search for its lasting truths” (xv). In this statement, he argues for the validity of rooting fairy tale analysis in a particular historical time and place (the goal of chapter one of this thesis), but also suggests a universality (at least in terms of a Western perspective) of form and theme, hence justifying the use of Propp and Lüthi for analyzing works by British authors. Therefore, chapter two will emphasize the structural similarities of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* to fairy tales, demonstrating how the authors are utilizing a well-established format to draw on the already familiar relationship between children and food, often used in fairy tales. Structural analysis also helps establish binaries (good vs. evil, for example) and provides a system of organization for analyzing the thematic importance of food.

Chapter Three: Food, Feasting and Frivolity offers the “meat and potatoes” of the thesis by focusing on the thematic importance of food and consumption more generally in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*. Taking direction from British anthropologist Mary Douglas’ book *Purity*
and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, chapter three examines the ideas of acceptable consumption in terms of the binary of purity and pollution. Acceptable consumption is discussed in a variety of ways, including the difference in the way that children and adults approach and consume food, and the lessons that Harvey Swick and Coraline must learn in order to become proper consumers. While the children consume edible and culturally acceptable food items, the villains seek to consume human children, thereby committing a social taboo (and thus appearing as monstrous beings, contrasting with the purity of childhood). The amount of food that the children eat is also relevant here. It is Harvey’s voracious appetite, and his lack of discretion, that aligns him more closely at the beginning of the story with the vampiric Mr. Hood, and less closely with his family in terms of proper consumption habits. Again, the dichotomy between good and evil as outlined in the previous chapter becomes important, as both protagonists follow the progression outlined by Propp in order to become heroes, and triumph over evil. It is only in facing a villain who wants to consume them that the child characters in each book are able to face their own alarming consumptive patterns and learn moderation.

Chapter Four: Literary Lessons for a Lifetime will also focus on the thematic importance of food, but will address the lessons that food teaches in The Thief of Always and in Coraline. Tying together the previous chapters, the final chapter focuses on how the creation of childhood as its own space separate from adulthood, the rise of the middle class (and consequently consumption in and of childhood), and the pervasiveness of food in fairy tales (by extension the use of fairy tale format in contemporary books such as The Thief of Always and Coraline), all help highlight the way that adults today view childhood. Additionally, this chapter will focus on the way that these two books, as part of children’s literature that includes food themes, serve as modern day parables about proper consumption habits. Both Harvey Swick and Coraline live in
relative comfort, and are able to justify leaving home due to boredom. However, they are both initially lured by the villains of the stories through invitations to eat. From an adult perspective, this suggests that adults recognize food as bargaining tools in childhood. While the food in these books does not perform a base, survival function, it does act as an object through which the child characters willingly exchange some of their agency for false comfort. It is only when the children are able to temper their own hunger and avoid temptation that they are able to combat the lure of food, and triumph over the villains of each story.

In addition to exploring the socializing power of food in children’s literature, this chapter will also address the ways in which *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* offer insight into the relationship of adulthood and childhood, in order to highlight some of the anxieties in contemporary childhood. Literary food has been used historically by adults to express anxieties over real deprivation and consequent child abandonment; food is used in these books not only to coerce children, but also to discuss the ways in which children are still deprived (albeit not necessarily through diet). Instead, by relating food to parental comfort and security, food addresses an unmet need for Harvey and Coraline: it provides emotional and physical fulfillment that they are unable to attain from their parents, who are too busy to spend time with them.

Two books are particularly important to the study of food and consumption in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*. The first is *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature*. In this book, author Carolyn Daniel argues that children’s literature is didactic in nature, attempting to teach children socially acceptable eating habits based on the inclusion of food in works such as C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. She also recognizes the historical progression of childhood in Britain as influencing the food fantasies imbedded in British literature. Some of Daniel’s analysis centers on the dietary restrictions and educational
agendas of children in the nursery age of Britain (mainly during the nineteenth century), as well as acknowledges the separation of children from the adult sphere of the household. This also lays the groundwork for suggesting why the children in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are rebellious in the beginning of each book. Harvey feels that he is being unfairly treated by being assigned chores (which keep him occupied and away from his parents), while Coraline feels neglected by her parents and alienated by their propensity to work instead of desiring to play with her all day.

While Daniel focuses mainly on British classics, author Susan Honeyman pursues the importance of food to childhood in America in her book *Consuming Agency in Fairy Tales, Childlore, and Folkliterature*. Although she also utilizes the history of childhood to make her points, she keeps her analysis rooted expressly in American childhood. One of the major arguments in her book is that, in both literature and real life, food is used to coerce children into behaving properly. For example, she analyzes the way that children are encouraged to eat healthier through popular figures such as Popeye, who projects the image of someone who is strong and therefore admirable. Honeyman also focuses on the issue of purity and pollution in terms of food consumption by analyzing E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, and Wilbur’s disgust at Charlotte’s diet of bugs. A similar scene presents itself in Neil Gaiman’s book. At one point in the story, the other mother also consumes a bug, eliciting a similar reaction of revulsion from Coraline.

In conclusion, both Barker and Gaiman demonstrate in their books that food is used instructively. In addition to proper consumption habits, the children also learn to be resourceful and contributing members to their respective families. Rather than relying solely on their parents for entertainment, the children return home with a much more independent and content outlook.
on life. Independence is one of the expectations for modern day childhood, as will be argued later. Therefore, this expectation informs the rites of passage that Harvey Swick and Coraline embark on in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*. In the end, it is food that is used as the vehicle for bartering agency in childhood, in order to teach children the ways of proper consumption, of independence and self-reliance, and of being contributory members of their families.

This thesis will argue for the relevance of Clive Barker’s *The Thief of Always* and Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* to the analysis of food and fairy tales in children’s and young adult literature, as well as the importance of examining the literary construction of childhood, both in Britain and in the United States, as being informed by adult ideas about childhood. These two books are positioned in a long history of the literary depiction of childhood by adult authors, the thematic importance of food (particularly in the fairy tale tradition), the use of food by adults as a means to coerce children, and the ways in which children learn about purity and pollution, and ultimately about proper consumption habits, through literature about food.
CHAPTER ONE: CRAFTING THE COMPPLICIT CHILD

This chapter begins with the premise that to understand children’s literature, one must first understand the ways in which childhood—and by extension children’s literature—reflect and serve adult agendas. Because much of this thesis hinges on the idea that there exists an unequal distribution of power in the relationship between adults and children, and that food is one of the devices that adults use to gain behavioral and moral compliance from children, this chapter will explore the historical relationship between adulthood and childhood. Since both Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman are British authors who now reside in the United States, histories of childhood in both countries will be examined, though more of an emphasis will be placed on Britain, since this is the authors’ country of origin and therefore where they were children. Additionally, British children’s literature sustains a rich tradition of food and feasting as important themes, so this chapter will also explore the way that food began to inform the relationship between adults and children over time. Since chapter two takes on the task of outlining *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* as fairy tales, this chapter begins its exploration of childhood from the seventeenth century, when fairy tales were widely circulated in printed format and became a large part of the socializing process for children.

Children’s literature as a category is problematic. It implies that the themes are relevant to child audiences, but obscures the fact that more often than not, the writers of these works are adults. In her book, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose proposes that “there is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction’, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (10). Essentially, Rose suggests that there is no such thing as true, unadulterated children’s fiction, because children’s fiction is mediated through the experiences and expressions
of adult authors. This sentiment is echoed by other scholars of children’s literature, such as Carolyn Daniel, who identifies the power struggle inherent in the world of adult authors and child readers: “children’s fiction is a category of literature written by one powerful group, not for equals, but for another less knowledgeable, less socially enabled and thus subordinated and vulnerable group” (4). At the outset, this sets up a dichotomy that distinguishes adults from children, positioning children in a marginalized status. Additionally, this issue is complicated by the fact that the history of childhood is often composed by adults as well. Scholars in various fields—from history to sociology—herald the concept that childhood is a construction, informed by socio-historical, economic, and adult agendas. Barker and Gaiman characterize the relationship between adults and children in their books, and due to the relatively close publication dates of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, it is no surprise that the way childhood is constructed is similar.

Published in the mid-twentieth century, Philippe Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood* spurred many of the studies of childhood that exist today. Although the accuracy of his conclusions and the scope of his research are questionable at best, scholars do agree that he offers one of the more accepted viewpoints about childhood in general: that it is a social construction, which therefore varies across space and time. In formulating a timeline of childhood, Ariès suggests that “the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century, and its progress can be traced in the history of art in the fifteen and sixteenth centuries. But the evidence of its development became more plentiful and significant from the end of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth” (47). It is debatable whether or not childhood became a recognizable status during the thirteenth century (particularly because Ariès uses artwork as his main source for this claim); however, it is interesting that representations of childhood became more prominent around the
seventeenth century, because this coincides with the rise and consequent circulation of fairy tales in printed format.

Fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes offers some important historical analysis of the fairy tale, and its relationship to childhood. He particularly focuses on the socializing power of the fairy tale. In discussing the view of childhood in the seventeenth century, Zipes argues:

Children were now being taken seriously as a separate age group with a special set of characteristics, and it was considered most important to advance the cause of *civilité* with explicit and implicit rules of pedagogization so that the manners and mores of the young would reflect the social power, prestige, and hierarchy of the ruling classes. Socialization through fairy tales. (Zipes, *Fairy Tales* 9)

Not only does this express the idea that children during this time period existed in a separate social sphere from adults, but also that adults approached children as beings that required socialization and education in proper modes of behavior. Additionally, by highlighting the correlation of fairy tales with the “pedagogization” process, Zipes suggest that fairy tales and childhood share an important history with one another. This history is determined by adult attitudes toward children, and adult perceptions about the proper way to instruct children. Therefore, fairy tales during this period, and arguably from the seventeenth century on, were appropriated by adults in order to educate children and influence proper behavior. The fact that children are considered in need of instruction also suggests their inferior status to their adult counterparts.

During the same period in American history, “most young colonists, regardless of region and social class, had lived in a state of dependency upon their parents or upon a master and a mistress” (Mintz 51). Steven Mintz focuses his research on adolescent culture as opposed to
child culture, but his findings indicate that control by adults over children extended well into their teenage years as well. In his book, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*, he argues: “Through their control over dowries, inheritance, landed property, and access to training and apprenticeships, fathers and masters determined when young people were able to leave home, marry, and achieve the independence of full adulthood” (51). Mintz suggests that there is something gained from adulthood, and that reaching adulthood is therefore considered an achievement of sorts. The suggestion here is that childhood is characterized by a lack—certainly a lack of training, which is explicitly stated by Mintz—but also a lack of morals, manners, and power, if Zipes’ statement is taken into account alongside Mintz’s. In these ways, the seventeenth-century depiction of childhood is a childhood very much under the control of adult power that regulates the trajectory of childhood itself, and determines the ways and time in which a child enters into the adult sphere.

Transitioning into the eighteenth century, Ariès identifies an emerging “concern about hygiene and physical health” (133). Physical health suggests dietary concerns, and it is during this time period that regulations regarding food intake during childhood became more prominent and documented. Coupled with the influence of John Locke’s work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, the emphasis on childhood shifted to the acquisition of education and reason, along with the added focus on physical well-being. One scholar suggests that in this book, “Locke seems to be laying out a blueprint for the production of capitalist man, repressing his desires and deferring if not denying gratification” (Cunningham 63). Locke’s ideas about self-denial and governing the body can be connected to the growing emphasis on food in childhood, and its regulation by adults. In *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock*, Marina Warner recounts an eighteenth-century London menu from the Foundling Hospital: “in 1747, the
General Committee minutes show that during one week ‘in the Pork Season’ the menu offered ‘Gruell’ for breakfast, ‘Potatoes’ for lunch, and ‘Milk & Bread’ for supper on Monday” (137). Warner goes on to explain that “this was a remarkably rich and varied diet for the times, far better than the fare of many children in working families” (138). No doubt dietary restrictions were in part due to economics, especially in working-class families as pointed out by Warner. However, the insubstantial offerings do provide insight into the fascination with food exhibited throughout fairy tales, and the inclusion of food fantasies that would continue to appear in children’s literature in the centuries yet to come.

Despite the influence of Locke’s work on childhood, there existed another perspective that appeared in the latter part of the eighteenth century: that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In valuing the experience of nature over institutionalized education, Rousseau and other romantics “set out an ideal of childhood in which it was transformed from being a preparatory phase in the making of an adult to being the spring which should nourish the whole life” (Cunningham 73). Childhood became equated with purity and innocence during this period, and thus transformed into the time of life to both cherish and look back at nostalgically. Though expressing different viewpoints about the proper approach to childhood, the ideas of Locke and Rousseau continue to co-exist in notions of childhood into the twenty-first century. Certainly there remains an emphasis on the innocence and purity of children, which results in a protectionist attitude toward their safety and well-being. However, there also exists the mindset that children require experience and preparation if they are to deal with the harsher realities of the adult world.

The mid-nineteenth century saw a rise in legislation regarding juvenile offenders. This legislation created further distinctions between adulthood and childhood by reinforcing the
unequal distribution of power in adulthood, and the necessity of overseeing proper development in childhood. The legislation during this era:

- defined the extended ‘childhood’ as ‘different’;
- reinforced the view that they were not ‘free’ agents;
- drew attention to the child-parent relationship with the latter being expected to exercise control and discipline;
- and emphasized the danger of those in need of ‘care and protection’ becoming delinquents. (Hendrick, *Constructions* 43)

The emphasis on vocabulary here suggests that there exists such a thing as a proper childhood, and that this proper childhood can only be maintained through adult interference and supervision. According to this philosophy, lack of appropriate instruction in childhood inevitably leads to the delinquency of the individual child. One of the ways that this guidance from the adult sphere manifested itself in childhood was through a continuing focus on food restrictions. Not surprisingly, literature from this period incorporates food themes, particularly sweet, forbidden foods that appeal mainly to children. Jacqueline M. Labbe insists in, “To Eat and Be Eaten in Nineteenth-Century Children’s Literature” that “for the middle and upper classes, for whom the next meal was a certainty and the question was, rather, how many courses it might consist of, children’s appetites received regulation that those of adults often did not” (93). Clearly, there is a dietary discrepancy during this time period in terms of what is deemed appropriate for adults, and what is necessary for proper children. While it is assumed that adults can maintain control over their appetites and make the appropriate decisions about what to consume, children are seen as requiring structure and discipline in this regard.

A transition occurred from the nineteenth century, when children contributed economically to the household as workers to the twentieth century, when children were primarily
“an ‘emotional and affective’ asset” (Hendrick, *Children* 10). This led to an increased emphasis on school and play, but also changed the domestic atmosphere, and the way that children and adults interacted in the early part of the twentieth century. This time period became associated with the nursery age in Britain, when nannies oversaw the children in upper-class families for the majority of the day. Additionally, these parents and children usually ate apart from one another, reinforcing the notion that there are separate and distinct dietary ideals for adults and children. The result was that:

Parents started to eat later in the evening and wanted more time on their own. As a result, children spent less and less time in their company. By the late 19th and early 20th century, the nanny was at the peak of her influence. In the upper class families able to afford her services, many children spent most of their time in the nursery, seeing their parents only occasionally and at prescribed times. (Madge 89)

This expressed desire for more child-free time by parents would continue throughout the twentieth century. So, while many children were freed from the workforce and as a result had more leisure time to seek the attention of their parents, their parents were often too busy with their own responsibilities to play with them. For example, war-time efforts resulted in a shifting of duties, as fathers were often absent from the household and mothers were called into the workforce. This led to household economic constraints as well. Consequently, World War I and World War II had profound effects on the relationship of food and fairy tales to childhood.

Carolyn Daniel highlights the realities of rationing during World War I for British families, arguing that “a shortage of fats and sugars in the diet of the general population apparently produced cravings in many people, particularly children” (71). Rationing during the
war only compounded the already stringent diets of children in Britain, making the concept of food and feasting all the more attractive. For British children then, food deprivation led to an affinity for food fantasies in children’s literature. Notably, fairy tales increased in popularity during times of war. As Zipes notes, “fairy tales became more and more popular toward the end of World War II because they were a kind of refuge from the bitter reality of the war and ideological warfare” (Fairy Tales 141). There seems to be a correlation, then, between times of scarcity and the popularity of fairy tales. Arguably, this is because of the incorporation of themes of food, feasting, and fantasy in fairy tales. Since children were exposed not only to bland diets, but also to “bitter” warfare, fantasy (especially food fantasies) became a palatable solution to their unhappy situation. Carolyn Daniel nicely sums up the connection between the nursery age, war-time rationing, and food in literature:

I attribute the prevalence of literary food in the early British classics to the austerity of the traditional nursery upbringing, a child-rearing regime much influenced by Puritanical discourses, which recommended an extremely bland and restricted diet for children. Later on, war-time rationing restricted readers’ diets and sharpened their appetites for fictional feasting. (11)

Although Daniel offers an articulate account of the social and historical factors influencing the inclusion of food themes in children’s literature, other scholars have also noted the visceral and emotional appeal of food fantasies. Indeed, even Barker and Gaiman themselves suggest the power and importance of food in their books.

Food certainly plays an important role in both The Thief of Always and Coraline. However, The Thief of Always offers the more appetizing and grandiose presentation. When Harvey initially arrives at the Holiday House, he is greeted by a magnificent feast. Barker writes,
“Mrs. Griffin had set a dozen plates of food in front of him: hamburgers, hot dogs and fried chicken; mounds of buttered potatoes; apple, cherry and mud pies, ice cream and whipped cream; grapes, tangerines and a plate of fruits he couldn’t even name” (21). It is not just the quantity of plates set before Harvey that is attractive, but also the types of food that he is offered. Fittingly, the foods that are prepared and plated by Mrs. Griffin are foods that are most likely to fall into the category of “junk food,” and therefore appeal to children, who historically have been denied these items. Even the most healthy of the offerings, fruit, consist of a lot of sugar, albeit natural sugar. Although children today may not be denied these foods in the same ways as children in the past, it is often the practice of parents or physicians to regulate the amount of junk food children consume.

Although food certainly has an appeal to physical appetite, especially where deprivation is involved, it must serve an additional purpose to be so prevalent in children’s literature, especially over such a long period of time. In *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*, Sheldon Cashdan states that “it is through the act of feeding that children are soothed, comforted, and made to feel secure” (72). This suggests that there is a strong emotional attachment to food, and that offerings of food are equated with parental comfort. For example, Stephanie C. Plummer discusses the role of peanut butter in the household, observing that it acts as “a symbol of the knowledge, care, and love that a guardian passes on to a child” (18). However, there is also a dimension of power in this relationship, because it is adults who usually provide food for children, and thus are providing this sense of security; therefore, it creates reliance on the part of the child to the adult figure. In *Consuming Agency in Fairy Tales, Childlore, and Folkliterature*, Susan Honeyman notes that “literary food symbolically surrogates unmet needs” (57). Whether this unmet need is nutritional sustenance or emotional contact, food is a powerful
force in children’s literature. Considering that the relationship of children to food changes over time, in terms of food availability and types of food children are allowed to consume, it makes sense that food is able to serve other purposes than just quenching physical appetite. In the same way that childhood is a social construct and malleable, so too does food serve a changing purpose throughout its usage in literature.

Karen Coats suggests that the literary nourishment of food themes is twofold. She states that “from our very first beginnings, we are fed stories, embraced by stories, nourished by stories” (1). From her viewpoint, stories themselves can serve nurturing purposes. She suggests that, like food, we consume stories. Again, since it is usually adults who tell stories to children, there is an attachment to stories because they are representative of the adult-child relationship. Therefore, it is not only food fantasies that attract children to fairy tales, but the fairy tales themselves, as alluring stories. As noted earlier, fairy tales became particularly important during times of war in order to offer escapism from the harsh realities of the situation. Therefore, the combination of fairy tales as a genre, and food as a theme, is particularly attractive to children, who historically have been controlled by adult ideals of proper childhood development, and concepts about physical well-being through dietary restrictions.

The seventeenth century trend to consider childhood as a separate domain from adulthood is apparent even in today’s attitudes. In his book *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990*, Harry Hendrick declares that “conceptions of ‘child’ are never completely separate from those of ‘adult’” (4). Hendrick goes on to report that “the most recent sociological survey confirms that ‘childhood as “separateness” largely remains the dominant conceptualization in modern Britain’” (*Children* 97). This indicates that modern notions of childhood are still dependent on the way that childhood is viewed in comparison to adulthood. This tendency to
compare and contrast childhood to adulthood automatically assumes that adulthood is the unmarked and idealized category which a child aspires to, thereby situating childhood as “a stage or state of incompetence relative to adulthood” (Archard 39). This relationship reinforces the notion that adults generally know what is best for child, because they are grooming them for the realities and responsibilities that come along with adulthood. Perhaps part of the reason that childhood is such a malleable concept comes from the fact that it is itself never recognized as an isolated and self-sustaining state of being, but instead is always positioned as a transitory stage on the way to achieving maturation through the acquisition of adulthood.

One of the difficulties in analyzing childhood today stems from the employment of several different ideas concerning childhood originating from both Locke and Rousseau, as outlined earlier. Some of the messages conveyed to children today by adults represent contradictory modes of thought: “Exhortations to ‘grow up’ and ‘stay young’ in almost the same breath, and an uneasy blend of permissiveness and restriction, attest to the confusion that exists” (Madge 9). Once children reached the nursery age, parents demanded more time to themselves, away from children. This requires that children become increasingly more responsible for themselves, at earlier ages. At the same time, adults express reservations about children growing up too quickly, particularly with the assumed freedom of choice that children today have as avid consumers in an age where they are increasingly treated by big business as their own marketable category of persons.

Some of the contentions surrounding the construction of childhood are caught up in these issues of consumerism, as Daniel Thomas Cook writes: “Understood as a consumer, ‘the child’ thus could be individualized as someone with desires and, at the same time, universalized as a category of social being who remains in need of training, direction, and some measure of
The coupling of individual desire with curtailed guidance is an important component of both *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, where the protagonists of each novel are driven by their own compulsions at the beginning of the stories, but only in the service of receiving an education about proper behavior and consumption along the way. Additionally, the adult characters in the books express both a desire for the child character to become independent, and a concern for his or her safety and well-being. For example, when Coraline seeks direction from her mother about an activity to engage in, the response is this: “‘I don’t really mind what you do,’ said Coraline’s mother, ‘as long as you don’t make a mess’” (Gaiman 6). In contrast, Coraline’s elderly neighbors embody a protectionist stance: “Miss Spink and Miss Forcible made a point of telling Coraline how dangerous the well was, and they warned her to be sure she kept away from it” (Gaiman 5). Essentially, Coraline is told to find her own entertainment, yet is warned that in doing so she might encounter danger, which should be avoided. These conflicting messages certainly make navigating and understanding childhood a difficult task. Complicating this issue is the introduction of leisure to the everyday lives of children and adults, and the relationship between them.

The shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when children moved from the workforce to the comfort of domesticity, also marked the beginning of childhood as a leisure class. Additionally, because children became more of economic burdens during this time period than economic contributors, family size decreased. What this represents for childhood is the dilemma of boredom, as “without siblings to integrate them into informal neighborhood activities and children’s cultures, children find they have to rely more on their parents” (Corsaro 81-82). Although having fewer children might minimize the financial burden felt by parents, having fewer children also creates more demands for their time because children do not have any
siblings to play with. Of course, with the world wars in the first part of the twentieth century, and
the incorporation of both genders into the workforce in increasing numbers during the second
half of the twentieth century, parents were often too busy working to fill this void in children’s
lives. Maria Tatar explains that “with the rise of leisure time and a class that could enjoy it,
boredom has taken the place of what was once known as weariness, dejection, or exhaustion”
(Enchanted 163). One of the fears associated with boredom is that excess time and lack of
supervision will result in delinquent behaviors (as heralded in juvenile offender legislation). Not
surprisingly, then, the journeys of both Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones begin with boredom.
Their initial decisions also exhibit delinquency, because they essentially leave their homes
without their parents’ knowledge, and put themselves and others in danger because of it.

Boredom appears immediately in The Thief of Always and in Coraline. Gaiman writes,
“Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she’d read all her books”
(6). Coraline is therefore introduced from the beginning as a child who has extra time, but lacks
the physical and/or mental stimulation necessary to fill it. Likewise, Harvey resents the tasks that
his mother assigns to him, considering them to be more representative of work than of play: “‘I
am ten,’ he said to himself (having no brothers and sisters, he talked to himself a good deal). ‘I
mean, it’s not like I’m a kid. I don’t have to tidy up just because she says so. It’s boring’”
(Barker 4). Not only do both authors address the sense of boredom experienced in childhood
today (at least by children of parents who make a sizable income), but Barker also alludes to the
smaller family size, and the expectation by children that their parents will fill the social void that
was occupied by siblings in earlier eras. It is when their parents are unable to fulfill this function
that both Harvey and Coraline are lured into dangerous situations, becoming delinquents in a
sense by defying their parents’ expectations (for example, in Harvey’s case he talks to a stranger,
Despite indicating that his parents have warned him about engaging in such behavior. It becomes problematic to try and analyze the books from the viewpoints of the children, however, because as Jacqueline Rose has noted, children’s literature is written by adults. Therefore, these representations of childhood are restricted to an adult perspective, not only through the writers’ words, but also through my own observations as an adult reader of these books.

One of the most obvious examples of an adult character projecting ideas about childhood onto a child character is when Coraline phones the police to alert them of her parents’ disappearance. The police officer does not take her seriously and suggests, “you ask your mother to make you a big old mug of hot chocolate, and then give you a great big old hug. There’s nothing like hot chocolate and a hug for making the nightmares go away” (Gaiman 55). Tellingly, the police officer suggests food as a means to comfort Coraline. He also correlates physical affection from her mother to a mug of hot chocolate, indicating that they are one and the same. As scholars have argued, “food symbolizes love, comfort, and safety and is coded to create familiar atmosphere, a ‘homely’ maternal environment” (Daniel 95). One of the effects of food in childhood is to function as comfort, or consolation. In Coraline’s case, the police officer suggests that she ease her anxieties via consumable comfort in the form of hot chocolate. Because she is a child she lacks authority, so her story is received not as the truth, but as a ploy for attention.

The tendency to ignore the problems and desires of children is evident in recent British and American history. In Children These Days, Nicola Madge seeks to illuminate the attitude toward childhood in Britain by quoting a statement by The Mental Health Foundation from 1999: “We claim to be a child-centred society, but in reality there is little evidence that we are. In many ways we are a ruthlessly adult-centred society where children are defined almost
exclusively in terms of their impact on adult lives’” (103). Again, there is a strong sense that children are only valued for their contribution to adult culture, or for their perceived eventual entry into adulthood. This sentiment is channeled in American culture as well. Mintz argues, “Americans are deeply ambivalent about children. Adults envy young people their youth, vitality, and physical attractiveness. But they also resent children’s intrusions on their time and resources and frequently fear their passions and drives” (2). From the beginning of the twentieth century on, it becomes apparent that adults require more time to themselves, while children increasingly have more leisure time of their own. This conflict over time is evident in the way that Harvey and Coraline express their boredom, and the way that Harvey’s parents respond to this by assigning chores, or in the way that Coraline’s parents assign her menial tasks or suggest that she play outside, or with the neighbors, or that she occupy herself in some other way in a location other than her parents’ offices.

So far, this chapter has attempted to portray a picture of childhood as a moldable concept, and the way that it has historically and contemporarily been constructed in comparison to adulthood. From at least the seventeenth century onward (if not before), childhood was understood as a separate sphere from adulthood. This means that ideas about childhood were informed by adult concepts of proper behavior and that childhood should be approached as a place to train children for their eventual entry into adulthood. Sometimes, approaches to childhood are contradictory, or ambivalent, as is the case of having a desire to protect children from the harsh realities of the adult world, while at the same time encouraging self-reliance and independence at earlier and earlier ages. What several scholars suggest is a need to distinguish between the lived experiences of individual children and the conceptual construction of
childhood in any given social context. In *The Sociology of Childhood*, William A. Corsaro describes this distinction:

> When we refer to childhood as a structural form, we mean it is a category or part of society, like social class and age groups. In this sense children are members or incumbents of their childhoods. For the children themselves childhood is a temporary period. For society, on the other hand, childhood is a permanent structural form or category that never disappears even though its members change continuously and its nature and conception vary historically. (4)

What this means is that the notion of childhood is contingent on prevailing social attitudes, economic climates, and the prior history of the concept. However the term “childhood” might change in its meaning, the concept itself, particularly in the last few centuries in terms of its relationship to adulthood, remains a constant. Therefore, the terms “childhood” and “adulthood” are maintained, although their definitions can be altered. However, the actual experience of a child is individual, and temporary. Cunningham reinforces this notion, stating that “we need to distinguish between children as human beings and childhood as a shifting set of ideas” (1). While it is certainly an intriguing and lofty pursuit to determine the way that individual children read and respond to *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, the ethnographic inquiries required of such a task are outside the scope of this analysis. Thus, this analysis will focus solely on the concept of childhood, and the way that it is crafted through a contemporary and adult perspective. Most notably, the goal of the research here is to argue for the way that adults use food in order to manipulate children into accepting and embodying certain social expectations as befitting of their status. Because these books use fairy tale structure, and because fairy tales and food have a long history together, these books are particularly potent in fulfilling this agenda.
Historically, adults have imposed their will upon children via control over their bodies. Hendrick reinforces this idea by proclaiming that “much of the history of child welfare has been the imposition of adult will upon children’s bodies” (*Children* 37). Welfare reforms that are supposed to have children’s best interests in mind often reflect anxieties that adults have about children. For example, the institutionalization of juvenile delinquents during the mid-nineteenth century (and even continuing today) is arguably more for the safety and security of adults than for the children themselves. Hendrick goes on to say that one of the forms in which adults exert this control over children is through “food and feeding” (*Children* 37). Even the earlier literature about child-rearing, returning to Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, placed such an emphasis on the body that: “Children’s food became the vehicle for their control and subjugation” (Daniel 42). The food themes in fairy tales and children’s literature (particularly those stories like *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* which extend the fairy tale tradition to contemporary literary audiences) serve particular, socializing functions. Written by adults for consumption by children, these books suggest ideas about moderation and social hierarchies, where children are encouraged to behave under adult supervision.

Many scholars agree that in relation to adulthood, “children are usually viewed from the perspective of *becoming* (growing to adult maturity), rather than *being* (children as their own persons)” (Hendrick, *Children* 3-4). It is assumed by adults that children lack proper training in social behavior and must be taught how to eat appropriately, for example. Daniel states, “We are what we eat and those that don’t eat like us, including children, are therefore designated ‘other’ to varying degrees” (211). This suggests that children exist in a marginalized status even today and that their appetites, which are not cultured in the same way as those of adults, are relegated to an “other” or unacceptable category of consumption. It is fitting, then, that many of the
villains that children face in fairy tales, and in both Barker’s and Gaiman’s books, are monsters with atrocious appetites. Daniel goes on to point out that “food events in children’s literature are clearly intended to teach children how to be human” (12). Fairy tales, then, are structured in such a way that children are paired with monsters who share similar uncontrolled appetites. It is only in encountering this monster and escaping from its jaws that children learn proper modes of consumption. However, it is important to note here that if children are viewed as the equivalent of the monsters they face, it is only because adult society has crafted this image of children. Therefore, these books not only serve a socializing function for children, but they also make statements about adult anxieties toward children and childhood, and about the relationship between adults and children more generally.

The children in these books embark on a journey away from their home, but it is only when they are rehabilitated (through their encounter with the villain) that they are able to return home with a new, more productive attitude regarding family life and their contribution to it. Hendrick makes the argument that the concept of normality is based on power systems, and that what is considered “normal” for the child is also weighed against our understanding of adulthood, and expectations of a child as she/he grows. Therefore, disobedience is classified as something which must be confronted and fixed (sometimes through institutionalization), in order to return the child to a socially acceptable trajectory toward adulthood:

By and large, those children who disobey, who are abnormal, are deemed to require ‘treatment’ (medical, psychological, social, educational)—sometimes together with their families—rather than punishment. Once successfully ‘treated’, they can be returned to the ‘normality’ of the normal family, so that they may
have the opportunity of realizing their potential as future adults. (Hendrick, *Children* 5)

Expanding from Hendrick’s notion of reforming disobedient children, so that they can become normalized on their path toward adulthood, this chapter has attempted to show the way that adults have perceived children over time as existing in a subordinate position, which can only be understood in relationship to adulthood, and their trajectory toward adulthood. Additionally, this chapter has touched on the idea that over time fairy tales have served didactic roles in the socialization of children. Finally, this chapter has suggested the ways in which children have been controlled historically through food and dietary restrictions, arguing that food fantasies in literature are especially appealing to children. It will be the focus of later chapters in this thesis to discuss the ways in which food and consumption are used to dictate and comment on the relationship between adults and children. Chapter two, however, will introduce more of the history of the fairy tale and also present a structural analysis of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, rooting them within the realm of fairy tales in order to argue that they serve similar educational and socializing functions as more traditional fairy tales.
CHAPTER TWO: PLAYING IN PROPP’S PLAYGROUND

The focus of this chapter is to argue that *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are essentially literary versions of fairy tales. The use of fairy tale structure by Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman helps reinforce food as a socializing agent in the lives of young people. Fairy tales also have a tendency to highlight the binary of good vs. evil. As the previous chapter demonstrated, childhood exists in binary opposition with adulthood. Good and evil can be used to regulate and reinforce notions of the proper childhood, such that the “good” child is the one who adheres to adult expectations, while the “bad” child is the delinquent who disobeys social rules. By extension, the next chapter will demonstrate how food and consumption also conforms to a binary (purity vs. pollution) in order to further comment on what characteristics are required for a proper childhood. The use of fairy tale structure accentuates these binaries, while the emphasis on food as a theme throughout fairy tale history and also in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* indicates the way that food is used to negotiate or reinforce the relationship between adulthood and childhood.

Fairy tales have served different functions over time, appealing to both children and adults for various reasons. At times, they express stark realities about scarcity, and the relationship of adults to children. Carolyn Daniel documents an instance of this, remarking that “fairy tales not only warned against but also echoed the awful truth of child abandonment (and consumption) in times of famine and were also a supernatural explanation for the disappearance of unwanted children” (146). In historical situations like these, fairy tales served completely different functions than in modern times of relative ease (at least for those who are economically stable). Though child abandonment still exists today, fairy tales are no longer used to rationalize this behavior. So, rather than serving as tools of socialization for children, fairy tales sought to
explain the necessities of otherwise cruel treatment toward children. However, as living conditions improved over time, and technological developments like the printing press allowed for mass printed documentation and dissemination of fairy tales, they became more directed toward child audiences.

As discussed in chapter one, changes in both childhood and fairy tales occurred simultaneously during the seventeenth century. For Ariès, more references to children in the artwork of the period documented the emergence of childhood as its own space, separate from adulthood. Basically, childhood received more recognition. Fairy tales—due to wider availability through printing—became associated with these emerging child audiences, and the functions of fairy tales changed to address these new patrons. Zipes notes that stories during this period differed from their predecessors “by the manner in which they portrayed children and appealed to them as a possibly distinct audience. The fairy tales were cultivated to assure that young people would be properly groomed for their social functions” (Fairy Tales 14). So, as fairy tales were being printed, they were also attracting a very specific audience (children), for a very specific purpose (to socialize them into the world of adults). Even projecting forward to the nineteenth century and the tales of Han Christian Andersen, fairy tales continued to serve this purpose: “From the dominant class point of view his tales were deemed useful and worthy enough for rearing children of all classes, and they became a literary staple in western culture” (Zipes, Fairy Tales 71). As the middle class rose in power, so too did their influence over the content of fairy tales. Middle-class sentiments regarding social mores and the conception of childhood as a site for didactic measures determined the ways in which fairy tales were meant to be consumed by their newly identified child audiences.
Though it is clear that fairy tales enjoyed much attention in previous centuries, they are still popular in the twenty-first century as well. In *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale*, Elizabeth Wanning Harries suggests that fairy tales continue to appeal to writers today, for their ability to speak to modern audiences, and for their adaptability: “Resurrecting old forms and inventing new ones, contemporary writers reach again and again for fairy tales to transform” (103). Two authors who certainly take advantage of the fairy tale tradition are Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman. For all outward appearances, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* read like fairy tales. In an interview, Clive Barker acknowledges a fairy tale influence, declaring, “In the case of *The Thief of Always*, what I wanted to do was make something with a classical feel of a fairy tale, but at the same time with modern resonance” (“The Official”). Likewise, in praising *Coraline*, Terry Pratchett (who co-authored the book *Good Omens* with Neil Gaiman) is quoted as saying, “It has the delicate horror of the finest fairy tales, and it is a masterpiece” (“Neil Gaiman”). While the books certainly have the feel of a fairy tale, the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the ways in which they actually utilize this structure intentionally, and how this structure ultimately helps reinforce food as a major theme.

Vladimir Propp offers a detailed structural analysis of the progression of the fairy tale hero in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. While Propp was working with Russian folktales, and Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman are British authors living in America, Propp’s analysis is still useful in analyzing Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones as fairy tale heroes. For one thing, Stith Thompson comments in his book *The Folktale* that “folklorists have always remarked on the scarcity of the authentic folktale in England” (19). To reinforce the probability of shared similarities of fairy tales despite their area of origin, he also suggests that “the limitations of human life and the similarity of its basic situations necessarily produce tales everywhere which
are much alike in all important structural respects” (7). Therefore, given the lack of originality of folktales in England (or at least their scarcity in terms of documentation), and the likelihood of fairy tales to share certain motifs even across time and space, it is possible to look at these two books using Propp’s work. Max Lüthi also comments that Propp “was convinced that with insignificant modifications his results, as far as they were correct, were also valid for non-Russian materials” (The European 130). So, Propp himself suggests that his work has a much larger range, and should not be limited to analysis of the Russian folktale. In comparing Propp’s work to his own, Lüthi goes on to say that “Propp’s structural analysis and my stylistic analysis work hand in hand to complement one another” (The European 133). Instead of dismissing Propp’s contribution to the structural analysis of fairy tales in favor of his own research, Lüthi proposes that they be used in conjunction with one another. Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson also offer insight to fairy tale types and content. The Thief of Always and Coraline should be read as fairy tales, so the contributions of all of these scholars are applicable here.

Structure is important. It does not just outline the plot progression. Instead, it carries cultural implications as well. Zipes claims that the structure of a fairy tale is inherent to its message: “it is through the structure or composition of the tale that we can gain an understanding of its meaning or enunciation, what it is trying to communicate” (Fairy Tales 5). In determining the tale type that The Thief of Always and Coraline most closely align with, and outlining the actions taken by each of the protagonists, it becomes evident that these stories are about consumption. The heroes embark on a journey away from home, are lured in by cannibalistic villains because of their own appetites, and must outwit the villains in order to return home safely. Alan Dundes introduces Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale by stating that the scope of Propp’s research encompasses tale types 300-749 in the Aarne-Thompson classification system.
(xiv). Since Harvey and Coraline follow many of the functions outlined in Propp’s work, the implication here is that *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* must align most closely with one of the tale types falling between 300 and 749. Being contemporary, book-length stories with one specific author, neither work perfectly adheres to all of the characteristics of any tale type. However, they do share important similarities with one of the better known types.

In *The Types of the Folk-Tale: A Classification and Bibliography*, Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson delineate the tale types 300-749 to be “Tales of Magic” (44). Both *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* include villainous characters that are able to utilize magic, so this serves as a fitting category for these two books. Arguably, the specific tale type that the books align most closely with is type 327: *The Children and the Ogre*. Although this generalized description may not be familiar to those outside of fairy tale studies, in *The Folktale* Stith Thompson states that “in an important series of tales about witches and ogres the principal part is played by children. Best known of these stories is Hansel and Gretel” (36). Indeed, “Hansel and Gretel” is a form of this type of tale, and shares some similarities with *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*. Certainly there are some important distinctions to be made since the books are constructed to appeal to modern audiences and since they are entirely creative works by their respective authors (save for some of the structural and thematic components). In considering the story of “Hansel and Gretel,” the most obvious difference is that the original story includes two children. Harvey and Coraline are part of single-child families. Historically, this can be linked to the overall decline in the size of families throughout the twentieth century as described in chapter one. Also, both books include other child characters who Harvey and Coraline meet upon, “*Arrival at Ogre’s House*” [emphasis by authors] (Aarne and Thompson 56).
Type 327 indicates the children in the story are abandoned by their parents. In “Hansel and Gretel,” this is literal and purposeful abandonment in the woods. This type of abandonment is a historical reference to food scarcity, as described earlier by Carolyn Daniel. In The Thief of Always and Coraline, the abandonment might be read more figuratively from the children’s perspectives, for their parents are too busy to keep them company. Therefore, the children are left to their own devices. The tale type states that the children “find their way back” (Aarne and Thompson 56) after their initial abandonment. Both Harvey and Coraline do return to their own homes before they once more venture to the villain’s abode. The second phase of the tale type is documented as “The Ogre Deceived” (emphasis by authors) (Aarne and Thompson 56). In this phase of the story, the children are imprisoned. The villain (or ogre) intends to devour them. Harvey faces a vampiric villain who sucks the time (and therefore lives) out of the children who stay at his house. A mist wall keeps the children imprisoned at the Holiday House. Coraline’s monster is a hybrid, who is compared to a spider that only leaves the “‘husks’” of the children whom she consumes (Gaiman 85). Children are held captive by the other mother through her magic. The options for deception in this second phase of the tale type are very specific, but variations do exist.

One of the descriptions of deception is: “the ogre’s wife or child burned in his own oven” (Aarne and Thompson 56). “Hansel and Gretel” offers a slight variation to this step, for it is the witch herself who is burned in her own oven. In a similar fashion, Harvey and Coraline deceive their own monsters by using the monsters’ powers against them. Both Harvey and Coraline initiate contracts with the villains, where their lives are bartered through games of wit. Knowing that Mr. Hood grants wishes, Harvey tests him into granting the ultimate wish: all four seasons at once. In desiring to prove that he is all-powerful, Mr. Hood consumes himself with his own
magic. Coraline uses the other mother’s love of games against her; Coraline must outwit the other mother in a game of hide-in-seek in order to save herself, the trapped souls of the other children, and her parents.

The final phase of this tale type is described as “Escape” [emphasis by authors] (Aarne and Thompson 56). Although the options for escape are once again very specific, such as the way that the children “throw back magic objects which become obstacles in the ogre’s path” (56), the way that the escape happens in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* occur as variations of this step. Harvey must actually defeat Mr. Hood a second time, before he is able to free himself and the other children. Coraline flees through the corridor leading from the other mother’s house to her own house, and even then must outwit the other mother’s detached hand in order to fully escape her grasp. This phase of the tale type does suggest that the ogre of the story follows the children as they try to escape, and this aspect of the tale type and the books are consistent with one another.

Ultimately, because of the way that the children leave home (and return to it once before actually battling with the villain), use deception to defeat the villain with the villain’s own devices, and must flee from the pursuing villain in the end in order to escape, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* align most closely with tale type 327. Since Aarne and Thompson identify “Hansel and Gretel” as a form of this type of tale, it is no wonder that there is such an emphasis on food and consumption in the books by Barker and Gaiman. The Aarne-Thompson classification system helps to identify the fairy tale type that these stories most closely align with, and also suggests why there is such a focus on food. Additionally, since the books are akin to type 327, they also fall into the scope of Propp’s research on the fairy tale protagonist. The
following analysis utilizes Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* to highlight the ways in which Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones fulfill the necessary functions of the fairy tale hero.

Vladimir Propp titles the third chapter of his book “The Functions of Dramatis Personae” (25). Earlier in the book, he defines a function as follows: “*Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*” [emphasis by author] (21). Therefore, the functions are meant to show the actions that the fairy tale hero takes in order to propel the story forward. These actions are essential to the movement of the story and the development of the hero. These functions are part of what imbue *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* with the feeling of a fairy tale. At the very least, they demonstrate the types of obstacles and situations that arise in fairy tales, and the actions that fairy tale heroes must take in order to initiate the adventure, combat their villain, and return to the safety of their own home. The summaries of the functions as they arise in *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* demonstrate the ways in which the books’ protagonists fulfill these actions in order to become fairy tale heroes. It is possible to frame each function individually and identify plot points that fulfill the functions for each of the two books. In the following analysis, each function is described alongside its corresponding plot point for *Coraline* to demonstrate how this process might be done; for brevity’s sake, however, functions are grouped together for the most part for *The Thief of Always*.

Propp describes Function I as follows: “One of the members of a family absents himself from home” (26). This is accomplished in two ways in *Coraline*. First, Coraline’s parents, though physically present, are emotionally detached from her and therefore “absent” while preoccupied with their work. Her father blatantly tells her, “‘leave me alone to work’” (Gaiman
7). This causes her to seek adventure outside of her home, whereupon she decides, “I’m an explorer” (15).

Function II: “An interdiction is addressed to the hero” (Propp 26). This decree is delivered via Mr. Bobo, the circus man from upstairs. Acting as a messenger for his band of mice, he relays the following warning to Coraline: “Don’t go through the door” [emphasis by author] (Gaiman 16). Already, the connection from Function I to the interdiction is cemented. Coraline’s parents prioritize their work over Coraline’s desire for entertainment. This suggests that they are not cognizant enough of their own surroundings and the immensity of Coraline’s boredom to recognize that her predilection for adventure will lead to her peril.

Function III: “The interdiction is violated” (Propp 27). Temptation ultimately triumphs, and Coraline’s interest in the door she has found and the excitement from the warning she has been given, overtake her: “She knew she was doing something wrong, and she was trying to listen for her mother coming back, but she heard nothing. Then Coraline put her hand on the doorknob and turned it; and, finally, she opened the door” (Gaiman 26). As Propp explains, this violation allows for the introduction of the villain, whom we recognize in the character of other mother.

In The Thief of Always, Functions I through III arise when Harvey decides to leave his home and follow Rictus, the monstrous errand boy of Mr. Hood, to the Holiday House. Despite his own inner reservations: “I…don’t think I’ll be staying,’ Harvey said. ‘I mean my mom and dad don’t even know I’m here”’ (Barker 22), Harvey disobeys the rules of his parents and chooses to remain at the Holiday House. Here, he prioritizes the dissolution of his boredom over his parents’ authority, exhibiting his initial state of self-absorption. It is this ability to cast aside
what he internally knows to be right (e.g. not talking to strangers; returning home before curfew) that places him in a susceptible and coercible position.

Function IV occurs when “the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance” (Propp 28). In Coraline, much of this step is performed by one of the other mother’s creations: the other father. Upon her initial visit to the other house at the end of the corridor, Coraline is asked the following question: “‘So,’ said her other father. ‘Do you like it here?’” (Gaiman 45). His interrogation is an attempt to get her to acknowledge her contentment so that she will stay with them.

Propp outlines Function V as the instance when “the villain receives information about his victim” (28). Here, it is Coraline’s response to the other father’s inquiry about her enjoyment of her other home that supplies the information they need to continue their pursuit of her: “‘I suppose,’ said Coraline. ‘It’s much more interesting than at home’” (Gaiman 45). This admission makes her vulnerable to their future coercion.

In Function VI, “the villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings” (Propp 29). It is possession of Coraline that the other mother is after. This becomes apparent when she requests that Coraline allow her to sew on black button eyes. “‘If you want to stay,’ said her other father, ‘there’s only one little thing we’ll have to do, so you can stay here for ever and always’” and, as though to persuade her further, the other mother adds, “‘it’s just a little thing’” (Gaiman 45). Though Coraline refuses to allow this to happen, she does display uncertainty about whether or not to stay, leading to the next function.

Function VII occurs when “the victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy” (Propp 30). Though she initially decides to leave the other mother and the other father, Gaiman writes, “Coraline hesitated. She turned back. Her other mother and her other father were walking toward her, holding hands” (Gaiman 46). Here, Coraline exhibits
reservations, showing that her other parents have already established some authority and influence over her.

In comparison, Functions IV through VII occur in *The Thief of Always* when Mr. Hood divulges Harvey’s fascination with vampirism on the very first night of Halloween. In unknowingly selecting a costume that channels the true nature of Mr. Hood, Harvey aligns himself with the villain. Wendell even suggests that Harvey yearns to be a vampire for real, teasing that, “I’ve seen him filing down his teeth” (Barker 46). For this reason (their similar natures), Mr. Hood attempts to captivate—and thereby keep—Harvey at the House by offering him his first (and one Harvey believes to be impossible to fulfill) Christmas wish: a toy ark his father built him long ago. When Harvey is baffled by Mr. Hood’s innate ability to re-create the exact ark, Mrs. Griffin replies by telling him, “Mr. Hood knows every dream in your head” (Barker 62). Despite the eeriness of Mr. Hood’s ability, Harvey decides to stay another day at the House, playing into Mr. Hood’s trap. He allows himself to give in to temptation, overcome by his greed for more presents and more Holiday House surprises. This propensity for greed is common in fairy tales: “There is a folk saying that greed is still young when other sins are old. Perhaps this is why avarice is so ubiquitous a theme in fairy tales” (Cashdan 194).

Function VIII depicts the malevolent nature of the villain and is enacted when “the villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family” (Propp 30). Propp writes that this can be accomplished via abduction. Coraline tells the local authorities, “my parents have been stolen away into a world on the other side of the mirror in our hall” (Gaiman 54). However, they are reluctant to believe her tale, and thus her mother makes a direct appeal to Coraline for assistance.

In *The Thief of Always*, Function VIII is fulfilled via Lulu. While at the House, the other children—Wendell and Lulu, and even Mrs. Griffin to some extent—become Harvey’s newly
adopted family. For this reason, it is when Lulu has (literally) outlived her stay at the Holiday House that Harvey’s hesitations about being there are confirmed. In an earlier search over the grounds, Harvey comes across a lake, which carries none of the fabulous mystique of the House. Instead, it is dark and gloomy and odd-looking fish circle endlessly in its murky waters. Harvey even asks, “‘why would Mr. Hood have fish like that? I mean, everything else is so beautiful’” (Barker 41). The question is certainly valid and should cue Harvey in to his mortal peril, but he only realizes the danger that all of the children are in when it is too late for Lulu: “She wasn’t human any longer. She was becoming—or had already become—a sister to the strange fish that circled in these dark waters, cold-blooded and silver skinned” (103). Wendell and Harvey initially use this as their motivation to flee the Holiday House, but what they find waiting for them in the real world spurs their return, falling in line with the later functions.

For Function IX, Propp indicates: “Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched” (Propp 36). Coraline’s mother asks for her help: “Her mother breathed on the inside of the mirror glass, and quickly, before the fog faded, she wrote SU PLEH” (Gaiman 53). Given the urgency of the request, and knowing that she is at least partially responsible for their abduction, Coraline immediately prepares for departure.

Function X: “The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction” (Propp 38). In discussing her decision with the cat, Coraline announces, “‘I’m going back for them because they are my parents. And if they noticed I was gone I’m sure they would do the same for me’” (Gaiman 59). She bases her decision on what she believes to be morally right, and the courageous thing to do. This appeal to bravery is relayed in a personal story she tells the cat
about her father saving her from a wasp attack: “when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, that’s brave” (59).

Function XI is described by the following action: “The hero leaves home” (Propp 39). Propp distinguishes here that this is different from the first incident of the hero leaving home. The first functions to establish the inciting incident. This time, Coraline is leaving to embark on a quest, one that she recognizes will be full of trials: “She took her first step down the dark corridor” (Gaiman 59).

Functions IX through XI are present in *The Thief of Always* when Harvey and Wendell are able to find their way through the mist with the help of Blue-Cat, one of Mrs. Griffin’s pets. While not necessities of these functions, cats do play an important role in fairy tales in general, arguing for an overall connection between Barker’s book and traditional fairy tales. Zipes points out in his book *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*, “It is said that a man’s best friend is his dog, but those of us who read fairy tales know better” (15). Indeed, it is a cat that helps them to make their escape. When Harvey emerges back in the real world, however, he discovers something incredibly disconcerting: “For every day he’d spent there a year had gone by here in the real world” (Barker 120). With Wendell’s support, Harvey decides to return to the House, not only to steal back the time that Mr. Hood has taken from the two of them, but also to save Lulu and Mrs. Griffin.

Function XII is described as the time when: “The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper” (Propp 39). This occurs in a back-and-forth exchange with the other mother, who continuously tries to coax Coraline into being compliant. When this tactic fails, the other mother asserts the following: “‘sharper than a serpent’s tooth,’ she said, ‘is a daughter’s ingratitude. Still, the proudest spirit
can be broken, with love”’ (Gaiman 77). Her plan includes playing games with Coraline, in the hopes of winning her over: “‘Coraline, my darling,’ she said. ‘I thought we could play some games together this morning, now you’re back from your walk’” (Gaiman 77).

Function XIII: “The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor” (Propp 42). Here it should be noted that the other mother unknowingly acts as the donor, contributing to the situation in which Coraline learns about the use of her magical agent. Coraline resists the persuasions of the other mother, first by denying her any authority: “‘You aren’t my mother,’ said Coraline” (Gaiman 78). Second, as one of the subcategories of this function, Coraline uses the tactic of her enemy for her own benefit: “‘Wouldn’t you be happier if you won me, fair and square?’ asked Coraline” (Gaiman 91), who then challenges the other mother to a game on her own terms.

In Function XIV, “the hero acquires the use of a magical agent” (Propp 43). While it is true that Coraline receives a stone from Miss Spink and Miss Forcible early on in the book, the usage of the object is not revealed to her until she is punished by the other mother for her disobedience and locked in the closet with the ghost children. Here, she is informed of the stone’s power: “she felt a ghost kiss her cheek, tenderly, and a small voice whisper into her ear, a voice so faint it was barely there at all, a gentle wispy nothing of a voice so hushed that Coraline could almost believe she was imagining it. ‘Look through the stone,’ it said to her” (Gaiman 87).

During Function XV, “the hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search” (Propp 50). On initiating a game of exploration with the other mother, Coraline attempts to find the trapped souls of the ghost children, and her imprisoned parents. Acting on the advice given to her, “she raised the stone to her eye once more and looked through it at the marble. Once again the marble burned and flickered with a red fire” (Gaiman 97). The stone therefore leads her to each successive discovery of another trapped soul.
In *The Thief of Always*, when Harvey and Wendell return to the House, Wendell succumbs to the allure of the House once more: “The House had claimed Wendell entirely. He’d be more of a hindrance than a help in the battle ahead” (Barker 164). So, Harvey is left alone as Mr. Hood’s henchmen test him one by one. He must face each of the brood monsters, Marr, Jive, and Carna, successively. Harvey is able to defeat each in turn by using the monsters’ own devices against them. For example, Marr is able to grant wishes, but when Harvey turns her magic back on her and asks what she dreams of, Marr states that, “‘I dream of nothing…” [emphasis by author] (156). As a consequence, into nothing she dissolves. In outwitting the monsters, Harvey is able to make his way to the attic where he faces Mr. Hood for the first time, thus fulfilling Functions XII through XV. In this case, the “magical agent” that Harvey acquires is the power of words. In this world, anything he can dream can become a realized event or creation. Harvey understands soon after defeating Carna that “he had no weapon against the enemy but his wits” (Barker 183). In order to defeat Mr. Hood, then, Harvey must be resourceful and just as crafty as the vampiric villain he faces.

In fulfilling Function XVI, “the hero and the villain join in direct combat” (Propp 51). In order to save her parents, Coraline must duel with the other mother, who stands between them and Coraline. She does this through distraction, using the cat as her weapon “and, hard as she could, she threw the black cat toward the other mother” (Gaiman 131).

During Function XVII, “the hero is branded” (Propp 52). This function is perhaps the most divergent from Propp’s original description, though at times branding can be unintentional, as is the case for Coraline. Her “branding” is acquired through her attempts to find the imprisoned souls of the ghost children, and from her battle with the other mother: “Her left knee
was scraped and skinned, and the palm of her one hand she had thrown out to stop herself was a mess of scraped skin and grit” (Gaiman 122).

In Function XVIII, “the villain is defeated” (Propp 53). The other mother is shut out of Coraline’s world when Coraline flees through the corridor, and with the help of those she has freed, she is able to close the door between the worlds: “There was a final moment of resistance, as if something were caught in the door, and then, with a crash, the wooden door banged closed” (Gaiman 134).

For Function XIX, “the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated” (Propp 53). Once Coraline recognizes that her parents are imprisoned in the snow globe in the other mother’s house, all she has to do is take it into her possession: “Without waiting to see what would happen, Coraline reached up to the mantelpiece and closed her hand around the snow globe, pushing it deep into the pocket of her dressing gown” (Gaiman 131). When she exits through the corridor, they are released.

In Function XX, “the hero returns” (Propp 55). After successfully freeing the ghost children from enslavement and her parents from their snowy prison, Coraline returns to the safety of her own home and bedroom: “Panting for breath, she staggered through the door, and slammed it behind her with the loudest, most satisfying bang you can imagine” (Gaiman 136).

Throughout Function XXI, “the hero is pursued” (Propp 56). Though most of the other mother remains locked away on the opposite side of the corridor, it is soon enough revealed that a part of her has escaped and is still after Coraline: “then, in a skittering, chittering rush, it came. The hand, running high on its fingertips, scrabbled through the tall grass and up onto a tree stump” (Gaiman 158).
Function XXII is characterized by: “Rescue of the hero from pursuit” (Propp 57). Coraline succeeds in rescuing herself by devising a trap for the other mother’s hand. Knowing that the hand wants the key to the corridor, Coraline covers the well outside with a tablecloth and places the key in the middle of the tablecloth to lure the hand to the well. This scheme is most akin to Propp’s description of the hero laying down obstacles in the path of the pursuer. Coraline weights the tablecloth down with cups and then pretends to picnic with her dolls, waiting for the hand to go after the key: “then the weight and the momentum of the hand sent the plastic dolls’ cups flying, and the paper tablecloth, the key, and the other mother’s right hand went tumbling down into the darkness of the well” (Gaiman 159).

The remaining Functions, XVI through XXII occur in The Thief of Always when Harvey finally battles Mr. Hood, defeating him the first time by testing his powers. Harvey challenges him to conjure all of the seasons at once, a task that he is ill-suited for. In this way, he wins initial victory over Mr. Hood, but must defeat him a second time when Rictus appears, retaining some of Mr. Hood’s magic. Mr. Hood steals this back from Rictus, and Harvey and Lulu (now returned to normal as the magic begins to dissipate) must again defeat Mr. Hood by tricking him into a void that appears in place of the lake as the illusionary world begins to fold in on itself. Only then can the children return to the real world and to their parents, covered in “‘blood and dirt all over’” (Barker 220) but otherwise safe. Additionally, this scene becomes an extension of an earlier sentiment by Harvey, where he makes note that “he felt different; marked by his adventure” [emphasis by author] (114).

Though Propp identifies more functions that can follow, he also states that “a great many tales end on the note of rescue from pursuit” (58). While it is possible to imagine a sequel in which Coraline once more faces the other mother, or another adversary, this is where Gaiman
ends the story. Her safety is ensured (for now), her relationship with her parents is renewed and appreciated as never before, she is content in the knowledge that she has saved other trapped souls, and she has befriended the cat and her neighbors. Likewise, Harvey returns home to his parents with a renewed sense of self after having freed other children. He also has an appreciation for his family. As the exercise above demonstrates, both of these characters embody the attributes of the quintessential fairytale hero. Their journeys read and feel like fairy tales, because these characters perform essential fairy tale functions. Although Propp’s functions are perhaps the most structured way to identify these books as fairy tales, the work of other fairy tale scholars can also be used to reinforce this conclusion.

In contrast to Vladimir Propp, Max Lüthi discusses stylistic properties of the fairy tale. In the preface to The European Folktale: Forms and Nature, translator John D. Niles describes Lüthi: “In his view, the form remains constant while its constituent motifs change” (xix). One of the first fairy tale components that Lüthi discusses is the inclusion of magic and enchantment in the fairy tale. In The Folktale, Stith Thompson echoes the universality of magic as well by noting that “in a very large proportion of folktales wherever they may be found magic plays a considerable part, and it is almost universal in some form in all those stories we know as wonder tales” (67). In this case, “wonder tales” is used to replace the term “fairy tales” to emphasize the element of magic. Kay Stone also describes the problematic nature of the term “fairy tales,” writing that “folklorists have struggled in vain to define the genre precisely; no single term suffices to capture the essential nature of these tales that bring together worlds of common experience and uncommon happenings” (5). Although the incorporation of magic is widely documented in fairy tales in general, Lüthi identifies a specific trait about the magic used in fairy tales. He addresses the way in which magic—how it came to be, what its limitations and range
are—is never actually discussed within the world of the fairy tale. Instead, magical elements are accepted alongside more realistic ones: “The marvelous events of the folktale require no more explanation than do the events of daily life” (The European 8). In the Thief of Always, Barker makes it explicit that entry into the world of magic is dependent on Harvey’s silence. When Rictus first visits him, Harvey is full of questions, but Rictus is quick to hush him: “‘No more questions, eh?’” (Barker 7). Rictus goes even further to declare, “‘Questions rot the mind!’” [emphasis by author] (8). Both Harvey and Coraline transition from the real, non-magical world into magical counterpart worlds, Harvey through a mist wall and Coraline through a corridor. Once they have navigated the passageways and emerge on the opposite side, it is merely accepted that a magical world can exist alongside the real one.

Lüthi goes on to state that in addition to magic and realism co-existing, “the hero or heroine either is alone or is the last member of a triad” (The European 32). On the one hand, Harvey and Coraline are both singular protagonists. The stories are clearly theirs, and the obstacles they face are conquered mostly on their own. At the beginning of their journeys, they are alone. However, once Harvey arrives at the Holiday House, he becomes the third child to be staying there, along with Wendell and Lulu. Although Wendell and Lulu do little to assist him in his eventual battle with Mr. Hood, it could be argued that they form a triad together. Coraline deviates from this fairy tale component slightly. She receives some assistance from the black cat, and also learns information from Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, and the trapped children in the other mother’s house. However, since her neighbors only play small roles in the story, and since the other children are already deceased, she is clearly the sole protagonist of the story. In addition, the deceased children play another role based on Lüthi’s description of fairy tales.
Although *The Thief of Always* is clearly Harvey Swick’s story, and *Coraline* (as evidenced by the title) is the story of Coraline Jones, there are other people who are affected in the process of their journeys. Lüthi notes how, “by following his own course, the hero also rescues other people, often without intending to do so” (*The European* 64). Harvey first escapes the Holiday House with Wendell, but decides to return to save Lulu when he realizes that Mr. Hood has stolen all of their childhoods. In the process of defeating Mr. Hood, he also saves Mrs. Griffin from the magic that has held her prisoner for years. Likewise, when the other mother parent-naps Coraline’s mother and father, she must embark on a journey to save them; this choice is intentional. During the process, however, she discovers the trapped souls of the children that the other mother has already devoured, so she inevitably saves them at the same time. Therefore, in the process of receiving their own educations, both Harvey and Coraline intentionally, and to a lesser extent accidentally, save others who are held prisoner by the villains.

In another book, titled *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, Lüthi comments on how in fairy tales, “evil consumes itself. It is striking how frequently and persistently the folk fairy tale depicts this phenomenon” (64). Both Mr. Hood and the other mother are defeated by their own hubris and their own uncontrolled consumption. Here, the fairy tale binary of good vs. evil is expressed through appetite, where “good” is equated with regulated consumption and “bad” with unchecked gluttony. Mr. Hood, confident in his own magical abilities, allows Harvey to test him and consents to conjuring all of the seasons at once, which ultimately destroys him. The other mother engages in a game of wits with Coraline, believing that there is no way that Coraline can win. By agreeing to play the game, it is not only Coraline who escapes the other mother’s grasp, but also Coraline’s parents and the trapped souls of the other children in the
house. Therefore, the other mother’s assumption that she will win the game, because she always does, results in her downfall.

Finally, one of the recurring motifs that Lüthi identifies is that, “in general, one can say that the fairy tale depicts processes of development and maturation” (Once 139). As identified in Propp’s functions, Harvey is described as arriving at the end of his journey, feeling “marked” by it [emphasis by author] (Barker 114). The last line of Coraline ends with the statement that “the summer was almost done” (Gaiman 162). Earlier in the story, Coraline’s mother talks about buying Coraline new clothes for school. Coraline has literally aged one year, and will be moving on to the next school grade. However, the end of summer, with all of its associations to childhood play and time off, suggests that Coraline has matured in more meaningful capacities as well. In this way, both of the protagonists arrive at the end of their journeys with more wisdom and maturity than when they began them.

Chiming in on the structural components of fairy tales is Bruno Bettelheim, although he looks at structure in terms of its implications for the psychology of childhood. He offers an explanation for the inclusion of both good and evil in fairy tales, stating:

Contrary to what takes place in many modern children’s stories, in fairy tales evil is as omnipresent as virtue. In practically every fairy tale good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it.

(8-9)

He suggests here that the moral journey undertaken by the protagonist in the fairy tale is dictated by his/her own capacity to act in either virtuous or evil ways. Indeed, the next chapter will
discuss the ways in which the child protagonist embodies some of the qualities of the villain and the actions they must take in order to overcome these impulses. Therefore, one of the components of fairy tales is that they demonstrate the existence of a good vs. evil dichotomy, but also portray this dichotomy as one that, at times, is gray at best. More specifically, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* suggest that children contain the capacity to do both good and evil, but are only perceived as good when they are compliant with social expectations.

The ability of the protagonist in a fairy tale to demonstrate both morally acceptable and reprehensible behavior has to do with the way that “the fairy tale…makes clear that it tells about everyman, people very much like us” (Bettelheim 40). It is important to note that not only are Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones fairy tale heroes, but by being fairy tale heroes, they are also everyman heroes as well. Since it has been argued that historically fairy tales have been used to socialize children, it becomes imperative that real children who read (or are read) fairy tales identify with the protagonists. Harvey and Coraline are admirable protagonists because they are flawed and because they encounter anxieties and challenges that every child might potentially face.

In specifically addressing the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel,” Bettelheim discusses the way that the ending of this story diverges from the more common fairy tale conclusion of a marriage. He notes that, “since the two are definitely not of marriageable age, the establishment of human relations which will forever ban separation anxiety is symbolized not by their getting married, but by their happy return home to their father” (146-147). Both Harvey and Coraline express anxiety at the beginnings of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* because they are bored and not receiving enough attention from their parents. Since they are children like Hansel and Gretel, the endings cannot result in marriage either. However, Barker does suggest that an
infatuation exists between Harvey and Lulu. Lulu is also much older than Harvey in the real world when they escape the Holiday House and she is married by the end of the story. For Harvey and Coraline, though, Barker and Gaiman conclude the books with a happy return home.

In this case, the children do not just return to a biological father, but to both parents. Still, it is suggested that their return heralds a much more agreeable situation for all three involved (mother, father, child) than before the journey took place.

_The Thief of Always_ and _Coraline_ feel like fairy tales, and read like fairy tales, because structurally, they are fairy tales. Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones take the necessary actions to become fairy tale heroes. By being fairy tale heroes, they are also everyman heroes, who appeal to readers because these characters suffer from the same realistic anxieties of childhood the readers themselves might. Additionally, both protagonists must struggle with their own capacity to do both good and harm. Sharing similar properties as the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel,” the books by Barker and Gaiman place a particular emphasis on matters of consumption. The following chapter will highlight some of these issues, and address the theme of food more specifically. The history of childhood as explored in chapter one suggests that a binary exists between adulthood and childhood. Chapter two demonstrates that fairy tales depict a good vs. evil dichotomy. Chapter three will suggest that consumption (particularly of food) is viewed through a binary as well—purity vs. pollution—and that this perception informs notions about good and evil and how they are related to the characterizations of adulthood and childhood.
CHAPTER THREE: FOOD, FEASTING AND FRIVOLITY

This focus of this chapter will be on the role of boredom in the lives of the main characters, the representations of food in *The Thief of Always* and in *Coraline*, and the undesirable traits that Harvey and Coraline demonstrate at the beginning of the books (which characterize them as little monsters). Expanding on chapter two, this chapter will address the ways in which the children have the capacity to do both good deeds and harmful ones, and the disturbing ways in which they share similarities to the villains that they face. In order to fully embrace the concepts of purity (goodness) and pollution (badness), the protagonists must make distinctions between their own actions and those of the monsters that they encounter. Only when they express more adult (and therefore desirable) qualities and demonstrate socially acceptable behavior regarding consumption, their families, and their position within their families, are they able to reintegrate. These two books demonstrate that it is through the theme of consumption and the medium of food that children are taught proper modes of conduct, aligning with the function of fairy tales as socializing tools.

The protagonists of both stories are introduced via their shared boredom. To reiterate a quote from the first chapter, Gaiman notes how Coraline has become bored with all of the material objects she currently owns: “Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she’d read all her books” (6). Clearly, her possessions are unable to pique her interest. Harvey is given a similar introduction by Barker. Reminiscing about Christmas delights and looking forward to spring break, Harvey imagines a scenario in which the dreariness of all of the time between these two events actually consumes him. In this daydream, a detective tries to discern what killed Harvey, and Harvey imagines “he’d sit at Harvey’s desk, and listen to the pitiful drone of the history teacher and the science teacher, and wonder how the heroic boy had
managed to keep his eyes open” (Barker 3). Here, Harvey clearly demonstrates his attitude toward school and designates himself a hero, although he has performed no heroic functions yet. In his mind, it is his ability to withstand the “drone” of his teachers that gives him this status. Maria Tatar comments on the tendency of children’s literature to begin with this scenario, commenting, “Look closely at children’s books and you will find that the heroic child often begins as a bored child, a child faced with the challenges of coping with the tedium of everyday life” (Enchanted 163). In this way, we are introduced to the protagonists as not yet heroic beings, but rather as ordinary children, toiling through the dismal dreariness of their everyday lives. Because they are everyday people, they have the capacity to become fairy tale heroes.

Early in the book, Gaiman establishes Coraline’s relationship with her parents. Although Coraline seeks out attention from her parents and wishes to incorporate them into her play, she is constantly encouraged to find entertainment elsewhere. “‘Read a book,’ said her mother. ‘Watch a video. Play with your toys. Go and pester Miss Spink or Miss Forcible, or the crazy old man upstairs’” (Gaiman 6). Her father gives her the same suggestion when she approaches him in his home office. “‘Busy,’ he said. ‘Working,’ he added. He still hadn’t turned around to look at her. ‘Why don’t you go and bother Miss Spink and Miss Forcible?’” (18). It should be noted here that her neighbors Miss Spink and Miss Forcible are retired stage actresses. Due to their age and retirement, they consequently have more time to socialize than do Coraline’s parents. Hence, Coraline’s parents both suggest that she seek out the elderly women for their company. Gaiman makes a point to mention that Coraline’s parents both work and furthermore that they work from home: “Both of her parents worked, doing things on computers, which meant that they were home a lot of the time. Each of them had their own study” (7). Although they work from home and therefore get to interact with Coraline, the way in which Coraline always seeks their
attention suggests that she believes their time at home should be spent on leisure with her, not on their occupations. It is also notable that her parents have their own designated workspaces.

Even when one of her parents does offer her ideas about how and what to play, he or she does so in a manner which keeps them distanced from her. Hendrick suggests that childhood games serve a particular function in relationship to adulthood. He writes that “games, besides affecting children, also serve to influence the network of spatial and personal relationships involving their parents and other adults” (Children 83). While this was certainly the case in the nursery age of Britain, where children were clearly separated from adults, the same concept is echoed here. Coraline’s parents constantly give her suggestions of things to do that will keep her away from their offices. “‘Then explore the flat,’ suggested her father. ‘Look—here’s a piece of paper and a pen. Count all the doors and windows. List everything blue. Mount an expedition to discover the hot water tank’” (Gaiman 7). Coraline’s boredom with her toys indicates that she has outgrown them, so it is telling that the task her father gives her (although mostly to occupy her free time) is also functional in some important ways. For example, locating the hot water tank is a reasonable task for homeowners, in the event that repairs are required. Additionally, doors and windows are usually locked at night to serve security purposes; therefore, one must be sure to locate all of them. The task her father gives her suggests a certain amount of independence and maturation. Also significant is the fact that her father gives her paper and a pen from his office, tools that he uses for his job. Though Coraline accepts the challenge, she does so reluctantly. Therefore, the functionality of the task is lost on her.

Just as the task that Coraline’s father assigns her is more adult in nature, more reflective of work, so too is the assignment that Harvey is given. Referring to Harvey’s inadequate usage of time, his mother says, “‘you shouldn’t waste your time sitting up here’” (Barker 3). When he
remarks that, “‘I’ve got nothing better to do’” his mom is quick to say, “‘you can start by tidying up this room’” (4). The task she assigns for him to do will keep him in a separate place in the household from her, but it also serves a practical purpose and is more adult in nature. Instead of complying with his mother’s request, which would also give him something to occupy his time, he looks around and decides his room “looked just fine” (4). This attitude not only reflects his resentment toward his mother for assigning what he considers to be an unreasonable task, but it also demonstrates his immaturity. As David Archard observes in *Children: Rights and Childhood*, “the modern conception construes the child as someone who plays; work is the polar opposite of play, and something only adults engage in” (37). Harvey would rather remain in a state of boredom and complain about it than be productive in any way. At this point he is very much depicted as a child in this sense, and childhood here is equated with immaturity.

Both authors introduce the relationship that the protagonists have with their parents (or in Harvey’s case with his mom) prior to their leaving the house. However, it is only in *Coraline* that this relationship is also commented upon with food. It is established early on that Coraline’s father does the majority of the cooking in the household. Even when Coraline’s mother does attempt to make a meal she is uninformed about the lack of supplies for cooking: “Coraline’s mother looked in the fridge and found a sad little tomato and a piece of cheese with green stuff growing on it” (Gaiman 24-25). Yet, Coraline’s mother does demonstrate that there is a hierarchy in which games and play are subordinate to meals, and that the family will dine together. Gaiman notes how “her mother made her come back inside for dinner and for lunch” (6). In fact, there is added emphasis on the importance of family meals, because it is mentioned that, “Coraline’s father stopped working and made them all dinner” (9). So, although Coraline’s parents shoo her away during their work hours, they do have established meal times where they
come together as a family and this time is important enough to halt both their work and Coraline’s play.

Gaiman emphasizes Coraline’s palate at the beginning of the book as well. Since it is Coraline’s father who does the majority of the cooking, Gaiman states that “when Coraline’s father cooked chicken he bought real chicken, but he did strange things to it, like stewing it in wine, or stuffing it with prunes, or baking it in pastry, and Coraline would always refuse to touch it on principle” (29). The impression here is that Coraline cannot appreciate the culinary inventiveness that her father puts into his cooking. Although there is no indication that the meals he prepares for the family are lacking in taste (neither her father nor her mother comment on them), there is clearly a distinction between the food that Coraline as a child prefers, and the food that her parents expect her to eat and therefore partake in themselves. To demonstrate this, Gaiman offers a couple of examples of the cuisine that Coraline chooses when she is left to her own accord. The first time she prepares food for herself, she makes the staples of a childlike meal: potatoes and pizza. Gaiman writes that “she went to the freezer and got out some microwave chips and a microwave minipizza” (10). Additionally, the food is already pre-packaged and does not require the same time or thought to make as the meals prepared by her father. When her parents go missing later on in the book, Coraline shops for herself: “She bought two large bottles of limeade, a chocolate cake, and a new bag of apples, and went back home and ate them for dinner” (51). While apples certainly contain more nutritional elements than do limeade or chocolate cake, they also contain massive amounts of sugar. Therefore, Gaiman emphasizes that Coraline’s palate is still maturing in comparison to the palates of her parents. Her willingness to undermine family meals together by preparing frozen meals for herself also highlights her lack of civility in terms of dining.
The boredom that both children express spurs their departures from their homes, despite warnings that they should stay put. It is Coraline’s neighbors who provide this advice to her. After reading her tea leaves, Miss Spink gives her a warning (whilst getting her name wrong). “‘You know, Caroline,’ she said, after a while, ‘you are in terrible danger’” (Gaiman 20). Rather than inquire about the nature of this danger, or discuss the possibility of the danger with her parents, Coraline’s reaction reflects her irresponsible tendencies: “In danger? thought Coraline to herself. It sounded exciting. It didn’t sound like a bad thing. Not really” (21). In this case, her concept of danger is childish in the sense that she equates danger with adventure and not with viable, bodily harm. When Harvey is visited at his home by Rictus, he engages in conversation with the stranger. Later, “Harvey said nothing about his peculiar visitor to either his mom or his dad, in case they put locks on the windows to stop Rictus returning to the house” (Barker 10). The fact that he imagines his parents boarding up his windows to keep Rictus out suggests that Harvey knows his parents would disapprove of the visitor. When Harvey arrives at the House he is greeted with a moment of guilt and reservation where he comments, “‘I…don’t think I’ll be staying,’ Harvey said. ‘I mean my mom and dad don’t even know I’m here’” (Barker 22). The warning that Coraline receives comes from an external source, while Harvey internally recognizes his own warning. Yet, both protagonists choose to overlook these warnings and instead embark on their journeys. As Bettelheim notes, this impulse may be related to the fact that “fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further” (24). Because the characters are introduced in ways which exemplify their immaturity, some encounter must occur in order for their behavioral patterns to change and for them to ultimately embrace a newfound identity.
Given that the villains the children encounter are cannibalistic and that the children express appetites for adventure, it is no wonder that the ways in which they are first lured into danger is through actual physical appetite. These books also uphold the tradition of food found in earlier British literature. Daniel writes: “The British classics in particular are a rich source of fictional feasting: copious quantities of rich, sweet and, by contemporary standards, fat-laden foods are frequently served to children who seem to have huge appetites” (2). When Coraline first ventures down the corridor, she is greeted by a stranger: “‘I’m your other mother,’ said the woman. ‘Go and tell your other father that lunch is ready,’ She opened the door of the oven. Suddenly Coraline realized how hungry she was. It smelled wonderful. ‘Well, go on’” (Gaiman 28). This is the first instance where Coraline reacts so positively to food, particularly food prepared by a person she perceives as a parental figure. This is not the way she responds to food made by her real parents. In comparison, when Harvey chooses to accompany Rictus to the Holiday House, Barker writes that “half out of hunger, half out of curiosity, Harvey did as Rictus had instructed” (14). It is not just that Harvey ignores his inner warning signs to follow Rictus, but that these warnings are trumped by his appetite which leads him into danger. This is made explicit by his initial contact with Mrs. Griffin, who says, “‘let me tempt you with some treats’” (21). The food that Mrs. Griffin prepares for Harvey and the children is especially tantalizing. To reiterate here: “Mrs. Griffin had set a dozen plates of food in front of him: hamburgers, hot dogs and fried chicken; mounds of buttered potatoes; apple, cherry and mud pies, ice cream and whipped cream; grapes, tangerines and a plate of fruits he couldn’t even name” (21). Thus, Harvey’s appetite mirrors Coraline’s in his drive for all things tasty (namely junk food).

In *The Thief of Always*, food not only serves as a lure for Harvey, it also provides a warning. In a few instances, other beings are extinguished by food and Harvey bears witness to
these instances. Mrs. Griffin keeps cats in the Holiday House as company. Aptly named, one of the felines is called Clue-Cat. Early upon his arrival, Clue-Cat is hanging around the kitchen with Harvey. At one point, Clue-Cat jumps up onto the stove. When Harvey tries to get him down, Clue-Cat’s fate is sealed: “Clue-Cat yowled, and tipped over the pan he was perched upon…Whether drowned, scalded or incinerated, the end was the same: He hit the floor dead” (Barker 33). Fittingly, it is in the kitchen that Clue-Cat loses his life. Harvey fails to notice the subtlety of the situation, though. After this tragic event, Harvey wanders the grounds around the Holiday House and comes upon a murky lake. Here, he notices that “there was a legion of flies buzzing around in search of something rotten to feed on, and Harvey guessed they’d have no trouble finding a feast. This was a place where dead things belonged” (40). Later on, Harvey learns that the lake is the place where the children go once Mr. Hood has sucked them dry of their lives, so it is literally where the “dead things” go. Even though the lake and the flies are disturbing when he first encounters them, Harvey does not equate them with his own purpose for being at the House. Shortly thereafter, a more obvious statement is made with Harvey’s own food. Harvey spends some time outside with Wendell and falls asleep. Upon waking up, “he reached for his soda, but the bottle had fallen over, and the scent of sweet cherry had attracted hundreds of ants. They were crawling over it and into it, many drowning for their greed” (Barker 42-43). Because of their gluttony, the ants are consumed in the spilt soda. Imbedded in their behavior is a moral about greed and consumption, but it is lost on Harvey.

Not only are Harvey and Coraline tempted by food, but they are also lured in by the prospect of wish-fulfillment and attention. Since food is often equated with physical and emotional comfort, the two promises (for food and for attention), go together. In discussing the debate over whether childhood is disappearing because of consumerism, Hendrick suggests that
this viewpoint depends—at least economically—on: “the assault on children’s values by commercial interests, leading to the hunger for instant gratification” (Children 95). In The Thief of Always and Coraline, this desire for immediate satisfaction is evident in the children’s hunger for actual food and for their insistence on attention, often fulfilled in the form of toys and play. 

During his first Christmas holiday at the House, Lulu suggests to Harvey that he make a Christmas wish, telling him that “‘there’ll be presents for everyone. There always are.’” She then goes on to inform him, “‘I’ve been here so long I’ve got everything I ever wanted’” (Barker 58). Harvey is oblivious to the melancholy that this causes in Lulu, and instead busies himself thinking about his first Christmas wish.

In comparison, when Coraline visits the other mother’s house, she is encouraged to play in her room. Gaiman spends time describing the fascinating nature of this room:

> There were all sorts of remarkable things in there she’d never seen before: windup angels that fluttered around the bedroom like startled sparrows; books with pictures that writhed and crawled and shimmered; little dinosaur skulls that chattered their teeth as she passed. A whole toy box filled with wonderful toys. This is more like it, thought Coraline. (30)

Like Harvey, Coraline is enchanted by the prospect of being showered with toys and, consequently, what she determines to be affection by the other mother. The fact that these toys are given freely, for no apparent reason, does not cause suspicion in her yet. However, as Hendrick suggests, “since toys usually reach children as ‘gifts’, and we know from anthropological studies that gifts ‘are a very special form of exchange which require their own reciprocities’, clearly ‘gifts are not given “freely”. Some return is expected’” (Constructions 59). In the beginning of their journeys, then, the children encounter beings that are willing to offer
them the things that they desire the most: food, toys, and attention. These things are provided seemingly effortlessly and both of the children partake unassumingly, unaware that they are placing themselves in positions of peril. It is in their self-absorbance and greed to consume that the children take on the qualities of the villains that are luring them in. Fundamentally, the children come to represent little monsters themselves.

The children demonstrate egotistical behavior early on. For example, the black cat teases Coraline about behaving as a know-it-all: “‘How fortunate I am,’ said the cat, ‘in having a traveling companion of such wisdom and intelligence.’ Its tone remained sarcastic, but its fur was bristling, and its brush of a tail stuck up in the air” (Gaiman 59). In the exchanges that follow between Coraline and the cat, it is obvious that it is the cat that has the most knowledge about the other mother and her motives. Gaiman also makes it clear that Coraline, despite her attitude, is not able to care for herself. When she finds herself alone in her home (because her parents have already been parent-napped by the other mother), Coraline displays her childishness at bedtime: “She ran herself a bath with too much bubble bath in it, and the bubbles ran over the side and went all over the floor” (Gaiman 51). It is clear here that Coraline still requires the guidance and supervision of her parents. In contrast, Harvey’s self-centered behavior is evident in the way that he consciously thinks about home, but fails to identify the needs and feelings of his parents regarding his absence. Instead, his thoughts revolve around his own attitudes, especially toward school: “he had his homesick days—but he knew if he went back home he’d be in school the day after, and wishing he’d stayed in the Holiday House a while longer” (Barker 73). Both children embrace childish and selfish behavior through displays of self-importance and greed, but Gaiman and Barker make their parallels to the villains they face even more blatant as the stories proceed.
In another exchange with the cat, Coraline is horrified at the way that he toys with a rat. In response, the cat suggests that some believe “‘the tendency of a cat to play with its prey is a merciful one—after all, it permits the occasional funny little running snack to escape, from time to time. How often does your dinner get to escape?’” (Gaiman 76). Not only does this foreshadow the game that Coraline will later engage in with the other mother to free herself and the other mother’s prisoners, but it also suggests something about hierarchies in terms of food. Coraline, as a human and as a child, does not contemplate the origin of the pepperoni on her microwavable pizza. In the same way that rats can be lured in with food, trapped, and killed, Coraline does not recognize the danger of partaking in the other mother’s culinary gifts. Warner, however, summarizes this dynamic: “The one who consumes can also run a terrible risk: eating at someone’s table places you in their power” (74). The cat’s statement is then twofold: it positions Coraline as a monstrous consumer, who is not aware of her place in the food chain, and it also suggests her placement at the other mother’s table, as being on the plate rather than eating from the plate. In this case, it is Coraline who acts not only as monster to other animals, but also as rat when pitted against a monster more vicious than her. The same contempt that the cat expresses towards the rats is channeled in the other mother’s true feelings toward Coraline when Coraline ceases to obey her. While mice are looked upon favorably in the book (they warn Coraline, after all), rats are clearly approached with disdain.

Coraline is also compared to the other mother in a more subtle fashion, much earlier in the book. Gaiman writes, “Coraline, who was standing in the doorway, cast a huge and distorted shadow onto the drawing room carpet—she looked like a thin giant woman” (11). Later, Coraline describes the other mother in these terms. When comparing the other mother to her real mother, Coraline thinks they look a lot alike, except the other mother “was taller and thinner”
(Gaiman 28). Coraline’s shadow actually depicts her as the other mother in this sense. One of the most obvious characteristics of a shadow is its darkness, and it therefore bears certain connotations about the darker side of one’s personality. Marie-Louise von Franz draws extensively on Carl Jung and the term “shadow,” suggesting that “at the beginning stage we can say that the shadow is all that is within you which you do not know about” (4). Therefore, this visual by Gaiman suggests at the beginning of the book that Coraline has the capacity to do great harm, and must temper her childish desires and mediate her self-absorbed behavior lest she should embrace some of the other mother’s more sinister qualities herself.

While Gaiman provides visual comparisons of Coraline to the other mother, both in the scene of the cat playing with the rat, and also in the projection of Coraline’s shadow on the doorway, Barker pairs Harvey with Mr. Hood through verbal statements. It is Mrs. Griffin who makes the observation first and although her jest is said in affection for Harvey and Wendell, it still draws a parallel between the boys and their host. “‘You’re monsters,’ she replied, with a hint of a smile. ‘That’s what you are. Monsters.’” Her statement is more generalized, encompassing both children into the category of monster. In response to Mrs. Griffin’s words, Wendell coyly says of Harvey, “‘I’ve seen him filing down his teeth’” (Barker 46). This statement foreshadows the costume that Harvey is going to choose for Halloween (a vampire), but also compares him to their vampiric host, Mr. Hood. When Harvey and Wendell go looking for their costumes, Barker further cements Harvey’s nature as one that coincides with Mr. Hood’s:

After a few minutes of searching he found a long black coat with a collar he could turn up, which Wendell pronounced very vampiric. Well satisfied with his choice, he went back to the wall of faces, and his eyes almost immediately alighted upon
a mask he hadn’t previously seen, with the pallor and deep sockets of a soul just risen from the tomb. He took it down and put it on. It fitted perfectly. (48)

It is telling that not only does Harvey choose to dress as a vampire on Halloween, but also that his eyes are instantly drawn to the appropriate mask to complete his costume, a mask that fits his face as though it were made for it. To add to this depiction, two of Mr. Hood’s henchmen (Jive and Marr) later concoct a plan and use magic in order to physically transform Harvey into the subject of his costume, at which point Jive “peered at Harvey with his squinty eyes. ‘Wouldn’t be surprised if you weren’t a vampire in another life, boy,’ he said” (Barker 78). Rob Latham describes the vampire figure, stating that “‘the modern vampire…can be a youthful consumer, a consumer of youth, or a figure consumed by a mythology of youth—or all three at once’” (qtd. in Honeyman 173). Harvey is seen as the youthful consumer here, while Mr. Hood is literally “a consumer of youth.” Even Harvey comes to the realization later in the book that he is too alike Mr. Hood for comfort: “Repulsive as it was to think of himself in any way similar to this monster, there was some corner of Harvey that feared this was true” (Barker 174). So, while Coraline is compared to the other mother through visuals, Harvey is directly described as embodying qualities of Mr. Hood. In this way, the children are aligned with the monsters that wish to devour them. As Warner argues, “monsters have become children’s best friends, alter egos, inner selves” (15). Harvey and Coraline are actually depicted as similar versions of the monsters that they face.

Only after extended stays are the children able to distance themselves from their villainous counterparts. For Coraline, this happens when she no longer enjoys the attention showered on her by the other mother: “Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more. A tolerated pet, whose behavior was no longer amusing” (Gaiman 106). Ironically, Coraline’s
insistence that her parents play with her, despite the fact that they have to work in order to support her, projects this idea of a person as a plaything. It is only when she herself becomes the toy that Coraline recognizes the downside of this position. Cashdan remarks that “‘possessions’ are not human beings, but rather assets…This is the hidden perversion in greed, whether it involves a desire to collect gold or people” (193). In time, Coraline is able to distinguish what it means to play with her toys and what it means to ask her parents to function as toys. However, the other mother does not make this distinction. It is here that Coraline, although originally sharing some similarities with the other mother in terms of appetite, begins to distinguish herself, for “difference relies on comparison, on opposition” (Berglund 38). Simply, it is the idea that sameness and difference are best expressed through binaries and categories. Fairy tale structure dictates that there must be a hero and a villain, so Coraline, eventually viewing the other mother as the villain she is, must take action to become the hero. Becoming the hero here also means accepting the socially constructed proper or “good” childhood.

Like Coraline, Harvey is also forced to embrace his heroic status. In analyzing fairy tales, Stith Thompson states in *The Folktale* that “one of the best ways to search the heart is to see what use one will make of unlimited power” (134). This is the test that finally creates a schism between Harvey and Mr. Hood. When Jive and Marr turn Harvey into a real vampire on Halloween night, he first delights in the terror that his persona causes in Wendell. In fact, he takes the trick too far. Barker writes, “Wendell whined, all snot and tears” (84). Harvey’s harassment of Wendell results in real fear, to the point that Wendell pleads for his life. Tatar notes that “in fairy tales, nearly every character…is capable of cruel behavior” (*The Hard Facts* 5). This is true of Harvey as well. It is only when Jive encourages Harvey to cause real physical harm that Harvey reigns in his delight and ends his game. Jive expresses disappointment in
Harvey and says, “I thought you had the killer instinct” (Barker 85). It is the statement that follows that separates Harvey from his host, who has no reservations about stealing the lives from the children at the House. In reply to Jive’s remark, Harvey comments, “Well, I don’t,” said Harvey, a little ashamed of himself. He felt like a coward, even though he knew he’d done the right thing” (85). All along, Harvey has expressed his knowledge of “the right thing,” first admitting that his parents would board up his windows if they knew he was talking to Rictus and then sharing his reservations about staying at the Holiday House without his parents’ consent. It is only here, though, when he has the opportunity to really take advantage of Wendell and demonstrate his power, that Harvey takes a stand. As Thompson points out, Harvey must be tested with true power before he is able to maneuver into the position of the hero. With distinctions made, the children begin to position themselves in opposition to their villainous counterparts. When they stand counter to the villains, Harvey and Coraline are also able to see the atrocious and “bad” appetites of the villains.

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas tackles the cultural binary of purity vs. pollution. She explains that “dirt…is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (35). In order for the children to learn moderation in their consumption habits, they must refrain from unmediated consumption in order to differentiate themselves from the villains they encounter. In this sense, they reject their baser desires and opt for civility instead, in eating and in their behavior more generally. Douglas goes on to explain that “hybrids and other confusions are abominated” (53). Therefore, distinctions are made between the children and the villains in two ways: (1) through their physicality, and (2) through the things and ways in which
they consume (later on in the stories, after the children become aware of their own destructiveness and begin to distinguish themselves from the villains).

Physically, the other mother projects the concept of the hybrid that Douglas addresses. While Coraline fails to make important distinctions between her real mother and the other mother in the beginning of the story (except for the other mother being taller, thinner, and having button eyes), her physical abnormalities become blazingly apparent later on. At one point, Coraline observes of the other mother that “her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp” (Gaiman 28). The sharpness of her fingernails suggests the other mother’s predatory nature, from the very beginning. To further emphasize this aspect of her being, Gaiman writes, “the other mother smiled, showing a full set of teeth, and each of the teeth was a tiny bit too long” (61). Finally, Coraline comes to the realization that the other mother is never actually looking at her with affection, but rather with appetite: “The other mother and the other father were looking at her hungrily” (61). The other father, a creation of the other mother, also serves to help Coraline distinguish between herself and her host. In her book, Douglas addresses the types of animals that are viewed as unclean: “The last kind of unclean animal is that which creeps, crawls or swarms upon the earth” (56). In support of this statement, Warner stresses that “insects are universally considered the most ancient surviving species, the most numerous, the most adapted and adaptable: for this they are feared—and provoke awe” (173). Therefore, Coraline is repulsed by the other father when she finds him later. Gaiman describes that he no longer looked like the other father, but rather, “the thing was pale and swollen like a grub, with thin, sticklike arms and feet” (110). Physically, then, both the other mother and the other father fall into categories that separate them from Coraline. The other mother is predatory in appearance, and the other father is molded from something that
very much resembles an insect; both Douglas and Warner argue that this makes him unclean and something of a fearful nature. In addition to their physical characteristics, the other mother and Coraline also differ in terms of the types of food they consume.

In Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors, David D. Gilmore argues that “eating human beings is as critical an aspect of monsterhood as bigness, physical grotesqueness, and malice” (7). The other mother definitely displays physical anomalies, but Coraline soon discovers that the other mother’s appetite deviates from her own in important ways. At one point, the other mother offers Coraline a bag full of beetles. When Coraline declines, Gaiman writes that the other mother “carefully picked out a particularly large and black beetle, pulled off its legs (which she dropped, neatly, into a big glass ashtray on the small table beside the sofa), and popped the beetle into her mouth. She crunched it happily” (78). Since insects are described earlier as being both unclean and able to provoke fear, a being who consumes beetles can only be “‘sick and evil and weird,’” (78). Daniel describes the sense of repulsion that Coraline has with the other mother’s diet: “Transgressive eating evokes disgust, revulsion and horror and, while spoiled/bad food can literally poison, when food that is perceived to be disgusting is eaten, the eater’s credibility as a subject and their morality is damaged” (24-25). Coraline no longer sees the other mother as a moral figure, but rather as a dangerous foe. Later, Coraline finds that the other mother’s cravings are far more repulsive and grave. She encounters three soulless ghost children, trapped in the other mother’s house, who tell her: “‘She kept us, and she fed on us, until now we’ve nothing left of ourselves, only snakeskins and spider husks’” (Gaiman 85). It is at this point that it becomes obvious that the other mother is a monster, fulfilling the necessary attribute identified by Gilmore: she eats children—human children.
*The Thief of Always* offers more than one depiction of a monster. When Harvey first
encounters Rictus, he takes notes of his grin: “It was wide enough to shame a shark, with two
perfect rows of gleaming teeth” (Barker 5). Although Harvey does not recognize Rictus as a
threat this early in the book, by comparing Rictus’ teeth with those of a shark, Barker hints at his
true nature. This emphasis on the mouth is echoed in another of Mr. Hood’s henchmen—Carna.
Harvey recognizes that “Carna’s jaws were wide enough to snap him in half with a single bite”
(110). These two henchmen are monstrous in the sense that their mouths are large enough to
consume live prey, namely, Harvey. When Harvey first encounters Mr. Hood, it is not as a
recognizable vampire in the traditional sense, but rather as a master of magic that embodies and
emanates outward from the House itself. Barker describes the way that Mr. Hood does this:

> His face was spread over the entire roof, his features horribly distorted. His eyes
were dark pits gouged into the timbers; his nose was flared and flattened
grotesquely, like the nose of an enormous bat; his mouth was a lipless slit that was
surely ten feet wide, from which issued a voice that was like the creaking of doors
and the howling of chimneys and the rattling of windows. (171)

The fact that Mr. Hood chooses to compose himself out of inanimate objects, like the materials
needed to construct the House, shows his utter inhumaness. Just as the other mother and her
environment embody traits of spiders and insects, Mr. Hood shares a likeness with another
despicable creature: a bat. This is fitting, given that he is a vampire, and vampires are often
associated with bats.

It is in addressing Mr. Hood’s appetite for children that Barker’s book aligns with
Douglas’ study of purity and pollution. Warner suggests that Douglas’ ideas are useful in tales of
this type because, “when it comes to ogres in fantasy, the fundamental principle behind ideas of
pollution can be applied with a difference—not dirt in the wrong place, but the wrong food on the table dished up in the wrong way” (36). At the beginning of the book, Mrs. Griffin greets Harvey with a feast. By the end of the book, Harvey is trying to keep from becoming the feast. In recognizing the motivations of Mr. Hood, Harvey notes that “blood was life, and life was what Hood fed upon. He was a vampire, sure enough. Maybe a king among vampires” (Barker 136). Latham says of the vampire that it “is literally an insatiable consumer driven by a hunger for perpetual youth” (1). Mr. Hood echoes this sentiment by his consumption of childhood (the way he steals the time from children, and therefore their lives and youth). In the same way that Coraline is disgusted by the other mother’s eating habits, Harvey is wary of Mr. Hood’s motivations and appetite. As Daniel points out, “those who eat badly threaten the coherence of the social order, reveal the precariousness of humankind’s place at the top of the food chain and remind us of the corporeality of our bodies—that our flesh can be classified as meat just as readily as that of any other animal” (139). In the beginning of the books, the children eat in ways that do not adhere to adult expectations of etiquette. Both Harvey and Coraline partake in junk food on a regular basis, and Harvey indulges in magnificent acts of feasting. Later, it is the villains of the book who embody these despicable traits, based on their consumption of humans.

Although the children eventually distance themselves from the villains, it is only through combating them that they are truly able to establish themselves as fairy tale heroes, and learn their lessons. Bettelheim suggests that “fairy tales provide reassurance to children that they can eventually get the better of the giant—i.e., they can grow up to be like the giant and acquire the same powers” (27-28). Due to the difference in physical size, adults may appear as giants to children. By implication, children learn through facing literary giants alongside child protagonists that they must develop the same traits as the adults in their lives in order to inherit
the same amount of power that adults wield. In *The Thief of Always*, by literally inhabiting the actual building materials of the House and taking it over, Mr. Hood presents himself as a giant to Harvey. Even the other mother grows in size when Coraline challenges her: “Then she stood up, and up, and up: she seemed taller than Coraline remembered” (Gaiman 79). Both of these villains express a physical prowess and intimidation that must be overcome by the children. In order to overcome these menacing enemies, Harvey and Coraline offer challenges to their foes, using their newly-acquired wit to beat them.

The other mother expresses her interest in games to Coraline: “‘Coraline, my darling,’ she said. ‘I thought we could play some games together this morning, now you’re back from your walk. Hopscotch? Happy Families? Monopoly?’” (Gaiman 77). Knowing her inclination to play, the black cat tells Coraline that she should engage in a game with the other mother, if she has any hope of finding her parents and escaping: “‘Challenge her. There’s no guarantee she’ll play fair, but her kind of thing loves games and challenges’” (65). Taking the cat’s advice, Coraline challenges the other mother to an exploration game, where she will attempt to find out where the other mother has hidden her parents, and the trapped souls of the ghost children. As a prize, Coraline offers her own freedom: “‘If I lose I’ll stay here with you forever and I’ll let you love me’” (91). Coraline exemplifies the growth she has undergone in this instance, because she is no longer focused on her own agenda, but is rather attempting something heroic for the benefit of her parents and the imprisoned ghost children. As Lüthi explains, “children in fairy tales are by no means helpless; many of them free themselves by their own ability and cunning. The fairy tale shows not only that children have need of care and protection, it also gives them the ingenuity to make their way and to save themselves” (*Once* 65). Gaiman makes it clear that the Coraline who challenges the other mother to a game with such deadly odds is not the same
Coraline who could not successfully draw herself a bath without the water spilling everywhere. Instead, this Coraline exemplifies some of the independence and self-reliance that her parents requested of her earlier on. Just like Coraline, Harvey also uses his wit to defeat Mr. Hood’s henchmen and Mr. Hood himself.

Where Coraline only has one adversary to face, Harvey has many. He demonstrates how “the evil presence in the story pays the price for sinful tendencies shared with the hero” (Cashdan 182). Essentially, Harvey is able to show how evil that seeks to consume (in this case children), is ultimately only successful in consuming itself. When Harvey first escapes through the mist wall keeping him at the Holiday House, Carna follows. Barker writes that “suddenly Carna wasn’t swooping but falling, holes opening in its wings as though a horde of invisible moths was eating at their fabric” (112). As the name indicates, Carna is equipped with a big appetite and a mouth large enough to eat the meat off of Harvey’s bones. However, Barker indicates that Carna cannot survive in the real world. Instead of devouring Harvey, Carna is feasted on by “invisible moths.” When he later returns to the Holiday House, Harvey challenges Marr first. Knowing that she is able to manifest dreams (after all, she turned Harvey into a real vampire on Halloween), Harvey cleverly asks her, “what do you dream about?” to which she replies, “I dream of nothing…” [emphasis by author] (Barker 156). At this point, she begins to disintegrate in front of Harvey. Barker writes, “she was gone, devoured by her own magic” (156). Notably, the verb that Barker uses to describe her downfall is directly related to the process of eating. The term “devouring” also depicts an uncivil form of consumption. On his way to challenge Mr. Hood, Harvey encounters Jive and Rictus. Jive tries to encourage Harvey to eat something, but Harvey is able to resist the temptation this time (something he could not manage before now). When he refuses the food, Jive questions him by asking, “you think it’s poisoned?” (162). In order to
prove that it is not, Jive eats the pie and ice cream that he is holding. As Jive begins to turn to dust, Harvey declares: “‘You shouldn’t have eaten that pie,’ he said. ‘It’s reminding your belly of what you’re made of’” (162-63). Conspicuously, the food that destroys Jive is junk food. Through the process of eating dust, Jive becomes dust. This time, there is a literal act of eating which results in the monster’s demise.

Fearful of Harvey, Rictus stays out of his way as Harvey proceeds onward to challenge Mr. Hood himself. Knowing that Mr. Hood is apt to grant wishes, Harvey uses this against him. Like Coraline, he offers himself up for one last demonstration, baiting Mr. Hood by saying, “‘If I’m going to be your apprentice, I need to know how powerful you are’” (Barker 191). Believing he will have Harvey’s soul afterward, Mr. Hood consents. At this point, Harvey lays the trap for his adversary, telling Mr. Hood, “‘I want the seasons,’ Harvey said. ‘All the seasons at once’” (192). By attempting to conjure all of the seasons and indulge his own hubris, Mr. Hood’s magical act results in the destruction of the Holiday House: “Loud though the dins of wind and thunder were, they couldn’t drown out the sound of the House as it perished and went to dust” (196). Mr. Hood himself remains for a second encounter. It is Mr. Hood who destroys Rictus, enraged that he brought Harvey to the House in the first place. Though he must face Mr. Hood directly, Harvey is still able to outwit him. When Mr. Hood requests his coat back, Harvey tosses it toward the lake, which (due to the magic used to conjure the seasons) has become a raging whirlpool. It is here that Mr. Hood meets his ultimate fate. Barker writes, “he was drawn into the white waters at the whirlpool’s heart, and shrieking with rage, went where all evil must go at last: into nothingness” (213). Like Marr and Jive, Carna and Rictus, Mr. Hood is reduced to nothingness via a watery esophagus. The Thief of Always thus gives several depictions of the way that evil is devoured by itself, arguing that “bad” eating is always punished.
In discussing “Hansel and Gretel,” Bettelheim says that a major lesson in the tale is that “unrestrained giving in to gluttony threatens destruction” (161). Both The Thief of Always and Coraline demonstrate this concept through several avenues. First, the children are presented as over-indulgent and self-absorbed, and their leaving home and subsequent actions (such as eating from the villain’s table), put them in jeopardy of being consumed themselves. Second, the children are likened to the villains, so that when the villains eventually display unclean behavior and immoral eating practices (chomping beetles and children), the children bear witness to the consequences of unrestrained appetite. Finally, the children are only able to defeat the villains through wit. The monsters, through their own hubris and appetites, consent to the challenges posed by the children and are ultimately defeated (sometimes literally consumed) in the process.

This chapter has outlined the ways in which Harvey and Coraline express undesirable behaviors prior to and at the beginning of their journeys, how they mirror the villains they face in disturbing ways, and how they are only able to overcome their own destructive behavior by engaging in direct combat with the villains. The final chapter will discuss the lessons learned throughout these journeys and the purpose for the obstacles that the children face in order to argue that these books extend the fairy tale tradition and act as socializing agents for children. By depicting proper modes of behavior and suggesting the consequences for those who do not conform to these ideals, The Thief of Always and Coraline address the relationship of childhood to adulthood today and depict a portrait of the socially acceptable child. Chapter four will also offer a suggestion as to the contemporary function of food in children’s literature, and examine the ways in which these books not only socialize children, but also comment on the way that adults characterize and interact with children today.
CHAPTER FOUR: LITERARY LESSONS FOR A LIFETIME

The Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones who are introduced at the beginning of *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, respectively, are not the same Harvey and Coraline who return home. Zipes notes that “the wandering protagonist always leaves home to reconstitute home” (*Fairy Tales* 57). When Coraline explores the land surrounding the other mother’s house, she finds that wherever she walks, she always returns to the house. She asks, “‘how can you walk away from something and still come back to it?’” (Gaiman 74). Although she is asking in reference to the other mother’s house, symbolically, she is referring to her real home and her real parents. In the beginning of the books, Harvey and Coraline express obvious boredom at the lack of stimulation around them and the relative absence of their parents in their everyday lives. For example, Harvey is not content with his surroundings: “Millsap, the town in which Harvey had lived all his life, wasn’t very big, and he thought he’d seen just about all of it over the years” (Barker 12). In discussing J.R.R. Tolkien’s take on fairy tales, Bettelheim states, “Tolkien describes the facets which are necessary in a good fairy tale as fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation—recovery from deep despair, escape from some great danger, but, most of all, consolation” (143). Chapters two and three outline the ways in which Harvey and Coraline encounter fantasy, recovery and escape. What is left is consolation and they can only obtain this by returning home, changed by their heroic progression and maturation. Lüthi argues that “since our children are interested in fairy tales in their most receptive years, and since even today almost all children have a considerable number of fairy tales which are told or read to them or which they read themselves, it is worthwhile to ask what sort of picture of man they find there” (*Once* 137). During their journeys, the protagonists in these books learn valuable lessons about family and home and their
places there. They also learn moderation in terms of consumption, and therefore become
civilized in the process.

At the Holiday House, Lulu informs Harvey that she has received everything that she
ever wanted. The dreariness of her days at the Holiday House—in comparison to the lighthearted
days of fun had by Wendell and Harvey—suggests the downfall of getting all of one’s wishes
fulfilled. In *The Thief of Always*, it is Lulu who best demonstrates the need for moderation and
pacing, at least at the beginning of the book. Harvey learns this lesson only after Mr. Hood
claims Lulu. Coraline decides that she does not want the smothering affection of the other
mother. Although the other mother and the other father state that they desire to give her
everything she wants, Coraline comes to realize, “‘I don’t *want* whatever I want. Nobody does.
Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and
it didn’t *mean* anything. What then?’” (Gaiman 120). Although both children are tempted by
food, toys, and games, they come to the same conclusion: what they want is a home and, more
specifically, parents to come home to. Bettelheim summarizes this conclusion in fairy tales: “a
happy though ordinary existence is projected by fairy tales as the outcome of the trials and
tribulations involved in the normal growing-up process” (39). Despite their fantastical journey,
the children ultimately want stability. They begin as everyday people and therefore must return
to their everyday lives.

When Harvey escapes from the Holiday House the first time with Wendell, he returns
home to find that thirty-one years have passed in the real world. Although he is horrified at the
thought of the lost time and guilt-stricken by the pain he has caused his now aged parents, he
comments, “‘It’s home, and that’s all I care about’” (Barker 126). Even partway through his
journey, he comes to recognize the appeal and security of his own home. Harvey eventually
returns to the Holiday House (so that he can save Lulu and reclaim his lost time), whereupon he admits, “I didn’t know what I was losing” (173), referring to his childhood, his home, his parents and his time with them. Coraline also displays her relief in being home and having her parents back. Honeyman discusses Zipes’ belief that “child readers and characters have a presumed emotional responsibility to reciprocate love and earn adult approval” (3). This is indicated by Coraline’s physical gestures toward each of her parents. When she wakes up the following morning, after having just escaped from the grasp of the other mother, she greets her mother in an overtly affectionate way: “she hugged her mother so tightly that her arms began to ache” (Gaiman 139). When she finds her father in his office, she also displays a heightened sense of affection and appreciation. Coraline “kissed him on the back of his balding head” (140). By the end of the stories, both of the children profess a newfound satisfaction and joy at simply being home and in their parents’ presence. Bettelheim suggests that “all young children sometimes need to split the image of their parent into its benevolent and threatening aspects to feel fully sheltered by the first” (68). For Coraline, this projection is the most obvious, because the villain she faces is named “the other mother.” Coraline finds that even though the other mother is willing to grant her wishes and play with her, this is not what she actually wants from a parent, because it turns her into a plaything.

In *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination*, Steven Swann Jones discusses the journey of the young fairy tale protagonist, noting that “the problem concerns adjusting to family life at home, and the quest concerns acquiring or demonstrating the social and domestic skills needed to be accepted as a competent member of that family” (22). Pre-journey, Harvey resents his mother for asking him to contribute to household chores and Coraline feels neglected by her working parents. Post-journey, the children are grateful merely to have a home and a place
within its confines to call their own. Additionally, as Mallet points out, “At some point in their young lives, children learn for the first time that they can be left alone, that the mother’s constant presence is not to be taken for granted” (60). Although Harvey may have felt secluded in his bedroom and Coraline is left to explore her flat and the grounds surrounding it on her own, it is not until they actually embark from home that they truly become isolated from their parents and their homes. Bettelheim argues that “the child, as he develops, must learn step by step to understand himself better; with this he becomes more able to understand others, and eventually can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful” (3). It is imperative that Harvey and Coraline experience the journeys that they do, and encounter the villains, so that they might see their parents in ways that do not cast them as villainous or neglectful. Another lesson that the children learn is the relative brevity of childhood itself.

Gail Schmunk Murray addresses the changing attitudes toward American childhood in American Children’s Literature and the Construction of Childhood. She describes the perception of childhood developing in the 1960s, which “recognized that children could not always be protected from the dangers and sorrows of real life; they might be better prepared to cope with pain if adults did not try to protect them from it” (185). In navigating the dangerous obstacles and encountering the realities of villainy, Harvey and Coraline are changed. Barker and Gaiman both put an emphasis on time at the end of their books. Barker writes that, for Harvey, “Time would be precious from now on. It would tick by, of course, as it always had, but Harvey was determined he wouldn’t waste it with sighs and complaints” (226). Though Harvey fills his time with excuses before his encounter with Mr. Hood, he is resolved by the end of his journey to make use of the time he is given. More subtly, to return to the closing line of Coraline, Gaiman writes, “the summer was almost done” (162), suggesting that the summer of play and games and
childhood is ending for Coraline, who is transitioning into a more mature period in her life. The children learn eventually that “one cannot free oneself from the impact of one’s parents and one’s feeling about them by running away from home—although that seems the easiest way out” (Bettelheim 208). The time they spend running away from their homes is time that they ultimately regret losing. Not only do they miss their homes, but they also miss their parents. In arriving at an appreciation for time, Harvey and Coraline also learn that the time that they have—because it is so limited—must be used in productive, rather than self-destructive, ways.

Douglas writes that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). By encountering a villain who shares some of their own attributes in terms of appetite and self-absorption, Harvey and Coraline exchange their destructive behavior for a sense of order and balance. In discussing the content and heroic progression in fairy tales, Lüthi states that “the characters’ effortless mobility, given that anything conceivable can happen in the folktale, produces the impression of the greatest freedom. This freedom is not arbitrary, however. The folktale as a form is subject to stringent laws” (The European 78). Harvey and Coraline initially consume the food offered to them by Mrs. Griffin and the other mother, seemingly without consequence. However, they learn that this perceived freedom is actually being exchanged for their capitulation to the villains’ whims. In defeating the villains, they obtain freedom from their own self-destructive behaviors, but only to return to their homes and consent to the supervision of their parents and to meeting their expectations. Cashdan writes that “young readers are once again reminded that resourcefulness is a useful virtue, and that children can be valuable family members” (77). Harvey and Coraline express liberation via their escape from the villain, and their abandonment of childish behavior, but ultimately do so only to conform to another set of
restrictions: those imposed by their parents. Daniel observes that “the way adults write about children, for children, tends to uphold the notion that, while adults are regarded as civilized, controlled, sophisticated, and properly human, children lack these qualities” (12). The fairy tale journey of maturation, then, is a journey of civility. Children, depicted as little monsters, embark on this journey only to emerge on the other side one step closer to achieving the desired state of adulthood. One of the ways in which this concept appears in much of children’s literature is embodied in food.

Food helps to soften the socializing process. In analyzing the thematic importance of food, Daniel writes that “food events within children’s literature seduce child readers and add flavor and spice to the narrative. They lend aspects of materiality to the text so that mediation is unsuspected” (212). As a reader, there is a visceral attraction to the feast that Mrs. Griffin prepares for Harvey. Children may envy Coraline when she takes the initiative to prepare microwavable pizza and chips (fries) for herself. Just like Harvey and Coraline are lured into the Holiday House and into the other mother’s house with promises of food, so too is the reader willing to accompany them on their journey, enticed by the tasty treats that await on the following pages. Rose discusses the danger of this tendency for readers to immerse themselves in the fictional world of the characters, suggesting that “the writing that is currently being promoted for children is that form of writing which asks its reader to enter into the story and to take its world as real, without questioning how that world has been constituted, or where, or who, it comes from” (62). The inclusion of food in stories like these is not accidental, but serves a particular socializing function by teaching children what happens to those who exhibit improper eating (and by extension uncivilized or childish) behavior. Zipes notes how “fairy tales and children’s literature were written with the purpose of socializing children to meet definite
normative expectations at home and in the public sphere” (Fairy Tales 9). These books place particular emphasis on the home (having to leave the home in order to return to it), suggesting that the lessons learned through food are related to behavior in the home. Therefore, the children must see the way in which transgressive eating and selfish actions are punished in order to return home and display more socially appropriate behavior.

Mr. Hood and his henchmen and the other mother are defeated because of their atrocious appetites for food and for power. Cashdan suggests that “it is the craving to amass more than one really needs, the willingness to do anything to ensure that you have more than the next person, that makes for greed” (178). Although the children display greedy tendencies at the beginning of the books, they learn through their interactions with the villains that this type of behavior is destructive. Food is an especially effective literary vehicle through which to learn this lesson: “Consumption was always a topic of popular stories, and it has remained a much-revisited theme: tales and rituals tell of the defeat of the bad eaters, and proclaim the identification of good eaters and their survival” (Warner 138). Harvey and Coraline learn moderation because they see the results of those who consume without inhibition: destruction. In discussing the historical progression of fairy tales and their documentation in written format, Zipes writes that “the literary fairy tale for children, as it began to constitute itself as a genre, became more an institutionalized discourse with manipulation as one of its components” (Fairy Tales 10). In these two books, and in many fairy tales, this manipulation takes the unassuming form of food. Blackford agrees, arguing, “Food lies at the center of socialization rituals for children” (42). Disguised in an appetizing format, the directive to consume moderately and appropriately, and to adhere to the expectations of one’s parents, is all the more enticing.
It is clear that Harvey and Coraline return from their journeys changed people. They are more content with their home lives and they have a renewed appreciation for the efforts of their parents. The questions to address are: Why must this journey take place? Who does it serve the most? Arguably, this journey to attain a new sense of self is in actuality the acquisition of an already culturally accepted and socially constructed identity. Warner argues, “Monsters, ogres, and beasts who kill and eat human flesh dramatize the complexity of the issue: they variously represent abominations against society, civilization and family, yet are vehicles for expressing ideas of proper behaviour and due order” (11). The introduction of chaos and pollution into the lives of Harvey and Coraline encourage the children to place themselves on the opposite side of this dichotomy by choosing order and civility. Coats suggests, “What we get from children’s literature are the very patterns and signifiers that define our understanding of and our positions with respect to the Other and, in so doing, structure our sense of self” (4). The children eventually align themselves in opposition to the villain, or the “Other.” They accomplish this in the form of self-denial and restraint, condemning their monstrous desires to consume voraciously in order to win parental approval and become active and contributory participants in their families. This self-denial is not unlike the kind heralded by John Locke in Some Thoughts Concerning Education. Additionally, Hendrick notes, “it has been argued that children are conventionally viewed through the concept of familialization, meaning ‘the fusion of childhood into the family institution…’” (Children 40). By denying their own impulses to consume, Harvey and Coraline are successfully subsumed into the family unit and no longer exist as anomalies with their own wants and desires. They cease to be little monsters.

Children only become a part of the family when they adhere to the guidelines set forth for them about what attributes a “good” child possesses and how this separates them from a “bad”
Cook argues that childhood, since it is a culturally-dependent construction, is malleable. It is also susceptible to outside influences, since it is not controlled completely by children, or by any one direct source. He suggests, “Malleability cuts both ways. The innocent child may be weak and easily influenced by Satan or some other form of pollution, but it can also be guided in proper or desirable directions” (28). Therefore, we get literary depictions of what constitutes a socially acceptable child and also what kind of child is marked as bad or inappropriate. Nicola Madge cites J. Fionda, who suggests (when discussing Harry Potter) that “‘the ‘good’ child in literature is often the one with adult-like qualities of competence, maturity and social awareness. They are often depicted fighting forces of evil (either in other ‘bad’ children or in adults) using cunning and ingenuity” (qtd. in Madge 5). Harvey and Coraline eventually do come to embody the characteristics of the “good” child, when they engage in combat with the villain and return home more mature than when they left. Although more adult in their behavior, they are not yet adults, and therefore lack the same agency and decision-making power as their parents. Cook observes that “desired qualities in children expressed by parents have changed since the 1930s to favor ‘independence’ and ‘thinking for oneself’ over those of ‘obedience’ and ‘loyalty’” (146). This indicates that parents today expect children to essentially parent themselves, while at the same time they also demonstrate that children still require protection and therefore rules (exemplified by Miss Spink and Miss Forcible who are always warning Coraline about the dangers of her environment). Tatar further shows the complications in this mindset. She argues, “Without agency and mobility, they often depend on adults for their entertainments—and the adults in their lives are often busy” (Enchanted 161). Therefore, while The Thief of Always and Coraline utilize fairy tale structure in ways that make them suitable for the socialization of
children, the books also succeed in offering a critique of the relationship of adulthood to childhood and modern day notions of parenting.

The exploration of the history of childhood has indicated a shift from children as economic contributors to the family to children as economic burdens. Cunningham writes, “Economic goods began to flow from parents to children rather than from children to parents” (80). It is obvious, then, that material goods now play a key role in informing the adult/child dynamic. An additional complication occurs is the ways in which children are (or are not) able to contribute to their families in meaningful ways. Mintz states, “Unlike children in the past, young people today have fewer socially valued ways to contribute to their family’s well-being or to participate in community life” (x). This situation likely leads to the boredom expressed by Harvey and Coraline at the beginning of the books. Unable to assist her parents with their work, Coraline must find other outlets for her energy, for example. The problem is that her parents are so busy that other than during meals they have little availability for family time, and time is essential to this relationship. According to Corsaro, “One of the most important things that adults can do to enrich children’s lives is to give them more of our time. What is needed most is everyday time for routine activities, talk, and play” (261). Harvey’s mother only visits his room to criticize his usage of time and to assign chores. Coraline’s parents try to pawn her off on her neighbors. Arguably, neither set of parents spends enough time addressing the needs and desires of Harvey or Coraline, as children who have their own anxieties and demands. Corsaro continues, writing that “adults most often view children in a forward-looking way, that is, with an eye to what they will become—future adults with a place in the social order and contributions to make to it. Rarely are they viewed in a way that appreciates what they are—children with ongoing lives, needs, and desires” (7). Until Harvey and Coraline return home with their newly
acquired sense of self and a greater display of maturity, they are mostly overlooked by their parents. They must express the desirable traits of the “good” child before they are completely accepted into the family and feel content with their situations. Another issue that arises is the way in which Harvey and Coraline must ultimately find this maturity and independence of their own volition.

It is questionable how much protection parents can offer children today. Gail Schmunk Murray argues that “adults do not make the world better or safer for children; children themselves shoulder the responsibility for learning how the world works and then finding a way to adapt to it. The child becomes parent to herself” (191). Since adults expect children to display independence and maturity, but do not offer their time in developing these traits, children (like Harvey and Coraline) must create their own experiences in order to acquire these characteristics. Although books like *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* and fairy tales more generally can serve socializing functions, teaching children proper behavior, they can also provide outlets for anxieties in childhood about how to achieve these desirable qualities. Bettelheim states:

> Today children no longer grow up within the security of an extended family, or of a well-integrated community. Therefore, even more than at the times fairy tales were invented, it is important to provide the modern child with images of heroes who have to go out into the world all by themselves and who, although originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence. (11)

If children are truly parenting themselves today, as Gail Schmunk Murray argues, then they need protagonists like Harvey and Coraline to confirm for them that they can be successful on their own and find a sense of personal security and fulfillment. However, as Bettelheim hints, fairy
tales also suggest that there is a right path to follow in order to achieve these things. Food is a common device through which children are encouraged to follow the right path: “What is often called the dilemma of ‘eat or be eaten’ in traditional folklore takes on renewed relevance within consumerist cultures, which represent the dilemma of hunger as capitulation to the demands of social bonds that provide access to food” (Honeyman 184). It is here that the stories serve the interests of adults more than children. Although they do serve a socializing function, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline*, as well as fairy tales more generally, can still be utilized for liberating purposes in order to discuss the relationship between children and adults in more meaningful ways.

In discussing children’s literature, Rose argues, “Children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (1-2). *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are both imbedded with suggestions about expectations that adults have for children in terms of acquiring independence and maturation, and ideas about proper behavior in the form of food consumption and etiquette. However, read with a more critical eye, they also offer observations about the relationship between adulthood and childhood in the modern-day, with a particular emphasis on time as a major concern and driving force in the maintenance of this relationship. Rose hints that the way to approach this schism is for adults and children to meet on neutral ground, where issues from both sides might be addressed and worked out together. Rather than writing *at* children, perhaps adults need to learn to write *with* children in mind.

Honeyman claims that “to be a parent is to make another an agent of oneself” (50). When adult authors write for children, it is possible that they serve a similar function (even if they do so unconsciously), addressing children in a way that is more beneficial to adults than to the children.
themselves. Rose goes on to remark that “children are no threat to our identity because they are, so to speak, ‘on their way’ (the journey metaphor is a recurrent one). Their difference stands purely as the sign of just how far we have progressed” (13). In depicting children as beings on their way to adulthood, rather than as existing in their own state, literature for children serves the purpose of training them to arrive at this preferred state of adulthood. It becomes apparent that in discussing the relationship between adulthood and childhood, especially as it is constructed in the literary world, one of the vital missing factors is the voices of children themselves.

Historically, adults have determined the definition and scope of childhood. Children are expected to work and contribute to the family, or they are not. When they are not working, children are expected to spend their days in school, but with the understanding that they are doing this as preparation for a responsible and contributory adulthood. *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* project the idea that children are understood to be dependent and in need of guidance, especially in terms of dietary concerns, but they are also supposed to find independence and develop maturity on their own. The books also indicate that children require more time with their parents, but are usually not afforded it. Because voices of individual children are lacking throughout history, adults need to be cognizant of the fact that their written words are contributing to the construction of childhood, and that these words might influence child development. Harvey and Coraline suggest that children who embark on dangerous adventures and face abominable adversaries turn out for the better, and that they must do this in order to return home more mature and acceptable to their parents. Although real children might engage in conversations with strangers and sneak away from their homes at night, they do not always meet the same end.
These books help construct a childhood that is full of contradictions. Children require protection, but they can only gain true experiences through dangerous encounters. Children are dependent and require guidance in their day-to-day choices, but adults do not have the time to instruct them, and therefore require that they gain independence through their own devices. Children are too immature to make the right choices, but must somehow become mature in order to be seen as “good” and contributory family members. Children demonstrate that they have voracious appetites and are avid consumers of material goods, food, and experiences, yet they are no longer able to earn their own economic incomes in order to procure these goods. Choices regarding consumption—when, what, how much, etc.—are therefore determined by the adults in their lives, who control the flow of these goods. Food is one of the key ways in which adults barter with children for their agency. The issue, as Honeyman argues, is: “Perhaps all that agency comes down to is having control over one’s food supply. After all, food *is* agency. Food is fate” (52).

Children are required to be mature and independent, but the agency afforded to them to do this is a false agency where the adults in their lives act as puppeteers, controlling them through food lures and material objects, and directing them to behave in ways that serve adult lifestyles and time constraints, rather than in ways that actually address modern anxieties in childhood regarding issues of production and consumption, and family worth. Daniel writes, “There is plenty of food available to sustain us, but we are never satisfied” (213). Because of this tendency to treat children like moldable objects, food fantasies in children’s literature continue to be inviting and powerful. Food serves as a substitute for things that children are lacking in their lives. Many scholars suggest that food is equated with comfort. These books suggest that food is
equated with time—the time and attention of their busy, working parents, time which is lacking in the lives of Harvey and Coraline.

Finally, the way that adulthood and childhood have been compared over time needs to be considered in any discussion of children’s literature, as does the construction of childhood. Generally, depictions of childhood suggest that it is a less desirable or inadequate state of development. Archard suggests that if Western culture is going to continue to look at childhood as a transitional period into adulthood, there is a way of approaching it from this angle in a more positive light: “when adulthood is viewed as a becoming there can be no obvious line of division between it and childhood. And if adulthood is a never-realised goal towards which one is forever maturing, childhood is not obviously an inferior stage which is left behind at once and completely” (45). Thus, rather than view childhood as a state in opposition to adulthood or as inferior, childhood can be approached from a more uplifting perspective—one which considers it its own stage, with its own needs and desires. Focusing on individual needs and desires might also help to eliminate the set trajectory for a “normal” childhood and dispel the concept of the “good” child. If children like Harvey and Coraline display the behavior of little monsters, perhaps the blame should be placed on the system that characterizes them as such, and not on the actions of the children themselves.
CONCLUSION

Food is an important element in literature for children, especially in works that draw on fairy tales for narrative structure like *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* do. Although food in fairy tales might have once served the purpose of reflecting physical hunger and anxieties about survival, food today expresses anxieties in childhood regarding family contribution, leisure, and time. Food is also utilized by adults toward another end: coercion. Scholars like Jacqueline Rose argue that the needs and agendas of adults are always given priority over those of children, at least in the realm of children’s literature. The two books analyzed here suggest that this might very well be the case. However, the books are at least redeeming in the ways that they question the relationship between adulthood and childhood, especially through the emphasis on time.

Chapter one of this thesis outlines the changing perceptions of childhood over time. It argues that since childhood is a social construction, any study of children’s literature must address the prevailing attitudes about childhood in that given time period and geographical location. In addition, it points out that children’s literature prioritizes adult agendas over children’s concerns. Chapter two analyzes the ways in which *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are structured as fairy tales to argue that, like fairy tales, these books have the capacity to serve socializing functions in childhood. Therefore, food as a theme in these books is not accidental, but rather extends from an already prominent tradition within the fairy tale genre (“Hansel and Gretel”). Chapter three discusses the way that food is utilized to create cultural binaries surrounding proper modes of consumption, comparing adults and children, children and monsters, and purity and pollution. These binaries benefit adults by leading to the creation of the “good” child. Finally, Chapter four touches on the idea that food is used today as a replacement for time, because adults are often too busy to devote enough time to their children. The overall
implication is that contemporary childhood is full of contradicting messages fueled by adult perceptions about childhood. Childhood is a site of dependence and restricted agency that is, at the same time, full of expectations about demonstrating maturity and independence.

If childhood itself is nothing but a social construction, and if Harvey Swick and Coraline Jones are associated with monsters because of their atrocious appetites, then it is only because adults see children who behave like this as monsters. Ultimately, it is the children in these books who are forced to change and not the adults. Harvey and Coraline embark on their journeys out of boredom, boredom that might be addressed if given more time and attention from their parents. Instead, they are forced to mediate their desire for attention through dangerous encounters with monsters whose appetites are even bigger than their own.

Food becomes the vehicle for this journey of maturation. Harvey and Coraline are lured in by the villains via food. Whether it is serving a physical function or a psychological one, food is fulfilling to those who consume it, literally or metaphorically. Food is comfort, but in these stories, food is also a substitute for time—specifically, the time that their parents are neglecting to give them. Food is also associated with security. If the parents are not spending time with the children, they are not building a secure environment either. With security lacking in their lives, Harvey and Coraline subject themselves to danger. In order to meet familial expectations and return home, Harvey and Coraline must learn to resist temptation and moderate their appetites. In this way, they are taught to conform to their parents’ wishes. While the books project this journey as one of maturation, they fail to address the original lack: time with one’s parents.

Coraline and Harvey demonstrate that children who are left to their own devices will make unhealthy eating choices, migrate toward danger, talk to strangers and give in to temptations for material goods. They suggest that children require direction and protection. At
the same time, the books indicate that children are required to be mature and independent beyond their age and must acquire these traits of their own accord. Children are required to behave with sophistication, but are asked to do so without being given any real agency over their own lives, situations, or food choices. These books are attractive because of their inclusion of food, their fairy tale structures, and the journeys of the protagonists. They are also disturbing because of their potential to socialize children. Yet, there may be redemption in their commentary on the relationship between adulthood and childhood. Lüthi notes that “when something has the ability both to attract and repel one so forcefully, one may assume that it deals with fundamentals” (Once 22). Although he is speaking of fairy tales as a genre, his words are applicable to these books as well. At the heart of their message is not only a journey of maturation, but also a statement about the ways that adults and children interact in our culture today.

Until children are perceived as a marginalized population with their own concerns and needs, it is likely that children’s literature will continue to reflect adult notions of the “good” child and proper childhood. When childhood is placed in opposition to adulthood, children are disempowered. Their only course of action (according to didactic works like fairy tales) is to conform to adult expectations about socially acceptable behavior and to adhere to proposed trajectories for maturation. Unless they conform, children are viewed as the ostracized “Other,” as monstrous beings in need of social reform. Since food is a requirement for survival, The Thief of Always and Coraline suggest that food is a powerful medium used by adults to garner consent from children in order for the socializing process to occur. If adults today want children to be independent, independence should come through the acquisition of personal agency, not through complacency.
In conclusion, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* are two texts that deserve recognition in the realm of children’s literature focusing on food and issues of consumption. There is a growing field of research in this area, ranging from Carolyn Daniel’s work on British literature to Susan Honeyman’s focus on the issue of food and agency in America. Recently, Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard edited the compilation *Critical Approaches to Food in Children’s Literature*, bringing together a multitude of scholars who address the theme of food in a variety of texts from varying perspectives. Other scholars have published books on consumption and childhood more generally, such as Daniel Thomas Cook’s book *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, or Rob Latham’s work on youth culture in *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption*.

As for the texts themselves, there are plenty of examples of children’s literature that incorporate the theme of food. Some of the more well-known titles are: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham*, E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or *The BFG*, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* and C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. These are but a few examples of the places where food plays a predominant role in the realm of children’s literature. There are certainly strong connections between food and childhood, whether one examines the relationship historically or contemporaneously. Imbedded in this relationship is also commentary about the dynamic of adulthood and childhood, about the expectations that adults have for children, and potentially some valuable lessons for adults about the way that they treat children. Through food, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* suggest ways in which the current construction of childhood can be reinforced, and ways in which it might be re-configured to address some major concerns in contemporary childhood.
WORKS CITED


“The Official Clive Barker Resource—Revelations—Clive on The Thief of Always.”


