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<p>Tutkielman aiheena on tarkastella kahden fiktiivisen henkilöahmon rakentumista semioottis-kognitiivisena prosessina sekä lukijan kiintymyssuhdetta henkilöahmoihin. Tutkimuksen kohteena on kaksi Neil Gaimanin fantasiakirjaa: <i>Coraline</i> ja <i>The Graveyard Book</i> sekä erityisesti teosten päähenkilöt. Pysin osoittamaan, että henkilöahmojen rakentuminen on prosessi, joka yhdistää tekstin lingvistiset elementit ja lukijan kognitiiviset mielentoiminnot. Lähestymistavassani hyödynnän Jonathan Culpeperin näkemystä henkilöahmojen pohjimmaisesta dualismista sekä tulkinnan kaksisuuntaisuudesta. Pysin myös havainnollistamaan potentiaalisia syitä sille, miten ja miksi lukijan kiintymyssuhde henkilöahmoihin rakentuu niin psykologisten kuin neurobiologisten prosessien kautta. Kiintymyssuhteen analysoinnissa hyödynnän tutkimuksia mm. peilineuronien toiminnasta, sekä tunnereaktioista.</p> <p>Ensimmäinen tulkintasuunta henkilöahmon rakentumisessa ottaa huomioon, millä tavoin hahmo välittyy tekstistä lukijalle. Tarkastelun kohteina ovat sanavalinnat, fokalisaatio ja metaforinen kieli, jotka kiinnittävät lukijan huomion päähenkilöön tekstitasolla. Tämän lisäksi ne aikaansaavat lukijassa mielentoimintoja, jotka täydentävät, yhdistävät ja tulkitsevat luettua tekstiä verraten sitä aikaisempaan eksplisiittiseen ja implisiittiseen tietoon ihmisistä. Toinen tulkintasuunta ottaa huomioon, millä tavoin ja millaiseksi henkilöahmo rakentuu ensisijaisesti lukijan aikaisemman tiedon ansiosta. Tarkastelun kohteina ovat lukijan perustavanlaatuiset ajatusmallit, joita hän tiedostamattaankin soveltaa kohdatessaan fiktiivisen henkilöahmon. Tämän tulkintasuunnan analysoinnissa hyödynnän mm. Lisa Zunshinen katsausta mielenteoriaan (Theory of Mind).</p> <p>Tutkielmani osoittaa, että edellä mainitut tulkintasuunnat eivät ole ristiriidassa keskenään, vaan täydentävät toisiaan. Fiktiivistä henkilöahmoa ei voi mieltää ainoastaan lingvististen elementtien summaksi tai lukijan kognition luomaksi itsenäiseksi kokonaisuudeksi, sillä tekstin ja mielen aikaansaamat prosessit ovat hyvin tiiviisti sidoksissa toisiinsa. Tutkielmani osoittaa myös, että lukijan kiintymyssuhde fiktiivisiin henkilöahmoihin on valtaosin väistämätöntä. Kiintymyssuhde muodostuu automaattisten ja implisiittisten prosessien, kuten tunnereaktioiden kautta niin psykologisella kuin neurobiologisella tasolla.</p>			
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The reconstruction of fictional characters and our readerly engagement with them

A cognitive approach to Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The
Graveyard Book*

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1. Introduction

The innermost essence of fictional characters remains an ongoing debate among scholars. The main argument revolves around how much of their nature is dictated by the text and how much is determined by the reader. Despite the ontological debate, the reasons we care about fictional literary characters are not too different from why and how we care about real life people, especially considering people we have never met or likely never will. People care about fictional characters because humans tend to care about things that are important to them, which is usually themselves and other people (Guthrie 3). Nevertheless, since caring about a fictional character in the aforementioned sense does not require identification or even positive affection on behalf of the reader, I will hence employ a more accurate term, that is “engagement” (Eder et al. 47; see also Polvinen and Sklar 7). This engagement occurs in our minds and brains due to how they are constructed and inevitably intertwined with reading (see Gallese and Goldman 497–499; Williams et al. 287; Keyser et al. 234). Our brains, synapses and neurons are prone to inevitable processing and problem solving, whenever we encounter new information and to an extent, our brains do not distinguish whether that information is fictional or factual. In this thesis, I aim to show that the characters of Coraline Jones in *Coraline* and Nobody Owens in *The Graveyard Book* can only be reconstructed by acknowledging and accepting the dual effect of components from the main two approaches in character studies: de-humanizing and humanizing. I furthermore aim to illustrate that the reasons why and how we engage with these characters is for the most part inevitable and much alike the engagement we form towards real life people. By verbalizing the processes of the mind, it can be shown that this readerly engagement is due and highly dependent on the psychological and neurobiological operations which we undergo mainly unconsciously upon reading about fictional characters.

In the analysis of the aforementioned protagonists I apply views from both main approaches in character studies, since I argue they are ultimately complementary rather than conflicting. The de-humanizing approach emphasizes the semiotic, semantic and the structural value of a character as a textual construction, while the humanizing approach perceives fictional characters not to be as bound to the textual level and stresses the importance of the cognitive abilities of the reader. I consider Coraline and Nobody to exist in between these definitions; not only as textual phenomena nor as being independent creations of the readers mind. In support of this view, my thesis builds upon Jonathan Culpeper’s “cognitive stylistic approach” (251), which considers both the importance of the text and the reader in the dynamic cycle of comprehension and in the reconstruction of a fictional character (255–73).

In addition to the linguistic analysis and close reading of both stories, I discuss the relevance of certain theories, which illustrate the extralinguistic operations of the reader's mind, such as Lisa Zunshine's Theory of Mind and Alan Palmer's notion of *fictional minds*, both of which primarily take into account the fundamental concepts of real minds as a basis for interpreting and constructing the mental functioning of fictional characters (Zunshine 6–7, 22–26; Palmer: *Fictional Minds* 45, *The Social Minds in the Novel* 2–9). A dualistic approach describes my standpoint towards the characters of Coraline and Nobody. This thesis does not take into account the genre of Young Adult fantasy in particular, thus the differences between an adult reader and a child reader. I see the reconstruction of a fictional character not to be bound to any specific genre and my argument focuses solely on the adult reader to retain a coherent, explicit focus throughout.

As was mentioned, in respect to Culpeper's view of the dualistic nature of fictional characters, my thesis discusses both aspects. I first consider the textual elements of *Coraline*. These textual elements function as "bottom-up" processes, which prompt the comprehension of the reader based on what she sees (Culpeper 261). From this perspective, the character of Coraline commences from examining word choices, linguistic forms and the organization of the text such as focalization and metaphorical language. This *bottom-up* approach to a fictional character ultimately generates extralinguistic operations such as assumptions and judgments (Culpeper 261). As Blakey Vermeule appropriately summarizes, fictional characters are "the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented" (xii). The analysis then discusses *The Graveyard Book* from a "top-down" viewpoint (Culpeper 261) in addressing the protagonists' mind, mental functioning, context and the readers' extralinguistic knowledge, which are not as restricted to the textual layer of the book. From a *top-down* perspective, the character of Nobody reconstructs based on the reader's extralinguistic knowledge about real people and the world. This approach ultimately connects to the textual fabric of the story, since none of the mental operations begin to function without explicit or implicit textual cues.

These approaches can be further deciphered with such terms as deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning. The *bottom-up* approach agrees with deductive reasoning; first there is a premise, followed by another, followed by an inference. As an example, Coraline lives with her parents and she has toys. Therefore, Coraline is a minor or a child. This demonstrates how an understanding of Coraline is built upon certain textual premises, which lead to a conclusion that is logical and true. This exemplifies how information is processed when the reader consciously focuses on the textual dimension in which a fictional character evidently exists. The *top-down*

approach in turn embodies inductive reasoning, which is the opposite of deductive. Inductive reasoning makes broad generalizations from specific observations. As an example, Nobody is a child. Nobody is brave. Therefore, all children are brave. Although this example illustrates how misleading inductive reasoning might be at times, it conveniently describes how the human mind tends to function in a *top-down* fashion. The reader automatically assumes, explains and attempts to rationalize the incoming information about Nobody, who is a fictional character, but seems to embody qualities which are typically associated with real people.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to provide potential explanations for the readerly engagement with Coraline and Nobody. The analysis is divided into the psychological and the neurobiological aspects. While the psychological aspect considers concepts such as Theory of Mind and Gossip, the neurobiological aspect discusses a potential neurobiological reason behind readerly engagement—mirror neurons—which is in close connection with the reader's emotional responses such as empathy and sympathy.

1.1. On Neil Gaiman

Neil Richard MacKinnon Gaiman (b. 1960) is a prolific English writer of both books and graphic novels for adults and children. He is the author of over thirty acclaimed works such as *The Sandman* (1989–2015), *Stardust* (1999), *Coraline* (2002), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005) to name a few. Many of his works have also been adapted for film, television and radio (*The view x*).

Gaiman has won numerous awards, including the Hugo, Nebula and Newbery. As for the books analyzed in this thesis, *Coraline* won the *Hugo award for Best Novella* (2003), the *Nebula Award for Best Novella* (2003) and the 2003 *Bam Stoker Award for Best Work for Young Readers*. *The Graveyard Book* was the winner of the *Hugo Award for Best Novel* (2009) and the first ever winner of both *The Carnegie* (2010) and *Newbery Medals* (2009)¹. The list of awards and nominations Gaiman has overall received seems to be endless. This demonstrates the extensive affection and appreciation both the readers and the literary scholars have towards him and his writing—and it is perhaps the reason why he has collaborated with many other authors, such as Terry Pratchett and Alan Moore and illustrators such as Dave McKean and

¹ Information retrieved from the American Library Association.
(ala.org/awardsgrants/content/graveyard-book-2)

Chris Riddell. In addition to all this, Gaiman has also written scripts for the famously known *Doctor Who* (Kane and O'Regan 29).

Gaiman's collection *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction* offers a survey into the author's mind. The book is not an autobiography, but rather an "enthralling collection of nonfiction essays on a myriad of topics—from art and artists to dreams, myths, and memories—observed in [Gaiman's] probing, amusing, and distinctive style"² or as Gaiman himself describes it

a motley bunch of speeches and articles, introductions and essays. Some of them are serious and some of them are frivolous and some of them are earnest and some of them I wrote to try and make people listen. You are under no obligation to read them all, or to read them in any particular order... There is writing in here about things and people that are close to my heart. There's some of my life in here, too: I tend to write about things from wherever I am standing, and that means I include possibly too much me in the things I write. (*The View* 2–3)

This piece of writing speaks volumes. Neil Gaiman is a self-described "feral child who was raised in libraries"³ and tends to export his ideas and personality into whatever he writes. An even more accurate description of this feral child is given by Andrew O'Hehir "If there is any contemporary cognate to the kind of literary celebrity once enjoyed, in as vastly different cultural setting, by Charles Dickens or Leo Tolstoy, it is surely found in Neil Gaiman" ("Trigger Warning").

1.2. *Coraline*

I had typed the name Caroline, and it came out wrong. I looked at the word *Coraline*, and knew it was someone's name. I wanted to know what happened to her. (xiv)

— Neil Gaiman in the foreword of *Coraline*

Coraline is an eleven-year-old girl with a grand attitude. She is clever, curious and snarky. Soon after she and her family move into a new house, she finds herself terribly bored in these new surroundings. Her parents are either working all the time or busy making up weird recipes (7). In an attempt to entertain herself, Coraline starts to explore the house and discovers a small door at the corner of the drawing room. At first it seems like the door goes nowhere; behind it is a brick wall. However, a couple days later the door opens to a dark hallway.

² A book overview of *The Graveyard Book* from Harper Collins Canada. (harpercollins.ca/9780062262264/the-view-from-the-cheap-seats/)

³ A citation from the author's official website, under section "Biography".

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* is a story about a young girl who finds herself in a parallel world. She goes through a hallway behind a door in her house and discovers herself in what seems to be her house, only that everything seems a little different. She finds a woman in the kitchen, who bears a striking resemblance to her mother. She claims to be Coraline's *other mother* (26). This woman, also known as *the beldam* (83), desperately wants to love Coraline and insists that she stays with her in the other home. However, in order to stay, Coraline would have to let the other mother sew buttons on her eyes and very likely give up on her life and soul—and who knows what else—too. Not trembling in front of the frightening beldam, Coraline declines to stay. Consequently, she finds her real parents missing and it is obvious who has kidnapped, or *grown-up-napped*, them (52). Coraline starts her adventure and arguably becomes the bravest and smartest young girl since Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, when she finally defeats the malicious other mother and saves her real parents.

Neil Gaiman has been very open about the fact that he borrowed several details of the story from his own life. He “borrowed bits” from his childhood, like the layout of the flat (“Origins of Coraline” 00:01:07) in which he was living as a child and the mysterious door which really was in the drawing room of their house (Afterword 7). He has also told that her daughter Holly, who was around 4 years old at the time, was especially keen in dictating her own stories to her father. These stories were often about “young girls, very much like Holly”. Gaiman tried looking for “really good scary books for four-year olds” but could not find anything so he began writing one himself (“Origins of Coraline” 00:00:19–00:00:56).

Six years after starting *Coraline*, by the time Holly was 15 years old and her youngest daughter Maddy 10 years old, Gaiman finally started writing *Coraline* again upon realizing that otherwise Maddy “would be too old for it by the time I was done”. (Foreword xv) It eventually took him 10 years to finish the story. *Coraline* respectively begins with a dedication

I started this for Holly

I finished it for Maddy

to illustrate how important it was for Gaiman to write this story for his daughters. He wanted to tell them something he wish he had known as a boy—“that being brave didn't mean you weren't scared, really scared, badly scared, and you did the right thing anyway” (Foreword xvii).

1.3. *The Graveyard Book*

The man Jack is invading a family home. He kills the whole family except for a child roughly 18 months at that time, who miraculously makes an escape to a nearby graveyard. The child is quickly surrounded by ghosts who are in awe of this unusual guest in the middle of the night. The mother of the child, or what is left of her spirit, makes an urgent plea to the graveyard before disappearing “Protect my son!” (15). A childless ghost-couple, Mr. and Mrs. Owens, feel compassionate towards the distressed mother and eventually consent to take care of the child. And so begins the story of the child, who “looks like nobody but himself” (25), hence named Nobody Owens, among supernatural entities, in between worlds and in between life and death.

The Graveyard Book, hence *TGB*, depicts the enchanting events of a boy who grows up in a graveyard with ghosts and other supernatural beings. Nobody (more commonly known as Bod) is appointed a guardian called Silas, who is arguably a vampire, and the only one who can leave the grounds and get food for the living child. Since Bod is infinitely interested in his surroundings and the inhabitants of both the graveyard and the world outside, he is bound to encounter the evil as well. The man Jack who murdered his family, belongs to a larger organization “The Jacks of all Trades” or “the Knaves” (270). This fraternal organization tried and is still trying to kill Bod, since one of their members predicted thousands of years ago that someone like Bod, who “would walk the borderland between the living and the dead... would mean the end of our Order and all we stand for” (271). It is never revealed what this precisely means, but the imbalance of these opposing worlds culminates into an epic confrontation in which Bod ultimately defeats every last Jack. In the end of the story, Bod is “about fifteen” and starts to notice that his supernatural abilities are starting to disappear (298). It is time for him to leave the graveyard.

In his 2009 Newbery Medal Speech, Gaiman tells that *The Graveyard Book* was “inspired by one image”, which was the sight of his son “Michael, who was two... on his tricycle, pedaling through the graveyard across the road in sunshine, past the grave I once thought had belonged to a witch” (*The View* 23). In the acknowledgements of *TGB* he also highlights the “enormous debt” which he owes to Rudyard Kipling and his work *The Jungle Book* (311). The story of Nobody Owens took Gaiman more than “twenty-something years” to write (*ibid.*), since at that time he felt that the book was “a better idea than I was a writer” (*The View* 23). He explains that the book is ultimately about such issues he could not have understood (well enough to write

about) before “discovering the big glorious tragedy of being a parent” (“on writing *The Graveyard Book*“ 00:04:23).

2. On Children’s literature

In reality, childhood is deep and rich. It’s vital, mysterious, and profound. I remember my *own* childhood vividly. . . . I knew terrible things. . . . But I mustn’t let adults *know* I knew. . . . I would scare them. (80)

—Maurice Sendak, in Art Spiegelman’s *In the Dumps*

Children’s literature has been and to an extent still remains quite didactic; it is expected to export important values to their addressees. This is also brought up by Perry Nodelman who exemplifies that the category implies much more about the text itself than about its intended audience (3). This makes the category *children’s literature* unusual, since it does not typically denote the same as other literary categories, e.g. women’s literature or Victorian literature. The canon of children’s literature inherently contains “the needs of children”, which in turn causes how children’s literature is written, sold, published and bought by adults (Lesnik-Oberstein 23).

Both *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* are targeted and promoted for young readers. Nevertheless, I see them more accurately targeting the adult audience. Therefore the focus here is not to analyze the genre and complexity of children’s literature profoundly, but to offer a compact yet comprehensive account on how children’s literature can be defined and how it can be understood in the sense of the broader literary canon. The account of children’s literature further clarifies the contrast between traditional children’s literature and the modern fairytale, which I consider both *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* to represent in addressing a more mature audience.

2.1. What is children’s literature?

Modern children’s literature can be classified in two ways: as a genre or as a category of literature for certain aged readers (Lesnik-Oberstein 15). These classifications complete each other and are therefore often analyzed together. Both concepts undeniably contribute to the meaning, effect and purpose of literature. On attempting to further define children’s literature, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein claims that it

...lies at the heart of its endeavor: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a reading audience: children. The definition of 'children's literature' therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this

is supposed to connect it with that reading audience—'children'—with which it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned. (15)

In the broadest sense then, children's literature denotes whatever children enjoy reading, whether it be science fiction, poetry or even plays. Primarily placing the child in the focus, there are two more core elements in this field of study: the literature and the adult critics (Hunt 15). The relationship between these agents is complex, partly because all these concepts are hard enough to define individually, not to mention being intertwined with each other. Furthermore, adults need to *construct the child* in order to discuss and analyse the books, which are assumed to convey something 'good' for the audience. As Peter Hunt well summarizes, these "tensions which are generated are fundamental to the way in which we think and talk about the subject" (15).

There are distinguishable and widely agreed upon main genres in this literary canon such as fantasy, fables, moral tales, problem novels and adventure stories which have existed since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when children's literature was first established "as a separate part of print culture" (Grenby 1). However, the foundation of children's literature lays in stories originally intended for adults. The story-telling tradition functioned as a relief from the everyday troubles of life for adults. Then in turn, they told these stories to their children, but moderated them. Often, for example sexual references and violence were reduced so that important life lessons could be imported to children, who needed to be cautioned about misbehaving and prepared for the future (Bottigheimer 125).

The quintessential definition of children's literature is in a constant flux. Both of the concepts included are fundamentally dynamic in nature and continue to expand and change form in light of historical, cultural and the socioeconomic senses

[...] the histories of children's books worldwide demonstrate tensions between educational, religious and political exercises of power on the one hand, and various concepts associated with 'freedom' (notably fantasy and the imagination) on the other. The literatures that result demonstrate very clearly those societies' concepts of childhood and its power-relationship to adult. (Hunt 6)

Aidan Chambers argues that in children's literature, likewise in everything considered as literature, "we find the best of the human imagination, and the most useful means by which we come to grips with our ideas about ourselves and what we are" (16). In this sense, there is no clear division between any literature and children's literature in particular. Although some

motives in children's literature might differentiate from those targeted for adults, there are no ultimate gatekeepers to dictate what a unique reader enjoys or how they experience literature.

2.2. The modern fairytale

As was mentioned, *Coraline* and *the Graveyard book* are categorized for young readers, but simultaneously targeted to the adult audience. *Coraline* is a dark fantasy novella, comprising of 160 pages. The 2012 edition utilized in this thesis includes “wonderful, beautiful, funny and creepy”⁴ illustrations⁵ by Dave McKean. *The Graveyard book*, hence *TGB*, a young adult fantasy novel, 309 pages, also includes illustrations⁶ by none other than Dave McKean. Both the books represent the aforementioned constant flux in which the tradition of the fairytale is in. These stories represent modern ideas about children's literature and diverge from the typical assumptions of the identities of the audience.

The dark tone in both if these books is unavoidably present with elements such as murdering one's family or sewing buttons onto someone's eyes and sucking the life out of them. Gaiman, true to his style, escapes these unwritten restrictions and expectations that literature, or fairytales for young readers tend to have. I argue the aforementioned dark tone in these books stems from the fact that these child protagonists are largely all alone in distressing situations. As an example, no adult believes Coraline, not even the police. She has to save her parents who in the end have no recollection of what happened, thus cannot support their child. Bod, on the other hand, is surrounded by ghosts who are unable to even interact with him as the living could. Although he receives some help in defeating his archenemy, the final outcome depends on him and his actions. Coraline and Bod illustrate that a child can be brave even if they are afraid and alone in the most daunting situations and experiences. Contrary to the traditional view of children's literature as something that educates but protects (see Bottigheimer 125), *Coraline* and *TGB* are straightforward in their depictions of death, violence and suffering.

Another modern element in *Coraline* and *TGB* is that they have another explicit target audience in addition to children, that is adults. Gaiman addresses the adult readers with literary, philosophical and historical references. For example, literary references include character's names from Shakespeare's plays such as Portia and Ophelia (*Coraline*) or historical figures

⁴ Neil Gaiman's official website and personal blog, posted 22.1.2002.

⁵ Twenty-four images per page with illustrations.

⁶ Twenty-two images spread into 34 pages.

such as *The Duke of Westminster* or *Harry Truman (TGB)*. The mode of simultaneously addressing both children and adult is what Barbara Wall describes as “dual address” in narratives (9). The intertextual layers in both books illustrate how Neil Gaiman expresses his love for fiction. Both *Coraline* and *TGB* are stories about storytelling. *Coraline* can be seen as a parallel to Alice and her adventures in *Through the Looking-Glass*, whereas *TGB* is an extended homage to Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. Further intertextuality addressed to adults in *TGB* is the name Owens, as in *Nobody Owens* and his adoptive parents Mr. and Mrs. Owens. This can be seen as a reference to Agatha Christie’s chilling *And Then There Were None*, where a man, Mr. U.N. Owen lures ten people into an island. All of them die under unnatural circumstances. Whether this is a conscious reference on the author’s behalf or not, my interpretation is that it is certainly not meant to be understood by children.

The reason why *Coraline* and *TGB* are depictions of the modern fairytale lie in their intentions. These stories do have important values and morals to pass on the young reader, such as facing obstacles, being good, fair and brave, but they also include a completely different world that is only available to the adult reader. This dimension calls for implicit and explicit knowledge and experience of life and people, which is unachievable to a child. Although dual address is not uncommon in contemporary children’s literature, it is frequently an indication of the purpose of the story. *Coraline* and *TGB* are not simply books for educating or entertaining children, but stories that urge the adult reader to reflect her extralinguistic knowledge into what she reads. I thus consider these stories offering an exclusive opportunity for the adult reader to grasp the core of these stories through the offered interconnective affordances.

3. On fictional characters

As John Frow well states, the full complexity of defining what a fictional character is in the literary narrative has been dodged both by the de-humanizing and the humanizing approaches:

The concept [of a fictional character] is both ontologically and methodologically ambivalent; and any attempt to resolve this ambivalence by thinking character either as merely the analogue of a person or as merely a textual function avoids coming to terms with the full complexity of the problem. (227)

The particular problem with fictional characters is their perceived nature as “both the conveyor and the product . . . [which makes it] very difficult to tell where characters end, plots begin and vice versa” (Varis 10). Further contributing to the issue is the collaboration between the narrative and the reader which creates infinite variations due to the uniqueness of the author,

the reader and the narrative. Despite the possible variations, the narrative works closely with the reader and therefore it would be too vague an argument in any case to regard a fictional character as either a textual element or as an overextended illusion of a real person created solely by the reader's mind.

The de-humanizing approaches of structuralism, semiotics and semantics have acknowledged that there is a linguistic function or a convention in the narrative called 'a character', which is bound to its textual existence. For example, a character is seen merely as an agent restricted by the causal events in the narrative (see Rimmon-Kenan 36) or as a sign/combination of signs, which varies in meaning from page to page (see Varis 15). The de-humanizing approach considers characters to be dependent of the text and having little if any value beyond the purely linguistic research (see e.g. Knights 18⁷). In support of this view, Terry Eagleton points out that fictional characters do not have an existence, or "pre-history" before we encounter them (45). On the contrary, the humanizing approaches stress the importance of the reader's mind and its abilities in the construction of characters. The extreme view is that fictional characters *are* real people (see e.g. Mead 442⁸, Bradley 264⁹). According to this view, the reader draws on assumptions, utilizes cognitive frames and is affected by sympathy and empathy. The humanizing approaches propose that fictional characters are primarily derived results of the readers' extralinguistic knowledge and consider them as matters of interest in e.g. cognitive psychology (Zunshine 4). As a result of these main conflicts, problems and gaps in the research, fictional characters are often somewhat ignored and only analyzed as a part of the narrative, the whole.

The division of the humanizing and the de-humanizing views is further elaborated by James Phelan. He divides the audience's interests and responses into three components: the mimetic, synthetic and thematic (5). Mimetic response involves an audience's "interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible" (5). Mimetic responses describe the reader's personal and imaginative connection with a fictional character, since it includes "our evolving judgments and emotions, our desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments" (Phelan 5). On the other hand, synthetic responses involve the audience's "interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs" (Phelan 6). The thematic component describes

⁷ Knights argues that characters in Shakespeare's play are nothing more than parts of the verbal layout.

⁸ "[W]e recognize, understand and appreciate fictional characters insofar as their appearances, actions, and speech reflect or refer to those of persons in real life".

⁹ He discusses characters in *King Lear* as if they were real people.

responses to an ideological representation, thus to a combination of the mimetic and the synthetic components (Phelan 6). All these three components are intertwined with each other, thus are not exclusive as Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz well argue

Our position is that we should eliminate the competition between these positions by recognizing that character has both mimetic and synthetic components— and thematic components as well. Characters do resemble possible people, are artificial constructs that perform various functions in the progression, and they can function to the political, philosophical, or ethical issues being taken up by the narrative. (111)

Merja Polvinen and Howard Sklar have continued research on fiction and fictional characters on the basis of this tradition. Their cognitive-rhetorical theory embraces the multidimensionality of fictional characters as both rhetorically and cognitively conceptualized entities (6–7). They illustrate the varying responses to a fictional character based on an empirical study¹⁰, which were mixed with mimetic and synthetic conceptions and emotions (see Polvinen and Sklar 7–13). This further demonstrates that neither approach alone, defining a fictional character as a purely linguistic construction or as a real person, is not adequate to illustrate the fundamental nature of characters in fiction.

Another account on the issues of characterization is offered by Jonathan Culpeper. He vividly describes the rooted dichotomy in character studies as “throw[ing] the baby out with the bathwater” (252), which denotes the total rejection of anything but the only true explanation and the denial of a possible mixed approach to fictional characters. Culpeper also belongs to a division of scholars who suggest that there is no need to completely reject anything, since the truth tends to lie in the middle (257). This thesis supports this mixed approach as I aim to demonstrate that *Coraline* and *Nobody* cannot be simply defined as either textual elements nor as independent creations of mind, since the concept of a fictional character ultimately embodies both definitions (see e.g. Rimmon-Kenan 35). A print on a paper will remain static without the participation of the reader as well as characteristics created solely by the mind, not considered as intertwined to the textual elements, do not possess a character. Since the reader’s comprehension is undeniably cyclic, both approaches to characterization must be considered; the *bottom-up* processes which describe comprehension achieved by the text and the *top-down* processes which describe comprehension achieved by previous knowledge and the evident functions of the mind (Culpeper 261).

¹⁰ In which they consider how young readers responded to the protagonist Charlie, in Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*.

4. The case studies

The following chapter focuses and analyzes the protagonists of my primary materials. First, I will provide a detailed *bottom-up* examination of Coraline, which exemplifies the process of characterization prompted primarily by the textual level of the story (Culpeper 261). The analysis of Coraline will highlight the significance of various textual choices, that ultimately affect the reader in the character reconstruction. This approach thus considers a fictional character to be primarily a compound of textual features. However, these features evidently prompt the extralinguistic knowledge of the reader, which is applied to complete the reconstruction. Consequently, the reader is engaged with something that is not just a drop of ink on a paper, nor an independent creation of the reader's mind. With the character of Nobody Owens I aim to provide a slightly diverging account on character reconstruction. The *top-down* view primarily considers the readers habitual tendencies, or in other words the extralinguistic knowledge which primarily guides the reader to regard a fictional character and their fictional mind similarly to real minds (Culpeper 261). This approach humanizes the character and the represented fictional mind by considering the characters' textual dimension and existence as secondary.

These two different approaches intend to expose some of the triggers created both by the textual layers of these works and the readers' mental operations. My intention is to illustrate that fictional characters such as Coraline Jones or Nobody Owens cannot be adequately understood or described solely through the humanizing or the de-humanizing approaches in character studies. This chapter focuses on demonstrating how inextricably intertwined the two main approaches in character studies are; the textual dimension inevitably has an effect on the extralinguistic dimension and vice versa. The opposing views on characterization are ultimately complementary rather than conflicting considering the reconstruction of Coraline and Nobody. I acknowledge that the dichotomy in this analysis remains rather artificial, since the boundaries and directions of information processing are tenuous and in constant flux. Thus, the information processing of the human mind cannot be distinguished as being unidirectional, or even verbalized at times. Nevertheless, this division has been utilized in an attempt to demonstrate that despite the primary angle from which these characters are approached, they both evidently exist somewhere between the scale of an object and a person and hence internalize both categorizations.

4.1. Coraline Jones: You had me at *Hullo*

The analysis of Coraline moves forward from smaller textual devices such as the proper name, onomatopoeia and descriptions into larger entities such as focalization and metaphorical language. These textual elements function as *bottom-up* processes, which prompt the comprehension of the reader based on what she sees (Culpeper 261). From this perspective, the character of Coraline commences from examining word choices, linguistic forms and the organization of the text.

4.1.1. From words to descriptions

The first line of the story captures the reader, for a name becomes the center of attention: “CORALINE DISCOVERED THE DOOR a little while after they moved into the house” (1). The reader has already reached the point of no return, to quote Roland Barthes: “As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun to flow toward and fasten onto), the semes become predicates, inductors of truth, and the Name becomes the subject” (191). As a result, the need for supplementary information about *the name* arises.

The first foregrounded literary device composed of words that provides information about Coraline is called onomatopoeia. All onomatopoeic words in the story are represented as something she hears, whether it connects to inanimate objects or something her neighbor says. A word that reflects, imitates or more precisely “resembles the sound that it names”, is defined as “direct onomatopoeia” (Bredin 558). It involves “a relation between a specific verbal sound and a sound that is in some way an aspect of meaning: a denoted sound, a sound associated with the denotation, or a sound property constituting part of the connotation, of the onomatopoeic word” (Bredin 568). This textual element is a tailor-made device to attract the reader’s attention “to the surface form of the text” (Culpeper 269). The amount of effort invested in rationalizing these abnormalities in turn strengthen their interpretations (Culpeper 270), which in this case increases the reader’s knowledge and awareness of the protagonist. The influence of onomatopoeia is both explicit and implicit. Distinctive words can be easily detected from the text, but their causal effect goes beyond the reader’s arrested attention. The focus is drawn on Coraline and she gains the expressional power as she becomes a mediator.

Coraline is the only character who hears something in the middle of the night go “*kreeee. aaaak*” (8) and the only one who hears the door make “a loud *clunk*” (56) when opened, or the key “*Chink*” (23) when she reaches for it standing on a chair. Coraline’s character is uplifted from a name into a medium of experience; the representations on a paper reflect what she hears.

If the onomatopoeic words were replaced with plain descriptions, it would draw the reader further away from Coraline, thus giving the expressional power to the narrator. In the following passage, the peculiar upstairs neighbour complains about his mouse circus to Coraline and how their show is not progressing according to plan: “All the songs I have written for the mice to play go *oompah*. But the white mice will only play *toodle oodle*, like that” (2). Rather than being a direct representation of her neighbour’s words, I believe the line represents what Coraline hears and her interpretation of whatever sounds Mr. Bobo utters. If *go oompah* was replaced with a description such as ‘marching music’ and *toodle oodle* with ‘piping’, this excerpt would exclude Coraline, and diminish her status from a reflector into an observer. As a reflector, she is in charge of what she perceives and mediates, while the role of an observer would restrict her perceived subjective experience and the reader’s focused attention towards her. The textual device of onomatopoeia thus imperceptibly grants Coraline the ability to sense and more importantly a reason for the reader to assume so.

Further attention towards the character is achieved through patterns of descriptions, or more precisely, implicit patterns. Even though Coraline is the protagonist and the reflector, she is not externally described in the book beyond what she wears in a few instances and that she has “hazel eyes” (77). Due to these textual gaps, the reader never finds out exactly how old she is, whether she is tall or short, or what she looks like. Nevertheless, complementing “places of indeterminacy” (Ingarden 173) is unconscious and immediate for the reader, who does not require much before she begins to attribute a character with intentions, desires and features (Zunshine 22). These textual gaps create a similar pattern as does the onomatopoeia, but instead of being bound to specific words, the pattern is implicit on the textual level and is “no longer an object to be defined, but . . . an effect to be experienced” (Iser 10). Since Coraline goes shopping clothes for school with her mother (21–22), she is likely a child and since she needs a chair to reach a key her mother hung on top of the doorframe (23), she is likely shorter than her adult mother. Despite these examples of filling out the textual gaps are rather banal, they clearly illustrate the importance and relevance of the fundamental processes of the reader’s mind when encountering a fictional character without explicit features. Instead of hindering the reconstruction of Coraline, the textual gaps and lack of descriptions contribute in the process. The reader has to fill in what the textual level leaves out, thus create the meaning as an image (Iser 9). This filling “represents a basic condition of communication” (Iser 9) and consequently makes the mind of the reader function as it would in a real-life situation. The reader gives attention to the character, because it requires personal investment from her pre-existing

knowledge of what children are like in the broad sense. Despite lacking explicit descriptions, Coraline embodies “personality traits”, which Seymour Chatman sees as essential to a fictional character (110). For example, ‘Coraline is an explorer’, or ‘she is curious’ These traits arise both by textual and non-textual cues. Coraline being an explorer is mentioned multiple times in the text, whereas her perceived curiosity descends from represented actions; she is immensely interested of her surroundings, constantly searching and examining something. Coraline being curious is therefore an association created by the reader based on textual gaps. This exemplifies how the character of Coraline, already at this stage, escapes the restrictions of a purely linguistic construction as she is not simply a name, a combination of words or a sum of explicit features. The majority of her features, either external or internal, are realized by the reader not the text.

Another contributing factor increasing the perception of Coraline as more than a textual element is the contrast between the quality of descriptions between her and the other characters, for example the round-shaped two former actresses from downstairs, “with a number of ageing Highland terriers” (1) and Mr. Bobo, the “crazy old man with a big mustache” (2) from upstairs who is training a mouse circus. The reader knows what the other characters look like, but does not receive information about their innermost being, thoughts or senses. All the other characters thus fit into a certain stereotype, which resonate with the reader. The downstairs neighbours are *the crazy dog ladies*, the upstairs neighbour is *the weird foreigner*, Coraline’s parents are *the absent parents* and her other parents represent a stereotype of a dominant, unequal relationship. The character of Coraline does not as straightforwardly evoke any classifications; she is more complex than that. Due to this distinction between her and the other characters, Coraline has the possibility to develop, as she is not bound to such categories, thus has no reader’s expectations to fulfill. On the contrary, the other characters seem one-dimensional types or caricatures built around a single “idea or quality”, trait or obsession (Forster 75–80) which act according to stereotypes and hence do not attract the reader’s attention, since they blend in with the background (Culpeper 266). The contrast between Coraline and the other characters creates a distinction between “flatness” and “roundness” (Forster 75–85). Coraline has the possibility to develop and experience, which according to E.M. Forster defines her as a round, interesting character, whereas the other characters who are doomed to play their predictable part in the story remain flat and imperceptible.

Coraline can be furthermore described as “a psychological narrative”, in which a character dominates (Todorov 67). The less the dominating feature, here Coraline, is described the more the reader must contribute to it beyond the textual level. The proper name, onomatopoeia and

various traits connected to Coraline establish “a unity in diversity . . . on which the effect we call ‘character’ depends” (Rimmon-Kenan 42).

4.1.2. Focalization and the ideology of a child

I propose focalization, or “perspectival filter” (Jahn 94) functions as a reward to the reader in *Coraline*. It awards the reader for paying attention to the character of Coraline with the submission of narrative information, which allows her to become “a witness rather than the narrator’s communicative addressee” (Jahn 96). According to Gerard Genette, there are three main types of focalization in the narrative: zero, internal or external (189–90). Gaiman’s *Coraline* employs fixed internal focalization. *Internal* signifies that the events are narrated through a story-internal character and *fixed* specifies that the events are narrated through a single story-internal character, Coraline (see Genette 189–90). Although Genette provides a steady foundation for focalization, his classifications have been deemed too visually oriented and therefore further research has been more accepting towards the term “apperception” instead (see for Jahn 101). This term considers “both the interpretative nature of perception and one’s understanding something in “frames” of previous experience” (Jahn 101), which is logical since it is nearly impossible to deny that subjective human properties have a direct impact on perception.

The fixed focalization or the apperception of Coraline draws the reader closer and functions as a teasing, urging invitation for her to imagine situations and emotions. The events in the story are seen from within. The reader is only able to see, feel and smell through Coraline and only share her thoughts, emotions and views. The story “thrusts itself in the reader’s consciousness” (Vermeule 41), thus the reader becomes closely bundled and emotionally attached with Coraline as she offers the only perspective on the situations.

The following excerpt describes what Coraline sees— a door, which seems to be responding to her gaze. The reader is invited to feel conflicted and confused. Doors are inanimate, thus do not look at anything: “She walked into the drawing room and looked at the door. She had the feeling that the door was looking at her, which she knew was silly, and knew on a deeper level was somehow true” (54). The passage reveals not only an experience from Coraline’s perspective, but also how she feels and rationalizes the puzzling situation. She acknowledges that the idea of the door looking at her is silly but nevertheless somehow true. The confusing sensation, especially that of a child’s, is perhaps easier to express through another subject. Coraline is too perplexed to pay full attention to her own bodily movements or subjective feelings. She might not understand that another emotion, such as fear diverts her focus. The perplexment of a child

is visible in regard to Coraline's other sensations as well. She defies her mother by further investigating the mysterious door in the drawing room: "Coraline put her hand on the doorknob and turned it; and, finally, she opened the door . . . There was a cold, musty smell coming through the open doorway: it smelled like something very old and very slow" (24). The adjectives 'old' and 'slow' do not fit in the frame of odours. These descriptive words stem from Coraline's confusion, once more feeding into the reader's sympathetic attitude towards her. What she smells, is likely unpleasant and the reader might already guess there is something sinister at the end of the hallway, while Coraline is driven by her child-like curiosity and only hinted of the future by her inexplicable sensations.

The previous examples of focalization illustrate how the reader invests interpretative effort in the focalizer. Coraline is a child, thus the story focalized through her might be confusing at times. She does not have the ability to express her sensations directly or precisely, but nevertheless the reader has a need to attempt understanding the only perspective offered to her. In addition to the engaging child-like puzzlement, focalization reveals Coraline's stance towards adults; they lie and do not make sense. When the other mother assures sewing buttons on Coraline's eyes will not hurt, she hesitates: "Coraline knew that when grown-ups told you something wouldn't hurt it almost always did" (43). This passage reveals the perspective of a child and a childlike tendency to generalize all adults into a group of unreliable, confusing people. For the most part, Coraline has to figure her way out of situations on her own, since adults tend to ignore her. This could perhaps explain her suspicious attitude towards them. Coraline does not consider the peculiarity of adults to derive from the fact that she is young and has a restricted knowledge compared to them, but simply because they do not understand the differences between children and adults: "Coraline wondered why so few of the adults she had met made any sense. She sometimes wondered who they thought they were talking to" (18). The ideology of a child, thus the juxtaposition between children and adults is almost palpable. Coraline acknowledges that she is a child, which adults either try to take advantage of or disregard completely. Her perspective gains even more credibility, since it is rather easy to accept her stance towards adults who have systematically let her down in a way or another.

Even though focalization and apperception are expressed through language in a text, it is nevertheless a non-verbal component (Rimmon-Kenan 85), an effect. Focalization in *Coraline* is two-dimensional in nature. From a purely linguistic perspective, it retains a coherent focus on the protagonist through an appropriate use of pronouns and verbs. From the cognitive perspective, it invites the reader to understand Coraline and feel sympathy towards her. The

mind of the reader is engaged into an exercise, which requires the use of extralinguistic knowledge of other people and the complex human nature and sensations—especially that of a child’s, who is often forced to function in distressing situations.

4.1.3. Metaphorical language and Coraline’s consciousness

Coraline employs what Andrea Wylie defines a *restricted third person narrator* (116), since the narrative perspective is limited to a singular perspective and in this case of the protagonist. This type of narration “fosters a trusting and personal relationship between narrator and the narratee . . . that is ultimately deflected onto the character due to the anonymity of the narrator” (Wylie 116). In other words, the invisibility of the narrator creates a close bond between the reader and Coraline, thus ignoring the narrator as having a role in the communicative process. Due to the silent narrator, representations of Coraline’s thoughts seem to well up directly from her to the reader, without filtration. Her thoughts and descriptions of her sensations are filled with metaphors and similes, which affords the reader a new dimension of Coraline; she has a consciousness.

According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphorical language is an integral part of human communication (3). Marco Caracciolo further suggests that metaphorical language is a highly instrumental tool and can create an illusion that the reader is given an almost “unmediated access to the conscious experience of the focalizing character” and the possibility of “experiencing a storyworld *through* the consciousness of a fictional being” (61). This illusion is another potential force behind the reader’s sympathetic attitude towards Coraline and a logical extension from the fact that a character is after all always “reflected from or by real people in one way or another” (Varis 12).

The metaphorical language connected to Coraline is what I would define as age appropriate. It utilizes factual or material references which are more approachable—considering that she is a child—than completely abstract references. This systematic use of references in metaphors and similes representing Coraline’s sensations reflects “an idiosyncratic cognitive habit, a personal way of making sense of and talking about the world: in other words, a particular mind style” (Semino and Swindlehurst 147). Coraline has a distinctive, unique mind, which further invites the reader to fuse into a “mental imagery” from her perspective (Caracciolo 68). The next passage not only represents what Coraline sees, but also what Matthew Rattcliffe describes as “existential feelings” (2). The Beldam shows Coraline a vision of her real parents rejoicing

about their newfound freedom without a daughter, who they never actually loved. Coraline declines to believe in the vision, which enrages the Beldam

[Coraline] hoped that what she had just seen was not real, but she was not as certain as she sounded. There was a tiny doubt inside her, like a maggot in an apple core. Then she looked up and saw the expression on her other mother's face: a flash of real anger, which crossed her face like summer lightning, and Coraline was sure in her heart that what she had seen in the mirror was no more than an illusion. (61)

Existential feelings are distinctively different from emotions, since "they are affective in nature without being reducible to definite emotions" (Caracciolo and Guédon 52). Coraline is not only scared and uncertain, but her mood and feelings are complex. Metaphorical language does not attempt to capture her sensations in propositions, but rather rely on the reader's "familiarity with the relevant affective qualities" (Caracciolo and Guédon 53). Furthermore, Marco Caracciolo and Cecile Guédon stress the compactness of metaphors in the sense that they "fuse domains of experience that literal language and conceptual thinking tend to present as distinct and unrelated" (53). In the passage, the sensation of uncertainty is blended into the image of a maggot in an apple core and the sensation of the Beldam's anger blended into the image of a summer lightning. This description renders "the integratedness of . . . consciousness where different perceptions converge *before* conceptual thinking begins its work of differentiation" (Caracciolo and Guédon 53). In conclusion, the representation of Coraline's consciousness creates or reinforces the empathetic closeness; the reader senses an unmediated access to the mind of a child and gives value to Coraline as a sentient being, who perceives, reasons and thinks.

If similes and metaphors were to be considered only as linguistic constructions conveying speech or thought, it would ignore that the "ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson 3). Moreover, from a purely linguistic perspective, metaphors and similes are lies, which simply "violate the semantic rules of a language", which makes metaphorical language meaningless unless processed beyond its textual nature (Taylor 132).

4.2. Nobody Owens: "You're *alive*, Bod. That means you have infinite potential" (179).

As was mentioned, the analysis of Nobody Owens as a fictional character will diverge from that of Coraline Jones. Nevertheless, the same type of analysis could be applied here too, and I

argue with similar implications (see e.g. Giovanelli 180–95¹¹). A shift in focus and angle in approach is necessary, since with *Nobody Owens* I aim to illustrate the opposite than with *Coraline*, as in how a “character frame” (see e.g. Fludernik 60–61) is established immediately upon meeting a fictional character for the first time (*top-down processing*) and only then adjusted according to the textual evidence and constructions (*bottom-up processing*). The analysis of *Nobody Owens* in a *top-down* fashion considers what a fictional character is primarily based on what the reader knows either explicitly or implicitly about life, real humans and their relationships, communication and environments (Culpeper 261).

4.2.1. Frame theory

Frame Theory (see e.g. Wolf 5; Fludernik 60–61; Palmer: *Social Minds* 24–27) holds that all mental activity is governed by cognitive *frames*, in other words, by “metaconcepts” which “enable us to interpret both reality and artefacts and hence other concepts that can be applied in perception, experience and communication” (Wolf 5). Literature is already in itself a “macro-frame” inside which further cognitive frames shape its production and reception (Fludernik 60–61). In other words, frame theory aims to illustrate how humans apply existing knowledge when encountering new information. Indeed, according to this theoretical framework, readers are able to follow narratives precisely due to our ability of filling out the blanks with our existing knowledge. As Palmer points out, in only few occasions is the reader able to extract the meaning of a sentence, since the meaning is often nowhere to be found within that sentence (*Social Minds* 25). Frame theory considers these processes of the mind to be in a constant flux; to be both *top-down* and *bottom-up* simultaneously. Therefore, the reader’s attention is under constant negotiation as well, moving backwards and forwards, when continually making adjustments to frames (*Social Minds* 25–26).

According to Frame theory, reading about a fictional character, the name and the descriptions quickly prompt an initial frame for that character—not as being a combination of letters or words, but as being a sentient entity. The human mind is swift in attributing thought processes, desires and beliefs for something that echoes familiarity of the real world. The frame of and for *Bod Owens* is created right at the beginning of the novel. There is *somebody* instead of *something* that requires the attention of the reader and gains a status of an entity with a body and a mind

¹¹ Giovanelli applies a cognitive stylistic approach to the opening of *The Graveyard Book* which illustrates e.g. how the reader is “positioned to adopt the narrator’s deictic perspectives [and therefore] has the potential to yield interesting and subtle interpretative effects” (192).

filled with mental functioning. Bod is only a child, not aware that there is somebody in their house, with a knife that violated his family-home and is eager to get him too:” The knife had done almost everything it was brought to that house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet (5). The Man Jack, who holds the knife, is keen to find his final target

The hunt was almost over. He had left the woman in her bed, the man on the bedroom floor, the older child in her brightly coloured bedroom, surrounded by toys and half-finished models. That only left the little one, a baby, barely a toddler, to take care of. One more and his task would be done. (7)

The setting is made clear right from the beginning. There is a ruthless killer chasing a defenseless baby. The text positions the reader in between two conceptualizations of pure evil and on the other hand the innocence and purity of a baby. The story triggers frames such as *horror story* and *good vs. evil*, which influences the reader’s further interpretation. The arising frames create expectations and function as interpretive guides for the reader. It is a natural and effortless reaction to side with the victim, or the one that is inherently good in nature, who in this case is the child (see Rahn 163–179¹²). Therefore, the baby, the child and eventually Nobody Owens gains the undivided devotion right from the beginning, as the situation seems unacceptable, horrendous, and unfair. The existing frame of this character—a child in his nappies, heading towards a graveyard—has gained grounds on existing knowledge, either general or personal, about what small children are like both in the internal and external sense. Another strong frame guiding the interpretation of the child is the elements of the supernatural and fictionality. In the real world, it is not likely that a toddler escapes a professional assassin or that he ends up in the care of supernatural entities. Upon the reader having knowledge and/or experience about genre-related conventions, it becomes evident that this foregrounded child becomes the protagonist of the story and of great importance to the whole narrative. The habitual tendencies of the reader will thus lead to a certain categorization of Nobody Owens: *Nobody* dying to be *Somebody*, in-between worlds, existence and identities.

The reader’s primary categorization is nevertheless susceptible to changes, because it is created for the most part in *top-down*, or inductive fashion. The human mind tends to make decisions inductively upon *feelings*, which means that our conclusions are often erroneous and remain to be negotiated. The assumptions and judgements are based on information derived from e.g. interaction with other humans, encounters with other characters in fictional worlds or

¹² She discusses the importance of societal and historical factors, which affect the fundamental functioning of the reader’s mind upon deciding what is and is not morally acceptable in children’s literature. In other words, she points out the similar interpretations between what is good or evil.

knowledge of genre conventions. Categorization may also be evoked from *bottom-up* perspective; from the texts descriptions of the “character’s dispositions and acts as stable and habitual” (Schneider 123) As Schneider points out, the reader will eventually have to readjust the “prejudicial implications of social categorizations” which leads to either de-categorization or suggesting a re-categorization of a character (126). De-categorization occurs, if categorization and individuation are both untenable in the presence of new information and force the reader to search for a new model from which to derive new expectations from. Re-categorization refers to the reader adjusting her mental image of a character in more positive terms (Schneider 125–26).

Nobody Owens exists in between categorizations. He is an orphan, a vulnerable child, but at the same time a heroic, independent person on who the ultimate resolution and victory lies upon. This illustrates how different categorization cues provide a mental model for a fictional character which is modified and extended throughout reading and eventually exist in several different categories (Schneider 123). This also reflects the process in how we “enrich” the mental models and reach states of “individuation” when observing real humans as well (Schneider 123).

4.2.2. The fictional mind

A second cognitive-driven strategy stemming from *top-down* processing concerns another fundamental human tendency: the need to attribute Nobody a mind of his own. Alan Palmer has addressed this aspect of characterization in his books *Fictional Minds* (2004) and *Social Minds in the Novel* (2010). In these works, he takes on a humanist approach to fictional minds and utilizes the many connections in his research concerning the study of real human minds, such as psychology, philosophy and cognitive science. Palmer brings up that much use has been made from “hard” cognitive sciences such as neuroscience, while the “soft” sciences, such as sociolinguistics have often been disregarded as irrelevant, (cf. Knapp 16, Herman 306–34) even though they complement each other in several ways. He further argues, that unlike the traditional dichotomy between the humanizing and the de-humanizing approaches in characterization, the division actually occurs between those “who explicitly see themselves as cognitivists and make use of real-mind discourses to study literary texts, and those who do not” (*Social Minds* 7). Palmer thus argues that the cognitive aspect functions as the basis in understanding fictional minds, whether this tool is explicitly applied in analysis or not. This is

due to his view of the mind as a *social mind*, which is “embodied, engaged and specific” (*Social Minds* 7).

Considering Nobody Owens as someone possessing a mind of his own, one must then consider *The Graveyard Book* as the primary location for where it descends from. Once again, inspired by Alan Palmer¹³, I present the following excerpt from *TGB* where Nobody is walking through the graveyard and sees two familiar characters

Bod wandered over to the north-western part of the graveyard, to the tangle of ivy that hung a yew tree and half-blocked the far exit from the Egyptian Walk. **He saw** a red fox and a large black cat with a white collar and paws, **who sat conversing together** in the middle of the path. At Bod’s approach **they looked up, startled**, then **fled** into the undergrowth, as if **they had been caught** conspiring.

Odd, he thought. **He had known** that fox since it had been a cub, and the cat **had prowled** through the graveyard for as long as **Bod could remember**. **They knew him**. If they were **feeling friendly**, they even **let him pet them**. (295, my emphasis)

The emboldened words of this passage represent the cognitive functioning of characters. Instead of spoken action, it mostly consists of physical action, body language, gestures and means of looks. Nobody, the fox and the cat are engaging in the complex act of mind reading without saying a word. Even though the above passage includes two animals, (whose characterization and mind-functioning are not the focus of this paper), this is essentially what Palmer implies with the notion of *social minds* in action; they are embodied and public, thus “available to each other without the need for speech” (*Social Minds* 2). Bod has a unique mind, which is and functions as part of a larger cognitive network, including other characters and context. In order to provide a richer and fuller account of how readers actually construct fictional characters, Palmer states the following

The first stage ... is to recognize that the fictional minds belonging to characters in novels do not function in a vacuum. As with real minds, fictional minds are only partially understood if a merely *internalist perspective* is applied to them. Fictional minds, like real minds, are part of extended cognitive networks. We will never understand how these individual fictional minds work if we cut them off from the larger collective minds to which they belong. (*Social Minds* 26)

In contrast to this externalist approach, many scholars have and continue to privilege the *internalist* approach on fictional minds. This aspect holds, that the mind and mental functioning are revealed as “private, passive, solitary and highly verbalized inner thought” in the narrative (*Social Minds* 9). The internalist view, such as the *speech category approach*, detaches the subject in question from its surroundings and emphasizes the importance of representations such as free indirect discourse, interior monologue or focalization (cf. McHale 258–60;

¹³ See chapter 1 of *Social Minds in the Novel* (1–34).

Fludernik 311). However, since readers “enter storyworlds primarily by attempting to follow the workings of the fictional minds contained in them” more focus needs to be allocated to the surroundings in which these minds function (*Social Minds* 9). This includes the plot and events of the narrative, which ultimately represent experiences of characters and refer to “the mental network behind them—the intentions, purposes, motives, and reasons for the actions” (*Social Minds* 9). In short, Palmer offers the form of a typical plot summary “character A performed action B because of their belief C and their desire D. This is a causal network because action B was caused by the mental events C and D” (*Social Minds* 9). This means that readers, in essence, follow the plot by following the character and the workings of their fictional minds (*Social Minds* 9).

Bod’s nature, or inevitable humanness, is even further progressed due to his relationship with his supernatural guardian Silas. The dichotomy between the mental workings of a child and an adult becomes visible in many conversations and occurrences between them, accentuating the understandable confusion on behalf of Bod. For example, when Silas is leaving from the graveyard to do something (which is obscure to the reader as well) we tend to side with Bod and attribute him a perplexed mind of a child, which fits to the existing frame of him.

‘But *why?*’ said Bod.

‘I told you. I need to obtain some information. In order to do that, I have to travel. To travel, I must leave here. We have already been over all this.’

‘What’s so important that you have to go away?’ Bod’s six-year-old mind tried to imagine something that could make Silas want to leave him, and failed. ‘It’s not fair.’

His guardian was unperturbed. ‘It is neither fair nor unfair, Nobody Owens. It simply is.’

Bod was not impressed. ‘You’re meant to look after me. You *said.*’

‘As your guardian I have responsibility for you, yes. Fortunately, I am not the only individual in the world willing to take on this responsibility.’

‘Where are you going anyway?’

‘Out. Away. There are things I need to uncover that I cannot uncover here.’

Bod snorted and walked off, kicking at imaginary stones. (65, my emphasis)

What can be inferred from the above passage is then the mental workings of a child, who is confused and frustrated since an important adult figure in his life is about to abandon him. Adults are often illogical and unfair in the eyes of children, whose minds work differently. Bod is looking for meanings and connections which are essentially covered from him. The same reasoning and functioning applies to the reader at this stage too, allowing an effortless immersion into the plot, which is tightly bundled with Bod’s perspective. The last line of the above passage that is emboldened, once again depicts a mental state of a fictional character. Bod is feeling upset, since he does not want Silas to leave him. Imagining a situation where a six-year-old *snorts and walks of kicking the ground* inherently creates negative associations

with mood. The passage is not a thought presentation, nor does it directly tell the reader how Bod is feeling. Instead, we simply connect the pieces which are provided to us by the narrator, the context and our knowledge about human behaviour and relationships.

4.2.3. Themes

Themes can rarely be traced down to certain patterns, forms or organizations of the text, since they ultimately result from the reader's prior knowledge and value systems. I agree with Wolfgang Iser, who suggests that theme is an "empty reference" (147), which denotes that the reader must evoke her previous knowledge and experiences of human life to make sense of the whole, which is the story. In addition to the reader's more profound understanding of the text, themes add depth to the character. The importance of the thematic dimension resides in that the reader automatically applies prior knowledge from real life to a fictional character and primarily assumes that Nobody is *someone*, who is capable of transferring values to her or that at least the uprising dilemmas and morals should be reflected upon. I argue that themes are not univocal, but can vary in meaning due to different readers. My interpretation of the themes in *TGB* and how they contribute to the character reconstruction are thus subjective and I acknowledge that my understanding may vary from that of other readers.

I see the thematic message culminating in the ending of the book. Bod is now around fifteen years old and facing an evident change; leaving the graveyard. He has been losing abilities he formerly had which made him a part of his community. "The world was changing" for him (295).

The midsummer sky was already beginning to lighten in the east, and that was the way that Bod began to walk: down the hill, towards the living people, and the city, and the dawn.

There was a passport in his bag, money in his pocket. There was a smile dancing on his lips, although it was a wary smile, for the world is a bigger place than a little graveyard on a hill; and there would be dangers in it and mysteries, new friends to make, old friends to rediscover, mistakes to be made and many paths to be walked before he would, finally, return to the graveyard or ride with the Lady on the broad back of her great grey stallion. But between now and then, there was Life; and Bod walked into it with his eyes and his heart wide open. (307)

The Lady on the stallion is a character, who remains mysterious throughout in the story. She can be argued to be a personification of death—a more beautiful version of the grim reaper. The ending of Bod's story reflects the meaning of home and growing up. Bod is unsure where he situates in the world. The passage entails a touching depiction of Bods struggle and fear towards

changes, but also a realization that the graveyard is where he would finally return. In other words, Bod is facing and accepting his new identity as a mortal being.

Besides establishing an approving ambience towards fear, the story culminates into morals: *be careful what you wish for, the grass is not always greener on the other side* and ultimately *there is no place like home*—wherever that home eventually is. They all closely relate to ordinary human life, the spectrum of emotions in regard to growing up and overcoming of obstacles. Whether reading fiction or not, the reader seeks a better understanding of life and themes nurture that fundamental craving of the mind. In addition to significant, unforgettable characters, themes and morals are what continue to affect the reader even after the text is finished. Throughout the story, the reader is educated alongside Bod and invited to feel affection, sympathy and empathy towards him. Engagement with a character through themes creates another cycle of communication and a possibility for the reader to reflect upon her personal self. Bod is *someone* who learns and develops. The growth through challenges attributes another humanlike feature to him, since developing, either mentally or physically is fundamental and evident for humans as well. Themes would not carry any meaning to the reader if certain events and characters were to be approached as nothing beyond textual constructions.

Themes of *TGB* might not be as clear during the reading experience, since the thematic atmosphere of the text ultimately builds upon gaps of the story. Rarely does a narrative explicitly state what the morals are, but that is left to be decided by the reader. The themes of this story are tightly connected to the protagonist, Nobody Owens. Experiences, events and social relationships either involve him or revolve around his life, past and future. Especially in the case of Bod, who is a child, many occurrences leave gaps in the narration. What actually happened and why remain to be weighed and relied upon the judgment of the reader. Porter Abbot argues that this is a fundamental feature both in fiction and in non-fiction, since “as long as one can only say this is likely to be what happened, rather than this is what happened, then whatever this is likely to be lies in the shadows of a gap” (105). This enables the reader to play with ideas and scenarios, which are tightly intertwined with the individual imaginative qualities and other shifting variables such as time and place of the reading experience.

The reason why gaps are important in the reconstruction of Nobody Owens, is that they reinforce the thematic dimension of the story. The collaboration between the reader and the text has an inevitable extralinguistic consequence which in turn strengthens Bod’s ontological status as an entity worthy and capable of transferring morals to the reader. These morals are then

weighed in comparison to our real-life values and morals. The cycle of dynamic information processing involved in negotiation of themes illustrates how the analysis of an extralinguistic feature of the story ascends Bod's status—from Nobody to somebody.

5. Why and How we engage with Coraline and Bod?

As has been shown in the previous chapters, why and how we engage with a fictional characters such as Coraline and Bod is due to what is in a text, but also due to how the human mind works and automatically processes both explicit and implicit information. In other words, it is ultimately our mental architecture which dictates how we reconstruct and perceive fictional characters. Our individual experiences of fictional characters translate into certain psychological and neurobiological processes, or as I have previously referred to more broadly as readerly engagement. Consequently, the engagement with Coraline and Bod has to be examined taking into account both perspectives. The *why* and *how* we engage with fictional characters relies on automatic responses which actively involve not only universal tendencies, but some involuntary brain activations as well.

This chapter aims to explicate the essential concepts and theories behind readerly engagement with fictional characters appropriate to the study of Coraline and Nobody provided by examples. First, I address the psychological processes including Theory of Mind, simulation theory and Gossip, which illustrate the habitual tendencies and the individualistic dimension of the reader. Secondly, in reference to the psychological aspect, I will address the neurobiological factors, such as mirror neurons and emotional responses. The latter aspect includes more than tendencies, since biology creates some inevitable functions and reactions on behalf of the reader. In short, the potential reasons behind how and why we engage with Coraline and Bod are mainly unconscious and automatic. The human mind is delusional in that it processes information from real life people and fictional people in a similar fashion. Instead of functioning like a machine, uncompromised by emotions, individuals often form opinions and make judgments based on how they *feel*. As was demonstrated in chapter 4, the human mind is swift in attributing anthropoid features to Coraline and Bod although they are fictional. The feeling of similarity is more important to humans (see Guthrie 3), thus the obvious differences between real people and fictional characters remain of secondary value and do not gain prevalence in our minds.

5.1. The psychological dimension

As Patrick Hogan well summarizes, our experiences are never “pure” and “direct”, since they are

mediated by our sensory and cognitive architectures, the innate structures, the acquired processes and contents that shape what occurs in the world into what we think occurs. The fundamental operation here is encoding—the selection, segmentation, and structuration of input at various levels of processing. (14)

I have argued that experiencing fictional characters is a fundamental reflex functioning on the basis of the readers’ extralinguistic knowledge about other real-life people. This is accurate and logical in the sense that our brains are evolutionary prone to explain and arrange incoming information to suit into our existing knowledge base. The fundamental psychological tendency to engage with Coraline and Bod can be explained with concepts such as Theory of Mind, simulation theory and Gossip. All the aforementioned phenomena avail the path into understanding how the human mind works with Coraline and Bod, who stem from such textual environments which aim to convey emotional simulations and morals to the reader by creating an environment where good and bad are rather contrary to each other.

5.1.1. Theory of Mind and the Simulation theory

The reason behind why the reader automatically assumes, rationalizes and predicts that Coraline or Bod are someone beyond a print on a paper lies in the human cognitive abilities. Theory of Mind, mind-reading or hence ToM, is a term describing the ability of a human to explain and interpret others behaviour and mental states in terms of their thoughts, beliefs, feelings and desires (Zunshine 6). A person engages in mind-reading every time she “ascribe[s] to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action” (Zunshine 6), whether watching television, chatting with a person or reading a book. The reason behind why the mind functions this way is largely unconscious and inevitable, unless this capacity is impaired by cognitive deficits, such as autism or Asperger syndrome (Zunshine 7). When the reader approaches a representation of a fictional character’s mental state, her mind employs a similar process as it would in ordinary social interactions; it predicts and assumes (see e.g. Zunshine 6–7). Even though ToM and the metarepresentational ability are far from perfect, thus incorrect interpretations are possible, they “still get us through another day of social interactions” (Zunshine 59) and define us human.

When Coraline “stood there, rigid and trembling as the other mother held her tightly” (58), the reader’s mind goes through a rapid process of possible interpretations to decide, whether she might be rigid and trembling, e.g. because of a seizure, shock, coldness, excitement or fear. The reader has learned through representations of Coraline’s mental state that she shuns and detests the other mother, who has gleaming “big black buttons” (26) instead of eyes, bizarre skin “white as paper” (25) and too long “dark red fingernails . . . curved and sharp” (26) which “never stopped moving” (26). No ordinary reader remembers these actual words in the story, rather the emotions caused by them. Consequently, the reader might arrive at an interpretation that Coraline is ‘rigid’ and ‘trembling’ because she fears the other mother. This process automatically occurs even when the author provides a minimum of textual cues for arriving at an interpretation. This is due to the reader’s “evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there *must be* a mental stance behind each physical action” (Zunshine 23). Therefore, Coraline’s every action undergoes a process in the reader’s mind and is by nature associated with the preconception of human behavior.

There is also an alternative view to ToM—the simulation theory, which holds that “people read other minds not by having a theory about what those minds are like but by running in their own minds the mental states experienced by the person who is the target of their mind reading” (Vermeule 39). In other words, the reader comes to read a mind by mentally putting herself in the other’s shoes. An illustrative example can be drawn from a situation where Nobody is about to learn about his past

‘I think,’ said Silas, ‘it is time to talk about where you came from.’
Bod breathed deeply. He said, ‘It doesn’t have to be now. Not if you don’t want to.’ He said it as easily as he could, but his heart was thudding in his chest. (178)

The reader, or the “mentalizer” would simulate Bods mental state by first “creating pretend states” (e.g. a pretend desire to know about one’s past) that in her own mind correspond to those of Bod’s (Shanton and Goldman 1). The reader would then “input these pretend states into a suitable cognitive mechanism, which operates on the inputs and generates a new output (e.g. a decision)” (Shanton and Goldman 1). This new mental state would then be taken “off line” and consequently attributed or assigned to Bod (Shanton and Goldman 1).

This would however mean, that the reader, who is tightly bundled with the perspective of Bod does not realize that “what she knows about the scene is different from what the character [and the narrator] knows” (Vermeule 43). I believe that both Theory of Mind and the simulation theory can be true, even though they are often depicted as conflicting approaches. The possible

solution would require the reader to adopt new positions, as Gregory Currie proposes: “the point of view of a hypothetical “reader of fact” or “observer of fact” (68–71). This adaption of positions is further elaborated by Alvin Goldman: the reader of fact learns about the events and empathizes with the character, and insofar the reader empathizes with him, she does too (287). The “observer of fact” then both helps keep track of the plot and lends her state of mind to the reader (Currie 68–71). Although this is a hypothetical proposition, it would eliminate the need to “choose between simulating a character’s state of mind and simulating the perspective of somebody who knows more (or sometimes less) than the character possibly could” (Vermeule 43).

Even though ToM and the simulation theory are somewhat diverging approaches describing the mind processes of the reader, they both aim to explain that anthropomorphizing is fundamental to humans, especially when encountering another sentient being as a representation on a paper, such as *Coraline* and *Nobody*. Humans tend to anthropomorphize, because

guessing that the world is humanlike is a good bet. It is a bet because the world is uncertain, ambiguous, and in need of interpretation. It is a good bet because the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us. That usually is other humans. (Guthrie 3)

Both Theory of Mind and the simulation theory unveil the cognitive mechanisms behind why the reader automatically attributes anthropomorphic features to *Coraline* and *Bod*. In light of ToM or the simulation theory, the reader tends not to distinguish between whether the character is fictional or not.

5.1.2. Gossip

Blakey Vermeule suggests that the quintessential reason behind readerly engagement and possible affection towards fictional characters is gossip, simply because the reader “need[s] to know what other people are like, not in the aggregate, but in the particular” (xii). Gossip in the context of *Coraline* and *Bod*’s characters thus denotes exactly what it means in ordinary situations as well: speculations, evaluations and judgements of someone based on our personal views, feelings and opinions (Vermeule 4–5).

Robin Dunbar argues that gossip might also serve to fill in a biological need in us. He demonstrates that gossip for humans counters to what grooming does for other primates—it drenches us in pleasure (1–8). This pleasure is achieved through the narration in the stories, which are internally focalized through *Coraline* and *Bod*. Both stories have a restricted, silent

third-person narrator. Unlike in an immersing first-person narration, where the story urges the reader to lose herself in the intensely personal account of events, emotions and thoughts, the third-person narration causes the reader to realize that her feelings are separated, counter parts from those of the characters. The situations in the stories further “nudge the reader into seeing that what she knows about the scene is different from what the character knows” (Vermeule 43). Hence, the reader’s mind is able to function the same way as towards real people; she distances herself from the characters’ sensations and experiences. For example, when Coraline or Bod is about to be in danger, the reader would feel concern and fear for them, instead of imagining herself to be them and then experiencing their fear. Evidently, the reader is able to observe the events from an objective point of view, even though she is allowed inside the characters’ head through representations of their consciousness.

The reader enjoys gossiping, since her objective perspective provides an opportunity to reflect upon personal opinions, values and more importantly, a subjective worldview to another person’s innermost essence and actions. Coraline and Bod become fair game. To further illustrate this phenomenon of fundamental gossiping, Vermeule draws the attention towards celebrities, (who are of course not fictional characters in the same sense as Coraline or Bod) who are constantly used to “sort out basic moral problems or to practice new emotional situations . . . [and] to cut through masses of ambient cultural information” (xii), whether they deserve sympathy or not. The reader is susceptible to make constant evaluations ergo, gossip when reading about fictional characters and in a sense de-humanize them into *mirrors*; these evaluations and judgements are highly dependent on circumstances that are “largely external to how we think about ourselves” (Vermeule 160). Consequently, everything Coraline and Bod do and do not do is evaluated by the reader.

The involvement through gossip with Coraline and Bod is an enjoyment especially since this activity does not require the reader to reveal anything about herself (see Vermeule 155). The reader remains in a safe zone and gets to enjoy the pleasure of perceiving and evaluating them from the outside without having to invest anything about her inner self and not being evaluated or judged by anyone other than perhaps herself.

5.2. The Neurobiological dimension

The psychology of the reader ultimately culminates into physical processes of the mind. Thus, the aforementioned phenomena of the mind are inextricably linked to the physical body of the

reader. As Patrick Hogan well summarizes, the ongoing psychological readjustments of our experiential responses to emotionally eliciting situations can be further explained

... by reference to the working memory integration of emotional memory, long-term explicit memory, and changing perceptions. We then seek to explain this mental architecture of working memory, emotional memory, and the like, and these psychological processes (e.g., of integration) by reference to functional neuroanatomy. Thus we refer to processes in dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, their relation to activations of the amygdala and to sensory cortex. We explain functional neuroanatomy, in turn, by cytoarchitecture and neuronal connections, and so forth. (15–16)

As a logical extension to the mind-operations involved in why and how we engage with fictional characters, this section introduces explanations to readerly engagement from the neurobiological side. The main argument constitutes around our neuronal system, or particularly our mirror neuron system, which has been found to activate unwitting reflexes in the reader. In connection to our mirror neurons, emotions such as empathy and sympathy also gain prevalence, since various medical studies have been able to connect such emotional responses to similar brain activations among numerous test-subjects.

5.2.1. Mirror Neurons

We have muscular reflexes in our body which can be tested visibly when in a doctor's office. Our neuronal system is alike, only the stimulus and the reaction are invisible to the human eye. Mirror neurons (see Gallese and Goldman 493–96; Williams et al. 290–91; Keyser et al. 233) are located in the “ventral premotor cortex” in a designated area which is “reciprocally connected with the hand field of the primary motor cortex” (Gallese and Goldman 493). It has been discovered with macaque monkeys that stimulating this area of the brain activates neurons, which “show activity in relation both to specific actions performed by self and matching actions performed by others, providing a potential bridge between minds” (Williams et al. 287). Although multiple studies have been conducted with monkeys, it is important to stress that the existence of an equivalent system, referred to as the “putative mirror neuron system (pMNS)” has also been located and demonstrated in humans (Gallese and Goldman 495; Keyser et al. 239). To summarize, mirror neurons activate muscles in the observer, thus physical sensations while tracking another individual perform an action (Gallese and Goldman 498). This places “the observer ‘into the mental shoes’ of the observed” (Williams et al. 290). Despite the widely accepted term *mirror neuron* in the literature, it should not be taken to suggest that “mirror neurons, like a true mirror, reproduce every detail of an observed action” (Keyser et al. 234). As Keyser et al. incisively point out, mirror neurons “produce something akin to an

impressionist painting of the action that has been seen; in broad strokes, they capture the goal of the observed action through the observing [individuals] own subjective motor vocabulary” (234)

The functions and existence of the mirror neuron system have been studied in humans using multiple forms of testing¹⁴. One of them is the “TMS” or the transcranial magnetic stimulation (Keyser et al. 239). This procedure traces muscular twitches and whether the MEP (motor evoked potential) increases when a person observes someone else performing an action (Keyser et al. 239). Another test form is psychophysics, which includes participants to “execute certain actions in response to a cue and simultaneously show seemingly task irrelevant actions (Keyser et al. 239). If there is a pMNS, the “execution of a particular action should be *accelerated* by viewing actions using the same muscle and should be *slowed* by viewing actions using antagonistic muscle” (Keyser et al. 239).

As J.H.G Williams et al. suggest “the evolution of imitation in humans is likely to have utilized an existing [mirror neuron] system, even if its prior uses lay in more generalized kinds of social understanding” (291). Therefore, the function of these neurons might serve as a precursor to simulation theory and in the broader sense underlie the whole process of mind-reading (Gallese and Goldman 495). Mirror neurons could potentially offer an explanation to the possible physical sensations and emotional responses that the reader experiences while reading about a fictional character. For instance, when Coraline is escaping from the other world and struggles to keep the door shut behind her while the Beldam is pulling back, the reader could feel tension, a sense of urgency or even increased heart rate due to her neurons firing up and automatically responding to Coraline’s distress and physical efforts. Coraline is encouraged by the ghosts of other children who are trapped by the Beldam along her intense experience: “Never let up, Miss! Hold strong! Hold strong!” . . . “Pull, girl, pull!” (132). Our mirror neuron system could also offer an explanation to why we are prompt to empathize or sympathize with Nobody who does not understand how authorial, supernatural figures reason with him. He is about four years old when he asks his guardian Silas permission to build a hut inside a tomb

‘Can we make a little house in one of those stone houses?’

‘You can’t get in. It’s locked. They all are.’

‘Can you get in?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why can’t I?’

‘The Graveyard,’ he explained. ‘I got the Freedom of the Graveyard. It lets me go places.’

‘I want to go in the stone house and make little houses.’

¹⁴ For a more detailed description of different forms in testing the mirror neuron system in humans see Keyser et al. 239–40.

'You can't.'
'You're just mean.'
'Not.'
'Meany.'
'Not.' (45)

We might either feel closeness to Bod or in turn feel distanced to his experiences and respectively feel with (empathize) or for (sympathize) him. Especially in the case of empathy, it has been shown that such emotional responses to either fictional or real people create similar activations in our brains (Keyser et al. 244).

The function of mirror neurons would suggest that to an extent the engagement with Coraline and Nobody is evident and unavoidable. The arising engagement is dictated by neurons which activate without the reader's agreement to undergo such process. This preceding brief account of mirror neurons thus proposes that the reader engages with Coraline and Bod because the human brain innately constrains her to. However intriguing, the connection between fictional characters and mirror neurons is still somewhat an overextension, since the research has so far mainly been concerned with the effects of direct visual images instead of imagined visuality (see e.g. Williams et al. 292–93; Keyser et al. 234–35).

5.2.2. Sympathy and Empathy

Another engagement enhancing process with Coraline and Bod concerns sympathy and empathy. Both characters are young children in distressing situations which is a tailor-made scenario to provoke our emotional responses. These emotions ignite both mental and physical operations in the reader—most of which are similarly applied in engagement with real people as well

Examining the neural correlates of perspective taking and self-other distinctions ... highlights ways in which the brain supports empathy through relatively explicit, cognitive means that are distinct from the processes supporting other kinds of social and nonsocial cognition. This approach parallels behavioral approaches in suggesting that mentalizing—reasoning about the mental states of others—is accomplished by naive psychology theories, which may be derived from innate domain-specific modules or developed during childhood but which, most importantly, are unique to thinking about other people. (Pheifer and Dapretto 186)

As was earlier shown in reference to the mirror neuron system, our brains undergo processes which are evident, rapid and independent of the readers' consent. This applies to empathetic and sympathetic responses to fictional characters and has been demonstrated with neuroimaging studies. For example, neuroscientists have already attested that “people scoring high on

empathy tests have especially busy mirror neuron system in their brains“ (Keen 207). The human mind and brain seem to function and invest interpretative effort to others’ feelings and mental states whether the witnessed occurrence is fictional or not.

Both empathy and sympathy are tested and recorded in a variety of ways by psychologists. These include physiological measures such as “self-reports, changes in heart-rate, skin conductance (palm sweat), facial reactions, Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)” (Keen 210–11; see also Keyser et al. 239–44). It has been discovered with research subjects that the affective brain areas (the amygdala, anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex, the latter cerebellum and the brainstem¹⁵) “responded both to real and imagined pain” on the matching emotional areas, but not on the sensory areas (Keen 211). This means that these particular brain areas can be provoked by “directly witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (Keen 208).

Since the discussion on these emotions is targeting Coraline and Bod, who are fictional characters, it is necessary to address more accurate definitions of empathy and sympathy, that is *narrative empathy* (Susanne Keen) and *narrative sympathy* (Howard Sklar). Both terms include and focus on certain triggers which either invite or disinvite the readers’ engagement with fictional characters. The extent to how certain narrative techniques and some extralinguistic features are experienced among individuals is diverse, due to readers inevitably different backgrounds, personalities, experiences etc. However, despite the individuality of our explicit experiences, neurobiological studies have shown, that our implicit responses on the neuronal level are similar. The affective and cognitive responses of the reader do not inevitably lead to affectional caring with Coraline and Nobody, but as has been brought up earlier, “fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning” that may inhibit feeling with or for somebody in the real world (Keen 213). This would then allow fictional characters more felicitous grounds to gain the affection of the reader compared to an actual person. Nonetheless, I have used the term engagement, since it does not carry the weight of feeling positively or negatively towards someone or whether one feels affection towards another. What is of importance here in regard to emotional responses is the sense of similarity experienced by the reader. For example, as Susanne Keen well summarizes, “Human beings, like other primates, tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us” (214). This exemplifies how our brains, to an extent, tend to ignore the distinction

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of these brain areas and their functioning during brain-imaging studies, see Rizzolatti et al. 44–50.

between fictional characters and real people, when it comes to social engagement with someone that seems like *us*. Coraline and Bod are not merely compounds of textual features, but entities worthy of emotional investment.

Although both empathy and sympathy entail a variety of emotions and are uniquely experienced, they can be defined as follows. *Empathy* is “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect” and it occurs, when a person feels what she believes to be the emotions of someone else. Empathy has been argued to be a sort of “precursor” to *sympathy*, which in turn holds that a person feels a “supportive emotion” about another’s feelings (Keen 208–209). Although empathy is inextricably linked to its close relative sympathy, Susanne Keen points out that personal distress, which is often associated with sympathy, differs from empathy in that it “focuses on the self and leads not to sympathy but avoidance” (208). The distinction between personal distress and empathy is important since empathy is associated with sympathy and thus with “prosocial or altruistic action“ (208).

In reference to these emotions particularly in the context of fictional characters, Susanne Keen discusses and raises the notion of *narrative empathy*. Her theory among other intriguing questions¹⁶ focuses on decoding narrative techniques that invite yet also disinvite empathetic responses towards fictional characters. Character identification is the most commonly highlighted feature of narrative fiction to be associated with empathy. A necessary clarification is however, that it is not a narrative technique because it occurs in the reader, not in the text. Character identification is a consequence of reading, which “may be precipitated by the use of particular techniques of characterization” (Keen 216).

The reader’s possible identification with Coraline or Bod thus occurs in an emotional level. This is important to note here, since this paper is solely focused on the adult perspective and the fictional characters in focus are children. On the contrary to a popular fallacy, identification often “invites empathy even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways” (Keen 214). In support of Keen’s view, whether character identification truly comes first remains an open question, since sometimes it is the “spontaneous empathy for a fictional character’s feelings” which leads to character identification (214). This can be explained by the fact that readers’ “empathetic dispositions are not identical to one another” (Keen 214). In other words, character identification is not necessary in order to empathize with Coraline or Bod. What is highly promoted in empathetic

¹⁶ “[D]oes novel reading, by eliciting empathy, encourage prosocial action and good world citizenship?”. (224)

response is the sense of closeness with the character. According to Susanne Keen, this can be well accomplished not through feelings of similarity with the character, but through awareness of the predominant fictionality.

[R]eaders' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion. Thus they may respond with greater empathy to an unreal situation and characters because of the protective layer of fictionality, but still internalize the experience of empathy. (220)

Empathetic response to either *Coraline* or *Bod* could thus stem from certain feelings of closeness, but also from the protective distance created by the unrealness of both storyworlds. The sense of closeness or distance is furthermore reliant on the timing and context of the reading experience. As Keen explicates

some novels may only activate the empathy of their first, immediate audience, while others must survive to reach a later generation of readers in order to garner an emotionally resonant reading. Reader's empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances, either in the moment of first publication or in later times. (Keen 214)

In the current western context children, their well-being and experiences are valued. Thus, distress experienced by minors is a seriously taken issue. This was however, not the case 50 or 60 years ago. If either *Coraline* or *The Graveyard Book* were published then, their reception would have certainly been different, since children had a drastically different status and role in the society. Empathetic response towards *Coraline* and *Bod* is facilitated by the current values of our societies.

A close second in the narrative techniques evoking empathetic responses is narrative situation. This includes aspects such as perspective and narration. It has been a prosaic of narrative theory that internal perspectives are ideal to promote character identification and provoke empathetic responses. Internalist perspectives such as first person self-narration, figural narration and authorial omniscient narration minimize the visible and sometimes obstructive role of the narrator, thus bringing the reader and the fictional characters closer to each other. In other words, the mediation of mental states, thoughts and feelings are more personally addressed to the reader than if the narrator had an externalist perspective (Keen 219–20). *Coraline* employs a restricted third person narrator, which means that the narrative perspective is limited to a singular perspective and in this case of the protagonist. *The Graveyard Book* has an omniscient third person narrator, which has an unlimited knowledge of events and characters' minds but remains most closely bundled with *Bod* and his story. These are somewhat contrary to the preferred internalist perspectives. I nevertheless see both *Coraline* and *Bod* situated in such

textual environments which invite the reader to focus on their mental states and experiences that demand a sequence of mental exercises, potentially leading to empathetic responses. Especially since the protagonists are children, I consider that first person narration (an even more internalist perspective) could actually discourage the potential empathetic response on behalf of the adult reader, since children are often regarded as unreliable narrators. Despite the third-person perspective on these stories, the reader is urged to consider how Coraline or Bod might feel and what she feels herself. This reflection is done based on the reader's implicit and explicit information about the characters in their storyworlds, but also based on information about real people and experiences from the real world. I see that the narrative situation in both *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* urges the reader to feel with these children through generous depictions of mental states and internalist views on personal experiences—even if the explicit narration remains external.

In addition, both stories utilize what Keen describes as *Broadcast strategic empathy* (224). This is “a variety of the authors’ empathy, by which authors attempt to direct an emotional transaction through a fictional work aimed at a particular audience” (Keen 224). There are several strategic empathies and not all of them aim to address every reader who happens upon the text, nor is it always a deliberate choice on behalf of the author (Keen 224). Broadcast strategic empathy “calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations” (Keen 224). As was mentioned, in the western-context children are regarded as important members of our societies, but as dependent individuals who need constant guidance. Whenever we read, hear or see a child lacking some of these necessities, it calls upon our abilities to reflect how that child possibly feels. Learning that e.g. Bod’s family is murdered or that Coraline is neglected and ignored by her parents might lead to empathetic response either through identification, due narrative techniques leading to sense of closeness or due a particular time and context of the reading experience. Although empathetic responses ignite through complex individualistic operations, I argue that the stories about Coraline and Bod exist in optimal grounds for the reader to empathize with them.

Children in unfair, distressing situations is also felicitous to prompt a more ethical response, that is sympathy. This describes an emotional response to another’s suffering involving both “physical and mental sensation” (Sklar 454). As an example, the reader might feel pity or anxiety for the pain and ordeals Coraline and Bod face and endure. In contrast to empathy, sympathy involves a “greater distance between the individual who feels it and the person toward

whom it is directed” (Sklar 453). From the purely technical point of view, Coraline and Bod are more likely to cause sympathetic than empathetic responses in the reader since the narrative perspectives in both stories are external and the sympathizers in the context of this thesis are adults and the target characters are children.

A punctual way to illustrate the ethical and moral dimension of sympathy is with Howard Sklar’s definition of it. He has identified certain elements which he sees as the core elements of sympathy

1. Awareness of suffering as something to be alleviated
2. Frequently, the judgment that the suffering of another is undeserved or unfair
3. “Negative” feelings on behalf of the sufferer
4. Desire to help”. (466)

Sklar points out that sympathy by definition implies two key characteristics that are of importance in regard to the “rhetorical dimension of fiction-induced sympathy” (466) or as he refers to this fiction-induced sympathy; *narrative sympathy* (458). First, narratives that aim to prompt our sympathy for fictional characters “implicitly anticipate *response* on the part of the readers” (466). Second, sympathetic response involves “a *judgment* of the *suffering* of another” (466). These characteristics are what James Phelan further describes as “the activities of the audiences”, since they occur on the “readerly” side of the rhetorical process when considering sympathetic response to fictional characters (3). Sklar furthermore raises the notion about individuality and how that affects our responses. Sympathy has perhaps endless forms, since “one’s emotions are shaped and made palpable by the experiences that precede them—[which has a] direct relevance to the way we conceptualize the way sympathy operates in our lives” (455). Our different backgrounds, experiences and personalities have a major impact on our actual responses, which “involve complex sequences of judgments that result in feelings for an individual person or character, as well as larger conceptions of what it means to be good and fair” (Sklar 455).

A logical counterclaim to the nature of sympathy considering fictional characters opposed to real people has to do with the active consequences of sympathy. It has been often raised, that sympathetic response towards fictional characters lacks the possibility of *acting upon* that sympathy (Sklar 455). This would mean that sympathetic response towards fictional characters and real people would be fundamentally different concepts. Moreover, it would indicate that e.g. brain imaging studies demonstrating the connection between brain activations and emotional responses to real people would not apply here. In my mind, Sklar makes a clear argument on why this is not the case

the typical suggestion that readers cannot *act* on their sympathy, while technically true, seems to conflate what in our daily lives are actually separate responses. In this important sense, then, our sympathy for fictional characters can be said to resemble similar feelings for real people, in that our action on their behalf – impossible in fiction, and often in real life – are separate from the emotion itself. (455)

If sympathy was defined by the action that it produces, it would first of all muddle “the identification of the emotional content involved” (Sklar 455). Secondly, while some cases of sympathy result in active responses, “other responses remain at the emotional level” (Sklar 455). Moreover, sympathy does not always require an active response nor is it always even possible. As Sklar well concludes, despite “psychologists who study so-called prosocial behavior frequently consider sympathy a prerequisite to altruism, it is also clear that this connection is neither automatic nor absolute” (455).

Narrative sympathy is typically produced by elements¹⁷ such as aesthetic distance and the specific features of sympathy itself that are activated in a given work of fiction (Sklar 458). Both *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* utilize third person narration, which is suitable to create aesthetic distance between them and the reader, since sympathetic response requires the reader to adapt the position of the observer (Sklar 468). In this sense, the reader understands that her and the character’s feelings are separate of each other; that her feelings are counterreactions to someone else’s feelings. Another sympathy reinforcing feature is the lack of sympathy in the storyworld. The stories about Coraline and Bod include few features of sympathy towards them from other characters. This can be justified by the fact that both characters are *out of place*; Coraline is in another dimension with evil doppelgangers and Bod is in a cemetery. Furthermore, these children are *alive*, which is questionable considering other characters surrounding them. As a result, the reader is forced by the narrative to make judgments in favor of Coraline and Bod and furthermore adopt a position of a sympathizing observer.

Sympathy in the case of Coraline and Bod culminates into universals about the welfare of children and family dynamics. As was pointed out, active responses due to sympathy are impossible considering fictional characters, but it does not diminish the value or the accurateness of the emotional response. When the reader learns that Coraline is systematically ignored by her parents, as in “I don’t really mind what you do” (4) and “Go away” (16) or how Bod struggles with his identity or within a community of ghosts being the only one alive, I would argue that a sympathetic response comes naturally on behalf of the adult reader. The

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of sympathy evoking features in different narratives, see Sklar 458–69.

unfairness and struggle these characters experience may take different forms in the readers' sympathetic response such as concern, pity, sadness, caring or outrage. The reader does not have to understand neither empathize with Coraline or Bod to feel sympathy for them. In the case of *Coraline* and *TGB* that would also be impossible, since both stories exist in supernatural grounds in which real world standards are not applicable. As James Phelan notes, narratives that either explicitly or implicitly "establish their own ethical standards" do so in order to guide their audiences to certain judgments and consequently "within rhetorical ethics, narrative judgments proceed from the inside out rather than the outside in" (10).

In conclusion, possible empathetic and sympathetic responses in regard to the characters of Coraline and Bod partake in the reader's engagement with them. These emotions occur often unconsciously, thus they activate mental operations due to certain brain activations. The reader has no power over the neurobiological processes which are shown to be inextricably linked to empathetic and sympathetic responses. Even though the exact nature of sympathetic or empathetic response remains hard to unambiguously define, their causal effect and connection to certain brain activations has been illustrated with several methods. Responses on the neuronal level have been proven to be similar whether the observed person is fictional or not. Evidence shows, that upon feeling with or for Coraline and Bod, the reader is engaging with a fictional character similarly to real people on the neuronal level.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows that the extreme positions of the de-humanizing and the humanizing approaches in character studies are complementary rather than conflicting, considering the reconstruction of the protagonists in the case studies. The textual elements and the cognitive abilities of the reader are intertwined in a dynamic process and cannot be completely separated when considering the multidimensionality of components in the reconstruction of the characters Coraline Jones from *Coraline* and Nobody Owens from *The Graveyard Book*.

As has been illustrated, the characters of Coraline and Bod are not merely combinations of textual elements nor simply analogues of persons; they exist somewhere between the scale of an object and a person. If these characters were regarded simply as linguistic constructions that are only present as a print on a paper, their characters would cease existing after their stories were finished by the reader. This is precisely what Terry Eagleton emphasizes—that a character would only exist on paper and does not survive the "conclusion" of the text (46). This de-

humanizing view is already questioned by the existence of this thesis; I do remember and think about Coraline and Bod. I have also shown that devices, which are primarily textual in nature, evidently have either implicit or explicit extralinguistic results and vice versa. This is due to how the human brains have evolved. The reader and her mind are active participants in the process of reading, thus a text does not remain static after being read.

Even though Eagleton is right to state that a fictional character is “a pattern of meaning, and patterns of meaning do not lead lives of their own, like snakes or sofas”(46), he remains short-sighted in claiming that the nature of fictional characters would be determined solely by the fact if they can lead lives of their own. I have shown that to an extent, Coraline and Bod continue to exist in our thoughts, imagination and brain operations, even after the texts are finished. Our brains do react to other textual patterns of meaning as well, but not to the same extent as when we think we are reading about *someone*. Nonetheless, the humanizing approach by itself proved to be inaccurate as well. A character is not a *real* person nor an independent product of the reader’s mind, but inextricably connected to a text. The cognitive abilities of the reader only begin to function when they receive cues of actions, sensations and mental states, which are ultimately provided by the text, either as explicit or implicit patterns, forms and constructions of the narrative.

The reconstructive processes of these characters are fundamentally based on drawing similarities and finding resemblance between them and real people. The reason we engage with them is due to them being much like real people (except for the obvious reasons they are not). Consequently, the fundamental reasons for readerly engagement with Coraline and Bod lie in the human cognitive abilities, which are both psychological and biological in nature. The reader makes constant assumptions, judgements and evaluations about fictional characters based on her extralinguistic knowledge of other people, communication and relationships. Rationalizing incoming information by anthropomorphizing and attributing features that resemble familiarity of real people to fictional characters is innate. Terry Eagleton explains these tendencies stemming from the fact that it is simply most probable that someone echoing familiarity in features is someone like us, another person.

We like to think of individuals as unique. Yet if this is true of everyone, then we all share the same quality, namely our uniqueness. What we have in common is the fact that we are all uncommon. Everybody is special, which means that nobody is. The truth, however, is that human beings are uncommon only up to a point. There are no qualities that are peculiar to one person alone. Regrettably, there could not be a world in which only one individual was irascible, vindictive or lethally aggressive. This is because human beings are not fundamentally all that different from each other, a truth postmodernists are

reluctant to concede. We share an enormous amount in common simply by virtue of being human, and this is revealed by the vocabularies we have for discussing human character. We even share the social processes by which we come to individuate ourselves. (54)

In other words, we automatically engage with fictional characters since their resembled familiarity causes our mind and brain to automatically operate as if we were encountering a real person.

The psychological side of readerly engagement involves operations such as mind-reading and mental simulations, both of which we apply to in real life as well. Ascribing or imagining mental states, moods and emotions of others is an imperative skill to successfully—and often unsuccessfully—navigate through our social lives. Another psychological phenomena connected to readerly engagement with fictional characters is our craving to Gossip. As Blakey Vermeule suggested, fictional characters are “the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented”, since they allow the reader to “cut through masses of ambient cultural information” without risking their own face or reputation (xii).

The neurobiological explanation for readerly engagement stems from our neural mechanisms and notably our mirror neuron system. This neural network has been proven to activate unwitting brain activations in the reader upon witnessing, or even reading about someone performing actions and undergoing experiences. For example, a connection has already been established between certain activations and emotions, such as empathetic and sympathetic responses. These emotions are prevalent both in engagement with fictional characters and real people, since they include weighing upon personal ideas, opinions and ideologies—how we as humans regard not only ourselves but others situated in the same world.

The cognitive-critical approach utilized in this thesis aimed to offer potential responses on certain textual and extralinguistic effects, thus a possible perspective into how we encounter fictional characters and the reasons we engage with them. Important to note here is “that the task of interpretation still lies with the individual reader or critic” and as long as these are not clinically testable (if even then), this approach will likely to an extent “demystify” the complex operations included in how we receive and reconstruct fictional characters (Schneider 130). Another aspect that requires more research to gain more prevalence is the research conducted on the human mirror neuron system and direct visual stimulus. At this stage the discussion remains somewhat an overextension, since the current studies have often ignored visual imagining, as we do in reading with nothing but words in front of us. Further research could thus focus on engagement with fictional characters based on the effects of the text and the

illustrations, since certain editions of both *Coraline* and *The Graveyard book* are rich with pictures. In connection to brain activations and functions, further research could also focus on the sympathetic and empathetic balance between different characters in the stories. The discussion provided here about emotional responses could benefit from comparing the types of responses evoked by the seemingly evil characters, the authorial figures or the apparent sidekicks in relation to the child protagonists. For example, emotional responses to Coraline and Bod are perhaps more fixed than in the case of e.g. The Other Mother or Silas, who might induce more fluctuating responses due to their complex natures that simultaneously embody good and evil, instead of contrasting them.

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