As the essays in this volume clearly demonstrate, children's Gothic has become prevalent enough as a phenomenon to represent what can be considered a cultural symptom—an indicator that points to an underlying trauma, often in such a displaced or condensed way that there is no apparent link between the trauma and its symptom. Interpretations of symptoms always operate as limits, that is, to give an interpretation is to limit what most likely has multiple meanings to the one or two meanings the interpretation generates. This is, in part, one of the reasons why knowing what a symptom means, according to a particular interpretation, doesn't make it go away. What interpretations can do, however, is make a symptom more interesting, or less threatening; they can make us less likely to try to censor or eradicate a symptom that isn't really hurting anyone and is in fact helping certain people to cope with the circumstances of their lives, and allow us to enjoy it. This essay takes such an approach: my goal is to look at children's Gothic as a symptom, to explore some of the possible traumas that produce the Gothic as symptom, and to suggest how the Gothic may help children cope with those traumas in an indirect fashion.

Though my arguments have a wider application, I will focus them by looking specifically at three texts by Neil Gaiman. Certain Gothic motifs in his work, including big old houses with secret spaces, doppelgangers, dream-visions, and dark tunnels, operate rather obviously as
metaphors for unconscious depths, but he also employs Gothic themes through the use of the macabre, the ghostly, and the anti-expected (as opposed to the merely unexpected) event or characterization (such as portraying Death as a cute teenaged Goth girl). Gaiman’s work is particularly interesting for this collection as he is bringing Gothic resonances to the whole range of age groups in children’s literature, from his picture books (The Wolves in the Walls, 2003), to his preadolescent fiction (Coraline, 2002), to his work for young adults (the Sandman graphic novels series, as well as stand alone novels and graphic novels such as Neverwhere and Creatures of the Night, various short stories, and his recent film Mirrormask, 2005). Gaiman often combines humour and horror, which has been the legacy of the Gothic since its inception, and indicates the close relation between fear and humour as two affective responses to incongruent stimuli. Ethically speaking, Gaiman does Gothic old-school, that is, the demarcations between good and evil are clear, and even when the evil is within, it is soundly defeated and expelled by a problem-solving hero or heroine. Obviously, Gaiman is only one of the many authors using Gothic conventions in his work, and I will be exploring but a small, interconnected sample from among his many works for my readings, but the phenomena he explores are spread across all aspects of children’s literature and culture. Though the market undoubtedly has a strong role in creating the desire for the products it has to offer, it is also beyond question that these products are responding to a demand; that is, there is an appetite that they are feeding. So the question is: What needs are being met with these works, and why are they emerging so strongly in the present cultural milieu?

Traditional adult Gothic has tended to give a sinister inflection to fairy tale tropes and motifs, combining elements of horror and the supernatural to produce situations in which the humble subject can become a hero or heroine, beset on all sides but ultimately (usually) triumphant. This affinity with fairy tales gives us a starting place to consider why the Gothic has become a prevalent form in children’s literature in recent years. Bruno Bettelheim and Marie-Louise von Franz have taught us about the unconscious psychic work that the fairy tale is supposed to do for children—to provide concrete images of villains and monsters on which to project undirected anxieties and fears so that they might be contained and dispatched, to facilitate psychic integration, and to assure the child of the possibility of happy endings when present trials are overcome. The dark landscapes, inappropriate lusts, and ravenous villains correspond to the dangerous impulses and aggressions that children actually experience as part of their own mental topographies, and fairy tales offer narratives that put those scary appetites in their proper places, so to speak. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture, however, has degraded these once psychically useful tales into little more than “a couple of rodents looking for a theme park” (Hercules, 1997), where ogres don’t eat children as much as entertain them, an average Joe can have his princess without slaying any dragons, and a schoolgirl will be handed both her kingdom and her prince at the low cost of learning how to walk properly and style her hair. Such sanitizations render fairy tales less able to do their work despite the fact that our unconscious is as murky and the outside world as dangerous as ever they were. In addition, materialist objections, including feminist and Marxist critiques, have cast traditional stories in a bad light; their legitimate concern with the surface values of the tales has led to either dispensing with the tales altogether, or to calling for revisions that fail to pack the unconscious punch needed for the tales to be psychically effective. These circumstances create the conditions for the Gothic in contemporary children’s literature to fill the gap that the loss of traditional fairy tale has created.

The initial instantiations of the Gothic as a form are often considered to be a reaction to the Age of Reason, a time when superstitions and folkways were losing ground to scientific investigation and explanation. However, ignoring the irrational, affect-driven aspects of human experience doesn’t make them go away, and the force of their re-emergence is often in direct proportion to the force with which they have been repressed. Thus it makes a kind of sense that this is a form that would speak to children, who are themselves involved in a project that will involve them giving up certain cherished beliefs, inventions, and fantasies in light of more reasonable and impersonal explanations. They need to put aside magical thinking, and realize that their evil wishes did not cause their gym teacher to break his ankle, or that the universe didn’t decide to rain just because they had an important soccer game. The residue of magical thinking persists, however, well into adulthood, if only for those fleeting seconds when we are caught off-guard by the fulfilment of our wishes for good or ill, before we take ourselves in hand and talk ourselves into the reasonable explanation. By casting these wishes into story form, and taking them to their hyperbolic extreme, we are more readily able to see their absurdity, to turn them into moments for self-deprecating and subsequently empowering laughter.

We find such a dynamic in Gaiman’s The Wolves in the Walls. While the rest of her family blithely engages in quotidian occupations, Lucy alone hears noises inside the walls of her house. She is convinced that there are wolves in the walls. Why wolves? Remember Max’s drawing of a wild thing that he pins to the wall going down the stairs in Where the
When Max enters his fantasy domain, then, he encounters the creatures of his own imagination. This is why he doesn't fear them, but the point of the story is that they nonetheless must be contained in a private space; mom will not have him acting like a wild thing in her house, so he must learn to control the wild things in his mind. Like Max, Lucy has drawn a picture (many pictures, actually) of her particular bogeyman; she has in fact covered the stair wall with pictures of wolves. In terms of Gothic space as private, haunted space, it is significant that it is the stair wall in both stories, as stairs usually lead from the public spaces of a house to the private spaces, and how many times have we all yelled at the heroine on the horror-movie screen not to go upstairs? At any rate, Lucy has conjured her own villain—she has effectively accomplished one of the functions of the Gothic, which, according to Mark Edmundson, is “to turn anxiety, the vague but insistent fear of what will happen in the future, into suspense” (1997: 12). The anxiety that Lucy is experiencing is a common one for children—what if I lose my home, which represents, for most children, the boundaries of their whole world? Most of us can remember this anxiety taking some very particular shape in our own pasts, or we can see shades of it in our children—fear of sounds in the night, fear of monsters under the bed, fear of a certain space (the basement or attic, for instance), fear of the house catching on fire, fear of intruders, etc. are all linked in some way to the anxious residue of the trauma of separation from that first womb-home. What is interesting about this particular anxiety is that it is not at all irrational; rather it will certainly come to pass. Children will lose the presently necessary comforts of their home, their family, and the protection from responsibility that those things afford them; there is a Gothic moment where that vague anxiety must be turned into suspense, and so they had better learn to cope with whatever symptom that trauma has produced.

Gaiman links this vague anxiety to a truly absurd narrative scenario so that he can actually bring it to pass and have Lucy deal with it. But first he exposes (or, more accurately, illustrator Dave McKean exposes) its internal origins, the drawings on the wall, and its position as repressed by the forces of reason. When Lucy tells her mother her fears, her mother offers the much more reasonable explanation that she is hearing mice. Her father suggests rats, and her brother bats. Her brother is, significantly, the most determined to be reasonable, perhaps because he has only just emerged from a belief in the irrational himself: “Firstly,” he says, adopting a pedantic tone, “there are no wolves in this part of the world....Secondly, wolves don't live in walls, only mice and rats and bats and things” (2003: n.p.). His hold on the reasonable is childlike and tentative, though, as he says later, “I shall ensure that I sleep with my neck exposed tonight, in case one of them is a vampire bat. Then, if it bites me, I shall be able to fly and sleep in a coffin, and never have to go to school in the daytime again” (n.p.). Impeccable logic, no doubt, even if it is based on faulty premises. Like his parents, however, he adds the ominous warning: “Thirdly, if the wolves come out of the walls, it's all over” (n.p.). The question of what's all over, and who says, are answered “it” and “everyone,” respectively. That is, if our unconscious fears do become manifestly present and are allowed to run amok, they will have the last word. When the wolves do come out of the walls, the family panics and moves out, preferring to live in the garden rather than to confront the interlopers. But under this interpretation (limited and limiting, remember?), they really can't do anything about the wolves until Lucy decides to take charge. They are Lucy's wolves, after all.

Realizing that she has left her most important comfort object, a pig puppet, to the unkind ministrations of the wolves, she goes back to retrieve it. After seeing what the wolves are doing to her home, she convinces her family that it would be better to live in the spaces in the walls than to spend another night in the cold garden, but it isn't long before the family, brandishing the legs of a broken chair, breaks out of the walls and reclaims their home. I can't help but be reminded of the retaking of Toad Hall from the weasels here—in both cases, the childlike characters have lost their comfortable homes to menacing representatives of insatiable appetite and unchecked greed. But whereas Badger and co. on Toad's behalf to get him under control, Lucy takes that initiative upon herself. Toad remains a child, but Lucy, like Max, takes the first steps toward growing up by suppressing her wild things. She has temporarily lost her home, but she proves that she has the power to reclaim it, to chase the wolves away. Gaiman slyly suggests that her psychic work in protecting her ego-home from the intrusion of id-dwellers will be an ongoing process when he introduces the spectre of elephants in the walls on the final pages.

The composition of the book encourages readers to take an interpretive stance toward the story. McKean's surrealist mixed-media images engage the viewer on multiple levels but never at the level of a straightforward representation of reality, thus imposing an ironic distance from which the reader can safely and critically view the events. The compositions are technically fascinating, impelling readers to a figure-it-out response: How did he create this effect? What are the objects in
of patriarchal values that suppressed individual freedoms, but were
the unexpectedness of the turn-around and its successful outcome
valences felt by those who wanted to throw off the oppressive mantle
one is menaced by them from the safety of one's armchair. But it is
the ambi­
to
clichéd, of course a fairly standard but decidedly useful
domination of reason, the Gothic is indebted to a culture of revolution;
idea that wolves are as afraid of humans as humans are of wolves is
Besides being a reactionary form of psychic protest against the
children's emotional preparedness for the times when their own wolves
coming out of the walls. Thus these stories increase
ing, heightens the sense of textuality and elicits laughter, as does the
story responds to is something that will come to pass, repeatedly even,
credible, not for her importance to the story, but to maintain the structure
anxieties; in our narratives we can muster a degree of control over our
dark, obsessive daydreams in order to get some mastery over unfocused
manufactures a new player:
that releases psychic tension and results in laughter. Every fairy tale-
reading child knows that wolves are a threat to little girls. But the
absurdity of wolves playing video games, eating jam, and playing the
tuba sets off giggles because it defangs their fears, making them seem
child-like. When Lucy and her family send the wolves off in fear for
their lives, the inversion is complete—the child reader, like Lucy, is
superior to these silly ink drawings, and can send them packing with
whatever weapons they find on hand. Therefore, when the elephant
footprint appears in the final scene, all that is left, affectively speak­
ing, is humour. Whether or not the readers were a little spooked by
the previous home invasion, it has been rendered safe by the ensuing
events. Furthermore, elephants don't carry the same fairy tale bag­
gage as wolves, and their size makes the possibility that they are living
in Lucy's walls quite silly indeed.

In this book, then, Gaiman uses Gothic conventions to dress up a
common childhood fear, and then dresses it down with humour and
Lucy's assertive agency in the face of that fear. His story plays in the
spaces between the quite reasonable emotional anxiety that children
(and adults) feel at the threat of loss, and the irrational forms that fear
can sometimes take. We manufacture fearful stories and engage in
dark, obsessive daydreams in order to get some mastery over unfocused
anxieties; in our narratives we can muster a degree of control over our
responses by giving them a specific location in a character or a setting,
and producing a narrative arc where anxiety becomes suspense,
suspense culminates in the thing we fear actually happening, and we
work out possible plans of response where we do not disintegrate into
quivering jellies, or maybe we do, but we get back up and move forward.
Once we have achieved a sense of superiority over the anxiety through
narrative, we may even move into a position where we can laugh about
it. This kind of Gothic story helps children because it acknowledges and
validates the horror—Lucy was right about the wolves, even though her
family pooh-poohed her—even as it domesticates and contains it. And
as I mentioned above, the anxiety of loss of home and security that the
story responds to is something that will come to pass, repeatedly even,
over the course of a child's development. Thus these stories increase
children's emotional preparedness for the times when their own wolves
come out of the walls.

Besides being a reactionary form of psychic protest against the
dominance of reason, the Gothic is indebted to a culture of revolution;
thus, the emergence of Gothic is also attributed in part to the ambiva­
ences felt by those who wanted to throw off the oppressive mantle
of patriarchal values that suppressed individual freedoms, but were
mother-son incest is both the ultimate expression of the son's desire and fiction—namely, the trope of incest. In a traditional oedipal scenario, the deep bond between a mother and a daughter, but it also opens up a cultural interpretation of an oedipal trope prevalent in early Gothic and her husband. As a story of female development, this one highlights she eats, causing her to have to divide her time between her mother and her husband. She gives her a pomegranate, three to six (accounts differ) seeds of which along the baggage of a fixed and immutable sense of self. He does, but he demands that Hades release Zeus until such fragmentation can be read as a cultural advantage; chasing cool will not suffer her kidnapping, and she causes the world to go dormant today's embrace of postmodernist ideals of self-fashioning, however, comes to like, according to some versions of the legend. But Demeter makes her Queen of the Dead, a position she eventually embraces and a time when fragmentation of the self was, if not an indicator of insanity and disintegration, then at least an undesirable state of affairs. With the problems, of course, are manifold. First, such change isn't accomplished without some resistance on both sides; children don't want to be clones of their parents, so their assertion of their identities will most likely involve some measure of rejection of paternal values. Additionally, though, the ego-ideals that children internalize are reflective of both conscious and unconscious legacies of their parents, so that the things we have repressed about ourselves may in fact be the things that emerge most forcefully in our children, much to our shame and dismay. Even if the parents are utterly supportive of their child's identity choices, the process is painful, because it involves yet another time of separation and sense of some connection lost, with the accompanying grief. Finally, there is no guarantee that the new identity will have uptake or ultimately lead to the life one dreams of having; teens are notorious for trying out multiple provisional identities in order to find one that effectively matches their desire with the requirements of the community they wish to join. Psychologically speaking, Fiedler was writing both during and about a time when fragmentation of the self was, if not an indicator of insanity and disintegration, then at least an undesirable state of affairs. With today's embrace of postmodernist ideals of self-fashioning, however, such fragmentation can be read as a cultural advantage; chasing cool and adapting to rapidly changing technologies is easier without dragging along the baggage of a fixed and immutable sense of self. Fiedler's broad and rather dramatic statement is an attempt to make a cultural interpretation of an oedipal trope prevalent in early Gothic fiction—namely, the trope of incest. In a traditional oedipal scenario, mother-son incest is both the ultimate expression of the son's desire and the ultimate violation of the father's law, which sets the limits of who is available to be desired—not mothers and not sisters. As long as the son (and the mother) plays by the father's rules, dark desires remain in the walls, so to speak; they are properly abjected, in Kristeva's terminology, sloughed off as impure and dirty, unthinkable (1980). But Kristeva also reminds us that what has been abjected doesn't simply go away. We are haunted by the persistence of those incestuous desires, and we are haunted by the guilt we feel in having them. Surely not in children's literature! Well, not usually openly, no, but the patterns are there in veiled form, just as the desires themselves emerge in veiled form in our existential life. Though most critics have focused on the father/daughter, mother/son, or brother/sister incest plots in Gothic fiction, Claire Kahane suggests that these plots often act as mere overlays for "another mode of confrontation even more disquieting" (1985: 336). She continues:

What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront. (336)

She cites Fiedler, who also affirms that "beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last" (Fiedler 1982:132; quoted in Kahane 1985: 336).

Because children are in the process of birthing an ego separate from that of their mothers, the mother/child relationship finds various modes of expression in children's literature, including mother/daughter incest anxiety. Both Lacan (1988) and Kristeva (1980) remind us that the mother is the first object of desire for the daughter as well as the son. But female identity is more likely to progress not in the fashion of Electra, as some psychoanalytic models have proposed, but in what may perhaps be the archetypal font of all Gothic fiction—the myth of Persephone. While gathering flowers, the beloved daughter of Demeter is stolen by Hades who erupts from the earth. He rapes Persephone and makes her Queen of the Dead, a position she eventually embraces and comes to like, according to some versions of the legend. But Demeter will not suffer her kidnapping, and she causes the world to go dormant until Zeus demands that Hades release Persephone. He does, but he gives her a pomegranate, three to six (accounts differ) seeds of which she eats, causing her to have to divide her time between her mother and her husband. As a story of female development, this one highlights the deep bond between a mother and a daughter, but it also opens up questions and points to ambivalences. Persephone misses her mother,
but she has been made a queen and relishes her power. As for her abduction, she wandered far away from her companions while picking flowers and didn't give up her plucking habit while in the Underworld; according to some versions, she is the one who picked the pomegranate from Hades' garden. Hence, Persephone is caught in the ambivalences that plague all young girls: a desire to remain in a dyadic relationship with their mothers, which is the variant of the incest plot that concerns us here, and a desire to break away and explore things on their own, which is the plot of the revolutionary indicated by Fiedler.

Gaiman's versions of this Gothic drama of female development are found in his preadolescent novel Coraline, and his film Mirrormask. Both narratives are indebted to Lucy Lane Clifford's eerie short story, "The New Mother" (1882) in which two children are tempted to be naughty by a mysterious stranger who will only show her magical talents to truly naughty children. Their mother warns them that if they are truly naughty, they will prove that they do not love her, and she will have to leave and be replaced by a new mother with shiny glass eyes and a wooden tail. The stranger convinces them that no such creature exists and encourages them to escalate their naughty behaviours, since it is clear that they are not sincerely mischievous, but only want to see what she has in the box attached to her peardrum. She's right, but the little girls are so consumed by their desire to see her secret that they do their best. Though they fail to achieve the level of willful misbehaviour that the stranger requires, their mother leaves, and the new mother arrives, forcing them to flee their home and live out their lives in the woods behind their house. It's a spooky, cautionary tale that works by playing on very real childhood fears: What if my desires become too much for my mother? What if she withdraws her love? What if she is replaced by an ogress who will devour me? Which is worse—giving up what I want, or giving up her love?

Gaiman plays with these fears as well, but ends in a very different place. Unlike the girls in "The New Mother," Coraline is not naughty, nor does she desire to be. She's just bored. Adam Phillips asserts that "boredom starts as a regular crisis in the child's developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother" (1994: 69). Up to a certain point, the developing child is so entangled with the mother that his and her desires are not perceived as separate, at least on the part of the child. When a child develops the capacity to be bored, it is a signal that he or she is in a transitional state, a state where he or she is developing a separate sense of self, a need to assert his or her desires over and against the desires of the mother. Boredom is, in Phillips' words, "that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire" (1994: 68). So long as the boundaries between mother and child are fuzzy and indistinct, the mother fills in the child's desire—he desires her, and he desires as and what she desires. But when he begins the long process of disentangling himself from her, of becoming a subject, he needs to develop his own desires, and sometimes that project momentarily fails.

Hence we see Coraline caught in that liminal moment when she finds herself cut off from her parents' desire, and not yet sure of her own. When she goes school shopping with her mom, we get a fuller picture of the disconnection of their desires. Mum is aligned with the shop assistant and the school's dress code; Coraline wants to assert an individual sense of style by buying some Dayglo green gloves. Coraline's mother ignores her, and Coraline drifts away. When she returns and her mother asks her where she's been, she replies, "I was kidnapped by aliens...They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped," to which her mother replies in patented distracted momspeak, "Yes, dear" (Gaiman 2002: 24). These small interactions clearly show that Coraline is searching for her own desires, and is in fact alone in the presence of her mother. It is significant, then, that it is immediately after this shopping trip that Coraline first enters the realm of the other mother. It is also significant that it is her mother who has shown her the key and has also shown her that the doorway is blocked. One of the most important things that parents do for children is to educate them in the way of desire, not by fulfilling their desires but by showing how desire may be pursued as a project, not by distracting them out of their boredom but by allowing boredom as an opportunity to explore their own possible desires. When Coraline and her mother view the opened door together, it is blocked by a brick wall; this is not the space of a shared desire, but one that Coraline must pursue on her own.

Coraline's experience in the other mother's world charts the development of a sophisticated sense of desire. At first, she is intrigued by the promise of a world where all of her desires are met with things she likes and finds fascinating. But it soon becomes clear that she will never be allowed to be bored in this world; she will never be allowed to want. Her other parents will never be too busy to stop what they are doing to play with her, but she will never be able to move beyond her other mother's desire. As Coraline explores the grounds around the house, she realizes that everything has actually been constructed, or rather copied, by the other mother, and that the world ends where the other mother stopped being alone in the presence of the mother.
Coraline tries to figure out the nature of the other mother’s desire, the cat replies, “She wants something to love, I think,” said the cat. ‘Something that isn’t her. She might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that” (65). And this is the true horror of the other mother—for her, love is a regressive desire to consume Coraline. The ghost children that Coraline finds in the closet are mere husks because they didn’t learn the paradoxical lesson that Coraline does, that desire doesn’t work by getting everything you want. The offer the other mother makes through the rats, “If you stay here, you can have whatever you want” (120) is roundly rejected by Coraline:

Coraline sighed. “You really don’t understand, do you?” she said. “I don’t want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn’t mean anything. What then?” (120)

The other mother’s desire is devouring, but Coraline is as resistant to it as she is to her father’s recipes; unlike the other children, she is discriminating enough to know what she likes, and she also knows, somehow, that being bored is a necessary move in the game.

Gaiman uses multiple womb images to underscore the nature of Coraline’s plight. The point of mother/child incest is not the pleasure of sex after all, but the dubious pleasure of regressing into an infantile state of undifferentiation, of plentitude experienced as reuniting with the body you once shared, marking it as a death drive rather than the claiming of one’s actual desire. The creatures that Coraline encounters in the other mother’s realm are versions of fetuses in various stages of development—the sisters Miss Spink and Miss Forcible regress first to younger versions of themselves, and then to two half-formed bodies in a thing resembling a spider’s egg-sac. The other father is also punished with regression of form; when Coraline finds him in the basement, he looks unfurnished, having lost distinction in his facial features and missing one of his button eyes. When she finally rescues her parents and the souls of the children, they have to pass through a long, dark, undulating tunnel that is at first “warm and yielding...covered in a fine downy fur” and then becomes “hot and wet, as if she had put her hand in somebody’s mouth” (135). Mouth, indeed.

Coraline’s final test, after successfully escaping from a world where she would have certainly been absorbed into the other mother’s consuming desire, is to escape her clutches, literally, once and for all. Here Gaiman uses the ghastly device of a severed, malevolent hand with lethal fingernails that he continually compares to a spider skittering along. Both hands and spiders are traditionally linked to mothering in a child’s psycho-symbolic world.

If I may be permitted a personal anecdote and some whimsical interpretation by way of example: My younger daughter, Blair, had a Gothic dream when she was three. She said that her daddy, her sister Emily, and she were being chased by a giant spider, but that I, her mommy, wasn’t in the dream. I had learned enough from my elder daughter’s drawings of me that I most certainly was in that dream; Emily drew most of her figures with the correct number of arms and fingers, except for me, who always had way too many of these appendages. It makes sense that a mother, who does so much washing and combing and buttoning, etc. for a child, would be represented as having more than the requisite number of arms and fingers, and it is no small leap to think that a breastfed child, especially, might bear a residual image of her mother as nothing but a breast with arms, i.e., a spider. Not very flattering, of course, but there you are.

Whether or not one buys my little story, it is undeniable that, from Charlotte’s Web to The Hobbit to Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, spiders figure largely as bloodthirsty maternal symbols. And just as Ron Weasley’s fear of them can be linked to Molly Weasley’s overprotective streak and her propensity for sending howlers, so Coraline’s problem with the spidery hand can be linked to a more sinister mother bent on smothering her child. Coraline has no choice but to dispatch this demon back to hell, which she does by trading on what she has learned about the other mother’s inability to resist going after what she wants.

The final text I will explore in my sample is Gaiman’s film MirrorMask (2005), which I see as a synthesis of the themes he develops in The Wolves in the Walls and Coraline. McKean partnered with him on all three of these projects, heightening the sinister strangeness of the worlds with his ragged and angular figure and landscape drawings. The breathtaking visual effects of MirrorMask, as in The Wolves in the Walls, contribute to the thematic density of the works, creating an aesthetic mood that intensifies the story’s effect. Like Coraline, MirrorMask is centrally focused on a mother/daughter plot. Unlike Coraline, though, Helena means to be nasty to her mother. Helena is in an adolescent moulting. She is resisting her place in her father’s circus, and, lashing out at her mother in typical teen girl fashion, screams that she wants to run away from the circus and join “real life.” When her mother claims that Helena will be the death of her, Helena replies, “I wish I was.” Of course her mother collapses that very night and has to go to the hospital for an unspecified but apparently serious problem. Helena is undone with guilt,
which occasions her journey into a dream-world of her own making. Instead of her drawings coming out of the walls like Lucy’s, Helena enters the world composed of the drawings on her walls and finds there a world of doubles. Her mother has both a white and a dark queen double, the white queen, significantly, being asleep. Helena sees an opportunity for reparation—if she can find the charm that will waken the white queen, she can atone for being so nasty to her mother and her mother will be well. But Helena does not take the blame for her fractured relationship with her mother entirely on herself. Both mother and daughter are out of balance; the good, kind side of them is sleeping, while the evil, sinister side is taking control. Whenever Helena peeks through a window from her dream-world into her real life, she sees the runaway princess of the Land of Shadows, her dark double, yelling at her dad, making out with a guy and burning all of Helena’s drawings in an attempt to prevent Helena’s return to her real world. When Helena meets the Queen of Shadows, she finds her to be like Coraline’s other mother, bent on possessing her and turning her into an automaton. Interestingly, the cost for both Helena and Coraline is the loss of their eyes; Coraline’s other mother wants to replace Coraline’s eyes with buttons, whereas Helena’s eyes fill in with an inky black blankness. Helena makes an eloquent plea for her beleaguered double, requesting that her mother let her make some of her own choices, but the evil queen flatly refuses, and Helena realizes that they must both be destroyed in order for her world to survive.

Helena is clearly more entangled with her real mother than Coraline is. At a pivotal moment in Helena’s quest, her mother comes to her and they muse over whose dream this actually is. Her mother thinks it is her dream, brought on by the anaesthesia they are using for her surgery. She even asks Helena if she has dreamed a boyfriend, indicating the companion that Helena has picked up on the way. Helena is clearly embarrassed by this, but it is a telling moment in the psychic drama of separation; her mother clearly has some of the controlling traits of the Queen of Shadows, thinking it is she who has procured a boyfriend for her daughter. Helena insists that this is her dream, and she uses that belief as an impetus to change the landscape. In other words, she can only make progress when she has asserted that she is the dreamer of her own dreams. Nonetheless, she uses the same words her mother used on her when she finally expels her evil twin: “You couldn’t handle real life.” Helena’s recovery of her mother would be less decisive than Coraline’s in developmental terms, then, were it not for the appearance, in real life, of her dream boyfriend. Whereas Coraline’s mother/daughter incest plot ends with her rebirth and a firm expulsion of her other mother from her world, Helena’s ends with the finding of an appropriate male substitute.

What is perhaps most interesting from a psychoanalytic point of view here is that even though both Coraline and Helena have good, wise, loving parents who recognize and support their need to grow away from them, they still need to go through harrowing psychic dramas of separation from them in order to achieve their own desire. Part of that drama is their recovery; not only must each girl find a way to assert her identity apart from her parents, but she must also find a way for them to be part of her without being all of her. Gaiman maintains a clearer ethical stance in his fiction than many Gothic writers for children; his villains are truly nasty, and his heroines are steadfast in their work to defeat them. This may be yet another function of the Gothic for outwardly stable, well-loved children. Their worlds do not provide them with circumstances that adequately represent for them the violent, bleeding cut that is psychically necessary for them to learn to be alone in the presence of their parents. Their outer lives give them no actual contexts for the fear that accompanies the inner dramas and psychic losses that are an inevitable legacy of growing up. Well-made Gothic can fill in those gaps, giving concrete expression to abstract psychic processes, keeping dark fascinations and haunting fears where children can see them, and mingling the horror with healthy doses of humour and hope.

REFERENCES