The novella *Coraline* follows a young girl as she rescues her parents from an alternate reality. In his short story, author Neil Gaiman covers scarcely one week of Coraline’s life. Still, the descriptions of Coraline’s experiences and thoughts can engage Carl Jung’s psychological theories of personality structure and individuation. In particular, I will analyze how Coraline’s character illustrates Jung’s concepts of the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, and archetypes.

**Personality Description**

A key aspect of Coraline’s life is that she is very much alone. She is her parents’ only child and has just moved into a seemingly childless neighborhood. Her retired neighbors, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, continue to call her “Caroline”, despite shy reminders from Coraline. Although her parents work from home, they rarely find time to engage with Coraline and do not stock the home with much edible, not perished food. When Coraline tries to interact, her mother says, just “don’t make a mess” (Gaiman, p. 6), and her father asks Coraline to leave him alone and busy herself with meaningless tasks, such as counting all of the doors and windows (Gaiman, p. 7). Upon reflection, Coraline wonders: “why so few of the adults she had met made any sense” (Gaiman, p. 20). Finally, although Coraline’s house is surrounded by a forest, meadow, and mysterious closed-up well, the only inhabitant is a black cat, and Coraline quickly returns to pestering her parents. It is clear that Coraline craves human attention.
As she is completing one of her father’s suggested tasks, counting all the doors and windows, Coraline finds a tiny, locked door, and behind it a brick wall. Coraline returns later to discover that the brick wall is gone, and behind it lies “the other world”. With this development, the narrator turns away from Coraline’s real experiences and thoughts, and toward what one might consider fantasies or dreams. Although the reader presumably realizes this other world is a projection of Coraline’s, Coraline initially believes that everything in this other world is real. As the story progresses, Coraline still believes that the other world is real, but recognizes that every item and character is heavily influenced by Coraline’s imagination. The story’s parallel worlds show Coraline’s full personality: her consciousness and her unconsciousness, and how the two relate to and shape each other.

In this other world, Coraline is not shy, bored, or ignored. She is almost completely opposite: brave, intuitive, and above all else, paid attention to. In fact, Coraline initially finds that everything in this other world is a more perfect version of what exists in the real world. Nothing is missing, and nothing is really new. Rather, everything is better, including her parents and neighbors, the toys in her room, and the food she eats. Her other mother is completely attentive and cooks simple, delicious food. Her other father is witty and charismatic, and sings songs written for and about Coraline. The other Misses Spink and Forcible are always performing theatre. The other toys in her room are animated. And, the nameless black cat speaks.

But, Coraline has apprehension about the other world. Even before entering the other world, she experiences strange warnings from those around her. When the real Misses Spink and Forcible read Coraline’s tea leaves, they warn her that she is in danger and give her a stone for protection. According to Mr. Bobo, a neighbor upstairs who did not know about the door, his pet
mice warn Coraline to not open the door. Also, the night before finding the other world, she has a premonitory dream in which rats sing a song of warning.

Inside the other world, the black cat tells her she was wise for bringing “protection,” most likely referring to the stone, (Gaiman, p. 38), and she finds rats that sing a familiar, ominous song. The most striking visual warning is that her other parents have black, button eyes in place of real eyes. Her other mother is prettier and slimmer than her real mother, but has sharp, curved fingernails (Gaiman, p. 28). The other mother’s features make her at once more attractive yet intimidating, and her constant attention is enticing yet constrictive. When her other parents ask her to stay forever and abandon her real family, Coraline rejects their offer and leaves the other world.

However, when Coraline returns to the real world, her home is empty and her parents never return. After one night, she consults with the best authority figures that she can think of: her neighbors. Coraline’s neighbors not only ignore her concerns about her missing parents, they even tell her they will be away for a couple of days. Coraline is forced to take care of herself for two days, and even has to go to the supermarket to buy food. During her second night alone, she is awoken by the black cat and sees an omen: her parents standing in a mirror’s reflection writing “HELP US” in the foggy glass. When she calls the police, the police officer asks her to wake up her parents for comfort from her nightmares (Gaiman, p. 55). Without any help from adults, Coraline decides to re-enter the other world to save her parents from the other mother.

As Coraline confronts the other mother, she tells herself to be brave and strong, and then switches to telling herself she is brave and strong (Gaimain, p. 61). During this confrontation with her mother, Coraline also recognizes that the other world is a projection of her imagination. Essentially, she realizes that all of the other characters’ actions are influenced largely by
Coraline’s thoughts. Coraline uses this realization and her growing confidence to trick the other mother and rescue her parents, the black cat, and the souls of the three other children that were trapped in the other world.

After her escape, her real mother wakes her up back in the real world. Coraline never doubts her experiences as fantasies. Even if she has doubts, she leaves the other world with her scrapes intact, the three marbles that contain the souls of the three other children, and an empty snowglobe. Although her parents never say they have memories, or have no memories, of their kidnapping, Coraline easily explains this by thinking they are simply the sorts of people who do not “keep track of every day and every hour” (Gaiman, p. 149). In conclusion, the narrator notes, “Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realized, there was nothing left about school that could scare her anymore” (Gaiman, p. 161). Having braved the fears of her unconscious, Coraline is braver, more confident, and feels loved by her parents.

Personality Analysis

As quoted by Sollod, Jung explains that a person’s psyche consists of both conscious and unconscious content, “including the conscious ego, thoughts and feelings, memories, surface and deeper emotions, the personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, and a multitude of archetypes…” (Sollod, p. 160). Coraline’s personality can be analyzed with Jung’s theory of the psyche: she has a conscious ego, unconscious ego, and evidence of a connection to the collective unconscious, including archetypes. Also, some of Jung’s related ideas, such as the concept of psychological principle of entropy and theory of individuation, can be illustrated with Coraline’s character and experiences. Her conscious ego is illustrated by her experiences and thoughts in
the real world and other world. In this analysis, however, I explore her personal unconscious and the collective unconscious in the most detail.

Some of Coraline’s experiences can be explained through Jung’s ideas of the personal unconscious having a prospection function and a compensatory function. As part of her personal unconscious, Coraline has predictive dreams and has a hunch that allows her to save her parents. Before entering the other world, she dreams that she sees “…little black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth” who sing a high pitched, ominous four-line lyric (Gaiman, p. 12). Later, in the other world, finds that “Fifty little red eyes stared back at her” from under her bed and sing an ominous, four-line lyric that sounds strangely familiar to her (Gaiman, p. 31).

Although the exact contents of her dream are not in Coraline’s conscious ego, she is able to pull the information into awareness when reminded by a similar experience. This is an example of what Jung would consider the personal unconscious (Sollod, p. 161). In another example of Coraline’s personal unconscious, she accurately and intuitively predicts that her parents have been trapped in a snowglobe. Jung would call this an example of the “prospection function”, or a sudden solution to a “seemingly unsoluble problem” (Sollod, p. 161).

Coraline’s experiences in the other world are a great example of Jung’s concept of “compensatory function”. To Jung, “When an individual’s conscious attitude leans too one-sidedly in a single direction, the unconscious may compensate for the imbalance by producing dreams or fantasies that emphasize the opposite tendency” (Jung, as quoted by Sollod, p. 161). In Coraline’s fantasies of the other world, her other parents compensate for her parents’ inattention by being hyper-attentive. In the other world, adults not only pay close attention to her, but their every action revolves around her presence.
This is also a good example of Jung’s concept of the psychological principle of entropy. According to Sollod, Jung posits that “The principle of entropy implies that psychic energy also flows from the most intensely energized ideas, archetypes, and complexes to those that are less energized” (Sollod, p. 152). The other world is extremely opposite to Coraline’s real world. After exploring this opposition, Coraline is able to feel more engaged with her parents, is braver with her adult neighbors, and is excited to begin school. Basically, she goes from feeling ignored and being bored, to feeling loved and being engaged. A key part of this transition is her experiencing an extreme of feeling smothered with attention in the opposite, other world.

To Jung, the third part of a person’s psyche is the collective unconscious. As quoted by Sollod, Jung states that this collective unconscious is “detached from anything personal and is common to all men, since its contents can be found anywhere”; it contains images that are “flexible templates, or models, for current experience to follow”, or “archetypes” (Sollod, p. 162). In Coraline’s situation, the main characters (Coraline, the other mother, and the black cat) each serve as at least one distinct archetype. Coraline is the Hero archetype, the other mother is mainly the Mother archetype, but is also the Trickster half of the Trickster/Magician archetype, and the black cat is the Magician half. Although Jung has many more archetypes that can help explain the unconscious, these three (Hero, Mother, and the Trickster/Magician) are the most developed in the story Coraline. Jung also believes that all people have a Shadow, Anima/Animus counterpart, and a Persona. In Coraline’s case, the other mother reveals Coraline’s Shadow, the black cat could be her Animus counterpart, and Coraline has a distinct Persona she channels when trying to defeat the other mother.

As quoted by Sollod, Jung believes that “The Hero defeats evil, slays the dragon or monster, usually near water, suffers punishment for another, or rescues the vanquished and
There are several examples of Coraline as a hero. When Coraline defeats the evil other mother, she does so by separating her body from her right hand. With the other mother’s body is trapped in the Other world, Coraline invents a trick to trap her hand and the door key in a deep well. Coraline closes the well, protecting future children from being captured by the other mother (Gaiman, p. 158-159). This trick conjures images of Jung’s idea that the hero slays the dragon by the water. Coraline also risks her own escape by rescuing the souls of the other children. Upon returning to the real world, the neighbor upstairs reports that his mice believe Coraline is their savior (Gaiman, p. 160), and Miss Spink calls her an “extraordinary child” twice. (Gaiman, p. 156 and 161). All of these examples show Coraline to be the Hero of her world.

Although Coraline is mainly the Hero, she also has a Shadow that is expressed through the other mother. To Jung, every person has a Shadow – a “dark half” that is composed of “repressed, unacceptable motives, tendencies, and desires” (Sollod, p. 163). According to Sollod, “It takes psychological insight and sometimes personal courage to deal with the Shadow archetype” (Sollod, p. 164). Coraline’s Shadow is mainly represented in the other mother’s desire to possess another person and portray this possession as genuine love. The uglier side of Coraline is that ideally, she would like to dominate her parents’ attention. When her other mother does this, Coraline realizes that it is so smothering and is not genuine love. Upon returning to the real world, she expresses genuine love for her parents and feels it in return.

The other mother is, at first, Jung’s loving Mother but is quickly portrayed as the terrible Mother archetype. Jung’s evil mother archetype is defined as one who is “heartless” or a “devouring and entwining animal” (Sollod, p. 163). The other mother is so possessive that she is smothering and requires complete power over Coraline. When the Other mother tells Coraline,
“You know that I love you”, Coraline thinks “It was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother’s button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more”. Coraline rejects this possessive form of love, telling her, “I don’t want your love” (Gaiman, p. 106).

The story also explores another archetype, the Trickster/Magician. As quoted by Sollod, Jung believes that the Trickster/Magician archetype has a “fondness for sly jokes, malicious pranks, and his dual nature: half animal, half human” (Sollod, p. 163). Both the other mother and the black cat represent this archetype; the other mother is the Trickster, or more villainous version, and the black cat is the Magician, one who is still helpful despite its aloofness.

The black cat describes the other mother as a trickster, someone who “wants something to love, I think… Something that isn’t her. She might want something to eat as well. It’s hard to tell with creatures like that… Challenge her. There’s no guarantee she’ll play fair, but her kind of thing loves games and challenges” (Gaiman, p. 65). The black cat’s description of the other mother as a “creature” who wants to eat the same things she loves, and enjoys playing games, illustrates how she is the Trickster, with both human and animalistic desires.

As the other half of the Trickster/Magician archetype, the black cat is not particularly sociable or nice to Coraline, but rather takes actions to protect and guide her. The black cat is literally part human and animal. Although it takes the form of an animal, in the other world, Coraline is able to communicate with it. The black cat has no “other” counterpart, but can enter and leave the other world without being seen. The black cat appears when Coraline needs direction, and gives her warnings. It is the one to wake her up and guides her back to the other world when her parents are missing. Also, the black cat kills a rat that is spying on Coraline and helps Coraline get the final marble (soul) of the third lost child (Gaiman, p. 123). Although the
black cat enjoys trickery and is aloof, he chooses to protect innocent Coraline and is more of a Magician than a Trickster.

In addition to these archetypes, Jung also describes that each person has an anima or animus archetype. In Coraline’s story, the black cat would serve as the animus to Coraline. When the black cat first speaks, the narrator notes, “Its voice sounded like the voice at the back of Coraline’s head, the voice she thought words in, but a man’s voice, not a girl’s” (Gaiman, p. 35). This example is surprisingly similar to the example provided by Sollod, when Jung heard a woman’s voice respond to his internal thoughts and began to engage in an argument with this feminine personality (Sollod, p. 164). Coraline and the black cat have frequent conversations using verbal language while they are both in the other world, and Coraline has one-sided conversations with the cat back in the real world. Having this animus counterpart to consult with gives Coraline an advantage to defeating the other mother, Coraline’s shadow.

Another part of Coraline’s personality is her persona. According to Jung as quoted by Sollod, the persona is “the front we present to others because social living makes for certain kinds of behavior” (Sollod, p. 165). The environment in Coraline’s other world encourages her to put on a front of bravery, strength, and whimsicalness. Out loud, especially where the other mother can hear her, she says she has the traits she wishes for herself (being brave), but inside and she is constantly aware of how her true feelings (being scared, not fully believing in herself, and being anxious about her parents’ and her own well being). Coraline portrays herself as brave so that the other mother does not know how frightened Coraline is. Although Sollod mentions there is a “danger” of the persona taking over the psyche (Sollod, p. 165), for Coraline, pretending to be unafraid is a means to an end of saving her parents. Further, as the story develops, Coraline starts to genuinely think of herself as brave.
In addition to this detailed explanation of the personality structure and the archetypes in the collective unconscious, Jung also posits that people are able to undergo a process of attaining harmonious integration of the conscious and unconscious ego, or individuation (Sollod, p. 171). According to Jung, “successful individuation means the acceptance of inherent opposites. Individuation is such an involved process that it necessarily can come to fruition only in one’s mature years” (Sollod, p. 172). Although the story Coraline only reveals a few days of Coraline’s childhood, it reveals enough of Coraline’s personality to indicate she has potential for achieving individuation in her later years. She challenges her Shadow (the other mother) and she is very imaginative and in touch with the opposites expressed in her other world. Assuming she retains her imagination and willingness to challenge her Shadow, in her adulthood, Coraline might be able to achieve individuation.

In my analysis, I do not address Jung’s concepts of abnormal personality and ideas for therapy for those with abnormal personality. Although very imaginative, for a child, Coraline’s brief fantasies hardly seem abnormal. Rather, her fantasies showcase Jung’s concept of the personality structure, including the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious.

References
