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 ENG 375

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Tapping, clicking, scurrying feet: The Beldam's Hand in *Coraline*

The depicted hand of the other mother, also known as the beldam, initially appears grotesque and menacing. The image appears at a moment of perceived safety which is violated by the appearance of this appendage with “tapping, clicking, scurrying feet” (146). In Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, the illustration of the beldam's hand by Dave McKean blurs the lines between safety and danger within the uncanny maternal relationship between Coraline and the other mother.

This image of the beldam's hand is representative of the safeguarding nature of the pseudo-maternal relationship between the other mother and Coraline. Dave McKean positions the claw-like fingers of the hand in a cupping shape reminiscent of a protective cage. He ensures that the palm of the hand remains nearly horizontal, which creates a feeling of shelter and security among the outstretched fingers. The shape of the hand is the same shape that would occur when holding someone's hand or cradling something fragile and precious. While on her quest to escape the other mother, Coraline discovers “the snowglobe, with two little people in it” which contained the souls of her stolen parents (70). Immediately after encountering this micro-world created by the beldam, Coraline realizes that she is, like the snowglobe, inside a piece of the beldam's handiwork: a world of her own, replete with trees that become “cruder and less treelike” near the fringes of her domain (70). The spherical shape of the snowglobe mirrors the cupped shape of the beldam's hand in the illustration, as if the spidery hand could perfectly cup and shelter the globe beneath its arching heights. In a similar way, the beldam has complete power and domain over Coraline's world. Though uncanny, this idea of maintaining perfect control over the worlds she has created contributes to this conception of safety and security.

Even as this image highlights the feeling of refuge and security between Coraline and her other mother, it also portrays the treachery and peril of this motherly relationship between them. McKean chooses not to place a tidy border around this image, which leads the reader into feeling even more intimidated and afraid of the crawling hand. The illustration is iterative, and when the reader views the picture, it calls to mind countless other instances when the other mother's hand represented Coraline's vulnerability and endangerment. When Coraline begins an attempt to escape and help free others from their perilous entrapment in the clutches of the beldam, the image of this hand immediately surfaces in the text as an iteration of this illustration. As Coraline is searching for the other souls, the other mother “pick[s] at her teeth with a long crimson-varnished fingernail, then [taps] the finger, gently, *tap-tap-tap* against the polished black surface of her black button eyes” (92). This depiction of the hand furthers the idea of entrapment and danger. It calls to mind the lingering threat of the beldam sewing buttons Coraline's eyes—the very act that would keep Coraline in the clutches of the other mother forevermore. The button threat is present in the illustration, as well. McKean brushes long, vertical, pointed

shadows in the background of this illustration, reminding readers that this threat of eternal captivity of Coraline by the other mother is still very much present. Additionally, the snowglobe containing Coraline's parents, though technically a place of security, is simultaneously a terrifying prison. The idea of this spherical world shape nestling perfectly under the bowed shape of the scuttling hand is complicated upon seeing it not only as a safeguarding hand, but as a cage—replete with sharp, menacing points to keep prisoners inside using the tips of her too-long fingernails. The risk of remaining inside the world held by the beldam's hand and her sharp, crimson fingernails is explicated clearly by the other stolen children Coraline finds behind the mirror. They lament: the beldam ““stole our hearts, and she stole our souls, and she took our lives away, and she left us here, and she forgot about us in the dark”” (82).

The illustration of the beldam's spider-like hand blurs the lines between two notions held in tension with each other: the idea of safety and security within the maternal relationship, and the inherent peril and danger of that very relationship between Coraline and the other mother. This interplay and intermingling of such strong and opposing emotions allows the reader to better understand the dynamic woven throughout the story between Coraline and her other mother.

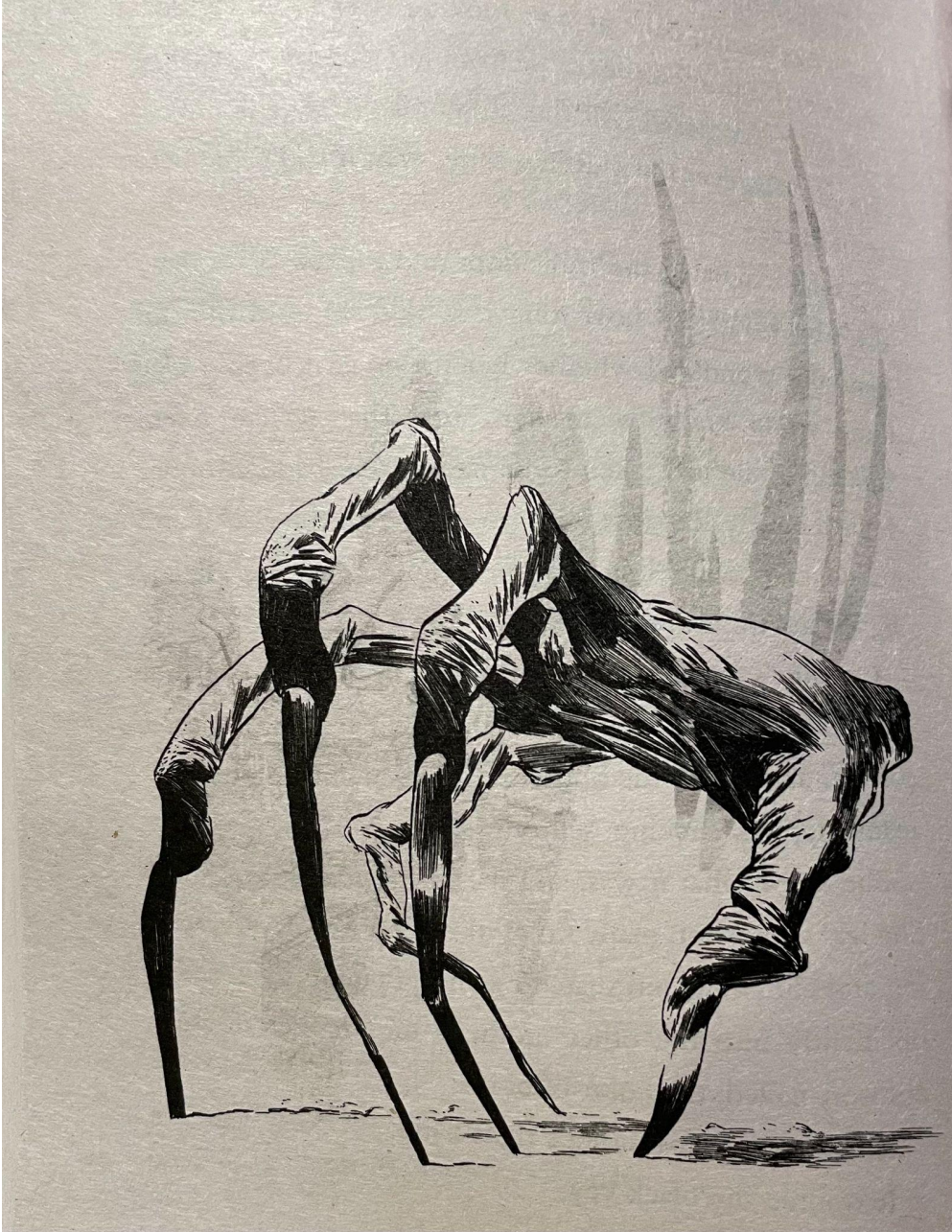


Fig. 1.

Works Cited

- Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. New York City, HarperCollins, 2002.
McKean, Dave. *Coraline*, by Neil Gaiman. HarperCollins, 2002, p. 146.