

Not at Home: Liminal Space and Personal Identity in *The Hobbit* and *Coraline*

KRISTEN MCQUINN

In much of fantasy literature, liminal space plays a prominent role. The otherworldly sensations the reader experiences, the surreal settings, and unsettling feelings, are all a function of liminal space. Often, liminal space is physically portrayed by a portal or a door, and the act of opening a door and stepping through can have lifelong consequences as well as rewards. When characters cross through the Door to Wonderland, Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, or even the door to the Secret Garden, they will never be the same again, nor will the ordinary world hold quite the same shine for them. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* reveal the importance of doors and liminal space as necessary catalysts for evolving personal identity. In both novels, the act of physically passing through doors becomes the literal means by which liminality enters the narrative. Once that liminality is introduced, the characters enter their own liminal spaces, begin their rites of passage, grow as individuals, and discover new aspects to their identities within the action of the story.

For the purposes of this essay, *The Hobbit* and *Coraline* were selected primarily because they were both written for children. While some of Gaiman's other works might better fit a discussion on liminality, in particular *Neverwhere* which is placed almost entirely in a liminal setting and even includes a character called Door, they are not books for children. Keeping the intended audience for each book within the same age demographic would be more appropriate for comparison. As such, this essay will focus on the liminal spaces in *Coraline* and *The Hobbit* in terms of their function within tales written for children. Additionally, while both books are indeed written for children, their protagonists are different ages; Bilbo is an adult and Coraline is a child. Focusing on protagonists of differing ages allows us to reflect upon the alternative ways they use 'to assert their individuality due to factors such as confinement, loss and alienation.'¹ How the characters approach obstacles informs the ways in which they undertake and overcome them throughout their journeys, and each has a different end result from their quest despite the similarities otherwise. These differences can be viewed as being a function of their ages, and it impacts the trajectory of each tale.

Liminal space is an in-between place, whether physical or metaphorical. Deriving from the Latin term *limen*, or threshold, liminal spaces are transformative or transitional, serving as places where one waits between one point and the next. These spaces often engender feelings of unease or discomfort. Physical places that embody liminality can include the beach, stairwells, or doorways. Adolescence is another liminal space, since one is neither a child nor yet fully adult. This applies especially to *Coraline*; although her age is not specified, it is clear that her adventures are a coming-of-age based on the arc of her development and character growth throughout the novel.

Adolescents in various cultures often undergo rites of passage, another form of liminality, before they can become fully adult, such as bar mitzvah or quinceañera ceremonies. In literature, liminality is sometimes more abstract. As Klapcsik states, in liminal space, 'the fantastic is no longer interpreted as a realm different and distant from consensus reality.'² Narratives such as *The Hobbit* or *Coraline* are written so that the fantastical elements common to liminal space are made ordinary yet are vital to the development of plot and characters. Thus, normal doors become portals, or Other Parents with button eyes are accepted without second thought. Every story needs liminality in some form for character growth.

Whether he realises it or not (and he doesn't), Bilbo encounters many liminal spaces in his journey: his own front door, when he is caught by his coat buttons at the door to get out of Gollum's caves in chapter five, the Doors of Durin, Beorn's home and Beorn himself, invisibility while wearing the ring, and the journey through the forest of Mirkwood. Each encounter with these liminal spaces helps to prepare Bilbo for a new stage of his journey and a deeper understanding of himself. This essay will look at Bilbo's most important liminal experiences.

The first door the reader encounters in *The Hobbit* is Bilbo's front door. Indeed, it is the third line Tolkien pens in the novel, implying its importance immediately. Tolkien writes, '[The hobbit hole] had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle' (*Hobbit*, i). When the reader first meets Bilbo, he is standing just outside the door. His position is telling, for although he is outdoors, he is in ready distance of the threshold and may quickly return inside. Initially, this doorway serves for Bilbo as a safeguard against the outside world, keeping him safe within and the frightening things of the world locked out. In fact, that is exactly the door's role after Bilbo's encounter with Gandalf: 'With that the hobbit turned and scuttled inside his round green door, and shut it as quickly as he dared...' (*Hobbit*, i). However, once Gandalf enters the picture, Bilbo's worldview begins to be challenged, and the front door undergoes a change from the ordinary to liminal space. Crossing the threshold back indoors after his encounter with the wizard no longer offers the safety it once did.

After Gandalf's intervention, Bilbo's door becomes a portal into what is, for him, another place altogether: the wide world beyond the narrow borders of the Shire. It becomes the entrance into his own liminal space where he will grow into a different version of himself. Appropriately, liminality is about being on the verge of something, and, as the reader knows, Bilbo is about to embark upon the adventure of a lifetime. This kind of gateway is a necessary element in liminality that allows the protagonist to launch and either thrive or fail. So, whether a character knows it or not, liminal space forces characters to put

themselves ‘in a position where they will forever be altered... Thus, ...there are three possible outcomes: the character will return to their world changed for the better, changed for the worse, or they will not return at all.’³ Bilbo, as we know, returns fundamentally changed from his journey, though whether for the better or for the worse might depend on if one asks a human or a hobbit.

Liminality also encompasses ambivalence; Bilbo embodies this at first, for he is uncertain about change, adventure, and going to new places. When Thorin arrives and begins making plans, Bilbo resists joining him. But then,

...something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick. ... Suddenly in the wood beyond The Water a flame leapt up probably somebody lighting a wood-fire and he thought of plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames. He shuddered; and very quickly he was plain Mr Baggins of Bag-End, Under-Hill, again. (*Hobbit*, i)

Bilbo’s yearning yet reluctance to join the company is a reflection of his liminal state, his desire to be in two places at once. Although he has crossed the threshold and taken the initial step into his adventure, he does not yet understand that liminal space is a place he cannot enter and then leave unscathed. His resistance reflects his new status; much like during adolescence, Bilbo is entering a similar state of growth. This journey is his rite of passage, and as most adolescents before him, Bilbo feels scared and eager, emotions which bring about a reflexive resistance. Eventually, although he still has understandable and normal fears, Bilbo stops resisting his liminality and instead leans in. ‘Then Mr Baggins turned the handle and went in. The Took side had won. He suddenly thought he would go without bed and breakfast to be thought fierce’ (*Hobbit*, i). Bilbo is still ambivalent at multiple points during his journey, but it is at this moment that he decides to enter his liminal space and embark on a life-changing adventure.

The Doors of Durin in the Lonely Mountain offer yet another entrance into liminal space for Bilbo. At first, the company is confounded by the door because it will not open. Bilbo physically enters a liminal state when he sits at the doorstep to ponder the dilemma: ‘he said they could sit on the doorstep till they thought of something’ (*Hobbit*, xi). Bilbo physically occupies a liminal place before entering the metaphorical space presented once the Doors of Durin are opened. The space acts as a waiting room for Bilbo; he is waiting to fulfil his role as Thorin’s burglar. The liminal space offers creative room for Bilbo to think, allowing him to figure out the secret of the Doors.

Once Bilbo figures out how to open the Doors, Thorin is able to use his key and reveal the actual passage into the Lonely Mountain:

A door five feet high and three wide was outlined, and slowly without a sound swung inwards. It seemed as if darkness flowed out like a vapour from the hole in the mountain-side, and deep darkness in which nothing

could be seen lay before their eyes, a yawning mouth leading in and down. (*Hobbit*, xi)

This tunnel is very much a physical manifestation of liminal space, leading Bilbo into another place. His liminal experiences up to this point have already made a profound change upon his identity, which is noted when he states,

‘Perhaps I have begun to trust my luck more than I used to in the old days’ - he meant last spring before he left his own house, but it seemed centuries ago - ‘but anyway I think I will go and have a peep at once and get it over.’ (*Hobbit*, xii)

Before entering his liminal space, it would have been impossible for Bilbo to take the initiative like this or to be bold enough to go into a dark tunnel. The narrator clearly acknowledges this change as well, stating, ‘He was trembling with fear, but his little face was set and grim. Already he was a very different hobbit from the one that had run out without a pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago’ (*Hobbit*, xii). Bilbo’s changing identity is linked inextricably with the time spent in liminal space.

Bilbo’s narrative presents liminality as seen in an adult journey. However, children and especially adolescents also have to go through liminal stages of their own, which is experienced differently than the journey from an adult perspective. Although *The Hobbit* is written for children, Bilbo himself is an adult character, albeit a fairly young one as far as hobbits are concerned. An adult character may incorporate the experiences of their liminal journey in ways which serve to deepen their personal identity, adding to what they already know about themselves or how they perceive themselves. An adolescent character on a liminal journey is more focused on initial self-discovery, figuring out who they are as opposed to adding to their own existing understanding of themselves. This difference between adult and adolescent journeys is evident in Neil Gaiman’s children’s novel *Coraline*. As in *The Hobbit*, liminal space is the vehicle for character growth and personal identity, and indeed, ‘*Coraline* is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one’s place in the world; how one is recognised in one’s own right...’⁴ The very first line of the book is about the door in the drawing room: ‘Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house.’⁵ Immediately, the reader is alerted to the door’s importance in the narrative, and it will be through this door that Coraline enters her own liminal space. Unlike in *The Hobbit*, there is only one door in *Coraline* which is truly of significance. Gaiman writes,

Of the doors that she found, thirteen opened and closed. The other - the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far end of the drawing room - was locked. ... [Coraline’s mother] reached up and took a string of keys from the top of the kitchen doorframe. She sorted through them carefully, and selected the oldest, biggest, blackest, rustiest key. ... She unlocked the door with the key. ... The door didn’t go anywhere. It opened onto a brick wall.⁶

Coraline is intensely curious about the door; there is a sense of fate that she is meant to find her liminal space there. Her curiosity is natural and utterly in alignment with Tolkien’s



comment from his essay *On Fairy Stories* when he states, ‘The Locked Door stands as Eternal Temptation.’⁷ Her parents are utterly uninterested, both in the door and, apparently, in Coraline herself. As Jones points out, ‘Coraline Jones is a very average, unextraordinary little girl with ordinary parents and a peculiar name that her neighbors seem unwilling to pronounce properly.’⁸ Unlike Bilbo, or other adult characters who know that there are many ways to identify oneself, Coraline still incorporates her name as the primary element of her identity and having others pronounce it correctly is a part of what can make her feel seen and valued; that so many people do not say her name properly contributes to the neglect and unimportance she experiences. Her feelings of neglect and abandonment create the framework for her to desire different parents and a different life, which ultimately highlights the importance of the door specific to Coraline and her evolving identity.⁹ That she feels invisible to her parents also creates a liminal space similar to Bilbo’s. Both are characters who are overlooked by others: Coraline by her parents in general and her neighbours who refuse to learn her name, and Bilbo when the dwarves talk about him as though he is not there at Bag-End before they set out on their quest. Being overlooked and marginalised can create some troubles with identity, largely because ‘the word *identity* implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact

we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties and intentions.’¹⁰ This marginalisation is the catalyst that sets Coraline on her own quest.

When Coraline is left to her own devices, she attempts to open the door once more. Instead of finding the brick wall again, she discovers a long, dark hallway.

The bricks had gone as if they’d never been there. There was a cold, musty smell coming through the open doorway: it smelled like something very old and very slow. ... Coraline walked down the corridor uneasily. There was something very familiar about it.¹¹

When Coraline reaches the end of the corridor, she discovers another flat mirroring her own, down to the same carpet, wallpaper, and parents. Coraline’s liminal space displays many traditional qualities, such as the feelings of unease that are often associated with liminality. She is being primed to enter her space purposefully so that she will be receptive to the tasks she needs to complete and the lessons she needs to learn along the way. Part of Coraline’s liminal space includes the Other Parents who want to keep her with them. She quickly learns that this liminal space tests her ability to think on her feet and outwit her Other Mother, honing her independence and critical thinking

in ways unavailable to her in the regular world. Tolkien's influence on Gaiman shines throughout this novel: Coraline's journey mirrors Bilbo's in its essence - she leaves the comfort of her home, undertakes an adventure she is not entirely sure she wants, performs heroic acts along the way, and returns from her quest changed in meaningful ways. Gaiman, perhaps drawing further influence from Tolkien, creates a journey through liminal space for Coraline that is similar to Bilbo's, albeit for a much shorter duration, a necessary concession to Coraline's young age.

Unlike *The Hobbit*, there is only one door in *Coraline* that is a threshold into liminal space; however, its function alters each time Coraline crosses it. Initially, the 14th door offers Coraline adventure, excitement, and a little bit of creepiness - nothing more than something to do to pass a boring, rainy afternoon. The door itself serves as her call to adventure, offering the liminality for her to explore a necessary new aspect of her identity. The function of liminal space to explore identity is underscored when Coraline meets the talking cat:

'Please, what's your name?' Coraline asked the cat. 'Look, I'm Coraline. Okay?'

The cat yawned slowly, carefully, revealing a mouth and tongue of astounding pinkness. 'Cats don't have names,' it said.

'No?' said Coraline.

'No,' said the cat. 'Now, you people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names.'¹²

It is here that Coraline starts to consider how the Other Place will influence her relationship with her own identity. The discussion of names continues during Coraline's second trip into the liminal space. The cat startles her but she still recognises him. "Oh. It's you," she said to the black cat. "See?" said the cat. "It wasn't so hard recognizing me, was it? Even without names."¹³ Coraline is learning now that names, while a definitive part of a person's identity, are not always the most essential part.

Identity is found or evolves in one's liminal space, but it can also be lost if care is not taken, as Coraline learns from the three ghostly children she meets. She asks who they are, and one replies,

Names, names, names... The names are the first to go, after the breath has gone, and the beating of the heart. We keep our memories longer than our names. ... But I have forgotten the name of my governess, and of the tulips, too.¹⁴

These children teach Coraline one of the most important rules for being caught in liminal space, at least in fantasy literature: 'Remember your name.'¹⁵ The thread of identity continues to be woven through Coraline's liminal space in this way, reminding her to reflect upon who she is, who she is becoming, and to hold on to that burgeoning self with both hands.

Coraline continues to evaluate her identity, though unconsciously, when her Other Parents ask if she likes it there. Coraline admits that it is more interesting than her real home, but balks at committing to staying there 'forever and always.'

¹⁶She returns to her own home and locks the door behind her, blocking the other world and resisting the call into her own liminal space as Bilbo similarly did. Resistance is futile, however, and once it becomes clear that the Other Mother has taken Coraline's real parents, her identity becomes entangled with the liminal space beyond the door. Crossing that threshold is now linked to the success of her quest to find her parents and bring them back. Coraline heads back through the door, telling the cat, 'when you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave.'¹⁷ She, like Bilbo in Smaug's lair, goes back down the dark corridor to face a monster despite her terror. When she crosses the threshold into her liminal space this time, it is far more sinister than before, something she knows will have repercussions far beyond just providing her with some entertainment for a day. Her ability to return to her liminal space, despite her fear, is a result of her time spent in liminality, examining her identity and understanding that, even though she is young, she is brave, worthy of notice, and a person who can take matters into her own hands.

Once Coraline's quest is complete, the return from her liminal space is just as fraught as the rest of her experiences had been. Coraline must return through the dark corridor, past the Other Mother who is determined to keep her. Because her experiences have prepared her and shown her a valuable new aspect of her identity, Coraline is able to take command of the situation and return successfully to her world, with her parents tucked safely in her pocket, the ghostly children and the black cat accompanying them. Returning from her liminal space is as difficult as entering it the first time was easy. Coraline struggles to shut the door behind her, but, '[i]t was heavier than she imagined a door could be, and pulling it closed was like trying to close a door against a wind.'¹⁸ The lessons she learns are being physically manifested in the battle with the door, which can be seen as a struggle against herself and her former desires as well as a struggle of good against evil. More importantly for Coraline, though, is that saving her parents requires 'being unselfish, a true indicator of maturity.'¹⁹ She has truly learned the value of wanting, that wanting is part of the process of living, and that a full life will have both boring days and joyful ones.

Liminal space is a place to discover new aspects of characters' identities. Bilbo finds that he is courageous and adventurous even while he yearns for home. At Thorin's deathbed, Bilbo proclaims that he is glad he has been able to share in their adventures, wholly opposite from his position at the start of the book. Coraline not only learns to be self-reliant and to make others see her, but also that 'I don't *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I wanted? Just like that, and it didn't *mean* anything.'²⁰ The lessons they each learn are appropriate to their ages and stage in life; it is reflected in the structure of their liminal spaces. These discoveries happen from the simple act of opening a door and stepping through. As author Seanan McGuire states, 'Doors are important. What we find on the other side matters even more.'²¹

Notes

- 1 See Z.D. Lalmangaihi, 'The Fantastic as an Act of Resistance in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*', in *Labyrinth*, 8.2 (July 2017), 48-58, p. 49.
- 2 See Sá Klapcsik, 'Neil Gaiman's Irony, Liminal Fantasies, and Fairy Tale Adaptations', in *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 14.2 (2008), 317-334, p. 321.
- 3 See Tanya Carinae Pell Jones, 'It Starts with Doors: Blurred Boundaries and Portals in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman', in *Mythical Dimensions of Neil Gaiman*, ed. by Anthony Burdge, Jessica Burke, and Kristine Larsen (Crawfordville, FL: Kitsune Books, 2012), pp. 208-222, p. 209.
- 4 See David Rudd, 'An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity', in *Children's Literature in Education*, 39.3 (Sept. 2008), 159-168, p. 160.
- 5 See Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 1.
- 6 Compare Gaiman, p. 6-7.
- 7 See J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), p. 11.
- 8 Compare Jones, p. 209.
- 9 See José R. S. Vargas and Juan C. S. Vargas, 'A Girl in the Dark with Monsters: The Convergence of Gothic Elements and Children's Literature in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*', in *Revista De Lenguas Modernas*, 21 (2014), 77-94, p. 83.
- 10 See Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2006), 257, quoted in Lalmangaihi, 2017, p. 55.
- 11 Compare Gaiman, p. 24-25.
- 12 Compare Gaiman, p. 35.
- 13 Compare Gaiman, p. 63.
- 14 Compare Gaiman, p. 81.
- 15 See Neil Gaiman, *Instructions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 21.
- 16 Compare Gaiman, 2002, p. 43.
- 17 Compare Gaiman, 2002, p. 57.
- 18 Compare Gaiman, p. 131.
- 19 Compare Jones, p. 211.
- 20 Compare Gaiman, p. 118.
- 21 See Seanan Maguire, 'Opening Doors: The Chosen Children of Portal Fantasy', in *Tor.com*, (4 Apr 2016), para 16, <https://www.tor.com/2016/04/04/opening-doors-the-chosen-children-of-portal-fantasy>.

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