

Coraline

Study Notes



Directed by: Henry Selick

Certificate: PG

Running time: 100 mins

Suitable for: KS2/3 English/Literacy

This resource is designed to work across upper KS2 and lower KS3. It could form the basis of a unit of work in either Key Stage or could act as a transition unit between the two.

Synopsis

Henry Selick [The Nightmare Before Christmas, James And The Giant Peach] presents another stop-motion animation based on Neil Gaiman's book of the same name. Coraline tells the story of a young girl who unlocks a mysterious door in her new home and begins a strange and scary adventure in a parallel reality.

Before seeing the film

Making predictions

1. What type of film do you think Coraline will be from reading the synopsis?
2. Will it be a comedy? An action adventure movie? A scary movie?
3. Select words from the synopsis to back up your opinion.

From page to screen

Coraline is based on a book by Neil Gaiman, an author well known for writing fantasy tales set in magical worlds. This kind of writing is very descriptive and relies on the reader's imagination to bring the text to life. Of course, in a film version the images onscreen – from the costumes and settings to the character designs – help transport you straight into that fantasy world.

1. Read a section from the novel. How do you 'see' the characters and the setting, in your mind's eye?
2. Draw a picture of a key moment from the book. Is your drawing similar to, or different from, your classmates?
3. When you come to watch the film version, think about how your impressions of the book – the characters, the setting and the atmosphere – are matched or changed by the film.

Choosing and using stop-motion

Coraline is an animated film produced using stop-motion animation. This is a painstakingly slow process where models are used to create the action. A picture of the model is taken, then it is moved slightly, then another picture is taken, then it is moved again. Then another picture is taken and so on: the process is repeated thousands of times to make the film. Eventually, the pictures are put together and played quickly one after the other, so it looks as if the model is moving. This method of filming takes many hours to produce just a few seconds onscreen. Coraline was also filmed in stereoscopic 3D (although you may have seen the regular 2D version).

1. What other stop-motion animation films do you know of? What makes them different to other children's films?
2. This film is produced by Henry Selick, who also worked on the films *The Corpse Bride* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. From what you know about these films (just go by the titles if you haven't seen them), what sort of film do you think Coraline might be?
3. 3D films have been around for some time and right now they are becoming increasingly popular. What other 3D films do you know about? Do they have anything in common with Coraline, or with each other?

Activity

Try stop-motion for yourself. Using plasticine, create a model of a dog or cat in a sitting position. Make its tail move: take a picture of your model sitting, then move its tail slightly – take care not to move the rest of the model – and then take another picture. Move the tail a little more in the same direction and take another picture. Keep doing this until you think you've taken enough pictures. Put the pictures into iMovie or Moviemaker and make the creature's tail move.

After watching the film

Opening sequence

The very first scene of the film was also one of the first pieces of the film to be finished. This was used as a 'teaser trailer': it appeared on websites and in cinemas to give fans a taste of the film before it was released. By doing this, the filmmakers hoped to build excitement about Coraline and encourage people to see it when it arrived at the cinema.

1. What do you remember about the very first scene? (Hint: before we see Coraline, we see a miniature version of her being made...)
2. Thinking about how the story develops, what do you think this first scene 'means'? What ideas does it give you to explain what happens in the rest of the film?

A fairy tale setting

Coraline is similar in some ways to a fairy tale, though it is a modern story.

1. Think of three or four fairy tales that you know of. What settings are there in these different stories? Do some settings seem to come up again and again in different stories?
2. Now think about the setting of Coraline in the first few scenes. Do the locations you see match up with any of the fairy tale settings you know?
3. Does the setting for Coraline have anything in common with other kinds of story that you know of?

Family life

When we first meet Coraline, she has just moved to a new house with her parents. It's the start of the school holidays and, with both of her parents working at home, she quickly gets bored.

Creative writing task

1. Imagine you are Coraline, before she finds the secret door. Write a postcard to your friends in your old town, describing the new house and your new life here. Who have you met? What have you seen? What plans have you made? What are your hopes for the future? Things you could mention:
 - the house
 - the woods
 - Wybie
 - the cat
 - Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, and their dogs
 - Mr Bobinsky
2. Draw an image for the front of the postcard based on one or more of these.

Characters and roles: making sense of the story

It has been said that many stories fall into similar patterns, with the same kinds of characters appearing again and again. In fairy tales this is particularly true. Think about the characters of the evil stepmother, the princess or the prince: these characters pop up in slightly different forms in many different tales. The table on page 6 shows one way of thinking about characters in a story, by looking at the 'role' they play.

1. First of all, fill in the gaps with examples from fairy tales.
2. Now think about the characters in *Coraline*, listed below: where do they fit in the table? Some of them may fit into more than one box.
3. Are there any characters that don't seem to fit any of the boxes?

Characters in *Coraline*:

- Coraline
- real mum
- real dad
- other mother
- other father
- Wybie
- the cat
- Mr Bobinsky
- Miss Spink and Miss Forcible
- the ghosts

Name of role	Description of role	Examples from fairy tales	Characters from Coraline
hero	This is the main character in the story that the audience supports. Generally they act for good, though they may have challenges to face as the story develops.		
dispatcher	This person sets the hero a challenge or sends them on a quest. There may be more than one dispatcher in a story.		
helper	This character might guide the hero throughout the story, or they might appear just at the moment they are most needed to save the hero from trouble.		
donor	The donor gives something to the hero to help them along their way (hint: several characters help Coraline as the story develops...)		
princess	In traditional tales the princess is the character who needs to be rescued by the hero (hint: the role of the 'princess' doesn't have to be played by a girl...)		
villain	This character works against the hero, trying to stop them from completing their quest. Generally their intentions are bad, although they may try to trick other characters into thinking they are good.		

Behind the door

When Coraline first crawls through the secret passage behind the cupboard door, she emerges into a parallel world which at first glance is similar to her own world, but with some key differences. On the other side of the door Coraline's room is full of fascinating toys; her parents have all the time in the world to play with her; even the food tastes better. But all is not as it first seems.

Activity

One of the main differences between the way the two worlds look in the film is the colour palette that is used. Create a colour palette for the film before Coraline climbs through the passage, and one for afterwards.

- What types of colours are used in each world?
- How do the different colour palettes change the feel of the story?
- What if the colour palettes were reversed?

Fantasy and imagination

Life on the other side of the secret door is full of magic and wonder, from Mr Bobinsky's mouse circus, to Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's incredible show. At one point in the film, Coraline walks into a magical garden that literally comes to life.

Activity

Imagine if you walked into your school grounds and the plants, creatures and insects came to life. Storyboard the scene. Use vivid colours to make it more magical.

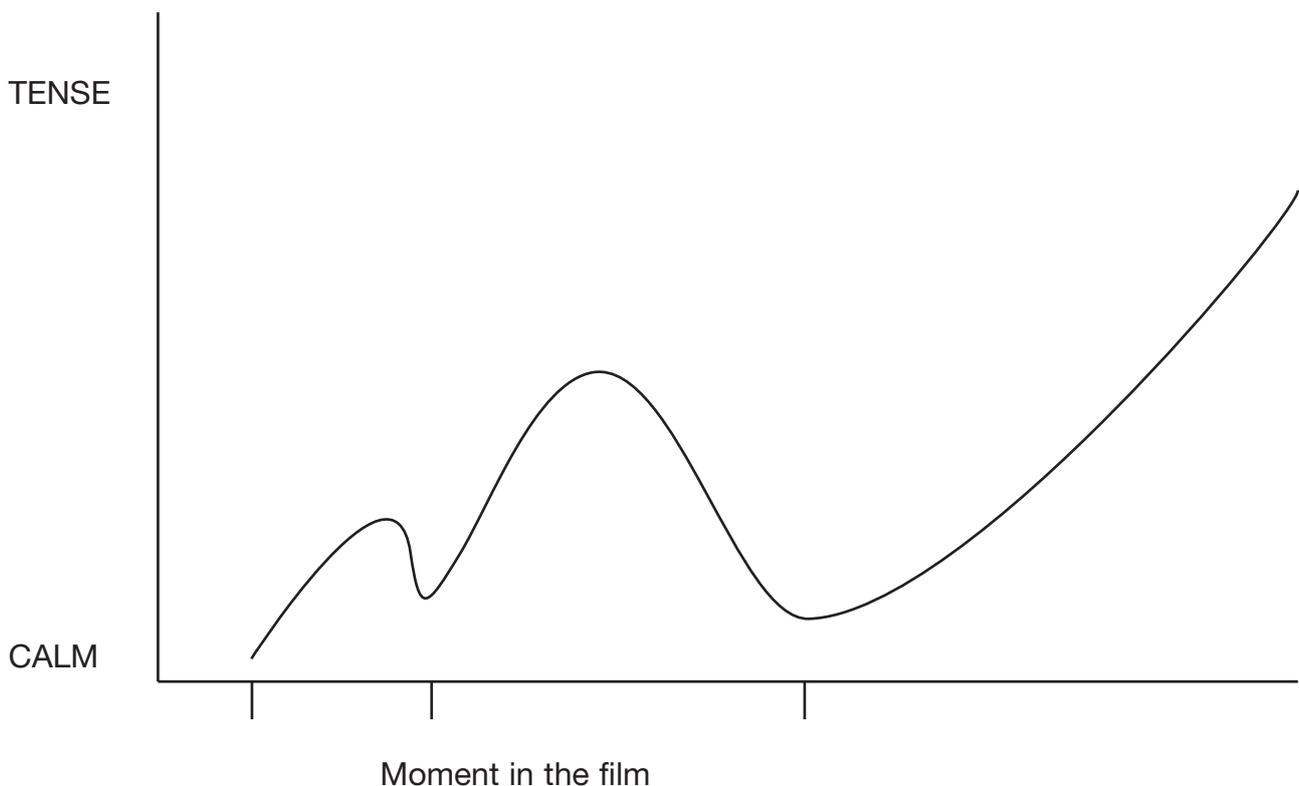
Another mother?

Coraline's Other Mother seems perfect at first glance – but after a while, it isn't only her button eyes that are frightening.

1. When do you first get the impression that life on the other side of the little door isn't as good as it first seems? What details give you this impression?
2. As the story progresses, how do the actions – and appearance – of the Other Mother and the Other Father change?
3. Why do you think the Other Mother wants Coraline to stay in her world with her?

Tension and suspense

1. In a small group, write down all the key moments you can remember from watching Coraline.
2. Once you have written down as much as you can remember, work out which order these moments came in the film – you can do this by giving each moment a number.
3. When you have all this information together, turn it into a tension graph – a line that goes up at the moments of highest tension and down again during calm or happy moments. Write the key moments in the space along the bottom, like in this graph:



4. What shape does your graph take? How does it compare to other groups' graphs?

Music and sound

1. Choose a moment from the film where the music, or a particular song, was important.
2. What was happening in that scene? How would you describe the mood of the music? How important was the music in creating the atmosphere in that scene?

Activity

Compose your own 'soundscape' to create a tense or ghostly atmosphere. Think about what sounds and instruments you could use to make listeners feel tense: will there be any sudden moments that make you jump? Will some sounds be louder and some quieter? How could you use voices – for example, chanting or whispering – to create effects?

Further activities

- When Coraline is sent exploring by her parents, she discovers that her neighbours are little eccentrics to say the least. Mr Bobinsky, the man who lives above Coraline, has smelly cheeses delivered to him in the post. The two actresses who live below her have a room full of their 'dear departed' dogs – stuffed. From what you can remember about these characters, their houses, their actions and their words, write a 'back story' for each character. Where does he or she come from? How have they ended up living next door to Coraline and her family? Why are they the way they are?
- Imagine you are one of the ghosts: a previous victim of the Other Mother who wasn't as lucky as Coraline. Tell your story: how did you get there? You should write in the first person, as though you are the ghost.
- Design your own 'other' world. What magical or wondrous things are there? What frightening and threatening things might be revealed? Make drawings of the key settings and main characters and write descriptions for each.
- The official website for the film has lots to explore and to entertain: you can visit it at <http://coraline.com/>