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"We keep our memories longer than our names": Name, Memory and Identity-Formation in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

Abhinanda Chakraborty

Abstract:

This paper seeks to analyse the identity-formation of Neil Gaiman's eponymous heroine in his coming-of-age novella *Coraline*. By examining both the mental processes by which memory is formed as well as the various different classifications of memory, it is possible to understand, to an extent, the ways in which memory helps in the formation of identity and character. Through an analysis of the events that transpire in Coraline's life and her interaction with the other characters, this paper thus seeks to chart not only how Coraline's memories are formed but also how her memories come to play an integral role, in turn, in the formation of her sense of identity and selfhood. Coraline's growth as an adolescent thus becomes characteristic of the genre of young-adult literature as a whole in which themes of identity and character-formation are not only relevant but also intrinsic since it relates to both adolescents and young adults alike.

Keywords:

Neil Gaiman, Coraline, Memory, Identity, Naming, Dark Fantasy, Young-Adult

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Published in 2002, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* has been classified as a children's as well as a young adult book belonging to the genre of dark fantasy. Deceptively simple on the surface, the book won the 2003 Hugo Award for Best Novella, the 2003 Nebula Award for Best Novella, and the 2002 Bram Stoker Award for Best Work for Young Readers. Centred around the experiences of the eponymous heroine, the novella deals with such themes as growing up, parental domination, desire for independence, wish fulfilment, and the interrelationship between desire and reality.

The story begins with Coraline moving into a new apartment with her parents which is really a rambling old house that has been divided into flats. The other inhabitants of the house include the Misses Forcible and Spink, former actresses who live with their dogs in their dusty old flat, and Mr. Bobo, a "crazy old man with a big moustache" (12) who claims to be training a mouse circus. Coraline's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, both work from home and largely leave their daughter to her own devices so long as she doesn't get in their way. When Coraline, during one of her episodes of exploration, stumbles through the door of their drawing room into the "empty flat" (18) on the other side of the house but having the same alignment as their own apartment, she finds to her astonishment that the flat is not really "empty": it is inhabited by her "other" parents – who physically resemble her real parents but have large, black buttons in place of eyes - who offer her a world of wish-fulfilment, albeit at a certain price – that of replacing her own eyes with black buttons like the others. The rest of the story portrays Coraline's efforts to resist the temptations of this other world, especially the powerful agency of

her "other" mother, and to realize her potential and her own individuality in the process of doing so.

Coraline's journey towards self-realization has been analysed by numerous critics and scholars. Possibly the most common form of interpretation has been in terms of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis wherein Freudian concepts like the Uncanny as well as the conscious/unconscious or Id, Ego and Superego (Conner), and Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (Agnell, Rudd) have been applied to better understand the narrative and the characters. Likewise, the work has often been viewed against a feminist framework in order to examine how the text portrays women not only through its female characters but also in its overall approach towards femininity (Keskula, Muller). It is also interesting to note that, as mentioned earlier, *Coraline* has been classified under the category of 'dark fantasy' because of the presence of elements of horror in the text including a severed hand, black buttons for eyes, ghosts of children and so on. According to Brian Stableford, dark fantasy can thus be described as 'supernatural horror set partly or wholly in "secondary worlds"' which can be usefully defined as a subgenre of stories that attempt to "incorporate elements of horror fiction" into the standard formulae of fantasy stories (97).

In nearly all interpretations of the work, it has been generally remarked how Coraline's name forms an important part of the narrative. From the very beginning, Coraline repeatedly attempts to make her neighbours realise the simple but significant fact that her name is 'Coraline' and not the more common 'Caroline' which is exactly the mistake they insist upon making unintentionally: "'It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline,' said Coraline." (12) And again, "'No,' said Coraline quietly, 'I asked you not to call me Caroline. It's Coraline.'" (12)

Frustrated in her futile attempts to correct the others, Coraline is at first understandably pleased and happy when, in the other world, she is addressed by her correct name by everyone else. This desire to be referred to by her proper name – thereby, to be apparently recognised as 'herself' - thus becomes one of the primary temptations that she must learn to resist before she can come to possess a proper sense of her self.

It is in this context that we must take a closer look at the idea of names and naming and especially how Gaiman represents them in the text. Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen, in their work *Names and Naming in Young Adult Literature*, state that

> Teenagers are vitally involved in developing their own identities as they say good-bye to who they were as children and hello to who they will be as adults. Their names are an important part of their identities, which may be at the root of our observation that, both in real life and in literature, young people are more interested in manipulating and presenting their names than are adults. (ix)

Although the above comment focuses chiefly on the significance that teenagers or young adults usually attribute to names, it is important for us to remember that names have universal significance in that they act as a sort of signifier of one's sense of self or identity and are hence, quite crucial in the process of our negotiating with the external world. In this regard, we may surmise that since names and identity are in a manner intertwined, therefore, since Coraline's selfhood is not adequately formed at the

beginning of the novella, there is much confusion regarding her name from the very start which is also a great source of annoyance for the heroine herself.

Apart from the confusion regarding Coraline’s name, it is also important to look at the names of the other characters in the book. Coraline’s parents are referred to simply as Mr. and Mrs. Jones since their role as parents is more important than their identity as individuals. The “other” mother and father, likewise, are examined more on the basis of their roles as parents – especially contrasted to Coraline’s real parents – which is why they are not given names either. It is interesting to note though that the “other” mother is referred to as the “beldam” (97) which refers to an ugly and/or malicious old woman, thereby hinting at her character even without the necessity of a name.

The Misses Forcible and Spink are another set of characters who are portrayed more as a unit than as separate individuals which partly explains why they are almost indistinguishable from one another: with a shared past and even shared memories of their acting days when they were both young, pretty and desirable, the two women are never seen as separate from one another. The most interesting character in the story who ironically possesses no name, however, is the black cat who is Coraline’s only constant companion in both the real and the other world. Coraline first encounters the cat in the real world but her first conversation with it takes place in the other world in which the cat explicates its personal theory of names:

> ‘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.’ (48)

It is perhaps here that we first come across the idea in the text that true knowledge of one’s own self can render names unnecessary, the concept that names might not actually be as essential to our identity as we generally believe it to be. The cat’s stern insistence that it simply does not require a name stems from its belief that it has an unquestionable, coherent, or essential sense of being, as it were, which is independent of any external signifier, like a name.

This questioning of the notion of name as an inseparable part of our existence or identity is further traceable in the book as the story progresses. When Coraline sets out to explore the “other” world, she chances upon the Misses Forcible and Spink engaged in a never-ending performance in a “poorly lit theatre” on a “high, wooden stage, empty and bare, a dim spotlight shining on to it from above.” (50) After a few of the performances, the two women engage in a bit of acting whose significance lies in the fact that they choose to act out the immortal lines from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* about the arbitrary relation between an object and its name (Act II Scene ii, 44-5), thereby reiterating and reasserting the same theme: “‘What’s in a name?’ asked Miss Forcible. ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’ (55), and

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again, a few lines later, "'I know not how to tell thee who I am,' said Miss Spink to Miss Forcible." (56) The choice of this particular speech from Shakespeare indicates a sense of deliberate emphasis on not only the superficial link an individual bears to her or his name but also the questioning of one's sense of selfhood or identity which further points to the futility of an external signifier if the object or subject in itself has no clear understanding of its own selfhood or personality.

Perhaps the most significant commentary on the relation between names and identity is made through the three ghost children whom Coraline encounters when she is imprisoned behind a mirror by the "other" mother as a punishment for her disobedience. Intimidated and lonely, Coraline realises soon that she is not alone in the dark space for she feels "somebody's cheeks and lips, small and cold" (96) which, as it turns out, belongs to three children, long dead, whose spirits have been kept imprisoned by the "other" mother behind the mirror. When Coraline wonders about who they are, she receives the following reply:

"'Names, names, names,' said another voice, all far-away and lost. 'The names are the first things to go, after the breath has gone, and the beating of the heart. We keep our memories longer than our names. I still keep pictures in my mind of my governess on some May morning, carrying my hoop and stick, and the morning sun behind her, and all the tulips bobbing in the breeze. But I have forgotten the name of the governess, and of the tulips too.'" (97)

The idea that names, likes our breaths, can be finite while memories can go beyond temporal and spatial limitations opens up an entirely different mode of interpreting the interrelationship between name, memory, and identity.

Memory can be looked upon as an internal register of past experiences, emotions, and sensations. It is an integral part of our identity for it provides a sort of continuation from the past to the present, thereby fostering a sense of its continuous growth or development. In their article, 'Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity', Stanley B. Klein and Shaun Nichols provide a splendid perspective into the background of the theory of memory, as it were:

> Memory is at the heart of the way most people think about personal identity... If I had no memory of past experiences, the sense that I existed in the past would be dramatically compromised.
>
> Memory also is at the heart of philosophical discussions of personal identity. Perhaps the most prominent account of personal identity, attributed to Locke, holds that these kinds of memories are (part of) what make me the same as the person I was in the past. Memories of past actions go towards constituting personal identity. Locke's immediate philosophical opponents, Reid and Butler, rejected the constitution thesis. But they didn't shrink from relying on memory to ground judgments of personal identity. On the contrary, Reid and Butler took memory to provide the critical evidence of past existence...
>
> Even philosophers like Hume, who reject the idea that there is an enduring self, still typically acknowledge the force of memorial experience in giving the impression of identity across time... Indeed, it

> is incumbent on theorists who deny persistence of self to maintain that memory presents us with an illusion of identity. (Introduction 2-3)

What becomes evident from the above extract is the intimate link between memory and the sense that one has of one's personal identity. However, to understand this link further, we have to delve deeper into the concept of memory. As Klein and Nichols explain, memory can be classified into two broad categories – short and long term. Long-term memory is of more significance to theorists for its role in the formation of identity (or, in the 'illusion' of its formation, as Hume specifies). Long-term memory is divided into two categories – procedural and declarative. While the procedural memory "makes possible the acquisition and retention of motor, perceptual and cognitive skills (for example, knowing how to ride a bike)" (Nichols and Stein 4), declarative memory, by contrast, "consists in facts and beliefs about the world (for example, knowing that *canaries are yellow*; knowing that *Nolan Ryan pitched seven no-hitters*)" (Nichols and Stein 4).

Declarative memory, in turn, is of two types: semantic and episodic. While the semantic part of declarative memory is mostly concerned with the general facts of the world that are "relatively generic, context-free" and have no "source-tag" (4), the episodic part concerns itself with the most vital aspect of our existence: it is this part of our memory that enables us to form personal memories of people, places and experiences which subsequently assist us in creating a sense of 'self' that has these memories, and by extension, a personal identity or selfhood – real or imagined – evidenced by those very memories. In the words of Nichols and Stein, the episodic memory is crucial since "retrieval from episodic memory is assumed to have a self-referential quality thought to be largely absent from other types of memory" (5) and also because "episodic memory has been thought to involve re-experiencing events from one's past, thus providing its owner with content by which he or she is able to construct a personal narrative, that is, his or her life stories" (5).

Lastly, another aspect of memory which needs to be discussed in this context are the two different kinds of self-related memories within semantic memory. The first is the "semantic factual knowledge of the self – for example, the memory that I am 58 and live in Goleta" (Shaun and Nichols, 6) while the second is the "semantic self-knowledge, knowledge of one's own traits" (Shaun and Nichols, 6). This semantic memory system "contains a specific subsystem that stores information about one's own personality in the form of trait generalizations" that provide a "fast access database", delivering, in the process, "a sense of the self-given by pre-computed summaries of the dispositions one manifested in various behavioural episodes" (Shaun and Nichols, 6).

Against this briefly detailed classification of memory and its sub-categories, it is possible to analyse Coraline's character as well as her actions in a different light. First, in terms of trait self-knowledge of semantic memory, Coraline uses her knowledge of her own traits to base judgments of her own self at important points in the text which enable her to make important decisions. She uses knowledge of her traits to quell the doubts of others as well as of her own self about her abilities. For instance, Coraline regards herself as an explorer and from the very start she emphasizes this aspect of herself not only through her conversations but also through her actions. Thus, when Misses Spink and Forcible warn her on the very first day after moving into their new house there is a dangerous well in the garden and that she would do well to keep away

from it, she promptly "set(s) off to explore for it, so that she knew where it was, to keep away from it properly." (13) Similarly, when Miss Forcible tells Coraline soon after, on a remarkably foggy day that "'You'd have to be an explorer to find your way around in this fog'"(24), she immediately replies with "I'm an explorer." (24) Later in the story when Coraline challenges the "other" mother to a game in order to win back the souls of the three ghost children, her parents, and her own freedom, it is an "exploring game" (108) that she specifically chooses, knowing it to be her strength.

Another important instance where Coraline uses her trait self-knowledge to strengthen her sense of selfhood is in her attitude to bravery. Time and again in the story when Coraline is faced with different intimidating situations, she insists on reiterating to herself that "I am brave" or, "I will be brave" (74) which points to her conscious choice of bravery over cowardice which is then subsequently manifested through her actions. For example, when the "other" mother attempts to manipulate Coraline into thinking that they are going to take better care of her than her real parents, she calls her bluff at once and, having rejected their offer of a delicious midnight snack, declares to the "other" mother that "You don't frighten me" (75) even though she actually feels slightly threatened by her. Again, when Coraline sets out to search for the souls of the three dead children, she ends up back at the other Misses Forcible and Spinks' theatre where, this time, she encounters only darkness and an eerie silence. As she progresses through the dim darkness, she finds herself in a highly unpleasant situation:

There was something up on the back wall behind the ruined stage. It was greyish-white, twice the size of Coraline herself, and it was stuck to the back wall like a slug. Coraline took a deep breath. 'I'm not afraid', she told herself. 'I'm not.' She did not believe herself, but she scrambled on to the old stage, fingers sinking into the rotten wood as she pulled herself up (118).

Finally, when Coraline enters the flat of the other crazy old man upstairs in her search for the children's souls, she is greeted by a near-complete darkness from which "red eyes stared at her" (135) and "darker shadows slipped through the shadows at the edges of things" (135). In this nightmarish situation when Coraline hears a voice address her a "(l)ittle girl" (135), her response is characteristic: "'Yes,' said Coraline. *I'm not frightened*, she told herself, and as she thought it she knew that it was true. There was nothing here that frightened her." (137)

In both cases, Coraline moves from a doubtful, less-than-certain, but adamant sense of her own abilities to a strong establishment of those very qualities: she does win the exploration game she had challenged the other mother to just as she also moves from merely convincing herself that she is not afraid to actually being unafraid and brave in the face of all the threats and tricks that the other mother employs to intimidate and control her, thereby establishing a greater sense of identity in the process.

The other aspect of Coraline's identity-formation through memory that remains to be discussed is to examine the impact of episodic memory on Coraline's actions, and by extension, on her character. Two instances need to be looked at closely in this regard.

When Coraline realizes that her parents have been kidnapped by the other mother "into a world on the other side of the mirror" (67) in their hall and that the onus of rescuing them rests on her, she is initially scared and uncertain but she soon rises to the occasion with the help of a memory of her father from her childhood. She remembers how, when

she was a little girl, she had adamantly wanted to explore the wasteland between their old house and the shops from which she had been effectively prevented by her parents since the place was filled with “too many sharp things, and tetanus and such.” (69) On her insistence, however, Coraline’s father had one day taken her to explore the place. Mid-way through, her father had urgently instructed her to run away fast up the hill and had followed her up himself, after a while, “charging like a rhino.” (70) When they were at a safe distance, they had looked back down the path to find “the air was alive with yellow wasps.” (70) Realizing that they had mistakenly stepped on a wasps’ nest on their walk, Coraline’s father had given his daughter the chance to run up safely as far as she could while staying back himself – and getting stung by the wasps – to buy her more time. Later that afternoon, he had returned to the same spot to retrieve his fallen glasses and this act, as Coraline remembers, is infused with a special quality which she holds especially dear:

> ‘And he said that wasn’t brave of him, doing that, just standing there and being stung,’ said Coraline to the cat. ‘It wasn’t brave because he wasn’t scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again to get his glasses, when he knew the wasps were there, when he was really scared. *That* was brave.’
>
> …’And why was that?’ Asked the cat, although it sounded barely interested.
>
> ‘Because,’ she said, ‘when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, *that’s* brave.’ (71-2)

Coraline’s own concept of bravery, as evidenced by her actions, is akin to her father’s for she too faces her challenges and fears head-on, knowing that she is intimidated by them. Coraline’s insistence to herself that she is indeed brave through all her travails in the other world can thus be perceived as stemming in a manner, from her memory of her father’s act of bravery, perhaps even imitating it consciously or otherwise: her trait self-knowledge and her episodic memory therefore appear to intersect at this point, shedding significant light on her characterization and growth of selfhood.

The second instance of episodic memory that has a palpable impact on Coraline’s mind is, once again, a childhood memory of her father. When Coraline escapes from the other world together with her parents and the cat, they are followed by the other mother’s severed hand into the real world, searching for the key that would open the door to the other world. Threatened by its presence, Coraline decides to take action to foil its intentions. Accordingly, she plans a dolls’ tea-party adjacent to the deep dark well in the garden where she hopes to lure the spider-like hand to entrap it. As she embarks on her mission, she initially feels apprehensive and decides to “whistle” (179) to hide her nervousness but since “nothing happened, so she sang out instead, a song her father had made up for her when she was a little baby and which always made her laugh.” (179) The song, which forms an integral part of her memory (an episodic memory of her father) serves two different purposes: first, as a memory of her father whom she associates with bravery and courage, the song provides her with the strength she requires to complete the task at hand. This is made evident by the line: “That was what she sang as she sauntered through the woods, and her voice hardly trembled at all.” (180) Second, the song in itself is significant for it acts as a reassurance to Coraline of

what a real parent-child relation – as opposed to the other mother-Coraline relation – should actually be:

> Oh... My twitchy witchy girl
>
> I think you are so nice,
>
> I give you bowls of porridge
>
> And I give you bowls of ice-
>
> cream.
>
> I give you lots of kisses,
>
> And I give you lots of hugs,
>
> But I never give you sandwiches
>
> with bugs
>
> in. (179)

As the words of the song indicate, it brings positive attributes to one's mind ("nice", "porridge", "ice-cream", "kisses" and "hugs"). However, the last line - "But I never give you sandwiches/ with bugs/ in" - is reminiscent of the other mother who is shown, at one point, to be enjoying a sumptuous snack of "large shiny blackbeetles, crawling over each other" (93). This image, gross and grotesque in itself, not just points to the other mother's monstrous nature but, in her offering of the same snack to Coraline, perhaps also indicates her desire to liken Coraline to herself. It is also interesting to note that following Coraline's refusal to share the snack, besides calling the other mother "sick and evil and weird" (93), she is put behind the mirror in the dark space as a punishment for her disobedience and lack of manners. The father's song thus invokes in Coraline a memory of a positive and happy childhood which becomes, in turn, a source of courage and strength for her to counter and foil the efforts of the other mother to return to the real world.

The restorative power of memory is wonderfully portrayed through the text. Not only does Coraline come to terms with herself, her real parents, and the real world by forging her identity with the assistance of her memory but it also splendidly exemplified through the ghost children. The children, who had lost all their external signifiers like name, age and gender because of their long imprisonment in the darkness (oblivion, perhaps), gradually come into a remembrance of their former selves when Coraline sets about searching for their souls. With each success, the children begin to remember their past lives and their sense of selfhood is restored to an extent. This is made possible through the act of remembering itself. When Coraline asks one of the children if it was a boy or girl while alive, it replies: "'A boy, perhaps, then,' continued the one whose hand she was holding. 'I believe I was once a boy.' And it glowed a little more brightly in the darkness of the room behind the mirror." (99) As they remark, part of the other mother's cruelty resides in the fact that she is ruthless in her demands and knows no values or boundaries of taking:

> ‘She will take your life and all you are and all you care’st for, and she will leave you with nothing but mist and fog. She’ll take your joy. And one day you’ll awake and your heart and soul will have gone. A husk you’ll be, a wisp you’ll be, and a thing no more than a dream on waking, or a memory of something forgotten.’
>
> ‘Hollow,’ whispered the third voice. ‘Hollow, hollow, hollow, hollow, hollow.’ (102)

We mark a transition in the ghost children when Coraline succeeds in finding each of their respective souls that had been hidden by the other mother. She finds the soul of the first child in the box of toys in her other bedroom, amidst “forgotten objects, abandoned and unloved” (113), reflecting, in a way, the condition of the children themselves – including Coraline – in the other mother’s world. No sooner than she finds the marble containing the soul that “(a) voice whispered in her mind, ‘Indeed, lady, it comes to me that I certainly was a boy, now I do think on it...’“ (114) Coraline’s successful quest in finding the souls of the dead children thus sets them free in more ways than one: she not only helps them escape from the other mother’s world but she also saves them, more importantly perhaps, from oblivion – she restores to them, together with their memories, the sense of their selfhood or identity which had been taken from them by the other mother, rendering them “hollow”. Coraline, as it were, pours back their memories and their souls into their hollow shells, and through the process, gains her own selfhood while helping them attain theirs. Coraline’s development as an individual and the growth of her identity is perhaps best expressed through her addressing of the black cat simply as “cat” (145) towards the end of her ordeal which clearly indicates her progression in terms of selfhood: from feeling intimidated by the cat’s supreme sense of being towards the beginning to her addressing of him as an equal, she grows adequately in terms of identity to come up at par with the cat who finally relents and comes to an acceptance of Coraline’s camaraderie.

That Coraline attains a healthy sense of identity and selfhood by the end of the novella is also made evident through her final interaction with Mr. Bobo. Before her adventure in the other world, Coraline’s biggest complaint had been others mistaking her name for Caroline instead of Coraline. However, she realizes only after her return to the real world that she too had been careless in her approach towards the others. When she is informed by Misses Forcible and Spinks that the crazy old man upstairs has a name, she is surprised, to say the least: “It had never occurred to Coraline that the crazy old man upstairs actually had a name, she realised. If she’d known his name was Mr. Bobo she would have said it every chance she got.” (178) When Coraline succeeds in getting rid of the other mother’s severed hand by trapping it in the deep dark well in their garden, she is flooded by a sense of achievement which further consolidates her sense of self. It is at this point that Mr. Bobo and Coraline interact with one another, their conversation pointing towards mutual recognition and consideration:

> Mr. Bobo was waiting for her in the driveway. He clapped her on the shoulder.
>
> ‘The mice tell me that all is good,’ he said. ‘They say that you are our saviour, Caroline.’
>
> ‘It’s Coraline, Mister Bobo,’ said coraline. ‘Not Caroline. *Cor*aline.’

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> 'Coraline', said Mr. Bobo, repeating her name to himself with wonderment and respect. 'Very good, Coraline...' (183)

With Coraline's realization of her own selfhood through her experiences in the novella, her recognition and acceptance as an individual on her own terms is also facilitated in her interactions with the other characters. *Coraline*, as a text, thus succeeds in splendidly portraying the interrelationship between memory and identity wherein character-formation is exhibited as being as inextricably related to the internal processes of the human mind – with Coraline's effective negotiations with both internal as well as external factors affecting her, her exemplary role as the protagonist of the novella enables Gaiman to render the text as a brilliant specimen of young-adult literature where issues of identity and selfhood remain integral to any understanding of the genre as a whole.

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BIO-NOTE

Abhinanda Chakraborty completed both his Graduation (2009) and Post-Graduation (2011) from Presidency College, Kolkata, (now university) under Calcutta University. He is currently employed as an Assistant Professor in English at Chandidas Mahavidyalaya under the University of Burdwan.

Email: abhinanda.chakraborty2010@gmail.com