The Madwoman Reimagined: Uncanny Doubling and Visibility in Julia Armfield's "The Great Awake"

In the chapter "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" from *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that female writers experience an "anxiety of authorship" that is inherently different from the male writers' experience of the "anxiety of influence." In short, the "anxiety of influence" is the idea that men suffer from an Oedipal-like struggle of imposter syndrome due to the overabundance of male forefathers. In contrast, the "anxiety of influence" reflects the unique struggle women writers face due to the absence of literary foremothers. The "anxiety of authorship" manifests itself in the angel versus monster binary. Women are either the angelic ideal of femininity or they are its monstrous shadow, most vividly embodied in the figure of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*. For Gilbert and Gubar, these doubles emerge unconsciously, reflecting the repressed terrors and desires of women who had no literary authority. However, as Veronica Schanoes suggests, contemporary women writers often deploy the doubling phenomenon more consciously, multiplying selves in ways that expose rather than conceal the mechanics of repression. Julia Armfield's short story "The Great Awake" is an example of this shift. Her uncanny "sleeps" are doubles that echo what Sarah Annes Brown describes as the unsettling tension of the familiar made strange. However, unlike the attic-bound madwoman, these doubles move around visibly in the public space. Additionally, as Jeanett Shumaker notes of Anne Enright's fiction, contemporary uncanny doubles often reveal gendered anxieties tied to identity and embodiment, a tradition that

Armfield inherits while reimaging it in terms of surveillance and productivity. By making the

double external rather than internal, and subjecting it to social regulation, Armfield transforms the trope of the madwoman from a hidden, unconscious manifestation of authorship anxiety into a conscious and visible figure that dramatizes twenty-first century anxieties about selfhood, surveillance, and control.

In "Infection in the Sentence," Gilbert and Gubar examine the ways eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers grappled with the "anxiety of authorship," a condition that constricted women's creativity and was both socially constrained and internally conflicted. Many women writers of the time employed the use of a symbolic double to represent the forbidden aspects of the feminine experience and explore their transgressive thoughts. The most famous madwoman figure to date is Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but there have been many others. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the construction of the double to discuss their internal struggles was not necessarily something that women writers were aware they were doing. The unconscious manifestation of the double illustrates how women authors internalized the social constraints that limited their daily and literary lives. The use of the madwoman was a way for the author to express her inner rage, desire, and creativity, which she could not fully express in the real world. By "projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished…), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire to both accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (Gilbert and Gubar 78). In this way, the madwoman is more than just an interesting oppositional character to the "angel," she is also the mediator between the author's inner life and the rigid expectations she is supposed to adhere to in the patriarchal literary world. The madwoman's

confinement, in the case of Bertha Mason, in the attic, reflects the degree to which women's internal conflicts had to remain hidden to maintain social order.

It is important to note that the madwoman double is both a threat and a companion to the socially sanctioned female writer. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the double haunts the woman writer, and the act of writing is an attempt to negotiate with the forbidden aspects of herself, a way to release her frustrations and desires in a socially acceptable way. It is precisely the woman writer's marginalization that makes the use and concealment of the double necessary. However, the double is more than just a psychological or literary construct; it is a reflection of the historical and social realities of women.

The idea that women authors used the madwoman double unconsciously provides the backdrop for understanding the work of contemporary author, Julia Armfield. Unlike the madwoman who must be confined or obscured, Armfield's "sleeps" are purposefully visible. Unlike Gilbert and Gubar's doubles, which must function secretly in the attics and margins of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers' work, Armfield's doubles perform and interact with social expectations in real time. This difference highlights an important shift in contemporary literary practice, in that doubling no longer needs to be a private or repressed mechanism; it can now be used openly to explore concerns about visibility, productivity, and surveillance. Through Gilbert and Gubar's examination, we can see how Armfield transforms the historical madwoman framework from something that must remain hidden in the attic to something that boldly walks the street with us.

In "Uncanny Doubles: Part Two," Sarah Annes Brown provides an important extension of this discussion by emphasizing the uncanny nature of the double, noting both its familiarity and its

strangeness. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, Brown argues that the double destabilizes the boundary between the self and the other, the interior and the exterior, and the conscious and the unconscious. She explains that the double provokes such unease because

they are both recognizably "us" and yet disturbingly autonomous, making one question which one is real and which one is the doppelgänger, "who is doing what to whom? Is the uncanny resemblance real?" (Brown 73). In Armfield's "The Great Awake," this uncanniness takes a distinct social form when the "sleep" mirrors its original self so perfectly that the difference between who is the real person and who is the doppelgänger is almost impossible to distinguish. This blurring is most striking when the unnamed narrator sits across her brother at the table and comments, "Reflected in the window, it was hard to tell which of them was paler, which would be more recognizable if I came up to the diner from the parking lot and saw them through the glass" (Armfield 38). The "sleeps" bring to life Brown's definition of the uncanny. They replicate the gestures, routines, and habits of their counterparts to the point where the characters themselves feel both recognized and redundant. However, Armfield complicates this by removing the uncanny from the private, psychological space of the Gothic attic to the bodily space of everyday life, where social performance is required. In this way, the uncanny is no longer confined to the home but has become a feature of the everyday social being.

While Gilbert and Gubar illustrate how the double works as an unconscious projection of the repressed, and Brown comments on the uncanny nature of doubles, later feminist and postmodern theorists believe that the use of the double is often an intentional and self-aware literary strategy. In "Doubling and Multiplying the Self/Story in Catherynne M. Valente's The Ice Puzzle," Veronica Schanoes argues that modern women writers consciously use the storytelling device of

a double to exert narrative control and explore their identities. Instead of the double representing an eruption of the repressed, it is a deliberate act used to multiply the self. Schanoes uses the analogy of a shattered mirror to illustrate her point that the scattered pieces of the narrative "reflect the self into different shapes…It uses different myths as mirrors of

one another and of one female character. If myth is a way to make meaning out of our lives…then here it becomes a way of creating ourselves as multiplied selves" (Schanoes 196–197). In this way, the use of the double is an act of agency and a way for women writers to inhabit multiple positions at the same time. This perspective highlights that doubles are not merely symptoms of anxiety, but can be creative acts of self-representation.

Schanoes's emphasis on conscious doubling helps us understand how Armfield's "sleeps" function as thinking and sentient counterparts who can exert control over their humans. The "sleeps" are sometimes havoc-raisers, but they also have a protective nature, preventing their human counterparts from doing something ill-advised. While on a phone call with her mother, the narrator considers telling her about a budding romantic relationship with her neighbor, to which the "sleep" chooses "that moment to take the receiver away from me and hang up the call" (Armfield 36). The "sleep," functioning as an extension of the narrator, knew that sharing this detail with the narrator's mother was not a good idea. The "sleep" thereby exerts control in a way that the narrator cannot, thus illustrating how the double can represent one version of the self that thinks and acts differently from another version. One version of the narrator wanted to share an important life detail with her mother, while her double knew that it would only cause more pain to tell her; thus, the double represents the part of the self who acts in the narrator's best interest and allows the author to inhabit conflicting positions simultaneously.

Armfield's doubles also participate in a broader cultural conversation about surveillance and productivity. A teenager writes to her local newspaper about how she is "too shy to masturbate with her Sleep watching" (29), which underscores how the existence of the "sleeps" compels people to act in a certain way even when they are alone. Despite being extensions of the characters, the "sleeps" are still an otherized presence that makes people feel like they are being

watched and judged for their behavior. Since they are not confined to either the public or the private space, "sleeps" can monitor and control behavior everywhere. In addition to their ability to uphold chaste behavior, the emergence of the "sleeps" also allows London residents to be more productive and pack even more activities into their days since they no longer have to designate time for sleep. The narrator explains that her brother is on his way to an acting audition at two o'clock in the morning, which is "an early example of what would become the fairly common practice of 'repurposing the night'" (28). The repurposing of nights to work more hours provides a crucial contemporary commentary on how, as technology advances and automates specific tasks, our capitalist society inevitably finds other ways to fill the time with more work. Unlike Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman, who rebels by retreating into madness, Armfield's double conforms so completely that rebellion is replaced by survival. No one pushes back against the "repurposing" of nighttime; instead, it becomes fully integrated into daily life as the people become more exhausted and too weak from a lack of sleep to fight it.

Aside from being cognizant entities that control their human doubles to act in ways that align with the chaste capitalist demands of society, Armfield's doubles also comment on the distinctly feminine forms of haunting. The narrator describes her "sleep" as a burden and a companion. It is something to talk to in the sleepless hours, yet also provides "little indication that what I said

was appreciated" (23) and essentially ignores her attempts at engagement. The "sleep" haunts her, yet she cannot engage with it or rid herself of it. The conflicted way she feels about her "sleep" reflects how modern women think about the social expectations placed on them. Women strive to fulfill societal expectations to the best of their ability, but inevitably fall short because the standard is unattainable. This creates a sense of ambivalence for women who are not allowed to engage in the conversation about the expectations placed on them, yet are still

expected to perform them perfectly. The double then becomes a figure of social exhaustion; it enables women to perform the feminine ideal, i.e., being the perfect caregiver without complaint, but to the point of depletion. The narrator is more productive than she has ever been, but at a severe physical and emotional cost. As Jeanett Shumaker notes, the double then "dramatize[s] the impossibility of stabilizing identity" (Shumaker 107). The modern woman will always be at odds with the unrealistic expectations placed on them and therefore her identity remains unstable. The uncanny, then, is not what is hidden but what is overexposed. The "sleep" walks through a world where the self has become a ghost, split between the competing drives for authenticity and social performance.

Julia Armfield's "sleeps" in "The Great Awake" reimagine the feminist double for the surveilled postmodern age. While Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman was confined to the attic, Armfield's double is free-roaming and infiltrates every aspect of modern life. The narrator is functioning in the way society expects, but she is still haunted by the presence and expectations that society imposes through the emergence of the "sleeps." By drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers whose doubles had to remain hidden, to Brown's belief that doubles are familiar yet eerie examples of the uncanny, to

Schanoes's understanding that doubles are now a conscious literary choice, to Shumaker's ideas about doubles representing gendered anxiety about identity, we can see how Armfield's work embodies the evolving ideas about the madwoman double to show how women's identity has become a public negotiation. The result is a new feminist uncanny in which the self is no longer fractured privately but is instead very publicly exposed and scrutinized.

Works Cited

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