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THE INFLUENCE OF SATIRE ON IDENTITY FORMATION IN JONATHAN COE'S *THE HOUSE OF SLEEP*

Abstract

The House of Sleep is a canny satire with an oblique meditation on love, sleep, memory and dreams, and Jonathan Coe proves himself to be a satirist of the ambiguities of identity. In addition to the social levels of signification specific to Coe's literature, *The House of Sleep* allows for a more intimate and psychological reading. The present paper is intended to provide an in-depth analysis on the character's identity formation, focusing on the relationship between the mechanisms of satire and the Self-Other dynamics – expressed in the novel through the dichotomies of power and subordination, and of superiority and weakness. In essence, the novel deals with the tension between subjective consciousness and objective reality, showing how difficult it is for the characters to separate fantasy from real life. Otherness takes multiple forms in *The House of Sleep*, being represented either by the new system, on a larger scale, or by the characters themselves, for being different and not fitting the norms, on a minor scale. In both cases, the dynamics between the Self and the Other influences the development of the characters because the process of constructing one's identity also involves the surrender to the Other.

Key words: Jonathan Coe, identity, satire, otherness, dream, sleep

1. Introduction

Identity and social identity theories describe the self as both a stable unity and a fluid one. Bauman regarded postmodern identity as fragmented and fluid, arguing that we have to create our identities, to make them from scratch, and spend our lives redeciding them, and that "we seek and construct and keep together the communal references of our identities while on the move – struggling to match the similarly mobile, fast moving groups we seek and construct and try to keep alive for a moment, but not much longer" (Bauman 1991: 26). The postmodern persona is presented as a hybrid, a combination of many selves, and therefore of many conflicting parts. Consequently, identity is "malleable and situation-sensitive" (Oyserman 2009: 278),

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so it entails the existence for one person of multiple identities, in direct proportion to the roles played in society.

During the second half of the 20th century, issues such as identity, Otherness and the role of social boundaries remained some of the main focuses of philosophers and literary critics. In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) Zygmunt Bauman stressed the idea that identities are set up as dichotomies, and the notion of Otherness is essential to the way in which societies establish identity categories. He argued that:

> In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm [...] woman the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, 'them' the other of 'us' ... (Bauman 1991:8)

In the 21st century, Massih Zekavat carries the study of identity formation further on and analyses the contribution of satire to the construction of social subjects' identities via the relationship between satire, identity and opposition. In his most recent study, *Satire, Humour and the Construction of Identities* (2017), Zekavat attempts to provide a theoretical background for the relationship between identity and satire, and more precisely to explain the mechanisms through which satire contributes to the formation of racial, ethnic, religious, national, and gender identities, through the opposition between self and others. As he explains, "since othering is the prerequisite of identity construction, then satire can construct the identities of social subjects or contribute to the process" (Zekavat 2017: 4). Therefore through the bipolarities of sexism, nationalism or religion, which presuppose otherness, satire can contribute to the construction of identities and give voice to the supressed identities.

Critics and thinkers across various disciplines emphasise that opposition and othering are two of the essential ingredients to the construction of identities and social subjects. Starting from the definition of the concept of *Otherness* as the state of being different from the social identity of a person and the identity of the self, we can claim that Otherness can also be originated in the divergence between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the real and the illusionary. In *The House of Sleep* (1997), through the motifs of sleep and dream, Coe illustrates passages from the real to the unreal. Moreover, the two motifs reinforce the issue of social fragmentation and the oppositional themes, reality and illusion.

2. The sleep and the dream – The self in-between

Starting with the 20th century, literature has been greatly influenced by the psychological theorising of Sigmund Freud. Freud considered dreams to be the royal road to the unconscious, because in dreams, the subject's Ego lowers its defences and the repressed material comes through to awareness, usually in distorted forms (Freud 1997: 132). Freudian school of thought increased the incorporation of dream motifs in fiction and, as a consequence, writers started not only to employ dreams to develop characters psychologically, but also intended to capture the essence of dreaming in their works.

In *The House of Sleep* the symbol of the dream blurs the frontiers between fiction and reality, and between the Self and the Other. Also, dreams play an important role in the relationships between people, based on the dichotomies of power and subordination, and of superiority and weakness. Although *The House of Sleep* leaves the historical and political contexts in the background, as opposed to other novels by the same author, it still shares with them an interest in the intimacy of private emotional lives and the sense of sharing that people achieve or fail to conjure. The focus of the present analysis will be mainly on the philosophical and psychoanalytical approaches to identity, insisting on the role of otherness in identity construction.

In contrast to Coe's previous novels, *The House of Sleep* evokes a dreamy and romantic atmosphere, but also has the usual bleak and mysterious tone, for the gothic elements that enrich the narration. The fates of the four protagonists interweave in the gloomy environment of Ashdown, a "huge, grey and imposing" Victorian manor, with "glacial rooms and mazy, echoing corridors" where "the wind howled around the walls", and with a creepy basement where strange experiments take place (Coe 2008: 3). The novel is a canny satire with an oblique meditation on love, sleep, memory and dreams, and Coe proves himself to be a "satirist of the ambiguities of identity and the afflictions of the sleep-deprived" (*Publishers Weekly* 1998). In addition to the social levels of signification specific to Coe's literature, *The House of Sleep* allows for a more intimate and psychological reading.

The central theme of the novel, and at the same time the element that holds all the characters together, is sleep. Through sleep and dreams, the characters' consciousness becomes fluid, it melts and transforms, ultimately generating a tangle of misreadings and misinterpretations. Sleep is presented as a paradox and the presence and the absence of it, respectively, is what connects the protagonists. Sarah Tudor is a narcoleptic woman who struggles to stay awake, while on the opposite side there is Terry Worth, who suffers from insomnia and is, ironically, addicted to dreams. Gregory Dudden, the figure of the mad scientist, is obsessed with watching people sleep and has a fetish about touching Sarah's eyelids while she is asleep, and Robert Madison, who

is hopelessly in love with Sarah, gets entrapped in a misinterpretation that results from one of her dreams, an illusion that ultimately changes his life.

Each of the characters experiences sleep differently. For Sarah, sleep means confusion and illness, because she cannot control it, and helplessness because of Gregory's "game" that places her in a vulnerable position. For Gregory on the other hand, sleep becomes an obsession. If in the beginning it was just about a sexual fetish, he soon becomes delusional and wants to eradicate sleep from human life. Terry goes from sleeping fourteen hours a day to not sleeping at all, both situations bringing about a series of social consequences. Moreover, in the novel, sleep is paradoxically envisioned as a weakness, a disease that shortens life by a third and submits the individual to a state of unconsciousness and helplessness, and as a reward, a "great leveller" where "nobody would ever tell a lie" (Coe 2008: 164). Sleep and sleep disorders are therefore part of the characters' lives and tools for constructing their identities, and the concept of dreaming functions as the liminal sphere in which the barriers between everyday life and the suprasensual become diffuse.

The plot of the novel is cleverly divided into six sections, following the different stages of sleep: Awake, stages from Stage One to Stage Four, and REM (Rapid Eye Movement) Sleep; and the time of the action shifts between two different periods, analepses and prolepses. As the author explains in a note at the beginning of the novel, the odd-numbered chapters are set in 1983–84, and the even-numbered chapters are set in the last two weeks of June, 1996. To the intertwined periods of time, Coe adds the shifting narrative perspective. Between the different phases of sleep, the narrator changes the perspective as well as the period of time, ending a chapter midsentence in one character's mind and picking up the same sentence in the following chapter, but from a different perspective and in a different moment in time. As Suzzane Berne argued, "instead of worrying about creating confusion, Coe exults in it" and the deliberate conflation of time and identity neatly illustrates how fluid our perception of the world can be – fluidity demonstrated in dreams when one person turns into another; when time collapses, elongates and spins in place; and when the most familiar things suddenly look strange (Berne 1998).

In essence, the novel deals with the tension between subjective consciousness and objective reality, showing how difficult it is for the characters to separate fantasy from real life. According to Prado Pérez, Jonathan Coe's *The House of Sleep* "depicts disjoined and chaotic characters at the point of dissolution" and challenges "the moral certainties and monolithic representations of reality promoted by conservative ideological discourses" (Prado Pérez 2006: 971). In terms of the social and political aspect of the novel, Coe cleverly satirises the reforms of the National Health System and the implementation of market-driven factors in its management. The writer introduces

his criticism of the reforms precisely through the stories of the sleep disorder of the protagonists and through the story of the Ashdown clinic and the endeavours of Dr Gregory Dudden.

3. (Re)constructing personal identity – An analysis of the characters

3.1 Sarah Tudor and Robert/Cleo Madison

The central character of the story is Sarah Tudor. Around her gravitate Robert Madison, Gregory Dudden and Terry Worth, her actions affecting their destinies and thus triggering the plot. From the very beginning, Sarah is presented as a quite isolated woman, although she is always surrounded by other people. Her medical condition makes her unable to distinguish between her dreams and reality, and throughout the novel, the other characters get trapped in her dreams too. Being a narcoleptic, Sarah had "dreams so vivid that she couldn't tell the difference between the things she dreamed and the things that really happened to her" (Coe 2008: 36). These illusions and confusion between dreams and reality lead to a series of misreading and misinterpretations that construct the comic sphere of the novel, in Coe's well-known style.

Although neither of the characters is provided any substantial background, the focal point of the novel is their identity dramas. Thus the attention is on the psychological situations of the protagonists rather than on the events, and the acts of each character are explained by analysing their psyche. The beginning of the novel presents Sarah with a "group of four strangers sitting at her table [who] may or may not have asked permission to join her. She couldn't remember" (Coe 2008: 4). The situation however does not seem to bother her at all, since she is lost in thoughts, recalling a previous event with a stranger that verbally attacked her in the street. Throughout the novel, the event is revisited in conversations between Sarah and her therapist, and the veracity of it becomes doubtful because of Sarah's sleep disorder. Soon, she becomes a mystery not only for the readers, but also for the other characters. Her relationship with Gregory is unusual from the very beginning, and his intentions towards Sarah and her medical condition are suspicious. "Tell me about your dreams", he asked her, and then he proceeded to write her words down in his notebook, under the title "Sarah's psychological problems". Sarah is to Gregory more like a patient or a source of inspiration for his studies than a regular girlfriend. On the other hand, while talking about her peculiar experiences with her alternative memory, Sarah confesses to Gregory: "I'm telling you now, because I trust you. Because I love you" (Coe 2008: 44). Therefore in the novel falling asleep can be easily associated with falling in love. Both conditions imply a certain degree of helplessness and lack of control, and can be easily achievable for some people, and very difficult to obtain for others.

As opposed to *What a Carve Up!* (Coe 1994), where dreams acquired metaphysical qualities, in *The House of Sleep* they were much more strongly anchored in reality, this being the reason why Sarah couldn't tell the difference between reality and illusion. In the novel, through the motifs of the dream and the sleep, the dichotomies between power and weakness, as well as between reality and the illusion of it, are established and they both contribute to the development of the characters' identities.

Sarah's medical condition is what alienates her from society. People tended to judge her and consider her crazy for her "alternative memory", for inventing another version of reality. Her quest for identity and her emotional instability are revealed by the way in which she changes her romantic partners. She dedicates eleven months to her toxic relationship with Gregory, but then she realises it not only hindered her true self, but also shut the door to her happiness and, "presumably, the freedom to pursue other, more successful friendships" (Coe 2008: 21). When she meets Veronica, she feels that she has regained control over herself, and at the same time she becomes a convinced feminist and starts to develop a bit of antipathy toward males. This is also the moment when she starts to identify herself as a lesbian.

In spite of her medical condition, Sarah is a bit more self-assured than the other characters and she manages to live with her narcolepsy and even build a future. On the other hand, Robert Madison is insecure, inconstant and easily influenced. The night Sarah broke up with Gregory, she met Robert, whose vulnerable nature is evident from the beginning. Robert got infatuated with her almost instantly, but she was more concerned about him than romantically involved. In terms of personality traits, we can argue that Robert and Sarah complement each other.

As opposed to Sarah, who is more assertive and enthusiastic, Robert is presented as introspective, thoughtful and restrained, and he does not reveal his real identity even to Terry, his only friend, when they meet again after twelve years. Nonetheless, Robert's introversion is more like a response to the society than a defining feature of his personality. When he meets Sarah on the terrace, her encouraging smile helps him lower the guard and they launch in a conversation that, as the narrator asserts:

> … [it] was probably, at that point, the longest conversation Robert had ever had in his life. The melancholy silence which had always enveloped him at home – his mother timid and deferential, his father morosely taciturn – had never prepared him for this kind of fluid, impulsive exchanging of confidences. They had discussed everything, [...] [and] Robert realised that he had trusted Sarah with secrets about himself, about his parents, about his home life, that he had never thought... (Coe 2008: 55)

The passage reinforces the idea that the face of the Self is revealed and redefined only as an effect of the interaction with the Other. Having a romantic interest in Sarah, Robert tries to cover her faults. When they met, "her sleeping patterns [...] had grown more and more erratic [...], and her dreams had continued to prove unreliable" (Coe 2008: 46). To protect her from being perceived as a mad woman, Robert acknowledges the fact he has a twin sister named Cleo, although that story was just part of a dream Sarah had had. From the very beginning, he is not sure of who he is in essence or who he wants to be, and even admits that he is "weak and indecisive" (Coe 2008: 239). Although he tried to be the stronger one and defend Sarah, he is in fact the one who needs self-confidence. Throughout the novel, he constructs his identity based on other people's opinions, but mostly in relation to Sarah's preferences. When the identity of Sarah's new lover is revealed to Robert, after he had mistakenly believed it was about a man, Robert Madison's own identity is shaken.

> "When you say that she's been with this man called Ronnie", Robert continued flatly, "I assume you mean that they're having an affair?" "I didn't say that she'd been with a man called Ronnie. That's not what I said". [...] "She's having an affair, but not with a man. Ronnie is female. It's short for Veronica". (Coe 2008: 90)

Understanding the fact that Sarah is actually a lesbian, and after she confesses to him that Veronica has introduced her to her "real nature" (Coe 2008: 240), he starts to hate himself for being a man: "You see… If she doesn't love me, now… If she *can't* love me, as I am… That's all right… Because neither can I… If she can't love me… Then I can't love myself…" (Coe 2008: 164). Sarah's previous confession that she would have loved to meet Robert's supposed twin sister Cleo, gives him the idea that a female version of him would be a better version: "Just imagine it – your twin sister: a female you. That would be my ideal partner, wouldn't it?" (Coe 2008: 240).

Sarah's dream about Robert's twin sister reveals her need to find or even to create an ideal partner for herself. The cliché about making someone's dreams come true is taken literally in the novel, hence Sarah invents a person who does not exist but whom she wants to love, and Robert struggles to become that person in order to gain Sarah's love.

As we have argued before, a person's sense of self is always mediated by the image he or she has of the Other. Othering is at the same time the consequence of the disparity between self and other, and the result of the opposition between people and their representations of the others. George Herbert Mead argued that the process of constructing one's identity is mostly based on the interaction with others. He defined

the self as the ability to be both the subject and the object, hence the development of the self could arise only in social interaction, when the individual develops the ability to take the role of the other. Mead explains that "it is only by taking the role of the others that we have been able to come back to ourselves" (Mead 1959: 184–185). In the novel, the process of "taking the role of the other" occurs at a metaphorical level, since Cleo is not a real person, but an ideal, a figment of Sarah's imagination. Therefore, Robert – the Self – wants to "take the role of the other", in this case, Cleo.

The process of changing his gender is not just physical, but also psychological. Robert Madison becomes Dr Cleo Madison, a doctor specialising in treating narcolepsy, and begins to work in Dr Gregory Dudden's sleep clinic, the old Ashdown residence, although he has never actually left that place. The event can also be seen as a materialisation of the prophetic dream Robert had as a child, about a woman pointing at a hospital. Robert later on interprets his dream as a sign that he should change his gender.

In the novel, identity becomes a game when Dr Madison switches between two stances: Cleo and Robert. Concealing the fact that she used to be a man, Cleo becomes even more alienated from society. When she meets Terry after twelve years, Cleo decides to hide the truth and is reticent to any closer connection with her former best friend. The undeniable similarity between Cleo and Robert does not remain unnoticed by Terry, and she decides to pass off as Robert's twin sister. Moreover, Cleo tries to cut off any connection with the past, and metaphorically kills Robert, declaring that "he drove his car into a wall one night. A street in South London. No note, no farewells, nothing" (Coe 2008: 280). Robert's "death" is quite poetical and mirrors exactly Veronica's death: "Driving around South London late one Friday night [...] she finds a nice long cul-de-sac with a brick wall at the end, revs up to ninety miles an hour, and drives straight into it" (Coe 2008: 214). In this way, two different chapters in Sarah's love life are closed.

In "What Became of the People We Used to Be?: *The House of Sleep* (1997) and the 1970s sitcom, *Whatever Happens to the Likely Lads* (1973–5)", Nick Hubble argues that "Robert as Cleo has the capacity to become an agent in the story in a way that Robert as Robert does not" (Hubble 2018: 106), because his relationship as Cleo with Sarah might move beyond being trapped by his earliest fantasy. When Cleo meets Sarah, some years after Robert has been rejected by her, she understands that she is not the only one that has redefined her identity. The shock of discovering that Sarah was about to get married to a man, makes Robert as Cleo question his/her identity once again:

> "But I thought you were gay". "Gay? What gave you that idea?" [...]
> "But you *said*, Sarah, I remember you saying, that Veronica had changed

> everything for you. She introduced you to your nature: those were your exact words". "Well, obviously I didn't know myself very well when I said that. I mean, I was only young, Robert. We were both only young". (Coe 2008: 309)

In this passage Coe employs irony as a mechanism of satire, and as he admitted in an interview at FILIT Iași in 2017, he made a cruel joke at the expense of the character, as a manifestation of the writer's well-known sadistic humour. The radical action of the character to change his gender in order to achieve the love of Sarah was the result of one of the writer's ideas of extending this kind of revolution beyond the boundaries of consciousness, involving the body too. Hence, Robert is forced to accept his new identity and has to learn how to live with it and assume it.

Sarah's reflection to her past homosexuality reveals the instability of her own identity and self-knowledge. Vanessa Guignery compares Sarah's unstable identity with her interest in Weil's book, *Gravity and Grace*, especially in the chapter on "The Self". She also argues that "*The House of Sleep* thus keeps enforcing confusion and will not offer the reader the comfort of stability and firmly-set categories" (Guignery 2016: 97). On the other hand, the same event helps Robert/Cleo decide on who (s)he really is and wants to be: "Whatever else has gone wrong, whatever other mistakes I may have made, I know who I am, now. I know who I am, and it suits me" (Coe 2008: 330). The circumstances forced Dr Cleo Madison to a realisation, and at the end of the novel, standing in front of Sarah's door, when asked if she knows her, Dr Madison replies: "Of course you do, [...] It's me: Robert" (Coe 2008: 330). Nonetheless, Robert at the end of the novel is not the same Robert at the beginning, nor Cleo, the ideal partner for Sarah.

Robert Maddison's evolution throughout the novel reinforces the idea that the novel follows the pattern of a bildungsroman, portraying the period of transition of the characters, from adolescence to adulthood, and contrasting the ambitions of youth with the realities of adulthood. Nonetheless, in the case of *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, the interpretation of the classic bildungsroman canon is subverted, hence the hero's process of evolution is not portrayed in terms of improvement, but through social criticism, providing a bleak image of Britain.

It is also important to mention that the core of the idea around which the novel unfolds is a personal experience of the writer, as he explained to Marius Chivu in an interview for the FILIT festival (5th October 2017). He confessed that during his university years he fell in love with one of his colleagues, a strong and convinced feminist, as he describes her; and started to read feminist literature and theories, which helped him reshape his identity and made an improvement in his career as a novelist.

Although he was not involved in any romantic relationship with her, the experience changed him in many ways, due to his constant struggle to impress her.

3.2 Terry Worth

Through the character of Terry Worth, Jonathan Coe enforces the dichotomy illusion versus reality, and as in the case of *What a Carve Up!,* illusion prevails, and sleep in this situation is seen as an escape door from reality. As the narrator explains "Terry was addicted to his dreams: they constituted the purest, most vital, most precious part of his life" (Coe 2008: 81). During his student days, Terry slept about fourteen hours a day for being addicted to dreams which "seduced and tormented him" and which he characterised as "dreams which took on the quality of the most pristine and idealised childhood memories, which were beyond the inventive powers of the most fertile, accomplished and assiduous fantasist". (*ibid*.)

The visions in his dreams were far more rewarding than everyday reality, hence he disconnected himself from the real world and went to pursue them in the oneiric dimension. As an adult, Terry finds himself in the incapacity of falling asleep and therefore of dreaming. Confused and feeling lost after having seen his career ruined by a mistake Sarah made while checking one of his articles, Terry replaces his dream addiction with watching films and becomes an insomniac, cynical film reviewer. We can therefore argue that Terry goes from one liminal phase to another, incapable of finding a balance between reality and fiction or of becoming an active figure in his own story.

In essence, Terry Worth and Michael Owen are very similar. As Michael saw reality as another side of the TV screen, Terry finds refuge in the films he watches every night, a variation of the dreams he used to have as a student. Both Michael and Terry choose to withdraw behind the curtains or behind the screen and prefer fantasy over reality, and in both situations fantasy determines the conduct of their lives.

Moreover, Terry draws a parallel between his dreams and his obsession of finding a lost Italian film that he read about when he was a student. He claims that "the only film worth seeing is the one nobody can ever see" and he compares the film with "the kind of dream that might just have been the best one you've ever had in your life, only it slips from your mind just as you're waking up, and a few seconds later you can't remember a thing about it" (Coe 2008: 126).

As we have mentioned before, sleep and dreams play important roles both in the relationships between people and in the development of the characters' identities, the motif of the dream being used as a tool for establishing the contrast between power and subordination. In the novel, sleep is associated with weakness and the absence of sleep is a symbol of power. When Terry slept fourteen hours a day he was less anchored in

reality and had to rely on other people, hence following Gregory's reasoning, he showed signs of weakness. Terry's vulnerability because of his sleep disorder is illustrated in the way in which his career is ruined because of one mistake Sarah made. Being "addicted to dreams", Terry asked Sarah to revise one of his articles and change a few footnotes, while he was completing his sleeping schedule. However, Sarah only dreamt about solving Terry's task and when she woke up she sent the document with the footnotes out of sequence, each one accidentally making a libellous or offensive remark. Sarah's mistake materialised in Terry being fired from the prestigious film magazine *Frame*, which subsequently transformed his life. Trev Broughton argued that all the destinies of the characters stem from casual encounters with Sarah's unconscious, and point to the fine boundary between two ontologically incompatible worlds, objective reality and subjective consciousness, sometimes leading to confusion as to what is memory and what is fantasy (Cited in Guignery 2016: 99).

Twelve years later, Terry becomes an insomniac willing to enter a competition where there "would be continuous screenings throughout the event, twenty-four hours a day" (Coe 2008: 31). His sleep disorder is this time perceived as a strength and after claiming that he would most definitely be able to "stay awake through all the 134 films", he is "recruited" by Gregory to take part in his experiments. Gregory saw this as "an *unmatched* opportunity to see what sort of effect continuous exposure to media images might have on dream content" (*ibid*.).

3.3 Gregory Dudden

In depicting Dr Gregory Dudden, Coe mildly satirises the British medical system and the increasingly harsh nature of British society. Vanessa Guignery even compares Gregory Dudden to the members of the Winshaw family from *What a Carve Up!* and argues that "Gregory clearly subscribes to a hierarchical conception of society dominated by the strong and wealthy" (Guignery 2016: 91). Gregory draws the balance of power between the people who need long hours of sleep, and the people who manage to stay awake and alert. Hence, in a neoliberalist attitude, the scientist struggles to find a way for reducing the number of hours a person needs to sleep in order to be functional, with the clear purpose of increasing profitability and lowering vulnerability. Starting from the premise that the end justifies the means, Gregory sets up an experiment in the basement of the clinic, meant to lead to a cure for sleep and whose subjects are either animals or even human beings recruited among disadvantaged students who needed money. Gregory Dudden's clinic, Ashdown, represents the author's tool by means of which the author realises the political criticism of the reforms of the National Health System, and which becomes a metaphor for the inhumanity that the marketisation of the health assistance produced.

Later in the novel, in one way or another, the protagonists return to the Ashdown sleep clinic with their dreams still unfulfilled. Robert becomes part of the staff, he becomes Dr Cleo Madison, specialising in treating narcolepsy; Terry now a failed writer, returns as a patient suffering from insomnia, and Gregory Dudden becomes the mad scientist who runs private experiments in the basement. Therefore the clinic, as well as the inhabitants, hide horrible secrets. The quite cyclic dimension of the novel is similar to the one in *What a Carve Up!*, and both novels draw the characters to their initial place in order to polarise the two conditions: then and now. Francesco di Bernardo argues in his thesis (2014) that in *The House of Sleep* Coe models the desire for sleep deprivation on Thatcher, whom he admires for only needing 4 or 5 hours a night. There is a critique in here of the idea that humans can function for profit, churning out work, 24 hours a day. The neoliberal ideal would be a day without sleep, dedicated just to profitable activities. This is a view which is cruel and inhuman in the end, not only to Dudden's experimental subjects but also to himself as we will see at the end of the novel. (Di Bernardo 2014: 113)

He also suggests that Gregory's madness can be considered a metaphor for the fanaticism of free market policies "that lose sight of the human dimension and turn human beings in machines prone to the most horrible enterprises" (Coe 2008: 114). By employing parody as a mechanism of satire in order to denounce the policies of privatisation of the health service, Coe realises a strong act of accusation against Margaret Thatcher's political system.

Gregory Dudden's affirmation that "the Americans can afford to do what they do because they have an efficient system of private medical insurance supporting the whole structure" (Coe 2008: 178) suggests that he supports the marketisation of the health system and is an advocate of the privatisation of the service and of free market. Another example that supports the idea that Gregory Dudden's clinic is one of the writer's tools in constructing satire against the Thatcherite reforms of the National Health System is Sarah's explanation regarding her refusal of being treated at the clinic: "There were two reasons why I didn't want to go. One is that I couldn't afford the fees, and the waiting list for NHS patients is nearly two years" (Coe 2008: 108). With this statement, the writer indirectly suggests that Thatcher's reforms effected in longer waiting lists and reduction of wards in local communities.

Dr Dudden is depicted as a monstrously inhuman scientist, who exploits the younger generations, the victims of the carving up of the country. Francesco Di Bernardo states that Gregory Dudden's characterisation "denounces the level of inhumanity that the achievement of profit as unique *raison d'être* can determine" and that by means of satire, Jonathan Coe "affirms that the marketization of the cure of the illness is not only wrong but also inhuman and hits the weakest people" (Di Bernardo 2014: 114).

Moreover, Di Bernardo considers that the story of Stephen Webb, the student who was killed in a car accident after having undergone one of Dudden's experiments – an exhausting session of sleep deprivation in the basement of the clinic – metaphorically illustrates what are the effects that a health system at the service of profit rather than human beings can create.

Although the satirical aspect of the novel is less evident here than in Coe's previous novel, we can still argue that in *The House of Sleep* the political system – in this situation the NHS – plays the role of the Other, the entity who diverges from the Self and affects the evolution of it. Otherness takes multiple forms in *The House of Sleep*, being represented either by the new system, on a larger scale, or by the characters themselves, for being different and not fitting the norms, on a minor scale. In both cases, the dynamics between the Self and the Other influences the development of the characters because, as it has been previously stated, the process of constructing one's identity also involves the surrender to the Other. Moreover, in the novel, sleep and dreams become more than a symbol, because the characters' obsessive and pathologic relations with sleep blur the dimensions of human consciousness and reinforce the issue of social fragmentation.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, throughout the novel, the protagonists define and redefine their identities, finally reaching a state of self-assurance and acceptance with their own being. In *The House of Sleep*, Robert at the end of the novel is not Robert, the insecure student from the beginning, neither Dr Cleo Madison the specialist in narcolepsy, but a new version of the protagonist's identity, a version that has managed to understand how to love and accept themselves. On the other hand, pointing at how painful it can be to separate fantasy from reality, we can argue that Sarah is the real heroine of the story, because of her literal struggle to wake up. The novel highlights the importance of the dreams in the relationships between people, based on the dichotomies of power and subordination, and of superiority and weakness. At the beginning of the novel, Gregory undermined Sarah's self-control and confidence in the same way her sleep disorder did. When Sarah regains control over her illness, she regains control over herself too, and in the process, she discovers her true identity. We can therefore conclude that the mechanisms of satire employed in the novel – irony, cynicism, dark humour, parody – are based on the dichotomies power and weakness and reality and illusion, and function in a similar way to the self-other dynamics, strongly influencing the construction of individual and social identities.

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