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An Unfaithful Feminist : Neoliberal Feminism, Identity, and Postmodernism in Jenny Offill's Dept. Of Speculation

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Abstract

Jenny Offill's novel *Dept of Speculation* explores the life of a female college professor who looks back on her marriage after her husband has an affair. Events are told through brief fragments. Much of the critical discourse surrounding the novel is concerned with its fragmentary form or postfeminism. In this essay, I assert that *Dept. of Speculation* is a reaction to neoliberal feminism because of the narrator's multiple challenges throughout the novel. Some vocal figures within neoliberal feminism assume a woman can balance upward mobility in a career and life as a mother. The ability to maintain this work-life balance is deemed progressive, which places the responsibility of progress onto the individual woman. According to Catherine Rottenberg's *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, neoliberal feminism is becoming influential as a result of popular feminist manifestos such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and Anne-Marie Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." While both women have different areas of focus, they both suggest that women can have a happy work-life balance if they assert themselves in the workplace or advocate for their flexible work schedules to accommodate motherhood while also being responsible for their personal happiness. Due to this framework, it is now up to the individual woman to uphold progress by balancing a career and family. Offill's *Dept of Speculation* challenges these neoliberal feminist ideals by detailing the narrator's financial and personal struggles on top of these expectations.

Keywords: autofiction, feminism, female identity, fragmentary form, neoliberal feminism, postmodernism

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An Unfaithful Feminist: Neoliberal Feminism, Identity, and Postmodernism in Jenny Offill's

Dept. Of Speculation

By

Anne Bobis

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

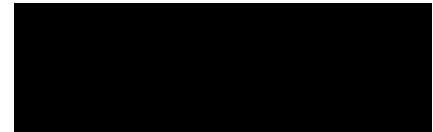
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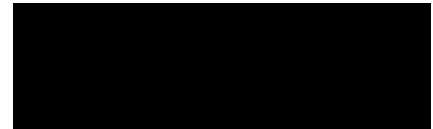
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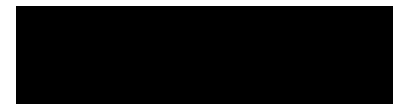
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AN UNFAITHFUL FEMINIST: NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM, IDENTITY, AND
POSTMODERNISM IN JENNY OFFILL'S *DEPT. OF SPECULATION*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by Anne Bobis

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Contents

1. Introduction	6
2. The Neoliberal Feminist Subject	9
3. Fragmentation, Postmodernism, and Identity in Dept. of Speculation	23
4. Conclusion	32
5. Works Cited	34

Introduction

Jenny Offill's *Dept of Speculation* is about a narrator-protagonist who reflects on her life after she learns about her husband's affair and eventually reconciles with him. Events are told through scattered and brief fragments and much of the critical discourse surrounding *Dept. of Speculation* focuses on the novel's fragmentation and its feminist undertones.

In Yanbing Er's "Contemporary Women's Fiction as Critique of Postfeminist Discourse," she argues the novel is an autofictional response to neoliberalism and postfeminism. According to Er, postfeminism is a contradictory and individualized belief that combines feminism and antifeminist ideologies and also "comes to reinforce and exacerbate existing gendered inequalities" such as "structures of male dominance, power, or privilege" (Er 318). Er also finds the term neoliberal postfeminism more useful than neoliberal feminism because it is more concerned with the apolitical nature of a woman's upward mobility and individualism. Er notices that *Dept. of Speculation* draws on confessional writing and uses this style to look "into a wider political reflection, on the immense difficulty of reconciliation," and "the roles of women and artists" in order to critique neoliberal postfeminism (321). The narrator of the novel is posed as an agent against the highly individualized postfeminist beliefs. Er states: "*Dept. of Speculation* takes a hard look at the perceived tensions that persist between domesticity and ambition.... Its narrative studies these recurring themes marking contemporary womanhood alongside the emotional trauma 'the wife' experiences and Offill is careful to avoid a stereotypical portrayal of the wife" (324). One way this thesis builds upon Er's argument is to consider the additional factors that affect the narrator of *Dept. of Speculation*, such as economics, work, and her lifestyle, to which Er's article does not dedicate much space.

Er interprets the art monster as a figure that defies postfeminist culture since:

The art monster cannot exist in the abstract, otherworldly terms of pure, artistic ambition; [and] it must accommodate the unequal gendered realities that persist in these postfeminist times. The confessions of the narrative put forth on the difficulties surrounding women's artistic creation are charged with an inherent political capacity insofar as the text itself ultimately comes to represent the subversive possibility of the female artistic achievement. (325)

Er rightfully observes that the art monster cannot avoid gendered inequalities in the real world. Art is the sole focus of the art monster, as the narrator elaborates: "My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead" (Offill 8). This mindset reflects an aspect of neoliberal feminism where young women prioritize their careers.

While both neoliberal feminism and neoliberal postfeminism focus on the highly individualized woman rather than on the collective problems of women, the two terms differ because neoliberal postfeminism separates itself from feminist politics and does not feel the need for feminism and, instead, focuses on the individual's journey and does not acknowledge gender inequality. In an interview with Sarah Banet-Weiser and Rosalind Gill, Catherine Rottenberg best explains the differences between postfeminism and her idea of neoliberal feminism:

I began to call this form of feminism neoliberal feminism, since, while it very clearly avows gender inequality—thus, I believe, differentiating it from a postfeminist sensibility – it simultaneously disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives. This feminism also helps to spawn a new feminist subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care. (qtd. in Banet-Weiser, et al. 7)

In other words, neoliberal feminism is aware of gender inequality, and this kind of feminism poses a personal responsibility as a progressive response to patriarchy, instead of assuming that

gender inequality is over. The neoliberal feminist thesis is this: If a woman can balance work and life, it allows other women to achieve this equal opportunity. The main problem with neoliberal feminism is that if a woman fails to take care of her “own well-being and self-care,” then it is all her fault even if she has to face challenges out of her control such as mental illness or racial discrimination. While Er’s use of the term neoliberal postfeminism is almost synonymous with Rottenberg’s definition of neoliberal feminism, Rottenberg’s definition points out neoliberal feminism acknowledges gender inequality and also places the idea of having a “happy work-life balance” as a solution to this inequality and one way to expand from Rottenberg’s idea is to look at the work-life balance faced by the narrator of *Dept of Speculation*.

In the middle of the novel, the narrator undergoes a breakdown that is indicated through a narrative shift from first-person to third-person narration. Both Er and Wojciech Drag associate the narrative shift with the narrator’s discovery of her husband’s affair; however, the novel points to other moments such as the narrator’s struggles as a mother and college professor as equally contributing factors to her breakdown. For example, the narrator is so overwhelmed by earlier motherhood and work that she stops keeping up with her hygiene:

“I have a chunk of vomit in my hair, I realize right before class. Chunk is maybe overstating it, but yes, something. I wash my hair in the sink” (36). This example signals one of the many struggles the narrator faces and prioritizes raising her daughter over her own appearance. If the narrator and her husband had childcare or better pay, she might have more time to take care of her own needs and he could help her, but they cannot afford to do so. In moments like these, the novel affirms that gender inequality has continued, while maintaining the narrator’s sense that she should look put together for work and be a mother, and if she cannot, it is because of her personal failings.

In addition to motherhood and teaching, the narrator faces pressure to publish:

“Where is that second novel?” the head of my department asks me. “Tick tock. Tick Tock.”

We used to call her *Little*. *Little, come here*, we'd say. *Little, unhand the cat*, but then one day she won't let us. "I am big," she says and her face is stormy. (38)

In this example, the narrator is so stressed that she neglects to fulfill her responsibilities as a professor. She cannot advocate for a different work schedule because the use of "tick tock" indicates there is a time crunch for her to complete the novel even though the narrator recently gave birth. She is expected to return to work as normal and simply cannot “lean into” these challenges because the fragment about her daughter shows that she chose to prioritize her daughter’s early years over her novel. When the daughter reacts to her nickname Little, this moment symbolizes the daughter starting to form her own opinions while also indicating that she is getting older. The daughter is growing up to the point of no longer being “Little” in a metaphorical and literal sense. In both of these examples, time is progressing quickly in the narrator’s personal and professional life and if she chose to work on her novel, then the narrator would miss out on making memories with her daughter and seeing her grow up.

Dept. of Speculation challenges neoliberal feminism culture in many ways through the narrator’s experiences as a mother, wife, and professor. Before showing these pressures in the novel, I will explain the source of the expectations that are central to the novel.

The Neoliberal Feminist Subject

In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg observes that neoliberal feminism arose as a result of popular manifestos like Ann-Marie Slaughter’s “Why Women Still

Can't Have It All" and Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. Slaughter places value on motherhood, and she argues that work schedules must change to accommodate mothers. On the other hand, Sandberg prioritizes a woman's career and believes that if women assert themselves, then they can overcome work obstacles.

Despite their different approaches, Rottenberg notes that both support the idea that women want to be workers and mothers simultaneously and imply that a person who is able to have a happy work-life balance will enable progress for all women. Essentially this form of feminism changes the terms of the debate by placing a collective problem onto the individual woman. This new form of feminism may make women, who do not have the same privileges as Sandberg and Slaughter, feel like they are inadequate as working mothers if they cannot uphold this balance.

Initially, feminism was a movement that sought to overcome obstacles for upper- and middle-class white women. The first and second waves allowed all women to have voting rights as well as more educational and employment opportunities. However, one of the many criticisms of these eras of feminism was that it overlooked marginalized groups, who did not get the right to vote until 1965 and faced racial discrimination and unequal pay on top of gender inequality. This limited focus on whose interests matter gets mirrored in neoliberal feminism, where a select group of women can choose to have a high-powered career and have the childcare to raise a family at the same time.

Rottenberg points out that "a happy 'work-life balance' is being (re)presented as a progressive *feminist* ideal" (14). In other words, a woman's ability to be happy at work and home while maintaining this balance becomes understood as a liberating goal for all women. This is not the case for all women because some women of color still face racial stereotypes in the

workforce. Some of these women often feel the need to behave differently out of fear that they would “come across as bossy, aggressive, and selfish” to their white coworkers (Cheeks) and both Sandberg and Slaughter overlook this challenge.

Rottenberg also asserts that the concept of a “happy work-life balance” is pushed onto women and conditions women to desire both a career and a family (14). This conditioning and influences are perpetuated through language such as Sandberg’s famous advice to “lean in,” and if a woman asserts herself in the workforce, she will be able to bridge the gap for other women. This language places the responsibility onto women to overcome issues that conflict with a work-life balance and to also desire a happy work-life balance.

Additionally, Sandberg suggests that having a “fair and equal partner” can help a woman care for their children while she works at a high-powered job. In some ways, this partner can enable women to maintain that balance, but this is not the reality for partners who both have to work in order to afford rent and other necessities such as food and transportation. Traditionally, women were expected to care for the children while their husbands worked and for some men, they may feel that child-rearing is emasculating and also may not want that responsibility.

Instead of acknowledging the obstacles faced by women, Sandberg and Slaughter provide suggestions that do not work for all women. Although Sandberg and Slaughter have different approaches, the two still have the same logic when it comes to upholding this work-life balance, and that it is up to individual women to evoke change, but these suggestions do not fully acknowledge the social, cultural, and personal struggles, such as the pressures to be a good mother, the husband’s extramarital affair, and expensive-to-deal-with pests in *Dept. of Speculation* or global warming in the case of Offill’s recent novel, *Weather*.

Multiple aspects of neoliberal feminism are reflected in *Dept. of Speculation* without mentioning the term. The narrator's artistic ambitions reflect this culture of neoliberal feminism. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes her mindset before meeting her husband: "For years, I kept a Post-it note above my desk. WORK NOT LOVE! was what it said. It seemed to be a sturdier kind of happiness" (7). To circle back to an earlier point made, the narrator wanted to be fully dedicated to her writing career:

My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn't even fold his own umbrella. Vera licked his stamps for him. (8)

One way to interpret this section is that the narrator views marriage in a patriarchal society and its common responsibilities as mundane. When the narrator brings up the reference to Nabokov and his wife Vera, she feels that she would have to complete mundane activities such as grocery shopping and raising the kids for her husband, whereas she'd likely desire this level of support. Marriage, as this passage implies, means she would have to abandon her art monster career in order to adopt a traditional female role as wife. Prioritizing work also reveals the narrator's reluctance to pursue relationships because she would not end up in a subservient role as a wife and as a wife, where she anticipates her art career would get neglected. When compared to careers in politics and business like, being an artist requires a similar dedication. In the case of Offill's narrator, she still has to teach to support herself even with a published novel since the success rate as an artist is extremely slim and artists have to supplement their incomes.

In some ways this framing mirrors a part of neoliberal feminist culture when Kate Taylor states: "many potentially high-achieving young women are presented as no longer interested in

investing in relationships during their college years—years when they feel the need to be concerned with building their professional resumes” (qtd. in Rottenberg 90). The narrator follows a neoliberal feminist pattern in which her career is her primary focus. She believes that a “sturdier kind of happiness” can be achieved through art. This futurity motivates her to invest in her career and she aspires to avoid romantic relationships.

Yet in the fragments that follow her original plan, the narrator indicates that the life of an art monster is lonely:

A bold plan, that’s what my friend, the philosopher, said. But on my twenty-ninth birthday, I turned my book in. *If I do not greatly delude myself...*

I went to a party and drank myself sick.

Are animals lonely?

Other animals, I mean. (Offill 8)

The narrator gets published and at some point, before the “animals” fragment, she realizes that the success and the life of an art monster is unsatisfying for her. She thinks about her environment and wonders if other animals feel lonely like she does, and this makes her reconsider her relationships to other people. The narrator initially believed her artistic success would alleviate her loneliness because of her “Work! Not Love” (7) mindset, but the juxtaposition of these fragments shows that the art monster life is not a “sturdier form of happiness” for her because she still pursues romantic relationships. Additionally, this also indicates a cultural pressure for female artist, and if she were a male artist, she would not feel the same pressure to seek out companionship since male artists do not have gendered expectations

whereas some women have these gender expectations where they are conditioned to worry about their “biological clocks” and to be a mother or wife.

In the fragment that follows, the reader gets a glimpse of the narrator’s relationship with an alcoholic ex-boyfriend sometime before her first major publication. She reminisces, “Of course, I thought of the drunkard boy in New Orleans, the one I loved best” (Offill 9). She then looks back on the relationship:

In those last weeks, we drove without talking, trying to outride the heat, each alone in the dream the city had become. I was afraid to speak, to touch his arm even. *Remember this sign, this tree, this broken-down street. Remember it is possible to feel this way.* There were twenty days on the calendar, then fifteen, then ten, then the day I packed my car and left. I drove the length of two states, sobbing, heat like a hand against my chest. But I didn’t. I didn’t remember it. (Offill 11)

Despite her ambitions to be a successful artist, this fragment shows that the narrator is drawn to relationships, even doomed ones, and also falls in love intensely. When considering the juxtaposition of this fragment and the previous “loneliness” fragments, the narrator’s reflection on this relationship indicates that the narrator believes she can alleviate her loneliness with companionship.

The narrator’s choice to become an art monster is mirrored in Rottenberg’s observation about “a striking gendered aspect to the avowed emphasis on futurity... is arguably the most evident in neoliberalism’s hailing of young upwardly mobile women who are still constantly told they must worry about their ‘biological clock’ in order to ‘have it all’” (Rottenberg 94). This quote reveals that women experience pressure to have children while men do not have to face the same pressure. While the narrator never explicitly mentions pressure to follow a “biological

clock,” she thinks about the futurity and predictability as an art monster because she continues making instead of taking a chance on a relationship that is not sturdy. Later, her friend, the philosopher, introduces her to her husband and the relationship is a success and this shows the narrator is able to alleviate her loneliness. The two eventually get married and have a daughter, but as the novel progresses, the two are met with economic and personal obstacles that challenge the “happy work-life balance” (Rottenberg 14).

When the two begin to raise their daughter, economic obstacles to achieving a “happy work-life balance” (Rottenberg 14) occur. This is first acknowledged in a fragment about the husband’s career change. He goes from recreating soundscapes to a commercial job that is financially stable. The narrator states: “My husband gets a new job, scoring soundtracks for commercials. The pay is better. It has benefits. How is it, people ask. ‘Not bad,’ he says with a shrug. ‘Only vaguely soul-crushing’” (Offill 33). In this example, the narrator uses short prose to indicate her sarcastic sense of humor when she notes that her husband trades a job that he enjoys for one that provides financial stability but is “vaguely soul-crushing” (33). This shift in tone also indicates that the husband believes he must do so in order to become a “fair and equal partner.” The husband feels pressured by their financial situation and society to get a job where “the pay is better,” and this pay can contribute to getting childcare for their daughter. In addition, the financially secure job allows him to have health benefits to provide insurance for the family and reinforces a traditional gender role where the man is expected to be a financial provider. Despite the benefits and better pay, the narrator and her husband still face economic obstacles such as the cost of rent and childcare even with a dual income.

The setting matters here too, as the narrator and her husband reside in Brooklyn, where the cost of childcare is high. Around the time of the novel’s publication in 2014, the cost of

childcare was around \$14,939 annually in 2012 (DeSilver). While the narrator does not explicitly state the high cost of childcare, the setting indicates this. The reader can infer that that narrator is the primary caretaker at least partly because of the cost of childcare and because of the multiple fragments that indicate she is the primary caretaker of her daughter. Although her husband is an equal partner in caregiving at first, the responsibility of childcare falls onto the narrator because of a financial necessity:

I went only as far as Rite-Aid. Rite-Aid was a block away from the apartment. It was exactly the distance I could make in the freezing, cold, carrying the baby in my arms. Also, the farthest distance I could sprint if she started screaming again and I had to go home. These calculations were important because she screamed a lot on those days.

Enough that our neighbors, averted their eyes when they saw us, enough that it felt like a car alarm was perpetually going off in my head. (Offill 24)

This section shows multiple challenges faced by the narrator because she not only faces the challenge of a crying infant, but she also feels self-conscious around her and she also experiences anxiety and helplessness. In the next section, this anxiety is apparent when her husband has to leave for work, “After you left for work, I would stare at the door as if it might open again” (24). This moment implies that if the husband had a longer paternity leave, then she would not feel as overwhelmed. The anxiety deeply affects her early relationship with her daughter: “My love for her seemed doomed, hopelessly unrequited. There should be songs for this, I thought, but if there were, I didn’t know them” (24) and she later expands upon this, “The days with the baby felt long, but there was nothing expansive about them. Caring for her required me to repeat a series of tasks that had the peculiar quality of seeming both urgent and tedious. They cut up the day into little scraps” (25). Motherhood is a challenge for the narrator because caring for her

daughter requires necessary tasks that are time-consuming and tiring for her, and these tasks have an emotional impact on her. The narrator indicates her sleep deprivation through a mention of a study on cats: “I read a study once about sleep deprivation...I can’t remember what they were trying to prove exactly. All I took was the cats went crazy” (25). The narrator’s forgetfulness shows the mental impact on the narrator. These early interactions also point out the frustration and that the narrator often finds humor in these moments: “If I knew telekinesis, I would send this spoon over there to feed that baby” (29).

When her husband comes back from work, additionally, the narrator feeds her husband: “She was small enough then to still fall asleep on your chest. Sometimes I fed you dinner so you wouldn’t have to raise your arms and wake her” (Offill 25). This reveals the narrator barely gets a moment to relax since she goes out of her way to care for her family and takes on the responsibility to care for both of them.

Eventually, the narrator has to go back to work as a creative writing professor because her maternity leave ends and she has to work in order to survive. However, she neglects her personal hygiene, as we saw when she finds vomit in her hair. Her role as working mother is a very time-consuming one and reflects an aspect of society where work is prioritized over personal experiences.

Later in the novel, the narrator is offered a well-paying job as a ghostwriter. When she tells her husband about it, he enthusiastically responds, “Yes, yes, yes. It turns out we’re running low on money for diapers and beer and potato chips” (Offill 38). Despite the husband’s new job and the narrator’s job as a college professor and their privileged positions, necessities like diapers and cheap indulgences are expensive to get in this economic environment. Although beer and potato chips are not necessities, the list including these items show that the narrator and her

husband cannot afford cheap things even on a dual income. The additional income from the ghostwriting job allows them to afford the cost of living and remain in Brooklyn. This challenges the idea of a "work-life" balance because it is a necessity instead of a personal choice and shows it is difficult to maintain this balance. Their jobs are not enough because the narrator still has to work a second job even after her husband gets a new job in order to afford the cost of living as well as other expenses. Offill shows a marriage of equals who both have to work, raise their child, and pay for their living expenses. Even with these demands, Offill's narrator has to deal with inconveniences like lice and bed bugs, which are hassles that complicate the formula of a "happy work-life balance."

When her daughter becomes older, Offill suggests the narrator feels inadequate as a mother: "There are always other mothers at the school. Some of them arrive early, and because of this, it is the same ones who notice every day if I am late. Mothers, the early ones, were also good at remembering what to bring on a given day" (42). In this moment, the narrator feels more embarrassment:

There is also a grace period when it comes to the bringing in of things. The day the egg carton is due is not the real day but the day before it is really really necessary, before it is really really a catastrophe not to have it. And then, even then, some teachers make provisions for the moms who forget. They may bring extra cartons or receive extras from some of the other mothers, the rememberers, the ones who are always early. (43)

She compares herself to the mothers who are able to remember small tasks and "make it look so easy, the way they cast ambition off like an expensive coat that no longer fits" (Offill 92). These mothers are able to leave their high-profile careers and make motherhood a priority. In contrast to the mothers, the narrator still has ambitions to become a writer and takes on similar jobs such

as ghostwriting and teaching because the jobs not only help her family pay for living expenses, but these jobs also allow her to remain in the writing field.

The narrator's inability to remember to bring an egg carton is the least of her concerns when she receives a note about a lice outbreak at her daughter's school. She learns about a nitpicker from the other mothers who state she is "worth every penny" (53). Offill subtly portrays a class difference between the narrator and the mothers by following this moment with "my husband is very thorough too. He goes through our hair, then holds the comb up carefully to the light" (54). The mothers can easily spend \$100 to have their children's lice removed. The husband's thoroughness helps them save money. Offill indicates the way neoliberal feminism overlooks the inconveniences faced by the narrator and makes the struggle of being a working mother into challenges. These small annoyances, however, pale in comparison to the problem of bed bugs.

During the bed bug incident, the family has to wash everything, cook their clothes, and undergo a series of tedious tasks. After spending hours in the laundromat, the narrator mistakenly shrinks her daughter's blanket: "When I hand it back to her, she cries, 'That was my best thing,' she says. 'Why would you ruin my best thing?'" (59). The narrator experiences failure as a mother because she knows how much her daughter loved the blanket while also showing the difficulties of parenthood. The narrator's forgetfulness affects her relationship with her daughter and this forgetfulness can be attributed to the narrator's hectic lifestyle, including these impossible-to-plan-for disasters. The reader can see the narrator's guilt when the phrase "Why you ruin my best thing?" later reappears in the novel after the narrator learns about her husband's affair (102). In the context of that repetition, the narrator worries about the impact her actions

will have on her daughter. These multiple challenges and her responsibilities cause additional stress and anxiety.

If we consider the narrator's work life, she has to work two highly demanding jobs on top of raising a child. The first job is as a college professor, where there are pressures to publish on top of teaching and grading responsibilities. This career is something the narrator genuinely cares about because she looks at student reviews of her teaching (Offill 45); we also see evidence that her students' personal lives affect her. The narrator visits a suicidal student named Lia and in the next fragment, Offill writes, "The wife has been teaching for twenty-years. It is not the first time she's been at the bedside of someone with bandaged wrists" (117). In this example, the narrator often goes above and beyond as a professor because she goes out of her way to visit students at their bedside and goes as far as to buy Lia a notebook. This also shows an emotional connection, dedication to teaching and her students since this is a career she cares about and these visitations deeply affect her even though she initially planned to become an artist, but like her marriage and motherhood, she learns to accept and care deeply about these life choices.

Her second job as a ghostwriter is highly demanding, and when the narrator tells her boss, The Astronaut, that she has too much work, he increases her pay and provides her with a young male intern. She later mentions, "I have an intern. All of my life now appears to be one happy moment" (85). Everything seems to get better for the narrator, but the reader learns in a later fragment that it isn't the case: "That night, my husband complains that I'm working too much. He grumbles about the overflowing trash in the out of season, fruit rotting in the fridge" (Offill 87-88) This example shows the narrator also fails to do her part as an equal partner and this becomes a source of additional irritation from the husband. As a wife, she is expected to

fulfill tasks in order to be a good partner. Offill shows pressures historically faced by wives that the narrator has in order to be a good partner:

Advice for wives circa 1896: The indiscriminate reading of novels is one of the most injurious habits to which a married woman can be subject. Besides the false views of human nature it will impart...it produces an indifference to the performance of domestic duties, and contempt for ordinary realities.

It's true, that I am feeble-minded at the grocery store. I write lists that I forget, buy things we don't need or already have. (49)

Here, the narrator feels that she cannot complete simple domestic chores such as grocery shopping and somehow ended up completing the tasks a wife traditionally does to maintain a household. Her husband expresses annoyance when she fails to notice a new table: "I am not very observant, the wife thinks. Once the husband bought a dining room table, and it wasn't until dinner time that she noticed it. By then he was angry" (Offill 106). Although her inattention is understandable, the narrator's marriage gets affected as a result of this lifestyle. Offill includes more instances of the husband's annoyance at his wife. The husband asks "When were you the happiest" (96). In response to this, the narrator says her happiest time was when she was "all alone, in the country, with no one wanting a thing" and not with her husband or her daughter (95). She was happier when she was single and free of responsibilities which is often a male dream. This deeply upsets the husband who states, "I was hoping your happiest memory might include me" (137). He wants the narrator's happiest moment to involve him, but she is honest and, in some ways, this response to the narrator's honesty reveals the husband has a gendered expectation where he feels entitled to be a part of his wife's happiest memory. The husband also

feels a gendered expectation and this is implied in an interaction between the two early in their marriage: "Lying in bed, you'd cradle my skull as if there were a soft spot there that needed to be protected. *Stay close to me, you'd say. Why are you way over there*" (18). The husband has these expectations while also indicating that he wants the narrator to feel and want to be protected by him. However, this interaction shows the narrator's independence and that she does not feel the need to be held. Eventually, the husband has an affair and the reason for the affair is revealed when she asks him:

Taller?

Thinner?

Quieter?

Easier, he says. (98)

In this moment, the husband's emphasis on the ease of the affair indicates the relationship with the narrator is a difficult one because of her highly demanding schedule as a writer, mother, and college professor and because of her personality. In an earlier section of the novel, the narrator describes the personality differences between her and her "famously kind husband" (31). In the same section, she also reveals she has a cynical outlook. The narrator often shows that she expects the worst out of people and situations. She ponders: "How then is he married to me? I hate often and easily" (31). The reader gets more insight into these clashing personalities when the wife says, "On our seventh anniversary, my husband plays a song for me, but it's almost too sad to hear. It's about marriage and who will go first. *One of us will die inside these arms* is the chorus" (79). This disagreement over Iron and Wine's "Naked as We Came" indicates their different personalities; for the wife, she views the song as something upsetting whereas her husband has an optimistic and romantic view of this song.

However, the narrator cannot be easier because of who she is as a person and due to her responsibilities as a mother, professor, and ghost writer. Although the affair is not justifiable, the narrator puts her relationship on the back burner. When the discovery of the affair occurs, the narrator can no longer ignore her relationship and her role as a wife. She questions her identity: “If the wife becomes unwived what should she be called” (Offill 121). This shows that the narrator acknowledges she is a wife and is more than a worker and a mother. In a way, this realization indicates that being a wife and having this relationship to her husband are a part of the narrator’s identity as a person.

Fragmentation, Postmodernism, and Identity in *Dept. of Speculation*

In Wojciech Drag’s article “Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation* and the Revival of Fragmentary Writing,” he observes there is a revival of fragmentary writing in American and British literature, and scholars such as David Shields argue, “The novel is dead. Long live the antinovel, built from scraps” (qtd. in Drag 58). Drag turns to Sharon Spencer’s theory of the architectonic novel to analyze *Dept. of Speculation* and considers this novel as architectonic meaning the “text [is] constructed from prose fragments of diverse types and lengths and arranged by means of the principle of juxtaposition whose aim is to create the ‘illusion of a spatial entity’” (Drag 62). These are works that abandon a linear plot narrative, chronological order, and frequently use citations, repetitions, and lists (Drag 59). He notes there are two types of architectonic novels: closed and open. In short, closed types have a singular perspective and open types have multiple perspectives and voices. Drag finds the open type useful for his analysis of *Dept. of Speculation* because “the open is informed by a variety of perspectives and voices hence its portrayal of the world is more diverse and nuanced” (Drag 62).

Offill's narrator often alludes to different philosophers, and Drag points out the philosophy fragments provide additional perspectives and voices, which allows him to categorize it as an open architectonic novel. Drag's observation can be seen in the following fragments:

The Buddhists say there are 121 states of consciousness. Of these, only three involve misery or suffering. Most of us spend our time moving back and forth between these three.

Blue jays spend every Friday with the devil, the old lady at the park told me.

"You need to get out of that stupid city," my sister said. "Get some fresh air." Four years ago, she and her husband left. They moved to Pennsylvania to an old ramshackle house on the Delaware River. (11-12)

A way to build on Drag's observation about the philosophy fragments is to view the "Buddhist" fragment as a different perspective that also provides more information about the narrator's mental health. In that fragment, it reveals how she feels trapped in her own sadness and anguish, and in the next fragment, Offill provides an awkward and humorous interaction between the narrator and an older woman who is hallucinating and probably dealing with mental illness. The narrator's health becomes a thread between these two fragments and also shows that the narrator cannot ignore her mental illness. When her sister provides a suggestion that could help the narrator, there is a tonal shift in the next sentence which indicates that the narrator disagrees with her sister while also showing the narrator's characterization and desires: she is stubborn and implies that she also wants to stay in the city. In a sense, these previously mentioned fragments

show a postmodern sensibility where a part of the narrator's identity is not only fragmented, but her identity is more just her mental illness and her art career.

Unlike the textbook architectonic novel, however, Offill's novel focuses on the character of the narrator-protagonist (Drag 68). Towards the end of his essay, Drag states, "The links between the narrative and non-narrative passages are therefore to be supplied by the reader" (67). Drag states that the recent revival of fragmentary form "could be ascribed to a general distrust of totalization, which is a common attribute of postmodern sensibility" (Drag 59). With this observation in mind, *Dept of Speculation* often calls upon postmodern techniques to tell the story. The first of which is the novel's fragmentation and the second is through metafictional aspects. Throughout the novel, the narrator's thoughts are severed and these fragments reveal multiple sides of the narrator's personality and identity.

One way to understand some of the postmodern techniques is through Patricia Waugh's first chapter of *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*. In this, she explores the relationship between postmodernism and feminism and she argues that feminism and postmodernist writing share a lot of concerns and often blur the lines between art and life and high and low cultures:

Both examine the cultural consequences of the decline of a consensus aesthetics, of an effective literary voice, or the absence of a strong sense of stable subjectivity. Each expresses concern about the extension of relationships of alienation within a consumer society and the expansion of technological and scientific modes of knowledge which cannot be contained within traditional moral paradigms. (Waugh 6)

In other words, Waugh mentions that postmodernism rejects a collective style or symbol, a strong literary voice, and a stable sense of experience. Instead, postmodernism goes beyond these

concepts and looks at the relationships between an individual and their society. However, Waugh notes that women writers strayed away from postmodernism because it considered identity beyond an alienated self by looking into relationships and women were still forging their collective identities (Waugh 6).

Offill makes several allusions to Rilke, philosophers, and other artists. In the case of the Rilke references, Offill blurs the line between art and real life by having the narrator interact with Rilke after the discovery of the affair: “The wife is praying a little. To Rilke, she thinks” (95). The wife hopes to seek guidance from Rilke and later refers to him as if he could respond to her: “Rilke? Rilke! If you’re listening, come quickly! ...If you hear this, come now! I am untethering! Who can hold me” (112). In this moment, the wife is deeply upset because of the affair and she is desperate for help and affection after the downfall of her marriage. She hopes Rilke can provide her advice during these brutal times. For context, Rilke was an Austrian poet who is best known for his work *Letters to a Young Poet* which is a collection of Rilke’s letters to Franz Xaver Kappus and in this work, Rilke advises Kappus, "Nobody can counsel and help, you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself" (16). Ironically enough, Offill’s narrator initially does not follow this advice and tries to seek it elsewhere and ultimately, Rilke’s famous advice from the poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” applies to the narrator in her current anguish: “You must change your life” (line 14). Her prayers to Rilke are futile and the narrator does not have that guiding voice or universal truth. Instead of begging for Rilke, she must simply take action to change her life.

Another use of postmodern techniques is also seen when Offill blurs the lines between high and low art when the narrator first refers to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's friend, Stefan Zweig, who mentions, “It was quite difficult to reach Rilke. He had no house, no address where

one could find him” (Offill 67) and later, the narrator brings up a popular culture reference: “My husband shows me how far back the meme goes, all the way back to a big ugly cat saying: I CAN HAZ CHEEZBURGER” (Offill 69). Offill’s choice to blur these lines can also reveal information about the narrator’s character; Although the narrator has a connection to the high art world as a female artist and well-educated professor, she is still a part of her everyday culture and a consumer society. The narrator even plays on this phrase after her husband gets a girlfriend: “I CAN HAS BOYFRIEND” (111) and plays with the idea of pursuing extramarital relationships. This play with language shows another moment where the narrator uses humor to cope with stressful situations, and that she does not wallow in her sadness like a scorned wife would in this situation. She eventually moves beyond begging a deceased poet for help and begins to consider other relationships.

Waugh also mentions that women were traditionally defined by their relationships with others and that women writers of the 1970s sought to stray away from that by creating a character who independently defines their sense of self. This independent self-definition, however, is a traditionally masculine narrative. Waugh observes male writers realized they cannot be aware of their “self” in isolation. Instead, they are also defined through society and history. This approach to identity can also be reflected in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” when he states:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash) The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. (Barthes 315)

Although Barthes is referring to a literary text, the narrator's identity is formed through a collection of her personal experiences, quotes from philosophers, relationships, and her interactions with other characters.

Waugh notes that women and other marginalized groups experienced the opposite side of this and sought to define their identity through an ego-based self. However, these two approaches to identity exist as extremes on opposite sides of the spectrum. By bringing these descriptions of identities up, Waugh suggests that identity can be defined by both possibilities and one's identity is a mixture of these factors:

As the social psychologist Rom Harré has argued, we need that one level to believe in the theories in which concepts like "self" have a place, we structure our experience so as to create them. In order to function effectively, as "selves," we need to discover our histories (a sense of continuity in time), a sense of agency, (how we can act upon the world, and to be able to reflect self-consciously upon what we take ourselves to be.

Thus, 'one who is always presented as a person, by taking over the conventions through which this social act is achieved, becomes organized as a self' [Harré, 1983, p. 106].

(Waugh 30-31)

Waugh notes here that the idea of the "self" defined by one's singular experience is just one level of identity. However, in order to function in life, one has to be aware of their role historically and socially. In other words, one's relationships with others contributes to this self-definition and the self has to be made aware of the social relationships. Once a person accepts these conventions and participates in these social relationships, then they can be fully regarded as a "self" because one's identity cannot be defined in isolation. Circling back to the earlier idea, the narrator

realizes she cannot ignore that a part of her identity involves being a wife and has these significant relationships that shape her as an individual.

For the first part of the novel, Offill's narrator uses "I" and the idea of the "art monsters" as a way to define the narrator's identity mostly by herself. In parts that follow, Offill then uses "the wife" until the second-to-last page of the novel. In the aftermath of her husband's affair, the narrator, who is now referred to as the wife, goes back and forth between moments with her husband and quotes about other philosophers and scientists as she confronts him about the affair:

Her whole body is pricking. She feels hot and cold then hot again. *I noticed particularly*, she thinks. The minute it is light out she wakes him.

That's not what I asked you.

His eyes, god, his eyes, in the moment before he nodded his head.

Thales supposed the Earth to be flat and to float upon water.

Anaxagoras thought the moon was an uninhabited Earth.

Her sister drives in from Pennsylvania at five a.m. to pick up the daughter. (97)

In this moment, the narrator's anxiety over the affair manifests itself in physical discomfort. This discomfort gets to the point that it becomes her primary focus and is prioritized over sleep.

Instead of explicitly stating she was shocked, the narrator references Thales and Anaxagoras, and while this could reference her ghost-writing job for the Astronaut, these references involve philosophers who had specific observations of the world that were later disproved after new

discoveries. Although the narrator observes something is off when her husband leaves work late one night, she does not fully acknowledge her suspicion and anxiety until she confronts her husband about it. In a later section, we learn more about the narrator's feelings: "Nothing has ever surprised me more in my life" (Offill 107) and this implies that the narrator's observations and views of her marriage are not what they appear to be. After the initial shock, the narrator then turns to her sister for help and this decision marks the beginning of the sisters' strengthened relationship: "Her sister has a deal with her husband. *Whatever happens, keep it like in the fifties. Not one word ever. Make sure she's a nobody*" (126). The "she" in this quote refers to the other woman and the sister tells the husband to avoid bringing her up to spare the narrator's feelings. Because of this strengthened relationship and sisterhood, the narrator is able to take action after this betrayal.

However, before her husband's confirmation of the affair, Offill represents the narrator's fear through the first perspective switch in Chapter 22 where the narrative goes begins with first-person narration and Offill transitions into third-person with:

How are you feeling?

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Offill visually represents an overwhelmed narrator who ruminates over the state of her marriage and this is followed by the narrative shift where the narrator refers to herself as “the wife” (95). While it is easy to pinpoint the affair as the cause of the narrative shift, moments in the chapter before this shift also affect the narrator. The first is when she experiences another personal failure as a mother when her daughter leaves a note that states, “Stop writing I love you” (92). The daughter’s rejection of these notes echoes the narrator’s earlier fear from when her daughter was a newborn, “My love for her seemed doomed, hopelessly unrequited” (24). The rejection makes her love feel unrequited in some ways. Last, the narrator also feels the pressure to be a good wife: “The wives have requirements too, of course. What they require is this: unswerving obedience. Loyalty unto death” (93). The narrator cannot keep up with the expectations as a wife. All of these personal failures result in the narrator’s breakdown, which is signified by the first narrative shift. By positioning all those factors, Offill shows the challenges faced by women and the impact these pressures have on one’s mental health. Like identity, the narrator’s

breakdown cannot be defined by a single experience since the cause of the breakdown is far more complex and is affected by failures as a wife, worker, and mother. In writing that shift, Offill visually and fictionally embodies a temporary loss of identity as a coping mechanism where she is labeled as a wife while also revealing the difficulties of the neoliberal feminist ideal and how it affects her personal relationships.

Conclusion

Instead of characterizing the narrator as a spurned wife who stays in her marriage, Offill shows that the narrator is active in her healing process: “The wife goes to yoga now. Just to shut everyone up” (101). Despite her intentions and initial annoyance, the narrator uses this as one of the first steps to heal from the pain she feels as a result of the affair. In the section that follows, the narrator opens up to her yoga teacher about her situation and finds a person to whom she can vent to while also indicating a sense of sisterhood. This relationship signals a new beginning and change for the author where she expresses her emotions to others.

In addition to this, the narrator also seeks out therapy: “The wife thinks the old word is better. She says he is *besotted*. The shrink says he is *infatuated*. She doesn’t want to tell what the husband says” (106). The narrator is privileged enough to pay the therapist and yoga teacher, she has venues to process and feel her emotions. These interactions with the therapist and yoga teacher become a form of consistent and active healing for her. Additionally, when the narrator also chooses to move to an environment where the cost of living is cheaper, it lessens her immense stress from the balancing act of two jobs, motherhood, and marital struggles. Eventually “her sister comes up with the winning plan. They should move to her ramshackle house in Pennsylvania and live there for next to nothing” and the narrator really thinks about this move and considers the costs and the schools (159). As a result of this bonding, she is able to

remove herself from a stressful environment and move to a place where the cost of living is cheaper and she would not have to work as much. Although she and other women cannot escape neoliberal feminism, this new environment allows the narrator to work less and have more time for herself.

The change in the environment positively affects the narrator's attentiveness and alleviates her forgetfulness. She notices a story that the husband wrote about himself peeling an apple for their daughter and the fragment that follows is: "The Zen master Ikkuya was once asked to write a distillation of the highest wisdom. He wrote only one word: Attention" (176). The narrator begins to notice things her husband does and she gets more affectionate with him: "Sometimes she still strokes his hair in the middle of the night and half asleep he turns to her" (176). In short, once the narrator removes herself from these pressures, she has more time to bond with her daughter and repair her marriage and also take time for herself. Once she is able to take steps to repair and strengthen these relationships, she is able to write again. "The wife has a little room now, one that looks out over to the garden. She makes a note to herself about the book she is writing" (171). At the novel's conclusion, Offill reverts to first-person narration. In this instance, the narrator slowly comes back to her identity as an artist and concludes that her identity is more than being a worker and mother. In short, Offill creates a character who is more than a scorned wife or a keeper of a felicitous work-life balance, but instead creates a woman who is in a complex relationship and is defined through many ways such as her art career, motherhood, and her personal relationships. The novel ends on a hopeful note and everything appears to be resolved. Although the narrator cannot fully escape the neoliberal feminist culture, we can speculate this about her: she is an unfaithful neoliberal feminist.

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