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The Sleep Standard: Analysing Modern Anxieties of Insomnia

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The Sleep Standard: Analysing Modern Anxieties of Insomnia

The last few decades have seen renewed interest in cultural representations of sleep. This can be identified in numerous literary texts—both fictional and autobiographical—in which sleep and sleeplessness form a main focus. Alongside these narratives, and particularly in societies where healthcare is easily accessible, advertisements and popular medical journalism stress the importance of good sleep hygiene. By comparing recent newspaper articles to literature and memoir, this article will highlight the language of success and failure being attributed to sleep. It will provide historical context of sleep hygiene, but will focus on an eclectic range of texts—such as Jonathan Coe’s *The House of Sleep* (1997) and Richard Gwyn’s illness memoir *The Vagabond’s Breakfast* (2011)—to identify the ways in which sleeplessness is presented as a failure. As Eluned Summers-Bremner illustrates, sleeplessness ‘provokes peculiar outrage in we moderns, accustomed as we

are to micro-managing life's contingencies' (2008, p.122). It is Summers-Bremner's conception of the 'modern'—as a term for twenty-first century Western society—that I will largely be referring to in my analysis.

Sleeplessness is assumed to be an experience that is fundamentally biological, and yet widely publicised anxieties about failing to sleep are a relatively recent phenomenon. First published in 1973, Oliver Sacks's influential study *Awakenings* explains that the outbreak of *encephalitis lethargica*—'sleeping sickness'—witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century demonstrated 'that sleep was a physiological necessity' (1973, p.14). In addition, author Patricia Morrisroe, in her memoir of insomnia *Wide Awake*, points out that the importance of sleep medicine was only recognised by the American Medical Association in 1995 (2010, p.88). While this article does not disagree with the continuing development of sleep medicine and resources, it does suggest that the current fascination with sleep potentially coerces readers to scrutinise any sleeping habits that fall short of perfect. After all, sleep is an individual experience and, by imposing standards and ideals on a natural process that remains nonetheless unique to every human being, sleep is increasingly described as something fickle and elusive.

Are humans failing to sleep? Has sleep become a bothersome obligation in twenty-four-hour societies rife with shift work and technological distractions? This article will examine contemporary attitudes towards the performance of sleep; asking who and what dictates the idea of failure in this domain. The first section will discuss what it means to fail to sleep, and the anxieties typically aroused through fear of chronic insomnia. The second section will examine instances where humans are not depicted as the agents of their own sleep, understanding this in light of the medieval idea of sleep as a gift from the gods. In the final section, I will explore the benefits to be gained from rejecting the rhetoric of failure in order to better practice 'sub-standard' sleep. Through analysing both fictional and journalistic examples of what I call a 'modern preoccupation with sleep', I will discuss what might

be achieved through either the dread, or alternatively the acceptance, of unpredictable sleeping habits.

Pillow Pressure: The Self-Conscious Performance of Sleep

In *Understanding Sleeplessness*, David N. Neubauer explains that insomnia is defined in comparison to a norm, commenting that ‘with insomnia, sleep falls short of the expectation of how it should be experienced. People assess their sleep against a standard’ (2003, p.42). To detect insomnia, a sleep standard must first be established. Claudine Herzlich, in *Health and Illness*, argues that these standards of health and illness are socially constructed to define a person’s role in the world around them: ‘The adult learns from society to be ill’ (1973, p.1). This notion of ‘learning’ health and illness from socially promoted ideas of normalcy problematises commonplace perceptions of health; the sick condition of an individual is defined by their social environment, rather than the biological processes happening within. To what extent, then, is insomnia a cultural construct? And are these standards and recommendations dictating whether or not a poor night’s sleep need be interpreted through discourses of failure? This section will investigate the ways in which modern narratives and journalism potentially contribute to an unrealistic expectation of perfectionism regarding our sleeping habits.

More and more frequently, the idea of ‘sleep hygiene’ is a choice topic for popular health and science journalism. This link between sleep and health, as critic Tom Crook demonstrates, was emphasised during the reformation of public sleeping environments in the mid-Victorian period (2008, p.19). These changes to prisons, hospitals, and barracks involved the promotion of routine linen washing and enforced larger, better ventilated rooms. Crook explains, ‘The sleeping body was thus subject to a meticulous hygienic

management: it was spatialized, aerated and cleansed' (2008, p.19). The Victorian focus on healthy sleep could be the precursor for twenty-first century discourses on sleep hygiene.

Recent newspaper advice columns and reports of scientific studies allow readers to assess their own habits; however, these articles are rife with contradictions, and therefore presumably have potential to promote an anxious interpretation of one's sleep when it falls short of what is medically recommended. For instance, an article in *The Independent* published in February 2015 bears the gloomy headline: 'People who sleep more than eight hours are more likely to have a stroke, research shows' (Cooper, 2015). In October of the same year, an article on sleep hygiene declares: 'Six hours' sleep a night is enough, say scientists' (Matharu, 2015). As if to confuse things further, avid readers of *The Independent* might well happen across another article, also published in October 2015, which reports that: 'While we may not need ten hours of sleep all the time, there are some clear benefits from getting more sleep' (Paech, 2015). These articles imbue sleep with a morbid importance; it is fraught with life-or-death significance, as opposed to being a peaceful unwinding at the end of a day. Moreover, the so-called 'standard' is in almost constant flux, making readers (whose sleeping habits are here homogenised under the title of 'we') increasingly nervous that their current sleeping pattern is a risk to their health. Sleep is one of the most intangible human experiences, and yet the journalism covered here suggests that it is nevertheless subject to investigation, management, and regulation.

In addition to these articles, advertisements promoting sleep aids—with everything from camomile tea to white noise machines—encourage readers to invest money in sleep, promising that it can be shaped and controlled to suit the ideals promoted by popular medical journalism. In January 2017, an article in *The Guardian* described the new 'sleep technology' products exhibited at the CES electronics show in Las Vegas, and outlined that the 'global sleep market will be worth \$80bn by 2020' (Gabbatt, 2017). Titled

‘Don’t lose your snooze’, the article provides links to the homepages of each product, promoting the new technology rather than dismissing it. Thoughts of sleep are no longer reserved for the evenings; readers are told they must take active control in shaping their habits, in order to take advantage of the benefits of micro-managed sleep. To deviate from these guidelines, whether by staying up late watching Netflix or waking up after ten hours’ sleep on a weekend, is to fail. If, having subscribed to the advice included in these articles, the changes made by readers have no subsequent effect on their sleep, disappointment surely looms. The reader may feel they have disappointed the scientists who warn the less-than-ideal sleeper of an increased risk of early death, and the reader may be disappointed in the expensive mattresses and obscure vitamin supplements that have had no effect on improving their rest.

With sleep hygiene at the forefront of cultural conversations, the importance of an ideal night’s sleep places pressure on those that might in turn find themselves struggling to get any sleep at all. Readers who take notice of sleep hygiene articles want the money they spend on sleep aids to not be wasted, but the anticipation of a dramatic increase in the quality of rest may overexcite them when bedtime arrives. This double-bind is reflected in literary narratives of insomnia. Patricia Morrisroe’s book *Wide Awake* (2010) details her history of insomnia and the variety of methods and products she has tried in order to sleep better. In her memoir, Morrisroe describes a childhood memory in which she is given a ‘Big Bed’. She writes: ‘Living up to the Big Bed was a lot of pressure. Sinking into the cushy mattress, I’d stare at the white eyelet canopy and feel bad for not sleeping when less fortunate children were’ (Morrisroe, 2010, p.20). Here, her failure to sleep also means failing her parents by not being able to use the bed as intended; her guilt also has a moral quality in terms of the squandering of her class privilege. Morrisroe’s insomnia is the result of residual childhood

trauma, but it appears to be worsened by aligning sleep with ideas of performance, and surrounding the bed with an imaginary audience.

Another interesting example of this anxiety about sleeplessness can be found in Blake Butler's *Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia* (2011). Written to emulate the agonising and nonsensical churning of sleepless thoughts, Butler uses disjointed sentences and repetition to show his tormented obsession with sleep. His description of the performance anxiety of sleep is as follows:

The spark of anxiety feeds its own hole—altering the usual process of distraction within one's self to one of accrual, crudding up—allowing the system to become further damaged, fatter and fatter, toward a hyper, opaque state. Thus the sleep period becomes a paradox—a state you want so bad you cannot have it, the effort of solution refreshing the problem, again, again (2011, p.60).

In the above quote, Butler suggests that the act of paying too much attention to sleep does nothing but fuel the desperation about sleeplessness. Frequently, Butler equates sleep to a vicious circle, in which the effort put in to attaining sleep only drives sleep further away. This reflects what Neubauer describes as 'the fear of not sleeping', which provokes 'sufficient emotional distress to fuel persistent physiological activation' (2003, p.91). While Butler does not financially invest in his bedroom environment, there is a sense that he is preoccupied with maintaining a standard of sleep deemed regular. In a later passage, however, Butler expresses conflicted feelings with regard to buying his way to a better sleep. He reflects, with some cynicism, that not even our beds—with their hypoallergenic sheets and memory foam mattresses—can 'make their own decisions' and simply be beds. Yet, immediately after this thought, Butler wonders if there could be a bed 'that takes [him] wholly by skin' (2011, p.37). He is not unaffected by the middle-class, aspirational luxury that sleep aids evoke. And despite his dismissal of expensive beds and supplements, he cannot help but express the hope that

somewhere among the barrage of advertisements is a product that will genuinely alleviate his sleeplessness. Ironically, questioning the existence of a better bed further fuels his anxiety: the self-conscious desire for success, then, makes sleep unattainable.

In his memoir *The Vagabond's Breakfast* (2011), the author—and self-professed chronic insomniac—Richard Gwyn describes a similar anxiety regarding bedtime. Gwyn writes that he has ‘begun to dread and even fear the allotted hour for slumber’ because of the ‘certainty of failure, borne out by the experience of a thousand sleepless nights’ (p.119). Furthermore, Gwyn illustrates the futility of attempting to influence his sleeping habits: ‘When this dread seeps into the mind and flesh, it becomes impossible even to consider the bedtime routine because the body resists all efforts to relax ... as though one’s legs and arms have taken a life of their own and will broach no compromise with sleep’ (p.119). Sleep, for Gwyn, is a process that involves his entire body and, in not sleeping, there is a sense of separation and internal conflict to which he is only a passive observer. Gwyn expresses fear of the very idea of bedtime, something which, one might venture, would only be further exacerbated by newspaper articles of the kind considered earlier.

In their memoirs of insomnia, Morrisroe, Butler, and Gwyn echo Neubauer’s description of the ‘dread of bedtime approaching, along with increasing performance anxiety as the anticipated hour nears’ (2003, p.109). Ironically, however, Neubauer’s suggestion that a possible treatment can be found by ‘rescript[ing]’ the ‘story’ of bedtime invokes a sense of theatricality (p.111). If the insomniac can approach sleep from a different emotional perspective, then perhaps this ‘dread’ will disappear. Gwyn, in *The Vagabond's Breakfast*, expresses from the outset that sleep is beyond his control. Because his insomnia results from other health conditions, rather than a series of sleep-disrupting habits, the suggestion of ‘rescripting’ bedtime routines does not seem appropriate to Gwyn’s case. Morrisroe’s narrative, on the other hand, is wholly preoccupied with attempts to find

alternative approaches to sleep. Just as sleep is unique to every person, these texts show that the ability to practise good sleep hygiene is similarly subjective.

Sleeplessness can also emerge due to repercussions from external events: recent studies have shown a strong relationship between trauma and sleep disorders. In research conducted by Sue Wilson and David J. Nutt, 70–90% of a group of patients with post-traumatic stress disorder suffered chronic or intermittent insomnia (2008, p.78). In the contemporary fiction discussed below, the trope of sleeping difficulties is used in order to represent the protagonist's emotional unrest or as a link in a chain of failures. In Anne Enright's novel of childhood trauma *The Gathering* (2007), for example, troubled protagonist Veronica Hegarty's sleeplessness becomes self-destructive. She deliberately transgresses her role as wife and mother in order to induce a sense of shame. At night she leaves her sleeping husband and children, aimlessly driving her car and parking in desolate spots in a 'wait to be killed' (Enright, 2007, p.150). Her failure to sleep evolves into a lack of self-preservation. Enright's portrayal of sleeplessness can be applied to what Eluned Summers-Bremner describes as a 'history of regarding insomniacs as guilty or morally suspect' (2008, p.10). At the root of Veronica's depression is the memory of her brother's childhood abuse, something which was beyond her control and yet, decades later, she is preoccupied with receiving punishment for. Insomnia, for Veronica, becomes something she believes she deserves.

'Sleep comes from elsewhere': Depictions of Sleep as a Gift

As touched upon above, there is an established rhetoric that puts humans to blame for their own insomnia: they fail to sleep. There is, however, another side to sleep and sleeplessness in the texts discussed. Another way of

understanding sleep is as an external force—whether a gift from the gods or from some other place—that *comes* to the individual, rather than manifests from within. Here, then, sleeplessness is not so much a failure as it is a betrayal. In this rendition, sleep does not arrive because it is fickle, and has determined to toy with human emotions. This section will analyse the act of distancing the human body from the ability to attain sleep, or the absence of sleep.

In his text *The Fall of Sleep*, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes the process of sleep as follows: ‘No one puts himself to sleep: sleep comes from elsewhere. It falls onto us, it makes us fall into it. So we have been put to sleep’ (2007, p.29). Nancy emphasises that sleep is a force that originates from a different plane of existence. No one retains control over their descent into rest—humans must wait to be admitted, to be ‘put’, into the land of sleep. But put to sleep by whom? Nancy’s argument chimes with a historic belief in sleep as a power owned by a higher being. The god of sleep, Morpheus, was to be blamed for his whimsical cruelty during restless nights. In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1368), for example, the narrator, desperate to end his wakefulness, describes the gifts he would offer Morpheus in order to ‘make [him] slepe’ (l.245).

Even though twenty-first century society does not perhaps so overtly rely on the will of gods to grant rest, an article in *The Guardian* published in January 2016, for example, shows a continuation of the idea that people are recipients, rather than initiators, of their own sleep (Wiseman, 2016). The article promises a series of tips for achieving better sleep. It recommends seemingly bizarre ideas and language, advising readers to ‘distract your brain’ and ‘fool your body into thinking you’re tired’ by ‘faking a yawn or two’. These tips suggest that humans are not in complete control of their brain. Rather, it segments and separates the various parts of the mind, presenting the idea that humans are engaged in an internal struggle. Haruki Murakami’s short story ‘Sleep’ (1993) explores a similar idea. Tormented by

wakefulness, Murakami's protagonist describes her fingertips as 'brushing against the outermost edge of sleep' while her mind remains active: she exists as 'both a body on the verge of sleep and a mind determined to stay awake' (1993, p.75). If sleepless thoughts naturally breed the concept that the mind and body are no longer working in harmony, then it is problematic for sleep hygiene articles to encourage and normalise this separation of the self.

The topic of sleep hygiene is not reserved to newspapers, however. The issue of *New Scientist* published on 28 May 2016 included several articles on sleep (2016). The main feature—'A User's Guide to Sleep'—begins with a diagram of a bedroom, set out in the style of a Haynes Manual (p.31). This in itself suggests that sleep is a complex system, which must be pieced together and maintained by its human 'user'. The page following outlines the 'growing obsession with sleep' that is 'consuming our waking hours' (p.32). Tellingly, the titles of each segment are written as first-person questions, such as '[h]ow much shut-eye do I need?' (p.33) and '[h]ow can I nap like a pro?' (p.38). Despite showing awareness of how a preoccupation with sleep typically manifests itself, *New Scientist* encourages the reader's participation in such constructions. Whether or not the reader already spends time 'obsessing' over sleep, in imitating the reader's voice, the reader is made complicit in the ongoing sleep hygiene conversation.

If readers are inclined to take note of the concepts illustrated in such articles, they might be forgiven for believing that their bodies and minds are working against them. Just as Chaucer's narrator thinks of the gifts he would give to Morpheus in exchange for sleep, readers are encouraged to work around the body's idiosyncratic will and trick parts of themselves so that they might partake in rest. The tips outlined in *The Guardian* and *New Scientist* promote a pre-bed ritual: have a bath, drink warm milk, avoid looking at any bright screens before attempting sleep. Sleep is mythologised and readers follow a certain pattern of behaviour before bed in order to appease whatever force grants the gift of unconsciousness. This is a performance.

When people continue to be sleepless despite their efforts, the notion of failure, I propose, may manifest itself in one of two ways. Firstly, as discussed in the previous section, the resting of one's hopes of sleep on certain patterns of behaviour risks inciting performance anxiety. In this instance, by thinking about sleep as an external force, and pre-bed activities as a ritual, 'poor sleepers' feel they have not done enough for sleep to come to them. Secondly, and conversely, when sleep does not happen they can shift the blame onto an external entity: they did not fail to sleep, *sleep failed them*.

In addition to the distancing of sleep from human agency, there has been a recent trend of fiction exploring sleep as controlled by another force: scientific experiment. Charlie Huston's *Sleepless* (2010) and Kenneth Calhoun's *Black Moon* (2014) follow the conventions of well-known zombie narratives, but with hordes of shuffling insomniacs in place of the undead. Both texts examine the idea that we take our ability to sleep (as opposed to *agrypnia*: the absolute incapacity to sleep for any period of time) for granted. In *Sleepless*, the cause of the contagious insomnia is revealed to be a pesticide gone wrong (Huston, 2010, p.291). By trying to interrupt and manipulate natural processes, the text suggests, humans will ultimately damage the most crucial functions within themselves. While Calhoun does not offer a solid explanation for the similar dilemma in *Black Moon* (2014), he presents a team of sleep researchers hurriedly developing an electronic device implanted in the brain, that forces a sleep-like state at regular intervals. This new sub-genre seems to be taking a cynical view of scientific invention, using the tropes of zombie narratives to instil the dread of an uncontrollable, behaviour-altering disease. It suggests that the downfall of humanity will be a direct result of human meddling, and it will target human beings' most universal vulnerability: their ability to sleep.

The foundations of these texts are reminiscent of the idea that sleep is a gift. More than this, however, they demonstrate anxiety about an over-reliance on scientifically-altered food and new technologies. In other words,

they present the fear that sleep will be withheld, changed, destroyed, or delivered by pharmaceutical companies and research centres, entities perhaps figured in terms of a ‘modern Morpheus’. Here, anxieties are not performance-based, because human sleep is shown to be entirely malleable to scientific intervention. In this fictional scenario, to fail to sleep is to succumb to a dependency on biologically-altering technology.

Sleeplessness as a Valuable Failure

The performance anxiety of bedtime is a phenomenon that arises out of being overexposed to ideas of ‘perfect’ sleep. ‘Poor’ sleepers might typically place too much pressure on themselves in the hope of achieving an unrealistic and, to some extent, unnatural quality of rest. From this, notions of failure are easily assignable. But if the sleepless can dismiss this rhetoric, could sleeplessness be a valuable failure?

Jonathan Coe’s *The House of Sleep* (1997) is an exploration of numerous sleep disorders, from vivid nightmares to insomnia. Terry Worth, a freelance journalist and film critic, becomes an object of interest for the sleep research centre after one of his columns is passed around between the scientists. Coe writes:

In this column [Worth] had announced his intention of entering a competition which was to be held at a repertory cinema in London, where they were staging a ten-day ‘Cinemathon’. There would be continuous screenings throughout the event, twenty-four hours a day, and a prize was being offered to the audience member who could clock up the longest uninterrupted period of film-watching. Revealing that he was already a long-term insomniac, Worth had claimed that he would be able to stay awake through all 134 films ... (1997, p.31).

This passage stands out in its difference of attitude from the sleep hygiene articles of popular medical journalism explored above. Worth announces

himself an insomniac, as though it were an identity or even a special skill, and it is this talent that makes him feel as though the competition prize is his for the taking. Indeed, later in the book it is established that Worth became a film critic *because* of his sleeplessness. In a conversation with Dr. Dudden at the sleep lab, Worth explains that he stopped feeling tired and ‘instead of going to bed, [he’d] stay up all night. Watching videos’ (Coe, 1997, p.70). Rather than obsess over his lack of sleep, Worth allows it to become a part of his lifestyle. He makes use of his time awake, and it helps to establish and advance his career as a journalist. He does not experience sensations of failure because of a lack of sleep, but rather adapts and shapes his activities to fit with his waking hours. It is commonplace to wish that there were more hours in the day, so that more might be experienced. Worth’s insomnia allows him this extra time to consume as many films as the night allows. His sleeplessness is not failure, then, but something to be envied.

Sleep is an individual, subjective experience. It seems, therefore, wholly inappropriate to apply ideals and recommendations to something that is different for each of us. Eluned Summers-Bremner suggests that there is something to be treasured in sleep’s unpredictability, that it is the ‘one thing we do each day that cannot be fully mastered, and in that resides its ability to renew us and remake us’ (2008, pp.148–149). Human attempts to control sleep as explored here; to induce it, to trick oneself into it, or otherwise place anxious attention on a process that is transient and necessarily changeable, is to deny this.

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which a modern preoccupation with sleep, in both literature and journalism, has threatened reprimands of failure about a process that is fundamentally unconscious and artless. The journalism explored here indicates that newspaper pieces and

advertisements for sleep aids present contradictory ideas and stipulate that the individual is not doing enough to ensure a healthy rest. When readers follow the advice in popular medical journalism, drink herbal teas, and buy expensive bedding, they make the hours leading up to bedtime a performance: such efforts can only lead to a sense of performance anxiety. This is reflected in fictional and autobiographical explorations into insomnia. Where sleep remains elusive, readers convince themselves that they have not done or bought enough to ensure the ideal night's rest: they have failed to sleep, or otherwise, sleep has failed them. Yet the process should not be inscribed with ideas of failing or succeeding—sleep is unpredictable, and sleeplessness is just as unique an experience. If people become too self-conscious and too eager to seize and manipulate the exact moment in which they move into that other state of existence, they risk losing access to it altogether. The process of sleep, of falling and being asleep, is unknowable to humans: sleep necessarily resists the focus that modern culture is inclined to place on it.

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