

FRACTURED REFLECTIONS: MIRROR, DOPPELGÄNGER, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN *THE HOUSEMAID* (2025)

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Abstract

Paul Feig's *The Housemaid* (2025), adapted from Freida McFadden's bestselling novel, has primarily been received as a domestic psychological thriller driven by suspense and narrative twists. However, beneath its thriller conventions lies a sophisticated exploration of identity, female subjectivity, and psychological doubling. This article argues that *The Housemaid* reimagines the Gothic motif of the doppelgänger by relocating it within the contemporary domestic sphere, where identity is constructed through surveillance, trauma, class hierarchy, and patriarchal power. Drawing upon Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, Otto Rank's theory of the double, Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage, and feminist film criticism, the study examines how Millie Calloway and Nina Winchester function as psychological doubles whose identities are continuously reshaped through mutual recognition rather than rivalry. The Winchester mansion itself becomes a symbolic mirror, exposing the instability of domestic ideals and revealing how space participates in the construction of subjectivity. Through close textual analysis of characterization, visual imagery, and narrative reversals, this article demonstrates that the film replaces the supernatural double with relational and psychological forms of doubling grounded in contemporary experiences of coercive control and identity performance. Ultimately, *The Housemaid* extends the Gothic tradition by suggesting that identity is never fixed but emerges through the dynamic interplay between self and other, appearance and reality, repression and resistance. The film thus redefines the doppelgänger as a metaphor for fractured female subjectivity within modern domestic life.

Keywords: domestic Gothic, doppelgänger, identity construction, mirror, psychological thriller, female subjectivity.

Introduction

The motif of the double has occupied a central place in Gothic literature and psychological fiction since the nineteenth century, offering writers and filmmakers a powerful means of exploring divided consciousness, repression, and the instability of identity. From Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson* to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the doppelgänger has traditionally embodied the hidden or repressed aspects of the self, exposing the fragile boundaries between appearance and reality. Contemporary psychological thrillers continue this tradition, but increasingly relocate the double from supernatural encounters to ordinary domestic spaces where identity is shaped by surveillance, performance, and unequal power relations.

Paul Feig's *The Housemaid* (2025), adapted from Freida McFadden's bestselling novel, exemplifies this transformation. While marketed as a domestic suspense thriller, the film employs Gothic conventions to interrogate the construction of female identity within patriarchal structures. The narrative follows Millie Calloway, a young woman attempting to rebuild her life after imprisonment, who accepts employment as a live-in maid in the affluent Winchester household. Her employers, Andrew and Nina Winchester, initially appear to represent domestic success and social stability. As Millie becomes increasingly involved in the family's private life, however, the household reveals itself to be a space of manipulation, coercive control, and concealed violence. The film gradually dismantles the binaries of victim and perpetrator, sanity and madness, employer and servant, revealing identity as unstable and continuously negotiated.

Rather than presenting the doppelgänger as a literal double, *The Housemaid* constructs psychological mirroring through the relationship between Millie and Nina. Initially positioned as antagonists, the two women gradually emerge as reflections of one another, each embodying fears, vulnerabilities, and possibilities that the other has been unable to acknowledge. Their evolving relationship transforms the traditional Gothic motif of doubling from a narrative of rivalry into one of recognition and solidarity. This reinterpretation reflects broader shifts within contemporary Gothic narratives, where female alliances increasingly challenge patriarchal systems that rely on isolation and mistrust.

The film's exploration of identity is reinforced through its visual language. Mirrors, reflective surfaces, confined spaces, and symmetrical compositions repeatedly emphasize fractured subjectivity and the instability of appearances. The Winchester mansion functions not merely as a setting but as a psychological landscape where hidden rooms, locked doors, and carefully curated interiors symbolize repression and secrecy. Domestic architecture becomes an extension of the characters' divided selves, recalling the Gothic tradition in which houses externalize psychological conflict. Through these visual strategies, the film transforms the domestic sphere into a site where identity is simultaneously performed, concealed, and reconstructed.

Recent scholarship on domestic thrillers has focused primarily on unreliable narration, marital deception, and gendered violence, while studies of the Gothic have examined the persistence of doubling and the uncanny in contemporary culture. However, *The Housemaid* has received comparatively little scholarly attention beyond reviews of its adaptation and suspense mechanisms. Existing discussions rarely consider how the film reconfigures the Gothic tradition of the double to address contemporary anxieties surrounding female subjectivity, class, and coercive control. Consequently, its sophisticated engagement with psychological doubling remains underexplored.

This article addresses that gap by examining how *The Housemaid* mobilizes the concepts of the mirror and the doppelgänger to construct fractured identities within the domestic sphere. It argues that the film shifts the function of the double from supernatural alter ego to relational identity, where the self is formed through encounters with another woman who shares analogous experiences of trauma and patriarchal domination. Drawing upon Freud's theory of the uncanny, Rank's concept of the double, Lacan's Mirror Stage, and feminist film criticism, the study demonstrates that the film redefines identity as a performative and relational process rather than a fixed psychological essence.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the representation of identity in *The Housemaid* (2025). The analysis combines psychoanalytic criticism, feminist film theory, and Gothic studies to investigate how narrative structure, characterization, mise-en-scène, and visual symbolism construct the motif of the double. Rather than approaching the film solely as a suspense narrative, the study interprets it as a cultural text that reworks the Gothic tradition within a contemporary domestic setting.

Close reading serves as the primary analytical method. Particular attention is paid to recurring motifs such as mirrors, confinement, surveillance, domestic architecture, and role performance, as well as to cinematographic elements including framing, lighting, and spatial composition. These cinematic devices are examined not merely as stylistic features but as visual expressions of fractured subjectivity and psychological doubling.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing primarily on Freud's concept of the uncanny (1919), Rank's theory of the double (1914), and Lacan's Mirror Stage (1949), while incorporating insights from feminist film criticism, particularly Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze. These perspectives enable an exploration of how identity is mediated through visual representation, gendered power, and interpersonal relationships. The aim is not to impose theory upon the text but to demonstrate how the film's formal strategies resonate with broader debates concerning identity, subjectivity, and the contemporary domestic Gothic.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The motif of the doppelgänger has generated extensive scholarship in Gothic studies, psychoanalytic criticism, and film theory because of its capacity to reveal the instability of human identity. Freud's seminal essay *The Uncanny* identifies the double as one of the most disturbing manifestations of the unconscious, arguing that what appears frightening is often the return of something once familiar but subsequently repressed (Freud). Extending this argument, Otto Rank interprets the double as an externalization of divided consciousness, suggesting that encounters with one's double expose unresolved psychological conflicts and anxieties about mortality (Rank). Together, Freud and Rank establish the doppelgänger as a psychological rather than merely supernatural phenomenon, an interpretation that continues to shape contemporary readings of Gothic literature and cinema.

Later psychoanalytic theory shifted attention from repression to the construction of subjectivity. Jacques Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage argues that identity originates through identification with an external image, producing a self that is fundamentally shaped by misrecognition rather than internal coherence (Lacan). This insight has been particularly influential in film studies because cinema itself operates through visual identification, inviting spectators to negotiate identity through reflected and projected images. Consequently, mirrors in cinema often function as symbols of fractured subjectivity rather than simple reflections of reality.

Scholars of Gothic fiction have likewise emphasized that modern Gothic narratives relocate horror from supernatural settings to ordinary social spaces. David Punter argues that Gothic fiction persistently exposes the instability underlying apparently secure identities, while Fred Botting observes that contemporary Gothic increasingly transforms familiar domestic environments into sites of psychological unease. This shift has contributed to the emergence of the **domestic Gothic**, a mode in which marriage, family, and the home become locations of surveillance, repression, and concealed violence rather than safety and emotional fulfillment.

Feminist critics have expanded these discussions by examining how patriarchal structures shape female identity. Laura Mulvey demonstrates that classical cinema frequently positions women as objects of visual regulation through the male gaze, while Barbara Creed argues that female bodies are often represented as culturally disruptive whenever they resist patriarchal expectations. Within domestic Gothic narratives, women are therefore not only physically confined but also symbolically constructed through systems of observation and control. Identity becomes inseparable from performance, as female characters negotiate socially prescribed roles of wife, mother, caregiver, or domestic worker.

Research Gap

Although these theoretical approaches have been widely applied to Gothic fiction and psychological cinema, scholarship on *The Housemaid* remains comparatively limited. Existing criticism has focused primarily on its effectiveness as a suspense thriller, its adaptation of Freida McFadden's novel, and its commercial appeal. Discussions generally emphasize plot twists, unreliable narration, and audience expectations, while paying relatively little attention to the film's symbolic structure or visual language. More importantly, no sustained study has examined the film through the combined perspectives of psychoanalytic doubling, mirror imagery, and feminist Gothic criticism.

This article addresses that gap by arguing that *The Housemaid* reconfigures the Gothic doppelgänger within the contemporary domestic thriller. Rather than presenting the double as a supernatural duplicate, the film constructs identity through psychological mirroring, relational experience, and domestic performance. The relationship between Millie and Nina demonstrates that the double functions not as an enemy but as a reflected self whose recognition becomes essential for psychological transformation. By integrating psychoanalytic

theory with feminist film criticism, this study proposes that *The Housemaid* expands the possibilities of the domestic Gothic through its representation of female subjectivity as fractured, relational, and continually reconstructed.

The study draws primarily upon Freud's concept of the uncanny, Rank's theory of the double, and Lacan's Mirror Stage, while incorporating feminist film theory to examine how gendered power structures shape identity within the Winchester household. Rather than treating these theories as separate explanatory models, the article employs them collectively to demonstrate how mirrors, domestic space, surveillance, and interpersonal relationships function as interconnected mechanisms through which identity is produced and transformed.

Analysis

Fractured Selves: Millie and Nina as Psychological Doubles

From its opening sequences, *The Housemaid* presents identity as something unstable and performative rather than innate. Millie Calloway enters the Winchester household attempting to escape the social identity imposed by her criminal past. Her employment is more than an opportunity for financial stability; it represents an attempt to reconstruct herself through a new social role. Yet the film repeatedly suggests that identities cannot simply be discarded. Past experiences continue to shape present behaviour, producing what Freud describes as the return of the repressed. Millie's past is never entirely absent; instead, it exists as an invisible double that accompanies her throughout the narrative.

The film visualizes this instability through recurring images of reflection and confinement. Mirrors rarely function as ordinary household objects. Instead, they become moments of hesitation in which Millie confronts the gap between the person she wishes to become and the identity imposed upon her by others. Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage is particularly relevant here, as Millie's self-image depends less upon inner certainty than upon recognition by those around her. Her identity is continually negotiated through the expectations of employers, neighbours, and society itself.

Initially, Nina Winchester appears to occupy the opposite position. Wealthy, socially respected, and apparently secure within her domestic environment, she seems to represent the life Millie hopes to achieve. However, the film gradually dismantles this opposition. As hidden truths emerge, Nina is revealed to be as psychologically fragmented as Millie, though for different reasons. Her apparently irrational behaviour is shown to be a consequence of prolonged coercive control rather than inherent instability. The reversal compels both Millie and the audience to reconsider earlier assumptions, transforming Nina from antagonist into psychological counterpart.

This transformation constitutes the film's most significant reinterpretation of the Gothic double. Rather than functioning as opposing figures of good and evil, Millie and Nina embody parallel experiences of entrapment. Millie's imprisonment by her past mirrors Nina's imprisonment within an abusive marriage. One is confined by social stigma, the other by domestic violence. Although their circumstances differ, both women experience identities shaped by forces beyond their control. Their relationship therefore reflects Otto Rank's argument that the double externalizes aspects of the self that remain psychologically inaccessible. Each woman becomes capable of recognizing her own vulnerability only through the experience of the other.

Importantly, the film rejects the traditional Gothic pattern in which one double must destroy the other to restore psychological unity. Instead, recognition produces solidarity. As Millie gradually understands Nina's circumstances, suspicion gives way to empathy. The double ceases to represent psychological threat and instead becomes the condition for self-understanding. In this sense, *The Housemaid* transforms the doppelgänger from an instrument of horror into a catalyst for female agency.

The Winchester Mansion: Domestic Space as a Mirror of Identity

The relationship between Millie and Nina is inseparable from the domestic environment in which it unfolds. The Winchester mansion functions as far more than a backdrop for suspense; it operates as a symbolic extension of the characters' divided consciousness. Consistent with the traditions of the domestic Gothic, the house projects elegance, order, and security while concealing violence and repression beneath its carefully maintained appearance.

Millie's attic bedroom is particularly significant in this regard. Physically isolated from the rest of the household and capable of being locked from the outside, the room immediately evokes Gothic imagery of confinement. Yet its symbolic importance extends beyond imprisonment. Positioned at the margins of the house, the attic reflects Millie's liminal social position. She belongs within the household through labour but remains excluded from its emotional and social centre. Her room becomes a spatial representation of her fragmented identity: simultaneously inside and outside, visible and invisible.

The film repeatedly reinforces this symbolism through cinematography. Long corridors, closed doors, staircases, and carefully composed interior frames emphasize separation rather than connection. Characters are frequently filmed through doorways, mirrors, or windows, visually dividing the frame and suggesting fractured subjectivity. These compositional choices transform domestic architecture into a psychological landscape where identity is continually negotiated through spatial restriction.

Freud argues that the uncanny emerges when the familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar. The Winchester mansion exemplifies this process. Every revelation transforms previously ordinary spaces into sites of psychological disturbance. Bedrooms, kitchens, and hallways cease to signify domestic comfort and instead become reminders of surveillance and coercion. The home itself becomes uncanny because its apparent normality conceals systemic violence.

Rather than presenting horror through supernatural intervention, *The Housemaid* locates terror within the everyday structures of domestic life. The house mirrors its inhabitants: polished on the surface, fractured beneath.

Andrew Winchester and the Patriarchal Construction of Identity

If Millie and Nina function as psychological doubles, Andrew Winchester represents the institutional force that produces and regulates their identities. The film initially presents him as the rational, caring husband whose perspective appears trustworthy. This characterization encourages viewers to interpret Nina's emotional instability through his account, thereby reproducing a familiar patriarchal narrative in which female experience is mediated by masculine authority. As the narrative unfolds, however, this apparent stability is exposed as a carefully maintained performance.

Andrew's authority depends less on physical violence than on his ability to control perception. He repeatedly constructs narratives that define how others should understand Millie and Nina, positioning one as the grateful employee and the other as the unstable wife. His power therefore lies in determining which identities appear credible. This dynamic recalls Laura Mulvey's argument that patriarchal visual culture frequently denies women autonomous subjectivity by reducing them to objects interpreted through the masculine gaze. In *The Housemaid*, women are initially seen through Andrew's perspective before gradually reclaiming the authority to narrate their own experiences.

The film also demonstrates that patriarchal control operates through surveillance. Millie's movements, behaviour, and emotional responses are continuously observed and evaluated, compelling her to perform obedience even when she becomes increasingly suspicious of the household. Nina experiences an even more invasive form of observation, having learned to regulate her behaviour in response to prolonged coercive control. Surveillance thus becomes internalized; the women monitor themselves because they anticipate male judgment. The result is a fragmented identity in which authentic emotional expression is replaced by carefully managed performance.

As Millie uncovers the hidden dynamics of the household, this asymmetry begins to collapse. She shifts from being the object of observation to an active observer who questions appearances and reconstructs the truth independently. This reversal marks a significant transformation in the film's politics of looking. The gaze no longer belongs exclusively to patriarchal authority but becomes a means of exposing its mechanisms. Knowledge, rather than physical strength, emerges as the primary instrument of resistance.

Reimagining the Doppelgänger in the Contemporary Domestic Gothic

One of the film's most significant contributions to contemporary Gothic cinema lies in its reinterpretation of the doppelgänger. Classical Gothic texts often externalize divided identity through supernatural doubles or physically duplicated selves. *The Housemaid* abandons this convention in favour of psychological and relational doubling. The "other self" is no longer an uncanny apparition but another woman whose experiences reveal suppressed aspects of one's own identity.

Millie and Nina therefore function as mirrors that reflect not identical personalities but parallel conditions of vulnerability. Both are confined by patriarchal structures, although these structures operate differently in their respective lives. Millie struggles against social stigma and the burden of her past, while Nina struggles against coercive control concealed beneath the appearance of domestic respectability. Their identities intersect through shared experiences of fear, silence, and survival.

The film consequently redefines the purpose of the double. Rather than representing a destructive force, the double becomes a source of recognition and ethical responsibility. Millie's growing understanding of Nina's situation enables her to reinterpret her own identity, moving beyond personal redemption toward collective resistance. Likewise, Nina recognizes in Millie the possibility of agency that prolonged abuse had almost extinguished. Their relationship demonstrates that identity is produced not in isolation but through encounters with others whose lives illuminate previously unrecognized dimensions of the self.

The Winchester mansion reinforces this process by functioning as a material mirror of fractured subjectivity. Its polished exterior conceals hidden spaces, much as its inhabitants conceal emotional trauma beneath socially acceptable performances. The house is therefore not merely the setting of psychological conflict but an active participant in its construction. By locating Gothic horror within an affluent suburban home rather than an ancient castle, *The Housemaid* updates the domestic Gothic for a contemporary audience. The film suggests that modern horror resides not in supernatural threats but in ordinary social institutions capable of disguising coercion as normality.

This reinterpretation also reflects broader cultural anxieties surrounding identity in contemporary society. Modern subjectivity is increasingly shaped by visibility, performance, and external validation. Individuals negotiate multiple social identities while concealing experiences that contradict idealized public images. Although *The Housemaid* is not explicitly concerned with digital culture, its emphasis on appearance, observation, and performance resonates strongly with a social world in which identity is continually curated and evaluated. The film therefore extends the Gothic tradition by demonstrating that the most unsettling doubles are not supernatural beings but socially produced versions of ourselves.

Conclusion

The Housemaid (2025) transcends the conventions of the domestic thriller by offering a psychologically complex exploration of fractured identity through the Gothic motifs of the mirror and the doppelgänger. Rather than presenting identity as a fixed psychological essence, the film portrays subjectivity as unstable, relational, and continually reconstructed through memory, performance, and interpersonal recognition. Millie Calloway and Nina Winchester are not simply protagonist and antagonist; they are psychological reflections whose encounters expose the limitations of identities imposed by class, gender, and patriarchal authority.

By integrating Freud's concept of the uncanny, Rank's theory of the double, Lacan's Mirror Stage, and feminist film criticism, this study demonstrates that the film reconfigures the Gothic double as a relational rather than supernatural phenomenon. Mirrors, confined spaces, surveillance, and domestic architecture collectively reveal that identity is produced through external systems of recognition as much as through internal psychological experience. The Winchester mansion itself becomes a symbolic extension of divided consciousness, exposing the instability beneath the appearance of domestic harmony.

The film also challenges traditional representations of female relationships within Gothic narratives. Instead of sustaining rivalry between women, it transforms psychological doubling into solidarity. Millie and Nina achieve self-understanding not by defeating one another but by recognizing their shared experiences of coercion and survival. This shift from competition to collaboration marks an important feminist revision of the doppelgänger tradition and demonstrates that the double can function as a source of empowerment rather than destruction.

Ultimately, *The Housemaid* argues that identity is never singular or complete. It is shaped by social performance, historical trauma, and the continual negotiation between appearance and reality. The film's enduring significance lies in its ability to relocate Gothic horror from supernatural phenomena to the everyday structures of domestic life, where systems of surveillance, power, and control produce fractured selves. In doing so, it reimagines the doppelgänger as a compelling metaphor for contemporary female subjectivity and confirms the continuing relevance of Gothic conventions in exploring the complexities of identity in the twenty-first century.

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