

The Perceived Reliability of (Female) Narrators in Psychological Thrillers

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Abstract

This thesis explores techniques used in the field of creative writing to influence the reader’s perception of the narrator’s reliability. This thesis argues that the perceived reliability of the narrator is created in an interaction between the author, text, and reader, rather than being inherent to the narrator’s characteristics. This is demonstrated through the close readings of the novels *The Girl on The Train*, *Elizabeth is Missing*, and *Gone Girl*, which demonstrate that social subjects such as gender, age and schemas are of influence on the way the reader interprets the reliability of the narrator. Additionally, narrative structures such as the first-person point of view and the epistolary form also influence the perceived reliability of the narrator. This thesis looks at why the reader’s perception of the narrator’s reliability is important in the genre of the psychological thriller. In the three novels that are discussed in the thesis, the reliability of the narrators is perceived for what it is not, which means that the narrator is either trusted by the reader when in fact they are untruthful, or that the reader is distrusted by the reader when they are actually speaking the truth. When the reader finds out their perception of the narrator was wrong, this creates a plot twist, which adds to the shock and suspense that forms the thriller.

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# Introduction: Genre and the Unreliable (Female) Narrator

Between 2012 - 2015, three novels with several distinctive similarities were published by three different authors. The most striking of these similarities might be that each novel features an unreliable female narrator. First Gillian Flynn introduced the narrator Amy Elliott Dunne in *Gone Girl* in 2012. In 2014, Emma Healey followed with Maud Horsham in *Elizabeth is Missing*, and in 2015 Paula Hawkins wrote through the point-of-view of the character Rachel in her novel *The Girl on the Train*.  
 To elaborate on how and to what effect these authors construct the unreliability of their narrators, it is first important to establish the genre of the novels. In all three novels, a girl/woman goes missing, and the plot centers on if and how these characters are found. Therefore, all three novels feature a “whodunit” aspect, which is commonly found in fiction that Carl Malmgren groups together as “murder fiction” (115). Such fiction is often found together in the shelves of bookstores and libraries and includes a variety of genres such as mystery fiction, detective fiction, spy novels, and crime novels (115). This thesis more broadly defines *The Girl on the Train*, *Gone Girl* and *Elizabeth is Missing* as thrillers, which links to the all the other above-listed genres in the way that they feature crime as a main theme; however, according to David Morell, co-founder and president of the International Thriller Writers organisation, a thriller focuses on “addressing fundamental concerns —survival, the nature of humanity, the heroic struggle between right and wrong” (Morrell). This means that these novels not only revolve around the solving of the crime, but they also focus on the *inner psychological processes* that the characters experience during the solving of the crime. Another feature of a thriller is that “its atmosphere being more anxious and frenetic than that of detective fiction” (Baldick), and further, “the plot of a thriller is based on the basic principle of suspense” (Simpson 187).  
 Hawkins’ *The Girl on the Train* handles the case of a missing woman named Megan Hipwell. Narrator Rachel gets caught up in this mystery by being in contact with multiple suspects related to the Hipwell case. The psychological side of the plot comes forward through Rachel’s predominantly drunken and depressive state and her corresponding thoughts that are available to the reader through the first person-narrative. To identify the element of suspense in the plot, I rely upon the standard account regarding suspense, as theorized by psychologists Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins. They argue that suspense is based upon three things: “fear, hope, and the ‘cognitive state of uncertainty’” (Smuts 281). These three components are all integrated into the narration of *The Girl on the Train*. Although the reader clearly is meant to sympathize with Rachel and hope she will eventually be all right, at the same time the reader experiences and cannot help but share Rachel’s fear: “and for some reason I feel afraid” (Hawkins 78), “I was *terrified*” (298). Additionally, uncertainty (both on the part of the narrator and reader) is employed strategically and effectively in the novel. Apart from the fact that the reader certainly does not know what the outcome of the story will be, Rachel as a narrator is not much help as she repeatedly forgets details of an event or even blacks out completely; “I can’t remember” (63), she tells us, or she describes “total black; hours lost, never to be retrieved” (97).   
 This uncertainty is also employed in Healey’s *Elizabeth is Missing* where, through two different timelines, the missing case of Sukey, sister of main character and narrator Maud, is investigated. Again, just as with Rachel, the reader comes to sympathize with the psychological state of the narrator through the first-person narration. Because of this narration, the reader is aware that in the timeline that features an *elderly Maud*, her thoughts are all over the place, and that she, like Rachel, experiences forgetfulness that leads to a greater sense of uncertainty for the reader and creates a feeling of suspense: “‘Do you remember?’ I’m blank” (Healey 18). Other forms of suspense mainly take place in the timeline that features a *young Maud*, when her sister Sukey has just gone missing. Although Maud’s narration is more coherent in this timeline, Sukey’s disappearance raises questions about the degree to which other characters can be trusted. Additionally, the frequent appearance of a mysterious character referred to by Maud as “the mad woman” frequently contributes to the reader’s sense of suspense as well.  
 Lastly, in Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, it is actually the narrator Amy who goes missing and frames her husband Nick for her ostensible murder. Through reading passages of Amy’s diary, the reader is tempted to suspect Nick as well, since the passages elaborate on multiple events where Nick acted hostile towards Amy. The question for the reader is whether Amy is dead and who might have killed her, which creates moments of uncertainty. The psychological side of the plot comes to the fore as reader’s become more acquainted with Amy’s scheming and manipulative ways of thinking and the multiple roles she plays for others and herself, “The way some women change fashion regularly, I change personalities” (Flynn, 250), “I was playing the girl who was in stule” (250).  
 The fact that all three novels are narrated by an unreliable narrator contributes significantly to their identification as psychological thrillers. Generally, “a narrator is regarded as unreliable if the narrator cannot be trusted” (Köppe & Kindt 82). Accordingly, the narrator seems to give an objectionable or quite subjective account of the fictional facts and events of the plot (Köppe & Kindt), and this an unreliable narrator lends him/herself perfectly for the genre of the psychological thriller. In "The Psychological Thriller: An Overview." Kristopher Mecholsky sums up some of the motifs that seems to make up the contemporary psychological thriller, such as: “severe psychological illness, trauma, or memory loss in a main character”, “revenge plots”, “psychotic parents/spouses/significant others/apparent-innocents who seemed good”, “obsessive investigations (often of unsolved cases)”, “crucial scenes that depict psychological torture” and “misleading narratives and unreliable narrators” (1).

All of these motifs appear in one or more of the novels that will be discussed in this thesis, but it’s worth focusing on what Mecholsky describes as “misleading narratives and unreliable narrators” (1). The unreliable narrators in the case of these novels are also homodiegetic and thus part of the fictional world. Since a psychological thriller emphasizes a character’s psyche and its instability, a first-person narrator with a distorted perspective is particularly well-suited for the genre. A third person omniscient narrator for example, would give the reader less inside into the mind of the narrator, which would divert the attention of the thriller away from explicit psychological processes. Moreover, the unreliable narrator by definition creates uncertainty for the reader, which is an effective mode of creating suspense.  
 Gunther Martens elaborates on what he calls “the classical understanding of unreliable narration,” which “is based on the assumption that unreliability is inferred out of an embodied speaker as a character with a very specific habitus, with traumas, experiences, social backgrounds and other ontological properties” (78). Thus, this classical understanding sees the unreliability of the narrator as something that is tied to their nature of being; it comes forward from intrinsic features ascribed to them by the author. An unreliable narrator is often thought to be unreliable because of these intrinsic features, and especially in psychological thrillers with a crime element, the unreliability tempts the reader to suspect the narrator of being involved in or having committed the crime.   
 However, in the interesting case of these three novels, the authors seem to underscore that there are multiple parties involved in the establishment of the narrator’s unreliability; thus, this thesis will argue that the narrator and their intrinsic characteristics alone cannot be blamed fully for the established unreliability. First of all, a homodiegetic narrator’s characteristics are given to them by the author and interpreted freely by the reader. Often in these narratives, the story is more important than the discourse, and therefore, the reader is invited to read between the exact words of the narrator when distrusting him or her and make their own construction of what must have happened (Martens 79). In making this argument, Martens focuses more on the reader’s part of the narrator’s perceived reliability, and he describes a model by Nünning which rests on the claim that ‘“the reader’s or critic’s world-model and standards of normalcy” constitute a prerequisite of reading rather than emerging as a result of reading’ (79). Standards of normalcy are things or phenomena people perceive as the standard in a society, something more commonly referred to as dominant discourses. A discourse is the way in which people refer to phenomena, or the way in which they construct knowledge about this phenomena or practice (Hall, xxii). Therefore, a dominant discourse is the way in which the major part of society talks and thinks about or refers to a matter or practice. It is that what society takes for granted or perceives as “normal.” Martens does not fully agree with the model mentioned above, as he believes the standards of normalcy are not a prerequisite but “an often abundantly anticipated and prefigured effect of the text’s narrative and rhetorical strategies” (79). This implies that the author anticipates the standards of normalcy the reader must have and adapts these expected norms to his narrative to create the desired (un)reliability for the narrator.  
 These three novels are not only similar in the sense that their narrator’s reliability is perceived incorrectly (by other characters, by themselves, and subsequently by the reader), but in each novel, there is a female narrator. Building on Martens’ statements that a reader’s norms are of great influence on the extent to which a narrator is perceived as reliable, this thesis will investigate the effects of the gender of the narrator on judgements about their reliability. Generally, our society looks different upon actions performed by a male, than actions performed by a female, even when they are the same. Just so, a woman’s storytelling is often held to different standard and assessed differently than the storytelling of a man. We could argue that this is connected to the general view society has of women, which is made up out of both historical facts and a socially constructed image. Such a fact for example, comes forward from Gillian Bennett research on women’s storytelling which found that women tend to pace their storytelling in a particular way so remarkable moments do not pass by too quickly. Moreover, women are likely to mark clearly climatic moments (168). Thus, according to Bennett, women are quite focused on the remarkability and the climatic elements of their story.   
 This fact however, has been socially adapted and enlarged in our societal view, mostly through media representations of women. In 1974, Dee Boersma investigated the role of women in a burgeoning media society and wrote: “most countries agree that the mass media not only provide the impetus for new trends but also influence the formation of new attitudes on the role of women in society” (3). In contemporary media, this is still the case and even normalised, and the way we see a woman portrayed in the media shapes our view of women in everyday society. Stereotypes are created and “whether right or wrong, stereotypes are part of shared cultural knowledge” (Bauer 24), thus influencing an individual’s perception either consciously or unconsciously. Stereotypical aspects of a female foreground her role as a mother, a wife and a caregiver in assessing her trustworthiness. Additional traits are “compassion, warmth, and emotional sensitivity” (Bauer 24). Other research on female stereotypes found that audiences are more likely to believe that a woman “may attempt to manipulate via martyrdom; weepy, clinging vine, rattles easily in emergency, may avoid by fainting” (Williams and Bennett 335). These stereotypes in combination with Bennett’s statements on woman’s storytelling creates the impression of women as particularly sensitive, guided easily by emotions, and particularly interested in dramatic moments or gestures. This could lead the reader to either consciously or unconsciously doubt the reliability of a female narrator, just based on the fact that she is female and how she displays traits that are socially, conventionally associated with females.  
 When regarding this from the perspective of creative writing it is interesting to explore to what extent the author can anticipate and play with a reader’s standards of normalcy, and thereby achieve a degree of reliability for his or her narrator. Is a narrator purposely unreliable or do the author and the reader together create the biggest part of the narrator’s unreliability through textual strategies and social establishments? Through close-reading of the novels *The Girl on the Train*, *Gone Girl* and *Elizabeth is Missing* and research on psychological thrillers, unreliability and stereotypes, this thesis will argue that the reliability of (female) narrators in these psychological thriller novels is often not established by inherent qualities of the narrator themselves, but through how they negotiate with and respond to social expectations imposed upon them by other characters and the reader.

# Chapter 1: The Construction of an Unreliable “Oversensitive” Female Narrator in Hawkin’s *The Girl on the Train*

*Women are still only valued for two things – their looks and their roles as mothers. I’m not beautiful and I can’t have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless* (Hawkins 122).

Although the introduction, and this thesis in general, focuses on Rachel’s narration, *The Girl on the Train* is in fact a thriller written from the perspective of three different female characters: Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell and Anna Watson. The title of each chapter indicates from which narrator it is told. There is no clear order or distribution of narration. My analysis focuses on Rachel, because she features most evidently and deliberately as an unreliable narrator and plays the central role in the novel’s plot. This chapter will introduce and analyse three aspects of Rachel that contribute to her perceived unreliability.  
 First, Rachel can be perceived as an unreliable narrator because of her position as both narrator and character, which is referred to in narratology as a “homodiegetic” narrator. Moreover, the reader is given direct insight into Rachel’s thoughts and feelings. This portends that Rachel’s narration is subjective and relative (and therefore cannot be trusted as objectively true), because she tells the story from her own experience. This is different to when a heterodiegetic third-person perspective narrates the story: he or she would be more likely to offer the reader an objective version of the story, because they do not personally have a connection to the narrative. From the first-person narration, readers are told that Rachel is rather disconnected from the truth. She seems to have a taste for lying, which she confesses to multiple times: “I have lied – repeatedly – to the police” (Hawkins 97), “she knew I was lying” (100), “this is not actually true” (105), “it didn’t exactly happen like I told the police” (143), “I lied” (145). Additionally, Rachel tells the reader about the couple Jess and Jason that she watches daily from her seat on the train. She describes them in a strikingly (but seemingly impossibly) intimate way, stating things as “Jason knows not to bother her [Jess] when she is working” (Hawkins 25), details Rachel could only know if she was befriended with the couple. However, a few pages later it becomes clear to the reader that Rachel does not know this couple at all but has merely been fantasising about them; “I don’t know their names either, so I had to name them myself” (26), consequently showing the reader that she experiences her fantasies as intense and lifelike. This fantasy might be considered innocent, but in another part of the book Rachel imagines herself killing Anna, her ex-husband’s new wife:  
 I close my eyes tightly. I imagine myself going into the house, walking along the little pathway between their garden and the neighbour’s garden, climbing over the fence. I think about sliding open the glass doors, stealthily creeping into the kitchen. Anna’s sitting at the table. I grab her from behind, I wind my hand into her long blonde hair, I jerk her head backwards, I pull her to the floor and I smash her head against the cool blue tiles (65).  
Rachel’s fantasies are elaborate, lifelike and cloud her mind frequently. That makes it challenging for the reader to determine when Rachel is speaking from objective observation (or at least as close to objective as possible from a subjective point-of-view) or whether her fantasies fundamentally have altered her perspective.   
 Secondly, Rachel’s drinking problem adds to her perceived unreliability. It is clear from the beginning that Rachel is an alcoholic: “I take another sip, and another; the can’s already half empty but it’s OK, I have three more in the plastic bag at my feet” (Hawkins 17). For a large part of society, taking in large amounts of alcohol in order to function is not considered appropriate or normal; therefore people generally do not trust or rely upon someone with an addiction. This is scientifically substantiated: Steven M. Melemis states that “Addiction requires lying,” (330) and part of recovering from addiction includes exercises whereby the addict must practice telling the truth and correct themselves when they do not. Additionally, this great intake of alcohol causes Rachel to suffer from anterograde amnesia that is portrayed in the form of blackouts: “I wait for the memory to come. Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it’s there in front of my eyes in seconds. Sometimes it does not come at all” (61). These blackouts make it impossible for Rachel to fully reconstruct what has happened during a specific time. Moreover, the readers comes to regard the blackouts as indicative of Rachel’s identity, as they do not just happen once but regularly: “Blackouts happen... Total black; hours lost, never to be retrieved (97). Marcello Giovanelli expands on the way Rachel’s blackouts seem to be part of her habits, and therefore she seems more unreliable than the other two narrators; “the direct and explicit nature of her blackouts distinguishes her from the unreliability displayed by Anna and Megan, her co-narrators, and by other characters” (40).   
 Lastly, Rachel is perceived as unreliable because of her lack of autonomy. Autonomy is important for a narrator’s reliability, since an autonomous self is seen as “an authentic or true self” (Meyers 619), meaning that they can act upon their own motives rather than constantly reacting so someone else’s. First, Rachel, despite being in her thirties, is still not fully autonomous. She lives by herself for the first time in her life and has ended up in the spare room in the flat of an old college friend where she feels a “loss of control” (Hawkins 24). She is also no longer employed and at one point even contemplates borrowing money from her mother. Additionally, throughout the story she seems to be completely dependent upon a man. As discussed in the introduction, the gender of the narrator can influence their reliability. As Cornelia Butler Flora writes, “continuity of the ideal of feminine inferiority and the accompanying stress of passivity is shown through Aeschylus and Moses to St. Thomas Aquinas and Hugh Hefner” (435). This is strongly connected to the traditional idea that women are dependent upon men, whether socially or individually (Baxter and Kane 194). Rachel’s emotional dependence on her ex-husband Tom is evident through the number of times she thinks of him, calls him or dwells on their past together:  
 I can almost feel it, the warmth of that morning sunshine on my face and arms as I sit at the breakfast table, Tom opposite me, my bare feet resting on top of his because they’re always so much warmer than mine, my eyes cast down at the newspaper. I can feel him smiling at me, the blush spreading from my chest to my neck, the way it always did when he looked at me a certain way (Hawkins 48-49).  
Moreover, a police officer asks Rachels why she has not changed her last name (she still carries Tom’s last name) and why she is still wearing their wedding ring on a necklace around her neck (116-117). Meyers elaborates on the three conditions that form the image of a traditional, dependent woman, namely “(1) strongly directive prior socialization; (2) deep emotional ties to other people; and (3) a home-centered, rather than a work-centered, orientation” (622). The second condition is most interesting for Rachel’s image. There is a traditional view of women whereby a woman does not only rely on her husband economically or socially, “but also her love for him keeps her subservient” (623). Rachel seems not to be able to go on with her life after her divorce with Tom, even though it occurred over two years ago. She still seems to rely on his love for happiness, “I want to touch him so badly. I want to smell his neck, bury my face in that broad muscular gap between his shoulder blades” (Hawkins 291). Rachel does not come across as her authentic and autonomous self to the reader, as she does not even believe this about her, but rather as an overemotional, dependent woman that acts erratically due to heartbreak. It is only when Rachel distances herself from Tom and she finds out Tom has been manipulating her for years and that he is behind the murder on Megan Hipwell, that she becomes sure of herself and that people start to believe what she tells them.  
 Rachel’s positions as first-person homodiegetic narrator, her alcoholism and subsequent blackouts, and her lack of autonomy in relation to the traditional view of a woman all interact between the text and reader. Greta Olson compares the process of a reader detecting unreliability like one would recognise a mental disorder: “signs of irregularity are noted, and they are understood within the personal and literary schemata of unreliability” (99). Schemas are “knowledge structures that represent substantial information about concepts, its attributes, and its relationships to other concepts” (Baumeister and Bushman 153). It is knowledge that people have learned in the past and now apply to other situations in order to make sense of them quicker.   
 From these schemas, the reader is inclined to disbelieve someone who is continuously lying, not to take an alcoholic seriously, and to doubt the actions of a dependent, heartbroken, “oversensitive” woman. The author might recognize the common schemas of their readers and intentionally employ them to make the narrator come across as unreliable. As Olson points out, in general, “the implied author does not point her finger at the unreliable narrator or wink at the reader” (95); rather the author uses certain recognizable motifs in characterization that allow the reader to deduce for themselves which accounts they are likely to trust, and which they are not.

# Chapter 2: The Establishment of the ‘Mad Woman’ in *Elizabeth is Missing*

*‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Is it something to do with the mad woman?’  
Helen turns to me. ‘What?’  
I point at the mirror, whispering, ‘Is she hiding in here?’  
Helen stares, but doesn’t answer. (Healey 183)*

Emma Healy’s *Elizabeth is Missing* employs two timelines, both narrated by the protagonist Maud, but it is in the “present day” timeline that Maud clearly is mean to be perceived as unreliable by the reader. This timeline is written in the present tense and features an elderly Maud, and Healy quickly lets us know that the mystery to be solved in the book is whether Maud’s friend Elizabeth is missing, as Maud claims. Further if Elizabeth is missing, we have to wonder where she has gone. The other storyline is told in the past tense and is set in Maud’s youth, where we learn about the events around the unsolved disappearance of Maud’s sister Sukey. Although this storyline is also told by Maud, here, in fact, she comes across as far more reliable. Each chapter in Healy’s novel can feature more than one timeline, and the switch between timelines is indicated by a blank line and the start of a new paragraph. This chapter will argue that Maud’s age, gender, and mental health issues, as well as Healey’s application of two storylines, all contribute to elderly Maud’s perceived unreliability.  
 In the present-tense storyline, Maud seems to be suffering from dementia, which greatly influences her perceived unreliability. It is nowhere specifically mentioned that Maud has been diagnosed with dementia, but the text provides many hints that make Maud’s dementia known to the reader. The first chapter in its entirety plays out in the current timeline and is devoted to the introduction of elderly Maud. Since the narration is from Maud’s point of view, in the first person, the reader quickly detects that something seems not to be completely right with Maud as she constantly forgets things. Maud observes, “I have no recollection of Saturday, but I have no recollection of not recalling it either” (Healey 14), or “I’m blank” (18). Moreover, in the first chapter Maud tells about her memory aids,   
 There are bits of paper all over the house, lying in piles or stuck up on different surfaces, scribbled shopping lists and recipes, telephone numbers and appointments, notes about things that have already happened. My paper memory. It’s supposed to stop me forgetting things. (13-14)   
In later chapters, Healey’s application of the two timelines works well to show a contrast between Maud’s storytelling now and Maud’s storytelling in the past. Because these timelines are told right alongside each other, it is easy for the reader to compare the events that occur in these timelines. The storyline about Maud’s youth is told more smoothly and coherently than the storyline that is set in the present. This narrative strategy has a clear function in relation to dementia. Researchers use the term “the reminiscence bump” to describe the finding that people remember events that happened between their tenth and thirtieth birthday the best and the longest (Brysbaert 258). Often, people with dementia struggle most with remembering the recent past, but they can still vividly reminisce about the events from their youth (Dempsey et al 183). Elderly Maud experiences this frequently: “‘Oh yes,’ I say. Banana sandwiches were a real treat when I was a girl and I even used to have them for dinner” (213). Often such memories lead to a switch of timeline and take elderly Maud back into the stories of the past.  
 Apart from Maud’s constant preoccupation with and worry about remembering something correctly, or even at all, she also struggles with connecting a word or term with the correct object. According to de Lira, it is difficult for people suffering from dementia to identify objects “in isolation from everyday discourse” (440), and that is exactly what happens to Maud when she has to identify an object at the doctor’s office: “I can’t think of what it is called” (Healey 156). Also, in the first chapter she thinks of words but is unable to picture the corresponding objects, “‘Eggs, milk, chocolate. Eggs, milk, chocolate.’ I say the words, but I can’t quite think what the things look like” (7). Just as with Rachel who suffers from anterograde amnesia due to alcoholism in *The Girl on the Train*, it is difficult for the reader to rely upon Maud because of her failing memory. Angermeyer has researched the population’s view of people with a mental disorder, and this research showed that “among the negative attributes attached to people with mental disorders the most prevalent one appears to be that they are unpredictable” (170). Additionally, the reader knows Maud doubts herself too, “Of course we have. Have we?” (32)   
 Further, as a character older Maud lacks full autonomy, and this also affects her reliability as narrator. As mentioned when narrator Rachel’s autonomy was discussed in the former chapter, autonomy is important for a narrator since it represents a person’s integrity. It is difficult to grant any narrator full autonomy, since he or she is always dependent on the author. However, when dealing with a homodiegetic narrator, the reliability of narrator is reliant on the reliability of the character as they portray the same person. Maud’s character lacks autonomy and this influences her reliability as narrator. Maud is elderly in the story, has dementia and her physical health is declining: “(…) I feel a sudden exhaustion. My limbs won’t hold me up. I’m like one of those toys that flop over when you press the bottom in; the wire in my joints has uncoiled” (176). The alternation between the two timelines emphasise elderly Maud’s decline. In the same chapter young Maud is fit and able to run when she is chased by Frank: “I rushed up the stairs, higgledy-piggledy, turning and turning until my thighs burned and I was back at the top landing, looking for the runs of sand in the steps’ creases. Frank had started on the first flight, then given up” (171). This comparison shows that Maud is no longer what she used to be. She now needs help doing the simplest things, which is provided by her caretaker Carla and her daughter Helen. Things that Maud does do on her own, such as a trip to either the store or Elizabeth’s house, do not end successfully. Michele J. Hawkins has done research on the way students view elderly people, also particularly on the way students view elderly women. The older women get, the less the respondents thought of women as independent. In fact, less than 25 percent of the respondents saw women from the age of 64 and up as independent (274-275). When someone is independent of others, they are less likely to be influenced by their surroundings and can therefore follow their own norms and values. This is linked to intrinsic motivation, which is when a person performs an activity because they want to for their own sake ((Baumeister and Bushman 82). When a person is clearly dependent on others or on other external factors, their value of judgement is often dependent on extrinsic motivation, which is when a person performs an activity “because of something that results from it” (Baumeister and Bushman 82). People who act autonomously and from intrinsic motivation benefit from vitality, a better self-esteem and general well-being (Baumeister and Bushman 123). Additionally, they are seen as more valuable and reliable in society because “they are less prone to fall victim to passivity, alienation, and mental illness” (124). Hence, when elderly Maud as a character is not taken seriously by the reader because of her lacking autonomy, this affects her reliability as narrator as well.  
 Additionally, almost all characters in the current timeline do not seem to trust Maud. From early in the novel, the other characters in the book do not take the elderly version of Maud seriously. Whenever she asks or does something that is not normal in the eyes of another, she is either laughed at or gets a weird look in return: “He coughs and I see a glint of amusement in his eyes” (14), “He grins at me for a couple of seconds. I have a sinking feeling” (77), “There’s a silence. I wonder whether to shout that I’m not an imbecile” (104). Maud clearly notices this (as we learn about it from her perspective), but is unable to do anything about it. She states, “I’m tired of the sympathetic smiles and the little pats people give you when you get things confused, and I’m bloody fed up with everyone deferring to Helen rather than listening to what I have to say” (19).   
 Through the employment of the two storylines, the reader can detect striking similarities between elderly Maud and the mad woman, a character from young Maud’s storyline. The subtle comparison between the madwoman and Maud as implemented by Healey affect Maud’s reliability. First, they are both not taken seriously by the people around them. Due to her dementia and age, as described above, few to no people are inclined believe Maud’s claims. The mad woman, who is said to have become mad after her daughter was hit by a bus, is not taken seriously because of her mental disease either. It is as if both cannot speak, and this becomes clear in a comparison young Maud makes to describe her sister Sukey, “and then she raised her hand up until it covered her mouth, reminding me for one awful moment of the position of the mad woman” (70). Maud could have referred here to the actual physical position that she has seen the mad woman in; however, it is also possible she could have referred to the position of the mad woman in society, where she is seen solely as mad and therefore is not heard by others. Additionally, when trying to be heard when no one is listening, both the mad woman and elderly Maud end up shouting. Douglas, a tenant that lived with Maud’s family when she was young, tells Maud not to look at the mad woman in a weird way, “‘Don’t look like that. She’s not an animal she can speak’” (134), to which Maud replied, “‘I know, only she usually shouts.’” In the current timeline when Maud herself is not heard by others, she employs the same technique as the mad woman to still be heard, “‘Elizabeth is missing!’ I shout […] I shout it again and again” (236). Donaldson, who outlines a feminist disability studies theory of embodiment and mental illness, states that a concept such as madness is a socially constructed image. She adds, “an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers - affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural” (111). The mad woman is a woman in our society, socially constructed, who has been silenced because she does not answer society’s standards of normalcy. By giving the mad woman and Maud striking similarities, Healey constructed a position for elderly Maud in which she would not be heard by others, and therefore perceived as unreliable.  
 Healy includes other scenes of the mad woman and Maud clearly resemble each other, such as when the mad woman digs in the garden,   
 The mad woman’s eyes were fixed on me, her fingers tapping out some demented Morse code, but it was the sight of her hair shining that made me shudder. It was she who had been digging in that man’s garden, I thought, it was her white hair he’d mistaken for this Mr Murphy’s, and I imagined her out there in the dark, fingernails full of dirt, pressing the flesh of the vegetable marrows against her teeth.” (234)  
This account has a lot of similarities with an earlier scene of Maud,   
 It’s dark out there, but there’s a glimmer of grey light somewhere low in the sky; it will be day soon and I must finish this. A mist of rain clings to my hair, to my arms and thighs. It makes me shiver but thankfully doesn’t disturb the soil. That stays in its perimeter pile. I have to lean right in to dig now. A long breath, pulled deep into my lungs, leaves me with the raw wet taste of the bruised earth. My knees shift, nestled in the sodden ground, and the fabric on my trousers slowly draws moisture up my legs. Soil is caked on my hands and driven into my fingernails to the point of pain. Somewhere, somewhere, the other half of the compact hides. In front of me is a hole, a hole that I’ve been digging in the middle of the green garden carpet. And suddenly I can’t think what I’m doing here, what it is I am looking for. For a moment I’m too frightened to move, not knowing what I might to next. It could be anything; I might tear the flowers from their beds or chop down the trees, fill my mouth with leaves or bury myself for Helen to dig up again. (62)   
In these scenes, both women dig in a garden at night, both have dirt under their fingernails from scooping earth roughly with their hands, and both do so because they know someone is buried deep into the ground. That might be their most important similarity: both Maud and the mad woman have the answer to the disappearance of Sukey, they just cannot communicate it because of the way there are viewed by society. For Healey, this is something she could have deliberately employed to structure the plot of her psychological thriller, as the two people who have the answer to the mystery are not heard by either the other characters in the book or the reader. In this way, Healey keeps the suspense high during the novel.   
 Maud’s perceived dementia, her lack of autonomy, the image the other characters in the novel have of her, and the comparisons between the mad woman and Maud as created by Emma Healey, make the reader more suspicious of Maud’s credibility. This chapter has tried to show how Maude is *socially constructed* as an unreliable mad woman. Additionally, the switch between the two timelines function to emphasise elderly Maud’s possible fallibility. Each of these flaws are based on socially constructed views society has, and therefore, in an interaction between reader and author, elderly Maud comes across as foolish and unbelievable, whilst she has had the answer to the big mystery after all.

# Chapter 3: The Establishment of Reliable “Diary Amy” and Unreliable Nick Dunne in *Gone Girl*

*“I can tell you more about how I did everything, but I’d like you to know me first. Not Diary Amy, who is a work of fiction (…), but me, Actual Amy.” (Flynn 248-249)*

*Gone Girl* is divided into two parts and features three different narrators. There’s Nick Dunne, who talks to the reader from a first-person point of view in the past tense and who is a homodiegetic narrator. There is also Amy, who narrates in two different ways. In the first part of the novel, which is titled “Boy Loses Girl,” she talks to the reader in the form of diary entries written in the present tense. In the second part, “Boy Meets Girl,” Amy talks directly to the reader from the first-person point of view, again in the present tense. In this thriller, both Nick’s and “Diary Amy’s” (as she herself calls this form of narration) reliability as narrators are constructed to be misleading or surprising to the reader. Flynn has managed to make Nick come across as unreliable where he is not, and Diary Amy as reliable when she is not. This chapter will discuss the construction of these perceived reliabilities and will argue that they come forward from Flynn’s use of the epistolary form, the switching between Nick and Diary Amy as narrators, and the implementation of feminist standards such as the importance of equality in a marriage and the display of what a “good wife” should be like in combination with empathy to target the mostly female audience.  
 It is important for the plot that Amy’s character comes across as reliable in the beginning, so that it comes as a shock to the reader when is revealed that Amy has plotted her own murder scene to punish Nick for his affair. When things seem to go south between Nick and Amy, many readers will find themselves believing and supporting Amy rather than Nick. This is achieved, among other things, through the diary form Amy writes in. Elliot (1997) refers to diaries as “the documents of life” (38). As the *Oxford English Dictionary* simply states, a diary is a record of events that affect the writer personally (OED). This is the case for Amy’s diary entries as well, as she writes the date above every entry and then tells in detail what happened that day.  
 There is another important aspect of the diary that contributes to Amy’s reliability: the privacy of her diary. Most diaries are not meant to be read by anyone else but the writer of the diary. Elliot (1997) identifies three types of diaries: the intimate journal, the memoir and the log (38). The difference between the intimate journal and the memoir lies within its assumed audience. A memoir is often written with an audience in mind, whereas the intimate journal is not meant to be read by anyone but the writer. Elliot adds to this that intimate journals are “constructed within the diarist’s own frame of reference and can assume a forgiving, understanding reader” for whom there is no need to “present best face” (38). In an intimate journal there is no point in lying about events or withholding important information, since the writer will only fool themselves. Additionally, it is also not needed to hold back on emotions. In everyday life, nearly everyone is influenced by public self-awareness. Public self-awareness is the knowledge that others can see and judge the “public aspects of the self” (Baumeister and Bushman 74). This can lead to a person hiding their emotions in public, especially negative ones, to not seem weak or unstable to others. In a diary, theoretically this is different; there are no others who can judge the self, and therefore the writer is free to write whatever he or she feels or thinks. The writer of the diary can be and feel like their true self without interference of the outside world.  
 Amy’s diary entries give every indication of being classified as part of an intimate diary, since they are full of expressions of private emotions, forbidden thoughts and insecurities: “I am embarrassed at how happy I am” (Flynn 11), Amy confides, or, “I am such an idiot. Sometimes I look at myself and I think: *No wonder Nick finds me ridiculous, frivolous, spoiled, compared to his mom*” (175). Early in the novel, Amy writes in her diary:  
 I go home and cry for a while. I am almost thirty-two. That’s not old, especially not in New York, but fact is, it’s been *years* since I even really liked someone. So how likely is it I’ll meet someone I love, much less someone I love enough to marry? I am tired of not knowing who I’ll be with, or if I’ll be with anyone. (32)  
This last quote paints a clear picture of the public self versus the private self. In public, Amy holds herself together, according to what she writes in her diary. When she comes home, where there is no audience, Amy lets down her guard and cries, writing down her insecurities in the one place she feels safe, hereby creating an authentic self that is trusted more easily than a self that is focused purely on upholding a certain reputation.  
 Lastly, the reason why Diary Amy comes across as reliable as a result of the diary form is because diary entries are often written quickly after an event occurs. Duyfhuizen argues that “diaries evoke an immediacy that neither autobiographies nor first-person memoir-novels can approach. There may still be the necessary gap between the time of the experience and the time of writing, but the diary text is never edited with the end in view” (171). This argument ties in with the personal and the private aspect of the diary, as they all rule out the interference of the public, as well as of the possible inclination to edit or revise personal history in retrospect, and therefore maintain the writer’s authenticity.  
 Another way in which Amy’s reliability increases, while Nick’s reliability decreases, lies within the switching between the types of narration. In “Boy Loses Girl” Nick’s narration from the first-person point of view and Amy’s diary entries alternate each other. Even though the narration does not take place at the same point in the plot’s timeline, multiple events are linked, specifically with the consequence of increasing the reader’s suspicion of Nick. For example, the last paragraph of Amy’s diary entry from September 10reads: He promised to take care of me, and yet I feel afraid. I feel like something is going wrong, very wrong, and that it will get even worse. I don’t feel like Nick’s wife. I don’t feel like a person at all: I am something to be loaded and unloaded, like a sofa or a cuckoo clock. I am something to be tossed into a junkyard, thrown into the river, if necessary. I don’t feel real anymore. I feel like I could disappear (115).  
The next chapter, narrated by Nick and playing out in the current timeline, starts with the case of Amy’s disappearance: “The police weren’t going to find Amy unless someone wanted her found” (116). This of course ties in with Amy saying she could feel like she could disappear because of Nick, immediately making the reader more suspicious of Nick. Additionally, a few lines further, several characters talk about Amy’s disappearance,   
 ‘I still say it’s the river,’ one volunteer was saying to his buddy, both of them picking through the pastries with dirty fingers. ‘Right behind the guy’s house, what easier way?’  
 ‘She would have turned up in an eddy by now, a lock or something.’  
 ‘Not if she’s been cut. Chop off the legs, the arms … the body can shoot all the way to the Gulf. Tunica, at least.’ (116)  
This connects to Amy’s mention of the river, described below, which occurs months prior to this conversation.   
 Nick’s unreliability peaks during the switch from Nick’s chapter to Amy’s diary entry of April 28. Nick’s chapter ends with: “In my pocket, my disposable cell phone made a mini-jackpot sound that meant I had a text: im outside open the door” (156). This leaves the reader with questions; why does Nick have a disposable phone, and who is contacting him? Without answers to these questions the reader then is led to Amy’s diary entry, where Amy mentions having looked at her husband’s search history. “Nick has all sorts of bizarre things on his computer, and sometimes I can’t resist a little snooping - it gives me a clue as to what my husband is thinking. His search history gave me the latest: noir films and the website of his old magazine and a study on the Mississippi River, whether it’s possible to free-float from here to the Gulf” (158). The reader, still suspicious of Nick’s actions from the former chapter, will start to rely more upon Amy than on Nick after coming to know about Nick’s search history, since this study on the Mississippi River and how far things can float are of current importance in the disappearance of Amy. The reader’s increasing suspicion of Nick works very well for the shock effect that Flynn is trying to create when the reader finds out it is Amy herself and not Nick who is behind her disappearance.   
 The alternation between the two point of views also shows another difference that might affect the reader’s perception of Nick and Amy’s reliability. *Gone* Girl, unlike a regular novel, is written in different tenses; Nick narrates from the past tense, whereas Amy narrates in the present tense in both of her narrations. When the narration alternates, the tense changes as well. This could implicitly influence the reader. For example, the present tense has an immediacy that the past tense does not have. The reader might be inclined to rely upon Amy’s narration in the present tense more than Nick’s past tense because it seems like Amy has not had time to review her words and is speaking directly from her heart. Nick’s narration does not have this immediacy but comes across more as if he is retelling the story from memory because he is telling it in the past tense. Since Nick is a suspect in the disappearance of Amy, this narration in the past tense would give him the time and possibility to alter his story, influencing the reliability as narrator.   
 The characterization of Diary Amy also contributes to her perceived reliability and Nick’s perceived unreliability. Flynn constructs Diary Amy in a way in which a (particularly female) reader might quickly sympathize and, more importantly, empathize and identify with her. This is of influence on how the novel is perceived by the audience because the audience largely consists out of females. This is because more women (59.1 percent) than men (36.9 percent) read in general (National Endowment for the Arts 23), but additionally more women than man read fiction (Fottrell). Also, Gone Girl deals with subjects such as love and marriage, and features diary entries, themes often associated with female interest. Thus, it is of importance that the female reader especially can sympathise with Amy since they make up the largest part of *Gone Girl*’s audience. The standard definition of sympathy as the reader may experience it is “the quality or state of being thus affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration” (OED). Keith Oatley, however, refers to sympathy as “the meeting of minds” which exists among two different theories in fiction. The first theory is “*meeting by observing*” (445), where the reader is a spectator and is an “unobserved observer” throughout the novel. From this spectator stance, the reader may experience some form of sympathy with the narrator, but it is solely a one-way affair in which the reader does not affect the protagonist. The second theory “*meeting by merging*” (445) holds the process of identification in addition to the sympathy feelings. With identification “the reader takes on the protagonist's goals and plans. The reader then also experiences emotions when these plans go well or badly.” In addition, identification is part of empathy, “in which we do not merely sympathize with a person, we become that person” (Oatley 446). Oatley observes that whereas meeting by observing usually takes place with a narrator that narrates from the third person point of view, meeting by merging occurs when there is a narration from the first-person point of view (445). Through by being in touch with the protagonist’s feelings and thoughts, as the first-person point of view lends itself to, closely identifying with the protagonist becomes easier.   
 Narrative empathy and perceived reliability influence each other. The one is not necessarily needed for the other to exist, but they can strengthen each other. For example, when the reader feels empathy for a narrator and strongly identifies with them, the reader is likely to give them the benefit of the doubt regarding their reliability. After all, they recognise some of themselves in the narrator, thereby having a stronger bond with them and being inclined to trust them quicker. It works the other way around as well; often the reader will feel more empathy towards a narrator they trust and think of as reliable, than a narrator who they think is lying to them. Keen (2015) supports this claim, stating that “when a narrator generalizes in a reliable fashion about a character’s thoughts and feelings, using psycho-narration, readers have little reason to doubt it. Similarly, in fiction employing either quoted (interior) monologue or narrated monologue (free indirect discourse), in which the words of the characters’ thoughts appear, narrative empathic accuracy will be high” (128).  
 In *Gone Girl*, even though both Nick and Diary Amy narrate from the first person point of view, the (female) reader is set up to identify initially more with Diary Amy than with Nick, and thereby, based on the argumentation above, to trust Amy’s narration more than they do Nick’s. Keen (2006) identifies two different features of narrative fiction that influence whether the reader feels empathy for the narrator, namely *narrative situation* and *character identification*. *Narrative situation* includes the point of view and perspective, which is almost similar in the case of Nick and Diary Amy. Therefore, this analysis will look more closely at *character identification*. The (female) reader will quickly recognise traits from Diary Amy in themselves. For example, throughout her diary entries she talks about how she is trying to be the right wife for her husband, but in the process, gives up way too much of herself. As Amy explains later in the novel, Diary Amy was “Cool Girl,”  
 Being the cool girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintain a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl.* Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they’re fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. (251)  
Throughout the diary entries, Amy tries to be this girl, trying not to upset Nick. She states, “I shake my head at him. I don’t want him to see me cry, that will make him more angry” (114), “You don’t ever want to be the wife who keeps her husband from playing poker – you don’t want to be the shrew with the hair curlers and the rolling pin. You swallow your pride and say okay” (178), and “So *I am keeping my head down* and *making the best of a bad situation*” (157). As Amy suggests, there are many women in society who are trying to be this Cool Girl in order to please the man they love, indicating that there might be many women who would sympathize with her situation.   
 Additionally, many of the things Amy does due to the way Nick treats her go against the feminist standards commonly held in modern-day society. Back in the day, it was a very normal thing for a woman to not blame her husband for anything and to do everything for him, where “the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity”’ (Barbara). Nowadays however, feminism has created a focus on the importance of equal rights on all levels for men and women, liberating women from “inferior social status and all forms of sexual discrimination” (*OED*).   
 However, when things do go wrong between Amy and Nick, she blames herself and her gender for the problems they are having: “I won’t blame Nick. I don’t blame Nick. I refuse – refuse! – to turn into some pert-mouthed, strident angry-girl” (Flynn 72), “I am being a girl” (73), “I was doing the awful chick talk-cry” (73), “It’s a very female thing isn’t it” (77). In Nick’s narration it becomes clear he is not a big fan of women at all, exacerbating the anti-feminist relationship he and Amy seem to have, “I thought: *women are fucking crazy*. No qualifier: Not *some* women, not *many* women. Women are crazy” (148). So when Diary Amy blames herself for being ‘girly’, doing a lot for her husband and getting nothing in return, she is bound to accrue pity from readers, because of her extreme efforts for her husband in a time where a female is encouraged to think of herself and her own development.   
 Additionally, Keen (2006) states that “characters’ involvement in a suspenseful situation provokes physiological responses of arousal in readers even when they disdain the quality of the narrative” (217). In the first part of the novel, Nick is never in real danger. He might be in danger of going to prison, but his life is not threatened, neither is he part of a suspenseful situation, which keeps the psychological response of arousal from the reader low. Flynn made sure that Diary Amy’s life was understood as being threatened, even if communicated through a diary entry: “my husband is the most loyal man on the planet until he’s not. I’ve seen his eyes literally turn a shade darker when he’s felt betrayed by a friend, even a dear long-time friend, and then the friend is never mentioned again. He looked at me then like I was an object to be jettisoned if necessary, it actually chilled me, that look” (112). Returning to the motif of the menacing river, Amy writes,  
 I get frightened now, sometimes, when my husband gets home. A few weeks ago, Nick asked me to go on the raft with him, float along in the current under a blue sky. I actually wrapped my hands around our newel post when he asked me this, I clung to it. Because I had an image of him wobbling the raft – teasing at first, laughing at my panic, and then his face going tight, determined, and me falling into the water, that muddy brown water, scratchy with stickers and sand, and him on top of me, holding me under with one strong arm, until I stopped struggling. (230)  
 Amy’s diary entries do not simply *suggest* that her life is threatened, however; they even state so outright: “Because sometimes, the way he looks at me? That sweet boy from the beach, man of my dreams, father of my child? I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me*. So if you find this and I’m dead, well … Sorry, that’s not funny (231). These three passages indicate how Flynn produces alarm for Amy’s safety, inevitably producing a more intense emotional/psychological connection between the reader and Amy, as Keen describes. This makes the reader empathise with Diary Amy more, and thereby her reliability increases.  
 Diary Amy’s perceived reliability is established through her diary entries, which come across as reliable because of the personal, private and immediate aspect of the diary. Amy’s use of the present tense brings forward the immediacy of her story as well, whereas Nick’s narration in the past tense creates a feeling of mediation and scepticism. Even though Diary Amy and Nick narrate from an almost identical *narrative situation*, the reader comes to trust more than Nick. This is, among other things, made possible because Flynn switches between their narrations all the time, which shows the difference in their characters and makes it easy to compare them with each other. The implementation of feminist standards that are not met for Amy make the reader sympathise and empathise with her, which increases Diary Amy’s reliability. At the same time, Nick is seen as the cause of the lack of feminism in his relationship with Amy and the reader is therefore not keen to identify with him, which decreases his reliability. Flynn made both of the narrators’ reliability come across different than they were, again using narrative construction and the reader’s standards of normalcy to influence the reader’s perception of what is real and what is not.

# Conclusion

This thesis has looked at how the reliability of female narrators is constructed in psychological thrillers and considers why this might be done in the way that it is. As part of this research, the thesis looked at recent, notable examples from the genre, *The Girl on the Train*, *Gone Girl* and *Elizabeth is Missing*. These three novels all feature narrators whose reliability are portrayed differently for most of the novel than they turn out to be. In relation to this unsettling formulation of reliability by all three authors, this thesis argues that the reliability of (female) narrators in such psychological thrillers is not established by inherent qualities of the narrator themselves, but through how they negotiate with and respond to social expectations imposed upon them by other characters and the reader. In some cases, the author also makes use of the implementation of feminism to achieve their preferred reliability for their narrator.

Additionally, this thesis finds that the author can influence the reader to either trust or distrust the narrator by using various narrative strategies. First, the author makes sure that their narrator either appeals or does not appeal to the standard schemas of the reader. According to Baumeister and Bushman these schemas constitute of someone’s main beliefs and understanding of the world around them. They are the general norms and values in which a person interprets what is happening around them. These schemas, norms and values are socially constructed and are the same for the larger part of society. If the author wants the reader to believe the narrator, they will present the narrator in a way in which they conform to these schemas. If the author wants to narrator to come across as unreliable, they will present the narrator in way that conflicts with the reader’s schemas. For example, mental health, age, and gender are all of the influence of whether the reader is inclined to trust a person in general. This thesis has found that mental disorders, addictions, and old age all have a negative effect on someone’s generally perceived reliability.   
 Further, gender can be seen to have an impact on whether a narrator is believed to be reliable. This thesis has argued that a narrator being female usually has a negative effect on her reliability, pointing to research that indicates readers are more inclined to think of a female narrator as qualitatively inferior, more emotional, and lacking autonomy, which all make her come across as “unstable,” and thus, unreliable. However, Flynn managed to make narrator Amy Dunne come across as reliable (when she was not) in *Gone Girl* and used Amy’s gender to achieve this reliability. She did this by distinctly showing the inequality between Amy and her husband Nick, which would cause a reaction of indignation and sympathy from (especially the female) reader. Consequently, as pointed out by Keen (2015) when the reader sympathises with a narrator or character, they are more inclined to trust them.  
 Another factor that influences the seeming reliability of a narrator is how and when they are represented in the plot. For example, the way other characters respond to the narrator constructs the image the reader has of the narrator. In both *Elizabeth is Missing* and *The Girl on The Train*, the other characters think strangely of the narrator, which is made evident through the remarks they make. This causes the reader to be more inclined to think strangely of the narrator as well. Additionally, the author places certain events in a particular order so it makes the narrator come across as either reliable or unreliable. This was the case with Nick’s reliability in *Gone Girl*, where Flynn ordered the events in such a way that all the clues pointed at Nick being untruthful.  
 Lastly, this thesis found that the point of view from which the narrator narrates is of importance, as well as in what form they narrate. The first-person point of view allows the reader to experience all the thoughts and feelings of the narrator. This means that whenever the narrator is insecure or doubts him- or herself, this becomes evident to the reader and influences their sympathetic or unsympathetic perception of the narrator’s reliability. Additionally, all narrators that were discussed in this thesis also where homodiegetic narrators, meaning that they were part of the plot. This could of course make the reader wonder whether they are telling the story truthfully, or if they are acting upon their own assumptions and prejudice. *Gone Girl* showed that form is also of importance and research has proven that the epistolary form evokes a feeling of trust because of its private, personal and immediate aspects.  
 Having established the various ways by which the author constructs the reader’s perception of the narrator’s reliability, now the question is why the author would do this deceptively or ambiguously in the genre of the psychological thriller. First, the psychological thriller lends itself for the altering of the narrator’s reliability more easily than other genres. This is because of the psychological aspects, which focus on inner psychological processes and development of characters., thereby displaying thoughts, feelings, and mental health frequently throughout the plot. In all three novels, there is a plot twist which shocks the reader and creates suspense, which are both valuable to the genre of the thriller. Each time, this plot twist came forward from a misperception of the narrator’s reliability. In *The Girl on The Train*, the reader thinks of narrator Rachel as unstable and untruthful, whilst she has been victim to the abuse of her ex-husband and murderer Tom. In *Elizabeth is Missing*, Elizabeth is not trusted either because of her dementia, age, and gender, whilst she has the answer to the missing of her sister Sukey all along. And lastly, in *Gone Girl*, the reader is feeling sympathy for Amy Dunne and blaming her husband Nick for her disappearance, whilst Amy was the creator of the scheme all along. In conclusion, the author’s manipulation of the perceived reliability of the narrator among their readers is what builds and constitutes the novel into the shape of psychological thrillers and ultimately gives it its mind-games, suspense and shock effects.

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# Appendix

## Summary Paula Hawkins’ *The Girl on The Train*

The story starts off with Rachel, who is an alcoholic and rides the train to her old work every day, to trick the people close to her into thinking she is still employed. From the train she has a perfect view of the backyards of the houses on Blenheim Road. She used to live in one of these houses with her ex-husband Tom who has left her for his new wife Anna. They have a baby together and it pains Rachel to even look at the house. A few doors down lives a couple that Rachel does like to watch, since they seem to have such a perfect life together. She calls them Jason and Jess and imagines a whole life around them. One-time Rachel sees Jess in the garden with another man from her seat on the train. Furious at Jess for cheating on Jason, she contemplates in a drunken state whether to see Jason and tell him about his cheating wife. She gets on the train and doubts whether to get off at the right train station or whether to just leave the situation be. The chapter ends on this note and the next chapter Rachel wakes up, bloody, bruised and hangover. She has angry voice messages from her husband Tom and reads in the newspaper that Jess, who is actually named Megan, has gone missing that night. She doesn’t know what happened because she suffers from a blackout. This leaves the reader with a lot of questions. What happened? Who kidnapped and later murdered Megan? And what is Rachel’s part in this gruesome situation? It turns out that Rachel was attacked by Tom that night after she had seen him and Megan together. Tom and Megan had an affair for some time and when Megan got pregnant with his baby, she refused to have an abortion. This threatened Tom’s build up life with his new wife Anna and their child, and in a moment of rage he killed Megan. It is Rachel who eventually figures out Tom is Megan’s killer.

## Summary Emma Healey’s *Elizabeth is Missing*

The novel *Elizabeth is Missing* tells the story of Maud, who is now a grandma and suffers from dementia. Maud strongly believes her friend Elizabeth is missing but the people around her continuously dismiss that idea. During her search for Elizabeth, Maud is often remembered of the past. When she was young, her sister Sukey had gone missing and was never found. She thinks of the events around Sukey’s disappearance and of the people that were involved, such as Sukey’s husband Frank, the lodger Douglas and the mad woman that roamed around town. Through these memories and Maud’s daughter Helen, who finally comes to realise that her mother is not only murmuring random things but has been sitting on top of the solution to Sukey’s disappearance, Sukey’s remains are found in Elizabeth’s garden. The reader finds out that Elizabeth herself has had a stroke and is at the hospital, which people have told Maud but she just did not remember.

Summary Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl  
Gone Girl* tells the story of Amy and Nick in two parts. The first part is named ‘Boy Loses Girl’ and in this part Nick and Amy’s narration alternate each other. Nick’s narration takes place in the present, whereas Amy’s narration is in the form of diary entries that were written in the past. Amy goes missing and Nick particularly is suspected of having murdered her. In the second part ‘Boy Meets Girl’ Amy no longer speaks from diary entries in the past but from the present in a regular first-person point of view. The reader now finds out Amy was not murdered at all but has ran off to frame her husband Nick for her disappearance and possible murder. She tells how she found out Nick had an affair and decided to frame him by working on a plan over a year, which included writing fake diary entries. Nick discovers that Amy tried to frame him but cannot get the authorities to believe him without drawing more suspicion to himself. Amy sees Nick on TV doing all kinds of interviews and eventually decides to get back with him. She does this by framing and murdering a former ex-boyfriend named Desi. She goes back home, and Nick accepts her in. Throughout the novel Nick has been overly concerned with his reputation and to save face he stays with Amy a while after she returns. At night however, he writes his side of the story and eventually wants to publish it. When he shows Amy however, she reveals she is pregnant with his child, by having saved his semen from when he masturbated. Not wanting to lose the child, Nick stays with Amy and is learning, in Amy’s words, “Learning to love me [her] unconditionally, under all conditions” (Flynn 462).

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