



Epistemic Ambiguity and Gaslighting: Cognitive Dissonance Theory in Paula Hawkins'

The Girl on the Train

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Abstract:

This study applies Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) to analyse the interplay between unreliable narration, epistemic ambiguity, and gaslighting in *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. CDT, developed by Leon Festinger (1957), explores the psychological discomfort arising from conflicting cognitions, leading individuals to rationalize or distort reality to maintain internal consistency. The novel's protagonist, Rachel Watson, experiences cognitive dissonance due to her fragmented memory, alcohol-induced blackouts, and psychological manipulation by Tom. Similarly, Megan Hipwell exhibits dissonance through her unresolved trauma, self-contradictory behaviours, and rationalization of illicit affairs. This paper argues that Hawkins constructs Rachel's narrative as a psychological thriller to immerse readers in her cognitive distortions, highlighting the broader implications of gaslighting and memory unreliability. The study underscores how psychological thrillers utilize epistemic ambiguity to create suspense and deepen character engagement.

Keywords: psychological manipulation, conflicting cognitions, trauma, gaslighting, epistemic ambiguity.

Introduction:

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) explains how individuals reconcile conflicting thoughts or behaviours to reduce psychological discomfort. In *The Girl on the Train*, Rachel and Megan exhibit cognitive dissonance through fragmented memories, rationalization of self-destructive choices, and psychological manipulation by others. Hawkins employs epistemic ambiguity—a narrative technique that blurs the distinction between reality and perception—to reflect

Rachel's disoriented mental state. Simultaneously, gaslighting, primarily enacted by Tom, exacerbates Rachel's cognitive distress, leading her to question her own recollections. This paper examines how cognitive dissonance manifests in Rachel's and Megan's behaviours, shaping the novel's themes of trauma, memory distortion, and unreliable narration.

Literature Review and Research Gap:

Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly in relation to its themes of psychological trauma, narrative unreliability, and gendered experiences of violence. Jaber (2021) explores the intersection of shame and alcoholism within the novel, emphasizing how these factors contribute to the protagonist's vulnerability and the broader theme of violence against women. Similarly, Browse (2018) examines the novel's portrayal of cognitive dysfunction, particularly in relation to memory lapses and the protagonist's fragmented perception of events, which contribute to the novel's suspense and unreliable narration. S. Maha & Dr. T. Jayakumar (2016) examines intersectional feminist perspectives to examine oppression, trauma, and female agency. Grebeniuk (2019) further elaborates on the role of narrative unreliability, arguing that it functions as a mechanism to enhance reader immersion and engagement. Muthuselvam (2021) extends this psychological exploration by analysing the defence mechanisms employed by the characters, particularly in response to emotional trauma. Dr. S. Maha (2025) explores themes of oppression, marginalization, and the interplay between race, gender, and class themes that can be connected to *The Girl on the Train* through an intersectional feminist lens and the psychological impact of socioeconomic constraints on women.

In the context of literature, particularly psychological thrillers, CDT offers a valuable lens for examining the intricate psychological struggles of characters, as they attempt to reconcile their perceptions of reality with their actions or the manipulation of others. In the case of Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train*, CDT has not been widely explored as a central framework for understanding the protagonists' psychological journeys. Existing studies have primarily focused on themes of trauma, memory distortion, and unreliable narration, but there is limited research that directly addresses the cognitive dissonance experienced by Rachel and Megan. Most studies in the psychological thriller genre focus on the broad narrative techniques of ambiguity, suspense, and manipulation without linking these elements specifically to cognitive dissonance.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, literary analysis approach to explore how Cognitive Dissonance Theory is embodied in the behaviours and psychological states of the protagonists, Rachel and Megan, in *The Girl on the Train*. The research follows a close reading method, which involves analysing the text through the lens of cognitive dissonance and identifying key moments where the characters' experience psychological conflict. These moments are contextualized using the core principles of CDT, focusing on dissonance reduction strategies, memory distortion, gaslighting, and epistemic ambiguity.

Results and Discussion:

Cognitive Dissonance in Rachel and Megan:

The analysis of *The Girl on the Train* through the framework of Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) reveals a multifaceted interplay between internal psychological conflict and external manipulation, shaping the lived experiences of the protagonists, Rachel and Megan. The findings indicate that memory distortion, self-deception, and gaslighting are central to the novel's thematic construction, contributing significantly to the suspense and psychological tension as the protagonists navigate their cognitive dissonance in pursuit of truth.

The results highlight that Rachel Watson experiences pronounced cognitive dissonance, primarily triggered by discrepancies between her perceived and actual reality. Her daily commute from Ashbury to Euston fosters an escapist

tendency, as she derives solace from observing an ostensibly stable suburban life. However, the sight of a pile of clothes near the train tracks serves as a dissonance-inducing stimulus, eliciting discomfort and unease. This unease is further compounded by Tom's recurrent accusations of her overactive imagination, which construct a psychological dichotomy between Rachel's internal reality and external invalidation. To mitigate this distress, Rachel engages in maladaptive coping mechanisms, particularly alcohol consumption, which reinforces a self-perpetuating cycle of dissonance reduction through escapism. Her weekend binge drinking emerges as an avoidant strategy to suppress emotional distress stemming from her divorce and infertility, further entrenching her cognitive dissonance.

The findings also indicate that Rachel's cognitive dissonance is exacerbated by her idealization of a seemingly perfect couple, whom she names Jess and Jason, residing along her commute route. The internal construction of this idealized relationship serves as a psychological contrast to her own failed marriage. However, the revelation that Jess (Megan) is engaged in an extramarital affair disrupts this cognitive framework, inducing psychological distress. The dissonance between her constructed reality and observed reality compels Rachel to engage in obsessive investigative behaviours, reinforcing the novel's central conflict. As the following quotes notes, "She nicknames them Jason and Jess, and she imagines they have the happy life that she herself has lost. Until the day she sees Jess, sans Jason, kissing another man." (*The New York Times*). This critical shift in perception underscores the cognitive instability that drives Rachel's quest for resolution.

The study further identifies gaslighting as a principal mechanism through which Rachel's perception of reality is systematically undermined. Tom's psychological manipulation forces Rachel to question her memory, fostering an epistemic ambiguity that complicates her ability to discern reality from illusion. As it is reported in the quote: "Rachel is prone to blackouts, irrationality and drunk dialling." (*The Guardian*). Tom repeatedly attributes aggressive and violent behaviour to Rachel during her blackouts, despite her lack of recollection, thereby intensifying her cognitive dissonance. This manipulation engenders a self-perpetuating cycle wherein Rachel internalizes the imposed narrative, leading her to assume culpability for events beyond her control. The manifestation of physical evidence such as cuts, bruises, and dirt-stained clothing, further entrenches her self-doubt, aligning with CDT's assertion that individuals seek to resolve dissonance by adjusting their beliefs to align with external reinforcement.

As Rachel progresses in reconstructing her fragmented memory, she encounters increasing epistemic ambiguity. The findings indicate that her eventual cognitive shift occurs when she recalls that Tom, not Kamal Abdic, is responsible for Megan's disappearance. This realization dismantles the gaslighting narrative imposed upon her, enabling her to reclaim agency and resolve her cognitive dissonance through confrontation with reality. It is noted as, "She regularly remains him as killer," (Amuthapriya 88), emphasizing Rachel's ultimate cognitive reconciliation.

The study also examines Megan Hipwell's psychological distress, situating it within the framework of post-decision dissonance. Megan exhibits cognitive conflict between domestic stability and the desire for autonomy. Her relationship with Scott offers material security but simultaneously imposes control, creating a psychological tension between emotional fulfilment and personal freedom. The findings indicate that her unresolved trauma—stemming from the death of her brother Ben and the drowning of her infant daughter—exacerbates this dissonance. In response, Megan engages in extramarital affairs with Tom, Kamal Abdic, and Mac as a means of seeking external validation and emotional support. These behaviours align with CDT's postulation that individuals employ justification strategies to reduce cognitive discomfort, allowing Megan to rationalize her actions as necessary for psychological survival.

Furthermore, the results highlight that Megan's employment as a babysitter for Tom and Anna constitutes an avoidance-based dissonance-reduction strategy. While she initially perceives this role as an opportunity to suppress past trauma, she later resigns due to Tom's abusive behaviour. However, her reluctance to directly confront her emotional distress further exacerbates her psychological conflict. The study also identifies Megan's therapy sessions with Dr. Kamal

Abdic as a complex site of cognitive dissonance. While seeking therapy signifies an attempt at psychological reconciliation, her simultaneous engagement in an affair with Kamal represents a contradictory behavioural pattern, reinforcing the dissonance between her perceived intentions and actual actions.

The results illustrate a dichotomy in the resolution of cognitive dissonance between the protagonists. Rachel's persistent cognitive conflict ultimately leads to a transformative realization, allowing her to reconstruct the truth and dismantle the psychological manipulation exerted upon her. In contrast, Megan's inability to reconcile her dissonance precipitates her demise. Her confrontation with Tom regarding her pregnancy destabilizes his carefully constructed falsehoods, triggering a violent response. This is stated as "Megan going into Tom's car, and the head wound that she has no recollection of, she remembers that Tom hit her." (*The Invisible Mentor*). This outcome underscores the destructive potential of unresolved cognitive dissonance, highlighting its implications for character trajectories.

The Girl on the Train masterfully employs Cognitive Dissonance Theory to explore the psychological turmoil of its protagonists. Rachel's fragmented memory, gaslighting-induced self-doubt, and eventual cognitive reconciliation serve as the narrative's driving force. Megan's justification of affairs, avoidance of trauma, and unresolved psychological distress culminate in her tragic downfall. Hawkins' use of epistemic ambiguity immerses readers in the protagonists' cognitive conflicts, highlighting the fragile nature of memory and perception. By applying CDT to *The Girl on the Train*, this study underscores how psychological thrillers utilize cognitive dissonance to enhance suspense, deepen character engagement, and expose the vulnerabilities of human cognition.

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