

Narrative Intimacy and Reader Sympathy: Understanding Morally Ambiguous Killer Narrators in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Caroline Kepen's *You*

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Abstract- The traditional divide between heroes and villains has been altered by modern psychological thrillers, which provide readers ethically dubious protagonists whose deeds frequently transgress moral norms. Among the most notable instances of this trend are Caroline Kepnes's *You* (2014) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). The main characters in both books commit murder, stalking, deceit, and manipulation while still arousing the reader's pity and emotional connection. This essay looks at how Flynn and Kepnes use narrative devices to make readers feel sorry for Amy Dunne and Joe Goldberg in spite of their violent deeds. This study explores the connection between moral judgment and narrative intimacy by utilizing Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Suzanne Keen's notion of narrative empathy, and Wayne C. Booth's idea of unreliable narration. The study makes the case through comparative textual analysis that readers are encouraged to comprehend and sympathize with these morally dubious characters through first-person and second-person narration, psychological depth, and strategic characterization. The study comes to the conclusion that reader compassion shows how narrative perspective can influence emotional reactions rather than necessarily indicating support for violence. The study adds to current debates over morality, empathy, and audience participation in psychological fiction by analyzing these books collectively.

Keywords: Reader Sympathy, Narrative Empathy, Unreliable Narration, Psychological Thriller, Morally Ambiguous Characters, *Gone Girl*, *You*, Reader-Response Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

By giving readers heroes whose deeds are morally dubious but emotionally captivating, contemporary fiction is progressively challenging traditional conceptions of morality. Many contemporary psychological thrillers encourage readers to empathize with characters that participate in violence, manipulation, and criminal behavior by

blurring the lines between heroes and villains, in contrast to classic narratives that clearly distinguish between the two. This change is indicative of a larger societal obsession with moral ambiguity and psychological complexity.

Among the most notable examples of this trend are Amy Dunne in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Joe Goldberg in Caroline Kepnes's *You* (2014). Amy orchestrates an elaborate scheme to frame her husband for murder, while Joe stalks, manipulates, and ultimately kills in pursuit of romantic obsession. Despite their actions, readers often find themselves emotionally invested in these characters and, at times, sympathetic to their experiences. Such responses create an important literary question: why do readers develop sympathy for fictional killers?

The writers' use of narrative devices, in addition to the characters themselves, holds the key to the solution. Readers are given close access to the ideas, feelings, and personal histories of Flynn and Kepnes' heroes. Both authors urge readers to comprehend their characters before passing judgment on them through skillfully crafted narrative viewpoints. As a result, moral criticism becomes more difficult to understand.

The phenomenon of sympathizing with morally questionable characters has attracted considerable attention within literary studies. Scholars have examined how narrative structure, reader psychology, and emotional engagement influence responses to fictional characters. Wayne C. Booth's theory of unreliable narration suggests that readers often remain emotionally connected to narrators even when they recognize their distortions and deceptions. Suzanne Keen argues that fiction generates empathy by providing readers with access to characters' inner experiences, while Wolfgang Iser

emphasizes the active role readers play in constructing meaning from texts.

This paper argues that *Gone Girl* and *You* generate reader sympathy through narrative intimacy, unreliable narration, and psychological characterization. By granting readers direct access to Amy Dunne's and Joe Goldberg's inner worlds, Flynn and Kepnes complicate moral judgment and demonstrate how narrative perspective influences emotional engagement. Through a comparative analysis of both novels, this study explores the mechanisms through which readers become attached to morally ambiguous protagonists and examines what these responses reveal about contemporary fiction.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reader Sympathy and Unreliable Narration

The study of reader sympathy in literature has long been associated with questions of narrative voice and perspective. One of the most influential contributions to this field is Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), which presented the idea of an untrustworthy narrator. According to Booth, certain narrators provide readers incomplete or skewed accounts of reality, necessitating an interpretation of events that goes beyond the narrator's point of view. Because readers must actively balance between the narrator's account and the narrative's implicit truth, unreliability frequently boosts emotional involvement rather than decreasing it.

Booth's theory is especially pertinent to Joe Goldberg and Amy Dunne. Both characters portray realities that are strongly impacted by their own prejudices, emotional demands, and intentional manipulation. While Joe constantly justifies his violent acts as acts of love and protection, Amy makes up diary entries to frame her husband. Readers often maintain an emotional attachment to both characters even after realizing these inaccuracies.

Building upon Booth's work, Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) examines the relationship between narrative form and emotional response. Keen argues that literature generates empathy by allowing readers to imaginatively enter the experiences of fictional characters. Through detailed access to thoughts, emotions, and

motivations, readers develop emotional connections that often transcend moral judgment.

Readers' continued sympathy for Amy and Joe after their misdeeds are revealed can be explained by Keen's theory of narrative empathy. Because readers have already become emotionally immersed in the characters' situations, the emotional links created by narrative intimacy are challenging to sever. Consequently, censure and understanding frequently coexist.

This conversation is further expanded by Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, which highlights readers' active participation in meaning-making. Iser argues that readers must use their own experiences and perceptions to fill in the gaps and ambiguities found in literary texts. Therefore, rather than residing only in the text itself, meaning develops through interaction between the text and the reader.

In the context of *Gone Girl* and *You*, readers actively participate in constructing sympathy for Amy and Joe. They interpret motivations, evaluate justifications, and reconcile conflicting emotions. Reader sympathy becomes not simply a product of the text but also a result of the reader's engagement with narrative complexity.

Theoretical and Critical Perspectives on Gone Girl

Since its publication in 2012, *Gone Girl* has attracted a lot of scholarly interest. Feminism, gender politics, and cultural criticism are major topics of this research. According to Patrick Osborne, Amy Dunne is an example of female retaliation against patriarchal norms. Osborne claims that Amy's behavior is a result of her dissatisfaction with society's expectations that women exhibit idealized forms of femininity.

Because it clarifies why readers might respect Amy in spite of her moral failings, Osborne's interpretation is especially important. A complex kind of reader attraction is created by her intelligence, independence, and defiance of conventional gender norms. Even if they disagree with Amy's approach, readers are frequently drawn to her criticism of societal norms.

Emily Johansen offers another influential interpretation by examining *Gone Girl* within a neoliberal framework. She argues that the novel reflects anxieties surrounding identity, marriage, and

consumer culture. Amy and Nick's relationship becomes symbolic of broader social pressures that encourage individuals to perform idealized versions of themselves.

Similarly, Kenneth Lota situates Amy within the literary tradition of the femme fatale. According to Lota, Amy's attractiveness and dangerousness are inseparable aspects of her character. This interpretation helps explain why readers find her simultaneously fascinating and frightening.

While these studies provide valuable insights into gender, culture, and power, relatively little attention has been devoted to the specific narrative mechanisms through which Flynn generates reader sympathy. Existing scholarship often focuses on what Amy represents rather than how readers become emotionally attached to her.

Theoretical and Critical Perspectives on You

Compared to *Gone Girl*, scholarly research on Caroline Kepnes's *You* remains relatively limited. However, several important studies have begun exploring the novel's narrative and psychological dimensions.

Paula Sadkowska's analysis of Joe Goldberg's narrative unreliability provides one of the most significant contributions to current scholarship. She argues that the novel's second-person narration creates a unique relationship between narrator and reader. By addressing Beck as "you," Joe simultaneously implicates readers in his perspective and encourages emotional involvement.

This narrative strategy creates a sense of intimacy that distinguishes *You* from many other psychological thrillers. Readers are not merely observing Joe's obsession; they are experiencing it through his language and thought processes. Sadkowska suggests that this intimacy contributes significantly to reader sympathy.

Other studies focus on Joe's psychological complexity. Freudian interpretations emphasize his traumatic childhood experiences, abandonment issues, and obsessive attachment patterns. These analyses suggest that Joe's behaviour emerges from psychological damage rather than simple evil.

Although scholarship on *You* continues to develop, there remains a need for more comprehensive

studies that connect narrative form, reader sympathy, and psychological characterization. The novel's cultural impact, particularly following its Netflix adaptation, makes such analysis increasingly important.

Research Gap

Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into *Gone Girl*, *You*, and reader sympathy, several important gaps remain. Research on *Gone Girl* tends to prioritize feminist and cultural interpretations, while studies of *You* often focus on psychological analysis or narrative structure in isolation.

Few scholars have examined both novels together through a comparative framework focused specifically on reader sympathy. Furthermore, there is limited research integrating narratological theories with reader-response approaches to explain how emotional engagement develops despite moral awareness.

This paper addresses these gaps by bringing together theories of unreliable narration, narrative empathy, and reader response to examine how Flynn and Kepnes create sympathy for morally ambiguous protagonists. Through comparative analysis, the study highlights the shared narrative strategies that make Amy Dunne and Joe Goldberg compelling despite their violent actions.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative approach to textual analysis. The primary texts for this study are Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Caroline Kepnes's *You* (2014). Through close reading, the study examines narrative voice, characterization, psychological depth, and reader engagement.

The research is informed by three major theoretical frameworks: Wayne C. Booth's theory of unreliable narration, Suzanne Keen's concept of narrative empathy, and Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory. These frameworks help explain how readers form emotional attachments to morally ambiguous characters despite being aware of their unethical actions.

Rather than focusing on the morality of Amy Dunne and Joe Goldberg, this paper investigates the literary

techniques that shape reader responses to them. By comparing both novels, the study identifies common narrative strategies that encourage sympathy and emotional investment.

III. NARRATIVE INTIMACY AND READER SYMPATHY IN *GONE GIRL*

One of the most remarkable achievements of *Gone Girl* is its ability to make readers sympathize with Amy Dunne despite her manipulation and criminal actions. Flynn accomplishes this through narrative intimacy and strategic control of information.

At the beginning of the novel, Amy appears to be a victim. Through diary entries, readers learn about her courtship with Nick, her dreams for their future, and her growing dissatisfaction with their marriage. These entries create an image of a vulnerable woman trapped in a deteriorating relationship. Readers naturally identify with her frustration, disappointment, and emotional pain.

The shocking revelation that Amy's diary is fabricated transforms the novel. Readers discover that they have been manipulated not only by Amy but also by Flynn's narrative structure. Yet this revelation does not completely destroy sympathy for Amy. Instead, it creates a more complicated emotional response.

This continued sympathy can be explained by Booth's concept of unreliable narration. Amy is undoubtedly deceptive, but readers have already spent hundreds of pages inside her perspective. They understand her motivations, fears, and frustrations. Even after discovering her lies, readers remain emotionally connected to her.

Amy's famous "Cool Girl" monologue further strengthens this connection. In this speech, she criticizes the unrealistic expectations placed upon women in contemporary society. She argues that women are expected to be attractive, accommodating, sexually adventurous, and emotionally undemanding while maintaining impossible standards of perfection.

The significance of this monologue lies in its recognizability. Many readers identify with Amy's critique regardless of their opinion of her actions. Flynn deliberately presents an argument that feels

truthful and relatable. As a result, Amy becomes more than a villain; she becomes a commentator on social realities.

Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy helps explain this phenomenon. Readers empathize not because Amy deserves moral approval but because they recognize elements of human experience within her story. Her feelings of disappointment, resentment, and frustration are emotionally understandable even when her actions are not.

Flynn also complicates moral judgment by refusing to present Nick as an innocent victim. Nick's infidelity, dishonesty, and emotional neglect contribute to the breakdown of the marriage. Consequently, readers cannot easily divide the novel into categories of good and evil. Instead, they are forced to navigate a morally ambiguous world in which every character possesses flaws.

The novel's ending further reinforces this ambiguity. Amy successfully avoids punishment and secures control over her relationship with Nick. Traditional crime fiction often restores moral order by punishing wrongdoing. Flynn rejects this convention, leaving readers unsettled and questioning their own responses to Amy.

Through narrative intimacy, psychological complexity, and moral ambiguity, Flynn transforms Amy Dunne into one of contemporary fiction's most compelling anti-heroines.

Narrative Intimacy and Reader Sympathy in *You*

While Flynn relies on alternating first-person perspectives, Caroline Kepnes employs a different but equally powerful strategy. *You* is narrated entirely through Joe Goldberg's perspective using second-person narration.

From the opening pages, Joe addresses Beck as "you." This narrative choice creates an unusual reading experience. Readers are not merely observing Joe's thoughts; they are positioned inside his consciousness and forced to experience the world through his perspective.

The second-person narration produces a sense of intimacy that is difficult to resist. Joe appears conversational, intelligent, humorous, and emotionally vulnerable. His observations about

literature, social media, and contemporary relationships often seem insightful and entertaining.

This charm plays a crucial role in generating sympathy. Readers frequently find themselves agreeing with Joe's criticisms of superficial behaviour and social hypocrisy. Such agreement creates emotional alignment long before the full extent of Joe's obsession becomes clear.

However, Joe's narration is deeply unreliable. He consistently reinterprets stalking, surveillance, and violence as acts of care and devotion. He convinces himself that invading Beck's privacy is necessary for understanding her and that removing obstacles from her life is an expression of love.

Booth's theory of unreliable narration is especially useful here. Joe's perspective is distorted by his emotional needs, yet readers remain invested in his story. The gap between Joe's interpretation of events and objective reality becomes a central source of tension.

Keen's theory of narrative empathy also illuminates readers' responses to Joe. Throughout the novel, readers gain access to his loneliness, insecurities, and desire for connection. These emotions are universal human experiences. By emphasizing these feelings, Kepnes encourages readers to see Joe as more than a predator.

Joe's childhood trauma further complicates reader judgment. His experiences of abandonment and neglect provide a psychological explanation for his obsessive behaviour. Importantly, the novel does not excuse his actions. Instead, it encourages readers to understand the origins of his dysfunction.

This distinction between explanation and justification is crucial. Readers may sympathize with Joe's suffering while simultaneously condemning his actions. The coexistence of these responses demonstrates the complexity of narrative empathy.

Kepnes also denies readers access to Beck's inner thoughts. Everything readers know about Beck comes through Joe's perspective. This narrative limitation mirrors Joe's own inability to see Beck as a fully independent individual. As a result, readers experience a form of complicity that strengthens their emotional engagement with Joe.

By combining second-person narration, psychological depth, and emotional vulnerability,

Kepnes creates a narrator who remains compelling despite his increasingly disturbing actions.

IV.COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Although Amy Dunne and Joe Goldberg differ significantly in personality, gender, and motivation, the narrative strategies used to generate sympathy for them share important similarities.

First, both characters function as unreliable narrators. Amy deliberately deceives readers through fabricated diary entries, while Joe deceives both readers and himself through distorted interpretations of reality. In both cases, readers must actively navigate the gap between narrative presentation and objective truth.

Second, both novels prioritize psychological intimacy. Flynn and Kepnes grant readers direct access to their protagonists' thoughts and emotions. This intimacy encourages understanding before moral judgment can fully develop.

Third, both characters possess traumatic histories that complicate ethical evaluation. Amy's childhood was shaped by unrealistic expectations imposed by her parents, while Joe experienced abandonment and neglect. These experiences do not excuse their behaviour, but they provide emotional context that influences reader responses.

A significant difference lies in the nature of their violence. Amy's actions are calculated, strategic, and carefully planned. She exercises control over every aspect of her scheme. Joe, by contrast, is impulsive and emotionally driven. His violence emerges from obsession, jealousy, and fear of abandonment.

Gender also plays an important role. Amy challenges traditional representations of female characters by refusing to conform to expectations of victimhood and passivity. Joe represents a distorted version of romantic masculinity in which devotion becomes possession and love becomes control.

Despite these differences, both characters reveal how narrative perspective shapes reader sympathy. Readers do not sympathize because Amy and Joe are morally admirable. They sympathize because the novels provide intimate access to their humanity.

This finding supports Iser's argument that readers actively participate in constructing meaning. Sympathy emerges through interaction between narrative technique and reader interpretation.

Readers bring their own experiences, emotions, and assumptions to the text, contributing to the complexity of their responses.

V.CONCLUSION

The popularity of *Gone Girl* and *You* demonstrates the growing appeal of morally ambiguous protagonists in contemporary fiction. Through sophisticated narrative techniques, Gillian Flynn and Caroline Kepnes encourage readers to engage emotionally with characters who commit acts of manipulation, stalking, and murder.

This study has shown that narrative intimacy, unreliable narration, and psychological characterization play central roles in generating reader sympathy. Amy Dunne and Joe Goldberg remain compelling because readers gain direct access to their thoughts, emotions, and personal histories. This access complicates moral judgment and encourages understanding even when condemnation seems appropriate.

The analysis also reveals that sympathy does not necessarily imply approval. Readers may recognize the humanity of Amy and Joe while rejecting their actions. Such responses highlight the unique power of literature to explore moral complexity and challenge simplistic distinctions between heroes and villains.

Ultimately, *Gone Girl* and *You* demonstrate that contemporary fiction is less concerned with determining whether characters are good or bad than with understanding why they become who they are. By inviting readers into the minds of morally ambiguous figures, these novels expand the possibilities of empathy and reveal the profound influence of narrative perspective on human judgment.

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