

Unveiling the Layers of Identity: Psychological Transformation and Self-Realization in Paula Hawkin's *The Girl on the Train*

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Abstract

This paper examines how past experience shapes psychological transformation and the development of identity in Paula hawkin's *The Girl on the Train*. The novel presents characters whose present lives remain influenced by experiences they struggle to understand, remember, and confront. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, this study explores how unresolved experiences affect memory, perception, behaviour, and self-understanding. Through a close textual analysis of Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell, Anna Watson, and Tom Watson, the paper examines the different ways in which the characters respond to psychologically disruptive experiences and negotiate their changing identities. Rather than presenting transformation as a uniform movement toward recovery, Hawkins depicts varied responses that include recognition, self-awareness, denial, manipulation, and resistance. The study argues that identity in the novel is not fixed but continually shaped by the interaction between past experience and present consciousness. By examining these divergent psychological trajectories through the framework of trauma, the paper demonstrates how Hawkins moves beyond the conventions of crime fiction to explore the complex processes through which individuals confront, reinterpret, and negotiate experiences that continue to influence their understanding of themselves and others.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity Reconstruction, Psychological Transformation, Self-Realization, Memory, Perception, Unresolved Experience.

Introduction:

Contemporary crime fiction has increasingly moved beyond the conventional investigation of crime to explore the psychological conditions that shape perception, memory, identity, and human behaviour. The psychological thriller, in particular, often locates its central conflict not only in the discovery of external events but also in the uncertainty surrounding how those events are remembered and understood. Within such narratives, the distinction between truth and perception becomes unstable, while the past continues to exert an influence on the present. This movement has created a form of crime fiction in which the investigation of an external mystery becomes closely connected with the investigation of the human mind.

Paula Hawkin's *The Girl on the Train* (2015) is a significant example of this development. The novel constructs its mystery through shifting

perspectives, fragmented recollections, concealed experiences, and competing versions of reality. Rachel Watson, the central figure, observes the lives of strangers from the train while struggling with the collapse of her marriage, alcohol dependence, and gaps in her memory. Her inability to establish a stable account of her own past affects not only her understanding of particular events but also her perception of herself. As the narrative progresses, the apparently separate lives of Rachel, Megan Hipwell, Anna Watson, and Tom Watson become interconnected through experiences of deception, loss, guilt, desire, and psychological conflict. The novel consequently makes the reconstruction of personal truth inseparable from the reconstruction of identity.

One of the most significant features of Hawkin's narrative is its treatment of the past as an experience that continues to influence the

present. The characters do not simply remember earlier events and move beyond them. Instead, past experiences repeatedly emerge through memory, perception, emotional responses, interpersonal relationships, and attempts to construct coherent versions of reality. Rachel's fragmented recollections are particularly important in this respect. Her uncertainty about what happened during periods that she cannot fully remember creates a crisis of self-trust. She is compelled to depend upon the accounts of others, while the manipulation of those accounts further complicates her understanding of herself. The narrative therefore presents memory not merely as a device for withholding information from the reader but as a force that shapes the character's psychological identity.

This relationship between experience, memory, and psychological transformation can be productively examined through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth challenges straightforward understandings of traumatic experience by emphasizing the complicated relationship between knowing and not knowing. Her work considers trauma as an experience whose meaning may not be completely accessible at the moment of its occurrence and whose effects may emerge belatedly through repetition, memory, and narration. The Johns Hopkins University Press describes Caruth's study as a foundational contribution to trauma studies and emphasizes its concern with the relationship between immediate understanding and the later emergence of historical meaning.

Caruth's framework is particularly valuable for reading *The Girl on the Train* because Hawkins repeatedly constructs situations in which characters encounter experiences that they cannot initially comprehend in their entirety. The significance of an event may become apparent only after its consequences have already altered the character's relationships and perceptions. This delayed encounter with experience allows the novel to represent psychological transformation as a gradual and often painful process rather than as an immediate response to a clearly understood event. The relationship between experience and

identity consequently becomes central to the narrative: when an individual understands of the past changes, the individual's understanding of the self may also change.

The novel's use of unreliable narration has already attracted critical attention. Tetiana Grebeniuk, for example, examines unreliable narration in *The Girl on the Train* as a strategy of reader immersion, particularly focusing on how the instability of narration affects the reader's perception and the search for truth within the narrative. Other scholarship has approached the novel through psychological trauma, marital conflict, and feminine psychology. Saima Bashir and Bismia Fatima, for instance, examine Rachel's psychological trauma and marital difficulties through Karen Horney's framework. Such studies establish the importance of psychological instability, trauma, memory, and perception in Hawkins's novel.

The present study approaches these concerns from a different angle. Rather than concentrating primarily on unreliable narration, gender relations, or trauma as an isolated psychological condition, it examines how unresolved experience participates in the continuing formation and transformation of identity. The focus is therefore not simply on what has happened to the characters but on what their experiences subsequently do to their understanding of themselves. This distinction is important because psychological transformation in the novel does not follow a single trajectory. The characters respond differently to experiences that challenge their existing perceptions, and these responses reveal different possibilities of recognition, reconstruction, denial, and resistance.

Rachel provides the most visible example of this process. Her fragmented memory initially prevents her from trusting her own perceptions and contributes to an unstable sense of identity. The gradual recovery and reinterpretation of the past enables her to reconsider the narratives through which she has understood herself. Her movement toward recognition therefore involves more than solving the mystery surrounding Megan's disappearance; it involves recovering a sense of agency that has been undermined by her dependence on other people's versions of reality.

Megan's narrative, by contrast, reveals the psychological consequences of experiences that continue to influence her choices and her attempts to construct a different life. Anna's development is connected to her changing understanding of her marriage and the reality concealed within it, while Tom represents a contrasting trajectory in which identity is actively constructed through deception and manipulation. These differences prevent the novel from offering a simple model in which psychological suffering automatically produces recovery.

The concept of identity is therefore central to this study. Identity in *The Girl on the Train* is not presented as a stable or completed condition. It is continually negotiated through memory, relationships, perception, and the interpretation of past experience. The character's identities are influenced not only by what they have experienced but also by their capacity or inability to acknowledge those experiences. In this sense, self-realization becomes a complex process rather than a final achievement. Recognition may enable reconstruction, but denial and resistance may equally preserve distorted versions of the self.

The present paper argues that Hawkins represents psychological transformation as a process through which individuals confront experiences that have remained insufficiently understood and consequently reshape their perceptions of themselves and others. Drawing on Caruth's conceptualization of trauma, the study investigates how the persistence of past experience affects identity, memory, perception, and interpersonal relationships. It focuses on Rachel Watson, Megan Hipwell, Anna Watson, and Tom Watson not as isolated character studies but as different manifestations of the novel's broader concern with the relationship between past experience and present consciousness. Their contrasting psychological trajectories demonstrate that the encounter with the past can produce recognition and self-reconstruction, but it can also generate denial, manipulation, and resistance.

By approaching *The Girl on the Train* through this relationship between unresolved experience and identity, the study seeks to contribute to the existing discussion of Hawkin's psychological

fiction. The argument does not reduce the novel to a narrative of trauma or recovery. It considers how psychologically disruptive experiences continue to participate in the construction of identity and how different responses to the past create different possibilities for self-realization. Hawkin's crime narrative consequently becomes a study of psychological consciousness in which discovering external truth is closely connected to confronting internal experience. The novel ultimately suggests that understanding who one has become requires an encounter with the experiences that have shaped that identity, even when those experiences have previously remained fragmented, suppressed, distorted, or incompletely understood.

Review of Literature

Critical responses to Paula Hawkin's *The Girl on the Train* have developed along several interconnected lines, particularly narrative unreliability, memory and perception, psychological trauma, gender, marital relationships, and the representation of disturbed consciousness. Together, these studies establish the novel as a text in which psychological instability is central to both characterization and narrative construction. The existing criticism provides an opportunity to reconsider how these individual concerns intersect in the formation and transformation of identity.

One important strand of scholarship examines Hawkin's manipulation of narrative perspective. Tetiana Grebeniuk's study of *The Girl on the Train* approaches unreliable narration as a strategy of reader immersion, drawing attention to the instability of Rachel's perspective and the gradual reconstruction of truth. Her analysis is particularly useful in demonstrating that Rachel's unreliability does not merely obscure information; it actively shapes the reader's involvement in the narrative's investigation. This narratological perspective establishes an important relationship between fragmented knowledge and the construction of the novel's mystery. When unreliability is primarily examined as a narrative strategy, its significance for the protagonist's changing sense of identity can remain secondary. The present study extends this concern by asking what Rachel's unstable

perception does not only to the reader's knowledge but also to Rachel's knowledge of herself.

Memory provides another significant area of critical discussion. Studies of Hawkin's novel frequently connect fragmented recollection with the problem of establishing truth. The instability of Rachel's memory creates uncertainty about past events and makes her dependent upon competing accounts of what occurred. Such interpretations are valuable because they demonstrate that memory in the novel functions as an active component of the narrative rather than a passive record of the past. Yet memory can also be approached as an experience that influences identity: remembering, failing to remember, and gradually recovering an experience can alter the individual's relationship with the self. This dimension becomes especially important when memory is considered through trauma theory, where the relationship between experience and later understanding is not necessarily linear.

Psychological interpretations of the novel have likewise expanded the critical discussion. Bashir and Fatima examine Rachel's psychological trauma and marital dilemmas through Karen Horney's feminine psychology, emphasizing the relationship between psychological conflict, interpersonal difficulties, self-discovery, and resilience. Their study is significant because it moves beyond the novel's mystery structure and considers Rachel as a psychologically complex subject. Their focus on feminine psychology, however, places particular emphasis on Rachel's experience as a woman within difficult marital and social circumstances. The present study takes a different route by treating identity transformation as a broader psychological process and by considering contrasting responses among the principal characters rather than concentrating on one gendered psychological framework.

Trauma focused criticism has also been applied to Megan's character. Jubitha and Marimuthu examine Megan's traumatic experiences and their psychological consequences, particularly within her marital relationship. Their approach contributes to an understanding of Megan's behaviour as emerging from earlier psychological

wounds rather than from isolated personal choices. It demonstrates the importance of tracing the relationship between past experience and present behaviour. However, an emphasis on trauma as the explanation for behaviour can leave open a broader question concerning identity: when an earlier experience continues to affect present consciousness, how does it alter the individual's understanding of who they are? This question becomes central to the present study.

Another psychological approach examines the defensive mechanisms represented by Hawkin's characters. Research on *The Girl on the Train* has applied psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, denial, and reaction formation to Tom's behaviour, suggesting that his actions can be interpreted through psychological mechanisms that protect or distort the individual's sense of self. This line of inquiry is useful because it shifts attention away from Rachel and recognizes that psychological complexity extends across the novel. It also provides a productive counterpoint to readings centred on recovery Tom's character raises the possibility that psychological disturbance can result not in self-awareness but in greater concealment and manipulation. The present study develops this contrast further by examining resistance to self-recognition alongside processes of psychological transformation.

Gender oriented scholarship constitutes another important part of the critical field surrounding Hawkin's novel. Studies examining Rachel, Megan, and Anna have explored women's experiences, relationships, vulnerability, and struggles within social and domestic structures. These interpretations are crucial for illuminating how the character's psychological experiences are impacted by gender and interpersonal power. However, a gender-centered interpretation does not always take into consideration the various psychological paths taken by characters that react to their pasts by acknowledging, rejecting, reconstructing, or manipulating them. As a result, the current study does not make female experience its main analytical category. Rather, it views gender as one contextual factor in a more comprehensive analysis of identity and psychological change.

The significance of these approaches becomes clearer when considered alongside trauma studies. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* offers a theoretical vocabulary for understanding experiences that resist immediate comprehension and return in altered or belated forms. Caruth's work is especially relevant because it challenges the assumption that traumatic experience can be understood simply as an event that occurs in the past and produces a predictable psychological effect in the present. Trauma involves a complex relationship between experience, belated understanding, memory, and narration. This perspective provides an important bridge between the novel's fragmented narrative structure and its representation of psychological identity.

Caruth's intervention also creates a useful distinction between the occurrence of an experience and its later recognition. This distinction is particularly productive in *The Girl on the Train*, where characters do not possess complete knowledge of their own experiences at the moment in which those experiences occur. Rachel's fragmented memory is the most obvious example, but the principle extends beyond her. Megan's relationship to her past, Anna's changing awareness of her marriage, and Tom's manipulation of competing versions of reality all demonstrate different relationships between experience and knowledge. These differences suggest that the psychological significance of the past depends not only upon what happened but also upon how and whether the individual subsequently confronts it.

The existing scholarship therefore establishes a substantial critical foundation for studying *The Girl on the Train*, but it also reveals a particular space for further investigation. Unreliable narration explains how knowledge is controlled; trauma oriented studies illuminate psychological suffering; gender focused criticism reveals the social and relational contexts of the female characters and psychoanalytic approaches identify mechanisms such as repression and denial. What remains less fully developed is the way these concerns converge in the continuing construction and reconstruction of identity across contrasting

characters. The present study addresses this intersection by examining how unresolved experience influences self-perception and how confrontation with the past creates different possibilities for psychological transformation and self-realization.

The contribution of this perspective is not to suggest that trauma, memory, or identity have previously been overlooked in Hawkins study. In fact, it entails integrating various problems into a unified analytical approach. The study investigates how unresolved psychological experiences influence perception, relationships, and identity, as well as why some characters seek recognition while others rejects it. This perspective permits *The Girl in the Train* to be read not just as a story about hidden crime or untrustworthy memory, but also as a study of the unstable relationship between experience and self. The following section establishes Caruth's trauma theory as the primary theoretical framework for examining this relationship.

Theoretical Framework:

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* provides the primary theoretical framework for this study. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1996, the work has become an influential contribution to literary approaches to trauma. Caruth's central concern is not trauma as a simple psychological consequence of an identifiable event, but the difficulty of fully knowing an experience at the moment it occurs and the ways in which that experience may emerge later through memory, repetition, narration, and unexpected recognition. Her approach is therefore particularly relevant to literary characters whose understanding of their own histories develops gradually rather than through immediate comprehension.

A central proposition in Caruth's theory is the paradoxical relationship between experience and knowledge. Trauma unsettles the assumption that an individual completely possesses the meaning of an experience simply because the event has occurred. In the opening chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth describes trauma through the image of a wound that continues to speak, emphasizing its delayed relation to knowledge and

truth (Caruth 4). The significance of this formulation lies in its movement away from trauma as a completed event. The wound is important not only because it has been produced but because it continues to demand recognition. Experience consequently acquires meaning through a later encounter with what was not fully understood earlier.

Caruth's theory also emphasizes the relationship between trauma and narrative. If traumatic experience cannot be completely possessed at the moment of its occurrence, narration becomes a complex attempt to approach what remains partially unknown. The act of telling does not necessarily produce complete mastery over the past. Instead, narrative may expose the gaps, repetitions, contradictions, and silences through which an unresolved experience becomes perceptible. This aspect of Caruth's theory is particularly relevant to Hawkins's use of multiple voices and shifting temporal perspectives. The novel does not offer a single, stable account of reality from the beginning. Truth emerges through the gradual confrontation of competing memories, perceptions, and narratives.

Caruth's relationship between trauma and narration therefore allows the present study to move beyond a purely narratological reading of Hawkins. Unreliable narration may explain why the reader cannot immediately determine what happened, but trauma theory asks a different question: why is the character herself unable to possess a complete understanding of what happened? This distinction is crucial. Rachel's unreliable perspective is not simply a technical mechanism employed by Hawkins to create suspense. It is connected to her psychological condition and to her fractured relationship with her own past. The instability of narrative knowledge thus becomes inseparable from the instability of identity.

Another significant aspect of Caruth's theory is the idea of return. Traumatic experience may return in forms that are not consciously chosen or fully controlled. The past consequently remains active within the present rather than functioning as a closed historical period. This idea helps illuminate the repeated presence of earlier experiences

throughout *The Girl on the Train*. The character's present decisions cannot be separated from events that precede them. Their relationships, perceptions, fears, and attempts at self-definition are repeatedly influenced by experiences that have not been psychologically settled.

The concept of return is particularly useful when examining identity. If the past continues to interrupt the present, then identity cannot be understood as something formed once and subsequently preserved unchanged. Instead, the individual's sense of self may be revised whenever previously obscured experience becomes newly intelligible. In Hawkins's novel, this process can be observed most clearly in Rachel's movement from dependence upon other people's accounts of her past toward a more critical understanding of what she has experienced. Her psychological change is therefore connected to a change in knowledge the more she confronts what has previously remained unclear, the more capable she becomes of reconsidering the identity imposed upon her.

At the same time, Caruth's framework prevents the study from assuming that recognition automatically results in recovery. The persistence of traumatic experience does not guarantee that an individual will respond through constructive transformation. This distinction is important for reading the other central characters. Megan's relationship with her past demonstrates the continuing influence of experiences that complicate her attempts to construct a new life. Anna's changing awareness of her domestic reality illustrates how recognition can destabilize an identity previously grounded in assumptions about security and intimacy. Tom represents a contrasting possibility in which concealment and manipulation become methods of preserving a constructed identity.

The theoretical usefulness of Caruth's approach therefore lies in its ability to accommodate different relationships to the past. The theory does not require every character to experience trauma in precisely the same manner or to reach the same psychological outcome. It draws attention to the unstable relationship between experience, knowledge, and later recognition. This flexibility allows the present study to examine

transformation without turning the novel into a simple narrative of trauma followed by healing.

Caruth's theory also provides an ethical dimension to the act of listening to traumatic experience. The difficulty of fully articulating an overwhelming experience means that what is absent, fragmented, or delayed within a narrative can be as significant as what is explicitly stated. This perspective encourages a reading attentive to gaps and contradictions rather than treating them merely as obstacles to solving the mystery. In Hawkins's novel, fragmented recollection and conflicting accounts are therefore meaningful because they reveal the psychological difficulty of constructing a coherent relationship with the past.

For the purposes of this study, five interrelated concepts derived from Caruth's work will guide the textual analysis: unclaimed experience, belatedness, repetition or return, the relationship between knowing and not knowing, and trauma's relation to narrative. These concepts will not be applied mechanically to each character; they will serve as interpretive tools for examining how past experiences continue to influence present consciousness and how changing knowledge of those experiences affects identity.

The framework consequently establishes the central premise of the analysis: psychological transformation occurs not simply because characters have suffered, but because their relationship to what they have experienced changes. The crucial movement is from an experience that remains incompletely understood toward some form of confrontation, recognition, reinterpretation, or resistance. Such movement can alter the individual's perception of the self and of others. In *The Girl on the Train*, this process is complicated by deception, fragmented memory, competing narratives, and the deliberate concealment of truth. Caruth's theory enables a reading of Hawkins in which identity is understood as a process rather than a fixed psychological category. The character's identities are repeatedly challenged by experiences that return to the present and demand reinterpretation.

Psychological Transformation and the Layers of Identity

In *The Girl on the Train*, identity is introduced as something already damaged by the character's inability to reconcile their present circumstances with their earlier experiences. Rachel Watson provides the clearest example. Her failed marriage, unemployment, alcohol dependence, and separation from the domestic life she once imagined for herself have gradually altered the way she perceives her own worth. Her identity is not simply fractured because her marriage has ended; it is fractured because she continues to measure her present against an idealized version of the life she has lost. Rachel's attachment to Tom and Anna's household demonstrates this instability. From the train, she repeatedly observes the couple she imagines to be "perfect." The apparent perfection she assigns to them reflects more than curiosity about strangers. She projects onto their lives the stability she believes she has been denied. Her observation therefore becomes a psychological exercise in comparison: the imagined happiness of others reinforces her dissatisfaction with herself.

This projection becomes significant when Rachel's perception is disrupted by the discovery that the lives she has idealized are not what they appear to be. The contrast between appearance and reality forces her to reconsider both the people she watches and the assumptions through which she has understood her own failure. Her identity has been partly constructed through a false narrative of personal inadequacy, a narrative reinforced by Tom's influence over her memory and behaviour.

The problem becomes particularly acute when Rachel recognizes that she cannot fully trust her own recollections. She admits, "I can't remember" (Hawkins). The simplicity of the statement conceals its psychological importance. Forgetting is not merely a gap in information; it becomes a threat to self-knowledge. If Rachel cannot establish what she did or did not do, she cannot confidently determine what kind of person she is. Her uncertainty consequently transforms memory into an identity problem. Caruth's concept of trauma is useful here because the past does not function as a completed period that Rachel can

simply recall and evaluate. Experiences whose meaning remains inaccessible continue to affect her present consciousness. Rachel's fragmented identity therefore emerges from the distance between what she has experienced and what she is capable of knowing about that experience. Her eventual movement toward self-understanding begins when that distance starts to close. Rachel's transformation is consequently not the creation of an entirely new personality. It is a process of separating her own understanding of herself from the identity that has been constructed through other people's judgments. The recovery of truth becomes, simultaneously, a recovery of agency.

The past in Hawkins's novel is never entirely passive. Earlier experiences repeatedly enter the present through memories, emotional reactions, relationships, and patterns of behaviour. Megan Hipwell's narrative demonstrates this persistence particularly strongly. Her present life is shaped by an earlier experience that she has never fully integrated into her understanding of herself. Her attempts to construct a new identity are therefore accompanied by the psychological pressure of what she has left unresolved. Megan's desire for reinvention can initially appear as an attempt to escape her past. The novel gradually reveals the limitations of such escape. Changing one's surroundings does not necessarily eliminate the psychological effects of previous experience. Her relationships become entangled with earlier guilt and emotional conflict, suggesting that the past continues to influence present choices even when the individual attempts to move beyond it.

This is where Caruth's notion of belatedness becomes particularly productive. An experience may become psychologically meaningful not at the instant it occurs but through its later consequences. Megan's story illustrates how the significance of an earlier experience can remain active within subsequent relationships and decisions. The past consequently operates less as a remembered history than as an unresolved presence. The same principle appears differently in Anna's experience. Anna initially understands herself through her role as Tom's wife and as a mother. Her domestic identity appears secure because she believes she understands the

circumstances surrounding her marriage. As concealed truths begin to emerge, that certainty becomes unstable. The psychological transformation she undergoes is therefore connected to the collapse of an identity based upon incomplete knowledge.

The movement toward psychological transformation becomes visible when Rachel begins to confront rather than suppress her emotional suffering. After recognizing the destructive pattern in which she has become trapped, she states, "I've just got to let myself feel the pain, because if I don't, if I keep numbing it, it'll never really go away" (Hawkins). The significance of this realization lies in the movement from avoidance toward conscious confrontation. Alcohol had previously allowed Rachel to distance herself from painful memories and emotions; now she recognizes that continued avoidance prevents psychological change. Her willingness to experience pain becomes an act of agency. The transformation is immediately connected with practical decisions as she begins imagining a life away from Tom, including finding employment and returning to her maiden name. Psychological change therefore becomes more than an internal realization. It begins to reorganize the choices through which Rachel constructs her future. She does not erase her previous identity; instead, she begins to separate her understanding of herself from the identity that has been imposed upon her.

This movement can also be understood through Jung's distinction between conscious identity and the aspects of the personality that remain difficult to acknowledge. Rachel's alcohol dependence, anger, vulnerability, guilt, and emotional dependence have contributed to the negative image she has developed of herself. The transformation requires her to confront these characteristics without allowing them to become the total definition of her personality. Her development is therefore not a movement toward an idealized or flawless self. It is a movement toward a more complex form of self-recognition in which weakness can be acknowledged without surrendering agency. Rachel's decision that she must become "strong" (Hawkins) further indicates

this change in orientation. Her strength does not emerge from forgetting the past but from confronting the psychological consequences of that past.

Megan Hipwell introduces a different dimension to psychological transformation. Unlike Rachel, whose development gradually moves toward recognition, Megan attempts to construct a new identity while carrying experiences that remain psychologically active. Her desire for reinvention initially suggests that an individual can escape an earlier self by changing circumstances. Hawkins complicates this possibility by showing how previous experiences continue to influence present relationships, choices, and emotional responses. Megan's narrative therefore demonstrates that external transformation does not necessarily produce internal resolution. The past may be physically distant while remaining psychologically immediate. Caruth's concept of belatedness becomes particularly useful here because the significance of an experience may emerge through its later consequences rather than at the moment of occurrence. Megan's identity consequently remains layered: the person she attempts to become continues to be shaped by the person she has been.

Megan's experience also prevents the novel from presenting psychological growth as a simple movement from suffering to recovery. Her attempts at reinvention reveal the tension between the desire to escape an earlier identity and the persistence of experiences that cannot simply be abandoned. Hawkins therefore presents identity as cumulative rather than replaceable. An earlier self does not disappear when another self is constructed; instead, previous experiences remain embedded within later choices. Megan's trajectory consequently broadens the novel's psychological inquiry beyond Rachel's individual struggle and demonstrates that transformation may remain incomplete when the past has not been fully confronted.

Anna Watson provides another form of psychological transformation through the collapse of domestic certainty. Initially, Anna understands herself through her roles as Tom's wife and as a mother. Her sense of security depends upon her

belief that she understands her husband and the circumstances of her marriage. As the concealed reality of Tom's behaviour becomes increasingly clear, however, this identity begins to destabilize. Anna's transformation is therefore connected to the painful process of recognition. She must reconsider what she believed about her marriage and, consequently, about herself. Her realization that "I would never be safe, because I know" (Hawkins) marks the collapse of the security she previously associated with domestic life. Knowledge here is psychologically disruptive: once Anna knows the truth, she can no longer inhabit the same identity with the same certainty.

Anna's experience demonstrates that identity depends not only upon what individuals experience but also upon how they interpret those experiences. Her earlier confidence rests upon an incomplete understanding of her marriage; once that understanding changes, the meaning of earlier events changes with it. The psychological transformation therefore occurs through reinterpretation. Anna is forced to recognize that the domestic identity she believed to be secure was partly sustained by deception. Hawkins thus presents revelation as a force capable of reconstructing identity. Recognition does not automatically produce emotional stability, but it makes continued dependence upon the previous illusion impossible.

Tom provides the strongest contrast to the possibility of psychological transformation. While Rachel gradually begins to question the identity imposed upon her, Tom uses information and deception to control the perceptions of others. His manipulation depends upon Rachel's uncertainty and Anna's trust. His character demonstrates that knowledge alone does not guarantee self-recognition. A person may understand the truth of a situation and still refuse to confront its ethical consequences. Tom therefore represents a form of psychological resistance in which identity is protected through manipulation rather than reconstructed through self-examination.

The contrast between Tom's narrative and Rachel's emerging perception becomes particularly significant when Rachel observes that she "couldn't reconcile the violence that he talked

about with the fear that I remembered" (Hawkins). The opposition between "violence" and "fear" exposes two competing interpretations of the same experience. Tom's version positions Rachel as the source of danger, whereas her own emotional memory suggests that she experienced herself as vulnerable. The significance of this conflict extends beyond the question of factual accuracy. Rachel is attempting to determine whether the person Tom has described is actually the person she knows herself to be. The recovery of truth therefore becomes an act of resistance against an imposed identity. Hawkins uses this conflict to demonstrate how psychological manipulation can distort self-perception by making an individual distrust her own experience.

The different trajectories of Rachel, Megan, Anna, and Tom ultimately prevent *The Girl on the Train* from presenting psychological transformation as a simple movement from damage to recovery. Rachel moves gradually toward recognition and agency Megan demonstrates the persistence of earlier experience within attempts at reinvention; Anna experiences the destabilization of identity through revelation; and Tom represents the destructive consequences of refusing genuine self-recognition. Their differences are central to Hawkins's psychological representation because the past does not affect every individual in the same manner. Transformation depends upon the individual's relationship with memory, responsibility, perception, and truth.

The novel consequently presents identity as an ongoing process of reconstruction rather than a permanent psychological possession. Rachel's development is particularly significant because she does not become an entirely different person. Instead, she gradually reclaims the authority to interpret her own experiences without allowing Tom's narrative to determine their meaning. Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience provides a productive framework for understanding this movement because experiences that have not been fully understood may continue to shape the present until they are confronted and recognized. Hawkins therefore represents psychological transformation as a negotiation between memory and forgetting,

experience and interpretation, concealment and recognition. Self-realization emerges not as the discovery of a perfect or final identity but as the gradual recovery of agency through which the individual can reconstruct the meaning of her own experience.

Findings and Critical Insights

The analysis of *The Girl on the Train* establishes that identity is not a fixed psychological state but a continually reconstructed process shaped by memory, perception, relationships, and changing self-awareness. Rachel's experience demonstrates that fragmented memory can destabilize one's understanding of the self, particularly when another person is able to impose an alternative version of one's identity. Her movement from self-doubt toward recognition further reveals that psychological transformation begins when the individual confronts rather than avoids difficult experiences.

The study also finds that psychological transformation does not follow a uniform pattern. Rachel's gradual movement toward agency, Megan's struggle to move beyond earlier experiences, and Anna's destabilization following the discovery of concealed truths demonstrate different responses to psychological conflict. These differences allow Hawkins to present transformation as an individual and uneven process rather than a predictable movement from suffering to recovery.

Another significant finding is the strong relationship between interpersonal relationships and identity formation. The character's perceptions of themselves are repeatedly influenced by the people around them, particularly through manipulation, emotional dependence, domestic roles, and concealed truths. Tom's influence over Rachel demonstrates how an externally imposed narrative can distort self-perception, while Anna's experience reveals how the collapse of trust can also destabilize an established sense of identity.

The analysis further demonstrates that self-realization depends upon the reinterpretation of experience. Through Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience, the study reveals how

experiences that remain incompletely understood can continue to influence present consciousness. The character's psychological development therefore involves not simply remembering the past but reconsidering its meaning and its influence on the present. Overall, Hawkins presents psychological transformation as a gradual movement toward recognition, agency, and a more conscious understanding of experience. The novel does not suggest that individuals can completely erase their past or construct an entirely new identity. Instead, it presents identity as an evolving psychological process through which individuals negotiate memory, perception, relationships, and personal experience. The findings consequently establish that self-realization emerges through the reclamation of one's ability to understand and interpret one's own life.

Conclusion

Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* presents psychological transformation as a complex process through which individuals confront, reinterpret, and reconstruct their understanding of themselves. Rather than treating identity as stable or predetermined, the novel demonstrates how memory, perception, interpersonal relationships, and concealed experiences continually influence the formation of identity. Through Rachel, Megan, Anna, and Tom, Hawkins develops different responses to psychological conflict, revealing that individuals may either confront their experiences and move toward greater agency or remain trapped within patterns of denial and manipulation.

Rachel's journey remains central to this exploration. Her movement from uncertainty and dependence toward recognition demonstrates that psychological transformation does not require the creation of an entirely new identity. It involves reclaiming the ability to understand one's own experiences without allowing another person's narrative to determine one's sense of self. Megan and Anna further complicate this process by demonstrating that transformation may involve reinvention, disruption, and the painful reassessment of previously accepted realities. Tom, in contrast, illustrates the consequences of

resisting self-recognition and maintaining control through deception.

Through Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience, the study has shown how experiences that resist immediate understanding can continue to influence present consciousness. Hawkins's narrative makes this psychological process central to the reconstruction of identity, demonstrating that the past does not simply remain behind the individual but continues to acquire new meanings through later recognition. The novel therefore moves beyond the conventions of psychological mystery by examining the relationship between experience, memory, perception, and self-understanding.

The Girl on the Train suggests that self-realization is neither immediate nor complete. It develops through the difficult process of questioning established narratives, confronting uncomfortable experiences, and reclaiming personal agency. Hawkins presents identity as an evolving psychological construction rather than a permanent state, emphasizing those individuals continually negotiate that they are in relation to what they remember, what they discover, and what they choose to acknowledge. The novel's enduring significance therefore lies in its portrayal of transformation as an ongoing process of reconstructing meaning and reclaiming one understands of the self.

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