

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH FICTION: INTERPRETING PERSPECTIVE AND TRUTH

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Abstract

Unreliable narration is a central device in contemporary fiction because it makes readers question how perspective shapes what can be accepted as truth. This article offers a comparative literary and stylistic reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). Drawing on narratology, stylistics, and discourse analysis, the study examines narrative voice, focalization, inference, modality, memory, evaluation, omission, and revision as devices through which narrators guide, restrict, or redirect interpretation. The results identify four dominant patterns: interpretive overreach and retrospective reconstruction in *Atonement*; normalized limitation of perspective in *Never Let Me Go*; self-protective memory in *The Sense of an Ending*; and strategic manipulation of narrative evidence in *Gone Girl*. The comparison shows that uncertainty does not automatically make a narrator unreliable. Qualified or hesitant narration may strengthen credibility, whereas confident interpretation based on limited perspective may weaken it. The article proposes a recursive model of unreliable narration in which a narrative claim is presented from a particular perspective, provisionally interpreted by the reader, challenged by competing information, and reconsidered in light of later disclosure. Truth in these novels therefore emerges through interpretation and rereading rather than through a single stable narrative voice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Narrative fiction is mediated discourse. Events are selected, ordered, named, evaluated, remembered, inferred, and attributed through particular voices and perspectives. Readers therefore encounter fictional worlds not as raw information but as linguistically organized representations. Questions of reliability arise when the authority of those representations becomes unstable: a narrator may know too little, infer too much, remember selectively, protect a preferred image of the self, or deliberately manipulate another person's understanding. In each case, unreliability is first encountered through discourse before it becomes a plot-level judgment about whether the narrator has told the truth.

The term unreliable narrator is classically associated with Booth's account of narrators whose norms diverge from those of the implied author (Booth, 1961). Subsequent scholarship has complicated that formulation. Cognitive approaches emphasize readerly frames, interpretive hypotheses, and textual inconsistencies (Nünning, 1999, 2005); rhetorical approaches distinguish unreliability in reporting, interpreting, and evaluating (Phelan, 2005, 2007); and later work has questioned whether unreliability should be treated as a stable property of a narrator at all (Olson, 2003; Shen, 2011). Despite their differences, these traditions converge on a point that is crucial for linguistic analysis: judgments of reliability are constructed in relation to textual evidence.

A stylistic perspective asks where that evidence becomes observable. Modal auxiliaries and adverbs calibrate commitment; cognition and perception verbs identify sources of knowledge; pronouns and deictic expressions anchor perspective; evaluative lexis distributes sympathy and blame; tense and aspect organize retrospective distance; speech and thought representation control attribution; implication and omission regulate what readers are invited to take for granted. Such features are not inherently deceptive. Their significance lies in patterns and mismatches: certainty may outrun evidence, remembered propositions may be repeatedly revised, a supposedly private document may be revealed as performance, or a restricted perspective may be mistaken for comprehensive knowledge (Simpson, 1993; Toolan, 2001; Semino & Short, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007).

The present study compares four influential contemporary English-language novels that stage different relations between discourse and truth: *Atonement*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Sense of an Ending*, and *Gone Girl*. Rather than asking only whether their narrators are reliable, it asks how degrees and domains of reliability are linguistically produced, challenged, and revised. The comparison is especially productive because the four texts distribute narrative uncertainty differently: Briony's interpretive overreach and later authorship; Kathy's normalized limitations of knowledge; Tony Webster's unstable autobiographical memory; and the calculated evidential performances of Nick and Amy Dunne.

This article makes three contributions. First, it integrates narratological accounts of unreliability with feature-based linguistic analysis. Second, it distinguishes uncertainty from unreliability by focusing on the relation between epistemic commitment and narrative support. Third, it proposes the Narrative-Perspective Model of Unreliable Narration (NPMUN), which formalizes the recursive movement from proposition to readerly reassessment and negotiated narrative truth. The model does not claim that its individual components are unprecedented; rather, its contribution lies in connecting local linguistic positioning with the temporal dynamics of reader judgment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Where Does Unreliability Reside?

The central theoretical disagreement concerns the location of unreliability. In Booth's formulation, the narrator becomes unreliable when his or her values or judgments diverge from the norms implied by the work as a whole (Booth, 1961). This approach remains powerful because it explains why a narrator can be grammatically coherent yet ethically or interpretively suspect. Its difficulty is methodological: if the implied author functions as the benchmark, the analyst must still explain how readers infer the relevant norms from the text.

Cognitive accounts relocate emphasis toward the reader's interpretive activity. Nünning (1999, 2005) argues that readers draw on textual signals, world knowledge, genre expectations, and cultural frames to naturalize contradictions or to construct an unreliable narrator as an explanatory hypothesis. Zerweck (2001) similarly

historicizes unreliability by showing that judgments depend on historically variable interpretive conventions. In this view, unreliability is not merely discovered in a narrator; it emerges from an interaction between discourse and reading strategies.

Rhetorical narratology offers a third orientation. Phelan (2005, 2007) distinguishes unreliability along axes of reporting, interpreting, and evaluating, which helps explain why a narrator can be accurate about events yet misleading about motives or values. Olson's (2003) distinction between fallible and untrustworthy narrators is equally useful: cognitive limitation and deliberate or ethically charged distortion need not be treated as equivalent. These distinctions are important for the present corpus because Kathy's restricted knowledge, Tony's mnemonic self-protection, Briony's interpretive overreach, and Amy's deliberate fabrication do not occupy the same epistemic or ethical category.

A linguistic approach complements rather than replaces these traditions. It asks how texts prompt readers to assign, withdraw, or redistribute credibility. Modal and evidential expressions can mark degrees of commitment; evaluative language can reveal self-serving frames; restricted perspective can make limited perception appear comprehensive; and retrospective correction can transform a previously stable proposition into a provisional one. The central linguistic question, therefore, is not simply who is unreliable, but which forms of discourse make reliability perceptible, contestable, and revisable.

2.2 Epistemic Modality and Narrative evidence

Epistemic modality concerns a speaker's degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition. English resources include modal auxiliaries, adverbs, mental-state verbs, evidential verbs, and grammatical constructions that range from strong assertion to marked possibility (Palmer, 1986; Nuyts, 2001). Narrative evidence concerns the source or basis of information—whether it is perceived, remembered, inferred, reported, documented, or imagined (Aikhenvald, 2004). In fiction, these systems matter because narrators routinely move between seeing, remembering, supposing, and knowing without treating those sources as equally uncertain.

Unreliability often emerges from a mismatch between degree of narrative certainty and narrative support. Strong certainty grounded in weak perception may produce interpretive overreach, whereas explicit hedging may signal a responsible acknowledgment of limitation. Forms such as perhaps, might, I think, I suppose, I remember, or it seemed therefore cannot be classified as unreliable in isolation. Their significance depends on whether later discourse confirms, revises, or contradicts the propositions they qualify.

2.3 Perspective and Focalization

Genette's distinction between voice and focalization remains foundational for separating who speaks from who perceives (Genette, 1980). Linguistic stylistics extends this distinction through deixis and point of view: first- and second-person pronouns, demonstratives, temporal adverbs, spatial expressions, perception verbs, and represented thought orient the fictional world around a particular consciousness (Simpson, 1993; Toolan, 2001). Perspective can therefore generate unreliability without explicit lying. A narrator may accurately describe what was visible while treating an interpretation of that scene as fact.

Speech and thought representation further complicate source attribution. Direct, indirect, and free indirect forms distribute responsibility for wording and evaluation differently (Leech & Short, 2007; Semino & Short, 2004). In texts such as *Atonement*, shifts between external narration and character-bound perspective make the narrative status of a proposition inseparable from the consciousness through which it is filtered.

2.4 Memory, Temporality, and Narrative Self-Construction

Retrospective narration creates a structural distance between experiencing and narrating selves. Memory is not simply retrieved; it is selected, ordered, interpreted, and verbalized from a later temporal position. Narrative theory has long connected temporality to the construction of meaning (Ricoeur, 1984), while cognitive and stylistic approaches emphasize the role of remembered consciousness, mind representation, and discourse organization (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). In unreliable retrospective narration, correction and reinterpretation can become part of the narrative grammar itself.

The Sense of an Ending is exemplary because Tony's self-understanding depends on a version of the past that later evidence destabilizes. Recent criticism has accordingly linked the novel to memory, retrospective reconstruction, and post-truth epistemologies (Rossi, 2016; Purdy, 2020; Bushra, 2023; Bartamay, 2023). Acknowledging uncertainty can initially strengthen Tony's ethos, yet repeated revisions expose the extent to which autobiographical coherence has been built through selection and self-protection.

2.5 Evaluation, Stance, and Self-Presentation

Evaluation is central to unreliable narration because narrators do not merely report facts; they characterize people, assign motives, intensify blame, mitigate responsibility, and present versions of themselves. Appraisal and stance research shows how affect, judgment, graduation, and engagement position speakers toward propositions and audiences (Martin & White, 2005; Hyland, 2005). In first-person narration, evaluation is therefore simultaneously world-description and self-presentation.

Gone Girl makes this relation explicit. Nick and Amy continually anticipate audiences, rehearse interpretations, and stage identities. Hnatkovska's (2018) syntactic analysis of first-person utterances in the novel shows how false starts, subordinate explanations, and syntactic irregularities contribute to unreliable self-presentation. The novel thus provides an especially clear case in which linguistic form and rhetorical strategy converge.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative comparative design combining close reading, stylistics, discourse analysis, and narratological interpretation. The analysis focuses on literary features that shape a reader's judgment of narrative credibility: modality, narrative evidence, perspective and focalization, evaluation and stance, speech and thought presentation, memory and temporality, implication and omission, and contradiction or revision. Stylistic analysis examines how wording, degrees of certainty, evaluative choices, and shifts in perspective shape the presentation of events. Discourse analysis examines how claims develop across passages, how narrators position themselves and other characters, and how later disclosures alter the interpretation of earlier narration. The unit of analysis is a narratorial clause, sentence, or short passage that materially affects perspective, inference, self-presentation, or the reader's understanding of truth.

The four novels were purposively selected because they instantiate contrasting configurations of unreliability rather than because they constitute a statistically representative corpus. The period 2001-2012 is treated operationally as contemporary because all four texts belong to twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction and have generated sustained critical discussion around perspective, memory, narration, and truth. The comparative aim is analytical transferability: the study asks whether a common linguistic framework can distinguish different mechanisms of unreliability across heterogeneous narrative designs. Bibliographic identification follows the English-language editions listed in the References (McEwan, 2001; Ishiguro, 2005;

Barnes, 2011; Flynn, 2012); quotation-specific pagination is reported only when it has been checked against the analyzed copy.

Textual-source protocol. The analysis distinguishes between direct primary-text evidence and episode-level evidence. The available edition of *Gone Girl* supports direct short quotation and clause-level analysis. For *Atonement*, *The Sense of an Ending*, and *Never Let Me Go*, the available materials do not provide equivalent access to complete primary-text passages; accordingly, no wording from summary material is presented as if it were the language of McEwan, Barnes, or Ishiguro. Those works are analyzed through narratively identifiable episodes in conjunction with established narratological and stylistic scholarship. This restriction is stated explicitly to preserve source accuracy and to avoid unsupported quotation or pagination.

Passages and episodes were identified manually through close reading and targeted textual searching. No frequency-based corpus claims are made. A feature was treated as analytically significant when it (a) marked the narrator's degree or source of knowledge; (b) positioned a proposition through a restricted perspective; (c) framed responsibility or character through evaluation; (d) revised or contradicted an earlier proposition; or (e) changed the reader's understanding of the evidential status of previous discourse.

Table 1. Literary-Stylistic Framework for the Analysis of Unreliable Narration

Feature	Literary function	Narrative indicators	Interpretive function	Interpretive value
Epistemic modality	Degree of commitment to proposition	must, might, perhaps, probably, seem, think, suppose	Calibrates certainty	Certainty vs narrative support
Narrative evidence	How the narrator presents the basis of a claim	see, hear, remember, infer, report, document	Shows what the narrator can know or infer	Perception, memory, testimony, inference
Perspective/focalization	Viewpoint through which events are presented	I/you, here/there, now/then, perceptual verbs	Limits or expands the reader's viewpoint	Restricted or competing viewpoints
Evaluation/stance	Narrator's judgment and self-presentation	adjectives, intensifiers, mitigation, blame, affect	Shapes alignment/self-presentation	Bias, alignment, and self-presentation
Memory/temporality	Narrative reconstruction of the past	tense shifts, recall markers, correction, repetition	Makes reconstruction visible	Instability of remembered experience
Speech/thought representation	Presentation of voices and consciousness	direct, indirect, free indirect forms	Controls attribution and distance	Attribution of judgment and viewpoint

Feature	Literary function	Narrative indicators	Interpretive function	Interpretive value
Implication/omission	Information implied, assumed, or withheld	implication, silence, selective detail, delayed disclosure	Guides reader inference indirectly	Omission, silence, or normalization
Contradiction/revision	Later narration changes the meaning of earlier claims	countertestimony, self-correction, documents	Prompts reinterpretation and rereading	Changing judgments of reliability

4. RESULTS: STYLISTIC AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The comparative results show that unreliability is produced through different combinations of perspective, inference, modality, memory, omission, and retrospective revision. *Atonement* is dominated by interpretive overreach; *Never Let Me Go* by limited and normalized perspective; *The Sense of an Ending* by unstable memory and self-protective interpretation; and *Gone Girl* by deliberate narrative performance and competing accounts. Across the four novels, the decisive issue is not uncertainty alone but the relation between what a narrator can reasonably know, how confidently that knowledge is presented, and how later information changes the reader's interpretation.

4.1 *Atonement*: Restricted Perspective and Interpretive Certainty

Atonement presents a recurrent sequence in which Briony observes an event from a restricted position, interprets it through an existing imaginative frame, and gradually treats inference as knowledge. The fountain scene is decisive because the event is perceptually available while its interpersonal meaning is not. Briony sees Cecilia enter the fountain and later encounters Robbie's letter and the library scene; across these episodes, an initial interpretation hardens into conviction. The linguistic issue is therefore the transition from perception to interpretive closure, not the absence of perception itself.

This configuration can be described in narrative terms. Direct visual access supplies only partial evidence, yet subsequent cognition converts possibility into certainty. In a stylistic analysis, perception verbs and restricted perspective would identify the boundaries of what Briony can actually know, while modal force would identify how strongly she commits to an interpretation. The ethical force of the accusation arises precisely because a restricted focal position is treated as if it authorized an unrestricted proposition. Marsh (2018) similarly argues that *Atonement*'s unreliability involves metarepresentation and source-monitoring rather than a simple opposition between truth and lie.

The novel later introduces a second level of unreliability through retrospective authorship. The final disclosure reclassifies the apparently resolved reunion of Robbie and Cecilia as Briony's fictional construction. The epistemic problem thus expands from childhood misinterpretation to adult narrative authority. Earlier discourse acquires a different status once readers learn that representation itself has been shaped by an author-character seeking a form of atonement. This is a paradigmatic instance of recursive reliability: late information does not merely add a fact; it reorganizes the meaning of prior narration.

The interaction of limited focalization, inferential certainty, and retrospective rewriting makes *Atonement* analytically distinctive. Its unreliability is neither purely cognitive nor purely strategic. Briony is initially fallible because she mistakes interpretation for knowledge; later, as an authorial consciousness, she

deliberately reorganizes the past while acknowledging the ethical limits of doing so. Recent criticism continues to connect the novel's unreliable narration to forgiveness, guilt, metanarrative construction, and the instability of authorial truth (Warda & Karim, 2024; Seo, 2024).

4.2 Never Let Me Go: Normalized Limits of Perspective

Never Let Me Go requires a more cautious evidential procedure because the available source material does not support direct quotation from Ishiguro's primary text. The comparative discussion therefore relies on established criticism of Kathy H.'s homodiegetic, retrospective narration and on scholarship that identifies memory, normalization, and limited narrative perspective as central to the novel (Thirumalareddy & Allamneni, 2022).

Kathy's distinctive form of unreliability is best described as normalized limitation rather than calculated deception. Her world has taught her what may be known, asked, and linguistically foregrounded. Readers often infer the disturbing implications of institutions and practices before Kathy explicitly conceptualizes them. The relevant gap is therefore not simply between a false statement and a true fact; it is between a narrator's available interpretive vocabulary and the broader model readers construct from contextual evidence.

This distinction matters for modality. A narrator who marks uncertainty can be epistemically responsible even when her knowledge is incomplete. Kathy's retrospective manner, associative transitions, and memory-based organization have often been read as signs of fragility, but such features need not make her untrustworthy. Instead, they foreground the limits of access. In NPMUN terms, readers revise their model of the world more dramatically than they revise their moral judgment of Kathy. The narrator can remain sincere while the discourse remains epistemically incomplete.

Never Let Me Go therefore helps separate unreliability from deception. The reader's recognition develops through accumulation: apparently ordinary recollections acquire darker significance as institutional facts become legible. This gradual process contrasts with *Gone Girl*'s abrupt reversals and *Atonement*'s retrospective metafictional reclassification.

4.3 The Sense of an Ending: Memory, Hedging, and Retrospective Self-Correction

The Sense of an Ending is treated in the same cautious manner: the available source material establishes the narrative architecture relevant to the analysis but is not quoted as Barnes's prose. Tony Webster's later life is disrupted by an inheritance, Adrian's diary, renewed contact with Veronica, and evidence that forces him to reassess earlier memories and relationships. The dominant mechanism is therefore mnemonic revision rather than strategic fabrication.

Tony's unreliability is especially useful for distinguishing hedging from deception. Critical readings repeatedly note his awareness that memory is selective and unstable (Rossi, 2016; Purdy, 2020; Bushra, 2023; Bartamay, 2023). Metanarrative qualification can initially increase trust because the narrator appears aware of cognitive limitation. The problem emerges when later evidence reveals that caution has coexisted with a deeply self-protective organization of the past. In other words, explicit uncertainty does not cancel unreliability; it can coexist with larger patterns of omission, evaluation, and autobiographical simplification.

The narrative structure of the novel depends on competition between memory and documents. A remembered event is not simply contradicted by another memory but placed alongside letters, a diary fragment, and Veronica's resistance to Tony's explanations. This creates a hierarchy of evidence in which the

narrator's earlier coherence becomes progressively less secure. Each new piece of information changes the status of previous propositions from settled recollection to provisional interpretation.

The resulting unreliability is self-protective rather than straightforwardly mendacious. Tony's retrospective stance is oriented toward preserving a manageable self-narrative. When that narrative fails, the reader's work is not limited to identifying factual error; it involves reconstructing how evaluative language, selective recall, and delayed recognition supported the narrator's preferred identity. Recent post-truth readings of the novel extend this point by emphasizing the instability of personal truth when memory and documentary evidence compete.

4.4 Gone Girl: Strategic Evidential Manipulation and Competing First-Person Voices

Gone Girl provides the strongest direct primary-text evidence in the available materials. Its alternating first-person structure places readers between two self-conscious narrators who evaluate one another, anticipate audiences, and control evidential disclosure. The novel repeatedly foregrounds cognition and stance. Nick's opening description of Amy's unknowability contains the hedge "I suppose," which weakens commitment while simultaneously generalizing his uncertainty about marriage. The modal marker is not itself a sign of unreliability; rather, it displays awareness of limited narrative perspective.

"I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage" (Flynn, 2012, p. 9).

The syntax places a personal uncertainty inside a generalized proposition. "I suppose" marks narrative distance, while "every marriage" broadens the claim beyond Nick and Amy. The effect is rhetorically defensive: private difficulty is reframed as a universal condition. This is a useful example of how modality and evaluation can work together. Nick does not lie in the clause; he normalizes the conditions under which his own failures may be judged.

Self-presentation becomes more explicit when Nick describes his relation to his twin sister. He claims unusually complete authenticity while immediately qualifying that claim through omission:

"I don't tell her everything, not anymore" (Flynn, 2012).

The negation and temporal adverb "not anymore" revise the preceding image of total openness. Such micro-revisions are important because they prevent reliability from being treated as a binary characteristic. Nick may present himself as candid while acknowledging selective withholding. The linguistic effect is a controlled confession: limited disclosure can enhance apparent honesty while preserving informational asymmetry.

Amy's narration produces a different structure. Her language openly reveals prospective control over other people's actions and over the evidential environment:

"I need her to break" (Flynn, 2012).

The deontic force of "need" converts another person into an instrument within Amy's plan. In the surrounding passage, Amy sequences desired outcomes and monitors whether the diary, affair, and pregnancy narrative will be discovered in the intended order. This is not merely unreliable reporting after the fact; it is the deliberate manufacture of the future evidence on which other characters will reason. The narrator's discourse therefore occupies both sides of the evidential relation: she produces the clues and later interprets the consequences of their discovery.

The novel also dramatizes the instability of documentary authority. Amy's diary initially appears to offer intimate historical evidence, yet its status later changes from private record to constructed performance. When Amy later explains to investigators that she can become "a little dramatic" in the diary, she strategically reframes the same document again, converting incriminating detail into emotional excess. Narrative evidence

here is not a fixed property of a textual object; it is negotiated through competing accounts of how that object was produced.

A later formulation summarizes the novel's epistemic logic:

"The bigger the lie, the more they believe it" (Flynn, 2012).

The sentence is aphoristic and categorical: comparative structure ("bigger") is paired with an unqualified generalization ("they believe"). Its rhetorical force lies in converting deception into a rule about audience cognition. *Gone Girl* repeatedly tests this principle by exploiting expectations about gender, marriage, victimhood, media narratives, and documentary proof. Strategic unreliability therefore depends not only on what Amy says but on what she predicts other interpreters are prepared to believe.

The contrast between Nick and Amy demonstrates why unreliability should be analyzed by domain. Nick's discourse contains concealment, self-exculpation, and selective disclosure, yet Amy's discourse reveals a qualitatively different level of evidential engineering. The alternating structure prevents either voice from becoming a stable external benchmark. Instead, readers build truth relationally by comparing propositions, motives, documents, and later disclosures. Hnatkovska's (2018) analysis of syntactic features in the novel supports this emphasis on the linguistic construction of unreliable first-person narration.

5. TRUTH NEGOTIATION: FIVE ANALYTICAL STAGES

The phrase negotiation of truth names the interpretive process through which readers move from narratorial claims toward a revised model of the fictional world. It does not imply that all versions are equally valid. Rather, it emphasizes that narrative truth becomes available through comparison, contradiction, attribution, and retrospective reassessment. Across the four novels, five analytical stages recur.

Stage 1 is narrator's truth: the version of events or motives that a narrating consciousness presents as coherent. Stage 2 is textual evidence: the local linguistic cues that qualify that version, including modality, source of narrative knowledge, perspective, evaluation, and omission. Stage 3 is competing truth: another perspective, document, disclosure, or contradiction that challenges the initial model. Stage 4 is provisional reader truth: an interim reconstruction that ranks the available accounts by credibility. Stage 5 is revised narrative truth: a later model that reorganizes not only what readers believe happened but also how they understand the discourse that previously shaped belief.

Atonement moves from Briony's interpretive certainty to retrospective recognition of the limits of her evidence and then to metafictional disclosure. *Never Let Me Go* produces a slower recalibration in which readers revise their understanding of the world while preserving a degree of sympathy for the narrator's limited narrative position. *The Sense of an Ending* repeatedly pits autobiographical memory against documentary and interpersonal counterevidence. *Gone Girl* makes the process overtly adversarial because evidence itself has been manufactured and narrated for strategic effect.

6. CROSS-NOVEL COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

Table 2. Comparative Literary Profile of Unreliable Narration

Novel	Dominant unreliability	Main linguistic mechanism	Evidential problem	Reader response
Atonement	Interpretive / reconstructive	Focalization, inference, modality, retrospective authorship	Perception ≠ knowledge; reclassifies prior discourse	Reinterpretation and metafictional rereading
Never Let Me Go	Limited narrative perspective	Normalization, restricted perspective, retrospective memory	Knowledge is and socially conceptually bounded	Gradual recognition rather than exposure of deceit
The Sense of an Ending	Mnemonic / self-protective	Hedging, correction, autobiographical evaluation	Memory competes with documents and counterevidence	Retrospective revision of self-narrative
Gone Girl	Strategic evidential	Competing voices, stance, omission, fabricated documents	Evidence is deliberately manufactured and reframed	Radical reassessment of both narrators

The comparison supports three broader findings. First, reliability is gradient and domain-specific. A narrator may be sincere yet limited, accurate about events yet unreliable in interpretation, or deceptive in one domain while revealing important truths in another. Global labels such as reliable and unreliable are therefore analytically insufficient unless the relevant domain of reliability is specified.

Second, uncertainty and unreliability are not synonymous. Epistemic markers such as I think, I suppose, perhaps, or I remember can increase credibility when they accurately calibrate the narrator's access to evidence. Conversely, categorical certainty may be a stronger signal of unreliability when the evidential basis is weak. What matters is calibration: the relation between linguistic commitment and narrative support.

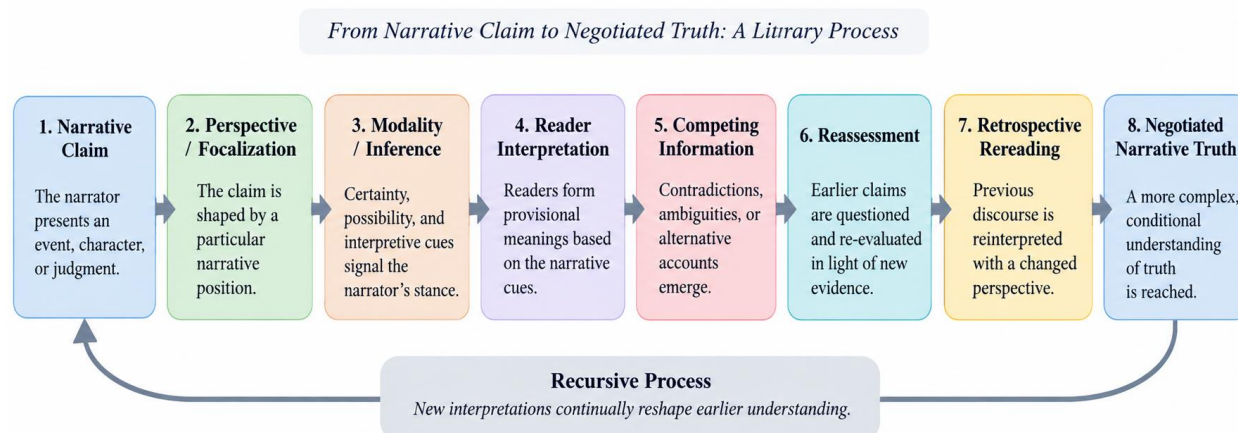
Third, unreliability is temporally recursive. A later disclosure changes the status of earlier discourse. This is especially visible in *Atonement* and *Gone Girl*, but it also structures Tony's memory revisions and the reader's gradual recognition in *Never Let Me Go*. Reliability judgments therefore develop across narrative time rather than being made once and retained unchanged.

7. NARRATIVE-PERSPECTIVE MODEL OF UNRELIABLE NARRATION (NPMUN)

NPMUN formalizes the recurring interpretive process identified across the four novels. A narrator presents a claim through a particular voice and perspective, using modality, evaluation, memory, and narrative evidence to shape its apparent credibility. The reader provisionally interprets that claim. When competing information or a later disclosure appears, both the claim and the narrator's earlier perspective are reconsidered. Rereading then works backward, changing the significance of earlier statements, silences,

judgments, and omissions. Narrative truth is therefore constructed through comparison and reinterpretation rather than received from a single authoritative voice.

Figure 1. Narrative-Perspective Model of Unreliable Narration (NPMUN)



7.1 NPMUN Across the Four Novels

In *Atonement*, a perceived scene becomes linguistically organized through restricted perspective; interpretive certainty encourages provisional acceptance; later evidence destabilizes the inference; adult Briony's authorship prompts narrator reassessment; and the metafictional ending forces retrospective reinterpretation. Negotiated truth remains ethically incomplete because fiction can revise representation without undoing historical harm.

In *Never Let Me Go*, ordinary recollection and normalized vocabulary support provisional acceptance of Kathy's world; contextual cues create discrepant evidence; readers become aware of institutional realities that exceed Kathy's explicit conceptualization; narrator reassessment remains sympathetic rather than accusatory; and negotiated truth emerges through the gap between normalized narration and readerly recognition.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, autobiographical recollection is linguistically positioned through retrospective qualification; initial acceptance is challenged by letters, diary evidence, and Veronica's resistance; narrative uncertainty extends to Tony's self-image; readers reinterpret earlier evaluation as potentially self-protective; and negotiated truth remains partial because the past cannot be fully recovered.

In *Gone Girl*, diary discourse and alternating testimony produce competing provisional models; later revelation exposes deliberate fabrication; evidence is reclassified; Amy and Nick are reassessed in different domains of reliability; and earlier passages are reread as performances directed toward imagined audiences. The model is especially visible because the text makes evidential manipulation an explicit object of narrative strategy.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings refine the concept of unreliable narration in four respects. First, the distinction is terminological. The phrase unreliable narrator suggests a stable character property, whereas the evidence is better captured by unreliable narration: a shifting relation among proposition, evidence, perspective, and reader judgment. This shift aligns with postclassical approaches that resist purely categorical accounts and with rhetorical work that distinguishes reporting, interpreting, and evaluating.

Second, the findings clarify narrative calibration. Hedging should not be treated as a simple linguistic cue to unreliability. A narrator who marks the limits of knowledge can be more trustworthy than one who speaks categorically from inadequate evidence. Briony's interpretive certainty is problematic because the evidence does not warrant it; Kathy's limitation can coexist with sincerity; Tony's qualifications can be credible locally while masking broader self-protection; and Amy can manipulate both certainty and uncertainty strategically. Unreliability is therefore better modeled as miscalibration or manipulation of relations between perspective and truth than as the mere presence of doubt.

Third, the analysis complicates the status of narrative documents. Documents do not automatically stabilize truth. Diaries, letters, memories, and testimony acquire authority through assumptions about who produced them, under what conditions, and for which audience. *Gone Girl* radicalizes this point by turning the diary into fabricated evidence; *The Sense of an Ending* uses documentary fragments to destabilize memory; *Atonement* reveals an entire narrative as retrospectively authored representation. Narrative evidence in fiction is consequently relational and revisable.

Fourth, the findings are temporal. Readers do not merely update the present state of the story; they reinterpret earlier language. A late disclosure can convert a hedge into foreshadowing, a confident assertion into evidence of overreach, or an apparently private record into performance. NPMUN captures this backward reach of interpretation and provides a vocabulary for comparing different forms of recursive rereading.

These findings also clarify the value of combining narratology with stylistics. Narratological theory explains why judgments of reliability matter to plot, ethics, and reader response; linguistic analysis identifies how those judgments are locally cued and revised. Neither level is sufficient on its own. The larger interpretive category becomes more precise when connected to clauses, stance markers, evidential choices, perspective shifts, and patterns of omission.

9. LIMITATIONS

The study is qualitative and based on a small purposive corpus. It does not claim that the four novels represent all contemporary English-language fiction or that the identified features occur with statistically distinctive frequencies. A larger corpus-assisted study could test whether particular combinations of modality, narrative evidence, correction, and perspective recur across broader genres and periods.

A second limitation concerns asymmetry in primary-text access. The available materials provide substantial direct textual evidence for *Gone Girl* but not equivalent clause-level access for the other three novels. The analysis therefore avoids presenting summary wording as original novel language. A future version based on fixed primary editions should verify all direct quotations and pagination and could support more symmetrical close reading across the four texts.

Finally, qualitative stylistic interpretation necessarily involves researcher judgment. Operational categories increase transparency but cannot eliminate interpretive plurality. NPMUN should therefore be treated as a comparative analytical model open to further testing and refinement rather than as a universal law of unreliable narration.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Future literary studies of unreliable narration should combine close reading with systematic stylistic and discourse-based comparison across a wider range of contemporary fiction. Researchers should distinguish limited perspective from deliberate deception, examine modality in relation to the narrator's actual access to events, and give particular attention to focalization, memory, omission, competing voices, and retrospective revision. Where direct textual analysis is undertaken, the same verified editions should be used consistently so that short quotations and page references can be compared accurately. The Narrative-Perspective Model proposed here should also be tested on other genres, including crime fiction, autobiographical fiction, and multi-perspective novels, to assess how far its stages of claim, interpretation, challenge, and rereading remain useful across different narrative forms.

11. CONCLUSION

Unreliable narration is better understood not as a permanent defect attached to a narrator but as a discourse process in which claims are positioned, evaluated, challenged, and retrospectively reclassified. Across *Atonement*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Sense of an Ending*, and *Gone Girl*, different mechanisms dominate: interpretive overreach, limited narrative perspective, mnemonic self-protection, and strategic fabrication. Yet all four depend on the interaction of linguistic form, evidential access, and reader inference.

The comparative analysis shows that modality, narrative evidence, deixis, focalization, evaluation, memory, speech/thought representation, presupposition, omission, and contradiction become meaningful through relations rather than isolated occurrences. A hedge can signal caution or manipulation; certainty can indicate knowledge or overreach; a document can stabilize truth or manufacture it. Reliability therefore depends on calibration between linguistic commitment and the evidence available to narrator and reader.

NPMUN summarizes this process as a recursive sequence from narratorial proposition to linguistic positioning, provisional reader acceptance, discrepant evidence, narrative uncertainty, narrator reassessment, retrospective reinterpretation, and negotiated truth. The model places rereading at the center of unreliable narration because later evidence reorganizes earlier language. By integrating stylistic detail with rhetorical and cognitive narratology, the study offers a more precise account of how contemporary fiction makes readers participate in the construction, destabilization, and reconstruction of narrative truth.

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