

Unveiling The Unreliable Narrator in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*

ميغان أبوت "تحدثني" للكاتبة الكشف عن الراوي غير الموثوق به في رواية

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Abstract:

This article explores the narrative unreliability of Addy Hanlon in Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*, published in 2012, using James Phelan's framework of unreliable narration. The purpose is to examine Addy's narrative by employing the six categories of unreliable narration, namely, misreporting, underreporting, misreading, underreading, misregarding, and underregarding in the context of her complex relationship with her mysterious cheer coach Colette French and her closest friend Beth Cassidy. In the light of this textual analysis, the study discerns how Addy's unreliability is central to the novel's themes of power, ambition, and friendship and reveals how Abbott skillfully uses this narrative device to confuse the line between truth and fiction and enhance the novel's tension and suspense.

Keywords: Unreliable narrator, Addy Hanlon, Reporting, Interpretation, Evaluation

ملخص:

يبحث هذا المقال في كيفية تقديم أدبي هانلون بصورة غير موثوقة في رواية "تحدثني" لميغان أبوت. من خلال استخدام نظرية جيمس فيلان حول السرد غير الموثوق. يهدف البحث إلى تحليل سرد أدبي من خلال استخدام الأنواع الستة من السرد غير الموثوق: التبليغ الخاطئ، التقصير في البلاغ، القراءة المغلوطة، القصور في القراءة، الإغفال الخاطئ، والتجاهل المتعمد، وذلك ضمن سياق علاقتها المعقدة بصديقتها المقربة بيت كاسيدي ومدرستها الغامضة كولين فرنش. من خلال التحليل النصي، يكشف البحث كيف أن تقديم أدبي بشكل غير موثوق به يشكل جوهر الموضوعات الرئيسية في الرواية مثل القوة، الطموح، والصداقة، ويبرز كيف استخدمت أبوت هذه الآلية السردية ببراعة لتمويه الفروق بين الحقيقة والخيال، مما يزيد من توتر وإثارة الرواية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الراوي غير الموثوق به، أدبي هانلون، التبليغ، التفسير، التقييم

1.Introduction:

Dare Me, published in 2012, is one of Megan Abbott's most intricate psychological thriller which dives into the intense and competitive universe of high school cheerleading. Abbott has meticulously created an exciting tale about the themes of power, obsession, friendship and betrayal. The story is told from Addy Hanlon's perspective, a 16-year high school cheerleader who has been the dedicated second in command to her best friend and squad commander, Beth Cassidy (Turchiano, 2019). However, their friendship has been

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thrown into disarray by the emergence of a new cryptic coach, French Colette. Beth lost her friendship with Addy and her position as a captain within the cheer squad since Addy and the other girls became infatuated with the new coach, and this incites the tension between Beth and Colette. Ultimately, an enigmatic death happens, and the narrative turns dark by involving the main characters Addy, Beth, and Colette in a mysterious chaotic atmosphere.

In *Dare Me*, Abbott employs a homodiegetic narrator since a first-person narrator with a flawed perspective works magnificently in psychological thrillers (Roggeveen, 2020). The novel's narrator, Addy Hanlon, appears as an unreliable narrator whose account is deeply shaped by her instinctive evaluation, twisted perception, and selective memory. Following literary critics, first-person narrators are unreliable as they describe events from their own perspective and shape their account to appear truthful for various personal reasons (Rebai, 2017). Addy's primary role in the novel is to shape the atmosphere of uncertainty and tension, challenge the reliability of an omniscient storyteller, and make the novel a compelling read. The reader is then drawn into a world in which treachery, passion, and power obsession permeate the understanding of truth.

The methodology entails a meticulous textual analysis by using James Phelan's model of unreliable narration. Specific instances of Addy's misreporting, underreporting, misreading, underreading, misregarding, and underregarding are identified and analysed in relation to other characters within the novel to answer the following research questions:

- ✓ How does the unreliable narration of the protagonist, Addy Hanlon, blur the line between truth and reality throughout the novel?
- ✓ How does her unreliable reporting, interpretations, and evaluations contribute to the psychological complexity of the thriller?
- ✓ To what extent does Addy's narration deviate on the axes of unreliability?

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Wayne C. Booth proposed the notion of unreliable narration in his revolutionary work "The Rhetoric of Fiction" in 1961 (Phelan, 2017, p. 89). Since then, the debate about unreliable narration has been grouped into two main headlines: the rhetorical and cognitive approaches. Booth and some of his significant followers, including Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Seymour Chatman, Greta Olson, and James Phelan, have approached reliability from a rhetorical stance, which implies that the process of decoding the textual evidence in a work leads to untrustworthy narration. Conversely, Ansgar Nünning, Tamar Yakobi, and Bruno Zerweck have approached narration from a cognitive perspective, which supports the reader's notable role in the interpretation process of untrustworthy narration (Vural, 2021). Still, these seemingly opposing points of view eventually coalesce into a single stance, assuming that untrustworthy narration is contingent upon authorial purpose, textual occurrence, and reader response. By combining these two approaches, scholars endeavour to create a multidimensional approach to unreliability that considers the textual format of the narrative used by the author for a specific purpose and the reader's mental processes used to construct meaning and interpret the untrustworthy narration (Phelan, 2005).

Booth (1961) contends "a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does

not” (p. 158). Namely, the trustworthy narrator is the person who gives a truthful narrative in compliance with the standards of the implied writer. In contrast, the untrustworthy narrator is the person whose expressions, views, and morals contradict those of the indicated author. In the same line, Seymour Chatman (1978) regards a narrator as unreliable when s/he prominently contravenes the morals incorporated by the implied author. Suspicion about his trustworthiness stems from the unreliable discourse of the narrative, which hinders the reader's capacity to construct the real version of events in the story. Greta Olson (2003) also affirms that untrustworthy narration arises once there is a discrepancy between the standards of the narrator and the indicated author. Thus, it drives the readers to suspect their perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of matters. Thereupon, the previously mentioned definitions center on the idea that the narrator is deemed unreliable when he /she does not align with the morals of the implied writer designed by the actual writer to shape the reader's engagement in narratives.

In the untrustworthy narration “The implied author” serves as “the second self” who establishes the framework of principles under the mastery of the actual writer and guides the narrator to appear unreliable through textual choices throughout the story (Sun, 2023, p.2). When the narrator oversteps the standards made by the implied author, this gap creates an irony that prompts the readers to question the narrator's credibility. Ultimately, the irony, the leading model for any untrustworthy narration is often established at the level of the unreliable narrator's attitudes and perceptions compared to those of the implied writer (Olson, 2003). As stated by Booth (1961), the author and the readers covertly conspire and establish the criterion through which the narrator is considered untrustworthy, as there is a secret link between the implied writer and the reader when the latter discerns the true meaning behind the message conveyed in the story. This link empowers the reader's engagement in the literary work and makes irony a crucial rhetorical tool to detect the narrator's unreliability (Olson, 2003).

Cognitive theorists criticized Booth's approach to unreliability because of the implied author's perspective. Ansgar Nünning's research has challenged the rhetorical model by emphasizing the reader's important role in making stories clear and rejecting the idea of the implied writer as a way to get readers to stop believing a storyteller who is not telling the truth (Al-Mansoob, 2011). Nünning's model hinges deliberately on cognitive narratology, in which the reader's cognitive schema and frames of reference are of considerable significance in the concept of unreliability. The reader actively engages with the text as a critical evaluator of the narrative's complexities, spotting textual inconsistencies and dissimilarities to assess the narrator's credibility. To support his view, Nünning's employs Vera Nünning's extensive research on the reliable narrator, which asserts that our cultural and historical conditions shape the conceptualization of unreliability as the latter changes over time and across cultural factors (Olson, 2003). From this perspective, advocates of the cognitive model shifted focus from text-oriented analysis to reader-oriented analysis. However, this shift disregards the structural parts of the narrative and the author's intents (Prather, 2014).

Additionally, James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin amplified Booth's model by introducing a comprehensive framework for understanding and identifying narrative unreliability (Grebeniuk, 2018). Consistent with Booth, Phelan and Martin (1999) contend

that a narrator's untrustworthiness is related to the implied writer; however, the divergence occurs along a span that extends along the story. In a sense, the discernment of unreliability relies on three main factors that indicate a narrator's deviation from the implied writer's lens: the narrator's reporting, the narrator's interpretation, and the narrator's evaluation across three significant axes. Accordingly, unreliable reporting takes place on "the axis of facts" (events) pointing out the truthfulness of the narrator's account while unreliable interpretation emerges on "the axis of perception" and refers to the narrator's credibility to examine and elucidate events. Evaluation, on the other hand, indicates how the narrator's ethical values and philosophical stance determine his/her perspective in the story and occur on "the axis of ethics" (p. 95).

One of Phelan and Martin's most notable contributions is establishing a stand on which unreliable reporting occurs and develops. They pinpointed six distinct types of unreliability, which are classified into three axes: events, perception and evaluation ((Jia, 2016). These forms of unreliability has been divided into two leading groups: the "mis" group encompassing "misreporting", "misreading" (misinterpreting), and "misregarding"(misevaluating), and the "under" group, consisting of "underreporting" , "underreading"(underinterpreting) , and "underregarding" (underevaluating) (Greanga, 2021,p.324). Based on this model, misreporting happens due to the narrator's insufficient knowledge, misreading arises when the narrator draws wrong conclusions based on his /her limited knowledge or interpretation, and misregarding takes place because of the narrator's inability to evaluate truthfulness accurately. Conversely, underreporting occurs when the narrator withholds crucial details, underreading comes about because of the narrator's inadequate explanation of characters' attitudes and the narratives' situations which require more thought; and underregarding takes place once the narrator makes inadequate moral judgments about events, characters, or situations in the narrative (Phelan & Martin ,1999).

Following Phelan and Martin's (1999) model, a narrator's trustworthiness is not a twofold principle of reliable or unreliable. Nevertheless, there are various levels of trustworthiness ranging from partial unreliability on one or two dimensions to full unreliability on all dimensions. To put it concisely, Phelan and Martin expand a multifaceted approach that focuses on both textual inconsistencies conveyed by the implied writer and the reader's engagement in determining and interpreting the degree of reliability along the reading journey.

3. Narrative Unreliability in *Dare Me*

Megan Abbott, with her fascinating psychological thriller, delivers a creepy glimpse at the dark realm of American high school cheerleading. In *Dare Me*, Abbott meticulously depicts the inner life of American teenagers by probing themes of authority, obsession, friendship and betrayal. The novel's narrator is Addy Halon, a 16-year high school cheerleader, a loyal and dedicated lieutenant to the team's ruthless and arrogant captain Beth Cassidy, Addy's closest companion. The tale opens with the arrival of a mysterious new coach, French Colette. With her manipulative and attractive involvement, she immediately traces a tremendous transforming impact within the squad's power dynamics. Eventually, this change sets the stage for the competitive and obsessive events that unfold in the narrative.

Once Colette arrived and took the reins of the squad, she declared that the squad did not require a captain and dethroned Beth from her position. Beth loses her dominance over the team and her friendship with Addy, too, as Addy becomes captivated by the charming Colette, who attempts to establish close relationships with the girls of the team, especially Addy. Colette invites the girls to her house to party and drink, which adds to Addy's fascination with her. Beth finds herself out of the group's golden circle, inciting tension between her and Colette. Later along the story, Addy and Beth discover that Colette is cheating on her husband, Matt French, a distant workaholic man. Their strained relationship forces Colette into an affair, with Will Sarge, an army recruiter at the high school. To regain her position and friendship with Addy, Beth finally finds something against Colette. The friction between the two swells and creates a toxic atmosphere, bringing about tragic ends.

Soon after Beth manipulates events so that Matt can discover Colette's infidelity, Will ends up dying. At first, his death is considered a suicide. However, Colette and Matt to conceal the truth altered the crime scene. Following the death, a police investigation took place. Addy is willing to bend over backwards to protect herself and Colette as both were present at Will's house the night of his death. The investigation; on the other hand, reveals that Matt murdered Will in a confrontation with him at Will's house. With an enigmatical note, the novel ends with Beth throwing herself from the top of the cheer pyramid when she realizes her inability to regain her position and her friendship with Addy, and Addy becoming the cheer captain, asserting her dominance and authority within the team. Following the Gone Girl trend, Abbott gradually unveils that Addy has been an unreliable narrator who has orchestrated her account meticulously to achieve her intended outcomes, adding fascination and tension to the story (Gretchen, 2019). All these events leave readers with a sensation of doubt and mystery about Addy's trustworthiness.

Accordingly, throughout the novel, Addy stands out as an unreliable narrator whose perspective is tainted by her internal conflicts, her loyalty to coach Colette, and her friendship with Beth. As Phelan and Martin (1999) contend, "narrators may deviate from the implied author's views in the roles as reporters, as evaluators and as readers or interpreters" (p. 94). This study will analyze Addy's unreliable reporting, interpretations and ethical judgements along the story to unveil how her inner struggles and subjective perspective intensifies the psychological complexity of the story, engaging the readers into a world in which ambition, power, and betrayal permeate the understanding of truth.

3.1 Addy Hanlon's Unreliable Reporting

The primary function of a narrator in a story is to convey what happens and exists in the narrative realm. When reporting events, narrators can either misreport by expressing untruthful information or underreport by canceling critical details, thereby delivering an incomplete account (Phelan, 2005). Addy Hanlon, the novel's narrator, is an ambitious teenager whose account diverges from the implied author's perspective on the dimension of facts. Her narrative provides typical cases of misreporting and underreporting that arise from her constant emotional state and her friendship with Beth and coach Colette. At the level of facts, Addy misreports Beth's unquestioned authority over the team and underreports crucial details during the police investigation after Will's death.

One of coach Colette's initial moves with the cheer squad is maintaining her authority and power. Hence, she removes Beth from her post as captain and decides that a captain is unnecessary. Once Beth is demoted, Addy exhibits her deep loyalty and empathy towards Beth, stating "Beth has always been captain, and me, her badass lieutenant, since the day she and I, after three weeks of flipping roundoffs together in her backyard, first made squad together. She was born to it, and we never thought of cheer any other way" (Abbott, 2012, p.16). In this quote, she thoroughly encapsulates their interactive dedication and enthusiasm for cheerleading and asserts Beth's unquestioned control and authority over the team. She provides insights into their already defined roles, Beth, the instinctive captain, and Addy, her loyal right-hand girl. Addy and the other girls in the squad regard Beth as their absolute leader and they cannot supplant her. Yet, by the end of the story, Addy assumes the role of a captain. Her statement "Turning from the stands, facing my girls, I gather everything in my chest. I have to hold it tight. These things I've learned" "It showed me," "I say pulling in breath", "how to be a leader" (Abbott, 2012, p.326) indicates the moment of Addy's self-awareness and agency. She acknowledges leadership skills, which have been previously overlooked by her. At the level of this statement, readers detect a typical example of misreporting as Addy's first quote inaccurately reflects reality and entails her lack of knowledge and belief in her own abilities.

Following Will Sarge's demise, Addy is summoned for a police investigation. Her responses during the inquiry provide a further deviation in her reporting as a narrator and manifest a quintessential instance of underreporting, which significantly affects her reliability. Addy's answers carefully depict her decision to disclose pivotal information to the police that would change the course of the investigation. To a significant extent, this casts doubt on her trustworthiness as a narrator. She deliberately covers crucial details that would implicate her coach by withholding Colette's affair with Will and the fact that she and Colette were both there at Will's house after his death. Coach Colette has staged the scene to look like a suicide to hide the murder, subsequently calling Addy to Will's house to persuade her that Will took his own life. Addy's primary purpose is to safeguard Colette from suspicion even at significant personal risk, which indicates her immense loyalty and dedication to her coach. Accordingly, Addy's underreporting at this scene enhances the suspense and mystery of the narrative by compelling the readers to question everything told, making the story more intriguing.

3.2 Addy Hanlon's Unreliable Interpretations

Following Phelan's (2005) model of unreliability, the narrator's interpretations play a significant role in the detection of her/his unreliability by either misinterpreting or underinterpreting characters, events, or situations happening along the story. In *Dare Me*, Addy's misinterpretation of coach Colette's character and the underinterpretation of the moments leading up to the murder of Will shape tremendously the aspects of her unreliability.

The misinterpretation of coach Colette's character can be considered a central element in Addy's untrustworthiness as a narrator. Once the new coach arrived, Addy becomes captivated by her, regarding her as a liberating woman who infuses the squad with a new positive energy and sets them free from the boundaries of high school expectation. "She was the one who showed me all the dark wonders of life, the real life, the life I'd only seen

flickering from the corner of my eye. Did I ever feel anything at all until she showed me what feeling meant? Pushing at the corners of her cramped world with curled fists, she showed me what it meant to live” (Abbott, 2012, p. 4). This initial perspective stems from Addy’s fascination with Colette’s impressive engagement as the new coach established close relationships with the girls of the team, especially Addy. Colette invites the girls to her house to party and drink, which adds to Addy’s admiration believing that Colette takes them to the corners of her world and shows them the real life. Throughout the story, it becomes obvious that the coach is an authoritarian perilous figure who strives to maintain her power and control over the girls by favouring certain girls and fostering division by putting Beth and Addy against each other. Despite these obvious signals, Addy misconstrues Colette’s behaviours. Her perception is tainted by her deep admiration and loyalty to her and; thus, Addy is drawn into a dark and toxic atmosphere.

The underreading of the moments preceding Will’s murder is essential because it intensifies the tension and suspense in the narrative and shapes the schemes of Addy’s unreliability. Addy underestimates the ongoing tension between Beth and Colette, which sets the stage for the fatal twist of events. Once Beth loses her spot in the squad, Addy is unable to define accurately Beth’s emotional state. Though she knows, Beth’s fascination with being a cheer captain and her strive for power and authority, Addy cannot figure out her true response. She dismisses her anger and jealousy especially after the discovery of Colette’s affair with Will, which triggers Beth’s anxiety and drives her to scheme against Colette. Addy also disregards Beth’s potential for causing destruction and expresses her sense of peace and stability, “There is a golden period, a week, two, when Beth seems to have settled herself, when all our days are brimful with cheer...” (Abbott, 2012, p. 76). In fact, Beth’s power and danger lie in her skill to manipulate discreetly and stage events as she does with Matt French. For Matt to suspect Colette’s action and uncover the affair on his own Beth puts things up while remaining behind the scenes; her subtle manipulation precipitates extensive and disastrous events.

3.3 Addy Hanlon’s Unreliable Evaluations

The last criterion to analyse a narrator’s reliability is to evaluate her/his moral judgement as s/he can misregard or underregard (Phelan, 2005). Addy’s unreliability on the dimension of evaluation is displayed in the misregarding of Will’s death and the underregarding of coach Colette’s affair.

One of Addy’s unreliable moral judgements is illustrated in the misevaluation of Will’s demise. After the death of Will, Addy expresses her emotional instability by stating, “You saw a dead man last night, that’s what I’m saying in my head. You saw a suicide right before your eyes. You saw Will, dead” (Abbott, 2012, p. 161). This statement highlights her psychological struggle to reinforce the version of events crafted by Colette, the dominant figure who moulds Addy’s thoughts and perception of reality. Rather than viewing Will’s death as an act of violence that occurred under questionable circumstances, Addy downplays this truth by complying her moral judgement with her idol, Colette, who is in charge of the situation. Her devotion and strive for approval and praise from Colette compels her to opt for the covering up of the case, and this diminishes her ethical discernment. In essence, Addy undermines the gravity of the case when she believes that loyalty and concealing of the truth

are sufficient to maintain the narrative and eliminate suspicion. She also misjudges the ethical issues of bending the truth and the long-term consequences for her and others. This attitude denotes Addy's immature thinking and lack of foresight, which strengthens her unreliability in evaluating the lasting impacts of their actions, and eventually makes her version less credible for the readers.

Additionally, the underevaluation of coach Colette's affair with Will notably demonstrates Addy's unreliability in the story. Addy idealizes the relationship and interprets it as a cinematic romantic bond in which two passionate persons are escaping their social life struggles. She contends the affair is an emotional escape for both Colette and Will. In the following lines, Addy expresses her fascination when she saw Colette with Will in the teachers' lounge "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." "It lasted only a second, so how could it pierce me with such thorny beauty-but it does" (Abbott, 2012, p. 83). Instead of considering the relationship a violation of moral and professional limits, she becomes captivated and enchanted by their secret romance. This tendency denotes her flawed ethical evaluation and her disconnection from authenticity. Her passion and devotion to coach Colette impair her moral judgements, causing her to overlook the potential risks and underestimate the far-reaching impacts, which eventually resulted in Will's death. Addy's reflections after will's death further amplify her misregarding and reveal her internal conflict with denial and reality, but she chooses to downplay the warnings in order to remain faithful and close to her coach. Largely, this adds layers of suspicion to her credibility as a narrator and makes the narrative a compelling read.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, this article illustrates how Megan Abbott masterfully designs the unreliable narrative of Addy Hanlon in her novel *Dare Me* to delve into the themes of power, ambition, manipulation and betrayal. Addy's unreliability reveals the intricate and cruel power dynamics within the cheerleading squad. She reflects her internal struggle between her ambition and her loyalty to her friend Beth and to her coach Colette. Eventually, this complicates the readers' perception about Addy's relationship with both of them and makes her appears as an unreliable narrator. By employing James Phelan's six categories of unreliable narration, this study demonstrates that Addy's narration deviates on the dimension of facts, interpretation and evaluation. In terms of facts, she misreports Beth's unquestioned authority over the team and underreports crucial details during the police investigation after will's death. At the level of interpretations, she misreads the character of Coach Colette French and underreads the moments preceding Will's death. She misregards will's death and underregards Colette's affair on the axis of moral evaluations. These deviations shape Addy's erroneous perspective, which plays a significant role for enhancing the readers' engagement as well as the novel's ambiguity and tension, prompting the readers to question every detail she provides and become confused about what is real and unreal in the story's events.

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