

Psychological Manipulation in Psychological Thrillers: A Case Study of “The Housemaid” by Freida McFadden

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ABSTRACT

Psychological thrillers as a genre have become a powerful vehicle for exploring the dynamics of power, trauma, and manipulation in human relationships. This article discusses psychological manipulation in the psychological thriller genre, focusing on Freida McFadden's novel The Housemaid. The main issue raised is how manipulation is constructed and displayed through the psychological behavior of the characters. The purpose of this study is to uncover the narrative techniques and psychological strategies used by the author in building tension and directing the reader's perception. This study uses a qualitative method with a psychological literary approach, analyzing the behavior of the main characters, namely Andrew Winchester, Millie, and Nina in their interactions to identify elements of manipulation. The results show that McFadden effectively uses unreliable narratives, character isolation, and changing power dynamics to enhance psychological tension. The conclusion shows that these elements work together to create an intense and disturbing reading experience, and reveal the important role of manipulation in the psychological thriller genre.

Keywords; *Psychological thriller, psychological manipulation, narrative techniques, power dynamics, Psychological literary approach.*

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological thrillers are a fascinating literary subgenre that has become one of the reader's favorite genres by investigating the complexities of human psychology, in an exploration of manipulation, trauma, and distorted reality. Psychological thrillers delve into the internal struggles and mental complexities of individuals, creating tension through ambiguous narratives and unreliable perspectives (Simpson, 2015). The subgenre deals with the mental state of the characters and always creates a suspenseful atmosphere that in every narrative plays with the reader's perception and emotions. Peter Hutchings (2013) further elaborates on the genre, stating that psychological thrillers are narratives "with domesticated settings in which action is suppressed and where thrills are provided instead via investigations of the psychologies of the principal characters" (p. 4). The novel has a core conflict in psychological manipulation. Psychological manipulation, involves the subtle control of one character by another, which often leads to the distortion of truth and morality.

Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid* is a recent example of this genre that effectively uses manipulation as its main theme, presenting a suspenseful and gripping story in which characters engage in psychological deception, control, and capricious power. The psychological state of each character is different and we are introduced to it, especially how they interact with each other, which is an important element in understanding the deeper part of psychological manipulation in this narrative.

This research focuses on identifying how this psychological manipulation is constructed in *The Housemaid* through the use of certain narrative techniques and psychological strategies. The purpose of this study is to analyze how Freida builds psychological threat and tension and directs the reader's perception with unbelievable narration, and character isolation. By applying a psychological literary approach, this article aims to provide a broader understanding of how manipulation operates as a thematic and structural element in this psychological thriller.

The author's unreliable writing, fragmented memories, and deceptive dialog in a psychological thriller book not only challenge the reader's trust, but also reflect the unstable mental state of some characters. These passages serve to convey the very thing that makes us hesitate between truth and illusion, thus increasing psychological tension. Freida McFadden skillfully manipulates narrative perspective to maintain tension and mislead the reader, which creates deception in the reader of the novel. This technique draws attention to how language and narrative structure can be used as tools of manipulation. According to Burke (2014), narrative unreliability is often employed in psychological thrillers to destabilize the reader's perception of reality and enhance the sense of psychological unease. In addition, the character dynamics in the novel-particularly between Millie, Andrew Winchester, and Nina-illustrate how deception in psychological control can be normalized and hidden behind domestic routines. Set within the household, it becomes a symbolic space where power is contested and redefined. Freida's depiction of manipulation not only serves a dramatic function, but also critiques broader social themes such as gender roles, privilege, and control in intimate relationships. This aligns with findings by Johnson and Smith (2017), who argue that psychological thrillers frequently expose the intersections of psychological trauma and societal structures in intimate settings.

With the growing popularity of psychological thriller genre novels in contemporary literature, there is a growing need for critical literary analysis that focuses on how these narratives construct manipulation through psychological and structural means. Therefore, this article seeks to contribute to literary research by offering a focused case study of *The Housemaid*, examining the psychological depth of its characters and the literary mechanisms that convey manipulation, deception, and control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychological thriller genre has been a rich source for exploring emotional manipulation, deception, and mental instability for a long time. This genre has been recognized by scholars as one that centers on internal psychological conflict rather than external conflict, placing character psychology at the heart of the narrative experience. Psychological crime fiction differs from traditional detective stories, according to Knight (2004), in that it focuses on character-driven narratives and examines the emotional and psychological effects of manipulation and control. Readers are frequently compelled to face the volatility of perception and truth in these stories, which frequently depict morally complicated circumstances.

According to Simpson (2010), psychological thrillers confuse the line between reality and illusion by employing unreliable narrators and fragmented memory patterns. These components reflect the characters' warped mental states while also serving to both perplex and captivate the reader. This storytelling method is especially applicable in *The Housemaid*, where Freida McFadden intentionally confuses the reader through selective revelations, changing points of view, and untrustworthy event descriptions. According to Hutchings (2013), the suspense in psychological thrillers is primarily created by the characters' internal experiences rather than by external action, which makes the genre particularly well-suited for exploring manipulation as a psychological entity.

In addition, feminist interpretations of domestic thrillers, which are sometimes viewed as a subset of psychological thrillers, have highlighted how manipulation in domestic environments mirrors broader societal hierarchies. According to Mulvey (2015), the domestic environment in such thrillers acts as a symbolic power place, where psychological manipulation can either overturn or uphold conventional roles. *The Housemaid* depicts the home as a place of confinement and control rather than one of solace. The dynamics between Millie, Nina, and Andrew highlight the gendered nature of power imbalances in intimate relationships by showing how manipulation may be masked as concern or protection.

Gaslighting and coercive control have also been highlighted in earlier research as literary manipulation techniques. Johnson and Smith (2017) explore how psychological thrillers employ manipulation as a means of critiquing social norms, particularly those pertaining to class, gender, and emotional labor, in addition to advancing the plot. McFadden's work may be understood within this context since it demonstrates how psychological abuse functions insidiously through personal dependence and social expectations.

These critical viewpoints lay the groundwork for the emphasis of this research on *The Housemaid*. Though the book has not yet been the focus of much scholarly study, its popularity and thematic substance make it a pertinent topic for examination. This article adds to current debates in the literary and psychological studies of the thriller genre by engaging with existing scholarship on psychological manipulation, narrative strategies, and domestic power structures.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach, augmented by a psychological literary perspective, to examine how psychological manipulation is developed in the narrative of Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid*. Due to its focus on understanding symbolism, patterns, and meanings in their natural contexts, the qualitative method is appropriate for studying literary works. Instead of relying on quantitative

information, it examines how language, character interaction, and narrative techniques work to convey psychological tension and manipulation. The psychological literary approach, as described by experts like Tyson (2006) and Barry (2002), enables a thorough investigation of characters' mental and emotional states by analyzing how their psychological struggles influence the story and affect how readers see it. This approach is especially suited for psychological thrillers, which are characterized by their focus on internal conflicts, emotional pain, and cognitive processes.

The Housemaid, a novel by Freida McFadden that was first released in 2022, serves as the study's main source of data. The study centers on three key individuals, Millie, Nina Winchester, and Andrew Winchester whose relationships and changing dynamics provide the foundation for examining manipulation. Patterns of psychological manipulation are identified based on specific passages that include dialogue, inner monologue, and narrative perspective. Data was gathered by closely reading, annotating, and thematically coding the text of the novel. Important signs of manipulation like gaslighting, control, deception, emotional dependence, and isolation were recognized and grouped according to both psychological theory and literary analysis. The research also includes pertinent secondary sources, such as academic articles on manipulation strategies in literature, narrative theory, and psychological thrillers.

Structural strategies that increase manipulation throughout the book are also examined, such as narrative unreliability, fractured memory patterns, and shifting power dynamics. These components are analyzed in relation to the characters' psychological growth and the reader's changing perceptions throughout the narrative. This methodological framework allows for a complex and layered understanding of psychological manipulation, both as a topic and as a narrative tool that influences the overall reading experience. With this method, the study seeks to reveal how Freida McFadden's literary techniques enhance psychological tension and mirror larger societal issues ingrained in close relationships.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the construction of psychological manipulation in The Housemaid through narrative methods, character development, and the domestic environment's role as a symbolic power setting. The examination is organized into three primary sub-sections: (1) narrative structure and unreliable narration, (2) psychological control and character isolation, and (3) power relations in the home environment.

Unreliable Narration and Narrative Structure

Freida McFadden skillfully utilizes unreliable narration by limiting the narrative point of view to Millie's perspective. Millie, the protagonist, is portrayed as a desperate woman seeking stability, but as events unfold, her judgments are often questionable, shaped by emotional trauma and confusion. The reader's trust is tested, mirroring the protagonist's own uncertainty.

For instance, Millie narrates:

"I try to tell myself that Nina is just under stress. That her mood swings aren't personal. But I can't help wondering what kind of person locks someone in their bedroom."

(McFadden, 2022, p. 73)

Here, Millie tries to make sense of Nina's harmful actions, highlighting both her own weaknesses and the influenced view of the reader. The suspense increases as the story reveals only fragments of information, keeping crucial details about Nina's reasons and Andrew's real nature hidden. The inclusion

of flashbacks and selective recollections adds to the lack of reliability. Millie remembers her past hardships vaguely, and the reader discovers the depth of her troubled history only later. This postponed understanding confuses the reader and supports Burke's (2014) assertion that unreliable storytelling in psychological thrillers "shakes perception to enhance discomfort. "

Character Isolation and Psychological Control

Millie's physical and emotional isolation is a critical tool of manipulation in the novel. From the beginning, she is offered a job that seems too good to be true, but gradually the environment becomes oppressive.

One striking example of isolation is the attic room Millie is forced to live in

"The door clicks shut behind me, and I hear the key turn. I'm locked in again. My heart pounds as I check the tiny window. Still sealed shut."

(McFadden, 2022, p. 89)

This enclosed space represents Millie's diminishing independence and growing susceptibility. She is trapped physically and emotionally isolated from everything around her. As Nina and Andrew's unpredictable actions distort her perception of reality, Millie's reliance deepens reflecting methods of manipulative control, as outlined by Johnson and Smith (2017).

Furthermore, the inconsistency of Nina's behavior swinging from kindness to hostility keeps Millie in a state of psychological instability:

"One minute she's hugging me, and the next she's accusing me of stealing her perfume."

(p. 102)

This pattern of manipulative affection and accusation is a classic trait of emotional abuse, designed to instill confusion and obedience.

Power Dynamics in the Domestic Space

The home in *The Housemaid* functions as more than a setting it is a theatrical space of control and surveillance. The grandeur of the Winchester house masks the emotional decay inside, creating a dichotomy between appearance and reality.

Millie notes:

"Everything in this house looks perfect. But it feels like I'm being watched all the time. Like there are cameras in every room." (p. 56)

This feeling of ongoing observation contributes to the controlling environment. The home, usually linked to security and warmth, is instead turned into a place of confinement. Additionally, the book examines gender-based power relations. Andrew first seems to be a likable and prosperous spouse, but his actual character comes to light through his domineering actions, threats, and ultimately aggression. Nina, who is seen at first as erratic and hostile, is ultimately shown to be a victim as well, using Millie for her own survival.

In a twist, Millie herself begins to adopt manipulative tactics in order to survive and fight back. In the climax, she deceives Andrew into a false sense of security:

"I smiled at him, sweetly, the way he liked it. I let him believe I was still the obedient little housemaid."

(p. 214)

This moment represents a shift in power dynamics, as Millie employs the same tactics of manipulation that were once used against her oppressor. It adds complexity to the moral framework of the novel, demonstrating that manipulation can be harmful or empowering based on the situation.

The examination of *The Housemaid* shows that Freida McFadden employs psychological manipulation through a diverse mix of storytelling techniques, character insights, and symbolic use of space. All these components play an essential part in illustrating the intricacies and depth of manipulation as both a thematic focus and a storytelling device. To start, the use of an unreliable narrator creates instability in the reader's confidence in Millie, the main character. This approach reflects the protagonist's own mental chaos, underscoring the emotional and psychological manipulation she endures. By presenting all events through Millie's constrained and increasingly dubious viewpoint, the book compels readers to continuously reevaluate their interpretations of the characters' motives and the unfolding plot. This corresponds with Burke's (2014) remark that psychological thrillers often employ disjointed storytelling techniques to incite doubt, tension, and ambiguity key aspects in depicting manipulation.

Moreover, emotional and physical seclusion is not merely a plot device but also a psychological tactic that reflects genuine abuse patterns. Millie's imprisonment in the locked attic, her limited social interactions, and the unpredictable, controlling actions of the Winchesters exemplify common behaviors associated with coercive control. These behaviors elevate psychological vulnerability and dependence, which are defining traits of emotional manipulation in both fiction and reality. The narrative subtly illustrates how the gradual loss of agency occurs, making the manipulation feel more subtle and realistic. Furthermore, the home setting serves as a significant symbol of manipulation. The Winchester residence, which appears affluent and respectable on the outside, hides the emotional abuse taking place inside. This inversion of domestic imagery from a safe haven to a space of oversight and dominance—underscores how manipulation can be woven into ordinary settings. As Mulvey (2015) supports, such spatial symbolism is prevalent in feminist interpretations of domestic thrillers, where private places transform into fields of psychological conflict.

Additionally, the evolving power relationships among Millie, Nina, and Andrew complicate simplistic ideas of victim and aggressor. While Andrew's abusive nature is evident, Nina's manipulations expose her own methods of survival, complicating moral distinctions. Millie herself evolves from a passive victim to a more active participant in deception, especially at the story's peak. This change suggests that manipulation, despite its harmful effects, can also be used as a means of empowerment and defiance especially by those who are marginalized. McFadden prompts readers to reconsider the ethics of manipulation in psychologically intricate situations.

In summary, the interaction among narrative structure, psychological authenticity, and symbolic space in *The Housemaid* showcases the complex layering of psychological manipulation. McFadden's work does more than entertain; it also provides a thoughtful critique on power dynamics, gender roles, and the delicacy of perception. By integrating manipulation into the very fabric of the storyline and the interactions between characters, the book effectively engages with significant themes in psychological literature and the thriller genre as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This explored the ways in which psychological manipulation is crafted and conveyed in Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid* by analyzing narrative techniques, character relationships, and the meaningful

use of home environments. The results show that manipulation in the novel serves not only as a theme but also as a structural element that influences the reader's experience and understanding of the narrative.

A significant discovery is the employment of unreliable narration, which undermines the reader's confidence in the main character's viewpoint and establishes a narrative atmosphere filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. By placing the reader in Millie's narrow and emotionally unstable perspective, McFadden successfully reflects the nature of psychological manipulation where what is perceived and what is real become indistinct.

The book also emphasizes emotional isolation and controlling behavior as key elements of psychological manipulation. Millie's limited freedom and her increasing emotional reliance illustrate patterns of abuse and psychological control that are frequently observed in actual intimate relationships. These patterns are carefully created and heightened through interactions that swing between love and anger, leading to a psychological trap that is both convincing and unsettling. Additionally, the study shows how the home serves as a place that symbolizes both monitoring and power. McFadden challenges the conventional view of the home as a place of safety by turning it into a site of mental conflict, where outward appearances disguise emotional control and authority is continuously redefined.

Significantly, the book also makes the moral positions of the characters more complex. Millie, Nina, and Andrew are all involved in manipulative behaviors, albeit to differing extents and for diverse reasons. This indicates that manipulation, although frequently detrimental, can also act as a means of resistance or survival for individuals in powerless situations. McFadden questions simple ideas of victims and perpetrators and offers a more detailed view of how manipulation works in close and home environments. In summary, *The Housemaid* demonstrates that the psychological thriller genre serves as an effective means to examine intricate relationships between individuals, especially regarding manipulation, control, and trauma. Through the use of unreliable storytelling, deep psychological insight, and symbols related to the home, Freida McFadden creates a complex narrative that both captivates the reader and encourages thoughtful examination of power and the way we understand it. This case study adds to the wider conversation in literature by showing how psychological manipulation can be looked at as both a key theme and a structural technique in modern fiction.

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