

## The Performance of Marriage and Manipulations Within: A Dramaturgical Analysis of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

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📖 Research Article | Accepted version published on 5 July 2025

 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15813652>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the performative aspects of gender roles and the complex relationships they engender through the medium of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). The paper employs Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and, through it, studies the protagonists Nick and Amy Dunne, with a deep focus on how these characters construct and deconstruct their roles by performing and eventually subverting them. The dramaturgical approach compares social interactions as a form of self-performance, and by examining the performances of these characters in their marriage, this paper illustrates how marriage itself becomes a stage where boundaries between authenticity and performance are constantly blurred, redefined, and reconstructed through their frontstage and backstage behaviours. Role performance and impression management are also studied. The analysis highlights the performative aspects of both personal and socially constructed identities, demonstrating how *Gone Girl* serves as a nuanced commentary on performative societal roles and relationships.

Keywords: social performance; identity; psychological; societal pressure; narrative

### FULL PAPER

#### Introduction

Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* is a dark and delicate examination of the fragility of human relationships, specifically the institution of marriage, which unravels the machinations of its players —the husband and the wife — and reveals what a

performance of marriage looks like and what happens when the facade becomes fractured. The inability to fulfil societal and gendered expectations results in lies, betrayal, and a constant shift in power dynamics—all of which make the characters worthy of profound study. The paper seeks to understand the psychology behind these characters and their actions and how they differ by the setting they find themselves in using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework by dissecting the optics of a marriage through the lens of performances, witnessing how a loving marriage can descend into complete annihilation of trust, affection and lead to diabolical actions of killing, lying, manipulation and entrapment within expectations.

### Methodology & Discussion

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis of *Gone Girl*, utilising both the 2012 novel and the 2014 film adaptation, with a primary focus on understanding the nuances through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Through the lens of Goffman's dramaturgical model, an analysis can be made of how the two characters behave and negotiate their identities in various settings. According to Goffman, individuals present crafted versions of themselves to others, depending on the social setting; thus, individuals are akin to characters performing on a stage. They constantly go back and forth, navigating between the frontstage (public persona) and the backstage (private self).

Nick and Amy Dunne act as perfect vessels for understanding and analysing Goffman's framework. Their marriage itself becomes a stage where they perform the roles expected of them, curating themselves in a way that fits whatever narrative they are playing - the dutiful husband and the doting wife are portrayed to the media and the outside world. In contrast, the unfulfilled cheating husband and the shrewd manipulative wife are personal perversions of societal expectations that are saved for the private self. There is an excellent line between knowing which role is being played and performed out of pretence and what the actual intentions and motivations of the characters are.

Goffman's concept is further used through important concepts such as impression management, sign vehicles, props, settings and the audience. The goal is to dissect the psychological performances of the chaotic couple, both as individuals and as performers of gender roles and societal expectations, and to explore how complex and layered they can be.

### Frontstage vs Backstage Performance

According to Goffman, there is a frontstage where the performance of the self takes place- it is curated, filtered, and a specific image is presented to the audience.

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The backstage is where unfiltered, raw reality exists, and roles can finally be shed. This juxtaposition of front and backstage becomes a crucial element in *Gone Girl* as characters slip in and out of these stages throughout.

Amy Dunne does so like a chameleon, playing the frontstage role of an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a media darling to perfection. Her victimhood is rooted in performativity, as are her roles as a daughter and wife. She is not allowed to exist the way she wants; she has to conform to the idea of womanhood as prescribed by society. What lies deep beneath is her backstage self, who is cunning, vindictive and knows how to manipulate everyone around her to her advantage. It is best seen in the way she manoeuvres the media narrative into thinking her husband killed her, and also in the way she shifts that blame onto her former lover. She tells the camera, “We are so glad to be home” (Flynn, 2012, p. 397), even after orchestrating Desi’s murder.

Nick’s frontstage performance borders more on the clueless and untruthful side. He withholds facts from the police, especially about his infidelity, in order to be perceived more favourably; it is the result of the intangible societal pressure to be ethical and truthful, especially in matters of matrimony. Eventually, his backstage self, which harbours contempt for Amy and dissatisfaction with his marriage, merges with his frontstage self due to the overwhelmingness caused by Amy’s “disappearance”. In the end, they both lose their backstage selves as they are reduced to puppets forced to perform for the media, for the sake of their marriage, for the sake of their sanity.

### Impression Management

According to Goffman, it is when individuals consciously or subconsciously try to control the impressions they make on others. Nick and Amy, through the rigours of societal conditioning, have to make impressions that are expected and accepted by society. Amy’s impression management can be attributed to her “cool girl” persona that she constructs to woo Nick. Her monologue is not just the truth, it is also a commentary on the pressure that’s put on women to perform: “Cool girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want.” (Flynn, 2012, p. 221) “And the cool girls are even more pathetic. They are not even pretending to be the woman they want to be; they are pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be.” The *Amazing Amy* books, written by her parents, also create a sense of pressure in her to live up to the expectations, further fueling her insecurities.

Nick, on the other hand, fails to create a positive impression on the press, media, and even Amy's parents. He is unable to perform his grief; he seems detached and aloof, and when his affair with a younger student is revealed, it undermines his sincerity and intentions even more. However, he realises the importance of public perception. He can skew it in his favour by learning how to sound sincere in the interview, such as apologising to Amy on camera. Nick remarks, "My wife was a murderess – that was one hell of a marriage vow" (Flynn, 2012, p. 405). This suggests that he is aware of Amy's true nature, yet he continues to play the role of a loving spouse in an attempt to lure her back home. This underscores the crucial role that impressions play in determining a character's fate.

### Sign Vehicles

These are tools used by individuals to communicate information about themselves and mould their perception among others. The tools range from the use of language to tone to body language to dress sense. Amy's use of sign vehicles is what makes her performative victimhood so compelling and believable. She employs tears, blood, bruises- all of which make for strong visual markers of her narrative. But she takes it a step further by modifying her body language (through limping, almost fainting, crying) and her tone (whispery soft vocals) to appear helpless. She also uses gendered sign vehicles to solidify her case by using maternal phrasing, "I just wanted to be a mother", all while faking her pregnancy. Another interesting use of a sign vehicle appears when she changes her accent and appearance while hiding out in the Ozarks to hide her true identity. She similarly pretends to act submissive and modest around her ex, Desi Collings, thus weaponising the traditional feminine signifiers of vulnerability to her advantage.

Nick's use of sign vehicles helps to reveal his inner emotions of anger, dissatisfaction and confusion. The smirk at the press conference, the detached demeanour, and his overall inability to showcase concern for his missing wife all add to an air of suspicion and distrust about him. The signs on vehicles help others form their judgment about him. Only later does Nick self-correct his language and tone by showcasing glimpses of earnestness and openness in his words, which eventually win over the media, and Amy returns to him. Both Nick and Amy use sign vehicles to shape the narratives around them, and they do it so well that the line between reality and performance becomes ever so thin and hard to separate.

### Props and Setting

In a dramaturgical approach, both these tools serve as important factors in determining the identities and perceptions of the individuals. Props are objects used

by characters in ways that often reflect a part of them, thereby becoming an extension of their personalities. The setting informs individuals on how to act and present themselves in changing environments, affecting and dictating their behaviour, shaping their identities, and deepening their connections. Amy relies heavily on props to shift the blame in different situations. The way she stages the crime scene by overturning the furniture or by leaving little clues in all the places where Nick had extramarital relations or by fabricating a personal diary where she writes, “Nick will kill me. He will kill me because I know him” (Flynn, 2012, p. 215), underscoring her manipulative control of the narrative.- all of these props act as evidence that paint Nick in an unfavourable light. Similarly, she skillfully stages the murder of Desi Collings to make it seem like it was not a well-planned act of cruelty but simply self-defence. Nick’s props often include objects that point to his guilty behaviour. The clothes for his mistress, the burner phone, even his unkempt look- all serve to underscore his negligence. However, he eventually attempts to redeem himself through his memoir and by maintaining a presence in the media.

The setting serves as a constant reminder of the meanings and actions of characters and their narratives. Missouri becomes a symbol of suburban gloom, the Ozarks become a dark underbelly of secrets, and Nick and Amy’s home becomes a prison for the performance of their marriage. Even Desi’s lake house, where he is eventually murdered, represents isolation and disconnect, where no one can gauge the truth of what happened, even in the presence of cameras aplenty, thus highlighting the brilliant use of props by Amy.

### Audience

According to Goffman, the audience plays a pivotal role in shaping the interactions and performances of individuals. The reaction of the audience influences how individuals present themselves, as they manage impressions to achieve desired outcomes. Nick and Amy constantly perform for different audiences, shifting between frontstage and backstage with their behaviour depending on the kind of audience they have to interact with. The first and foremost audience they have is each other. Amy manipulates Nick, and Nick tries to appease her through performative affection. The media becomes another audience where all the domestic drama of their lives unfolds before the public's eyes. Amy crafts her narrative perfectly and extracts unwavering sympathy for her cause. Nick is initially disliked by the media and eventually learns impression management, employing favourable signs and symbols to shift his perception. The only time he is truly himself and not performing is when he is with his twin, Margo, who brings out a sense of comfort from the chaotic outside noise that Nick has to endure. The audience thus

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decides how the characters manoeuvre their behaviour, and whoever does it according to their expectations turns out to be in a better position. In this case, Amy knows exactly what the audience wants and can behave and act accordingly.

### Conclusion

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework helps in understanding the characters more profoundly, as it sheds light on the theatrics they employ. Nick and Amy emerge as characters bound by the performative roles of gender, and *Gone Girl* becomes a cautionary tale, illustrating the ill effects of societal expectations and the dangers of emotional manipulation that can lead to resentment and hatred in intimate relationships. Ultimately, Goffman's theory helps reveal the central idea of the story: Nick and Amy are nothing but performers with curated identities, enacting gender roles and manipulating the truth. Amy's astute use of impression management and Nick's inability to separate his front and backstage versions make Goffman's framework increasingly relevant in unearthing and understanding these complex characters. Thus, employing the dramaturgical theory makes *Gone Girl* a brilliant meditation on understanding the performative aspect of characters in the literary landscape.

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