# *THE RUINED FEMININE AND QUESTIONABLE PERSPECTIVES IN PAULA HAWKINS'* "THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN"

**Alexandra Roxana MĂRGINEAN***

***Abstract***: *This study concentrates on the feminine figures in the novel, be they prominent or secondary characters, assembling a glossary of female types according to the personality features that are highlighted in the story by their actions, attitudes and discourse. As the analysis unfolds, a few obvious realities as well as more covert truths come to the fore. On the one hand, all the significant female characters seem to possess ruined selves and lives, even or especially when appearances tend to show otherwise. Moreover and more importantly, on the other hand, we show that the deception entrained by appearances goes much deeper than that, as, towards the end, we realize that the character raising the highest suspicions in terms of credibility turns out to be the most reliable. Also, the bitterest enmities can turn to alliances against all odds under dire circumstances, which is yet another aspect in which the disintegrated feminine portrayed by the narrative takes us by surprise. Towards the end, we reveal the facets of the concept of ruined femininity in light of recent discoveries made available by the turn of events in the story.*

***Keywords***: *femininity, types, perspective, truth, appearances.*

## 1. Introduction

Rachel Watson is a young woman living with her best friend, who commutes from Buckingham-Ashbury to London for work daily. On the way, at a point in the road where the train habitually makes a short halt, she has time to look through the window and spy on the people living in the suburb. Thus, she observes their lives and imagines what they are like, even giving them imaginary names and identities. However, one day she witnesses a young woman in whom she has taken a particular interest kissing a man other than her husband. Rachel finds out that the woman, called Megan Hipwell, goes missing and is later on found dead. As the story unfolds, Rachel takes on the role of an imperfect detective due to her drinking problem and realizes she may have witnessed something significant for the ongoing investigation during one of her pedestrian incursions in the suburb which she is initially, nevertheless, unable to recall.

## 2. Tangled lives

The novel is conceived as a diary made up of entries coming from three different women, the first one and the predominant voice being Rachel, and the others, in the order in which they appear and the percentage held by their accounts, being Megan and Anna. This arrangement draws attention to the female characters, constituting one of the first and most overriding clues as to the importance of the feminine in the story, as women, exclusively, in the absence of any male voice, provide the readers with the overall perspective on events.

We are not clearly pointed out the existence of any connection between the three women. Although we realize that there must be one, we do not suspect it to be as

* Romanian-American University; alexandra.marginean05@yahoo.com



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

close as it is revealed as the story progresses. The women's identity is kept to a minimum, as they are introduced to us only by their first name. We soon understand why: two of the women share their last name, as Rachel is the former wife of Anna's current husband, Tom.

Megan's connection to the other two women telling the story is still the same man, Tom, as she is Tom and Anna's babysitter, as well as Tom's mistress. Anna enters the story only as we have gone through a good third of the novel, and originally has short entries, which get longer (but not more frequent) into the second half of the book.

Besides the man that they have in common, there are other small but significant features that they share. For instance, all women seem to be troubled in some way or another, bearing the imprint of psychological issues, be they more or less serious. Also, they are impressed with the railway and trains. Rachel commutes to London on a train and likes riding it as it helps her put her thoughts in order. The sound made by the railway makes Megan remember the time she lived in the beach house of one of her former lovers. Anna is annoyed by the screech of train wheels, which at the beginning seems to be the only aspect spoiling the picture perfection of her life. One more aspect that sometimes permeates the women's thoughts is the superstition linked with counting magpies and associating the number of birds one sees with divination, foretelling the future or the interpretation of the present.

## 3. Deceptive selves

### 3.1 Rachel

There are a few apparently insignificant details introduced by Rachel as self-descriptions or admissions made just-so, which in reality guide – or, should we say, misguide – us in the reading of her character.

As she is on the train to work one day, waiting for it to start moving again after the stop it makes in the area where the rails are being reconditioned, she sees a few torn clothes abandoned by the railway and immediately starts making assumptions as to who might have put them there – thinking they could have been thrown as trash from the train, left there by the workers, or how it might be something else entirely, something more mysterious. Then, she admits that she has a tendency to create stories around small details such as this one, admitting to a rich imagination and backing up this characterization with the conclusions drawn by the two people that presumably know her best – her mother and her former husband Tom, who both noticed this trait of hers at some point. Through this solidly created assumption – announced no later than in the very first paragraph of the narrative – she casts a doubt in the mind of the reader on almost everything that she will ever say. Her vivid imagination is what determines her to call the inhabitants of house fifteen on Blenheim Road, which she usually observes from the train, "Jess" and "Jason". Although these are not their real names, Rachel calls them like this for a while to us, in a matter-of-fact way, before revealing that she has no idea who they are, which is yet another aspect that adds to her unreliability as a narrator.

She introduces her drinking problem casually, as if it were not a real issue. On a Friday afternoon on the train, she is sipping some gin tonic, recalling its taste as the taste of her first holiday with Tom, associating it with long walks on the beach, swims in the sun, and lazy afternoons spent in beach bars watching football and volley players in the sand. So far, the little nostalgia for past vacations accompanied by a drink is not seemingly such a serious matter, especially as it is presented in the context of the



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

mentality referred to as TGIF ("Thank God it's Friday") (Hawkins, 2015: 13). Later on, however, the gin turns into any and all type of alcohol drunk in huge quantities at any time of a given day, and we realize that her potential drinking problem is actually turning into alcoholism. She reaches the point where the red wine bought as ingredient for steak sauce becomes a means to quench her lunchtime thirst for alcohol as Rachel also forgets the bloody meat in the kitchen where she has made a mess with all the items prepared for cooking; the meat begins to smell badly and is found rotting by Cathy upon her late return home. Sometimes Rachel even blacks out after heavy drinking.

The protagonist seems unable to take care of her body in both health and appearance. She admits to the fact that her physique leaves a lot to be desired although things have not always been so. She overhears Cathy asking her boyfriend, Damien, to find someone for Rachel to date, but Damien's retort is that he knows no one who would be that desperate. Besides having gained weight, Rachel describes herself as negligent with her clothing, wearing shirts that are too tight, but also that her clothes are in need of cleaning, bearing sweat marks and stains.

The way at the age of 32 Rachel lives with her friend Cathy from the university in the apartment of the latter makes Rachel look like a failure, especially since Cathy is not exactly her best friend, just a generous one, and since the situation has been going on for two years, since Rachel's separation from Tom. The fact that Rachel is also out of work, as she was fired for coming to the office under the influence (and not just once, apparently), that she has been pretending to still be employed – commuting each day to London and coming back in the evening – lying about her real situation to Cathy for quite a long time, paint the picture of a ruined, unsuccessful and unreliable woman.

The lies Rachel tells do not stop at the ones she uses with Cathy regarding her unemployment and her drinking. She deceives a few other people as well, using no minor, white lies. When one day she approaches Scott, Megan's husband, she introduces herself as Megan's friend from the library, leaving him the impression that Megan and she are friends, in order to be accepted as a confidante and find out details on the couple's lives and what might have caused the tragedy of Megan's death. When she wants to make her entrance to doctor Kamal Abdic (Megan's psychiatrist) for the same reason – to acquire information, she lies about needing therapy.

The picture painted by Rachel of herself is blackening with scandalous features. She appears to harass both Tom and Anna with phone calls, especially while drunk, during which she screams and proffers insults, not only during the day but also at night, which is why Anna leaves her a message on the voice mail sympathetically asking her to stop as the sound of the phone ringing wakes up Tom and Anna's small child, Evie. Occasionally, Rachel gets off the train in the suburb and watches the couple's house from across the street, behaving like a voyeurist and a stalker. She goes as far as entering the property one day and trying to walk out with baby Evie in her arms, determining Anna to call the police and report her as a potential child kidnapper.

One afternoon she wakes up from drunkenness in a panic, her pillow smeared with blood, feeling that something is different from the usual, regular state of morning sickness. Upon examining herself in the mirror, she finds bruises on her naked body, a cut on her lower lip and a bump on her head. Downstairs she sees her clothes (trousers and underwear) as well as her bag near the front door. She is in pain and nauseated at the smell of her own urine on the carpet. Fearing the worst and realizing she cannot remember what has happened – with the exception of flashes of a red-headed man coming on to her in a talk filled with sexual innuendo and then helping her off the train – she throws up before making it to the bathroom. She forgets to clean up again and all



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

the filth is found by a horrified, revolted Cathy upon her return home from work. From this portrait we suspect that Rachel might have been involved in anything from beating, rape or being a witness to something terrible, and we also add another feature to Rachel's profile: being a person of questionable morality, from a sexual point of view.

What is even worse is that her blackout and subsequent amnesia introduce the possibility of her guilt in connection to Megan's death. This theory is reinforced by the police coming to Cathy's house to question Rachel. Rachel fears her potential involvement herself, remembering how once Tom bought her a book on how people are capable of irresponsible acts under the influence of alcohol, acts which they may then have no recollection of, no matter how terrible these may be, for quite a long time afterwards, possibly forever. At the point when Rachel's guilt is hinted at in this way, we do not fully realize that Tom had had his own agenda in inducing Rachel her doubt in relation with her own sanity, namely to cover his guilt of adultery.

The two contradictory aspects of Rachel's personality – her ruined self and her clear-minded objectivity – are well suggested by a leitmotif image in the story: jotting down thoughts on the back of pieces of paper that are proof of her being a broken person. Even though Rachel appears as incapable of organizing her life, which presents itself as an incredible mess, on the back of the eviction paper from Cathy she makes a to-do list showing ordering capabilities and the harmonizing drive of her mind that synthesizes the aspects that she will need to take care of in the following hours: going to the Holborn library to search for newspaper articles on the Megan case, e-mailing her mother, finding out about the London-Ashbury AA meetings, telling Cathy about her inexistent job etc. At another time, on the back of the receipt from a spirits shop, she puts down her working hypotheses on Megan Hipwell's disappearance in order to help her weigh likelihoods and sort out the mystery surrounding the woman's death. Also, overall, she plays the detective quite well in her attempt to find out what has happened to Megan, proving that she has good intuition and logic despite her condition, catching a glimpse at subtle aspects invisible even to the police and showing a dedication, will power and perseverance unusual for somebody like her in the pursuit of the truth.

Rachel is Kristeva's abject being, which is neither subject (empowered), nor object (the other pursued out of desire) (Kristeva, 1982: 1), and both at the same time. Rachel is the writing author making us witness her internal turmoil and reasoning with respect to her drama and to the murder investigation, but at the same time shows herself as unworthy, steps aside from the central position and points the headlights towards Megan as a more interesting character. Hence, Rachel is ambivalent in her endeavor, a feature that characterizes the abject. The abject refers primarily to that which exists on the outside of rule, constantly challenging it, not to what is unclean or unhealthy, although both aspects are part of its universe: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (*ibidem*: 4) Rachel is guilty of excessive eating and drinking, but Kristeva points out that physical hunger is a sign for the symbolical hunger for truth, backing this remark with Jesus' indication that defilement comes with what "emanates" from a human being, not what enters one, and with His "multiplication of bread and fishes": "Satisfied physiological hunger gives way to unsatiable spiritual hunger" (*ibidem*: 117).



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

### 3.2 Anna

Anna is, by all intents and purposes, the conqueror, the *femme fatale* who came between Tom and his wife Rachel, becoming Tom's lover and later replacing Rachel as his wife. The first fragment in which she is the narrating voice opens on a beautiful birthday scene in which Anna, the birthday girl, is brought breakfast in bed and presents by Tom (among which a sexy black camisole), then they rest together with little Evie in between them on the bed. The image is that of a perfect couple who are still attracted to each other and even have a small child to make their happy life even more fulfilling, as if nothing is missing from it to be an ideal one.

However, the image of a happy woman is just an image after all in Anna's case. She confesses in her monologues that she misses dressing up nicely and going to a job, as she used to be a real estate agent. Nevertheless, it is not the actual work that she is nostalgic about, but the feeling of being a sexual predator, admired and desired by men, as she also admits to the fact that while being the mistress of a married man she only pretended before her friends to feel guilty and sorry for the adultery because she wanted to escape the harsh judgment of all her acquaintances. In fact, she had no remorse, as the thought of having power over a man was enticing. Anna is described by Megan (her baby-sitter) as dull, uninteresting and dominated by anxiety in connection with her child's welfare. She appears as the sexually attractive blonde type who is apparently empowered but in fact performs a mimesis of male desire by envisaging herself as an object, a marketable commodity worth more than the other women because she looks better and because she has managed to give Tom a baby unlike his former wife, in the spirit of the complacent woman in Tina Chanter's essay (Chanter, 1999: 365-6). That is why, when Tom compares her to Rachel in the end, when his mean character is revealed, Anna is offended by the comparison more than by the discovery that her husband is an appalling individual. The baby is, besides a means to show her superiority over another woman, a reminder of her possession and appropriation of the man (Tom), as Luce Irigaray points out (Irigaray, 1999).

As Anna realizes that Tom is willing to spend money on a vacation in Bali or Mauritius but not on buying another house, although she is unhappy living so close to the noisy railway and in the home of his former wife who keeps calling them there and even spying on them, she becomes suspicious and remembers other small lies Tom has told her throughout their time together, which she has let to pass at the moment. Also, he admits that he met with Rachel in person a few days before (in order to try to determine her to quit harassing them), while Anna thought he was at work because that is what he had told her. One day she cracks the password to his laptop and inspects the content without finding anything. She is relieved, but then immediately realizes that Tom has left to the gym without taking his equipment and, while arranging the bed, stumbles upon a bag hidden under it, which contains a cell phone. As she charges and opens it, she sees multiple messages that confirm the time and place of secret meetings, as well as a woman's voice on the voicemail which is – we infer – Megan's.

### 3.3 Megan

In her first self-reflexive passages, Megan reveals a few aspects that compose the present atmosphere of her mind: a nostalgia for Holkham, the place where she used to live a long time before; also, nostalgia for a time closer to the present when she used to be the director of an art gallery, a time she regrets as she contemplates the prospect of



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

getting a job as a baby sitter while also analyzing her elegant and completely unsuitable-for-this-job wardrobe. Megan takes the job, but then gives it up quickly. Her financial status allows her to be unemployed and fill her time with shopping, walks in the park and Pilates hours. She is also considering the prospects of taking a photography or gastronomy course, or of selling jewelry. All this changing of one's mind seems to be nothing more than the mood swings of a rich, bored, spoilt woman without a care in the world, who can afford them because she can afford staying out of work.

As insomnia, panic attacks, strained nerves, itches, her compulsion to throw herself at men (Abdic and Tom), the desire to travel or even thoughts of running away enter the scene, we realize that Megan's restlessness is actually not the carefree state of a spoilt woman but unhappiness, discontent with her own life verging on a depression which she tries to keep in check by paying regular visits to the psychiatrist.

Her compulsion to lure men is also a desire to control other human beings, as she admits herself, describing the feeling as head-spinning and as a kind of intoxication. This is why the relationship with her psychiatrist is governed by her constant attempts to make it unprofessional. However, as she refers at some point to clandestine romantic meetings in various hotels, although we initially think that they are with the doctor – as he is the one she has referred to in connection with her romantic fantasies first – it is unclear whether these are actually with Kamal or Tom, but we are given hints that it is the latter after all. The disturbing aspect of her being the author of the repeated night phone calls to Tom and Anna's residence shed light on Rachel's innocence and character as well as on Tom's, as he is the one who claims before Anna that they come from his ex-wife instead of Megan.

The men Megan wants to attract are older and financially potent, and she has been having this taste and behavior all her life. When she was only 15, while on an Easter holiday with her family, she almost went with her brother on the yacht of an older rich man she had just met, but it was Ben who ultimately convinced her to let go of the occasion despite her being mad at him for preventing her to do so. Also, around the same age, she let herself be picked up by another older man on the road, and then driven to his beach house; in the end, it was the man, whose name was Mac, who refused to begin a physical relationship with her, at least not for another year, until she was 16; then, 3 years later, she left him.

Dramatic aspects of Megan's past come to the fore, pointing to the causes of her multiple-layered trauma. Her brother, Ben, with whom she used to dream about taking the road, died in an accident, his head cracked against the wheels of a truck. She admits to missing him deeply and to feeling his absence like a big void in her life. The other traumatic event in her life is worse than the first because she considers it to be her fault. At some point in her relationship with Mac, Megan got pregnant and had a little girl, Elisabeth-Libby, but one thunderstorm cold night, as she entered the tub with the baby on her chest in order to get warm after having drunk a bit for the same reason, she fell asleep and woke up to find the lifeless body of her child face down in the bathtub. She recounts all this to her psychiatrist, obviously overwhelmed with guilt.

Taking into account the losses that she has experienced, we can infer that Megan suffers from "separation anxiety", defined as a "dread of losing the object believed capable of protecting or relieving one" (Rycroft, 1972: 150-1). She lost her brother and that translated in a need to ensure that all men in her life – potential protectors – stood by her, and is also the reason why these men are always older. Her refusal to leave Scott despite her being attracted to others, and the fact that she feels secure by his side is also a consequence of her anxiety. In her case, Scott is also "her



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

defense against some other form of anxiety" (*ibidem*: 150), namely against "psychotic anxiety", which refers to "threats to identity" (*ibidem*: 8), and against "depressive anxiety", which is a "fear of one's own hostility towards 'good objects'" (*ibidem*). Let us explain. Her identity is threatened because her other fear, which is even greater than that of losing her male protector, is admitting that she is a child murderer. By killing her small baby out of negligence she became a danger to and destroyer of the "good objects" mentioned in psychoanalysis.

### 3.4 Riley

Detective sergeant Riley appears in the story as the female officer accompanying detective Gaskill in the room where Rachel gives her statement about what she remembers from the night Megan disappeared. Riley is introduced as a slender tall brunette woman, fairly attractive with her sharp features, and inquisitive and suspicious with Rachel.

Riley's character is meant to emphasize Rachel's unreliability. During the police interview all of Riley's gestures suggest Rachel's untrustworthiness: raising her eyebrows at Rachel's admission of unemployment, shaking her head a couple of times, frowning as if to convey the idea that Rachel is deranged, and displaying insincere smiles to show the situation is serious enough that these are needed to soften its gravity.

As a woman employed in the police workforce, she seems to subvert the idea of traditional authority associated with masculinity. We could say that she is an example of subversion of typical male-female *hexis* i.e. values embodied in postures and ways of being (Crossley, 2001: 154-8), because she possesses the well-trained, disciplined body employed in the service of order-making (which normally belongs to a man), but not devoid of physical attractiveness, and because she likes clear facts spilled out without sentimentalisms and subtlety, just like men who dislike emotionality.

Paradoxically, this stance has its usefulness both in the reinforcement of the protagonist Rachel's credibility, by showing that truth/power/authority/the center may lie associated with unexpected figures, and in undermining Rachel – as, since a woman that would normally show solidarity becomes an accuser of the protagonist, disapproving her, the suggestion may be that the protagonist is indeed unreliable.

## 4. Revealing deception

The key to the whole mystery and entanglement of affairs and murder lies in Rachel remembering what happened the night before she woke up bruised and sick in Cathy's apartment and which has been a blank in her memory for quite a long time.

One morning she awakens knowing everything, as a result of a nightmare during which her mind recomposes the chain of events accurately. She remembers that the night in question she went to Blenheim and met Tom, who hit her and then got in his car next to Megan, not Anna as she has believed all along. The reason why they were together in the car was because Megan had repeatedly been asking him to see her ever since she had discovered she was pregnant, and Tom had been refusing because he was already bored with her. But when she started calling his house threatening to come there, he took her in his car, and they went to a parking lot, where, upon finding the news of her pregnancy and seeing she was intent on keeping the baby, he killed her.

As soon as Rachel remembers that night and realizes the implications – that Tom is the murderer of Megan and their unborn baby, she visits Anna and tells her



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

everything, but they are surprised by Tom in the middle of the conversation. As the two women confront him in regard to the above-mentioned events, he gradually admits to the facts, trying to explain that he was bored and that it was the women's fault. He sequesters them both, but Rachel manages to run in the garden, and, as Tom pursues her with the intention to kill, she sticks a corkscrew in his neck; Tom falls to the ground and Anna comes from behind him and kneels by his body, not in order to help, as Rachel initially thinks, but to make sure he dies, thrusting the corkscrew deeper in his throat. Anna corroborates Rachel's statement of self-defense to the police and the novel ends with Rachel's determination to catch the morning train to London to start a new life.

## 5. Conclusion

This unexpected turn shows collaboration between the worst enemies of the story – Rachel and Anna, Tom's former and present wife. The central male figure who duped three women is shown to be a pathetic disturbed individual, a chronic liar and someone who inspires pity rather than dread because of his obvious mental disturbance. As the truth comes out we realize that he interrupted all communication with his parents not because of his father being a rough, adamant man, but because, despite Tom having stolen the family money and his father having forgiven him for it, Tom was the one who still cut all ties with them. Also, notwithstanding his repeated lies linked with meeting former combat comrades, we find out that he never managed to enter the military service as he was refused twice. In this light, the two women who appeared to be failures and victims become empowered and eliminate the threat that would have otherwise menaced their lives forever, also raising above the animosities seething between them for obvious reasons. The ruined feminine turns out to be deceptive in essence, as the women prove more powerful and capable than they seemed. All Rachel's suspicions are demonstrated to be more than a drunken woman's aberrations, as she practically solves the murder case by herself. Moreover, the women's lives gain some perspective with this unveiling of the mystery, which changes the courses of their existences for the better.

The realities in the story get their lines blurred and the reader's perspective tends to mix them, confusing one for the other, just as it happens with one's vision while admiring the scenery from the window of a speeding train. Contours get indistinct and images run into one another and can often be muddled or seem unclear. The perspective offered in the end, nevertheless, is crystal clear, as the disorder is made sense of and the links between events and characters are explained thoroughly.

As yet another closure, Rachel has a funerary stone arranged for the tomb she saw nearby the railway at the beginning of the story, and which belongs to Megan's first child, Libby, whose remains are finally given a name and can rest in peace.

***References***

Chanter, Tina. "Beyond Sex and Gender: On Luce Irigaray's This Sex which Is not One". *The Body. Classic and Contemporary Readings.* Ed. Donn Welton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999. 361-375. Print.

Crossly, Nick. *The Social Body. Habit, Identity and Desire*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001. Print.

Hawkins, Paula. *Fata din tren (The Girl on the Train)*. Translated by Ionela Chirilă. Bucharest: Trei Publishing House, 2015. Print.

Irigaray, Luce. "Female Desire". *The Body. Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Ed. Donn Welton. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999. 353-360. Print.



BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)

Rycroft, Charles. *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972. Print.
Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia Press University, 1982. Print.



**BDD-A29927 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 13:01:38 UTC)**