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The Art of Manipulation: Exploring Gaslighting in James Thurber's Narratives

You can fool too many people, too much of the time.
James Thurber

Abstract

Gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation, represents a complex discourse with significant linguistic dimensions. Despite its relevance, it has received relatively little attention in linguistic research. This paper investigates the linguistic manifestations of gaslighting in James Thurber's works, drawing on excerpts from *The Unicorn in the Garden (1939)*, *The Little Girl and the Wolf (1939)*, and *The Great Quillow (1944)*.

The theoretical framework integrates speech act theory (Austin, 1961; Searle, 1979), the theory of the linguistic order of gaslighting (Catapang Podoski, 2020), and approaches from linguo-stylistics and discourse analysis (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981; Verdonk, 2002). The analysis demonstrates that gaslighting in Thurber's stories is primarily enacted through explicit assertive speech acts. These assertives satisfy both preparatory and sincerity conditions, enabling the speaker to achieve the intended perlocutionary effect on the listener.

In Thurber's narratives, gaslighting is shown to operate predominantly as first-order gaslighting: it does not overtly negate the victim's perception of reality. Still, it subtly reshapes it to the manipulator's advantage. Moreover, stylistic devices such as epithets, similes, and metaphors enhance the linguistic construction of gaslighting, reinforcing manipulation strategies and rendering them more covert and insidious.

This study provides insights into how language functions as a tool of manipulation and control, offering implications for literary analysis and the understanding of real-world communicative practices.

Keywords: *gaslighting, language order, manipulation, speech act theory*

1.Introduction

A popular quote, often attributed to Sigmund Freud, says, *Everywhere I go, I find that a poet has been there before me.* One can hardly argue with this statement, as authors of literary works had been exploring the depths of the human psyche long before psychoanalysis emerged. In literature, we find remarkable portrayals of complex characters and detailed depictions of the sophisticated ways they behave and interact with others. Literary villains, in particular, often plot against the virtuous, demonstrating remarkable manipulation skills.

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James Thurber (1894-1961), a master of humour and satire, is brilliant at portraying vivid human characters. His works often explore social and interpersonal contexts, revealing the absurdities of communication and relationships. Through sharp wit and keen observation, Thurber captures the peculiarities of individual interactions and reflects on broader societal issues. Not surprisingly, his stories exhibit elements of such socio-linguistic phenomena as gaslighting, illustrating skilled manipulators and their attempts to exert control in both interpersonal and social contexts.

This paper aims to explore the peculiarities of the linguistic realisation of gaslighting in James Thurber's narratives *(The Unicorn in the Garden, 1939; The Little Girl and the Wolf, 1939;* and *The Great Quillow, 1944)* from the standpoint of speech act theory (Austin, 1961; Searle, 1979) and the theory of linguistic order (Catapang Podosky, 2020). Additionally, the study examines the stylistic devices used to enhance manipulation.

Observations indicate that while gaslighting is typically a destructive manipulation tactic, in James Thurber's narratives, it often serves as a tool for the righteous to outwit evil and restore justice. Rather than being purely harmful, in Thurber's work, it becomes a strategic means of overcoming tyranny and deception. Nevertheless, from a linguistic standpoint, it comprises all the manipulative techniques inherent to gaslighting — a subject that will be explored in greater depth in this paper.

2. Theoretical Framework

Gaslighting, *a form of verbal, cognitively oriented psychological manipulation,* represents a complex discourse with significant linguistic implications (Purtseladze, 2024a). As one of the most destructive psychological manipulation tactics, gaslighting involves numerous linguistic strategies employed by the speaker (gaslighter), making it particularly harmful to the hearer (victim). Recent studies indicate that verbal manipulation in gaslighting mainly relies on assertive speech acts. Three distinct types of assertives commonly found in gaslighting discourse are explicit assertives, where the encoded message directly corresponds to the literal illocutionary act; covert assertives, in which an assertive speech act is embedded within a different illocutionary act; and inclusive assertives, which encode a message within an assertive speech act that implicitly contains another illocutionary act, such as a directive or a commissive (Purtseladze, 2024a).

The effectiveness of gaslighting can be attributed to the interplay of directions of fit that govern verbal manipulation. Specifically, gaslighters employ assertive speech acts aligned with reality, following the word-to-world direction of fit. Their statements, whether based on accurate or deceptive past or present observations, become felicitous due to interpersonal factors such as the hearer's *trust* (Searle, 1979, p. 44). As a result, these assertives may adopt a world-to-word fit orientation, as the hearer perceives them as reliable and unconsciously adjusts his or her perception accordingly. The pragmatic aspects of gaslighting extend beyond traditional speech act theory. In gaslighting scenarios, assertive speech acts demonstrate a double direction of fit, meaning they not only describe reality but also aim to alter it — an attribute not typically associated with assertives. Moreover, the gaslighter establishes predetermined felicity conditions that influence the communicative context. These factors play a crucial role in producing the intended perlocutionary effect, impacting the hearer's perception and interpretation of reality (Purtseladze, 2024a).

When subjected to gaslighting, individuals may start to question their perception of reality in various ways. According to P.M. Catapang Podosky, the level and nature of this doubt depend on the linguistic order in which the gaslighting interaction takes place. This distinction results in two types of gaslighting: first-order and second-order gaslighting. First-order gaslighting occurs when there is a disagreement about

whether a shared concept applies to a specific aspect of reality. In this case, the speaker's use of language causes the hearer to doubt his or her ability to interpret a situation correctly. However, their confidence in the underlying concept remains intact. Second-order gaslighting, on the other hand, occurs when there is a disagreement over which concept should be applied in a particular context. Here, the speaker's language leads the hearer to doubt not only their interpretive abilities but also the validity of the concept being used. This deeper level of doubt makes the manipulation more profound, reshaping the hearer's fundamental understanding of reality. First-order gaslighting undermines perception within an established framework, while second-order gaslighting challenges that framework itself (Catapang Podosky, 2020).

In summary, from a linguistic perspective, gaslighting operates at the intersection of semantics and pragmatics, making it a highly effective form of psychological manipulation. Semantically, gaslighters manipulate the meanings of words and concepts to instil confusion and self-doubt in the hearer. (Purtseladze, 2024b) Pragmatically, they exploit speech acts and shape communicative contexts to alter the hearer's perception of reality.

3. Methodology

3.1. Instruments

This article employs a qualitative literary and linguistic analysis to examine the presence and function of gaslighting in James Thurber's works. The study focuses on close readings of selected texts, identifying narrative structures, character interaction patterns, and the linguistic means by which gaslighting functions as a central or underlying mechanism within the plot. (Haupt, 2022; Gillis, 2023; Holland, 2023; Wilson, 2024) Additionally, it applies linguistic frameworks, particularly speech act theory as proposed by J.L. Austin and J. Searle, to analyse how gaslighting is enacted through linguistic behaviour. The theory of linguistic order, developed by Catapang Podoski, is utilized in this study to explore how language patterns influence cognition and facilitate psychological manipulation within James Thurber's works.

3.2. Data Collection Procedures

The texts selected for analysis feature, either explicitly or implicitly, gaslighting as a key element of the plot. For this study, ten (10) conversation excerpts from the chosen literary works were examined. The identification of gaslighting in these excerpts relies on psychological definitions and linguistic markers commonly associated with the phenomenon. The excerpts were chosen based on their relevance to the concept of gaslighting, with particular attention to the harmful effects on the hearer as depicted within the narrative. This criterion aligns with the psychological core of gaslighting — a manipulative act aimed at affecting the hearer's perception of reality. In each of the selected excerpts, the linguistic interaction does not merely involve disagreement or conflict; rather, it results in confusion, self-doubt, or a shift in control that disempowers the victim.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following a classification of assertive speech acts specific to gaslighting (Purtseladze, 2024a), built upon the traditional speech act classification proposed by J. Searle. (Searle, 1979) Particular attention was given to the analysis of felicity conditions (Austin, 1961) of the utterances produced by the speaker. Additional focus was placed on stylistic devices, if present, that contributed to the linguistic realisation of gaslighting. This approach enabled the identification and interpretation of the linguistic

strategies employed in gaslighting scenarios depicted in James Thurber's works. Due to space limitations, only some excerpts will be discussed in this paper.

4. Findings and Discussion: Gaslighting in James Thurber's Narratives

James Thurber (1894–1961) was an American writer, cartoonist, and humorist renowned for his wit and satirical view of modern life. A long-standing contributor to The New Yorker, he combined humour with social critique. Politically, he was sceptical of authoritarianism and valued individual freedom, though he avoided overt partisanship. Nevertheless, he satirised contemporary society, mocking its rigid structures, pointless rules, and unquestioning adherence to convention.

Psychological manipulation is a subtle yet significant theme in James Thurber's works. His stories often feature characters who utilize language and social conventions to control, confuse, or undermine others. As stated earlier, in this paper, I will analyse *The Unicorn in the Garden (1939)*, *The Little Girl and the Wolf (1939)*, and *The Great Quillow (1944)*. These stories have been chosen for their distinct and original portrayal of gaslighting and their effectiveness in illustrating psychological manipulation. Rather than examining them chronologically, I will discuss them based on the complexity of the gaslighting depicted in each narrative, starting with the least sophisticated tactic and gradually progressing towards more original ones.

4.1. The Great Quillow

The Great Quillow (1944) is a short story by James Thurber in which a small, unassuming toymaker cleverly overcomes a fierce giant named Hunder and saves his town from destruction. Using his intelligence, creativity, and skillful manipulation, Quillow convinces the giant that he is suffering from a mysterious illness with strange symptoms, which Quillow orchestrates with the townspeople's help to make the illness appear real. He then persuades Hunder that the only possible cure is to bathe in yellow waters at dawn, in the middle of the vast blue sea. Believing this, the giant rushes to the sea in desperation, only to drown as he swims further, convinced he is following the recommended remedy.

Before analysing the selected excerpts, it is important to emphasise that gaslighting, as a sustained form of manipulation, develops gradually. For the gaslighter to achieve his or her intended effect, he or she must first establish the necessary conditions that allow the manipulation to succeed. In this context, timing is crucial, as it enables the speaker to create the illusion that their assertive speech acts meet two key felicity conditions: the preparatory condition and the sincerity condition (Purtseladze, 2024a).

According to Austin, the preparatory condition ensures that the circumstances and people involved are suitable for effectively executing a speech act. Conversely, the sincerity condition requires that the speaker genuinely believes in the truthfulness of their statements. (Austin, 1975:14f). The process of establishing these necessary conditions is clearly demonstrated in the following excerpt.

Once upon a time, […]a giant came to our town from a thousand leagues away, stepping over the hills and rivers. He was so mighty a giant that he could stamp upon the ground with his foot and cause the cows in the fields to turn flip-flops in the air and land on their feet again.

Garf, growled Hunder, I can stamp upon the ground with my foot and empty a lake of its water.

I have no doubt of that, O Hunder, said Quillow, for the thunder is your plaything and the mountains are your stool. But the giant who came over the hills and rivers many and many a year ago was a lesser giant than Hunder. He was weak. He fell ill of a curious malady. He was forced to run to the ocean and bathe in the yellow waters, for only the yellow waters in the middle of the sea could cure the giant.

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Rowf, snarled Hunder, picking up another sheep. That giant was a goose, that giant was a grasshopper. Hunder is never sick. […]

This other giant, said Quillow, had no ailment of the chest or the stomach or the mouth or the ears or the eyes or the arms or the legs.

Where else can a giant have an ailment? demanded Hunder.

[…]In the mind, said Quillow. […]No one to this day knows what brought on this dreadful disease in the mind of the other giant, said Quillow. (The Great Quillow. J. Thurber, 1944)

This passage illustrates gaslighting as a language-based cognitive tactic in action. Quillow shapes Hunder's perception using explicit assertives, embedding his message within an innocent-sounding story. By suggesting that giants can suffer from a *disease of the mind*, he introduces doubt, prompting Hunder to question his invulnerability.

Quillow carefully constructs felicity conditions to make his manipulation effective. The preparatory condition is established by linking the illness to a past event, making it seem plausible. Hunder's engagement reinforces the sincerity condition — his question *Where else can a giant have an ailment*? indicates he is beginning to internalise Quillow's framing.

Ultimately, Quillow's strategy embodies the essence of gaslighting: the gradual erosion of confidence and perception. Here, Thurber skillfully depicts gaslighting involving triangulation[1], which includes diminishment and idealisation. Quillow introduces a fictional past giant as a comparative figure to influence Hunder's perception of himself. By portraying the other giant as inferior to Hunder, using epithets such as *lesser* and *weak*, Quillow diminishes him, reinforcing the idea that true giants — like Hunder — should be invincible. At the same time, Quillow idealises Hunder, boosting his ego with metaphors like *the thunder is your plaything and the mountains are your stool.* This strategic flattery makes Hunder more receptive to Quillow's claims, while planting the idea that even mighty giants might succumb to an unseen *disease of the mind.* Through these tactics, Quillow gradually shifts Hunder's perception, demonstrating the essence of gaslighting: undermining certainty through subtle yet calculated influence.

Let us now see how gaslighting unfolds in the next excerpt.

Did this goose, this grasshopper, have pains in his head? he asked. […]

This other giant, said Quillow, suffered no pain. His symptoms were marvelous and dismaying. First, he heard the word. For fifteen minutes one morning, beginning at a quarter of six, he heard the word. […]

What was the word the giant heard for fifteen minutes one day?

The word was 'woddly', said Quillow. All words were one word to him. All words were 'woddly'. […]

I shall bring you a better tale tomorrow, said Quillow. Meanwhile, be sure to see the first star over your left shoulder, do not drink facing downstream, and always sleep with your heart to the east.

Why should Hunder practice this foolish rigmarole? asked the giant.

No one knows to this day, said Quillow, what caused the weird illness in the mind of the other giant. (The Great Quillow . J. Thurber, 1944)

This passage demonstrates the use of explicit and covert assertives in Quillow's manipulation of Hunder. The explicit assertive occurs when Quillow describes the mysterious illness of the other giant, presenting it as a fact and subtly implying that giants are not immune to sickness. The covert assertive is employed when Quillow issues directives — instructing Hunder to follow specific rituals (*see the first star over your left shoulder,* etc.) — but embeds them within an assertive framework. This blurs the line between statement and command, making Hunder more likely to comply without questioning.

[1] *Triangulation* is the act of introducing a third party to influence or control the dynamics of a relationship. (Holland, 2023)

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Additionally, Quillow employs *a double bind*[1], a classic gaslighting technique. He reassures Hunder that he is not affected by the illness, yet simultaneously introduces doubt by stating that the cause remains unknown. This contradiction creates psychological tension, making Hunder anxious and prompting him to focus on self-preservation rather than oppressing the townspeople. By shifting Hunder's attention to his vulnerability, Quillow strengthens his control over the situation, further isolating Hunder from independent reasoning. The following excerpt demonstrates how Quillow continues to use his manipulative approach.

The following excerpt demonstrates how Quillow continues to implement his manipulative approach.

It is the malady! I have heard the word! It is the malady! cried Hunder. What am I to do to cure the malady?[…]I heard the word, he said. All men said the word,

What word? asked Quillow.

Woddly, said the giant

'That is but the first symptom, said Quillow reassuringly, and it has passed. Look at the chimneys of the town. Are they not red?

Hunder looked. Yes, the chimneys are red, said Hunder. Why do you ask if the chimneys are red?

So long as the chimneys are red, said Quillow, you have no need to worry, for when the second symptom is upon you, the chimneys of the town turn black.

I see only red chimneys, said the giant. But what could have caused Hunder to hear the word? […]

Perhaps, said Quillow, you stepped on a centaur's grave or waked the sleeping unicorn or whistled on Saint Nillin's Day. (The Great Quillow . J. Thurber, 1944)

Quillow employs explicit assertives to manipulate Hunder, exploiting the preestablished felicity conditions in this passage. The first symptom, hearing the word *woddly,* is fabricated with the townspeople's assistance, who repeat the word to Hunder. This ensures the sincerity condition is fulfilled, as Hunder believes the event to be real, thereby making Quillow's subsequent statements more convincing.

Quillow also bolsters the deception by asserting that the second symptom will cause the chimneys to turn black. This shifts Hunder's focus from questioning his supposed illness to anxiously awaiting further signs, deepening his psychological confusion.

Furthermore, Quillow offers arbitrary explanations for the cause of the illness, such as stepping on a centaur's grave. These explanations generate an aura of mystery, enhancing the credibility of the manipulation. They also divert Hunder from doubting the illness, keeping him focused on avoiding additional symptoms. By establishing a system of symptoms and causes, Quillow increases his control over Hunder, exemplifying gaslighting in its most effective form.

Let us now examine the following example to trace the progression of gaslighting.

When you see the blue men, he said, it is the third and last symptom of the malady. If that should happen, you must rush to the sea and bathe in the yellow waters or your strength will become the strength of a kitten. […]

I will do as you say, teller of tales, said the giant, for you are wise beyond the manner of men. (The Great Quillow . J. Thurber, 1944)

In this passage, Quillow uses inclusive assertives to influence Hunder by embedding commands within descriptive statements. For example, when he says, *When you see the blue men, it is the third and last symptom of the malady,* he implies that Hunder should respond by rushing to the sea when faced with the final symptom. This method conceals the directive within an assertion, making it less obvious.

[1] *A double bind* is a situation where a person receives two conflicting messages, which makes it difficult to respond appropriately. This can be confusing and may influence the person's behaviour in a way that limits his/her ability to make a clear decision. (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956)

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From the perspective of felicity conditions, the preparatory condition is met since Hunder already believes in the illness, and the sincerity condition is fulfilled because Quillow's words appear genuine to him. Hunder's trust in Quillow reflects his belief in the advice, which ensures the manipulation's success.

The subsequent excerpt exemplifies the peak of gaslighting and shows that Quillow has achieved his aim. At this stage, Hunder is completely convinced of his supposed ailment and reacts with panic to the imagined symptoms.

The blue men! cried Hunder. The blue men have come! The world is filled with little blue men!

I see no blue men, said Quillow, but you have begun to shrink like the brook in dry weather, and that is the sign of the third symptom.

The sea! The sea! Point me to the sea! (The Great Quillow . J. Thurber, 1944)

In this passage, Quillow skillfully employs gaslighting techniques through assertive speech acts. He begins with an explicit assertive, denying Hunder's claim of seeing the blue men and suggesting that Hunder's condition is worsening. This denial undermines Hunder's sense of reality, implying that his perception is flawed. Quillow then shifts to an inclusive assertive tone, combining an assertion about Hunder's shrinking with an implied directive, indirectly prompting him to rush to the sea. The felicity conditions of the speech acts are met: the preparatory condition is established by creating a sense of urgency and presenting Hunder's actions as necessary, while the sincerity condition is maintained as Quillow continually presents Hunder's symptoms as genuine.

Additionally, the simile *shrinking like the brook in dry weather* intensifies the illusion of illness, making Hunder more vulnerable to Quillow's manipulation. Using these linguistic techniques, Quillow guides Hunder to act according to his design.

In conclusion, *The Great Quillow* illustrates how the speaker uses explicit, covert, and inclusive assertives to manipulate the hearer's perception, gradually shifting his sense of reality. Thurber effectively makes Quillow's statements believable and convincing by skillfully fabricating felicity conditions, particularly the preparatory and sincerity conditions. Stylistic devices such as epithets, metaphors, and similes amplify the illusion of illness, making Hunder more susceptible to gaslighting.

It should be emphasised that what Thurber depicts in *The Great Quillow* can be identified as an instance of first-order gaslighting, because the main character manipulates the giant's perception, instilling a false belief into him without explicitly denying reality. As is well known, in first-order gaslighting, the speaker does not outright reject the hearer's reality but instead shapes his or her perception in a way that leads to false conclusions (Catapang Podosky, 2020). Unlike second-order gaslighting, where the victim's ability to trust his or her perceptions is eroded through denial and contradiction, first-order gaslighting operates by exploiting a person's existing beliefs or vulnerabilities and guiding him or her towards a false but seemingly logical conclusion. Quillow does not tell the giant he is imagining things — he provides him with a version of reality that leads to self-deception. First-order gaslighting is the optimal choice for Quillow, since it allows him to outsmart the giant without confrontation. This method works particularly well because the giant relies on his reasoning to reach the wrong conclusions, which renders him more susceptible to fear and retreat.

4.2. The Unicorn in the Garden

The Unicorn in the Garden (1939), one of Thurber's most renowned stories, skillfully portrays first-order gaslighting in personal relationships. The protagonist, a husband exhausted by his toxic marriage, manipulates his wife into believing he has lost his sanity by claiming to have seen a unicorn in their garden. Once the wife becomes convinced of his supposed mental instability and eagerly contacts the authorities to

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have him institutionalised, the husband reverses the narrative. As a result, it is the wife who appears delusional, leading to her being restrained in a straitjacket and taken away. Now, let us examine in more detail how gaslighting is linguistically constructed in this story.

There's a unicorn in the garden, he said. Eating roses. She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. The unicorn is a mythical beast, she said, and turned her back on him. […]

The unicorn, he said, ate a lily. His wife sat up in bed and looked at him coldly. You are a booby, she said, and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch. […]

He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead, he told her. […]

Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn? asked the police. Of course not, said the husband. The unicorn is a mythical beast. That's all I wanted to know, said the psychiatrist. Take her away. I'm sorry sir, but your wife is as crazy as a jay bird. (The Unicorn in the Garden . J. Thurber, 1939)

As seen from the excerpt above, the husband repeatedly claims to see a unicorn in the garden, describing its actions in detail: *There's a unicorn in the garden. Eating roses.* His statements are explicit assertives, as they convey information about the external world. However, the hidden assertion within them — *I have lost touch with reality* — is never explicitly stated. Instead, the wife is led to infer this conclusion herself.

The felicity conditions are satisfied because the wife understands that unicorns do not exist: *The unicorn is a mythical beast.* Her prior knowledge acts as a condition that allows her to dismiss her husband's claims as absurd and to infer that he is no longer in touch with reality. Additionally, his insistence — *The unicorn ate a lily* — introduces ambiguity, as his detailed descriptions — *He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead* — suggest he genuinely perceives the unicorn. The sincerity condition of his speech acts is thus fulfilled, further supporting the possibility that he may indeed be delusional.

When the wife, convinced of his madness, attempts to have him institutionalised, the husband suddenly changes his narrative. To the police, he denies ever claiming to have seen a unicorn: *Of course not. The unicorn is a mythical beast.* This final statement is also an assertive, but unlike his previous claims, it now aligns with reality, making it fully felicitous. Since his wife has already acted on the assumption of his insanity, she now appears irrational. Her earlier belief in a claim that contradicts his final assertion discredits her, leading to her institutionalisation while the husband remains in control.

Through this seemingly simple use of speech acts, manipulation of felicity conditions, and embedded meanings, Thurber illustrates the destructive effect of first-order gaslighting. The wife is not manipulated into questioning her own reality but into believing a false narrative about her husband, one that ultimately turns against her. This reversal is what sets Thurber's portrayal of psychological manipulation apart — it shows how gaslighting does not always involve making someone doubt his or her own sanity but can also operate by manipulating one into constructing and defending a false narrative that ultimately harms the hearer. This is precisely what makes this instance of gaslighting unique.

4.3. The Little Girl and the Wolf

James Thurber's *The Little Girl and the Wolf (1939)* is a satirical retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood.* In this version, the girl is notably more intelligent and perceptive than the traditional character. When she encounters the wolf disguised as her grandmother, she immediately recognises the deception and outsmarts him. Instead of being naïve, she applies logic and quick reasoning to turn the situation to her advantage, subverting the conventional fairy tale narrative. In this manner, Thurber emphasises intelligence over conformity, employing his characteristic irony and dark humour.

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This story is notable not so much for its linguistic depiction of gaslighting, but for its reversal of traditional gender stereotypes. In classic fairy tales, female characters are often portrayed as naïve, passive, or in need of rescue, while male figures — protectors or predators — dominate the narrative. (Meland, 2020) However, Thurber reverses this pattern. The girl in the story is neither gullible nor defenceless; she quickly recognises the wolf's deception and refuses to be misled. By using intelligence and critical thinking rather than fear or submission, she dismantles the expected victim-predator dichotomy. This can be observed in the following excerpt:

When the little girl opened the door of her grandmother's house, she saw that there was somebody in bed with a nightcap on. She had approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So, the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead. (The Little Girl and the Wolf. J. Thurber, 1939)

In the original *Little Red Riding Hood,* the wolf's deception relies entirely on first-order gaslighting. He does not try to make the girl doubt her ability to perceive reality (which would be second-order gaslighting). Instead, he presents her with a false reality that she is expected to accept without question. By disguising himself as the grandmother, the wolf does not challenge the girl's mental faculties or try to make her believe she is imagining things. Instead, he creates a misleading situation and expects her to be fooled. The iconic dialogue (*What big eyes you have!* etc.) reinforces this illusion, leading her to engage with it rather than reject it outright. This aligns with first-order gaslighting, where the manipulator imposes false events rather than directly undermining the victim's sense of reason.

In Thurber's version, the expectation of this gaslighting scenario is set up but immediately subverted. Instead of being lured into questioning her perception, the girl recognises the wolf and acts decisively. The humorous analogy — *for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge* — undermines the very premise of gaslighting, as it emphasises the absurdity of mistaking the wolf for a human. Thurber eliminates the psychological manipulation, presenting a protagonist who is neither naïve, nor vulnerable. This sharp reversal not only satirises traditional fairy-tale gender roles but also dismantles the underlying mechanism of gaslighting by portraying a heroine who trusts her perception and takes immediate action. This shift challenges deeply ingrained social expectations, portraying the female protagonist as independent and capable rather than helpless. In doing so, Thurber critiques not just the conventions of fairy tales but broader societal assumptions about gender roles, illustrating how awareness and rationality can serve as tools of empowerment.

The story's moral — *It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be* — stresses the idea that the gaslighting effect depends on the victim's willingness to accept a false reality, which is vividly portrayed in the original fairy tale. Thurber's phrase *not so easy to fool little girls nowadays* constitutes a wider commentary on changing expectations concerning gender roles, implying that women (or society in general) have become more sceptical and resistant to manipulation. The story highlights the importance of critical thinking and autonomy by subverting the expected gaslighting scenario, suggesting that awareness and resilience are vital against deception.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, although gaslighting is often associated with destructive, manipulative behaviour, in James Thurber's works, it paradoxically functions as a defence mechanism against perceived evil or oppression. Rather than portraying gaslighting as malicious, Thurber employs it as a strategic response to toxic influence in personal relationships and wider societal contexts.

The empirical analysis confirms that the linguistic expression of gaslighting in the examined texts predominantly involves explicit assertives — statements that perform assertive illocutionary acts while conveying implicit messages. These underlying assertions are carefully crafted to influence the hearer (victim) in favour of the speaker (gaslighter). Covert and inclusive assertives are less frequent in Thurber's works because his style tends towards directness and transparency, emphasising clear, explicit statements that highlight the irony for which he is renowned and align with the conventions of the fable genre. Such speech acts achieve their intended perlocutionary effect because they meet two key felicity conditions: the preparatory condition, which presupposes that the shared context allows the speaker to make the assertion, and the sincerity condition, which assumes that the speaker genuinely believes in what they are saying. However, in Thurber's narratives, these conditions are distorted — felicity is manufactured and sincerity feigned — a characteristic feature of gaslighting discourse.

The findings also indicate that the type of cognitively-oriented psychological manipulation depicted in Thurber's stories can be classified as first-order gaslighting. Unlike second-order gaslighting, which gradually causes the victim to question their sanity or judgment, first-order gaslighting in Thurber's work does not directly challenge the victim's perception of reality. Instead, it reinterprets the narrative to turn it against the victim. Thurber favours first-order gaslighting due to its subtlety, fitting the context of gradual and covert manipulation. Using this form of influence allows him to craft the irony and absurdity typical of his style, as the manipulation happens without overt conflict, making the distortion of reality more convincing within the story's framework.

Furthermore, Thurber enhances the effect of manipulation through stylistic devices such as epithets, similes, and metaphors.

This study emphasises the importance of analysing gaslighting through psychological perspectives, discourse analysis, and linguistic pragmatics. Understanding how language can shape perception and distort reality — even subtly, under the guise of humour — remains vital for raising awareness of the mechanisms behind real-world manipulation.

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