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WOMEN'S OBJECTIFICATION THROUGH EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION IN DIARY OF AN OXYGEN THIEF: A FEMINIST LITERARY STUDY

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Abstract
In this study, emotional objectification of women is studied through emotional manipulation in Diary of an Oxygen Thief by Anonymous (2016) through a feminist literary approach that combines Nussbaum's (1995) theory of objectification with feminist narratology. The study highlights the presentation of women's emotional objectification through emotional manipulation and how the point of view of the male narrator shows the process of objectification of women's emotions. Emotional objectification is defined here as treating a woman's emotions as an instrument for the narrator's purposes while denying her own emotional subjectivity. This study adopts the qualitative literary research design. The data used in the study are the chosen excerpts from the literary work, which include narration, dialogue, thoughts, actions, and descriptions of emotional manipulation, objectification of women, and point of view of the narrator. As revealed by these findings, it can be observed that the narrative perspective of the narrator towards women allows him to engage in emotional manipulation. In his account, the narrator presents women as weak, treats them as a category, and interprets their emotions according to his own expectation; because he is the only source of information about them, claims about the women's feelings are treated as inferences from his narration. Emotional manipulation occurs when a woman's vulnerability is identified, affection or attention is offered by the narrator, it is later withdrawn so as to create emotional pain for her, and the reaction from her part is interpreted as a proof of the manipulation by the narrator. Emotional manipulation acts as an instrument of emotional objectification of women's emotions whereby they become mere tools in the hands of men.
Keywords: Emotional Manipulation, Emotional Objectification, Feminist Literary Criticism, Patriarchy, Misogyny, Narrative Reliability.

INTRODUCTION

Women's objectification is often discussed in terms of the body, but it can also work through emotions. Manne (2017) argues that misogyny is not merely a form of hatred toward women but also a way of maintaining patriarchal norms and expectations. This view helps explain how emotional manipulation and other harmful behaviors toward women can occur in everyday relationships.

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The feminist movement focuses on women's rights, experiences, and roles in society. Feminism seeks to address inequalities that affect women's status in relation to men. In addition to addressing rights of women in social and political affairs, feminism is also centered on representations of women and their experiences in culture and literature. Feminist theory is diverse, and it deals with concepts like gender, experience, representation, identity, and women's agency (Mohajan, 2022).

Equality between women and men is another thing that feminism stands for. It implies that women must have equal rights, chances, and worth and not be considered inferior on account of their gender. A feminist approach questions those aspects of culture and society that lead to inequalities in women's opportunities or expectations. In the study of literature, it is possible to analyze equality from the perspective of the possibility to act freely and independently and have the same chance to do so as men do. The evolution of feminism has always been closely linked to the evolution of women's rights (Mohajan, 2022). Objectification is the treatment of human beings as instrumental objects without considering their needs or feelings (Nussbaum, 1995). Sexual objectification means treating a woman as a body or a collection of body parts valued mainly for others' use, pleasure, appearance, or sexual appeal (Ward et al., 2023).

Objectification often happens to women, transforming them into something that brings pleasure. While there is still a long way to go regarding this phenomenon, it has created a lot of debate and reform over time, primarily by feminists and other activists of civil rights (Fatima et al., 2024). In the novel they analyze, women are valued mainly for their beauty and their bodies, while men are praised for their bravery and strength (Fatima et al., 2024).

The novel "Diary of an Oxygen Thief" by Anonymous was first published in 2006 by NLVI Publishers. This study uses the 2016 edition published by Gallery Books (Anonymous, 2016). The novel offers readers a unique story about relationships, pain and manipulation. It is narrated from the point of view of an unnamed male narrator who is an Irish advertising executive living in London. The narrator shares his stories about his past relationships with women, and reveals how much he liked causing them emotional and psychological pain. The novel therefore shows how women are perceived in the world of a man who sees all relationships as an opportunity to serve his own ego. Because the narrator recounts his past relationships, everything the reader learns about the women comes from his retrospective, first-person account.

The novel was published anonymously, and its publisher classifies it as a novel (Simon & Schuster, n.d.). In a 2012 interview, the anonymous author explained that the book was meant to read like a personal diary (Grieve, 2012). Because the relationship between the author and the narrator remains unclear, the narrator's views are treated in this study as part of the fictional representation and not as the author's own position. The novel is the first book of *The Oxygen Thief Diaries*, which continues with *Chameleon in a Candy Store* and *Eunuchs and Nymphomaniacs*

The previous literature has explored emotional manipulation using the feminist approach. For instance, Sabtiana (2025) explores emotional manipulation in song lyrics Shawn Mendes' Treat You Better and highlights the fact that what seems to be expressions of affection can actually be used for emotional manipulation and control that reduce the agency of women. Other literary works have also explored the issue of objectification of women using a feminist approach, especially concerning women's bodies, male power, and patriarchal representation. (Batool et al., 2017; Fatima et al., 2024)

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Recent studies show growing attention to emotional abuse and manipulation of women in literary texts. Al Ghammaz et al. (2022) read emotional abuse in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" as a consequence of gender inequality and irrational social beliefs, while Chiumburu & Mutasa (2025) show how women in selected Shona novels are manipulated through false promises of marriage and are subjected to objectification, silencing, and male control. Studies of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* have likewise treated manipulation as central to the narrative: Arletta & Haryanti (2026) interpret it as a strategic performance of gender norms, Bain (2023) analyzes the rhetoric of the narration, and Osborne (2017) discusses conditional love. Patriarchy in fiction has also been examined in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Bekler, 2022)*, The Handmaid's Tale* (Calvi et al., 2020)*,* and selected Boom and Post-Boom novels (Pillado, 2023).

While these studies address patriarchal power and women's positions in different contexts, the present study focuses specifically on how women's emotions are objectified through emotional manipulation and how the narrator's perspective shapes their representation.

Beyond literary studies, research on gaslighting offers useful concepts for understanding emotional manipulation in intimate relationships. Sweet (2019) argues that gaslighting is rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and that it works when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes against their victims. Klein et al. (2023) found that gaslighting in romantic relationships occurs within relationships that combine affectionate and abusive behaviors, and that victims experience a diminished sense of self and mistrust of others.

Despite this attention, a gap remains. Research on objectification in literature has concentrated largely on women's bodies, male power, and patriarchal representation (Batool et al., 2017; Fatima et al., 2024), and studies of emotional abuse and manipulation have examined how women are controlled or silenced (Al Ghammaz et al., 2022; Chiumburu & Mutasa, 2025; Sabtiana, 2025). To the author's knowledge, these studies do not treat women's emotions themselves as what is objectified. A literature search conducted on October 16, 2026, using Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCO, and ProQuest, with the novel's title and combinations of keywords related to emotional manipulation, objectification, and feminist literary analysis, returned reviews and popular commentary but no academic journal articles specifically examining the novel from this perspective. This study addresses the gap by analyzing how emotional manipulation contributes to the objectification of women's emotional experiences in the novel, as told by a male narrator who openly enjoys causing emotional pain and who is the only source of information about the women.

Accordingly, this study examines women's emotional objectification through emotional manipulation in Diary of an Oxygen Thief from a feminist literary perspective. The following research questions have been formulated to guide the study: (1) How is women's emotional objectification represented through emotional manipulation in Diary of an Oxygen Thief? and (2) How is the process of objectifying women's emotions through emotional manipulation revealed through the perspective of the male narrator? Because the narrator is the only source of information about the women, the study treats claims about their feelings as inferences from his narration. The term emotional objectification is defined in the theoretical framework below.

METHOD

Research Design

The research uses a qualitative literary research methodology with the use of feminist literary analysis to analyze women's emotional objectification through emotional

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manipulation in the novel Diary of an Oxygen Thief by Anonymous. The key data for this study are the selected excerpts from the literary text that depict emotional manipulation, women's objectification, and the male narrator's attitude toward the women characters. The data were gathered using close reading by selecting the relevant excerpts as well as noting their page numbers. After that, the data were sorted into groups according to the research question. These gathered data were analyzed in relation to their narrative contexts as well as the application of feminist literary theory and Nussbaum's (1995) objectification in terms of instrumentality, autonomy denial, and subjectivity denial. These three features were chosen because Langton (2009) treats instrumentality and denial of autonomy as the conceptual core of objectification, and because denial of subjectivity is the feature through which Gervais et al. (2013) tie objectification to a person's experience and not only to the body, which a study of emotions requires. The other features (inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership) are noted only where a passage clearly shows them, and a single passage may show more than one feature.

Data Source

The primary source of this study is Diary of an Oxygen Thief by Anonymous, using the 2016 edition published by Gallery Books. All textual references are based on this edition. Since pagination and line breaks may vary across editions, citations are provided by chapter and page number (e.g., ch. 2, p. 40) rather than by line number. The novel is narrated in the first person by an unnamed male character who reflects on his past relationships with women through a retrospective account that takes the form of a personal confession.

Data Selection

The novel was read in its entirety, and passages in which the narrator describes his treatment of women, interprets their reactions, or expresses attitudes toward them were identified. Nine passages were selected for analysis from the early, middle, and later parts of the novel. A passage was selected if it met at least one of three criteria: (1) the narrator describes his attempts to approach, attract, or withdraw attention from a woman; (2) he interprets or reinterprets a woman's reported response; or (3) he expresses a general perspective on women. Among the nine selected passages are two that add complexity to the initial interpretation: one in which the narrator interprets Aisling's behavior according to his expectations (ch. 3, p. 130), and another in which he corrects his earlier account and admits that he deliberately hurt women (ch. 3, p. 158). Both passages are discussed in the findings.

Feminist Literary Theory

This research is based on feminist literary theory, an analytical framework that explores literary texts within the context of social and ideological frameworks that affect the experience of genders. According to Tyson (2006), feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature and other cultural productions reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. Instead of analyzing the novel as an objective depiction of the happenings in it, feminist criticism considers whose point of view is represented in the narrative and whose voice has been marginalized.

At its core is the idea of patriarchy, which Tyson (2006) describes as any society that favors men through the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. These roles stereotype men as being rational, powerful, protective, and decisive whereas they stereotype women as being emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing, and submissive (Tyson, 2006). However, these roles are not determined by biology but by society because, Beauvoir (1956) famously argued that women have historically been positioned as the "Other," while men are treated as the norm.

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Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) treat gender relations through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which places men's dominance within a gender hierarchy. Manne (2017) conceptualizes misogyny as a mechanism that polices and enforces patriarchal expectations. This perspective provides a framework for examining how the narrator's treatment of women reflects gendered expectations and power imbalances within relationships.

Of the concerns that feminist criticism raises, two guide this analysis. Autonomy is a woman's capacity to determine herself, and power relations concern how much control each character has over the other in narrative as well as interpersonal terms (Tyson, 2006).

Feminist literary theory is appropriate for this study because *Diary of an Oxygen Thief* by Anonymous, is narrated entirely by an unnamed male narrator who recounts his deliberate infliction of emotional pain on women. The novel therefore provides an opportunity to examine how a male narrator represents women and how female agency, autonomy, and subjectivity are shaped by his perspective and his control over the narrative.

Narration, Reliability and Feminist Narratology

In *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*, the story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed male narrator, meaning that the female characters are presented primarily through his account. Booth (1983) distinguishes between the narrator and the implied author, providing a basis for examining whether the narrator's statements and judgments correspond to the norms conveyed by the text as a whole. This distinction allows readers to question the narrator's perspective rather than accept his account as entirely objective.

Phelan (2005) distinguishes three aspects of narrative reliability: reporting, interpreting, and evaluating. Reporting concerns the presentation of events and facts, interpreting involves the narrator's understanding of what occurs, and evaluating refers to judgments about characters and their actions. These aspects may vary in reliability, meaning that a narrator can provide an accurate account of events while offering questionable interpretations or evaluations. This distinction is relevant to the novel because the narrator acknowledges his own harmful behavior but may not provide an equally reliable account of the women's feelings and intentions.

Cohn (1978) further examines retrospective self-narration through the concepts of *consonant* and *dissonant self-narration*. These concepts describe the relationship between the *experiencing self*, who undergoes past events, and the *narrating self*, who recounts them. In consonant self-narration, the perspectives of these two selves remain relatively close, whereas dissonant self-narration emphasizes a greater distance between them. In *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*, this distinction helps examine how the narrator recounts his past relationships and whether his later reflections reveal a different understanding of his previous behavior. The relationship between these perspectives is important because the way he remembers and interprets past events influences how readers understand his treatment of women.

Lanser (1992) connects narrative voice with gender, ideology, and authority, emphasizing the relationship between narrative authority and social power. This approach is relevant to the novel because the female characters' experiences are conveyed largely through the male narrator's perspective. Their words and actions are presented through his account, while their feelings and intentions are often interpreted by him. Consequently, the analysis must distinguish between what the narrator reports about the women and the meanings he assigns to their behavior.

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These theoretical perspectives guide the examination of how the narrator's account contributes to the objectification of women in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*. Booth's concept of the implied author and Phelan's framework help assess the narrator's reliability, while Cohn's concepts clarify how retrospective narration shapes the presentation of past experiences. Lanser's feminist narratology, in turn, provides a basis for examining how gender and narrative authority influence the representation of women. By combining these perspectives, the study analyzes how the narrator's descriptions, interpretations, and judgments shape the portrayal of women's emotional experiences. The women's inner states, intentions, and consent are therefore interpreted cautiously and are not treated as established facts unless supported by sufficient evidence in the text.

Women's Objectification

Feminist criticism considers objectification to be one of the most important forms of gendered damage. According to Papadaki (2024), objectification is a broad term that generally refers to seeing/treating a person (typically a woman) as an object. The systematic account of the concept that has had the most profound impact is provided by Nussbaum (1995), for whom objectification refers to the treatment of a human being as an object.

Nussbaum (1995) has identified seven features of objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Gervais et al. (2013) in their reading of Nussbaum (1995) draw attention to the fact that the presence of any one feature is sufficient to identify a case of objectification, although typically several features will be present. Langton (2009) subsequently added three further features of objectification, reduction to the body, reduction to appearance, and silencing, arguing that the concepts of instrumentality and autonomy denial lie at the conceptual core of the idea of objectification. Such flexibility allows us to apply this approach to those cases of objectification that are not primarily about the physical or sexual aspect. The latter, however, are captured by the body-related account of objectification developed in objectification theory by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) and also in the analysis of sexual objectification as the focus on a person's utility by Bartky (1990).

In this study, instrumentality, denial of autonomy, and denial of subjectivity are selected because they are relevant to examining how the narrator uses women's emotions for his own purposes, disregards their wishes, and overlooks their personal experiences. These features provide a framework for analyzing emotional objectification in the novel. A single passage may reflect more than one feature, depending on the textual evidence.

Gervais et al. (2013) provide a useful development of the idea, arguing that objectification minimally requires that the agent use the other as an instrumental means and deny or fail to acknowledge some dimension of the other's personhood (e.g., her autonomy or subjective experience). This formulation is especially valuable in capturing objectification that works through emotion rather than the body. The denial of subjectivity is also closely related to research on dehumanization, which examines how people are denied full human qualities (Kteily & Landry, 2022).

For the purpose of this study, emotional objectification means treating a women's emotional life as material for one's own purposes: her feelings, vulnerabilities, and reactions are used as instruments (instrumentality), provoked or shaped without regard for her own wishes (denial of autonomy), and interpreted according to the other person's expectations instead of her own account (denial of subjectivity). The term does not introduce a new feature of objectification. Nussbaum's (1995) denial of subjectivity already covers treating a person's feelings as irrelevant, and Langton's (2009) additions concern mainly the body, appearance,

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and silencing. What the term adds is a specific object of the objectifying act, namely the emotions themselves, in a case with no sexual or bodily focus. It is therefore used here as a descriptive label for a pattern in the text and not as a new theoretical category.

Although emotional objectification may overlap with psychological abuse and coercive control, these concepts are not interchangeable. Lohmann et al. (2024) explain that psychological intimate partner violence may involve verbal aggression, intimidation, and belittling, while coercive control involves a broader pattern of domination, isolation, and restrictions on personal freedom. This distinction is consistent with Stark's (2007) explanation of coercive control as a pattern of tactics used to establish dominance and restrict another person's freedom within a relationship. In contrast, this study focuses on how women's feelings, vulnerabilities, and reactions are used to serve the narrator's interests while their autonomy and subjective experiences are disregarded. Therefore, emotional objectification is used to identify a specific pattern in the novel without automatically classifying every instance of emotional manipulation as psychological abuse or coercive control.

Emotional Manipulation

Emotional manipulation involves influencing another person's feelings and behavior to achieve personal goals (Austin, Farrelly, Black, & Moore, 2007; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013). Austin et al. (2007) found that emotional manipulation was associated with Machiavellianism but was not significantly related to emotional intelligence. This suggests that the ability to influence others' emotions should be distinguished from the way that ability is used for personal gain.

In this study, emotional manipulation is analyzed through three categories: exploiting emotional vulnerability, using affection to build emotional attachment, and withdrawing affection or attention to cause emotional distress. The first category draws on Ovshieva's (2022) study of manipulation in fictional dialogue, which identifies the exploitation of emotional vulnerability as one form of interpersonal manipulation. The other two categories are used to examine the narrator's relationships with women in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*, particularly how emotional attachment may be established and later used to hurt them. These categories guide the analysis of the novel rather than represent a fixed classification of emotional manipulation.

Gender and power are also relevant to understanding these interactions. Sweet (2019) explains that gaslighting can draw on gender stereotypes and social inequalities to make a person doubt their own perceptions. Klein et al. (2023) identified excessive affection, unpredictable changes in behavior, and cold shouldering as relationship dynamics that may occur in relationships involving gaslighting, although these behaviors do not necessarily constitute gaslighting on their own. Gaslighting specifically involves undermining a person's confidence in their own perceptions or judgment. These perspectives help frame the analysis of how the narrator uses affection and emotional distress in his relationships with women, while keeping emotional manipulation distinct from gaslighting as a more specific form of psychological abuse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Content note: this section discusses emotional abuse, an accusation of rape, and a passage about pushing a person toward suicide.

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1. Emotional Manipulation as a Means of Control

"I like hurting girls. Mentally not physically." (ch. 1, p. 1). This line appears on the first page. This line becomes a hook, a series of promising words that invite all the following women to be potential objects rather than different women with their own identities. The male narrator controls the representation of women and events through first person narration. Thus, the female characters are mostly seen almost entirely through his eyes: their voices and experiences reach the reader only through his account, even in the few moments when their words are reported. By separating mental and physical pain, the narrator downplays the seriousness of his actions, since emotional harm is less visible than physical harm.

The narrator describes how he approaches, attracts, and eventually hurts women, presenting this behavior as a common practice among men rather than something unique to himself. What the narrator considers distinctive is not the method itself but the pleasure that the narrator gains from causing pain. *"Not the sex or even the conquest, but the cause of pain." (ch. 1, p. 3).* This shows that the harm experienced by women is not a result of failed relationships but a deliberate goal of the encounters. The affection, attention and intimacy that the narrator gives are therefore presented as calculated rather than genuine while the narrator's claim that "everyone did it" further normalizes the manipulation of women's emotions as part of ordinary heterosexual relationships. The narrator's emphasis on causing pain also reveals that women are valued for their ability to experience and suffer emotionally, turning the emotional capacity of women into something that can be used for the narrator's own satisfaction. In this sense, women are treated as instruments for achieving a desired outcome rather than as individuals with their own feelings and interests. By describing the narrator's actions as a practice already shared by men the narrator also places the narrator's behavior within a broader pattern of male conduct in which the interests and emotional experiences of women are subordinated to the desires of men. This reflects Nussbaum's (1995) concept of instrumentality, as women are treated as means to fulfill the narrator's desire to cause emotional pain. Ovshieva (2022) explains that manipulation in literary discourse can involve deception, pressure, and the exploitation of emotional vulnerability. The study found that exploiting emotional vulnerability occurred more frequently than the other forms of manipulation examined in fictional dialogue. This finding provides a useful perspective for examining how the narrator exploits women's emotional vulnerabilities in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*.

The narrator describes Lizzie as part of a line of women: *"Then Lizzie came. Beautiful hardwood floors and gorgeous high ceilings. But she too had hair on her ass. That's one crime, but crime number two? She actually liked me." (ch. 2, p. 25*). The phrase "Then Lizzie came" places Lizzie in a sequence and implies that she is fungible with other women, in Nussbaum's (1995) sense. The apartment and body of Lizzie are described prior to her personality, and her body hair is referred to as a "crime," making her nothing more than her physical attributes (Langton, 2009). Most importantly, her affection is framed as a second crime. That affection is reported only by the narrator "she actually liked me", so it should be read as his claim about Lizzie's feelings and not as an established fact.

"I ended up having sex with her on the kitchen floor in the middle of her making some bullshit vegetarian meal... After I left her there like that, I never saw her again. Later, she left a message on my machine saying I'd raped her. Emotionally speaking maybe I did rape her, but physically she was up for it." (ch. 2, p. 25). The perception of Lizzie is reflected indirectly in the story through the descriptions made by the narrator. There is no direct quotation of her claim; instead, there is the expression "saying I'd raped her." Thus, even

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when she tries to give her perception, the words of the woman remain under control of the narrator who controls her words in the way he wants to express them. This can be explained by Lanser's (1992) narrative authority when women's voices can occur in the narrative but remain under control of the one who narrates the story. Nevertheless, considering that the narrator is reporting an accusation of rape that makes him look negatively, his report that the message was left can be treated as fairly reliable (Phelan, 2005). In other words, the key issue of analysis is not whether it was reported correctly but how it was interpreted and evaluated by him. For example, his claim that "physically she was up for it" cannot be confirmed from the text, which gives no account of the encounter from Lizzie. This study neither adopts nor adjudicates his claim. Moreover, his idea of raping her "emotionally" means that her accusation appears to him like a mere possibility. The novel does not provide enough information to determine exactly what happened.

The narrator's use of language also helps to illustrate how close the relationship between the experiences in question and the narrator's thinking about them really is. For example, the phrase "ended up having sex" implies a sense of chance that lessens the notion of a deliberate choice on his part. Moreover, the way in which the narrator describes Lizzie's vegetarian dinner by calling it "bullshit" suggests a certain disdain towards the activity that seems to have some significance for her. The phrase "left her there like that" illustrates how nonchalantly he talks about leaving her alone. In spite of the fact that he realizes that he might have done something that hurt her emotionally, his language shows that he has not gained a significant understanding of his own actions. This suggests little distance between the experiencing self and the narrating self, which Cohn (1978) calls consonant self-narration. The distance is not entirely absent, however the concession "Emotionally speaking maybe I did rape her" shows the narrating self registering that the earlier behavior may have been wrong, even as the phrasing continues to minimize it.

Furthermore, Nussbaum's (1995) theory also helps clarify the ways in which the narrator constructs Lizzie in this passage. Firstly, the fact that she becomes abandoned following the encounter points to the way in which the principle of instrumentality applies here, since she becomes less important to him after the sexual encounter. Also, Lizzie's own emotional experience is omitted from the narrative. All that is provided about her side is her accusation, which is nothing more than just a message which the narrator describes briefly. Therefore, this passage says more about the dismissive attitude of the narrator and his attempt to interpret the encounter than about Lizzie's experience. In Table 1, denial of subjectivity is listed as the main feature for Lizzie because her liking is classed as a crime and her accusation reaches the reader only as a message that he interprets; instrumentality (he leaves after the encounter) and fungibility ("Then Lizzie came") are secondary.

The narrator describes Catherine as emotionally vulnerable following the end of her relationship and sees this vulnerability as an opportunity to present himself as someone who can offer her care and attention. However, in his account, once Catherine becomes emotionally attached to him, the narrator withdraws his affection and causes her further emotional distress. The narrator takes advantage of Catherine's vulnerability by using her grief and need for support to manipulate her emotions. His pattern of giving and withdrawing affection shows how he uses emotional closeness to influence Catherine's feelings. *"If I hurt this woman enough, I could nudge her over the edge into suicide. I'd be helping her do what she really wanted, and it'd be a good test of my powers" (ch. 2, p. 35).* The narrator's desire to test his power through Catherine's suffering shows that he prioritizes his own satisfaction over her well-being. His willingness to consider pushing Catherine toward suicide further demonstrates the extent of his disregard for her safety. From a feminist perspective, his

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actions show how emotional attention can be used to manipulate women like Catherine rather than provide genuine care. This reflects Nussbaum's (1995) concept of instrumentality, as Catherine's suffering becomes a means for the narrator to satisfy his desire to exercise control over her. Instrumentality is therefore the main feature for Catherine, because her grief and need for support are the means by which he tests his power. The passage also shows denial of autonomy: by planning to "nudge her over the edge" and by deciding that this is what she "really wanted," he substitutes his own judgment for any wishes Catherine might have about her life. His claim that suicide is what she "really wanted" is itself an interpretation of Catherine's inner state, offered as fact it shows the same overreach in reading women's feelings that appears in the Aisling passage. Brown (2018) examines how power, control, and abusive behavior are represented in fictional relationships. This provides a comparative perspective for understanding the narrator's treatment of Catherine. Furthermore, Dokkedahl et al. (2022) found associations between psychological violence in intimate relationships and mental health problems, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety, Catherine is a character, not a participant in such research, but the finding show why the deliberate emotional harm described in this passage is treated as serious harm outside fiction.

"My ego would tell me I was hurting her needlessly by not calling her. That I was hurting her. That she had to play hard to get. That was what girls had to do." (ch. 3, p. 130). The narrator perceives Aisling as another potential victim of his manipulation, but as he reports it, she does not react to his attention or withdrawal in the way he anticipates. The narrator interprets Aisling's lack of response through his own assumptions rather than considering her perspective. He does not accept her apparent apathy as genuine, but instead attributes to her a hidden emotional state that fits his own self-image. Aisling's perspective is disregarded, as the narrator treats her feelings as insignificant when they do not align with his own expectations. Aisling's reported response differs from what the narrator expects, and the text does not show whether she was uninterested or simply behaved differently. Instead of questioning his assumptions, he reads her behavior as concealment, explained by what "girls had to do." On Phelan's (2005) axes, this is a misinterpretation her behavior is used to confirm his assumptions instead of challenging them, which also illustrates Nussbaum's (1995) denial of subjectivity. The phrase "my ego would tell me" suggests that the narrating self recognizes this voice as his ego's, but the passage does not show whether he accepts or rejects that reading, so his distance from his earlier view remains unclear (Cohn, 1978). In Lanser's (1992) terms, Aisling's behavior resists his interpretation, yet it reaches the reader only through his narration. The passage therefore reveals more about him than about her. Denial of subjectivity is the main feature for Aisling because he replaces her reported response with his own explanation of it. The passage also touches denial of autonomy, since he explains her behavior by what "girls had to do" and not by her own choice. From a feminist perspective, the narrator's assumptions reflect the conventional stereotype that women are naturally emotional, while men are more rational. This assumption shapes his interpretation of Aisling's behavior and leads him to question her lack of emotional response. To the extent that his report of her lack of response can be trusted, Aisling's behavior challenges this stereotype and exposes the limits of the narrator's assumptions about women's emotions.

2. Narrator's Perspective on Women and Male Power

"And girls wouldn't beat me up. They'd just stare at me in disbelief and shock. Their eyes, you see." (ch. 1, p. 2). Following a drunken altercation in which someone physically hit him, the narrator assumes that women would not respond with physical violence. Instead, he

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expects them to react with disbelief and shock. Rather than recognizing women as individuals capable of independent responses, he focuses on their presumed vulnerability. This viewpoint helps address the second research question by illustrating how the narrator's treatment of women contributes to their objectification through emotional manipulation. Thus, he turns women's perceived weakness into a means of asserting his own power.

"Unkind to womankind. That was my mission. I discovered the meaning of the word "misogynist" I remember thinking it hilarious that it had "Miss" as a prefix". (ch. 1, p. 6). In this statement, the narrator's point of view on women becomes clear as he mentions causing harm to them for a specific purpose. By referring to "womankind," the narrator treats women as a collective group rather than as individuals. Regarding the second research question, this suggests that objectification begins with the narrator's perspective on women, as he disregards their individuality and views them in relation to his own mission. This perspective allows the narrator to repeatedly manipulate women by applying the same assumptions to each of them. Batool, Zaidi, & Bahadur (2017) similarly identified the objectification of women as a form of gender bias in their analysis of *Neuromancer*, which suggests that treating women as a category rather than as individuals is a recurring pattern in the representation of female characters.

The Aisling's passage quoted above (ch. 3, p. 130) also bears on the second question. Aisling's behavior does not match the narrator's expectations, and he reads it as an attempt to conceal her feelings rather than as possible disinterest, the novel does not show which reading is correct. This shows how the narrator's worldview shapes his interpretation of women's feelings. Rather than allowing that Aisling's feelings may differ from what he expects, the narrator relies on his own assumptions about what women should feel and think. This provides a direct answer to the second research question because the narrator uses his assumptions to objectify women's emotions. The narrator considers himself to have the right to interpret and reinterpret the emotions of women even if his manipulations do not work.

"*I fancied myself the nonchalant playboy in the smoking jacket and cravat. I enjoyed hurting them. I wasn't aware in the depth of in fact, I was capable of achieving. I only knew how much they like me after I hurt them by which time it was too late. Correction. I know. That's exactly why I hurt them. How could they like me? I was punishing them for liking me."* (ch. 3, p. 158). This passage adds complexity to the previous interpretation because the narrator reconsiders his own explanation of what happened. At first, he claims that he only realized how much the women liked him after hurting them. He then corrects himself, admitting that he already knew and that this was precisely why he hurt them. In Cohn's (1978) terms, this correction shows how the narrating self revises the account given by the experiencing self, suggesting a greater distance between the two than in the passage about Lizzie. From Phelan's (2005) perspective on the reporting axis, the admission is self-incriminating, which lends some credibility to his account. However, the women's feelings are still presented only through his narration. His question, "How could they like me?" also suggests that he views their feelings in relation to how he sees himself.

This admission also adds nuance to the analysis of his attitude toward women. The narrator does not simply overlook their feelings. He acknowledges that they liked him and admits that he deliberately hurt them because of it. This recalls the passage about Lizzie, in which her liking him is described as a "second crime" (ch. 2, p. 25). Both passages suggest that the women's emotions matter to him mainly because of how he responds to them, rather than as experiences that deserve consideration in their own right. This supports the interpretation of instrumentality and denial of subjectivity, showing that emotional objectification can

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involve recognizing another person's feelings while disregarding their perspective. Nevertheless, the passage does not establish whether the narrator later changes his behavior. His admission is not an apology, so it complicates the interpretation of his character without necessarily challenging the argument about emotional objectification.

Discussion

The Findings answer the two research questions passage by passage. This section asks what the passages mean when read together, how they relate to earlier research, and what the study adds.

Taken together, the passages suggest that the objectification in this novel lies less in any single act than in the narrator's position as the one who decides what women's emotions mean. He does not ignore women's feelings; he needs them. What he reports as Lizzie's liking, Catherine's grief, and the disbelief and shock he expects from women all matter to him as material for his own purposes. What he withholds is the standing of those feelings as the women's own. This is why the pattern cannot be reduced to cruelty alone: his attention to women's emotions is what makes them available as instruments, and his authority over how they are interpreted is what keeps them so.

Table 1 compares the features of objectification identified in each passage, with the main feature listed first and others noted where a passage shows more than one, following Nussbaum (1995).

Table 1: Emotional Manipulation and Objectification of Women in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*

Women	Emotional Manipulation	Narrator's Interpretation	Features of Objectification	Data
Lizzie	Has sex with her, leaves, and does not see her again. Treats her liking him as a "crime"; she later leaves a message accusing him of rape (as he reports it)	Claims that "physically she was up for it" and concedes only an emotional wrong. Her own account is absent	Denial of subjectivity (main); Also, fungibility, instrumentality	ch. 2, p. 25.
Catherine	In his account, offers care and attention after her breakup, then withdraws affection once she attached	Considers pushing her toward suicide as "a good test of my powers"; claims this is what she "really wanted" (his interpretation, not established)	Instrumentality(main) Also denial of autonomy and denial of subjectivity (he claims she "really wanted" suicide (this is his interpretation)	ch. 2, p. 35.

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Aisling	In his account, gives and withdraws attention, but she does not respond as he expects	Reads her indifference as an attempt to "play hard to get"	Denial of subjectivity(main) Also denial of autonomy (her behavior is explained by what "girls had to do," not by her own choice)	ch. 3, p. 130.
Women as a group	Repeats the same assumptions with each woman	Refers to "womankind" and expects disbelief and shock rather than resistance	Denial of subjectivity (women treated as a category) Also fungibility	ch. 1, p. 2.

Table 1 also shows how Nussbaum's (1995) features relate to one another in this novel. Denial of subjectivity appears in every row, whereas instrumentality is the main feature only for Catherine and denial of autonomy is never the main feature. With four cases this is a tendency and not a general finding, but it suggests that the features do not simply operate side by side. A woman's feelings can be used as a means only once their meaning has been taken over by the person using them, and that takeover is what denial of subjectivity describes. In this novel, then, denial of subjectivity works as the condition for the other features rather than as one feature among several. This also explains why the objectification continues when the manipulation fails: the Aisling passage shows that a response that does not match his expectation is not allowed to change his view, since he reclassifies it as concealment, so that any response, or none, confirms what he already believed.

Feminist theories of gender help explain why the narrator interprets Aisling's behavior in this way. Tyson (2006) explains how women are often stereotyped as emotional. Under this assumption, even when a woman shows little emotion, her behavior can be interpreted as an attempt to conceal her true feelings. As a result, the stereotype becomes difficult to challenge because both emotional expression and the absence of it can be used to support the same belief. Manne's (2017) account of misogyny offers another way to understand this pattern. She argues that women are often expected to provide attention, care, sympathy, and other forms of feminine-coded labor to men. Although the narrator presents himself as the one offering affection, his interpretation of Aisling reflects a similar sense of entitlement: he treats her emotional response as something she should provide. When she does not respond as he expects, he explains away her behavior rather than considering that she may simply feel differently. Research by Ali et al. (2022) also identifies role expectations as a source of conflict in intimate relationships. In the novel, however, the expectation of how women should feel comes from the narrator alone, and women who do not meet it are reinterpreted rather than heard. His statement that "everyone did it" further presents this attitude as a shared and ordinary practice. From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) this claim normalizes emotional domination by presenting it as common behavior rather than something that requires justification. However, because this view is conveyed solely through the narrator, the analysis cannot establish whether the novel endorses or criticizes it. Following Booth's (1983) distinction between a narrator's perspective and the text's broader position, this attitude is therefore attributed to the narrator, not to the anonymous author.

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The passage in which the narrator corrects himself (ch. 3, p. 158) points to a further meaning. His admission that he knew how much the women liked him and deliberately hurt them because of it is one of the self-incriminating statements in the novel. However, this admission does not necessarily change how he views their feelings: even in correcting his earlier account, he presents their emotions in relation to himself. His acknowledgment of what he did therefore coexists with the same objectifying way of interpreting women's feelings. In Cohn's (1978) terms, the narrating self revises the earlier self's account of events without necessarily changing its perspective on women's emotions. In a confessional narrative, admitting harmful actions should not automatically be taken as recognition of women as subjects in their own right. Phelan's (2005) distinction between reporting and interpreting helps clarify this point. Although the narrator admits that he deliberately hurt the women, his account does not establish how they themselves understood or experienced his actions.

These findings relate to earlier research in two ways. First, studies of emotional abuse and manipulation in fiction have examined these issues in relation to marriage and broader social inequality. Chiumburu and Mutasa (2025) found that men in selected Shona novels manipulate women through false promises of marriage, resulting in sexual objectification, female silencing, and male domination. Similarly, Al Ghammaz et al. (2022) relate emotional abuse in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" to gender inequality and patriarchal social beliefs. In *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*, however, the narrator's manipulation is not primarily framed through marriage or institutional relationships. Instead, the analysis focuses on how the narrator deliberately hurts women because he knows they have feelings for him. This extends the discussion of women's objectification in fiction by examining emotional experiences alongside the forms of objectification explored in previous studies (Batool et al., 2017; Fatima et al., 2024). The silencing identified by Chiumburu and Mutasa also differs from the pattern examined here. In their study, women are silenced within the relationships represented in the novels, whereas in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief*, their perspectives are also limited by the narrative form because their experiences are presented through the male narrator's account.

Second, the pattern of affection followed by withdrawal can be compared with research on gaslighting, although the two should not be treated as equivalent. Klein et al. (2023) found that gaslighting relationships often involve a combination of affectionate and abusive behaviors. However, the authors distinguish these relationship patterns from gaslighting itself, which involves undermining a person's confidence in their own perceptions and understanding of reality. Sweet (2019) further explains how gaslighting can draw on gender stereotypes and structural inequalities. These studies provide a useful context for understanding manipulation in gendered relationships, but the passages analyzed in *Diary of an Oxygen Thief* do not clearly establish that the narrator attempts to make the women doubt their own perceptions. Instead, they show how he interprets and uses their emotional responses for his own purposes, while their perspectives remain accessible only through his account. The distinction, therefore, lies in the mechanism examined: gaslighting undermines a person's confidence in their own perceptions, whereas emotional objectification, as examined in this study, concerns the treatment of another person's emotional experiences as instruments for causing harm rather than as experiences deserving recognition in their own right. Gaslighting consequently serves as a point of comparison, not the primary analytical framework of this study.

The forms of emotional manipulation identified in this study can be further understood by comparing them with previous research. Ovshieva (2022) reported that exploiting emotional

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vulnerability appeared more frequently than other forms of manipulation in the fictional dialogue examined in her study. A similar pattern can be seen in the passage involving Catherine, where the narrator takes advantage of her emotional state to establish closeness before withdrawing his affection. The other two forms identified in this study, namely building attachment through affection and withdrawing affection to cause distress, were developed through the analysis of the novel rather than adopted directly from Ovshieva's framework. In Catherine's case, these two actions function as connected stages: the affection initially offered creates an attachment that makes its subsequent withdrawal more distressing. Whether a similar pattern occurs in other literary works requires further research.

This study makes three contributions to feminist literary analysis. First, it applies Nussbaum's (1995) theory of objectification to women's emotional experiences, extending its application beyond the treatment of the body. The findings indicate that denial of subjectivity is particularly important in understanding the narrator's treatment of women, as he interprets and uses their feelings for his own purposes rather than acknowledging their experiences from their own perspectives. Second, the study connects objectification with narrative reliability. The novel's first-person confessional form reveals the narrator's objectifying attitudes but also restricts access to the women's perspectives. Consequently, interpretations of their thoughts and feelings must be understood as inferences drawn from his account rather than as confirmed facts. Third, this study differentiates emotional objectification from related concepts, including psychological abuse, coercive control, and gaslighting. This distinction provides a more specific way to describe how women's emotional experiences are used to cause harm without automatically categorizing every instance of emotional manipulation as one of these phenomena.

Limitations and Implications

This study has several limitations. It analyzes one novel, narrated by one man, through a small set of passages that concern three named women and one general category of "women," so its findings describe how this narrator positions women and cannot be generalized to other texts or to the author. The three categories of emotional manipulation were developed for this study, and only one of them has direct support in earlier research. Because the women's feelings are available only through the narrator, the study can describe what his account allows readers to infer, but it cannot establish what Lizzie, Catherine, or Aisling experienced. The analysis also depends on a single edition, and page numbers may differ in others. Finally, the study analyzes the text only and does not address how readers respond to the narrator.

These limits suggest where the analysis could go next. Further research could compare this novel with the other books in The Oxygen Thief Diaries, with first-person narratives by women, or with readers' responses to a narrator who openly enjoys causing pain.

CONCLUSION

This article asked how women's emotions are objectified through emotional manipulation in Diary of an Oxygen Thief. It argues that objectification lies not only in the narrator's attempts to provoke emotional responses but also in his control over how women's feelings are interpreted. Because he is the only source of information about the women, his interpretations replace their own perspectives, even when their responses do not match his expectations, as seen in the case of Aisling. The study contributes to feminist literary analysis by extending Nussbaum's theory of objectification to women's emotional experiences and identifying denial of subjectivity as the central feature connecting the other

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forms of objectification examined. It also highlights the importance of narrative reliability, since a first-person confession reveals the narrator's attitudes while limiting what can be known about the women's inner states. Therefore, claims about their feelings must be treated as inferences from his account rather than established facts. However, this study is limited to one novel, one narrator, and a small selection of passages. Further research could examine other literary narratives and explore how readers interpret representations of emotional manipulation and the objectification of women's emotions.

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