

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trust Under Revision: The Ethics of Unreliable Narration

Aza Takho-Godi^{1,*}

¹Department of Classical Philology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

Correspondence: aza.takho@philol.msu.ru

Abstract

Unreliable narration is often identified by locating false or contradictory statements, but that procedure can overlook how trust changes as readers encounter later evidence. This article asks how narrative trust is produced, withdrawn, and ethically revised through sequence. It compares Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Ford Madox Ford's "The Good Soldier," Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw." Comparative close reading follows claims that invite, resist, or retrospectively alter judgment, while distinguishing textual inconsistency from the social authority initially granted to a narrator. The analysis argues that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than isolated falsehoods, that social authority influences presumptions of credibility before evidence is assessed, and that ethical reading requires revising judgments without assuming that uncertainty can be eliminated. The article contributes a relational account of narrative trust that makes disagreement locally testable. Its claims are confined to the selected texts and do not establish authorial intention, historical reception, or a universal ethics of narration.

Keywords: unreliable narration; ethics; trust; rhetoric; interpretation

1 Introduction

This comparative study addresses how unreliable narration makes revision of judgment an ethical rather than merely technical activity. Its corpus comprises Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Ford Madox Ford's "The Good Soldier," Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw". The central claim is that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements. That proposition matters because narrative technique trains readers to distinguish skepticism from the refusal to listen. Attention therefore falls on claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment.

The project works within humanistic interpretation. It must be described, situated, compared, and tested against plausible alternatives. This separation does not eliminate judgment.

The question is more tightly bounded than a general history of revisable trust. Within these texts, narrative trust is assessed through claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three findings organize the article. First, unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather

than through isolated false statements. Second, social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed. Third, ethical reading requires revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated. Collectively, the findings establish that revisable trust is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The research question is how sequential changes in evidence redistribute credibility and ethical responsibility. The objective is to compare textual mechanisms of revision without diagnosing narrators or treating ambiguity as proof of one stable meaning. The article moves from critical context to corpus and method, develops three findings, discusses their significance, and closes with limitations and conclusions.

Rhetorical narratology supplies a firmer basis for separating unreliability from simple factual error. Booth's account of distance among narrator, implied author, and reader remains foundational for this distinction [1]. Phelan re-frames narration as purposive communication and thereby links ethical judgment to progression and audience response [2].

2 Narrative trust in critical context

The interaction between detail and whole supplies a second commitment.

The research problem in Trust Under Revision has two parts. The descriptive part asks where claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment enter the selected works and how their placement changes. The interpretive part asks why those changes require the vocabulary of narrative trust rather than a simpler account based on convention, chronology, or genre. Keeping the two parts separate prevents the conclusion from being built into the description. It also clarifies the article's novelty: the new contribution must lie in the explanatory connection, not in the mere presence of the chosen material.

In this article, narrative trust does not name a mood, topic, or value detached from form. It names the interaction among preparation, allocation, and revision. Preparation concerns the expectation built around claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment; allocation concerns who or what can act on that expectation; revision concerns the subsequent event that changes its status. The definition is intentionally operational. It tells the reader what evidence would support the term, what evidence would weaken it, and why the three findings belong to one argument

rather than three parallel themes.

Dialogism clarifies why credibility emerges through relations among voices rather than isolated statements [3]. Narrative framing helps distinguish a narrator's claim from the textual arrangement that qualifies it [4]. Narrative temporality explains how later evidence can revise an earlier judgment [5]. Critiques of cultural authority make prior assumptions about credibility historically consequential [6]. Interpretive communities situate ethical judgment within socially learned reading practices [7].

3 Sequential Claims and Revisable Judgment

The selected materials comprise Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" [8], Ford Madox Ford's "The Good Soldier" [9], Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" [10], and Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" [11]. Corpus design privileges analytical variation over numerical representativeness. Each item offers a distinct configuration of revisable trust and permits comparison through claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment.

The inquiry employs comparative rhetorical reading with sequential annotations for assertion, evidence, contradiction, withheld context, and reader responsibility.

The comparison begins where narrative trust becomes traceable—in claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment. The procedure records position, recurrence, interruption, and outcome before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters because a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a later disclosure may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

Source control is integral to the claim about narrative trust. Differences among editions, transcriptions, reproductions, restorations, recordings, or performance documents can alter the very feature being compared. The article therefore treats the version named in each reference as part of the evidence. Where the supplied bibliography does not yet identify that version precisely, the interpretation is provisional at that point; it cannot support a locator-dependent assertion until the author checks the consulted source.

4 Unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements

The opening analytical pattern can be stated directly: unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

Relational analysis demonstrates that the pattern operates at more than one scale. The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why revisable trust can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

The first proposition is strongest where claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment do more than recur. To count as support for the claim that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements, an occurrence must be prepared by an preceding expectation and must alter the outcome of what follows. Trust Under Revision therefore reads recurrence with placement: identical words, sonorities, shapes, gestures, or interface elements may carry different force when their structural position changes. This criterion keeps narrative trust tied to sequence instead of treating visibility alone as proof.

5 Social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed

The textual interpretation further finds that social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

The second proposition asks who or what receives the force identified in the first. If social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed, then position is inseparable from access: a voice, instrument, figure, object, space, or interface option matters partly because it can initiate, interrupt, answer, or withhold. Trust Under Revision traces this allocation through claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment. The resulting hierarchy is not assumed in advance; it is inferred from the capacity to redirect subsequent action or interpretation, including cases where peripheral placement proves more consequential

than organizational centrality.

The baseline reading concerns Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The reading tests the proposition that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements by restricting attention to claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the proposition that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment, which agent or structural layer controls it, and what result follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment, the expectation active at that moment, and the consequence that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Trust Under Revision only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general parallel to the other cases is not enough; the passage must show why the proposition about narrative trust is required to explain its organization.

A second comparison, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed. This is not read as a defect in reliability.

Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* changes the scale of comparison. Here narrative trust is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed.

For Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Sol-*

dier, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on narrative trust. The article answers only at the level of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces an ensuing effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition narrows. If it does, the case clarifies how structural hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third case turns to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether ethical reading depends on revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated.

The value of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is retrospective. Ensuing passages are reread against the first account of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the ensuing event merely restates the prior one, the proposition that ethical reading calls for revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case shows how narrative trust acquires structural memory.

Verification in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* requires two locators: one for the initial treatment of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, foreseen, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the subsequent reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about narrative trust a visible temporal basis.

The closing comparative test, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment tests how far the claim that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance depends on qualification. The comparison does not convert resis-

tance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition holds, which part contracts, and which additional source would be called for to decide between rival readings.

The resistant role of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which narrative trust ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or formal account should take over.

6 Ethical reading requires revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated

The textual interpretation concludes its findings by proposing that ethical reading demands revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed consequence are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

Considered as a group, the findings form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second demonstrates that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how subsequent events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that revisable trust is historically variable and formally organized.

The third proposition is tested retrospectively. For the claim that ethical reading requires revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated, following evidence must change the status of something already encountered; simple repetition is insufficient. Trust Under Revision therefore rereads earlier claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment after each return, correction, re-entry, or altered frame. This backward movement reveals whether the text stores a difference and activates it later. Where the earlier event remains unaffected, the proposed revision has not occurred and the claim about narrative trust loses explanatory force.

7 Discussion: What Narrative Trust Changes

The three propositions alter one another. If unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements, then social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed cannot be treated as a separate theme; it describes who or what controls the first process. The claim that ethical reading depends on revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated adds a temporal test, asking whether ensuing events confirm, narrow, or overturn an prior inference. Trust Under Revision therefore explains narrative trust through ordered dependence rather than a list of recurring devices.

The textual selection also supports the view that narrative technique trains readers to distinguish skepticism from the refusal to listen. This consequence does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

The article's contribution is therefore methodological as well as interpretive. The distinction has force especially for interdisciplinary research.

Counter-reading is used here as an analytical control. For the proposition that unreliability develops through changing relations among claims rather than through isolated false statements, the strongest alternative is one that explains the same sequence without assigning it the same function. The proposition that social authority influences which narrators are presumed credible before evidence is assessed must then show why distribution, rather than mere recurrence, accounts for the contrast. Finally, ethical reading demands revising judgments without imagining that uncertainty can always be eliminated is tested by asking what subsequent event would have to be absent for the interpretation to fail. These tests make disagreement about Trust Under Revision local and answerable.

The intervention of Trust Under Revision is not the discovery of an unnoticed motif. Its contribution is to specify how narrative trust operates when the same feature changes function through sequence. Existing vocabulary can name the relevant elements, yet naming does not explain why one occurrence prepares an inference and another revises it. By keeping claims that invite, resist, or retroactively alter reader judgment connected to position and result, the article turns a broad thematic observation into

a claim that can be evaluated passage by passage and case by case.

This distinction also changes the status of absence. A missing response, withheld transition, unoccupied space, unrealized cadence, or unnamed agent is not automatically meaningful. It enters the argument only when the surrounding organization creates an expectation that the absence modifies. For Trust Under Revision, such negative evidence is judged by the same standard as a visible feature: it must be locatable, connected to sequence, and capable of changing the account of narrative trust.

8 Conclusion

The article asked how unreliable narration makes revision of judgment an ethical rather than merely technical activity. Comparative rhetorical reading shows that unreliability develops through relations among claims, that social authority shapes initial credibility, and that later evidence requires revision without guaranteeing certainty. Together, the findings

answer the question by locating narrative trust in an ordered process of expectation, challenge, and reconsideration.

The contribution is a relational method for making disagreement about unreliable narration locally testable. Its reach is limited to four first-person or framed narratives and to the editions identified in the current references. Future research should verify editions, compare other forms of unreliability, and examine reception evidence to determine how historically situated readers negotiated credibility.

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