

# Obsession and control in Lisa Jewell's *Then She Was Gone*

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## Abstract

Lisa Jewell's psychological thriller *Then She Was Gone* explores the hidden face of Lisa human behaviour through the interrelated themes of obsession and control. The novel follows the disappearance of fifteen-year-old Ellie Mack and the destructive effect it has on her family, especially her mother, Laurel. Ten years after Ellie's disappearance, Laurel meets Floyd Dunn, an attractive yet secretive man whose young daughter, Poppy, supports a discomposed equivalent to Ellie's. As the story evolves, readers discover the disturbing truth behind Ellie's disappearance, her confinement at the hands of Noelle Donnelly, her former tutor, and the manipulative influence of Floyd.

This paper investigates how obsession navigates the actions of main characters and how control becomes both a physical and psychological weapon. Nolle's obsession with having a child and her incompetence to have a healthy relationship make her kidnap Ellie and stalk her convict. She wants to influence Ellie's life by controlling her gestures, thoughts, and even physical actions. It reveals the harmful nature of wild addiction. Similarly, Floyd's precise manipulation of Laurel exhibits a different kind of control—emotional instead of physical—in order to prove that dominance can be the same as convincing regarding force.

The paper also inspects how obsession and control interconnect to shape relationships. Both Noelle and Floyd view others as fulfilling personal desires instead of as individuals with liberty. This frame of mind transforms love, care, and attraction into unhealthy addiction; it leads to misuse and harm. Laurel's journey throws back the struggle to break from the psychological grip of misery and the influence of manipulative people. Through her terminal conflict with the truth, she begins to retrieve her liberty.

By exploring these interlaced themes, the novel offers a general overview of the uncertainty of emotional dependence, the human need for control, and the termination when obsession revokes ethics. The story apprises that obsession, whether it exposes strong love, deep desire, or aspiration, can clean out people of empathy and lucidity, leading to harmful choices. When control is navigated by such obsession, it becomes a form of confinement that can be discreet until it is too late.

This paper concludes that *Then She Was Gone* uses the strain between obsession and control not only to construct suspense but also to disclose how such behaviours bloom in secrecy and denial. Jewell's work becomes both a grab mystery and a discouragement about the risk of surrendering one's liberty to others' desire.

**Keywords:**

1. Obsession
2. Control
3. Psychological thriller
4. Manipulation
5. Captivity
6. Emotional abuse

**Introduction**

Lisa Jewell's *Then She Was Gone* is a psychological thriller that takes a deep dive into the mystery of human behaviour. It tells the story of power: how people lose it, how they get it, and most importantly, how they use it. The plot is about two main forces: obsession and the need to control.

The plot opens with a terrible fateful incident —Ellie Mack, a smart, attractive girl, vanishes without any clue. Her mother, Laurel, is so overwhelmed with grief that she spends years in a state of uncertainty. After ten years Laurel meets Floyd Dunn, a man who seems to give her comfort and a reason to live. Unfortunately, as their relationship strengthens, so do the secrets of Floyd's past, specially through the character of Poppy, Floyd's daughter, who is very similar to the missing girl.

In the book, obsession is not only referred to as the love for somebody, but it is also shown as the representation of the need for a person, the desire for the object, and the unhealthy addiction. Noelle Donnelly, Ellie's former tutor, is burning with the irresistible desire of having a child even if it means that she will take the freedom of another person. Whereas the control, instead, is presented in both aggressive and passive methods: Noelle is using physical confinement, while Floyd is manipulating with charm, secrecy, and emotional pressure.

**This paper discusses the ways in which these themes are evident:**

Noelle Donnelly's confinement of Ellie —showing how obsession turns into controlling behaviour. Floyd Dunn's Emotional Manipulation showing how control can be hidden behind charm. Laurel's struggle for liberty shows the psychological effects of being under someone's control and the journey to freedom.

In this article, the author will demonstrate how Jewell's novel is more than a mystery about a missing child; betrayal is a theme of the story and also an exposition of the ways in which oppressive society can lead to tragedies.

**1. Noelle Donnelly's Captivity of Ellie: Obsession as Imprisonment**

Noelle Donnelly's character embodies the extreme results of unfettered obsession.

She is socially awkward, emotionally unstable, and extremely desperate to have a child. Her demand becomes so strong that she cannot accept living without fulfilling it. After becoming Ellie's tutor, her infatuation with the girl multiplied—Ellie's youth, beauty, and intelligence seemed to Noelle as if they were the only things she needed to make her complete.

From the very beginning, inspiration to possession rapidly transformed. Noelle no longer regarded Ellie only as a student but rather as a vehicle for her own objectives. When she finds out that she is

pregnant using the stolen sperm of Ellie's boyfriend, her obsession becomes very strong. Instead of asking for permission, she takes Ellie, pretending that she is going to give her some tutoring, and then she locks her up in a basement that nobody knows about.

Here, domination is total—Ellie is far from liberty, safety, and even herself. Noelle is the one who decides what Ellie is going to eat, when she is going to sleep, and the kind of life she is going to have. She does not leave Ellie alone at all and thus makes her dependent on her. This kind of domination is not only physical but also psychological because the constant monitoring makes Ellie's character get more and more indefinite, and thus her personality slowly disappears.

Noelle's obsession makes her blind to Ellie's pain. She tries to prove her case by insisting that she is actually giving Ellie a role—to be the mother of her child. The truth is that she has taken away from Ellie the power of choosing and has turned her into nothing but an object of her fantasy of motherhood. Jewell illustrates this kind of relationship to emphasize the idea that obsession, when it is mixed with power, can be the basis of one's dehumanization.

## **2. Floyd Dunn's Emotional Manipulation: Control Behind Charm**

Floyd Dunn is a very quiet but still very dangerous person, who represents a more invisible but equally powerful control. To his friends and neighbours, he is a charming, smart, and caring man. For instance, he is a single father who takes care of his daughter, Poppy, with love and attention. On the other hand, the manipulative personality that is hidden behind the charm and uses emotional influence to keep the power is exactly his.

Floyd and Laurel's love story is, however, based on lies that are told selectively. He does not tell her all the truth about the things that happened in his life, especially the part that he was involved in the disappearance of Ellie, as it is revealed in the story of Noelle. Thus, by limiting the amount of information given, Floyd makes Laurel see him as he wants. This gives him the opportunity to keep the relationship going as if nothing had happened, while at the same time hiding his actions from Laurel that would make her end their relationship had she known. His power is definitely not through physical violence, as Noelle experiences; rather, it is emotional imprisonment. Laurel, however, is not aware that she is just an emotional prisoner, but she actually feels attracted to him, caused in part by her loneliness and the pain that has not yet been healed. Emotionally, she is powerless to resist Floyd, and his mere interest makes her feel as though she has importance, but that is exactly how he is able to influence her—he is like the cat warming only one part to keep the whole warm, which is why she remains ignorant of his secrets as he always gives her that little bit of warmth that is enough to quench her thirst for the truth.

Jewell drives home the point that control can be accomplished without the use of violence; it can be accomplished through love, secrecy, and dependency. In Floyd's case, his charm disguises his role in protecting Noelle's secret for years.

## **3. Laurel's Struggle for Autonomy: Breaking Free from Control**

Laurel's trek in the book is all about gaining back her independence. She is emotionally numb for ten years after Ellie's vanishing; that is, she is not able to develop a full relationship with her other kids, has a distant relation with her ex-husband, and is affected by unresolved questions. She is limited by her grief, which is the main factor that restricts her from going forward.

Seeing Floyd seems to be the turning point when she gets out of this circle, gets solace, and also feels that her life has a meaning. At the same time, this situation becomes the occasion of a latent influence of the other person, which is hitherto not revealed. When she starts realizing Poppy's similarities with Ellie, Laurel's desire for truth triggers her to ask questions. This is a moment of change - it puts Floyd's domination under contest and thus paves the way for her learning the actual facts of the incident. The news about Noelle's deeds and Floyd's complicity forces Laurel to face up to her emotional imprisonment; thus, the acknowledgement of the truth, whichever it is, can now be interpreted as her emancipation from both grief, which is the main factor that restricts her from going forward.

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Jewell casts Laurel's fight as illustrating that in order to become free of control, one often must not avoid unpleasant truths and accept losing. Genuine liberty is not only about being free from someone else's force but also about being free from the tricky emotional places we get ourselves in.

In *Then She Was Gone*, Lisa Jewell threads the themes of obsession and control through the narrative to not only extend these themes but also to create tension of a deep psychological nature. Noelle's tying up of Ellie in a physical way is a clear example of how obsession can escalate to the point of going to negative extremes. Floyd's gradual mental domination of Laurel illustrates that control can be very discreet, masked by love and attractiveness. Through Laurel, Jewell shows the harsh reality and the need for a way out of such influences.

The novel acts as a warning that obsession, regardless of its starting point, has the power to make individuals deprive others of empathy and their sense of right and wrong. The merging of obsession with control can lead to scenarios where victims are robbed of their liberty without them being aware of it. Jewell's tale is a suspenseful mystery and, simultaneously, an admonition of the significance of being self-aware, having personal boundaries, and having the bravery to take one's life back.

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