

AFTER SCOTLAND'S LITERARY "GOLDEN AGE":

LOCATING AGNES OWENS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Celebrations of Scottish literature in the last decades of the twentieth century have neglected one of Scotland's most important writers: Agnes Owens. Owens' work and its influence is far more complex, and far greater in reach, than most accounts acknowledge. Her significance is no secret: Alasdair Gray and James Kelman have championed her work; Glasgow University's Douglas Gifford has said that Owens "can claim to have done more than most in the redefinition of women in fiction." This paper aims to lay the groundwork from which meaningful criticism of Agnes Owens can be realised in the 21st Century. Taking cue from Walter Benjamin's "The Author as Producer", particularly his argument that "the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense", I argue that the aesthetics and politics of Owens' work deconstruct and redefine traditional models of working-class literature and representation.

The first chapter analyses her first collection of short stories, *Gentlemen of the West* and its sequel novella, *Like Birds in the Wilderness*. I challenge the way these texts have been read as realist working-class fiction through a careful examination of her short stories and novellas, offering an alternative framework through which they can be read. *Gentlemen* subverts notions of societal "initiation" in working-class fiction, with Mac's attempt to escape his community being undone by the conclusion of *Birds*. The second chapter is a study of three of her short stories, attending to her minimalist illustrations of the socially condemned, and her confronting exposition of the readers' gaze. Finally, this thesis discusses the gendered landscape of her novel, *A Working Mother*. Using Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* as an organising text, I argue that Owens' treatment of gender relations challenge literary notions of female "hysteria" and madness. Taken as a whole, this thesis addresses Owens' absence, attempting to locate her work within Scottish literary criticism. It is offered as a way forward for the study of her work in years to come.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Page references to *Gentlemen of the West* apply to the King Penguin edition, which shares the page layout of the Polygon edition. All references to *Like Birds in the Wilderness* refer to the pages of *The Complete Novellas*, and all references to Agnes Owens' short stories are from *The Complete Short Stories*. I have used the Abacus edition of *A Working Mother*. The bibliographical format of this thesis follows the directions of the current MLA Handbook.

In the absence of much published work on Owens, many interviews and essays have been published on-line without numbered pages. Therefore, the in-text citations for James Kelman's "Make Yer Point" and "Agnes Owens", Jane Gray's "Giving "people like that" a Voice", Ali Smith's "On the light side of dark", and Chitra Ramaswamy's "The fat with the lean – Agnes Owens Interview" do not contain page numbers.

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INTRODUCTION

Agnes Owens was both one of Scotland's most respected writers, and one of the most neglected. Contained on the inside page of her *The Complete Novellas* is *The Guardian's* claim that "Agnes Owens is part of a Golden Age in Scottish literature", and the other writers of this "Golden Age" have been equally emphatic. Alasdair Gray dedicated his *The Ends of our Tethers* (2004) to Owens, calling her "the most unfairly neglected of all living Scottish authors" (175). Booker Prize winner James Kelman called her a "literary hero" in *The Guardian*, asking, "How much more could it have been" had she been granted a "proper chance to write" ("Make Yer Point"). Owens first drew attention from Liz Lochhead – who was tutoring a writing class in the late 1970s – with the nightmarish story of "Arabella". The story is a droll fairytale about a woman who spends her days pushing her four dogs ("children") around in a pram, visiting her cruel mother and bedridden father (who likely dies during her visit) and providing a thick, "evil-smelling" (4) potion to a wealthy, male clientele who pay for the treatment of ill-defined ailments. In her introduction to Owens' *The Complete Short Stories*, Lochhead wrote that she had found it a "terrifying, terribly funny story, so anarchic and archetypal, so short and so complete" (viii-ix). Impressed, she presented the story to Gray, then Kelman, who assisted in finding Owens a publisher for her first collection of short stories, *Gentlemen of the West* in 1984.

According to an anecdote of Gray's, finding a publisher required some effort. After Gray had unsuccessfully offered the manuscript to Canongate, Owens sent it to the Molendinar Press, where "[she] was told it might be published if Billy Connolly¹ said he enjoyed it. It was posted to him and placed on the pile of unsolicited correspondence nobody famous has time to answer" (6). When Owens' husband retired from the building trade, she was hired by Connolly as a part-time cleaner and was able to quietly retrieve the manuscript. Owens also told Chitra Ramaswamy of another publisher who "said people didn't want that kind of writing... about poor people" ("The fat"). It was not until Kelman took the collection to Edinburgh University Press' Peter Kravitz that it was published as a novella through Polygon Books. Alasdair Gray has subsequently championed Owens' work, and named *Gentlemen* "the first British novel about a brick layer in a housing scheme" (5). He wryly observes that against the

¹ Connolly's name was excluded from Gray's Postscript, but was included in his *Scottish Review of Books* article, "Honest Poverty and Agnes Owens at 70".

backdrop of Margaret Thatcher's supposed introduction of a "healthier, fitter Britain", *Gentlemen* is now "a historical novel" (6). Owens has since been published alongside Gray and Kelman in the 1985 collection, *Lean Tales*; released three short novels; two further collections of short stories; and two novellas, all of which have received praise from her peers and critics.

To read through the glowing reviews that fill the first two pages of *The Complete Short Stories* reveals two things. The first is that many critics have found her work striking: *The Sunday Times* described her "slicing wit... honest and unaffected"; *The Financial Times* said that she possessed "a mind that clamps her characters like a steeltrap in the predicaments of passion, poverty and the patterns of their lives"; and *The Herald* stated that the stories of *People Like That* "leave an echo. Their compassion lies in their honesty. Owens will not let us look away". The second is that her work is yet to be located within a specific literary context. In their attempts to locate her work, reviewers have been wildly divergent in their comparisons. *The Daily Telegraph* compare her to "the best of Evelyn Waugh and Beryl Bainbridge"; *The Sunday Herald* to Muriel Spark in her "appealingly wicked eye for familial love on the dole"²; and *NME* to Billy Connolly's early comedy "in the sense that its observation and timing bring humour to a sad reality"³. Jane Gray offered the most accurate comparison in "Giving 'people like that' a Voice", observing similarities between Owens' pitch-black comedy and Flannery O'Connor's. Gray quotes Frederick Asals, suggesting that both writers expose a folly "so pitiless, that the revelation of emptiness and self-deception is as appalling as it is comic" (4-5). In her interview with Gray, Owens cited O'Connor as a personal favourite, and elsewhere expressed admiration for Gabriel García Márquez, John Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* ("Aspects" 150).

Despite the praise she has received, sustained critical discussion of Owens has been largely absent from Scottish literary studies. I suggest there is a gap in contemporary Scottish literary criticism, and this gap has allowed Owens' work to slip through without receiving the critical and academic attention it deserves. She does not

² That this is then laced with her peculiar and sparkling wit does place her in a lineage with writers such as Spark. Think of Spark's 1963 novella, *The Girls of Slender Means*, set in a post-war England. When the detonation of an unexploded bomb renders Kensington's May of Teck Club on the verge of collapse, the girls inside realise the only way out is a small skylight, and only those with slender hips can escape. Chillingly, near the conclusion, a tape-measure is used to determine which girls are able to live; and with one girl, Joanna Childe trapped in the burning building. Selina (an escapee) returns to rescue not Joanna, but a Schiaparelli dress.

³ All of these reviews have been taken from *The Complete Short Stories*.

feature in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (2007) or *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women's Writing* (2012). Very little academic writing has attended to her work. Of all published works, only Horst Prillinger's *Family and the Working-Class Novel 1984-1994* features Owens as a central figure. Often when she is referenced she appears as a contributor to *Lean Tales*, as is the case in Robert Crawford's *Scotland's Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (2007); *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, edited by David Malcolm and Cheryl Alexander Malcolm (2008); Matt McGuire's *Contemporary Scottish Literature* (2009); and Joseph Brooker's *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed* (2012). Few canonising texts have referenced her, those being *The Other voice: Scottish Women's writing since 1808*, edited by Moira Burgess (1988); *Streets of Gold*, edited by Moira Burgess and Hamish Whyte (1989); *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (1997); *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Scottish Fiction*, edited by Peter Kravitz (1999); and *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, edited by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (2000).

In *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, Gifford claims that Owens "can claim to have done more than most in the redefinition of women in fiction" (589). Though he references Owens several times in his first essay, his arguments are not developed into a thorough analysis of her work. Her significance is recognised, but few attempt to answer the question of *how* her work achieves this, or *why* it is significant. The attention he gives her in "Contemporary Fiction II" suggests there is a space to be made, as does her acknowledged exclusion from "Contemporary Fiction I". These have been the organising questions of this thesis: Why has Owens been neglected, and through what critical framework can we read her work?

Alongside Gray and Kelman, Owens' work stresses the importance of giving a voice to those neglected by both society and fiction, thereby allowing them a cultural existence. Lynne Stark described this as "[bringing] fiction to the unimagined" (111). These writers do not offer their readers the comfort of condescension, nor do they represent the lives of the poor with moralistic indignation. Talking to Jane Gray, Owens noted the similarities between her work and Kelman's earlier stories, particularly in that he "wrote a lot about ordinary people, and very, very funny he was". However, she went on to assert: "I don't want to resemble people's writing. I can't remember what

they wrote anyway!” (“Giving”). Owens’ voice is not Kelman’s, Gray’s, Lochhead’s, Bainbridge’s, Waugh’s, Spark’s or O’Connor’s. Her focus is not on those who rail against the economic and social forces keeping them down, but on those who have no choice or will but to survive from day to day. These stories are challenging representations of systems of abuse, and of the pervasive and cumulative effects of this on marginalised individuals. This abuse extends not only to individuals, but to relations between men and women; within families; between communities and the elderly, the youth, the poor and the mentally unstable.

Comparisons between Owens and other writers become problematic when the differences between them are considered. For example, Kelman has radicalized a tradition in Scottish literature that identifies itself with the inner rhythms and poetics of Scots language, and has said that “[his] culture and [his] language have the right to exist and no one has the authority to dismiss that” and has defined his writing as belonging to a wider movement “towards decolonisation and self-determination” (qtd. in Miller, Mitch and Rodger 161). For Kelman, language is utilised as a site of resistance, whereas Owens has expressed a desire to separate her writing from the masculine literary tradition occupied (and arguably re-defined) by Kelman:

I get vaguely tired of the Scottish situation and the Glasgow man, the tough people, the alcoholics [...] I find it a great relief to always remember “this is what the Scottish say”, “aye” and that, you find it in the dialogue and you find it irritating. I find it irritating to always be Scottish. I think there's more to life than being Scottish. (“Aspects” 149)

Owens' writing is uniquely marked by stark minimalism and an understated brutality, or what Ali Smith has described as a “blunt-weaponed clarity” coupled with a “down-to-earth insistence on the surreality of most people's normality” (“On the light side of dark”). Her minimalist aesthetics push her work into an immediate and threatening territory. In an appreciation, Kelman stated that she had “remained a socialist to the end of her days” (“Agnes Owens”), and although Owens may not position her politics at the forefront of her writing in the way that contemporaries such as Kelman do, there is indeed political intent in her work. Her gaze is as sympathetic as it is acerbic. In her own words:

if I'm going to read about terrible conditions I always like there to be some black bit of humour in it somewhere rather than just straightforward trying to make people shake their head and cry and do nothing anyway. (“Aspects” 150)

Her use of irony and pitch-black humour save her stories from a fatalism that would cause a reader to “do nothing” in response to the “terrible conditions” she writes about.

Tony McKibbin’s essay “Agnes Owens: The Non-Ameliorative” has addressed the neglect of Owens, as has Alasdair Gray’s “‘Honest Poverty’ and Agnes Owens at 70”⁴. Both offer suggestions as to why Owens is absent, gesturing towards a general discomfort with the lack of narrative pay-off expected by middle class readers of working-class literature. As McKibbin says of Owens’ work, “we have [...] the narrative dimension, but without the narrative pay-off or the dramatization of the event” (4). This political dimension is more explicit in Alasdair Gray’s essay, which argues that in highbrow or popular fiction, the poor have been often reduced to “servants, truculent eccentrics, [and] jostling rabbles”, and even in British twentieth-century writing “which attempted a closer view of common folk” the subjects were condescended to for their middle-class readership:

The angle of vision shows social victims, like beetles crawling over each other at the bottom of a tank, which is also the view of most Marxist writing. There are no suggestions that such people can initiate anything valuable or be much, even to themselves, unless they join the Communist Party. (“Honest Poverty” 2)

Gray cites Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long’s *No Mean City* (1935) as an example of this problem (more so for its long-held status as the definitive fictional account of Glasgow life) as the novel focuses around youth gangs resorting to criminal violence. Gray argues that “storytellers cannot be moralists [...] if authors make their stories texts for sermons then sermons they become” (2). Owens, for Gray, provided a much needed antidote – and indeed a direct challenge – to such an exhausted “realist” practice.

Her work is more complex than has been acknowledged. This thesis demonstrates that meaningful criticism of Owens can be realised in years to come. These challenges will be addressed through an analysis of her writing, both her novellas and short stories, and will demonstrate what makes her work aesthetically and politically unique. I do not wish simply to locate her work in relation to her influences or contemporaries. Rather, I will attempt to locate her aesthetics and politics as they are

⁴ This essay is very similar to his postscript for *Gentlemen of the West*, though it gives different information in parts.

communicated in her writing, and define what has made Owens' such a striking and significant presence in contemporary Scottish literature. This will provide the framework for my first chapter, which examines *Gentlemen of the West* and its sequel novella, *Like Birds in the Wilderness*, discussing the way these two texts problematise notions of societal “initiation” in realist working-class fiction.

The second chapter, “The bigger picture in fewer words” examines the short stories “The Silver Cup”, “People Like That” and “The Writing Group”. Gray has suggested that perhaps her exclusion from “nearly every survey of modern fiction” may have been “because all her novels are short” (8). Owens herself expressed excitement upon the publication of her *The Complete Short Stories*, “This is the kind of book that writers have, not like the wee skinny books I do... a thick book!” (Ramaswamy, “The fat”), and has elsewhere acknowledged that she felt unable to identify as a writer until her output had reached a substantial volume:

I don't care about how little other people write as long as it's good, and yet yourself you're feeling 'oh, I haven't written much' [...] That's the way I look at things. It's probably just a Scottish inferiority complex. (“Aspects” 150)

If indeed the brevity and concision of Owens' work has contributed to her exclusion, then there is a need to re-evaluate existing notions of literary value within the context of Scottish writing. Owens' short stories press us to consider the humanity (in as much as this can exist in fiction) of the socially condemned characters that populate her imagined landscapes.

Moira Burgess has questioned whether we can now classify the Glasgow short story as a “separate sub-genre, as it were, of the Scottish short story” (“The Glasgow Short Story”). Her article goes on to discuss works by George Friel, Edward Gaitens, Margaret Hamilton, Alan Spence and Joan Ure; the 1980s “Glasgow group” of Agnes Owens (Burgess cites *Arabella* as a *tour de force* in style), Carl MacDougall, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman; and the work of recent writers Dilys Rose, A.L. Kennedy and Janice Galloway. The Scottish short story is as much an important aspect of Scottish literary history as its larger counterpart; just as thought-provoking, just as relevant. In the preface to *The Complete Short Stories* of Muriel Spark, Galloway notes that the short story contains “the bigger picture in fewer words” (iii), and quotes Spark as

saying that “a novel is a kind of lazy way of writing a short story, a short story a lazy way of writing a poem. The longer they become, the more they seem to lose value” (ii). These three stories demonstrate Owens’ powerful dissections of literary conceptions regarding community and sisterhood in working-class fiction through a forceful separation of the external (the community) from the internal (“people like that”).

The final chapter focuses on her novel, *A Working Mother*. Taking cue, in part, from Gifford’s assertion that Owens “can claim to have done more than most in the redefinition of women in fiction”, this chapter seeks to examine the characterisations and relationships represented in this work, considering the way these are framed by Owens’ affirmation that “It’s hard to have a family and be a feminist” (“A heart that stays at home”). These are some of the most complex and difficult relationships observed in her oeuvre. Betty, the working mother of the novel’s title, is trapped within an abusive and restrictive domestic environment which contributes to the unravelling of her sense of reality by the novel’s conclusion. I argue that *Mother* is an intervention into literary representations of female hysteria and madness; a notion popular in the nineteenth century, and has been found throughout literary history from *Hamlet’s* Ophelia to *Jane Eyre’s* Bertha, the “mad” first wife of Edward Rochester.

Though these chapters will focus on both the aesthetics and the politics of her writing, these two concepts will not be separated. My understanding of Owens’ aesthetics coincides with the political, paying heed to Walter Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” which argues that:

the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense. That means that the tendency which is politically correct includes a literary tendency. And let me add at once: this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly included in every correct political tendency, this and nothing else makes up the quality of a work. (*Understanding Brecht* 86)

Owens’ direct, minimalist aesthetics are intrinsically tied to the swift brutality and midnight-black comedy of her narratives. These work in tandem to produce a body of work that, in its brevity and its boldness, dismantles and reshapes our understanding of literary realism and “honest” writing. Benjamin argues that the bourgeois writer works in the service of certain class interests, whilst the progressive writer is positioned on the side of the proletariat on the basis of class struggle; this is referred to as pursuing a

tendency or commitment (85-6). Furthermore, the relationship between commitment and quality must be treated dialectically, as the non-dialectical separation of the two produces “unfruitful” criticism (87).

Sadly, Owens passed away in October of last year. My tribute to her was published in *Overland* literary journal and was amongst the first to be published, alongside James Kelman’s in *The Herald Scotland*, and Chitra Ramaswamy’s in *The Scotsman*. Each appreciation revealed a great deal of admiration and respect for Owens and her work, though the few tributes published suggests that there is no time more vital than now for Owens’ body of work to be considered. In “Make Yer Point” Kelman asked, “How much more could it have been?” inadvertently suggesting there is something lacking in the volume of her output. It is as true as it is for any writer: had Owens received more support critically and financially, she may have been granted “a proper chance to write”. Yet even without that support, Owens produced a terrific body of work. This thesis was intended as a tribute to one of Scotland’s great writers, and as a provocation in hope that her writing will finally receive the critical attention it deserved.

Chapter One

Just a hint of something beyond:

“Anti-Initiation”, Realism, *Gentlemen of the West* and *Like Birds in the Wilderness*

I counted my notes. Eight in all. Hardly a fortune but folk had set out with less – and starved to death.

Agnes Owens, *Gentlemen of the West*

“Generous, treacherous, vicious and kindly with no admiration for the rich and successful” is how Mac, the protagonist of Agnes Owens’ *Gentlemen of the West*, describes his friends Mick and Baldy. Unemployed, homeless and partial to a drink, “You could say Mick and Baldy were the true gentlemen of the west” (124). The stories that make up the collection are biting, comedic and often touching. True to the spirit of *Gentlemen*, when Ramaswamy asked how she managed to find time to write the stories whilst bringing up seven children, working as a typist, in factories or as a cleaner, Owens replied “How did I find the time to go out and get drunk!” (“The fat”). The monotony of Mac’s life is recounted in a “straightforward, deceptively transparent narrative style” (Gray, “Giving”), and Owens gives narrative space to the routine tasks he has to carry out:

I carried the hod, laid common brick, facing brick and coping stones. I laid brick down manholes, and laid brick up ten storeys, but I never had a pound in my pocket beyond a Monday unless I won it at cards. I was twenty-two. My arms were knotted like a man of forty-two, and sometimes my back ached like a man of fifty-two. And it all added up to being paid off once again. (78)

Passages like this have led commentators and critics to view Mac’s narrative as a realist novel of “initiation”, and the collection of stories itself as grounded in the traditional model of working-class literature, whereby the working-class protagonist will eventually find success, either in education or gainful employment. Gareth Mangan reviewed the collection in *The Times Literary Supplement*, calling it “an uncritical celebration of the Scottish working-class male” (qtd. in “Aspects” 27-8), and Austrian academic Horst Prillinger sees it as “much indebted to the realist working-class novel” (*Family* 83). The model of the realist working-class novel presents us with a form of societal “initiation”. As Alasdair Gray explains in his postscript, “Working-class novelists usually incarnate [their writing] in someone like themselves who has left or will leave their community, or is suffering because he can’t or won’t” (138).

Conversely, this chapter argues that *Gentlemen* is unsuited to such a reading. To

read it as a novel of “initiation” imposes limitations on the scope of interpretative possibilities it offers, and minimises its political incentive. These stories directly challenge notions of literary working-class representation, societal “initiation” and realism. In Mac, Owens created a character that becomes increasingly aware of the restrictions of his literary narrative, and the fallacy of the imagined community he inhabits. The characters who inhabit the town drink heavily, work (if there are jobs to be found), brawl on occasion, and complement their broo (“benefit”) money through sometimes questionable means. In Mac’s words, “Ye know how it is. When ye’ve nothin’ tae dae ye get intae trouble, even if ye’re no’ lookin’ for it” (125). He remains displaced in a self-defeating narrative that provides no hope of individual or societal reconciliation. His increasing dissatisfaction with the monotony of working life, home life and pub life provokes a desire to escape. Despite his wish to escape, the narrative of *Gentlemen* – and its sequel novella, *Like Birds in the Wilderness* – renders the possibility of extrication impossible, and fails to offer him “a hint of something beyond” (116). This chapter seeks to re-evaluate realist readings of *Gentlemen*, discussing the aesthetics and politics of this text against the traditional model of working-class literature and representation, and will do so through a close examination of Mac’s narrative journey, leading to his departure at the end of *Gentlemen* and subsequent return in *Birds*. Developing on Shintaro Kono’s concept of “anti-initiation” literature, I examine the seditious qualities of *Gentlemen* and the way this works against the conceit of the “initiation novel”.

Many of the stories of *Gentlemen* conclude with a return to their beginnings, rather than progressing with a cohesive narrative structure. Instead, the collection is structured by a process of undoing, partly due to the work being an intermediary form between a collection of short stories and a contained narrative. Having been written as a collection of thirteen short stories, it was published as a novella in 1984, and later re-published in her *The Complete Short Stories* in 2008, the publication history of *Gentlemen* is notable, as the tension between the two forms produces something altogether more interesting than either provide exclusively. The status of *Gentlemen* remains ambiguous. Are these chapters of a novel or a collection of short stories? The publication history suggests that the answer is both. This chapter addresses the generic novella status of *Gentlemen* by discussing how its thirteen short stories function both independently, and also as a unified narrative. Before this is possible, I must address what is meant by Kono's concept of “anti-initiation” literature, and outline a number of concerns regarding the realist novel.

1.1 “Anti-Initiation”

As stated earlier, Gray has observed that the traditional working-class novel adheres to a linear narrative model (beginning→ middle→ end) which concludes with the working-class protagonist finding success outside of his community⁵. These novels represent a form of societal “initiation”. Not only do texts like these offer comfort to privileged readerships who wish to engage in non-combative, non-accusatory voyeurism (to see how the “other half” live), but they also compromise the possibility of representing lived experience by subjecting their narratives to a specific set of coded expectations. In this context, Aaron Kelly suggests, “What appears as the shared accessibility of reality to the readers of conventional realism is the *supplanting of reality* [my emphasis] as viewed by its oppressed” (28). Here Kelly draws our attention to one of the central aims of the realist working-class novel: to represent the experience of working-class life. However, he argues that what is actually produced is the supplanting of reality with a fictionalised representation, and it is important that the represented is not taken as equivalent to the real.

In an essay on Raymond Williams, “Soseki Natsume, Raymond Williams, and the Geography of 'Culture'”, Shintaro Kono advances the concept of an “anti-initiation” literature. He cites Raymond Williams’ discussion of George Eliot, whose novels he sees as being:

transitional between the form which has ended in a series of settlements, in which the social and economic solutions and the personal achievements were in a single dimension, and the form which, extending and complicating and then finally collapsing this dimension, ends with a single person going away on his own, having achieved his moral growth through distancing or extrication. (94)

Kono goes on to discuss Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), citing it as an example of an “inheritance plot”, which “takes the crisis of inheritance at its full human value, without displacement to the external and representative attitudes of the disembodied class”. He argues that if we define the Bildungsroman as being concerned with human development or growth, and if we are to believe Williams’ claim that prior to Eliot, no individual human growth in literature was separate from its social and economic conditions, “we can say that there was nothing in Bildungsroman that can be called inner personal or individual development in our modern sense. Rather, what we find is nothing

⁵ I use the male pronouns here, as the protagonists of these particular narratives are almost exclusively male.

more than upward class mobility” (94).

Kono sees novels such as Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1959) as knowing “no possibility of class mobility, but what is there is only the protagonist’s inner growth through the course of the novel, for which his class-ridden life is a given” (94). Where my analysis diverges from Kono's is in his definition of “initiation”. Whereas he views the novel of initiation as representing a complete break from the *Bildungsroman* – in that “initiation” depicts a character’s inner or personal growth – my reading focuses more on its societal implications, “initiation” being escape from the working-class community. It is against this realist tradition of working-class representation that much recent Scottish fiction has developed in opposition. Aaron Kelly discusses this literary opposition in relation to James Kelman’s work:

[...] it is precisely the inability of his characters to find narrative forms in which they can assert themselves freely and fully which points to the limits of individualism in a class society, to the social mediation of individualism, and the ultimately unrealisable promise of universal freedom for all in society and culture as they are presently constituted [...] Kelman’s writing is ingrained in the dislocation of subjects and objects, in the lack of narrative space in which his characters can reconcile the individual with itself or with society. (11)

Though it is necessary to be cautious of discussing Owens’ through criticism of her contemporaries, Kelly's argument provides both a background from which to work, and helps to locate her in relation to these other writers. In *Gentlemen and Birds* this lack of narrative space is made visible. The intention of this chapter will be to characterise these texts as “anti-initiation”, or as a subversion of this realist narrative model.

1.2 True Gentlemen of the West

The first story, “McDonald’s Dug” opens with Mac describing the pet dog of local man, Paddy McDonald (self-described as a ploughman, suspected to be a ‘squatter’ or a ‘tinker’ by others): “not the type of animal that people took kindly to, or patted on the head with affection...” (7). Mac relates an incident wherein one “particularly dreich evening... soaked to the skin” he is offered a lift home by another local, Willie Morrison in a “honky-tonk motor like something out of Wacky Races” (8). Unable to see the road clearly Willie hits an animal on the road, which is later revealed to be Paddy’s dog. Later, when Paddy relates the incident to Mac, he appears upset:

‘It’s that dug o’ mine.’

‘Yer dug?’

‘Aye. Some bastard run him ower.’

‘That’s terrible Paddy.’ My brain was alert to the danger.

‘As ye know yersel,’ continued McDonald, unobservant of the shifty look in my eyes, ‘ma dug is no’ ordinary dug. It’s a good hard-working dug. In fact,’ his chest heaved with emotion, ‘ye could say that dug has kept me body and soul when I hudny a penny left.’

(10)

Though the dog survives, Paddy laments: “if I get ma haunds on the rat that done it I’ll hing him” (11). When he learns that Willie was responsible, he pays local “heid-banger Pally McComb” to “gie him a doin” (14). McComb mistakes Willie’s brother, Johnny for the offender, and attacks the latter instead. Paddy then sends McComb to deliver a note to Willie, threatening that “he’d better buy the dug, due tae its poor condition efter bein’ run ower, or else” (15). The contradiction between Paddy’s earlier claim that the dog had kept him “body and soul”, and his following claim that “it wis a bloody nuisance wi’ a’ these complaints about it” (14) illustrates *Gentlemen*’s self-defeating narrative process, whereby the advancement of story is comically undercut, or undone, by its conclusion: Willie runs over the dog; Paddy is upset; Johnny is accidentally beaten up; Paddy forces Willie to buy the dog under threat of further violence.

The second story, “McDonald’s Mass” also follows this cyclic arc. Mac, having been injured in a fight, walks along a riverbank “feeling lousy” due to the injuries on his face and hoping to encounter Paddy, “an understanding man if he was not too full of the jungle juice” (16). Instead, he finds Paddy’s unemployed “cronies”, Billy Brown, Big Mick, Baldy Patterson and Craw Young drinking wine underneath a bridge. They inform him that Paddy has died, found by Billy earlier “cauld as ice an’ blue as Ian Paisley” (17). Baldy expresses a desire to move into Paddy’s house, dubiously claiming he wants to “see tae his pigeons”, and though Mac is offended by this he holds his tongue, realising that “they [are] all away beyond [his] age group and fragile with years of steady drinking and sleeping out” (18). The group proceed to discuss their respective stints in jail, briefly suspect one-another of having murdered Paddy, and debate as to whether the deceased was a Catholic or not. Mac remains silent for the duration of this discussion. At home, Mac tells his mother of what he has learnt, to which she is indifferent, stating that Paddy was “just a drunken auld sod that neither worked nor wanted” (21). Mac lets this go, considering that his mother would not understand Paddy, and decides to go to the funeral: “It would be the decent thing to do. I was feeling a bit emotional about it all, and stood up

quickly before she noticed my eyes were wet” (22).

Where the previous story had remained comical, here we begin to get a sense of Mac as an individual character and the narrative seems to be moving forward. However, at the chapel, “confronted with all the solemnity of the papal worship”, listening to the priest’s “meaningless drone” and confused by the regularity at which he was meant to sit and stand, Mac enquires as to whether the priest is saying mass for Paddy. The woman next to him responds balefully: “I don’t know anything about Paddy McDonald, but whatever they tell you I’ve lived a decent life [...] I’m never away from this bloody place atoning – so don’t start” (23). Embarrassed, Mac leaves and collides with Paddy McDonald, furious that Billy had caused him to be sent to hospital and are currently letting away his pigeons. The story concludes with Mac thinking: “I hope he had enough energy to batter Billy Brown to a pulp for the bother he had caused me. And all of this to happen when I had a sore face” (25).

As with “McDonald’s Dog”, the end of “McDonald’s Mass” mirrors its beginning with Mac lamenting his sore face. However, despite the comedy of the story, through his reaction to Paddy’s supposed death, an interiority that was not previously present is shown in Mac – this being the first indication that Mac’s character is distinct from the events and characters around him, and gestures towards his recognition of “the trap his world has become” (129). Gray says of these first two stories that they were “too funny by half” and “the characters a mere grotesque bunch of proles” (140). However, as these stories accumulate “they become [...] a moving picture of a hard, surprising world which is forcing a young man to understand both it and himself” (140).

The third of these stories, “Grievous Bodily Harm” continues in the same vein. The story opens with “auld cheat” (26) Duds Smith driving through Mac’s street offering compensation in exchange for old rags; though Mac’s mother knows Duds is not a trustworthy salesman, she offers Mac a pound to sell him an old television. Mac convinces Duds to buy it for two pounds, though when he returns home he tells his mother it sold for one, and he keeps it for himself. Later on, at The Paxton Arms (his local pub) Mac runs into Willie, who tells him Paddy’s dog has run away (this is the first direct link between stories). Willie has been injured again, this time by Paddy’s nephew, Murdo, who allegedly punched him unprovoked (29). Mac concedes that one McDonald is “as bad as the other”, claiming to have “gone off” Paddy himself (29).

Murdo and another “rat-faced fellow” join the two, and Willie sheepishly offers to buy them drinks; whilst he is at the bar, Murdo tells Mac the real story behind Willie’s

injured face:

He wis cheatin' at cards the other week, so I punched him. No' much. Jist opened up his face a wee bit. The next thing he had me charged wi' grievous bodily harm. I warned him wi' ma haunds roon' his neck I wid gie him real grievous bodily harm if he didny withdraw his statement[...] When the magistrate asked him tae point oot the accused[...] Willie said he didny know who it was[...] The magistrate wis that fed up wi' him he fined him a fiver for contempt o' court. (30-1)

Later in the evening Mac, Murdo and his “rat-faced mate” (31) go to visit Paddy, who Mac now calls “a great case” (31) and arrive to find him thoroughly engrossed in the television Mac had sold to Duds earlier. Mac asks how Paddy acquired the television, and is told that Murdo had witnessed Duds give a child a “balloon that widny even blaw up” in exchange for a bundle of rags. Having seen this, Murdo threatened Duds with a carving knife and was given the television; rather than giving the set to the child, he gives him ten pence instead. Whilst Murdo is praised by Paddy and “Rat-face” for his generosity, Mac quietly drinks his beer and says nothing (33). This story is the most parodic of the three, with Murdo’s anecdotes reflecting the circularity of the short stories themselves.

Although we can sympathise with Gray’s observation that were the other stories in *Gentlemen* equally facetious, the collection “would have been as enjoyable in small doses, and as disappointing on the whole, as any book by [American short story writers] O. Henry or Damon Runyon” (139), these first stories are structurally significant. I suggest that in re-producing the circularity of *Gentlemen*’s stories in Murdo's anecdotes, Owens draws our attention to the peculiarity of her structuring. If we are to consider *Gentlemen* as one on-going narrative, these “chapters” appear atypical as they possess the circular, self-contained structural qualities of short stories. Horst Prillinger notes that:

Gentlemen has an intermediary form between novel and short story cycle. It can be read as both; reading it as the former, one might note a very un-novel-like structure at the beginning; reading it as the latter, one could note a number of weaknesses in the closing 'short stories', notably their non-independence and too many cross references. (“Aspects” 39)

Reading these either as chapters or short stories ignores this formal abnormality; reading them as neither, but as an intermediary form is reflective of something altogether more unique. If we attend to these stories individually, paying attention to the similarities and differences in their structuring, the conceit of the entire narrative is made clear. We are positioned *with* Mac, the more these structures are re-produced, the more tired of the narrative repetitions we (like Mac) become. Furthermore, in re-publishing *Gentlemen* as a

collection of short stories, Owens questions the role of both short story and novella by setting *Gentlemen* in conflict with its own narrative form.

These first three stories are essentially anecdotes, the sorts of hapless stories Mac might tell or overhear at The Paxton Arms. Owens makes this connection herself in Murdo's two anecdotes; perhaps rather than Murdo's anecdotes reflecting the structure of the stories in *Gentlemen*, it is actually the reverse. Why is this interesting to us, though? These stories reflect what we expect of a working-class short story: humourous, self-contained, and legless. Douglas Gifford provides us with this very reading, calling the characters “feckless, reckless and sad cases”, and says the stories are focused on ejections from pubs, “fights and stitches, hangovers [...] cadjing for drink” set within a “tatty bar with a humourless barman”. As he argues, the stories are concerned with:

local treacheries, dog-thefts, old scores, famous booze-ups, death from drink and hypothermia are their matter, and style and character drawing seems crude, like naïve painting. The sheer hardness at first repels [...] But the monotony of topic and violence has its purpose [...] to show the debilitation of all this, so that Mac's problems in changing his life are seen not just as his own, but as a complex of events around him. (“Contemporary Fiction II” 624-5)

Because these stories are populated by a small selection of local characters, these narratives cannot help but reproduce themselves. These characters are merely stereotypes of the Scottish working-class, reflective of those that populate many realist novels of working-class life (such as Kingsley Long and McArthur's *No Mean City*). In this they become parodic archetypes confined to a reduced narrative space (embodied here as The Paxton Arms). Because of this, their narrative possibilities are greatly limited. Owens has effectively drawn our attention to a central problem of realist fiction: these novels are populated by stereotypes that re-enact the same tired narrative cycles. Mac says himself, his entire social life consists of buying drinks and having “the same conversations and the same arguments with the same faces” (63).

What Owens challenges is this form of narrative representation. What is really debilitating for a character like Mac – to recall Kelly's argument – is that this is not a narrative form in which he can “assert [himself] freely and fully” and this is therefore unable to “reconcile the individual with itself or society”. An increasing awareness of this is reflected in Mac's frequent silences. He holds his tongue when around Billy, Mick, Baldy and Craw, and also when Murdo is being praised for his so-called “generosity”. Mac is dislocated from the people and events surrounding him. The traditional model of realist

working-class representation is the very “complex” that denies him the possibility of changing his life. This is where the introduction of Tolworth McGee becomes significant.

1.3 Tolworth McGee

There is an interesting comparison made by Gray in his postscript between Owens and works influenced by Thomas Hardy, who “left behind a literature almost completely class-bound, and bound to the propertied classes”, citing “Galsworthy, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, [and] Elizabeth Bowen” as writers who describe characters “so detached from their source of wealth in land, trade or industry that they can ignore it” (133), and though other characters within the novel may feel that this is unjust, the classes remain separate and are never made *visible* to each other. The “initiation” novel is dependent on such a separation of classes to maintain the illusion of upward class-mobility. When a novel concludes with the protagonist's departure from his community, we are left to assume he will find success outside and effectively “initiate” himself. We do not follow a character's life beyond this departure or see what happens next, as this is where their narrative (and our reading experience) concludes. This conceit allows the classes to remain separate, as “society” is positioned *outside* of the working-class narrative.

The fourth story in *Gentlemen* presents us with an interjection in the arrival of Tolworth “Toly” McGee, the first character we encounter from *outside* the community. Consider what we learn of Toly's history: his father “worked on the railway and, when drunk, battered Toly stupid” (35); he was often bullied or given “beatin' ups” at school because he had to wear his father's old shirts, making him an “easy target” (37); during school lunch hours he would “wait inside the toilet till the bell rang”, partially because he was often in pain from his father's beatings (38); after his school years, his family get free train passes and leave for the “big smoke” (35); his father wins money on the pools, and gives a large amount to Toly to start him off in business (36). Toly is an example of the “initiated” character, who has found success despite his “terrible life” (38). Mac notes on seeing him that “[he] was dressed neatly in a brown suit with tie to match, and a crew-cut which did not enhance his naked face [...] there was an air of success about him compared to the old days” (35). Despite his formal dress and his newfound “posh accent” (35), when they are drinking Mac notices Toly “relapsing into the vernacular of his race” and feels more at ease talking to him (37).

When the two part ways, Toly quickly reappears at Mac's house having been chased there by a gang. Mac reluctantly agrees to walk with him to the train station having wrapped his hand in bandages. During the walk they encounter "The Hoodlum Gang" and Mac reasons with them, saying that as "he's already had a doin' an' broke his wrist [...] there's nae need tae gie him anither one" (41). Mac leaves the station and goes to The Paxton Arms for a drink, where he is quickly approached by his mother and told that Toly is back at their house waiting on an ambulance with a genuine broken wrist (41); the gang had found him at the station, and kicked his wrist six times (42). Mac ensures that Toly does not return or stay any longer by reminding him "that the Hoodlum Gang never forget" though asserts they parted "the best of mates" (42).

Despite Toly's "initiation" into outside society, and despite surface alterations he has made, nothing has really changed for him. Like Mac, Toly is displaced and his return only serves to highlight this. He reverts to his original vernacular when drinking; his relationship with the local lads remains as hostile as ever; and he claims to have returned to visit his friends, though his only friend appears to have been Mac. His narrative maintains an air of the downtrodden despite his success. However, though his "initiation" has failed to change him, his re-introduction enacts a structural change in *Gentlemen*. Until this point, these stories have been structured by the same narrative circularity. However, these stories are only able to re-produce themselves provided that they maintain this structural and thematic interiority. If a character's "initiation" is indeed a form of escape following a linear realist mode (beginning → middle → end), then return to the community must be one step backwards. Toly's re-introduction into Mac's community makes this fallacy visible, and simultaneously functions as a reversal of Mac's own narrative arc (Toly returns and leaves again; Mac leaves and returns).

In place of the linear "initiation" model, Prillinger sees the respective structuring of *Gentlemen* and *Birds* as following a pattern of "equilibrium" and "disequilibrium". His diagram is as follows:

[equilibrium]

Mac is a brickie in a small town on the west coast of Scotland. The employment situation is unstable.

[disequilibrium]

He is put out of work and [is] caught in a burglary.

[attempt to re-establish equilibrium]

He decides to leave town. He leaves town. ("Aspects" 40)

This offers a structural distancing from the “initiation” narrative. Mac’s attempted initiation is riddled with uncertainty: he does not have a secured job; he has no promise of success; his departure is an attempt to re-establish equilibrium rather than being grounded in any form of opportunity. *Gentlemen*’s cynicism towards the very idea of societal “initiation” is made evident when Mac considers his prospects for leaving: “I counted my notes. Eight in all. Hardly a fortune but folk had set out with less – and starved to death” (126).

1.4 Up Country

“Up Country” signifies Mac’s first physical distancing from his community, opening with Mac having “lost interest in the usual programme” and “becoming too aware of increasing pressures”:

All Friday night’s talk had seemed loaded to me. Usually discussions go above my head unless I’m personally involved, but phrases like “Are ye lookin’ for trouble”, “Stick the heid on him” or “He’s only a Tim” pierced through my ears and stuck in my brain until, for no apparent reason to anyone, I threw a glass at the mirror behind the bar. (51)

What appears to trigger Mac’s outburst here is a sudden reaction to the rhetoric used by the bar’s punters. This sort of dialect might also be familiar to readers of more well-known working-class literature. Speaking of the English realist tradition, Kelman has argued, “People from communities like [his] were rarely to be found on these pages. When they were they were usually categorised as servants, peasants, criminal elements, semi-literate drunken louts” (“And the judges said...” 38). This characterisation is made manifest by the majority of Mac’s acquaintances, all of whom embody these stereotypes.

The insertion of such hackneyed dialogue and characterisation in “high” literature provides a distancing between subject and reader, allowing for voyeuristic condescension. Kelman sees the “distinction between dialogue and narrative as a summation of the political system; it was simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities” (40). That a text such as *No Mean City* could be seen as a realist representation of Glasgow life denies its characters an internal existence. As Kelman states: “I was uncomfortable with ‘working-class’ authors who allowed ‘the voice’ of higher authority to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred” (40). This denial of an internal existence is made evident in all but Mac. There is a sense in which his character becomes more aware of not only “the

trap his world has become”, but of the trap his *narrative* has become and his displacement within said narrative. There is a trace of the meta-fictional here, as Mac’s frustrations seem reflective of Owens’ frustrations with the traditional realist novel. His glass-shattering act of frustration stemmed from overhearing the dialect of the stereotypical working-class male; this is the “usual programme” he has lost interest in. We see him “becoming too aware” of the pressure put on him to exist in such a restrictive narrative space.

Carole Jones discusses this narrative displacement in her book *Disappearing Men* (2009), citing a passage from Ian A. Bell’s *Imagine Living There: Form and Ideology in Contemporary Scottish Fiction*: “Scottish novelists since the early 1980s have concentrated on individual moments of crisis, alienation and fragmentation, moments dramatizing the loss and discovery of self”. Jones relates this to Franz Fanon’s concept of “inferiorisation”, a colonial process which affects “the culture of the colonised in relation to that of the coloniser entailing a deferring to the superiority of metropolitan culture”. Though wary of the act of equating Scotland with the colonies of European empires, she sees a similar process of “inferiorisation” being explored in “the anxious Scottish soul-searching in the wake of the failure of the 1979 referendum for devolution to produce a decisive vote for Scottish self-rule” (16).

In the context of *Gentlemen* and *Birds*, this process of “inferiorisation” is linked to class politics. In denying Mac comfort within a literary trajectory that is intended to represent his own experiences, Owens draws attention to this very crisis of representation, thereby positioning her work within a literary trajectory of “working-class writing attuned to existentialism, and to language and form, as part of a commitment that the existence of working-class experience can be registered in its own terms rather than explained or cancelled by someone else’s” (32). In her interview with Ramaswamy, Owens said of her writing:

All my stories are about building site workers, tramps, and alcoholics. They’re the only people I have great knowledge of. I’ve lived with them and had husbands who took a good drink. I know the patter. I couldn’t have written about anything else and I didn’t want to talk about wealthy people. It’s boring. (“The fat”)

In Mac, Owens created a character that begins to “become [*too*] aware” of the conceit of working-class representation, and the “pressures” placed on a character such as himself to behave to a predetermined character type. Jane Gray rightly sees connections between Mac and some of Kelman’s characters – specifically, Hines in *The Busconductor Hines*. She quotes Gavin Wallace’s observation that these “narrators and protagonists [are] rarely, if

ever, fully in control of their existences, and morbidly aware of the fact” (“Giving”). Mac’s frustrations are reflective of a wider problem in realist representation, this being what Kelly identifies as the “lack of narrative space in which his characters can reconcile the individual with itself or with society”. Realist working-class characters are floating signifiers, or ghosts, and to allow these to be taken as indicative of real experience or as authentic representations is fundamentally flawed. As Kelly argues, “a more radical working-class culture would only ever find its authenticity in the paradox of its own inauthenticity, in the antimony of being required to find its own reality in the illusion of someone else’s” (39). In *Gentlemen*, we witness Mac gradually recognising the inauthenticity of his own narrative, in which he is required to find himself in the illusive landscape of traditional realism.

After his outburst at The Paxton Arms, Mac waits to board a bus hoping to travel north (52). At the bus-shelter he meets Collie Lumsden who “used to work beside [him] on the building sites before he gave it all up to be a full-time alcoholic” (51). Mac is less than enthusiastic about his company – “At present I was not on the same wavelength as him”, though he reluctantly accepts a sip of beer “wishing the bus would hurry up before [he gets] sucked back into his familiar social life” (52). Once he has boarded the bus and arrived at his destination, Mac considers getting a drink, but “[forces] himself to give it a miss” and instead he buys a bottle of lemonade and a pie, and boards a tourist boat which offers a tour of the islands. He quickly begins to feel uncomfortable amongst the “English patter” and decides to get off at the first island and wait to be collected upon the ship’s return – “I had no intention of being trapped on this boat for any length of time with these foreigners”, though he is fed up with his “familiar social life” he is uncomfortable and feels all too aware of his presence amongst the English sightseers on board:

I leapt onto the jetty of an unknown island. I nearly fell in the drink but desperation saved me. Like a fugitive I scurried up the first path which led me away from the shore. I sensed contemplative stares following me, but when I turned round the moon faces on the boat were becoming harmless dots [...] I retreated into the undergrowth (53).

Here, Mac’s displacement is rendered physical, removed from both his community and the English tourists on the boat. This is the first story in which we have encountered Mac in an isolated setting. Within this story Owens creates an environment in which Mac is given freedom from his character type; that he refers to the ocean as “the drink” is telling – escape from his community and the narrative he inhabits, or drown drunk in cynical resignation.

Though he initially feels at peace on the island, Mac becomes anxious in his isolation and feels like he is being watched – “I don’t know why, but once you start running it makes it a certainty that somebody’s following you” (55). That Mac had been anxious about his visibility on the boat, and remains anxious about visibility on the island is notable. His readers are the only people Mac is visible to. In this light, Jones makes a relevant comment of Kelman’s protagonists, in that his fictions are “concerned with a ‘non-working class’, the burgeoning group of unemployed and casually employed labour subject to the insecurities and vagaries of the changing industrial landscape of the 1980s” (35). For these characters “unemployment is a constant threat brings with it the danger of non-being” (36). For Mac to recognise that he is a construct also comes with the threat (or realisation) on “non-being”; without the presence of an observer he is also in danger of “non-being”, as a fictional character can only exist when read. This causes Mac to panic. “Up Country” begins with Mac’s realisation that he is “becoming aware of increasing pressures”, and from the moment of his departure from the bus he becomes anxious about being watched – or for clarity of argument, read.

The fear of non-being is further explored when Mac walks through the bushes until he comes across a path leading to a graveyard. He deciphers the verse on one tombstone:

Here lies Tom,
His Life was Squandered,
His Days are Done,
But Yours are Numbered

Mac spies a wooden seat “twisted and gnarled as a corpse itself” and sits on it, imagining “Tom [...] sitting there peacefully with his arms folded and legs crossed”:

It was strange but I couldn’t hear any birds singing now. The only sound was my breathing and I tried to quieten this down a bit. I sat as still as the vision I had of old Tom because I didn’t think I could move even if I tried. I had the crazy feeling I was part of the seat. Then from the wood there was a crack as if someone was or something had stood on a branch while he or it was watching me. I could bear it no longer [...] (56)

What Owens captures here, and what Mac begins to understand, is that as a fictional construct he cannot exist without an observer. Mac feels the creeping threat of inertia when he imagines himself into Tom’s position, and feels as though he is becoming a part of the graveyard seat. Like Tom, Mac’s days are numbered, though his are literally numbered by the pages of his story. Kelman articulates something similar in *The Busconductor Hines* (which is also cited by Jones):

He is dependent. He is a thing that comes to life under certain conditions for if they do not obtain then he is to be being false i.e. unalive. He would be an unalive bastard, for whom death is the probable next step. (100)

If Mac, the archetypal working-class protagonist, is to remain as he has done (dependent on conditions determined by an accepted literary form) he is then redundant, or “unalive”. He is “false”, re-produced and stereotyped until finally rendered insignificant.

Boarding the boat again he is greeted by “broad, forgiving smiles” (“I smiled back gratefully because at least they were human, if English”) and Mac feels at peace enough to respond to their rendition of “The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond” with the retort, “An’ I’ll be in the pub afore ye” (56). Taking a break in a local, Mac meets a German tourist looking for friendly company. Somewhat reluctantly, Mac obliges; when he sees the man swallow his whiskey with ease he relents that “maybe he wasn’t so bad” (58). The tourist, whose name is Max, has come to study Scottish castles for a book he wishes to write, which confuses Mac (59-60). Mac generously offers Max a bed for the night, and asks if he wishes to have a drink together, though Max declines and says that for Mac “[his] presence would cause violence”, meaning that he is likely to be accosted as an outsider. As they part ways, Mac considers the confidence and self-assuredness of Max, still lamenting the world he is in: “They are a right ignorant lot round here, but some day I will get away from this place. Some day I might go see castles myself” (62).

Mac’s disillusionment, coupled with his newfound comfort amongst the English tourists, and his befriending of Max seemingly gesture toward Mac’s “initiation”. In contrast, the following stories make a return to Mac’s usual living experience, something comedic and saddening in turn. In “The Group” a band are hired for regular performances at The Paxton Arms, their first performance deteriorates into a fist fight between the bar patrons and themselves and Flossie (the barman) reveals that Paddy McDonald is now a police informer which greatly upsets Mac – “The night air must have nipped my eyes because they were wet [...] if ever I had liked a fella it had been Paddy and him an informer” (71); in “Paid Aff”, Mac and the builders he works with are told that they have all lost their jobs as a result of their attitudes and laziness, though it concludes with the site manager, McCafferty instructing Mac to return early in the morning; “McCluskie’s Oot” involves one of Mac’s childhood friends being released from prison (for manslaughter) and joining Mac’s building site. Sensing hostility from the workers, McCluskie asks to be paid off; in “Christmas Day in the Paxton” Paddy is found hypothermic outside the Paxton one morning - barely regaining consciousness once inside the Paxton, Paddy tells Mac he

is not an informer and that his house was recently burnt down before dying defiantly as the ambulance men arrive; “The Aftermath” tells of Mac being convinced by Murdo to assist him in robbing the house of Scottish Nationalist “Kilty Cauld Bum McFadjan” (104), Mac reluctantly agrees and both men are arrested.

The second to last story of *Gentlemen*, “The Ghost Seeker”, returns to the existential angst of “Up Country”. Mac has been unemployed for a month, and decides to take a walk through the Douglas Estate, to the “old lodge cottage” where he used to spend time in his schooldays – “It had been the last place to be inhabited when the gentry abandoned it after a fire had burned the big house to the ground” (109). Moving on to the “hut wi’ the hooks” a few yards further, Mac recalls the fears he and his friends had of its being haunted by ghosts, and of a dare he had faced to walk through the estate alone in the dark:

Yes, these were the days of real adventure, real heroes and real villains. Now it was all grind, booze or trying to get by on the dole.

The damp, cold air cut through my reveries and I decided it was time to get going. As a gesture I patted the clammy wet wood of the remains of the hut a farewell. It had once been a refuge for ghost seekers and at heart I was still one. Any old ghost would have pleased me. Even the faintest suggestion of one. Anything, just anything to give me a hint of something beyond. (115-6)

If we compare this to “Up Country”, in which he imagined taking the place of the ghost of “old Tom”, we see his perspective shifting. Mac is no longer anxious, but reflective and ready “to get going”, which he enacts in the final story, “Goodbye Everybody”. Mac visits the charred remains of Paddy’s home, hoping to find the latter’s cat waiting for him to return:

It would just give a bit of justification to everything [...] But the fact was there was no cat, no spirit, and not even a singed bit of fur. To hell with it all; I would make my own ghost. I picked up a piece of blackened char and marked on a bit of wall that remained “PADDY WILL RETURN” then left quickly before anyone saw me. (116)

Gifford may be right that in Paddy’s death Mac sees a warning (“Contemporary Fiction II” 624), though here he is far less anxious than in “Up Country”. Mac recognises the conceit of the events that have occurred, and despite being unable to find “a hint of something beyond” or even “a bit of justification”, he defiantly immortalises his friend’s memory in blackened char. Rather than a warning, this seems to be acceptance that his narrative has to end.

1.5 Like Birds in the Wilderness

Gentlemen concludes much like an “initiation” novel, with his departure and the prospect of adventure. However, if we consider *Gentlemen* and *Birds* as an on-going narrative, Mac’s attempted “initiation” is exposed as a failure. Once Mac has left his town hoping to find employment in the north-east (*Gentlemen*); he finds accommodation in a lodging house despite being presently unemployed (*Birds* 3). Here he meets the other lodgers including Dad, a “con-man by trade” (5); another lodger, Jimmy tells him there is space for a brick worker on his building site (7); Mac meets upper-class ‘travelling salesman’ Colin Craig in a pub (8); he is introduced to Nancy and immediately decides “there [is] no future for [him] with this skinny dame, even if she was passable looking in a snooty way” (17); he quickly falls for Nancy; in an attempt to find Craig, Mac takes Jimmy to a derelict bar called The Open Door and asks the barman, McLerie if he knows Craig - McLerie denies any knowledge (24); a ‘burnt-out case’ Mac and Jimmy saw at the bar approaches them in the street to ask for help home.

Though it is assumed he was either in a car crash or a war casualty, he reveals himself as Dad and claims to be testing out masks for a theatre company, he also reveals that he has seen Craig before (25-9); dates with Nancy happen sporadically, Mac is resentful whenever Nancy cancels and doe-eyed whenever he is with her; Mac sees Craig at a peace festival and is offered work in Craig’s new business, though details are vague (43-4); Mac loses his virginity to Nancy, though he keeps this a secret (52); Mac is given a week’s notice for failing to show for work (54); Mac passes-out drunk at The Open Door, and awakes to see “Craig the toff, McLerie the sinister pub owner, and Dad the shabby lodger”, and “[judges] them to be villains of some kind” (59), despite this he is pleased that Craig again offers him work; having passed-out in the street, Mac wakes up in a jail cell for “drunk and disorderly” behaviour (62) and is referred to a hospital ward (63); Nancy visits him in hospital and he is discharged two days later (67-9); Mac moves into Nancy’s aunt’s spare room (73) though shortly after he finds a newspaper article on Craig’s business (called Lifeline), Nancy offers to follow him to Langholm Valley to accept Craig’s offer (108). More than half of the novel then follows Mac and Nancy on this wild goose chase.

Eventually, Mac’s drinking coupled with his lack of consideration for her becomes unbearable for Nancy and she boards a bus back home (114). Mac does find Dad in a pub shortly before Nancy leaves, and it is revealed that Dad and Craig are involved with a

right-wing group, who “stir things up” (109) amongst marginalised individuals and subsequently inform on them: “[t]here’s always some that want tae dae somethin’, but usually they don’t bother until somebody comes along and stirs it up. Afore ye know it there are organised groups tryin’ to create disorder” (110). McClerie was one such victim, pinpointed as an activist and has now been jailed – this, Dad argues, is “daein’ decent folk a favour” (111). Mac is disgusted with this, and upon seeing Craig walking with Dad he attacks him in the street (117). Mac makes his way back to his mother and hometown and accepts a job selling caravans for a local salesman, Duds Smith, “the only option ahead of [him]” (135).

The reasoning for detailing this story in such a way is to ask: what actually happens here? When considered as an extended narrative, the “convincingly hopeful end” Alasdair Gray sees in *Gentlemen* becomes a red-herring which *Birds* then appears to undercut.

Consider this quote of Raymond Williams’, from his *Politics and Letters*:

The new forms of the fifties, to which many writers quickly turned, were usually versions of the novel of escape, which one part of [D.H.] Lawrence had prepared. Their theme was really escape from the working class – moving to the top of the room, or the experience of flight. They lacked any sense of the continuity of working-class life, which does not cease just because one individual moves out of it, but which is also itself changed internally. (qtd. in Kono 95)

What this suggests is that the idea of *escape* is in itself a myth. In the context of Mac’s narrative journey, if every fictional working-class character that had broken free from the shackles of working-class existence had successfully travelled north for work - where are they? The towns Mac passes through in *Birds* are as barren as anywhere else he visits. Such absence serves to highlight the falsity of the ‘initiation novel’.

Mac’s entire story has led him to this point in hope of work, though unlike Tolworth McGee he never comes into money nor was the possibility ever really entertained. Prillinger notes that though the conclusion of *Gentlemen* promises a new start for Mac: “[That] was all finished. It was, goodbye to everybody. I was on my way to do better things. I was on my way to adventure” (127), his future is already limited:

‘Better things’, as referred to in the quote above, is merely ‘work’ (as opposed to his present state at the end of *Gentlemen*, namely ‘unemployment’), but not necessarily ‘social rise’. [...] it is clear that Mac is not unintelligent, but it is unclear just how he was rated at school and if there were any chances of anyone suggesting to him any form of higher education. Most probably, however, him coming from a poor area, his social ‘career’ was taken for granted and the way it was expected to be. (“Aspects” 100-1)

The few workers Mac encounters when he travels north are unable to offer him anything. At one point he comes across a roughly dressed man (“which meant his gear was worse than mine”) who he identifies as a tinker (“travelling folk”). When he learns that the man collects scrap metal and sells it illegally, he asks if they need an extra pair of hands. Though the man declines, and when Mac asks how far it is to Langolm Valley, he is told: “Christ man, ye’re staunin’ in the very spot, and there’s naethin’ happenin’ here except for a couple o’ fellas diggin’ a ditch two miles back.” Resignedly, he responds: “Ach well, somethin’s bound to turn up, even if it’s only ma toes” (103).

Gentlemen sets up Mac and the reader to believe that his departure from the debilitating monotony of his community will bring some form of success, be it personal or financial. Returning to Williams’ concept of “initiation novels”, “in which the social and economic solutions and the personal achievements were in a single dimension and the form which, extending and complicating and then finally collapsing this dimension, ends with a single person going away on his own, having achieved his moral growth through distancing or extrication”, what we see in *Gentlemen* and *Birds* is a demonstration of the falsity of this. The conceit fails precisely because the “initiation” narrative fails to consider continuity of working-class life, rendering claims to “realist” representation unsuitable.

The arc of Mac’s narrative in its entirety re-produces the circular structure of the first three stories in *Gentlemen*. Mac leaves for work; falls in love; is unable to find work; his girlfriend leaves him; he returns home. However, unlike the earlier short stories this encompassing narrative circle is not comedic in the way that the short stories were. *Gentlemen* and *Birds* construct a narrative that subverts the trajectory of the “initiation” novel through a process of revising, re-producing and undoing. Mac does not succeed in his “initiation”, and *Birds* makes visible the conceit of this very notion. Gray proposes that a reader of *Gentlemen* will be “relieved that Mac has had the sense and energy to step out of the trap his world has become, and leave us with a convincingly hopeful end” (129). However, this sense of relief is then undone by the conclusion of *Birds*, and through this Owens has extended, complicated and collapsed the single dimension of Mac’s narrative. Rather than illustrating the freedom of the individual, Owens uses and confounds this structural device to point towards “the limits of individualism in a class society, to the social mediation of individualism, and the ultimately unrealisable promise of universal freedom for all in society and culture as they are presently constituted” (Kelly 11).

Owens has gestured towards a way of re-thinking and re-shaping realist literature. Considering some implications of Owens’ approach to “initiation”, Prillinger is right to

oppose Gareth Mangan's claim that *Gentlemen* presents "an uncritical celebration of the Scottish working-class male", arguing instead that:

[*Gentlemen*] offers a light-hearted treatment of a grim subject [...] but it does not depict Mac's life as desirable. [...] his working situation is unstable and he gets increasingly fed up with the stupidity of the clientele at the Paxton Arms. In the course of the novel, he tries to break out of the boundaries of his life three times: Once with his trip to the island, a second time when he visits the Douglas estate and the third time when he finally leaves town to start anew somewhere else. [...] Mac as the first person narrator is part of the world of the narrative; he is therefore limited in his ability to criticize himself or other characters; and Owens's approach is to make the reader think over situations rather than tell him what to think. (122)

If the "initiation" structure and the aesthetic representation of working-class experience has failed Mac, our challenge is to consider how we can begin to re-consider the possibilities and limitations of aesthetic representation, and question the role realism can play – if at all – in the modern literary landscape. Is there a place to be made for a "totalising aesthetic representation" (McNeill 20), or has the possibility of this dwindled in light of the "random chaos and simulacra" of postmodernity and globalisation?

This question is one that organises Dougal McNeill's *Forecasts of the Past*, in which he considers the possibility of new realism emerging following the innovations of modernism and postmodernism. In its early pages, he draws attention to a number of questions Fredric Jameson posed in regards to realism and modernism. McNeill provides context, which I will paraphrase here. In reviewing the debates within the Marxisms of the 1930s, Jameson noted that "all manner of political and aesthetic concerns re-emerging in the then-contemporary moment of the 1970s" (1). He argued that this "return of the repressed" had never been more dramatic "than in the aesthetic conflict between "Realism" and "Modernism" whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today" (1-2). Though modernism's innovations in "making strange" and accepting "the shocks of monopoly capitalism" had dismayed readers, Jameson wondered:

whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be...realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of "estrangement" have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be "estranged" and corrected by a more totalising way of viewing phenomena" (qtd. in McNeill 2)

Though there is a challenge presented in attempting to imagine how a new realism might appear, McNeill notes that the “tasks and functions of this new realism [...] are clear”, citing Jameson’s claim that:

To resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by the existential fragmentations on all levels of life and social organisation today, can alone project structural relations between classes.
(2)

McNeill reflects that though these “brief, inconclusive but intensely suggestive sketches for a contemporary realism stood alone in Jameson’s work as the challenges of periodising the postmodern, re-evaluating the utopian demand and assessing and responding to the various challenges to Marxism issued through the 1980s”, Jameson returned in 2002 with this “astonishing aside”:

each realism is also by definition new: and aims at conquering a whole new area of content for its representation... (and this is why, throughout and beyond the age of modernism, there are still new and vibrant realisms to be heard and to be recognized, in parts of the world and areas of the social totality into which representation has not yet penetrated). That is to say not only that each new realism arises out of dissatisfaction with the limits of the realisms that preceded it, but also and more fundamentally that realism itself in general shares precisely that dynamic of innovation we ascribed to modernism as its uniquely distinguishing feature. (2-3)

McNeill goes on to consider whether this revitalised realism, “one that can ‘alone project social relations amongst classes’ is accessible today, is active today, and how it may have rearranged itself in the era of globalisation and full postmodernity” (3) in great depth. Such questions are far beyond the scope of this thesis; though I suggest that whilst *Gentlemen* may not present a complete break from the traditional realist working-class novel, it engages with the possible re-structuring of such a model, or is at least attuned to its limitations.

If indeed the “possibilities for [totalising] aesthetic expression or articulation” (Jameson, qtd. in McNeill 20) can now be “nothing more than an empty and unfulfilled desire”, then perhaps the realist writer is now little more than a “ghost seeker”, and the realist model as it exists can no longer be the “refuge for ghost seekers” (*Gentlemen* 116) it once was. This produces an anxiety, a fear of redundancy that is written into Mac’s character. This anxiety is expressed through a restless fear of idleness, hence his want to leave his community; anger, as he displays in his violent outburst resulting from the behaviour of the Paxton’s punters (51); superstition and fear, as he feels on the island

thinking about “the vision [he has] of old Tom” (56), and through his mourning the death of Paddy (116). The problem is that, as Jameson says: “if we can grasp the truth about our world as a totality, then we may find it some purely conceptual expression but we will no longer be able to maintain an imaginative relationship to it” (qtd. in McNeill 20), and this is just as true of Mac’s relationship to his world. He finds no trace of the ghost he wishes to find in the ruins of Paddy’s house, there is not even a trace of his cat (consider that cats are often associated with superstitious beliefs): “the fact was there was no cat, no spirit, and not even a singed bit of fur” (116).

What Owens makes clear in the hopelessness of Mac’s situation is the full impact of post-Thatcher neo-liberalism, which McNeill describes as having been:

the wrecking of whole lives and communities, the destruction of much of Wales, the north of England and Scotland as viable social areas, the emergence of mass social problems like long-term unemployment and drug-abuse (120)

Mac’s entire existence is, in his words “all grind, booze or trying to get by on the dole” (115), and *Gentlemen* is the fictional documentation of his attempted navigation through the remains of the fictional landscape of the realist working-class novel. Far from being apolitical in its focus on the individual and isolated Mac, *Gentlemen* argues that if realism can be at all re-imagined – if there is indeed hope left for the totalising aesthetic project – then it must be one that recognises the limits of representation. There is a hint of anticipation here: Mac resolves to “make [his] own ghost” (116) and in this, ultimately, is Owens’ hopeful gesture.

Chapter Two

The bigger picture in fewer words:

Agnes Owens' short stories

In her interview with Jane Gray, Owens discussed her interest in “treacheries of attitude”⁶, both in so-called real life and in fiction:

Yes, that's the word I've been searching for: treachery. Not on a Hitler-type scale! Treachery, people are treacherous, you're treacherous yourself sometimes. That just sums it up: that I like to expose the treacheries. But people that are treacherous are not necessarily monsters. They're not necessarily even evil or wicked. But we're all treacherous. There's always somebody we're letting down. I discover that I'm talking about somebody and then I say, “I hope she disnae find out what I've been saying about her!” You know, *that* kind of treachery. You think you like this person, and yet you're quite willing to join in and run them down. Send them to the guillotine! (“Giving”)

The suggestion of common complicity, that there's “always somebody we're letting down”, is central to Owens' fictional world. Here, the internal and external struggles of others are ignored, overlooked, or physically shut away by the communities that house them. The tension she places between the external (the community) from the internal (“people like that”), far from being apolitical or anti-collective in its focus on isolated individuals, also brings to light our own treacheries as passive-readers of our world. Owens' represented landscapes are those that have been left forsaken by the advances of neo-liberalism, under which “in Britain the proportion of the population with less than half the average income has trebled since 1977” (McNeill 120). Owens registers the devastating impact of these advances through the lives of characters that have no collective community left to support them.

In the previous chapter I discussed *Gentlemen and Birds*, and the way these texts problematise notions of “initiation” in working-class fiction. Mac does not find economic success, and is returned to a restrictive community he is unable to extricate himself from. Where these texts address notions of the restrictive working-class community, Owens' short stories challenge what Francis Russell Hart sees as a vital aspect of Scottish literature:

⁶ Owens first used this phrase in an interview with Joy Hendry, published by *The Scotsman* in 1996 as “Finding Truth in Hard Times”.

[a] noteworthy feature of Scottish fiction is the moral primacy of the community, the faith [...] that community is the ground of individual worth and a condition of salvation. From Galt to Duncan, it is implied that the true community matures genuine individuality; for Lockhart, Alexander, and Gunn, a denial of community is a threat to personal integrity. (qtd. in “Aspects” 84)

Owens’ characters are often those not only on the margins of society, but also on the margins of their small communities: those deemed mad, drunk, tinkers, criminals, down-and-out. For these characters, “a denial of community” is not so much a choice as the communities that house them are not only “a threat” to notions of personal integrity, but actively deny them their support.

Owens’ writing, as I have previously stated, maintains a specific point of focus on those who have no choice or will but to survive from day to day. These qualities allow her to explore private and institutionalised systems of abuse, and the aforementioned “treacheries of attitude” (qtd. in Gray 2) in ways that are wholly distinct from her contemporaries. Such considerations will remain central to this chapter, and the stories I will discuss in detail are taken from each of her collections. From *Lean Tales* (1985), “The Silver Cup”; from *People Like That* (1996), “People Like That”; and from *The Dark Side* (2008), “The Writing Group”. These few stories effectively demonstrate Owens’ unflinching and sympathetic portrayals of lives lived in the margins of community. This limited selection of stories demonstrates some scope of Owens’ vision, whilst leaving space for future criticism of her short stories.

As with many of Owens’ stories, these stories are narrated in the third-person by an external narrator-focaliser. The term “focalisation” was first introduced by French structuralist Gérard Genette, and is distinct from traditional concepts of “perspective”, “angle of vision” or the more commonly used “point of view” because it suggests “a degree of abstractness which avoids the specifically visual connotations of ‘point of view’” (Rimmon-Kenan 72). “Focalisation”, unlike the purely visual “point of view”, contains broader implications of cognitive, emotional and ideological orientation. However, the definition I follow here is Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s, who develops on Genette’s ideas thus:

As Genette has shown, most studies of point of view [...] treat two related but different questions as if they were interchangeable. Briefly formulated, these questions are ‘who sees?’ v. ‘who speaks?’ [...] it is almost impossible to speak without betraying some

personal 'point of view', if only through the very language used. But a person (and, by analogy, a narrative agent) is also capable of undertaking to tell what another person sees or has seen. Thus, speaking and seeing, narration and focalisation, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent. (73)

The distinction between "who sees?" and "who speaks?" is a theoretical necessity, and an important aspect of Owens' fiction. Lynne Stark is right to see this as a feature that distinguishes her from her contemporaries. Whereas Kelman resists the third-person and his characters are "perceived from within, rather than observed from without", Owens' subject "*is* the disparity between social and individual perception" ("Untold Stories" 113). Owens deliberately uses the third-person to separate the reader from the subject. Her characters are defined by their actions and the way they engage with their environments, and the narrator-focaliser shifts between direct, indirect and free indirect discourse, disclosing to the reader varying degrees of 'internal' knowledge.

2.1 Treacheries of Attitude

"The Silver Cup" crafts a microcosm of the imagined community that serves as a backdrop to the majority of Owens' work. The story is focalised through a woman known only as Sammy's Ma, who lives in a small flat with Sammy's Da and of course, Sammy. The family are a picture of a stereotypical, fictional Scottish working-class family (as suggested by the withholding of the parents' names): the subdued wife; the abusive father; the delinquent son. We learn very little of Sammy, other than that he spends the majority of his time holed away in his "flame orange" room (or "territory"), which is "as damp and fetid as an old shed", entertaining his friends most evenings from five to ten o'clock behind a closed door which reads "KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING". Whilst Sammy's Ma tries to respect his demand for privacy, Sammy's Da (who is quick-tempered and aggressive as a result of his being banned from smoking and drinking) is more inclined to kick the door open, or orders Ma "to 'see what the bugger's up to', rather than risk raising his blood pressure to dangerous heights". It is clear that Sammy and Da do not see eye-to-eye, though a photograph of the latter in his youth reveals the former to be his splitting image (145).

The turning point of the story comes when Da begins a gruff search for a ball-point pen, which Ma suspects is an excuse for him to search through Sammy's room. Subsequently, a large silver trophy is found hidden away, with an inscription reading

‘PRESENTED TO THE PENSION CLUB BY COUNCILLOR HOOD’. Da is excited by the thought that Sammy will be sent to an approved school, as he is not yet old enough to be sent to prison; Ma is sent into a state of disbelief: “To rob a pension club was unforgivable. A football club was more acceptable, when one considered risks” (147). The former’s hypocrisy is quickly exposed when he starts to consider the money he could earn if he had the cup melted down, a proposition made all the more tantalising by the thought of seeing “the look on that bugger’s face when he discovers it’s gone” (149). Initially, Ma worries about what the neighbours will say if Sammy is reported to the police:

They would snigger, and look up at her window, and shake their heads as if it was only to be expected [...] Once from her kitchenette window she heard a woman in the back green say to another, ‘That one upstairs is a proper misery. Never has a word to say and runs along the road on her shopping errands as if she hasn’t a minute to spare.’ (148)

During the two page argument they have over what is to be done, Da displays a violent physicality: “His eyes bulged”; “he replied, banging the trophy down”; “She broke off when her husband punched the wall in anger”; “he demanded”; “he was rubbing the knuckles of his right hand”; “He sat down beside her breathing heavily”; “Her husband shouted”; “Her husband wiped beads of sweat from his forehead [...] he said through clenched teeth”; “To placate his mounting wrath”; “Her husband jumped violently to his feet”; and finally upon leaving, he slams the door hard “as if to shut her in” (148-9).

Both Da and Sammy are dismissive of Ma, who early in the story finds solace within the kitchenette, where she “[feels] safe amongst the unwashed dishes” (146). The kitchenette here is considered “safe”, as the men occupy the other spaces in the house make them unsympathetic and oppressive to Ma. For example, Da occupies the living room during the evenings watching films that are not to Ma’s taste (though she finds some relief in that these keep him distracted and quiet): “He always maintained he liked a bit of action, but none of that lovey dovey stuff, nor plays that were all gab, nor anything that related to female predicaments. Sammy’s Ma had learned to keep her mouth shut about what she liked” (146). Despite her resigned acceptance, Da often retires to bed with “as he described it, brain fatigue, prompted by ‘certain persons, whom she took to mean herself.’” Owens rendering of spaces is interesting, in that the kitchen is only a “woman’s space” in that it provides refuge from the otherwise masculine-dominated spaces of the rest of the house. The concept of separate, gendered spheres is imposed both within the house as well

as outside; though Da is at pains to express his aversion to sharing space with her, he also “[views] darkly any mission which [necessitates] her being gone from the house for more than an hour” (146). Owens shifts focus *within* this stereotype: the “woman’s space” is only upheld as such due to the restrictions imposed on occupying anywhere else.

The only other women in the story are Ma’s neighbours. Whilst the external neighbourhood is not physically threatening, it presents the threat of judgment. Earlier, when Ma reflects on what she has overheard neighbours saying about her (including that they have nicknamed her “the road runner”), though we understand that her haste to complete her errands is likely a result of both the external threat of the neighbours, and of the internal threat of her husband and son. If we map the physical spaces Ma occupies throughout the story, Ma’s entrapment is evident: Sammy’s room (145); living room with Da; kitchenette; living room whilst Da is asleep in the bedroom; kitchenette (146); Sammy’s room whilst he is out (147); living room after Da has stormed out (149); kitchenette; outdoors; is returned to the living room by her neighbours (151). We can see that Ma’s life is spent indoors, largely within three rooms. She is not welcome in Sammy’s room, nor in the living room when Da is there. The kitchenette is the only space that is exclusively occupied by her, and the living room when her husband is asleep. We also know that Ma rarely leaves the house and that she has “never been further than the townhead in all her fifteen years of marriage” (146). Ma is boxed in.

It is characteristic of Owens to allude to the more disturbing elements of her stories in a sharp utterance or passing sentence⁷. An example of this occurs during Ma’s attempts to escape the house. Early in the story, Ma considers that her husband often loses items. “His pen, his screwdriver, his socks, his heart pills, were just a few of the items which he lost daily” (147). When he leaves with the trophy, “[she clutches] her husband’s small bottle of heart pills, which she had found behind the curtains. She was thinking that for once she would have them ready on his command” (149-50). This raises a number of

⁷As Moira Burgess observes in “The Glasgow Short Story”, another example of this is when Sammy alludes to a gang bang which we never hear of again:

Sammy punched the air and shouted, ‘It was a pal who left it here! [...] He just left it while we went out for a gang bang with the guys up the lane.’

Sammy’s Ma wrinkled her forehead. ‘Gang bang?’ she repeated. (150)

questions that remain unanswered: had the heart pills been hidden? If so, by whom? If Sammy's Da is often searching for the pills, we can assume he is not the one hiding them. Ma considers that "for once she would have them ready"; why "for once"? Is Sammy hiding the pills? We learn nothing more, but in this brief moment Owens opens up questions which are left to lie dormant in readers' minds. It is unlikely that Ma is hiding the pills, as the pills are all she has available to calm her husband's anger. However, Owens does not allow us the comfort of certainty, and instead leaves these questions open and resistant to clear interpretation.

The presence of unanswered questions in fiction can be frustrating to the reader who expects to "read the story and climb out of it into the meaning", as Flannery O'Connor puts it ("The Nature" 73). Echoing sentiments similar to those expressed by Benjamin in "The Author as Producer", O'Connor argues that a good writer speaks "*with* character and action, not *about* character and action" and that the writer's moral sense "must coincide with his dramatic sense" (76). For Owens to explain her characters' actions by way of explicit moral justification would be to compromise the integrity of these stories, as "you can't make an inadequate dramatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it" (75). Rather than climbing out of these stories and into "the meaning", "the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction" (73). For the reader, the comfort of certainty can only be expressed through abstractly expressed compassion or morality; such a writer writes *about* character and action. Owens does not make such aesthetic or political compromises.

"The Silver Cup" is narrated *with* Ma. This gives the reader a perspective on Ma which is not shared by her community. Ma does not receive any support from her community and is actively excluded, whilst the neighbours and Sammy enjoy companionship and collective experience. Her only attempt to leave her environment is met with the neighbours sealing her back in (151). In an attempt to befriend the neighbours she decides to bring out a pot of tea and recount the bizarre events of the day. "She longed to speak rather than listen [...] Sammy's Ma became quite giddy with the notion that seized her, which was to join them on the steps". Whilst crossing the street she trips on the grating of a drain, breaking the tea cups and losing the heart pills through the bars. Though the neighbours laugh, two help her back inside, and assume her to be unstable due her repeated insistence that "[she] really must tell [them] about the silver cup" (151).

The two ask if Ma's husband is around and she responds with hysterical laughter. One neighbour taps the side of her head "significantly while she gave her companion a meaningful glance", and the two leave (152). The story concludes with the two closing the door softly. Though her husband slams the door on her earlier and the neighbours close the door softly, both do so "as if to shut her in". Although this is not seen to be malicious or even necessarily bad-natured, it is certainly indicative of a complicit antipathy which can be traced back through the story. Though her neighbours speculate about Ma's sanity and home life, none consider offering their support, choosing instead to laugh at her from outside the kitchenette window. Though the kitchenette is Ma's "safe" space away from the internal house-bound threat of her husband, the window is all that separates her from the external threat of her neighbours.

Prillinger notes a similar division of internal and external in "Bus Queue", a story set in a poor suburb and concerned with the fate of one youth and a group of middle-aged passengers-to-be awaiting a bus. As he notes, "[t]he community in question is formed by the bus passengers" who talk amongst each other about bingo, the value of youth joining the army, husbands and discipline (87). The queue itself is indicative of order, and the young boy's refusal to join it leads to a shared anxiety that they might attempt to jump the queue: "[...] 'Hi son,' someone called, 'you'd better join the queue.' The boy shook his head in the negative, and a moody silence enveloped the group" (126). When the boy is joined by two other youths it is clear that he is worried, as Owens describes his posture stiffening against the fence and the others begin to question him about the hospitalisation of a friend menacingly. Those in the queue have already dismissed him as a "hooligan" and are busy discussing the youth's lack of "consideration for anyone nooadays" (126). The boy contemplates asking for help but "[suspects] they wouldn't listen to him, judging by their comments" (127-8). The boy is held back and stabbed in the gut as the bus is being boarded, and as it departs the passengers remark that he should have been in the army learning to fight competently (128-9). It is as though in the eyes of the community, the boy's fate was already sealed.

Owens' direct challenge to literary notions of community, or sisterhood (in terms of Ma and her neighbours) becomes clearer if we consider Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *dialogic*. Bakhtin argues that dialogue generates difference and always involves multiple perspectives. In this, the concept of truth is open to debate. This contrasts with the

monologue, which centralises its voice and appears as authoritative and unchallenged. An example he gives is of the epic novel and the epic hero:

In the epic, characters are bounded, pre-formed, individualized by their various situations and destinies, but not by varying “truths”. Not even the gods are separated from men by a special truth: they have the same language, they all share the same worldview, the same fate, the same extravagant externalization. (“The Dialogic Imagination” 35).

The dialogic *novel* then, is in a constant state of dialogue with the other writers and works of literature that came before it, just as those works are given new meaning by the works that follow. These works inform each other. For Bakhtin, language can only be dialogic, and is learned through contextualised social interaction. Language is always addressed from one point of view to a real, or imagined, addressee; is always informed by context; and is therefore ideologically motivated. In other words:

all social discourses are distinguished by the point of view they express: each social language is [...] “populated” with the communicative “intentions” and ideological investments of the actual people who have used this language. (Hale 450)

In a literary sense, this brings into tension the position of the narrator, the narrated, and the narratee. My focus here is on these first two (the narrator and the narrated), as the role of the narratee will become more significant in the following stories, “People Like That” and “The Writing Group”.

It must be stressed for clarity, that narrator and narratee exist within the text. We can define the narrator as “the agent which at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration”, and the narratee as “the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator” (Rimmon-Kenan 90). These are conceptually distinct from the author and the reader, who exist externally. The model I follow here is taken from Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) in which he introduced the idea of an *implied author*. Unlike the real author, the implied author “must be seen as a construct inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text” (88). American critic Seymour Chatman uses the following diagram to visualise this concept, which is re-produced by Rimmon-Kenan (see fig. 1).

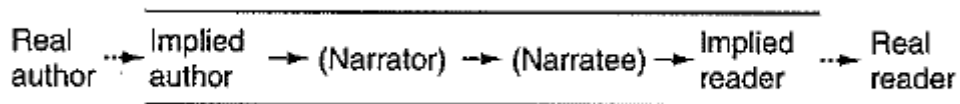


Fig. 1 Chatman's diagram. Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction*. 1983. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Chatman also explains the distinction between implied author and narrator thus:

Unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn. (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 88)

The tensions between the internal voices of the *narrator* and *narrated* can be reframed as the voice of the *knowing observer* and the *lived relations* described. This produces what Raymond Williams describes as a “knowable community”. According to Williams, a narrative neither depends on the suppression of the knowing observer or the lived relations by its counterpart. Rather, the success of a narrative depends on the relationship between the two, and these exist in a dynamic state of dialogue and interrelation (Hitchcock 53).

Williams uses this concept in order to demonstrate how knowledge of community becomes increasingly difficult and problematic in English literature from the nineteenth century⁸:

For Williams, the knowable community is a discursive strategy that challenges the dominant traditions of the novel, particularly when they attempt to articulate a metonymic substitution of bourgeois society for society in general. (Hitchcock 53)

This challenge becomes all the more evident in literary representations of knowable working-class communities, though these representations are not without problems. Peter Hitchcock is right to note that Williams' argument is not to reject the possibility of the knowable community, despite notions of “community knowledge” being fragmentary and dispersed among a range of communicative levels, but to provide a deeper understanding of the narrative strategies of the working-class novel that negotiate such difficulties (53).

⁸This concept is discussed in depth in *The English Novel, from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970) in relation to the imagined communities that populate George Eliot and Jane Austen's work.

How does this relate to the communities of Owens' world? In "The Silver Cup", the moment at which Ma begins to laugh hysterically is – as with the loss of the pills – unexplained. Whether or not Ma has "cracked" as a result of the events that have taken place, or if this is simply a reaction to her inability to tell her story to the neighbours, becomes ancillary. Owens diverts our attention towards the neighbours and their perception of Ma. Resulting from our inability to answer the questions posed, our understanding of Owens' characters, and the way they are viewed from the outside, is brought into conflict. Thus, the external (the community *and* the reader) from the internal (Ma) are separated. As the door closes, Ma is re-confined. The patterns of life are left unaltered, but very much exposed.

Owens' imagined communities are in a dialogic relationship to the working-class communities found in the work of her predecessors and contemporaries. In Owens' universe, we see a reversal of what is expected from the notion of community as being "the ground of individual worth and a condition of salvation". In her stories we rarely see the "insiders" of a community in active conflict with the "outsiders"; here we see a conflict between the community and the individual. Prillinger also discusses this, drawing on sociologist Richard Hoggart's claim that there are two constituent factors of working-class experience:

one of 'positive' description [...] in Hoggart's terms by showing friendliness, cooperation, and neighbourly help; the second is what one might call 'negative' description, where the group of insiders is defined by means of accounts of conflicts with outsiders, the more frequent method in Agnes Owens's fiction. ("Aspects" 86)

Sammy's Ma is not an "outsider" because of class difference, as she is of the same class as her neighbours. Her conflict is contained; she is an "outsider" *within* this class. Owens' fictional landscapes are marked by "treacheries of attitude". These are landscapes which counter, rather than deny, expected representations of working-class community. In this subversion, Owens' work avoids the assumption that these are lived relations, concerns or shared experiences, but offers these stories as contributions to an on-going dialogue with the numerous and complex voices of working-class fiction.

2.2 People Like That

Owens commented on the reception of her work as being compassionate. Asked by Jane Gray whether she wrote with any specific intention, Owens responded thoughtfully and tentatively:

My writing has been described as being “good”, “charitable”. I mean, the characters portrayed deserve sympathy. I’m portrayed as a writer who champions the underdogs, in a way. But I don’t do it in an *obvious* way. And the underdog can turn round and bite you just the same as any other dog! I would say I want to convey people that are condemned in a better light than what people would think, you know, or maybe to make people think, well, these people are human. Something like that. (“Giving”)

Here, Owens addressed a fundamental under-reading of her work. Whilst she certainly does write with compassion, her intention is not solely to “champion the underdog”, but “to make people think, well, these people are human.” In the same interview, Owens asserted that her interest in the poor was “not necessarily because they haven’t got enough to eat – but the way people can be poor in their minds, and not try for things, and become alcoholics”. What needs to be stressed is this question of “the way people can be poor”. What contributes to one’s “condemnation”, and what social factors allow this to remain in place?

In this context I discuss one story from her second collection *People Like That*, “People Like That” and another from *The Dark Side*, “The Writing Group”. These first two offer a more radical approach to the techniques adopted in the stories from *Lean Tales*, and an arguably more blunt depiction of social isolation. As with the previously discussed stories much information is withheld, and for a writer who sees her writing as “very simplistic” (Gray, “Giving”) these stories are hardly porous where closure is concerned. The first, “People Like That” tells the story of Mary awaiting her son’s arrival at a train station, and her subsequent rape; “The Writing Group” portrays a sexual assault during a night class. Both of these events occur at the hands of different, though similarly abject men.

The first is introduced unusually, as are many of Owens’ stories⁹, in a way that appears to set the reader up in a position of knowledge. We know that Mary experiences memory blanks from time-to-time, and that this is part of an as-yet undefined “problem”.

9 I think of the fantastic and bizarre opening of “Arabella”: “Arabella pushed the pram up the steep path to her cottage. It was hard going since the four dogs inside were a considerable weight.”

When we enter the story we are told very little about Mary, and very little about the setting. The story is narrated by a third person narrator which only admits the reader as onlookers, immediately focalising on the central figure:

Mary sat on a bench at the top end of the central station, panicking. Her mind had gone blank again. She knew this was part of her problem, but it was a horrible feeling, as if a brick wall had shut out half her brain. For a minute she couldn't think why she was here then thankfully it came back to her. She was waiting for her son Brian to arrive [...] (235).

She expresses frustration at her frequent memory blanks, considering that she is “not old enough to have senile dementia” at forty-six, though she has been experiencing this for the last two years. Mary is joined on the seat by another woman who perches on the far end, and although “[s]he didn't like the look of this woman”, Mary begins to make polite conversation because she feels “nervous and jumpy and alone”. It is clear that the other woman has very little interest and mostly ignores Mary's attempts. Anxious for the train to arrive, Mary stares at her wrist “surprised to see no watch on it”, concluding that she must have left it behind in a hurry (235). At this point we see nothing alarmingly unusual about the character, and although we know she is losing memory, her conversation is reminiscent of the sort most will have experienced awaiting public transport; we learn that the watch “had been a present from one of the staff” and Mary concludes that “they could keep it for all she cared” (236), though “the staff”, much like her “problem” remain ambiguous.

Mary begins to feel “uptight” when her companion puts on gloves and begins to stroke them, as it reminds her of the way Brian used to stroke his pet gerbils, until one day he accidentally squashed them¹⁰. In an attempt to explain this to the woman, the latter exclaims “This is too much” and walks off, leaving Mary thinking she is “off her head”, though “[y]ou were bound to meet people like that in a railway station”. Left to her own she begins to remember that “[s]omething else had happened two years ago – something of importance” and enquires again as to when the train will arrive (236). Upon arrival, she fails to see anybody departing who resembles Brian, and eventually asks a stranger “Are you Brian McGuire?” to which he tells her to “Shove off”. It is alarming that Mary cannot identify Brian, and seems to have forgotten his appearance – was the “something of importance” two years ago Brian's death? If we haven't yet, we begin to suspect here that

¹⁰ Owens has referred to Steinbeck as a writer she admires – though there is little else reminiscent of his *Of Mice and Men*, the crushed gerbils do seem a bleak parody of Lennie Small's love of softness leading to his accidental killing of a puppy, later mirrored in his breaking of Candy's neck.

there is something more to her memory blanks as it seems that Brian is not going to arrive. At this point she fondly recalls a trip she took with her son on his twelfth birthday to Greenock, though it appears he was sullen and withdrawn for the duration of the trip.

Mary panics and flees the station on noticing the woman from earlier talking to a porter and pointing in her direction: “Was the woman complaining about something, saying she’d been sworn at, or worse still, assaulted? This had happened to her before on a chance encounter with another crazy bitch who’d said Mary had tried to steal her purse” (238). She encounters a man at a news kiosk drinking alcohol. He threatens her when she catches her eye, but she persists, wondering if he is her ex-husband:

‘Pardon me,’ she said, ‘but do you happen to be Brian McGuire who used to live with his wife Mary along in Young Street twenty years ago, though I expect the place is not there now and –‘

‘What the fuck are you on about?’ he said, wiping the side of his mouth.

She could have slapped his face at the rotten way he spoke to her, but even then he had been a foul-mouthed drunkard. (239)

She is certain this man is the father of her son and ex-husband from twenty years prior, despite his assertion that “[his] wife’s name was Nan and she’s been dead a long time so it’s no’ possible” (240). As with her son, it is strange that Mary struggles to remember how her family had looked, and we can only assume that the gaps in her memory are far wider than she has suggested. The man catches sight of a policeman and hastily ducks into a dark alleyway, where she follows him and is violently raped. At this point she recalls that “Brian had died of an overdose two years ago when he’d gone down to Manchester with his junkie friends” (242).

The narrator-focalizer of this story is positioned directly between the reader and the character. It is neither wholly external nor internal; it has access to internal information, though maintains an extradiagetic distance. To explain this further: external focalisation is “close to the narrating agent, and its vehicle is therefore called ‘narrator-focalizer’” (Rimmon-Kenan 75); internal focalisation occurs inside the represented events, and is recounted through a character-focaliser. As in “The Silver Cup”, Owens blurs this distinction by shifting between direct, indirect and free-indirect discourse, though here this technique is used to greater effect. To clarify, indirect discourse represents the speech or thoughts of a character through the voice of the narrator: “Mary thought she would ask her

about the train in case the chap in the ticket office had got it wrong” (235). Direct discourse (DD) creates the illusion of mimesis through direct reporting of speech or quotation. For example: “The woman broke in. ‘If you don’t mind, I don’t want to hear any more about your Brian.’ Then she looked behind her [...]”. Free-indirect discourse (FID) is grammatically and mimetically intermediate between indirect and direct discourse, a form of third-person narration in which a character’s thoughts are presented in the character’s voice without being set off by quotation marks or entering into first-person narration. The first moment of FID occurs when the other woman first walks away: “Perplexed, Mary watched her go, wondering what she’d said to annoy this woman with a face like a pig and legs as thick as tree trunks. Likely she was off her head [...]” (236).

Though the narrator-focaliser initially reports this indirectly, the insulting observations, and the speculation that she is “off her head” belong to Mary. From this point, Mary’s voice becomes more prominent in the narration. Not only do we encounter FID more frequently, “Come to think of it, that fellow had been nothing near as good-looking as Brian” (237), but also anachronistic moments of analepsis (narration of an earlier story-event at a later point in the text - similar to a flashback, though without the visual connotation). For example:

‘Grenock,’ said Mary, her face brightening. ‘I believe I’ve been there once. It’s a rather nice place as far as I can remember.’

‘Is it?’ said the driver, pulling his window back up while she suddenly remembered it was Ayr that she was thinking of. She’d taken Brian there on his twelfth birthday. She remembered how he’d sat tight-lipped and sullen on the journey because she’d snatched the packet of cigarettes out of his hand before they’d stepped onto the train.

‘It doesn’t look right smoking in front of your mother at your age’, she’d told him. (237)

From here, we enter Mary’s memories of the trip to Ayr recounted in ID, though coloured by Mary’s own language. Continuing to blur distinctions, the shift back into the stories present is barely perceptible:

Brian had stood outside eating a fish supper. He wouldn’t be seen dead in a dump like that, he’d explained. She sighed with regret that he was too old to take anywhere now and even apart from that she knew he preferred being with his pals. She began to wonder what she could do to pass the time. (238)

As the narrator shifts seamlessly through modes of narration, Mary slips between memory and so-called reality. This is a deceptively complex technique. As an external observer restricted to a limited gaze, we gain sympathy for the character that the internal characters do not share. In the moment of brutal exposure, we are made aware of both our externality to the character and their mistreatment at the hands of the internal characters. This offers us multiple perspectives on the narrated events and also draws our attention to the aforementioned disparity between the social and the individual.

More so than “The Silver Cup”, “People Like That” makes clear Genette’s distinction between “who sees?” and “who speaks?”, and enacts Stark’s claim that Owens’ subject “*is* the disparity between social and individual perception” (13). Mary does not have any conception of how she is perceived by others, and nor do we (this is clear in her speculation that the other woman is “off her head”). It is not until Mary’s rape and subsequent re-capturing that we are fully aware of how she appears *within* this setting. Stark describes this method faultlessly: “Owens allows the reader to enter this private landscape and then exposes it, and them, to a brutal public gaze” (114). This provokes a compassionate reading. Returning to O’Connor’s arguments,

The fiction writer has to realize that he can’t create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. He has to provide all these things with a body; he has to create a world with weight and extension. (“Writing Short Stories” 92)

In the exposition of her characters, Owens’ stories achieve what they intend through shock. This is not naïve writing, but the work of an author who understands well that

Judgment is something that begins in the act of vision, and when it does not, or when it becomes separated from vision, then a confusion exists in the mind which transfers itself to the story [...] No reader who doesn’t actually experience, who isn’t made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. (91)

Owens’ stories force us to look, not with a cursory glance but to look beyond the surface. This is achieved through careful aesthetic considerations such as focalisation, organisation of events and characterisation.

The characters of her stories often conform to “types”, whose behaviours are reproduced across stories. These types are often: the demanding son; the sullen father; the downtrodden mother; the ‘woman of experience’ (an example being Nancy in *Birds*); the fatherly friend (Paddy MacDonald in *Gentlemen*); the inexperienced, clumsy youth; the

unpredictable woman; the young worker; the alcoholic; the abusive male and the odd woman (“Aspects” 69). These “types” are relevant to this analysis, as through repetition of character Owens creates a sense of circularity and social reproduction. Frequencies of events occur throughout her oeuvre, and are not isolated within one story. “People Like That” is particularly notable in terms of character repetition and frequency in that Mary draws connections between her rapist and her abusive husband. She expects “a blow on the mouth” after the horrific encounter, given that “[her] husband had always done that” (242). Here, Owens connects both men through misogynistic abuse: we know that Mary’s husband had been a violent, abusive, “foul-mouthed drunkard” and this would render her domestic situation toxic.

Returning to the station “with the smell of him in her nostrils, which she suspected might never go away”, Mary is collected by a man and a woman (who we understand to be hospital staff of some kind) who warn her: “One of these days you’re going to come to real harm, you know”. On leaving together the railway clerk says to the group, “We have them in here all the time – people like that” (242). The warning that Mary will “come to real harm” is made all the more unsettling by our knowledge of what has preceded their finding Mary, in that it is evident that she already has – not only at the hands of the drunk, but previously at the hands of her husband. Furthermore, we can continue to connections between the characters of “People Like That” and “The Silver Cup”, which fit into the aforementioned categorisations.

Ma’s mental health seems tenuous by the conclusion of the story, and Mary has been sectioned following Brian’s overdose. These two characters blur the distinctions between “the downtrodden mother” and “the odd woman”. That the conclusion of “The Silver Cup” leaves unanswered whether Ma has “cracked” under the pressures of her confined, cyclic life brings us back to this question of what contributes to one’s “condemnation”, and what social factors allow this to remain in place? It seems that the “condemnation” of Ma and Mary is ultimately tied to their oppression as women. There are also similarities between the disaffected children Brian and Sammy, both of whom are “demanding”, delinquent sons who live within this misogynistic domestic environment.

In Sammy’s case, he reproduces his father’s behaviour, and is his “spitting image” (145); Brian becomes a drug addict. In these repetitions, Owens is able to question and challenge the social “condemnation” of these characters indirectly and without taking an

expressly moralistic position, leaving her readers to consider and infer how these cycles are produced.

Owens talked at length about her position as a “woman writer”, and her responses were conflicting. This was partly due to her feeling that “maybe I’d rather be seen as a Scottish writer rather than a female writer. I have that kind of attitude – because I’m far from a good person! – that sometimes I would rather read what men write [...] I like a male character” (“Giving”), though she has said elsewhere (as quoted earlier): “I get vaguely tired of the Scottish situation and the Glasgow man, the tough people, the alcoholics [...] I find it irritating to always be Scottish.” It is difficult to gain a concrete understanding of where Owens positions herself in either context, as in both interviews her feelings towards such categorisations fluctuate and find positives and negatives in each. What this seems to suggest is Owens’ overall discomfort with her critical positioning – both interviewers ask how she feels about being labelled a “woman writer” and a “Scottish writer” as though the two must be separated; this critical desire to pigeonhole her work offers no suggestion that Owens is simply a “writer”. However, as Owens acknowledges:

I can’t explain why I feel this, because I do think women are abused terribly by men, but they’ve got to maybe make it *believable*. I mean, most men can’t help being abusive to women, and they might be good husbands, they might be good fathers, but they might also feel, “I’m the boss”, you know. And you get that. I have to live with that attitude as well, or else it’s “clear off!” (“Giving”)

The suggestion that “most men can’t help being abusive to women” is understandable when we consider how misogyny is perpetuated culturally. As American author and activist bell hooks has said, “the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact...” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 2), and elsewhere that:

Even though not all men are misogynists, feminist thinkers were accurate when we stated that patriarchy in its most basic, unmediated form promotes fear and hatred of females. A man who is unabashedly and unequivocally committed to patriarchal masculinity will both fear and hate all that the culture deems feminine and womanly. (*The Will to Change* 108)

Whilst I do not wish to make assumptions about Owens’ own politics, bell hooks’ arguments are important to consider in terms of Owens’ fictional representations of men in her stories.

That Mary in “People Like That” expects a “blow to the mouth” is telling in that it produces a sense of continuity. This continuity is further communicated by Mary’s suspicion that the smell of the man in her nostrils might never go away (242); a culture that remains “committed to patriarchal masculinity” and an accepted “vision of domestic life” in which “male domination is intact” promotes fear and hatred of women, and as Owens says though men “might be good husbands, they might be good fathers”, they also adhere to a belief in masculine dominance which in turn produces fear and hatred of women. This adherence is complicit with the persecution of women. In her portrayals of male/female relationships, Owens challenges idyllic conceptions of the domestic, just as she subverts ideas of community. In her own words: “I think when you write stories you want every one of them to convey something. Maybe I try to cut across people’s idea of what’s good, by substituting what’s bad” (“Giving”). For Sammy’s Ma, the external (her neighbours) provides no salvation from the internal (her domestic situation); for Mary the internal (the hospital) fails to provide salvation from the external (male violence). What is considered “good”, Owens reconfigures as “bad”.

It is within this struggle that many of Owens’ male/female relationships are situated. This is further evidenced in “The Writing Group”, a story that echoes Owens’ earlier sentiments in an altogether bleaker context: Danielle’s concluding thoughts are “They say these kind of men can’t help themselves. Maybe it’s not their fault” (313). In short, the story is about Danielle, a girl who has joined a small writing class having been recommended by the St. John Ambulance Club. Madge, who seems to run the class, introduces her. Danielle finds the introduction suspicious as Madge appears to suppress laughter as she says “I hope the class will benefit her as I am sure it has benefited so many”. The former is uncomfortable in the class, and wishes “that the social worker had not told her to come, saying a writing group would build up confidence” (309). Owens quickly sets up what we need to know: Danielle has been sent by a social worker; Madge is derisive of those sent by social services; there is one man in the class whom Danielle instantly nicknames “Mr Portly”.

The class does not proceed well, with Danielle not being a natural writer and Madge’s Gaelic poems making her feel insignificant (310-11). Eventually Danielle produces a crumpled piece of paper, and reads aloud a story she “copied from a women’s magazine found in her doctor’s waiting room” about a baby being abandoned on a doorstep. This raises questions as to whether or not Danielle is the woman the article is

about, or if she has done something similar, as this would explain why she has been set to the class and chose to write out the article. If we infer that she had indeed abandoned her baby, this becomes concerning - all we know of Danielle's age is that she had turned fourteen the previous year (309). This then opens the text to questions of consent and past sexual abuse¹¹. When Portly later asks if this is the case, she replies that she had not abandoned her baby, but that a friend of hers had done. That this is not further explained and remains open is significant, as although Danielle is a fictional character, her experiences (or potential experiences) reflective real, lived experiences of those outside of the fictional world. In preventing us from knowing more, Owens respects and maintains Danielle's right to privacy.

When Danielle finishes reading the story to the group there is “a long silence until Madge [asks] if this sort of thing happened nowadays, when women had the right to have abortions on demand”. Madge’s comment on abortion is used wryly by Owens here, and is indicative of attitudes Madge expresses later. Abortion laws continue to deny a woman’s full agency over her body, and the claim that “women [have] the right to have abortions on demand” reflects anti-choice rhetoric¹². When Daisy - the only member of the group to extend any kindness towards Danielle - questions Madge’s comment, she is quickly told to be quiet (311). Offended, Daisy makes a sarcastic comment about Madge's poetry, and the slighted poet storms out, followed by the rest of the class until only Portly and Danielle remain.

Portly asks whether she was sent by an institution: “We get these people sometimes. They swell the numbers, and our class is supposed to have at least eight”. When she responds that she has been sent by a teacher who said she had talent, he puts his hand on her knee and she strikes it off and rises to leave. Quickly, he stands and fumbles

11 Child abuse is a recurrent theme in Owens' stories, the strongest examples being 'The Lighthouse' and 'Annie Rogerson'.

12 Abortion laws in England, Scotland, and Wales continue to follow the 1967 Abortion Act which, according to the NHS, states that an abortion can usually only be carried out during the first 24 weeks of pregnancy as long as certain criteria are met:

- abortions must be carried out in a hospital or specialist licensed clinic
- two doctors must agree that an abortion would cause less damage to a woman’s physical or mental health than continuing with the pregnancy

Although the 1967 Abortion Act is, to quote Abortion Rights (a leading U.K. national choice campaign) “one of the most significant pieces of public health legislation in England, Scotland and Wales, in the last hundred years”, these criteria still deny women full agency over their bodies.

with the zip of his trousers saying, “Do you want to see what you’ve done to me?” Of course, Portly is referring to his erection. In this action, Portly attempts to dominate Danielle, his erection being the ultimate expression of his masculinity. However, Owens’ language undercuts this: “He too stood up, fumbling with the zip of his trousers” (312). Portly, whilst still posing a threat, is rendered somewhat pathetic by the word “fumbled”. Whilst this does not take from the potential horror, it disallows Portly from asserting an imagined male dominance. Danielle runs from this attempted assault, with the other in pursuit. The two encounter Madge, who is told by the latter that Danielle had propositioned him. Danielle is silent, as “from experience she knew she was unlikely to be believed”. Madge’s reaction that “[they] should never take on any of that lot” as they “do anything to get attention” is the first indication that this is not an isolated incident, which is further suggested by Portly arguing that “If [they] apply again the next one might be better”. The latter adds preposterously that “[he] still [has] faith in human nature” (312).

Our knowledge of the events that have occurred – Portly’s attempted assault and Madge’s disbelief – render Madge’s assertion that she and Portly are “decent folk” as ludicrous as her earlier claim that women were legally able to have abortions on demand. That the two speak “as if Danielle [is] not there” is telling, in that her voice is actively suppressed (312) by them: just as Sammy’s Ma’s was, just as the boy at the bus stop had his request for help ignored, and as Mary is written off as being someone “like that”. With these events in place, Danielle’s final thoughts in the story are reflective of Tony McKibbin’s observation that Owens’ fiction often concludes with one of two options: mental collapse, or cynical resignation (6). However, the conclusion of “The Writing Group” is more complex: Danielle (having stolen Portly’s wallet) knows he will not complain to the police “because several girls where she lived knew what he was like” (313). The theft of Portly’s wallet does not seem like “cynical resignation”, nor does her knowing he cannot do anything about it. Although the story concludes with Danielle’s condemnation at the hands of Portly and Madge, Owens does not strip Danielle of all agency or power. We can see in this her desire to convey “condemned” people “in a better light than what people would think”.

Furthermore, the passing comment about Portly’s reputation is one of the most challenging in the text: if Portly is a known predator, is Madge protecting him? Why would the class leave Danielle alone with him? Was Danielle aware that he would be at the class? Not only does this bring us back to notions of complicity, but Owens’ treatment of

narrative time is aesthetically remarkable here, as she conveys a lot in very little space. This minimalism is a hallmark of Owens' style. Time in narrative fiction refers to the relations of chronology between story and text. Because text-time is "inescapably linear", it is unable to correspond to the multilinearity of "real" story-time (Rimmon-Kenan 45). This means that it is difficult to locate a hypothetical 'norm' of correspondence between text-time and story-time, and this produces discrepancies (most commonly, anachronies) between them. There are two levels of narrative structure: the surface structure and the deep structure. The surface structure is syntagmatic (governed by temporal and causal principals), whereas the deep structure is designed to "account for the initial articulations of meaning within a semantic micro-universe" (11). The temporal (surface) structure of "The Writing Group" is the sequence of events starting from Danielle's arrival at the class to the attempted assault and departure. Owens gives us access to the second narrative level (deep structure) through these brief internal anachronies. Analepsis is essential to Owens' structuring, as it allows the story its power and contextual grounding. This allows Owens to craft "the bigger picture in fewer words".

Owens was sure to respect and maintain the privacy of her characters, and withhold information from the reader. Contexts are inferred through analeptic glimpses, with little (if any) space given to the relaying of precise information. The stories rarely stray far from the established narrative succession. We do not *need* to know Portly's full history to understand that he is a known predator, as we have seen him attempt to assault Danielle; we do not *need* to know Danielle's background to interpret the events narrated, but a passing comment such as "from experience she knew she was unlikely to be believed" reveals that this has occurred previously at the hands of somebody else (312). Similarly, the brief analepsis about her shabby duffle coat "bought last winter for her fourteenth birthday" (309) makes it conceivable that the abandoned baby (if it was indeed her own) was the result of sexual assault. This interpretation cannot be any more than conjecture, as we are told none of this specifically, but can draw this out of the few analeptic fragments we are given. Just as Mary expects a blow to the mouth in "People Like That" as her husband "had always done that" (242), Danielle saying that "several girls where she lived knew what [Portly] was like" (313) reveals a great deal more than Owens explicitly stated. Given their ambiguity these comments function as analeptic fragments, ultimately providing these stories their understated thematic weight.

These three stories display a number of Owens' most compelling and recurrent thematic concerns: systems of abuse; treacheries of attitude; complicity; the condemnation of marginalised individuals; and the disparity between social and individual perception. Owens' gaze repeatedly turns to themes of continuity and complicity, using this to galvanize her readers to consider the lives of those who are shut out by society, and to reflect on our own position within the world we inhabit. In Stark's words, "we do not recognise ourselves in these shambling, derelict figures and neither do they" ("Untold Stories" 113). Though I would not suggest that we share the experiences of her characters, these stories do mirror real lives, and these characters experience condemnation and marginalisation as people do in the "real" world. Our response to these stories should not be to "shake [our] head and cry and do nothing", but to consider how we respond to our own environments and the lives of others rather than continuing to gaze inwards whilst marginalisation, abuse, exploitation and poverty continue to thrive.

Owens' work is challenging precisely because it makes us consider our own complicity in "the way people can be poor", and how we contribute to the condemnation of others. What is so striking about this writing, however, is that Owens does not moralise. Her politics are tied to her aesthetics, neither of which is substituted in place of the other. If Owens' subject is the disparity between "us" and "them", the "insider" and the "outsider", observer and subject, we are left with little choice other than to consider what these stories and characters reflect. The ambiguity and openness of her short stories are not simply thematic, but also structural. This technique allows her stories to linger in the mind, and gives the reader space to consider what meaning is produced in these ambiguities.

Furthermore, if Alasdair Gray is indeed right in his suggestion that Owens' exclusion has been influenced by the short lengths of her works, then a space needs to be made for the short stories produced by Owens, Spark, Kelman, Gray, Galloway, Kennedy and others whose shorter works are as worthy of consideration as any novel. The short story is by no means a lesser form than the novel, nor is it "an incomplete action in which a [sic] very little is shown and a great deal suggested", as O'Connor explains,

Being short does not mean being slight. A short story should be long in depth and give us an experience of meaning [...] Meaning is what keeps the short story from being short [...] The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is [...] The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but

experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is to help you experience that meaning more fully. (“Writing” 94)

The novel communicates meaning through the slow accumulation of detail; the short story must resort to more dramatic measures given the constraint of space and time. Owens’ short stories, as I have demonstrated, are far from short in meaning.

Chapter Three

I am their mother:

Gender, hysteria and *A Working Mother*

Owens spoke of her feelings towards being considered a “woman writer” several times. As quoted in my introduction, Owens had said that it was “hard to have a family and be a feminist” (“A heart that stays at home” n.p.). Elsewhere, she asserted that she preferred to be seen as “a Scottish writer rather than a female writer” (“Giving”). However, her feelings towards either label seemed tangled, as she also said at times that it was pleasing to be “thought of as a woman writer” (“Aspects” 147). That Owens expressed discomfort with both labels suggests that although she recognised the importance of solidarity, the titles were restrictive in their categorisations. Regarding her feelings towards her position as a “woman writer”, she said: “I can’t explain why I feel this, because I do think women are abused terribly by men, but they’ve got to maybe make it *believable*” (“Giving”).

A Working Mother is marked by this tension, and attempts to represent Betty’s abusive environment in ways that communicate her suffering in believable and challenging ways. Owens has said that Betty is “hard” though “she deserves sympathy”, and she acknowledges that in Betty are fragments of herself:

although I didn’t really think I was *quite* as hard, I thought there was something... *cheeky* about her. And maybe that’s what I try to be at times. Maybe I succeed, I don’t know. Maybe I say cheeky things but really I’m quite soft! (“Giving”)

Mother portrays the lives of two psychologically traumatised characters, Betty and Adam, caught in an abusive marriage and a hostile domestic situation. Betty dreams of a better life, and sees in Brendan (her lover) and Mr Robson (her employer) the possibility of a change that Adam is unable to provide. However, all three men contribute to Betty’s oppression. Brendan possesses violent inclinations and Robson treats Betty as a case-study for his perverse psychoanalytic “studies” of human behaviour in animals. Betty’s relationships with Adam, Brendan and Robson directly affect her life and have tragic consequences, all of which are the result of an environment that refuses to acknowledge her as a subject.

Betty's narrative concludes grimly. Her mind gradually unravels; Adam takes their children and has her sectioned. However, Betty is amongst Owens' most interesting characters. Through her Owens challenges literary notions of female hysteria and madness, and addresses what Mary Wollstonecraft described as "the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (qtd. in Showalter 1). Betty's first-person narration is rife with contradictions, inconsistencies and reversals. Because of this *Mother* is one of Owens' most complex and difficult narratives, and one which actively resists easy interpretation. Near the story's end, we discover that the novel has been narrated by Betty to another hospital patient, Lady Lipton, meaning that "the perception through which the story is rendered is that of the narrating self rather than that of the experiencing self" (Rimmon-Kenan 75). Betty is the internal narrator-focaliser of her own story.

The hysterical female subject has historically been denied her own voice, or the ability to communicate her own story, as the task of the psychotherapist was to construct, infer, and document her narrative instead. In placing us in the hands of an unreliable, internal narrator-focaliser, Owens makes Betty the subject and object of her own narrative. Put differently, within the internal world of *Mother*, Betty plays the roles of focaliser and focalised. This both complicates our understanding of Betty's narrative, and simultaneously enacts a significant literary intervention. Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* forms the backbone of my analysis of *Mother* and its protagonist. This remarkable and sobering study demonstrates how cultural ideas regarding "proper" feminine behaviour have influenced the treatment of mental disorder in women, and imposed specifically sexual connotations onto this. As Showalter explains in her introduction:

The statistical overrepresentation of women among the mentally ill has been well documented by historians and psychologists. As early as the seventeenth century, the files of doctor Richard Napier showed nearly twice as many cases of mental disorder among his women patients as among men. By the middle of the nineteenth century, records showed that women had become the majority of patients in public lunatic asylums [...] in 1967 a major study found "more mental illness among women than men from every data source."
(3)

Asking how we should interpret these statistics, Showalter draws our attention to the work of contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics and social theorists, who have shown how "women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically

situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body,” whilst “men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind” (3-4).

The figure of the “deranged women [...] haunts the margins of nineteenth-century women’s texts as the symbolic representation of the female author’s anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition” (4), and our cultural history has often seen woman represented as the embodiment of madness, Shakespeare’s Ophelia and the many paintings she inspired being a particularly well known example. In later literature, female heroines who were characterised by social, economic or sexual independence were often treated as scandalous degenerates, or hysterics. Showalter cites a few examples:

“The masculine tone is passing out of the world,” wrote Henry James; “it is a feminine, nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age.” *Hedda Gabler*, wrote the critic of *The Times* in an obvious allusion to Maudsley, is “a demonstration of the pathology of mind, such as may be found in the pages of the *Journal of Mental Science* or in the reports of the medical superintendents of lunatic asylums.” And Thomas Hardy’s feminist Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1985) was attacked as a “poor maimed ‘degenerate’ ignorant of herself and of the perversion of her instincts.” (146)

Similarly, in responding to *Mother* Gifford remarked that “Betty is a liar, and keeps telling anyone who’ll listen... anything that reverses her own drunken blame, her nastiness, her lust, and puts it on Adam, her lover Brendan, whoever” (qtd. in Prillinger 85). This chapter demonstrates that *Mother* resists and subverts such a reading. I will discuss the implications of Owens’ centering of Betty’s narrative voice, and how this challenges concepts of reality, illusion, and “honest” writing.

Gentlemen intervened into notions of literary realism and working-class representation, and her short stories addressed conceptions of community, treacheries of attitude, and the disparity between subject and object. *Mother* combines a number of these concerns and tactics and turns our vision towards Betty, resulting in a powerful and sympathetic narrative that questions the relationship between gender, social status and literary conceptions of female hysteria.

3.1 Love Came Too Late

Betty is a mother of two young children, Rae and Robert. Her husband Adam, whom she married after his return from the war ten years ago, has been left traumatised by his time in service and continues to have nightmarish flashbacks (107). Adam is medically

unfit for work, and so the novel opens with Betty's declaration: "I'll have to get a job" (1). Immediately, the traditional model of the post-war working family is subverted, with Betty's realisation that she is the only one fit to provide for her family, and securing a position as a typist before the day concludes (3). Adam is affronted and dismissive, remarking that she is "bound to be a success in an office with your laddered stockings and black fingernails" (2). His disapproval is characteristic of the prevailing attitudes of post-war Britain. Women were expected not to work after marriage, and were discouraged from doing so. As Helen Clark and Elizabeth Carnegie explain in their study of Scottish tenement life, "Despite the critical levels of income on which most families survived at this period, the general prejudice against women going out for work after their marriage was very strong" (*She Was Aye Workin'* 142).

The money they have is enough to buy food and alcohol, though both are often scarce. What they have is often sparse and unappetising:

'Can I get some sauce?' asked me ten-year old son Robert, whose hair fell over his eyes in a maddening way.

'We can't afford sauce,' said Adam. (6)

The only break from the monotony of their lives comes from Adam's hapless, stupid and obsequious friend Brendan, with whom Betty starts an affair after he whispers "I'd like to do something to you" after a night at the pub with her and Adam (17). During their first introduction, Betty finds him attractive and compares the two men: "He had the friendly look of a brigand from a Mexican film: swarthy, unshaven, and too young to be a veteran" (28). Abject though he is, Brendan seems to represent an alternative to Betty's suffocating marriage. The tension between the three has been present since the first meeting between Betty and Brendan, which concludes with the two dancing "while Adam sat with downcast head, silently crying, which was a bad sign" – Adam attacks Brendan, and Brendan punches the former on the mouth whilst Betty admires the ease at which his "powerful hands unlocked Adam's" (28). Where her home life increases her and Adam's depression, Brendan is seen as the hopeful outsider. In recognising this difference, Betty desires him and Adam is driven to lash out violently.

Betty and Adam's marriage does not exist purely on a basis of resentment. When leaving the house for her first sexual encounter with Brendan, Betty considers her feelings for her husband:

‘I won’t be long,’ I assured him, inwardly aghast at my deceit towards this man whom I loved and hated with an equal intensity. Tonight I could easily have loved him, but I loved Brendan so much more. At that moment it seemed conscience does not necessarily make cowards of us all. (20)

Whilst it’s true that in passages both characters admit a degree of love for each other, for example when Adam says to her “Now and again I’d like to say something like I love you” (106), ultimately it’s ineffective. Their relationship is abusive, verbally and emotionally, and damaged beyond repair, and all moments of shared affection quickly fall to pieces. Adam and Betty are emotionally scarred characters, who engage in power plays of one-upmanship and disparagement to rival George and Martha from Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* For example:

‘You knew nothing about the war,’ Adam was saying.

‘I knew about Sidi Barrani, El Alamein and Tobruk. When we went to the Saturday matinée the names went through my head all the time like the dreary poems you got at school. Then there were the Desert Rats. We were hoping to see big rats in the sand. All we saw were tanks and guns. We used to stamp our feet and shout, “We want James Cagney. Give us the picture.”’

‘While men were dying,’ said Adam.

‘You didn’t die. I wish you had.’

‘So do I when I look at you and these brats and this dump.’

I smashed my empty glass into the empty fire-place.

[...]

‘I’m going home,’ said Brendan. ‘I can’t stand this.’

‘Don’t go,’ said Adam and I almost simultaneously. ‘We’re not really fighting.’

‘No, stay,’ said Adam. ‘I’ll get another bottle. We’ll be alright with another bottle.’ (27)

Such fights are commonplace in their relationship: at every given opportunity Adam criticises her parenting, cooking, and discourages her from working, and Betty often mocks his experiences in the war.

We know from the beginning of the novel that the marriage itself was superficial and impulsive, and Betty's initial attraction was more to the mythos of the returned war-hero:

Ten years after the war he still looked as if he had just come home from the battlefield. Flags and bunting had hung from the windows in our street. I had helped to paste the letters reading WELCOME HOME ADAM, and immediately fell in love with his handsome, suffering face when he had passed by our window [...] I wanted to run out and touch him. (1)

Of course, the suffering she read on his face never left, and their marriage develops unhappily. When Robson asks if she is happily married, Betty replies in the negative: "Perhaps because my husband was a war hero" (5). For her, the reality of the returned war-hero being much more real, and the damages more permanent than she had thought in her youth. Following their ceremony, Betty remarks that she has never been so happy; asking whether Adam is happy too, he states that he wishes he was back in the army – "I suppose it was hell, but at least it wasn't like this" (15). Her romantic notions cannot be reconciled with Adam's post-war trauma, and Adam's emotional withdrawal continues until the collapse of their marriage:

'Why does everything remind you of the war?' I asked.

'It was the only time I felt alive.'

'So you enjoyed it.'

'You wouldn't understand,' said Adam. His eyes stared towards the horizon like a castaway.

I snatched up the bottle saying, 'I've never made you happy, have I?'

'I'm happy enough.' He sounded uninterested. (41-2)

Owens makes it clear that upon his return Adam received little support from his family, with a step-mother and step-brother who hated him (14-5) and a father who was "drunk out of his skull" (97). We do not know how supportive Betty has been, as there are only two moments where his trauma is made explicit. In the first, Betty is caring and supportive:

I kissed the top of his head where his fine brown hair was becoming thin. 'Take it easy. Your nerves are still shattered from that fireworks display when they opened the new town hall.'

‘I couldn’t help thinking it was gunfire. I must have dozed off.’ (8)

In contrast, the second incident is more disturbing:

When I crept downstairs Adam was crawling round the floor like an animal or a gigantic baby, moaning and grinding his teeth and muttering words that were unintelligible. Then he shouted, ‘Fire! Fire!’ and began to thump the floor and weep. I turned away and crept back up to my bedroom to lie awake waiting for the dreaded creak on the stairs. It was a while since he’d been like this. I knew the war had a lot to do with it. But I had no sympathy. He should go get treatment, but of course the first thing they’d do was tell him to keep off the drink. (107)

In moments like this Owens demonstrates just how challenging her writing is: how do we begin to interpret a relationship like this? What do we make of Betty’s lack of sympathy? What is significant is that Owens does not judge Betty, nor does she moralise her actions. Neither should we. This is not to say that these are necessarily *likeable* characters, or that we should not be critical of their behaviour. In recalling the novel, and particularly its central figure, Owens said that “[Betty] wasn’t a good mother, but she wasn’t such a bad mother either. She wasn’t a cruel mother, just a neglectful mother” (“Giving”). As with her short stories, Owens portrays the condemned protagonist of *Mother* “in a better light than what people would think”.

Owens provides us some context through which we can consider Betty’s life more broadly. Her childhood is alluded to a number of times, only ever in brief analeptic passages. The war had broken out when she was thirteen, bored, and unable to understand the gravity of the news. When the war is announced over the radio she notes that her parents “appeared frightened”. Betty simply asks, “Shall we all get killed?” and when dismissed she leaves to buy chocolate liqueurs with money stolen from her mother’s purse (25-6). We know that her mother strongly disapproved of their marriage from the start. At her first sighting of Adam she comments that he looks unreliable (1), though her disapproval seems to stem mostly from Adam’s class background¹³: “That’s what happens when your daughter marries beneath her. They try to bring her down to their level” (72). Adam is more than aware of this, commenting before the ceremony that Betty’s “people

¹³ We are told about Betty’s background later: “When I was very young, before the war, I took it for granted that if my parents were not exactly rich they were not poor; that is, poor in the sense that you didn’t get twopence for the Saturday matinée, a penny for sweets, and a penny for a comic [...] It was when I was sent to the Secondary Academy, twenty-minute bus journey out of town, that I discovered we were poor. I didn’t wear the appropriate clothes with the appropriate school colours, and worse still I had to borrow a hockey stick from the school pavilion when we played the ghastly game.” (95-6)

don't approve of [him]" (14). Because of this, her mother had refused to attend the wedding, or to tell anybody her daughter was engaged because she feels ashamed – something she tells Betty directly (13). In another passage, Betty is caught stealing food from a bakery, and her mother sends her to bed without food: "In my room I cursed my family and God. But then as I shivered in the cold and dark it came to me in the midst of my despair that there was no God, so I merely cursed my family and felt much better" (111).

Adam and Betty both come from unloving family environments. Beyond this, Adam's wartime trauma is clear before the wedding. Days beforehand, Adam drunkenly broke into the post office and was caught throwing money in the air:

'Stupid bastard,' said my father. He sniffed. 'Of course I blame the bloody war. They're all nuts.'

'To think I've scrimped to throw her away on a nut case.'

'I'll have to go now, Mum,' I said. 'Do I look all right?'

'You look a bloody treat,' said my father.

My mother burst into tears and handed me a fiver. (14)

Here, we see two things. The first is that the community are well aware that Adam has been damaged by his experience in the war, though nobody has taken this seriously and dismiss it just as Betty's father does in calling him "nuts". The second is that Betty does not have a particularly loving environment, and is treated as an indicator of social status, rather than as a person. Her mother considers marriage beneath their class as throwing her away, not once is love mentioned in regards to their marriage. As their marriage goes on, alcohol becomes a central mechanism in their shared life. Betty tells her parents they argue more frequently than she and Adam, though she "[doesn't] mention the heavy sullen silences that had hung in the air like a thick fog in the early days", and we are told that "It was only when [she] began to share the drink with Adam that [her] tongue was eventually released" (71). Alcoholism is a central aspect of their life together. One example of this is quoted above, from the opening of chapter seven. In an earlier passage, Betty goes out to buy a bottle of sherry, "Only a half-bottle, but it might placate Adam, who hadn't been speaking to me recently" (73). More tellingly, Betty thinks to herself in one passage: "I

don't mind his drinking now since it's about the only thing we have in common, apart from Brendan and the kids" (97).

Chapter seven begins with the two not on speaking terms. When Robert dislodges an old bottle of wine from a cupboard "the cloud [lifts] immediately" and the two have a pleasant talk which concludes: "I looked at Adam affectionately. I would really miss him if he went out of my life, but someday he would have to go" (94-5). Though the assertion the Adam will have to go is foreboding, the two often threaten to leave and never return. Of course, where would they go? They know very little else. As bell hooks suggests in *All About Love*:

An overwhelming majority of us come from dysfunctional families in which we were taught we were not okay, where we were shamed, verbally and/or physically abused, and emotionally neglected even as we were also taught to believe that we were loved. For most folks it is just too threatening to embrace a definition of love that would no longer enable us to see love as present in our families. Too many of us need to cling to a notion of love that either makes abuse acceptable or at least makes it seem that whatever happened was not that bad. (6)

It is important to consider the ways in which early familial life may have affected Betty and Adam's own marriage, and their negligent treatment of their children. All of the domestic situations described in *Mother* are dysfunctional, and there are certainly echoes of Adam's father's alcoholism¹⁴ and the lack of care felt by Betty and her spouse evident in Rae and Robert's relationship to their parents. More often than not, the children are absent from the narrative. In one particularly telling moment, where the two are considering giving up drinking Betty says: "The kids would miss it; I mean us stopping the drink. They wouldn't recognise us" (122).

3.2 The Joys and Fears of Extra-Marital Bliss

Despite the mutual attraction between the two, their relationship (at least from Betty's perspective) is not so simple. Neither of Betty's romantic relationships are simple, nor are they positive or satisfying. Though Betty refers on occasion to Brendan's vivid-blue eyes (17, 28, 45, 68, 77, 138) and insists on his sweet nature and her attraction to him, she also feels "there's something wrong with him" and that he is "backwards" and

¹⁴ Betty says to Adam during an argument, "... just because I'd like you to be different from your father-", when Adam cuts in that he wishes he were more like his father, Betty retorts, "You are like him. Is that why you drink so much?" (97)

“uncouth” (17). These latter sentiments are echoed by outer characters at various points: her employer Mr. Robson wonders if he is “dangerous” (17), “insecure” or “lazy” (29), observing that “he has a behaviour pattern that could be associated with crime” (124), and her workmate Mai expressing that he “looks like a proper weirdo” and gives her “the creeps” (51). Betty is quick to defend him, asking Mai if she noticed his eyes (51) and claiming that he is “not the type one fancies. He’s someone you can rely upon when the chips are down” (52). She also continues to compare him to Adam: on their first night together, she thinks:

I wondered if I really loved this man, an unemployed labourer, who possessed hardly anything. He was good-looking in a thuggish fashion, but I had seen better-looking – Adam for instance, but then Adam was an old and difficult story. (21)

It remains unclear throughout the novel the extent of her feelings for Brendan, to both the reader and seemingly to Betty. As we know, she does not “fancy” Brendan in a physical sense, other than his vivid-blue eyes: “What was he to me? A lover? An ally? Or simply a distraction, with his vivid-blue stare which saw nothing or everything” (68).

As the novel continues, it becomes clear that Robson and Mai are more right about Brendan than Betty is. After all, Brendan kicks a small dog to death after it tears his trousers (76) and eventually murders Robson brutally with a spade (145-6). Robson is the first to acknowledge Brendan’s violent behaviour” “He’s not a complicated person, but let’s say being acquainted with the criminal mind I have a way of talking to him”. Explaining what he means to Betty, he says “Brendan is the kind who has a direct approach to life, a simple type who views situations in black and white rather than in various shades of grey like you and I” (124). Robson’s inference is that Betty’s lover is likely sociopathic. We see further evidence of this behavioural pattern in a later scene:

‘Love,’ I repeated, smiling in the dark. ‘Tell me,’ I asked, looking up at the red burning sky, ‘if I got a divorce from Adam, would you marry me, and take care of the kids?’

[...]

He didn’t answer. I pulled on his arm when he stepped forward.

‘So you love me?’ I followed him into the house. Adam still lay on his back with his mouth open. ‘Look at him,’ I said. ‘If he was sick he could choke to death.’

Brendan's eyes wavered from me to Adam, his eyes far from vivid. 'Would you want that?'

I looked at him and laughed. 'You take everything I say far too seriously [...]' (109)

Here he is unconcerned by the possibility of his friend choking to death, and almost seems to offer to do the deed, so to speak, should Betty wish that to happen. He is a violent character throughout. When he first confesses his love for Betty, he grips her arm so hard it makes her wince (22); and after their first sexual encounter he warns Betty, "One time you are going to make me hit you" (23).

The threat of violence is not isolated in Betty's history, and all of her relationships with men have been abusive. Chapter five begins in analepsis. Betty (sixteen) and her friend are at an amusement arcade surrounded by American soldiers, whom her mother has warned her about, though both are eager to impress and be noticed (58). When one calls Betty a "Regular little sad apple", she leaves embarrassed and distressed (58-9). When her friend catches up with her, Betty says "I wouldn't be seen dead with these Yanks [...]. They would rape you as soon as look you". She narrates that she was not sure what the word 'rape' meant, but "sensed it was about the worst thing that could happen" (59). Later, when her father brings same the two home from the pub, one of the soldiers sexually assaults her: "I darted out of the room and collided with Aza who was buttoning up his fly. He gripped my arm, pushed me up against the wall of our hall (as mother called it) and shoved his hand up my skirt" (60). In this passage, what begins with a youthful fascination with the American soldiers ends with her sexual assault. Her mother is furious with the soldiers, which is a comfort to Betty; though earlier she had felt resentfully towards her mother after she returned from showing Aza the bathroom with her hair dishevelled and her lipstick smudged (60).

Owens does not draw direct parallels. As with the majority of her characters we are given a broad picture of their lives, and left to consider the connections between various narrated events. At this point, every deduction we can make is assumed. Is there a connection between this assault and Betty's ensuing attraction to abusive relationships? Owens suggests traces of masochism in her character, and it is plausible that Betty has internalised from an early age a sense of worthlessness, and that her actions re-affirm those beliefs. Her sexual encounters with Brendan cause her shame and guilt: "I'm really quite ashamed of myself" (108); her drinking causes shame and guilt: "It's the life we lead. It's

so pointless. All we do is drink” (106); as do her continuous put downs of Adam’s war experience:

‘In all my experience – ’ he began.

‘Would that include the war?’ I said sarcastically, hoping to shut him up.

‘I’ve never met anyone as chilling as you.’

‘What did I do?’ (46)

It is stressed a number of times that Betty is sexually unsatisfied. The first time being after her first meeting with Brendan: “without much sexual satisfaction of my part, but I had the pleasure of making him happy” (21); the next with Brendan also: “I never reached a climax because Brendan was inept and apologetic, but I enjoyed the risk” (107-8); and lastly with Adam: “The act had done nothing for me” (123).

This last example comes from a particularly interesting scene, the same passage where they swear to stay off the drink. The two are in bed together:

‘Why don’t you make love to me?’ I whispered into Adam’s ear [...] I had figured that it was almost a fortnight since we had had sex. The contact was more necessary than the actual deed.

He half turned towards me. ‘I can’t switch it on when it suits you.’

‘You don’t love me anymore?’ I asked.

‘I’m not sure what I feel about you,’ he grumbled softly.

‘Neither am I sure about you.’

‘You’re very devious,’ he said, stroking my hair.

‘My mother used to say I was too deep for her liking.’

‘Forget your mother.’ Our arms were touching now.

‘I don’t want anyone else, that’s for sure,’

I smiled, staring up at the ceiling.

Though there is a caring tenderness between them here, it develops strangely:

‘I suppose I’m difficult to live with. It’s not been easy for you,’ he said.

‘It’s not been easy for you either.’ Our voices sounded wooden, like the first stages of a prayer meeting.

[...]

‘I drink too much,’ he said.

‘So do I.’ Now we were facing, but it was dark. He was like a stranger. ‘We don’t drink all that much.’ I stroked his cheek. It was like a stranger’s cheek.

[...]

He laughed, like a stranger. (122)

The longer this scene plays out with increasing tenderness, the more emphasis is put on the strangeness of it. They sound wooden to each other, they sound and feel like strangers. This (tenderness, care, sobriety) is not what their marriage is based in, and as a result in this surprisingly unguarded moment they hardly know each other, though they continue to play out the marriage scenario like an act¹⁵. When the passage turns sexual (when Adam strokes Betty’s breast) she feels “as if [she] was being insulted or assaulted” (122), when he touches her nipple it makes her want to scream (123). What reads on the surface as a loving moment between a long-married couple is undercut by Betty’s internal responses. However, when the subject changes to Brendan, this changes:

Adam gave one long sigh. ‘Fuck Brendan,’ he said. Roughly he pulled me close then moved on top of me.

‘Fuck me,’ I said. Normally I don’t like the word, but I was excited. (123)

All that shifts here is that Adam acts gruffly and acts ‘roughly’, and so conversely this no longer feels like insult or assault to Betty.

This is not without textual precedence. Betty appears to enjoy the rougher aspects of Brendan’s character. We see this when she admires Brendan’s “powerful hands” in his fight with Adam (28), and later after he has murdered Robson:

‘You’re a fool,’ I said, warming to his fatuous, beaming face, ‘but I’ll always love you.’ I traced a cross on his forehead. ‘What about Mr Robson though?’

‘Fuck the old bastard, that’s what I say.’

¹⁵ Earlier in the book, Mrs Rossi who manages Betty’s employment agency is caught reading a romance novel called *Love Came Too Late*. The title is reflective of Betty and Adam’s marriage.

I was impressed by the touch of violence. ‘You’re dead right. He owes me money.’ (138)

Though Betty is unaware of Robson’s death, her being “impressed by the touch of violence” could be related to her falling into the “old trap” (22) of power-play, a constant presence in her romantic relationships. This often works to affirm Betty’s sense of guilt and shame, but it also offers her power she does not feel she possesses. For example, when Brendan threatens to hit her she says “I wished then he would hit me so that I could have more power over him” (23). She recognises this as a problem. Initially she sees in her relationship with Brendan an escape from her claustrophobic, unhealthy marriage.

However, when they first meet in the woods:

‘You don’t really love me. You just use me.’ I was falling into the old trap again, just when I had the notion to break loose.

He gripped my arm, making me wince. ‘I love you, I love you, I’ll make a record of it, and send it to you so that when I’m dead and buried you can play it over and over, if that’s what you want to hear.’ He looked at me miserably and I was glad to have wrung the words out of him.

[...]

Gently I took the bottle from him, satisfied I had hurt him. (22)

This is a strange passage in terms of the power dynamics being played out. If we return to bell hooks’ suggestion that “it is just too threatening to embrace a definition of love that would no longer enable us to see love as present in our families”, we can infer that Betty knows no other way to express nor feel love other than this. Damaged by past sexual experience, the shame her mother made her feel, and her abusive co-dependent marriage, she recognises that she is falling “into the old trap” and re-producing in this relationship the scars and traumas of those that have preceded it.

3.3 The Study of Human Behaviour in Animals

Betty is offered few opportunities for escape, and those that exist would result in further poverty or the loss of her children. Brendan and Robson are both just as miserable as alternatives. Brendan remains unable to fully grasp the idea of eloping, and her lecherous employer Mr Robson sexually harasses her. He asks inappropriate questions of Adam’s sexual capabilities (9) and in one passage he puts his hand up her skirt at work

(11). Robson regularly invites Betty to do typing at his home, where he also pays her for sexual favours:

He stroked my hair, my face and my breasts for some minutes, then retired behind the screen. I sat on the edge of the bed hearing small panting noises, then a low painful groan, but as I wasn't involved in this I considered I had been let off lightly.

He emerged from the screen quite composed and asked me if I could manage the following Sunday, handing me a ten-pound note. (86-7)

Robson himself is one of the strangest and most repellent characters – an ex-lawyer and self-styled psychoanalyst who is currently writing a book on his studies of human behaviour in animals. Betty finds the subject of his study disturbing, thinking at one point that “It didn't seem right” (42).

Psychoanalysis has been referred to as “the child of the hysterical woman” (Smith-Rosenberg 197) and by Juliet Mitchell as the “daughter's disease” (qtd. in Showalter 147). Robson also has a keen interest in Darwinian theory (48), which has historically been hostile to feminist rebellion. Showalter cites an article by Henry Maudsley written in 1874 to evidence this:

[...] the small minority of women who have other aims and pant for other careers, cannot be accepted as the spokeswomen of their sex. Experience may be left to teach them, as it will not fail to do, whether they are right or wrong in the ends which they pursue and in the means by which they pursue them: if they are right, they will have deserved well the success which will reward their faith and works; if they are wrong, the error will avenge itself upon them and upon their children, if they should ever have any. In the worst event they will not have been without their use as failures; for they will have furnished experiments to aid us in arriving at correct judgments concerning the capacities of women and their right functions in the universe. (146).

However, such dualistic forms of understanding fail to recognise women as persons, and the prevalence of beliefs such as Maudsley's – alongside ominous prophecies of transgression causing hysterical breakdowns and subsequent sectioning – were intimidating enough to prevent many women from aspiring beyond the rigid cultural roles assigned to them.

Robson is a character who does not accept women as persons. When he asks Betty if he can use her as a case study for his book, he refers to women as a 'species' as though she is an animal for observation and reduces her to a curiosity for his studies:

“My dear, I am not exactly Dr Frankenstein. Of course not. The questions would be less than embarrassing, but sometimes with female conclusions I am often working in the dark, so to speak, and any data I have gained in the past from the female species was never conclusive enough, for reasons I will not go in to. So what do you say? I will pay you adequately, if not handsomely.” (84)

When Betty realises these 'tests' are as perverse as they are bizarre, she feels nauseated: “The activities of this deluded old man made me want to puke. It seemed I had displayed my soul to him for a few paltry pounds” (133). Robson's “scientific” interest in Betty is sexually motivated, and he treats her as an object rather than a subject. However, as Tony McKibbin has noted, she has agreed to this out of poverty: “On the way back home I calmed down. There was no harm done really. I would display a lot more than that if the price was right. That's how desperate I had become” (133). Owens is making a significant claim. Betty is socially marginalised because of her gender, her economic position, and she is subject to a society that does not allow her full agency over her life. McKibbin stresses an important point, that in Owens' fiction “the treacherous act needs to be viewed within a broader context of righteous actions linked to the sociological situation” (5). Though she recognises that Robson is exploiting her for sexual gratification, the only way for her to escape is to earn money and the only person who can provide that is Robson.

Her marginalised position does not allow her the privilege of “righteous” behaviour, Owens invites us to sympathise rather than judge. In contrast, Robson is unsympathetic. After his murder by Brendan, Betty finds his writing about her behind the screen, which she reads with “surprise, relief, and anger”:

It would appear that this subject is a reckless young woman who will readily enter into a situation without any thought of consequences. Given certain factors she could be a danger to society. Without any qualms she sits on the other side of the screen with an air of expectation which would be frightening if it were not so interesting. Such simple tests have proved – (133)

Robson's character is made all the more repellent when we read his judgments of Betty, which reduce her to an object for the “hysterical” narrative he projects onto her. Much of *Mother's* subversive potential comes through its critique of the 'hysterical narrative' often

associated with Sigmund Freud's case-studies¹⁶. Freud recognised the similarities his case-studies shared with fictional narratives, lamenting that they "read like short stories" and often lacked "the serious stamp of science", though he consoled himself by reflecting that "the nature of the subject [was] evidently responsible" for the form of the narrative (qtd. in Showalter, "On Hysterical Narrative" 25).

According to his beliefs, the "hysterical" subject could not tell an exact or ordered story about themselves, and would often leave out details or distort them because of sexual repression. If a patient could be brought to remember what had been repressed and create a consistent and ordered life story, this would signify that they had been 'cured'; the therapist's job was to construct, edit or suggest such a narrative (26). In *Mother* Robson enacts this very process by attempting to author Betty's existence as one of a "reckless young woman". At no point does he consider her subjecthood, as this would interfere with the narrative he desires to project onto her. He assumes she has no "qualms" and is frightened by the "air of expectation" he imagines her to possess.

An interesting comparison for this is Sigmund Freud's *Dora: Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. In this controversial publication, the subject was resistant to his attempts to construct such a narrative, would not accept his interpretations of her thoughts or feelings, and eventually opted to discontinue her therapy. All Freud could do to conclude the study with his beliefs intact was to claim that Dora had projected her feelings of erotic attraction for her father and Herr K.¹⁷ and was punishing him for this – in Freud's narrative, Dora was unable to face his truths and ran away. However, as Showalter argues, if Freud is an unreliable narrator (as Robson is):

Dora is a victim of Freud's unconscious erotic feelings about her that affected his need to dominate and control her. Dora has no voice in Freud's text; we hear nothing of her direct dialog, and her historical and Jewish identity are both suppressed. He never understands her story at all and simply tries to bully her into accepting his version of events. His interpretations of her problem reflect his own obsessions with masturbation, adultery, and homosexuality [...] She never becomes a subject, only the object of Freud's narrative. (27)

¹⁶ Showalter makes an important point that the 'hysterical narrative' predates Freud, and can be found in Max Nordau's 1892 polemic *Degeneration*, and also many stories by female writers of the 1890s (such as George Egerton, Olive Schreiner, Victoria Cross and Charlotte Perkins Gilman) used the term 'hysteria' to describe the consciousness of their heroines (25).

¹⁷ Dora's father was prompted to bring her to Freud after she told him Herr K. had made sexual advances on her, and that she had slapped him; Herr K. denied the claims and her father disbelieved her.

Robson is a parody of a Freud-figure, never made more comic than when Betty walks in on him reading a book called *The Joys and Fears of Extra-Marital Bliss* (46). Robson never considers Betty's economic needs; espouses half-cooked theories about her life; and treats her as a sexualised object for his studies and obsessions. However, rather than suppress Betty's voice, Owens makes this central to the narrative. The narrative of *Mother* is Betty's version of events and hers alone for all its inconsistencies, distortions and fragmentations.

Perhaps the source of Betty's concern over the title of Robson's studies (her feeling that "it didn't seem right") is that Owens seems more concerned with displays of *animal behaviour in humans*, than displays of human behaviour in animals. It seems strange that Betty is denied her personhood at the hands of men who often behave like animals. Owens often relates the characters' actions to animal behaviour (as does Robson). During an argument, Adam stands over Betty and they "[face] each other with what amounted to bared teeth" (54); when he goes behind the screen, Robson makes "small panting noises" (87); Brendan is described as "looking like a dog that is torn between two owners" (100) and much later Betty sees him "wavering at every lamp-post", again "Like a dog" (139); during Adam's trauma attack he is described as "crawling round the floor like an animal or a gigantic baby" (107); Betty's mother describes her daughter's children as "Poor neglected lambs" (134).

When Betty reveals that Robson is writing such a book, Adam is enraged, shaking her violently: "Animals? By God that's rich. Who the hell is he to study anything? Does he experiment on them as well, does he?" (54). There is also the incident where Brendan kills the dog:

'That's not my blood,' he said. 'It's the dog's. I kicked its head in and threw it over the hedge. It's dead.'

Adam and I regarded each other, slightly open-mouthed.

[...]

'Was it an Alsatian?' Adam asked.

'Brendan thought for a minute. 'It wasn't an Alsatian, it was one of those small, white, furry dogs.' His forehead puckered. 'What do you call them again?'

'A poodle,' I suggested. (77)

It appears to the reader, as it does to everyone else in this scene, Brendan has exhibited animal behaviour here. Far more so than the poodle.

However, though both are distraught and appalled by the story, when Adam tries to understand Brendan's actions, Betty chastises him:

'It wasn't that when you shot down a German pilot baling out of his plane. You killed a man. That was worse.'

'That was different,' said Adam. 'It was the war. We didn't know what we were doing half the time.'

'Yeah,' I sneered. 'There is still a good difference between a man and a dog.' (78)

Betty's final comment brings into question this distinction between human and animal. When Adam writes off the incident, saying that "if a guy loses his head once in a blue moon he's entitled to. He doesn't have much of a life at the best of times", Betty retorts "Who has, but we don't go around kicking dogs to death" (79).

Adam's statement opens up a number of questions. How much does he think this entitles a *man* to do? Why is this entitlement exclusive to men? Betty doesn't have much of a life at the best of times either. What Adam says is consistent with a comment Robson makes of a criminal he defended as a lawyer. The man in question had cut the throats of his parents and sister whilst they slept (80). Though Robson claims his involvement was only a formality, his defence is not:

'But what he did was horrible.'

'I agree, but it's unreasonable to expect everyone to be reasonable or rational. Now and then the mind keels over for some apparently trivial cause. It could be compared to a sudden emergence of a pimple on the face. One doesn't want the pimple, but there it is.' (81)

This particular argument, losing the head or having a "pimple on the brain" only appears twice, and only appears in defence of male violence. This suggests that when Brendan kicks a poodle's head in, he is entitled to lose his head once in a blue moon; when Robson's client murders his parents and sister, "the pimple vanished as quickly as it came, leaving no evidence of a disturbed mind" (81). In contrast, when Betty's mind eventually "keels over" she is immediately institutionalised, blamed by Adam for Robson's murder and loses her children. Owens draws our attention to this disparity – of all characters, why

is it only Betty who lives with the consequences of this narrative? Her sectioning and the loss of her children are not equivalent to a dead poodle over the hedge, nor to Robson's murder; Betty is abandoned and made to live a ruined life. In contrast, Adam re-marries and gains custody of their children.

Many characters in the novel say that she is responsible for her own fate. Betty herself places some stock in the tarot card reading of Mrs Rossi, whose predictions are often broadly relevant: "There are three men in your life [...] One of whom you have great doubts about. Cast your doubts aside, for this man is good for you and he will improve your circumstances greatly" (31). Whilst Rossi is not entirely wrong, it is difficult to see which of them could possibly improve Betty's circumstances. As Betty reflects much later "Adam is certainly not rational. Brendan has no intelligence whatsoever and Mr Robson is weird. But they're all I've got to work on" (117). Rossi's predictions are suitably vague enough to be believable for Betty. When Betty reveals that she is a Gemini, Rossi accurately suggest that Betty is "always on the move, easily dissatisfied" (30). Owens treats this with characteristic humour, when Rossi tells Betty to beware of a "dark-haired man" (56). Betty considers that Adam and Brendan are both dark-haired, and Robson "had undoubtedly been dark-haired before he turned white". When she asks for further information, Rossi rubs her eyes and dismisses the question. Much is made of fate through the novel. Robson tells Betty:

'You' – his forefinger stabbed a bone in my chest – 'are the master of your fate. It's up to you to decide whether events are meant to be or not.'

'I don't see how I can alter anything,' I snapped. 'It's so bloody difficult-'

'Tsk, tsk,' he exclaimed gently. (62)

Betty is sceptical. Leaving his house she becomes lost, "avoiding the glances of lonely males" she resolves "Master of my fate indeed, [...] One nod to any of those wayfarers and I could finish up floating along the city river face downwards" (66). Why then, does Robson deem Betty "master of her fate" when he will defend a man who murdered his wife and child due to a "pimple on the brain"?

We can and should ask these questions, though we are given no explicit answers. Ultimately, the question Owens asks us to consider is not whether Betty is "master of her fate". Rather, we should ask "*to what extent* is Betty master of her fate?" *Mother* suggests that she is denied this agency, and it is not beyond trying. Betty does attempt to take

control of her fate to little gain: she attempts to elope with Brendan, she finds employment, and she saves money. Despite this, she is unable to succeed in an environment that does not support her. To claim that she is master of her own fate places the onus of improvement solely on her, and none on the economic or social forces that prevent and dissuade her from doing so. We should not overlook Betty's marginalised identity as a working-class mother.

Despite Rossi's readings being of little help, Betty's interactions with her are more positive than those she has with the men in her life. They spend their time together laughing (111), even about Robson's activity behind the screen and about his perverse studies (126). When Rossi suggests that she'll eventually leave the agency, Betty is depressed (112). Rossi and Mai form her only two female friendships, and though Betty finds the latter trying at times, she enjoys her companionship. Though on occasion she snipes at Mai and puts her down – after she calls Brendan a “weirdo”, Betty remarks that her breath smells bad, “I’ll say that much for Brendan. He might be a weirdo but his breath doesn’t smell (52)” – when she decides to visit Mai at her home, she has a pleasant time. The notion strikes her “with something like joy” after considering returning to Adam at their house, and is greeted by Mai and her baby at the door brightly (66-7). Sitting in Mai's house, it initially strikes her that her life seems “to be a vacuum of desperate nothingness” and that she has little in common with Mai (68). However, shortly after she finds herself enjoying Mai: “We laughed and joked a lot after that and I began to feel I had benefited from my visit; so much so that I invited her to come to our house the first Saturday she could manage and bring Anthony.” Although she leaves happily, the chapter ends with her calculating whether or not she has enough money to buy sherry, which she plans to drink alone in the bathroom (69).

The point here is that Betty lacks positive female companionship, and her interactions with Mai and Rossi contrast strongly with her male relations. She admits herself: “I don’t rate women very highly” (117). Rossi and Mai, flawed as they are, seem to have a far more positive effect on Betty than Adam, Brendan or Robson. For this reason, she feels “despairing” when Rossi is unable to offer her a job working together (126), and greatly saddened when Rossi disappears altogether (136). Betty's desire to maintain companionship with Rossi is evident in scenes where she lies to Brendan, saying that she and Rossi are going into business together (128-9), and when she tells the same to Adam (130-1). The only other female friends we learn of are imaginary friends from her

childhood. Susan and Ina were constructions which helped her combat loneliness, and relieve her self-doubt and sense of worthlessness:

I did not like Ina as much as Susan. In my mind she was always poorly dressed with a runny nose while Susan was beautiful and blonde-haired, like a doll with china-blue eyes. Susan and I whispered things about Ina, who usually walked six paces behind, pleading with us to be allowed into our company. Sometimes we let her [...] when we needed a child to be slapped or a patient to be poked. Now I can see that Ina and Susan were based on myself. Susan was what I wanted to be. Ina was the real me – shy and awkward and without friends. (116)

This passage reflects sentiments she expresses earlier - “just because I’d like things to be nice – just because I’d like to dress nice and have a nice house –“ (97) - though what is more significant is the passing comment she makes following this: “I wonder if all lonely children play this game or only those with split personalities” (116).

As a character whose mental stability is brushed off or not taken seriously by those around her, this is an important moment. Elsewhere we see Betty covering up questions about herself to Robson, pretending they are about Brendan. Early on, Betty wakes up largely unaware of a particularly combative evening spent with Adam and Brendan. It is only when Adam says he is leaving for good that she asks him what she had done:

‘What did you do?’ he laughed. ‘What did you do?’ It would take all morning to describe what you did – laughing, crying, kissing Brendan, the poor fellow was completely confused – and screaming how I’d never been anywhere during the war, that is anywhere farther than Aldershot –‘

‘I’m sorry I can’t stop to hear all this, I’ve got to work you know.’ (46)

Later that day she broaches the subject to Robson, though parts of her re-telling are altered and she has substituted Brendan in place of herself: “It was predictable that Adam would act like that under the stress of Brendan’s accusation. But for Brendan to make the accusation is completely out of character”. She calls the Brendan of this story “deranged” and “shyly” asks Robson if he thinks Brendan has a “split personality” (48). Later, when typing one of Robson’s reports, she pauses at a part discussing how one patient, “Maurice had sexual aberrations which were similar to those discovered in white mice after injections of hormones” (83). She finds this particular passage “fascinating” and suggests

to Robson that she feels Brendan may have sexual aberrations, though it is also possible she is referring to her lack of enjoyment in sex (85).

Owens has used a technique familiar to us from her short stories. For the duration of the narrative, we have been placed in the hands of a highly subjective and unreliable narrator-character, and the extent to which this has informed our reading is revealed swiftly, economically and brusquely. The idea that Betty has “split personalities” is also a literary device, which brings to mind themes of duality. Re-considering Owens’ assertion that “It’s hard to have a family and be a feminist” (“A heart that stays at home”), we see that Betty’s family life has made her independence an impossibility. Her attempts to step out of her expected role as a mother have resulted in tragedy. As a subject who desires independence, Betty is at odds with her role as a mother, and her personhood at odds with rigidities of patriarchal tradition. Through this, Owens challenges cultural assumptions of female identity and brings to light the fallacies we project onto concepts of femininity and motherhood. Through Betty’s relationship with Robson, Owens is at her most critical of a diagnostic approach to literature, especially of the pseudo-psychoanalytic Freudian approach undertaken by Robson. As Susan Katz puts it:

What remains troubling about the literary form of the case history as a synthesis of clinical observations and fictional devices is that the ‘heriones’ disguised for anonymities sake behind pseudonyms and altered circumstances were *real* women; and Freud was trying to direct the course of their lives with his personal and literary values. (qtd. in Showalter 27)

Though Betty is a fictional character, Showalter is right to warn against “using the case-study as a scientific back ground against which to assess fictional characters” because “many of Freud’s conventions came from fiction to begin with” (27).

Further complicating our ability to interpret Betty’s narrative, Owens plays a trick with the story-text relations of her novel. In the middle of chapter nine, after Adam has left with the children and before Betty’s sense of reality completely unravels, Owens inserts what seems to be prolepsis. Suddenly, we are on the veranda of a cottage hospital. “Lady Lipton is asleep. She’s been asleep for most of my tale. I’m surprised when she says with her eyes still closed, ‘Is that all?’” Here, Owens has thrown our sense of understanding, and our ability to find stable ground in regards to Betty’s narrative. What has appeared to be narrated to us – the narratee – by an internal narrator-focaliser has actually been

narrated within the story-world to the elderly Lady Lipton. The narration has shifted from internal past-tense to internal present-tense.

Within the story world, Betty is only now communicating directly with the reader. This break in story-time signifies that the preceding narrative was really an analepsis from the narrative present. What's more, Betty dubiously denies to Lady Lipton the truth of the story (135). This denial of truth reflects that in breaking narrative convention, Owens reminds the reader of the fictionality of the novel itself. This break lasts for less than a page before Betty's internal narrative continues, though this becomes increasingly disoriented with Betty's stability and the "people she was connected with [...] disappearing" around her¹⁸. During this period she has conversations with Adam and Rossi "in spirit if not in reality" and falls asleep to the imagined sound of Brendan singing (141). During this drunken haze she realises that she is "completely alone" (142). She remains in the house for a week, drunk having various conversations with Adam, Brendan, Mr Robson, and occasionally Mai and Mrs Rossi, and says she is certain Adam came back once in reality, and sends for a social worker (144). From this point on the narrative occurs entirely within the hospital, though Owens has now made us witness to Betty's exposure.

Because her style is economical, this does not mean we should overlook *Mother's* meta-fictional qualities. This is a difficult text with characters that resist simple interpretation. Beyond this, there are further questions we can ask. *Mother* and *For the Love of Willie* are Owens' final novels, published in 1994 and 1998 respectively¹⁹. These two are related works, with repetitions in character, language, and narrative. When Betty is assaulted by the American, he has previously called her a "sad apple"; in *For the Love of Willie* an American soldier calls Peggy a "sad apple" too (66). Both stories focus on a central female character; both contain the narrative conceit of her life story being recounted to an elderly, formerly wealthy (possibly) patient at a medical institution; both are set in post-war Britain (though much of *Willie* is narrated adjacent to World War II); both deal with the thematic implications of narrative truth, reality and illusion; and both conclude with a perceived mental collapse. However, despite the similarities, these works stand apart from each other. The lives narrated, the story events, the characters and the

¹⁸ Betty attempts to visit Mrs Rossi after Adam's departure, but finds the agency empty and abandoned (136).

¹⁹ These are not her final works: the novellas *Bad Attitudes* and *Jen's Party* were published together in 2003 and the short stories from *The Dark Side* in 2008.

story structure are dissimilar, though the repetitions are as interesting as their differences. Do we compare Betty and Peggy to similar characters in her short stories? These repetitions are not incidental; these are purposeful aesthetic decisions. In positioning her work in conversation with itself, through repetitions or republication (as is the case with *Gentlemen*), Owens destabilises her work thematically and structurally. As these are all works that undermine notions of narrative “truth” and destabilise concepts of realist, “honest” writing, the process of destabilisation is central to her aesthetic and political project.

Juliet Mitchell has gone as far to assert and defend that the women’s literary tradition is the “discourse of the hysteric”, in as much as she simultaneously accepts and refuses “the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism” (qtd. in Showalter 24-5). *Mother* is a text that simultaneously reclaims and refutes the “discourse of the hysteric” through Owens’ sympathetic centralising of Betty’s voice, and in her parodying of the male discourses that attempt to define her – Robson’s postulations being a fitting comparison here. Much of *Mother*’s strength comes through Owens’ empathic representation of Betty, though, like O’Connor, she recognises that a writer cannot create empathy with empathy. It is far more politically and aesthetically compelling to produce this through strong, direct writing and subversive tactics. That she has made this novel Betty’s story, as narrated by Betty for all its unreliability makes this work all the more compelling as a response to the narrative of female hysteria and madness. Though fate is made a constant theme through Betty’s narrative, Owens makes it clear that Betty’s fate is determined not so much through her actions as it is subject to the dominant economic patriarchal forces surrounding her. Certainly, Betty is a “hard” character, though her hardness is synonymous with her strength. Betty articulates her situation succinctly in a conversation with Rossi: “I’m still young and it’s no life for a working mother” (126).

CONCLUSION

How do we locate Agnes Owens in the Scottish literary canon? Contextually, the answer is simple, being part of “The Glasgow group”. Certainly, location necessitates comparison. However, the intention of this thesis has been to set her work apart from her contemporaries, and demonstrate what is unique to her aesthetic and political approach. I hope that these chapters have demonstrated this, and have done justice to what is now her complete literary legacy. Madness, oppression, abuse and “honest writing” were Owens’ central thematic concerns, and are threaded through all her works. What should be clear is that her work is oppositional to accepted representations of marginalised identities. I have discussed how *Gentlemen* and *Birds* subvert concepts of societal initiation, how her short stories address notions of community, abuse and “treacheries of attitude”, and how *Mother* challenges literary themes of madness and “female hysteria”.

Repetition was important to Owens’ challenging of realist literary tropes. Where in *Gentlemen*, Mac is frustrated by the stereotypical characters and scenarios surrounding him – himself also being an archetypal protagonist of the realist working-class novel – Owens’ interest in dissecting and reproducing characters extends beyond *Gentlemen*. In her short stories, Owens draws our attention to the way we view her characters and challenges the way we perceive these “condemned” characters. *Mother* depicts the unravelling of Betty’s mind and the loss of her family in ways that do not allow us to look away. These character types appear throughout literary history: the subdued wife, the abusive father, the delinquent son, and the hysterical woman. Through her writing, Owens provided them with an internal existence, treating them as subjects. These paper-beings are condemned by their economic standing, their degrees of so-called sanity and gender, but also by their fictional existence.

The representation of lived experience cannot help but reduce, or re-produce, character types, narrative cycles and structures. In contrast, Owens’ concern was less with the development of character within these narratives, but with the way they perceive their restrictive environments, and of the way we perceive them. McKibbin has commented on this, summarising that:

the reflective life is the one, if not always worth living, certainly worth writing about: what matters is not the change Owens can narratively generate, but the perceptual awareness she can explore through her characters. (2)

As I discussed with *Gentlemen*, many of Mac's anxieties seem to stem from his increasing awareness of the hopeless trajectory of his narrative. The only possibility is escape, certainly, but Mac is a creation and only exists for the duration of his narrative. *Birds* sees him sent on a wild-goose chase looking for work and social stability that he is unable to find, resulting in his return. Betty in *Mother* also longs for the possibility of an escape that eludes her, sensing the hopeless fate that her narrative offers. Under our gaze, they are unable to escape; under Owens' gaze, neither are we. She highlights the gap between the real-world observer and the fictional character, thereby forcing consideration of the disparity between social and individual perception. If, as Georg Lukács would have it, realism's goal is "to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society" (qtd. in McNeill 117), then surely realist fiction must by definition acknowledge the contradiction in terms that is "realist fiction". Owens' stories make this contradiction perceptible. Her work is restless, always considering and re-considering itself, the lives it portrays, and its own fictionality. Through re-purposing and re-examining stereotypes and narrative forms Owens displayed commitment to a wider project of de-constructing and destabilizing such narrative conceits.

Ultimately, the contextual positioning and understanding (or *location*) of a writer's oeuvre requires collective input. This thesis should be seen, alongside the work of Gray, Gifford, Burgess, Prillinger and Stark, as the beginnings of a body of research yet to be completed. Owens' location will emerge as the natural outcome of this shared effort. There is yet more to be gleaned from her work. Certainly, my own suggestion regarding Owens' relationship to realism could be expanded further. There are more novellas to explore, and far more short stories. What of the harrowing "The Lighthouse" or "Annie Rogerson", stories that deal explicitly with child abuse, abduction and trauma? What of her representations of the elderly in "Neighbours" or "Visiting the Elderly"? How can we compare *Mother* and *Willie*'s near-identical situations, and what do the similarities between the two reflect? What of the status of the Scottish short story? Were we to thoroughly examine, as Burgess suggests, the significance of the short story in Scottish literature, Owens would certainly be an important writer to consider. Whatever the outcome of these questions, I can only look forward to and anticipate the appreciation of her work yet to come.

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