

THE
*Agnes
Owens*
ARCHIVE

The Gothic in the Fiction of Agnes Owens



Written by Arran Mackenzie Rey, 2025

Alan Bissett in his chapter 'The Dead Can Sing' in *Damage Land: New Scottish Fiction* (2001) describes the Gothic, stating:

'It is that which is going on beneath the world, that which we'd rather ignore, thankyouverymuch, if it's alright with you [...]. Gothic is about breakdown, about terror, about the collapse of territory, structure, order authority. Gothic does not believe in the unity of the self or in the safety of the flesh. Its bible is written in the margins, its church is buried underground, its hymns praise taboo and its choir is the dead. (pp. 4)

The Gothic is the other, that which disrupts, deconstructs, and shocks, causing us to reassess the world around us. Agnes Owens is a writer whose fiction explores the everyday experiences of working-class men and women in Scotland. Owens depicts her characters in an interview with Jane Gray (2008) as 'treacherous' or 'people like that'. Similarly to her contemporaries, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, Owen's characters emerge from the margins of the text and move to the centre of the page, exploring 'that which is going on beneath the world.' (Bissett, 2001, pp. 4). She explores people who face the everyday horrors of unemployment, the dole, alcoholics, hostile domestic environments, systematic oppression and those who find themselves on the brink of hopelessness. These are fragmented people whose everyday lives and identities have become unfamiliar to them and those around them. The familiar house becomes a prison for the mother, the self is deconstructed into madness, and the structures of authority terrorise the flesh, revealing the unspoken, the taboos, and the everyday experiences buried under the earth. Owens constructs an array of horrific, satirical, ironic, and at times humorously dark narrative voices who deceive, manipulate, harm, and are harmed by those around them.

The use of voice, the female body, and the domestic environment in Owens's fiction are stylistically representative of Scotland's historical Gothic literary culture. This text will highlight Owens's influence on Scotland's Gothic literary culture by outlining a connective throughline of authors whose work encapsulates similar voices, styles, and thematic concerns to *A Working Mother* (1994), *For the Love of Willie* (1998), and 'Arabella' (1985).



Cover artwork by Alasdair Gray for *A Working Mother*, Agnes Owens, 1994
From *A Life in Pictures*, Gray, 2010, Canongate

VOICE

The gothic voice is characterised by dark humour, satire, and irony to expose unspoken truths hidden in everyday life, creating a shocking, frightening, and disruptive effect on the reader. Owens's thematic, narrative, and stylistic concerns have been compared to Muriel Spark's by Lynne Stark in 'Agnes Owens's Fiction: Untold Stories', stating:

'Owens's interest in 'the treacheries of attitude' ('Finding Truth'), the dynamics of betrayal, links her thematically to the earlier (but near contemporary) writer Muriel Spark [...]. With its terse dialogue, bitter humour and cast of grotesque characters, *A Working Mother* recalls Spark's grimly comic novellas of the mid-1970s. (Christianson, A., and Lumsden, A. 2000, pp. 114).

The use of this gothic narrative voice by Owens can arguably be linked to her literary influences, Flannery O'Connor (March 25th, 1925 - August 3rd, 1964), about whom, Owens stated, in conversation with Jane Gray (2008) to be 'the only person who inspired me and still does', and Jessie Kesson (28th October 1916 - 26th September 1994), who she describes as, 'a kind of Flannery O'Connor in a way, only a Scottish one' (pp. 7). Flannery O'Connor was an American Southern Gothic writer whose ironically dark narratives blur the moralities attached to binaries such as good and evil, conscious and unconscious, desire and greed. Similarly, Jessie Kesson was a Scottish gothic author whose satirical narratives explore the themes of gender identity, feminism, and eroticism, disrupting dominant patriarchal ideological structures imposed on women during the early to mid-twentieth century.

In O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" from her collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1977), Joy, a depressed woman, is abandoned in an attic by a bible seller. The ironic tone of this story derives from Joy's mum's presupposition that Christians are 'good country people' (O'Connor, 1977, pp. 104-120). Joy does not believe in Christian morals, instead, she believes Christians are blinded by their faith and cannot perceive the world from her more advanced philosophical mindset. This position of Christian moral righteousness is shockingly disrupted when the bible salesman offers Joy his whiskey flask, which she refuses, causing him to steal her prosthetic leg, stating, "I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" (O'Connor, 1977, pp. 120). Ironically, Joy is shocked that the bible salesman is not a morally righteous Christian, which in a humorously dark turn proves her point, but makes her wish he had been. The gothic voice is used to highlight and blur the duality of good and evil, satirising the monolithic perspectives of these binaries.

Similarly, Jessie Kesson's short novella "Where the Apple Ripens" from *Where the Apple Ripens: & Other Stories* (1986) uses irony and satire to explore the dualities of child and adult, fantasy and reality, desire and loathing. The text follows Isobel's transfer from childhood to adulthood, satirising patriarchy's expectations of women during this transition (Murray, Isobel. 2025). Isobel's conflict develops from the oppression of her erotic desires and the fear of being marginalised by an unwanted pregnancy. When she decides to ignore all warnings and set out for Alex Ewan's house to satisfy her desires, Isobel is ironically rejected, leaving her shamed and embarrassed for not having considered this possibility (Kesson, J., 1986, pp.66-68). This situation is similarly played out in Owens' *For The Love of Willie* (1998), where Peggy's mum warns her of Willie Roper, Peggy's boss, by stating, 'Maybe you don't know this, but he gets the name for being fond of young girls, and I don't mean in a nice way' (Owens, 2009, p.295). Peggy ignores her mum's implication that Willie has pursued sexual relationships with young girls before and, unlike Isobel, has sex with Willie. Ironically, Peggy then becomes pregnant with Willie's child, justifying her mum's warnings. Once Willie and her mum become aware of her pregnancy, they decide to send Peggy away to a birthing home, as Willie explains, 'Society doesn't look kindly on young girls who have illegitimate children' (Owens, 2009, p. 326). The subversion of expectation and lack of subversion link both writers similarly but differently, producing dark, ironic, and satirical gothic narrative interpretations of society's treatment of the female body by the dominant phallogentric culture.

In Muriel Spark's (1st February 1918 – 13th April 2006) novella *Memento Mori* (1981), irony is used for a similar narrative effect. In this text, a congregation of elderly characters begin receiving mysterious phone calls stating, 'Remember you must die' (Spark, M. 1981, pp.2). The text's humorously dark and satirical voice is constructed through the elderly considering this reminder of their mortality a threat. The voice reminds the elders of the life and death binary, satirising their need to stay alive even though they are closer to death. Their ignorance towards the life they have already lived is revealed as they attempt to grasp the existential concept of death. As the story progresses, the elderly's panic intensifies, exposing an underlying narrative of secrecy, sin, and blackmail centred around Charmain, Godfrey, and Pettigrew (Spark, M., 1981, pp. 174-176). The irony of this situation derives from their regrets this late in life towards the treacheries they have committed against each other throughout their shared life experiences, highlighting the question of what it is to live a moral life and an immoral life, or if there is such a thing. Similarly, in the final chapter of Owens's *A Working Mother*, in *Agnes Owens: The Complete Novellas* (2009), Betty's ironic narrative is highlighted when she states:

'Lady Lipton said I was in a bad state when they brought me in, shouting and screaming and acting like a madwoman. I don't particularly believe her. She's the type that exaggerates. But I put up with her. She's the only one worth talking to in here. I haven't seen Adam since he told me about Brendan. You'd think he'd come and visit me now and again and bring the kids. It would be nice for us to be together again. After all, I am their mother. (pp. 263).

Betty spends most of the text lamenting her presupposed motherly role, depicting her imprisonment within the everyday routine of taking care of the kids and her husband. She searches for a way to free herself from it all and to start her own life. However, the text ends with this bitter, melancholic, humorously dark, ironic statement, where she acknowledges the expectation that a family should be together as, at the end of the day, she is 'their mother' (Owens, 2009, pp. 263). The irony of Betty's narrative is further shown in her dismissal of Lady Lipton's statement about her admission to the hospital. Betty's dismissive attitude to Lady Lipton's memory as unreliable ironically highlights her own unreliability as a narrator. Similarly to Spark, O'Connor, and Kesson, Owens uses the gothic voice to blur the binaries of motherhood and mother, insanity and sanity, denial and acceptance, showing the irony of her character's inability to consider both sides of the binary. Owens and the other writers explored in this essay use the ironic, satirical, and humorously dark voice of the Gothic to highlight binaries, disrupting the familiar side with the marginalised other, such as life being disrupted by death, or sanity by insanity, causing the reader to reconsider the self and the world around them.



Flannery O'Connor, 1962. Gelatin silver print by Jay Leviton



Jessie Kesson, photograph made available by Moniack Mohr

THE DOMESTIC

The domestic environment is a familiar and contested setting for many of Owens's working-class mothers, who attempt to break free from the shackles of patriarchy's imprisonment of the housewife within the home. Silvia Federici, in her essay *Wages Against Housework* (1974), explores the marginalisation of women's work within the household, depicting the physical, emotional, and sexual labour they must enact under the dominant phallogocentric ideology (1974, p. 76-77). The role of the housewife is horrified in Owens's *A Working Mother* (1994) through Betty's treatment in the domestic environment, at work, and by society. This is similarly represented in Jackie Kay's short story 'The woman with fork and knife disorder', which Alan Bissett, in his chapter 'The Dead Can Sing' in *Damage Land: New Scottish Fiction* (2001), presents its domestic environment as a story of 'everyday insanity' (pp. 8). These characters' depictions of their entrapment within the household, the abusive family dynamic, and the treatment they receive from society are harrowing, ironic, and humorously dark.

In Jackie Kay's short story 'The woman with fork and knife disorder' from her short story collection *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2003), Irene Elliot is driven to insanity by her daughter's hatred towards her, her divorce from her ex-husband, her husband's treatment of her before the divorce, and the loss of all her friends since. This gradually leads to her loss of sanity, with the fork and knife disorder as the first signs of insanity. Irene develops a disorder where she cannot organise the cutlery within the right compartments, which worsens into the cutlery falling from different kitchen compartments, stating, 'She opened the fridge for the milk and it all fell out of the fridge, slashing, stabbing, smashing onto the floor.' (Kay, 2003, pp. 94). Her visits to the doctor are unsuccessful, and the constant feeling of isolation, entrapment, and unwantedness drives Irene to imagine herself using the knives too, 'Rip her own useless, pathetic skin till it split' (Kay, 2003, pp. 101) and to feel like she, 'wanted to die' (Jackie Kay, 2003, pp. 104). This constant abuse she suffered at her husband's hands and still suffers silently within the domestic environment leads to her further loss of sanity, as shown at the end when she visits a park, stating, 'At her place, Irene methodically cut her way through bits of grass and turf. Her mouth was full of the taste of earth, iron.' (Kay, 2003, pp. 107). Insanity, at this point, is ironically the most reasonable reaction towards the horrific events Irene depicts throughout the story. The gothic is imbued into the 'everyday insanity' of the mother's experiences within the domestic environment, highlighting the physical, emotional, and sexual labour which has been historically marginalised within the four walls of the home.

Similarly, in Owens' novella *A Working Mother* (1994), Betty explores the physical, emotional, and sexual labour from inside the domestic environment and outside in the workplace. The text opens with Betty stating, 'I think I will go to the city for work' after her husband (Adam) has been made redundant due to his war injuries (Owens, 2009, p. 139). This results in Adam growing frustrated with his role within the domestic environment, stating, 'It's all balls (...) you out working. The doctor said I was fit to go back to work. How can I, now that you're away all day? Someone's got to be in for the kids coming home from school' (Owens, 2009, p. 144). Betty attempts to refuse the imposed position of the housewife within the home, accepting her new role as the breadwinner of the house, causing her to feel isolated with Adam undermining her efforts by stating, 'You're bound to be a success in an office with your laddered stockings and black fingernails' (Owens, 2009, p.139). This demand for Betty to enact physical, emotional, and sexual labour by Adam is further complicated in the workplace.

Betty's boss, Mr Robson, expects her to carry out extra typing duties for his book 'The Study of Human Behaviour in Animals', offer him emotional support, and allow him to masturbate over her body from behind a curtain whilst she sits on the bed. The constant degradation, unappreciation, and claustrophobia of these everyday experiences within the domestic environment and at the workplace cause Betty to search for an escape, which she sees in her affair with Adam's friend Brendan. Ironically, in a humorously dark turn of events, Brendan is imprisoned after murdering Mr Robson whilst tending his garden, and Adam ends up abandoning Betty, running away with the children and starting a new life with Betty's friend, Mai (Owens, 2009, pp. 260-262). Betty is institutionalised after these events unfold, and she stumbles across Adam and Mai one last time at the supermarket, stating, 'After that everything was a blur in my head' (Owens, 2009, pp. 262). The institutionalisation of Betty complicates her reliability as a narrator, stating when arguing with Lady Lipton, 'Supposing I told you I made the whole thing up [...] When you're in here everything gets so jumbled up it's hard to know the truth' (Owens, 2009, pp. 255-256). This final statement surrounding the reliability of her memory turns the humorously dark, ironic tone of the text on the reader's presumption that Betty is a trusted narrator. Similarly to Irene, Betty's insanity has a humorously dark gothic narrative tone as her world is ironically flipped upside down when her plans to run away are enacted by her husband, whereas, in Irene's case, the disorder is a bad joke being played on her when she is most vulnerable. The domestic environment is a familiar gothic setting; it's a haunted house, a crime scene, and for the mothers in this text, a prison, highlighting the everyday insanity mothers have experienced within hostile domestic, workplace, and societal environments, bringing a different lens to the gothic home.

BODY HORROR

In the works of Owens, Kirsty Logan, Janice Galloway, and A.L. Kennedy the body is explored through what Julia Kristeva coined as the 'abject' (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 1-6). The abject is that which opposes our sense of self; it is the other, it causes us to question our perception of identity and the world around us. Kirsty Logan, in her short story 'Last One To Leave Please Turn Off The Lights' (2020) within the short story collection *Things We Say In The Dark* (2020), represents the body as a home constructed from the teeth, bones, nails, and hair of women, stating, 'The first house I gave you was a tooth [...] The second house I braided from my hair [...] The third house was my fingernail.' (Logan, K. 2020, pp. 5-14). The horrific and grotesque imagery of the body is not in itself 'abject', it is the disruption of phallogocentric cultures' depictions of female sensibility, stability, and cleanliness which causes abjection.

In Janice Galloway's 'Blood' in the short story collection *Blood* (1991), the imagery of the dentist ripping the tooth out of the young girl's mouth and the uncontrollable amount of blood excreting from her body when she gets her period in school are used to create abjection. In this text, phallogocentric cultures' rejection of the feminine 'abject' body is literalised by the boy's reaction to the girl spewing blood onto the piano. Similarly to both of these texts, Owens uses the grotesque in her short story 'Arabella' from the short story collection *Lean Tales* (1985), when the sanitary inspector comes to visit, stating:

'He had witnessed many an odious spectacle in his time but this fat sagging filthy woman with wild tangled hair and great staring eyes was worse than the nightmares he often had of dismembered bodies in choked drains. (pp. 113)

Arabella deconstructs patriarchal perceptions of the female body as clean, composed, sensible, and passive through her active representation of uncleanness, causing the sanitary inspector to have a heart attack (Owens A.,1985, pp.113-115). Through the grotesque, horrific, and satirical appropriation of the 'abject' female body, these writers are establishing a new feminine self, disrupting established phallogocentric depictions of femininity. It is not only those images of grotesqueness and horror which cause abjection.

In A.L. Kennedy's *So I Am Glad* (2007), abjection is produced through the narrator Jenifer's depictions of female eroticism, the traumatic experiences of having to watch her parents have sex for their pleasure, and the concept that her lover Martin or Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac does not exist. The erotic expression of the libidinal economy, be it horrific or pleasurable, is representative of the body and disruptive of that which phallogentric culture has marginalised throughout history.

In Owens's *For the Love of Willie* (1998), Peggy is marginalised by the phallogentric culture into a birthing home for her representation of the female libidinal economy through the pregnant body, as shown when she states, 'She'd been warned not to come in the front door in case the sight of a pregnant woman gave the place a bad name' (Owens, 2009, p. 334). The oppression of Peggy's pregnancy leads to a horrific ending where she murders the child before handing it over to the couple trying to adopt it, causing her to be institutionalised in a mental hospital (Owens, 2009, p. 349). The dead baby, the pregnant body, the blood, the uncleanliness of Arabella, the insanity, and the erotic taboo between Willie and Peggy show Owens's use of abject imagery to produce visceral reactions within the reader. Like the other writers explored in this text, Owens uses these images of the grotesque, the uncanny, the fantastical, and the unclean to disrupt societal perceptions of identity and the self, linking her to a contemporary literary culture of body horror.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Gothic influences Agnes Owens's narrative voice, setting, imagery, and form similar to the other authors explored in this essay, showing the historical influence of the genre and Owens's role within that literary culture. This is not to suggest that the writers explored in this essay are Gothic writers or writing within a specifically Gothic culture, but that the Gothic is intruding into their writing in similar and varying ways. This essay positions Owens within a historical and contemporary culture of writers who use the Gothic genre style to tackle contemporary cultural, economic, and political issues.

The ironic, satirical, and humorously dark gothic voice in Owens's narratives is traced in this essay to Flannery O'Connor, Jessie Kesson, and Muriel Spark, drawing a historical set of influences. These writers use the gothic style to explore the duality of humanity, highlighting the ironies of good and evil, man and woman, life and death. Similarly to Owens, these writers concern themselves with human betrayal, treacherous attitudes, and breaking dominant phallogentric ideology, satirising and subverting their character's narratives through the gothic voice.

Owens, Kirsty Logan, Janice Galloway, Jackie Kay, and A.L. Kennedy use body horror, the domestic environment, insanity, and the gothic voice, to disrupt social, political, and economic structures, reappropriating and reconstructing those images by adopting the 'abject'. Owens and the other writers explored in this essay reshape the contemporary Gothic genre by highlighting the fears, struggles, and horrors hidden in the dark corners of society.

In conclusion, a clear throughline is drawn of Owens's historical influences and contemporary influential uses of the Gothic genre within her texts, linking her to Scotland's gothic literary culture. The similar thematic concerns, use of voice, and interest in duality link Owens and the other writers in this essay back to Gothic classics, such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), or James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Overall, this text is representative of the various approaches which are still to be explored in Owens's work, establishing her influence on Scotland's Gothic literary culture and drawing attention to her influence on Scottish literary history as a whole.

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At the time of writing, Arran was studying for his Masters in Creative Writing at The University of Strathclyde. Arran undertook a placement at The Agnes Owens Archive after writing his undergraduate dissertation on her work. He arrived with interest in Owen's role in Scotland's gothic literary culture and worked to draw connections between Scottish writers whose use of gothic style literature has influenced Owens' work.

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