



Original Article

Poverty, Addiction, and Social Marginalization in Douglas Stuart's
Shuggie Bain

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Abstract:

Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020) portrays the lives of working-class people in 1980s Glasgow against a background of industrial decline, unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited social support. Focusing on Agnes Bain and her son Hugh "Shuggie" Bain, this paper examines how poverty, alcoholism, and social marginalization reinforce one another. Using Marxist literary criticism as its principal framework, the study considers the relationship between material conditions and personal suffering, the alienation experienced by Agnes and Shuggie, and the ways class and gender expectations shape social identity. Agnes's alcoholism is interpreted not simply as an individual moral failure but as a destructive response situated within loneliness, economic insecurity, gender inequality, and the absence of reliable support. Shuggie, meanwhile, experiences exclusion because his sensitivity and mannerisms conflict with dominant ideals of working-class masculinity. The paper also explores how poverty affects housing, food, clothing, family relationships, and educational experience, and how social stigma reduces complex individuals to labels such as "drunk" or "different." The analysis argues that Stuart exposes the structural conditions that intensify suffering without removing the characters' capacity for dignity, attachment, and resilience. Although the novel depicts a cycle in which poverty contributes to stress and addiction, and addiction further deepens poverty, Shuggie's devotion to his mother reveals the emotional complexity of life at the margins. The novel ultimately challenges readers to understand working-class suffering through both material circumstances and human relationships.

Keywords: Douglas Stuart, *Shuggie Bain*, Marxist Literary Criticism, Poverty, Addiction, Social Marginalization, Class, Alienation, Masculinity.

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Introduction:

Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*, published in 2020, presents a deeply affecting portrait of working-class life in Glasgow during the 1980s. The novel follows Hugh "Shuggie" Bain and his mother, Agnes, whose relationship unfolds amid economic decline, insecure employment, unstable housing, and the social consequences of alcohol addiction. Although the narrative centres on a family, its concerns extend beyond the household. The Bains' suffering is situated within a community in which poverty is normalised, opportunities are limited, and people are frequently judged according to their class position, appearance, behaviour, and ability to conform to social expectations.

Agnes dreams of respectability, beauty, and a secure family life, but her hopes are repeatedly damaged by disappointment and economic insecurity. Her relationship with Big Shug does not provide the stability she desires, and her dependence on alcohol gradually undermines her capacity to sustain relationships and fulfil parental responsibilities. Shuggie, who loves his mother and remains deeply attached to her, becomes a caretaker at an age when he should be protected. At the same time, he is bullied and marginalised because his sensitive nature and mannerisms do not fit conventional ideals of masculinity. His experience demonstrates that poverty does not operate only through material deprivation; it also shapes self-image, belonging, and access to dignity.

This paper analyses the novel through Marxist literary criticism, with particular attention to class relations, material conditions, alienation, ideology, and the intersection of class with gender and sexuality. It argues that

Stuart represents poverty as both an economic reality and a psychological condition. Poverty limits access to secure housing, food, clothing, employment, and education, while also producing shame, anxiety, and social invisibility. Addiction is presented as part of a destructive cycle: economic and emotional insecurity intensify Agnes's reliance on alcohol, while drinking further damages family life and consumes resources needed for survival. The novel nevertheless refuses to reduce its characters to passive victims. Shuggie's empathy and endurance, and Agnes's continuing desire for dignity, reveal the humanity that persists within marginalised circumstances.

Theoretical Framework: Marxist Literary Criticism:

Marxist literary criticism examines the relationship between literature and the material conditions in which people live. It considers how class structures, labour, ownership, ideology, and economic inequality shape social relationships and cultural representation. From this perspective, literature is not isolated from society; it can reveal the contradictions of an economic order and make visible the experiences of groups whose suffering is overlooked or normalised. A Marxist reading of *Shuggie Bain* therefore asks how the family's private difficulties are connected to broader patterns of industrial decline, insecure work, deprivation, and class-based judgement.

The novel's Glasgow setting is central to this interpretation. The decline of industrial employment and the weakening of the working-class way of life form the material background to the Bain family's instability. In the world represented by the novel, employment is



uncertain, housing is often inadequate, and families have few resources to absorb crises. These conditions reduce the characters' control over their lives. Their suffering cannot be explained only through personal decisions because their choices are made within a restricted field of economic possibility.

Alienation is another useful Marxist concept. It describes separation from meaningful activity, social relationships, and a secure sense of self. Agnes experiences alienation from family and community, and she increasingly turns to alcohol as a way to escape disappointment. Shuggie is alienated because he does not conform to dominant expectations of masculinity. His sensitivity and feminine mannerisms make him vulnerable to ridicule, demonstrating that social norms can isolate people who do not fit accepted roles. The novel also exposes ideology: beliefs about personal responsibility and masculinity can make unequal conditions appear natural. Agnes is often judged as a woman who drinks rather than understood as a person whose addiction exists within loneliness, economic insecurity, and limited support.

Class and gender must therefore be considered together. Agnes's position as a woman affects her access to security and her dependence on male partners, while social expectations place pressure on her appearance and respectability. Shuggie faces a different but related pressure: he is expected to display toughness and conventional masculine behaviour. A Marxist reading, attentive to gender and sexuality, reveals how economic marginalisation is reinforced by cultural norms. The novel also complicates any simple division between oppressors and victims, showing that marginalised people may reproduce stigma by

mocking or excluding those considered weaker. Yet love, humour, dignity, and care prevent the characters from being fully defined by the system that constrains them.

Poverty and Working-Class Life in 1980s Glasgow:

Poverty is not merely the setting of Shuggie Bain; it is one of the forces that organises the characters' daily experiences. The novel depicts crowded and unsuitable housing, limited privacy, unstable relationships, and a lack of money for ordinary necessities. Shuggie's early life takes place in environments where security is fragile and where adults themselves struggle to manage the pressures of work, family, and addiction. Such conditions make childhood unpredictable. Instead of relying on stable adult care, Shuggie learns to observe the moods and needs of others and to respond to crises that should not be his responsibility.

Big Shug's departure from Agnes for another woman leaves Agnes and the children in a difficult financial position. The household has little money, and Agnes's hopes for a stable family are further damaged. The relationship between economic insecurity and intimate life is important: Agnes seeks affection and protection, but her dependence on a partner does not provide lasting security. The family's circumstances reveal how limited resources can magnify the consequences of betrayal and separation. When there is little financial independence, emotional abandonment may also become material abandonment.

Catherine's decision to marry Donald Jnr and move away can likewise be read as a search for a different future. Her departure suggests that leaving the family environment



may appear to offer a route towards stability and opportunity. For those who remain, however, the family's burdens become more concentrated. Leek withdraws emotionally, while Shuggie becomes increasingly involved in caring for Agnes. The novel shows how economic hardship shapes family decisions, including who leaves, who stays, and who assumes responsibility for those in crisis.

Food, clothing, and appearance are everyday measures of inequality. Shuggie does not always receive proper meals, and the money available for household needs may be spent on alcohol. Basic items that other children take for granted, such as suitable shoes or clean clothes, become sources of anxiety and shame. At school, visible differences make Shuggie an easy target for bullying. Poverty therefore moves from the home into public life: the child's economic circumstances become visible to peers, and material deprivation becomes a basis for social judgement.

Agnes's concern with appearance also reveals the emotional dimensions of poverty. She wants to look attractive, stylish, and respectable, and she hopes that her appearance will help her maintain dignity. Her spending on clothes or beauty may appear irresponsible when necessities are scarce, but it also expresses a desire to control how others see her. Respectability becomes a defence against humiliation. The tragedy lies in the gap between the identity Agnes wishes to project and the limited resources available to sustain that identity. Stuart thereby shows that poor people do not lack aspirations; rather, their aspirations are repeatedly obstructed by material conditions.

Addiction and Agnes Bain's Alcoholism:

Agnes Bain's alcoholism is central to the novel's emotional and social structure. Stuart presents her as a complex person with pride, longing, disappointment, and vulnerability, rather than as a one-dimensional figure defined by drinking. Agnes hopes for affection and security, particularly through her relationship with Big Shug, but his unfaithfulness and unreliability intensify her loneliness. Alcohol offers temporary relief from emotional pain, allowing her to escape, at least briefly, from the gap between the life she imagined and the life she experiences.

The relief is temporary, and dependence gradually becomes destructive. As Agnes's drinking increases, her ability to maintain relationships, employment, and parental responsibilities declines. Alcohol also absorbs money that could have been used for food, clothing, or other household needs. The effects are therefore both personal and structural: drinking damages Agnes's health and relationships, while the family's existing poverty makes it harder to manage the consequences. Economic deprivation and addiction reinforce one another, creating a cycle that is difficult to break.

A Marxist interpretation helps resist the reduction of addiction to a simple moral failure. The novel does not suggest that Agnes has no agency or that every harmful action can be excused by poverty. Instead, it places her behaviour within a wider context of limited opportunity, emotional isolation, gendered dependence, and weak social support. The community often sees her primarily as a drunk, ignoring the history of disappointment and deprivation that surrounds her. This judgement makes it harder to recognise her individuality



and to imagine forms of assistance that go beyond blame.

Agnes's addiction reshapes the lives of her children in different ways. Catherine leaves the family and attempts to build a new life elsewhere. Leek remains present for a time but becomes emotionally distant and eventually recognises the need to protect himself. His warning to Shuggie, "Don't make the same mistake as me. She's never going to get better. When the time is right you have to leave. The only thing you can save is yourself" (Stuart 356), expresses the painful conflict between love and self-preservation. Leek understands that continued involvement may destroy his own future, yet Shuggie struggles to separate his mother's suffering from his responsibility toward her.

Shuggie becomes a caretaker, helping Agnes get ready, waking her, hiding bottles, and attempting to manage the consequences of her drinking. His care reverses the expected relationship between parent and child. He takes on adult responsibilities while remaining emotionally dependent on the mother he wants to save. This role gives him a strong understanding of Agnes's habits and vulnerabilities, but it also deprives him of the freedom and protection associated with childhood. His devotion is moving, yet the novel also shows its cost.

Social Marginalisation, Masculinity, and Identity:

Social marginalisation in Shuggie Bain operates through both material deprivation and social judgement. The Bain family lacks money and security, but it also lacks recognition and respect. Their accent, clothing, housing, and behaviour become visible signs through which

others classify them. Such markers turn poverty into stigma: the characters are not simply people with limited resources but people who are treated as less worthy because of those limitations. Their social position affects how they are perceived and how they understand themselves.

Shuggie's marginalisation is intensified by his failure to conform to conventional masculinity. In the environment represented by the novel, boys are expected to be tough, physically confident, and emotionally restrained. Shuggie's sensitivity and mannerisms do not fit this ideal, making him vulnerable to bullying and rejection. His experience demonstrates that class-based exclusion intersects with gender and sexuality. He is judged not only for the family's poverty but also for being different from the masculine behaviour expected by his peers.

Bullying also reveals that marginalisation can be reproduced within working-class communities. People who experience exclusion may themselves exclude those perceived as weaker or less acceptable. The novel therefore avoids portraying social oppression as a simple conflict between a powerful upper class and a unified working class. Prejudice and humiliation can circulate within the marginalised community, allowing dominant ideals of masculinity and respectability to survive even among those who suffer from economic inequality.

Agnes is also judged through gendered expectations. Her appearance is connected to her sense of dignity, yet her attractiveness does not provide the economic independence or social protection she needs. She is expected to maintain respectability while living with conditions that undermine her ability to do so.



The novel exposes the contradiction between the social demand that women preserve family stability and the lack of support available to women whose relationships and resources fail them. Agnes's suffering is consequently shaped by class and patriarchy together.

Despite these pressures, Shuggie's sensitivity is not presented only as weakness. His attention to Agnes's pain allows him to recognise emotional realities that others overlook. His compassion becomes a form of resistance to the social world that mocks vulnerability. Although he cannot simply escape the effects of poverty and family trauma, he maintains an ability to care. Stuart's portrayal suggests that dignity does not depend on conformity to dominant standards of masculinity or wealth.

The Relationship between Poverty and Addiction:

The relationship between poverty and addiction is one of the novel's most important patterns. Economic insecurity produces stress, shame, and limited prospects; alcohol offers Agnes a temporary escape from these feelings; and the consequences of drinking deepen the family's deprivation. Money spent on alcohol is unavailable for necessities, while deteriorating relationships and parental responsibilities further destabilise the household. This cycle does not mean that poverty inevitably causes addiction, but the novel shows how deprivation can increase vulnerability when emotional and social support is inadequate.

Agnes's circumstances also reveal the gendered character of this cycle. Her search for security is tied to relationships with men, while her appearance becomes a way of preserving a sense of value in a society that judges women

harshly. When those relationships fail, she has few dependable resources with which to rebuild her life. Alcohol becomes an immediate form of relief, but it cannot provide the lasting security she desires. The novel thus presents addiction as a deeply personal problem embedded within economic and social conditions.

Shuggie's life shows that the effects of this cycle continue beyond the moments of crisis. Even after Agnes's death, he remembers her in detail and continues to speak about her. In conversation with Leanne, who has also experienced life with an alcoholic parent, he recalls, "My mammy had a good year once. It was lovely" (Stuart 429). The brief statement is powerful because it preserves a memory of happiness amid a history dominated by suffering. Shuggie's remembrance does not deny the damage caused by addiction, but it refuses to reduce Agnes's entire life to that damage.

The novel's representation of poverty and addiction therefore requires a balance between structural explanation and personal responsibility. Economic deprivation does not erase the harm Agnes causes, just as her harmful behaviour does not erase the conditions that contribute to her suffering. By maintaining both realities, Stuart encourages readers to look beyond stigma and consider how material insecurity, loneliness, gender expectations, and inadequate support shape the possibilities available to individuals and families.

Dignity, Resilience, and the Limits of Social Support:

Although Shuggie Bain depicts harsh and often devastating circumstances, it does not represent its characters as entirely passive victims. Agnes continues to desire beauty,



affection, and respect, even when her efforts are undermined by addiction and insecurity. Shuggie demonstrates endurance and a capacity for empathy. These qualities do not solve the structural problems surrounding the family, but they prevent the characters from being reduced to their poverty or failures.

Shuggie's care for Agnes is both a source of strength and a sign of social neglect. His devotion reflects genuine love, yet the extent of his responsibilities suggests that the family lacks sufficient support. A child should not have to manage a parent's addiction alone. The novel's emotional force therefore raises a social question: what happens when private love is expected to compensate for the absence of reliable community and institutional assistance? Shuggie's resilience is admirable, but it should not be used to justify the conditions that require such resilience.

Stuart's portrayal of marginalised life is ultimately compassionate without becoming sentimental. Love cannot restore employment, remove poverty, or cure addiction by itself. Nevertheless, emotional connection helps preserve a sense of dignity in a world that repeatedly devalues the characters. Shuggie's memories of his mother contain pain as well as tenderness. His ability to remember the good moments alongside the damaging ones demonstrates a form of understanding that resists simplistic moral judgement.

Conclusion:

Douglas Stuart's Shuggie Bain reveals the interconnected nature of poverty, addiction, and social marginalisation. Through the Bain family's experience in 1980s Glasgow, the novel shows how economic deprivation affects housing, food, clothing, employment, family

relationships, and social identity. Poverty is not simply a lack of money; it becomes a source of shame, insecurity, and exclusion. The family's material conditions shape their choices and reduce the resources available to respond to personal crises.

Agnes Bain's alcoholism is presented as destructive, but the novel also situates it within loneliness, disappointment, gender inequality, and limited social support. Her dependence on alcohol deepens the family's hardship, while the hardship itself makes recovery and stability more difficult. Shuggie's experience demonstrates the intersection of class marginalisation with expectations of masculinity. Because his sensitivity and mannerisms differ from dominant norms, he becomes a target for bullying. Yet the empathy that makes him vulnerable also allows him to recognise and respond to the suffering of others.

A Marxist reading reveals how individual pain is connected to broader material and ideological structures. The decline of industrial working-class life, insecure resources, and beliefs about respectability and masculinity all contribute to the characters' exclusion. At the same time, the novel shows that oppression can be reproduced within marginalised communities and that human dignity persists despite social judgement. Its critique is strongest when it refuses both to blame individuals alone and to deny the consequences of their actions.

Ultimately, Shuggie Bain presents poverty and addiction as social and emotional realities that cannot be understood through stigma alone. Shuggie's loyalty to Agnes does not erase the harm he experiences, but it reveals his capacity for love and compassion. Through the family's tragedy, Stuart asks readers to



recognise the structures that intensify suffering and the humanity of those who live within them. The novel's lasting contribution lies in its insistence that working-class people should be understood not as stereotypes or social failures, but as complex individuals whose lives are shaped by economic conditions, personal histories, and enduring desires for dignity and belonging.

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