

Shuggie Bain



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DOUGLAS STUART

Douglas Stuart was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in the Sighthill neighborhood, where he grew up with his two older siblings. His father left early in his life, and he lived with his mother and siblings until his mother passed from complications of alcoholism when he was 16. After her death, he moved into a boarding house on his own. Stuart went on to earn his bachelor's at the Scottish College of Textiles and his master's degree at the Royal College of Art in London. He has primarily worked in the fashion industry in New York with several world-renowned brands. In addition to his work in textiles, he began writing smaller pieces that were published in *The New Yorker* and *LitHub*. His debut novel, *Shuggie Bain*, received broad praise and won the Booker Prize in 2020. Heriot-Watt University subsequently awarded Stuart an honorary doctorate in 2021. His second novel, *Young Mungo*, was published in April 2022. Stuart is a dual citizen of the United Kingdom and the United States, and he currently lives in New York with his husband, Michael Cary.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Economic instability serves as a main backdrop in *Shuggie Bain*. In the 1980s, during which the majority of the novel is set, the Scottish economy experienced a severe downturn. During Margaret Thatcher's tenure as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, there was a steep climb in unemployment across the country and a simultaneous decline in manufacturing, especially along the Western Coast of Scotland. The resulting recession and societal unrest colors a good deal of the novel. Another pervasive issue in the text is the divide within Scotland between Catholic and Protestant communities. This divide is rooted in the Scottish Reformation of the 16th century, when the country officially changed its religious affiliation from Roman Catholicism to Presbyterianism. During the Great Famine in the 19th century, a large number of Irish Catholic immigrants settled in Glasgow, Scotland, increasing competition for housing and employment that has led to long-standing animosity between the two religious groups. The economic unrest in Scotland in the 1980s exacerbated these issues.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart's second novel, *Young Mungo*, considers the challenges of growing up queer and impoverished in 1980s Scotland. *Milkman* by Anna Burns,

which won the Booker Prize in 2018, similarly explores tumultuous coming-of-age experiences within a sectarian society—Northern Ireland, in this case. Burns's novel is also characterized by the striking use of regional dialect and idiosyncrasies. Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* is another example of a contemporary *bildungsroman* story, as it depicts the formative years of a group of friends and explores similarly difficult themes around intolerance, sexual and physical abuse, and illness.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Shuggie Bain*
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman, Queer Literature
- **Setting:** Glasgow, Scotland in the 1980s
- **Climax:** After Shug, Leek, and Catherine leave, Agnes dies from the alcoholism from which has been suffering from for decades, leaving Shuggie to navigate life on his own.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Real-Life Inspiration. Many of the circumstances driving *Shuggie Bain* are drawn from Stuart's own family life and childhood experiences. Same as Shuggie, Stuart was born in the Sighthill neighborhood of Glasgow as the youngest of three children to an absent father and an alcoholic mother. His early years, just like his character's, were deeply colored by abandonment, neglect, addiction, and poverty.

Another Win for Scottish Literature. *Shuggie Bain* is only the second Scottish novel to win the Booker Man Prize. The first novel written by a Scot to win this award was James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*, which won the Booker Prize in 1994. Stuart has said that Kelman's work and embrace of Scottish diction greatly inspired him in his own writing.



PLOT SUMMARY

Shuggie Bain recounts the early years of the titular protagonist, Shuggie. The novel contains five parts; the first and last sections depict Shuggie in the present, while the middle three sections chart his earlier years living in three Glaswegian neighborhoods.

The reader first meets Shuggie in the South Side of Glasgow in

1992, where he has taken up work at a grocery store, Kilfeathers. His days pass routinely and without much thought or joy. At night, he returns to a boarding house, where his landlord doesn't care that he's only fifteen. The apartment is dreary and ill-appointed. Shuggie knows his mother would be ashamed of the state of his living quarters, but he intends to improve his space as soon as he saves enough money. One of his neighbors, Mr. Darling, has taken an inappropriate interest in him, and though this makes Shuggie uncomfortable, he knows he can get some money out of the lonely man and tries to play this to his advantage.

The narrative the jumps back to 1981 in Glasgow's Sighthill neighborhood, where Shuggie lives with his parents, Agnes and Shug, his grandparents, Wullie and Lizzie, and his two older siblings, Catherine and Leek. Agnes mourns her youth one night as she plays cards with her middle-aged friends and neighbors, disappointed with the way her life has turned out. She is ashamed to being living with her parents, and she resents her husband for failing to make her happy as he promised to do when she left her first husband for him. The tension between them is first seen when he comes home from driving his cab during the ladies' card night, clearing out the other women. He leaves almost immediately, telling Agnes not to wait up. She copes as she typically does, going to her room to drink from a secret stash of liquor. Agnes has a flash back of a vacation she and Shug took to the seaside years ago, where the shiny boardwalk lights and escape from the day to day gave them hope. Or it did, until Agnes drank too much, causing a scene at their hotel. Shug retaliated, physically and sexually abusing Agnes.

Back in 1981, Shug continues to carouse while driving his **cab** on the night shift, meeting up with Agnes' friends and his coworker Joanie Micklewhite after finishing an evening of driving. On one of these nights, Shuggie sits with a drunk Agnes. During their time in Sighthill, everyone recognizes that Agnes has developed a drinking problem and tries to encourage her to manage her addiction, but Shug's philandering exacerbates her condition. Catherine has taken a fancy job in the city, hoping to make money for her cash-strapped family and save for her own future. Leek, on the other hand, copes by making himself scarce, running away to his hideout in a nearby warehouse. Shuggie tries to help his mother by keeping her company and **dancing** to keep her entertained, but even his affection can't combat her disease. Even at this young age, Shuggie is perceived as different because of his feminine mannerisms. On this night, Agnes has a violent drinking episode when Shug returns home and ignores her. She sets fire to the curtains in her room, nearly killing herself and Shuggie. Shug is able to put out the fire, but the incident is enough to convince him a change is needed. He persuades Agnes to move out of her parents' apartment and into subsidized housing in Pithead, on the edge of the city, promising her that their life will

improve. Once they arrive and find that the house is a dump, Shug announces to Agnes that he's leaving her for Joanie Micklewhite.

After Shug leaves in 1982, Agnes and her children begin their new life in the Pithead house. The family, especially Agnes and Shuggie, are treated as outsiders by their new community. The neighbor women—Bridie Donnelly, Jinty McClinchy, and Colleen McAvennie—peg Agnes as an alcoholic, while Shuggie is mocked and bullied for his effeminate behavior. Agnes's alcoholism only grows worse. Catherine spends more time away from home, planning to marry Shug's nephew, Donald Jnr. Leek tries to avoid the house and can tell from its **exterior** whenever Agnes is drunk. Shuggie, in turn, is left alone with his mother, who he tries to prevent from hurting herself or embarrassing herself with her drunken **phone** calls to Joanie. Agnes does whatever it takes to fuel her drinking, using the family's benefit money or pawning her expensive belongs or items stolen from her kids. Leek and Catherine attempt to help their little brother in small ways; Catherine takes Shuggie to visit Shug before she leaves with her new husband for their new life in South Africa, and Leek tries to teach Shuggie how to walk more masculinely. Eventually, both Wullie and Lizzie die. With Leek increasingly absent, Shuggie is usually alone to handle his mother's drinking. As Shuggie gets older, he begins to pick up on his mother's drinking patterns, noticing which of her friends—women like Jinty McClinchy and sleazy men in town like Lamby—encourage her alcoholism. His anxiety around Agnes' drinking has physical ramifications, too, from nervous bowels to bedwetting.

One day, Shuggie comes home to find the house in order and his mother sober. Agnes attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and eventually gets a job working the night shift at a gas station, which keeps her out of trouble. During one of her shifts, she meets a cab driver named Eugene. On their first date, she learns he is her enemy, Colleen McAvennie's, brother, but he convinces her to give him a chance. During this period, Agnes is the happiest she has ever been, and Shuggie begins to open up to his mother again. At one point, Shug comes to visit, hoping to sleep with Agnes, but she turns him away. Despite Agnes's progress, Eugene remains curious about Agnes sobriety and wonders why she can't drink now that she's better. He pressures her to have one glass of wine, telling her he wants to be normal, and eventually she relents. She immediately spirals out of control, coming home heavily intoxicated, which infuriates Leek and scares Shuggie so much that he pees his pants.

After the incident with Eugene, Agnes's alcoholism becomes worse than ever. In Shuggie's attempts to help his mother, he is often left alone and vulnerable, put in situations where he is bullied and even sexually assaulted. Agnes uses all their money to buy alcohol, and the family goes hungry. One day, Shuggie comes home to find Leek pressed on top of his mother, trying to

stop the bleeding coming from her slit wrists. Shuggie is sent off to Shug and Joanie's house while his mother recovers, though Agnes eventually comes to collect him. Even after this incident, her alcoholism escalates. Shuggie often skips school to care for her. He continues to be bullied for his queerness. One day, Agnes drunkenly kicks Leek out, and he leaves permanently. Before Leek leaves, he tries to tell Shuggie that Agnes won't ever get better, but Shuggie is not ready to believe it. Agnes arranges a house swap, promising Shuggie that they will both start fresh in this new place. She dumps all her alcohol down the drain. He wants desperately to believe her.

In the fourth section, which takes place in 1989, Agnes and Shuggie move to a new apartment in the East End. The same day they move, Agnes begins drinking again. Shuggie tries his best to fit in at his new school, but he is labeled "strange" and bullied almost immediately. He feels certain that nothing has changed or ever will. Still, he goes along when his new neighbor Keir, who Shuggie has a crush on, asks him to keep his girlfriend's friend company. This is how Shuggie meets Leanne Kelly, who also has an alcoholic mother and is questioning her sexuality. The two bond, exchanging horror stories about their mothers.

One day soon after, Shuggie comes home to find Agnes drunk and agitated. She kicks him out the same way she kicked out Leek, calling Shuggie a cab and telling him not to come back. Shuggie goes to Leek's apartment, begging his brother for money to pay for the cab. While at Leek's, Agnes sends over two more cabs, making her sons pay the fee. In the first, she sends a bag of canned custards, and in the second, she sends her telephone. Leek and Shuggie understand she is trying to say goodbye, and Shuggie hurries home. While Agnes doesn't follow through on this veiled threat to kill herself, her drinking does not stop. On another day a few months later, Shuggie comes home to find Agnes passed out. He cleans her up and removes her clothes for her. As he ministers to her unconscious body, he comes to terms with the fact that, like Leek has tried to tell him, she is not going to get better. Standing there, Shuggie notices that Agnes has thrown up in her sleep. Her head is tilted back, and she begins to choke on her bile. Before Shuggie can bring himself to do anything, she dies.

In the final section, the narrative returns to Shuggie in the present, where he lives in his South Side room. A year has passed since Agnes's death, and Shuggie is remembering her funeral. Leek came for her cremation, but neither Shug nor Catherine showed. Shuggie reflects on his mother, whose birthday it would be, as he goes about his day. He stops by a bakery for strawberry tarts on his way to meet Leanne. Together, they find Moira Kelly, Leanne's mother, whose alcoholism has left her homeless. Shuggie watches, infuriated, as Leanne cares for her mother. Moira barely tolerates her daughter's attention and openly mocks them both. Leanne changes Moira's dirty clothes and feeds her, telling her about

the exciting social life her brother has been leading. Moira soon runs off, eager to meet her drinking buddies. As the two teenagers leave, Shuggie tells Leanne that he wishes they could go dancing like Leanne's older brother. Leanne laughs, not believing Shuggie can dance. As they continue along the river, Shuggie runs ahead. He begins to dance wildly, making Leanne laugh with joy.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shuggie Bain – The novel's protagonist, Shuggie is the son of Agnes and Shug, born after the two leave their previous marriages to be together. Shuggie is the youngest of three children; his older siblings, Leek and Catherine, are products of his mother's first marriage. He spends his early life living with his parents, siblings, and Agnes' parents, Wullie and Lizzie. His childhood is tumultuous, both because of his mother's largely unchecked alcoholism and his father's numerous affairs and ultimate abandonment of the family. Shuggie's siblings eventually leave as well, pushed away by Agnes's disease, after which Shuggie becomes her main caretaker. Instead of focusing on school or making friends, Shuggie devotes his efforts to preventing Agnes from injuring herself, spending all their money on alcohol, or embarrassing herself to the best of his ability. Though she constantly disappoints him, he cannot give up on her. Alongside his troubled home life, Shuggie is also considered to be "strange" by both his family and their friends from an early age because of his interest in things that are viewed as atypical for boys, like hair, clothing, makeup, and dolls. As he gets older, these interests persist, and Shuggie is bullied for his mannerisms and speech as well, which are considered feminine. As a teenager, his attraction to other boys grows, isolating him further. He tries desperately to change himself to fit in, but he can't. Shuggie's eventual acceptance of himself and realization that his mother will die before she quits drinking are slow to come, but his friendship with Leanne and his brother's acceptance help him come to terms with both realities. Though he struggles to provide for himself after Agnes's alcoholism kills her, Shuggie finally begins to feel hopeful about the future at the end of the novel.

Agnes Bain – Agnes is Shuggie's mother. She has two other children (from her first marriage), Catherine and Leek. She was raised Catholic by her parents, Wullie and Lizzie, but she abandoned her religious background to marry Shug, who's Protestant. Their marriage ends when Shug leaves her for another woman, Joanie Micklewhite. Agnes copes with Shug's abandonment as she has coped with every disappointment in her life—by drinking heavily. Throughout the course of the novel, her alcoholism worsens, with the exception of a yearlong stint of sobriety. Despite her addiction, Agnes maintains a level of respectability due to her devotion to her image, including her

personal appearance, her well-appointed home, and her refined manners. Agnes has always been driven by a desire to have more, to be loved, and to be envied, though that drive ends up leaving her more impoverished, more alone, and more judged by her community. Her drinking causes her to lash out at others and slowly pushes everyone away, but she is unable or unwilling to stop. Shuggie is the only one who stays by her side and is deeply committed to supporting her, though this only seems to hurt him. Despite her constant failure to care for him or keep her promises, he remains with her until she dies from her alcoholism.

Shug Bain – Shug is Agnes’s second husband and Shuggie’s father. Shug is a **cab** driver whose regular night shift enables him to carry on a multitude of affairs. While his love for—or at least desire for—Agnes is genuine, her constant need for more and her inability to keep drinking slowly push him away. His temper and vanity make him abusive toward Agnes as well, though he refuses to acknowledge or apologize for his violence. Like Agnes, Shug also demonstrates exceptional selfishness. He abandons his first wife and young children to be with Agnes, but then he abandons her and their children to be with Joanie Micklewhite. Even after leaving, Shug can’t bring himself to fully let Agnes go, continuing to drop by her house to sleep with her when the mood suits him. At times, he tries to maintain a relationship with Shuggie, but his motivations seem to revolve around his desire to hurt Agnes. He is also unable to accept his son as he is, taking any opportunity to encourage him to behave more masculinely. When Agnes dies, Shug neither shows up for her funeral nor offers any assistance to Shuggie, who is left to navigate the world without either parent.

Leek Bain – Leek is Agnes’s middle child with her first husband, though he is primarily raised by his stepfather, Shug. The quietest of the Bain children, he prefers to hide away and draw instead of dealing with Agnes’s alcoholism or her conflict-laden relationship with Shug. Because he’s so soft-spoken, his absence often goes unnoticed, which works to his advantage. After the family moves to Pithead and Catherine and Shug both leave, Leek is left with the primary responsibility of caring for Agnes and Shuggie. While he is offered a scholarship to art school, he declines in order to support his mother and brother. He continues to run away to Wullie and Lizzie’s when Agnes’s drinking gets to be too much, but he feels guilty for not being able to take Shuggie with him. He is thrilled when Agnes gets sober, throwing her a party to celebrate her one-year anniversary. When that sobriety is broken at Eugene’s urging, Leek beats Eugene in anger. Leek is also the one who finds Agnes after she slits her wrists. After this, Agnes’s alcoholism worsens and her paranoia about abandonment escalates, leading her to preemptively kick Leek out of the house despite his pleas to stay. He relents and goes, but before he leaves, he firmly explains to Shuggie that Agnes will never change. Leek remains supportive of Shuggie even after he leaves their shared

home, sometimes feeding him when Agnes has spent all their money on alcohol and at other times giving Shuggie a place to stay when Agnes temporarily kicks him out. When Agnes dies, Leek helps Shuggie make arrangements for her burial. The brothers stay in contact after Leek leaves Glasgow for work, where he meets a woman and has a baby.

Lizzie Campbell – Lizzie is Agnes’s mother and Wullie’s wife. She is harsh with Agnes in the hopes that her daughter will begin making healthier choices for her and her children, leading to ongoing tension between the women. Lizzie vocalizes her desire for Agnes to have married a steadfast man like her father, Wullie, rather than philandering Shug. Even before Shug’s affairs, Lizzie strongly disliked him due to his Protestant faith, as Lizzie is Catholic and doesn’t believe in interfaith marriages. Still, Lizzie shows empathy for her daughter when she tells Agnes that she understands a mother’s need to do whatever she thinks is best for her children, even if it hurts her. While Wullie lies on her deathbed, Lizzie explains that she had an affair with the grocer, Kilfeather, while Wullie was away at war, in exchange for which she got plenty of groceries to feed Agnes. When Wullie returned to find the baby born of Lizzie and Kilfeather’s affair, Lizzie let him take the unnamed boy away without a fight. Despite the pain this caused her, Lizzie continued to love Wullie until his death. She dies in a traffic accident only a month after her late husband, and it is suspected that she may have thrown herself in front of a bus on purpose.

Wullie Campbell – Wullie is Agnes’s father and Lizzie’s husband. Wullie has a particular soft spot for his grandson, Shuggie, who he takes special care of when Agnes is incapacitated by alcohol. He is easier on Agnes than Lizzie, whom he convinced to accept Shug when Agnes married him, despite Lizzie’s misgivings. Throughout the novel, Wullie feels guilty for spoiling Agnes, his only child, throughout her youth. He often wonders if his doting led to her alcoholism, so he tries to encourage her to quit drinking. He decides to take a firmer approach by spanking her as an adult after she lights the curtains on fire and almost kills Shuggie. When Agnes agrees to move away to Pithead with Shug and the children, Wullie is heartbroken. Later in the novel, when Wullie is dying, Lizzie tells Agnes about the affair she had with the grocer when Wullie was away at war. When he came home to find a new child in the house, he took the boy away and pretended he never existed.

Catherine Bain – Catherine is Agnes’s eldest child from her first marriage to a Catholic man, whom Agnes left for Shug when the children were young. Catherine struggles to navigate her turbulent family life, but she begins working in the city in the hopes of making a better future for herself. She plans to marry Shug’s nephew, Donald Jnr, who has the same confidence and charisma as her stepfather. Being closest in age, Catherine and Leek have a particularly close bond, leaning on

each other for support in order to deal with their mother's alcoholism. Catherine also tries to her best to care for Shuggie, serving as a second mother at times and trying to mediate a relationship between her stepfather and Shuggie after Shug leaves Agnes. When Catherine marries Donald Jnr and moves to South Africa, both her brothers and Agnes are left feeling abandoned. She keeps in contact with Leek but refuses to speak to her mother. When Agnes dies, she does not come to the funeral.

Eugene – Eugene is Agnes' boyfriend in Pithead and Colleen McAvennie's brother. Like Shug, Eugene is a **cab** driver, and Agnes meets him when he stops by the gas station where she works the night shift. The two meet while Agnes is sober, but Eugene struggles with her inability to drink. He believes she should be able drink again now that she is sober, and he encourages her to consume alcohol so they can be "normal" together. Agnes eventually agrees, breaking her sobriety and falling back into her alcoholism. Leek beats Eugene when he brings her home drunk. Agnes and Eugene formally split after this incident, but Eugene continues to come by most mornings after Leek leaves for work, helping to take care of Agnes, make improvements to her home, and bring food for her and her sons. Eugene also tries to support Shuggie, giving him a small book of famous football statistics, which Shuggie studies in an attempt to be more masculine. Eugene shows up for Agnes after her suicide attempt, and he is one of the few people at her funeral when she dies.

Colleen McAvennie – Colleen is a neighbor who lives directly across the street from the Bains. Colleen has many children who run around unkempt, stirring up judgement from appearance-obsessed Agnes. The two women have cheating husbands and difficult lives in common, and Agnes takes pity on Colleen when the younger woman discovers her husband's affairs and has a public meltdown in the street. Still, Colleen judges Agnes's drinking and haughty demeanor, and she believes Agnes is promiscuous—all of which she tells her brother, Eugene, when he begins dating Agnes. When Agnes and Shuggie move from Pithead, Agnes takes revenge on Colleen by telling her that Agnes once slept with Jamesy. Colleen's children are also Shuggie's biggest bullies, which is behavior that Colleen often encourages.

Jamesy McAvennie – Jamesy is Colleen's husband. He worked in the now-closed coal pits and was injured when they collapsed, leaving him visibly scarred. Agnes sleeps with him in exchange for his agreement to take Shuggie fishing and serve as a male figure in his life. Jamesy never follows through on his promise.

Jinty McClinchy – Jinty is another neighbor of the Bains in Pithead. Like Agnes, she is an alcoholic. She uses the pretense of being a supportive friend to take advantage of Agnes's disease and mooch alcohol from her. She also uses information Agnes tells her in confidence to manipulate her into drinking

more and maintaining relationships with men like Lamby, who can supply them with alcohol when they run out.

Joanie Micklewhite – Joanie Micklewhite is a radio operator for the cab service, which means she's one of Shug's coworkers. Shug and Joanie carry on an affair, and Shug eventually leaves Agnes for her. Joanie is plain in comparison to Agnes, but her predictability and devotion win out over her competitor's beauty. Joanie has several children, whom Shug helps raise. Joanie attempts to befriend Shuggie early on by giving him roller-skates when he is young. Joanie is subject to constant harassing calls from Agnes, whom Shuggie routinely finds yelling at Joanie over the **phone** for years. Later, when Shuggie comes to stay with her and Shug after Agnes's suicide attempt, Joanie is colder to him. Agnes breaks Joanie's front window and hits her in the head with her high-heeled shoe when she eventually comes to collect Shuggie after she recovers.

Leanne Kelly – Leanne is friend Shuggie makes when living in the East Side. The two meet when Keir asks Shuggie to keep Leanne company while he has sex with her friend. Leanne and Shuggie sit awkwardly while the other couple make out, and they soon learn they have a lot in common. Neither is interested in members of the opposite sex, and both have grown up with alcoholic mothers. The two form a close friendship in which they are fully accepted. After Agnes passes, Shuggie helps Leanne care for her mother, Moira, whose alcoholism has led to homelessness.

Annie – Annie is a girl in the grade above Shuggie when he lives in Pithead. She stands up for Shuggie one day when he is being bullied. Annie brings Shuggie home, where she tells him that she knows he is "odd" and allows him to play with her toy ponies. The two discuss their parents' alcoholism and the sexual contact they've had with some of the boys in the neighborhood. Shuggie dislikes Annie's candor and steals two of her ponies, which he later buries in a field.

Lamby – Lamby lives in Pithead and is introduced to Agnes by Jinty. He is lonely and has money to spend, so he often drinks with the two women. Jinty encourages Agnes to reward Lamby's generosity with special attention, but Agnes is put off by how close in age Lamby is to Leek.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Moira Kelly – Moira is Leanne's mother, who has an extensive history of alcoholism. After Agnes' death, Shuggie helps Leanne take care of her mother, who is living on the streets.

Bridie Donnelly – Bridie is a neighbor of the Bains in Pithead. Bridie is a straight-talker and gossip who immediately picks up on Agnes's drinking and Shug's absence. She helps Agnes figure out how to get on government disability so that she has benefits to support herself and her children.

Kilfeather Family – The grocer in the Sighthill neighborhood. The older Mr. Kilfeather had an affair with Lizzie while Wullie

was away at war. Later, his son employs an underaged Shuggie because he is not obligated to pay him a full wage.

Donald Jnr – Donald Jnr is Shug’s nephew who later marries Catherine. The couple move to South Africa, where Donald Jnr gets a job working in the mines, after which they cut off contact with Shuggie and Agnes.

Keir – Keir is a classmate of Shuggie’s in the East End. Shuggie has a crush on Keir and agrees to help him by hanging out with a friend of Keir’s girlfriend—Leanne.

Reeny Sweeny – A friend of Agnes’s when the family lives in Sighthill. When Shug offers to drive her home one night after cards, Agnes suspects Reeny of having an affair with him.

Ann Marie Easton – Ann Marie is another friend of Agnes’s from Sighthill. Ann Marie is a young and beautiful nurse with whom Shug carries on an affair. Shug quickly decides to end his relationship with her because of her attachment to him.

Nan Flannigan – Nan is Lizzie and Agnes’s old family friend. She dominates in all the group’s card games. She also sells goods from the catalogue and is responsible for collecting debts from many of her friends.

Shona – A neighbor of the Bains when they live in Pithead. She is primarily friends with Leek and helps him arrange the one-year sobriety party for Agnes.

Anna O’Hanna – Anna is Agnes’s old acquaintance from her time in Sighthill. One New Year’s Eve, Agnes abandons Shuggie to go to Anna’s party, and Shuggie comes to find his mother at the woman’s apartment.

Mr. Darling – Mr. Darling is Shuggie’s neighbor in the boarding house in the South Side. Mr. Darling pays inappropriate attention to Shuggie, despite him being underaged.

Father Barry – Father Barry is the principal at Shuggie’s school in Pithead. The other kids tease Shuggie about having a sexual relationship with Father Barry.

Lachlan – Lachlan is Shuggie’s classmate who, like Shuggie himself, gets bullied. Lachlan makes fun of Shuggie with the other boys one day, and the two end up fighting in the schoolyard.

Johnny – Johnny is an older boy in Pithead who takes advantage of Shuggie one day when he is alone in the neighborhood.

Mary-Doll – Mary-Doll is a young friend of Agnes’s from Alcoholics Anonymous.

East End School Children – Several unnamed classmates of Shuggie’s make fun of him for his accent and feminine self-presentation.

Mary-Doll – Mary-Doll is young friend of Agnes’s from Alcoholics Anonymous.

Cab Driver – The cab driver picks up Shuggie to take him into the city to find Agnes at a New Year’s Eve party. In the cab, he

molests Shuggie.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

Shuggie Bain is about a boy grappling with his identity in a society that antagonizes him for being himself. The expectations for men and women are quite different in the novel’s community, and there’s a distinct dichotomy between what’s considered feminine and what’s considered masculine. From a very young age, it’s clear to everyone that Shuggie doesn’t adhere to stereotypical ideas of masculinity. He is intrigued with Agnes’s hair and clothing, and he gravitates toward the women painted on her beer cans. Both Lizzie and Shug tell Agnes she needs to watch Shuggie because there’s something amiss about him. But Agnes ignores their concerns; she lets him play with jewelry and buys him a doll to replace the beer cans—in other words, she supports him and lets him (for the most part) be the person he is. But even with a supportive mother, the older Shuggie gets, the more he is mocked for his speech, **dancing**, and conventionally feminine mannerisms. After years of hearing from family, friends, and neighbors that Shuggie’s queerness is a problem she must control, Agnes crumbles under the pressure of their intolerance. She begins to equate her alcoholism with Shuggie’s sexuality, as if both are flaws that can be helped if she and Shuggie make a concerted effort to start anew.

Tragically enough, Shuggie believes his mother and everyone else’s assertion that he must change, and he tries desperately to weed whatever is different out of himself. He memorizes football scores and practices walking in the manly way his brother shows him. When he goes through puberty and becomes attracted to other boys, his shame is immense. He wants so badly to become a new, normal person by the standards of the society that refuses to accept him as he is, but he can’t seem to change.

However, Shuggie’s otherness ultimately allows him to show compassion to the people around him. Although being different makes him a target for close-minded people, it bonds him with others who are viewed as outsiders. In part, this accounts for Shuggie’s closeness with Agnes, though Shuggie’s otherness is a result of the intolerant community in which he lives, while Agnes’s is the result of her alcoholism. Still, their bond deepens the more her condition—and her connection with the rest of

the world—deteriorates. After Agnes’s death, Shuggie finds a healthier relational model in his friendship with Leanne, who—like him—has had experiences that have long isolated her from others. Together, they’re able to finally be themselves. In turn, the novel highlights just how meaningful it can be for people facing prejudice and mistreatment to find stable and supportive relationships.



COMING OF AGE AND TRAUMA

Central to the novel is the way that trauma accelerates Shuggie’s coming of age. Throughout the story, adult figures fall like dominoes around

Shuggie and Agnes. First, his family moves away from his grandparents, who are his most responsible caretakers. Immediately upon arriving in Pithead, Shug leaves Agnes and the children to move in with Joanie Micklewhite. Catherine follows shortly after when she marries Shug’s nephew, Donald Jnr., and finally, Leek leaves—or, more accurately, is kicked out by Agnes. Shuggie is therefore forced to step into an adult role to deal with Agnes’s alcoholism at a very young age, making sure they have enough money for food and that Agnes doesn’t hurt herself. The fewer people remain in his life, the more his responsibility for holding his mother together increases. Even Agnes, when sober, notices the constant worry etched on her son’s face. And yet, while Shuggie is forced to function as an adult in his home, he is still extremely vulnerable. To take care of Agnes, he often has to navigate the world alone, from riding in **cabs** with strange men to cashing the family’s benefits, and these very adult pursuits ultimately leave him exposed to danger and abuse—a good illustration of the harmful situations that children forced to assume adult responsibilities often encounter.

Despite Shuggie’s advanced responsibility for his age, he still takes on this mantle with a very childlike dependence and devotion to Agnes. Like most children, his identity is intrinsically linked to his parent, and the trauma Agnes’s addiction inflicts on him binds him even tighter to her. For years, then, protecting her and mitigating the damage she inflicts is Shuggie’s guiding purpose. He tries to keep her from hurting herself, spending all their money, and slinging abuses at her enemies over the **phone**. The true climax of Shuggie’s coming of age arc is when he finally accepts that Agnes will not change. In realizing this, he also realizes that he wants better for himself, and though it’s extremely painful, it’s only through disentwining his fate from hers that he manages to move toward a healthier, more stable life.



ADDICTION AND ABANDONMENT

Shuggie Bain depicts communities that are debilitated by desperation and colored by addiction. Many characters throughout the novel

use alcohol, pills, and gambling to cope with an unending cycle

of poverty, debt, and longing. Agnes is the key example of this struggle. Her dependency on alcohol predates the events of the novel, but the story reveals how feelings of abandonment fuel her overall deterioration. For instance, her first suicide attempt comes when Shug openly cheats on her, prompting her to drink so much that she decides to set the bedroom on fire with her and Shuggie in it. Things only get worse when Shug leaves her permanently for Joanie Micklewhite. After Shug leaves and Agnes’s problem becomes more pronounced, she loses Catherine, then later on, her new boyfriend, Eugene. Neither can handle her drinking. Agnes becomes increasingly paranoid about her sons leaving her too, which prompts her to preemptively kick Leek out of the house. Only Shuggie remains by her side until the end, and she even tries to push him away at one point. Agnes is thus stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy; she gets drunk as a way of quashing her loneliness and fear, but her drunkenness pushes everyone she loves away. For all the anger and blame that Agnes hurls at Shug for his selfishness throughout the novel, she can claim no moral high ground, since—using alcohol to cope—she selfishly pursues a remedy for her pain that causes her to systematically abandon everyone she loves.



PRIDE AND APPEARANCES

In *Shuggie Bain*, Agnes uses her pride in her appearance as both armor and salve as she navigates heartbreak, poverty, and addiction. While

her drinking alienates her from others and damages her most intimate relationships, even those she’s wronged still credit her for her ability to maintain an immaculate home and appearance. Whenever she prepares to do something difficult, like crossing the street to confront her hateful neighbor Colleen McAvennie, she dons her best clothing and high heels. She is also obsessed with presentation on the mornings following particularly embarrassing benders, such as the day after she sets her bedroom on fire. On that morning, she feels compelled to fix herself up and go downstairs to tan with the other women, proving—or *trying* to prove—that nothing is wrong. Agnes does not stop at her own appearance, either. When she abandons her first husband to marry Shug, she dresses not only herself in her finest clothes, but her children as well. At the viewing of her mother’s body, she is more concerned with ensuring Lizzie has fresh lipstick and matching earrings for the attendees than she is with handling her own grief. In this way, Agnes uses beauty and appearances to signal that everything is okay, as if she can right internal conflict with external perfection. Ultimately, Agnes’s pride is just another form of denial. In presenting a pleasing mask to the world, she attempts to erase the ugliness of her addiction and the pain that drives it. Like makeup on a corpse, however, the façade she cultivates hides but never addresses what’s rotting at the center.



SECTARIANISM

Though sectarianism is not the primary concern of *Shuggie Bain*, the impacts of the historical division between Catholic and Protestant Scots are felt throughout the novel. On the surface, the tension between these two groups is attributed to religious differences, but social, economic, and political discord are also at the core of sectarian conflict. For both Catholics and Protestants in the novel, there are very rigid expectations around behavior and values, and the pressure to uphold these norms (or else risk ostracization) is immense. In the novel, there are several instances in which a character is confronted with a direct question about their religious affiliation. Catherine, for example, has to identify herself as Catholic or Protestant at knifepoint without knowing which side her attackers are on. What she *does* know, though, is that neither answer is safe—one might get her killed, but the other might still get her assaulted.

The deep-seated conflict between Protestants and Catholics is important on the larger scale of the novel's setting and social context, but it is also a vital element of the conflict within the Bain household. Agnes is Catholic and Shug is Protestant, which causes a schism in the foundation of their marriage. In fact, their clashing backgrounds account for a large portion of their attraction to one another, since they both originally want something different from what they already have. But once they get together, those differences are a constant source of tension. The cultural stranglehold that sectarianism has on their respective communities trumps their passion for each other. This is true not only between Agnes and Shug, but also within the extended family. Lizzie's dislike of Shug, for example, is cemented long before his infidelity and physical abuse; she initially objected to their marriage because of her distaste for interfaith unions. Shuggie in particular suffers the consequences of his parents' split religious backgrounds and constant fighting, making him unable or unwilling to identify with either faction and leaving him as an outsider to both. By highlighting these sectarian struggles, then, the novel examines the unfortunate ways in which external cultural tensions can make their way into personal relationships.

consistently combine to lighten her mood, and he learns that dancing is a tool with which he can lift her out of dark spaces. His dancing later becomes a source of mockery because others only see oddness in his effeminate movements. Shuggie learns to hide this part of himself to avoid bullying. On one occasion when the family lives in Pithead, he relents and dances in the living room at his mother's request, only to realize that Colleen McAvennie and her children are watching through the window across the street. They are in an uproar of laughter at his expense, but Agnes warns him that he better keep going so they don't win. Despite his horror, he continues. As he gets older, Shuggie begins to accept himself in spite of societal intolerance. At the end of the novel, he dances in public once again to cheer up his friend Leanne—a final symbol of hope at the conclusion of the narrative.



AGNES'S PHONE

Like the **exterior** view of the Bains' home, Agnes's phone serves as another omen of her emotional state. Beside it sits her black book of addresses and phone numbers, which she annotates with nasty asides and epitaphs on drunken nights spent calling anyone she believes has wronged her. The book thus contains her various histories with others, and she uses it and her telephone to take the worst of that history out on others. She calls her ex-husband, Shug, his mistress Joanie Micklewhite, and anyone she has ever suspected of sleeping with her husband. Later, she calls Eugene to pester him at work after their relationship dissolves. She also contacts her drinking buddies, both in Pithead and back in Sighthill, to gossip or angle for more booze when she runs out.

In this way, the phone serves as a symbol of her complicated connection with others, as well as a symbol of her will to keep fighting. The phone is never a tool of positive communication. Instead, it both enables her drinking and enables her to weaponize her pain and loneliness. Often, Shuggie will find the phone dangling from the hook, dead, beside his passed-out mother. These moments are never a relief to him, but merely evidence that she was too drunk to keep going. In fact, one of the most frightening moments that Shuggie and Leek experience is the night Agnes kicks Shuggie out, subsequently sending her telephone to them via cab. Immediately, the boys know that Agnes means this gesture as a goodbye, a surrender to her pain and isolation. While Agnes does not end her life that night, this gesture signifies her waning will to fight, and she dies from her disease not long after this incident.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



DANCING

In *Shuggie Bain*, the act of dancing is used as a symbol of joy, identity, and hope. When Shuggie is very young, he dances to make Agnes feel better when she is depressed and drunk. His exuberance and sense of freedom



HOUSE EXTERIORS

Throughout the novel, the exterior appearance of the Bain household serves as a symbol for Agnes's state of being. Catherine is the first to demonstrate this skill, arriving home late at night after Agnes's curtain-fire episode to

find all the lights on in the apartment and a pile of burnt drapery in the street. Without going upstairs, she knows her mother is having a bad night and leaves to find Leek in his hiding spot. Later, Leek is also able to discern his mother's drunkenness from the exterior of their Pithead house. Whenever he approaches the house to find the lights burning and the curtains flung open, he turns around and walks the other direction. Shuggie also develops the ability to divine Agnes's level of intoxication before he enters the door. Whenever the lights are on and music is playing, it's a bad sign, whereas closed curtains paired with the smell of food tends to bode well. Though Agnes tries her best to hide her alcoholism with her well-kept home, beauty, and upper-class manners, the patterns of her addiction are so regular that her children can always tell the truth from the outside of their home when they arrive, so the home itself comes to symbolize Agnes's shoddy attempts to keep her chaotic personal life hidden.



BLACK CABS

In *Shuggie Bain*, black cabs (known as “hackney cabs”) function as a symbol of abandonment and abuse. They are most strongly linked to Shug’s character. His nightshift driving the cab allows him to cheat on Agnes, and his cab is also the vehicle he uses to finally leave her behind. Even after Shug abandons Agnes and their children, cabs and their negative connotations remain a motif in the story. In the throes of her alcoholism, Agnes regularly calls cabs and leaves without saying where she is going. Whenever her children see one approaching or leaving, they know that their mother has temporarily abandoned them. In more than one of these instances, Agnes is assaulted by the driver while she is inebriated. Shuggie also endures sexual abuse at the hands of a cabbie, who takes advantage of his vulnerable state when he rides into Glasgow alone in search of his mother. Agnes later dates another cab driver, Eugene, who eventually leaves her as well, but not until he pressures her to break her sobriety after a year. Drunk once again, Agnes comes home in Eugene’s wildly swerving cab—Leek and Shuggie both know as soon as the couple arrive that things have turned dark once again. Similarly, when Agnes’s drinking and paranoia later lead her to kick her sons out of her house, it is the familiar ill omen of a black cab that greets them at the door. Cabs themselves therefore symbolically represent the feelings of fear and anxiety that Shuggie himself faces on a daily basis.

Chapter One: 1992, The South Side Quotes

☝ Shuggie tried to calm himself as he smoothed his hand over the mismatched sheets. He thought how his mother would have hated these bedclothes, the off colours and patterns, layered one upon the other as if he didn’t care what people would think. This mess would have hurt her pride. Someday he would save some money and buy new sheets of his own, soft and warm and all the same color.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the first explicit mention of Shuggie’s mother, Agnes, though her absence in Shuggie’s life is felt from the beginning of the novel. In Shuggie’s small, rented room, things are neat but clashing, chosen because they were free or cheap. It is the bed that bothers him most because he knows it would upset his mother. This hints at how intimately Shuggie knows his mother—her fears, her motivations, her vulnerabilities. Shuggie’s reflection that Agnes would be embarrassed by the discordant patterns showcases how central her vanity is to her overall personality. Ironically, Agnes’s easily wounded pride is a key driver of her addiction to alcohol throughout the narrative. Her alcoholism is the reason Shuggie finds himself living alone now, forced to make do with the marginal resources he has, mismatched sheets and all.

Shuggie’s hierarchy of concerns as a 15-year-old are also underscored in this passage. It is not Agnes’s opinion about him living alone, cold, and hungry that Shuggie worries about; he only thinks about how his life would look to her, knowing that she’d only think of how it would look to everyone else. In this way, it is clear he has internalized his mother’s obsession with appearances. Even once she’s gone, his mother’s pride is a more powerful force than his own interests or security.

Even so, underneath feelings of shame and a desire to live up to his mother’s expectations, Shuggie’s dream is to have his own soft, warm sheets. Throughout the bulk of the novel, Shuggie places his mother’s safety and desires above his own needs, but this passage reveals a longing for comfort and independence that has remained and is, perhaps, growing stronger in Agnes’s absence.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Shuggie Bain* published in 2020.

●● His armpit was dusted in a fine lint, like baby duck feathers. He brought his nose to it; it smelled sweet and clean and of nothing at all. He pinched the skin and squeezed, milking the soft flesh till it flushed red with frustration; he sniffed his fingers again, nothing. Scrubbing at himself harder now, he repeated under his breath, “*The Scottish Football League Results. Gers won 22, drew 14, lost 8, 58 points total. Aberdeen won 17, drew 21, lost 6, 55 points total. Motherwell won 14, drew 12, lost 10.*”

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain (speaker), Eugene

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt introduces Shuggie’s intense longing for masculinity, a desire that increases throughout the novel as he matures. Alone in the bathroom, he probes his body for signs of manhood, manipulating his skin to the point of pain as he tries to detect body odor (without luck). Frustrated, he recites old football statistics to himself.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Shuggie has been targeted throughout his childhood for being different than other boys. He is perceived as feminine by his neighbors, classmates, and even family, and he endures emotional and physical abuse because of it. In an effort to escape harassment, Shuggie is on a continual quest to overcome what society has convinced him is a personal flaw. The little red book of football scores given to Shuggie by Agnes’s boyfriend, Eugene, signifies masculinity to Shuggie—something that supposedly “normal” boys are interested in. He repeats them obsessively throughout his teenage years, hoping they will make him “normal,” too.

Shuggie’s lack of hair and body odor, of course, are not indicative of a failure of masculinity. Rather, they are evidence of his youth. Despite working hard to support himself and living alone, this passage highlights that Shuggie is far from fully grown.

Chapter Two: 1981, Sighthill Quotes

●● Her own adult teeth had come in small and crooked...At fifteen she begged Lizzie to let her have them all taken out. The discomfort of the false teeth was nothing when compared to the movie star smile she thought they must give her. Each tooth was broad and even and as straight as Elizabeth Taylor’s. Agnes sucked at her porcelain. Now here they were, every Friday night, these same women playing cards in her mammy’s front room.

Related Characters: Agnes Bain, Shug Bain, Lizzie Campbell

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Agnes reflects on the disappointing reality of her life as other women jabber around her. Instead of going out dancing so that she can feel beautiful the way she did when she was young, she is stuck in her mother’s small apartment playing cards with these middle-aged women, horrified to find that she, too, is middle-aged.

Agnes’s reflection also shows that her vanity is not limited to matching bedsheets, but also includes her appearance too—a far more consuming obsession. Her decision as a teenager to have her real teeth pulled in exchange for painful dentures displays her willingness to endure discomfort in service of her own beauty. She eagerly sacrifices authentic parts of herself in order fit societal ideals. Her desire to be beautiful is driven by her belief that beautiful people are happy people. She is said to look like a movie star with her fake teeth, yet she is unsatisfied with her life. Her new smile, however lovely, exists in contrast to the dull nights in her mother’s apartment; her teeth only seem to remind her of the excitement and joy missing from her days.

This dissatisfaction follows her throughout the novel, driving her alcoholism and her fury at Shug, whom she blames for failing to provide her the life she always wanted. Counteractively, the angrier and drunker she becomes, the further she gets away from the happiness she longs for, forced to draw more and more of her worth from her appearance.

●● He was a selfish animal, she knew that now in a dirty, sexual way that aroused her against her better nature...Big Shug Bain had seemed so shiny in comparison to the Catholic. He had been vain in the way only Protestants were allowed to be, conspicuous with his shallow wealth, flushed pink with gluttony and waste.

Lizzie had always known. When Agnes had shown up on the doorstep with her two eldest and the Protestant Taxi driver, she had had the instant compulsion to shut the door, but Wullie would not let her...They said it was wrong, to marry between the faiths, to marry outside the Chapel.

Related Characters: Agnes Bain, Shug Bain, Lizzie Campbell, Wullie Campbell

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt provides insight into the ways the divisive sectarian dynamic built into Agnes and Shug's marriage has played out in the last decade. Here, Agnes's thoughts retrace the assumptions she made about Shug when they met, showing a certain awareness (in retrospect, at least) that those assumptions were based on societal stereotypes about Protestants. Having been raised in a Catholic home, Agnes envisioned being sentenced to a life just like her mother's if she stayed with her Catholic first husband: one defined by poverty, modesty, and devotion. In this way, her mother's disapproval serves only to encourage Agnes's desire to marry outside her faith. Shug seemed novel in contrast, with flashiness and confidence that she believed promised a better life. Her desire for him, from the beginning, was intricately intertwined with her desire for a more extravagant existence.


Now, Agnes lives with Shug and their children in her parents' apartment—the opposite of what she hoped. Sectarian prejudices are still at play in their relationship, but to ill effect. The swagger that stoked Agnes's desire and expectations early on now strikes her as an animalistic selfishness characteristic to all Protestants. In her mind, Shug not only failed to give her the life she deserved, but also lied about his intention and ability to do so from the start. This, paired with the feeling of abandonment that Shug's adultery gives her, are additional motivators in Agnes's addiction. Agnes does not appear to shoulder any blame for her unhappiness or her alcoholism, however. Instead, she places all responsibility for her circumstances—and therefore all liability—on others.

●● With his free hand he gripped her thighs and tried to pull the dead weight of them apart. There was no giving. The lock was tight. He dug his fingers into the soft tops of her legs, digging the nails in until he felt the skin burst, until he felt her ankles open.

He pushed into her as she wept. There was no drink in her now. There was no fight in her any more. When he was done he put his face against her neck. He told her he would take her dancing in the lights again tomorrow.

Related Characters: Agnes Bain, Shug Bain

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback to a trip Agnes and Shug took to the seaside, the brutal realities of their marriage are unveiled. In the lights of the boardwalk, their desires are illuminated; Agnes relishes feeling vibrant and beautiful, while Shug relishes the sight of other men envying him because of his wife's vibrancy and beauty. The two feel inspired to dance, marking a moment of hope in their marriage. The moment quickly passes when Agnes, who wants to savor the moment, complains about him pulling her too fast. In response, Shug's anger flares suddenly. Just as the peak of his joy was based on others' perception, so is his fury, which is sparked by looks of judgement he believes other men are giving him for mishandling her.


The couple does not navigate this emerging conflict well, turning instead to coping mechanisms that enflame their anger. Agnes drinks in an attempt to elevate her mood, and Shug grows more violent the drunker Agnes gets, trying to ground her back in reality. Shug's brutal assault of his drunk wife is the only thing that seems to bring her down to earth.

Tragically, neither can see in the moment how their impulsive, indulgent behavior brings out the ugliest parts of the other person. Only afterwards can they reckon with the damage they have done, though neither of them addresses what has occurred directly. Shug tells Agnes, who is now still and silent, that he'll take her dancing the next day, attempting to restore the hope they felt only hours before.

●● Shuggie lifted her lager can. He put it to his lips like it was a magical power juice. The bitter oaty flavor made him flinch, the way it tasted like fizzy ginger, milk, and porridge all at the same time. He danced for her, stepping side to side and clicking his fingers and missing every beat. When she laughed, he danced harder.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain, Shug Bain

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt demonstrates how Shuggie, growing older, moves to fill the gap left by his father. Shug has only drifted farther away from Agnes and the chaos of her drinking the longer they've been together, either not caring or not realizing that his growing abandonment of her is perpetuating the issue.

Even as a five-year-old, this passage shows Shuggie taking on adult responsibilities. His love for Agnes leads him to study her closely, and in the absence of his father, he steps in to stabilize her emotional well-being in any way he can. While Shug doesn't seem to really see or understand Agnes, Shuggie is acutely aware of her from a young age. He sees her regain her good humor, at least briefly, when she drinks from the lager can, so he sips at it too, convinced that it is magic. He has also seen his mother dancing when she's happy, so he gyrates wildly for her when the alcohol pulls her down into her sadness. Seeing her laugh solidifies his belief that he can help her, which only becomes more ingrained the older he gets.

●● Agnes used her free arm and pulled him tighter toward her. "Shhh. Now be a big boy for your mammy." There was a dead calmness in her eyes.

The room turned golden. The flames climbed the synthetic curtains and started rushing towards the ceiling. Dark smoke raced up as though fleeing from the greedy fire. He would have been scared, but his mother seemed completely calm, and the room was never more beautiful...Agnes clung to him, and together they watched all this new beauty in silence.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Agnes attempts suicide for the first time, setting the curtains in the bedroom on fire in response to a perceived slight from Shug. This incident proves to be a final straw for Shug. While the fire is a cry for attention on Agnes's part, it backfires, leading to his ultimate abandonment of her and their children.

This scene is also significant because Shuggie's response to the enflamed room foreshadows the way he will handle his

mother's drinking as he grows older. His love for his mother leads him to endure the escalating danger of the blaze, and this same patience and trust in Agnes galvanizes him throughout his adolescent and teen years. While everyone else gives up on Agnes, Shuggie remains by her side, trusting her beyond all reason and to the point of danger. Similarly, Agnes's instructions to Shuggie—asking him to be a big boy and brave—model the way her addiction forces him to grow up quickly. Her irresponsibility necessitates calmness and maturity on his part from a young age.

In many ways, the fire represents Agnes; she too beautiful, yet erratic and capable of causing significant damage. As Shuggie watches the flames crawl up the wall, he reflects that the room never looked more beautiful to him, even though it puts him in imminent danger. Similarly, he and Agnes's bond is one of the most beautiful aspects of his life—and the most destructive.

●● "If you cannae make Shug do right by you, at least make him do right by the boy." Lizzie narrowed her eyes at her grandson, at his blond dolly. "You'll be needing that nipped in the bud. It's no right."

Related Characters: Lizzie Campbell (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain, Shug Bain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs at a pivotal moment in Agnes and Shug's relationship. It is becoming apparent that Shug is losing his patience, but there remains some hope that the family's move to the outskirts of the city may constitute a fresh beginning. Lizzie, true to form, is doubtful, so she cautions her daughter that if nothing else, Shug needs to step in to straighten out their son.



Though Shuggie is very young, Lizzie's comment shows he is already considered different from other boys, even by his family. The doll Shuggie is holding was given to him by Agnes after noticing his penchant to play with her old lager cans, which have pinup women plastered on the labels. Agnes's gift of the doll was an affirmation of her son and his deviation from various societal expectations for boys, while Lizzie's assessment that something is not right with her grandson is a rejection of his differences.



In this comment to her daughter, Lizzie is essentially suggesting that queerness is a failure of masculinity, a natural consequence to a lack of male guidance. She is also attributing both Agnes's drinking and Shuggie's stereotypically feminine interests—one being an actual addiction and the other an expression of identity—to Shug's absence. This belief is not only Lizzie's, but widespread in their culture. It sets the tone for the ways that both Agnes and Shuggie try to address their problems throughout the novel. Rather than accepting themselves, they seek validation through societal standards and healing from outside sources.

“You three keep your mouths shut,” she hissed. She lowered her head into the cavernous bag and tilted it slightly to her face. The children watched the muscles in her throat pulse as she took several long slugs from the can of warm lager she had hidden there. Agnes drew her head from the bag; the lager had washed the lipstick off her top lip, and she blinked once, very slowly, under the layers of wasted mascara.

“What a shithole,” she slurred. “And to think I dressed up nice for *this*?”

Related Characters: Agnes Bain (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Shug Bain, Leek Bain, Catherine Bain

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this excerpt, Agnes reacts to the exterior of the new Pithead home. She believed her husband had arranged a fresh start for the family in a bright, new home, but when they arrive, she finds only a bleak, ill-made house on a street lined with equally bleak, ill-made houses. The exterior of that home tells her everything she needs to know about what their life will be like—just as miserable, impoverished, and hopeless as the life they fled—and she cannot live with it. As she always does, she turns to alcohol to cope with her dissatisfaction. Drunk in the backseat, her venomous retort all but ensures their family life will be just as tense and dismal as it was in Sighthill.

Agnes and her children are crammed in the back of the taxi in this scene, clad in their neatly pressed dress clothes. This imagery mirrors the day Agnes abandoned her first husband to run away with Shug. Then, just as now, she insisted on

dressing her kids and herself up, believing that a new life awaited her at the end of the taxi ride. Agnes is disappointed to find that, once again, this ride in a cab is only a perpetuation of disappointment and trauma.

Chapter Three: 1982, Pithead Quotes

“Aye, ah took ye for a drinker.” She drew on her fag. “Aye, the minute ah saw ye, ah spotted it. They thought you were the big *I Am*, all done up in sequins, like some big dolly bird from the city. But ah could see through it. Ah could see the sadness, and ah knew ye had to be a big drinker.”

Related Characters: Bridie Donnelly (speaker), Agnes Bain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis


When Agnes meets the other women in the new neighborhood, Bridie Donnelly offers her vodka in order to confirm that Agnes is an alcoholic. Despite Agnes's immaculate appearance, Bridie asserts that she knows the look of sadness in a person's eyes. While Bridie intends for this to be a point of connection between the women, Agnes is horrified by the suggestion that she and the other women, who are dressed in sweats and have unrefined speech, are the same.

In her neighbor's gaunt faces and their shabby clothing, Agnes plainly sees their poverty and strife. In contrast, Agnes does everything in her power to erase the traces of pain, loneliness, and lack in her appearance. She chooses her pride over the opportunity to have support and friendship, alienating herself from her neighbors by maintaining a holier-than-thou attitude. Though Agnes's alcoholism is fueled by abandonment and isolation, in forsaking the possible friendship offered to her by these women, she demonstrates that she has no interest in being known if it means admitting she is anything less than perfect and happy.

As he climbed the stairs to the hallway he could hear her on the phone. “*Fuck you, Joanie Micklewhite. You tell that whoremastering son of a Proddy bitch that he cannot have his cake and eat it too!*” Each filthy syllable was enunciated with the alarming clarity of the Queen's English. “*You shitty, dick-sucking bastard. You are as plain and tasteless as the arse end of a white loaf.*”

Related Characters: Agnes Bain (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Shug Bain, Joanie Micklewhite

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis


In this scene, Shuggie comes home to find Agnes in a familiar state: drunk on the phone yelling at the woman Shug left her for. Agnes's penchant to hurl insults over the phone demonstrates that the only connections she wants to keep are those based in hurt and rage. She lets these grudges fuel her sickness, and in turn her drinking perpetuates her anger. That she harasses those she feels have wronged her, namely Shug and Joanie, over the phone is also significant. Because she fears abandonment, keeping people close to her means giving them power to hurt her. Instead, she prefers to keep people—nearly everyone but Shuggie—at arm's length, which her phone allows her to do.

The manner in which Agnes insults Joanie is also indicative of her values. Agnes, who prioritizes beauty and class, cannot understand why Shug would choose someone as plain and common as Joanie. Her insults are somewhat hollow in light of this, only scratching at surface-level judgments on Joanie's appearance. The contrast of Agnes's cursing and her refined accent in this exchange also point out how little inherent correlation there is between presentation and virtue. Agnes is beautiful, but she is also cruel and vulgar.

☞ It was still daylight, but there were harsh lights on in every room, and the curtains lay open in a shameful way. It was a very bad sign. In the front room Shuggie was idling between the net curtain and the glass. His palms and nose were pressed flat against the window, he was rocking his head back and forth in a soothing way, and no one was telling him to stop...Leek picked up his tool bag and turned away from the house.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain, Leek Bain

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125


Explanation and Analysis

To cope with their mother's erratic drunken behavior, all the Bain children learn to read the exterior of their home to assess Agnes's state. This passage reveals how Leek knows, before even entering the house, that things aren't going well inside. In this scene, the whole house is lit with the blinds open—the interior is visible for everyone to see, her pain laid bare and illuminated for the neighborhood. The usual preoccupation Agnes has with appearance has been forgotten in a deluge of booze.

Leek runs off to his grandparents in response: more evidence of isolating himself in order to cope with his difficult home life. Shuggie is left behind with Agnes in turn, demonstrating his status as a perpetual casualty of his mother's sickness. As she pushes everyone away, including Leek, she pulls Shuggie closer. With no one else to rely on but his mother, Shuggie truly has no option but to stay committed to her and maintain his belief that she might change. Stuck with Agnes, he also inadvertently becomes her caretaker despite his very young age, trying to keep her happy and safe while she is drunk.

☞ “Well, first, never say *common* again. Wee boys shouldn't talk like old women.” Leek haunched a wad of phlegm. “And you should try to watch how you walk. Try not to be so swishy. It only puts a target on your back...Don't cross your legs when you walk. Try and make room for your cock.”

Related Characters: Leek Bain (speaker), Shuggie Bain

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, it is evident that even though he often leaves Shuggie alone with Agnes, Leek still tries to look out for his little brother when he can. Like Agnes and Lizzie, Leek sees the ways that Shuggie's queerness isolates him and makes him a target for abuse. With Shug gone, Leek feels pressure to act as the man of the household and serve as the main male influence in Shuggie's life. Shuggie is not the only one forced to grow up faster than he should—Leek also becomes trapped in the role of father before he is ready.


Inadvertently perhaps, Leek's instructions about how to walk like a man communicate to his little brother that there really is something “wrong” with him, in both his appearance

and his behavior. Shuggie, not knowing better, believes that if he can follow his brother's instructions, it might fix the part of him others feel is wrong, not understanding that they are expressions of his true identity.

- “I can manage. I can fetch messages and make sure she goes to bed on time. Besides, Sister Nurse. You never answered my question. My mother told me that my granddaddy would be going to heaven soon, and I wanted to know if he had to get a bus or if we could take him in a black hackney?”
- ...“Och, son. It disnae really work like that. They don't leave on a bus...when a person goes to heaven they don't take their bodies wi' them.”
- ...“So if your body doesn't go to heaven, it doesn't matter if another boy did something bad to it in a bin shed, *right?*”

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain (speaker), Wullie Campbell

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Shuggie not only suffers verbal abuse because he doesn't conform to stereotypical conceptions of masculinity, but also because he is often alone, making him vulnerable to certain dangerous situations. For instance, he is targeted by an older boy who sexually assaults him. In this conversation that Shuggie has with a nun working on the hospital unit where Wullie is dying, the lasting impact of this incident is made evident, as is how deeply Shuggie has internalized the homophobia of his community.



The nurse, a Catholic nun, ignores his question about heaven initially, showing far more concern about Shuggie's well-being after encountering drunk and belligerent Agnes. Shuggie is so accustomed to this behavior that he waves the nun's worry off entirely, assuring her he can keep his mother safe just fine. Alcoholism is a sickness so pervasive in their community that it is all but normalized for Shuggie.

In contrast, deviation from society's expectations for gender expression and sexuality are viewed so harshly that it has become Shuggie's main concern. When the nurse assures him that no vehicle is involved in going to heaven because the body is left behind, Shuggie is comforted. Because he believes something is wrong with him, Shuggie seems to be

eager to escape his body, which he associates with that trauma and all the differences that alienate him from his prejudiced peers. Also, since he sees black cabs as ill omens—both due to Shug's visits and the taxi drivers who come to take advantage of Agnes—he is extra relieved that neither his body nor a ride in a hackney cab will factor into his final rest.

- Agnes pushed out her bright lipstick and drew it across her mother's thin lips. Rubbing a little on her thumb she smoothed it into her gaunt cheeks as rouge...“There, you look better for a little life in your cheeks.” The words stuck in her throat.

Related Characters: Agnes Bain (speaker), Lizzie Campbell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

This passage touches once more on how Agnes prioritizes appearance. Agnes and Lizzie's relationship had always contained some tension, especially regarding Shug or Agnes's drinking, but in death, Agnes cares for her mother the only way she knows how: by seeing to her makeup, her hair, and her jewelry as a way of making Lizzie's body appear as presentable as possible for her public viewing.



Her preoccupation with beauty is not only an expression of care, but also the main way Agnes copes with pain of any kind. Agnes wears her pride and her beauty like a mask, veiling her sadness and sickness behind it so she doesn't have to address the root of her issues. In the same way, focusing on applying makeup to her mother in her casket to make her appear more lifelike is a way for Agnes to distract herself from the acute grief of losing yet another family member. While there is tenderness in Agnes's ministrations over Lizzie, they serve Agnes far more than her mother's memory.


“That one is practically on call for the Greater Glasgow Taxi Livery.”

Agnes felt the sting of the words push into the bruises on her body. She lifted her mug anyway and nodded a sad acceptance of the award.

Jinty pulled the plastic bag from between her small feet and added, cruelly, “If you’re not a taxi driver, then this one’s not interested.”

Related Characters: Jinty McClinchy (speaker), Agnes Bain, Lamby

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs at a particularly intense period of Agnes’s alcoholism, during which she often runs out of money and cannot keep enough alcohol around to meet her increasing need. Jinty, a neighbor of hers who also has a drinking problem, suggests that they invite over a single man, Lamby, who has money to spare and may provide them both with booze.


Once Lamby arrives, Jinty’s utter disregard for Agnes’s well-being is made clear when she throws Agnes under the bus with her comments about Agnes’s preference for taxi drivers. She does this only hours after Agnes confides in her about being raped by a cabby the night before. Jinty takes Agnes’s real pain and trauma and uses it to entertain Lamby so she can get her fix.

The black cabs and the men that drive them symbolize exploitation and manipulation for Agnes—and Shuggie too. The abuse Agnes suffers in cabs encourages her to drink in order to cope, and once drunk, she finds herself even more vulnerable to that kind of violence. Jinty is just another person taking advantage, engineering this situation to serve her own desires, though she manipulates Agnes by repeatedly telling her she’s only trying to help her feel better. Agnes’s deep shame about her addiction leads her to push away people who truly care for her, allowing only people like Jinty and strange men to get close to her.

Every small detail of the house told of what lay within. This evening the curtains were drawn tight against the cold and the lamps were on. His stomach lifted in hope. Shuggie opened the front door a crack, just enough so he could hear the hum of the house. He knew what to listen for.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks the first sign of Agnes’s sobriety in years. Shuggie, now approaching his teenage years, has adopted the same ability his older siblings once used to read the outside appearance of the house to see how Agnes is doing. For once, the signs bode well—the curtains are closed, no sad music or sounds of angry phone calls spill out into the street, and the lamps glow warmly instead of glaringly inside. When Shuggie goes inside, he finds his mother alert, cleaning the house and cooking for him.

Appearance is a central theme in the novel, but the way house exteriors function in the narrative is very different from Agnes’s fixation on beauty. While Agnes uses her own attractiveness as a false mask with which she attempts to hide the pain and ugliness aching inside her, the exterior of the Bain household always reflects the truth of what lies within.

“Well, you get a little bit stronger every day, but the drink is always there waiting. Doesn’t matter if you walk or run away from it, it’s still just right behind you, like a shadow. The trick is not to forget.”


...“I bet ye can master it,” he said plainly.

She looked up at him. “That’s why going to the meetings is important. You’ll *never* master it.”

...“Just wish I could have one with you. To feel normal.”

Related Characters: Agnes Bain, Eugene (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Once Agnes gets sober and her world begins to open up, new people come into her life. One, her new boyfriend Eugene, finds it hard to believe Agnes had as bad of a problem as she says. She tries hard to explain the reality of her addiction to him, for once dropping her pride and admitting just how ugly her life got when she was drinking.

Eugene naively attempts to persuade her that it's something she can overcome if she tries hard enough. He doesn't hear her; he can't, having never faced addiction in the way Agnes has. In his inability to understand, Agnes is left wishing she could be "normal" with him, having one drink and leaving it at that.


The entrance of cabby Eugene, who is kind and steady, seems to fly in the face of the other taxi drivers in the novel. Eventually, however, the consistent symbolism of black cabs as harbingers of abuse and hurt plays out just the same with Eugene. He cannot accept Agnes's sickness and support her through it. Instead, he continues to push her to act in the way that best suits him, even pulling away from her after meeting her Alcoholics Anonymous friends, whom he finds pathetic. This, in turn, exacerbates her intense fear of abandonment.

●● Agnes whirled as though dancing with an imaginary partner. "Get your wee arse outside and dance with your mother," she called too loudly, her voice bounding off the miners' houses.

Inside, in the shade of the cool bedroom, Shuggie scowled on the edge of his bed...He had never been embarrassed by the sober her before. It was a new and unwelcome feeling.

Related Characters: Agnes Bain (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Eugene

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Before Eugene's pressure breaks Agnes's commitment to staying sober, there are many good months between her and her sons. In this passage, Agnes revels in the summer sunshine, dancing among the roses she and Shuggie dug up from the roadside in the night. The motif of dancing is

reprised here, but this time, it is actual joy that causes Agnes to dance. Before, most instances of dancing were an attempt to conjure it in the face of sadness.

This passage also depicts a return to a truly childlike state on Shuggie's part. As Agnes tries to convince him to come out and dance with him, he finds that he is embarrassed by his sober mother. Feeling ashamed of a parent's goofy behavior is developmentally appropriate for a teenager, but Shuggie is unused to this kind of ordinary parental embarrassment. For most of his life, Shuggie has been accustomed to the feeling of deep, damaging shame surrounding his mother's drunkenness. Agnes's former behavior also necessitated advanced maturity on Shuggie's part, making it all the more difficult for him to accept this new reality and embrace her childlike joy.

●● He was enjoying her attention. Something inside him flowered, and he started popping his body like he'd seen the black boys on telly do. They self-consciousness left him, and he spun and shimmied and shook in all the telly ways. He was mid *Cats* leap when he let out a sharp scream. It was high-pitched and womanly...Across the street, in the window of their front room, stood the McAvennies. They pressed again the large glass window, and they were gutting themselves with laughter.

..."If I were you, I would keep dancing."

"I can't." The tears were coming.

"You know they only win if you let them...Just hold you head high and *Gie. It. Laldy.*"

...Shuggie looked at her now and understood this was where she excelled. Everyday with the make-up on and her hair done, she climbed out of her grave and held her head high.

...It was hard to keep moving again, to feel the music, to go to that other place in your head where you keep your confidence...But it was in him, and as it poured out, he found he was helpless to stop it.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain (speaker), Colleen McAvennie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Agnes's period of sobriety, Shuggie seems hesitant to accept that things are going well. This is understandable, given the trauma he has suffered over the years of her drinking, but this passage marks the moment Shuggie starts to believe he can trust her. The rigid composure he developed during the worst years of Agnes's alcoholism finally loosens, and he finds himself dancing for her as he used to in the light of the living room where they are cozied up for the evening. His joy propels his movements, just as joy propelled Agnes's dancing in the front garden.


Shuggie is described here like a bud opening in response to warm spring weather, he begins to bloom in the warmth of this new, safer home. He becomes more fully himself, moving freely, unconcerned with how his dancing may mark him as different—until he spots the McAvennies, his main tormentors at school. He begins to shrink back into himself.

This becomes an opportunity for Agnes to guide her son, taking on a parental role she has shirked for most of his life. By encouraging him to keep dancing and "*gie it laldy*" (go all out), she is telling him to be himself, and to be himself so boldly that their mocking can't touch him. Though the connection between her alcoholism and his queerness is a false equivalence throughout the novel, Shuggie understands that his mother is an expert on maintaining her pride in spite of having every reason to relinquish it.

☝ She was so sure she was smiling up at Leek, so she didn't know why her son would be so angry, why he was screaming down at her. All she understood was, he was hitting Eugene square in his thick neck with his fists. All she remembered was that another bedroom door opened, and there in the doorway was the little boy with the worried face of his own granny. His face was wet with disappointment. The front of his pyjamas was dark through with piss.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain, Leek Bain, Eugene

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Agnes comes home drunk after more than a year living sober, finally worn down by Eugene's desire for



her to try drinking—in moderation—again. As before, her alcoholism prevents her from doing this, and she's hopelessly drunk when she arrives at the house. The hackney cab that Eugene (also drunk beyond reason) brings her home in is the same type of black cab that all the other men who have hurt Agnes drove. Just like Shug and the random men who have come in and out of her life, Eugene proves that he cares about his desires more than Agnes's well-being. His desperation for her to be like everyone else, to be able to have a glass of wine at dinner, ignites her deep-seated desire to appear normal and refined. Her sobriety had required her to view herself honestly, to reckon with the sickness hidden beneath her beauty, but she loses her focus on that truth in the face of Eugene's insistence.

Both of her sons have physical reactions to her relapse, regressing to the old behaviors they developed out of a sense of fear and hurt before her period of sobriety. For Leek, it is aggression, and for Shuggie, it is a lack of control over his bladder. The closeness Agnes enjoyed with the boys when she was sober, then, is suddenly destroyed, her addiction pushing them away once again.

☝ With a slow hand, he pulled the back of Shuggie's shirt from his tweed trousers and insidiously pushed his fat warm fingers down the back of Shuggie's underpants. Without looking, Shuggie could tell the man was still smiling at him. "Aye, you're a funny wee fella, aren't ye?"

Related Characters: Cab Driver (speaker), Shuggie Bain

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs on New Year's Eve during the winter that Agnes starts drinking again. After leaving the house drunk without saying where she is going, Shuggie works to figure out where she has gone and calls a cab to take him there so he can bring her home.

Shuggie shows incredible savvy in discovering Agnes's location and finding his way to her, looking in Agnes's open address book and redialing the phone until he knows whose party she went to. He also manages to pry open the television and electric meters to steal change in order to pay for the cab into town.

Though Shuggie goes beyond what most children his age are capable of, the situation he finds himself in with this taxi driver highlights that he is still as naïve and vulnerable as any child. The cabby assesses Shuggie and sees that he is different, strange in both his mannerisms and his exceptional politeness. He understands that Shuggie is alone and unprotected, and he takes advantage of this, assaulting him in the black cab, just as Agnes has endured trauma in cabs throughout her life.

She strutted out a confident rhythmic clip and turned her head and said to the boy, “What would you like for dinner tonight?”

Shuggie looked up at his mother and did as he had been taught. “Roast chicken, please. I’m a bit tired of sirloin every other night.”

...The women said nothing as she passed, but she felt them draw their eyes over the coat, over the shoes and hair.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain (speaker), Colleen McAvennie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shuggie and Agnes are walking past the women in the neighborhood on their way to the grocer. Agnes has taught Shuggie to lie loudly about the indulgent food Agnes feeds him, intending for the neighbors to overhear and invoke their jealousy.

At this point in the narrative, Shuggie is regularly starving, having to squirrel away parts of their weekly disability check so Agnes doesn’t spend it all on alcohol. He also serves as his mother’s main caretaker, going to cash their government checks because she is too out of it to venture into town.

Even in light of how difficult Agnes has made his life, forcing him to act beyond his years, he still indulges her need to keep up appearances. Shuggie’s commitment to Agnes remains, despite the neglect, emotional abuse, and danger that her drinking forces him to endure. He also seems to have internalized her pride and is unwilling to ask for help or reveal how desperate their lives have truly become.

“Ye come here to our wee scheme thinking yer some kind of big *I Am*. Walking around thinking yeese are better than the rest of us, with yer hairspray and yer handbag there...Ye and that funny wee boy try and rub oor noses in it, and the whole time yeese are lying in yer own piss and fucking other wummin’s men.”

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 360

Explanation and Analysis

Before Agnes and Shuggie leave for their new flat in the East End, there is one final confrontation between Agnes and Colleen McAvennie, during which years of animosity are aired out. While there is nothing charitable or kind about Colleen’s sharp assessment of Agnes and Shuggie, the accusations she levels against Agnes are entirely rooted in reality. Colleen, for better or worse, has seen straight through the careful façade that Agnes thinks she has maintained. Agnes’s obsession with beauty and her coaching of Shuggie has not fooled Colleen in the least.

Again, though, Colleen unfairly lumps Shuggie’s queerness and Agnes’s sickness together as if they are the same thing: problems that Collen believes they should both be ashamed of and repent for. Her judgement, of course, also grossly overlooks the flaws in her own home—her neglect of her children, her cheating husband, and her prejudice that keeps her alienated from close relationships with others.

In reality, neither woman is fully good or bad; rather, both have fallen victim to abusive men, systemic poverty, and unachievable standards all women are held to in their society. Instead of directing their anger at the roots of these issues, they find it easier to turn this anger and resentment on each other.

Chapter Four: 1989, The East End Quotes


“Listen tae that voice!...Er, posh boy. Whaur did ye get that fuckin’ accent? Are ye a wee ballet dancer, or whit?”

This went down the best of all. It was a divine inspiration to the others. “Gies a wee dance!” they squealed with laughter. “Twirl for us, ye wee bender!”

Shuggie sat there listening to them amuse themselves. He took the red football book and dropped it into the desk drawer of this strange school desk. He was glad, at least, to be done with that. It was clear now: nobody would get to be made brand new.

Related Characters: East End School Children (speaker), Shuggie Bain

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 378

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt demonstrates Shuggie's growing certainty that he cannot change any more than Agnes can change her drinking, as well as his internalized belief that her alcoholism and his queerness are equivalent problems barring them from normalcy and, therefore, happiness. Despite Shuggie's efforts to memorize the scores from his book of football statistics and the time he has spent practicing walking in the exaggeratedly masculine way Leek showed him, Shuggie finds himself targeted once again.

Dancing, something that symbolizes hope and joy to Shuggie and Agnes, has once more become a weapon wielded against him; just as the McAvennies mocked him when they caught him dancing from across the street, these school children now taunt him by demanding that he give them a "wee dance." Though he and Agnes agreed they'd start fresh and work to become "normal" with their move to the East End, Shuggie is again once found to be unacceptably different and subject to homophobic slurs.

His posh manners and accent mark him as an outsider in the sectarian conflict as well, as he sounds like neither a Catholic nor a Protestant to his classmates. In truth, he is not one or the other—he is both, a child of a Protestant and a Catholic. Because the other kids can't classify him, though, they alienate him.

Leek looked down at the white plastic shopping bag in his arms and undid the knotted mouth. Shuggie watched his shoulders rise behind his ears. Whatever it was, it had turned Leek's anger into concern; it had scared him almost. Leek put his hand inside and slowly drew out the tan-coloured plastic with its looping spiral tail. "I don't think this is a good sign."

It was the telephone from his mother's house.

It was an end to all contact, a sign she would hurt herself and this time she would not call for help—not to Leek's gaffer nor to Shug nor to Shuggie. The tinned custard wasn't a fuck-you to ungrateful sons. She was making sure her baby was fed, and now she was saying goodbye.

Related Characters: Leek Bain (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain, Shug Bain

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

During a particularly bad bender, Agnes kicks Shuggie out of the house, calling him a taxi and all but forcing him out the door. Shuggie goes across town to Leek's apartment for refuge. As the two talk, multiple taxis arrive with packages from Agnes, which Leek has to pay for, the last of which is Agnes's phone.

Throughout the novel, Agnes's telephone and the address book beside it serve as a symbol for Shuggie, always indicating when she's worked herself up over several lagers. Even on her worst days, Agnes's spite keeps her glued to her phone and connected to the outside world. The use of her phone functions as sign that she is still committed to fighting and surviving.

By sending her phone to her sons, then, she sends a clear message that she is done with them and everyone else. The telephone itself is disconnected from power, just as Agnes is disconnecting from her fight. Though she does not attempt to kill herself that night and ultimately allows Shuggie to come back home, this act reveals that that her endurance is lagging.

Her face changed then the worry fell away, and at last she looked at peace, softly carried away, deep in the drink.

It was too late to do something now.

...Shuggie arranged her hair as best he could. He tried to cover the brazen whiteness of roots, to arrange it just the way she liked to wear it. He unwrapped her dentures again and gently placed them back inside her mouth. Then, taking the toilet paper, he wiped the sick from her chin and pulled fresh paint across her lips, taking care to push the colour into the corners and stay neatly within the lines. He stood back and dried his eyes. She looked like she was only sleeping. Then he bent over and kissed her one last time.

Related Characters: Shuggie Bain, Agnes Bain

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 411

Explanation and Analysis

This passage outlines the last moments of Agnes's life. After years of taking care of his mother, on this night, Shuggie pauses when Agnes begins choking on her own vomit. Before he decides to do anything, she is dead.

This excerpt shows the moment Shuggie finally accepts that his mother will never change, that her addiction will be the death of her. He decides to stop fighting her on her stubborn path to ruin, allowing her addiction to play out. While abandonment and fear of loss has always driven Agnes to drink, ultimately it is she, lost in an alcoholic stupor, who abandons Shuggie for death.

Even so, Shuggie's love for his mother is evident in this passage. He shows her the care he always showed her when she was passed out drunk, making sure she is comfortable and clean. In this final moment between the two of them, he applies her make-up and cleans her. He is still committed to helping preserve her fragile pride, even in death. He makes sure, before anyone arrives to remove her body, that her beauty is on display—a last gift.

Chapter Five: 1992, The South Side Quotes


●● “You know, hearing about your Calum did make me wish we could go up the dancin’ one time?”

Leanne was still swinging the dirty bag, and now she howled with laughter. It was so loud, so vibrant, it made the videocassette jakeys jump with fright. “Ha! *You?* Get to fuck wi’ those poncey school shoes,” she squealed. “There is no way Shuggie Bain can dance!”

Shuggie tutted. He wrenched himself from her side and ran a few paces ahead. He nodded, all gallus, and spun, just the once, on his polished shoes.

Related Characters: Leanne Kelly (speaker), Shuggie Bain, Moira Kelly

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 430

Explanation and Analysis

In this final scene of the novel, Shuggie is moved to dance one last time. The excerpt occurs on Agnes's birthday, one year after her death, when Shuggie accompanies his best friend, Leanne, to visit her mother, Moira. Like Agnes, Moira suffers from alcoholism, and she has been experiencing homelessness for some time. After providing food and clean clothes to an ungrateful Moira, Leanne and Shuggie walk along the river. The tension of their visit, and the grief stirred in Shuggie by Moira's similarity to Agnes, is suddenly eased when Leanne refuses to believe Shuggie can dance; he decides to prove her wrong.

Shuggie's decision to dance for Leanne, even after she good-naturedly borrows the homophobic language that bullies have thrown at him his whole life, represents a shift in his acceptance of his identity. Though he only runs ahead and spins once in response, this image—the last in the novel—is both an assertion of hope and an acceptance of identity, completing the arc of this symbol.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER ONE: 1992, THE SOUTH SIDE

Shuggie moves through his day as normal, mindlessly and soullessly going through the motions while daydreaming about tomorrow, which is far more hopeful. Beginning his shift at the deli, he neatly arranges dips, olives, and sliced meats in the display case, though he is offput by the sliminess and sickly appearance of the food. Because his coworker has called in sick again, he steps in for her and prepares raw chickens for the rotisserie. His repulsion at the task and annoyance at her absence distracts him from his daydreams.

While Shuggie dislikes many of his work tasks, they pale in comparison to the difficulty of handling customers. They are entitled and picky, asking for an assortment of chicken pieces, never a whole chicken. Under their sharp attention, he struggles to cut through the birds' bones, sometimes dropping one on the floor in the process. Despite his personal sense of cleanliness, he often returns the contaminated bird to the case so nothing is wasted. This act of defiance, along with his habit of mixing bodily fluids into the dips on difficult days, prevents him from outright violence.

Though Shuggie never intended to stay at Kilfeathers, he has been working there for over a year. He was hired by the owner because he is underaged, making it so Mr. Kilfeather can pay him less than minimum adult wage. Mr. Kilfeather allows Shuggie to fit work shifts around his inconsistent school attendance. Shuggie planned to attend hairdressing school, having always been fascinated by hair, but found he was too intimidated to register because of the fashionable and confident students he sees entering the school building one day.

Instead, he continues to work at the shop, barely making rent. On his breaks, he scavenges through dented, discounted cans of food. When putting the food in his locker, he encounters his three middle-aged female coworkers, who sit in the breakroom. The women all ask how he is doing and fawn over him, and he finds their motherly attention comforting—most of the time. He knows that he represents male attention, a rarity for them. In the past, more than one has tried to grope him under the table. Though they play it off as accidental, their lingering touches tell him otherwise. When he fails to respond the way they want, they refuse to take it as rejection and agree there is something not right about him.

Though Shuggie is clearly unhappy with his current situation, he still dreams of the future, suggesting that he maintains hope beyond his difficult present. Shuggie's attitude toward his work also reveals a great deal about his personality. He is picknickety about the presentation of the foods in the deli case, taking great pride in their neatness. He also has high standards for his coworkers, and he is enraged when people fail to show up or pull their weight.



Shuggie's hatred for exacting customers shows his sensitivity to how others perceive him, especially wealthy patrons whom he finds wasteful and entitled. When he feels judged by well-off people, he becomes excessively agitated, beyond what one might expect from a discontented worker. His refusal to waste food suggests that Shuggie has personal experience with poverty.



When Shuggie tries to pursue his dream of attending school to cut hair, his fear of others' judgment prevents him from committing to his studies. It is clear he feels unqualified to join the other students he sees milling outside, which is likely due to both his young age and his inconsistent history with schooling. He instead stays working a job he hates, avoiding potential rejection.



Shuggie's warm relationship with his three coworkers suggests that he bonds more easily with older, motherly figures. This, paired with his need to work underaged to support himself—and buy damaged food at deep discount from work—implies that Shuggie may be on his own, without any sort of reliable parental presence. That Shuggie has no large reaction to the women betraying that trust when they feel him up under the table or call him strange also suggests previous experience with abuse.



Back at his apartment, Shuggie lies in the dark listening to the sleep sounds of the other lonely tenants in his building, most of them single men. Shuggie arranges his food and loose change in the morning chill as his neighbor wakes on the other side of the wall. He coughs and rummages around before heading to the shared bathroom down the hall. Shuggie surveys his room. He owns dozens of porcelain dolls, which he has spent hours dreaming up backstories for. He also considers his bedding, reflecting that his mother, who was proud and appearance-driven, would have been ashamed by the mismatching sheets. He commits to saving up enough of his wages to buy new ones that match.

For now, however, he feels lucky to have found this apartment, as most people look on him with judgement and refuse to rent to 15-year-olds. The Pakistani woman he rents from, Mrs. Bakhsh, does not care about his age. In fact, she is rarely around, not bothering to drop in until one of her tenant's rents is late or to complete routine maintenance. Still, Shuggie went to extra efforts to decorate the envelope of his first rent payment with small designs and looping print to show her he was responsible and thoughtful.

After hearing his neighbor vacate the bathroom, Shuggie puts a parka on over his underwear and grabs tea towels to take with him. He unstuffs the sweater from under his door, which lets in the smell of the other men in the tenement he tries hard to block out. Over time, Shuggie has learned to identify his neighbors by the smell of their meals and dirty clothes and haircare products. Once he reaches the bathroom, he doublechecks the lock on the door before unzipping his coat. He bathes himself with one of the towels, splurging on the 50 pence required to turn on the warm water, dreaming of one day having a tub full of hot water so he can fully thaw himself.

Shuggie inspects himself as he cleans, noting the narrowness of his upper arms and the fineness of his armpit hair. He pinches at the skin, trying to detect any odor without luck. Reciting football statistics to himself, he continues his examination. He finds his hair dark and long, his skin too white, and his cheekbones too high. Everything Shuggie notices about himself is feminine rather than masculine; he believes there is something wrong with him, too, something abnormal for a boy his age. He continues to scrub hard at his skin while he recites old football scores.

Shuggie works hard to evade the other men in his building, especially those untethered by relationships or stable responsibilities. Again, this avoidance hints at negative experiences he may have had with men previously. His room is a single one, further supporting the implication that he lives alone at a young age. The things in his rented room—both the dolls and mismatching sheets—provide further clues to his background. His concern over these items demonstrates a preoccupation with wealth, class, and beauty that may be considered abnormal for a teenage boy.



Shuggie's living situation, alone at the age of 15, is confirmed in this passage. His strategy for dealing with his landlady shows that he wants to appear older, but what he does to communicate maturity when he first pays his rent—carefully drawing pictures and printing in nice ink—is actually evidence to the contrary: he is a child trying to determine how adults behave, likely failing because he did not experience true parental influences growing up.



Shuggie's history with abusive individuals is further supported by his compulsion to cover his body on the way to the bathroom, as well as his hyper-awareness of those around him, from their smell to the sound of their footstep. His wish to be fully warm once again, like his desire for a matching sheet set, underscores the difficulty of his life now while also implying that he once had access to and values these comforts.



Probing himself for evidence of growing masculinity, Shuggie is frustrated to find none. That he pinches his skin, punishing himself, when he doesn't find what he's looking for speaks to a desperate need to appear more masculine. His disappointment moves him to begin reciting football scores, which illustrates a narrow societal definition of manhood, but one he nonetheless is trying to achieve.



Leaving the bathroom, Shuggie encounters his neighbor, Mr. Darling. He recalls that when he first moved in, Mr. Darling stopped by Shuggie's flat with a pack of beer. They had sat awkwardly on the bed with their lager, though Shuggie only pretended to drink. He learned that Mr. Darling, who talked nervously and seemed to be preoccupied, used to be a janitor at a Protestant school that was closed to integrate its students with a Catholic school. This astounded the older man, who was prejudiced against Catholics and wanted to know which faith Shuggie belongs to. When Shuggie answered that he is not really Catholic or Protestant, Mr. Darling asked about his best school subject. Shuggie didn't have an answer for this, either. While they had talked, Mr. Darling continued drinking heavily and rested his pinkie finger intentionally on Shuggie's thigh, making him uncomfortable.

Back in the tenement hallway, Mr. Darling asks Shuggie about his plans for the day. Shuggie answers that he has errands to run and a friend to visit. Mr. Darling is disappointed, saying that he was going to cash his unemployment and buy more beer, and he had hoped the two could drink together. Shuggie considers this, knowing that he can usually get some money out of the man but is sure he does not have time to wait on him today. Shuggie then lets his parka open, and Mr. Darling smiles as he takes in the boy's chest, underwear, and legs.

CHAPTER TWO: 1981, SIGHTHILL

On a night 11 years earlier, Agnes Bain leans out a window into the night air. She wants to feel alive and important, to dance and be seen, to be desired and envied. Though she is at home instead of out **dancing**, she is wearing a red velvet dress and pretending she can fly. She considers what would happen if she leaned out further and fell, just as her cigarette has fallen from where she stands on the 16th floor. Her life is not the way she imagined it would be. She is 39 and lives with her husband and three children in her parents' tiny apartment, surviving solely on credit and paycheck to paycheck, overwhelmed by all the empty promises that her husband has made her.

Mr. Darling seems unsafe in a whole litany of ways: his hyper-fixation on sectarian differences, his drinking problem, his probing hands on Shuggie's inner leg for an extended period of time. Shuggie's response to this is significant. On one hand, it stirs a reflection about his family's complicated religious background, providing further context about his character. Shuggie is neither Protestant nor Catholic—or, at least, he's unwilling to claim allegiance to either. Shuggie's reaction to Mr. Darling's unwanted contact (freezing until the threat passes) also further implies that he has had previous encounters with men like this.



Shuggie clearly understands what is motivating Mr. Darling's interest in him, recognizing the older man's desire to get him drunk. To a certain extent, he avoids encountering his neighbor, but he also knows that he can use Mr. Darling's attention to his own advantage with a little encouragement. Shuggie's willingness to sacrifice his comfort and potentially his safety shows his determination to survive.



Agnes once envisioned an extravagant, exciting life for herself, but instead she's left daydreaming of her youth, wishing she could still be out dancing instead of confined with the other women inside. Leaning out a window in a lowcut dress, considering falling, is the only thrilling outlet she can find. Likewise, she compensates for her lack of wealth by spending money she doesn't have on clothing in catalogues, imagining this might get her closer to the life she has always dreamed of. Further underscoring her longing and frustration, she deeply resents Shug, who promised her much more than she has ended up with.



Agnes rejoins the room, where a card game is being played by her friends and mother. She wants to dance, putting on music, but the other women pull her back into the game. They chatter and play and eat fried fish. Agnes watches, bored, and thinks back to when they were fifteen and they used to go **dancing**. Agnes would lead her friends, getting them into clubs though they were underaged. She was so fixated on her beauty that she convinced her mother to let her replace her mediocre teeth with porcelain dentures.

Now, the middle-aged women spend their Fridays at home playing cards. No one wears makeup or wants to sing anymore, and only their weekly card game gives them a break from their families. The women continue to squabble good-naturedly, accusing each other of cheating. Agnes drinks a stout, wishing she had something stronger. She gets up, bringing out a bag of bras that she promises are “magic.” She undresses in front of them and clasps hers on, and the other women follow suit. Nan, who usually wins the most amount of money on their card nights, tries to get everyone back to the game at hand. Lizzie opens a pack of cigarettes that the other women convince her to share.

Catherine, Agnes’s oldest daughter, comes out with Shuggie in tow, complaining that he won’t sleep. She doesn’t seem to notice that all the women are half-naked. Her grandmother, Lizzie, prods at Catherine’s hips, which she finds unfemininely narrow, remarking that it’s good luck her intelligence has landed her an important job, since her looks are wanting. The women encourage Catherine to open two bank accounts now, so that she can retain one in secret after she marries—they all have men at home who have wasted their money. Nan sends Catherine back to bed with Shuggie, trying to resume cards again. Agnes asks if Leek, her middle son, is home, and Catherine responds that he might be. He is too quiet to tell.

They keep playing and losing money until Agnes gets up once more, **dancing** in the living room with a drink in her hand. She convinces everyone but Lizzie to join, and they all gyrate together in their new bras, moving like they did when they were much younger. Lizzie sits alone at the table drinking cold tea. She abstains from alcohol to set a good Catholic example for Agnes, who she thinks drinks too much. Agnes is aware, however, that Lizzie and her father Wullie have a secret stash of whisky in their bedroom, which they drink on the sly. As the other women dance, Lizzie leaves to sneak a drink.

Normal expectations for middle-aged women—to play cards and spend time with friends—just don’t satisfy Agnes. Though she succumbs to peer pressure and rejoins the group, her mind is elsewhere as she remembers how beautiful and fun they all used to be. They used to dance, which serves as a symbol of joy and hope; no one is dancing now, and it robs Agnes of her belief in a happy new future. Her memory of replacing her teeth also highlights how her vanity has motivated her even from a young age. She willingly sacrificed her own comfort to look like a movie star, assuming the pain would pay off when her beauty guaranteed her a fabulous life. This makes her all the more bitter to find herself living a meager, boring life.



Agnes’s dissatisfaction with her current life is only accentuated by her peers’ apparent lack of care about their appearance. In this scene, Agnes starts drinking, using it as a coping mechanism for her unhappiness and boredom. By introducing miracle bras to the other women, she’s attempting to motivate them to present themselves better and infuse some sexiness into the evening. She puts on one of the bras to encourage the other women when they hesitate, taking pride in her own boldness.



Catherine endures the judgements about her physical appearance and recommendations about money from the older women without much frustration, showing that she’s used to this dynamic. The advice she receives about finances is an attempt to teach her how to protect herself from men who will spend all her money, which seems to have happened to many of Agnes’s friends. In contrast, Leek is getting no such warnings or education; he is left alone to do as he pleases, flying under the radar. It appears that all responsibility is put on women to ensure their families are surviving, while expectations for men are nonexistent.



Agnes’s dancing is an attempt to regain hopefulness in her situation, fueled by the effects of her drink. In her intoxicated state, she seems to infect the other women with her wistfulness, convincing them to join her in her longing for what they used to be. This scene also sheds light on Agnes’s relationship with her mother. Lizzie’s temperance, both in personality and alcohol consumption, is not a true reflection of her personality, instead reflecting her desire to help her increasingly out of control daughter.



Once again, Nan calls the women to the table, trying to get back to business and pulling out the catalogue from which she sells goods. The women all owe her money, having to buy their everyday necessities from her on credit. No one seems to own their lives fully, always renting instead. Ann Marie and Nan argue over Ann Marie's inability to pay. She says her plans have changed due to her man's flakiness, so Nan tells her to pick better men.

The mood shifts when Shug, Shuggie's father, comes in the door. Agnes feels his judgement as he takes in the sight of them sitting in their bras. He asks if anyone needs a ride home, and the women start filing out of the apartment. Shug studies them. Though he is aging out of his good looks, Agnes still sees the intensity and charm that pulled her to him and away from her first husband. Though he was a dedicated, hard-working Catholic man, Agnes grew bored of him. She was originally dazzled by his Protestant flash. Lizzie knew Shug was trouble and disapproved of interfaith marriage, but Wullie convinced Lizzie to give him a chance for Agnes's sake. Now, Agnes understands that there is something wild in Shug that grows daily, both in his animalistic eating habits and how he lusts blatantly after her friends.

Everyone but Reeny and Ann Marie have left the apartment. Agnes observes a wordless exchange between Ann Marie and Shug, but her concern solidifies only when Shug offers Reeny a ride home. He tells Agnes not to wait up, but she does anyway. When Lizzie's judgement grows too much, Agnes wanders down the hall to check on the boys. Leek draws on his sketchpad by flashlight while Shuggie is out cold. When Agnes goes to kiss Leek goodnight, he pulls away from her when he smells the beer on her breath.

Agnes continues to her room. Hidden under her mattress is a mostly empty bottle of vodka, which she empties into a paper cup. As she drinks, she looks out at the city lights and recalls the first time her husband did not come home. After calling around to the area hospitals, she pulled out her black book of contacts and rang each of her friends. On these calls, she had listened not to the other women, but to the background noise, hoping to catch Shug there. In the present, she imagines telling them all she knows about her husband's cheating and their secret meetings, about the promises he makes and then breaks. Even in her anger, she understands; he said the same things to her long ago.

The women, probably accurately, blame their men for their inability to pay their debts to Nan. Nan's assessment that the women should pick better men is less of a judgement about their individual choices of partner and more about the women's shared understanding that men cannot be relied on, and they must instead look out for themselves and their children. Trusting men only leads to more trouble, which Agnes's experiences throughout the novel support.



The women in the group are all Catholics, so Shug's presence is doubly alienating due to his masculinity and his Protestantism. As the other women leave, Agnes's reflection on Shug's different background and worsening desire show how they were mismatched to begin with. They have only grown apart, which has led to a preoccupation about his potential adultery, leading her to read into all of his interactions with her and Lizzie's friends. Her drinking is an attempt to cope with her fear of abandonment, but in reality it only exacerbates her fears.



Agnes's fear about Shug's infidelity makes her paranoid about how her friends interact with him, which is only made worse by her mother's aggressive judgement of Shug and their incompatibility from the start. Agnes seems to be searching for some source of happiness and meaning, so she goes to her sleeping children. They don't make up for Shug's distance though; in fact, Leek's implied judgement about her drinking only makes her feel more alone.



Agnes's poor coping mechanisms—her drinking, her paranoia about Shug cheating, and her accusations of other women—are clearly rooted in a larger pattern of absence on her husband's part. Her anger and hurt are undercut by her shame about the start of her and Shug's relationship, because she did exactly what she imagines her husband's mistresses are doing. Having cheated on her husband to be with Shug, fooled by his magnanimous personality and the promises he made her about a better life, Agnes knows her paranoia is, in truth, fully plausible.



In a flashback, Agnes remembers a trip she and Shug took to the seaside. They walked down the fully illuminated boardwalk, which stunned Agnes with its beauty. Shug was also a sight to see as he lifted her up, dressed in a suit that made him look like “somebody.” Shug remarked that the lights of their neighborhood would look bleak in comparison when they returned home, but Agnes begged him not to talk about home. She wanted to imagine they had run away. As they continued on their way, they tried not to think about the trials of daily life.

As men on the boardwalk turned to look appreciatively at Agnes, Shug felt a surge of pride in his wife. He pulled her manically down the promenade by the wrist, wanting to show her off and show her the sights, too. Agnes begged him to slow down, and when he released her, a red welt showed where his hand had been. In embarrassment, Shug told her not to begin arguing with him. She tried to placate him by saying that she just wanted to take things in more slowly, and she suggested they get a drink to right the mood.

At the bar, Agnes ordered a Brandy Alexander, and Shug ordered a glass of milk, complaining when it was brought in a children’s cup. The couple smoked as they drank, and Agnes eventually suggested they move to the seaside permanently so they could be happy. Shug only laughed and shook his head, saying he couldn’t keep up with her plans. Agnes’s mind had already shifted gears, though. She downed a second brandy in one mouthful and insisted they go play bingo. She was feeling lucky.

Later that night, at the couples’ bed and breakfast, Agnes laid out drunk on the carpeted steps to their room. She sang loudly, igniting the anger of other lodgers. Shug put his hand over her mouth, trying to quiet her, but Agnes just licked his palm in response. This angered him enough to grab her hard by the cheeks, threatening her to get up. Agnes paused for a moment before spitting in his face. Shug then grabbed her by the hair and put an arm around her neck to pull her up the stairs, tearing out her hair and burning her skin where it dragged on the carpet.

The joy that Agnes and Shug feel during this trip is rooted in an escapist fantasy. Agnes’s intense happiness in this moment is rooted in the aesthetic they have achieved on their vacation—Shug’s sharp, tailored suit makes him like the person Agnes wishes he was and originally imagined he would be. He is looking up at her with adoration, giving her his full loving attention. By waiving off his mention of home, she attempts to stay in this dreamlike state a little longer.



Shug’s happiness in this scene is also based in wish fulfillment. Agnes is as beautiful as ever, but here she is being noticed by others, and as her man, he feels others envying and respecting him. Her complaint about his tight, eager grip disrupts the illusion that she is a simple object of beauty. The hit to his pride stirs shame, which incites his anger.



Agnes’s behavior is a desperate effort to keep their dreamlike happiness in place, to keep Shug there with her in a rare moment of connection. It is too late; Shug has already been startled awake. The arrival of his milk in a child’s cup makes him feel disrespected, and Agnes’s suggestion that they stay at the beach sounds like another of her quickly changing whims. The alcohol Agnes consumed in hopes of calming down and holding on to Shug just makes her more unable to read the signs of Shug’s growing frustration.



Again, Agnes is lost in her fantasy, anchored there by her drunkenness. Drinking, which Agnes uses to cope with all negative emotions, only ever serves to push people further away from her. The influence of alcohol makes her defiant rather than repentant. She seems fully unaware of Shug’s intensifying anger until he begins to hurt her. While Agnes copes with drinking, Shug responds to his loss of control with violence.



Inside the room, she inspected her body. Shug watched and insisted he hadn't hurt her. In the mirror, he caught a glimpse of himself. His appearance was disheveled, and the bald spot he tried so hard to hide was uncovered. He then lunged at Agnes again, grabbing her by the neck and thigh and throwing her on the bed. She clamped her legs to evade him, but Shug dug his fingernails into the skin of her legs until it tore, and then her legs opened. He raped her, only calming down afterward. With his face pressed to her neck, he told her that they would go **dancing** the next day.

Back home in 1981, Shug heads out for a night of cab-driving. As the sky gets darker, he drives his normal route through Glasgow toward the town center. He winds through the seedier, secret parts of the city on his way. He observes people as he drives, trying not to catch sight of his own balding head in the rearview mirror. He considers the rainy Glasgow weather, reflecting that most people just settle for the bus since they'll get wet either way, though girls leaving the club are usually an exception. He parks in front of one. As he waits, he smokes and listens to the voice of Joanie Micklewhite on the CB radio as he does every night, finding it soothing.

Just when Shug thinks he has found a fare in a drunk young girl, he is intercepted by an old man. He is drunk and chatty, asking Shug if he saw the recent game and what team he supported. Guessing the man is Protestant, Shug lies and says he supports the Celtics in hopes it will shut the man up. He waves Shug off but keeps ranting to himself about unions and Catholics. Shug's next passenger is a middle-aged woman, who complains about her husband getting laid off from the iron works and her sons' inability to find work without leaving the country. He sympathizes. Driving his **cab**, Shug has seen how the city continues to change, how men are left emasculated without work as the economy turns from industry to technology. When the woman tries to tip Shug, he refuses, but she insists.

All the movies and most of the clubs have let out by the time Shug gets back downtown, and the other club goes won't be out for hours still. He decides to wait, hoping some lonely and unattractive girl will try to leave earlier. Soon, though, Joanie Micklewhite calls out to him over the radio, telling him to call into the station. Shug is convinced it is Agnes trying to get ahold of him, but instead Joanie tells him it's a request for him up at the hospital.

This violence does not make Shug feel better. He feels some embarrassment about his actions, but any remorse is overwhelmed by the sight of his exposed bald spot, which further undercuts his pride and causes his rage to spike once more. He regains his composure after assaulting his wife because he finally feels in control again. His promise to take her dancing, an attempt at reconciliation, only comes once he feels his position of dominance return.



This scene is the first time Shug appears in the novel on his own, his character depicted directly and not through another character's perspective. He observes and judges others as he drives, all the while obsessing over his bald spot, revealing the same kind of vanity that drives Agnes. Winding around in the dark, Shug's work seems fraught with feelings of restlessness and loneliness. His feelings toward Joanie's voice—foreshadowing his affair with her—and his decision to pass the clubs looking for young women suggest a preference for female company. As Agnes reflects earlier, Shug's lust is a key motivating factor for his character.



Though Shug is evidently lonely, he avoids any potential connection with the elderly Protestant man in his cab. In contrast, he finds himself moved by his next passenger, a woman who has clearly endured hard times. Her story about her family's struggles with unemployment strike a nerve in Shug. He sees the changes occurring in the country as disproportionately impacting patriarchal structures, which are deeply held values for him. This disruption of stereotypical masculine dynamics destabilizes Shug's sense of control, which stokes his erratic anger issues.



The complexities of Shug's relationship with women are further explored in this passage. His hope for a desperate, ugly girl to show up looking for a ride highlights both his and society's misogynistic treatment of women. Shug has also clearly grown used to harassing phone calls from Agnes while he is at work—a habit that has the effect of pushing him away rather than pulling him closer as she intends—so he is surprised when the call turns out to be from someone else.



When he arrives, Ann Marie is waiting outside, shivering and surrounded by doubts, which is Glaswegian slang for cigarette butts. He smiles, realizing how fully he has her under his thumb. The two have been having an affair. He berates her for calling him all the way out there just to say hi, insisting that they have to remain discreet or else Agnes will ruin her. Ann Marie begins to cry and insists that she loves him. He pulls into a far shadowy parking spot and tells her to take off her underwear.

After, Shug drives back into the city, reflecting that he'll have to break up with Ann Marie, who is beautiful but too clingy. Again, Joanie comes in over the radio, this time telling him harshly to call home. When he does, Agnes picks up and is extremely drunk. Repeatedly, she tells him that she knows what he is doing. He pleads with her not to call his work anymore so that he won't get fired. He tells her he loves her and hangs up. In anger, he shatters the glass of the phone booth and breaks the receiver.

He goes to the chippy, a restaurant for fried food, thinking that will make him feel better. There, he talks with the owner about a government-subsidized house that the owner is willing to rent to Shug. Shug tells the man to keep holding it for him. He intends to move Agnes and the kids there, though he is not ready to do so yet. After eating, Shug finishes his shift. The city is peaceful as the sun rises. He drives into the station, toward Joanie, who he is also having an affair with. Shug waits in the lot, excited to say things to her that can't be said over radio.

At the Bains' home on a different night, Agnes and Shuggie are sitting on the bed after a bath they've taken together, though Agnes decides he's getting too old and aware to see her naked. As she combs his hair, Shuggie plays with toy cars and unknowingly traces the scars Shug left on his mother's thighs. She cracks open another lager she had hidden, giving the empty can to her son, who likes the pin-up girl pictures on the cans. He collects them and uses them as dolls, making them talk about clothing and cheating men. While Shug thinks this habit is a function of Shuggie's attraction to women, Agnes suspects otherwise and buys Shuggie a real doll, which he adores.

Agnes realizes that Shuggie is watching her, as all her children seem to watch her—carefully. He asks if she'd like to be entertained using a silly accent, but Agnes makes him repeat the words, pulling at his jaw, until he pronounces them properly. Shuggie puts a tape in the alarm-clock radio he bought for Agnes, and the two begin **dancing**. Then Agnes closes her eyes and dances on her own, trying to remember being young and desired. She grabs at her stomach where she has put on weight from carrying her children. Her mood rapidly shifts.

This is the first confirmation that Agnes's fear that Shug has been cheating on her is well-founded. Though his request that Ann Marie be more subtle is delivered as if it's for her own good, Shug is really just hoping to avoid further drama with Agnes. Shug is unmoved by Ann Marie's admission of love, indicating his relationship with her is motivated entirely by sex and escapism from his marriage.



Shug's affairs function as outlets for his sexual desire without the complications of commitment and expectation, which have estranged him from his wife. Ann Marie's call to the taxi service mirrors Agnes's, revealing her growing attachment. This is the opposite of what Shug wants from women, therefore spelling the end of his affair with Ann Marie. He is unwilling to end his marriage, however, and instead takes his frustration out violently.



Shug makes plans to move the family out of the city, where a new start may be possible, but he also continues to carry out multiple affairs, including one with his coworker Joanie. Even as he speaks with the owner of the house they may rent, he hesitates in following through. This inconsistency points to Shug's internal battle about whether to stay with or abandon Agnes.



Despite how problematic Agnes's drinking has become, her care for Shuggie is evident in this scene. She sees that her son is different, but instead of trying to change him or judging him, she accepts him. Though society deems it odd for boys to like dolls, she buys him one anyway. Shuggie's unknowing tracing of his mother's scars, which were inflicted by Shug, is also significant, serving as a symbol of the family trauma that has impacted his childhood. Though Shuggie is too young to be aware of the conflict in his parents' relationship, he still feels the ramifications of their turmoil.



Like his siblings before him, Shuggie has learned to watch his mother, especially when she's drinking, to anticipate her mood swings and her needs. He is very young, but he has already developed caretaking impulses, shouldering the responsibility of cheering Agnes up when she becomes morose. Dancing doesn't break through her sadness for long; her fixation on beauty and dejection over her perceived flaws overwhelms her entirely.



Upset, Agnes starts complaining about everything: the curtains, the décor, the constant noise coming in through the thin walls. She pushes Shuggie away when he tries to comfort her. Then, thinking of her older children who seem to avoid her lately, she asks him to start **dancing** for her. She changes the music to something happy, and Shuggie takes a sip of her beer before beginning. He dances wildly and off-rhythm, but he succeeds in making his mother laugh. He keeps going until she is squealing, and no trace of sorrow lingers in her face.

The only thing more powerful than Agnes's spiral of dissatisfaction is her fear of abandonment, which is triggered when she remembers how she has slowly pushed away Leek and Catherine. She doesn't want to drive her youngest child away too, so she tasks Shuggie with cheering her up with a dance. In trying to keep him close, Agnes puts considerable pressure on him to help her regulate her emotions, cementing an unhealthy, codependent bond between the two of them. Shuggie's youth and impressionable nature are underscored when he sips at her beer as fuel for his merriment, thus following the behavior she has modeled for him.



Their fun stops when the door opens, and Shug's heavy footsteps come down the hallway. Agnes hides her beer cans and listens to her husband move through the house on his first tea break of the night. Drunk and overwhelmed by his cool demeanor, she knocks the perfumes, lotions, and lamp off her dresser. Agnes leans her head into Shuggie while she cries, spilling her beer and smearing her makeup. She sings along to a sad song and lights a cigarette, which she holds to the curtains until they burst into flame. She tells Shuggie to be a good boy and stay still. The fire crawls up the drapery and the ceiling, filling the room with smoke and a golden glow Shuggie finds beautiful. He trusts his mother's sudden calm and does not panic until the smoke begins to choke him. Agnes continues to sing with her eyes closed.

What faint comfort Agnes takes in Shuggie's attempts to care for her is quickly forgotten when Shug comes home. Agnes centers her worth in her desirability, so she yearns for Shug's affection as if her life depends on it. When he ignores her, he exacerbates her insecurities, and the alcohol and sad music she turns to fill that void only to aggravate her further. Again, Agnes asks impossibly too much from her young son, asking him to behave himself as she lights the curtains on fire. Shuggie's trust in his mother is so deep that he sits there calmly while the fire spreads across the room.



Shug's attention is finally called by the growing fire. When he opens the door, the air stokes the flames. He grabs the curtains with bare hands and tosses them out the window before running out to grab wet towels to dampen the fire. With them, he whips the lingering flames, then Agnes and Shuggie on the bed. He shakes with emotion once the fire is out. Lizzie and Wullie stand in the hallway. Shug grabs his son from his wife and puts him in Lizzie's arms. He tries to wake Agnes, who is unresponsive. They all stand in silence. Unsettled by the quiet, Agnes relents and opens her eyes. She takes a drag on her cigarette, asking Shug where he has been accusingly.

Whether this is a true attempt to end her life or a cry for help, Agnes succeeds in catching Shug's attention. While Shug arrives to put out the fire, this does not bring them closer together as Agnes may have hoped. Her drunken behavior usually angers Shug, but this incident scares him—which is far worse. Everyone present in the house is traumatized by the event, but Agnes doesn't show any remorse. Instead, when she finally speaks, she just hurls more accusations at Shug. For all her anger at Shug's neglect and infidelity, Agnes has no self-awareness about how her own actions hurt everyone around her.



The narrative shifts to Catherine, who's walking home on a cloudy July day. All day, she has listened to the Orangemen and their anti-Catholic songs. Meanwhile, she considers her love life, the various men who have crossed her path or been thrust into it. Chief among them is Donald Jnr., Shug's Protestant nephew, whom Shug has encouraged her to date. Donald Jnr. made an impression when they met, with a self-assurance and neat appearance that Catherine associates with Protestants. He's selfish, always taking more food than anyone in her Catholic family would dare and talking about himself, but this entitlement intrigues rather than repulses her. He has been attempting to sleep with her from their first introduction, but he was undeterred when she told him she wouldn't before marriage. She was surprised when he proposed, though she did accept.

Catherine's nerves walking home alone are rooted not only in the volatility of the Orangemen's parade, but in the spike of murdered young women in the city. When she sees a group of kids poking at something on the street in front of her building, she is scared it's another victim, but instead she finds her mother's burnt curtains. She knows this and from the **exterior** of their home she sees the lights on upstairs, which doesn't bode well. She commits to finding her brother Leek, who has likely hidden from the conflict, so she doesn't have to face their mother alone.

The way to Leek's hiding spot in a warehouse of empty pallets and shipping crates is treacherous and muddy. Catherine is intercepted by a group of men as she makes her way through the stacks, and they grab her violently, sticking a knife in her mouth. They ask if she's Celtics or Rangers, but she knows neither answer is safe without knowing the boys' affiliation—guessing wrong could end in mutilation and guessing right could end in rape. She guesses Celtics, correctly, and they let her go. There is blood in her mouth. They realize she is Leek's sister, and she realizes they are only teenage boys. As she climbs the tower of crates to reach her brother, they grab at her. She kicks someone in the face.

Catherine's perceptions of Donald Jnr. are deeply colored by stereotypes against Protestants, which are reinforced by Catherine's complicated relationship with her Protestant stepfather (and Donald's uncle), Shug. Like her mother, these differences—which she interprets as entitlement, confidence, and self-worth—stoke her attraction rather than deter it. These traits are likely compelling because they are in direct contrast to Catherine's upbringing. That he proposed instead of fleeing when she set boundaries only adds to her interest.



Sectarianism's effect on the Bains' community is most on display in this passage. The Orangemen's parade is a public display of solidarity with English Protestantism, during which it is not uncommon for riots to break out between the opposing religious groups. This dynamic, paired with the violent crime spiking in the city, sets Catherine on edge as she walks home. On high alert, she is surprised to find the threat of danger not on the street, but in her own home. Catherine has developed the ability to discern the state of the household by its external appearance. The windows being wide open in the night and the crumpled pile of burned curtains on the sidewalk terrify her, and she turns away to search for Leek. Both she and Leek turn to avoidant behavior when it comes to the tension in their home and their mother's drinking—a clear defense mechanism.



Catherine's near-violent encounter in this passage throws the everyday dangers of sectarian division in Glasgow into harsh relief. She is forced to identify her political and religious affiliation, but there is truly no safe answer, and the stakes are high regardless; as a woman, harm may come from any direction. This encounter is another example of the pattern of abuse against women and children in the novel, leaving them to carry a disproportionate burden to maintain their own survival.



She finds Leek in his hideaway of hollowed out pallets, where boys go to get into mischief and escape their fathers' abuse. It smells of teenage boys and is filled with scraps of junk. Leek uses it to escape Agnes, hiding out all weekend while she drinks. He only comes home when he knows she is sober and apologetic. Usually, no one notices his absence, just as they don't notice his presence. This is the way he likes it, being a solitary and sensitive person. Catherine thinks he takes after their real father.

Leek and Catherine discuss Agnes's state. Leek knew an alcohol bender was coming before he left in the morning. He fiddles with his dentures, which Agnes convinced him to get when he turned 15. They cause him pain. Catherine apologizes for leaving him and kisses his cheek, but her affection is rebuffed. She studies Leek's sketchbook when he steps away. He grabs it back from her, annoyed, and Catherine tells him she thinks he's talented. She tells him they're going to make it out of this world, but Leek reminds her she's planning to marry a Protestant, leaving him to handle Agnes on his own. Eventually, Catherine convinces Leek to come home with her after mentioning the boys' assault, which makes him angry. As she leaves, she points to a dark spot on the horizon. There, she explains, is where Shug plans to take them.

The next morning, Agnes wakes to find the sooty evidence from the night before and the bed empty beside her. The memories flood back; she reaches for a cigarette to tamp them down, but her lighter and pack have been confiscated. In the bathroom, she finds the blackened towels. She lingers in the hallway, trying to decide what expression would play best. She finds her parents and sons in the kitchen, and Wullie and Leek treat her indifferently. Shug isn't there, which disappoints her. Only Shuggie is excited to see her.

While feeding Shuggie, Wullie tells Agnes he knows her drinking problem is his fault because he spoiled her as a girl. While he talks, all she can think about is her cigarettes. He tells her that he only wanted her to be cared for, that she was something for him to take pride in. She tells him he did a good job and that she was happy. He cannot understand why, if that is the case, she is so unhappy now. He decides the only way to get through to her is to belt her. Agnes tries to evade him, hiding behind Shuggie. Wullie moves Shuggie aside. Wullie prays for strength as he brings his belt down on Agnes' backside. Lizzie kneels and prays too, holding her daughter's hand.

Leek's escape to his secret cave speaks to two main dynamics. The first is the strikingly different societal expectations for men in their community. While women are burdened with family care and maintaining their own safety, men are able to run free with impunity from a young age. His usage of the hideout also illustrates Leek's place within his own family. He chooses to separate himself from the drama of Agnes's drinking, even if it means being alone.



Leek's dentures are also significant, symbolizing a transfer of generational trauma. Agnes decided as a teenager to prioritize beauty over comfort, and her deeply held belief that appearance determines success and happiness leads her to pressure her son to make the same permanent sacrifice. This conversation with Catherine also suggests that Leek shares Agnes's fear of abandonment. Agnes copes with it by drinking, while Leek preempts his sister's departure from the home by pulling away first. His anger illustrates just how much he cares for her. His sketch book further reveals the depths of his feelings. Though he is often absent, it's not because he is oblivious or uncaring. In contrast, he is a sensitive, keen observer.



When Agnes is faced with the fallout from her suicide attempt, she tries her best to appear penitent. She does not reckon with her behavior. She is still consumed by her own experience and unwilling to consider the way her actions impact the people who love her. The only person who hasn't grown tired of that dynamic is Shuggie, who loves his mother deeply and is too young to understand.



Again, Agnes can hardly pay attention to her father's heartfelt admission because she is preoccupied with her own needs. She tells him he did a great job raising her, but she is motivated less by earnest sentiment and more by her desire to end the conversation so she can find cigarettes. Her parents are not fooled—it is clear that they are familiar with Agnes's pattern. Though the Campbells are not devoutly religious or traditional, they are desperate. Wullie's use of Catholic prayer and corporal punishment are last-ditch efforts to get through to their daughter.



Later, Shug has still not come home. Agnes decides to sun herself in the courtyard in front of the apartment to save face. Downstairs, she finds Lizzie and other women from the complex. Agnes tries to make amends with her mother, but Lizzie tells her that she should have stayed married to her first husband, who would have treated her as well as Wullie treats Lizzie. After bringing her mother a cigarette and taking out her curlers, Agnes asks her to tell Wullie about her impending move with Shug. Lizzie responds that it will kill Wullie, but Agnes insists it's the only way to save her marriage. Soon, Wullie and Shuggie, who has his doll in tow, come home from the store. Lizzie tells Agnes that whatever happens between her and Shug, Shug needs to address Shuggie's femininity, which she finds troubling.

Agnes's decision to join the other women on the sidewalk is an attempt to save her pride. When it comes to her and her family's appearance, Agnes's obsession with beauty is driven by her belief that appearances shape identity and convey a sense of worth. Interestingly, with Lizzie, appearance seems instead to be a way to build relationships and communicate. Agnes's attendance to her mother's hair is both an act of loving care and an authentic apology. Lizzie's comments about Agnes staying with her first husband have nothing to do with the man; instead, Lizzie's true complaint is against Agnes's insatiable need for a bigger, better life. If Agnes had learned to accept what she had, the fuel feeding her drinking and her conflict with Shug would evaporate. By bringing up Shuggie's doll, Lizzie is also asking her daughter to maintain the status quo when it comes to gender expression.



As they prepare for their move, Shug places all his things in new red suitcases. Though they are half full, he does not add her or the children's things. Instead, Agnes packs them along with her belongings in her brocade suitcases—the same ones she once packed with expensive new clothes to run away from her first husband. Agnes and Shug agreed to start fresh without their kids. When Shug arrived to take her away, he told Agnes that his wife had threatened to kill their children if he didn't stay. He left anyway and was livid that Agnes didn't follow through, too. That day, they moved in with her parents. Still, her ex-husband paid child support and spent time with Leek and Catherine until the day he heard his daughter introduce herself as Catherine Bain. They haven't seen him since.

The separate sets of suitcases symbolize the division that exists between Shug and Agnes and the children as they transition to a new space. Agnes carries the full contents of her and the kids' things, while Shug only exerts effort packing his own things. Agnes's suitcases contain even more metaphorical weight because she used them when leaving her first marriage for Shug. Both this and that move were made in pursuance of a better future. Despite that conviction, Agnes's decision to pack her brocade bags and leave her Catholic husband ended in disappointment, hinting that this ordeal may end similarly.



Now, with the same suitcases packed, they prepare to leave. Because Shug is the only one who has seen the new house, everyone is anxious about where they are going. As before, Agnes sits in the backseat of the **cab** with her children, all dressed in their finest clothes. Shug says they are getting close as they drive past large houses with green yards and gardens. He raves about the great community they will have, but as they turn on their street, the green fades and gives way to dead grass, coal hills of abandoned mines, and broken fences.

Agnes's insistence on dressing herself and her kids in their finest clothing to face their new lives once again underlines her obsession with appearances. Agnes dresses for the life she thinks she deserves, ultimately making an effort to show her new neighbors that she and her children are worthy of respect.



Their house sits in a block of four, all the homes identical to each other. Even in the height of summer, coal fires are burning to keep the homes warm because they are so poorly made and hold no heat. The yards are brown and small, and in front of them, women in shabby housecoats stand staring. Shug is dejected but silent. Agnes tips her bag to her face, drinking from a can of beer she stashed there. She declares that she can't believe she got dressed up for a place like this.

The exterior of the home again communicates vital information to the Bain clan. The uniform, impoverished, grey neighborhood and the dim people wandering the streets speak volumes; the lush garden, cozy home, and respectable community Shug promised was another lie. Interestingly, the presence of the beer in Agnes's handbag suggests some amount of preparation for such an event—Agnes may have been hopeful about their future, but she is not as naïve as the excessively nice clothing suggests. Again, she will drown her dissatisfaction in beer, and the beer will only make her more dissatisfied and vocal about that dissatisfaction.



CHAPTER THREE: 1982, PITHEAD

As the Bain family begins moving their things into their new home in Pithead, all the neighborhood families come out to watch them. Mothers and children alike gawk at them, especially Agnes in her fine clothing. Their new neighbor, Bridie Donnelly, introduces herself and the others in the neighborhood. Most are her family, either by marriage, or in the case of Jinty McClinchy, by blood. The women ask if Agnes has a man. Before she can answer, Shuggie comes out with hands on his hips and announces dramatically that he can't live in a such a smelly, awful place. The neighbors break into laughter, comparing him to Liberace. Agnes turns to leave, angry, but the women quiet and tell her they'll all get on fine if Agnes and her fancy clothes stay away from their husbands.

Because the Bains have moved to an impoverished Catholic neighborhood, Agnes's finery actually alienates her neighbors, who perceive her as entitled and overtly sexual rather than well-bred and well-off. One thing that has not changed is the way Shuggie's effeminate mannerisms are perceived—he is immediately treated as a joke. Shuggie's judgmental response to the new neighborhood and house also reveal how deeply Agnes's extremely high standards have sunk into his view of the world, pushing him even further from what their society expects from young boys.



Shuggie observes the neighborhood children playing outside as the movers bring in the rest of the Bains' things. He wanders up the street, which dead ends at a bog. He tries to act busy, but he secretly hopes the other kids will invite him to play. To fit in, he tries to remove the shine from his dress shoes with juice from berries he finds. Eventually, the unemployed mine workers make their way down the street from the pub, each man collecting their children and heading home.

Shuggie is torn between his desire to make friends in this new neighborhood and his desire to present himself well. He begins to try to change himself to fit in, without any luck. This scene also shows the gender dynamics in the new neighborhood. The men in this Catholic community suffer from unemployment, sequestering themselves in the pub to drink while the women stay home to care for children and the household.



Back inside, Agnes finishes her hidden purse beer and surveys the house. There are only two rooms instead of the promised three; she knows the children will have to share a room again. The windows are poorly sealed, so she can hear the neighbor kids talking from where they are spying from the window ledge. In the kitchen, she finds Shug, who tells her he can't stay. He is tired of her always wanting more and her drinking. Agnes asks why she isn't enough for him, and Shug counters that it was him that was never enough for her. She may not have cheated like he did, but he wonders why his love, hard work, and provision for their family wasn't enough to keep her out of the bottle.

Agnes handles her increasing panic about their meager lodgings by drinking the beer stowed away in her bag, returning to her established coping mechanism. When Shug finally tells her he's leaving her, all Agnes's long-held paranoia about being abandoned is actualized. In their argument, both Agnes and Shug reveal the issues underlying their poor behavior. In the same way Agnes drinks to manage her dissatisfaction and fear, Shug cheats to manage his feelings of insufficiency.



As they fight, Agnes sits in a chair in front of the door to the kitchen to block Shug's exit. He tries to move her multiple times, but she holds her ground. Half-drunk and sad, she insists that things like this shouldn't happen to people like her. She motions to her expensive clothing. Shug grabs her by her sweater and hair, throwing her to the ground. He opens the door forcefully on her head and cuts her chin open with his shoes as he steps over her. She tells him she loves him, and he responds that he knows. He is gone by the time the children find Agnes crumpled on the floor.

Despite leaving Agnes and moving in with Joanie Micklewhite, Shug continues to return to the Pithead house during his night shifts to have sex with Agnes. If she tries to hold him afterward or asks questions, he always leaves right away. Cooking sometimes keeps him there longer. When he leaves, Catherine slips into bed with her mother and asks why they can't go home. Agnes can't bring herself to answer. All she can do is stay and take what little Shug offers her.

After another day of drinking and waiting for Shug, Agnes calls and asks him to bring dinner when the children complain about their hunger. Joanie picks up the phone and puts Agnes on hold. Joanie returns to the line and finally tells Agnes about her and Shug's relationship. When Shug eventually arrives with Chinese food, Agnes asks him what Joanie has that she doesn't. She asks if she is attractive or if she maintains a nice home. He tells her he doesn't want to talk about Joanie, so instead, Agnes asks him why he brought her here. He responds that he needed to see if she would come. Agnes grabs him by the collar, and he nearly crushes her hand in the process of breaking free. He feels that he must destroy her to truly be free of her, leaving nothing left for anyone else to love.

Four months into their residency at Pithead, Agnes dresses up to walk to the Miner's Club, the only pub in town. She passes the neighbor women, who are drinking tea by the fence post. They intercept her and tell her to drink with them instead of the dirty bar, pouring her a mug filled with vodka. When someone pulls out loose tobacco and rolling papers, Agnes offers up her more expensive pre-rolled cigarettes. They notice her emerald earrings, then ask her where she's from and why she is here. She tells them that Shug heard it was a nice neighborhood, and the women agree that this description was true before the mine collapsed and left most men unemployed. Some men died in the accident, and one woman—Connie McAvennie—has a husband who was burned horribly.

Agnes shifts her original tactic, no longer trying to shame Shug into staying and instead begging him, placing her body in the way of his escape route. Shug's impending abandonment is all the more terrifying to her in light of their move—she is isolated from her parents and even further from her aspirations in life.



Shug's selfishness is never clearer than in the months following the move to Pithead. He benefits from the security of his new life with Joanie, but he still uses Agnes freely to satiate his own selfish desires. Agnes attempts to emulate stereotypically feminine roles to keep him around, and because they serve his greater needs, it works—but only for a bit.



Because Agnes has always found her worth in her attractiveness and believed it would secure a better life for her, she is especially leveled by the news that Shug has left her for plain, classless Joanie. The utter selfishness motivating Shug's decisions is cemented by his admission that he brought her to Pithead to see if she would come. The fact that she did ultimately makes no difference because he has already decided his course. Shug's pattern of violence continues here as well. Just as he hurt Agnes to get through to her when they were at the seaside, he feels he must hurt her to break free in this passage.



Agnes dresses up and heads out, meaning to acquire the two things that she knows can make her feel better: more alcohol and attention from men. The women of the neighborhood cajole her into speaking with them, and as isolated as she has been in Pithead, she accepts the opportunity for companionship. She is unwilling to be honest about her situation; she is too embarrassed and prideful to be forthright. Agnes is also determined to maintain her feeling of superiority over her neighbors, and engaging honestly with them would make that impossible.



The women then ask about Shug, wondering where he went off to with his red suitcases. They don't believe Agnes's lie that he just packs heavy for his night shifts. They ask what she plans to do for money, and when Agnes has no answer, Bridie offers to help her get set up on disability benefits. Seeing Agnes gulp easily from her teacup of vodka, Bridie also asks her if she is a drinker. Agnes insists she doesn't have a problem, pointing out that the other women are drinking, too. Bridie responds that the rest of them are still drinking tea. When Agnes flushes in embarrassment, Bridie and the other women commiserate about their own histories with alcoholism, blackouts, and drunken brawls. Instead of drinking, Bridie now takes Valium to cope. She offers Agnes a few to try.

One afternoon, Shuggie can't find Agnes anywhere. He wanders down the street aimlessly with his doll, ending up at the Catholic school where his neighbors attend. They spot him from the playground. They make fun of both his doll and the way he curtsies to them. When the boys ask why he isn't in school and where his father is, Shuggie doesn't know. They hound him about Agnes's alcoholism. As the bell rings, they try to snatch Shuggie's doll through the fence, yelling that they're going to tell the school about Shuggie's truancy.

Shuggie runs until he finds himself at the Miner's Club. He finds a puddle of oil shimmering iridescently and dips the doll's head in, confused that it only turns her blond hair black and not rainbow. Continuing on, Shuggie finds a boy named Johnny sitting in the barrel of an abandoned industrial washer. He offers to give Shuggie a ride in it. When he sees Shuggie's doll, he asks if he's a girl or if he's a "poof." Shuggie doesn't know what this means, but the boy tells him it means a boy who wants to be a girl and do "dirty" things with other boys.

Johnny lifts Shuggie into the washer and begins to spin the barrel until Shuggie is tossed painfully against the agitator paddles inside. While Shuggie is crying in pain, someone comes to chastise Johnny, but they quickly leave. Johnny pulls Shuggie from the washer drum and sees he is covered in blood and bruises. He rubs at Shuggie's cuts with a leaf to remove the blood. Then, he takes off his shorts, exposing himself and ordering Shuggie to rub him. Only after Shuggie begins to limp home does he realize he left his doll, but he is too afraid to go back to get her. When Shuggie returns home, he can hear his mother screaming on the **phone** at Joanie. She is drunk and doesn't notice that Shuggie is injured.

Even without sharing freely with them, the neighbor women have picked up on both Agnes's alcoholism and her absent husband, seeing through her elegant appearance. The minimal effort Agnes made to connect with the other women ends abruptly after she realizes they've guessed at her truth and tricked her into confirming their suspicions, which wounds her pride. Even so, Bridie and the others offer advice about getting on government assistance, which sustains Agnes and her children—and inadvertently her drinking problem—far into the future.



The effects of Agnes's drinking on Shuggie's well-being have begun to escalate. He is largely alone and has yet to be enrolled in school. Without protection from any adults, the other children begin bullying him for his differences, his missing father, and his mother's growing reputation for her drinking. Unfortunately, Shuggie thus bears the brunt of the community's judgement.



Despite the bullying Shuggie is subjected to, his childlike innocence remains. The beauty he sees in the rainbow sheen on the oil and his confusion when only blackness transfers to his doll's hair functions as a representation of how his earnest self-expression evokes such nastiness in his peers. Still, Shuggie's encounter with Johnny shows that he gives people the benefit of the doubt, even those who seek to take advantage of him.



This is first instance of sexual abuse that Shuggie suffers in the novel. Johnny targets Shuggie because he is vulnerable, both due to his ostracization for his feminine mannerisms and the lack of adult supervision in his life. Shuggie leaves behind his doll afterward, which is symbolic of his loss of innocence, brought on by the bullying and the assault. He leaves him largely because he is too afraid to go back in case he runs into Johnny again, but it seems that he also understands that his doll has made him a target. When he arrives home, his mother is also too wrapped up in her own anger, harassing Joanie over the phone, to notice Shuggie's obvious injuries.



Leek comes home, and walking up to the house, he can tell from the **exterior** of their home, with the lights on and open curtains, that his mother is drunk again. Shuggie is at the window and spies him. When Leek turns to leave, Shuggie taps on the window until Leek faces him again. Leek tells him that he's going to their grandparents'. Agnes appears in the window with a vacant smile on her face, and it is clear to him exactly how inebriated she is. Just as quick, she's gone. Shuggie asks if he can come with Leek to Sighthill, but Leek tells him he is too big to carry. He turns away again, leaving Shuggie behind.

Agnes wakes to find herself alone in the house one morning with a dead **phone** beside her. Usually, Shuggie is there to greet her before he goes off to school, but today she finds only a cold cup of tea that he left for her. Experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms, she searches the house for any dregs of beer left in her scattered mugs. As she looks, she smokes her last cigarette. She finds nothing and realizes she's already spent the week's benefit money—it's only Thursday, and she can't get more until Monday. She goes through Leek and Catherine's things looking for something to pawn, but the two know not to leave anything of value behind. In a cabinet, Agnes rediscovers the mink coat she bought on her first husband's credit.

In her fur coat and high heels, Agnes walks four miles from Pithead into the city, where the closest pawn shop is located. It begins to rain. Soaked, she ducks into a mechanic's shop and asks to use the bathroom. Once there, she tries to dry her wet, matted coat with paper towels. When she leaves the bathroom looking only marginally better, the mechanic is waiting with a cup of tea. He can tell from her shaking that she's experiencing withdrawal. He also guesses correctly about her plan to pawn her coat, having once stolen his mother's fur coat to do the same thing. Agnes insists she doesn't have a problem. He suggests Alcoholics Anonymous. When he discovers that a man is her main reason for drinking, he tells her the best way to get back at him would be to move on and be happy.

Catherine pulls Shuggie through the Glasgow city center. Catherine observes how, in the two years they've lived in Pithead, Shuggie has grown in stature even though he's beginning to shrink in on himself. The turmoil in their household has made him seem much older than eight. As they hurry to the bus stop, Catherine tells Shuggie that he can never tell Agnes where she is taking him. She says that if he tells Agnes, her drinking will worsen until she extinguishes every good part of herself. If that happens, Leek will never forgive Shuggie.

Leek, like Catherine back in Sighthill, can tell from the outside of the house that things are not going well inside. Agnes, who is so concerned with the way she and her family appear to their community, has lost that impulse in her drunkenness, leaving the curtains open and lights on. Leek's suspicions are confirmed when Agnes comes to the window drunk. As is his usual habit, Leek leaves so he does not have to deal with his mother, leaving Shuggie behind to handle Agnes alone.



The phone, which symbolizes Agnes's anger and connection to the outside world, has died from Agnes's overuse the night before; in Pithead, she is alone and starving for companionship, but having none, she acts out of spite instead. The only care she receives is from Shuggie, who shows her love the only way he knows how: tea. She ignores this, instead looking for her next fix. After finding no alcohol and knowing she's already spent the family's money for the week, her decision to look for her children's things for something to pawn highlights exactly how dependent on drinking she has become. Only after she finds nothing valuable does she go through her own things in search of something to pawn.



The mechanic shows shocking insight into Agnes's situation. His quick assessment of her withdrawal symptoms comes from personal experience, but it also suggests that Agnes's desire to present herself well is far less successful than she believes. Many people, including Bridie and the mechanic, are able to see right through her clothing and posh accent to the hurt hidden beneath. He also tries to assure her that healing is a better revenge than collapsing inward on herself, but Agnes is too lost in her own experience to hear him—or anyone else.



As Catherine spends increasingly less time in the Pithead house, preparing to marry Donald Jnr., she is better able to see the changes her little brother has endured. In living with an alcoholic mother, Catherine observes that Shuggie behaves far beyond his years. He has been forced to mature quickly. Even though Catherine sees this, she manipulates Shuggie in her own way by threatening that Agnes and Leek will both suffer if Shuggie discloses their visit. In choosing to marry Shug's Protestant nephew, it seems that her sympathies have shifted almost entirely away from her mother and brothers.



They arrive at a plain but nice house, and Catherine tells Shuggie to be on his best behavior. Inside, the smell of fried potatoes and ham makes Shuggie dizzy. He is introduced to his aunt and uncle, as well as Catherine's fiancé, Donald Jnr. Someone flicks Shuggie on the back of the neck, and when he turns around, he sees his father. He doesn't remember Shug, but he recognizes him from the photo Agnes keeps of him. Behind Shug is Joanie, waiting patiently to be introduced. She and Catherine hug awkwardly. Having heard his mother harassing Joanie on the **phone**, Shuggie regards Catherine as a traitor for embracing her. Shug tells Shuggie to say hello to his new mother, saying he will need a new one with the way Agnes is drinking herself to death. Joanie approaches Shuggie, holding out a gift.

Inside the bag, Shuggie finds a pair of roller skates that once belonged to one of Joanie's daughters. Catherine helps him lace up the boots as everyone else discusses the fact that Donald Jnr. has been offered work at a mine in South Africa, meaning he and Catherine will be moving soon. Shuggie stands and tries to balance on his skates. Shug notices him and jokes that Shuggie can't be his son. Hearing this, Shuggie balks. Shug wonders aloud how Agnes will react when she hears they've seen each other, and Catherine tells him that Agnes can never find out. The adults continue talking about the couples' move to South Africa while Shuggie skates on the hallway carpet. He tries to damage it by wearing grooves into it. As he does, he wonders why his sister wants to leave him.

Sitting at the top of the abandoned quarry's slag hill one afternoon, Leek draws and thinks about how desolate Pithead is. He reflects on the way his peers make theatrical shows of their anger, while he prefers to remain sad and quiet. He retreats into himself. This is the main reason his apprenticeship is not going well, but he doesn't care. From his sketch pad he pulls two letters. The first is from Catherine in South Africa, recounting her happy experience there so far. It makes him feel heartsick to read. The other letter is a notice of acceptance to art school, which he received two years ago. After watching how Shug and Catherine leaving affected his mother, and in turn his little brother, Leek couldn't bring himself to go.

Shug and Joanie's home is filled with things that Shuggie lacks: responsible adult figures, good food, warmth. He can't help but desire those things—his body automatically reacts to the smell of food, for example—but his mother's hatred for his father Joanie have become so ingrained that Shuggie feels ashamed of his reaction. Shuggie also understands that, by Agnes's standards, Catherine has betrayed the family by tolerating Shug and his family. Shug himself only makes the situation worse by speaking ill of Agnes with no thought of how it makes his son feel.



This passage expands on the topic of Shuggie's advanced maturity, which stands in contrast to his more age-appropriate behaviors. Though he is young, he has learned his mother's moods and opinions by heart, which allows him to anticipate her episodes and help her any way he can. For this reason, he hates Joanie and Shug and, learning that Catherine will abandon them for South Africa, his sister too. He is still a child, however, so he processes these complex emotions by trying to destroy Joanie's carpet. This tactic also carries a note of Agnes in it, being driven by revenge and based on ruining the nice furnishings in the home, which Agnes would have prized greatly.



Leek had wanted to leave for art school and build his own life, but he feels pressure to step up as the man of the house. Knowing that Shug and Catherine's abandonment only exacerbated Agnes's drinking, Leek is reticent to add to the problem. This, as well as the letter from Catherine that he keeps with him in his sketchbook, show his deep care for his family. While he feels he cannot physically leave without destroying his mother, he copes by withdrawing more and more (on an emotional level) from all aspects of his life.



The noise of feet sinking into the hill of coal dust grows as Shuggie approaches. Leek tried to leave him behind, but Shuggie insisted on following. Now, Leek takes off again, hoping Shuggie will take the hint. He continues to follow Leek. As the coal begins to slide, Shuggie loses his footing and falls on his face. Leek asks him to act normal for once, which makes Shuggie flush in embarrassment. Leek asks if the other kids are still bullying him. Shuggie replies no, but after a beat, he admits they do sometimes. Leek tells him they only pick on him because he's special, but he's old enough to start trying to fit in more. Shuggie insists he tries to act like the other boys, but he finds their clothing and behavior "common." Leek tells him to try harder, giving him pointers on appearing more masculine.

Leek tells Shuggie to wait on the slag hill and keep watch while Leek goes into the abandoned colliery building. There, he routinely strips copper wires to sell. Shuggie asks Leek why he does it, and he responds that he is saving for future plans. Shuggie wonders if he is included in those plans. Shuggie draws a picture of Agnes in the dirt, especially enjoying the task of drawing her curly hair. Leek works away inside until the late afternoon approaches.

While Shuggie is distracted, practicing walking in the masculine way Leek showed him, a watchman approaches him. Shuggie runs away, eventually making it to the peat bog where he hides in the weeds. Afraid and wanting to go home, he pees himself. When the man finally leaves, he starts walking back along the marsh bordering the coal hills. He decides to take a short cut through a crater of mud, which he begins sinking into. It is growing dark. Shuggie is stuck, singing to keep calm, when Leek finds him. Leek gets him free, but Shuggie won't leave without his wellies (rainboots), which are still stuck in the mud. Agnes will beat him if he comes home without them. Leek goes back down to get them.

On their way home, Leek yells at Shuggie, telling him to pick up his pace. Shuggie realizes that Leek is hurt. He has a black eye, raw knuckles, and a splatter of blood on his cheek. Leek rubs his jaw and pulls out his broken dentures, berating Shuggie for not keeping better watch. Because he didn't warn him, Leek was forced to hurt the watchman badly in order to escape. They are both relieved when they make it back to their street, but Shuggie can still see the fear and anger in his brother's face.

Shuggie's desire to be close to Leek, both physically and emotionally, chafes against Leek's desire to isolate himself. Leek's sense of duty overrides his need for space when the topic of Shuggie's bullies come up. Leek, like everyone else, clearly sees the ways in which Shuggie differs from the other boys. He advises his little brother to simply imitate masculinity. In doing so, he tries to give Shuggie the tools to pass unnoticed in society, as Leek himself has managed to do.



Being as intimately connected to Agnes and her worries as he is, Shuggie reels at hearing that Leek is planning for the future. He knows he likely does not factor into these plans, having not been included in Shug or Catherine's escape either. It is fitting, then, that Shuggie chooses to draw Agnes, who is the only person he knows won't leave him—she needs him as much as he needs her. Shuggie's preference for stereotypically female activities is also underscored by the joy he feels drawing Agnes's hair.



Shuggie is so preoccupied in trying to override his body's natural inclinations that he forgets to do the job Leek assigned to him. Again, Shuggie's youth is highlighted. While he spends a good deal of time alone and carries the weight of adult problems on his shoulders, he is still vulnerable, in need of help, and fallible. Shuggie's body also reacts automatically to his fear in a way mental and emotional maturity can't counteract. Once the danger passes and Leek rescues him from the mud, Shuggie's mind returns to its usual concern: how to avoid upsetting their mother.



Leek is typically nonviolent and more prone to dealing with his problems by fleeing. His anger at Shuggie, whose failure to keep watch necessitated the use of force, is actually rooted in fear. Since Leek was also pushed to mature quickly and take on adult responsibilities early, it makes sense that he holds his brother to a higher standard than is fair for his age.



Leek stops salvaging in the old colliery, though he is never caught for hitting the watchmen over the head with his crowbar. It takes months for his new dentures to arrive, and when they do, they fit poorly. In penance, Shuggie endures Leek's welt-raising pinches and keeps bread in his pocket to cushion his brother's mouth. All summer, Shuggie keeps away from the other boys in the neighborhood. He does not know what, but he feels that something is different and incorrect about him. He spends his time alone trying to walk like a real boy, getting frustrated by his inability to do so. He wonders why it seems to come easy to everyone else.

Agnes watches the neighborhood kids playing together and wonders why Shuggie is not among them. She considers the McAvennie children, who she notices are attractive underneath their feral appearances. Agnes recalls one day when she managed to convince one of Colleen McAvennie's daughters to come inside so she could comb and cut the mats out of the girl's hair. Colleen had come over in a rage after, spitting in Agnes' face that she should worry about her "poof" son instead of judging other peoples' kids. Agnes realizes that she and Colleen are quite alike. They both worry endlessly over money, hiding from creditors and breaking into the electric meter to reclaim their coins. Still, Agnes knows Colleen hates her.

The idea strikes Agnes to go across the street to talk to Colleen's husband, Jamesy, who is working underneath their car. When he asks what she wants, she tells him that she wants him to act as male role model for Shuggie. Jamesy agrees that there is something not right about the boy and tells Agnes she needs to watch him. Agnes asks if, should she give Jamesy a few pounds, he'd be willing to take Shuggie along the next time he goes fishing. He declines her money, asking her to sleep with him instead.

After sleeping with Jamesy, Agnes is disgusted by him, but he acts as if he's the one who has been cheated somehow. When Agnes tells Shuggie about the upcoming fishing trip, he is displeased. When he hears Agnes crying in the bath that night, he commits to giving fishing a try to make his mother happy. He carefully plans out his outfit and what to bring the night before. When the McAvennies get ready to leave, Agnes and Shuggie wait patiently by the door, but Jamesy neither looks at them nor slows as his truck passes their house. After, as the two stand on the curb embarrassed, Colleen yells at them from across the street, asking what they are staring at.

Shuggie's subservient behavior illustrates his desperation to maintain his relationship with his older brother, who is his only ally in handling Agnes's mercurial moods. Shuggie has no allies outside the house either. He fixates on practicing walking, believing this may be his salvation from the ridicule of others and the growing shame he feels for being abnormal by his community's standards.



In a moment of rare clarity outside her drinking, Agnes takes notice of Shuggie's struggle to make friends in their new community. Shuggie's reputation in the neighborhood for being strange has not escaped her, given Colleen McAvennie's homophobic slur. Agnes's observation of the McAvennie children's bedraggled appearance is not surprising, but her willingness to acknowledge similarities between her and Colleen—someone who she constantly judges—is shocking.



Agnes fears that Shuggie's queerness is a result of his lack of a father figure, and she feels guilty for being unable to keep Shug around. In hopes of amending this failure to maintain a strong male presence in Shuggie's life, Agnes goes to Jamesy, who Agnes believes possesses many stereotypically masculine traits that Shuggie would do well to learn. Her care for her son—and her impaired judgement from drinking—push her to trade sex for his help.



Despite Shuggie's constant attempts to fit in, Agnes's means of assisting him only play on his insecurities. Still, Shuggie and Agnes's dependence on and love for each other is strong; while he doesn't know what Agnes has given in order to arrange this outing, he is willing to forsake his comfort for her, just as she did for him. Both of their prides are deeply wounded when, in spite of that mutual sacrifice, Jamesy leaves without Shuggie.



Inside, Agnes begins drinking, but only moderately. She is waiting for Jamesy to come home before she tells Colleen what she and Jamesy did together, and she wants to have enough wits to speak clearly. Agnes watches her gossiping neighbors while she waits. A strange woman arrives. She speaks with Colleen, who doesn't come out of her house after the stranger leaves. Agnes carries on her plan, drinking and dressing in her finest clothing before heading across the street to their house. Before she gets there, however, Colleen begins screaming at Jamesy and accusing him of cheating. He comes out with a torn shirt and scratches on his face. As he leaves, he sees Agnes in the road and calls her a whore. Colleen runs out as the truck pulls away. She collapses on the ground.

None of the other neighbors come to help. Agnes runs over to find Colleen ripping out her own hair. She quiets the distraught woman. Colleen tells Agnes that she has been withholding sex because she didn't want any more mouths to feed, and she worries that caused her husband to cheat. She works herself up again as she talks, then rips her dress off. Agnes tries to cover up the woman's naked body. Colleen says she doesn't care if she dies in the road and goes limp, and Agnes realizes that she must have taken something. She puts her own underwear and tights on Colleen as they wait for the ambulance to come.

Lizzie sits at Wullie's beside in the hospital. She remembers the vigorous man he was in his youth, so different from this still man lying in bed struggling to breathe. Lizzie climbs on the bed intending to lie beside him but changes her mind and straddles him instead. She moves on top of him, trying to give them both comfort. A nurse comes in and, without judgment, gently helps Lizzie down. She fixes Lizzie's skirt for her.

Agnes, drunk, arrives at the hospital with Shuggie in tow. The two are dressed impeccably, Agnes in her fur coat, Shuggie in a suit. Even Shuggie realizes that his mother's makeup is sloppy, however. The hospital staff are confused by this and her intoxication, thinking she needs medical attention or is a sex worker. The nurse tells Agnes that it is past visiting hours, but Agnes continues on to Wullie's room. Shuggie lingers behind to apologize for his mother. He asks the nurse, a nun, if people go to heaven in a **cab** or on the bus. She is more concerned with asking about his mother's drinking, but Shuggie insists he can handle it and restates his question. She tells him that peoples' spirits, not their bodies, go to heaven. In follow up, Shuggie asks if it's okay then that another boy did something bad to his body once.

Agnes proceeds with her normal pattern of drinking to handle her hurt, though this time her need for revenge outweighs her thirst. She also dresses up as if preparing for battle, using her beauty as a weapon when it serves her. Her desire to enact revenge is stalled by the scene that unfolds before her, as Jamesy and Colleen embarrass themselves more successfully than she could have managed.



Colleen's admission that Jamesy's cheating was her fault for not wanting to get pregnant again supports the ongoing theme that the pressures of survival, child-rearing, and stability fall disproportionately on women in this community. This is something Agnes understands, and her shame and anger are transformed into compassion for Colleen. Her earlier realization that she and Colleen are more alike than she originally thought is confirmed by this encounter. Colleen has also had her heartbroken by her spouse's infidelity, and she harms herself in response, just as Agnes has often done.



Lizzie and Wullie seem to have the most mutually loving, long-lasting relationship of all the couples in the novel. Even on Wullie's deathbed, he has a wife that loves him so dearly that she is committed to providing him comfort, even if it means giving up her sense of decorum.



Once more, Agnes dresses her best while preparing to face difficult circumstances. She is unaware that her extravagant clothes combined with her erratic drunken behavior make her seem even more desperate and unwell than usual. Shuggie's automatic response that he can care for his mother just fine indicates that he is used to apologizing on her behalf and having to convince other adults that he is okay. Shuggie uses this opportunity to talk to someone with religious authority to address his concerns about being assaulted by Johnny. The nun assures him that going to heaven does not entail a black cab—something that has been a harbinger for ill in Shuggie's life—or having a body at all (which is a relief Shuggie, since his body bears his memories of abuse).



Agnes enters the hospital ward with a wail and climbs on her father's bed. Soon, Shuggie comes in carrying her things. He chides her for being careless. Lizzie tells Agnes that visiting hours are over. Agnes climbs down and apologizes, saying it took her too long to gain the courage to come. In response to Lizzie's assessment of her drunkenness, Agnes promises she'll go to AA tomorrow. She pulls two cans of lager from her purse, handing one to Lizzie. Shuggie falls asleep as the two women talk about Wullie's impending death. Lizzie apologizes for being so hard on Agnes about Shug, but she explains that her harshness is rooted in her understanding of how difficult it is for mothers to survive, though they must always keep going for their kids.

In a flashback, Lizzie recalls the day Wullie came home from the war. She was washing sheets in Agnes's baby bathtub when her daughter came to her hungry. As they finished sharing a meal of fried eggs, a commotion built outside. Soon, there was a knock on the door. Wullie was home, finally, standing in his uniform. Lizzie watched him as he doted on Agnes, whom he hadn't seen since she was a newborn. He looked different, with skin tanned and hair lightened by the sun. Occupying Agnes with cake and ham, the two snuck off to make love in the bedroom. While they were together, a sound came from the corner of the room. Lizzie had forgotten, for a moment, the unnamed baby boy she had while he was away. She'd had an affair with the grocer, who had given her food in return.

The next morning, Wullie woke up before Lizzie. She came into the kitchen to find him in his wool suit, feeding Agnes with the last of the groceries she'd received from her affair. After breakfast was finished, Wullie put the baby in his pram and left, kissing Lizzie on his way out. Wullie didn't return until dark. The baby and the pram were gone. He came in whistling and happy, eating two large helpings of dinner. As the two laid in bed that night, Lizzie finally asked what happened to the baby, to which Wullie responded, "what baby?"

Back in the present, Agnes reels after her father's death, processing the new information her mother gave her. When Agnes is drunk, she calls her mother to berate her for ruining her memory of Wullie. Within a month, Lizzie dies as well. The police believe she stepped in the way of an oncoming bus on purpose. At Lizzie's casket side, Agnes prays for her forgiveness. She adds blush to her mother's cheeks and gives her the only pair of earrings she has left.

The image of Shuggie entering the hospital ward carrying Agnes's things cements the impression that Shuggie acts more like a parent than Agnes does. Lizzie and Agnes's conversation is the first time Agnes acknowledges that she may have a problem, though her promise of getting help is undercut by the beers she pulls from her purse. Lizzie's acknowledgment of the difficulty mothers endure is also a deviation from her usual harshness with Agnes. Her comment shows an awareness of the unequal burden that women are expected to carry in society; while men can leave, women must stay and endure hardship.



Though food during the war was scarce, Lizzie seems to have a reasonable backstock of rich foods like ham, cake, and eggs. The affair with the grocer was motivated by her need to care for Agnes; she was willing to sacrifice what she needed, including her fidelity to Wullie, if it meant keeping food in her daughter's belly. Wullie finds the consequences of that choice when he returns home: a beautiful, happy Agnes and a strange new baby that does not belong to him.



Wullie can only live with one of the outcomes of Lizzie's affair—the one that benefits him and his blood. He feeds Agnes with the food that he knows Lizzie received from her lover without complaint. When he takes the baby and comes back without him, he refuses to acknowledge that a baby ever existed. A child is the one thing that would have prevented him from pretending nothing happened while he was away, so he made it disappear.



As usual, Agnes needs to direct her negative emotions elsewhere, so she takes out her grief about Wullie's death on Lizzie. When Lizzie is gone too, she is forced to cope with her grief and shame differently. She communicates her love and regret by improving the appearance of her mother's body.



When they return from the funeral, Agnes begins drinking again. She has Leek call Catherine in South Africa, because he promised not to give Agnes her number. Leek breaks the news to Catherine about Lizzie and Wullie's deaths as Agnes listens. Catherine is furious that no one told her that Wullie died, and Leek tells her that he has had to make difficult decisions since she left him there on his own. Catherine declines to speak to Agnes at all.

The following morning, Shuggie finds Agnes asleep and hanging off the bed. He places her head back up so she doesn't choke, then unzips her dress. Before he leaves for school, he makes sure she has everything she needs: a bucket for vomit, a mug of tea for her throat, a mug of milk for her stomach, a mug of leftover beer for her shaking, and a mug of bleach to clean her teeth. He hears Leek slip from the house without comment. With time to spare before he has to leave, Shuggie sits on the stool by his mother's dresser and waits. He scans her jewelry, remembering when they used to play jewelry shop before Agnes pawned almost everything. Shuggie finds Agnes's mascara, which he uses to fill the creases in his shoes. He brushes some on his eyelashes, which he thinks look beautiful, right as Agnes wakes.

Shuggie is gone by the time Agnes opens her eyes. Slowly, she begins to piece together bits of yesterday. She remembers playing bingo and losing repeatedly, then a drive home in a **cab** with a man who wasn't Shug. When she realizes the man raped her, she throws up into the bucket Shuggie left for her. She takes a lukewarm bath, not having enough change to add to the electric meter to warm it. Floating in the water, she sees bruises on her thighs. After she dries off and puts some makeup on, Jinty McClinchy knocks on the door.

As soon as Jinty sees Agnes, she knows she's had a rough night. She says she can't stay long, but she continues to linger. She offers to get Agnes toast and tea and then suggests they share some lager too. She demurs that she usually wouldn't, but she doesn't want to see Agnes in pain. Once they drain their beers, Jinty hedges that she should probably leave now, but first asks if Agnes has anymore alcohol. When Agnes says no and that she has no money for a store run either, Jinty finally relents and pulls three beers from her purse.

The Bain children have all learned to handle Agnes's sickness in their own way. Neither Catherine's absence, Leek's emotional detachment, nor Shuggie's codependency prevent them from hurt. Instead of blaming the true source for that hurt—Agnes, or at least Agnes's alcoholism—they fight amongst themselves.



Shuggie's thoroughness in preparing for Agnes's inevitable hangover and his efforts to make her comfortable show his dedication to his role as caretaker. His recollection about the times they used to spend playing with her jewelry reveal part of his motivation. With Agnes, he has always been able to like the things he does without fear of judgement. He is conflicted, however, by the way gender stereotypes limit that enjoyment for boys like him. His mother prioritizes beauty in order to be accepted, but the same things that make her admirable—like wearing mascara or jewelry—make him a target for ridicule.



While Shug's behavior establishes cabs as a symbol of disappointment and abuse, other men, like the one who raped Agnes while she was drunk, continue this pattern. Agnes's drinking repeatedly puts her in the way of men acting in service of their own pleasure only. The same poverty that forces her to bathe in lukewarm water is a mitigating factor in her situation as well, pushing her to gamble for more money.



Jinty's insistence that they drink because she hates to see Agnes suffer is an effort to veil her own desperation for alcohol. Her repetition that she can't stay long is another farce; she means to come across as casual, but her continual pushing for more booze shows the intense need driving her visit. Jinty's eventual sharing of the beer in her purse suggests that she does actually want company (perhaps to avoid the shame of drinking alone), but it's clear that she was originally trying to drink on Agnes's dime.



After finishing the beers, Jinty begins gossiping about her daughter's slovenly housekeeping. When she notices Agnes is quiet, she asks if she is okay. Agnes confides in her about the rape, and Jinty comforts her the best she can. She argues that more alcohol will make Agnes feel better, but Agnes reminds her that she has no money. Jinty suggests they call a single man they know in Pithead, Lamby, who has money. On the phone with him, Jinty tells him of Agnes's beauty and that she wants to meet him. He agrees. Jinty hangs up and tells Agnes she should brush her hair to hide the bruises on her face from last night.

When Lamby arrives, Jinty pours drinks and tries to push him and Agnes together. Lamby flirts with Agnes, who can only think about how young he looks. He asks her if she is seeing anyone, and Jinty cuts in that Agnes only sleeps with taxi drivers, carrying on about the unlucky time she had last night. Agnes swears at Jinty, but Jinty brushes her off and pushes more alcohol her way. They continue drinking throughout the day, but Agnes stays quiet. Jinty apologizes to Lamby about her sullenness.

Jinty puts on music; Lamby pulls Agnes to her feet and supports her as they dance. Jinty tells Agnes she has to kiss him as a thank you for bringing them alcohol. **Dancing** so close to Lamby, Agnes realizes he can't be much older than Leek. She misses her oldest son all of a sudden. As the other two dance, Jinty starts consolidating alcohol and cigarettes and slipping them into her purse. Lamby kisses Agnes and moves his hands down her body, accidentally pressing on the tailbone bruise she got from the night before. She throws up all over him, just as Shuggie walks in the door. Shuggie sees his mother, drunk and crying. Lamby leaves angry. Jinty repeats one last time that she can't stay long, and then she rushes out the door.

On the playground at school, the children are making fun of Shuggie again for his femininity. One of Colleen McAvennie's sons hits Shuggie in the face with a ball, then again with his fist. As Shuggie lies in the dirt, the other kids repeat the rumor that Shuggie has an inappropriate relationship with their principal, Father Barry, telling Shuggie he will burn in hell. Before they can hit him again, a blond girl steps in and helps Shuggie up. As they leave the playground, Colleen's son shouts at them, asking if they are off to play with dolls together. The girl grabs him by the tie through the fence, mashing his face on the metal wire. She and Shuggie run away.

Jinty's interest in Agnes's assault has very little to do with true empathy. She immediately uses it to manipulate Agnes into drinking more, knowing that this negative experience might make Agnes willing to go to extremes to get more alcohol. Agnes views her beauty as a redeeming quality, something that allows her to maintain her pride in spite of everything, but it is also a bargaining chip that others like Jinty try to use to their own advantage.



Unsurprisingly, drinking does not address the trauma of the night before; it only makes Agnes more pliable to the whims of others. Jinty has already latched on to the assault from the previous night to mobilize Agnes's need, and now she flaunts it to entertain their guest. Just as drinking often makes Agnes incapable of seeing how she hurts others, Jinty's alcoholism eclipses her awareness of how selfish her actions are.



Agnes seems to believe Jinty that she owes Lamby a kiss. Jinty knows she can manipulate Agnes by calling her hospitality and decorum into question. With the two of them distracting each other, she can pocket all the remaining items for herself. When Lamby gets close and Agnes realizes he reminds her of her children, it gives her a glimpse into how her drinking has pushed them away from her.



Shuggie's interests, appearance, and behavior still conflict with societal norms for young boys, and the other children are intent on making him pay for it. They bully him both physically and mentally, and the rumor that he is being molested by Father Barry is even more cruel given that Shuggie has experienced abuse—but from a peer rather than an adult. For the first time, another student stands up for Shuggie. Though there is immediately blow back from the other children, Shuggie soaks up the rare kindness.



Once they are in the clear, the girl introduces herself as Annie and tells Shuggie that she's in the grade above him. As they walk down the street, Shuggie imagines the trouble Agnes is likely getting into at home and tells Annie he doesn't want to go there just yet. Annie invites Shuggie to her and her father's trailer. She knows about Agnes's drinking because Agnes once came over to drink with Annie's dad. Inside, it is dark and filthy, and Annie's father is drunk in front of the television. Annie brings Shuggie into her room, apologizing for the mess. Her room is entirely pink and immaculately clean. She brings out her collection of pony dolls.

As they play with the ponies, Annie asks Shuggie if he really touched Johnny's "wee man." Shuggie denies it, but Annie ignores him, asking him what it was like. Shuggie repeats that it never happened. Annie says she'd say the same thing, but she too has had sexual encounters with the older boys in town. Shuggie asks her why she hasn't told Father Barry about it. Annie pulls some half-smoked cigarettes from an ashtray under her bed and lights one. Shuggie thinks of his mother and how men have taken advantage of her. Angrily, he asks Annie why girls let boys do whatever they want. Annie remains nonchalant. When she goes outside to break up two dogs fighting outside, Shuggie leaves, taking two of her ponies with him.

Shuggie arrives home from school one day to find the curtains closed, the lamps on. His bowels always cramp in anticipation of what he might find. However, this view from the **exterior** of the home is a sign that Agnes is sober. He considers the other signs of sobriety and drunkenness, remembering the encounters that have taught him their meaning. The sound of food cooking is the most positive indication. Silence is bad news; one time when he came home to quiet, he found Agnes with her head in the oven. Country music bodes ill as well, indicating Agnes is still conscious enough to regale Shuggie with tales of the men who have harmed her. When finished, she makes him go through the phone book with her, dialing all the men with that name. Once he finds the right person, Shuggie has to hand the **phone** to Agnes, who begins cursing.

For the first time in the novel, Shuggie feels that he has made a friend. Because Shuggie suddenly has another option for companionship, he feels he can choose to spend time with Annie rather than babysit his drunk mother. This chance at escape—even briefly—is a significant moment. Unfortunately, it is disrupted by the realization that Annie's kindness is clearly rooted in their shared experience of alcoholic parents, and that their parents know each other. Shuggie cannot stop imagining his classy mother compromising her pride by hanging out with Annie's slobby father.



Annie is the first person other than Agnes who allows Shuggie to show his true interests without fear of retribution. The more they talk, however, the more Annie reminds him of his mother. She shares in common with Agnes an easy acceptance of Shuggie's differences, dependence on her coping mechanism (in this case, cigarettes), and a habit of letting let boys take advantage of her. While Shuggie forgives his mother repeatedly for her shortcomings, he is repulsed by Annie's lack of remorse about her own experiences. She no longer seems like a potential refuge to him, but another problem.



Shuggie tries to tamp down his mental and emotional apprehension about his home life, but his body is less easily controlled; his anxiety brings on digestive discomfort. In order to survive Agnes's capricious temperament, Shuggie has had to be intensely observant, and in that watchfulness he has picked up on her patterns. Like Leek and Catherine, he can assess her mood from seemingly innocuous external details. In this way, the outside of the house once more functions as a symbol for Agnes's internal state.



When Agnes has company over, it bodes particularly ill. If it's one of the greasy Pit uncles, Shuggie has to endure the man's company and questions before he eventually bribes the boy to leave so he can have sex with Agnes. The Pit aunties are worse, though, because Shuggie has to take care of both women. Jinty is the worst of them all, always able drag Agnes back to drinking after a several-day stretch of sobriety. Once, Agnes made Shuggie rub Jinty's feet as the women drank. Jinty told Agnes she should send Shuggie to the school her developmentally delayed daughter attends. Shuggie insisted that he doesn't have special needs, but Jinty told him it would be better—he wouldn't have to feel different anymore. Shuggie wrenched her toe then, twisting her leg up to the knee until she screamed in pain.

Shuggie is correct about the closed curtains; he goes inside to find Agnes sober, cooking in the kitchen. When she sees him, she tells him to change while she makes him tea, which shocks him. The house is clean and warm. They have six hours left on the television meter. When Agnes comes with his tea, she brings an apple turnover she has warmed for him in the microwave. The joy and peace of this rare moment overwhelms him, and he spins and spins in his seat.

Agnes has begun attending AA meetings. She goes to the ones far away in the city, neither wanting to be recognized closer to home, nor to recognize in herself the growing similarities between her and the other desperate women of Pithead. When she introduces herself at one of the meetings, the leader latches on to the lament of St. Agnes: "I am in flames, yet I do not burn." He drones on, giving a sermon comparing this to alcoholism. Agnes nods politely as he speaks. Another woman turns to her and denounces men, reminding her that they beheaded St. Agnes because she wouldn't burn.

After three months of sobriety, Agnes gets a job at the local petrol station shop. She is thankful to be on the night shift, which keeps her from drinking when she most wants to. Before long, the petrol station becomes a hot spot for men driving **cabs** and other lonely men on the night shift. They find Agnes beautiful and charming, which she relishes. One man is different from the rest; his body hasn't been worn down by years hunched over a taxi steering wheel or drinking. He isn't as taken with her as the other men are, either. On one of his stops at the shop, he asks for a loaf of bread but insists that Agnes shouldn't put it through the security window, afraid it will be smushed. Annoyed by this and his indifference, she passes him the loaf one slice at a time.

Because Agnes is easily manipulated by people with selfish intentions when she is drunk—primarily Jinty and abusive men—Shuggie does not like when he comes home to company. When it is other women over visiting, he resents that he has to take care of them like he does Agnes. Shuggie's commitment to his mother is rooted in deep affection for her, but he has no affection for these other women like Jinty. This annoyance escalates to rare violence when Jinty calls out Shuggie's oddness, equating his queerness with her own daughter's medical condition.



Shuggie's desire for Agnes to get better is so keen that he cannot stand to be disappointed. He is hesitant to believe the good sign he sees, but he is not wrong. Now sober, Agnes has begun to reclaim her parental role, for once making Shuggie tea and feeding him rather than the other way around.



Agnes's choice to attend AA meetings on the far side of the city shows that her pride is still of primary importance to her. Sobriety does not instantly erase the traits that motivated or her perpetuated drinking in the first place. This is evident in the AA leader's monologue about Saint Agnes, as well. Instead of allowing Agnes to share her story, he latches on to a piece of her experience—her name—and uses it draw attention to herself. He may be sober, but he still demonstrates a level of selfishness that men are permitted to possess in this society.



The night shift benefits Agnes in two key ways: it keeps her too busy to drink on what would otherwise be lonely nights, and the attention she gets from men strokes her ego. Agnes's past experiences have caused her to draw negative associations with cabs, so she is wary of them—and yet, she also enjoys the drivers' admiration. This is exactly why she takes special interest in the driver who seems different from the others. Since he doesn't fawn over her, he presents a challenge, but he also seems less likely to try and manipulate her.



The man, Eugene, takes Agnes on a date. She waits nervously with Shuggie and Leek, but when Eugene finally arrives, Agnes is reminded how handsome he is. She knows that her neighbors will be jealous. The two attend a honkytonk in town where Eugene is a regular. Everyone else is dressed up in western outfits. They talk, getting to know each other. When Agnes orders a soda at the bar, Eugene asks her why she doesn't drink. Agnes tells him it gives her a headache. They discuss their histories, and Agnes learns Eugene's wife died of cancer the year before. Two of Eugene's friends come over, telling him that they've been praying for him and his wife's peaceful rest. They look pointedly at Agnes. They ask after his sisters, specifically one named Colleen, making mention of the alcoholic they heard lives across the street from her.

After they leave, Agnes asks if they are all laughing at her, then Eugene insists he's not, but he admits that Colleen McAvennie is his little sister. Agnes asks what she says about her. Eugene tries to brush her question off, but in doing so, confirms Agnes's worst fears. Eugene asks Agnes, apologetically, if she has slept with Jamesy. Agnes says she hasn't. Eugene relaxes. Soon, a man gets on stage and begins the quick draw contest. Though Agnes loses right away, Eugene tells her she wins for being the prettiest. Agnes jokes about the dress she plans to make from her curtains for their next date. Eugene is pleased to hear this.

The two then talk about Agnes's drinking, and Eugene asks her how long she's been sober and what it's like. Agnes responds honestly. She tells him it's difficult, but she strengthens her resolve by remembering all the bad she has done. Eugene tells her he thinks she can beat her alcoholism, but Agnes tells him that isn't how it works. Eugene admits he wants to be able to share a drink with her. As they are **dancing**, and Agnes imagines what their life together could be like. At the end of the night, Agnes asks Eugene why he came if Colleen had said such terrible things about her. He tells her that when they met, he recognized in her the same loneliness he felt. He didn't want to be alone anymore. Agnes kisses him.

Back in Pithead, Agnes sorts through her underthings, separating white and black, old and less old. She is on her knees with her toes facing up behind her. Shuggie comes in and sits behind her, lacing his toes with his mother's. With his arms around her, he watches her work. He asks if she's doing it for Eugene, and Agnes tells him that they have a date. Shuggie wonders if she plans to show him her underwear, but Agnes responds that she won't.

Agnes takes extra interest in Eugene because she knows they would make an attractive, enviable couple. Her vanity is also responsible for her negative reaction to feeling out of place at the honkytonk venue. She lies about why she doesn't drink for the same reason; she doesn't want to stand out. Her efforts to maintain her pride suddenly become pointless when Eugene's friends make his connection to Colleen evident.



Because Eugene ignores his sister and friends' gossip about Agnes—gossip that is fully rooted in truth—Agnes is able to recover from the hit to her sensitive pride. Up to this point, Agnes has only spent time with men who reinforce her compulsions and insecurities, but Eugene calms her. It seems as though he is an exception to the abusive cabby pattern, and he may actually support Agnes's sobriety rather than undermine it.



Eugene's supportiveness up to this point encourages Agnes to be forthright with him about how badly her drinking has made her behave in the past. Eugene doesn't get why she can't drink again now that she's better. Agnes's explanation to him shows that she now understands the fears driving her drinking haven't gone anywhere, and that any alcohol at all feeds them, making them more powerful. While Eugene does not understand the functions of addiction still, he can understand loneliness—and this bonds them together. Dancing, as ever, serves as a symbol of Agnes's hope, except this time it is not an attempt to reclaim hope. Instead, it is a true reflection of how she already feels.



The image of Shuggie's toes interlaced with Agnes's is a poignant representation of how connected the two are. Shuggie is still studying Agnes closely, as he did when she was drinking. As he asks Agnes questions about her plans with Eugene, his concern is apparent. Men have so often derailed the small happiness that Agnes has found, and Shuggie is not yet convinced that Eugene won't do the same.



Agnes dresses nicely for the date, hoping Eugene will take her into the city to dinner or a show. Instead, they head further into the country. Eugene is nervous, repeatedly telling Agnes she will love it. They park next to a deep gorge, and Eugene has to carry Agnes down the steep path. At the bottom is a pool of water that has gone red from the sediment of the red sandstone cavern. Eugene tells her that his father used to bring him there as a child. Agnes is unnerved by the water, but Eugene assures her it is fresh and drinkable. Agnes declines the palmful of water he holds up to her. He apologizes for bringing a classy woman like her to a place like this, and Agnes tells him she likes it fine. They agree it's been a long time since either of them have dated.

Eugene carries Agnes out of the gorge, and they move on to their next stop. Agnes decides she will be game for anything he has planned. They hike out to a hill overlooking the city, where Eugene has planned a picnic for the two of them. The food is simple yet plentiful. Eugene asks Agnes if she minds if he has a beer. She says no. He offers her a choice of milk or juice, telling her that he doesn't know what people drink when they aren't drinking. "The tears of my enemies," Agnes responds—or tea and water. She asks if they can stay until the city lights come on, and Eugene agrees. When the wind picks up, he invites her to lie back against his chest. Curled next to him, she enjoys his solidness and warmth.

Agnes wakes Shuggie in the middle of the night, and the two sneak across the dark expanse of the bog and the highway. Agnes is carrying trash bags filled with softly clanging metal. Shuggie worries they are cans of lager, but instead Agnes pulls out a shovel and several spades. She begins digging into the earth and then tells Shuggie that they have to dig up every last rose before the sun rises.

In the morning, Shuggie goes out into their front garden to look at the roses planted there. He gathers any petals that have fallen. The McAvennies stand at the fence, gawking. They ask where they've been stolen from, and Shuggie responds that they might have just popped up. One of the McAvennie girls calls him a poof, jeering that he likes butts. They chant insults loudly at him, then they take turns spitting at him and the roses. After they leave, Shuggie wipes the spit from his face. Across the street, he sees their mother in the window, smiling.

This date is slightly more awkward than Eugene and Agnes's first outing, as a hike in the wilderness is even further outside of Agnes's comfort zone. By dressing up, she is revisiting some of the old expectations she had felt when she was with Shug. She still longs for a romance that makes her feel elegant and special. Eugene, unlike Shug, is forthright about who he is and what he can give her. While Agnes still feels uncomfortable, Eugene's honesty sets him apart from Shug in meaningful way. Like Agnes's first husband, Eugene comes from a large, impoverished Catholic family; in some ways, Eugene is a second chance for Agnes to be happy with what she has, like Lizzie wished she could be.



Agnes's request to stay for the lights is a callback to the disastrous trip to the seaside that Agnes and Shug once took. Shug pulled Agnes along so fast, eager to show her off, that she lost sight of the lights. That night, she only found pain in Shug's arms. Eugene, in contrast, is just happy to have time alone with her. He is in no rush to move, and Agnes finds peace in his arms. The only ongoing point of tension is Eugene's unfamiliarity with addiction and his discomfort with Agnes's sobriety.



Shuggie's worry that the noisy metal in the bag is beer highlights how difficult it is for him to believe that Agnes has truly committed to her sobriety. While this is understandable, this outing actually shows him a side of his mother he has not seen. Instead of continuing to wait for a man to give her the life she wants—like the nice house with a beautiful garden Shug once promised—Agnes goes out to claim it for herself



No longer having to put all his effort into ensuring that Agnes is safe, Shuggie devotes his energy to maintaining the new roses in the front yard. His meticulousness is just another thing that the neighbors find effeminate and worthy of ridicule. This encounter also makes it clear that while Eugene has chosen to ignore Agnes's past alcoholic mishaps, his sister and her children have no such intent.



Later, Agnes is outside **dancing** around in the garden of roses. Shuggie watches from the window, embarrassed for the first time by his mother's sober behavior. She begs him to come out and dance with her. He is surprised at how her happiness hurts him. After years of trying to make her happy and failing, suddenly Eugene has managed to do so easily. Agnes comes up to the window and tells Shuggie he'll be sad if he doesn't come out and enjoy the summer sun. Leek, asleep inside, motions for Shuggie to go out so he can get some sleep.

Agnes tries to break through Shuggie's unflinching seriousness by getting him to dance with her, celebrating her newfound hope. Shuggie is shocked to find that his sober mother can embarrass him, but Shuggie's frustration goes beyond his struggle to appreciate normal adolescent embarrassment. His anger is rooted in his ongoing observation of gender dynamics and the ways Agnes allows men to control her. Shuggie has devoted his whole childhood to supporting her, with no appreciation, but she allows men to influence her behavior instantly.



In the backyard, Shuggie sees that Agnes has tipped the old refrigerator on its back and removed the shelving. It had once belonged to the Donnellys, but Agnes claimed it from the roadside. For years, it sat stinking in the backyard. Now, she fills it with cool water from the hose. Shuggie imagines crawling in and closing the lid on himself. At the same time, he wants to tell his mother how glad he is that she is finally happy. He stands there, torn between these two emotions. He asks his mother what is wrong with him. Agnes tells him he is just growing up. She undresses him and makes him get in the water. As he does, it overflows. He looks at her, worried she'll be mad, but she encourages him. His sadness leaves him, and he jumps back under the water, farting.

Agnes's mission to break Shuggie's composure continues, and this time she is successful. The first emotion that arises is his confusion and shame about being different from other boys. Agnes, who has seen and accepted Shuggie from a young age, reassures him. Her support calms him, as it always has, and Shuggie finally accepts that he can let his constant guard down. His unrestrained farts as he jumps in the makeshift tub show his enjoyment, at last, of a fully childlike moment.



Agnes sits on the side of the tub smoking and drinking tea as Shuggie swims. She asks him what sort of man he will turn out to be. He asks her what she wants him to be, and she wishes he will be less anxious. Shuggie tells her he only wants to be with her, somewhere they can start fresh. He asks if Agnes is in love with Eugene. He reminds her how awful the McAvennies are, and Agnes tells him they aren't all so bad. He asks if Eugene will be his new father. After a minute of thoughtfulness, she tells Shuggie that it has been the two of them too long, which isn't "right."

Agnes's question here shows that she has continued thinking more about Shuggie's concerns about being different. Shuggie's response—asking her what she wants him to be—underscores how devoted he is to his mother, still used to sacrificing his own wishes to make her happy. Despite his brief moment of acting like a kid, Shuggie quickly goes back to worrying about Agnes. He fears that Eugene and the McAvennies are going to hurt her, and any progress she has made will be lost.



Later, Shuggie takes the money Agnes gives him and buys several chocolate bars from the neighborhood ice cream truck. He, Agnes, and Leek eat them while watching soap operas on the television. One of the characters is an alcoholic, and Agnes can't help but point out moments where she sees herself reflected on the screen. Shuggie is unconvinced, though. He knows the fake emotion on the actress's face is a lie. He wonders why the truest moments of alcoholism aren't shown: hungry children, strange men in the house, heads stuck in the oven.

Agnes shows some growing self-awareness as she and the boys watch the show about a drunk woman. Yet, what she notices has everything to do with her own experiences: her failures, her hurts, her shame. Shuggie and Leek's experiences as innocent victims of Agnes's alcoholism, however, are not represented on screen at all. They also remember all the terrible moments Agnes was too drunk to be able to recall. This scene shows that while Agnes has healed a good deal in sobriety, those who have been most affected by her drinking are still hurting in ways she does not understand.



Once the show ends and the chocolate runs out, Agnes tells Shuggie to dance for her. Leek goes off to his room to draw by himself. Agnes asks Shuggie to show her how the kids dance these days, and he models different dance moves for her. She mimics him, and he is annoyed that they look more natural on her womanly body. She is excited to give his moves a try when she goes **dancing** with Eugene next weekend. Agnes sits back down but tells Shuggie to keep going. He loses his tempo for a moment, annoyed at the reason she asked for his help and self-conscious to be performing alone. Soon, he finds his rhythm again. He loses himself in the joy of dancing.

When Shuggie looks up, he sees that the McAvennie children are all crowded in the window across the street. They are crying with laughter at his expense. He screams, freezing in place. Agnes tells him he has to keep **dancing** now unless he wants them to win. He is hesitant, but he realizes that this is what Agnes has always done; even at her lowest, she has always risen up, putting on her makeup and heels. She has never given anyone the satisfaction of seeing her pride broken. Shuggie starts to dance again, though he avoids the more feminine dance moves. Eventually, though, the music takes over, and he stops fighting against it. He lets what is inside come out for everyone to see, knowing he couldn't stop it if he tried.

At school, Shuggie is forced to play football in the cold winter air. He is embarrassed by getting picked last and because his team has been forced to play shirtless. Their teacher, trying to humiliate him into actually playing, addresses him with a homophobic slur. The whole class laughs, including an unpopular, impoverished classmate, Lachlan. When Shuggie asks Lachlan why he thought he had the right to laugh, Lachlan decks him. He tells Shuggie that he isn't better than him, calling him a "poofter." The teacher yells at Lachlan, telling him he isn't allowed to hit girls. Everyone laughs at Shuggie's expense again. Lachlan tells Shuggie to meet him after school so they can fight for real.

After a day of nervous anticipation for everyone at school, the boys meet on the playground. Lachlan savors his sudden popularity as his classmates cheer him on. When he isn't paying attention, Shuggie runs at him. They fight, but they are well-matched in their weakness. They roll on the ground for a long time until one of the McAvennie boys pins Shuggie down by the arm. Taking advantage of this, Lachlan punches Shuggie in the nose. The blood gurgles down the back of his throat as the other kids laugh. He begins to cry.

This scene further develops Shuggie's growing resentment about both gender and Agnes's relationship with Eugene. He notices that certain things he does—things that subject him to mockery and prejudiced intolerance—are considered fully permissible and even beautiful when Agnes does them, simply because she is female. He is also bothered by the way Eugene—and Agnes's growing attachment to him—encroach on aspects of his and Agnes's bond. Dancing, however, is something so central to his identity that he manages to push these frustrations away and begins to dance for himself instead of for her.



Shuggie loses his inhibition while dancing, letting his moves reflect the fullness of who he is—which makes it all the more heart-wrenching that his key tormentors, the McAvennies, have seen the whole display. When they make fun of his dancing across the street, they are making fun of the core of him. Agnes seizes this opportunity to give invaluable counsel: she tells him to continue dancing with all he has. Shuggie understands as he dances that he can't hide who he is, even though he has been trying to do so his whole life, so he might as well enjoy himself.



Though Shuggie, with Agnes's support, leaned into his identity while dancing, this victory does nothing to stop the daily bullying he experiences at school. Shuggie's peers are the ones who most directly punish him for being different, but the actions of his gym teacher in this passage show how prejudice and societal norms are passed down from and enforced by adults. Shuggie is not fully innocent, either. His anger at Lachlan is an attempt to defend himself, but it shows that Shuggie has also internalized his mother's belief that appearance and presentation create a sense of self-worth. He judges Lachlan on his behavior, just as the other kids just Shuggie on his.



This fight, and Shuggie's classmates' enthusiastic allegiance toward usually unpopular Lachlan, makes the hierarchy of acceptance clear in the community. Even when Shuggie takes a fair opportunity to get a leg up in the fight, the other kids side with Lachlan and gang up on him. In this community, it seems that people think there is nothing more reprehensible than being queer.



Shuggie sulks home after, hiding from the other kids. He slinks in through the back garden, stopping to wash his bleeding face in the water of the fridge-tub. The blood disperses pink in the water, and Shuggie is frustrated that he finds it beautiful. Leek grabs him by the collar and drags him inside, complaining that Shuggie has kept him waiting. Shuggie sees that Leek and their neighbor Shona have decorated the house for a party to celebrate Agnes's first year of sobriety. Shuggie is hurt that Leek didn't tell him, but Leek reminds him he is a notorious tattletale.

Many of Agnes's AA friends have come to the party. They mill around the house awkwardly, smoking and waiting for her to arrive. Shuggie is thrilled to be hosting. He makes constant passes with the food they have on hand, and people take food they don't want just to placate him. The neighbors have come too, not knowing the full context of the party; Jinty in particular is agitated that it is a dry gathering. When Agnes arrives with Eugene, she is fully surprised, tearing up as everyone wishes well on her anniversary.

As Agnes makes the rounds, Eugene lingers awkwardly in the kitchen. Eugene asks Shuggie if he knows who he is. Shuggie responds that he is the man dating his mother, adding that he has heard Eugene might be his new father one day, though no one asked his opinion on it. Shuggie warns Eugene that he will be angry if he hurts Agnes, and Eugene responds that Shuggie can stop worrying about Agnes. Instead, he should start worrying about fitting in with boys his age. Eugene hands Shuggie a small red book of historical football scores. Shuggie scans a few pages, then shoves it in his back pocket as he leaves to find Agnes. She is still talking with a few men from her meetings. A couple are her age, but one is much younger. Shuggie studies his straight teeth and bleached hair, feeling strange inside.

The abuse Shuggie endures makes him wish he was normal, but even something like admiring the pink water left after washing the blood from his face convinces him there is no hope for change. This is thrown into sharp relief by his realization that it is Agnes's one year anniversary of sobriety, which proves that she has been able to change in a way that he hasn't been able to, no matter how hard he has tried.



Shuggie still finds joy in this event, despite his difficult day and his frustration with himself. He thrives as a host and is far more equipped to care for others, making them feel welcome in a way other boys his age would be unable to do. Even so, he does not seem to see this as evidence of the ways in which his unique personality allows him to excel. It is also clear that Jinty has made no effort whatsoever to change; she is still at the mercy of her addiction, wishing for alcohol instead of celebrating Agnes.



Meeting Eugene finally gives Shuggie the opportunity to express his concerns about protecting Agnes. By responding that Shuggie should just stop worrying about Agnes, Eugene demonstrates exactly how little he understands about Agnes's bond with her son, what she has been through, and the way it has affected him. Eugene's words do hit home when he tells Shuggie to focus on fitting in, though this is dismissive of the effort Shuggie has been making his whole life. Eugene presents the red book of football scores, an emblem of stereotypical masculinity, as if this will easily fix what's considered wrong with Shuggie—and Shuggie, in turn, feels desperate enough that he's willing to believe changing will be as simple as memorizing a bunch of football scores. Shuggie longs for this even more after feeling the stirrings of attraction to another young man at the party.



Mary-Doll, one of Agnes's AA friends, makes her way over to Eugene. She tells him she doesn't recognize him from the meetings, and he says he doesn't attend. She mistakes his politeness for interest and begins to tell him all about her problems with alcohol and her hopes of getting her kids back. She wishes she had Agnes's taste, explaining that even at her worst, Agnes was able to keep a better home and attractive appearance. Mary-Doll asks Eugene where he attends his AA meetings, and Eugene tells her that he doesn't. *He doesn't have a problem.* Walking away from the woman, he motions to Agnes to follow him. He tells her that he needs to get back to work. She asks if he is okay, but she can tell that he is lying when he says he's fine.

Agnes sneaks off to the bathroom. As she walks through the crowd, she studies her AA friends. She is ashamed to be among them and wonders if she is just as stuck and sad. In the bathroom mirror, she wipes off her make-up and undoes her hair, both of which seem suddenly dated to her. She tries to redo them in a more youthful fashion, but she feels old and stuck. She rummages in her bag for the Valium Bridie gave her, taking two of the small pills. By the time she finishes her cigarette, she feels brand new.

Eugene has been pulling away from Agnes ever since the party. Agnes has been so sad that even Leek has noticed. Shuggie has been following her around day and night, reading to her to keep her from drinking. He has even skipped school to watch over her. When he comes home one day to find the door locked and football cleats waiting for him on the doorstep, he is just relieved that Eugene has returned. Shuggie needs to use the bathroom, though, so he yanks at the door trying to get in. It opens to reveal Shug, not Eugene. Shug wishes his son a happy birthday as he leaves, giving him some change. He tells Shuggie to chase girls before they're old enough to impregnate, then makes fun of his large nose. Shuggie goes inside to find his mother in bed with a bag of beer at her feet.

Shug hadn't heard from Agnes in over a year. He heard word that she was doing well, and the fact that she hadn't called to curse him and Joanie out over the **phone** suggested it was true. He knew Shuggie's birthday was coming up, so he decided it was a good time to check in and see. He wondered if she was still beautiful or if drinking had robbed her good looks. He got excited thinking of her and wondered if he could convince her to sleep with him one last time. In the phone book, he saw that she has kept his last name.

Mary-Doll's flattering comments about Agnes and her classiness make Eugene even more unable to believe that his girlfriend has anything in common with this young woman or any of the other addicts present—all of whom Eugene finds pitiful. Eugene's retort that he doesn't have a problem like hers makes his judgement of Agnes's Alcoholics Anonymous friends even more apparent. Agnes understands that something is wrong when Eugene leaves, though she is confused about what changed his mood so quickly.



Eugene's abrupt departure and lack of explanation stokes Agnes's long-held fear of abandonment. Swallowing her pride and accepting her faults so she could heal was an essential step in her recovery, but the sudden shame she feels about her friends who are also in recovery shifts something in her. She goes back to her old convictions about her beauty, trying to adjust her appearance to make herself feel better. When this doesn't work, the valium she takes marks the first serious crack in her year-long sobriety.



Shuggie and Leek started to believe Agnes was going to be okay after a year sober, but they now notice her growing sadness, ultimately suggesting that they're still hyper-attuned to her moods. Shuggie, who is used to guessing his mother's mental state from the exterior of their home, does not know what to do when he finds the football cleats and the door locked. Shug's decision to bring beer for Agnes and cleats for Shuggie represent the people he believes and wants them to be, showing just how out of the loop he has become.



In the same way that Agnes's harassing phone calls represent her anger and connects her to others while she is drinking, her lack of calls when she is sober shows the rage she has let go of in order to pursue more positive relationships. Shug's selfishness is in full display in this visit; he seemingly prefers to have Agnes in his life, even if that means she's not doing well. After considering her beauty, his reflection that he'd be willing to say anything to her in order to sleep with her also follows his long-standing prioritization of his own pleasure over others' well-being.



When Agnes opened the door to find Shug on her steps, she wasn't the least bit excited to see him. He produced the football cleats he brought for Shuggie, but she didn't take them, so he lay them on the step as a peace offering. He presented her with beer as well, but she told him she doesn't drink anymore. He was doubtful and asked how long she'd been sober. She said, "long enough to matter." He asked if he could come in, calling her Missus Bain. She turned to walk inside without responding, and he followed.

Agnes made tea and toast for Shug as he walked around the living room. He wondered where she got the money for all the new things she has. The two talked about Catherine in South Africa, and Shug told her that she is pregnant. He said that Donald Jnr.'s mother is planning to fly out and help. Agnes responded that she doesn't have the money to do the same. Shug asked if Shuggie had turned out anything like him, and Agnes said no. Then she left the room, needing a moment alone to deal with the news about Catherine.

Soon, Shug wandered down the hall looking for her, bringing the beer with him. He looked in the rooms he passed, taking in the ornaments he had forgotten about. Finally, he found her in the boys' room. On the windowsill, he noticed Shuggie's carefully curated collection of robots. In them, he recognized the same desire that he couldn't quench in Agnes. He asked her why Shuggie doesn't have any football posters, and Agnes told him that Shuggie doesn't like football or posters. She then told him to leave.

Later that summer, Agnes is worried that the laundry drying on their rack outside will be ruined by nuclear showers after the Chernobyl accident. Just as she and Shuggie bring everything in, it starts to rain. Agnes irons the damp laundry as Shuggie sits by the fire. He remembers, watching her, how they took the cans of lager Shug brought over to Jinty McClinchy. Shug had tried to ruin Agnes again, but he failed. Eugene called the same day, but Agnes was sure he was just letting her down gradually, since he is a good man.

Shug's initial tactics to manipulate Agnes are colored by kindness and generosity, but her lack of response shows how much she has changed since he abandoned her years ago. Gifts and booze would have, at one point, meant the world to her, but her compulsions—or at least the way she manages them—have changed along with her drinking habits.



Because flattery is ineffective, Shug actively tries to cut Agnes down, bringing up the grandchildren she didn't even know about in order to bend her to his will. When Shug wonders if Shuggie is anything like him, Agnes is firm and proud when she says no—even if Shuggie would be better accepted by his peers if he were like his father. Agnes leaving to process her grief alone also shows considerable growth, as she has historically relied on alcohol and others in times of strife.



Agnes leaving to handle her hurt privately gives Shug the opportunity to assess her home. Deciding that she must have a man, he doubles down on his commitment to have her even if it ruins her life. When he wanders down the hall, he explicitly ignores her desire for space. Agnes's assertion that Shuggie has nothing in common with his father is not an attempt at revenge, as it likely would have been when Agnes was drinking, but an effort to show Shug that there is nothing left for him here.



Giving Shug's beer to Jinty represents a significant victory of will on Agnes's part. In doing so, Agnes is demonstrating a generosity that Jinty has never showed her. That action is made even more meaningful to Shuggie given that his mother and Eugene's relationship seems to be ending—something that would have sent Agnes into a spiral of drunkenness in the past. Shuggie's amazement at his mother's strength is also informed by the coziness of their home; his belief in Agnes has begun to grow not only because of her words, but because she continues to make him feel safe.



When Eugene arrives to pick Agnes up for a date, she can tell things have changed. He doesn't come inside to collect her or open her car door; he just waits for her behind the wheel. They drive to the dark of the old colliery yard, and Agnes half-remembers an unpleasant encounter in a different **cab** in this same spot. Eugene admits to Agnes that he had planned on ending things because the other alcoholics at her party had scared him. He found them pathetic, and he still can't understand how Agnes is like them. To him, she seems normal, but Agnes assures him that she is exactly like the people he met. She asks him to take her home.

Instead, Eugene drives to a golf resort down the highway. Agnes feels underdressed, and she is dazzled by the classiness of the interior and the expansiveness of the menu. She tries to order something simple, but Eugene insists she order a three-course meal. As the two sip their cokes, Agnes tells Eugene she doesn't mind if he orders a drink. As they eat, he asks her if AA has told her when she will be better. She tells him she will never be able to drink again, but Eugene is insistent that she's a different person now. He admits that he is enchanted by her beauty and class, that she is by far the best woman in Pithead, but he worries about their future if she really has a problem.

Agnes keeps trying to bring the conversation back to the food, but Eugene is fixated on drinking. He orders them a bottle of wine and says he won't force her, but he thinks she can handle one glass. She ignores the wine when he toasts her, instead clinking her coke glass. She asks about Eugene's daughter. He tells her she is a good and generous person, like her mother, though he worries she's too religious. Agnes wonders if he told his daughter about her, but Eugene says that Colleen beat him to it. Agnes knows then that whatever his daughter has heard about her is surely unflattering.

The two finish their dinner and dessert, but Agnes still hasn't touched her wine. Eugene asks what would happen if she did, and she guesses she'd probably lose control. He tells her that she's changed, that maybe she'd be fine. Agnes doesn't understand why he is so insistent until he admits that he just wants her to act normally. To him, that means being able to have a drink. He wins her over, and she drinks the glass slowly. She feels unchanged and hopeful, seeing that he was right. The two go off to the bar for night cap.

Eugene's choice to take Agnes to an abandoned colliery (coal mine) is strikingly different from their earlier dates, when he took her out to show her off in public. Both this and their conversation confirm Agnes's suspicion that Eugene is having second thoughts about their relationship. In the past, this would have triggered her intense fear of being abandoned by those she loves. Agnes's strength in rejecting Shug has reinforced her commitment, though, giving her the strength to reaffirm that she is exactly as messed up as the other recovering addicts, even if it makes her boyfriend think less of her.



Instead of listening to Agnes, Eugene seems intent to show her he knows better. He thus takes her to the nicest place in town in an effort to sway her. This, alongside his intense flattery, plays on her old longing for an exciting, fancy life. At the beginning of their relationship, he was clear that he couldn't provide this for her, but his need to convince her to be the person he wants her to be has ultimately overshadowed his honesty. Just as soon as he builds her up and assures her of his affection, he holds her hope hostage by saying that he can't give her real love if her alcoholism is really as big a problem as she claims.



Eugene's attempt to persuade Agnes is not dissimilar from the cunning manipulation tactics used earlier by Jinty to convince Agnes to drink. In vocalizing that he won't make her do anything, he draws attention away from the extreme pressure he's putting on her. Like Jinty, no malice is likely intended, but he is similarly only thinking of his best interests. Unlike Jinty, Eugene does not have the excuse of addiction as driver for his selfishness. Instead, he is selfish in the way only men are allowed to be in this culture.



Eugene is confident in his argument, putting pressure on Agnes until he wears down her resolve. Ultimately, he convinces her to drink because she wants him to be right, and she lets that desire win out over her caution. Because she does not immediately spiral out of control, she even starts to believe that she was wrong to refuse alcohol in the first place.



Eugene and Agnes have drink after drink at the bar, and they leave drunk in Eugene's **cab**. They swerve back to the colliery lot, where they attempt to have sex. It is unpleasant; Agnes remembers again the other encounter she had on a different drunken night, and the coins coming out of Eugene's pockets make her feel like he is paying for sex. They stop and head home. When they reach Agnes's house, she struggles to get the front door unlocked. Leek comes to open it. Agnes smiles at him. When he sees that she is drunk, he starts pounding his fists into Eugene's neck. Behind him, Shuggie has woken. He stands in the hallway crying. He has peed his pants.

Agnes keeps drinking straight through the holidays, no longer bothering to hide the constant pouring of beer and vodka. While Leek starts to slowly disappear, favoring sleep as his escape, Shuggie is bound to Agnes's side. He guards the door so she can't wander out in the night, and he sits by her as she makes nasty **phone** calls. She starts telling horrible stories about Shug and other men who wronged her again. They are all going hungry, all the money going to alcohol, and Shuggie takes to stuffing the curtains in his mouth to abate his hunger. Sober Agnes would have chided him for ruining her drapery, but this Agnes doesn't notice.

On New Years' Eve, Agnes starts drinking early in the day. Leek is gone, but Shuggie watches over his mother. From the hallway, he hears the sad music on the cassette player that always bodes ill. He wonders when she will finally pass out so he can rest. When he enters the room, it takes Agnes a long time to react to him. She has on only a bra and her signature tights. When she finally sees Shuggie, all she notices is his pajamas. She gives him a coin to pay for hot water and sends him to take a bath. She tells him she wants to begin this year fresh. In the tub, Shuggie listens to Agnes rifling around the house looking for her various stashes. He reads from the football book Eugene gave him, committing the scores to memory. He wants to start the new year right, too.

Eugene's insistence that Agnes can handle drinking again is as arrogant as it is wrong. Everything about their resulting sexual encounter undermines Agnes's sense of worth and safety, from the lack of pleasure to the coins falling out of Eugene's pockets. The drunken, gratuitous sex in Eugene's taxi also calls up Agnes's memory of her rape, bringing the symbolism of abuse in black cabs full circle. Both Leek and Shuggie are also drawn back into their past traumas. Shuggie's body revolts against him as it used to, and Leek's love drives him to rage, pushing him to enact violence against Eugene.



Fighting with Eugene has burned through all of Agnes's resolve, making her drinking worse than it has ever been. Shuggie and Leek seem to revert almost instantly to their old roles as well, leaving Leek intentionally isolated and Shuggie alone with his feeling of responsibility for Agnes's well-being. The old anger that kept Agnes glued to the phone on her benders has returned. Her lack of interest in Shuggie's hunger or his staining of the drapes show that her resentment and thirst have even overpowered her extreme preoccupation with appearances.



Agnes is so far gone that she has lost all interest in Shuggie's attention. There is no real care behind her giving him change for a bath. It is like a toll she needs to pay in order to leave the house without resistance; Shuggie is now only an obstacle in her commitment to destroying herself. Her suggestion that they start the year right is language that is not backed up by action in any way, but Shuggie wants to believe there is still hope. He works on memorizing the football scores in the tub in an attempt to address his own supposed issues (which, of course, are only problematic insofar as he lives in a bigoted, homophobic culture).



Once Shuggie and Agnes are dressed in their holiday finery, Agnes hands Shuggie a can of lager. She tells him to take it to Colleen and wish her a happy new year from her and Eugene. Shuggie leaves, never intending to do so. Instead, he stands in the street, looking at everyone else's Christmas trees in their windows. He wonders what they are eating. He remembers the decadent food and quiet evening they had the year before, when Agnes was sober. Unsure what to do with the beer, Shuggie cracks the top and laps at the foam. It isn't as bad as he remembered, so he drinks the lager, filling his painfully empty stomach. He appreciates the warmth and the loopy feeling it gives him. While he is outside, Agnes stumbles out of the house and into a **cab**. Shuggie can tell it isn't Eugene.

The morning after Eugene pressured Agnes to start drinking again, he woke her and asked to meet her at the colliery. He apologized and committed to help her recover. He tasted beer on her breath when they kissed. She hadn't been drinking beer the night before; she showed up freshly drunk. In the four months following this, Eugene came by a few times a week, though he always waited for Leek to leave. On the mornings when Eugene came, Agnes would make him breakfast. He would offer to do work around the house. When he asked Agnes, who was quiet, if she was okay, she told him her head just hurt. At first, he encouraged Agnes not to drink. Then, he just asked her not to call the taxi rank when he was working.

Back in the street watching the **cab** pull away, Shuggie empties the rest of the lager in the grass. The **house** door is wide open, and he wanders the rooms. She is gone, but somehow he is still surprised. He finds their last can of custard and eats it to settle his stomach. After, he searches the house for a sign of where she went. Next to the **phone** he finds her black book. The book is filled with names and notes beside the names, many unkind. Shuggie knows from experience that Agnes could be gone for days.

Shuggie notices the re-dial button on the **phone**. On the other line, he can hear a party raging. He asks if his mother is there, giving her name. The woman who answered puts the phone down to find out, and soon Shuggie hears his mother slurring on the other end. Agnes asks him what he wants, and he asks where she is. She tells him she's at Anna O'Hanna's, and he asks when she will come home. She wonders what time it is, and when he answers, she tells him he should be in bed anyway. He begs her to come back; she accuses him of trying to ruin her party. When he tells her he is frightened, she tells him to go to bed again and hangs up. The receiver of the phone still smells like her.

Agnes's insistence that Shuggie take the beer to Colleen shows that her pettiness is back in full force, even if she says it's an act of good will. Shuggie refuses to do what Agnes requests, knowing that the fallout of the angry McAvennies will likely come his way—they torment him enough as is. The difference between this year and last year's holiday is striking. It highlights Shuggie's intense hunger, making him desperate enough to drink the beer despite his distaste for it. Agnes takes advantage of Shuggie's distraction to flee. It is no coincidence that she leaves in a cab—a consistent harbinger of hurt.



Eugene lingers in the picture, though it is hard to say if he stays out of guilt for pushing Agnes to try drinking again or if he actually believes that he can help her get back to her state of sobriety. Either way, the dynamic between the two has shifted. In coming by in the morning, he both avoids Leek's notice and the need to take Agnes out in public as he once did. Agnes, in turn, clings to him and begins calling his dispatch office as she used to do with Shug: just another way she has fallen back into her old behaviors when drinking.



In addition to the ill omen of the taxi that takes Agnes away, the open door is once more symbolic of the interior state of the house; Agnes is long gone, exposed to the full dangers of the world. The address book, like the phone it sits next to, is emblematic of Agnes's fraught, angry connections to the outside world. The book contains the volume and complexities of her alcohol-fueled resentments, and Shuggie is overwhelmed by it.



Once Shuggie has some food in his stomach and the shock of Agnes's utter abandonment wears off, he commits (ever her caretaker) to finding her. His quick thinking in redialing the phone and using Agnes's address book to track her goes far beyond what most children his age would be able to accomplish. Despite his year-long break from these adult responsibilities, Shuggie has been developing these skills from a very young age. Still, he longs for his mother like a boy much younger might when he smells her fragrance on the phone.



In the phone book, Shuggie finds Anna's address. He calls a cab company, and the man on the phone tells him the price of the ride from Pithead into the city. Shuggie raids the television and gas meter, getting just enough coins to cover the cost. Soon, the **cab** arrives. On the backroads into the city, he asks Shuggie if he is dressed so nice for a party. Shuggie says yes, but he also explains he likes to look good. The man asks after his mother, telling Shuggie he is very mature for travelling alone. He tells Shuggie he has a son his age. He pulls over on the side of the road and asks Shuggie if he'd prefer to ride in the front, as the man's son likes to do.

Once in the passenger side of the front **cab**, Shuggie sees there is no seat. He kneels on the floor, and the man offers him his half-eaten sandwich. The cabby seems friendly and decently handsome; Shuggie reflects that he'd like him to meet his mother. The cab takes off again, sending Shuggie flying. The driver puts his arm around Shuggie to hold him in place. He tells him he sees children left alone starving by their drunken parents all the time.

Slowly, the man moves his hand from Shuggie's waist into his underwear. Shuggie's waistband cuts into his stomach as the man presses into him. Shuggie feels the food he's eaten churning in the stomach with the lager. Shuggie tells the man his father is a cabby, as is his mother's boyfriend, and he wonders aloud if the driver knows either of them. The man pulls his hands from Shuggie's pants. They make awkward conversation until they arrive at the party. Shuggie offers the coins, but the man declines them.

In the building, Shuggie encounters a couple in an intimate position. He asks the woman if the man is hurting her, and the woman tells her companion to stop. Shuggie gives her one of his coins. He moves on to the apartment, but he doesn't see Agnes. A boy Shuggie's age sits in the living room. The boy waves, but noting his neatly parted hair and plate of sweets, Shuggie can tell the boy is loved. Shuggie walks away, checking the bedrooms. In the master bedroom, he sits by a pile of coats, defeated. As he begins to cry, the coats move. Agnes emerges, and her tears scare Shuggie's away. He uncovers her coat by coat until she stands before him. She is half naked. Her tights are ripped all the way up.

Once Shuggie finds where Agnes has gone, he faces a whole new set of obstacles. He successfully tackles these as well, forced to survive and driven by his feeling of commitment for Agnes, who can't feel any such responsibility for her child in her drunken haze. The cab driver's interest in Shuggie begins with his notice of Shuggie's peculiarities, though Shuggie is nonchalant in response, saying that he just takes pride in his appearance.



From his experience with other neglected children, the cabby sees through Shuggie's refinement and sees his need. The driver's motivations in offering him attention and food seem good natured to Shuggie, who is more used to dealing with individuals like Shug or Jinty, whose selfish actions are not effectively veiled by benevolence. Because of Agnes's beliefs about appearance, Shuggie also tends to believe well-kept individuals are more trustworthy.



While the cabby initially complimented Shuggie's apparent sophistication, it becomes very clear that his interest is not in Shuggie's maturity. Instead, he sees a child who is alone; like others before him, he takes advantage of the vulnerable position that Agnes's alcohol-fueled absence has put Shuggie in. Shuggie understands enough to know that he cannot appeal to predators nor fight them off, so instead he tries to scare the man off by implying that there are men in his life the cabby should be afraid of.



Shuggie's distrust of men understandably escalates immediately after his encounter with the driver. When he stumbles on the drunk couple in the stairwell, he cannot move on until he knows the woman is not being hurt like the cabby hurt him. The sight of the other boy, who unlike him is being cared for, also stops Shuggie in place. The shock of his own trauma and disappoint at not being able to find Agnes begins to overwhelm him until Agnes emerges. Seeing that she is unwell, Shuggie chooses to quash his own hurt and focus on caring for her instead.



Three months later in March, Agnes wakes Shuggie with desperate expression on her face. She sees the hair on his legs as he stretches in bed, remarking he'll be a man and taller than Leek soon. It's a Tuesday, so he knows she wants him to cash their child support and bring her home alcohol. Shuggie knows something has changed since New Year's; drinking is no longer a good time for Agnes, just a way to curb her loneliness. Agnes was fired from her job for missing work, though she tells her sons it was because she was too beautiful. Leek listens, waiting until she's finished to ask when she'll stop fooling herself.

At the office to cash their support, the postmistress gives Shuggie a hard time. Agnes has not signed properly, so Shuggie fills it out as a designee. The woman wonders why his mother can't come herself. She threatens to take the book from him, but the impatient crowd back him, repeating that his mother is not well. They know he will not eat if the woman takes away their benefits. She relents, but whispers to him that he should go back to school so he can make something of himself instead of living off benefits like his mother. After, Shuggie runs off to relieve his nervous bowels. By the time he gets home, Agnes is all done up. The two walk to the store, and as they pass Colleen and the neighbors, Agnes has Shuggie recite rehearsed lines about how tired he is of eating steak every night.

At the store, the grocer also asks why Shuggie isn't in school. Agnes lies, telling the man Shuggie has the bug that has been spreading around school. Agnes reads from her shopping list to him, asking for some essential food, then for the paper and some chocolate for Shuggie. Finally, she asks for her lager, as if she almost forgot. When the man gives the total, she admits she doesn't have enough. He tells her that she already owes him 24 pounds and that he can't cut her a break until it's paid. Agnes has him put back a few of the needed food items. At home, Agnes cracks the top of her first beer. Shuggie hugs her around the waist, telling her he'd do whatever she needs.

In the place where Shuggie used to practice walking like a real boy, he drags furniture, a rug, and a busted TV to recreate a kind of living room. He has collected plates and forks and other necessary house things. Like Leek before him, Shuggie hides in this special place during Agnes's benders. During his hunt for abandoned housewares, he has found a frozen, dead rabbit. After washing it in the stream, he buries it alongside the pony toys he stole when he was younger. He gathers flowers, too, trying to make a beautiful house like Agnes does.

All the good things that Agnes built over her year of sobriety—a sense of purpose, true friendships, romantic companionship—have been lost. She cites her own beauty and the jealousy of others for these losses because she is unwilling to stop drinking and rebuild her happiness; it is easier to blame outside factors. Leek's tolerance of this behavior has run out, and he is no longer willing to ignore the problem in order to keep the peace.



Unlike Leek, Shuggie does not know what to do except follow through on supporting his mother, even if he's enabling her. In his confrontation with the government worker, Shuggie unfairly shoulders the blowback from Agnes's decisions. Though the woman may be trying to help Shuggie by cutting Agnes off and forcing him to stay in school, the reality is that he suffers disproportionately either way. Even though Shuggie is missing school and starving because of Agnes's sickness, he is still committed to lying about their extravagant dinners to protect her pride in front of the neighbors.



Agnes has sunken so far into her alcoholism that she lies and manipulates freely all while feigning innocence—just as Jinty did at Agnes's expense earlier. Beer is the only thing keeping her afloat, so she is willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to keep her stash stocked. As the hope of Agnes getting better fades from view, Shuggie does not turn away. In some ways, he has nowhere else to go aside from Agnes, as he is still rejected by everyone else in the community because of his queerness. His love for Agnes, in spite of the position she has put him, endures.



As his home life falls apart, Shuggie's copes by creating this makeshift living room, which provides him a rare safe place over which he maintains control. His impulse to add beauty to the space reflects the best parts of Agnes—parts he has internalized, even though they have been overshadowed by her drinking. The care with which he prepares the rabbit's body and buries it also reveals a tenderness that he has managed to maintain despite the difficulty of his situation.



On his way home, Shuggie thinks he'll take a bath and study the book of football scores, but the door is hanging open when he gets there. He is confused by the commotion he finds in the living room, where Leek is sitting on Agnes. There is red in places there shouldn't be—the carpet, the coffee table, the television, Leek and Agnes's bodies. Many tea towels have been bloodied. Agnes is using curse words that Shuggie doesn't even know as Leek holds her down. Leek is crying in a way Shuggie has never seen before. On the carpet, Shuggie notices a razor blade, which looks small and harmless.

Once Leek can secure one of Agnes's wrists under his knee, he grabs at Shuggie and tells him to call an ambulance. Agnes's other wrist breaks free, spraying blood everywhere. Shuggie still can't understand what is happening. Agnes accuses Leek of selfishness as she cries. He is crying too, their tears meeting on her face. She says she is tired. She insists that he doesn't love her. Shuggie calls for help, not understanding the words Leek continues to scream at him through the door.

In the psychiatric ward, Agnes sleeps off her suicide attempt. Eugene and Leek watch over her together. Somehow, her body between them is a comfort against the awkwardness of their last interaction. The two barely talk, except to piece together what happened. Leek explains that he only came in time because she found a way to dial the foreman of his jobsite directly. The man had come to him holding his jacket, telling him he had to get home. It's the only reason she is alive.

When Agnes finally wakes, she doesn't remember what she did. She looks at the two men, only understanding when she feels the pain in her wrists. Agnes wonders where Shuggie is. Leek tells her he's fine, but she insists on knowing where he is. Leek finally tells her that Shuggie is staying with his father. Agnes almost doesn't believe him, not until he tells her that he thinks she called Shug before cutting her wrists, asking her ex-husband to come get the boy. Shug came for him while Leek was still waiting for the ambulance, and he couldn't protect her and Shuggie at the same time. Leek tells Agnes he can't look out for her anymore.

Again, the open door tells Shuggie that there is a severe breach of normalcy and safety in the house before he even walks in to discover Agnes's suicide attempt. The seeming innocuousness of the razor reflects how even the smallest things have become dangerous to Agnes in her state of addiction. Despite Leek and Shuggie's constant vigilance in trying to protect her, Agnes seems determined to find any opportunity to escalate the situation. She does so without regard for herself, let alone the people who love her, fighting them even as they try to help.



Agnes fights frantically against Leek's attempts to save her life as she continues to lose large quantities of blood, just as she fights both her sons' attempts to care for her and save her from the slow death her alcoholism is causing. Her insistence that they do not love her despite all evidence to the contrary has nothing to do with their efforts; she instead is projecting her own fear that she is unlovable onto them.



While Leek and Eugene have been at odds and have avoided each other since Eugene helped break Agnes's sobriety, their mutual love of her brings them together as she recovers. Though Agnes had been adamant that Leek didn't love her and that she was too tired to keep living, her choice to call Leek's foreman before her suicide attempt shows she still has some remaining will to live.



Agnes's attempt at her own life was serious enough, however, for her to consider calling Shug to come get Shuggie. This is not something she would have considered as a kindness to Shuggie in her right mind. Instead, it served as another cry for help that backfired when Shug showed up for Shuggie. Agnes's anger at Leek for letting this situation play out is fully misdirected. Even her near death is not able to scare her out of her spiraling delusions.



Shug came for Shuggie as Agnes had asked, though her call had been full of accusation. In it, she referred to her son as Shug's prize for finally doing her in. On their way to Shug's house, he pulled the **cab** over to make a phone call. Shuggie studied his few belongings: a clean pair of pajamas, some cherished possessions, and a photo of Shug holding newborn Shuggie. When Shug hung up the pay phone, he stood for a long time rubbing his mustache. Shug noticed his son was covered in blood and made him change into his PJs before arriving at his house.

Shuggie sees the house where Shug lives with Joanie; he feels it is absent of hope. There is no greenery anywhere, only concrete and asphalt. Still, the home has two stories and a dining room, which Shuggie knows would kill Agnes. Joanie came out to nod at Shuggie when he arrived, but nothing more. Shuggie's hatred of her has been ingrained in him from a young age. He only vaguely remembers the roller skates she gave him. At the dining table, the tension between Shug and Joanie is palpable. Joanie's children are unimpressed with Shuggie; they ignore him as they tell their mother about their days. They all call Shug "dad," and they vie for his attention. Shuggie watches his father as the other kids talk.

When dinner is done, Joanie shows Shuggie to the bed of her youngest son, Hugh. He is in the army, and she emphasizes that Shuggie's time there is only temporary. The room is messy and small, half the room of a boy and half the room of a man. Shuggie realizes Shug has 14 kids, adopted and blood, with a son named Hugh by each of his three wives. Shuggie reflects that, though he has only spent three hours with Shug, this is more than he might have expected given his number of children.

As much as possible, Shug picks up shifts to hide from everyone else. In the mornings, Joanie gives Shuggie a meager amount of food and tells him to go wherever he wishes, warning him not to come back until dark. Shuggie spends his time riding the elevators up and down the government housing towers. When he finds a laundry room unlocked, he either bides his time there or on the landing, where he sticks his legs through the blocks into the wind. From whatever height he can reach, he drops the green toy soldiers he finds in Hugh's room. He wonders where his mother is and if she is alive.

Agnes telling Shug that he has finally won Shuggie from her is not out of character, since she began drinking again, but Shug coming like Agnes asked him to is a departure from his typical response. It is unclear what shifted to cause this change. Shug's tense conversation at the payphone and his worried mustache rubbing suggest that he made the decision to bring home Shuggie without consulting Joanie, as well.



Shuggie is well aware that Agnes's main complaint against Shug—aside from his infidelity—is that he failed to follow through on his promise of a better life. His empty promise now makes the size of Shug and Joanie's house seem especially unfair, since this is clearly the kind of life Shug falsely claimed he would give Agnes and Shuggie. What bothers Shuggie the most, though, is how close everyone in Shug and Joanie's family is—a closeness that is nothing like the fraught, messy relationships in Shuggie's own household.



By staying in the room of his half-brother who shares the same name as Shuggie and their father, Shuggie feels particularly struck by the differences between he and the other Hugh. While Shuggie has been attempting to appear more masculine for years, Hugh's burgeoning manhood is apparent in the state of the room. Still, there is a sense of carefree living in Hugh's room that Shuggie has never experienced. Unlike Shuggie, Hugh has always had a father in the house, which is significant compared to the mere hours Shuggie has spent with Shug since he abandoned the family. It is as if he has been dropped in the alternate, Protestant life he might have had if Agnes hadn't been his mother.



Shug and Joanie's behavior toward Shuggie make it clear that he is barely welcome in their home. Though Shuggie is only a child and has done nothing—in fact, he has just lived through yet another trauma—all the family's disdain for Agnes lands on Shuggie by proxy. Shuggie is used to caring for himself, so his only real fear is how Agnes, who has always been the center of his world, is doing. As he bides his time and worries, he drops the toy soldiers of his counterpart, Hugh, from great height—an expression of his frustration.



It takes three weeks for Agnes to heal and start looking for Shuggie. When she calls, Joanie gives back as much grief as Agnes has given her over the years before hanging up on her. She and her children laugh at Agnes after. Shuggie cries, afraid his mother will think he has become one of them. Before Agnes comes for Shuggie, she does her hair and makeup, donning expensive clothes. Agnes makes sure her coat covers the bandages on her wrists, then drinks three beers for her nerves. She empties the house meters to get enough for taxi fare.

When Agnes arrives at Shug and Joanie's, no one answers, so she screams in at her ex-husband. Still without answer, she picks up a metal trash can and throws it straight through the glass of the window. When Joanie runs to see what happened, she finds trash, shattered glass, and her television broken in the living room. She threatens to kill Agnes. Shug uses his body to block the Micklewhites from running out to attack his ex-wife. Agnes keeps yelling for him to send Shuggie out. Joanie calls her crazy, and Agnes takes off her heels to throw at her. The second one connects with Joanie's face and draws blood.

Shuggie can't get through the mass of Micklewhite bodies at the door, so he jumps through the window that Agnes broke. Shug tells him that Agnes won't get better, trying to convince him to stay. Shuggie responds that she might. As he hugs his mother and begins to cry, Agnes gently tells him to save it until they are out of sight. They walk away, and Agnes hopes they never have to see Shug again. In the taxi, Agnes tries not to think about the smell of Joanie's soap in Shuggie's hair. He finally cries, and when Agnes makes promises he knows she'll break, he doesn't argue.

One morning, Eugene sits in his taxi outside Agnes's house, waiting for Leek to leave. When he does, Eugene goes inside. He makes toast for himself and Shuggie, who Eugene hears moving around in his bedroom. Agnes is snoring still, and he guesses her head is hanging off the bed again. He stacks some canned food in the cabinet, adding it to the others he has stashed there each day to make himself feel better. On the counter, he sees the ads for house swaps that Agnes has circled and the ad she has been working on for her own house.

Since she and Shug have guardianship over Shuggie, Joanie has an upper hand over Agnes for the first time in years. Agnes comes in person, but not before donning her perpetual armor of fine clothing and makeup. After such a terrible incident, Agnes is determined to communicate that she has not lost her dignity. This is not confidence enough for her mission, however. She is already drinking again to bolster her resolve, and the money has run so low she has to bust open the meters for change to get to Shuggie.



Without an immediate answer at the door, Agnes's anger rises. She seems bent on destroying the respectable home that Shug once promised her and has given to Joanie instead. It is also particularly fitting that Agnes's fancy heels land the blow to Joanie's head. They function as a symbol for Agnes's beautiful, curated appearance, which she uses to combat the judgement of others and maintain her pride.



The motivation behind Shug's warning to Shuggie could be interpreted as either a final stab at Agnes or a genuine caution for his son. Regardless of Shug's intent, Shuggie's response shows how committed he is to believing his mother may change, even in the face of significant evidence to the contrary. Agnes's motives in asking Shuggie not to cry are more straightforward—she is trying to save whatever face she can in front of Shug and the Micklewhites. Despite Shuggie's comment to his father, it seems that he knows deep down that he cannot trust Agnes, even if he still hopes she gets better.



In the months following Agnes's suicide attempt, Eugene has stepped up as a temporary caretaker for her. Whatever truce was reached between Leek and Eugene at Agnes's bedside has since ended. Eugene's habit of stocking the house with food and stopping in each day is largely driven by his own guilt and pity for Agnes. In reading Agnes's ad, Eugene sees that the tentative holding pattern they have reached will likely not last much longer.



After Agnes's suicide attempt, Eugene notices that she can't help picking at the scabs on her wrist. He feels her need to find a new place to live, far away from Pithead where she can regain some pride, is a similar fixation. One day, she mentioned wanting to find a place where they would live together, but he couldn't bring himself to answer. Just as Eugene goes to leave on this particular morning, knowing Agnes will never even know he was there, Shuggie emerges from his room. The two salute and pretend they are switching shifts; Shuggie leaves the night watch over Agnes, handing off the day shift to Eugene.

On the final morning of their relationship, Agnes asks Eugene if he will move in with them when she finds another house closer to the city. The two are in the middle of having sex. Eugene tells her no and goes into the kitchen. It takes Agnes a long time to get up and follow. In the kitchen as she makes him his usual toast, sausage, and morning tea, he tells her that he doesn't like when she's drunk. After he finishes his breakfast, he leaves in his **cab** and never returns.

After, Agnes's drinking worsens. She drinks beer to deal with her sadness, then vodka when she wants to be angry. Other people are constantly in and out of the house, bringing her more alcohol. Shuggie skips school to look after her, but he tries to study in quiet moments. One day, Agnes tells him to call her a **cab**, telling him she wants to get away from him. She says she wants to go to the bingo hall. She's angry when Shuggie says the taxi will be a while. He tries to tell Agnes her hair is a mess, appealing to her vanity, but only the promise of another drink coaxes her back inside.

Shuggie pours her a strong drink, hoping she'll pass out as he brushes her hair. She tells him that she wants to find him another father and continues to ask if the **cab** is there yet. Shuggie says he doesn't want a father. Eventually, Agnes does fall asleep. Shuggie tries to study, but Agnes wakes when Leek comes home and slams the door. She asks for money. Leek stalks off to his room when he sees how drunk she is, slamming another door. Shuggie yells after him that he tried, and Agnes chides him for screaming so loud. Agnes goes to the door and knocks until Leek answers.

Agnes's desire to move away from Pithead and her constant picking at her scabs shows her growing restlessness. Because she feels she has permanently lost her pride in their current community, she knows there is no hope left for her there. Eugene and Shuggie's joke about switching shifts for Agnes's care highlights the difficult work that watching over Agnes has become. It also underscores that Shuggie, an adolescent, has developed the same sense of responsibility as Eugene, who is a fully grown man.



It is apparent that Agnes has misjudged Eugene's commitment to her, though Eugene has not been transparent about his intentions either. When Eugene tells Agnes that he does not like when she is drunk, his role in her life comes full circle. It seems he has discharged his feeling of indebtedness to her, so he now abandons her just as all the other men in her life have done, pushed away by her addiction (which he himself fueled).



Drinking becomes Agnes's catch-all activity, and she keeps company only with people who enable her. Just as taxis symbolize abandonment by men for Agnes, they begin to symbolize Agnes's abandonment of Shuggie. Her alcoholism has begun to take precedence over everything else: beauty, pride, and family. Shuggie's determination to care for his mother does not waiver in response to her rejection of him, but his attempts to study in between benders shows that he still longs for a life outside her codependency with Agnes.



Interestingly, Shuggie has learned that instead of persuading Agnes not to drink, he can use alcohol to keep her bound to the house. Shuggie finds no real enjoyment in Agnes's presence any longer; he just prefers to have her around only so he can rest easy knowing she's safe from the people who will likely take advantage of her outside. When Leek disturbs the peace that Shuggie managed to arrange, the brothers fight. The two are increasingly at odds because Leek's primary goal is escaping Agnes, which butts against Shuggie's compulsion to care for her.



Agnes begins fighting with Leek, complaining that though she spends all her time cooking and cleaning and stuck at home with Shuggie, Leek can't even be kind to her when he comes home. He tries to apologize, but she suddenly notices he is wearing new jeans. She asks if he is wearing them to the pub; he only answers yes after she presses him. Agnes asks if he wants dinner first. When he says he would, she tells him he doesn't give her enough money to make any food. She calls him several homophobic slurs, the same ones Shuggie hears thrown at him every day. Leek looks to Shuggie as Agnes rages. She jabs her fingers into Leek's chest, and he bats her hand away.

Agnes, feeling her pride challenged by Leek, kicks him out of the house. She is deaf to his pleas to stay. He steels himself and goes to his room to pack. When Shuggie follows, Leek tells him that he is the man of the house now, which means he'll have to keep enough of the benefit money away from her so they can eat. Leek also tells him to try to keep the other alcoholics in the neighborhood out of the house, especially men. He implores Shuggie to try to finish school so he can leave one day. Whenever he does leave the house, Leek suggests that he hide all the sharp objects and medicine. Shuggie doesn't tell Leek that he already knows all these things, that he has been doing them since he was a child.

When Leek tells Shuggie he is getting older and will be able to leave soon, too, Shuggie asks him who will look after Agnes to make sure she gets better. Leek kneels so he can look Shuggie in the eye as he tells him that Agnes will never change. He tells his little brother not to make the same mistakes that he did by staying. The only thing Shuggie can do is to save himself. Once Leek finally leaves, things only deteriorate. Shuggie tries to do as Leek told him, hoping he might come back eventually.

Agnes wakes one morning alone. She spies Shuggie cleaning and asks for a hug. She notices how big he has grown, not quite a man or a child. Sitting there, they both agree they don't want to live in Pithead anymore. Agnes bathes and dresses up in her nice clothes, then walks into town. She ignores the neighborhood women and the men at the club as she passes, though she can hear them talk about her. On her walk, she runs into Colleen. The woman tries to avoid her, but Agnes insists on talking. She inquires after Eugene, who Colleen says is well, before asking Colleen to stop calling to harass her. Colleen blanches at this.

Agnes's regard for Leek and Shuggie has been totally eclipsed by her drinking. She is locked in her own experiences and desires. When Agnes sees that Leek has spent money on himself rather than contributing to their communal welfare—glossing over the certainty that she would have only spent that money on more alcohol—her anger goes far beyond reason. Her usual sensitivity to Shuggie's differences is gone as well, and she coopts homophobic language in an effort to tear Leek down, not caring how it makes Shuggie feel.



Leek tries to fix the situation, but Agnes is in no state for mercy; something shifts in him when he sees this, however. He understands her rejection of him could be an opportunity to be an adult for himself, as opposed to the way he has stepped up to fill the hole left by Agnes's absence of responsibility. Being the older brother, Leek has failed to see how much Shuggie has also shouldered over the years. In many ways, Shuggie has carried more than Leek, since he has not only looked out for Agnes's physical safety but also her emotional well-being. While Leek's instructions on keeping dangerous household items and men away from Agnes and money stashed for food read as condescending to Shuggie, his admonishment that Shuggie finish school hits home.



With Leek leaving, Shuggie feels like the full weight of ensuring Agnes doesn't harm herself now falls to him. At a younger age, Leek felt this same pressure, and his conversation with his little brother is an attempt to help Shuggie realize that he needs to look out for himself first—because Agnes never will. Shuggie is not ready to see the situation as Leek has come to.



In an increasingly rare moment of sobriety—or withdrawal in between benders, at least—Agnes sees her son with fresh eyes. She sees him not as a man or a child, but stuck somewhere in between, just as the two have become stuck in Pithead. Agnes harnesses her momentary clarity to fix herself up before going to post her ad, girding herself with confidence as she has done for her previous moves.



Agnes continues, telling Colleen that she is putting a house swap ad in the paper and plans to leave as soon as possible. Colleen tells Agnes she and Shuggie are hypocrites for thinking they are better than everyone in town. She berates Agnes for sleeping with married men and calls Shuggie a “funny wee boy.” Colleen tells Agnes that her late mother and Eugene’s wife will never take him back in heaven after sleeping with someone as dirty as her. Agnes does not respond to this, instead telling Colleen she may want to clean the dirt from her neck before going out in public. Colleen asks if that’s her best insult. Agnes throws one more in Colleen’s face; she tells her that she slept with Jamesy, that it was bad, and that he had skid marks in his underwear.

Back at home, Shuggie knows Agnes has done something when the McAvennie girls try to coax him outside with candy. He won’t come, so they spit in the mail slot until it runs into the carpet. They call him dirty names and try to break the door in. When they tire, their older brother comes over and tries to talk to Shuggie. His tone is kind, which Shuggie finds confusing. He tells Shuggie he came to apologize for being cruel. He pushes a toy through the slot, but Shuggie still won’t open the door for him. He tells Shuggie he wants to give him an apology kiss. Shuggie considers this, but instead he shoves the rag covered in the McAvennie girls’ spit into their brother’s mouth. He tells Shuggie he is going to stab him. Shuggie sits still as he jabs his knife through the letter slot repeatedly.

In preparation for their move, Agnes sells as much of their things as she can and then spends her time scanning catalogues for the new things she will buy. Shuggie wonders under his breath why he isn’t enough. Still, he helps her pack. On their last night, they eat chocolate and go through Agnes’s clothes, picking only the items that will help her be what she wants to be in their new life. As Shuggie gives her advice on her wardrobe, she asks him what he wants to be. He says he doesn’t know because all his effort has gone toward her. She promises to stop drinking in their new place, and Shuggie nods even though he doesn’t believe her. She hands him one of the last two beers in the house, and the two pour them down the sink drain.

Colleen’s comments show that she has seen through Agnes’s carefully crafted image, underneath which Colleen only sees vanity, judgement, and overcompensation. Shuggie, too, is lumped into Colleen’s critique, though this is largely just because he is different. Agnes rebuffs Colleen’s very accurate assessment of her by cutting her down based on her cleanliness, taste, and marriage. Her declaration that she had bad sex with Jamesy and saw his dirty underwear combines all three insults. Though Agnes’s admission confirms some of her most shameful drunken behavior, her main goal is to deeply injure Colleen; she succeeds.



As usual, Shuggie is the one who bears the brunt of Agnes’s inflammatory behavior. Shuggie’s classmates are never nice to him, so the McAvennies’ kind demeanor reads immediately as a red flag to him. The McAvennie boy’s quiet request to kiss him does take Shuggie by surprise, however. Shuggie’s attraction to other boys makes him pause, but he sees through the rouse to get to him. Shuggie’s payback is not considered an equal offense, however. The price for standing up for himself—potentially getting stabbed—is always higher than it would be for anyone else because of the prejudice of his peers.



Shuggie and Agnes’s preparations for moving are another example of how central appearance and pride are to Agnes. More than her loving son, her intelligence, or her will, Agnes trusts that the right wardrobe and new people who haven’t seen her pride crumble will ensure her happiness. Agnes’s purchase of a whole new closet on credit is also a continuation of the constant striving, overextending, and dissatisfaction that played a large part in the end of her and Shug’s marriage. Just as Agnes’s previous relationships with men overshadowed all her other concerns, Shuggie sees his mother prioritizing her pride over him and is deeply hurt by it. For one of the first times in the novel, Shuggie summons the courage to challenge Agnes on her commitment to starting fresh.



Shuggie is shocked when Agnes goes around the house, finding all her hidden bottles and half-drunk cans. She puts them all down the sink. She asks if Shuggie believes her now. He has never seen her waste so much alcohol; he tries to hide the hopeful tears her actions elicit. Agnes tells Shuggie that no one will know who they have been in this new place. She will stop drinking, he will try to be normal, and together they will have a fully fresh start.

Agnes is, perhaps unintentionally, equating her drinking problem with Shuggie's queerness, even though she struggles with a sickness whereas Shuggie's queerness is an earnest expression of his identity. Ultimately, the message that Shuggie receives is that the chance to be "normal" and admired is more important than honoring his identity. Still, he is so hopeful that Agnes will finally be okay that he doesn't feel hurt by her suggestion that they change together. All he has ever wanted is to be accepted and cared for, and he has always been willing to sacrifice almost anything to realize those dreams.



CHAPTER FOUR: 1989, THE EAST END

As Agnes and Shuggie arrive in the city, Shuggie is amazed at how different it is from Pithead. Every inch of the main streets is brimming with life; people move about their day, the tenements go on for miles, and shops are crammed into every building. Above them, the sky feels very far away. The movers park in the middle of the street, and Agnes and Shuggie go upstairs to their new apartment. Shuggie grabs Agnes's hand, even though he feels too grown for it, trying to hold her there—sober. He continues to pray they will be normal and new here. The apartment is small, and Shuggie knows Leek really can't come home now. When Shuggie sees Agnes looking out the window at the city, he puts his arms around her. They stand there daydreaming, he hopes, together.

While the excitement, variety, and size of their new home engages Shuggie's hope and interest, it also makes him afraid. Looking after his mother in Pithead—where there were limited places for her to get into trouble—was hard enough, and now she has the whole city to disappear in if she wishes. With Leek gone and unable to come back even if he wanted to, there's even more pressure on Shuggie to care for his mother.



Agnes leaves to get tea and pastries. While she is gone, Shuggie sits at the window watching the building kids play in the large, enclosed back garden. He envies how carefree they are, but he also witnesses their brutality. He turns to his football book, continuing to commit scores to memory. As he is reading, Agnes comes home. He knows at once she has been drinking. She insists she hasn't, but her denial only convinces Shuggie more. The alcohol on her breath is damning. He yells at her, accusing her of not even trying to be new here. Agnes is angry at him for ruining her fun. She storms off down the hall, and Shuggie can hear her knocking on all the neighbors' doors to introduce herself. He knows all they will see is a woman drunk before noon.

When Agnes got sober previously, she greeted Shuggie unexpectedly with tea and pastries, so her plan to do this again in celebration of their new chapter feels promising to Shuggie. By going back to memorizing football scores while Agnes is out, Shuggie tries to hold up his end of the bargain and develop more masculine interests. Agnes has already broken their pact, though; not only has she gone out drinking, but in her drunkenness she has embarrassed them both in front of all their new neighbors. Their refreshed sense of pride is very short-lived.



The next day, Shuggie follows a boy his age to the secondary school. The building is massive, seeming to Shuggie like another tenement or city. He follows his neighbor all the way to his classroom, introducing himself as a “late enrollment” to the teacher once class has started. When the man asks his name, the other students jump in, calling him the same slurs his peers in Pithead had. He gives his name, causing another uproar as they point out the slight femininity of his voice and his proper grammar. His new classmates ask if he’s a ballerina, insisting he show them his **dancing**. Shuggie knows for certain in that moment that neither he nor Agnes get to be different here. He leaves the red football book in the desk.

A few months after Shuggie and Agnes move into their East End apartment, the neighbor who Shuggie followed to school on the first day—Keir—knocks on their door. He tells Shuggie he needs his help, and Shuggie agrees. He follows Keir down the road, thinking about the boy’s tanned skin and warm brown eyes as he walks. Keir tells Shuggie he is going to visit his girlfriend, and he needs Shuggie to keep her friend Leanne entertained. He turns around to assess Shuggie’s appearance, then fixes his jacket and hair in a more fashionable, masculine way. They arrive, and Keir chews some gum to freshen his breath. When he is done, he passes the chewed gum to Shuggie, who hesitantly pops it in his mouth, surprised at how enjoyable he finds it. After some convincing, the girls agree to come out with them.

As the couples walk toward the park in pairs, Leanne sneaks glances at Shuggie. Finally, she asks if he doesn’t have a dad because he looks funny. Shuggie tells her his father is dead, and Leanne responds that hers is too. She asks him if he likes girls, and Shuggie is surprised to hear himself admit he doesn’t know. In turn, Leanne tells him that she isn’t sure if she likes boys. She asks if he wants them to date, just for now, as they are trying to figure things out. He agrees, and the two hold hands. Leanne is taller than Shuggie and her arms are longer, but he finds it pleasant enough.

Shuggie follows his neighbor to school rather than asking for guidance because he is both skittish of kids his age and he is used to being self-sufficient. Shuggie’s fear of other students’ prejudice, based on his experiences in Pithead, proves valid at his new school as well. Dancing, which previously functioned as an emblem of hope, unfortunately leads Shuggie’s new classmates to mock and embarrass him for who he is—or at least who they assume he is based on their instant judgements. As he has seen with his mother, Shuggie is now convinced nothing will be different for him here, either. Ditching his football scores signifies that his efforts to change himself have been futile.



In addition to Shuggie’s effeminate mannerisms, the older he gets the more he is confronted with his interest to other boys. Despite Shuggie’s experience-based distrust of his peers, his attraction to Keir makes him happy to follow the older boy blindly. Keir’s adjustments to Shuggie’s appearance in order to mask his queerness are seemingly made without judgment. Shuggie goes along with whatever Keir wants because he is just happy to be near him. Chewing Keir’s used gum makes Shuggie feel even closer to him.



Leanne immediately identifies that there is something different about Shuggie, like most other kids his age do, but her guess that it’s because his father left him is surprisingly accurate. Her assessment indicates she has special familiarity with this dynamic. The two find that they share a lack of attraction to the opposite gender, and their agreement to date for the time being allows them both the protection of appearing straight.



The four children reach their destination, a semi-private hillside past the park, under a bridge and overlooking the motorway. As Keir and his girlfriend begin making out, Shuggie and Leanne sit quietly watching the traffic. When Leanne shivers, he gives her his coat. The two wrap their arms around each other.

Eventually, Shuggie's gaze is drawn to the other couple, who are grinding and moaning. Shuggie finds that he likes the way the muscles in Keir's arms and butt strain. Keir catches him looking and yells at him, but his attention soon goes back to the other girl. Leanne tells Shuggie he can feel her up if he wants, but he declines. He puts the comb Keir used to fix Shuggie's hair in his mouth, enjoying the cigarette and hair gel smell of the other boy. Shuggie offers to comb Leanne's hair instead, and she relaxes into his gentle touch.

While Shuggie brushes her hair, Leanne asks him if his mother drinks. Shuggie responds she does a little and wonders how Leanne knew. She tells him he looks too worried for his age. She confides in him that her mother drinks a little, too. Shuggie tells her that he's worried his mother will drink herself to death, which would devastate him. Leanne tells him she thinks that's what alcoholics want; they just kill themselves slowly. Shuggie feels himself opening to her as they talk, his load lightening in a way he didn't expect.

Shuggie and Leanne continue to exchange war stories about their mothers' drinking. They commiserate about never knowing what they are coming home to, having to hold back some benefit money to feed themselves, and the creepy uncles who are always making their mothers worse. Leanne tells him that her mother, Moira, made her try going to the AA support group for families. All the other kids' mothers were mild drinkers and couldn't understand the level of destructive behavior that drove her mother to drink aftershave and perfume when the alcohol ran out.

Shuggie tells Leanne that Agnes tried to kill herself the night before. Leanne asks if she took pills, slashed her wrists, or put her head in the over. Shuggie tells her that Agnes has done those things before, but this time she tried to jump out the window naked. He pulled her back in, but it terrified him. Shuggie admits that he feels like if she dies from drinking, it will be his fault. Leanne tells him that she probably will drink herself to death, but there is nothing he can do to stop it.

Seeing Keir engaged in sexual activities with his girlfriend only strengthens Shuggie's attraction to him. The only time that Keir is harsh with Shuggie is when he catches him watching him, though his annoyance is soon overshadowed by his interest in his girlfriend. While Leanne gives Shuggie permission to make a move, his observation of Keir has made him certain that he is uninterested. Instead, he satiates his longing for Keir in the only way he can—sucking on his comb. To pass the time, he combs Leanne's hair, an act of care that Shuggie has often extended to his mother to soothe her when she is drunk.



Again, Leanne exhibits a particular insightfulness into Shuggie's life. She's able to do so because, like Shuggie, Leanne's mother's alcoholism has forced her to become a highly observant individual. Because of their shared experience, Shuggie is able to share his fears about Agnes with Leanne in a way he has been unable to do with anyone else.



For the first time, Shuggie is also able to find some humor in the severity of Agnes's—and Moira's—sickness. When speaking with his siblings or father about Agnes in the past, the conversation would be complicated by family dynamics and conflicting desires, but those complexities do not exist between Leanne and Shuggie. Instead, they are two children who love their mothers and have sacrificed for them throughout their childhood.



Leanne's own experience also allow her to fill in the gaps when Shuggie is hesitant to go on. The shared understanding that gives Leanne this ability to anticipate what he has been through takes some of the horror out of the truth for him. Knowing that Leanne is in the same situation also allows Shuggie to believe her when she says there is nothing he can do, in the end, to help Agnes.



Agnes is at home waiting for Shuggie on a different day. As soon as he walks through the door, he tells her he's hungry. She is livid, hearing only male entitlement in his plea. She asks Shuggie why he can't ask about her day, but Shuggie just keeps repeating that he's starving, they have no food, and she needs to do something about it. Agnes tells him that he has it better than her, because he gets a hot lunch at school at least. Shuggie responds that the older boys at school steal his meal ticket every day. He asks his mother what happened to the money—there is not enough alcohol in the house for the money to have been spent on just that—and Agnes admits she lost it at bingo. They look at each other. Shuggie says they'll both starve, and Agnes agrees they probably will.

Shuggie tries to figure out how to feed them, and he decides he will try to steal some crisps from a street vendor like Keir taught him. When he stands to leave, though, Agnes interprets it as Shuggie leaving for good. She calls him a **cab**, telling him to leave and not come back. He begins to cry, trying to hold onto her, but she won't hear reason. Agnes tells him everyone always abandons her, and now he can have his wish and leave too. Shuggie insists that that he wants to stay, that he would even stay to starve with her, but she has made up her mind. She watches him climb hesitantly in the taxi, feeling that he's just proven her right.

In the **cab**, Shuggie sits for a long time. He keeps waiting, hoping Agnes will change her mind and come down. She doesn't. Eventually, he asks the taxi driver to take him to the South Side, where Leek lives. He doesn't know the address, having only been once before, but he is able to find it because the apartment is above a bank. When they arrive, the driver finds out Shuggie doesn't have any money. Shuggie promises that his brother will pay the fare, but the driver won't let him out and threatens to take him to the police. Desperate, Shuggie tells the driver he will give him sexual favors. The man is shocked, seeing how young Shuggie is. He unlocks the doors, and after a few minutes, Leek comes down to pay him.

Inside, Leek asks why Agnes kicked Shuggie out and how long she's been drinking this time. Shuggie says he doesn't know on either account, but he believes he just needs to try harder to keep her sober. Leek tells him again she's never going to stop drinking. Leek makes Shuggie instant noodles, and the two sit in silence watching TV. Shuggie scans the room, observing Leek's haphazard collection of spare dishes and furniture. In the corner, he sees a stack of boxes and realizes his brother is moving away. He feels even more alone.

Shuggie's encounter with Leanne, the previous admonitions from Shug and Leek, and Agnes's continued alcoholic benders begin to shake Shuggie's unquestioning loyalty. It is a significant shift for Shuggie to even admit he is hungry, let alone demand that Agnes feed him. His drive to confront Agnes about her behavior, especially after she accuses him of taking advantage of her like so many men have done, reveals that Shuggie is nearing the end of his willingness to sacrifice his needs in order to keep the peace with her. Agnes is so far gone that she is completely unmoved by this change in attitude.



Unfortunately, Agnes loses her already failing sense of reason before Shuggie finds the will to fully break free. Like her drinking, her fear of being abandoned by her last ally overpowers her logic. Instead of reckoning with how her behavior routinely pushes people she loves away, Agnes doubles down and ousts Shuggie, just like she did Leek. Though Shuggie protests, Agnes sends him off in a taxi: yet another instance of cabs symbolizing her abandonment of Shuggie.



Agnes's neglect has forced Shuggie into a desperate, vulnerable position, just as it did on the taxi ride where Shuggie was molested by the cabby. When this driver won't let Shuggie leave the car to get Leek, Shuggie's will to survive proves stronger than anything else, including his pride. Having learned from that previous cab ride, which he never had to pay for, Shuggie offers himself in lieu of payment because he sees no other option. This cab driver's reaction to his offer underscores both Shuggie's youth and how socially unacceptable such a proposition is, even though it has (tragically enough) been somewhat normalized for Shuggie.



Faced with the idea of being separated permanently from his mother, Shuggie's resolve that Agnes may never change falters. In telling Leek that he feels he hasn't tried hard enough, Shuggie is essentially backing down from the progress he has made. Leek continues to try to convince his brother to let Agnes go. Because Shuggie can see how well Leek is doing since he left home, his brother's words carry more weight than they once did.



Shuggie asks Leek what he thinks is going to happen to Agnes. Leek tells him that she'll end up homeless on the street most likely, but Shuggie can't picture his posh mother there. Leek argues that when Shuggie is gone, Agnes will have no safety net. Shuggie responds that he will never leave her, then. Leek tells him that he can't stay with Agnes forever. Shuggie asks why Leek never came for him, and Leek explains that he had no means to care for him. Now, Shuggie will need to find his own way out, just like he and Catherine did.

Shuggie's difficulty in imagining his mother living on the street, even though he has seen her do and say unspeakable things, demonstrates how firmly his perception of Agnes is still rooted in the best of her. This conversation also shows a rare moment of directness on Shuggie's part; he actually confronts Leek about his feelings of abandonment by his siblings instead of bottling them up. Leek understands his brother's resentment, as it mirrors the way he felt when Catherine left. Having finally left himself, however, Leek has a newfound perspective about personal responsibility. Though he wants the best for Shuggie, he now understands that his brother will only accept the truth about Agnes when he is ready.



There is a buzz at the door. Leek looks at Shuggie, horrified. Shuggie admits that he may have told Agnes where Leek lived, or at least the landmarks. Leek answers the buzzer, then gathers all the change he can find before leaving. After a while, he returns, angry and exhausted. Agnes has called the taxi service and given the driver a bag full of canned custard, which she instructed him to take to Leek's, promising he would pay the fare on the other end. Leek has to spend the last of his money to do so.

Leek's generosity of spirit toward Shuggie is dimmed upon discovering that Shuggie told Agnes where he lives, which feels to him like a betrayal. The canned custard that Agnes has sent is meaningful. In the past, canned custard was one of the only things Agnes kept in the house to feed Shuggie when she'd spent all her money on alcohol. The custard seems to Shuggie like a message that Agnes is discharging all responsibility for him once and for all.



The brothers cannot believe it when there is another buzz on the door. Leek springs the electric meter for more change. He is gone longer this time, and he is very quiet when he returns. Leek tells Shuggie the **cab** will take him home. In the second bag is Agnes's **phone**. Shuggie and Leek both know this is a terrible sign, indicating that Agnes is done reaching out. If she plans to hurt herself, there will be no way to ask for help. Shuggie realizes the custard was a goodbye.

The connotation of the custard cans shifts significantly upon the arrival of the Agnes's telephone. Even in the worst years of her alcoholism, the hours Agnes spent yelling at others over the phone showed her desire to fight and to be connected to others, even if that connection was based fully in resentment. It was also the lifeline that saved her when she attempted suicide. By sending her phone to her sons, she signifies to them that she no longer wishes to fight or bother anyone. She is, in fact, giving up.



In March, Agnes's birthday comes around, and Shuggie presents her with daffodils and the change he's collected from the benefit money so she can play bingo to celebrate. She is thrilled. It is the police who bring her home in the morning. She never made it to bingo, instead spending the night walking through the city without her coat or shoes. Neither Shuggie nor Agnes can acknowledge each other when she arrives. Instead, Shuggie runs her a bath and makes her tea to soothe her soreness from a night in the cold. He leaves for school, but realizing he has some money in his pocket, he climbs on a city bus instead.

The veiled threat of suicide encapsulated in Agnes's delivery of the phone stunts Shuggie's progress toward striking out on his own. His return home and birthday gifts are gestures of reconciliation. While he doesn't seem to believe she'll get better anymore, he is clearly not ready to let her go, either. When she returns home from another bender and Shuggie runs a bath and makes tea for her, he is working to maintain the status quo between the two of them. However, his decision to skip school suggests a change may be coming.



Back in Sighthill, the neighborhood where Shuggie was born and the family had once lived with Wullie and Lizzie, Shuggie rides up to the 16th-story breezeway where they used to live. He sits with his arms and legs through the blocks by the stairwell, hanging over the city. He feels heavy. From his pocket, he pulls out a card from Leek. He has found good paying work somewhere Shuggie has never heard of, and he's found a nice girl too. In the card, Leek has taped a 20-pound note. There is also a page tucked inside, covered in drawings of a boy playing with toy horses. Looking at it, Shuggie realizes that Leek had always seen exactly who Shuggie was. When he finally gets too cold, Shuggie heads home.

At home, Shuggie finds the **phone** off the hook and the phone book covered in Agnes's notes and scratched through names. Beside where Agnes sleeps in a chair, Shuggie finds the empty beer cans and vodka bottle she's been nursing all day. Agnes throws up in her sleep, and Shuggie uses some toilet paper to clear and clean her mouth. He sits looking at her, then tells her he loves her. He apologizes for not being there to help her when she was out alone the night before. He takes off her shoes and rubs her feet as he tells her about going up to Sighthill.

Shuggie removes Agnes's bra for her too, rubbing at her chest when she starts hacking in her sleep. Her head rolls back, so he moves it back to a safe angle. He tells her that he's going to stop attending school as soon as he can and move them away from here. He asks where she wants to go, suggesting a few places. Shuggie listens to her unconscious breathing. He takes off her skirt for her and removes her dentures, then rubs her scalp gently.

Agnes coughs up bile again in her sleep. He goes to grab the toilet paper but freezes. Looking down at her, Shuggie realizes Leek is right. Agnes's head falls back, and she begins to choke on her vomit. She starts shaking, her brow furrowed. As he thinks to help her, though, her breathing stops and her worried face relaxes. Shuggie cries at her feet for a long time before rising. When he does, he wipes the bile from her face, fixes her hair, replaces her dentures, and applies fresh lipstick. To him, it looks like she is just sleeping when he kisses her goodbye.

Shuggie's trip to Sighthill is a kind of reckoning for him. By returning to the place where he was born and where Agnes's issues started in earnest, he tries to account for what has happened. The money contained in Leek's letter—and Leek's account of the life he has built—paint a picture of hope and care. Yet, more significant than either of these things is the drawing Leek made of Shuggie playing with ponies as a young boy. At last, Shuggie realizes that Agnes is not the only person who sees and accepts him. She is not his only chance at having loving family.



The phone, which has consistently symbolized Agnes's tenuous connection to reality, hangs off the hook. This image illustrates how her rage and drunkenness have depleted her will to fight; the dead phone mirrors Agnes's unconscious, drunken stupor. Shuggie is dutiful, as he has always been, as he cleans up his passed-out mother and talks about his day.



Shuggie removes the clothing and dentures that are symbols of the beauty Agnes has tried to hold on to through her struggle with alcoholism. Shuggie does not care about maintaining her appearance anymore; he only wants her to be comfortable. He talks, making her promises about all he will sacrifice for her. She cannot hear him, though, just as she has failed to see all he has done for her throughout the years.



In the same way that the years of effort Shuggie put into his mother's care failed to heal her, his efforts in this scene are pointless. As Agnes throws up again, Shuggie can finally see what everyone has been telling him—Agnes will never change. Shuggie stops fighting her on her path, and before he can change his mind, she dies. Even in his grief, he tries to honor her lifelong need to be beautiful, putting her back together so she can retain her pride in death.



CHAPTER FIVE: 1992, THE SOUTH SIDE

In his small tenement room, Shuggie cleans the porcelain ornaments that once belonged to his mother. When he moved in, several of the pieces chipped. As he stares at them, he is mad. He has spent his whole life trying to be good and cautious, but things keep breaking. Shuggie holds one of the ornaments in his hand, a fawn that had a nick in its ear. One by one, he snaps off its porcelain legs, tossing the broken figure behind his bed when he can't bear to look at it anymore.

Shuggie leaves, climbing on a bus that takes him across town. As he looks at the city passing, he thinks of Agnes's funeral. Leek came on the overnight bus after Shuggie called to tell him about Agnes. By the time Leek arrived, Shuggie had been watching over her corpse—caring for her as if she were still living—for two days. Shuggie told Leek he wished he'd tried harder to save her without telling him what really happened. Together, they made the cremation arrangements. Neither Catherine nor Shug came, though Eugene and some of the neighbor women from Pithead did. As they watched her casket burn, Leek said, "that's her away," the same thing he used to say to Shuggie whenever Agnes left drunk in a **cab**.

Back on his bus ride, Shuggie makes plans to call Leek later in the day to ask about his baby. He knows they will talk about Shuggie coming to visit at some point, as they usually do. There won't be much more to say after that. Shuggie gets off the bus at the main station and continues his errands, stopping for strawberry tarts at a bakery before walking on through the city center and along the river. Sitting there on the fence is Leanne, waiting where they agreed to meet. He notices how closed off and inward her expression has become in the year since they met. Leanne gives him a hard time for making her wait in the rain.

Shuggie asks if Leanne wants to walk around. She calls him predictable but agrees. First, she has something she wants to do. Shuggie knows immediately what she's planning and tries to discourage her, though he knows he'd do the same thing if his mother was alive. Leanne waves Shuggie off, saying she knows it's hopeless to try, but she has to anyway. Leanne hands him some tea that's gone cold. Shuggie tells her that it would have been Agnes's birthday today. He produces a bottle of ginger soda and the tarts, which the two share in honor of Agnes. The worry starts to leave Leanne's face as she eats. She puts the last tart aside.

As Shuggie stares at the broken ornament, he is confronted by the loss of his mother. The figurines, inherited from Agnes after her death, are symbolic of both her fragility and her beauty. His frustration as he destroys the fawn has everything to do with his anger at Agnes for resisting his efforts to keep her whole.



Despite Leek's acceptance that Agnes would eventually kill herself by drinking, he still shows up to help his brother make arrangements. Unlike Shug and Catherine, who left and never reconciled with Agnes—or Shuggie—Leek has managed to retain a connection to his complicated home of origin. Together Leek, Shuggie, and Eugene attend Agnes's cremation; all the people who tried to help her, sacrificing bits of themselves to do so, are represented. In echoing the same language he used to use when Agnes would disappear in a strange cab, Leek's remark equates Agnes's death to an ongoing sense of abandonment.



While Leek and Shuggie's relationship is not perfect, there is hope in it. Leek's happiness with his wife and baby is something neither he nor Shuggie could have imagined during the worst moments of their shared life with Agnes. Shuggie may not have found his place in the way Leek has, and getting to that place will be more difficult because of society's homophobia, but there is more hope than there has ever been. In contrast, Shuggie sees his own former dejection and stress in Leanne's expression; she is still trapped in a spiral with her own alcoholic mother.



Shuggie is annoyed with Leanne because she wants to visit her mother, even though he knows Moira won't care. However, the year that Shuggie has had on his own since Agnes's death has given him a better perspective on how little he was able to see when he was in the thick of his desperation. In turn, this realization pushes him to be more tender toward his friend. Today's visit with Moira is even more poignant than normal, given that it is both Agnes's birthday and nearly the one-year anniversary of her death.



As Shuggie and Leanne sit and gossip, Leanne bites at her cuticles. She doesn't notice when a woman nears them, trying to convince the much younger man whose arm she's hanging on to keep her company. Shuggie points her out to Leanne, and they both sigh. The man breaks free from the woman, and she just stands there. Shuggie and Leanne take her in. Shuggie thinks she looks worse than the last time he saw her, but he can still see traces of makeup on her face, and at least she's fully clothed.

Leanne gets up from the fence, bringing along the bags at her feet. They are filled with clean laundry and food. Shuggie remembers the dented cans of fish he got from Kilfeathers and adds them to the bag. At first, Leanne tells him that the woman will have no way to open them, but she changes her mind. She says Moira always finds a way. As Leanne crosses the street to her mother, Moira rolls her eyes. She lets Leanne lead her back over to their spot by the river. Leanne offers Moira the last tart, and Shuggie is repulsed by the way she sticks her tongue into the jammy center. He can see the bags under her eyes are deeper and more teeth are missing from her mouth. Seeing Moira makes Shuggie miss Agnes.

When Leanne finishes telling Moira about the happenings at home, she has Shuggie hold up the woman's overcoat so Leanne can help her mother change into clean clothes. Moira is impatient, wanting to get back to her friends before they finish drinking the last of what they have on hand. As Leanne slides fresh underwear on her mother, Moira gives Shuggie a hard time for being there with her instead of out chasing girls. Shuggie replies that he is not there for Moira. He asks her how she has been, dodging her unkindness, but she mocks his posh grammar and accent. Eventually, she tells them about her boyfriend, laughing as she recounts how he pretends to be blind in order to steal others' drinks. Shuggie can tell Moira's laughter makes Leanne happy.

Moira asks Shuggie for money before she leaves. She accepts the rest of the ginger fizz instead, gulping it down obscenely. Shuggie can't stop himself from asking her why she's like this. Moira proclaims that she likes to have a good time, and everyone is just jealous of her. Shuggie tells Moira that her daughter loves her, but Leanne asks him to stop talking. Moira responds that love is just another way for people to take advantage of each other. As Leanne collects her mother's dirty clothes, Moira says she has to get to the pubs before they fill up. Leanne tells her to take care of herself. Shuggie reaches into Moira's coat to fix the lining of her skirt, which is rumpled.

Shuggie is able to see Moira more truthfully than Leanne, who is locked in the middle of her struggle with her mother. The sensitivity to appearance that Shuggie learned from his mother is also apparent in his assessment of Moira. There is lingering judgement about her state in his assessment, but he also understands from his own experience that small victories—like Moira being fully clothed—matter.



Though Shuggie is horrified by Moira's lack of decorum, he cannot overlook the similarities between her and Agnes. The cans that Shuggie bought on discount at his work at the beginning of the novel were not intended for himself, but for Moira all along. Though Shuggie finds it difficult to be around Moira because she reminds him so much of the worst parts of Agnes, his care for Leanne drives his desire to help. This call-back to the start of the story also sheds new light on Shuggie's spare existence. At the beginning of the story, his bare room and lack of luxuries seemed dire, but now, at the end of the novel, his circumstances feel oddly victorious.



Shuggie tries to hold his ground as Leanne's friend rather than slipping into his feelings of resentment as another child of an alcoholic. Moira's cruelty makes this extra challenging, especially when she throws homophobic slurs at Shuggie. Though Shuggie's rage at Moira is spiking, he is able to see through it and recognize the happiness that seeing Moira gives Leanne.



Moira's request for money sparks Shuggie's own trauma. The accusing questions he spits at her are not for her at all, in the end. Instead, they are the questions he can no longer ask Agnes. Moira's retorts about love reveal exactly how far her alcoholism has taken her from feeling or receiving love. Love is a threat to the selfishness that fuels her actions, just as it was for Agnes. Shuggie knows he can't change her mind, so he shows kindness in the way he knows best: fixing her appearance.



As Moira stumbles away with her new clothes and food, Leanne begs Shuggie not to say anything. He says he won't, but he asks if Leanne feels any better. She shrugs, pulling up her hair. Shuggie notices her face harden again. She bites the skin around her fingers, and Shuggie tells her about how nice it was the year Agnes was sober. He reaches over to pull a loose thread off Leanne's coat. When she suggests they go for a walk, he recalls her earlier jab and calls her predictable. She jokes back, saying he just wants to go to the arcade to check out cute boys. Shuggie freezes, ashamed. Leanne gestures him to stop as he begins to deny it, then tells him she thinks one boy they have seen there may have a crush on Shuggie.

As they walk away, Leanne pantomimes throwing her mother's dirty clothes in the river. She places her arm in Shuggie's, laughing. Shuggie tells her that hearing about her brother's antics makes him wish they could go **dancing**. Leanne finds this hilarious, pointing at his posh shoes. She tells Shuggie that she doesn't believe he can dance. Shuggie boldly sprints ahead of her then, stopping to show her just how well he can spin.

Leanne's usual sensitivity has been dulled by the presence of her mother—her need to care for her has monopolized her attention—but as Moira finally leaves, she returns to herself and picks up on the severity of Shuggie's agitation. She cannot carry his frustration and sadness; her own feelings are heavy enough. In the same way that Leek came to realize he couldn't convince Shuggie to come to terms with the reality of Agnes's decline until he was ready, Shuggie knows that Leanne will need to make the same realizations about Moira when she is ready. Leanne returns to her usual self as they walk away, poking fun at Shuggie about his crush on a boy not to shame him, but to playfully show that she cares about him.



In pretending to throw Moira's clothes in the river, Leanne acknowledges the pain and frustration that characterizes her interactions with her mother. In return, Shuggie tries to lift both their moods by recommending that they dance. Leanne's incredulity about his ability to dance sparks something in Shuggie. The one spin he shows her in response is a final acceptance of both his identity and his timid hope for the future.





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