

# Between Hope and Ruin: The Dichotomy of Agnes in Douglas Stuart's Shuggie Bain

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**R. Sivaranjini**

*Research supervisor*

**Kuna Sama Mariam**

*Research Scholar, PG Department of English  
M.M.E.S Women's Arts and Science College*

## Abstract

*Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart is a novel set in 1980s Glasgow, following the life of young Hugh "Shuggie" Bain as he grows up in poverty with his alcoholic mother, Agnes. Shuggie struggles with his identity as an effeminate boy in a tough, working-class environment while trying to care for Agnes, whose addiction worsens over time. The novel explores themes of addiction, resilience, masculinity, and the impact of poverty on family life. Through its raw and emotional storytelling, *Shuggie Bain* paints a heartbreaking yet tender portrait of love and survival against harsh circumstances.

## Introduction

Douglas Stuart depicts addiction as a destructive force that gradually fractures Agnes Bain's identity, leaving her trapped between an illusion of control and the harsh reality of her decline. Agnes presents herself as sophisticated and superior to the women around her, meticulously upholding an image of beauty and resilience. She clings to her pride, refusing to confront the depth of her struggles, even as alcohol steadily erodes her sense of self. Initially, her drinking serves as a means to cope with Shug Bain's neglect and infidelity, but it soon becomes a defining aspect of her existence, shaping her relationships, choices, and emotions. The more she indulges, the more erratic and distant she becomes. One moment, she is glamorous and assured; the next, she is unstable and reckless. She insists she is in control, yet with each relapse, the gap between her self-image and reality widens, making her unrecognizable even to those who love her. Her fractured identity is most evident in her relationships with her children, particularly Leek and Shuggie, who perceive her decline in different ways.

Leek, disillusioned, emotionally withdraws, realizing she cannot be saved, while Shuggie remains devoted, convinced his love will be enough to inspire her recovery. Agnes's struggle creates two conflicting versions of herself: a mother who, at times, is nurturing and affectionate, yet also one who disappears into a haze of intoxication, neglecting her children. She is not a villain, but a woman ensnared in addiction, unable to reconcile her desired image with her painful

reality. The judgmental working-class community only heightens her shame, driving her deeper into alcohol abuse. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Agnes is gradually unravelling, losing herself to addiction with each passing day. Her dependence consumes not only her body but also her identity, leaving behind a mere shadow of the woman she once believed she was.

Douglas Stuart explores how addiction dismantles Agnes Bain's self-concept, illustrating her painful struggle between aspiration and downfall. From the beginning, Agnes defines herself through pride, beauty, and defiance, determined to rise above the struggling women around her. She carefully styles her hair, wears elegant clothing, and refuses to be viewed as just another impoverished mother in Glasgow's crumbling economy. However, alcohol becomes both her refuge and her downfall, progressively eroding her identity and straining her relationships. She drinks to numb the pain of Shug Bain's cruelty and abandonment, but as her addiction deepens, she loses control over her life. The captivating woman admired for her charm and grace transforms into someone pitied and scorned by neighbours who whisper about her drinking and failures as a mother.

Despite her decline, Agnes refuses to see herself through their judgment. She clings to the illusion that she remains in control, still unique and superior. This refusal to acknowledge her reality isolates her further, as even her closest relationships begin to fracture under the weight of her addiction. Leek, recognizing his mother's decline, emotionally distances himself, accepting she cannot be saved. He stops fighting, retreating into a protective silence. In contrast, Shuggie, still young and hopeful, refuses to accept her deterioration. He believes if he loves her enough, behaves perfectly, and stays close, she will overcome her drinking. This contrast between Leek's resignation and Shuggie's innocent optimism underscores the devastating impact of Agnes's addiction, not only on herself but also on those who helplessly witness her disintegration.

As the story unfolds, Stuart reveals that Agnes's drinking is more than just escapism; it represents the slow disintegration of her identity. Each drink distances her from the mother she wishes to be, the woman she once was, and the future she envisioned. Rather than offering support, the community reinforces her isolation, shaming and rejecting her. Her addiction becomes both a consequence and a reflection of her fractured identity; she drinks to avoid confronting her failures, yet drinking only tightens her entrapment in the life she longs to escape. By the novel's end, it is evident that Agnes is losing herself, piece by piece, as alcohol takes control. She still applies her makeup, styles her hair, and carries herself with defiance, but these gestures are hollow, mere remnants of the woman she used to be. What began as an occasional indulgence has become a necessity, stripping her of her ability to function as a mother, a woman, and an individual. Stuart portrays Agnes's fractured identity through her shifting emotions, behaviours, and relationships. When sober, she shows warmth, humour, and deep love for Shuggie, who idolizes her. She makes grand promises of change, vowing to drink less and be a better mother. Yet these moments of clarity are fleeting, and addiction quickly reclaims her.

As her addiction worsens, Agnes's behaviour becomes more erratic, sometimes protective and loving, at other times cold and neglectful. The emotional toll is felt most profoundly by her children. Leek, older and more aware, sees the truth and withdraws into his art and silence. He understands that his mother's addiction is beyond his control, shielding himself from further pain by detaching emotionally. In contrast, Shuggie remains desperate to save her, believing that his love can pull her back from the edge. His unwavering devotion reflects the painful reality of a child trying to rescue an addict, clinging to the belief that love alone can heal. Beyond her family, the harsh and unforgiving Glasgow community worsens Agnes's isolation.

The women of Pithead gossip about her, ridiculing her drinking and branding her a failure. This societal rejection fuels her addiction; she drinks not only to escape personal suffering but

also to numb the sting of humiliation. She becomes trapped in a vicious cycle: drinking to forget her shame, only to face further disgrace. Her identity fractures further as she desperately clings to fading remnants of her past beauty, charm, and desirability, even as these qualities slip away. Agnes's struggle is intensified by her emotionally detached husband, Shug

Bain who humiliates her and treats her with indifference. She clings to the fantasy that her beauty and charisma will keep him, but it becomes clear that he sees her as more of a burden than a partner. His cruelty manifests in subtle yet painful ways, belittling her emotions, disregarding her aspirations, and gradually withdrawing from their family. As Agnes succumbs further to alcohol, she drinks not just to escape but to reclaim a false sense of control. Each drink offers temporary relief, allowing her to forget the disappointment of failed relationships and the hardships of daily life. Yet, the more she drinks, the more distant she becomes from the happiness she craves, pushing away those who love her.

Shuggie, still just a child, is torn between watching her decline and trying to save her, longing for the stability she can no longer provide. Stuart also highlights the bleak social landscape of 1980s Glasgow, characterized by poverty, unemployment, and addiction. The Bain family resides in Sight Hill, a deteriorating housing scheme where many families struggle. Agnes refuses to see herself as part of this world, clinging to the belief that she is meant for something greater. This pride alienates her further, driving her deeper into addiction. Despite her deteriorating marriage, social rejection, and deepening dependence on alcohol, Agnes still perceives herself as glamorous and worthy of love. Stuart's portrayal of her is both intricate and deeply emotional, illustrating how addiction not only destroys the body but also erodes identity, relationships, and the ability to confront reality.

## Conclusion

By the novel's conclusion, the figures in Agnes's identity are irreversible. The illusion of control she once maintained has collapsed, leaving her trapped in a cycle of self-destruction. Her story is a haunting portrayal of addiction's devastating grip, revealing its impact on both the addict and those who love them. Yet, her journey also offers a sobering truth recovery,

Though difficult, it is not impossible. While Agnes's fate is marked by suffering, her story reflects the complexities of addiction and resilience. In the end, Shuggie Bain is not just about addiction but about the painful, unwavering love between a child and his mother, even as she slips further away.

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