A Tug of War. The Importance of Duality in Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*
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Abstract

The novel *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassic Gibbon is in part a modernist work written in opposition to the Kailyard tradition. Therefore it is a realistic work without the idealisation of rural life. The novel deals with the split or duality in characters and their search for identity while the Scottish language has suffered a decline under the shadow of the English rulers. This split or the Caledonian Antisyzygy has been a prevailing element in Scottish literature. Lewis Grassic Gibbon was one of the writers who concerned himself with this supposed superiority of the English language and culture in lieu of the Scots and the dilemma of a literature without a language. Through their duality, the characters communicate Gibbon’s criticism on society. He was a devoted socialist who was appalled by the social injustice in Scotland. He was influenced by modernism and created a language and a voice to generate his message. This duality appears in the characters of Chris Guthrie, her father John Guthrie and her husband Ewan Tavendale. Chris is torn between her dreams of education and her strong connection to the land which corresponds with the author’s own experience. John Guthrie is a representative of the patriarchy and he also represents the last of the small farmers in Scotland as farms are undergoing changes due to new technology. Gibbon believed that those change were regrettable. John Guthrie is also shown to represent religious bigotry, since Gibbon was critical towards religion and clergy. Ewan Tavendale’s choice to respond to the demands of the outside world proves to cost him dearly. Through Ewan, Gibbon is demonstrating the ill effects war has on people and society in general.
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1. Introduction

*Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassic Gibbon criticises the social injustices in Scottish society and explores, the search for identity. The author was a devoted communist and nationalist who was appalled by the squalor and poverty that he saw all around in Scotland and in *Sunset Song* he criticises this society. The novel also deals with the social changes that come with the extinction of the small farms. Gibbon was concerned with the changes that were happening in Scotland and believed them to be for the worse. He was a Marxist that wanted to see justice for the common man, and he was along with other writers a part of the Scottish Renaissance that aimed to demonstrate that the Scottish language and culture should be appreciated equally to the English.

Scotland has been politically united with England for over three hundred years and is by many seen to be ruled by their southern neighbour. Due to this the Scottish language and culture have existed in the shadow of their rulers’ language and culture. To shed light on this conflict the author’s representative is the main character Chris Guthrie who is torn in search of her own identity. She is torn between the English language and the Scots language. The Scots language is nearer to her heart when it comes to expressing her true feelings, but English is the language that is used for education. English and education represent progress while Scots represents stagnation and hardship. There is also a tug of war between love of the land and hatred for the hard life of farmworkers. This split of characters is drawn from the author’s own experience while he was growing up. It is the conflict between an easier refined Anglicised life of knowledge and that of a life of hardships and ignorance as a Scottish farmer that is the centre of gravity of this novel. Through his portrayal of duality in the Scottish characters in *Sunset Song*, Gibbon is demonstrating and criticising various aspects of society such as social injustice, religious bigotry, the destructive effects of war and the tug of war between Scotland and England.
2. The Author

James Leslie Mitchell was Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s given name. He was born on 13 February 1901 in Aberdeenshire and Ian Campbell claims that “[I]ke Chris in Sunset Song, he was to move to the Mearns in his formative, impressionable years but he appears to have retained a close memory of Aberdeenshire” (1). Mitchell was the son of a farmer who according to Campbell “shared some of John Guthrie’s features from Sunset Song” (1). Mitchell later took the writer’s name Lewis Grassic Gibbon, which is obviously derived from his mother’s name, Lilias Grassic Gibbon. He came from a “crofting family” (Campbell, 2) and was the youngest of three sons. The farm life was hard work with not much time for leisure, and according to Gifford, Dunnigan and MacGillivray, Gibbon was not content with his background (583). Also, according to Kidd, Gibbon had a “peculiar love-hate relationship that distinguishes the true countryman” (16). Thus there was a duality in Gibbon’s own character where he loved the land and hated the hard and all-consuming work. This sentiment can be observed in Chris Guthrie.

While living on the farm, book reading was an escape for the young boy and adolescent. He was allowed to attend secondary school even though there was need for him at home and Gifford et al. claim that Gibbon’s enthusiasm and talents for literary studies were not well regarded by his family or the community (583). He absorbed himself in his studies and was considered a good student, although not a very sociable one. After his schooling was finished he became a reporter, a job that took him to Aberdeen and Glasgow where he witnessed with his own eyes the squalor and poverty that people were subject to in the larger cities. According to Ian Campbell, Gibbon “felt for the common man: he was an open Marxist though a difficult one to equate with any of the existing political parties” (10) and in Sunset Song his political views come to light through the characters, Chae Strachan being a strong socialist voice for the author.

After being dismissed from his journalist job with disgrace, Gibbon returned to his family, but his abhorrence for working on the land was such that he chose to join the armed forces, even though in Sunset Song his descriptions of the effect the war has on Ewan Tavendale, Long Rob and the Kinraddie community as a whole, indicates that he was a pacifist. Although Gibbon was not satisfied with his job, it did open for him the chance to travel and thereby an opportunity to expand his horizon. In 1925 he married Rebecca Middleton, a girl he had grown up with and after a few difficult years he experienced success.
that enabled him to make a living with his writing. In 1932 *Sunset Song* was published and by then Gibbon had a happy life in Welwyn in England, with his wife and two children. He did well as a writer although he was not appreciated by those living in his home region or by his family. They resented that his writing could be applied to the people he grew up around. His visits to Scotland were therefore not happy ones. Gifford et al. claim that Gibbon had a “striking sense of community tradition and cultural identity” (581), nevertheless they also claim that he “all too frequently felt hatred for his community and the effects that hard farming labour had upon it” (Gifford et al., 582). This personal tug of war or duality, is reflected in *Sunset Song*, however, according to Kidd “Gibbon’s real ‘forte’ is his ability to catch and hold that unique sensuous feeling of being at one with the land and the countryside, when all the senses are brought into play and one is really living and feeling to the depths of one’s being” (17). This is apparent whenever Chris seeks refuge and tranquillity in nature; then the description of the land and the sensations that it evokes come to life for the reader.

When Gibbon died in 1935 he was well respected as a writer although he was bitter due to the rejection he experienced by his own people. Gifford et al. allege that his compatriots felt that he was belittling them by “traducing his own people and his own homeland” (592) which they could not forgive him for. This caused a strain in his relationship with his family in Scotland. Gifford et al. also maintain that Gibbon was convinced that man had lost an ideal past and along with it a certain innocence (583), and in *Sunset Song* many examples can be found of how he explores with regret the Scotland that is gone. One example is the memorial service held by the minister, dedicated to the fallen soldiers of Kinraddie, that he equates with a Scotland that is gone and according to Gifford et al.

> there is no doubting his [Gibbon’s] regret that traditional community and its intimate connection with the land is coming to an end. The old way of life of the crofter and the small farmer is passing away as social changes – incomers working far larger farms, tractors and machinery replacing horses, battery farming – break the traditional cycle. *Sunset Song* documents this in both the Prelude and the Epilude. (585)

Gibbon was convinced that the changes in Scottish society due to the industrial revolution with its modern technology and new ways of running farms was for the worse for the Scottish population. He also believed that changes for the worse came with the war, where people were drawn into profiting at the cost of changed management of farms and the sacrifices made
to the war effort, such as the woods that had provided shelter for the land. All this combined caused alienation in people since they were cut away from their connection to the land.
3. The Influence of Modernism

In 1936 Edwin Muir wrote about the decline of the Scots language and according to him “since some time in the sixteenth century Scottish literature has been a literature without a language” (6). This was one of the subjects that the modernist writers of the twentieth century Scottish Renaissance concerned themselves with in their writing. Gibbon had explored this predicament in his novel *Sunset Song*, and the duality or the Caledonian Antisyzygy, in the Scottish character due to the tug of war between the Scottish language and the English language, where the English language has been considered to have the upper hand for quite some time. The idea of the Caledonian Antisyzygy was originally put forth by G. Gregory Smith in 1919 and according to Carruthers, he maintained that there was continuity in Scottish literature that entailed the idea of “the two moods” (11) that had been prevailing from medieval times well into the nineteenth century. What Smith was referring to was the “realism and fantasy” and the “coexistence between the rational and the irrational” (Carruthers, 12) in Scottish literature. Smith maintained that these two aspects existed side by side and that Scots were at ease with both the rational and the irrational within the same work. The poet Hugh MacDiarmid revived the term Caledonian Antisyzygy which according to Fry “means the national taste for dualism, for opposites and extremes, and for disputation between them” (6).

Fry maintains that MacDiarmid’s aim was, to create a national literature, as had been created during recent decades in Norway or Ireland. But he also stressed that this national literature of Scotland must have a higher vocation – to reflect the extraordinary contribution since at least the eighteenth century made by an authentic Scottish civilisation to the civilisation of the whole world. (5).

This idea proved to be an inspiration for Gibbon and other writers to explore further the split or duality, in the Scots character, which Gibbon developed as one of the main themes in *Sunset Song*. An example of this is his emphasis on the split between the two Chrisses, or the Scottish Chris and the English Chris.

Similar to other writers of the Scottish Renaissance Gibbon was influenced by modernism and according to Gifford, Dunnigan and MacGillivray they, explored tradition, legend and Scottish history in a new and critical way, which to a great extent repudiated the earlier views of Scott and the nineteenth-century way of looking at Scotland. They question[ed] the value, for Scotland, of historical
episodes like the Reformation and the industrial revolution. Instead Scottish Renaissance writers looked to pre-history, to legend and myth, especially the myth of a golden age of primitive, uncorrupted, non-institutional man, for a basis to their work. (581)

A part of this prehistory are the Standing Stones which are a means to connect Chris to the past history of Scotland and Gibbon also brings in the supernatural on various occasions in the novel for the same purpose. Another trait of modernism seen in *Sunset Song* is Gibbon’s use of language, where in fact he creates a new type of dialect. Other writers such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Hugh MacDiarmid were concerned with the alleged inferiority of the languages of a colonized population. For Gibbon, modernism entailed an attempt to promote his own culture and language by innovation, following MacDiarmid’s ideas (Watson, 144). According to Robert Crawford,

Modernism’s delight in the construction of synthetic languages full of exotic and learned terminology can be seen as an attack on “standard English” by writers wishing to escape the latent limitations in their provincial origins by forging a diction so polylingual and sophisticated that it tops and outflanks the English cultural centre. (261-2)

This can truly be applied to Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*. The reconstruction of the language and the coverage of the provincial can be viewed as an attempt to rebel against the supposed superiority of English language and culture. Gibbon does this with a brilliant result and the outcome is a delightful and humorous language and a story that is both gripping and poignant. However, even though Gibbon does construct a dialect of his own, Gifford et al. maintain that he is true to the spirit of the Scots language (587). Robert Crawford claims that *Sunset Song* is a modernist work “not least in […] [its] synthetic language, which blends spoken and archaic Scots idiom into the fundamentally English-language narrative voice, producing a seductive constructed speech” (266). The aim of the modernist writers was to elevate their own language and culture that had existed in the shadow of their colonizers. Their aim was to show that even though their language may not be considered by some to be proper English (R. Crawford, 270) it is a fully valid and rich language all the same. McCulloch argues that Gibbon was a pioneer in his treatment of the language in prose:

Until Gibbon appeared, the revival of the language for modern literary purposes had been almost totally a poetry-based revival. Fiction had continued to be written in English, or, following the example of Walter Scott, written with an English-
language narrative voice accompanied by dialogue for country-dwellers or lower-class characters in either a rural or urban dialect of Scots. (133)

The modernist authors felt that it was timely that this frame of reference should be reconsidered and the contribution of the colonized should be valued as equally significant to that of the colonizers. Gifford et al. maintain that Gibbon’s aim was to create an authentic and realistic voice (589) which he successfully accomplished and *Sunset Song* is a realistic work that does not romanticize the rural life as had been done before by the Kailyard writers. Gibbon writes about the rural life as he knows it, in a sometimes ironical and malicious tone, where the characters have flaws and do not always act in a socially accepted way, to the extent that the reader has no sympathy towards them.
4. Chris Guthrie

The question of identity is a dominant subject in the mind of Chris Guthrie, the main character of *Sunset Song*. She feels that the life of the Scottish farmer entails a life of ignorance, dirt and toil, while the life of education is an Anglicised life that entails personal progress. In Chris’s mind one life excludes the other. Julian Meldon D’Arcy comments on this in his article: “In some well-known passages in *Sunset Song* the young Chris Guthrie regards herself as two different and incompatible personalities” (42). She is struggling with finding her identity and is torn between the two aspects of her life that split her into the two Chrisses, the Scottish Chris and the English Chris. The English Chris is the one that wants to get her education and dreams of becoming a teacher; the Scottish Chris wants to live on the land which she finds at times to be breath-taking and soothing. The following quote demonstrates this split clearly:

So that was Chris and her reading and schooling, two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you’d waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of earth in your face, almost you’d cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies. (Gibbon, 32)

The same sentiment is still prevailing when she goes on to college in Duncairn, there she still feels the split into two characters, the Chris that absorbs herself into her studies and then the Chris that misses and longs to be back at Blawearie (Gibbon, 44).

Although Chris is charmed by the idea of becoming a teacher and dreams of an education, she grows up and lives in a community that is in part opposed to and suspicious of education, which is in accordance with the author’s own experience. The community is split in its attitude towards education where opposition is the predominant view. After Chris’s mother is dead, Mistress Munro echoes this view when she says to Chris: “You'll be leaving the College now, I’ll warrant, education’s dirt and you’re better clear of it. You’ll find little time for dreaming and dirt when you’re keeping the house at Blawearie” (Gibbon, 64). Mistress Munro feels that Chris has a duty to take care of her family, which is for the most part the dominant view of the community. Her place is in the home instead of going to school, which according to Mistress Munro is a waste of time and idle dreaming. Chris is needed in the home to help her father run the farm and take on her mother’s work. Nevertheless there are a few in the community, who argue that education is necessary for personal progress and
progress in society in general. Those who promote education and thereby echo the author’s view are both Long Rob and Chae Strachan. Chae’s daughter, Marjet Strachan goes to school with Chris and later on she plans to go further with her studies and become a doctor. Counter to Chris, Marget realizes her dream of education, which is also Chris’s dream, while Chris lets her dream slip away and chooses to stay on the land. Marget’s father is a socialist and therefore has a more positive view towards education, as well as a different outlook on society in general from most of his compatriots. He openly encourages his daughter to get an education, and he has a clear picture of what her future should entail:

[Marget] was to learn and be ready for the Revolution that was some day coming. And if come it never did she wasn’t to seek out riches anyway, she was off to be trained as a doctor, Chae said that life came out of women through tunnels of pain and if God had planned women for anything else but the bearing of children it was surely the saving of them. (Gibbon, 45)

Chae has passed on his ideals in his daughter and he portrays the author’s views on what is needed in a society where people die due to poverty and squalor. Educated doctors are needed to help save lives and Chae has the vision to see his daughter take part in that progress even though she is a girl. He feels that she should take full part in society just as if she were a man. Chae also believes that education is a means to create equality for everyone (Gibbon, 86).

Even though Chris does not follow through with her future plans it can still be argued that she is more independent than women in general in her environment, since at this time the role of women in general would have been to stay in the home and take care of the house and family, although views in that regard were gradually changing. In Kinraddie all the women work at home on the farm to take care of their households. The path that Marget chooses can be seen as a reflection of changing times for women and the same applies to Maggie Jean Gordon who is off to organise a union for the “farm servants” (Gibbon, 248). They are both modern women in the sense that they do not follow the convention when choosing their roles in life. Here Gibbon demonstrates a duality in society in regard to the role of women. On one hand there is the view that women should stay in the home where their place has been for centuries and on the other hand they should take full part in society outside the home. Gibbon also demonstrates that women are capable of making independent decisions regarding their own future, instead of submitting to the authority of the patriarchy.
Although Chris does not leave Blawearie she is not submissive and stands her ground. Her brother Will even comments that she “should never have been born a quean” (Gibbon, 88). When they are preparing to go and help out at the fire at Peesie’s Knapp, Chris decides to go along to help and thereby ignores her father’s orders after he has specifically told her to stay in the house. This is a clear indication of her independent way of thinking. Another example of Chris’s independence is that she is not ready to submit to the authority of Auntie Jane and Uncle Tam after her father’s death. She realises that her newfound freedom is fragile and not something that she is willing to give up so easily and in order to keep her independence she needs to tend to her affairs on her own without their interference. However, when she announces her scheme, to go and see the lawyer Mr Semple, they are not pleased with her as the following passage demonstrates.

Their faces reddened up with rage, she saw plain as daylight how near it lay, dependence on them, she felt herself go white as she looked at them. *I’ll transact my own business fine*, she said hardly, and called Ta-ta from the door and heard no answer and held down the Blawearie road. (Gibbon, 120-1)

With this behaviour Chris defies the authority of her elders by managing her own business instead of adhering to the rules of the patriarchy and also shows how courageous she really is. Chris also stands her ground after her father has become a bedridden invalid, and does not give in to his incestuous demands even though she is afraid of him. She also demonstrates her independence and courage when she goes out into the storm on her own to save the horses even though Auntie tells her that “Uncle Tam was feared at the lightning, he wouldn’t go out” and tells Chris to go back to bed (Gibbon, 130). Chris therefore shows more courage than Uncle Tam does when it is really needed. It is a wonderful irony that Uncle Tam does not dare go out into the storm in order to save the horses, in spite of all his medals, which leaves the question of on what grounds he has received them and hints at his pretentiousness. In this case the medals appear to have no significance other than being ornaments.

In Chris’s mind the farm life makes such high demands that there is no room for anything else in the lives of farmers than the endless work, which leaves people totally exhausted at the end of each day. Women have their share of the workload in addition to too many pregnancies when contraception seems to be out of the question, as in the case of Chris’s mother. This hard life of farming has driven her mother to take her own life and also the lives of two of the youngest children, the twins, after learning that she is pregnant once more while already having six children. Jean Guthrie does not foresee anything but the toil ahead and the
endless mouths to feed. She anticipates the difficulties ahead as overwhelming and meets no understanding in her inflexible and dogmatic husband when she pleads with him to try to keep the expansion of the family under control, saying “Four of a family's fine; there'll be no more. And father thundered at her, that way he had Fine? We'll have what God in His mercy may send to us, woman. See you to that” (Gibbon, 28). John Guthrie is quite unwilling to take notice of his wife’s point of view and he even hides behind the will of God instead of assuming the responsibility needed. According to Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, Chris’s mother is a very tormented, individual woman, worn out and desperate with too many pregnancies. Jean Guthrie is essentially an individual who decides to kill her two youngest children also, presumably to save Chris from the cares of a ready-made and totally demanding family. (12)

Chris’s mother does not want her daughter to end up with all the work she will leave behind, as she knows full well how overpowering it is. Chris has also seen how this hard life and later the loss of his wife and children, has embittered her father and made him an even harsher man to live with.

Right at the beginning of the novel Chris’s love for the land is evident. She enjoys being outdoors breathing in the smells and colours of nature with all her being:

Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet. And in the east against the cobalt blue of the sky lay the shimmer of the North Sea, that was by Bervie, and maybe the wind would veer there in an hour or so and you’d feel the change in the life and strum of the thing, bringing a streaming coolness out of the sea. (Gibbon, 25)

Chris has a strong connection to both the land and to the beasts that live in harmony with nature. She is deeply affected by the beauty of the land and seeks peace and refuge outdoors:

Chris herself would help of an early morning when the dew had lifted quick, it was blithe and lightsome in the caller air with the whistle of the blackbirds in Blawearie’s trees and the glint of the sea across the Howe and the wind blowing up the braes with a fresh, wild smell that caught you and made you gasp. (Gibbon, 47)
This is a reflection of the love for the land that Gibbon himself experienced as he grew up on a farm and knew well all that it entailed. His writings about the land are descriptive and come alive in the reader’s mind through Chris’s experiences.

Chris feels that the community in Kinraddie is a closely knitted one, at least when its members need help in a crisis, as can been seen when Peesie’s Knapp is burnt down. People come from all around to help put out the fire and everybody works together as best they can. Ellison from the Mains is one example and even though people are of the opinion that he might be little more than a windy Irish brute but he’d the sense for all that, the gig was crammed with ropes and pails, Ellison strung out the folk and took charge, the pails went swinging from hand to hand over the close from the well to the childe that stood nearest the fire, and he pelted the fire with water. (Gibbon, 89)

The same applies when Chris goes out into the storm to get the horses into shelter. Then help comes to her in the form of Chae and Ewan who help her get the horses out of the storm into safety. Even though they have both been out in the storm before tending to their own beasts, they do not mind the extra effort to help their neighbour when in need. However even though the community unites when the need arises, the meanness and gossiping is never far away.

Chris reflects on “the coarse speak of the folk” (Gibbon, 32), that in general appears to be a prevalent occupation among the people of Kinraddie. However, an example of the unity of the community can be seen at Chris’s wedding. There the people of Kinraddie gather to rejoice with Chris when she gets married and enters the life of womanhood, where everyone unites in celebrating the event to make it a festive occasion. It is an exceptionally touching episode with the sharing of stories, singing and dancing, and the sharing of food. Chris is touched by the kindness and togetherness of her neighbours at her wedding and she feels affection towards them at that moment, although at times she feels that she is not in harmony with them. Chris does not care for people’s gossip and the meanness that she feels is always lurking under the surface and at times makes her feel alienated from them. The following passage reflects the duality in Chris’s attitude towards the folk of Kinraddie.

And Chris listened and glowed with pride that everything at hers was just and right; and then again as so often that qualm of doubt came down on her, separating her away from these kindly folk of the farms-kind, and aye ready to believe the worst of others they heard. (Gibbon, 154)
In spite of everything Chris is her father’s daughter and shares with him a hatred for unjust rulers, whether English or Scottish. They both hate the social injustice that the people of Scotland have endured from their rulers and thereby reflect the political views of the author. The same can be applied to Chae Strachan who is a socialist and he remarks that “there was no justice under capitalism, a revolution would soon sweep away its corrupted lackeys” (Gibbon, 26) and according to Ian Carter, when Sunset Song was published in 1932 socialists received the novel with enthusiasm (169). Chris can be equated with the author in many ways and according to Ian Campbell, “The characters who haunt the pages of the Gibbon novels […] have much in common with their creator. Caught between town and country, between past and present, between Scotland and England” (40). Chris reflects this split, or duality, in the author in many ways and there is also a split in her between the English language and the Scots language. She knows that Scots is the language of the heart and people need the “Scots words to tell your heart how they wrung it and held it” (Gibbon, 32). Scots is the language that people want to use to express their true feelings. English on the other hand is the language for education and success in society and Chris believes that “the English words so sharp and clean and true – for a while, for a while, till […] you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all” (Gibbon, 32). The English language cannot grasp the emotional nuances of the Scots language. Here the duality in regard to the language is evident.

Sunset Song is a nostalgic salutation to a Scotland that was and is no more and the peasants that were “the last of the Old Scots folk” (Gibbon, 256). It is also a criticism on an unjust society, through the voice of Chris Guthrie. Ian Carter explains that Gibbon was a socialist and nationalist who “saw the fight for political nationalism and for socialism to be a single struggle” (181). Carter also maintains that “[t]he Mearns peasantry’s decline is exemplified through the biography of the novel’s central character, Chris Guthrie” (170) and right at the start of the novel Carter argues that “it is clear already that Sunset Song it to be no rural idyll” (170). The farm life is not illustrated as a romantic harmonious life; it is rather a life of endless battle to ensure the bare necessities of life.

It has been suggested that Chris’s character can be interpreted as representing Scotland itself, although Murray and Tait are of the opinion that this idea “has been taken too far” (15). There are changes in Chris’s life that are consistent with Scotland’s history; however she is only a mortal who will only live one lifetime where change is the only constant in her life. A
human life is only a moment in the history of the land which is the only thing that endures while everything else is subject to change.
5. John Guthrie

John Guthrie does not approve of the changes imminent in farm work due to industrialisation and new technology, even though machines make cultivating the land considerably easier and more productive. He is a representative of the old ways of farming and he is a stubborn, inflexible man, while at the same time he is struggling to keep his independence as a farmer. Although he hates the unjust rulers of Scotland he proves to be no better himself in regard to his family. He is a violent tyrant that dominates his family. Nevertheless they all break away from his tyranny in different ways. His wife gives up trying to reason with him and feels that she has no choice but commit suicide in this way to get away from under her husband’s authority and sexual demands. His son Will runs away and marries his Mollie in secret away from his family. He has before warned Chris about standing up to their father and guarding her independence. It is a reflection of Will’s opinion of their father when he says to her “Chris, don’t let father make a damned slave of you, as he’d like to do. We’ve our own lives to lead” (Gibbon, 66). Will believes that his father is an unreasonable man and he has lost all tolerance towards his father due to his tyrannical demands and violent temper.

John Guthrie seems to be driven by sexual desire to extremes, and in a destructive way for those nearest to him. He does not appear to realise how demanding he is towards his wife and family and does not understand what drove his wife to suicide: “God, I wonder why Jean left us?” (Gibbon, 92). He does, however, have another side which we are shown at the beginning, before Jean and he were married. He takes her away with him and he never touches her until they have saved up enough to marry and start a home. Still there is already a hint at the beginning of his violent temper:

So that was beginning of their lives together, she was sweet and kind to him, but he mightn’t touch her, his face would go black with rage at her because of that sweetness that tempted his soul to hell. Yet in two-three years they’d chaved and saved enough for gear and furnishings, and were married at last, and syne Will was born, and syne Chris herself was born. (Gibbon, 28)

John Guthrie is his own worst enemy. He has to leave the fertile land at Echt due to his own unruly temper in his dealings with the gentry (Carter, 170). What he acquires instead is the land at Blawearie, which is much more difficult to cultivate. In reality this is not accurate
according to Ian Carter (173) since “Kinraddie lies in literary space” (174). However this demonstrates John Guthrie’s self-destructive behaviour due to his inflexible mood.

John Guthrie takes his frustrations and disappointments about his situation in life out on his family with outbursts of violence. He was not a cheerful man to begin with, before losing his wife, and early on we learn that he did not take part in pleasantries with his compatriots, as when Long Rob tells a joke, Chris observes that “everybody laughed except father, God knows why” (Gibbon, 25). Eventually John Guthrie ends up as a deranged invalid, again as a direct result of his violent temper. After a stroke he has lost both mental and physical health and to Chris’s horror he makes demands on her of an incestuous nature. She is terrified of the monster her father has become. In spite of his behaviour, John Guthrie believes himself to be a religious and God fearing man, when in fact it can be said that he is a religious bigot with no tolerance towards his family or anyone else for that matter. His actions are in no accordance with Christian values. For one thing he swears “Damn’t to hell!” (Gibbon, 29, 81, 88) on every possible occasion, however, when Will utters, “thoughtless like” (Gibbon, 29) the name Jehovah that he has heard in church, his father’s reaction is extreme to say the least. He beats Will till he is bleeding, for taking the lord’s name in vain. John Guthrie uses religion to justify his violent outbursts as well as his own sexual demands on his wife and he even quotes the Old Testament to justify his incestuous demands on Chris. This is a sharp criticism on religious bigotry. Gibbon was critical of the church and clergy as his descriptions of the minister Mr Gibbon bear witness to. The same applies when Will is seeing Mollie. John Guthrie right away assumes the worst of Will; as he is himself sexually repressed he does not allow for any decency or self-control on Will’s part or Mollie’s for that matter. Will treats Mollie with respect and does not let his sexual drive get the better of him. He does not want to put her reputation into jeopardy and he tells Chris that he would rather cut his throat than harm Mollie (Gibbon, 81). The same cannot be said about his father who resorts to name calling. John Guthrie’s violence towards his oldest son, Will, has evoked in Will a deep hatred towards his father: “Will hated father, he was sixteen years of age and near a man, but father could still make him cry like a bairn” (Gibbon, 30). The beatings deeply affect Will and even long after John Guthrie is dead when Will comes on a visit back from Argentine, he still has not forgiven his father for his cruelty and he says to Chris “that folk who ill-treated their children deserved to be shot, father had tormented and spoiled him out of sheer cruelty when he was young” (Gibbon, 216). This abuse has marked Will and made him despise his father for life.
However, after John Guthrie’s death Chris does remember that he was not always a monster. She does have fond memories of her father from the time when she was a child, and she mourns a happier time with him, when she remembers how he used to be:

and she minded then, wildly, in a long, broken flash of remembrance, all the fine things of him that the years had hidden from their sight, the fleetness of him and his justice, and the fight unwearying he’d fought with the land and its masters to have them all clad and fed and respectable, he’d never rested working and chaving for them, only God had beaten him in the end. And she minded the long roads he’d tramped to the kirk with her when she was young, how he’d smiled at her and called her his lass in days before the world’s fight and the fight of his own flesh grew over-bitter, and poisoned his love to hate. (Gibbon, 116)

Chris remembers how her father had been struggling to keep them safe and never spared himself while working the land to sustain his family. She also remembers how he had without effort shown her tenderness when she was a child and she thinks of “how he’d smiled at her and called her his lass” (Gibbon, 116). There were times when John Guthrie was a happier man and at peace with his family.

Even though John Guthrie is a violent and harsh tyrant, and a representative of the patriarchy who expects every member of his family to obey his every word without question, he is also a sensible and industrious man, as can be seen when Peesie’s Knapp is burning. He is the one that takes charge in waking up the Strachans and thereby he saves his neighbours’ lives before everything burns to a cinder. However, true to his harsh nature he calls out to them “Damn’t to hell do you want to be roasted?” (Gibbon, 88). Nevertheless, he does not spare himself while putting out the fire and when Long Rob takes on the task of saving the beasts “Chae followed and John Guthrie, and the tree of them worked like madmen there” (Gibbon, 90). John Guthrie is a man of contradictions and evidence of the duality in his character is the fact that he works himself to the bone to ensure his family’s wellbeing, and on the other hand he never has a kind word for any of them. Work appears to be the only thing that has any meaning in his bleak life. Apparently there is nothing in his life that makes him happy and he has alienated himself from his family to the extent that on New Year’s Eve Chris and Will do not even expect him to wish them a Happy New Year, when the clock strikes at midnight. When Long Rob and Chae show up, to celebrate with them, they cheer up the gloomy atmosphere at Blawearie “and John Guthrie smiled at him [Chae] over his beard, as though he’d really rather cut his throat than smile” (Gibbon, 95). It appears as if he finds himself forced to smile against his will. This is a dismal picture of a bitter man. The hardships
of life and the struggle to keep his independence as a farmer have made him an unhappy and dour man.
6. Ewan Tavendale

Ewan Tavendale can be seen as two completely different characters. He is a Highland man and even if he is not as confident as Chris, he is proud like his kin. According to his fellow farm hands, Highland men have the reputation to be “dour devils to handle” (Gibbon, 145). His pride is evident when Chris first brings up the subject of marriage. He is not ready to marry her until he has saved up some money for their start. Nevertheless he puts his Highland pride aside and lets Chris persuade him to start their life together with the money her father has left to her and the result is that Ewan leads a good life on the farm with Chris and they are content in their marriage until he decides to sign up as a soldier. His life revolves around the farm and the work on the land and his whole universe is in Scotland on the farm with Chris. She observes how much he loves the parks (Gibbon, 178) and how hard he works, yet in a brisk and cheerful manner quite different from that of her father John Guthrie which is a source of contentment for Chris (Gibbon, 175).

England and the empire are irrelevant to Ewan and belong to the outside world. When he is called to Aberdeen for an examination for the army, he is confident that he will not be required to serve in the army since farming the land at Blawearie is more important (Gibbon, 208). The fight for King and Country are of no concern to Ewan. Nevertheless he does finally get fed up with the constant innuendos that he is not contributing to the war and his country and therefore he ends up going to enlist. After he has left he writes to Chris that he was fed up with people accusing him of being a coward (Gibbon, 213) therefore he has given in to the pressure of the outside world and when Ewan returns home on leave to Chris before going to France, he is a completely different man, a man who has been engulfed by the madness of the war. The army has changed him and according to D’Arcy “Ewan’s drunken, boorish treatment of Chris while on leave from the army, is clearly intended by Gibbon to be seen as the result of the brutal and demoralising barrack-room existence during military training” (44). The army training has brought out the worst personality change possible in Ewan. At the beginning of his relationship with Chris, he is insecure and gentle towards her and blushes every time she looks at him. Chris is stronger than he is and she is the one who takes the initiative to suggest that they marry and Ewan follows her lead. Even though they are both literally frightened at their wedding ceremony, it is Chris’s strength that calms Ewan. However on Ewan’s return, Chris does not recognise him as the man that she married and was in love with. He talks to her about women that he has lain with in order to humiliate and hurt her as much as possible, which is uncharacteristic of him and Chris is stunned by his
behaviour. “He had never spoken to her like that – he was EWAN, hers!” (Gibbon, 211). This man is her Ewan that not so long before had blushed whenever he was near her, but has now become a violent brute. He has always been kind and gentle to Chris, therefore the transformation is total and he is now a man that repulses Chris with his violent behaviour towards her. Ewan turns her against him to the extent that she cannot even bear to look at him (Gibbon, 227). Thomas Crawford claims that Ewan has been turned into a beast by his life in the army (ix). Gibbon is here demonstrating the unwholesome effects of war and how it demoralises people.

After her horrible experience with her husband, Chris is sure that their relationship is ruined and will never be the same again. Ewan has destroyed everything that they had together, or perhaps it is the war that has destroyed everything. However, at the end of the chapter on Harvest when Chris goes up to the Standing Stones, Ewan appears to her and tells her “Oh lassie, I’ve come home! He said, and went into the heart that was his forever” (Gibbon, 241). Here Gibbon uses the supernatural to unite Ewan with Chris, after Ewan’s death; in other instances Gibbon also uses the supernatural to link the characters with Scotland’s history and its folk. This exploration of the past bears witness to the influence of modernism in Gibbon’s writing.

It can be argued that when Ewan submits to the demands of England and the empire, or his duty to King and Country, that it ruins his character and his life in Scotland. It may be argued that like Chris, there is a duality in Ewan’s character that pulls him in two different directions, the Ewan that feels he has a duty to fight in the war and the Ewan that is the Scottish farmer that loves the land. His choice to give in to the pressure of his peers has devastating consequences for him and his family; he is overcome by the madness of the war beyond the hills. The army training and the fighting have traumatized Ewan and when finally he comes to his senses from his nightmarish dream it is too late for him, his life is over. This reflects the author’s view on the futility and destructiveness of war. However it is not only Ewan that has been traumatised, Chris is also traumatized by her loss. It is not only the soldiers that suffer; those left behind also suffer in times of war. Moreover, another life that is lost to the madness is the life of Long Rob who ironically receives a medal for his contribution in the war. However it has no meaning for him as he is dead when he receives it. Long Rob the pacifist has given his life for a cause that he did not believe in, and Long Rob’s death is just as senseless as Ewan’s death is. Sunset Song thus presents a sharp criticism on the war and the idealisation of the useless sacrifices of lives.
7. Conclusion

Duality in characters consistent with the Caledonian Antisyzygy is a dominant theme in *Sunset Song* and Gibbon uses this duality to criticise the flaws of society. He was part of the Scottish Renaissance and was under the influence of modernism when he wrote *Sunset Song*. This is not a romantic novel, it is rather written in opposition to the Kailyard tradition. In accordance with modernism, Gibbon reconstructed the language and explored the past history of Scotland, where the Standing Stones and the supernatural are a means of connecting the characters to the idealised past of Scotland. In *Sunset Song* the characters echo the author’s views on various issues such as social injustice, the destructiveness of war, the tug of war between the love of the land and hatred for the hardship of farm life, and the tension between the English and the Scots language. In spite of the overwhelming struggle of farm life Gibbon clearly demonstrates how important people’s roots are, while also lamenting a generation that is gone in Scotland. Through duality in the characters in *Sunset Song* Gibbon promotes his criticism and this novel is a keen observation of the need for reformation and change in various aspects of modern society in the author’s lifetime.
Works Cited


