

The Banality of Violence in A. L. Kennedy's Early Short Stories

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Abstract

The present paper adapts Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil to illustrate the banality of a specific manifestation of evil, which is violence, as it is presented in the early short stories of A. L. Kennedy. Selected stories from Kennedy's first two collections, *Night Geometry* and *the Garscadden Trains* (1990) and *Now that You're Back* (1994), are analysed to show that, like Arendt, Kennedy does not dismiss the perpetrators of violent acts as sadistic monsters but rather perceives them in their complexity as human beings who may commit inhuman crimes, yet cannot be explained away easily as less than human. Kennedy's point about the banality of violence – banality in the sense of commonness or ordinariness, not in the sense of triviality – is reinforced by her preoccupation with ordinary characters leading mundane lives, whose humdrum existence is disrupted by unexpected, though typically unexceptional, circumstances. Lacking the capacity or skill to cope by non-violent means, Kennedy's characters resort to violence in a perverted attempt to come to terms with the uncertainty of life and to express in a physical manner what they cannot express in language.

Keywords: A. L. Kennedy; Scottish literature; women's writing; banality of evil; violence

CONTEXTUALISING A. L. KENNEDY: A SCOTTISH WOMAN WRITER?

We have small lives, easily lost in foreign droughts, or famines; the occasional incendiary incident, or a wall of pale faces, crushed against grillwork, one Saturday afternoon in Spring. This is not enough.

—A. L. Kennedy, “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains”
(Kennedy, *Night* 34)

A. L. Kennedy (b. 1965) embarked on her literary career at the height of what is retrospectively known as the second Scottish literary renaissance, which was initiated by the 1981 publication of *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, a monumental novel from the pen and pencil of Alasdair Gray (b. 1934), the doyen of Scottish letters as well as an illustrator, painter and muralist. In his seminal novel, accompanied by his own black-and-white illustrations, Gray bemoans the absence of a continuous Scottish cultural tradition worth the name in creative writing and otherwise:

Think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he’s already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. . . . Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That’s all we’ve given to the world outside. It’s all we’ve given to ourselves. (Gray 243)

While Gray’s complaint bore some relevance at the time of its writing, when the Scottish literary heritage rested on the fame of several individuals considered in isolation – notably Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and a few others – and appeared to lack in continuity as much as contemporaneity, originality and memorability, now the tables have turned and it is also owing to the significant contribution of Alasdair Gray that Scottish writing started to find its own unique direction(s) at the end of the twentieth century.

By their own admission, the Scots have struggled to define a national identity on which to build an artistic tradition as a consequence of Scotland’s historical development as a stateless nation since the 1707 Act of Union, which merged the formerly separate kingdoms of Scotland and England into what is now the United Kingdom. More than three hundred years, two major Jacobite uprisings, two devolution referenda and one independence referendum later – with a second independence referendum currently under consideration – the year 1707 is by

no means a long-forgotten history. That is, not for Scotland, which has experienced from the beginning of its difficult relationship with England the feeling that the wealthier, more powerful, and more influential south of Britain perceives and treats the Scottish as inferior, inconsequential and impoverished in terms of not only economic but also social and cultural development.

How the national identity issue inevitably impacts on both the production and reception of Scottish literature is illustrated in A. L. Kennedy's characteristically evasive response in an interview when the obligatory question about the Scottish character of her work comes up:

I use the language that I use, which has Scottish-isms, Scottish rhythms in it, but that's not me making a point, that's where I come from. That's the frustrating thing, people down here will say: "What's it like being a Scottish writer?" and I'll say: "I don't know, I've never been anything else." I'm not being awkward, but it's a question you don't get asked if you're from London. (Kennedy qtd. in Merritt 13)

Kennedy notoriously eschews the limitations imposed by labels and the confines enforced by neat definitions but no matter how she rejects the idea of "making a point" out of the fact that she happens to be Scottish, she cannot avoid the peculiarities of the Scottish language, character and experience seeping in throughout her work. Despite the sheer precariousness of any attempts to capture the common characteristics of the continuously living, organically evolving and spontaneously transmuting body of a nation's literature, it may be helpful to tentatively offer a snapshot of the most prominent features that A. L. Kennedy shares with many of her contemporaries as well as with some of her predecessors. What appears to be a distinctly Scottish strain in Kennedy's writing involves her frequent focus on troubled identities and the tension between one's private personality versus one's public persona—which is the quintessential Scottish theme reaching back to Robert Louis Stevenson's foundational novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) – and, furthermore, her explorations of the intricate interdependence of the individual and the nation, her preference for dark, disturbing, even perverse subject matter and her penchant for balancing out even the grimmest subject with a paradoxically life-affirming gallows humour. Ultimately, as Kaye Mitchell puts it, Kennedy's texts "all contribute to and disseminate some idea of 'Scotland' and 'Scottishness', regardless of her desire for her writing to be judged independent of considerations of national identity" (Mitchell 45).

Scottish women writers arguably create under the pressure of the historical double bind as representatives of a dispossessed nation and members of the oppressed second sex, in Simone de Beauvoir's terms:

For man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (de Beauvoir 15–16)

The marginalisation, dismissal or outright omission of women's experience as inconsequential has been particularly prevalent in Scotland's culture, which tends to present itself deliberately as hypermasculine – epitomised in the popular imagination by the face-painted, dishevelled and bloodied Mel Gibson defiantly yelling "Freedom!" with his last breath as he plays the historical Scottish warrior William Wallace in the blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995). A. L. Kennedy's fellow-Scottish woman writer, Janice Galloway (b. 1955), pays tribute to the inspiring, energising and even mobilising influence of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, where she discovered, in her own words, "a voice that offered me something freeing" (Galloway 195), which was the much-needed impetus that galvanised not only Galloway but arguably a whole generation of emergent writers of either sex in a world where the "so-called women's issues are still regarded as deviant, add-on, extra. Not the Big Picture," Galloway contends (Galloway qtd. in March, "Galloway" 85).

Kennedy firmly rejects the restrictive "woman writer" label as well as the even more definitive "feminist" label, along with any other neat categories that would reduce her work into an exercise in promoting a particular preset agenda. "I've certainly had feminists come to my readings and walk out," she recounts. "I think they came expecting me to be someone who conforms to their agenda. No guy ever does a reading and has a whole load of guys at the back standing up and saying, 'why aren't you redefining maleness?'" Kennedy argues against the stereotypical assumption that "to be a female writer you must be something else too" (Kennedy qtd. in March, "Kennedy" 107). While it certainly holds true that Kennedy does not pursue any immediately identifiable ideological purpose or didactic goal, especially her early writings manifest unmistakably female sensibilities – even without assuming any apparent moral stance – which are not paralleled in any other works by her "default" male fellow-writers.

When pressed to comment on the often harsh plights of the disempowered, dispossessed, and disaffected female characters in her writing, Kennedy clarifies her point, claiming: "I'm always drawn to the border between what you want and what you want to say and what you need to say and what's actually possible – the interior life and the exterior life. . . . So if I've got any kind of agenda at all it's this: the people who come to me tend to be people who can't say what they want to say, so I say that they can't say what they want to say" (Kennedy qtd. in March,

"Kennedy" 117). In other words, Kennedy does not presume to appoint her characters, whether female or male, to represent any larger social, economic, or other group and speak on its behalf; she cannot give voice to the voiceless, as the critical cliché goes, because she knows as little as her conflicted characters what it is that they are trying to express.

"There are no monsters": The Motif of Violence in Kennedy's Stories

If I could be the first pensioner film director, I would make films about us. I wouldn't choose anyone special, like a spy, or a general, who might be remembered, or famous for anything else. I would film an ordinary person, their story, because they have good stories, too.

—A. L. Kennedy, "Star Dust" (Kennedy, *Geometry* 88)

Kaye Mitchell aptly characterises Kennedy's early work, noticing the author's self-admitted preoccupation with the clash of the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, the particular and the general, pointing out that in Kennedy's imagination "these are not lives or people defined by their membership of groups but rather defined by their very lack of such membership. . . . Her focus is on specificity, particularity and the ways in which such lives are subsumed by some greater whole or system. Kennedy demonstrates an awareness of the potential violence of this subsuming" (Mitchell 58). The short story proves to be a medium particularly well suited to resonating with the procession of small people whose small lives Kennedy depicts with sharp observational skills, a keen sense for detail – a peculiar gesture, an idiosyncratic word or a silence pregnant with meanings – and, above all, with unflinching honesty and quiet sympathy untainted by any demonstrative display of sentiment or excessive melodrama. Kennedy brings to the fore the raw experience of those who rarely attract serious attention in literary fiction, unless as curiosities, aberrations or even perversions: she devotes her stories to the overlooked uncomfortable struggles of disintegrated marriages, single mothers, alcoholic fathers, neglected children, the mentally ill, the elderly, sick and dying. In doing so with earnestness, grace and sensitivity, she respects and accepts any person without doubting their status as a human being, however inhuman they may appear.

"It's about humanity," Kennedy insists when speaking about her preferred choice of seemingly monstrous characters. "Looking out of someone else's eyes, and planning them as human, whoever they are. So you understand that there are no monsters" (Kennedy qtd. in March, "Kennedy" 108). Kennedy painstakingly refrains from as much as implying any moral judgement and treads carefully to avoid dehumanising her characters, so that in her chillingly understated stories, as Cristie March observes, "we see everyday people committing monstrous acts, illustrating

both their humanity and their fallibility” (March, *Rewriting* 139). The bulk of Kennedy’s work, but especially her early short story collections, manifests her preoccupation with various forms of violence, though the domestic kind appears most frequently, including both psychological and physical abuse, specifically the recurrent motifs of rape and molestation. Considering the noisily masculine nature of the Scottish cultural tradition, it does not come as a surprise that artistic explorations of violence have formed a large part of the tradition—in fact, a characteristically dark strain of hardboiled crime fiction marketed as “tartan noir” has been Scotland’s chief literary export product since the 1980s. The founder of the genre, William McIlvanney, in his pioneering tartan noir novel, *Laidlaw* (1977), interestingly voices the same premise as A. L. Kennedy when it comes to dismissing the perpetrators of monstrous acts as monsters: “Monstrosity’s made by false gentility. You don’t get one without the other. No fairies, no monsters. Just people” (McIlvanney 85).

Kennedy’s oeuvre suggests the possibility of drawing another parallel with her argument against explaining away monstrous deeds as the actions of creatures that are less than human: her unorthodox line of thinking brings to mind the controversial concept of “the banality of evil” introduced and developed by Hannah Arendt in her observations on the trial of the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann, published in book form as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Arendt (in the same way as, later, Kennedy in her fiction) does not in any thinkable way trivialise or even dare to excuse the atrocities committed by Eichmann and others; rather, she seeks to refute the simplistic popular notion of Eichmann and his like as monsters, as anomalies existing outside the ordinary course of humankind. Quite the contrary, Arendt stresses “that it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster” (Arendt 372); however, “the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (Arendt 373). While “normal” may not be the best choice of word – alternatively, it might be more accurate to describe them as *appearing* normal rather than *being* normal – the point is that nothing sets the Little Eichmanns among us apart from the general population and that, by extension, we may each discover all the prerequisites for perpetrating evil in our very own selves.

The discomfiting idea of the banality of evil in general and violence in particular – “banality” in the above-defined sense as commonness, ordinariness, unexceptionality, as opposed to monstrosity, perversity, exceptionality – accordingly permeates much of Kennedy’s writing, where she sets out “to highlight the presence of the perverse within the normal”, as Mitchell formulates it, “thus deconstructing that apparent dichotomy” (80). In arguably one of her most powerful and chilling stories, “The Boy’s Fat Dog” (1994), Kennedy seems to echo some of

Arendt's concerns in fictionalised terms in choosing the backdrop of a major war conflict to present the disjointed (dis)contents of the mind of a voluntarily enlisted soldier. The story dispenses with particulars regarding the setting, belligerents or nature of the conflict, which reinforces the universal resonance of its message. Here and again in many other stories, Kennedy presents perfectly ordinary characters with dull everyday lives, whose routines are disrupted by unexpected but more or less unexceptional circumstances, which typically trigger inexplicably extreme responses, so that, as March remarks, she ultimately "allows us to see the thought processes of rational people who commit unthinkable acts, recognising that 'there are no monsters'" (March, *Rewriting* 154).

In "The Boy's Fat Dog", the narrator-protagonist is shown surveying a peasant village on the eve of its obliteration, a village which he himself spotted, duly reported and hence consigned to destruction. As his thoughts flow and freely associate, it transpires that he is actively and deliberately complicit in war crimes, including genocide, but also that he is deeply dissociated from the surrounding reality as well as from himself. It is as though he suddenly found himself in the midst of an escalated situation by an inexplicable accident which he cannot fathom, although his rational reasoning faculties remain perfectly intact:

We were being asked to go out and kill these people before they could kill any more of us. There can be none of them left, because they have crossed a kind of line and become animal, machine, something unhuman and only concerned with killing people like me who have homes and rows of winter greens, two little girls, a red-haired wife and jobs that don't quite suit them. (Kennedy, *Now* 148)

These are not the words of a deranged sadist who gets a kick out of raping women and slashing children across the face, and Kennedy takes great care not to present her protagonist as dehumanised: he has flashbacks of the little boy whose face he cut, "which was not what I intended", as he plainly observes (Kennedy, *Now* 149); he feels bad about the pigs on which he practised killing and most of all, he pities the fat old dog which he watches moving around the village, hoping that the dog makes it out of the condemned village alive. It is worth noting that the dehumanisation cuts both ways, as the above-quoted passage illustrates, since it is not only we who deny the perpetrators of terrible crimes their humanity, it is also the rapists and murderers who depersonalise and objectify their victims, perceiving them as "animal, machine, something unhuman", as the protagonist of the story puts it (Kennedy, *Now* 148).

"The Boy's Fat Dog" illustrates Kennedy's typical take on the banality of violence, and yet it is atypical in its focus on a grand-scale narrative of violence, for Kennedy characteristically deals with deceptively unremarkable domestic stories. Evaluating Kennedy's work, Ali Smith argues that "the impetus for her writing

is the giving of voice and articulacy to ordinary people who have been silenced by their ordinariness, the calling for due recognition of the complexities of their lives" (Smith 180). To what extent Kennedy actually does the job of "giving the voice and articulacy" to the silenced is debatable, since her characters are nearly always inarticulate and as often as not quiet, whether by choice, necessity or coercion. What Kennedy indisputably does is to give these troubled character types presence, illuminating the invisible and centralising the marginal. Her characters yearn for connection and communication but their solipsistic inclinations, among other factors, prevent them from forging balanced relationships and functioning in them, leading to what David Borthwick terms "the loss of any spiritually fruitful or intellectually rewarding intersubjective communication" (Borthwick 267).

In Kennedy's fictional world, communication eventually becomes replaced by silence and violence, as is the case of the marital fight in the story "Sweet Memory Will Die" (1990), whose protagonist replicates her father's habitual abusive behaviour when her marriage starts disintegrating after the birth of her son Sandy and she hits her husband, who retaliates:

It's funny, all the time it happened I thought of Sandy. I didn't want him to hear us. I didn't want him to know. He would have heard me falling, he would have heard the body, the feet, the head, but he didn't hear my voice. I never made a sound that might worry him. Paul was quiet, too. There was only the noise inside when he hit me and the sound it made outside, in the room. The sound he would listen to. (Kennedy, *Geometry* 59–60)

Domestic violence is a recurrent motif not only in A. L. Kennedy but in a whole stream of Scottish working-class fiction, established by the infamous *No Mean City* (1935), a crudely naturalistic novel produced by H. Kingsley Long and Alexander McArthur, which, despite its dubious literary merit, is significant in that it created the stock character of the wee hard man, a razor-slashing, heavy-drinking and wife-beating Scottish slum dweller. The very existence of a perpetrator of domestic abuse as a stock character type in Scottish literature evidences that violence is a major theme and a prevalent phenomenon, certainly in the fictional worlds of Scottish writers.

Apart from Kennedy's preoccupation with domestic abuse, Mitchell notices "the proximity of sex and violence" underlying much of her writing (Mitchell 80), where the blurred boundaries between seemingly irreconcilable opposites evolve into a series of other unlikely combinations, including not only the commonplace confusion of sex and love but, even more alarmingly, the conflation of parental love and child abuse. In the deeply disturbing story "A Perfect Possession" (1994), a married couple who are orthodox believers set out on the godly mission

of exorcising their young son of supposed sin, substituting literal pain for love, convinced that "it hurts when we love somebody, because loving is a painful thing, that is its nature" (Kennedy, *Now* 1). Another uneasy story, "Friday Payday" (1994), featuring an underage Scottish prostitute who fled from her abusive father to London, illustrates the all-too-common rationalisation of fathers sexually abusing their daughters: "Father called it having a cuddle and said it was her mother's fault. He'd used to do this with her mother but then she'd gone to somewhere else and he still needed someone because he was a normal man" (Kennedy, *Now* 133). This train of thought is reminiscent of a scene along the same lines in a much-beloved classic Scottish novel, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), which Kennedy seems to echo in her story, also in terms of paying a tribute to fierce women survivors far surpassing their weak men as well as in terms of a passionate love for the land, though translated in Kennedy's story into an updated language: "Sometimes she just got dead homesick – adverts on the underground for Scotland, they lied like fuck, but they still made you think" (Kennedy, *Now* 142).

Kennedy emphasises the banality of violence in her stories by presenting violence typically as a character's primitive, unskilled first response to circumstances beyond their control which they do not have the knowledge, experience or ability to handle in a constructive rather than destructive manner. Many of her characters feel vaguely anxious, insecure and threatened by the commonplace but no less acutely experienced uncertainties of everyday life, and their heightened neuroticism makes them easily susceptible to even seemingly minor stress factors, which triggers the fight-or-flight reflex in them. When they choose to fight, they follow their biological survival instinct to the fullest and opt for physical violence instead of taking the extra step that is needed for impulse control and a rational consideration of other than violent options. This process is well illustrated in the story "Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains" (1990), whose protagonist makes what looks like an inconsequential small adjustment in her daily routine, which, however, leads to her arriving home early and finding her husband Duncan with his mistress. She unthinkingly picks up a carving knife, only to realise that she has no idea what she intends to do with it:

I was going to run back to the bedroom and do what you would do with a carving knife, maybe to one of them, maybe to both, or perhaps just cut off his prick. . . In the end I tried to stab the knife into the worksurface, so that he would see it there, sticking up, and know that he'd had a near miss. The point slid across the formica and my hand went down on the blade, so that all of the fingers began to bleed. When Duncan came in, there was blood everywhere and my hand was under the tap and I'm sure he believed I'd tried to kill myself. (Kennedy, *Geometry* 33–34)

Apart from Kennedy's trademark sense of understated dark humour, this scene shows an ordinary character's failure to cope when her accustomed internal mundanity is disrupted by an external threat. Here Kennedy does not depict a brutal monster but a mere human being who resorts to violence – though gone grotesquely awry in this case – because of a lack of insight into other options.

Here and elsewhere, violence acts as a substitute for communication, which is the missing piece in much of Kennedy's writing, as Eluned Summers-Bremner observes:

Kennedy's characters frequently suffer from incommunicable feelings that have an intimate relation to language while not being expressible within it. The feelings themselves are often of impotence and lack, which increases relative to attempts to use words to convey them, or of a promissory fullness whose comforts cannot be reached. It is as though language, through which the body gains a useful, if ill-fitting, means of communication, fails to silence the body's inarticulate response to this arrangement in the flesh. (Summers-Bremner 124)

Kennedy's characters "communicate" through violence, which is, in their case, as banal a means of expression as language is to those more articulate; the intention in both cases being not primarily to cause harm but to establish a connection with another person, with the world at large but also with oneself. Kennedy's work reaches a universal human resonance with its concentration on the small lives of ordinary people, and yet it also stands out as a unique take on and, simultaneously, an embodiment of the peculiarities of Scottish experience, the slight differences and little details that make each of us individual while at the same time always belonging to one human race. Even if Kennedy can be disconcerting, even disturbing, as Sarah Dunnigan points out, she equally "creates an almost fabled beauty at the heart of her most tender fictions about lovers, and daughters and fathers. While her work as a whole is about the emotionally and politically disenfranchised and dispossessed, it also aims to discover the means of (re)enchantment" (Dunnigan 154).

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Banalnost nasilja v zgodnjih zgodbah A. L. Kennedyja

Članek uporabi concept Hannah Arendt o banalnosti nasilja za ilustracijo banalnost specifične manifestacije zla, ki je nasilje, kot ga najdemo v zgodnjih kratkih zgodbah A.L. Kennedyja.

Ključne besede: škotska književnost, žensko pisanje, banalnost zla, nasilje