

From Dialect to Literary Voice: The Role of Language in Shaping Modern Scottish Identity

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Abstract:

The Scots language is an essential component of Scottish identity and culture. It is a marker of cultural and historical continuity, a symbol of resistance and national pride, and a living testament to Scotland's diversity and linguistic richness. While the language has faced challenges, particularly in the face of English dominance, it remains a vital part of Scotland's cultural expression, whether through literature, music, or daily life. Scots continues to shape how Scotland sees itself and how it is perceived in the world, making it an invaluable part of both personal and national identity. The Scots language, particularly in literature and political discourse, has become a form of cultural resistance and a tool for articulating a separate Scottish identity, distinct from English or British identity. During movements for devolution or independence, the promotion and celebration of Scots as part of the national culture has gained greater significance as a way to express Scottish autonomy and self-determination. This paper explores how contemporary Scottish writers use Scots dialect and language to reflect identity, culture, and regionalism in their works.

Keywords: *national pride, resistance, Scottish autonomy, Scottish identity, Scots*

The Scots language, with its deep historical roots in Scotland, continues to hold significant relevance in modern Scottish literature. Once the dominant tongue of Scotland Scots experienced a decline in influence after the union with England, English gradually became the preferred language for official and literary use. Despite this, Scots has maintained a robust presence in Scottish culture and identity, particularly in literature.

The Scots language is a Germanic language variety spoken in Scotland. It is closely related to English but has distinct characteristics, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar that set it apart. Scots developed from Old English and was spoken throughout much of medieval Scotland. Over time, it evolved into a set of dialects, influenced by both Gaelic and Norse, especially in different regions of Scotland.

Scots is often classified into three main dialect groups – Insular Scots (spoken in the Lowlands and Central Belt); Northern Scots (spoken in the northern and rural parts of Scotland, such as the Borders and Orkney); and Doric (spoken in the northeast, particularly in Aberdeenshire). While Scots and English share many linguistic features, Scots retains more archaic forms of English and is noted for its distinctive vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures. For example, Scots has unique words like “bairn” (child), “dinnae” (don’t), and “wee” (small).

Despite historical prestige and its use as the language of government and literature in Scotland up until the 17th century, Scots began to decline in favour of English after the Union of Scotland and England in 1707. Today, Scots is still spoken by a significant number of people in Scotland, though it is often considered a dialect of English rather than a separate language. Nonetheless, it holds cultural and historical importance and continues to be used in literature, media, and everyday speech, especially in areas of Scotland where it remains more prevalent.

The Scots language plays a significant role in shaping Scottish identity and culture, serving as both a marker of regional and national identity and a medium for expressing the unique cultural and historical experiences of Scotland. The language’s importance can be understood in several ways. Scots is deeply tied to Scotland’s cultural heritage, offering a linguistic link to the past. As a variety of the Germanic language, it evolved in parallel with the development of Scottish society, reflecting its particular customs, traditions, and worldview. For many, speaking or writing in Scots connects them to centuries of Scottish literature, folklore, music, and oral traditions, and provides a sense of continuity with past generations. The use

of Scots often carries with it a sense of local pride, particularly in rural or working-class communities where the language has traditionally been spoken. It is a reminder of Scotland's distinctiveness, especially in the face of historical efforts to diminish it through Anglicization.

In the context of modern Scottish nationalism, Scots has become a symbol of resistance to English cultural dominance. After the 1707 Act of Union, which merged the Scottish and English parliaments, the Scots language, along with Gaelic, faced decline due to the spread of English as the language of governance, literature, and education. However, the revitalization of Scots in the 20th and 21st centuries has been seen by many as part of a broader effort to reclaim and reassert Scotland's national identity.

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Scots is a language that reflects the diversity of Scottish society. It is spoken with various regional accents and dialects, such as Glaswegian, Doric, and Lowland Scots. Each variation of Scots carries its own local flavour and distinctiveness, offering a rich tapestry of linguistic expressions that highlight Scotland's geographic, cultural, and historical diversity. The regional variation of Scots also provides insight into Scotland's history of settlement, migration, and cultural exchange, with influences from Old Norse, Gaelic, and French. The language, in this sense, acts as a living testament to the country's complex past and its diverse communities.

Scots has served as a language of resistance, both socially and politically. During periods of cultural suppression, when speaking Scots was discouraged in favour of English, using the language became an act of defiance and pride. In literature, Scots has been used as a means to articulate the struggles of the working class, the rural population, and

those marginalized by mainstream English-speaking society. In modern Scottish literature, Scots continues to function as a tool for social commentary, allowing writers to explore themes of class, identity, alienation, and national pride.

Scots is integral to Scotland's oral tradition, which includes storytelling, poetry, and song. The language is embedded in folk traditions, such as ballads, poems, and chants, many of which were passed down through generations. Scots-language poets and songwriters continue to draw on these traditions, often blending them with contemporary themes to preserve and adapt Scotland's rich oral history. Folk songs in Scots, whether celebratory or mournful, carry forward a collective memory of Scotland's history, from its struggles to its victories. This oral heritage helps maintain Scots as a vital part of the nation's cultural fabric, ensuring that the language and its meanings remain alive for future generations.

Humour is another key aspect of Scots, as the language's rhythm and vocabulary lend themselves well to wit and satire. Scots is often used in comedic settings, whether in everyday conversation, theatre, or literature. Its expressiveness and flexibility allow for playful manipulation of words, which is a central feature of Scotland's humour. Humour in Scots is not just about jokes; it can also reflect the social realities and struggles of everyday life in Scotland.

The use of Scots in comedy and popular culture allows the language to remain relevant and accessible, helping it to stay connected to the daily lives of Scots speakers. Scottish language has played an essential role in Scottish literature, offering authors a means of expressing Scottish identity through the lens of the vernacular. Writers like Robert Burns, who is often hailed as the national poet of Scotland, used Scots to craft poems and songs that encapsulated the hopes, dreams, and realities of the Scottish people. Burns' works have become synonymous with Scottish pride and identity, and his use of Scots continues to resonate today. Scots is used not just for aesthetic or cultural purposes, but as a way to explore themes of nationalism, class, and the tension between Scotland and England.

Scots evolved from Old English and was used as the primary language in medieval Scotland. However, after the Union of Scotland and England in 1707, Scots began to lose its status, as English took precedence in the arts, education, and governance. The decline of Scots in literature during the 18th and 19th centuries coincided with the growing cultural and political hegemony of English. However, Scots persisted as a spoken language, and efforts to revive and maintain it have shaped its role in contemporary literary production.

In modern times, Scots plays a significant role in shaping literary voices that are distinctly Scottish. Authors such as Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead, and James Robertson have incorporated Scots into their works, whether in poetry, prose, or drama, as a means of exploring themes of national identity, class, and the complex relationship between Scotland and England. Scots is more than just a dialect—it is a key tool for expressing local realities and identities. Writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Liz Lochhead used Scots to express their vision of an independent and culturally distinct Scotland, reflecting the aspirations of many Scots who felt their voices had been ignored in a predominantly English-speaking society.

Hugh MacDiarmid, one of the most prominent figures in Scottish literature, played a crucial role in revitalizing the Scots language in the 20th century. His use of Scots, particularly in his poetry, was both an artistic and political statement. By writing in Scots, MacDiarmid sought to assert a distinctive Scottish identity and culture, which he felt was being undermined by English dominance and cultural imperialism.

MacDiarmid's work, including his long poem "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle", employs Scots not merely as a regional dialect but as a symbol of resistance and cultural pride. His decision to write in Scots was rooted in his belief that the language held the key to expressing Scotland's unique history, values, and traditions. At the time, Scots was often seen as a "low" or "substandard" language, and many Scots people spoke English as a result of cultural and educational pressures.

By incorporating Scots into his poetry, MacDiarmid sought to elevate it to the level of literary sophistication, demonstrating its capacity for modern expression and intellectual discourse. His efforts were part of a larger movement known as the Scottish Renaissance, which aimed to rejuvenate Scottish art, literature, and identity following centuries of political and cultural union with England.

MacDiarmid's work remains relevant to Scottish culture today, as it continues to inspire debates around national identity, language, and the preservation of cultural heritage. His use of Scots also contributed to a broader resurgence of interest in the language, which is now celebrated as an integral part of Scotland's rich linguistic and cultural landscape. Through his poetry and advocacy, MacDiarmid helped to solidify the importance of Scots not only in literature but also as a symbol of Scottish autonomy and self-expression.

Liz Lochhead, another celebrated Scottish poet and playwright, has made significant contributions to the revitalization of the Scots language in contemporary literature. Her work, often infused with Scots, reflects a deep engagement with Scottish identity, history, and culture. Lochhead's use of Scots is not merely a linguistic choice; it is a deliberate effort to capture the authentic voices and experiences of ordinary Scots people, while also challenging established cultural and linguistic norms.

In her poetry and plays, Lochhead often writes in a blend of Scots and English, embracing the versatility and fluidity of the language. Her work, such as her poetry collection *The Colour of Black and White* and her play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, explores themes of identity, gender, and social change, while also celebrating the richness of the Scots language. Through her use of Scots, Lochhead both critiques and reclaims the language, rejecting the notion that it is inferior or outdated.

Lochhead's work resonates deeply with Scottish culture as it addresses themes of community, class, and the lived experiences of Scots people. By writing in Scots, she keeps the language alive and relevant in the modern cultural context,

while also drawing attention to its importance in expressing a distinctly Scottish voice. Her emphasis on the vitality and resilience of Scots also serves as a form of cultural resistance against the dominance of English, reinforcing the significance of the language in maintaining a unique Scottish identity.

Moreover, Lochhead's impact extends beyond literature. She has been an advocate for the use of Scots in education and the arts, contributing to the broader movement that seeks to elevate the status of Scots within Scottish society. Her work has played a role in renewing interest in Scots, encouraging future generations to engage with their linguistic heritage and to view the language as a valuable cultural asset rather than a relic of the past.

Overall, Liz Lochhead's use of Scots language not only enhances her literary voice but also plays a vital role in preserving and promoting Scottish culture and language in the contemporary era. Her work underscores the relevance of Scots in shaping Scotland's national identity, fostering pride, and celebrating the country's diverse linguistic traditions.

Scots plays an integral part in discussions around Scottish nationalism. The revival and use of Scots in literature is often seen as a counterpoint to English dominance, asserting Scotland's distinctiveness. As Scotland continues to debate its future within the United Kingdom, the use of Scots in literature becomes an expression of both cultural pride and political resistance, particularly in relation to the ongoing discussions around Scottish independence.

Despite its rich literary heritage, the Scots language faces numerous challenges today. The encroachment of globalized English, along with the decline in Scots speakers, raises questions about its future. However, the growing interest in Scots within contemporary literature, media, and education suggests that the language is far from being relegated to the past. Efforts to preserve and promote Scots are crucial in ensuring its continued vitality in Scotland's cultural landscape.

The role of Scots in modern Scottish literature remains vital for understanding both the cultural fabric of Scotland and its

literary traditions. While it faces challenges, the ongoing use of Scots in contemporary works of literature underscores the language's resilience and importance as a cultural symbol of Scottish identity. The continued evolution of Scots in literature is a testament to the enduring power of language in shaping national identity and artistic expression.