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Breaking the Pattern: Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and the *Mabinogion*

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Abstract

Examines how Garner’s *The Owl Service* reflects events of the *Mabinogion* in modern terms. Pays particular attention to issues of parental possessiveness, control and expectation, and the need to break “deterministic patterns.”

Additional Keywords

Garner, Alan. *The Owl Service*; *The Mabinogion*; Parents

BREAKING THE PATTERN

ALAN GARNER'S *THE OWL SERVICE* AND *THE MABINOGION*

SARAH BEACH



Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* is a tale of three young people molded over one of the mythic stories of *The Mabinogion*. In the quotations he chooses for the novel's headpiece, Garner points to his interest in the story he is about to tell. He uses two poetical quotations, one referring to owls and the other to flowers, and a third quotation from a 1965 radio program, a crucial quotation for his story: "Possessive parents rarely live long enough to see the fruits of their selfishness."¹

The story from the *Mabinogion* that Garner has chosen to work with is that of Llew Llaw Gyffes, his birth and growth and the making of his bride. It is a story driven by the parental figures and the destinies they lay out. To follow the dynamics of Garner's story, a recapitulation of the *Mabinogion* tale would be helpful.

Gwydion, a renowned figure in the Welsh mythos, precipitates the beginning of the tale by suggesting his sister for the position of footholder to Math, the ruler of the land. This duty must be performed by a virgin and Math tests the lady Aranrhod by magic. The result is that she "dropped" a boy child and a second "small something."² Gwydion snatches up the something and hides it away in a chest at the foot of his bed. Soon it is revealed to be a marvelous boy child, who grows quickly. Gwydion nurtures his sister's son with a strong parental warmth. But the child has no name and it is his mother's place to bestow it. Aranrhod had fled when the babies had been "dropped" and had nothing to do with them since. When Gwydion brings the boy to her for naming, she is angered at being reminded of her humiliation and so refuses to name the child.

"This boy is a son of thine," said he. 'Alas, man! What came over thee to put me to shame, and to pursue my shame, and keep it as long as this?' 'Unless thou suffer a greater shame than that I should rear a boy as fine as this, a small thing thy shame will be.' 'What is thy son's name?' asked she. 'Faith,' he said, 'there is as yet no name to him.' 'Well' said she, 'I will swear on him a destiny, that he shall not get a name till he get it from me.' (M, 64)

By his wiles Gwydion tricks her into naming the boy — Llew Llaw Gyffes. She reasserts her parental authority by vowing Llew will never bear arms unless she gives them, intending to never do so. Gwydion again tricks her on that issue. Thereupon she pronounces her final curse, the vow that precipitates the later tragedy: "'And I will swear a destiny on him,' said she, 'that he shall never have a wife of the race that is now on this earth.'" (M, 68)

To circumvent this last curse, the fiercely paternal Gwydion (with Math's assistance) creates a bride for Llew out of flowers.

And then they took the flowers of the oak, and the flowers of the broom, and the flowers of the meadow-sweet, and from those they called forth the very fairest and best endowed maiden that mortal ever saw ... and named her Blodeuedd. (M, 68)

Blodeuedd plays her role dutifully until she meets Gronw Bebyr and falls in love with him. The lovers contrive Llew's death, but rather than die he is changed into a "foul owl."³ Gwydion, relentless in his parental role, finds the wounded Llew and returns him to human form. Then father and son (for so they behave) hunt down the lovers. Blodeuedd flees, and when caught, Gwydion mercilessly turns her into an owl. Gronw ends up agreeing to re-enact Llew's murder, if he is allowed to put a huge stone between himself and the spear's blow. Llew allows this, and yet when he throws his spear from the ridge to the stream, the spear pierces the rock and kills Gronw. Llew then goes on to rule his land well, but one would hardly end it "happily ever after," given that his mother's curse remains in effect.

It is upon this grim tale that Garner builds his story. He very quickly links his characters with the mythic figures. The youngsters are cast into the roles of the romantic triangle, without their having any idea of the pattern they are about to embody.

Alison, the young daughter of the house (in a valley in Wales, but owned by English gentry), has heard scratchings in the attic over her bedroom. To accommodate her, Gwyn opens the attic space and finds no animals — only "a kind of scent ... yes; it's meadowsweet." (OS, 4) However, more than scent lingers in the space under the roof:

In the darkest corner of the loft a plank lay over the joists, and on it was a whole dinner service: squat towers of plates, a mound of dishes, and all covered with grime, straw, droppings and blackened pieces of birds nests. (OS, 4)

This is the Owl Service of the book's title. The plates are decorated with a pattern that can be put together two ways, owls or flowers. Alison becomes fascinated with it, and makes owls of the pattern. The scent of meadowsweet — one of the flowers from which Blodeuedd was made — in the attic and the droppings and birds nests signal the positioning of Alison for the role of Blodeuedd in the mythic re-enactment that is about to take place in the valley.

Roger, Alison's step brother (newly acquired) is likewise quickly linked to his mythic role. When first encountered in the story, he is swimming in the river. He climbs out by a huge rock and "sprawled backwards into the foam of meadowsweet that grew thickly He gathered the stems in his arms." (OS, 6) A moment later a strange event occurs.

Something flew by him, a blink of dark on the leaves. It was heavy, and fast, and struck hard. He felt the vibration through the rock; and he heard a scream. (OS, 6)

He cuts his hand on the meadowsweet, and then discovers a round smooth hole that goes clean through the rock. Like Gronw, he had taken the "meadowsweet" in his arms.

Gwyn's role is not made as explicit initially. When he first picks up one of the plates for Alison, he lurches. Later Roger and he work out that this happened at the same moment Roger had his odd experience. This parallels the mythic moment when Lleu threw his spear at Gronw. The rest of his identification with Lleu is accomplished by implication: his shrewish, unsupportive mother; his being Welsh and knowing the valley in contrast to Alison's and Roger's Englishness.

The issue at stake for the young people, and for the results of the mythic enactment, is that of identity. Since Garner is writing a fantasy, mythic power of a sort is connected with identity. Part of the way through his story, Garner puts the explanation of the power in Gwyn's mouth:

"Just suppose, a long time back, hundreds and hundreds of years, someone, somehow, did a thing in this valley. Suppose he found a way to control some power, or force, and used it to make a woman out of flowers. And suppose it went wrong — got out of hand — I don't know. It got out of hand because it wasn't neutral anymore. There was a brain behind it. Do you follow? Neutral like a battery, I mean. You can use it to explode a bomb or to fry an egg: it depends on you." (OS, 110)

Once it is put that way, Alison sees at least part of Gwyn's point and agrees to it. She responds by pointing out the effect of the power on the valley.

"Look at this sick valley, Gwyn. Tumbledown buildings: rough land. I saw two dead sheep on the way up the track. Even poor old Clive can't catch a tidler." (OS, 111)⁴

However, Alison thinks that the simple release of the valley's power should be sufficient to correct things. In supposing that, she misinterprets Gwyn's analogy of power: power released is only power, and more likely in events to be destructive than constructive.

The people of the valley are aware of this fact. Huw, the resident halfwit (or so he seems) warns Gwyn shortly after the plates are discovered: "Mind how you are looking at her." (OS, 8) Later, Gwyn and Roger make an excursion to the village store, where two local women are talking about the effect of the valley's power and the consequence of its identity.

"I've been expecting it, Mrs. Lewis-Jones, I've been expecting it. There was never a summer like it this week, and then Gareth Pugh's black sow ran wild on the mountain and they can't bring her down. Grandad used to say the beasts always know first." "To think we shall see it in our time, Mrs. Richards!"

"Is it certain?"

"It is. Mister Huw came to tell us last night. He was going to all the farms. He says she is coming, and it's owls."

"We must bear it," said Mrs. Richards. "There's no escaping, is there? Aberystwyth isn't far enough." (OS, 39)

Huw's warning to Gwyn indicates that it is the perceptions of the myth-players that determines the shape of the power, determines whether it will be owls or flowers.

The significance of the two choices is shown in the poetical quotations from Garner's headpiece. He presents the negative choice of owls with this quotation from R.S. Thomas:

The owls are restless.
People have died here,
Good men for bad reasons,
Better forgotten.

The more positive choice of flowers is reflected in these lines from a traditional song:

I will build my love a tower
By the clear crystal fountain,
And on it I will build
All the flowers of the mountain.

The choice of embodying the power of Blodeuedd (for such is the force that fills the valley) as either owls or as flowers has drastic consequences for the valley. If owls, "good men" die "for bad reasons", but if flowers are chosen, the valley will be fruitful with "all the flowers of the mountain."

For this young generation, the key to unlocking the power of Blodeuedd lies in the plates that had been hidden in the attic, and to a lesser degree in a painting that had been hidden under pebble-dash walling. In the painting of Blodeuedd, she is shown surrounded by flowers, by clover heads. But they are not simply flowers. When the young people examine it more closely, they find "the heads were formed of curved white petals bunched together, each painted separately, fine and sharp. But the petals were not petals: they were claws." (OS, 34-35) Roger protests, "You can't have flowers made of claws." But Gwyn responds by reminding Roger of the pattern on the dinner service and Alison's choice: "You can have owls made of flowers, can't you?" (OS, 35). At a later point in the story, Huw tries to explain to Gwyn why the painting and the Owl Service were made. He says (though Gwyn has his doubts about the complete truth, given the age of the painting and Huw's tenuous hold on reality) that his grandfather made the plates, and his uncle the painting.

"You see, grandfather and uncle were great men, and they thought they could tame her. They thought they could end the sorrow of this valley. But they made her owls, and she went hunting. They rid themselves at last by locking her in plate and wall — and then they sought a quiet grave." (OS, 78)

With Huw's indication that the tricornered conflict of Lleu,

Blodeuedd and Gronw has been enacted down through the ages, the effect of parental possessiveness is brought into focus — both in the mythic pattern and in the “real” life of the young people.

In the mythic story, Gwydion’s actions as a parent are evident in his relationship with Lleu: he nurtures the infant, provides for the child, and works to circumvent the destiny curses of the boy’s mother. However, he stands in a parental position to Blodeuedd as well. He has created her (as close to birthing as a man might get), and proves to be very definite about her destiny: she is to Lleu’s wife, period. His ruthless judgement of her when she fails that destiny is the harshest of parental punishments. He changes the nature of her identity, with a sort of “that is the end of that” finality. Garner’s book, of course, contends that that is not the end “of that.” Gwydion’s merciless condemnation of Blodeuedd to the form and nature of an owl shows him to be as possessive of her destiny as he is of Lleu’s. No attempts at forgiveness or reconciliation are made.

With his interest in the effects of parental actions, Garner extends the effect of Gwydion’s choice down through the ages. Because real mythic power is involved and not simply “the sins of the father,” he shows how badly a merciless choice can effect following generations. We have already mentioned the effect on the valley. Alison calls it a “sick valley” and it is so: generations of Blodeuedd’s power in the form of a ruthless hunting owl have hurt the land and the people. And the pattern will not go away: it will only lie in wait for the next generation to try and reshape it.

Garner slowly unfolds the relation of what happened to the previous generation in their attempt at handling the myth. Huw, the handy-man for the property, is first shown “raking the gravel on the drive in front of the house.” (OS, 7) Though in a high traffic area such an activity does serve a purpose, in this situation it is an added occupation eminently suited to the surname he is given in this description: “Halbacoen.” Roger, with a facetiousness that holds more truth than he knows, says, “That man’s gaga He’s so far gone he’s coming back.” (OS, 8) For “coming back” he is, though not in the role he went out on.

In a moment of clear conversation, Huw says “Lleu, Blodeuedd and Gronw Pebyr. They are the three who suffer every time, for in them the power of this valley is contained, and through them the power is loosed.” (OS, 77) He relates this crucial bit of information moments after saying to Gwyn:

“We are not free We have tried too many times to be free. No lord is free. My grandfather tried, my uncle tried, and I have tried to end it, but it has no end.” (OS, 77)

Tried to end what? we ask. Huw had actually answered that earlier. The trying had made his grandfather mad: “He saw the lady made of flowers, but he was not strong enough to keep her, and she changed into — he would never say what happened.” (OS, 76) Given all that Garner

has placed in the story, it is not difficult to guess what happened: she became owls and Huw’s grandfather went mad from the force of the valley’s power in that form. In conveying all this information to Gwyn (the Lleu of the younger generation), Huw enacts the role of Gwydion, trying to assist his protegee.

Huw, in his moments of clarity, is driven to help the youngsters shape the power more favorably because he knows the cost from experience.

“She is here, the lady, and you have made her owls: she will go hunting. But don’t let her destroy. She will be the worse for my fault, and my uncle’s fault and my grandfather’s fault, who tried to stop what can’t be stopped.” (OS, 150)

He then reveals to Gwyn that the previous generation failed to face the mythic pattern, and identifies the players: “Me, your mother, him.” (OS, 151) The “him” was Mr. Bertram, a cousin of Alison’s father, through whom she inherited the house in the valley. Huw, Nancy (Gwyn’s mother) and Bertram had played out the parts of Lleu, Blodeuedd and Gronw with disastrous results. Huw had courted Nancy, but she and Bertram had fallen in love and Bertram had had the intention of wedding her. Bertram had a motorcycle he liked to ride, and the jealous Huw had removed the brake linings. In a sudden change of his usual behavior, Bertram rode his bike up the valley’s pass and had a fatal accident. (OS, 152) After relating this to Gwyn, Huw then reveals the last consequence: that he is Gwyn’s father.

Gwyn shook his head. “She never told me, Huw. She never. And she did that to you? She did that?”
“It was my ending,” said Huw.

Indeed it was. Like Lleu in the bird’s form after Gronw’s blow, Huw became in a way “bird-brained.” Though it seems that slowly, as his role changes from the wounded (and unredeemed Lleu) of the previous generation to the Gwydion of this, he regains a coherence of mind, it is only a partial recovery. The wounds of the past are real and have done serious damage to the valley and to the person.

Nancy, however, seems to ignore the past in all but the most superficial ways. The damage done to her by her being made into Blodeuedd of the Owls has resulted in her becoming the Aranhod of this generation. Though in her pride she has sent Gwyn to grammar school that his chances in the world might be bettered, she also constantly threatens her son with the loss of the opportunities thus gained.

As the power becomes more active in the valley, Nancy becomes more and more hostile to everyone. She is angered any time Gwyn pauses to speak with Huw, and this anger reaches a peak pitch as the shaping of the valley’s power reaches a crucial point. In the middle of a rainstorm she determines to leave the valley and return to Aberystwyth. Gwyn, having just learned that he is Huw’s son, refuses to go.

“What’s that, boy?”
“My Dad ran away,” said Gwyn. “I shan’t. I don’t want to end up like him — or you.”

Nancy brought her arm around and caught Gwyn at the side of the head. The blow knocked him off the chair. (OS, 161)

This violence of Nancy's carries the force of both the hunting owls of Blodeuedd and the anger of Aranhrod at the reminder of her shame in *being* a parent. In addition to this physical violence, she has the power to inflict a great emotional wound on her son, to yank him out of school and set him to work in a shop: a fate that devastates him when she finally says that it *will* come to pass.

He managed to close the door of the flat behind him and to walk down the stairs. He was at the bottom of the stairs. He sat on the bottom step, his head in his hands, and there was nothing else he could do. Through the distance inside him he heard footsteps far away, and voices, and rustling, and through his wet fingers he saw two pairs of shoes stop in front of him, then move around him, and he felt the wood creak, and he was alone again and no one had said his name. (OS, 124)

Like Aranhrod, Nancy has tried to make her son's destiny a nothingness. She has set an emptiness in his heart that leaves him emotionally cold at a time when positive feeling will be needed. She succeeds in crippling him.

Each of the young people are brought to face the matter of parental expectation. Gwyn is caught between his desire to continue his education and Nancy's expectations. "I've got plans," he tells Alison (OS, 103), though at the probable age of 15 or 16 how effective they are is debatable. But since the question is on his mind regarding his own fate, he asks Alison about hers and Roger's futures.

"What are you wanting to do when you leave school, Alison?"

"Mummy wants me to go abroad for a year."

"But what do you want to do?"

"I've not thought. I expect I'll go abroad."

"Then what? Sit at home and arrange flowers for Mummy?"

"Probably."

"And Roger?"

"He'll join Clive in his business, I expect."

"Real fireballs, aren't you?" (OS, 102)

Because Gwyn has raised the question for her, Alison later poses it to Roger — who also has resigned himself to the parental expectation, although his actual love is for photography. Because of their inexperience, the youngsters have no idea how to escape the harsh pressure of their parents' expectations. And under the driving pressure of the valley's mythic power they are on the verge of being emotionally and spiritually destroyed. Unless they, unlike the generations before them, find a way to make Blodeuedd of flowers, the hunting owls of power and parentally determined destiny will shred them.

The pattern of owls is subverted, however, in the way Garner has set up the situation. In a way, he stacks in their favor things which could help them succeed where others have failed. Firstly, for this trio, the conflict between them

is not a matter of sex and love. The young people are seemingly of a young enough age that sex is not the first thing on their minds. Secondly, rather than have this generation's Blodeuedd and Gronw be lovers, they are new step-siblings. And although romance has been known to spring up between step-siblings, Roger and Alison in actuality do behave toward each other as brother and sister. Thirdly, between Gwyn and Alison lies a genuine and comfortable friendship that could with time mature into a real love (a possibility which Alison's mother has perceived and acted to prevent). In addition to this original positive arrangement of the trio, Garner casts the imposed conflict on them in terms of class conflict: Alison and Roger of the upper class and Gwyn of a working class. In class-conscious Britain that indeed can be a hindrance, but the remote Welsh setting softens the edges of that blade. Indeed, Garner uses it only as a tool of the owl power to drive the young people apart. And finally, Garner from the beginning gives Roger, the outsider to the valley, the insight to see around the facade of centuries of owls.

Roger's insight, and (in the end) emotional courage, become crucial in the breaking of the owl pattern. His first reaction to seeing the design on the Owl Service is completely neutral: "An abstract design in green round the edge, touched up with a bit of rough gilding." (OS, 18) Even when Alison insists that it is an owl, Roger's response tends toward the positive interpretation: "I suppose it is, if you want it to be. Three leafy heads with this kind of abstract flowery union in between each one. Yes: I suppose so." (OS, 10)

Because Roger is already minded to look at the pattern as flowers, it is somewhat easier to provide the comfort to Alison that Huw says is needed when the power fully comes upon her. Ideally, it should be the Llew figure who comforts Blodeuedd, who bestows forgiveness. But Gwyn, wounded by his mother and by the power-driven malicious comments of Alison and Roger, is not capable of giving that comfort. Stern, he says to Huw, "I've stayed to help you and the valley, not this lot.... These two are nothing." (OS, 173) It is Roger, anxious to do anything to help his new, suffering sister, who sees the way to bring the needed comfort to Alison. For he recognizes that Gwyn also needs to be released from the pattern. The wounded Llew must be acknowledged: Gronw must confess his sin against Llew and must stand and accept the spear's blow. For Roger, that means letting Gwyn ridicule the mother that had abandoned Roger and his father.

The blue of the eyes froze, and in a slow voice Gwyn said, "Get lost — Mummy's boy."

The walls were shedding their texture and taking another in the pouncing feathers. Gwyn spoke again, but Roger could scarcely hear across the darkness. "Yes. Yes, Gwyn." The back of his head and all his spine were hollow. There was bile in his throat. He could do nothing to answer the words. He could only shore his mind against them, because if he did not he would be spilled by the bitter dark.

"And how is the Birmingham Belle? Still ringing?"
"Yes, Gwyn." (OS, 175)

"The Birmingham Belle" is a nickname applied to Roger's frivolous, amorous mother, and it is a hurtful one for Roger to hear. But Roger stands his ground and discovers this result: "in the calm of the pain's clearing he found no anger." (OS, 175)

By passing through his pain without fleeing it, and without clutching onto anger, Roger can perceive Huw and Gwyn and Alison with mercy. He sees the wounds in Gwyn and Huw and is moved to say "You poor devils." Huw, anxious, babbles: "He hurts too much she wants to be flowers and you make her owls and she is at hunting." In his new clarity of vision, this revelation strikes Roger as being amazingly simple: "Is that it? Is that all it is? As easy as that?" (OS, 175) He turns to the struggling, suffering Alison who is being shrouded in magic feathers and marked by claw scratches, and he speaks encouragingly to her.

"You've got it back to front, you silly gubbins.
She's not owls. She's flowers. Flowers. Flowers, Ali....
You're not birds. You're flowers. You've never been anything else. Not owls. Flowers." (OS, 175)

His continued insistence, in a gentle voice and with laughter, changes the shape of the power, easing Alison. Garner ends the book with this joyful release:

And the room was full of petals from skylight and rafters, and all about them a fragrance, and petals, flowers falling, broom, meadowsweet, falling, flowers of the oak. (OS, 176)

Garner's story is of the breaking of a pattern. In Roger's actions Garner indicates that the courage to endure suffering and the willingness to have mercy and forgiveness are crucial to ending a cycle of emotional abuse and anger. His presentation may verge a little on the simplistic, for we do not see the consequences of the change from owls to flowers. We do not see the restoration of the friendships between Roger and Gwyn and Alison. We do not see the young people standing up to their parents' determination of their futures. We can only speculate that because they do achieve the shaping of Blodeuedd of the Flowers they will now have the capacity to reshape their own lives. But Garner indicates that a difference can be made in dealing with deterministic patterns if we "mind how we are looking at her" and respond positively to the occasions — and powers — that come our way.

NOTES

1. Garner, Alan; *The Owl Service*; Ballantine Books, New York, 1981, p. i. Hereafter cited as OS.
2. *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones, and Thomas Jones; Dent, London, 1975, p. 63. Hereafter cited as M.
3. Actually, into an eagle that is like a living corpse, with decaying flesh dropping off him when he moves.
4. Clive is Alison's step-father, who has been attempting to catch fish in the valley's river.

Mythopoeic Core Reading List

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit, 1937; *Leaf by Niggle*, 1945; *"On Fairy-stories"*, 1946; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977

C.S. LEWIS

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1942; *The Horse and His Boy* 1944; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

War in Heaven 1906; *Many Dimensions* 1913; *The Place of the Lion* 1913; *The Greater Trumps* 1913; *Shadows of Ecstasy* 1913; *Descent into Hell* 1913; *All Hallow's Eve* 1940; *Taliessin through Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1948 (the last two printed together in 1954).



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