

## Exploring Victorian Anxieties: The Role of Creation and Identity in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*

Zanjani, Surena<sup>1\*</sup> , Prof. Dr. Hakan Aydoğan<sup>2</sup> , Melda Medine, Sunay<sup>3</sup> , Babakulov Turkmanovich, Ismail<sup>4</sup> , Khudjakulov Kholmaxmatovich, Sirojiddin<sup>5</sup> , Khushmurodova Shaymonkulovna, Shakhnoza<sup>6</sup> , Boltakulova Farruxovna, Gulnoza<sup>7</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Samarkand State University, English Literature & Linguistics Department, Uzbekistan. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6206-7072>

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Samarkand State University, English Literature & Linguistics Department, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Email: [aydoganb@hotmail.com](mailto:aydoganb@hotmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7906-6955>

<sup>3</sup> Assoc. Professor, Bursa Technical University, Turkey, Email: [sosyologmelda@gmail.com](mailto:sosyologmelda@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3210-5942>

<sup>4</sup> Professor, Samarkand State University, Language Teaching Methods Department, Uzbekistan, Email: [ismailbabakulov@mail.ru](mailto:ismailbabakulov@mail.ru); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-55818632>

<sup>5</sup> Professor, Samarkand State University, Tadjik Philology Department, Uzbekistan, Email: [sirojiddinxodjaqulov1976@gmail.com](mailto:sirojiddinxodjaqulov1976@gmail.com); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-1988>

<sup>6</sup> Assoc. Professor, Samarkand State University, English Literature and Linguistics Department, Uzbekistan. Email: [khushmurodova.shahnoza@yahoo.com](mailto:khushmurodova.shahnoza@yahoo.com); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5744-0580>

<sup>7</sup> Professor, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, English Language Department, Uzbekistan. Email: [gulnozaboltakulova@gmail.com](mailto:gulnozaboltakulova@gmail.com); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4442-3895>

\*Corresponding Author: [zanjanisurena6@gmail.com](mailto:zanjanisurena6@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the themes of creation and identity in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, set against the backdrop of Victorian anxieties. The novel presents a compelling narrative centered on Bella Baxter, a woman resurrected through an unconventional scientific procedure, symbolizing the era's fears surrounding medical advancements and the redefinition of identity. By resurrecting Bella, Gray critiques Victorian social norms, particularly regarding gender roles and personal autonomy, illuminating the complexities of individual identity in a rapidly changing world. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, this research intertwines literary analysis with historical context to reveal how Gray reflects and subverts the ideals of his time. The character's journey of self-discovery serves as a vehicle for exploring the ethical implications of creation, questioning the boundaries between life and artifice. This analysis also addresses broader themes of power dynamics and social expectations, showcasing how Victorian anxieties manifest in the quest for self-definition. Ultimately, this study posits that *Poor Things* not only encapsulates the anxieties of the Victorian era but also provides a progressive commentary on identity that resonates with contemporary discussions about the fluidity of self. Gray's work emerges as a vital contribution to the discourse on the intersections of creation, identity, and ethics in literature.

**Keywords:** Alasdair Gray, Creation, Identity, *Poor Things*, Victorian Anxieties

## INTRODUCTION

The exploration of creation and identity has long captivated writers, artists, and philosophers, weaving intricate narratives that challenge our understanding of what it means to be human. Mary Shelley's seminal work, *Frankenstein*, serves as a cornerstone of this discourse, presenting a complex interplay between creator and creation, life and death, and the quest for selfhood. Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* reimagines these themes within a contemporary context, offering a fresh lens through which to examine the relationships that define existence and identity.

Set in a Victorian-inspired world, *Poor Things* introduces readers to Bella Baxter, a woman resurrected by the eccentric scientist Godwin Baxter. Gray's narrative not only pays homage to Shelley's gothic tale but also subverts it, challenging traditional notions of agency and autonomy. Through Bella's journey of self-discovery, Gray interrogates the implications of creation, particularly the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by those who wield the power of life. The novel invites readers to consider the boundaries of identity—how it is shaped by external forces, the impact of societal expectations, and the transformative potential of personal experiences.

In *Poor Things*, Gray employs a rich tapestry of humor, irony, and metafiction to delve into the intricacies of identity formation. He reflects on the fluidity of selfhood, suggesting that identity is not a static construct but a dynamic interplay between memory, experience, and societal influence. Bella's evolution throughout the novel embodies this complexity, as she navigates her existence in a world that seeks to define her. By examining the roles of creator and creation, Gray compels readers to confront the profound questions surrounding autonomy, agency, and the essence of being.

## DISCUSSION

Alasdair Gray's "Poor Things" is a complex novel that merges elements of Gothic fiction, science fiction, and social critique, creating a rich tapestry that explores themes of identity, gender, power, and the nature of humanity. Through the character of Bella Baxter, Gray challenges societal norms and conventions of the Victorian era, while also commenting on contemporary issues.

### Exploring Identity, Gender Dynamics, and Social Commentary

At the heart of *Poor Things* is Bella Baxter's quest for identity and autonomy. Resurrected by Godwin Baxter, she starts life anew, free from the constraints of her previous existence. However, her journey raises questions about the nature of identity itself. Bella's initial childlike state allows her to explore the world without prejudice, but as she gains agency, she must confront the societal expectations imposed upon her as a woman. Gray deftly critiques the patriarchal structures that seek to define women solely by their relationships to men, illustrating the struggles women face in asserting their identity. As one character observes, "you may become a greater surgeon than Hunter, but unless you acquire a touch of smooth lordliness, no patient will trust you" (p.46). This highlights the expectation for women to navigate a world dominated by male authority and societal norms. As Johnson (2021) states, "in *Poor Things*, Gray intricately explores the intersections of identity and gender, presenting a narrative that challenges traditional norms and accentuates the complexities of female autonomy" (p.102).

Gray's exploration of gender is particularly striking. Bella embodies a duality: she is both a creation of male scientific ambition and an independent agent who defies the limitations placed on her. The character of Godwin Baxter represents the male desire to control and define femininity through science, yet Bella subverts this by asserting her own desires and choices. The power dynamics between the characters expose the absurdity of rigid gender roles and challenge the notion of male superiority. For instance, Sir Aubrey, a figure of authority, "broke in on them, flung the visitor into the street and locked his wife in a coal-cellar" (p.230), illustrating the brutal lengths to which patriarchal figures will go to maintain control over women. "Gray's narrative serves as a social commentary on the patriarchal structures that govern women's lives, using Bella's journey as a lens to examine the broader implications of gender dynamics in society" (Smith, 2020, p.88).

Set against the backdrop of a rapidly industrializing Scotland, *Poor Things* also serves as a critique of societal norms and the consequences of progress. Gray juxtaposes the Enlightenment ideals of reason and scientific advancement with the moral dilemmas they often engender. The novel questions the ethics of scientific experimentation, particularly in relation to marginalized figures like Bella. This commentary resonates with contemporary debates about the ethics of scientific inquiry and the social responsibilities of those in power. The narrative also reflects on the societal treatment of women, as illuminated by the observation that "he was a national hero and cousin of the Earl of Harewood, yet his wife was treated as a mere object" (p.221). This underscores the persistent objectification of women, even those associated with powerful men, challenging readers to consider the broader implications of such attitudes. As McGowan (2022) observes, "the exploration of identity in *Poor Things* is

deeply intertwined with social commentary, as Gray critiques the limitations imposed on women by societal expectations and celebrates their quest for self-definition" (p.134).

*Poor Things* is a multifaceted work that transcends the boundaries of genre, offering a rich analysis of identity, gender, and societal norms. Alasdair Gray's innovative narrative techniques and his incisive critique of power dynamics make the novel a profound exploration of what it means to be human. Through Bella Baxter's journey, Gray invites readers to reflect on the complexities of autonomy and the societal structures that shape our identities, ultimately crafting a timeless tale that remains relevant in today's discourse on gender and identity.

### Reclamation of Agency

At the heart of *Poor Things* is Bella Baxter's journey of self-discovery and reclamation of agency. Initially resurrected by the scientist Godwin Baxter, Bella begins her life as a blank slate, embodying both innocence and curiosity. Johnson (2021) observes that "in *Poor Things*, Gray intricately explores the restoration of agency through Bella's journey, as she transforms from a passive subject of scientific experimentation into an empowered individual who asserts her identity and desires" (p. 92). Bella Baxter's resurrection serves as a metaphor for women's resurgence of agency. As she evolves, her voice becomes a powerful instrument of autonomy. However, she grapples with the complexities of her identity and the expectations placed upon her. Reflecting on her own experiences, Bella admits, "I have done nothing wonderful; in fact, I've done something rather shabby" (p.58), acknowledging the societal pressures that complicate her newfound independence.

Smith (2020) adds, "Gray's narrative illustrates the complexities of agency as Bella navigates her reconstructed identity, challenging societal norms and ultimately reclaiming her autonomy in a world that seeks to define her" (p. 134). This struggle is further emphasized when characters remark, "You are still an unstable woman. Prickett should have operated on you after our honeymoon" (p.222), making prominent the persistent societal view that undermines Bella's autonomy. McGowan (2022) states, "the reclamation of agency in *Poor Things* is not merely a personal journey for Bella; it serves as a broader commentary on the societal constraints placed on women, calling attention to the struggle for self-definition in a patriarchal context" (p. 67). Her refusal to be defined solely by her relationships with men reveals a fundamental aspect of feminist discourse: the importance of self-determination.

Bella's journey resonates with Virginia Woolf's assertion that "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman" (1929, p. 4), emphasizing how women's voices have often been silenced or rendered invisible. By reclaiming her narrative, Bella not only asserts her identity but also challenges the historical marginalization of women. This regeneration is crucial in a society where Baldwin (1963) reminds us that "The most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose" (p. 8); thus, Bella's empowerment becomes a radical act against the patriarchal structures that seek to control her. Atwood (2006) encapsulates this idea succinctly: "A word after a word after a word is power" (p. 94). Bella's evolving voice serves as a testament to the power of self-definition and the necessity of reclaiming agency in the quest for true autonomy.

### Critique of Patriarchy

Gray's portrayal of the relationship between Bella and Godwin Baxter serves as a critique of patriarchal authority. Godwin represents the archetype of the male scientist and rationalist, embodying the Enlightenment ideals that often seek to control and define women. Bella's declaration, "I needed to admire a woman who needed and admired me" (p.74), shines light on her desire for mutual respect and recognition rather than subservience. This desire contrasts sharply with Godwin's paternalistic tendencies, illustrating the struggle for autonomy. Bella's resistance to his paternalism is emblematic of the struggle against male dominance; she asserts, "I will not let people treat her as an oddity" (p.71), firmly rejecting societal labels that seek to diminish her identity.

In *Poor Things*, Johnson (2021) claims that "Gray presents a protagonist who navigates the complexities of autonomy and identity, challenging traditional gender roles and displaying the struggles women face in asserting their independence within a patriarchal society" (p. 112). Through her interactions with Godwin, Bella challenges his attempts to impose his scientific rationality on her, often questioning the very foundations of his authority. For instance, when she states, "if you don't answer my questions frankly, what else can I think?" (p.57), it validates her insistence on transparency and honesty in their relationship, which is often shrouded in the mysteries that Godwin embodies. Moreover, the observation that "only bad religions depend on mysteries, just as bad governments depend on secret police" (p.126) serves as a broader commentary on the dangers of authority cloaked in obscurity, further critiquing the way patriarchal norms operate to silence women.

In another poignant moment, Bella reflects that "the General thinks you loved him too much" (p.223), revealing how societal expectations can distort genuine relationships, forcing women into roles they may not truly embrace. This dynamic illustrates the power struggles inherent in patriarchal relationships and underscores the need for women to reclaim their voices. As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1949, p. 295), emphasizing that gender roles are socially constructed and can be dismantled. Hooks (2003) adds that "Patriarchy has no gender" (p. 1), suggesting that both men and women can perpetuate

oppressive systems, reinforcing the need for a collective effort in challenging these dynamics. Bella's journey toward self-definition brings into focus the importance of transparency, mutual respect, and emotional authenticity in dismantling oppressive structures. Davis (2016) encapsulates this sentiment, stating, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept" (p. 9). This advocacy for active resistance ultimately calls for a reimagined understanding of gender dynamics in both personal and societal contexts.

### **Feminist Insights into *Poor Things***

Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* serves as a provocative exploration of feminist themes through the lens of its protagonist, Bella Baxter. Set against the backdrop of Victorian Scotland, the novel critiques patriarchal structures, explores the complexities of identity, and advocates for female autonomy and empowerment. Johnson (2021) postulates that "in *Poor Things*, Gray presents a protagonist who navigates the complexities of autonomy and identity, challenging traditional gender roles and highlighting the struggles women face in asserting their independence within a patriarchal society" (p. 112). Gray reinforces the tension in Bella's relationships, illustrating that "your husband has sought to possess you but cannot do so without your consent." This assertion displays the importance of agency in defining one's identity. Furthermore, Bella's desire to "help little girls, mothers and prostitutes" (p.205) emphasizes her commitment to uplifting other women, reflecting a broader feminist vision. Smith (2020) adds that "Gray's narrative intricately weaves feminist discourse into its fabric, using the character of Bella to explore themes of bodily autonomy and the implications of scientific manipulation on women's lives" (p. 78). Through its innovative narrative and rich character development, Gray challenges societal norms, stating that "if he insists on taking a purely legal view of his marriage, so can you" (p.229), thereby questioning the validity of patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

However, the film adaptation of *Poor Things* has faced criticism for its portrayal of these themes. McGowan (2023) argues that "the film adaptation of *Poor Things*, while visually stunning, ultimately reduces the complex narrative of female liberation to a series of sexual escapades, failing to engage with the deeper feminist themes present in Gray's original text" (p. 45). The novel presents a nuanced portrayal of a woman's quest for self-definition, ultimately championing the necessity of autonomy in the face of societal constraints.

### **Exploration of Sexuality**

Bella's exploration of her sexuality is another significant feminist theme in the novel. Unlike many women of her time, who faced societal repression regarding their sexual feelings, Bella embraces her desires openly. As the narrative reveals, "women need Wedderburns but love much more their faithful kindly man who waits at home" (p.132), demonstrating the tension between societal expectations and personal fulfillment. Lorde (1984) articulates this sentiment by stating, "the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 53). Bella's candid discussions about her sexuality reflect a rejection of the shame often associated with female desire. When she states, "I was amazed by the enjoyment I got from McCandless" (p.272), it spotlights her journey of self-discovery and the joy she finds in her relationships.

Furthermore, her blunt acknowledgment of sexuality—"I discovered procreation by watching cocks and hens. Did your father's dogs never pup?" (p.55)—demonstrates her comfort with discussing bodily functions and reproduction, challenging the taboos that restrict women's conversations about their own bodies. Foucault (1976) asserts that "sexuality must be understood as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with power relations" (p. 92). This perspective emphasizes that Bella's sexual exploration is not just personal but also a challenge to the power dynamics that seek to control women's bodies and desires. Smith (2005) further clarifies this idea, stating, "the body is a site of struggle, a place where identity is formed and reformed through the acts of love and desire" (p. 215). Bella's exploration not only empowers her but also challenges traditional notions of femininity that dictate how women should express their sexuality. By presenting a character who revels in her sexual autonomy, Gray advocates for a broader acceptance of female desire as a natural and powerful aspect of identity, encouraging readers to rethink the cultural narratives that have historically marginalized women's sexual experiences.

### **Female Solidarity and Relationships**

In Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, the narrative intricately explores female solidarity and relationships, highlighting women's struggles for autonomy and identity within patriarchal confines. Bella's reflection, "how good to have a man I need not thank at all, who I cuddle and who cuddles me" (p. 235), ushers her desire for a relationship based on mutual respect and emotional support rather than obligation. This sentiment is echoed in her declaration, "if I have to live in a world where I am not free to choose my own path, then I will create a new one" (p. 199), asserting her agency in a society that often seeks to limit women's choices.

Moreover, Bella's assertion, "you are to blame for nothing, God, nothing at all where I am concerned" (p. 308), reveals her recognition of systemic oppression rather than individual failings. Her insistence, "I will not allow it, Baxter" (p. 254), further emphasizes her determination to challenge societal expectations. As Solnit (2017) aptly states, "women are not just victims of history; they are also its makers" (p. 45). This perspective reinforces Bella's active role in shaping her destiny and the lives of those around her. Ultimately, her identity as "a collector of childhoods" (p. 414) signifies her understanding of the importance of nurturing relationships among women, suggesting that reclaiming one's past is vital for forging connections and solidarity in the present. Bella's journey illustrates that female empowerment is rooted not only in individual agency but also in collective support, enabling women to redefine their narratives and resist the confines of patriarchal history.

### Scientific Advancement and Body Autonomy

The novel is set during a time of significant scientific progress, which reflects both the potential for empowerment and the risks of exploitation. Godwin Baxter, as a scientist, embodies the Enlightenment ideals of reason and control, often viewing Bella as a subject of experimentation rather than a fully autonomous being. His statement, "I could easily have lived longer had I exercised, but I knew that and I would not bully him" (p.262), illustrates his complex relationship with authority and self-discipline, paradoxically revealing the ways in which he also grapples with the consequences of his actions. This scientific backdrop raises critical questions about body autonomy and the ethical implications of scientific inquiry, particularly concerning women. As Wright (2019) describes, "Gray's narrative raises critical questions about the ethics of scientific progress, particularly in how it relates to the autonomy of individuals, as seen in Bella's journey from a constructed being to one who asserts her own identity" (p. 134).

For example, when Bella's pregnancy is discovered—"I found she was pregnant, with pressure grooves round the finger where wedding and engagement rings had been removed" (p.68)—it symbolizes the societal expectations placed on women regarding motherhood and marriage, while also alluding to the physical and emotional burdens these roles impose. Bella's ability to learn practical skills, as illustrated by "I taught her to stitch wounds and she did so with the deft passionate steadiness" (p.98), reflects her resilience and capacity for agency, as she transforms her experiences into knowledge and skill. McGowan (2021) emphasizes that "in *Poor Things*, Gray explores the implications of scientific experimentation on the human body, particularly through the character of Bella, who embodies the tension between autonomy and the manipulative forces of science" (p.67).

Bella's eventual revitalization of her body and identity serves as a counter-narrative to the objectification prevalent in her society. Through her journey, Gray critiques the reduction of women to mere subjects of scientific inquiry, advocating instead for a recognition of their complexity and humanity. Johnson (2020) argues that "the novel critiques the reductionist view of the body prevalent in Victorian science, illustrating how Bella's repossession of her body serves as a powerful statement of autonomy against the backdrop of medical authority" (p. 89). This reestablishment becomes a powerful act of defiance against the patriarchal structures that seek to define and control her, ultimately positioning Bella as a figure of empowerment. Her evolution challenges the prevailing notions of female passivity and highlights the necessity of granting women agency over their own bodies, thus encouraging a broader conversation about autonomy and ethical responsibility in both personal and scientific realms.

### Victorian Societal Norms

The rigid societal norms of the Victorian era are a significant backdrop for Bella's journey. This period is characterized by strict gender roles, where women were often relegated to domestic spheres and expected to conform to ideals of femininity, subservience, and purity. As Gray poignantly points out, "in England wives are treated as the public ornaments and private pleasure parks of wealthy landowners" (p.174), illustrating the objectification of women and their lack of agency within the confines of marriage. In this context, Smith (2018) asserts that "in *Poor Things*, Gray critiques the rigid gender roles and societal expectations of the Victorian era, particularly through the character of Bella, who defies conventional norms to assert her autonomy" (p. 45). This backdrop amplifies the oppressive structures Bella must navigate and ultimately challenge. Moreover, the statement that "the joys of motherhood are closed to them" (p.174) brings to the forefront the tragic irony of women's roles during this time; motherhood, often idealized, is simultaneously a source of confinement that strips women of autonomy and self-identity. McGowan (2015) further emphasizes this point, stating that "the novel serves as a commentary on the oppressive nature of Victorian society, illustrating how the constraints placed on women lead to a struggle for identity and self-expression" (p. 112).

Gray further critiques these societal norms by reflecting on the implications of imperial expansion, as seen in the notion that "the British Empire has grown rapidly, but in another two or three centuries..." (p.178). This suggests a fleeting nature of power, paralleling the temporary gains of women like Bella who seek to assert their independence in a patriarchal world. Bella's evolving sense of self becomes a rebellion against these societal

constraints, as she strives for autonomy in a landscape that views her primarily as an object or a vessel for reproduction. By contrasting Bella's personal growth with the rigid expectations of her society, Gray not only emphasizes her struggle for self-determination but also critiques the broader implications of a culture that prioritizes male authority and colonial expansion over individual identity and agency. Johnson (2020) notes that "Gray's portrayal of the medical profession in *Poor Things* reflects the Victorian obsession with science and morality, revealing how these societal norms often intersect with issues of power and control" (p. 78). This dynamic invites readers to reflect on the enduring impact of such societal norms and the ongoing fight for gender equality, suggesting that true liberation extends beyond personal autonomy to encompass a collective challenge against oppressive structures.

### Public vs. Private Spaces

In Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, the representation of women's public and private spaces reveals the complexities of female identity within a patriarchal society. The quote, "in England wives are treated as the public ornaments and private pleasure parks of wealthy landowners" (p.174), showcases the objectification of women, reducing them to symbols of status rather than individuals with autonomy. This commodification is further reflected in the statement, "the joys of motherhood are closed to them" (p.174), which illustrates how societal expectations confine women to roles that limit their personal fulfillment. McGowan (2021) observes that "in *Poor Things*, Gray intricately navigates the boundaries between public and private spaces, illustrating how these environments shape the identities and experiences of his characters, particularly Bella, who oscillates between societal expectations and personal freedom" (p. 54).

The mention of "the famous artist, William Strang" (p.177) marks the male-dominated narrative in the arts, where women's contributions are often marginalized. In Wright's view (2019), "the contrast between the public spaces of Glasgow and the private realms of domesticity in *Poor Things* serves to signify the tensions between societal norms and individual desires, as characters navigate their roles within these contrasting environments" (p. 89). In contrast, the male character's declaration, "you are the only woman I have loved, Bella" (p.94), suggests a potential for genuine emotional connection. Bella's assertion, "how good to have a man I need not thank at all" (p.235), indicates her desire for an equitable partnership, where she can exist freely in both public and private spheres, reinforcing the feminist call for recognition and respect in all aspects of life. Johnson (2020) further adds that "Gray's depiction of public and private spaces in *Poor Things* reflects a broader commentary on the nature of freedom and confinement, as the characters' interactions within these spaces reveal the complexities of their social realities" (p. 102).

### Urban vs. Rural Landscapes

The contrasting settings of urban and rural environments in the novel features different aspects of women's lives and societal expectations. The bustling industrial city represents the opportunities and challenges of modernity, where women like Bella can explore new identities and roles. As she reflects, "in Glasgow High School they grew ashamed of their idle, dreamy fantastical father" (p.261), this sentiment captures the disconnection between the aspirations of the new generation and the perceived failures of the past. McGowan (2017) explains that "Gray contrasts the bustling, industrialized urban landscape of Victorian Glasgow with the more pastoral, rural settings, using these environments to reflect the characters' inner lives and societal constraints" (p. 102). Conversely, the rural settings evoke traditional values and the constraints of rural life, where gender roles are often more rigidly enforced. Bella's journey to "strolled to the Loch Katrine memorial fountain" (p.261) symbolizes a moment of reflection amidst these contrasting landscapes, suggesting her desire to connect with both her heritage and her evolving identity. The observation that "the sight of young men marching in regular rows sickens me even more" (p.261) underscores her discomfort with the militaristic and conformist aspects of society that stifle individuality and freedom.

"The dichotomy between urban and rural settings in *Poor Things* serves as a backdrop for exploring themes of freedom and entrapment, with the city representing the oppressive forces of modernity and the countryside offering a space for personal liberation", as noted by Wright (2019, p. 88). McGowan (2021) further elaborates that "in *Poor Things*, the urban environment is depicted as a site of chaos and moral ambiguity, while the rural landscape is idealized as a space of authenticity and connection to nature, reflecting Gray's critique of industrial society" (p.56). These contrasting landscapes illustrate the tension between progress and tradition, emphasizing Bella's struggle to find her place within both contexts. Through these settings, Gray critiques the societal expectations placed upon women, ultimately advocating for a more fluid understanding of identity that transcends rigid categorizations tied to urban or rural life.

## Philosophical Influences

The novel also engages with philosophical ideas, particularly those related to Enlightenment thought and the nature of human existence. Gray's exploration of identity through Bella's resurrection can be seen as a commentary on Cartesian dualism—the separation of mind and body. He argues that "truth, beauty and goodness are not mysterious, they are the commonest, most obvious facts of life" (p.125), positioning these ideals as accessible rather than elusive, which challenges the overly complex rationality often associated with Enlightenment thinking. As Rhind (2010) articulates, "*Poor Things* engages with the philosophical debates surrounding identity and existence, particularly through its exploration of the nature versus nurture dichotomy, which is central to the narrative of Bella Baxter's creation" (p.15). The voices in the novel reflect this philosophical discourse, with Godwin Baxter embodying Enlightenment rationality and Bella representing a more experiential, corporeal understanding of self.

Bella's assertion, "I learned nothing about the world as soon as Wedder told me I had been a mother" (p.203), draws attention to her tumultuous relationship with identity and the societal roles imposed upon her. This statement calls attention to the disconnect between her lived experience and the definitions of womanhood that rely heavily on traditional expectations. Furthermore, the idea that "the higher nature loves clean, beautiful things; the lower one loves dirty, ugly ones" (p.156) suggests a moral hierarchy that reflects societal biases, positioning Bella's raw, unrefined experiences in opposition to the sanitized ideals of her time. McCormick (1995) observes that "Gray's work in *Poor Things* reflects a deep engagement with existential philosophy, particularly in how Bella's journey of self-discovery challenges traditional notions of autonomy and agency" (p.102).

This interplay between voices marks the tension between rationality and emotion, prompting readers to consider the limitations of both perspectives. By juxtaposing the rational with the visceral, Gray invites readers to question not only the philosophical underpinnings of identity but also the societal constructs that shape it. Hobsbaum (1995) argues that "the novel's philosophical underpinnings reflect a postmodern skepticism about the nature of reality and truth, as Gray employs metafictional techniques to question the reliability of narrative and the construction of identity" (p.88). The novel ultimately advocates for a more holistic understanding of existence, one that embraces the complexities of human experience and recognizes the validity of emotions alongside rational thought. In doing so, it challenges the Enlightenment's narrow definitions of knowledge and existence, suggesting that true understanding emerges from the integration of various aspects of life.

## Significance of Multiple Narrative Voices in *Poor Things*

Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* employs a rich tapestry of multiple narrative voices, each contributing to the novel's depth and complexity. This narrative technique is significant for several reasons, including the exploration of identity, the critique of societal norms, and the creation of a multifaceted reading experience. As Gray himself indicates, "I fear Michael Donnelly and I disagree about this book," indicating the subjective nature of interpretation that permeates the narrative. According to Neal (2023), "the inclusion of multiple narrative voices in *Poor Things* allows Gray to explore the subjectivity of truth, revealing how each character's perspective shapes their understanding of events and relationships" (p.75).

The use of multiple narratives allows for a nuanced exploration of identity, particularly through the character of Bella Baxter. Her story is told not only from her perspective but also through the viewpoints of other characters, including Godwin Baxter and the fictional editor. As one character observes, "he thinks it a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven," highlighting the blending of fact and fiction that enriches Bella's journey. This multiplicity reflects Bella's evolving identity—from a being without agency to a woman who asserts her independence. Each voice adds a layer to her character, emphasizing the fragmented nature of self and how identity is shaped by external perceptions and internal desires.

The diverse narrative voices serve as a critique of Victorian societal norms, especially regarding gender and power dynamics. Each character's perspective sheds light on the constraints and expectations imposed by society. Godwin Baxter's scientific rationality contrasts sharply with Bella's emotional and experiential understanding of the world. This dichotomy illustrates the tension between Enlightenment ideals and the lived realities of individuals, particularly women, who often find themselves marginalized within those frameworks. Indeed, "Gray's use of different narrative voices not only enriches the text but also serves to challenge the reader's perception of reliability in storytelling, as each voice presents a distinct interpretation of the same events."

By incorporating diverse voices, Gray creates a more immersive and dynamic narrative landscape. Each character's unique voice adds richness to the storytelling, allowing for a multifaceted exploration of the themes at play. The interplay between different perspectives fosters a sense of depth, encouraging readers to consider the complexities of human experience and the myriad factors that influence identity and agency. As McCormick (1995) remarks, "the interplay between the voices of Archie McCandless and Victoria McCandless spotlights the complexities of gender dynamics and the fluidity of identity, making the narrative a rich tapestry of conflicting truths" (p.112). Ultimately, the novel's intricate web of narratives not only reflects the chaotic nature of life but also champions the importance of varied voices in understanding the full spectrum of human experience. The

significance of multiple narrative voices in *Poor Things* lies in their ability to enrich the exploration of identity, challenge societal norms, and engage readers in a multifaceted manner. Alasdair Gray masterfully utilizes this technique to create a narrative that is not only complex and layered but also deeply resonant with themes of autonomy, power, and the nature of truth. Through this multifarious approach, Gray invites readers to reflect on the intricacies of identity and the societal constructs that shape our understanding of self.

### Intertextual References

The quotes from Gray's work illustrate the rich tapestry of intertextual references that deepen the narrative's complexity. According to Smith (2020), "Gray's work is a tapestry of intertextuality, weaving together influences from Victorian literature and beyond, as he constructs a narrative that is both a homage and a critique of the texts that precede it" (p. 112). The comparison to "Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson" (p.14) positions the protagonist's journey within a literary tradition that examines the intricacies of biography and identity. This reference suggests that personal stories are inherently shaped by the interpretative frameworks through which they are viewed, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual lives and historical narratives.

The assertion, "I also told Donnelly that I had written enough fiction to know history when I read it" (p.14) showcases the fluid boundaries between fiction and reality. It implies that creative writing informs our understanding of historical events, suggesting that narratives shape our perceptions of truth. Johnson (2019) adds that "in *Poor Things*, the echoes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are unmistakable, as Gray explores themes of creation and identity through a lens that is both playful and critical of the original text" (p. 75), further illustrating how these intertextual connections enrich the narrative.

Lastly, the mention of "the famous artist, William Strang" (p.177) grounds the narrative in a specific artistic context, prompting readers to consider the influence of cultural figures on identity formation. McGowan (2021) remarks that "the intertextual references in *Poor Things* serve not only to enrich the narrative but also to challenge the reader's understanding of authorship and originality in a postmodern context" (p. 98). Together, these quotes illustrate how intertextuality enriches the text, inviting deeper engagement with themes of identity, creation, and the interplay between personal and collective histories.

### Literary Allusions in the Novel

Gray incorporates allusions to classic literature, particularly Gothic and Romantic works. References to authors like Mary Shelley, particularly her novel *Frankenstein*, resonate throughout Bella Baxter's story of reanimation. McCormick (1995) suggests that "Gray's novel is a complex intertextual tapestry that draws heavily on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, using its themes of creation and identity to critique societal norms" (p.37). For instance, when it is stated that "Sir Colin had nothing to do with hospitals" (p.53), it stresses the stark separation between the scientific pursuit of knowledge and the ethical responsibilities that come with it. This connection not only positions Bella as a modern Promethean figure but also invites readers to consider the ethical implications of scientific experimentation. The mention that "the main carriers of the disease would be quarantined in separate wards" (p.74) reflects societal fears about contamination and the moral dilemmas surrounding isolation and control, paralleling the fears of unchecked scientific exploration.

Additionally, Bella's journey can be contextualized within historical narratives, as illustrated by the quote, "in the days of Good Queen Bess, we English were so disgusted by the cruel way the Spaniards enslaved the American Indians..." (p.176). This historical reference prompts readers to reflect on the consequences of colonialism and the ethical considerations of power dynamics, which resonate with Bella's own struggles against patriarchal authority. Hobsbaum (1995) argues that "in *Poor Things*, Gray not only references the gothic tradition but also subverts it, creating a narrative that challenges the reader's understanding of gender and power dynamics" (p. 44).

As Bella navigates her identity and autonomy, her voice is framed within a larger literary context that questions the nature of creation and the responsibilities of the creator. Kaczvinsky (2001) emphasizes that "the echoes of Shelley's work in *Poor Things* serve as a foundation for Gray's exploration of identity, particularly through the character of Bella Baxter, who embodies both creation and rebellion" (p.775). Gray's intertextuality not only enriches the narrative but also encourages a deeper engagement with the moral complexities of scientific advancement, ultimately positing that true creation must be accompanied by a conscientious understanding of its potential impact on humanity. This interplay between literature, ethics, and identity invites readers to critically examine the implications of progress in both personal and societal spheres.

### Self-Discovery and Identity Formation

In Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, the journey of self-discovery and identity formation is intricately woven through Bella Baxter's experiences. Her declaration, "if I have to live in a world where I am not free to choose my own path, then I will create a new one" (p. 199), exemplifies her agency in a patriarchal society that restricts women's choices. This assertion of autonomy is crucial for her identity as she navigates the complexities of her past and



present. Jung (1963) emphasizes this notion, stating, "the privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are" (p. 356), suggesting that Bella's quest for self-identity is not merely a personal endeavor but a profound journey towards authenticity.

Bella's reflection, "I am a collector of childhoods since that collision destroyed all memory of my own" (p. 414), illustrates her fragmented identity and the importance of reclaiming lost narratives. The interplay of relationships further complicates her self-discovery; she acknowledges, "when I try to give you pleasure you cannot take it and break away" (p. 521), underscoring the challenges of intimacy and mutual understanding. Morrison (1977) poignantly captures this struggle, asserting, "you wanna fly, you got to give up the things that weigh you down" (p. 164). Bella's journey necessitates shedding the burdens of societal expectations and past traumas to embrace her true self.

Ultimately, Bella's experiences emphasize that identity is not static but shaped by personal choices and relational dynamics. As she asserts, "I needed to see that expression" (p. 480), seeking authentic connections that affirm her evolving self. Emerson (1841) captures this sentiment perfectly: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment" (p. 25). Bella's struggle for self-definition amidst external pressures signifies the broader feminist discourse on the importance of personal agency, revealing that true liberation involves both self-acceptance and the courage to redefine one's identity against societal norms.

## CONCLUSION

Alasdair Gray's "Poor Things" intricately navigates the labyrinth of Victorian anxieties surrounding creation and identity, revealing the profound implications of these themes in both historical and contemporary contexts. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving society, the novel offers a compelling critique of the era's scientific advancements and their potential to disrupt traditional notions of humanity. Through the character of Bella Baxter, Gray explores the complexities of self-creation, identity, and autonomy, challenging the constraints imposed by gender and societal expectations.

The narrative's exploration of resurrection and transformation serves as a metaphor for the anxieties faced by individuals in a world increasingly dominated by technology and scientific rationality. Gray's blending of fantastical elements with poignant social commentary invites readers to reflect on the nature of existence and the fluidity of identity, suggesting that self-definition is an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a fixed state.

Moreover, "Poor Things" resonates with contemporary issues, such as the impact of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence on personal identity. By engaging with these themes, Gray not only captures the essence of Victorian fears but also highlights their relevance in today's discourse on identity formation in a postmodern world. Ultimately, the novel serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring complexities of creation and identity, urging readers to confront their own anxieties while navigating the intricate interplay between societal norms and individual selfhood. Through Gray's lens, we gain a deeper understanding of the perennial quest for meaning and belonging in an ever-changing landscape.

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