

**DISSECTING GLASGOW:  
ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS***

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*ABSTRACT*

*Poor Things* is, to a large extent, concerned with the representation of the city of Glasgow during its year as European City of Culture. The novel not only shows that there is more to the Victorian era than is evoked by the conservative propaganda of those years, but also suggests that there is more to Glaswegian culture than that which was marketed during 1990. In this paper I will analyse the three main narratives that converge in *Poor Things*, each written from a distinct perspective and at different points in history, and the links they create between Victorian Glasgow and contemporary Glasgow. We will study how Gray uses multiple narrative perspectives and historical frames of reference to recontextualise contemporary political and ideological concerns within historical discourses, re-historicising the debate about contemporary Glasgow and making historiographic reconstruction a central feature of the whole novel. The paper will also explore how the author uses the history and the landscape of Glasgow to chart a new anatomy of the city, fashioning these images and ideals into a new mythography of Glasgow, against which the contemporary city can be measured.

*Poor Things* was a commercial success and met with critical acclaim, winning Gray the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award and The Guardian Fiction Prize in 1992. For most of Alasdair Gray readers, the publication of his fourth novel offered a new and exciting material, combining the familiar fruits of Gray's playful narrative techniques with both satiric socio-political commentary and the author's traditional self-conscious engagement with literary and academic establishments. This is probably the most substantial novel Gray has written since *Lanark*, as he managed to unite and

relate a number of apparently contradictory obsessions with women, fiction, politics and Glasgow historiography into a great post-modern construction. In this way, *Poor Things* revives a forgotten literary form, the medical romance. Like *the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Gray's novel poses serious philosophical and historical issues within the complex framework of a witty nineteenth-century melodrama. What may seem at first an amusing narrative of virtuous Scotsmen, wicked English imperial figures, Parisian brothels and monstrous medical experimentation slowly reveals itself to be a deep meditation upon sexual morality and upon notions of femininity. *Poor Things* includes three main narratives, each one written from a distinct perspective and at different points in history. The link between Victorian Glasgow and contemporary Glasgow is clearly established as the novel opens and ends in the contemporary city, introduced, commented and annotated by "Alasdair Gray" in an ambiguous but familiar fictional role of editor. The most substantial part of the novel is a memoir supposedly written by Archibald McCandless, a Scottish Public Health Officer, at the end of the nineteenth century. It is followed by an open letter (dated 1914) from his wife, Victoria McCandless, refuting most of her husband's account.

Archie McCandless's narrative is a key-element in *Poor Things*. Although quite fantastic and clearly linked with the tradition of Gothic literature (especially related to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), it is an "emotionally" truthful account of Archie's relationship with the woman he calls Bella Baxter. The events and situations he mentions would be no possible in a rational, material world, but in fictional parameters they become a touching and beautiful tale. Archie describes himself as a Scottish Public Health Officer. Like the anti-hero of Gray's earlier novel *1982, Janine*, who is a Security Installations Manager, Archie's self-description is indicative of more than his professional occupation. Archie, as one of the narrators of the novel, is in charge of the public health of Glasgow in more than a physical sense. Victoria McCandless claims that it is a very wrong description: "he was a Glasgow municipal health officer for exactly eleven months" (PT 251). Victoria, the highly pragmatic rationalist and utopian socialist, thinks that Archie's memoir is a distraction from the practical business of helping people and setting the world in order. She accuses her husband's memoir of being hopeless and embarrassing, adding that "He also paid a small fortune for it, enough to feed, clothe and educate twelve orphans for a year" (PT 251). In the course of denying her husband's fantastical tale of life in Park Circus, Victoria also reveals herself to be severely naive and out of touch with the world in which she lives. Her narrative seems more probable, rational, and grounded in practical "common sense" than Archie's, but the limits of her "reality" are made manifest in her idealistic optimism about the future. Readers will be aware of the irony that Victoria's idealistic hopes for the future will be faced by World Wars I and II, conflicts which she stubbornly refuses to contemplate because she cannot rationalise them or understand the mentality that provokes them. She declares:

I almost hope our military and capitalistic leaders DO declare war! If the working classes immediately halt it by peaceful means then the moral and practical control of the great industrial nations will have passed from the owners to the

makers of what we need, and the world YOU live in, dear child of the future,  
will be a saner and happier place. (PT 276)

The logic of Victoria's argument is clear, and her utopian vision admirable, but in any case both argument and vision show she is out of touch with the *real politick* of twentieth-century Europe.

On the other hand, Bella's narrative expresses certainties about the past, but anticipates a utopian future without any hope. Gray's notes mostly try to fix historical details (without much success) for polemical ends. Archie's narrative, the least plausible of the three, moves little beyond a fantastic account of the protagonists' experiences in Victorian Glasgow. Nevertheless, it is Archie's narrative which remains the most persuasive and engaging, mainly because of its portrayal of the city's landscape, its depiction of the splendid figures of Godwin and Bella Baxter, and the touching love story it includes. Most significantly, however, we could say that, in a sense, Archie's memoir is an urban myth of creation and regeneration. Ian McCormick draws attention to *Poor Things*' emphasis on creative processes:

A major preoccupation of the text is with the very notion of making. The chapter headings (Making Me, Making Godwin Baxter, Making Bella Baxter, Making a Maniac) emphasise this point, showing [...] what we assume is real or natural is everywhere a constructed product. (McCormick 91)

Indeed, the novel is just another "creation," a clever physical artefact, decorated and designed with Gray's usual attention to detail. Although it might not appear at first to be relevant to the way in which the city of Glasgow is depicted, the creation narratives of *Poor Things* are of central importance to the connections the novel makes between the city and its inhabitants. An important similarity between *Lanark* and *Poor Things* lies in their shared interest in the relationship between the structures of a human being in a physical sense, and those of human beings as part of society. In this respect, Gray might have used another Victorian scientific classic, Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, instead of *Gray's Anatomy*, as a metaphorical and structural source. Gray attempts to explore the origins of Glasgow in *Poor Things* by searching the origins of its (fictional) inhabitants, and the foundations of its institutions. Bella is the most obvious and central figure whose origins are distorted, mysterious, and confused, but all the main figures in Archie and Victoria's sections of the novel are implicated in narratives of lost origins and disputed paternity.

So, for example, Godwin Baxter and Archie, despite their class differences, share the stigma of having been born outside wedlock. Archie's father has done nothing to assist Archie's education or support his mother. Godwin's has at least covered his material needs, although Godwin's mother (if the testimony of the narrators is to be believed) retains her low public status as a paid servant in the household. Gray displaces not only the myth of the noble Caledonian savage in his portrayal of Scraffles (Archie's father), but also the traditionally honourable Victorian gentleman in his portrayal of Sir Colin Baxter. Clearly unworthy fathers, it is never entirely evident that these men *are* the authentic biological fathers of the masculine protagonists. Scraffles seems to bear little relation to his son, and there is a strong suggestion in

Archie's tale that Godwin is an early experiment of the type that produces Bella Baxter. It is in these lost and contested sources where the origins of Gray's characters lie.

The choice of the name of Sir Colin Baxter for Godwin's father stresses again the fact that image and representation are key issues in *Poor Things*. During the nineteen eighties, Colin Baxter became known throughout Scotland as a photographer whose romantic depictions of both Highland and urban scenes transformed the Scottish postcard industry. His images of Glasgow, which often focus on interesting buildings and architectural landmarks, helped popularise the Mackintosh revival, and continued to appear in calendars and books promoting the city as a tourist location. Obviously, his photographs portray very partial, attractive, and ideal views of the city. The public life of Gray's character might be thought to give an equally idealistic impression of bourgeois family life in *Poor Things*, and put a respectable face on the medical profession in Victorian Glasgow. By using a familiar contemporary name in a "Victorian" context, Gray breaks down all expectations of a linear progression. In doing so, he also suggests complex responses to the most important question implied in the origins of his central figures: "Who are the city fathers?"

The so-called "city fathers" became part of a hot political debate in 1990. Were they the Merchants who built Glasgow for the glory of the Empire, or were they the industrial workers of the "red" side of the Clyde? Conflicting and usually distorted mythologies of merchants and socialists were used to defend or deny both approaches. *Poor Things* displaces and complicates such debates by asking not only *who*, but also *where* the City Fathers are to be found. Sir Colin Baxter, a Victorian surgeon, is presented as a worthy city father, but one whose hidden private life is less admirable than what his public image suggests. Apart from some ethically questionable experiments, and an illegitimate son, Sir Colin's legacy to Godwin, according to Victoria, has been, "a syphilitic illness which would eventually cause insanity and general paralysis" (*PT* 266). Gray implies that the images of contemporary Glasgow left to posterity will be Baxter's idealistic images of tourist postcards unless other discourses, other "Glasgows," are presented. And he suggests that not all the inheritance of the city fathers might be desirable or worthy. Most significantly, however, by making all the main figures in his novel "illegitimate" Gray suggests that the debate itself is illegitimate and instead he redirects his attention to the neglected mother-figures in the city's heritage, who were notable absent in the political arguments of 1990.

As we can see, *Poor Things* is rich in literary allusions and contemporary relevance. In this article, we will try to concentrate less on the structural and stylistic features of Gray's novel, and more on the cultural and political discourses of the text. However, any strict dichotomy cannot be made between the form and content of Gray's work, as his postmodern style is inseparable from his social concerns.

Two of the many literary ancestors of *Poor Things*, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and James Bridie's play *The Anatomist* (1930), have particular relevance to this discussion, as they help illustrate the ways in which Gray manipulates historical discourses to explore contemporary contexts. Victoria complains of Archie's Memoir that, in addition to be heavily supported on the writings of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe, "He has made a sufficiently strange story, stranger still by stirring into it episodes and phrases to be found in Hogg's Suicide's Grave" (*PT* 272). She continues:

What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from? I find traces of The Coming Race, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Trilby, Rider Haggard's She, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes and, alas, Alice Through the Looking Glass. (PT 273)

Victoria's list is similar to *Lanark's* "Index of Plagiarisms," illustrating again Gray's eclecticism and intertextuality. James Hogg's influence is more easily seen in *Poor Things* in its structure, rather than, as Victoria suggests, in its macabre elements. *Poor Things* presents, like Hogg's novel, two mutually exclusive accounts of the same events written at different times.<sup>1</sup> No narrator in Gray's novel is reliable, Victoria McCandless tries to discredit her late husband's memoir by presenting an alternative, more rationally plausible course of events, and a discrediting psychological profile of her husband when he wrote the document: "As locomotive engines are driven by pressurised steam, so the mind of Archibald McCandless was driven by carefully hidden envy" (PT 273). She maintains that Archie remained "at heart just 'a poor bastard bairn'" (PT 273). As in Hogg's *Confessions*, conflict between the fantastic and the rational is evident in *Poor Things*, and both novels share a concern with the social and ideological climate of their respective times. The Enlightenment conflicts so obvious in Hogg's work seem no less pertinent to Gray's society. This is an important point, as it situates Gray's historiographical fiction within a rarely acknowledged tradition of self-conscious, politically engaged and experimental narrative fiction that combines *Poor Things'* Victorian setting and its postmodern context. The tensions between Archie's account and Victoria's account are less about playful literary labyrinths than they are about the incompatibility of Victoria's rational idealism and Archie's imaginative idealism. In mentioning her husband's literary plagiarisms, Victoria seems to ignore the way in which her letter, by offering a parallel to the editor's narrative in Hogg's *Confessions* will actually *strengthen* comparisons between Archie's memoir and the sinner's memoir. Her failure to see this "bigger picture" makes her seem naive and undermines the authority of her own views.

Yet in spite of its historical settings, *Poor Things* is a novel about contemporary Glasgow, just as Hogg's novel with its historical settings addressed itself to its author's contemporary setting. Gray distances himself from authorial responsibility for the supposedly "historical" texts by presenting Archie's memoir and Victoria's letter as authentic curiosities which his friend Michael Donnelly has found. Hogg used a similar tactic in his *Confessions* by writing to *Blackwood's Magazine*, announcing the publication of two very old and rare manuscripts in August 1823.<sup>2</sup> Gray's use of this old literary game of placing fictional matter in a context more conventionally reserved for factual information suggests that his engagement with public historical discourses is aimed at upsetting contemporary cultural discourses.

In *Poor Things* Gray defies the distinction between historical "fact" and "fiction" by using his "historical" documents to address issues which have political and philosophical significance in his *own* time. The conflict between Archie and Victoria's accounts of events in 1881 is mirrored in the novel by the differences of historical approach which lead to conflict between the editor, Alasdair Gray, and his friend, the historian Michael Donnelly. Donnelly is portrayed as being rational, serious in his methodology, and committed to the common good. Gray, by contrast, is more in-

clined to interpret the truth, to be, like Archie, another unreliable commentator. The debate about 18 Park Circus, home of Godwin Baxter (and another architectural landmark) illustrates the point: Donnelly refutes Archie's story on the grounds that the site of the garden described by Archie (*PT* 22) is, in fact, the site of a coach house. Gray responds that this, "only proves that the coach house was built at a later date" (*PT* 280). Interestingly, both use the building to support their preferred version. Gray's witty account of their debates emphasises that the historical aspects overlook the larger cultural, political, and philosophical issues at stake.

In *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*, Elaine Showalter's study of relationships between literary production and cultural politics in the late-nineteenth century, parallels are drawn between the literary and political preoccupations and tensions within Victorian society, and a similar sense of cultural unease evident in late-twentieth-century Britain. Showalter argues that although the *fin-de-siècle* is an imaginary cultural landmark, it acted as a powerful one by giving rise to widespread cultural assessment and becoming a way of expression for anxieties about social changes in Victorian Britain. Using literary texts as a kind of cultural barometer, she argues:

fin-de-siècle narratives questioned beliefs in endings and closures. [...] As endings opened up, the genre of the fantastic also introduced the theme of split personality at the same time that psychoanalysis was beginning to question the stable and linear Victorian ego. (*Sexual Anarchy* 18)

Interestingly, she names Robert Louis Stevenson "the *fin-de-siècle* laureate of the double life" (*Sexual Anarchy* 106), and quotes Conan Doyle (another Scottish novelist alluded to by Gray) in his assessment of Stevenson as "the father of the modern masculine novel" (*Sexual Anarchy* 79). Gray's permanent concerns with fragmented subjectivity and narrative structure could be read as symptomatic of a millennial identity crisis, a contemporary *fin-de-siècle*. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this crisis leads Gray to take refuge in the historical safety of Victorian pastiche in *Poor Things*. On the contrary, his work offers a historiographical survey of the anatomy of the city, a specific reflection on the "body politic."

Developments such as open endings and split personalities are neither new nor unique to Victorian fiction, but, according to Showalter, their more frequent use and the emphasis placed upon them at particular points in history is of the greatest significance. Showalter's main concern is with contemporary gender discourses and she uses nineteenth-century texts to recover evidence of gender discourses in Victorian society. Having reconstructed a "gendered" history, she can then interpret contemporary gender politics within that historical context. In *Poor Things*, Alasdair Gray appears to take a somewhat similar approach with regard to the city of Glasgow and the history of its inhabitants. He uses typical postmodern literary strategies to recreate nineteenth-century society, then dissects its discourses, and at the same time draws attention to the presence of these discourses in contemporary Glasgow.

Although Gray frequently inserts his fiction into literary discourses, it is also revealing to examine the cultural bits, which compound literary discourses. *Poor Things* presents another mythology of Glasgow, constructed from a background of histori-

cal images of the city. In contrast to the physical landscape of the city (which, although shown to be constructed within historical discourses, remains relatively stable in the novel) the central figures move through various states and experiment transformations. Gray creates a cultural collage that does not attempt to represent Glasgow or Scotland itself, but rather it seems to underline essential notions of country, city, or individual. He recreates the city and nation from the perspectives of central figures who are themselves constructs of complex and often contradictory images. These figures, Archie, Bella, and Godwin are unstable (in a representational, not psychological sense) and act as destabilising agents for representations of contemporary Glasgow, another very important aspect of the novel.

Like *Something Leather*, *Poor Things* is, to a large extent, concerned with the representation of Glasgow during its year as European City of Culture. Gray's representations of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Glasgow offer both peculiar approaches to the city and alternative cultural values to those encouraged by the civic authorities and businessmen involved in the institutional events of 1990. The novel presents earlier, diverse and alternative Glasgows by redefining the contemporary political landscape and breaking the constraints of partial or traditional historical discourses. Significantly, the larger part of the novel is set in 1881, exactly a hundred years before the publication of *Lanark*, Gray's best-known novel, drastically agitated Glasgow's cultural and literary context.

It is obvious that historiographic reconstruction is a central feature of *Poor Things*, for this work continuously mixes up historical circumstances with imaginary events, challenging conventional divisions between fictional and historical narratives. Other interesting features of the narration include its clear literary referentiality, and the mutual incompatibility of its narrative voices.<sup>3</sup> Victoria makes this explicit in her "Letter to Posterity" when she says: "You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable" (*PT* 272). It is significant that Archie and Victoria's stories do not corroborate each other as it suggests that the co-existence of contested historical discourses is a positive fact. This conflict reappears in the late-twentieth-century sections of the book in the disagreement between the editor, Alasdair Gray, and his friend, the historian Michael Donnelly.

*Poor Things* is, as much as *Something Leather*, an attempt to claim a radical Glasgow's image, quite distant from the view of 1990 "professional opinion makers." Gray's use of multiple temporal perspectives and narratives allows him to redefine the debate about contemporary Glasgow. He also recontextualises contemporary political and ideological concerns within historical discourses, and presents a great intellectual and moral challenge to the defenders of Glasgow's year as City of Culture, precisely because it uses the history and the landscape of Glasgow to draw a new anatomy of the city. It recovers images from Glasgow's invisible past and reclaims lost ideals of previous eras. Gray transforms these images and ideals into a new mythography of Glasgow, much more powerful than in *Lanark* or in *Something Leather*, against which the contemporary city can be measured. The intellectual touch and political vision of Gray's "Glasgows" openly contrast with the narrow, de-historicised political agendas adopted by most local institutions and the media in that moment. The ground in which Gray sets his agenda manages to embrace greater social diversity and progressive ideals without avoiding the less attractive aspects of the city's heritage. Gray uses

images of Victorian Glasgow as a counterpoint to Margaret Thatcher's appeal to "Victorian Values" during the nineteen eighties.<sup>4</sup> In the false book reviews of *Poor Things* on the dust jacket of the novel's first edition, Gray, satirising the style of well-known English publications and conservative authors, makes this link explicit:

He satirizes those wealthy Victorian eccentrics who, not knowing how lucky they were, invented The Emancipated Woman and, through her, The British Labour Party —gang of weirdos who kept hugging and dropping the woolly socialism of their founders until Margaret Thatcher made them drop it for ever. (*PT* dust jacket cover).

The late-nineteenth-century perspective Gray adopts in Archie McCandless's narrative, allows him to depict Victorian Britain as a complex and heterogeneous society: he presents the misery, injustice, and violence of Victorian Britain, as well as the visionary socialism, egalitarian attitudes, and libertine behaviour of some of its inhabitants. He also briefly presents, at Archie and Bella's wedding ceremony, traditional features of imperialism, which uphold the patriarchal family and the British Empire as the two sides of the same coin. Most of these diverse faces of Victorian Britain are not in accordance with, and were subsequently omitted from, Thatcher's reconstruction of Victorian values in more recent times. Just as *Poor Things* shows that there is more to the Victorian era than is recovered by the conservative propaganda of recent years, the novel also shows that there is more to Glaswegian culture than that which was marketed during 1990.

Gray succeeds in portraying diverse Glasgows by using architectural landmarks as cultural reference points. These elements are spatial, physical structures which complement his historiographical approach. The novel's "Notes Critical and Historical" (*PT* 277-317) inform the reader about all kinds of little known historical details of the present-day landscape which might otherwise remain confined to the city's archives. For example, Gray draws attention to the fact that Landsdowne Church on Great Western Road was greatly admired by Ruskin and has the most slender spire relative to its height in Europe (*PT* 289, illustration 296). The church in question is actually a very impressive building, but few passers-by are probably aware of its architectural significance or its historical associations. The effect of such well-informed details in Gray's editorial notes adds authenticity to the (fictional) description of Bella and Archie's wedding and, at the same time, Landsdowne Church acquires a new historical attachment and a small line in literary history.

Another important landmark in the novel is the Stewart Fountain in Kelvingrove Park, for which Gray provides also a bit of history (*PT* 283, illustration 295). The factual tone of his statements emphasises the sharp critic he aims at the local council: "Around 1970 the authorities turned the water off and made the stonework a children's climbing frame" (*PT* 283). Gray's words may seem objective and out of judgement, but they contain a sharp political subtext which comes into focus in the following few sentences. Gray encourages his readers to interpret the repair of the fountain prior to 1990 and its subsequent rapid decay as a symbol of the abandonment of civic principles in contemporary Glasgow. He suggests that the restoration of the fountain was a superficial and temporary gesture towards the preservation of historical monu-



ments which was quickly abandoned after the celebrations: "as Glasgow prepared to become European Cultural Capital, it was fully repaired and set flowing again. In July 1992 it is waterless once more" (*PT* 284).<sup>5</sup>

However, the more general principle of recovering the history of the city's monuments to historicise political debate can open many other interesting issues. For instance, although Gray does not mention the fact that the Provost Stewart in question was a Tory, the fountain was dedicated to Stewart because he ordered the connection of the city's public water supply. Stewart's far-sighted and practical project might be seen to stand in sharp ideological contrast to the efforts of former Conservative governments to privatise water services during their mandates. Gray urges a renewed awareness of the physical landscape and encourages his readers to search for current cultural significance by dissecting the anatomy of Glasgow and its "body politic."

In fact, anatomy, dissection, and all medical aspects deeply influence the novel. It is clear that Bridie's play *The Anatomist* inspires the themes of *Poor Things* to a considerable extent, and even provides Gray with his novel's title: "Poor things. Poor hearts" (*PT* 24), says Bridie's central character, Knox, to the sisters Amelia and Mary Belle Dishart near the end of Act One. Ironically, Gray's only direct mention of Bridie's play in *Poor Things* (300) suggests that *Bridie* has been influenced by a play about the West Port murders written by Archie McCandless. Of course, Bridie's play was not performed until 1930, so Victoria, writing in 1914, could not possibly allude to it. Bridie's comedy lends Gray some of his novel's central metaphors. Not surprisingly, there are striking parallels between Gray's novel and Bridie's play. Both texts centre on the development of medical sciences in the nineteenth century, and the play, like *Poor Things*, is an exercise in historical reconstruction, based on the notorious West Port murders committed in Edinburgh by Burke and Hare in 1828. However, the play focuses less on the murderers than on Dr. Robert Knox, a Lecturer in Anatomy at the moment, and an outstanding member of the Edinburgh medical establishment. Popular opinion implicated Knox in the murders, as he received and paid for the bodies Burke and Hare supplied for dissection.

Bridie's play also connects with current controversies about gender and medical discourses. So, the Dishart sisters hear Dr. Knox lecture in the "private space" of their living room, rather than in the "public" lecture theatre. The human body, particularly the human heart (the joke in the sisters' family name is no coincidence) is the main source of the play's central tensions. The play ends with Knox delivering a lecture on the physical properties of the human heart, although the play as a whole offers a more metaphysical reflection on the properties of that organ. Knox's decision to concentrate on the "right auricle" (*The Anatomist* 73) at the end of the play might point towards the moral verdict of history on his life and work. A conflict emerges between Knox's scientific rationalism and his emotional and moral concerns in the ethical dilemmas caused by his use of dead bodies for medical research without the subjects' consent. The body is the site of the play's key ideological conflicts. In *Poor Things* also, the body (in that case Bella/Victoria's body) is figured as the site of cultural conflict by Gray in a highly self-conscious way.

Dissection is a crucial metaphor in *Poor Things*. Apart from the novel's joke on the Victorian medical textbook, *Gray's Anatomy*, Gray decorates his work with anatomical drawings. As we can see, anatomy, dissection, and vivisection are key issues

in *Poor Things*.<sup>6</sup> Archie suggests that Baxter has not only created a pair of “pied-hermaphrodite rabbits”, but has transplanted the brain of a child into the body of an adult woman. He cannot easily agree with Baxter’s experiments and the ethical dilemmas they imply, even though Baxter assures him, “*I have never killed or hurt a living creature in my life*” (PT 20).

*Poor Things* is also about the dissection of a society, in that it investigates the “body politic” of Glasgow. Discourses of medicine and medical experimentation in nineteenth-century Britain are complex and very significant. Some critics have highlighted the virtual exclusion of women from medical training, in contrast to their pre-eminence as clinical and psychiatric subjects.<sup>7</sup> Glasgow University was, and still is, a well-known centre of medical research, but some embarrassing aspects of medical advances in Europe and North America have often been hidden. Although women at that moment were never accepted as doctors, many new and dangerous medical procedures were tested on them, or on people unable to pay for better treatment. When Godwin tells Archie “The public hospitals are places where doctors learn how to get money off the rich by practising on the poor” (PT 17), Gray highlights retrospectively a conveniently forgotten aspect of some medical advances. The author looks “under the skin” of Glasgow’s history (another dissection) through the figure of Bella, who embodies the female subject of medical science.

However, Bella also embodies the figure of the New Woman. Her struggle to become a doctor illustrates another often forgotten aspect of Glasgow’s history. According to Gray’s introduction, Michael Donnelly discovers Archie’s Memoir only because he notices in it “the name of the first woman doctor to graduate from Glasgow University, a name known only to historians of the suffragette movement nowadays” (*Poor Things* viii). Gray offers an account of women’s entry into the medical profession, a long and hardly fought process, another neglected aspect of medical history. However, Gray’s fictional account is slightly anachronistic. For example, when Gray has Victoria awarded a medical degree by Glasgow University in 1890 (PT 302), he anticipates in four years the first women’s graduations, those of Lily Cumming and Marion Gilchrist in 1894. However, his account of Victoria’s struggle for her medical career does truly indicate how fiercely women’s entry to higher education was contested.<sup>8</sup>

Bella carries a tremendous range of cultural significations in addition to those already mentioned. Her name, like those of the other characters, has a number of cultural associations. In Archie’s memoir she appears in a drawing as “Bella Caledonia.” Her dress and the deep perspective of the background parody those of the Mona Lisa. Christopher Gittings notes:

Cultural history is replete with the bodies of women who have been imported into the visual iconography of patriarchal political systems to personify the state. (25)

The feminine personification of Scotland in literature has been a long-standing tradition, and a classical topic for some twentieth-century writers and critics, but the panoramic background to Bella’s portrait can be taken as a humorous joke to defenders of the “eternal feminine.” Bella’s genealogy is too ambiguous, her existence too

manifestly constructed through Godwin's scientific experiments, Archie's romantic imagination and, of course, Gray's self-conscious literary creativity, to do anything other than parody essentialist notions of gender or nation. Of greater significance to the present discussion are Bella's social transitions and metamorphic transformations: she is Caledonia, moving across social classes, progressing from a Manchester slum to bourgeois respectability, eventually marrying an aristocrat (at least according to her own version of events). She is mother, muse, and prostitute at different stages of the narrative, both a doctor and a medical experiment.

Victoria's account of how she came to arrive at 18 Park Circus represents, in an accelerated process, the social ascendancy of industrialists in the nineteenth century. Victoria's early childhood is spent as the daughter of a Manchester manager who becomes a merchant. Her father is violent and mean, and she grows up in an environment of fear and deprivation. However, Victoria's material status changes dramatically when her father makes his fortune and she is sent to school in Lausanne. Victoria's change of social class brings her little advantage: instead of being "a working man's domestic slave," she is taught, "to be a rich man's domestic toy" (*PT* 258-9). Victoria marries into the minor aristocracy, and her progression makes clear the marginalisation of women in Victorian Britain across social class boundaries.

Victoria's account of how she meets Godwin Baxter emphasises her cultural alienation. She and her husband consult Godwin after her "third hysterical pregnancy" (*PT* 259). Elaine Showalter (1987) and others have argued that hysteria was a cultural phenomenon that mostly affected women in Victorian society. Victoria is thought to suffer from a psychological disorder, as her physical relationship with her husband is so unsatisfactory that she and her husband have approached Baxter for a clitoridectomy (the clinical term for a procedure now outlawed under international law, more commonly referred to as genital mutilation). Such operations were a fashionable, but controversial, cure for the so-called erotomania in women in Britain and were performed from the 1860s onwards until being rejected between the 1880s and 90s. Victoria is "begging for a clitoridectomy" (*PT* 259) when she meets Godwin Baxter. Two months later she arrives by cab at his home in Glasgow. It is this Victoria, the wife of General Blessington, who becomes an emancipated woman, proclaiming free-love and birth control, who trains as a doctor, following Godwin's advice.

In the process of becoming a doctor, Bella seems to resemble the "New Woman" of late-nineteenth-century fiction in other respects. Like the protagonists of the New Woman novels, Bella is intelligent, educated, well-travelled, sexually liberated, financially secure, politically motivated and determined to join a worthwhile, fulfilling, and socially productive career. As Peter Keating (1989) points out, the New Woman was a popular literary phenomenon a number of years before young British women actually started to enter professions in significant numbers, or gain some measure of personal and financial independence. The New Woman novelists inspired young women to raise their demands for education, for voting rights, and for personal freedoms. In this sense, Bella's profession is significant. Gray's fictional account of her achievements, as well as the hostility she faces from the respectable Glasgow establishment, is an attempt to concentrate in one figure the powerful social forces at work in the nineteenth century, and to review Glasgow's social and medical history from forgotten and marginal perspectives.

Throughout *Poor Things*, Gray prevents Glasgow's history being seen through rose-tinted glasses. By placing Bella/Victoria in ambivalent relations to medical discourses, he also implies some criticism of the assumptions that motivate Godwin's own scientific research. According to Archie's narrative, Bella Baxter is "made" by Godwin ("God," to his friends) in his laboratory, in much the same way as Dr. Frankenstein makes his creature in Shelley's novel.<sup>9</sup> As we have already mentioned, *Frankenstein* is, like *Poor Things*, concerned with the subject of "creation." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues "In Shelley's view, man's hubris as soul maker both usurps the place of God and attempts, vainly, to sublimate woman's physiological prerogative" (Warhol and Herndl 808). Godwin Baxter also attempts to "play God" with Bella's life: while Bella thinks God "ininitely good" (*PT* 268) Archie's account encourages readers to exercise some scepticism.

In Archie's narrative there is some clear disagreement about the procedures supposedly used by Godwin Baxter to revive the body of Victoria Hattersley, and the power he assumes while doing so. Godwin has no problems about having used the "unclaimed" body of a drowned woman. Gray's novel critiques the "ownership" of Victoria by her father, and then, her husband. In contrast, Godwin is well-intentioned and benevolent, but his right to claim her body rests on patriarchal authority. In Archie's account of Bella's creation, Bella is a typical pregnant suicide victim. Godwin tells Archie "Every year hundreds of young women drown themselves because of the poverty and prejudices of our damnably unfair society" (*PT* 33). As Elaine Showalter notes, a "popular theme in *fin-de-siècle* painting, as in medical literature, was the doctor performing an autopsy of a drowned prostitute" (*The Female Malady* 131). The image of young women jumping into the Thames because of scandal or disgrace is a recurring one in nineteenth-century art and literature. In *Poor Things* this familiar scenario is located in the Clyde where, by implication, the same social pressures on women apply. But by specifying the time and date when Victoria's body is recovered by a non-fictional figure, Geordie Geddes, Gray moves Bella into a role somewhere *between* that of cultural symbol and historical figure. Bella puts a human face on the nameless women occupying late-nineteenth-century mortuaries in both the abstract imagination and the material world.

When Godwin's autopsy reveals that Victoria has committed suicide, he decides to use her body as a laboratory specimen, but does not revive her because he decides that to do so would go against her personal freedom: "she has chosen not to be" (*PT* 33). Instead, he transplants the brain of her unborn child into her adult body to create Bella Baxter. Baxter seems to locate his subject's "being" in her mind, rather than in her body, which he has no trouble working with. Regardless of ethical considerations, his reasoning seems to reinforce a classical hierarchical dichotomy between mind and body. The first words Bella pronounces in the novel, "hell low God win" (*PT* 29), are transcribed by Archie in a way that suggests a diabolic aspect to Godwin's attempt to take control of life and death and assume the role of a Creator. Bella's words confirm God's "win" over Victoria's physical body. Godwin's hierarchy of values is mirrored in his own morphology, as he is a man of great intelligence but grotesque physical proportions. However, Archie's eccentric narrative balances in a way Godwin's powerful Enlightenment discourse of progress and patriarchal authority. Archie's transcriptions of Bella's speech illustrate this point well, but he also

resumes his own authorial position to some extent. Unlike Baxter, Archie refuses to “play God.”

Duncan Wedderburn, in the madman’s letter contained within Archie’s narrative, reinforces Archie’s ambivalence towards Godwin by referring to him as “King of Hell” (*PT* 77), “Mephisto” (79), and “Satan Himself!” (78). Despite the fact that Wedderburn’s accusations are the outburst of a lunatic, they do open readers’ minds to the possibility that God is not as “infinitely good” (*PT* 266) as Bella seems to think. As Foucault’s work has shown, madness in Western society is defined by its exclusion from the rational domain.<sup>10</sup> In *Poor Things*, the insanity of Wedderburn, the fantasies of Archie, and the discontinuities of Bella’s early writings offer a transgressive counterpoint to the voices and values of reason, those of Godwin and the editors, Victoria and Gray. Gray’s ability to hold in tension the fantastic and the rational in *Poor Things* emphasises again his open search for alternative perspectives and his refusal to privilege a point of view without examining in depth its sustaining discourses.

Much remains still to be written about *Poor Things*. It is a rich and absorbing novel, which uses an almost forgotten history of Glasgow and its people to redraw the political histories of the present-day city. In this novel, Gray presents views (better “re-views”) of Glasgow which create a new political geography of his home city, in which tensions emerge around the human body and its relation to capitalism and imperialism. As the human body becomes a politically contested issue in Gray’s work, questions of gender relations, so central to Western social and political changes in this century, come to the front line.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his 1995 interview with Mark Axelrod, Gray claims that the novel “contained no original devices at all. The editor’s introduction of long lost narrative was in *The Master of Ballantrae*” (114). Hobsbaum, in “Unreliable Narrators,” also discusses Gray’s reliance on Stevenson’s model (39-40).

<sup>2</sup> Gifford notes that *Blackwood’s* magazine played host to “frequent hoaxes” (140) of a similar sort, presumably intended as an advertising device. It is also important to note Hogg’s role as a literary character, the Etrick Shepherd in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a collection of fictional conversations between Hogg’s contemporaries, Wilson, Gibson, Lockhart, and Maginn.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Hobsbaum refers to this issue in more detail in “Unreliable Narrators.”

<sup>4</sup> Thatcher’s appeal to Victorian values was more than a return to nineteenth-century economic liberalism. It was also a valorisation of a particular code of individualistic sexual and moral values. As Hall points out, Thatcherism involved “looking back to past ‘imperial glories’ and ‘Victorian values’ while simultaneously undertaking a kind of modernisation” (295). However, as Michael Mason (1994) has shown, the Victorian values inherited by the twentieth century were established at the end of Victoria’s reign, and were a consequence of a polarisation of attitudes between anti-sensualists and libertarians. Mason argues that “the victories of anti-sensualism in sexual codes, at this date, were also illusory [...] Indeed, ‘Victorian’ was ‘a stigmatising label’ at the beginning of this century” (213).

Elaine Showalter also challenges the notion that the late-nineteenth century was a model of sober behaviour and industrious living, in fact, she characterises it as a period of “Sexual Anarchy” in her book of the same name.

- <sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Gray remarks with some dissatisfaction that, at the time of writing, the fountain is ruined down due to a combination of vandalism and neglect. Nowadays this is no longer the case, although whether or not Gray’s intervention embarrassed the authorities into action will no doubt remain a mystery.
- <sup>6</sup> In *Lanark*, Thaw is permitted to study morbid anatomy in the Glasgow University dissection rooms, however, this only increases his “morbid” obsessions with death and grotesque human bodies (251-2).
- <sup>7</sup> See Showalter (*Female Malady*) and Moscucci for further discussion on the role of women as subjects of medical discourses.
- <sup>8</sup> See Wendy Alexander and Geyer-Kordesch for more detailed accounts of women’s demands to study medicine at Scottish universities.
- <sup>9</sup> The philosopher William Godwin, Mary Shelley’s father, seems to lend his name to Gray’s character. Baxter’s middle name, Bysse, might be taken from Shelley’s husband, Percy Bysse Shelley.
- <sup>10</sup> See in particular Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*.

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