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**Echoes of *Frankenstein* in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things***

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## Abstract

This thesis will analyze two novels: the first edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* published in 1818, and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* published in 1992, reading the latter as an intertextual response to the former. The focus of the thesis will be on the issues of gender, society and lack of female perspective, topics that both novels share. This will be done through close reading of the two novels whereby the influences of *Frankenstein* on *Poor Things* will be examined. Furthermore, the analysis will also examine the ways in which *Poor Things* challenges certain Victorian standards. The overall focus of this work will be on the depictions of the role of women and the effects of a male centered society.

KEY WORDS: Frankenstein, Poor Things, Mary Shelley, Victorian period, women, society

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# 1. Introduction

From an abundance of great novels of the English nineteenth century, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* stands out because of its innovative and captivating narrative which explores topics which greatly surpass its time and it continues to influence works even today, literary and other. *Frankenstein* is a novel by the English author Mary Shelley first published in 1818 and later edited and republished in 1831. This thesis is referring to the 1818 version of the *Frankenstein* text. The story is presented as a framed narrative in an epistolary form as the entire narrative is presented in the letter's Captain Walton sends to his sister. The letters briefly describe Walton's voyage to the north but focus mainly on retelling the story of Victor Frankenstein who was rescued by Walton's ship. It basically follows as Victor Frankenstein is slowly losing grip of his sanity following a sequence of some not so fortunate events. He was a man of science with a thirst for something more leading him to isolate himself from his family and friends to pursue his only passion – the completion of his creation. As a sudden twist of fate, upon completion, he realizes that he is appalled by the creature. Denying his creature love, whether from himself or a potential companion, leads to his demise as well as that of others. It is a story of a man attempting to create life by himself, a story of responsibility and the lack of it and a story of inevitable consequences. This thesis will focus on the influence of *Frankenstein* on another novel, *Poor Things* by Alasdair Gray, the story of a female monster of Frankensteinian proportions published in 1992. The story follows a woman named Bella Baxter who is deemed a monstrosity because she challenges the rules of the society she was born into. There is a century and a half between the two novels, yet their main concerns behind the story are the same. The

main issue concerning this thesis will be the representation of women in society and whether presenting the issue in this manner bodes well for feminism.

When taking a closer look at both of these novels, there is a notion that sticks out – that of “making”. In both novels, creatures and people are made or in case of Frankenstein’s female creature – almost made. To explain, in the novel *Frankenstein*, “making” refers to Victor Frankenstein’s creation of “the monster” and the its female companion whom he ultimately destroyed before completion. In *Poor Things* however, we are introduced to the main characters through chapters titled “Making Me”, “Making Godwin Baxter”, “Making Bella Baxter”, “Making a Maniac” and “Making a Conscience”. Aside from the obvious kind of making in *Frankenstein*, in this essay I shall explore the ways in which Gray took this concept and implemented it in his novel *Poor Things*, especially regarding to “Making Bella Baxter”, more specifically what does “making” a woman like Bella Baxter mean in relation to the society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

In *Frankenstein* we have the story about creating man without the aid of women while in *Poor Things* we are faced with the creation of a woman without a woman’s perspective. Since we are talking about a patriarchal society in both novels, men play a significant if not the only role in “making” women. The question I want to focus on is what was actually made while creating Bella Baxter. Other than the part on “making”, this thesis will focus on the different connections between the two novels. Given that *Poor Things* is a postmodern novel, the examination of this novel’s perspective will give us a different view of *Frankenstein* as well as of women’s lives in that period.

## 2. *Frankenstein*

Although presented mostly as a horror and science fiction novel with distinct Gothic and Romantic influences, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* gives the reader a lot to think about regarding the concept of female monstrosity and the lack of female perspective throughout the novel. Considering the author's background, it is fair to assume that it is not a novel about what happens when you choose the unconventional way to create life (unconventional here being the sewing of body parts and using electricity to instill vital signs) but rather a story of what happens when man attempts to create life without a woman. As Anne K. Mellor says, "One of the deepest horrors of this novel is Frankenstein's implicit goal of creating a society for men only: his creature is male; he refuses to create a female" (Mellor, 1988, p. 220).

Throughout the novel, there is an obvious lack of female perspective. As mentioned above, *Frankenstein* is a framed narrative consisting of three recollections of events, all by male characters. Walton's letters are addressed to his sister but we never see her replies, Victor Frankenstein's story only briefly describes the female characters and shows very little interaction with them and finally, the creature's tale comes from him observing life around him from a safe distance. *Frankenstein* most definitely fails The Bechdel Test which is a way of measuring the representation of women in fiction. It is mostly used for films, but works for other types of fiction such as literature. For a work to pass The Bechdel Test, it must have the following: (1) At least two female characters; (2) They must both have names; (3) They must talk to each other about something other than a man (Webb, n/a). In *Frankenstein*, all the female characters are passive, to say the least which is exactly the role women were expected to play in the nineteenth century; the role of mothers and wives bound to the men of their family. (Abrams, 2001) This lack of female perspective tells us quite a lot. If we look closely at the women in the novel, we

see that they are more tools than actual characters. Margaret Saville is the mere recipient of her brother's letters; she is not a part of the plot. Furthermore, Elizabeth Lavenza is a gift for Victor from his mother as she says in the novel: "I have a pretty present for my Victor – tomorrow he shall have it." (Shelley, p. 25) Other than her looks and a bit of her background, there is not much we learn about Elizabeth. Aside from being just a "pretty present", she is also used by Frankenstein's creature to teach Victor a lesson and she, therefore, suffers a horrific fate for his wrongdoings falling victim to his actions and paying the price for his mistakes.

Aside from women being extremely passive in the novel, there is also a certain degree of violence towards them. We see this in the death of Elizabeth and the destruction of the female creature. "I thought sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (Shelley, 1818, p. 150). From this we can see it was not only an act of violence, but one filled with passion. He did not destroy the creature for mankind but for himself. Another obvious act of violence towards women is Elizabeth's death, yet another crime of passion committed by man. Elizabeth was never seen as a person but rather as a possession and was taken for granted up until her demise. When warned about his wedding night, it did not even occur to Victor that his creature might target Elizabeth. Although it is, in fact, Frankenstein's creature who kills her and all the others, it is Victor's fault to a certain degree. His refusal to take responsibility for his creation is what ultimately leads to the murders. By not teaching him any other way, the creature had no other option but to catch his maker's attention the only way he knew how. By refusing him, Victor made a victim of the creature as well. Speaking of his victims, the Frankenstein family's servant Justine also falls victim of this vicious circle of guilt and inaction on Victor's part since she is wrongfully accused of a murder which she confessed to out of fear of eternal damnation.

Taking all things into consideration, the creature's demand that Victor make him a female companion seems reasonable. He did not ask for this life and despite his efforts, he knows he will never be accepted as part of society because of his vile and horrid appearance. Both in the novel and in life, appearance is more often than not more important than other qualities. We see this in the novel when the creature is created. Instead of being pleased that he finally succeeded, Victor can only focus on its repulsive physical features saying "I desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley, p. 45) As can be seen, the creature did the best he could; he learned about life from observing people and studying books. However, he was shunned, abandoned or chased away. By asking for a female companion, he is asking for what he believes women represent. He asked for a gentle companion, someone to share his solitude with, someone to care for as well as someone who would nurture and care for him. "You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being." (Shelley, p. 127) by asking for this, he seems more human than Victor because he shows his vulnerabilities. In the following paragraphs, I shall aim to explore the question why Frankenstein denied his creature a female companion.

In her essay on this topic, Anne K. Mellor outlines several reasons why a female creature is such a concern for Victor. To paraphrase, what he is concerned about is that the female creature could not be controlled by her male counterpart, that she would have her own desires and opinions which she would pursue. (Shelley, 1818, p. 149) Moreover, he imagines the female "ten thousand times" more evil than the male and far uglier than the male (Shelley, 1818, p. 149) He imagines the female would want to mate with "regular" males and would use her abnormal strength and powers to rape them. Finally, what he fears the most is her ability to reproduce, the



ability to easily produce a whole race of similar creatures. (Shelley, 1818, pp. 149-150) What we can gather from this is that Victor, in fact, fears female independence and integrity, female sexuality and consequently female anatomy. (Mellor, 1988, pp. 6-7) He is afraid of how much humanity depends on women. In a society organized in such a way that women are considered property, what would happen if they suddenly had the power to gain independence and make decisions concerning themselves? What Victor fears indeed is the equality of men and women.

What is also worth addressing here is that both Victor and his creature presuppose that the female creature would want to have anything to do with the creature just because they would be “of the same species, and have the same defects” (Shelley, p. 126). She is denied the opportunity to choose even before she is created. Her life is predetermined as it was for women back then. The male creature was good by nature upon his creation, it is the rejection by society that made him do what he did. When creating the male creature, Frankenstein never had doubts about its intentions and power. So why was the female denied this benefit of the doubt? A more in-depth analysis of the influence society has on the female creature is presented in the novel *Poor Things* and will as such be discussed in the following section.

### 3. *Poor Things*

More than a century and a half later, a new take on the Frankenstein myth occurred in the form of the novel *Poor Things* by the Scottish author Alasdair Gray. This postmodern framed narrative tells the story of Bella Baxter (later known as Victoria Blessington, and Victoria McCandless). In the first section of the novel narrated by Archibald McCandless, Bella is a 25-year-old woman who attempts to run away from a restrictive married life of an upper-class Victorian woman, a life she did not want, and commits suicide while eight months pregnant. At this point, Bella is presented as a mere statistic: “Every year hundreds of young women drown themselves because of poverty and prejudices of our damnably unfair society” (Gray, 1992, p. 33).

At the end of the novel, when we reach her own narrative account of the events, we find out that this was not true: Victoria Blessington was neither pregnant nor trying to commit suicide. However, to get back to McCandless’ story, this is when things take a Frankensteinian turn. Her “drowned” body is recovered by Godwin Baxter who according to McCandless’ recollection of events keeps her body alive at a cellular level and replaces her brain with the brain of her unborn child. That is how we get to meet the surgically remodeled adult female with the brain of an infant that is Bella Baxter.

It is at the beginning of the novel that we find many similarities with *Frankenstein*, only remixed. Moreover, Godwin created Bella because he sought a companion – as he says “a friend who would need and admire me as much as I needed and admired her” (Gray, 1992, p. 38) Since Godwin is described as a creature similar to Frankenstein’s for having a “big face, stout body and thick limbs” and being “a whole head taller than most” (Gray, 1992, p. 12). Godwin is also

much like Victor as he is the one who creates Bella. Regardless whether he is more like the creator or the creation, one thing is fairly obvious: Bella is the female companion Frankenstein's creature never got. However, in this story, Victor Frankenstein's worst fears come true: Bella does not find Godwin a suitable companion although she respects him as a parental figure, and instead she seeks the company of "regular" males such as Duncan Wedderburn and Archibald McCandless. The story continues with her "wedding"<sup>1</sup> her way through Europe with Duncan Wedderburn, ultimately driving him insane. Following a few adventures on her own, she ultimately returns to Godwin and McCandless, her fiancée, where she is confronted by her past life. Interestingly, Bella's side of the story is not told until the very end of the book in a letter written by Victoria McCandless in which she challenges the integrity of her husband's work. However, her integrity is challenged throughout the whole book.

Essentially, there are two versions of events in the novel all of which mutually exclude the authenticity of the others. We have McCandless' story "Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer" which encompasses Wedderburn's and Bella's letters, followed by Victoria's letter. As Eilidh MacLeod Whiteford explains in her thesis saying how *Poor Things* presents two mutually exclusive accounts of the same events written at different times (Whiteford, 1997, p. 182). These "mutually exclusive accounts" present very different ideas about Bella Baxter. A great example of this is the three different explanations for Bella's scar on her forehead. McCandless explains this as the scar left from the incision Godwin made while switching Bella's brain for that of her unborn daughter. For Wedderburn it is a "witch mark" and "the female equivalent of the mark of Cain, branding its owner as a lemur, vampire, succubus and thing unclean" (Gray, 1992, p. 89). Finally, Victoria's

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<sup>1</sup> In the novel, Bella uses the terms *to wed* and *wedding* for sexual intercourse (see, e.g., pages 105, 107, 117...).

explanation for the scar is by far the most believable one. According to her it is a result of her father hitting her and knocking her unconscious when she was five years old, when “he had clubbed me down with his fist” (Gray, 1992, p. 256)

Although we can never tell with certainty, it is rather safe to assume that Victoria’s version is the one most likely to be true. The question then remains why is Bella portrayed as a monstrosity by these men? Bella is the embodiment of Frankenstein’s fears, she is a strong, independent female figure with heightened sexuality and a refusal to abide by gender and societal rules. She refuses marriage and goes on to live in what is considered to be sin. Furthermore, if we look at it through her husband’s perspective, his wife is more accomplished than him, she is intelligent, confident and very sexual. All these things were unacceptable in the late 19th century. Women being open about their sexuality and their needs is not something society approved of back then. If we were to trust the information given in Victoria’s letter, we would see she was very focused on her career while her husband took on the domestic responsibilities. In the novel’s “Notes critical and historical” Victoria, in fact, claims that “I have a very good wife in my husband” (Gray 303). Such a statement suggests a lot about her own independence of mind.

Aside from Wedderburn’s version, Bella is not portrayed as a monster but rather as a surgical fabrication and the reason for her husband McCandless’s choice to explain his wife this way to the public is because the truth to him was much stranger. Perhaps, to him, having a wife with the brain of an infant was more acceptable than having an accomplished and successful spouse. When we look at it, Bella is portrayed the way she is because of several aspects of her persona all mentioned above. She is intelligent, good looking, sexual; she rejects social norms, challenges the male authorities in her life and rejects marriage. Unhappy and mistreated, she got

out of a marriage which did not agree with her and she never followed rules since. In his letter, Wedderburn writes “I had never before heard of a man-loving middle-class woman in her twenties who did NOT want marriage, especially to the man she eloped with” (Gray, 1992, p. 81). What he is describing here is the “New Woman”, a novel concept back then (Buzwell, 2014). Her behavior accompanied by the scar on her head and a few other clever pieces of evidence he lists in his letter, is enough for Wedderburn to deem Bella a monster.

What about the rest of the men in her life, what made them reject her in such a way? Her sexual appetite was enough for her first husband, General Blessington, to try and have her institutionalized. Her asking to “read books and learn about things” (Gray, 1992, p. 258) is what made her father ship her away to a convent school. Questioning the doctor in Paris left her without work and her earnings forcing her to ask help from yet another man, Professor Charcot. Throughout the novel, Bella is mistreated by men, especially those in the position of power. The only one who treats her with the respect she deserves is Godwin. This highlights the contrast between his appearance and his personality and leads us to another important issue this work presents and that is the significance of appearance. Nevertheless, the worst transgressions against her were those of her second husband, Archibald McCandless, who stripped her of the opportunity to have a say in how she was portrayed to the world. Conveniently, he made her promise not to read his work until after his death so she could not confront him about it.

Moreover, even the narrator in the guise of the book’s editor has some things to say about Victoria, making him sound biased as well. In the “Notes Critical and Historical”, he writes: “If Dr. Victoria had loved her husband more she would easily have seen why he wrote this claptrap” (Gray, 1992, p. 302). This is him directly meddling in the story. Never in the notes does the

narrator/editor challenge McCandless' statements. It seems as though he is protecting him, taking once again the male side, which is the note on which the book ends.

As I have mentioned before, basic reasoning leaves one to believe in Victoria's version of events. From her posthumously discovered letter we gather a great deal of information about the falsehood in McCandless' memoir. In his work, he falsely presented the relationship he had with Godwin and Victoria as well as the relationship between Godwin and Victoria. Victoria states in her letter "My second husband's story positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries, the nineteenth. 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* with additional ghouleries from the works of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe." (Gray, 1992, p. 272). He used ideas from other novels to fuel his grotesque descriptions which are mostly regarding Godwin and Bella Baxter in order to present them as unnatural. He exaggerated the extent of Victoria's sexual needs and developed an elaborate tale of how Victoria's pregnant suicide attempt ended by Godwin keeping her body alive and replacing her brain with that of her unborn daughter thus creating Bella Baxter. The story Godwin used to explain to the society the new female addition to his household is surprisingly the same in both accounts – Bella and her family were in railway accident in South America in which her parents were killed while she suffered a concussion resulting in amnesia. (Gray, 1992, p. 35)

Compared to this, Victoria's version of events can seem ordinary and even a bit dull. She met Godwin at a consultation for a procedure she thought she needed – a clitoridectomy<sup>2</sup>. He talked her out of the procedure by telling her "My dear, you have been badly treated all your life

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<sup>2</sup> According to the World Health Organization (WHO) it is a type of female genital mutilation including the partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals), and in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).

by selfish, greedy, silly men” (Gray, 1992, p. 260). This made her trust him and ultimately seek refuge with him when she ran away from her first husband. She was neither pregnant nor suicidal, she was simply getting out of an unhappy marriage. Victoria explains how Godwin taught her what freedom was: “Baxter taught freedom by surrounding me with toys I had never known as a child and by showing me how to work instruments” (Gray, 1992, p. 263). The playing with toys part was probably inspiration for McCandless’ “infant brain” part of the story. What McCandless also failed to include in his version is the fact that it was Godwin who rejected Victoria, not the other way around. Victoria refers to Godwin as “the only man she had ever truly loved” (Gray, 1992, p. 259). Her explanation for this is that McCandless also loved Godwin: “Small, awkward McCandless fell as passionately in love with God as I had done. He loved me too but only because he saw me as God’s female part”. (Gray, 1992, pp. 267-268). He was envious of the relationship Victoria and Godwin had because they deeply cared for each other while they were at best friendly towards him. That haunted him for the rest of his life leading him to write the story. “So in his last months he soothed himself by imagining a world where he and God and I existed in perfect equality” (Gray, 1992, pp. 273-274). He soothed himself by creating a version of the wife he wanted different from the one he had. In the story he made Bella this innocent and naïve creature because he was well aware of the fact that the only way he could have control over a woman like Victoria Blessington was if she were not herself and did not have the cognitive capacities she did.

#### 4. *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things*

There are other relevant similarities between these two novels. I would like to go through them using explanation and examples. Yet, if we set aside the basic storyline, surgical fabrications and tortured characters, most of the similarities lie in the easily dismissed details. What is even more, *Poor Things* in fact challenges some aspects of *Frankenstein*. Let us begin by examining the similarities first.

Both stories feature educated male figures who have particular scientific goals and a great motivation to accomplish them. Victor Frankenstein is working on his creature day and night; Godwin has his own work in his laboratory and McCandless is focusing on his education and on winning Godwin's trust. While *Frankenstein* has Victor the creator and the creature, *Poor Things* has Godwin who can be considered both Victor and the creature. His overall appearance, which was described in the previous section about the novel, makes him monstrous and unappealing leaving him to live a desolate life and even preventing him from practicing general medicine. On the other hand, what makes him similar to Victor are his actions – creating Bella.

If we look at the two novels closely, a strong connecting link between them is the selfishness of men. In *Frankenstein* we see men setting off on preposterous missions for which the only viable explanation can be that they wish to achieve a certain level of fame and fortune. Victor spends two years creating a man in his lab and Walton is on a pointless expedition to the Arctic to discover something the north-west passage. Interestingly, their paths cross and they end up in the same place without a happy ending in sight. The selfishness of men in *Poor Things* is seen in McCandless' actions, writing a book in which he dismisses everything his wife went through to get to where she wanted to be. Instead of writing a book about his strong, educated, independent



wife who worked as a doctor and as a feminist, he took away the most prominent aspects of her personality, lifted a paragraph or two from *Frankenstein* and out of that he “made Bella Baxter”.

In his book *The man who wrote Frankenstein* in the section on male love in *Frankenstein* John Lauritsen essentially makes a love interest out of every encounter between two men, completely ignoring female presence in the novel (Lauritsen, 2007, str. 79-164). Although his work is mostly questionable and his motivation for writing it exceeds that of an academic, he does make a good point in shifting the focus towards the relationships between male characters in the novel. Throughout the novel *Frankenstein* we see that men interact with each other more affectionately than with women. These interactions between male characters show quite strong feelings, depicting both affection (as in between Walton and Victor or Victor and Clerval) and hate as in the relationship between Victor and his creature. Interactions with female characters are secondary to the plot and serve mostly as narrative devices rather than actually contributing to the story. Supporting this claim is the fact that Walton’s sister serves merely as the recipient of her brother’s letters and does not affect the course of the narrative in any way: we never hear her voice. She remains at home while her brother gets to follow his dreams however crazy they may seem. Much like other women of this period, she is bound to the home with little to no interaction with the world outside her family and domestic responsibilities. Shelley most likely used this to portray the role of women in the patriarchal society of her time. Furthermore, in *Poor Things* we also see what Lauritsen would deem as male love specifically in the obsession McCandless has for Godwin. It remains debatable whether this is a form of romantic interest or merely an admiration for his knowledge and skills, but it is undeniable that that the men in these novels have stronger feelings towards their male friends than they do for their female companions which leads us to believe that there is a greater level of respect for men than for

women. We see this in the relationships between Clerval and Victor, Walton and Victor, McCandless and Godwin. In these relationships, at least one counterpart was very fond of the other.

As it is mentioned above, Victoria even accuses Victor of directly being influenced by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe and others. She says "the mind of Archibald McCandless was driven by carefully hidden envy" (Gray, 1992, p. 273). He used the book as a way to soothe his envy and unsettling heart over the fact that he was the odd one out in their trio. He was envious of their background, their lives and their relationship which led him to lift certain key elements of a well-known Victorian novel to create his very own twisted grotesque. "Having had a childhood which privileged people would have thought 'no childhood' he wrote a book suggesting that God had none either – that God had always been as Archie knew him, because Sir Colin had manufactured God by the Frankenstein method (Gray, 1992, p. 274)." With this sentence she is directly calling him out for using Shelley's concepts to suggest that Godwin, who is often referred to as "God" by Bella, was created in his father's laboratory supporting his claims with the apparent lack of affection between the two seen in the fact that Godwin refers to his father as Sir Colin explaining "I have never heard him called anything but Sir Colin" (Gray, 1992, p. 16)

As far as the differences are concerned, unlike Frankenstein, Godwin never abandoned his creation he acted as a decent parental figure all throughout the novel. Even when Bella ran away from him, he continued to care for her and never gave up. The biggest difference, however, is the gender of the creature, which in *Poor Things* is female. The female creature, Bella Baxter, is partially everything Frankenstein feared the female monster would be and partially the exact opposite. I have already explained above why Bella is the personification of Frankenstein's fears,

but she also has a few characteristics which would make her different from Frankenstein's male creature. Above all, it is the fact that she did not let society change her for the worse. She remained innocent and benevolent throughout. What is interesting to note here is that although Bella turned out to be the embodiment of Victor Frankenstein's fears regarding the female creature in terms of her sexuality and will, she did no harm to others and as a matter of fact only wished to learn about the world and help others. According to Victoria's letter and the novel's "Notes Critical and Historical", that is exactly what she did. She continued learning, became a doctor and a feminist. It was thanks to Godwin that she was able to do so because everyone else had different ideas about what women should be doing back then. In her letter she says: "Mother had thought me to be a working man's domestic slave; the nuns taught me to be a rich man's domestic toy" (Gray, 1992, pp. 258-259). Although his was "educated" in a sense, it is not the same education boys got and it is most definitely not the same as what we consider education to be today. She was given a set of skills, mostly domestic, sans the opportunity to learn how to think. She was given this particular set of skills to later be used by other people. This tragic truth is candidly explained in the novel by comparing a maid and the master's daughter, two girls who are of a similar age and body, stating how they have something else in common. "Both are used by other people. They are allowed to decide nothing for themselves" (Gray, 1992, p. 263) Bella recognizes. Godwin agrees with this when he says "Most people in England, and Scotland too, are taught not to know it at all – are taught to be tools" (Gray, 1992, p. 263).

Unlike in *Frankenstein*, this creature was not abandoned by her "maker" therefore showing us what can happen when women are given a chance to succeed. The unfortunate thing here is the fact that she would be unable to succeed without the help of a man. By helping her achieve her full potential, providing her with freedom and knowledge is how Godwin "made Bella

Baxter”. What is important to note here is that this is not the same Bella as the one “made” by McCandless.

#### 4.1. Separate Spheres – life for women in the Victorian period

There is something strangely paradoxical about 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The period is named after the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria, who was an 18-year-old girl at the time she became queen. In a period when women were considered “the weaker sex”, a woman was superior to every other citizen of Britain (Marsh, 2001). Lives of men and women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain were very different. There was a patriarchal society but with undeniable pressure from women challenging the long standing notions forced upon them. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain was the beginning of feminism in Britain with one of first feminist activists being the mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley. “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 35). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is Mary Wollstonecraft’s most famous feminist work in which she argued against the inequality of education. She proposes the idea of a different educational system in which girls were given the same opportunities as boys. According to her, this would make women prepared for the roles of mothers and wives as well as capable workers (Britannica, 2019). Despite the efforts, the roles of men and women remained very different throughout the century. According to Kathryn Hughes’ article “Gender roles in the 19th century, this sort of establishment was in place because women were considered to be weaker physically so their duties included taking care of the domestic sphere i.e. the house and children. Since they spent the majority of their time raising children resulting in them having a big influence on them, it added to the reasons why women were not

allowed to vote. Although they did receive an education, it was not the same for boys and girls. The skills they acquired were those to make them good wives. They studied things such as singing and dancing – entertainment skills. Regarding marriage, women were not to openly want marriage because that would make them seem too sexually eager and it was only appropriate for women to wish to be mothers. (Hughes, 2014) They had very little freedom which is why a lot of literature from this period featured “hysterical women” (Hughes, 2014). Great examples being Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the “madwoman” from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

In a great reversal of these gendered roles, it is not necessarily the woman who end up mad and hysterical in *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things*, it is the men. In both novels we witness men “losing their minds”. First, we have Victor Frankenstein who has more than one episode of mental instability. The first instance of madness in Victor we see when he becomes obsessed with finishing his creature. “Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree... my labors would soon end, and I believed that exercise and amusement would then drive away incipient disease” (Shelley, 1818, p. 44). At this point in the novel, Victor is aware of his deteriorating mental health but is convinced he would be better once he finishes his project. Later in the novel, Victor becomes depressed following the deaths of his brother and Justine since they were his fault. His madness reaches its peak after the death of Elizabeth when Victor decides to chase his creature and seek revenge but ultimately fails and is found by Walton’s ship. This can be used as a great metaphor for him fighting his inner demons as well; it is yet another fight he loses. As far as the novel *Poor Things* is concerned, we see this male madness in the mental deterioration of Duncan Wedderburn. Godwin warns Bella “Go your ways, Victoria, I cannot teach you about love. But be gentle with poor Wedderburn, he has not a strong head” (Gray, 1992, p. 270), which tells us that he was not the most stable of characters to

begin with. Throughout their travels across Europe we see him sink into madness more and more until, according to Victoria's letter, he ended up in an insane asylum where she continued to visit him over the following years. These specific instances allow us to say that in these novels women are not the weaker sex just like they are not the weaker sex in real life and this is how these novels challenge nineteenth-century beliefs surrounding women.

Furthermore, we can take a look at how this separation of public and domestic spheres is presented in the novels. In *Frankenstein* we have a clear division; men are the ones who go to school, travel, go on expeditions and it is only after they have finished with their "projects" that they pay attention to the women in their lives. The female characters in *Frankenstein* have no purpose, other than to wait around for their male counterparts to interact with them. We do not even get much information about their domestic life, apart from the creature's recollection of events at the De Lacy family. However, in *Poor Things* this division is not so clear. In the latter novel we are introduced to the concept of a New Woman.

The term "new woman" was first used in 1894 by the Irish writer Sarah Grand in her article about women seeking independence and change. Following that article, Maria Louisa Rame (pseudonym Ouida) titled her article on a similar topic using the term "The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers" (Diniejkó, 2011). It is a term used by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe women who were fighting against stereotypical feminine ideals of the period. They strived for more recognition in the public sphere and freedom to be more open about their sexuality. The new woman fought to read more, have a job and be physically active. She fought for legal and sexual equality. Marie

Corelli argues in her essay how there is no single definition of “the new woman” but rather a mixture of ideas with a single thing in common – greater female emancipation. (Corelli, 2009, p. 11)

Bella/Victoria complies with every one of the definition’s elements, from running away from a cheating husband, being sexually active outside of marriage because of her own will and curiosity, experimenting sexually with men and women. “I had never been kissed by a man before. My only amorous pleasures had been a Sapphic affair with my piano teacher in Lausanne. I would have loved her until the end of time, but alas, she loved too many others for my selfish taste...” (Gray, 1992, p. 269). That alone is already a big step for a Victorian woman seeking freedom. Furthermore, in *Poor Things* we see a complete reversal of gender roles. Victoria’s work as a doctor keeps her in the public sphere while her husband remains in the domestic sphere raising their children and spending his time idly.

How did Victoria become a New Woman? She showed an interest for learning from an early age by reading books, but every time her mother caught her reading, she would take the book away from her saying “Girls need no excuses for idleness” (Gray, 1992, p. 256). When she asked her father to let her “read books and learn about things” (Gray, 1992, p. 258) he sent her to a convent to get educated only not in the way she desired as convent schools prepared young girls for their future roles as wives, to be “a rich man’s domestic toy” (Gray, 1992, p. 259). Her father provided her with schooling that did her no good while her mother was against any type of education. When placed in this sort of positions, women were each other’s worst enemies. This is not however an act of malevolence but merely the result of ignorance. Victoria’s mother never knew things could be different as she was from the lower class – not much concerned with education.

After her not so fruitful convent education, Victoria's life continued in the expected order. She got married to General Sir Aubrey de la Pole Blessington, a man who did not care much for her for which she kept blaming herself. She only got the chance to act like this "New Woman" after running away to Godwin. Now, the question remains, was she like this from the beginning or did Baxter make her like this. In McCandless' version of the story Bella is given a new brain. Could this actually be true? Was Bella given a metaphorical new brain upon meeting Baxter, did he implement those ideas of freedom and independence in her? If we chose to look at it this way, we see that, in both stories, Baxter is the creator. In the first version he is the creator of a Frankenstein-like monster and in the second the creator of a New Woman. Alasdair Gray's novel suggests that for all we know, in the Victorian patriarchal society, the two were or meant the same.



## 5. The making of Bella Baxter, the making of a New Woman?

From what we have learned so far, both versions of events in the novel *Poor Things* arise questions regarding the making of a woman. “Both readings prompt questions regarding women being constructed to correspond to male fantasies, as either Bella is constructed by Godwin Baxter, or the entire tale is a fabrication of Archie McCandless.” (Stirling, 2008, p. 88). The aim of this section is to discern what is Bella made into. Is she a monstrosity, a man’s fantasy or does she indeed embody the principals of a new woman?

Either way we look at it, Bella Baxter is a man-made woman, literary constructed according to her husband’s ideals or she is Godwin Baxter’s creation. Godwin’s making of Bella is part of McCandless’ fiction, but what about Victoria’s letter? Although she does not explicitly state that he created her, we learn that Godwin had an influence in shaping the pioneer abortionist and suffragette that was Victoria McCandless. He was the push she needed to get where she was meant to be. The question still remains, regardless of all the things that make her a new woman, does it still hold water if it was thanks to a man, that she was able to accomplish herself. The answer is yes and no, depending on how we choose to look at it. The answer is no if we have a narrow idea of feminism and therefore reject all of her accomplishments merely because some of the steps on her way included men. I, however, am more inclined towards the latter and strongly believe that Victoria is a literary portrayal of a new woman. I hold this opinion firstly, because of everything that was already said about her throughout this work and secondly, because of the events from Victoria’s letter that provide us with a clear example of what modern day feminism aims to achieve. Instead of being suppressed, she was given the opportunities to succeed by none other than the men in her life. The man she loved gave her everything without asking for much in return while her husband gave her the freedom to work and fight for women’s rights while he

stayed at home. He did write his book in which she is presented somewhat like Frankenstein's female creature but since the book "was never published" and she did only marry him because he was easily manipulated and only needed him to fulfil certain physical needs having only friendly feelings towards him, we can say they break even regarding mutual disrespect. And that is exactly what feminism is - equality. "Just as the New Woman undermined the traditional view of the feminine, so the dandy threatened the accepted view of masculinity" (Buzwell, 2014). The appearance of the new woman brought about changes for both men and women and it had a different reception among both genders. Some men thought it made sense for women to be more independent, such is our unusual hero Godwin Baxter, some were against it. The same of course goes for women. Regardless of what anyone had to say, the new woman was not backing down. "New Woman fiction, post 1895, declined markedly but as a figure in real life, and as a prototype for virtually every feminist movement that followed, the legacy of the New Woman lives on to this day" (Buzwell, 2014).

### 5.1. *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things* – feminist works

Finally, the last issue I would like to discuss in my thesis is whether these novels contribute in any way to the goals feminism has set over the centuries. In which way does a novel with only traces of female presence, such as *Frankenstein*, contribute to the resistance against a male centered society? As far as *Poor Things* is concerned, we can argue that it features a strong female lead character. Although she is faced with many gender-biased challenges throughout the novel, she rejects the life that was forced upon her and finds ways to accomplish herself only to have her integrity challenged by the way she is portrayed in her husband's work. This section aims to answer in which ways these two novels, with such a short supply of female presence, work in favor of feminism and its aspirations.

First of all, Mary Shelley artfully suggests a lot through silences in the novel. Instead of featuring strong female characters, *Frankenstein* features the problems women faced in that time and place. She intentionally portrayed her characters as weak and overall unimportant since that is how women were considered back then. *Frankenstein* is in fact a novel full of hidden meaning and if one chose to look at it that way, we could say that the reason Elizabeth was killed on her wedding day showcases absolute submission and passivity women faced in marriage. One could suggest it even shows the author's view of marriage as a death sentence. Furthermore, the novel shows us that men prefer women to be very passive because they fear female independence; that is why the female creature never gets to see the light of day. Also, what makes *Frankenstein* feminist is the way Shelley portrayed what happens when men refuse to include women in important things. Victor Frankenstein was determined to finish his creature, without any help, especially from women. "Frankenstein's scientific project—to become the sole

creator of a human being—supports a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality” (Mellor, 1988, p. 2). His unruly methods for creating life resulted in a monstrous creature. A creature that will not bring Victor the scientific recognition he desires, a creature that will ultimately destroy his life and the lives of many others. All of this because Victor was eager to take women out of the equation for creating life.

As far as the novel *Poor Things* is concerned, I believe it to be an attempt to make the story of Frankenstein’s creature even more obviously feminist. We are faced with similar issues here as we are in *Frankenstein*, however in *Poor Things* we get to see what happens when men finally realize women are more than capable of handling the challenges of the public sphere. In fact, in the novel we see a reversal of gender roles as Bella is the one travelling Europe while Godwin and McCandless wait for her, leaving us with images of her in the public sphere and the men in the domestic. Furthermore, compared to all the other accounts of events, Victoria’s is the most reliable one. In an instance when there are two different versions of the truth, for the woman’s to be the reliable one rather than the man’s must be a step forward in fighting inequality.

However, what is important to note is that Gray uses exaggeration to achieve a certain effect. We see this in the fact that Bella, although mentally a child, has undeniable control over every major male character in the novel. The exaggeration here being how a person of seemingly very limited mental capacities has the upper hand in every exchange she has with mostly highly educated people. Most importantly, what this novel shows in support of feminism is that it connects the Victorian woman, with hardly any rights, to the modern woman with seemingly limitless opportunities. We see this through the notion of rebirth; the oppressed Victoria Blessington is killed and the new Bella Baxter is born. In the same person we see a major breakthrough from oppression to opportunity. In *Poor Things* even the smallest contribution

matters, that even one person is enough to make a difference. Godwin Baxter was to only one to treat Victoria like a person, to treat her with kindness and to tell her that she is not acting in her best interest. Thanks to the help of one person, she was able to succeed in things she previously could not even dream of.

## 6. Conclusion

The concept of female monstrosity is a recurring theme in these two novels and although they are presented very differently, in both instances women were deemed unacceptable monstrosities because of a same set of characteristics. All of these things that were welcome in a man were considered outrageous in a woman. Aside from free will, sexuality and intelligence, women were also condemned for their anatomy, for their ability to bear children. Victor Frankenstein destroys his female creature because of his fear of her femininity, especially her fertility. He fears the things that make her a woman and deems her a monstrosity because of it. That is probably why he created a male creature in the first place, to attempt to make femininity a male construct, to take control over it.

On the other hand, the men in her life deemed Bella a monstrosity because she acted like a woman, and just not like their idea of a woman. The men in *Poor Things*, aside from Godwin, are afraid of losing control over women and most importantly, they are afraid of change and in this time of change towards something new they try to make sense of the new. That is somewhat the reason Bella is considered a monster, because she was something unknown. In the novel, Godwin was the only one to accept Bella the way she was and his character serves as a reminder that everyone deserves a second chance.

I have argued in this thesis that Godwin played an important role in helping Bella fight off the hardships that come with being a nineteenth-century woman. Because feminism is on occasion misinterpreted as misandry by ignorant folk this is why this part of the novel is extremely important – to see men and women working together towards equality. Furthermore, it is an extraordinarily interesting journey comparing these two novels from the

aspect of the representation of women. *Frankenstein* leaves a lot of things unfinished in that regard and *Poor Things* picks these threads right up. When looking at the novels together, *Frankenstein* was a stepping stone for *Poor Things* to finally bring the Victorian woman to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, complete equality is something women are still striving for, even today. Works like these help us see how far women have come but also how far we still have to go.

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