Essay Topic Preview: This essay examines the complex theme of identity in *Poor Things* by Alasdair Gray — not just personal identity, but how identity is constructed, imposed, or reclaimed through language, narrative, and power. It explores how Bella Baxter, a character stitched together both physically and symbolically, becomes the center of a battle over truth, authorship, and womanhood. Using a wide range of the provided quotes, this essay argues that *Poor Things* critiques the idea of a fixed self, showing instead that identity is fragmented, fluid, and fiercely contested. In doing so, Gray interrogates who gets to define a life — and why.

Essay Title: "Who Owns the Story?: Narrative, Identity, and Reclamation in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*"

Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* is a novel obsessed with the construction of identity — and more importantly, with who gets to do the constructing. Framed as a narrative within a narrative (and interrupted by further narratives), the story of Bella Baxter is a deliberately unstable, fragmented patchwork. Like Bella's resurrected body, her identity is assembled by others: men who presume authority, doctors who rewrite her mind, and institutions that frame her worth. Yet Bella resists this imposed selfhood. Through both direct defiance and subtle irony, she reclaims authorship of her life. This essay argues that *Poor Things* dramatizes identity as a contested terrain — one shaped by gender, class, storytelling, and control — and that Gray ultimately places the power of self-definition in Bella's hands, not through a simple reclamation, but through the acknowledgment of fragmentation as freedom.

From the outset, Bella is not granted her own origin story. Instead, her body is a literal reconstruction: "Sir Colin trained one to be his anaesthetist, and worked so closely with her that

they managed to produce me, before she died." (47). The absurdity of this quote signals the novel's metafictional tone — Bella's existence is an invention, both medically and narratively. She is created by male ambition and preserved through male storytelling. In this case, the language of science masks the act of silencing a real woman, replacing her with a more compliant, imaginative fiction.

This fiction is not innocent. Baxter reveals, "By recasting its brain in the mother's body I shortened her life as deliberately as if I stabbed her to death... And I did it for the reason that elderly lechers purchase children from bawds." (114). This grotesque confession situates Bella's identity as a male fantasy: a woman with a child's mind. Gray is not just criticizing unethical science, but showing how male desire reshapes women's identities to better serve patriarchy. Bella becomes the battleground for fantasy and reality, victimhood and reinvention.

Such fantasies are perpetuated by cultural institutions. Bella is called "nearly four" in mental age (35), infantilized so that any rebellion can be dismissed as irrational. Even her questions are pathologized. "Politics … is filthy work and women should be protected from it" (138), one character proclaims. When she seeks knowledge, it is filtered through condescension: "in the American West we want our women to be equal partners" (143) — a line that still assumes women must be granted personhood by men. Identity here is not self-generated; it is bestowed, withheld, or manipulated.

The novel frames identity not just as personal but political. Bella's efforts to understand the world around her are met with layered forms of resistance. "No normal healthy woman – no good or sane woman wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as a duty" (218) reveals how even sexuality is co-opted to define womanhood through repression. Any deviation is

treated as madness. And indeed, madness becomes one of the most powerful tools for controlling identity: “If she is now sane she will come with me. If she refuses she is still mad...” (219). The legal and psychiatric system operates on circular logic, where disagreement is proof of illness. This mirrors historical abuses in which women were institutionalized for speaking out, desiring autonomy, or resisting roles assigned to them.

Gray complicates the narrative further by layering multiple perspectives. McCandless’s version of events is not the only one, nor the most reliable. Victoria’s interjections, Bella’s memories, and even the editorial footnotes contest each other. This narrative fragmentation reflects the instability of identity itself. The reader, like Bella, must decide whom to believe. When the narrator writes, “If Dr. Victoria had loved her husband more she would easily have seen why he wrote this claptrap...” (302), we are reminded that even seemingly affectionate relationships distort reality. Love becomes a tool of manipulation; writing becomes an indirect plea for control. Identity is not merely lived — it is edited.

The path toward selfhood for Bella is not linear, nor is it idealized. Her reflections often carry pain and irony. She says, “Mother had taught me to be a working man’s domestic slave; the nuns taught me to be a rich man’s domestic toy.” (333). Here, Bella confronts the way class and gender intersect to shape identity as utility. Regardless of social status, she is trained to serve. But the clarity with which she sees this marks her resistance. She is not confused or broken; she is articulate. Even when dismissed as a child or a madwoman, her voice cuts through.

Crucially, Bella reclaims identity not through grand gestures, but through insight. When asked what the scullery maid and the master’s daughter share, she answers: “Both are used by other people. They are allowed to decide nothing for themselves” (263). This moment is one of radical

recognition. Bella sees through the illusions of class distinction and speaks a truth most characters cannot admit. Her supposed naivety becomes moral vision.

Bella's identity is also forged in opposition. When a character recoils, "You are no virgin! Who deflowered you first?" (106), or when another says, "you ran away from home to escape from your wifely duties" (213), Bella's body is treated as a public document — her worth determined by purity, obedience, and role fulfillment. But her refusal to conform destabilizes those categories. She is not broken by shame — she speaks, questions, and eventually authors her own account.

In moments of anger, Bella reveals the full scope of her awareness: "And while they spoke I clenched my teeth and fists to stop them biting and scratching these clever men who want no care for the helpless sick small... who use religions and politics to stay comfortably superior..." (233). This is no passive observer. This is a woman watching the world's machinery grind others into silence and despair. Her identity emerges not from stability, but from resistance — a fire stoked by witnessing cruelty.

Even when she is underestimated, Bella remains alert. When Astley refers to a "bitter truth," she asks, "What bitter truth were you talking about, Mr. Astley?" (188). It is a deceptively simple question — one that challenges the entire paternalistic framework of the novel. Bella refuses to accept received wisdom without scrutiny. This is how she remakes herself: not by rejecting her past, but by interrogating it.

Gray is acutely aware that identity is shaped not just by internal experience, but by language. The General's babbling justification — "strong men... must cultivate their strength by revelling with sluts... and that is why poor Dolly had to be treated in that tutututerrible way" (229) — uses

speech itself as camouflage. The stammer mocks the failure of language to convincingly rationalize horror. In contrast, Bella's speech is clear, incisive, and unflinching.

Ultimately, *Poor Things* offers no final, stable definition of Bella. And that is the point. She is not reducible to wife, patient, virgin, or whore. She is a creation — yes — but also a creator. Her final power lies in narration. Her ability to name, to question, to remember, to resist — these are acts of authorship. And as Gray's metafictional structure suggests, authorship is power.

In the end, Bella's identity is not recovered — it is reimagined. She may be stitched together, but she is not broken. She is plural, defiant, and alive. In a world that tries to define her through law, sex, medicine, and myth, she writes herself anew. *Poor Things* becomes not just a novel about who Bella is, but a novel about who gets to decide what that means. And in the final pages, it is Bella — not her doctors, not her lovers, not her "creators" — who has the last word.