Essay Topic Preview:

This essay explores how *Poor Things* by Alasdair Gray exposes and critiques the patriarchal and legal systems that oppress women, especially through the control of female bodies, sexuality, and autonomy. Using only quotes provided, it examines how Gray uses Bella Baxter's narrative to challenge traditional gender roles, reframe Victorian morality, and confront institutional power structures.

Essay Title: "Constructed Bodies, Controlled Minds: Patriarchy and the Erasure of Female Autonomy in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*"

In *Poor Things*, Alasdair Gray constructs a scathing indictment of patriarchal society through the lens of Bella Baxter, a woman whose life, body, and mind become sites of ideological warfare. Set in a fantastical yet eerily familiar 19th-century Glasgow, the novel merges speculative fiction with political satire to dismantle the social, legal, and sexual hierarchies of its time. Bella's body becomes the battleground for competing male narratives — scientific, romantic, religious, and legal — that attempt to define her identity, purpose, and limits. Through Bella's struggle for self-definition, Gray unearths the historical mechanisms by which women have been infantilized, sexualized, institutionalized, and silenced. This essay argues that *Poor Things* uses Bella's creation, treatment, and rebellion to reveal how patriarchal institutions preserve power by denying women agency over their bodies and minds — and in doing so, it reimagines female liberation as an act of radical authorship.

At the heart of the novel lies the question of Bella's origins — not just biologically, but intellectually and socially. The grotesque medical experiment that births her is not just an act of

science, but a symbolic erasure of a woman's past and replacement with a male fantasy. Godwin Baxter's rationale is chilling: "By recasting its brain in the mother's body I shortened her life as deliberately as if I stabbed her to death at the age of forty or fifty... And I did it for the reason that elderly lechers purchase children from bawds." (114). This confession unmasks the central horror of Bella's resurrection: she is deliberately made childlike, both mentally and emotionally, to serve male desire. Rather than rescuing a life, Baxter replaces it with a version that better suits male fantasies of innocence, dependence, and sexual availability. The metaphor of child prostitution makes the violation undeniable — this is not rebirth but commodification. Bella's reconstructed body and mind are not gifts, but tools of possession.

This theme of infantilization continues throughout the novel, where women are systematically denied intellectual agency. Bella is frequently spoken about as if she were not fully human: "Bella's mental age is nearly four" (35), a diagnosis that conveniently justifies every restriction placed upon her. The underlying logic is clear — a woman stripped of her autonomy is easier to control. As another male character explains, "If we do not provide the information she craves it will remain the mind of a precocious infant. You English may prefer to keep your women in that state, but in the American West we want our women to be equal partners." (143). Even here, the supposed American ideal of equality still assumes women need men to provide enlightenment. Information becomes a form of gatekeeping, and knowledge — or the denial of it — is used to stunt female growth.

The connection between knowledge and control is particularly evident in Bella's interactions with politics. When she attempts to engage in conversations about capitalism and colonialism, she is met with condescension. Astley dismisses her curiosity outright: "Politics … is filthy work and women should be protected from it" (138). His response implies that ignorance is a form of

protection, reinforcing the idea that women are too fragile or too pure for the real world. Even when Hooker challenges Astley, his support is backhanded: he claims he can teach Bella politics "without 'wounding her womanly instincts'" (191). While his intentions are more progressive, the underlying assumption remains — that Bella's mind must be carefully managed. These men fail to imagine a woman whose intellect might stand on its own terms.

The legal system in *Poor Things* reinforces this infantilization through structural inequality. The quote "A husband's adultery is no ground for divorce" (234) captures the gendered double standards embedded in Victorian law. Men are permitted transgressions; women are punished for resistance. When Bella attempts to reclaim her freedom, she is told, "If she is now sane she will come with me. If she refuses she is still mad, and it is me duty as her husband to place her in an institution" (219). This Kafkaesque logic means that no matter what Bella chooses, she is declared either sick or subordinate. Mental illness is weaponized to override consent, and marriage becomes indistinguishable from incarceration. The use of institutions — medical, legal, religious — to confine and discipline women reflects a broader system in which female autonomy is treated as a threat.

That threat is most keenly felt when Bella expresses rage. In one of the novel's most powerful moments, she narrates: "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 make religions and politics, excuses to spread misery with fire and sword and how could I stop all this? I did not know what to do." (233). This is not the voice of a precocious child, but of a woman who sees clearly the structures that uphold suffering — and feels paralyzed by them. Her anger is righteous, her helplessness real. It's a striking contrast to how the men in the novel view her: not as a thinker, but as a vessel.

Bella's resistance to these roles culminates in her awareness of how gendered training molds women to serve men. She reflects: "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). This stark line collapses class differences to show how all women are conditioned for servitude, whether in poverty or privilege. Bella's ability to articulate this dual oppression marks her transformation. She is no longer merely reacting to male control — she is diagnosing it.

Yet the men around her continue to project their fears and fantasies onto her. The General's panicked speech — "the touch of a female body arouses DIABOLICAL LUSTS in potent sensual males... Cuddlin! The word is disgustin and unmanly" (217–218) — exposes the hysteria that underlies misogyny. Female bodies are treated as dangerous temptations, and women are blamed for male behavior. Similarly, women who resist domestic expectations are labeled mad or unnatural. One character proclaims, "No normal healthy woman – no good or sane woman wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as a duty" (218). Here, sexual repression is repackaged as moral virtue, and female desire is pathologized.

But Bella refuses to be silenced. Her voice, her story, and her perspective form the core of the novel's narrative structure. Even in the metafictional twists that question authorship and truth, Bella remains the most vivid and self-aware character. Her declaration that "Both [the scullery maid and master's daughter] are used by other people. They are allowed to decide nothing for themselves" (263) is a moment of radical solidarity — an understanding that all women, regardless of class, are denied agency.

Ultimately, *Poor Things* is not just a critique of Victorian patriarchy — it is a reclamation of narrative itself. Bella's story, full of interruptions, rewrites, and contestations, becomes a

metaphor for female identity under patriarchy: shaped by others, but capable of reshaping itself. Through Bella, Gray argues that autonomy is not given — it is written, spoken, and fought for. And in a world that seeks to define women as either mad, childlike, or sinful, the act of telling one's own story becomes the greatest rebellion.