

“A Changingable Feast”: Postmodern Female Grotesque in Gray’s and Lanthimos’s *Poor Things*

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Abstract | This paper investigates the convergence of postmodern narrative strategies and the grotesque in Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* (1992) and Yorgos Lanthimos’s 2023 film adaptation. Specifically, it asks to what extent the grotesque and the postmodern work together in these texts to subvert gender conventions and explore utopian futures, and where they fall short in these goals. Both works emerge from transitional periods of heightened anxiety about gender norms and women’s position in society—Gray’s novel from the early years of third-wave feminism, and Lanthimos’s film from renewed contemporary debates around reproductive rights. A focus on the female body and common grotesque motifs, including the chimera, fertile death, and the feast, represent new possibilities. I argue that both the novel and film employ polyphonic and chimerical narrative forms to subvert expectations while aiming to optimize their respective mediums. At the same time, I consider the issue of adaptation: while the film medium allows for increased expression of the visual grotesque, its limited runtime necessitates simplification of Gray’s originally complex narrative structure. Further, while both the texts’ hyperfocus on sexuality critiques traditional gender conventions and the Victorian Fallen Woman narrative, their reliance on grotesque aesthetics risks both perpetuating problematic associations between femininity and monstrosity, and collapsing lived experience into symbol or archetype. The appropriation of the female image as a posthumanist agent of change may undermine the texts’ subversive goals.

Keywords | Grotesque, Postmodern, Feminism, Monstrosity, Historiographic Metafiction, Alasdair Gray, Yorgos Lanthimos, *Poor Things*, Cinema, Scottish Literature

Alasdair Gray’s novel *Poor Things* and Yorgos Lanthimos’s 2023 film adaptation are both invested in the creation of the new through the transcendence of boundaries. This paper asks to what extent the grotesque mode and postmodern narrative strategies work together in these texts to challenge gender conventions and imagine emergent or utopian futures, and where this convergence ultimately falls short. As is common for works in the grotesque mode, both the novel and the film emerge from transitional periods—in the case of the 1992 novel, the beginning of the third wave of feminism, and in the case of the 2023 film, increased anxieties around women’s reproductive rights. They are structured around common grotesque characteristics which represent the emergence of new possibilities. These include a focus on the body especially female embodiment and sexuality and motifs such as the chimera, a mythical creature embodying hybridity; pregnant/fertile death, which symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, or death giving birth to new life; and the feast or banquet, which has several functions within the grotesque including the subversion or upturning of hierarchy and further emphasis on the body and bodily excess. Further, these works make use of polyphonic and what I term “chimerical” narrative forms in order to challenge ideas of certainty and consensus. Both the novel and film aim to optimize their respective mediums while simultaneously subverting expectations, including the Victorian era literary convention of the Fallen Woman narrative. However, while their hyperfocus on sexuality seeks to critique traditional gender conventions, their reliance on grotesque aesthetics also risks perpetuating misogyny, including a biological essentialization of women; associations between femininity and monstrosity; and a flattening of lived experience into romanticized, symbolic archetype. The latter manifests in different ways in the respective works: while Gray positions the female protagonist as a national symbol, Lanthimos’s Bella becomes something of an idealized, aspirational Everywoman for the contemporary age, robbed of the narrative complexity her character holds in the novel due to the limited runtime of the film. In either case, the symbolic appropriation of the female image in these texts may undermine the subversive aims of these texts, potentially reinforcing the very norms they seek to challenge.

In order to examine these questions, I draw on several intersecting theoretical frameworks centered on the grotesque, the carnivalesque, and the postmodern. While the grotesque mode tends to elude simple definition, for the purposes of this paper, I define it as a sustained and structurally central deployment of grotesque aesthetics that shapes both the form and content of a work. In his seminal work, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser conceptualizes the grotesque as a “structure” that creates—or reveals—an “estranged world [that] appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments” (186). This effect is achieved through formal features such as flat or archetypal characterization and abrupt shifts between oppositional moods—most notably the comic and the frightening, or the realistic and

fantastical (184). Exaggeration and ambiguity are other hallmarks of the mode. Philip Thomson builds on this liminal quality, noting that the grotesque is “a fundamentally ambivalent thing [...] a violent clash of opposites [...] and hence, in some of its forms at least [...] an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation” (11). In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin counters what he calls Kayser’s “gloomy” view of the grotesque (47) with his own conception of “grotesque realism,” rooted in the earth and the body. He argues that medieval folk traditions such as Carnival reveal a “world inside out” (11) and “the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life” (48). As Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia notes in *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*, many of Bakhtin’s theories of carnivalism or the carnivalesque, especially those surrounding the grotesque body and the feast, have become inextricable from broader conceptions of the grotesque (11, 42). According to Bakhtin, “eating and drinking are the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body” as through the act of eating, “the body transgresses [...] its own limits” (281). The feast or banquet motif is thus a manifestation of several related key concepts of the grotesque: the expanding, evolving, open body; community and the upheaval of social hierarchy (7); and cycles of (social) life and periods of transition (9). Mary Russo, in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, extends the arguably male-centered frameworks of Kayser and Bakhtin to consider the specifically gendered dimensions of the grotesque mode and the grotesque body, arguing that the female grotesque is defined by excess and unruliness, and that the image of the woman “making a spectacle out of herself” embodies the carnivalesque dynamic (53). Russo also notes the problems inherent in this figuration—particularly, the same excess that makes the female grotesque body a potentially subversive figure and force also renders it vulnerable to objectification and symbolic appropriation (29). Ultimately, these combined frameworks provide the tools necessary to analyze how both versions of *Poor Things* make use of the grotesque mode and where their limitations emerge.

The grotesque mode’s investment in transitional states, emergent possibilities, and the subversion of authority also connects it closely to postmodernism. Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia, in her book *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess*, argues that many feminist and postcolonial texts written in the grotesque mode are necessarily postmodern as well, due to an intentional distance from certainty encoded in both approaches (17). She draws on Linda Hutcheon’s working definition of the postmodern as “the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new” in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* to make this case (Hutcheon 4; Pimentel Biscaia 17). Hutcheon’s theory of “historiographic metafiction,” which I discuss in more detail later on, is also relevant to both works, which make use of pastiche techniques to critique societal conventions and destabilize expectations. Keith M. Booker and Isra Daraiseh, in their recent analysis of Lanthimos’s film, argue that it represents a specifically political form of postmodernism. They suggest that the pastiche construction of *Poor Things* functions in the manner of what Bakhtin calls “an intentional dialogized hybrid,” in which “languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another” (Bakhtin, qtd. in Booker and Daraiseh 211). This argument applies equally to Gray’s novel, whose polyphonic structure and deliberate pastiche of Victorian literary conventions function as

a carnivalesque challenge to authority and consensus. While this paper shares Booker and Daraiseh’s view that both works’ postmodern (and grotesque) strategies are politically purposeful, it also argues that both versions of *Poor Things* operate within a tension arising between the grotesque’s liberatory potential as well as its tendency toward essentialism, and the postmodern’s political ambitions and its formal limitations.

The 2023 film *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and written by Tony McNamara, tells the story of Bella Baxter, a woman who was “created” by a mad-scientist-slash-surgeon, Godwin Baxter. Bella abbreviates his name to “God” in both the novel and film. In a fantastically stylized late 19th-century London, Godwin recruits a medical student, Max McCandless, to study his creation, after some time revealing that Bella’s body is that of a woman who committed suicide by leaping off a bridge, and her brain is that of the fetus she was pregnant with at the time. Max is instantly smitten with Bella and proposes marriage, and Bella agrees. However, as she develops rapidly and quickly discovers her sexuality, she decides to run away with a lawyer named Duncan Wedderburn. During Bella’s travels with Duncan, she becomes increasingly interested in educating herself, becoming independent, and seeking pleasure, culminating in her employment at a Paris brothel and decision to become a doctor and a socialist. After returning to London at Godwin’s deathbed request, she agrees to finally have her wedding to Max, but her former husband, General Alfie Blessington, of whom she of course has no memory, interrupts the ceremony and asks Bella (whom he knew as “Victoria”) to come back to him. Much to the surprise of Max, Godwin, and the other witnesses, Bella agrees, but upon discovering Alfie’s cruel and controlling nature, she realizes that Victoria killed herself in order to escape him. She runs away from the house, and Alfie shoots himself in the foot in the process. Dragging his unconscious body back to Godwin’s house, she transplants a goat’s brain into Alfie’s head with the help of Max. Godwin passes away peacefully with Bella and Max at his side, and leaves his house and surgery to Bella. At the end of the film, the unconventional family of Max; Bella; Bella’s friend and lover from the brothel, Toinette; the housekeeper Mrs. Prim; Felicity, who is another “experiment” similar to Bella; and goat-Alfie are shown to be living peacefully together as Bella contentedly reads a medical text and presumably looks forward to the future.

While the film is unconventional in many ways, a runtime of 142 minutes does cause some simplification. Alasdair Gray’s novel is much more complicated, with a fragmented and polyphonic narrative style. It consists of four distinct parts: an introduction by the “editor” Alasdair Gray, a fictionalized version of the author; a book entitled *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer* by Archibald McCandles M.D. (this book is further divided into 24 chapters, including letters written by Bella and Duncan); “a letter about the aforementioned book to a grand- or great-grandchild” by “Victoria” McCandless M.D.; and “Chapter notes, historical and critical,” again by Alasdair Gray. Archibald’s book comprises the “main” text, and the film is based on this section, with some variation. In Victoria’s letter which follows, she claims that Archibald’s book is completely false and the product of hidden envy and egotistical delusions at the end of his life (Gray 272–273). She briefly provides her own history of her life, which though unusual, is much less fantastic, and in no way involves the transplantation of a fetus’ brain into its dead mother’s head. Following this letter, the

“notes” ostensibly provide historical context, albeit with a clear underlying bias towards Archibald’s account. The “editor” (I will refer to him as “Alasdair” in order to distinguish from “Gray,” the author) makes this bias explicit in the table of contents, where he notes that “the slightly edited repairing of the McCandless volume is given pride of place.” He also admits that “somewhere between editor, publisher, typesetter and photographer the unique first edition was mislaid” (XVI), prompting further skepticism about the authenticity of the documents. Thus, at the end of the novel, the reader is left wondering what, if anything, is true.

This chimerical narrative structure, as well as the profusion of chimerical images throughout both the novel and the film, serves as a central grotesque technique that blurs boundaries and highlights the novel’s theme of creation. Pimentel Biscaia discusses the importance of the chimera in the historical development of concepts of the grotesque, due to its uncanny, and both comic and terrifying nature (77). The chimera is a hybrid creature, and its ability to thrive as an entirely new being represents the potential for new forms of hybrid existence. In both works, the most obvious chimerical creature is Bella, who Godwin has pieced together from disparate parts. She also grows up among other chimeras - most notably in the novel, Mopsy and Flopsy, male and female rabbits who have their front and back halves switched by Godwin (Gray 23). These rabbits also appear in the film, along with an expanded menagerie of chimerical creatures (Figure 1), emphasizing Lanthimos’s interest in portraying the grotesque visually. During Bella’s time abroad, Max and Godwin create another woman, Felicity, through a process similar to Bella’s creation. Although Felicity’s development is slower, at the optimistic end of the film she begins to flourish, becoming able to catch a ball and follow a command to fetch water. A triumphant musical swell and the soft light that lends a utopic glow to this rather bizarre scene exemplify this film’s characteristic blending of styles (Lanthimos 2:14:32–2:15:58). Both Bella and Felicity represent a reworking of the concept of female monstrosity. Their non-normative bodies and behaviours—particularly Bella’s—are generally framed as sites of curiosity, freedom, and growth rather than fear or disgust. Kirsten Stirling in her book *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text* notes that in traditional conceptions of femininity “if a woman deviates from what is regarded as ‘normal,’ transgresses the limits of the roles defined for her – good mother, good wife, good daughter – she becomes monstrous” (96–97). However, Bella’s deviation from these roles in *Poor Things* is generally treated positively. In both the novel and the film, Bella’s frank pursuit of sexual and intellectual autonomy is celebrated—in the novel Godwin reads out her letters with pride, saying, “it is wonderful for a creator to see the offspring live, feel, and act independently” (99), and approves of the way Bella’s relationships with multiple men have seemed to enhance her development (151). Bella’s decision to become a sex worker to fund her independence is also narrated without censure and on her own initiative (177–180). In the film, only Duncan Wedderburn—who is also portrayed as an exaggeratedly comical villain—ever calls Bella a “monster” (Lanthimos 1:29:25–1:30:56). Bella’s escape from both Duncan and Alfie, who similarly tries to control her, are triumphant: “a woman plotting her course to freedom. How delightful!” as Madame Swiney pronounces (1:31:19–23).

Both works also use the figure of Godwin to question the ethics of human experimentation. While Bella’s hybridity is ultimately celebrated, the power imbalance

between creator and creation is never entirely obscured. Archibald’s repeated references to Godwin’s “monstrous bulk” (Gray 44) begin to locate monstrosity in the creator, rather than in the creation. This inversion reaches its culmination in the film when, upon returning to London and discovering Felicity, Bella calls Max and Godwin “monsters” outright (1:54:10–15). By placing the burden of monstrosity back onto the creators, rather than their creations, both works reframe the ethical stakes of the narrative. Rather than deviance to be condemned, the female chimera in *Poor Things* comes to represent a subversion of convention through transgression and hybridity.



Figure 1: Chimerical animals in *Poor Things*. 20th Century Studios, 2023.
(Image credit: u/rastroboy)

In addition to images of literal chimeras, the film’s three-act structure creates a kind of formal chimera by imitating the classical Hollywood convention of setup, confrontation, and resolution, while also distorting it at every level. Although the narrative loosely follows this classical pattern, the three acts are clearly demarcated through chapter breaks featuring screens labelled with the name of the current city Bella is in. These transitions are sudden and jarring, creating the effect of a deliberately pieced-together story. In the novel, this effect is even more pronounced, as it contains myriad disparate elements: Victorian novel-style narratives, notes, letters, handwritten messages, drawings and sketches purportedly by a variety of artists. Donald Kaczvinsky in “Making Up for Lost Time: Scotland, Stories, and the Self in Alasdair Gray’s ‘Poor Things’” notes that “Archibald’s” reproductions of illustrations from *Gray’s Anatomy* “never quite fuse into the depiction of a whole, complete, adult person,” further contributing to a sense of fragmentation (793). Victoria in her letter criticizes her late husband’s grotesquely pieced-together narrative, and appeals to the reader to believe her side of the story:

You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable. 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. What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from? [...] Ever since reading this infernal parody of my life-story I have been asking, WHY DID ARCHIE WRITE IT? (Gray 272–273)

Part of the irony of this passage lies in the fact that Victoria's letter itself has now become subsumed into the book. The end result of the stitching together of these fragments is a chimerical work that, in grotesque and postmodern fashion, establishes uncertainty and blurs boundaries both between authors, and between the author and reader.

The novel in its form, then, which parodies and critiques the structure of the Victorian novel through polyphony, challenges ideas of certainty and consensus in the postmodern manner described by Hutcheon (7). Further, the text is an example of what Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction," as it is "both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically lay[s] claim to historical events and personages" (5). While the novel is highly self-aware of its status as fiction, and the characters frequently discuss the construction of literature, fiction, and narrative, it is also firmly situated in late-19th-century Glasgow, within a recognizable social, historical, and literary context. "Alasdair" goes to great lengths to locate the various characters within real events and institutions by "collecting" or, more likely, fabricating newspaper clippings and claiming, for example, that General Blessington was a close friend of Tennyson and Kipling, and the inspiration for several of their works (291–292). Pimentel Biscaia notes that the decentering and metamorphic effect of such postmodernist techniques is frequently used in grotesque writing (13–14). Further, Archibald's narrative, with its grotesque, almost Dickensian characterization, especially of General Blessington and his cronies, and occasional addresses to a "Reader" is almost too obvious in its intentionally Victorian style, something Victoria notes with disgust in the continuation of her previous complaint:

I have no time to go through every page separating fact from fiction. If you ignore what contradicts common sense and this letter you will find that this book records some actual events during a dismal era. As I said before, to my nostrils the book stinks of Victorianism. It is as sham-gothic as the Scott Monument, Glasgow University, St. Pancras Station and the Houses of Parliament. I hate such structures. (Gray 274–275)

This mention of "structures" holds a double meaning, referring to both these architectural monuments to Victorian institutional power, and to Archibald's narrative structure. By suggesting that both derive their authority from the same kind of fabricated legitimacy, Victoria—and by extension, Gray—rejects the idea that any single narrative can claim definitive authority over events or persons. Instead, Gray's use of multiple unreliable narrators to recount allegedly true historical events serves to both reflect on history and establish uncertainty around its retelling.

The film, while lacking the multiple contradictory narratives and thus the overtly polyphonic aspects of the novel, nevertheless also functions within grotesque ambivalence through its medium-conscious filming style and blending of the real and the

fantastic. It is shot on 35 mm film rather than digitally, which lends a slightly grainy film “look” as opposed to the hyper-realism of modern digital cameras. Lanthimos’s cinematographer Robbie Ryan shoots the beginning of the film in black and white, switching to colour as Bella discovers her sexuality and the outside world. This filming choice, coupled with the blue dress that Bella wears at the beginning of her trip abroad, establishes intertextuality through references to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and thus demonstrates the film’s awareness of itself as a constructed story, or even a partial retelling of previous stories. Further, the fish-eye lens with which many scenes are shot contributes to a sense of unease and unreality, and renders figures grotesque through exaggerated proportions (Figure 2). Fantastical backdrops, steampunk settings, and extravagant costumes that only vaguely resemble real Victorian styles further serve to blend the boundaries between the historical and real, and the fantastic and imaginary. This deliberate destabilization is politically purposeful, exemplifying Thomson’s argument that “it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic” (17). By rendering reality and the past artificial, or in Kayser’s terms “estranged,” as discussed above (186), Lanthimos ensures that its social structures, which are still highly recognizable to contemporary audiences, are legible as constructions rather than natural conditions.



Figure 2: Examples of the use of a fish-eye lens in *Poor Things*. 20th Century Studios, 2023.

However, the film lacks the polyphony created from the novel’s collage of multiple voices and viewpoints, and fails to address the fact that it is derived almost entirely from what was originally Archibald’s narrative—a narrative that the form of the novel criticizes. Stirling notes,

the dual narratives of *Poor Things* allow at least two readings of the novel: the fantastic narrative, based on McCandless’s account of the Frankensteinian construction of Bella; and the realist narrative, based on Victoria’s more straightforward account of her life. Both readings, however, prompt questions regarding women being constructed to respond to male fantasies, as *either* Bella

is constructed by Godwin Baxter, *or* the entire tale is a fabrication of Archie McCandless. (88; italics in original)

In this way, the novel, while withholding concrete conclusions, hints that the story of Bella Baxter may only be a lonely man's fantasy of the "perfect woman"—one who is not only beautiful, but also profoundly childlike and primarily interested in heterosexual sex. While Nicole Fox in *Viewing Poor Things Through the Eyes of the Feminist Canon* argues that Bella's shameless sexuality and socially abnormal behaviour in the film is empowering and crucial to the story of her self-fashioning and growing agency (24), the film has also been widely criticized for what many see as excessive vulgarity and a male gaze viewpoint (West). I would argue that while Lanthimos's concept of sex as liberating for women is indeed totalizing and contrived at points, it also demonstrates his interest in making that liberation felt viscerally by the audience. The film's wild exaggeration and grotesque visual excess provoke an immediate, embodied response that pushes the audience to identify with Bella and her journey to self-actualization without the need for intellectual mediation. Further, the inherently and intentionally controversial nature of the film exemplifies his awareness of the discourse-producing effects of the medium: Where the novel generates polyphony internally through its competing narrators, the film perhaps attempts to generate it externally through debate among critics and audiences about its political goals and actual achievements. In provoking this extratextual contest of interpretations, Lanthimos perhaps compensates for the narrative's lack of competing voices by ensuring that no single reading of the film can comfortably prevail.

The depictions of Bella's sexuality and behaviour in these works to critique social and cultural structures involve a reworking of the fallen woman narrative, a common Victorian literary convention. In much of Victorian art and literature, the fallen woman's early death is frequently a suicide by drowning. Olive Anderson notes that "this romantic stereotype of female suicide" was so "completely familiar" to Victorians that any image of a "young woman depicted as lingering near deep water immediately understood to be deserted or 'fallen,' and contemplating suicide" (197). She further argues that "notions of suicide in Victorian England centre around images of a distraught girl flinging herself from a high bridge" (197) as depicted in this 1848 etching by George Cruikshank, frankly titled "a destitute girl throws herself from a bridge, her life ruined by alcoholism" (Figure 3). While Victoria's own suicide (Figure 4) echoes these stereotypes, Bella Baxter's story represents a carnivalesque inversion of the fallen woman's trajectory and fate: beginning with "her" suicide as Victoria (Figure 4), her subsequent engagement in sex, alcohol consumption, and other socially unacceptable behaviours are not destructive to her, but rather crucial to her development. At the end of both the film and Archibald's narrative in the novel she is depicted as healthy, successful, and affluent. This inversion of conventional and predictable narrative—employing the carnivalesque "logic of the 'inside out' [...] of the 'turnabout'" (Bakhtin 11)—is established near the beginning of the novel, when upon first meeting Bella and observing her childlike qualities, Archibald asks "what reduced her to that state" to which Godwin replies that "nothing reduced her to it, she has risen from it" (Gray 30). The film similarly establishes this reversal through the opening shot of Victoria's suicide, which contrasts with the closing shot of a content Bella in the garden. However, while both the novel and the film hold a positive attitude towards Bella's sexuality and sex work, they also dwell on the importance of the

prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (Gray 200; Lanthimos 1:57:57–1:58:00), perhaps revealing lingering Victorian anxieties regarding the fallen woman as a contagion (Gates 132). I would also argue that both Gray’s and Lanthimos’s emphasis on Bella’s medical profession and charitable works in some ways reaffirms the “whore with a heart of gold” stereotype, which is used in Victorian literary works that try to establish sympathy for the fallen woman and argue for her rehabilitation into polite society. Further, the film’s optimistic narrative of Bella’s upward progress lends itself to a somewhat overly simplistic and bildungsroman-like quality. The final scene is particularly ambivalent: here, the inversion of hierarchy and convention throughout the film has culminated in a triumphant celebration that, like Bakhtin’s banquet, signals both joyous completion and a potential for continued growth as Bella reads for an upcoming medical exam (Bakhtin 283). Yet, one may take issue with the fact that only Bella has truly reaped the benefits of *Poor Things*’s social inversion, and that true equality within this small community has perhaps not been achieved. Goat-Alfie being relegated to the garden and Max standing and serving drinks may represent merely a reversal of gender roles. Even among the women, Bella—the heir of Godwin’s estate—reclines most comfortably in a chaise lounge. Meanwhile, Toinette perches on an upright chair; Mrs. Prim entertains Felicity before (at Bella’s suggestion) resting on a similar upright chair; and Felicity is charged with the task of fetching water for everyone. In this sense, the final tableau suggests that only Bella truly undergoes a grotesque transformation, while the underlying hierarchy remains intact, ultimately reaffirming some of the conventions that the film’s carnivalesque mood and structure strive to overturn.



Figure 3: “A destitute girl throws herself from a bridge, her life ruined by alcoholism,” by George Cruikshank, 1848. *The Wellcome Collection*.



Figure 4: Victoria throws herself from a bridge, *Poor Things*. 20th Century Studios, 2023.

As well as this inversion of the fallen woman narrative, the concept of the female carnivalesque is key to the destabilization of social norms represented by Bella's character. Russo argues that "the categories of Carnavalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement" (62). She identifies three forms of carnival culture discussed by Bakhtin: "Ritual spectacles (which include feasts, pageants, and marketplace festivals of all kinds); comic verbal compositions, including parodies both oral and written; and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, profanations, marketplace speech)" (61). Comic speech and oral and written parody, while central to both the novel and film, are perhaps most obvious in the novel due to its emphasis on intertextuality and the creation of literature. For about ten pages of her letter to Godwin and Archibald, Bella attempts to write entirely in iambic pentameter, later proclaiming, "I will not write like Shakespeare any more. It slows me down" (115). She begins to develop her own highly unusual style that evolves as she learns and is influenced by those around her and the things she reads. Near the end of Archibald's narrative, a sudden outburst of laughter and profanity from Bella has a destabilizing effect, shocking Archibald and forcing General Blessington and his cronies to disperse, stumbling out in a daze (238–239). For Lanthimos, Bella's evolving speech is similarly key to the development of the film's themes of growth and change. On the ship, Duncan criticizes Bella's self-education endeavours, saying, "You're always reading now, Bella. You're losing some of your adorable way of speaking," to which Bella replies, "I am a changingable feast, as are all of we" (1:11:21–31). This line additionally evokes the grotesque motif of the feast or banquet. In the narrative of the film, Bella's hearty sampling of what the world has to offer in turn engenders a sense of this varied bounty within herself. In addition to these verbal markers of the carnivalesque and grotesque, Lanthimos creates visual spectacle through the film medium. Russo's concept of the "woman making a spectacle out of herself" (53) manifests when Bella, during a dinner with Duncan, suddenly gets up to interrupt a structured dance with her own grotesque freestyle interpretation. Duncan's attempts to control her movements and make her appear normal fail, as she ends up controlling him by leading the dance (54:35–55:50). This scene exemplifies the goals of the female carnivalesque, which parodies and exaggerates the absurdity of social convention.

This scene is also an example of what is often considered the most important element of the carnivalesque and the grotesque—a focus on the human body. In both versions of *Poor Things*, Bella’s body is figured as the ideal grotesque and postmodern female body, a vessel for the transcendence of boundaries and creation of the new. Bella’s construction makes use of the grotesque motif of pregnant or fertile death, suggesting that new life is capable of emerging from death (Bakhtin 322). Further, the positive treatment of Bella’s hypersexuality in both the novel and the film as key to her growth illustrates what Pimentel Biscaia calls “the functionality of orifices” within the grotesque, as “through them the body is able to escape its boundaries and makes connections with the world” (56). While there is no period scene in the film (a potential problem and rather contradictory for what is essentially a coming-of-age story centered around sexuality), in the novel Godwin notes that “[Bella’s] menstrual cycle was in full flood from the day she opened her eyes, so she has never been taught to feel her body is disgusting or to dread what she desires” (Gray 69). This line further establishes Bella’s body as the ideal grotesque body, which Russo defines as “the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change [...] the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world” (62–63). This process of constant change is illustrated quite literally in a scene in the novel where Bella, hearing of her former husband’s cruel treatment of both a servant he impregnated and of Victoria, undergoes a rapid and dramatic transformation:

her flesh had shrunk so close to the bones that her figure was now angular, but the horriblemest change was in her face. The white sharp nose, hollow cheeks and sunken eyesockets showed the skull all too clearly, yet within the sockets each black pupil had expanded to fill the whole eye, leaving just a tiny wee triangle of white in the corners. Her dark curling mass of hairs had also expanded, for the first inch of each one stood straight out from the head ‘like quills upon the fretful porcupine.’ (Gray 231)

In the next moment, she returns to normal (232). In place of this type of overt physical transformation, the film’s costume designer Holly Waddington uses designs and fabrics for Bella’s outfits that evoke aspects of the female body while also rejecting constrictions such as corsets (Ellwood). Bella’s unconventional costuming in comparison to those around her, and the way her costumes evolve to reflect her changing conception of herself and her role in society, demonstrate the possibilities coded within the evolving grotesque body to transcend boundaries and convention.

It is apparent, however, how the view of the female body in *Poor Things* on occasion falls prey to the misogyny encoded in the grotesque mode, and even how the grotesque’s focus on birth in some ways results in these works reaffirming the very conventions they aim to subvert. Russo notes that “in theories of the grotesque, the etymological starting point that links the grotesque with the grotto-esque, or cave, proceeds quite swiftly to the further identification of the grotto with the womb, and with woman-as-mother” (29). Both the novel and the film are extremely concerned with motherhood, most obviously in the ever-present conundrum of Bella’s self-motherhood—Bella is at once her own mother and her own daughter (Lanthimos 1:52:34–52). At the same time, it could be argued that she is neither, having never experienced normative motherhood nor known her mother as an entity separate from herself. Further, although Fox notes that “Bella exists outside [the] realm of expectations”

for women in the Victorian period, and “[t]here are no reasonings or expectations which push her toward marriage and motherhood” (15), throughout both the novel and film she is seen to have great sympathy towards children and a preoccupation with her own mysteriously vanished child (Gray 191; Lanthimos 1:47:50–1:48:20, 1:52:27–52). Rather than take on the traditional role of a mother, her desire to care for others drives her to become a doctor instead. Although Bella’s entry into healthcare would have been highly unconventional for women in the Victorian period, Gray and Lanthimos perhaps in these ways reinscribe an essentialist correlation between womanhood and the impulses to birth, nurturing, and motherhood. This essentialism is itself a form of the flattening that the grotesque mode tends to produce. Rather than fully liberating Bella from archetypal female roles, it uses her career ambitions as a stand-in for conventional womanhood. This tendency to reduce Bella to an archetypal or symbolic function manifests in other ways too. While the film’s narrative mostly centers around Bella’s direct experience, rather than being filtered through Archibald’s narration, she is still often depicted as a *tabula rasa* on which men impose their views. Indeed, as discussed previously, the film, with its primarily male authorship, risks imposing a totalizing narrative that sexual discovery straightforwardly equals female empowerment, leaving little room for ambivalence. Similarly, Bella’s conception of herself as a “changingable feast” or grotesque banquet—presumably for the enjoyment of others—carries objectifying undertones that complicate any straightforward reading of it as self-possession. As Pimentel Biscaia notes, the “utopian universalism of the concept of the grotesque,” can mask rather than dismantle hierarchies, with degradation lurking beneath an apparent celebration of the female body and women’s sexual liberation (55). In each of these instances, the exaggeration of the grotesque mode may obscure lived realities, producing a Bella who functions more as a symbolic vessel than as a fully realized woman.

In addition to Bella’s representation of woman-as-mother, in the novel she is also an obvious woman-as-nation figure, representing Scotland’s fraught history and identity, and reflecting Alasdair Gray’s complex relationship with his country. Gray makes this figuration explicit in an etching in the novel entitled “Bella Caledonia” (Figure 5), which depicts Bella wearing a tartan shawl, with a Glasgow landscape in the background (Gray 45). The image is itself internally divided: the tartan invokes a version of Scottish identity that is simultaneously authentic and fabricated, having been suppressed after the Jacobite rising (Trevor-Roper 23–24) before being romanticized and commodified during the Highland Revival (25, 30). The landscape also combines elements of modern industrialization with those of the frequently romanticized Scottish countryside. Stirling discusses the grotesque effects of Bella’s characterization as a symbol for Scotland more broadly:

Gray’s Frankenstein-like narrative makes visible the distortions to which the nation-as-woman figure—but particularly the Scotland-as-woman figure—is subject. The Scotland-as-woman figure is pulled in different directions by the clash of national and political boundaries, and this is reinforced by a critical tradition that sees Scotland and Scottish culture as essentially divided. (87)

This division is literalized by Bella’s physical construction. As a chimerical creature assembled from disparate parts, she embodies the idea of Scotland as a nation whose identity has been shaped and distorted by external forces rather than allowed to develop organically. Stirling argues that “It is Bella’s internal construction, the placing of her

infant brain within her adult body, which allows her to function as the incarnation of the monstrous and deformed body of state” (92). Further, her accent is not Scottish, but Northern English, which Godwin hypothesizes is because “the muscles of Bella’s throat, tongue and lips still move as they did in the first twenty-five years of their existence, which I think was nearer Manchester than Leeds. But all the words she uses have been learned from me, or from children who play with her here” (Gray 34). Even Victoria describes herself in this hybrid manner: “my own mother had made me Mancunian. The nuns had made me French. The friendship and conversation of Mrs. Dinwiddie gave me



Figure 5: “Bella Caledonia,” etching by Alasdair Gray. *Poor Things*. Mariner Books, 1992.

the voice and manners of an unprejudiced, straightforward Scotswoman. Colleagues who knew nothing of my early years still amuse me sometimes by saying how SCOTTISH I am” (261). Bella is further figured as a symbol for the hybrid and uncertain Scotland in a letter where she muses, “of all the nations I have visited the U.S.A and Russia suit me best. The people seem more ready to talk to strangers without being formal or disapproving. Is this because, like me, they have very little past? The friend I made in the betting-shop [...] said Russia is as young a country as the U.S.A. because a nation is only as old as its literature” (115). She then goes on to say that despite her efforts, she could not make this acquaintance understand the difference between Scotland and England (116). In this way, Gray portrays Scotland as a composite or chimerical nation, struggling to define its own history and identity under British power and influence. However, this portrayal is not wholly negative, as the novel is interested in the potential inherent in uncertainty and the possibilities of self-creation through narrative. Bella’s hybrid and evolving body and identity represents Scotland’s own potential to evolve and become independent.

The aspect of woman-as-nation is absent in the film, as Lanthimos shifts the primary setting from a relatively realistic Glasgow to a fantastical London. The only suggestions of Scotland remain in Godwin’s Scottish accent. This choice is somewhat problematic, as it potentially reaffirms the novel’s anxieties about Scottish literature and identity being overshadowed or swallowed by the English centre (Gray 116). However, in this way Lanthimos also avoids some obvious pitfalls of the woman-as-nation figuration—in particular, the grotesque flattening and dehumanization involved in making a female character a political symbol. Without the burden of standing in for the nation, Lanthimos’s Bella is free to become a more well-rounded and believable character. Further, as discussed earlier, the film’s visual and narrative style—the anachronistic technology, the fish-eye lenses, the stagelike set design—constantly signals its own artificiality. These choices invoke the postmodern “presence of the past”—a critical and often ironic engagement with the past and its social codes—that is

characteristic of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 4), and allows for a closer examination of the historical impact of gender norms. The denaturalizing effect of the visuals and narrative is amplified by Bella's own perspective. As Booker and Daraiseh argue, Bella's freedom from the "interpellating effects of Victorian bourgeois ideology" allows her to perceive the world and its norms with an outsider's clarity; she is "able to imagine a genuinely better world simply because she has never learned that such a feat is supposedly impossible" (210). Bella's infant brain, unburdened by typical socialization, effectively functions as the film's postmodern structure does—it refuses to naturalize the world it encounters, thus revealing its norms and mores as artificial. In this way, Bella's lack of a past, rather than symbolizing the history of Scotland, develops into a more universal and less nationally specific way to examine the transcendence of convention.

Both versions of *Poor Things* deploy the grotesque, carnivalesque, and postmodern with the shared aim of challenging the conventions that have historically constrained female identity and experience. Yet, as this paper has argued, neither work fully escapes the critical issues inherent in these modes. Despite its interest in freedom and the transcendence of boundaries, the grotesque mode carries within it a tendency towards essentialism and symbolic flattening that becomes particularly problematic when its object is a female character. While Bella is undeniably a figure of grotesque evolution, carnivalesque liberation, and radical possibility, both works still render her something of a blank slate onto which are projected broader anxieties or stereotypes about womanhood, nationhood, and the body. While Gray's polyphonic and metafictional structure mounts an ambitious challenge to social convention and male-authored narratives of womanhood, he potentially undermines this work through his use of Bella as a national figurehead. In turn, Lanthimos sacrifices some of the novel's formal complexity, but in doing so creates a protagonist who is arguably even more liberated than Gray's to encounter and challenge the world's norms. Nevertheless, the novel's simplification in the film adaptation comes at a cost, as it comes to resemble a condensed narrative of upwards mobility, somewhat weakening its political goals. Thus, subversion and reinscription coexist within both works—an often-present tension associated with the grotesque mode and postmodernism, which both rely on ambiguity, ambivalence, and a challenge to convention and dominant narratives. It is this challenge that endures across both versions of *Poor Things*, embodied in a protagonist who resists reduction to any single meaning.



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