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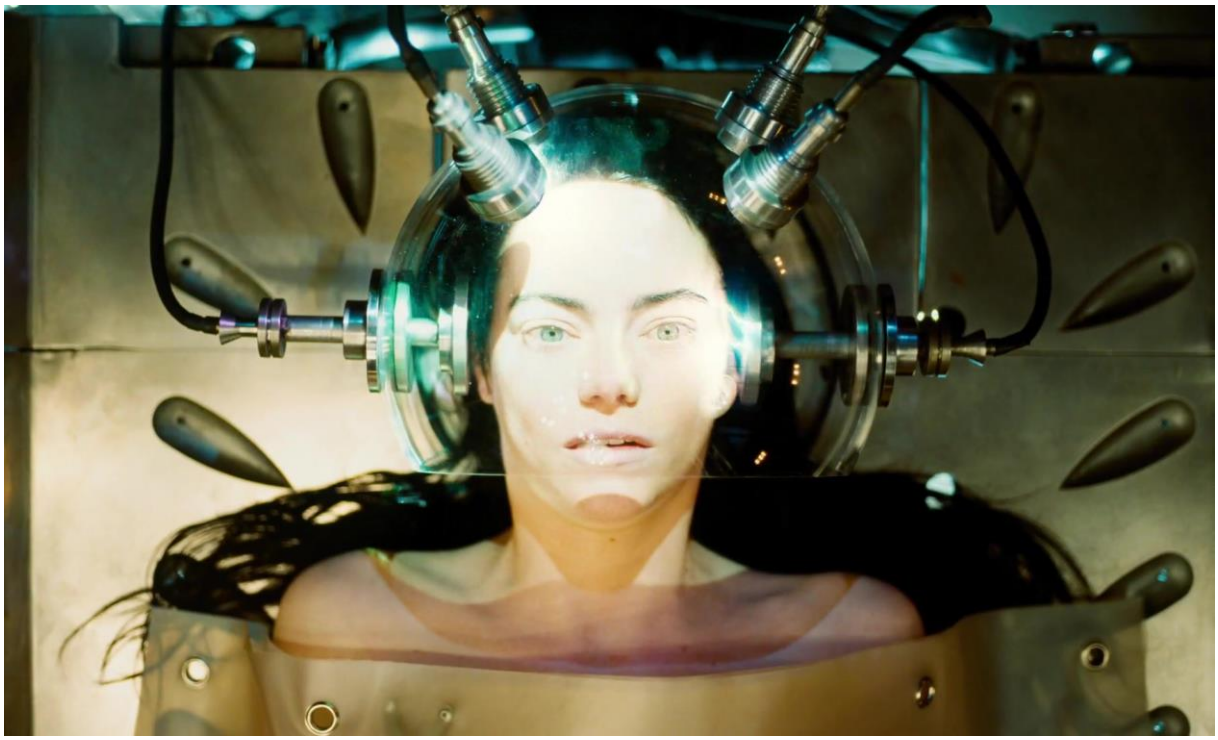

An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Man-Made Monster Trope in Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and its Film Adaptation

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Contents

Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) marked a point of no return in the monster-fiction tradition; it introduced the possibility of a human creating a near-human monster, and confronted readers with the moral complications of creating a life, while terrifying them with a creature which is almost exactly like themselves. This man-made monster trope has only increased in popularity in subsequent works of Gothic and Science Fiction, from *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* to *Westworld*, and appeared again in Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer* (1992), and its 2023 film adaptation *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. In *Poor Things*, the man-made monster is no longer a horrifyingly large, ugly creature. Instead, she is a beautiful woman, assembled out of a dead woman's body and her unborn baby's brain. As such, it is not just an exploration of monstrosity, but also an investigation of the position of women, and the ways in which representations of Victorian societal expectations of women reflect onto contemporary sexual politics.

Alisdair Gray is perhaps best known for *Lanark* (1981), which positioned him firmly within the twentieth-century Scottish literary canon. His novel *Poor Things* gained major attention too as it received the Whitbread Award and the Guardian Fiction prize upon its publication. Its 2023 film adaptation became a critical and commercial success, grossing over 120 million dollars worldwide and receiving 11 Oscar nominations. Lanthimos' film has become the subject of a heated online debate on whether the film is successful in its feminist message, with some arguing that the film is a feminist masterpiece (Lodge), while others berate it for "demonstrat[ing] the limits of the modern cis-male author's vision for and about women – particularly their sexual selves" (Bastién). The reason for this ambiguous critical view is the representation of the story's central female character, Bella Baxter. On the one hand, the novel consists of a number of differing accounts of Bella's life, which comment on

each other. The film, on the other hand, only shows the central narrative of the novel, in which the child-brained Bella matures separately from the story's Victorian setting, and thus grows into a person who follows her desires without taking heed of societal expectations. The novel's frame narratives serve to cajole the reader into critical reflection on these societal expectations in the composition of Bella by the men around her. The film does not have these frame narratives, and its exploration of gender thus may seem simplified, focusing on banal, hedonistic sexuality as the ultimate form of female liberation.

However, the use of the man-made monster trope has extensive implications for the sexual politics surrounding Bella's liberation, which make the film's exploration of feminism through this character anything but simple. Its presence in *Poor Things* imbues the story with the horror of a Gothic text. The Gothic is able to invoke terror by threatening to collapse hegemonic societal binaries and hierarchies (Höing 407): the dualities of rationality versus nature, of natural versus unnatural, of Man versus Other. Apart from being traditional Gothic themes, these dualities are also studied in the context of ecofeminist critical and literary theory, which was established in the 1970s on the intersection of feminist and ecocritical discourse. Ecofeminism explores conceptual and cultural connections between women and nature, both repressed within Western culture, and argues that their hyper-separation from men and culture is due to problematic "ideological dualisms and language binaries" (Taylor-Wiseman 244). An increased awareness of the "established hierarchical distinctions between pairs such as culture versus nature, men versus women, human versus non-human, reason versus emotion, or theory versus practice" (Estévez Saá and Lorenzo Modia 126) is necessary to disrupt these dualisms.

Critical ecofeminism argues that hierarchical dualisms are "the key to the ecological failings of Western culture" (Plumwood 44) as they lead to a separation of patriarchal and rational-scientific society from nature. As a result, scientific rationalist and masculinist

Western culture ignores nature's necessity to survival, instead dominating and exploiting nature through science to extract its resources. Furthermore, it perpetuates a gendered ideological understanding that science is male and that nature is the realm of women, as well as "other supposedly inferior orders of humanity, such as … slaves and ethnic Others ('barbarians')" (44), because of their "supposedly lesser participation in reason and greater participation in lower 'animal' elements such as embodiment and emotionality" (44). This rhetoric allows hegemonic culture in a society to justify the positioning of these parties as objects of experimentation, exploitation and domination. Ecofeminists who focus on the gendered nature of the scientific ideology of progress, such as Evelyn Fox Keller, offer a broader and more integrated view of these issues which enables the disruption of this problematic rhetoric.

Andrew Smith and William Hughes' *Ecogothic* (2013) illustrates that the Gothic is a site for the confrontation of patriarchal dualities. It addresses the development of an intersectional approach to Gothic texts that addresses their environmental ethics. Smith and Hughes demonstrate that, although the connection has only recently received attention, the ecogothic has existed since Romanticism, and was already present in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). It is concerned with nature as "a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological" (Smith and Hughes 3), an uncanny place reflecting human ecological anxieties. It confronts humans with the impossibility of maintaining the dualities they rely upon in the face of a nature that they need to survive and yet fear in its inability to be controlled. Anja Höing points out that "ecofeminist criticism can unearth the networks of interconnected dualisms each single dichotomy in a gothic text is only a minute part of, and can provide a versatile theoretical frame to tackle the problem at its root rather than chopping off its individual branches" (Höing 408). Therefore, this thesis applies an ecofeminist analysis to the man-made monster

trope in the *Poor Things* novel and film, in order to expose the underlying dualisms and the extent to which they both disrupt these dualisms.

Poor Things, the Novel and the Film

Gray's *Poor Things* opens with an introduction by "Alisdair Gray, the editor" (Gray vi), henceforth "editor Gray." Although editor Gray is not formally distinguished from the author, the reader realizes immediately that he is a character within the novel, as he describes the discovery and subsequent publishing of an biographical manuscript, which is actually the fictional story that constitutes the majority of the novel. By immediately challenging the reader's understanding of fact and fiction, the author introduces the reader to the novel's metafictional approach to narrative structure. The narrative's composition of found manuscripts, letters, and a mediating editor, creates an intertextuality with Gothic texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). According to Peter Garrett, "in allowing us more than one perspective … Gothic … enables self-conscious reflections on the form and function of narrative itself, the individual acts and social transactions through which fiction exerts its force" (3-4). The fragmented structure of these narratives benefit the inwards opposition of the Gothic.

This is also true of *Poor Things*, as its metafictionality brings into question the reliability of its narrators' representation of the character of Bella Baxter. Its structure of mixed narratives, according to Dietmar Böhnke, "confronts the reader with a number of different 'emplotments' … of the same underlying facts that cannot be accessed directly by the reader, just as the past cannot be accessed directly from the present … thus stressing the ultimate subjectivity and relativity of history" (195). Like *Poor Things* itself, Bella is

composed of several different accounts of her life, and it becomes impossible to create one objective image of this character and her story. In order to understand the complexities of Bella's composition, an outline of the novel's complex structure is in order.

Editor Gray is the first of a number of narrators to compose an image of Bella. He introduces the manuscript, titled "Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer," and written in 1909, and the accompanying letter, written in 1914, by Victoria McCandless – Bella Baxter's name after marrying Archibald – who claims the manuscript is a fabrication. Editor Gray asserts that he believes the manuscript to be the truth and the letter to be written by "a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life" (Gray xiii). Editor Gray thus establishes the denial of Victoria's autonomy in her own story early on, preferring to frame Archibald McCandless' longer and more enticing and fantastical account of Bella's life as the central narrative.

This central narrative takes place in late-Victorian Glasgow. It recounts Archibald's growing friendship with the brilliant but deformed and sickly doctor Godwin ("God") Baxter, who introduces him to Bella Baxter. Godwin pretends that she is his orphaned niece, but reveals to Archibald that she is actually the product of a medical experiment in which he transplanted the brain of the woman's unborn fetus into her own head after she committed suicide. Bella is maturing quickly but still acts like a young child. Archibald immediately falls in love with her. A few years later, after Godwin has travelled the world with Bella to educate her and to attempt to seduce her – at which he fails – Archibald proposes to Bella and she accepts, to Godwin's surprise and dismay. However, in her hunger for knowledge and life experiences outside the walls of Godwin's house, Bella runs away with lawyer Duncan Wedderburn.

Archibald then presents two letters he and Baxter receive. The first is written by Wedderburn who describes how Bella continually refused to marry him during their travels,

used him to satisfy her seemingly endless sexual needs, and wasted all his financial resources, finally driving him insane. The second long letter comes from Bella herself, who recounts her experiences on their journey through Europe and how they had led her to see the cruelty of the world and her decision to become a doctor herself. When Bella returns, she and Archibald are married but the ceremony is disrupted by the man Bella was married to before she committed suicide. This man, General Blessington, says her name is actually Victoria and demands she come home with him immediately. When Blessington accuses Victoria of hysterical sexuality, Bella becomes angry and refuses to depart with him, and the situation escalates. Finally Blessington leaves and Bella, Archibald and Baxter are able to live together in peace until Baxter passes away.

Archibald's narrative is then refuted by a letter found attached to the manuscript, in which Victoria states that the manuscript was one of her husband's many unpublished books. She notes her shock at the story and Archibald's presentation of this narrative as the truth, and presents a much more realistic version of her own life story. She never committed suicide, but ran away from an unhappy marriage, in which she was villainized for her sexual appetite, to the safety of Godwin Baxter, the only man she ever loved. When Godwin would not marry her due to his syphilis, she married his pathetic friend Archibald as he let her live her life in the way she wanted. Editor Gray follows this letter with a long list of historical facts which apparently prove that Archibald's story is the truth, and a summary of accounts concerning Victoria's final years, during which she became a doctor and published a manifesto on the importance of sex and physical affection, for which she was shunned within the medical world.

The ambiguity of Gray's metafictional approach creates much space for academic interpretation. Academics have investigated such themes as national identity (Kaczvinsky 776) and the social position of women (Genca 69). This thesis expands on feminist

investigations of *Poor Things*, focusing specifically on Bella's position as a man-made monster. As a female man-made monster, she challenges and disrupts the categories of the dualisms present in the patriarchal, scientific ideology that figures women as objects of exploitation. Furthermore, this thesis argues that the novel's narrative structure is integral to its subversive power. This metafictionality becomes a challenge when adapted to film, as it is a structural aspect more suitable to text than image. Instead, Lanthimos has made a number of formal choices in an attempt to foreground the same subjectivity and relativity of history present in the novel. For example, his sets are obviously sets, the costumes are not historically correct, and he plays with fish-eye lenses and black-and-white versus saturated color schemes. These choices result in defamiliarization in the viewer, who is constantly aware of the story's unreality and subjectivity. This thesis argues that the film's different approach to defamiliarization modernizes and explicates the feminist commentary in the novel.

Chapter 1 poses a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the man-made monster trope. It frames female monstrosity as a product of masculinist fears about the collapse of ideological categories that sustain patriarchal exploitation of nature and women's bodies. Chapter 2 analyzes how the metafictional structure of the novel creates a satirical narrative which invites a critical understanding of the subjectivity of those who compose Bella as monstrous. Chapter 3 compares the film's visual and thematic defamiliarization and exaggeration to its contemporary *Barbie* to reveal how it creates an explicit feminist commentary on the dualistic structures in hegemonic society. Chapter 4 compares the creation and subversion of Bella's monstrosity in the novel to that in the film and exposes the male monstrosity present in her creation as a man-made monster. Chapter 5 explores this male monstrosity in both the novel and film and interprets it as both a product and a critique of the scientific ideologies present in patriarchal society.

Chapter 1: The Man-Made Monster and Ecofeminism

In *Poor Things*, Gray uses the Gothic monster trope to compose a narrative which resonates with contemporary audiences. In order to understand the significance of Bella's monstrosity within this narrative, this chapter offers a methodological framework for the interpretation of monstrosity. In doing so, it reveals how an ecofeminist approach to the man-made monster leads to a useful conception of the monstrous-feminine. In this conception, it becomes clear that the idea of a monstrous-feminine figure is not inherent to women, but is instead a product of patriarchal society and masculinist scientific discourse. A text which subverts the monstrous-feminine invites contemporary readers to reflect critically on the problematic nature of its underlying dualisms.

1.1 Monstrosity

Scholars such as Noël Carroll, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and David D. Gilmore have taken many different approaches to the creation and interpretation of monsters. In the study of monstrosity, Gilmore has focused on the creatures found in traditional stories told across cultures and ages, and confines his definition of monsters to "supernatural, mythical, or magical products of the imagination" (6). Gilmore works with this myth-based definition with the aim of establishing one cross-cultural psychological image of each monster. However, with this restricted definition, he excludes more diffuse creatures such as "witches and sorcerers, because, like our serial murderers, they are only human beings who have gone bad, rather than fantasies. For the same reason I exclude revenants like ghosts and zombies, which are, once again, only dead (or half-dead) people come back to haunt" (6). This conservative approach to monstrosity neglects the subtleties surrounding these figures: sorcerers and witches are not necessarily humans gone bad, as they may also be heroic figures within their

tales, and zombies are ontologically opposite to ghosts, as they lack a soul and do not haunt anyone.

In arguing that each reiteration of a monster is created through a shared psychological image across cultures, Gilmore employs a psychodynamic theory to define monstrosity. He argues that monsters are created through "repressed experience and the operation of unconscious processes" (15). Situating his argument in the context of Freudian psychoanalytical theory, he defines monsters as products of atavistic processes which have been part of the human psyche since pre-history, and suggests that monsters are manifestations of "the uncontrollable and the unruly that threaten the moral order" (19). While this argument is sustainable in approaching the types of monsters Gilmore goes on to discuss, it falls short of explaining the monster that this thesis is concerned with: a near-human creature brought to life through scientific experimentation. However, the man-made monster is undeniably monstrous: it constantly reappears in horror narratives, and always embodies the source of horror at least to some extent. This monster exists in contrast to other monster myths, as its existence is only possible in the scientific age.

This inconsistency can be attributed to the significance of literary genre. Gilmore's anthropological approach focuses solely on those monsters that appear in mythology. As Chris Baldick argues in his survey of the pre-cinematic reiterations of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, these myth-focused critics assume that monster myths are "defined by their exclusive anteriority to literate and especially to modern culture" (1). However, mythological story-telling is very different from the genre of fantastic prose fiction where the man-made monster finds its origins, and has different aims and conventions. The etiological approach to mythology assumes that a main function of mythology is to explain the natural world. Gothic monster stories, by contrast, function as a mirror for society. Baldick clarifies why adhering to the genre of mythology in defining monstrosity has become a misconception:

"it seeks to establish a state of mind, a 'mythic consciousness' as a prelapsarian condition whose wholeness can readily be contrasted with the impoverished and self-divided mentality which is the modern" (1). Gilmore allows only for those monsters that are completely separate from reality and excludes the types of monsters that are too close to humanity and reality. However, the word monster itself ties it to reality: its origin as a derivation from the Latin *monere* implies both meanings of warning, as well as bringing to one's recollection (Harper) as an exemplar to the audience. Gilmore's limited perspective on monstrosity is brought about in part by his narrow focus on myth and legend. His psychoanalytical approach to the cultural image of a monster ignores instances of monstrosity which are inextricably linked to the horrors and fragmentation of modern reality.

Baldick demonstrates that scientific rationality impacts the stability of meaning assumed by Gilmore. Consequently, Gilmore's psychoanalytical argument concerning monster myths does not hold up for explaining the function of the man-made monster within its Gothic context. Gilmore is right in acknowledging the psychological aspect of the powerful fears triggered by the man-made monster. However, "it is of little help to reduce the story of Frankenstein and his monster to a conflict of psychic structures if this means abstracting it from the world outside the psyche, with which the myth engages" (Baldick 7). Gothic Science Fiction narratives, like *Frankenstein,* and the monsters that reside within, are tied to their historical context. Frankenstein's creature was inspired by experiments with galvanism, in which scientists like Giovanni Aldini experimented with the application of electricity to dead bodies (Ball and Featherstone 4). Similarly, Mr Hyde in R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) was inspired by the late-Victorian physiological theory of the double brain (Stiles 30). Both man-made monsters have to be read with reference to their historical and scientific context. Therefore, an approach which only engages with the

psychological image of the monster, like Gilmore's, is not always the most useful analytical tool.

Scholars who explore the sociopolitical significance of monsters are more effective in reading monstrosity within its contexts. Cohen, in the context of Said's postcolonial theory of orientalism, asserts that monsters are manifestations of the threat of difference to an established culture. Monsters must always be interpreted within their cultural context, since the same monsters are slightly differently construed in each iteration depending on the social, cultural, and literary-political relations in which they are generated (Cohen 5). Furthermore, monsters are an "incorporation of the Outside" (7), a representation of the cultural Other, an "exaggeration of cultural difference" (7). By confronting people with this difference, monsters expose the arbitrary nature of a culture's definition of individuality. Monstrosity can then be used to scapegoat the Other and justify the extermination of anterior cultures, by framing the monster as a creature that should be killed or banished. Moreover, monsters demarcate the "social spaces through which private bodies may move" (12). This becomes the cultural function of the monster; the threat that looms when one breaks the rules that "keep a patriarchal society functional" (13). Monsters are embodiments of transgressive acts. Cohen concludes that monsters are so appealing because they are secondary bodies representing the Othered desires that have become socially forbidden.

When a reading of monstrosity is situated within a specific sociohistorical context, the role of the self in the representation of the monstrous Other comes to light. Carroll addresses the artistic emotion of horror as found across genres, which he calls art-horror, and acknowledges the role of the self as the central element in feelings of horror. He stresses that monstrosity is never innate in a body. Rather, a thing or person is monstrous only from a specific perspective. Carroll argues that in order to invoke horror, creatures within a story have to be perceived as "abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (52). A feeling of

horror is not just experienced physically but also in relation to a person's beliefs, that is to say the constructions of what they believe to be threatening as well as impure. Carroll argues that something is impure when it is "categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless" (55). In monster stories, the emotional response of characters to a monster is supposed to be a model for the emotional response of the reader. Impure bodies inspire not just fear but also loathing. Although most scholars agree that monsters represent crises of categorization, this thesis mainly adopts Carroll's ideological approach to monstrosity, as it allows for the most flexible analysis of the monstrosity of the man-made monster trope. Its concern with the significance of aesthetic representation and interstitiality with regards to ideological patterns of thought in a culture is helpful in understanding which categories are being threatened by a monster and why. Cohen's sociohistorical contextualization is a useful addition in situating the ideological function of the man-made monster within its sociocultural narrative.

1.2 The Ideology of Scientific Progress and the Gothic Monster-Maker

The scientific man-made monster became popular in Gothic literature, particularly during the nineteenth century, but the unnatural creation of life is not a new idea. *Frankenstein*'s (1818) subtitle, "The Modern Prometheus," illustrates this point. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is often credited with the creation of humanity out of clay, and is later punished by Zeus for giving humans fire and thereby making them much more powerful than the gods ever intended. The Gothic stories concerning man-made monsters may be regarded as reinterpretations of the traditional creation myth in the new scientific context. While their scientific origins separate man-made monsters from their mythological predecessors, these

stories have an important notion in common. The creatures within are all "product[s] of creative action" ("Creature, *N.*") and thus in nature subject to the ambitions of their creators. These creatures only become monsters when they refuse their creator's will, and their creators eventually face retribution for the creatures' unnatural existence.

The term "unnatural" here is not an objective term, but dependent, rather, on an ideology's understanding of morality. Carroll uses Mary Douglas's notion of impurity to identify this ideological feature of monsters. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Carroll explains, Douglas "correlates reactions of impurity with the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization" (55). This means that people perceive a being as impure when it "cross[es] the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture's conceptual scheme" (55). When a being is unnatural, then, they "are unnatural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature … they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening" (56). When a creature threatens ideologically constructed categories of normal, desirable, and common sense, it is like to be labeled as unnatural. When using the term "unnatural" in relation to the man-made monster trope, it is necessary to stay attentive to the implied ideology and to the dualistic categories it aims to maintain.

In the case of man-made monster, the retribution faced by its creator implies a moral framework surrounding scientific progress. Pioneering ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant argues that the Scientific Revolution, the change to sociocultural structures which came about due to the scientific movement of the seventeenth century, went hand in hand with an ideology of progress which created a problematic relationship with women and nature (517). Scientific discovery made it possible for men to undermine the role of women in the sphere of production and their traditional dominance in the sphere of reproduction. Merchant's socialist ecofeminism theorizes that the ideal of human, scientific domination of nature, which was deemed necessary within the scientific ideology of progress, required a "subjugation of nature

as female" (515). This was legitimated through misogynist language surrounding nature by philosophers like Francis Bacon (515). She argues that "nature cast in the female gender, when stripped of activity and rendered passive, could be dominated by science, technology, and capitalist production" (514). In essence, this ideology which cast women as close to nature and inferior to men allowed for the scientific exploitation of both women and nature, all in the name of progress.

As this Scientific Revolution led to the industrialization of English culture and nature, some Romantics explored the ethical boundaries of scientific progress in dark Gothic tales. Baldick notes that in Romantic Gothic explorations of science, such as *Frankenstein*, "[a]s we are not yet dealing with a conscious or clearly defined 'science fiction' (the word 'scientist' itself does not appear before 1834), the kind of creator-figure we find in these stories is a peculiar mixture of artist, philosopher, craftsman, and chemical experimenter" (Baldick 64). In many of these stories, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Mines at Falun" (1819) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), this ambiguous creator-figure eventually faces retribution for his obsession with dominating the creative forces of nature. His work leads to his downfall and often to the loss of his loved ones. His creations, too, are imperfect, as they are "often poisonous or otherwise blighted, mocking the ideals of artistic perfectionism" (65). These Gothic narratives concerning the man-made monster, like their mythological predecessors, show the dangers of egotistical creative obsession. These early science fictions reflect onto the reader the ethical dangers of the ideological conquering of nature in unnatural ways.

Frankenstein is the primary Romantic text exploring the dangers of using scientific knowledge and practice to conquer nature and was one of the first to address it directly. It demonstrates the double-edged sword that is science and scientific invention, especially when the creator-scientist himself does not comprehend the long-term consequences of his

creations. Victor Frankenstein's feverish study of the secrets of life and his personal investments into mastery of these secrets, for which he even loses touch with his family, blinds him to its possible catastrophic consequences. Frankenstein is faced with the consequences of his actions when his outcast creation becomes destructive in its isolation and murders his brother. The creature requests that Frankenstein take responsibility for what he created and break its isolation by making a mate for it. Horrified by the idea of another unnatural creation now that he has been faced with its consequences, Frankenstein eventually refuses the request: "never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness" (Shelley 128). In order to reject his responsibility toward his creation, he has a vested interest in seeing it as monstrous.

In the Romantic Gothic tale, the man-made monster thus functions as the horrifying consequence of not taking responsibility for the unethical, unnatural creation of life. This same function of monstrosity is found in Edgar Allan Poe's "Morella" (1835). The protagonist begins to fear his wife Morella when her intelligence and thoughts begin to grow outside of his realm of understanding: "the time had now arrived when the mystery of my wife's manner oppressed me as a spell" (Poe). He yearns for her death, and eventually she passes away while giving birth to a daughter. When his child is still young and non-threatening, he adores her. However, as she grows unnaturally quickly and develops mature ideas in the same vein of Morella's, he becomes horrified with her: "terrible were the tumultuous thoughts which crowded upon me while watching the development of her mental being. Could it be otherwise, when I daily discovered in the conceptions of the child the adult powers and faculties of the woman?" (Poe). As the child grows, the protagonist is no longer able to fully comprehend and thus control her. She transgresses the boundaries in which he has created her and to which he has attempted to contain her.

The protagonist comes to believe that the child is a reincarnation of his late wife, and he believes he is responsible for this reincarnation, since he has named his child after Morella. When he speaks the name at the baptism, Morella seems to possess her daughter, speaking to her husband: "'I am here!'" (Poe). In order to handle the terror he associates with the unnatural cycle of reproduction that is reincarnation, he invokes the association of monstrosity by likening her presence to that of the poisonous plant hemlock and the cypress tree, a classical symbol of grief. His horror accumulates in his realization that, when she dies and he brings her to her tomb, his wife's body has disappeared, confirming his suspicions of reincarnation. Although the protagonist is not a scientist, his child nevertheless becomes a kind of man-made monster. The protagonist is horrified with his own creative responsibility in the existence of the child and the reincarnation of his wife. He is only able to deal with his own horror by banishing his child to the realm of the monstrous.

"Morella" shows that the themes of creation, responsibility and monstrosity are also present in narratives that employ the man-made monster trope without the explicit use of scientific invention. It is a useful illustration, therefore, of Baldick's argument that the trope becomes symbolic for the "relations between people, and between people and nature" (8). Baldick argues that the narratives employing this trope ultimately investigate the relationship between parent and child. Anne Mellor specifies the problem present in that relationship: "In *Frankenstein* [Shelley] analyzed the disastrous consequences of the absence of a nurturing parent or supportive family" (xii). This extends into the investigation of the hierarchical power relations which can be found in the dualisms of man and woman, rational man and nature, and natural and unnatural. Scientific progress eliminates the necessity of a nurturing figure, but in doing so these hierarchical power relations become starker and more harmful to the inferior end of these dualisms.

Frankenstein and the man-made monster trope owe their popularity to the timeless quality of these themes. As science and technology evolved, so did the anxieties surrounding them and the effects they would have on the world , including human relationships and the power structures in society. Each time *Frankenstein* offered a frame of reference in which to place these anxieties. As Baldick aptly states, "[w]ithin the [Frankenstein] myth, the inhuman – whether mechanical or demonic – has figured very strikingly, but usually as a metaphor of distortion in these relationships" (8). This accounts for the many reiterations of the story, from short stories exploring the same themes – as in Hoffmann and Hawthorne – to endless reproductions of Frankenstein's creature and the man-made monster trope in popular media. The trope offers a critical mirror for the evolving but ever-present ideology of scientific progress.

1.3 Mother Nature and Ecophobia in the Gothic

In many man-made monster stories, the scientific creation of life goes hand in hand with a male-centered society, in which the female role in reproduction is absent: indeed, "[o]ne of the deepest horrors of [*Frankenstein*] is Frankenstein's implicit goal of creating a society for men only" (Mellor 115). The eradication of the mother figure is central in Mellor's analysis of *Frankenstein*. She argues that, "[b]y stealing the female's control over reproduction, Frankenstein has eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power" (115). The creator-scientist characters work to usurp reproduction and destroy the female; Frankenstein even refuses to create a female mate for his creature. However, in their figuration of nature as female, they cannot escape the persistence of the mother figure, in the form of "pervasive presence of Mother Earth ideology" (Taylor-Wiseman 244). The figure of Mother Nature is a complicated one. On the one hand, it is part of the feminization of nature, which is perpetuated "in order to control, conquer, or objectify

nature, and by extension, women who are traditionally associated with nature in the binary opposition" (245). On the other hand, it suggests that nature contains some ancient female power that man is not privy to.

In the study of the Ecogothic, these narratives are construed as ecophobic. Ecophobia is, in Simon Estok's words, the "contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment" (207). In these narratives, nature is personified in a character who brings retribution to the protagonist, representing "'the hostile and deadly aspects of the otherwise nurturing image of 'Mother Nature'', commingled with resentment at this perceived betrayal of the maternal (Hillard 2009: 688)" (Deckard 174). The nurturing Mother Nature is then contrasted with a destructive, selfish female nature, a kind of *femme fatale* as presented in John Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1819) and beyond, a seductive yet destructive female figure who ensnares men and leaves them in a state of desolation. The feminine monstrosity present in nature can be found for example in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), in which female figures associated with paganism and untamed nature become sources of terror because they embody a kind of primal, hedonistic energy that escapes the rigid confines of Victorian patriarchal control. The ecophobic narrative and its treatment of Mother Nature becomes a mirror in which patriarchal figures fear to see themselves.

Many Gothic tales concerning the scientific abuse of nature are tales of transgression against Mother Nature. In these narratives, Mother Nature herself becomes a kind of *femme fatale*: an uncontrollable force that threatens human hubris. Hoffmann's "The Mines at Falun" (1819) is an early example. Its protagonist Elis is drawn to the world of mining, and he experiences an attraction to mining which is not merely monetary but ascribes a metaphysical quality to the mines. The mines become personified in Elis' visions of a subterranean Queen, and the magic of the mines is then metaphorically its invitation "to penetrate mother Nature" (Baldick 66). Elis is both attracted to and repulsed by feminine nature, and the ideology of

scientific progress leads to the understanding that penetrating Mother Nature is the only way to overcome the ancient female power present there.

In some instances, the complications of the Mother Nature figure, which is both subject of domination and in its ancient female power impossible to fully subjugate, are personified in the man-made monster. For instance, in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), the young scholar Giovanni courts the beautiful daughter of the doctor Rappaccini whom he encounters in the garden below his window. As he comes to know her, he becomes simultaneously enamored and horrified with her, as he comes to realize that this Beatrice was created by Rappaccini out of a poisonous flower in the garden and is as poisonous as the flower itself. In Rappaccini's attempt to take the power of creation away from Mother Nature, he has cursed himself and his creation, who will never be able to love due to her poisonous nature. When Beatrice realizes she has infected Giovanni, she kills herself. Rappaccini, like Frankenstein, has failed in his responsibility to his creation. When interpreted from an ecofeminist perspective, the themes in ecophobic stories reflect the panic at the discrepancy between man's intellectual knowledge and women's natural knowledge. These supernatural women reflect back the instability and fragility of the societal order they seek to uphold, and serve as critiques of patriarchal attempts to dominate and categorize the dualistic Other.

The nature-as-female rhetoric, which includes "hierarchical ways of thinking that justify the oppression of various 'others' in patriarchal culture by ranking them 'closer to nature' or by declaring their practices 'natural' or 'unnatural'" (Legler 228), is thus not sufficient to protect creator-scientists from the consequences of their creations. Ecophobic narratives illustrate the problem with the essentialism of this rhetoric by confronting these creators with the uncontrollable and dangerous aspects of nature. Sharae Deckard points out that authors may also subvert ecophobic anxieties by using ecogothic elements in a way that expresses "critique of the domination of nature in late capitalism, criticising dualist myths that

separate notions of the human from nature rather than embracing humanity-in-nature, or summoning spectres of past ecological disasters in order to explore the complex causality of compound catastrophes" (Deckard 174-5). Subversive Ecogothic narratives are able to use the fragmentation and alienation that both ecocriticism and the Gothic rely on to reflect onto the reader the "terror of unjust operations of power" (176) or the positive possibilities that result from the monster's "capacity for transgression" (176). Works by authors such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath explore the empowerment of women through their association with wild nature (Taylor-Wiseman 245). In doing so, they subvert the essentialist categories to which women are often contained in hegemonic society, and expose the patriarchal desire for and simultaneous revulsion toward monstrous feminine nature, the significance of which is explored in the next section.

1.4 The Monstrous-Feminine

When nature and women resist the ideological essentialism of patriarchal categorization, they become unnatural or monstrous. Barbara Creed explores this tendency in her psychoanalytic approach to women in horror. She coined the concept of the monstrous-feminine in 1993, expanding on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of abjection. As discussed previously, this thesis presumes that a strictly psychoanalytical approach to monstrosity, such as Creed's monstrous-feminine, is inadequate as it assumes atavistic forms of the psyche and thus fails to engage with the social context with which the psyche interacts. Moreover, its adherence to the figure of the mother and the importance of the phallus illustrates its continued gender essentialism. However, Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine is a useful addition to a feminist application of Carroll's theory of monstrosity. Carroll proposes that monstrosity is a product of beliefs regarding the natural order, and the monstrous-feminine concept specifies these beliefs by exposing their adherence to "the ways

in which anatomical difference has come to figure within patriarchy" (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 8). By applying the monstrous-feminine to cultural productions of women, Creed shows that "encounters with abjection such as those that occur in horror films hold the potential to enable the subject to revisit sexual difference" (8), thus allowing the audience to change their understanding of the categorical subjugation of women.

Kristeva's definition of "abjection" can be summarized as "the process by which an infant is able to forge provisional, transitory boundaries between itself and the figure of the mother" (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 3). These boundaries are necessary in order to have an understanding of the self and of subjectivity. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which crosses these boundaries (Kristeva 2). Creed sees horror films as encounters with the abject that serve to ritually purify it: the horror film "works to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies" (Creed 14). The mother's universe is referent to the idea of the primordial mother, a source of creation that could do so without needing a father, or as Creed frames it in her psychoanalytical approach, a "pre-phallic mother, existing prior to the knowledge of a phallus" (Chaudhuri 95). This Mother Nature-type figure represents a moment of abjection in its "de-differentiation at the level of sex" (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 12). The man-free mother is a monstrous form of femininity because it disrupts the boundaries between the self and the other, the mother being the ultimate other. Furthermore, Creed argues that all women represent this threat:

> As 'woman's nature is represented as deceptive and unknowable' in patriarchal ideology (Creed 1993, p. 136), she must constantly reassure through masquerade and deception. 'She may appear pure and beautiful on the outside but evil may, nevertheless, reside within' – a dominant misogynistic fear (Creed 1993, p. 42). It is when she tears the veil and drops her disguise, Creed argues, that abjection exerts its

> ambiguous appeal. The monstrous-feminine is *compelling yet terrifying*. (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 28, emphasis added)

Women cannot escape the suggestion of monstrosity as long as they pose a threat to the dualistic categorization that they are subject to within patriarchy, and their natural knowledge of reproduction which is outside of the realm of male knowledge means they constantly pose this threat.

The monstrous-feminine is a useful term in an ecofeminist analysis of monstrosity in horror and the Gothic. It exposes the link between the fear of nature present in the Ecogothic, and the fear of women's deceptive and unknowable nature in horror. In ecophobic narratives, nature's hostile and deadly aspects manifest in a character that inspires terror, but when written subversively, the ecogothic expresses "critique of the domination of nature in late capitalism [and of] dualist myths that separate notions of the human from nature rather than embracing humanity-in-nature" (Deckard 174-5). Similarly, narratives adhering to the monstrous-feminine work from the dualist assumption that women are closer to non-human nature than men. However, subversive horror narratives may employ an awareness of the monstrous-feminine trope to expose and challenge the artificiality of the categories to which women are defined. Cohen argues that "[t]he monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move" (12). Patriarchal structures need to perpetuate the idea that "[t]o step outside this official geography is to risk … becoming monstrous oneself" (12), in order to maintain the established boundaries between the self and the other. Thus, subversive narratives show that the function of the monstrous-feminine figure is to contain women to the hierarchical categories of male-female and man-nature dualisms.

A particularly effective contemporary example of a subversive narrative employing the monstrous-feminine trope is Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016). In speculative novel,

women gain the physical ability to use an electrical charge. Women's sudden ability to physically dominate men leads to a reversal of power structures. It is part of a tradition of feminist speculative fiction that exposes the horrors of patriarchal societal structures through role-reversal of gender, a tradition which includes writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood. Some of these works portray a matriarchal society as the more peaceful alternative to patriarchal society. This tendency follows the essentialist argument of gynocentric ecofeminists, who challenge "the traditional presumed inferiority of the sphere of nature and women, but [do not] challenge the idea that women (but not men) are part of it" (Plumwood 50). Gynocentric ecofeminism is opposed by critical ecofeminism, which argues that "women are no more 'part of nature' or 'closer to nature' than men are – both men and women reside in both nature and culture" (50). These academics urge us to "rethink hyper-separations, both the opposition and polarisation of men and women and that of humanity and nature", and do so by denying nature's "exclusive link to women" (50). Critical ecofeminists, like Plumwood, advocate for the upheaval of dualistic thinking.

This upheaval of dualisms is illustrated by the subversive narrative of *The Power.* It challenges hierarchical dualisms at their essence by suggesting that a reversal of power only recreates the same issues in a different direction. Those with the electrical power – biological women – oppress those that do not have it, and they go as far as policing the male body by restricting its movement in the way some orthodox patriarchal societies do with women. When some biological men develop the power, they are ostracized and punished. Paredes argues that, "[b]y de-essentializing matriarchies and suggesting that women are equally as capable of vengeance and being corrupted, *The Power* subversively challenges gender divisions as a legitimate basis for exclusion from power" (93). By using the monstrous-feminine trope to reach this goal, Alderman effectively demonstrates "the issue with awarding value to certain biological markers as the basis for social organization" (94) and subsequently

proves the “destructive nature of oppositional binarism” (95). This subversive narrative shows that the monstrous-feminine is not a quality inherent to women, but a product of this oppositional binarism, and thus illustrates the usefulness of the monstrous-feminine concept in an ecofeminist upheaval of a dualist conception of monstrosity.

Like the women in *The Power*, Bella Baxter in *Poor Things* is initially a monstrous-feminine figure. By constantly challenging her monstrosity, the text invites a critical reflection on the patriarchal beliefs underlying the patriarchal composition of Bella. As such, an ecofeminist analysis of *Poor Things* will expose the subjectivity of monstrosity in women and the beliefs that lie behind it.

Chapter 2: Metafictionality and the Neo-Victorian Narrative of *Poor Things*

Like its inspiration *Frankenstein*, Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things* is not a straight-forward monster narrative. It asks the reader to reevaluate their idea of what makes a monster and what scientific practices are ethically and morally acceptable. The following chapters analyze the forms of monstrosity present in *Poor Things* and their underlying ideologies, and argue that Bella's monstrosity challenges familiar hierarchical dualisms of rational patriarchal society. Integral to this upheaval of dualisms is the form of the narrative, which challenges the reader's understanding of patriarchal constructions of monstrosity.

The metafictional narrative structure of Gray's *Poor Things* works to establish it as a neo-Victorian novel. In neo-Victorian narratives, a post-modernist writer like Gray first sets up a Victorian diegetic situation and then "disrupts the implied conventions by treating the eminent protagonists with irreverence" (Gutleben 97), and thus creates a parody of the Victorian novel. In Gray's neo-Victorian parody, Archibald is a useful subject for the "deconstruction of the traditional character as social model and moral guide" (101). His point of view is marked by his difficulty in reconciling his progressive ideas of science with his conservative Victorian tendencies. For example, he is a self-proclaimed atheist, but falls back on biblical moral concepts such as "a God of Eternal Pity and Vengeance" (Gray 37) when disturbed by the discovery of Godwin's unnatural creation of Bella: "I had stopped believing in God, Heaven, Eternal Pity et cetera after reading *The Origin of Species* … I raved in the language of novels I knew to be trash" (37). The internal contradictions in his narration, found in the paradoxes in his beliefs and the hyperbole in which he expresses them, invite a critical reading of the extent of Archibald's objectivity.

Despite the internal contradictions in Archibald's manuscript, editor Gray presents it as entirely factual. He contrasts it with Victoria McCandless' conflicting account of her life. The way editor Gray frames these two accounts and his preference of Archibald's immediately implies that he is not an objective party. This becomes clear when he addresses the discussion he has had with a historian about the way the manuscript should be presented in relation to Victoria's contradicting letter: "Michael would prefer [Victoria's letter] as an introduction, but if read before the main text it will prejudice readers against that. If read afterward we easily see it is the letter of a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life" (xiii). Despite his own clear subjectivity in his assessment of Archibald's and Victoria's believability, editor Gray insists that the manuscript is an objective representation of historical events.

He is aware of the intertextual relations between the manuscript and classic works of literary fiction, but his own prejudice undermines their importance in exposing its fictionality. The examples editor Gray cites expose his motivation for presenting Archibald's account of Bella's life as the factual account:

> I fear Michael Donnely and I disagree about this book. He thinks it is a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven, a book like Scott's *Old Mortality* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. I think it like Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*; a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, stout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a friend with *a memory for dialogue*. (xiii, emphasis added)

Although the form of the novel as editor Gray has composed it is more reminiscent of Hogg's *Justified Sinner,* a Gothic novel which also explores the complications of different versions of the same story, and is also mediated by an editor, editor Gray takes pains to present it as a biography, like Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson,* one of the most famous biographies in the

English language. Notably, editor Gray is aware of the biographer's reproduction of dialogue through memory, but does not distinguish between empirical fact and memory, even though memory as a mental feature is not empirically verifiable. The biographical aspect of *Poor Things* is enhanced by the narrative's frequent references to historical events of the fin-de-siècle, which situate his narrative in Victorian Britain. For example, Godwin mentions that "the House of Commons was debating a bill to let married women keep their own property" (67),[1] and Bella's letter contains a long summary of her friend Mr. Astley's ideas of the world which references a number of historical events such as the opium wars[2] in China: "The least warlike and biggest and longest-lasting empire was Chinese. We destroyed it twenty-five years ago because its government would not let us sell opium there" (160). In the notes at the end of the novel, editor Gray reiterates the biographical nature of the manuscript by demonstrating that the references to Victorian Glasgow are factual.

In doing so, the editor exposes his prejudice concerning biography and autobiography. He strictly adheres to the idea that biographies are more believable, as they present a more multifaceted and less subjective image of a person than autobiographies do. However, the problem with this understanding of biographies is that it ignores the fact that biographers often have a vested interest in presenting their subject in a certain way, and may twist the truth in order to achieve this. In Victoria McCandless' letter attached to the manuscript, she expresses more awareness of Archibald's subjectivity which has twisted his representation of herself and Godwin. For example, she assesses that Archibald's own experiences of a childhood in poverty influenced how he chose to portray those of others:

[1] This debate took place between 1857 and 1882, during which time "eighteen Married Women's Property Bills were introduced in Parliament" (May 276). The final version of the bill was accepted by the United Kingdom Parliament in 1882, but did not extend to Scotland ("Married Women's Property Act 1882", s. 26).
[2] The first Opium War between Britain and China took place from 1839-1842, and the second Opium War in which Britain and France fought against China took place from 1856-1860 (Pletcher).

> 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. Then he deprived me of childhood and schooling by suggesting I was not mentally *me* when I first met him, but my baby daughter. (274)

As is clear from this passage, Victoria is aware of Archibald's presentation of herself and Godwin in such a way that it becomes more appealing and, importantly, more positive toward Archibald. She points out the Gothic elements – or what she calls "sham-gothic" (275) – which Archibald has incorporated into his narrative to do so: "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" (272). In presenting these Gothic influences to the reader, she pleads with the reader to understand that her own autobiography is the more objective version of the story: "You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable" (275). The conflict between Victoria's letter and editor Gray's introduction motivates the reader of *Poor Things* to understand the irony of Archibald's narrative and to reflect critically and with a contemporary perspective on its implications with regards to Bella Baxter's monstrosity.

Specifically, it invites a reflection on the construction of the character of Bella. Archibald acknowledges Bella's autonomy to a greater extent than most other men in the story, and does not disapprove of her sexuality and other category-defying behavior: "If you committed a crime by making Bell as she is I am thankful for that crime because I love her as she is, whether she marries Wedderburn or no. I also doubt if the woman who chloroformed me will be anyone's helpless plaything" (68). However, his appreciation of Bella becomes hyperbolic and parodic as he projects his own idealized idea of femininity on her: "everything

about her seemed to me the acme of womanly perfection" (53). Within Archibald's narrative, Bella is still construed by him, not just through his own account but also through his presentation of Duncan's and Bella's letters. Editor Gray, too, constructs Bella in his own way by undermining Victoria's account, and feels himself entitled to do so in his role as editor: "no book needs two introductions and I am writing this one" (xii). In doing so, he and Archibald compose Bella/Victoria from "various discourses, the totality of which form this unnatural, frightening female entity" (Genca 72). In Carroll's theory of monstrosity, a being becomes monstrous through the beliefs of others. In this case, the men present Bella as monstrous to sustain their patriarchal ideology and sexual politics in which Bella remains the object of their scientific experiment. The metafictional narrative structure of the novel, with its fragmented, interstitial and thus monstrous composition of Bella's life, is therefore integral to understanding Bella's monstrosity as a product of hegemonic dualisms.

Chapter 3: Ideological Shifts in Contemporary Cinema

As a neo-Victorian narrative, Gray's *Poor Things* uses metafictionality and parody of Victorian morality to encourage critical readings of representations of Victorian societal expectations of women and the way these reflect onto contemporary sexual politics. The way in which feminist commentary is expressed in media changes with time, as can be gleaned from the increased feminist response to the 2023 film as compared to the 1992 novel. McFarlane assesses that "the time-lapse [between a novel and its film adaptation] accounts for ideological shifts, for changes in censorship strictures, and for variations in aesthetic climate" (187). Representations of monsters, too, are subject to ideological shifts, as "[t]he monstrous body is pure culture" (Cohen 4). The differing ways in which monstrosity is represented in the novel versus the film gives insight into the differing sexual politics of the nineteen nineties versus the twenty twenties. In order to effectively interpret the commentary present in the *Poor Things* film, and the ideological shift with regards to its source material, this thesis compares the film to its contemporary, Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie*. Subsequently, it argues that the changes made by Lanthimos are part of a feminist movement in cinema which uses ridicule of traditionally patriarchal men to directly subvert dualistic representations of female bodies and, importantly, to offer feminist solutions for problematic patriarchal society.

The previous chapter established that the metafictional form of *Poor Things* is integral to its exploration of sexual politics; Lanthimos' adaptation of this form necessarily changes the story's approach to its ecofeminist themes. The metafictional narrative structure of Gray's *Poor Things* offers a number of difficulties for anyone attempting to adapt it to film. Structural aspects of a textual narrative are what McFarlane calls signifiers of narrativity (26), and these are not transferrable directly from novel to film as they are dependent on the structuring function of written language. Textual plot strategies, such as frame narratives, "alter sequence, highlight different emphases, … in a word – defamiliarize the story"

(McFarlane 23). Adaptations of *Frankenstein*, a text composed as a frame narrative, have faced the same problem. The first narrative, in which Captain Robert Walton writes to his sister about meeting Victor Frankenstein while his expedition ship is stuck in the ice of the North Pole, frames Frankenstein's story. However, Walton does not appear in most of the many cinematic adaptations of *Frankenstein*. The film *Poor Things*, too, elides the frame narrative of editor Gray's introduction and notes and Victoria McCandless' letter. However, while Lanthimos does not adapt the metafictional structure of the novel, he uses formal cinematic techniques to bring defamiliarization into the film.

Lanthimos is known for his formally stylized and idiosyncratic style. Some have argued (Kutlu, Rose) that his films are part of what is sometimes called the "Greek Weird Wave'", "Greek Absurdism", or "Greek New Wave", a recent phenomenon within Greek cinema that represents a bitter and critical appraisal of the values of contemporary Greek society. Although so divergent that it is difficult to define, Maria Chalkou attempts to summarize the trend, noting that its films present a clear break from past nostalgic themes in Greek cinema towards the "present reality, which is confronted with sharpness, irony, demystification and cold criticism, with the family and anxieties of identity as recurrent concerns", and its form often combines "high art, popular elements and a variety of genres as well as playful narratives" (Chalkou 245). His fragmentary style is thus suitable for visualizing the defamiliarization of *Poor Things* in film.

One aspect of Lanthimos' adaptation which creates defamiliarization in the viewer is the visual representation of the late-Victorian setting of *Poor Things*. In the film, the spaces the characters move through, especially once Bella departs on her travels, consist of film sets which are clearly artificial, as can be seen in figure 1. Lisbon even has a tram which is suspended in the air rather than on the ground. This visual parallel with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) gives *Poor Things* a cyberpunk element, which invokes cyberpunk's aim to

negotiate boundaries “by exploring the shifting and changing realities of our posthuman experiences” (Murphy and Schmeink xxiv). These sets, as well as the costumes which combine Victorian and modern styles as can be seen in figure 2, negotiate the boundaries of reality through the eyes of Bella by creating a visual anachronism. They rearrange familiar concepts from multiple periods into a new and strange hyperreality, and this defamiliarization jars the viewer, who is forced to reflect on previously familiar concepts in an unfamiliar way. The defamiliarization and visual hyperbole create a parody of Western society. This becomes an effective visualization of the neo-Victorian aspect of the novel, as it achieves the same relativity of history that the novel suggests through its metafictional narrative structure.

Fig. 1. The set of Lisbon in *Poor Things* (00:45:00)

Fig. 2. Example of Bella’s anachronistic costume in *Poor Things* (00:47:08)

The effect of this visual satire is thus to evaluate critically familiar representations of the position of women by defamiliarizing them. In order effectively to interpret the commentary present in the *Poor Things* film, and the ideological shift with regards to its source material, this section compares the film with its contemporary, Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie*. *Barbie* was an even greater commercial success than *Poor Things*, becoming the highest-grossing female-directed film of all time. Although the two films are different in tone, they share their use of visual hyperbole, which interacts with feminist themes to create a satire of contemporary society. As the two films were developed within the same cinematic context, a brief comparison helps to situate *Poor Things* within contemporary cinema.

The protagonist of *Barbie* is Stereotypical Barbie, a doll created by the company Mattel. She lives in Barbie Land, an imaginary world which, like the world of *Poor Things*, is obviously artificial, as seen in figure 3. This visually hyperbolic world is contrasted with the real world when Stereotypical Barbie leaves Barbie Land to find the girl who owns her. The contrast is not just visual but also sociocultural: Barbie Land is a matriarchy in which women – Barbies – hold all positions of power and men – Kens – are completely submissive to the Barbies and complicit in their own subjugation. This social structure is a "purposeful inversion of how modern patriarchy capitalizes on women's complicity within the system" (Delaney and Meyer 11), and it is so exaggerated that it becomes a caricature. When Barbie Land is exposed to the real world, the Kens very quickly turn it into a caricature of a patriarchy, and as Barbie is subjugated, she realizes how harmful dualistic hierarchies are. She is able to overturn Ken's patriarchy and establish a society in which neither men nor women are dependent on their position relative to the other. Stereotypical Barbie urges the Kens and Barbies to define themselves separately from the other gender, and thus subverts dualistic structures in her approach to creating a more equal society.

Fig. 3. Still from *Barbie* (00:05:57)

Both Barbie and Bella are man-made monsters: they are created by men, in both cases to some extent intended to be playthings, but both transgress the boundaries of their existence and create social change in the process. Gerwig's feminist commentary is explicit: she ridicules patriarchy and disrupts dualistic structures, instead promoting a more equal society. In their exploration of Gerwig's authorial style, Delaney and Meyer argue that it is characterized by four ideological signatures: "1) 'out of place' female protagonists, 2) a rejection of traditional gender norms, 3) explicit feminist critiques, and 4) critiques of men and masculinity" (13). While the feminist commentary in the *Poor Things* film is not as explicit, these ideological tendencies can be found in this film as well, especially in the comparable use of satire and visual hyperbole to subvert dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, in which men are the superior, rational minds and women are the inferior, emotional objects of exploitation, whose role it is "to nurture, to be self-sacrificing, to support the status quo" (Howell and Baker 10). Both the *Barbie* and *Poor Things* films contrast a fictionalized, exaggeratedly hegemonic society with a female character who, through her experiences with the problematic and cruel results of patriarchal domination, is able to critically evaluate those around her who adhere to it. This satiric approach to feminist commentary in cinema is a contemporary way of explicating to the audience the patriarchal structures in need of change.

Chapter 4: Bella Baxter's Monstrosity

As established in chapter 1, it is possible to define monsters in many different ways, but what always remains is the conception of the monster as an interstitial being, a creature which inspires a crisis of categorization. Bella Baxter is undeniably such a creature. Her mere existence, like that of Frankenstein's creature, defies the cultural categories of life and death. In creating a new life out of a body which has already died, Godwin Baxter has made a life which is, in Mary Douglas' words, impure, as well as cognitively threatening. This would mean, then, that Bella is monstrous, but the reality is not so simple. Although her existence transgresses the boundaries of the conceptual scheme of natural life, she is also a beautiful woman. As a woman, she is confined again and again to the category of female in the male-female dualism. Often, this means that the aspects of Bella that are categorically contradictory are ignored by those who have already decided her identity corresponds to their ideological construction of femininity. However, Bella refuses to allow her identity and role to stay within these dominant categories. Throughout *Poor Things*, she is seen triggering fascination and obsession in those who encounter her. Only when she threatens the men in their hierarchically superior position of male in the male-female dualism does she become monstrous in the eyes of those around her. Her beauty inspires desire, but in her desirability her rejection of male expectations becomes threatening.

This chapter argues that, in the novel, the multiple accounts of Bella's life compose an image of monstrosity, but the metafictional satire creates an understanding that in rejecting patriarchal expectations surrounding her own desire and exposing male hypocrisies surrounding sexuality and scientific rationality, Bella deconstructs the dualist structures which make her monstrous. Furthermore, the film creates a more explicitly monstrous image of Bella by letting the audience observe with disturbance her unnatural behaviors. By contrasting this with a shift in focalization to Bella, which undermines the construction of these behaviors

as monstrous, the film exposes the artificiality of the patriarchal categories which banish her to the realm of the monstrous.

4.1 *Poor Things* (1992)

Archibald's account of Bella Baxter's life relates that before Godwin's experiment, Bella's body belonged to a woman named Victoria Blessington, née Hattersley. Victoria is victim to a tremendously conservative patriarchal system in which she is treated as an object to be owned. As a young woman, she is controlled by her father. Mr. Hattersley confines Victoria to the house and later to a convent. When she is twenty-four, he marries her off to General Aubrey Blessington. Her father defines her position in this marriage as follows: "you *had* to love him! He was a national hero and the Earl of Harewood. Besides, you were twenty-four years old and he was the only man apart from me you had been allowed to meet" (Gray 215). In being her father, he sees himself as entitled to the products of her body. When he arrives at Bella's wedding together with General Blessington to retrieve her, he urges her to have the baronet's children and thus give her father titled grandchildren. According to Mr. Hattersley: "You owe me that, Vicky, because I gave you life. So be a sensible donkey" (224). In dehumanizing her, he applies the rhetoric which places women below men on the basis of their closeness to nature.

It becomes clear that Victoria's life was entirely demarcated by her father and husband. General Blessington, too, saw her value only in what she represented to him: "She was the purest creature and prettiest thing I had ever met … She had the soul of an innocent child with the form of a Circassian houri – irresistible" (215). He appreciated her body, which was physically attractive, and her pure innocence. However, during their marriage, Victoria did not fulfil this expectation of innocence. She experienced intense sexual needs which were deemed disgusting, on the grounds of which she was villainized. Her husband and his doctor

convinced her that these needs were unnatural for a woman of high social standing. Her doctor saw this as a sickness, erotomania: "No normal healthy woman – *no good or sane woman* wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as a duty. Even pagan philosophers knew that men are energetic planters and good women are peaceful fields. In *De Renum Natura* Lucretius tells us that only debauched females wriggle their hips" (218, emphasis added). Her sexuality made her not only sick and insane, but also immoral. According to Blessington, "[y]ou could never face the fact … that the touch of a female body arouses DIABOLICAL LUSTS in potent sensual males – lusts we can hardly restrain" (217). While Victoria's sexuality is portrayed as an inherently negative characteristic that disqualifies her as a "respectable woman" (218), Blessington's sexuality is portrayed as natural and outside of his control or responsibility. This dichotomous construction of male and female sexuality was part of a Victorian medico-moral discourse which was dominated by class- and gender-related dualisms that associated sexuality with depravity and animality of the laboring classes, while associating the middle classes with civilization and morality (Moscucci 60). Individual sexual pleasure, usually addressed in the form of masturbation, was assumed to have "a destabilizing effect on society, as it prevented healthy sexual desire from fulfilling socially desirable ends – marriage and procreation, which were the foundation of the social order" (63). With Blessington, this Victorian idea that sexual appetites need to be controlled to ensure rational civilization is exaggerated in order to ridicule the misogynism inherent the ideology of scientific progress. The concept of sexual pleasure is banished to the realm of woman and nature; men are above such things in Gray's neo-Victorian patriarchal society.

It is impossible for Victoria to make herself fit the expectations of the men who control her life. As a result, she becomes "a hysteric; so childishly dependent on a husband who found her unbearable that her doctor's visits were the happiest times of her week; so full of self-loathing that she gladly stupefied her mind with sedatives and yearned for her body to

be surgically mutilated" (Gray 221) through removal of her clitoris. When she becomes pregnant and is unable to have this surgery, she commits suicide and her body ends up in Godwin Baxter's possession. With knowledge from his father's medical journals and his own experiments, Godwin transplants Victoria's unborn baby's brain into her skull and brings her back to life, creating Bella Baxter. Like Mr. Hattersley, Godwin's role in her creation generates in him a sense of ownership over Bella. As he tells Archibald, Bella is "a fine, fine woman, McCandless, who owes her life to these fingers of mine – these skeely, skeely fingers!" (27). Bella, although physically an adult woman, is mentally a child. Godwin acknowledges this: "Physically she is perfect but her mind is still forming, yes, her mind has wonderful discoveries to make" (27). This state of physical maturity and mental malleability is very attractive to both Godwin and Archibald.

The sexual desirability of the childlike Bella eludes to the Othered desires she represents. As Cohen argues, monsters are secondary bodies which represent Othered desires: "Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space" (17). This is Bella's function during her stay in Godwin's house: Bella is completely innocent and thus the men can impose their own desires onto her without resistance, and she is an easy object for experimentation. However, Bella does not stay an innocent child. As she develops, she comes to discover her adult body's sexual desires and emotional needs. When she has matured mentally, Godwin attempts to seduce her, but she rejects him: "I am a very romantic woman who needs a lot of sex but not from you because you cannot help treating me like a child, and I CAN NOT treat you like one" (Gray 53). She recognizes that Godwin desires her both sexually and as a substitute for a motherly figure and has sympathy for this. However, she has discovered that his desires, which seek to restrict her, are at odds with her own desire for discovery and autonomy.

Instead, Bella accepts Archibald's proposal. This moment marks Godwin's realization that his control over Bella is dissipating. Godwin is shocked at the news, as he had wished for Bella to stay with himself. While he was previously only proud of his creation, now that he realizes Bella will make choices against his will he expresses regret at creating her: "Forgive me Bella, forgive me for making you like this" (52). When Bella's body no longer functions merely as a space in which Godwin can express his fantasies of domination, her beauty and desires become threatening, reflecting Cohen's observation that "[e]scapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries" (17) of the liminal space in which one can express their Othered desires. This is the first of many instances in which Bella following her own desires is constructed through the metafictional narrative as a source of displeasure for the men who attempt to contain her. Because the narrators struggle to continually figure Bella as the product of their penetration of female nature, Bella becomes monstrous in refusing to be a passive object within their scientific project.

An important moment in Bella's growing autonomy is her decision to leave London with Duncan Wedderburn, the lawyer hired by Godwin to create the marriage contract for Bella and Archibald. Bella is clear about her reasons to do so. She has had very few memories and little history: "I need more past … Duncan will give me a lot of past fast" (Gray 61). When Archibald refuses to let her leave, she chloroforms him and departs. Although Bella displays autonomy in her choice to travel Europe with Duncan, Godwin does not acknowledge this. Instead, he blames his own sexuality for Bella's departure: "my damnable sexual appetites employed my scientific skills to warp her into a titbit for Duncan Wedderburn!" (68). Like Blessington, Godwin dehumanizes Bella in the face of her sexuality, and describes his sexual appetites as something with its own autonomy, independent from his rational self. Although Archibald does not outwardly denounce Bella's sexuality, his

suggestion that "[m]aybe we should pity Wedderburn" (68) after they elope suggests that Archibald, too, sees Bella's sexuality as something malignant.

Of all the men in *Poor Things* that Bella spends an extended period of time with, Duncan Wedderburn is the one who embodies traditional patriarchy to the greatest extent. His letter to Godwin, in which he describes his perspective on his and Bella's travels, shows his own sense of moral superiority: "Basically innocent despite my wicked ways – fundamentally honest underneath my superficial hypocrisies – such was the man you introduced to your so-called niece, Mr. Baxter" (80). This results in his taking no responsibility for the deeds which would be considered "wicked," instead piling excuse upon excuse for his behavior toward the women he has courted and the children he has abandoned. This sentiment reveals that he sees his own essence as good and pure and is essential in perpetuating the dualisms underlying his conservative patriarchal thought patterns.

Duncan imposes his patriarchal ideals of womanhood onto Bella. They do not discuss their arrangements at the beginning of their travels, and Bella never indicates any intentions other than enjoying experiences and "wedding," which is what she calls sexual encounters. However, Duncan expects her to want to marry him. In his letter, he states: "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" (81). The next line shows his unquestioning acceptance of this patriarchal idea and his lack of interest in her perspective on it: "I was so sure Bella would soon be my bride that, by a piece of *harmless chicanery*, I obtained a passport on which we were named as husband and wife" (81, emphasis added). Even in spite of Bella's insistence that she will marry Archibald McCandless, Duncan "kept begging [Bella] hopelessly to marry [him]" (87). His dualistic thinking is inflexible: Bella's disregard of the social conventions surrounding man-woman relations and sexual behavior is so difficult for him to grasp that he ignores it, instead assuming she has the same thoughts as he.

This becomes impossible to maintain early on in their travels. Bella exhausts Duncan with her boundless energy and sexual appetite, even before they depart London for the European continent. Reflecting Baconian discourse, which frames science and rationality as tools to conquer feminized nature through "forceful and aggressive seduction" (Keller 37), Duncan tries to control Bella by draining her energy during the day to prevent her from draining his during "wedding." When he fails, the inadequacy of his dualistic thinking is exposed. Struggling with this upheaval, Duncan disembodies his own sexual needs, positioning them as separate from and lower than himself and as connected to Bella: "Between Bella and the natural Wedderburn – the lowest part of Wedderburn – was a sympathetic bond which my poor tortured brain COULD NOT stupefy or resist" (Gray 86). Confronted by his inability to resist her, Duncan's patriarchal ideology crumbles. Bella's independence reveals the limits of the Baconian ideology of scientific mastery over nature.

Duncan's reaction situates Bella's monstrosity within the social expectations of Gray's neo-Victorian Glasgow. In a diatribe on her evil nature, he describes her actions – dragging him around Europe, spending his money, and keeping Godwin's money from him – and concludes that she is a monster, and that the crack around her head, actually the scar from Godwin's experiment, is "a witch mark … the female equivalent of the mark of Cain, branding its owner as a lemur, vampire, succubus and thing unclean" (89). Bella's defiance of Duncan's rigid, dualistic worldview makes her monstrous, as she disturbs the social space through which women should move to keep Duncan's conception of rational patriarchal society functional. Duncan's letter proves his adherence to Creed's description of the dominant misogynistic fear that women's pure and beautiful appearance is a disguise for evil within (Chare, Hoorn, and Yue 28). This fear is reflected in his descriptions of Bella as a femme fatale: "I glanced at my Fate who had curled herself snakelike in the easy chair … with a smile of such peculiar meaning that I shuddered in awe, dread and intense desire"

(Gray 84). His tendency to compare Bella to female, sexualized monsters such as vampires and succubi illustrates the labeling of women as "monstrous female identities" that happens when they deviate "from the socially accepted norm of the complacent and desexualized woman" (Santos xvi). His reaction to her monstrosity, which is situated as representative of Victorian morals surrounding female sexuality[3], is so extreme that it becomes a parody of these morals. This is intensified when contrasted with Bella's letter which follows.

Bella's letter effectively subverts the narrative established by Duncan's letter. She describes Duncan's gambling issues, which are actually the cause of the loss of his money, and his possessiveness which drives him slowly insane. She recognizes Duncan's avoidance of blame: "Wedder is a lot cheerier since he decided he is not a fiend and that I probably am" (Gray 165). In her empirical approach, she is able to observe that, within Duncan's world, she as a woman has a set place. She accepts that by not adhering to his dualistic expectations, she becomes monstrous in his eyes and the eyes of those who subscribe to the dualistic ideologies which govern society. These realizations eventually lead to her rejection of Duncan, and as he has become obsessive, aggressive and irrational, she sends him back to Glasgow, where he is committed to an asylum. By rejecting Duncan's expectations in the knowledge of becoming monstrous, she challenges and collapses these dualistic constructs.

When Bella returns to London in order to marry Archibald, the wedding is interrupted and she is told of the history of her body and the way in which Victoria Blessington's sexual needs were villainized. Bella is horrified at the information and feels pity for Victoria: "Tears streamed down Bella's cheeks. She said, 'The poor thing needed cuddling'" (217). In her horror at Blessington's treatment of her former self's desires, she decides to stay with Godwin

[3] The assumption that Victorian morals were sexually repressive is persistent in neo-Victorian and other representations of the Victorian era in popular culture, but is a symptom of twentieth-century discourse around Victorian morality which was based on "literary productions of the educated classes" (Fee 632) rather than on reality. A more correct assertion is that "[t]he familiar pattern of sexual repression characterized the bourgeoisie – at least as an ideal of conduct, if not as an exact description of reality – while less constrained forms of sexual expression characterized the new working class" (632).

and Archibald. This decision leads to General Blessington's attempt to shoot Godwin and kidnap Bella, but Bella thwarts the attempt by jumping in front of the gun and receiving the shot in her foot. She is not impressed by Blessington's now blatantly aggressive attempt at reclaiming his ownership over her. She is finally able to send Blessington away by saying: "I think the rottenest thing about you (apart from the killing you've done and the way you treat servants) is what Prickett calls the *pupurity of your mumarriage bed.* Fuck off, you poor daft silly queer rotten old fucker hahahahaha! Fuck off!" (238). In calling out Blessington's sexual hypocrisy in such unwomanly terms, Bella rejects the conservative, dualistic structures of Gray's neo-Victorian patriarchy. She rejects the idea that sexual pleasure makes humans, both men and women, more animal and thus less civilized. Moreover, she rejects the Baconian idea that men can separate themselves from this lower form of humanity, which she has encountered in all the men around her.

The presentation of Archibald's manuscript as biographical, and the composition of Bella which results from this presentation, would construe Bella's rejection of these ideas as monstrous. However, the critical reflection which results from the neo-Victorian satire of the narrative offers a different reading. Her existence, and her subsequent choices to adhere to her own desires rather than to that of the society she is re-born into, is an indirect accusation of the patriarchal scientific ideology that constructs rigid categories of "natural" and "unnatural" in order to control and exploit women and their bodies. By revealing the artificiality of these dualistic categories, she undoes them, and that is what disturbs these men and prompts them to rewrite her and banish her to the realm of the monstrous.

4.2 *Poor Things* (2023)

One problem faced by the cinematic adaptors of the novel is that film cannot represent first-person focalization, an aspect which reflects the subjectivity of the characters, in the

same way novels can. McFarlane addresses subjectivity in film and argues that "[i]n a sense, all films are omniscient: … the viewer is aware, as indicated earlier, of a level of objectivity in what is shown, which may include what the protagonist sees but cannot help including a great deal else as well" (Gray 18). In adaptations, filmmakers may choose to visualize first-person narration through point-of-view shots or voice-over. However, the audience will always see everything the camera sees, rather than just what the narrator observes. As a result Archibald's first-person narration shifts to a more omniscient perspective in the film, which creates a different understanding of Bella's monstrosity. It is necessary to note that this change goes hand in hand with the change of Archibald's name to Max McCandless.

In the mediation of the story from the literary to the visual form, the filmmaker expresses his own style through his mise-en-scène and montage, a process called enunciation. Lanthimos has made various adaptive choices in *Poor Things* which, rather than minimizing his cinematic enunciation, foreground it. One notable formal choice is the use of a black-and-white scheme during the first forty minutes of the film. This is the part of the story in which Bella lives with Godwin, when she meets Max and later Duncan, and where she develops from a very young to a slightly older mental state. At the forty-minute-mark, the film becomes colorful, with an intensely saturated color scheme for the rest of its running time. This forty-minute-mark is visually signified as a moment of change in perception from Max' perspective to Bella's, which coincides with the start of Bella and Wedderburn's travels. During the black-and-white scenes, Bella is mostly portrayed as an object for observation and fascination for Godwin, Max, and Duncan. However, once Bella and Duncan depart to Lisbon, Bella becomes a much more autonomous presence in the scenes. This formal change thus suggests a level of subjectivity, which shifts from the men to Bella when she leaves the confines of Godwin's house.

During the first black-and-white act of the film, in which Bella still lives with Godwin, the viewer is asked to identify with Max. Together with Max, the audience meets Bella, learns of her strange behaviors, and discovers how she came to exist. In a narrative addition by Lanthimos, Godwin tasks Max with tracking Bella's development, positioning Max as both a perfunctory observer and a stand-in for the audience. Unlike the novel, which constructs Bella through different emplotments (Böhnke 195), the omniscient nature of film positions the viewer as a direct witness to her actions. However, this representation of Bella, while omniscient, is not entirely objective. The viewer's understanding of Bella's monstrosity is filtered through their identification with Max. As Carroll argues, "[t]he characters of works of horror exemplify for us the way in which to react to the monsters in the fiction" (53). Max's emotional response to Bella serves as a cue for the audience: he is fascinated by her and eventually admits to having feelings for her, but he also experiences moments of horror at her behavior.

Max especially models horror for the audience in instances where Bella displays a child-like violent curiosity. For example, he witnesses a moment when Godwin is performing surgery and Bella says: "Bella cut too," to which Godwin responds: "Just dead ones for Bella" (*Poor Things* 00:09:35-39). Bella then takes a scalpel and repeatedly stabs the eye of a body, which is kept in the surgery, with a gleeful expression. A zoom-in on Max shows a troubled look on his face, as seen in figure 4. This happens again when the three go outside in Godwin's carriage and Max shows Bella a frog. Bella smashes the frog happily. Later, when she learns that she will not be allowed to go outside again, she throws such a tantrum that Godwin chloroforms her to calm her down, reflecting his male panic for this unruly woman. At each of these instances, the camera zooms in on Max and shows his disturbance at Bella's violence. The addition by Lanthimos of Max' consternation at Bella's aggression reflects the viewer's horror and enhances her monstrosity at this stage of the plot.

Fig. 4. Stills from *Poor Things* (00:10:02)

One important instance in which Lanthimos makes the audience witness to Bella's monstrosity is the scene in which Bella is created. In the novel, Godwin only alludes to his specific method of creating Bella: "For years I had been planning to take a discarded body and discarded brain from our social midden heap and unite them in a new life. I now did so, hence Bella" (Gray 34). Since Archibald was not present at Bella's creation and Godwin is does not address the topic, it is never described. This means that, although Archibald is aware of Bella's unnatural creation, the fact that he has not actually seen it happen allows him, and consequently the reader, to exclude it from his image of her. Her beauty, so different from Frankenstein's creature's hideousness, makes it easy for Archibald to remain willfully ignorant of her construction.

The film instead shows the monstrous creation of Bella. As Godwin tells Max of the surgery, a flashback shows how Godwin finds Victoria's body, performs the surgery in which he transplants her unborn baby's brain into her head, and uses electricity to bring Bella to life, as seen in figure 5. This scene invokes the intertextuality of *Poor Things* with *Frankenstein*, especially its film adaptations. James Whale's 1931 adaptation *Frankenstein* included a scene in which lightning brings the creature to life, an image which has persisted in the popular representation of the story. Furthermore, the image of her electric creation is a direct visual parallel with the female robot Maria in *Metropolis* (1927) as seen in figure 6, which reiterates her artificiality. By forefronting Bella's scientific, electrical creation, as well as the parallel

with Frankenstein's creature through her childish violence, the viewer is entirely aware of Bella's transgressive existence and subsequent monstrosity.

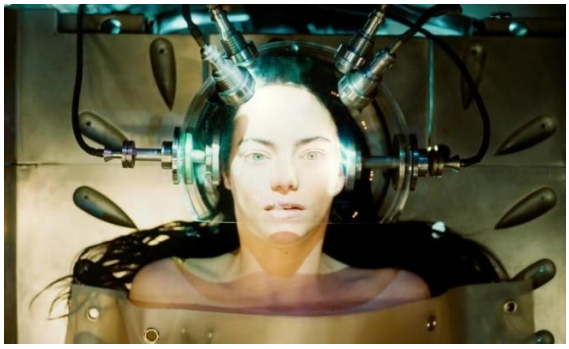

Fig. 5. Bella's creation in *Poor Things* (00:23:55)

Fig. 6. The robot Maria in *Metropolis* (1927)

The reason for Max' horror at Bella's transgressive behavior is exposed in the scene in which Bella discovers her own sexuality. In the novel, she discovers sexual pleasure in the form of holding her hand over others' mouths. Lanthimos' version of her sexual discovery is much less conservative than Archibald's. The film adds a sequence in which Bella discovers masturbation. She calls it "happy when she want" (*Poor Things* 00:26:56), which reveals her innocence of social expectations surrounding sexuality. However, she is immediately confronted with these expectations: when she wants to show her discovery to the housekeeper Mrs. Prim, the latter calls Bella "sick," and when she tries to show Max, he looks away and tells her that "in polite society, that is not done. Just do not" (00:27:28-37). Lanthimos uses the increased objectivity of the film medium to integrate Max's subjective perception of Bella, which is expressed through zoom-ins on his disturbed reaction to her transgressive behavior, with a more objective presentation of women's discovery of their sexuality. Max's shocked reaction to her masturbation exposes not just his horror at her sexual transgression, but also the confrontation with his own desires to transgress the norms of sexual modesty he publicly upholds.

When Bella leaves for Europe, and the focalization of the narrative shifts to her perspective, the image of Bella as monstrous-feminine, which has been explicit until that point, becomes problematic. In the novel, the shift in focalization from Archibald to Bella

happens in the form of Bella's letter, but in this her perspective is still represented through Archibald's narration. Lanthimos more distinctly separates Bella's travels from the men's perspective of them with the visual change from black-and-white to color. As the focalization shifts, so does the viewer's understanding of Bella's transgressive behaviors as monstrous. While the novel mentions that Bella and Duncan regularly engage in "wedding," it never explicitly describes the act. However, the film contains a number of explicit sex scenes, especially when Bella and Duncan are in Lisbon. These scenes are presented as an important step in Bella's self-discovery, as it takes place alongside scenes in which she experiences delicious foods, beautiful music, and alcohol for the first time.

The camera emphasizes Bella's emotional response to her discoveries through mise-en-scène techniques such as extended zooms, frog perspectives, fish-eye close-ups, and peeping-tom shots. These techniques involve the viewer in the intense sensations Bella experiences during her discoveries, sometimes to an uncomfortable degree, as peeping-tom shots can make the viewer feel like they are witnessing private events. By involving the viewer so intimately in Bella's new experiences and representing natural pleasures alongside sexual pleasure, the film urges the viewer to see that Bella's interstitial behavior does not make her a monster. Instead, it shows how natural it is for a young woman to discover her sexuality, and as such to take control and agency in her journey of discovery.

In prompting identification of the viewer with Bella in her self-discovery, she becomes the subject of empathy rather than an object for observation. As a result, when Duncan responds with horror to her unadjusted self-discovery, his anger becomes ridiculous. As in the novel, the film's Duncan adheres unquestioningly to dualistic, patriarchal ideas of women's identity and role. He boasts of his own sexual superiority and adventurous impulses, and tells Bella that he will help her discover the world; however, when Bella goes out to experience Lisbon without Duncan, he becomes angry, and when she has sexual encounters with others,

he is disgusted with her. Bella calls out his hypocrisy: "You're cross at Bella's outings and adventures. And yet we must discover by whim, as spoken by Duncan Wedderburn to Bella Baxter, day one of Lisbon love affair" (00:54:02-12). As in the novel, his desire for her, combined with his bewilderment at her refusal to adapt to his expectations, leads to irrational behavior and finally to his insanity as he is unable to contain her within his ideology.

The film contrasts this with Bella's calm and disdainful reaction to his behavior. Through this irony, the film suggests that the moral standards and etiquette of his neo-Victorian society[4] are what drive him mad. For example, when the two arrive in Paris, Bella sleeps with a man in the brothel where she is later employed. On discovering this, Duncan yells: "You are a monster, a whore and a monster, a demon sent from hell to rip my soul to shreds. To punish my *tiny sins* with a tsunami of destruction. To take my heart and pull it like toffee to ruin me. I look at you and I see nothing but ugliness" (01:29:18-35, emphasis added). These lines reflect Duncan's continued moral double standards, where he uses moral superiority as a mask for his own transgressive behavior. As Bella aptly observes: "That last bit was uncalled for and makes no sense, as your odes to my beauty have been boring but constant. And the simple act of having a strange man ride on me has erased all that? … Can I never win with you?" (01:29:36-30:00). She recognizes that Duncan's inability to contain her within his moral standards is what makes him see her as monstrous, rather than her own nature: as long as she maintains her autonomy, he will always see all her behavior as transgressive. She is able to see that the way in which she is perceived by Duncan, as an image of the monstrous-feminine, is not satisfactory, and is thus able to remove him from her life rather than giving up her happiness. Lanthimos' more omniscient *Poor Things* allows the audience to see Bella as interstitial, something that Archibald's subjective point-of-view often

[4] Neo-Victorian narratives often generalize the Victorian ideologies around sex and women's identities and roles, whether out of ignorance or to appropriate them in order to critique sexually repressive beliefs. It is important to remember that these beliefs were not necessarily accurate representations of the Victorian reality.

shies away from in his portrayal of her. Meanwhile, her responses ridicule the man who villainize her for it, creating a more direct form of satire than the novel which offers an explicit feminist commentary in its rejection of traditional gender norms.

4.3 Implications

By shifting the subjectivity of the film to Bella, her transgressions of dualistic ideals are more explicitly presented as a way to free herself from those who aim to control her, specifically in her acceptance of being seen as monstrous. Bella calls herself an "flawed, experimenting person" (*Poor Things* 01:30:08) who discovers the world through empirical means. Her discoveries lead to a growing knowledge and insight in the problematic structures of patriarchal society, which allow her to develop develops feminist ideals concerning autonomy and desire. In her aim to become free of patriarchal control, she embodies the "New Woman"[5] identity that surfaced in the early feminism of the Victorian fin-de-siècle. The film thus creates awareness that this was a time of pioneering feminist rebels alongside the persistent patriarchal ideology.

These feminist ideals lead Bella to pursue that which brings her satisfaction and happiness, even when the men she encounters see this as monstrous. Bella, and consequently the viewer, realizes that her monstrosity is "not an epistemologically or ontologically solid but a discursive construction perpetuated by the male gaze" (Genca 70). In the novel this subversion of Bella's monstrosity is more implicit in the satire created through its metafictionality, which urges the reader to understand that the men constantly observe and rewrite Bella. They see her transgressions of dualist categories as unnatural, and in their fear

[5] During this period "new figurations of gender and technology enabled women … to occupy previously barred spaces and roles" (Wånggren 2). The New Woman thus "became the focal figure for key nineteenth-century debates concerning issues as diverse as gender and sexuality, evolution and degeneration, science, empire and modernity" (2), and was central in early steps toward emancipation and the de-gendering of science.

of the unnatural, they appraise Bella as monstrous-feminine, being both appalled and attracted by her. In their own ways, both the novel and the film satirize the idea that Bella's sexuality is what makes her monstrous.

In satirizing the conception of women's sexuality as monstrous, *Poor Things* disrupts the dualistic ideologies which place female nature and sexuality as an object to be scientifically conquered by men. However, it does so without denying Bella's unnaturalness, as Bella remains a man-made monster. Importantly, this monstrosity is not inherent to Bella but created by Godwin. Consequently the man-made monster constantly questions the audience's understanding of unnaturalness. The study of the ecogothic helps to interpret the function of this monstrosity. If *Poor Things* is conceived of not as ecophobic but as subversive, it becomes clear that it critiques human domination of nature – and indirectly, of women – through scientific means. In doing so, *Poor Things* brings to the reader's attention the "terror of unjust operations of power" (Deckard 176), and shows that Bella's "capacity for transgression" (176) as a monster can expose the monstrosity inherent in creating these categories and maintaining them through the moral hypocrisy of gendered science.

Victoria illustrates how subverting the image of the monstrous-feminine, when seen in the context of the ecogothic, can expose male moral hypocrisy: "Small, awkward McCandless fell as passionately in love with God as I had done. He loved me too, of course, but only because he saw me as God's female part – the part he could embrace and enter" (Gray 267-8). This quote shows that the subjugation of women and nature makes them only a vessel for the expression of men's anxieties surrounding interpersonal relationships and intimacy. By approaching *Poor Things* as a subversive ecogothic, it becomes clear that the men who attempt to contain her to dualistic categories, with the goal of maintaining their domination in these interpersonal relationships, create their own monstrosity.

Chapter 5: Male Monstrosity in *Poor Things*

The previous chapter has established that patriarchal ideologies of gender and sexuality have constructed Bella as monstrous. As suggested above, *Poor Things*' subversion of the monstrous-feminine reveals that the male characters may be the ones who are monstrous. This is emphasized by the man-made monster trope, which necessarily contains a monstrous deed by the creator-scientist who transgresses a culture's understanding of natural life. An examination of the monstrosity of the male characters in *Poor Things* exposes the subversive effect of the narrative.

5.1 *Poor Things* (1992)

As the narrator, Archibald projects traditional monstrous features on Godwin Baxter, whose appearance inspires some disgust in Archibald. From the first introduction, Archibald describes Godwin as an unusually ugly and intimidating man. He is frequently disturbed by Godwin's "monstrous bulk and shaggy boyish head" (Gray 44) and even wears earplugs to protect his ears from Godwin's shrill, piercing voice. Archibald is insistent in his description of Godwin as being physically unnatural, often mentioning it at moments when the two are at odds. However, Victoria McCandless' letter reveals that Godwin does not have these monstrous features but that they were an invention by Archibald. Victoria's contrasting description of Godwin prompts the reader to re-evaluate Archibald's narration. It becomes clear that Archibald is prone to describing Godwin as monstrous when Godwin transgresses the morals Archibald ascribes to, leading to an understanding of Godwin's physical monstrosity is a hyperbolic visualization of Archibald's ideas concerning moral transgression.

One of these morals is Archibald's belief that the imagination and sexual desires are primitive, and have no place in scientific societies: "The imagination is, like the appendix,

inherited from a primitive epoch when it aided the survival of our species, but in modern scientific industrial nations it is mainly a source of disease" (55). In this, he maintains the science-nature dichotomy and maps onto it the man-woman dichotomy: scientific man is separate from primitive, female nature, including reproduction. This belief reflects Victorian anthropology and psychology, in which civilized, scientific man defined itself against the "aberrant" traits it projected onto others, such as primitive women, to maintain its image of progress and superiority (Miller and Adams 10), but which was complicated by Darwin's evolutionary theory which exposed the continuity between animal and man and between primitive and civilized man. As Dollimore notes, "what would count as a diseased state now [i.e. sexual depravity], would include a return to what was, at the primitive stage of the organism's development, a perfectly appropriate and therefore healthy state of things" (102). Archibald's moral hypocrisy mirrors the broader contradictions of Victorian scientific ideology, in which the social structures of middle-class, male power and civilized refinement were built on contradictions.

When Archibald discovers Godwin's scientific skills of joining together different animals and re-animating the composite creations, he sees an opportunity for the improvement of masculinist science: "If you can use [a corpse's] undamaged organs and limbs to mend the bodies of others you will be a greater saviour than Pasteur and Lister – surgeons everywhere will turn a morbid science into immediate, living art!" (Gray 23). Godwin is unwilling to become this "saviour", however. Instead, he uses his scientific skills, with which he is able to manipulate and exploit nature, for his own egotistical creative obsession. In spite of the ample attention he received from his father and nurses, he feels a need to fill the "woman-shaped emptiness" left after being abandoned by his mother with a "woman who needed and admired [him]" (39). Godwin becomes a creator-scientist in the same sense as Victor Frankenstein,

who also isolates himself in pursuit of his own scientific goals and creates a life out of dead human and animal body parts.

Godwin's emotional investment in transgressing the male-female dichotomy by penetrating the female sphere of reproduction goes against Archibald's dedication to scientific objectivity which is central to his adherence to the science-nature dichotomy. Archibald accuses Godwin of seeking to possess "what men have hopelessly yearned for throughout the ages: the soul of an innocent, trusting, dependent child inside the opulent body of a radiantly lovely woman" (36). Her innocence is also what made Victoria so attractive to General Blessington. This dynamic reveals the vested interest men have in scientific practices which allow for experimentation on and exploitation of women: they allow men to dominate and control women to their pleasure. Although Archibald is critical of this power imbalance, as he sees it as an impertinent emotional investment in what he believes should be an objective scientific practice, he too experiences an intense desire for the childlike Bella. Evelyn Fox Keller suggests that "the professional scientific demand for 'objectivity' and detachment often masks an aggressive desire to dominate the female sex object" (paraphrased by Mellor 112). By exaggerating this dynamic with the childlike Bella and the men in her life, Gray exposes the transgressions of the men who project their desires onto her. The resulting contradiction between Archibald's words and desires once again invites critical reflection on Archibald's narrative. Archibald is implicit in Godwin's abuse of his position of power over his creation.

In presenting Bella as Godwin's way to fill the void left by his mother, *Poor Things* plays with the anxieties about interpersonal relations that were already present in Poe's "Morella". As Baldick argues, the inhuman has become a metaphor of distortion in the relationship between parent and child (8). As is often the case in man-made monster narratives, the creator-scientist, in this case Godwin Baxter, becomes the embodiment of

parental abandonment. Gray reinforces this idea in his composition of Godwin's name, which contains a reference to the life of *Frankenstein*'s author Mary Shelley. It is composed of Shelley's father William Godwin, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the Baxter family with whom Mary Shelley stayed as a teenager. Each of these men represented parental abandonment to Mary: Godwin, the beloved father, stopped speaking to his daughter when she fell in love with Percy Shelley and travelled to Europe with him; Percy left Mary alone in her grief for their dead child; Mary was forced to live with the Baxters when Godwin did not want deal with the tension between her and his new wife (Mellor 1-32). With Godwin becoming the abandoning parent, this reinforces the idea of Bella, the man-made monster, as the abandoned child.

When Bella returns, Godwin is faced with the consequences of not taking responsibility in her creation. Bella has learned that the scar on her stomach means she has been pregnant, and demands that Godwin tell her where her baby is. Rather than admitting his transgression, Godwin and Archibald tell her the baby died in the accident that made Bella lose her memory. Only when the wedding is interrupted and Bella's previous life is about to be revealed is Godwin forced to admit to Bella that he has lied to her about this. The consequence Godwin has been avoiding now takes place, as Bella loses her unquestioning trust in him: "If you have lied to me how can there be any truth? Who can be any good?" (Gray 205). He has abandoned her in his responsibility to her to be a parental example of goodness.

Here Bella's character arc of the man-made monster departs from the narrative that often takes place in man-made monster stories. In *Frankenstein*, for example, the creator finds his downfall as a consequence of his attempt to dominate nature. In *Poor Things*, however, the story shifts strangely to the advantage of its narrator Archibald. As Blessington and his associates reveal Bella's history, the blame shifts from Godwin and Archibald to the other

men. When these men villainize the late Victoria for her sexual needs, Bella turns to Godwin and Archibald for comfort, as they express their acceptance of the female need for intimacy and autonomy: “Thank you for mending me, God, and giving me a home that is not a prison” (232). Bella decides to stay with them and the three live happily ever after. When reflecting on the problematic idea of objectivity of the biographer, it becomes clear that Archibald has a vested interest in removing Godwin’s monstrosity, as it also removes his own. He has become complicit in this monstrosity and also abuses his undue influence over Bella. Archibald has created his own familial structure which, while unusual, is still hierarchical in nature; Bella can become a doctor only within the limits imposed on her by Archibald and Godwin, and remains to these men a “woman who needed and admired [them]” (39).

Only when Victoria McCandless’ letter exposes that Archibald’s perspective is marred by his vested interest and fictionalizing tendencies, it becomes clear that he has abused his power in creating the narrative to make himself morally superior. In reality, he is the monster, as he has rewritten her as a transgression of the male-female and science-nature dualisms in order to establish dominance over her existence. He is the pinnacle in a long line of masculinist scientists who have rewritten her in order to undermine her actions towards de-gendering science. While her work as a sex-positive, women-focused doctor brings science into the feminine sphere and shows the potential of a de-gendered science for the improvement of female lives, this is left unacknowledged by the medical world, which shuns her for her manifesto. Paradoxically, the monstrosity of Gray’s neo-Victorian, re-written Bella is what allows a subversion of the patriarchal ideology of scientific progress; Victoria herself is unable to do so. However, in supplementing Archibald’s manuscript with her letter, she is finally able to bring Archibald’s narrative into question, at least for the reader if not for editor Gray.

5.2 *Poor Things* (2023)

In Lanthimos' *Poor Things,* the increased objectivity of the camera cannot represent the monstrous features Archibald sees in Godwin. Instead, Lanthimos' Godwin is physically malformed in a way that is objectively unnatural: his face is stitched together and lopsided, as can be seen in figure 7. His appearance causes horror in those who see him. For example, when Godwin is giving a lecture on anatomy, one of the students whispers to another that it is "devilishly hard to concentrate when the monster's talking" (*Poor Things* 00:05:18). Godwin's malformation is reminiscent of cinematic productions of Frankenstein's creature, such as Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein* (1931), as seen in figure 8. In a departure from the novel, it is revealed that that Godwin's father Sir Colin Baxter, a famous surgeon, experimented on his son. Sir Colin is the one who cut up Godwin's face and tortured him in other ways in the name of scientific progress. Through the visual parallel with Frankenstein's creature, as well as the addition of the creator-scientist figure of Godwin's father, the film's Godwin becomes not only a creator but as much a creature himself.

Fig. 7. Willem Dafoe as Godwin Baxter in *Poor Things* (00:02:56)

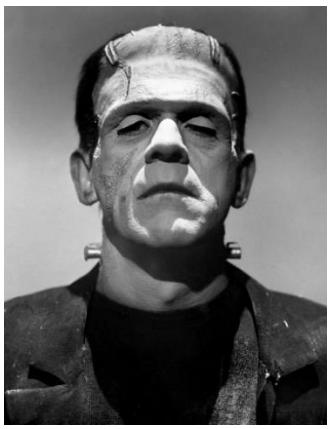

Fig. 8. Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's creature in *Frankenstein* (1931)

With this twist on the source material, Lanthimos creates a different narrative around the morality of the creator in the man-made monster story. Godwin is as much a victim of the ideology of scientific progress as Bella. Lanthimos enhances this perspective by revealing Sir Colin's cruelty. For example, when Bella asks why Godwin's thumbs look funny, he answers

that: “Once when I was very small, my father pinned my thumbs into a small iron case to see whether he could retard the growth cycle of bones”. He elaborates: “Now, the pain was so great, to stop myself from weeping, I would stare deeply into my other fingers, and simply by observation, begin to parse out the epidemiological elements. When he came back, to his surprise, I was smiling” (00:17:36-00:18:08). His father’s rejection of responsibility toward his son, his own creation, has resulted in Godwin’s unfeeling, purely scientific perspective of the world. This has become his way of coping with his difficulties with human relationships and emotional expression. In presenting Godwin as a creature, Lanthimos explores the cause of the scientist’s need to penetrate female nature, and reveals that it is a product of problematic societal structures rather than of a personal selfishness.

This also changes Bella’s significance in relation to Godwin. In the novel, Bella is a product of Godwin’s egotistical creative obsession, and subsequently an object of lust and, in her rejection of him, a source of pain. However, the film shows Godwin as a more paternal figure to Bella. He refuses to sleep in the same bed as Bella when she asks him to, and when Max suggests a sexual relationship between the two, Godwin says: “I’m a eunuch and can’t fuck her. … Besides, my parental feelings seem to outweigh my sexual thoughts” (00:30:15-30). In the film, Bella offers an alternative to the cruel, painful relationship between father and child that Godwin is familiar with. Bella’s childlike sincerity and innocent love for Godwin allows him to experience a different kind of familial relationship, one based on mutual love.

As a result, when Bella leaves, Godwin experiences a grief he is unfamiliar with. This is the result of the incongruence between his understanding of social relationships, which is determined by the scientific need for objectivity and the associated patriarchal domination, and the new type of love he experiences for Bella. In the first act of the film, he has placed this love within a structure he is familiar with: he thinks of Bella still as a product of his creation, not as an autonomous person, just as his own father treated him. When Max asks

him who Bella was before Godwin found her body, Godwin answers: "No idea. But would you rather the world not have Bella?" (00:24:03-12). Bella's departure confronts him with the fault in his reasoning, and thus in the scientific ideology that structures his understanding of relationships.

Rather than allowing this new grief to change his understanding, he represses it, instead falling back on his ideology: "I am a man of science. I just need to engage in, and continue, the project. That is all. I must go on to the next thing. Our feelings must be put aside. Do you think my father could have branded me with hot irons on the genitals the way he did if he could not put science and progress first?" (00:59:50-01:00:10). The "next thing" becomes the creation of a second woman, whom he and Max name Felicity. This second experiment is not as successful as Bella, as her motor skills and language develop much slower and she does not exhibit much emotional development. When Godwin is unimpressed with Felicity's progress, Max asks: "Can you not be so cruel to her?" Godwin answers: "I made a mistake with Bella. I allowed feelings to develop. There are none for her. She is no different to the chicken-dog[6] … It is better this way, perhaps, and gives some insight into my father's coolness to me. It was a necessity of science" (01:43:47-01:44:07). With Felicity, Godwin takes the same approach his own father took with him, of emotional distance and scientific objectivity. While Godwin believes this is the superior approach, the viewer understands that it is the reason that Felicity is not developing at the same rate as Bella. Consequently, the viewer comes to understand that Godwin's father's cruelty and coldness to his son is the reason Godwin himself is unable to have emotional intimacy in a way that is not

[6] The film includes numerous hybrid animals created by Godwin, which may be referential to H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), in which a mad scientist creates hybrid beings through vivisection of humans and animals. This parallel reinforces the questions around the morality of scientific experimentation on living beings.

dictated by hierarchical structuring. The addition of Felicity in the film exposes the futility of Godwin's patriarchal adherence to masculinist science.

Lanthimos' Godwin, as a creature himself, inspires a more sympathetic view on his actions. Nonetheless, the film does not excuse his transgressive actions as the novel does. When Bella returns from her travels, she questions Godwin about the scar on her stomach, which her friend Toinette in the Parisian brothel has explained means she once had a baby in her belly. Godwin reveals the way in which he has created her, and Bella confronts Max with the fact that he never revealed the information to her. Max admits that this was out of cowardice but also reinforces that keeping her innocent was his way to maintain ownership over her: "I wanted to be with you, and I was not sure you would even understand" (01:53:11-16). However, the mise-en-scène reveals the futility of his attempt at ownership over Bella. As can be seen in figure 9, Bella is calmly seated as Max nervously stands in front of her and to the side of the frame, visualizing the shift in the power balance between Max and Bella, as she has become the one in control.

Fig. 9. Still from *Poor Things* (01:53:14)

Through her experiences, Bella has become wise to the structures of power and the resulting cruelty present in the world, and no longer allows Max and Godwin to define her understanding of morality. When Bella finds out about Felicity, she is disgusted. She asks

Max: “Another one?” When he justifies Felicity’s creation by saying that “we missed you,” Bella does not accept this, and instead morally condemns their actions: “Monsters” (01:54:02-06). Max and Godwin have become monsters, not just because of their scientific transgressions of the categories of male and female, but more importantly because of their careless abuse of their position of power in the dualistic structures they move in. Through acknowledging her existence as a man-made creature and calling out the structures which have allowed the normalization of this, she subverts the trope of the monstrous-feminine and by doing so reveals the monstrosity of the men responsible for it. They are monstrous in maintaining the dualistic categories, which creates systemic cruelty and injustice toward those who are positioned in positions of exploitation, women and nature alike.

While the tension between Bella, Godwin and Max in the novel is never resolved but instead instantly forgiven when Bella sees their kindness when compared to the cruelty of her former husband, the resolution in the film requires a change in the men. The confrontation between Bella and Godwin reveals that their acknowledgement of her autonomy is necessary for Bella to be able to forgive them. When Bella states: “So, I am your creation, as is the other one,” Godwin acknowledges that his role in her and Felicity’s creation does not define them: “Neither of you are that. She wanders the halls with a hammer and a song, and that is not my doing. And I read your cards and your letters home and watched you fearlessly create Bella Baxter with wonder” (01:55:16-01:55:33). She is able to forgive Max, too, when he acknowledges her bodily autonomy. When she asks if “the whoring thing challenge[s] the desire for ownership that men have,” as it did with Duncan, Max says that he does not have “any moral aspersion against you. It is your body, Bella Baxter. Yours to give freely” (01:56:51-57:11). Rather than rejecting the two men, which would have reinforced the

impossibility of equality in the face of dualistic patriarchal structures, Max and Godwin's recognition of Bella's autonomy leads her to accept and love them.

In its treatment of Godwin's monstrosity, the film creates sympathy for Godwin and adds a moral redemption for this creator-scientist. It creates an understanding of Godwin's abuse of science in order exploit women and nature as a product of the problematic social structures of Western rational culture, personified in the cruelty of Sir Colin, that are dictated by the gendered ideology of scientific progress. While the novel is able to subvert this ideology through its metafictional irony, the film does not have this possibility. However, as Lanthimos' Godwin admits to his transgression, rather than denying it, and recognizes that he is not the sole influence on Bella's creation, the film emphasizes that the problem lies in the dualistic societal structures which indoctrinated Godwin.

Bella's actions toward Archibald and Godwin's monstrosity refute the cruelty of Sir Colin and those who perpetuate this problematic ideology. She models compassion, rather than rejection, in the face of scientific patriarchal abuse when she sees Godwin again: "Anger, confusion, and brain dissonance aside, I missed you" (01:55:50-54). This compassion and emotional intimacy allow Godwin to finally reject his father's indoctrination and masculinist science: "My father once told me, always carve with compassion. He was a fucking idiot. But it's not bad advice" (01:56:09-18). This assessment of his father shows that Godwin can now rewrite the role of his father and focus on the nurturing aspects of his beliefs. Like *Frankenstein*, *Poor Things* "underlines the mutual deprivation inherent in a family and social structure based on rigid and hierarchical gender-divisions" (Mellor 117). With the explicit feminist restructuring of these divisions, Bella offers an alternative to the scientific cruelty of patriarchal domination in which new identities are possible for both creator and creature.

This explicit feminist critique in this contemporary film is reminiscent of that by bell hooks, a cultural critic and intersectional feminist who explored varied perceptions of the "development of feminist identities" ("bell hooks"). hooks argues that "[m]en cannot change

unless there are blueprints for change. Men cannot love if they are not taught the art of loving … To know love, men must be able to let go the will to dominate" (hooks xvii). An ecofeminist reading of this critique moves beyond patriarchal structures to expose the underlying dualistic structures. Bella's alternative to patriarchal domination is reminiscent of the ecofeminist approach to science as described by Evelyn Fox Keller. Keller moves away from masculinist scientific objectivity and instead suggests a dynamic objectivity, which "aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed relies on, our connectivity with that world" (Keller 117), as an alternative pursuit of science, where "the scientist employs a form of attention to the natural world that is like one's ideal attention to the human world: it is a form of love. The capacity for such attention, like the capacity for love and empathy, requires a sense of self secure enough to tolerate both difference and continuity" (117-8). This dynamic autonomy reframes science as an act of connection and care, mirroring Bella's anti-patriarchal compassion. Bella's monstrosity shows that a family in which no gender dominates over another can liberate masculinist science of its destructive aspects and create new possibilities.

Conclusion

This thesis examines *Poor Things: Episodes From the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer* (1992) by Alisdair Gray and its 2023 film adaptation *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, through an ecofeminist lens, focusing on the way each approaches the man-made monster trope. The ecofeminist perspective helps to understand this Gothic trope as a vehicle for both the enforcement and the disruption of hierarchical relationships, such as man versus woman, culture versus nature, mind versus body, human versus non-human. Ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant and Evelyn Fox Keller show that these dualisms are part of a patriarchal ideology of scientific progress that figures women as inferior and closer to nature in order to justify their scientific exploitation. Man-made monster stories explore the dangers of unchecked male ambition and the ethical implications of attempting to control and manipulate life though science. The creator-scientists attempt to dominate nature by penetrating the female, natural sphere of reproduction. They are faced with the catastrophic consequences of this transgression when their creations lead them to ruin. *Poor Things* subverts this familiar narrative of monstrosity with man-made monster who reveals the possibility of rewriting the familiar structures of exploitation. The thesis has argued that the novel's metafictional form is integral to the subversion of hegemonic dualisms, and that the film faces its own challenges in adapting this aspect, leading to a contemporary, explicitly feminist reinterpretation of the story's commentary.

In *Poor Things*, the man-made monster is not an abhorrent creature but a beautiful woman. In Gray's text, Godwin is the archetypal male creator who attempts to mold Bella into his idealized version of womanhood. Bella's existence at the intersection of life and death, human and non-human, autonomous man and subjugated woman, resists this male categorization, and thus serves as a critique of the ways in which patriarchal society seeks to

control, define, and commodify female bodies through scientific subjugation of the natural world. As such Bella is a monstrous-feminine figure, representing the simultaneous desire and repulsion scientific men experience toward women, and she cannot escape being cast as monstrous in her reanimation and her defiance of social expectations of women. However, *Poor Things* also subverts the monstrous-feminine: Bella asserts her agency not only in her physical and sexual autonomy but also in her refusal to conform to binary expectations. Her monstrosity, then, becomes a site of liberation, a rejection of the constraints imposed by the men who seek to define her.

The novel's fragmented structure plays a crucial role in reinforcing this challenge to dualistic thinking. *Poor Things* employs unreliable narration, fragmented structure, and multiple perspectives to satirize the monstrous composition of Bella's narrative. Archibald McCandless's account reflects the traditional male gaze, portraying Bella through the lens of his desires and biases, and editor Gray's framing of this account as the truth reinforces the male composition of Bella's existence. Victoria McCandless' response to this account, however, subverts this perspective, exposing Archibald's narrative as incomplete and unreliable. This creates a neo-Victorian story in which the influence male narrators with vested interests in categorizing her as an object in their lives are brought into question. It is through Bella's monstrosity that Gray critiques the imposition of restrictive dualistic categories and the historical tendency to view women's bodies as something to be manipulated, controlled, or redefined by gendered scientific forces. Its metafictional form becomes a critical part of the novel's larger thematic exploration of monstrosity as resistance.

Bella's monstrosity offers resistance to patriarchal dualisms which enforce exploitation. Her body is a site of both agency and objectification, embodying the tensions that arise when women are forced to occupy positions defined by others. In Bella's case, this tension is embodied in her literal reanimation – an act performed by a male scientist who seeks to recreate life according to his vision. But Bella's gradual development into a figure of

agency and self-awareness subverts the expectations of both the scientist and society. Instead of being a passive creation, Bella becomes an active force within the narrative, using her monstrosity as a means to redefine her own identity and expose the moral hypocrisy of the problematic ideology of the men around her.

Lanthimos' film adaptation *Poor Things* offers a different approach to addressing ecofeminist issues than its source material, while staying true to the defamiliarization of the satiric neo-Victorian style inherent in the story. The film's surrealist aesthetic highlights the artificiality of the dualisms that structure Bella's world, echoing Gray's insistence that such dichotomies are ideological constructs rather than natural truths. Moreover, by emphasizing Bella's agency and subjective experience, the film extends Gray's subversion of monstrosity, bringing it into dialogue with contemporary feminist cinema which focuses on explicit feminist critique through exaggeration of the exploitative systems it means to disrupt. In doing so, it allows for a new discourse of compassionate, degendered relationships between people and between humans and nature.

Ultimately, Bella Baxter's story exposes the monstrosity inherent in the patriarchal need for categorization and subjugation of those deemed inferior, and in doing so invites its audience to reconsider the assumptions that underpin their understanding of monstrosity, femininity, and power. As such, *Poor Things* is a call to understand the (de)construction of truth and morality as a space for radical subversive potential. The film adaptation by Yorgos Lanthimos alters this message for contemporary audiences, translating the novel's themes into a visual language that emphasizes Bella's agency and the absurdity of patriarchal dualisms. By weaving visual hyperbole, ridicule and hyperreality into the story, the film serves as an explicit commentary that the boundaries between creator and creation, human and monster, are fluid, and that liberation lies in embracing this fluidity. Together, Gray's novel and its adaptation each provoke a reassessment of the ideological systems that define and constrain us, leaving us to wonder whether monstrosity is, in fact, the way to freedom.

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