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"All Made Miserable by One Cracked Bell:" Posthuman Monstrosity in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*

"All Made Miserable by One Cracked Bell": Monstruosidad posthumana en *Poor Things* de Alasdair Gray

VEGA ÁLVAREZ RIVAS
Institution address: Universidad de Oviedo. C/ Francisco Rodríguez García, s/n 33011 Oviedo, Spain
E-mail: uo289763@uniovi.es
ORCID: 0009-0008-8125-354X

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Abstract: By analysing Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* through the interrelated lenses of monster literature, neo-Victorian fiction, and posthumanism, this paper argues that the character of Bella Baxter reconfigures female subjectivity and sexuality, embodying a hybrid, posthuman identity that subverts patriarchal constructions of femininity and humanity. Through its use of intertextuality and a patchwork narrative, *Poor Things* transforms monstrosity from an othered category of abjection into a strategy for emancipation, thus situating the monstrous female body as a site of resistance rather than of threat and fear, and deconstructing humanist binaries and redefining what it means to be human.

Keywords: monster studies; neo-Victorianism; posthumanism; *femme fatale*; feminism; alterity; Alasdair Gray; *Poor Things*.

Summary: Introduction. Neo-Victorian Monstrosity. A Posthumanist Reading of the "Gorgeous Monster" Bella Baxter. Conclusions.

Resumen: Mediante el análisis de *Poor Things*, de Alasdair Gray, desde las perspectivas interconectadas de la literatura de lo monstruoso, la novela neo-victoriana y el poshumanismo, este artículo sostiene que Bella Baxter reconfigura la subjetividad femenina, encarnando una identidad híbrida y poshumana que subvierte constructos patriarcales de feminidad y humanidad. A través de su intertextualidad y narrativa fragmentada, *Poor Things* transforma la monstruosidad como categoría de otredad y abyección en una estrategia de emancipación. Así, se sitúa el cuerpo

femenino monstruoso como un lugar de resistencia en vez de amenaza, deconstruyendo los binarismos humanistas y redefiniendo la categoría de humano.
Palabras clave: monstruosidad; neo-victorianismo; poshumanismo; *femme fatale*; feminismo; alteridad; Alasdair Gray; *Poor Things*.
Sumario: Introducción. Monstruosidad neo-victoriana. Una lectura posthumanista del "hermoso monstruo" Bella Baxter. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Neo-Victorian literature is characterised by a redefinition of universalistic attributions regarding the subject and the "other" by means of revisiting and reconstructing the past, thus attempting against said past's alleged objectivity. Since Dana Shiller's groundbreaking essay on the genre (1997)—in which she claims that neo-Victorian fiction's main aim is to "question the certitude of our historical knowledge" (541)—many scholars have approached neo-Victorian literature as a method to shed light on the marginalised minorities that never had a voice in Victorian literature. Scholars, such as Mark Llewellyn, agree on neo-Victorian fiction's characteristic "historical pull of the past" in order to reconfigure our present reality, which we perceive as "fragile" and "transient," thus re-visioning the past through fiction (23). Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham claim that "the spectral presence of the Victorian past is all around us" (xi). This idea establishes the genre as a type of historiographical metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988).

On the other hand, monster literature makes use of a patchwork narrative transversed by intertextuality and multilamination, as well as the confluence of different narrative styles in order to defy traditional perceptions of the monster. In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen attempts to read "cultures from the monsters they engender" (3), which evidences its close relation with otherness. Cohen also claims to challenge historical certitude in his theory of the monstrous:

> I will partially violate two of the sacred dicta of recent cultural studies: the compulsion to historical specificity and the insistence that all knowledge . . . is local . . . One must bear in mind that history is just another text in a procession of texts, and not a guarantor of any singular signification. (Cohen 3)

The reconfiguration of historical fact and revisitation of the past is, thus, crucial because it allows for a comparison between the monster and the neo-Victorian other, as well as a reconfiguration of the two in posthuman terms, which I will address by drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti regarding posthumanism and posthuman subjectivity. This is possible because "monster" is an othered category, and therefore its subjectification supposes the deconstruction of said category. Consequently, both the monster and the posthuman inherently question the limits of what it means to be human and, naturally, what it means to be monstrous, by decentring the human subject and placing its focus on othered bodies that transgress traditional social conventions.

In order to exemplify the redefinition of monstrosity through a posthuman lens, I will analyse Alasdair Gray's novel *Poor Things* (1992) and its main character, Bella Baxter, a pregnant woman who, after attempting suicide, is resurrected by Godwin Baxter, a scientist who replaces her brain with the brain of her own foetus so as to be able to educate Bella as if she were a child. This article argues that *Poor Things* reconfigures monstrosity as a posthuman form of female subjectivity. Through Bella Baxter's hybrid existence, the novel destabilises the binary structures—human/monster, man/woman, object/subject—upon which Victorian humanism and patriarchal authority depend. By analysing the character of Bella Baxter as both a neo-Victorian and posthuman figure, I examine how the novel subverts patriarchal narratives that confine women to the category of less-than-human (Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 15) and monstrous. Focusing on the work of theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Anya Heise-von der Lippe, and Dana Shiller, I approach the novel as both a posthumanist and a neo-Victorian text through a series of steps: the first section justifies my contextualisation of the novel as both neo-Victorian and monster literature through its intertextual and hypertextual relationship with *Frankenstein;* following this, I focus on the intersections between monstrosity and posthumanism, analysing how the figure of the monster challenges humanist hierarchies and binary power relations; lastly, I interpret Bella Baxter as a hybrid figure who reclaims agency and sexual autonomy through her "monstrous" difference, thus reconfiguring the archetype of the *femme fatale*. Finally, in my conclusions, I argue that monstrosity in *Poor Things* operates as a deconstructive strategy for female emancipation and a redefinition of the human.

1. NEO-VICTORIAN MONSTROSITY: HOW THE MONSTER IS ARTICULATED

1.1 Contextualization of *Poor Things* as a Neo-Victorian Text

Neo-Victorian literature is characterised by its unique way of looking at the Victorian past in order to examine it from a perspective that usually draws from postmodernism since, as Dana Shiller contends in "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel" (1997), "neo-Victorian novels are acutely aware of both history and literature as human constructs, and use this awareness to rethink the forms and contents of the past" (540). That is, history is constructed, as well as deeply intertwined with binary relations of power and exclusion based on gender, race, class, sexuality, and other axes of difference, ultimately privileging the normative subject. Samatha J. Carroll argues that, through non-normative protagonists, neo-Victorian literature aims to deconstruct, decentre, and challenge categories in order to reveal their 'origins' as narratively constructed (182). By deconstructing history, the neo-Victorian novel completely rejects the usual universalistic notions of subjectivity because it denies the existence of persisting truths, which in turn argues for a tangible past that can indeed be retrieved through revisitation in spite of the biased construction of history based on power relations (Shiller 541). Moreover, scholars such as Rosario Arias classify neo-Victorian fiction as a double-edged tool for the reconstruction of subjectivity, since it does not only look back to the Victorian past, but it also turns itself to the future (45). Thus, neo-Victorian fiction challenges literary norms both in content and in form: on the one hand, it centres characters historically marginalised in Victorian narratives; on the other, it employs techniques such as parody, pastiche, and self-reflexive metafiction in order to question both the traditional literary canon and the conventions of Victorian literature.

Dana Shiller argues that the academic and literary use of present knowledge in order to revisit the past and consider its alternative possibilities might contradict the traditional and static academic idea of historical record (541). However, because said record lacks the objectivity it has been traditionally assigned, the revisionist tendency of neo-Victorian fiction is not too far off in its questioning the "certitude of our historical knowledge," since these novels "emphasize events that are usually left out of histories" (541). In this way, the historical record that the neo-Victorian novel deals with is fluid and, thus, "open to reinterpretation and therefore

constantly assuming different permutations" (540). Neo-Victorian literature is not preoccupied with presenting an accurate depiction of Victorian Britain but with examining "Victorian literary conventions and social ideologies" (Horrocks 164). These literary techniques used in neo-Victorian literature seem inherently monstrous in the way they employ intertextuality so as to build present interpretations of the past. This is why it is crucial to also consider the definition and representation of the neo-Victorian monster within the framework of posthumanism, as it questions the intellectual movement of humanism in a time of fascination for the othered body and scientific progress that inherently defies the limits of humanity. Neo-Victorian fiction therefore used, as the literary mode through which Gray revisits and destabilizes, Victorian constructions of femininity and monstrosity.

1.2 Monstrous Textuality and Intertextuality

Through the tendency to reengage with Victorian fascination with othered bodies, often considered monstrous at the time, the neo-Victorian monster acquires a special relevance. According to Jamie Horrocks, intertextuality, is a crucial characteristic of monster literature because, similarly to neo-Victorian fiction, it immediately supposes a patchwork narrative that combines not only elements of different literary works, but also diverse narrative styles. The literary work is also a patchwork creation similar to Frankenstein's monster itself. Linda Hutcheon claims that adaptations are "'multilaminated works' . . . and are inherently 'palimpsestuous' in that adaptations are texts through which other texts are always visible" (qtd. in Horrocks 163). *Poor Things* is an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which becomes evident in the names chosen for the characters, some of which pay homage to Mary Shelley's life—like her maiden name, Godwin, among others—but, more importantly, in the plot itself, in which a scientist resurrects a woman by substituting her brain with that of her unborn child. Moreover, *Poor Things* presents, narratively, a patchwork creation that can be situated within a monster literature framework because, though mostly linear, the narrative style varies within the novel, including letters, illustrations, and the entire story being in itself the fictional memoir of one of its main characters and narrators, McCandless. Therefore, the novel consists of a Russian doll structure and, in its hybridity, it reflects Bella's as well. The importance of incorporating letters must not be overlooked because it allows for Bella's perspective to

be included in the novel in order to oppose the assumptions and perception of the men that surround and try to manipulate her, thus becoming an element of resistance within McCandless' narrative.

The fact that Alasdair Gray as an author designates himself as the editor of his novel in order to present it as a pre-existent memoir written by one of the characters is a highly self-reflective gesture. This self-reflexivity is also a key feature of Gothic and, its sub-set, monster literature, which, according to Anya Heise-von der Lippe's *Monstrous Textualities*, tends to "comment on the circumstances of its own production and (potential) reception, the form of its medialization, as well as the possibilities of non-hierarchical epistemologies and the creation of narrative in general" (5). Moreover, as a neo-Victorian text, *Poor Things* also reflects on the blurred lines that separate fact from fiction, as Editor Gray himself mentions at the beginning of the novel, when talking about the individual from whom he obtained the memoir: "I have written enough fiction to know history when I read it. He said he had written enough history to recognize fiction" (xiii). This ambiguity prevails throughout the novel and contributes not only to its placement within monster literature but also within the framework of historiographic metafiction. *Poor Things* is a self-reflective novel that both takes place in the past and questions the validity of the historical record and its supposed objectivity. This can also be appreciated in the way its multiple narrators each claim truth and authority, turning the narrative into a hierarchical struggle for control of the narrative, mirroring the very processes involved in the construction of history.

Monster literature and its characteristic intertextuality also gives way to questioning themes revolving around identity, agency and subjectivity. Heise-von der Lippe argues that "*Frankenstein*'s open structure presents a model of monstrous textuality that specifically lends itself to [feminist] adaptations . . . creating openings for feminist explorations of authority and narratives of resistance against being framed as Other by a dominant epistemological system" (28). Lille Haase agrees with Heise-von der Lippe in how *Poor Things* draws on Shelley's work in order to "explore themes such as human identity, scientific progress, or processes of Othering" (135). *Frankenstein* questions industrialization and scientific progress, as well as the perception of the disabled—and, therefore, monstrous—Other and its numerous adaptations are often prone to question gender binaries and sexual impositions, which will be the main focus of my analysis of *Poor Things'*s Bella Baxter. Therefore, monster

literature defies the conventional literary canons, not only in their formal aspects but also in their content, since monstrous literary works, as contended by Chris Koenig-Woodyard et al. seem to prefer "re-inventions and innovations" and "the fluid and flexible parameters of post-modernity's deconstructive and incessantly slipping discourses of meaning" (3). Thus, the monstrous is a theoretical field that is inherently deconstructive, since the monster supposes a redefinition of subjectivity and otherness in terms of the disruption of previously established categories.

Koenig-Woodyard et al. further argue that the textual redefinition or "re-composition of monsters" results in "interrogating, and trans-mogrifying," as it presents re-incarnations in literature that establish the figure of the monster as "trans-corporeal, trans-generic and transhistorical" (5). Indeed, Cohen claims that the monster is "pure culture" (4), that is, completely constructed by the popular, historical imaginary: "the monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (4), which may contradict the previously mentioned argument regarding the monster's transhistorical ability. While the monster might be the corporeal result of the anxieties surrounding a particular historical moment, it does so through the incorporation of "fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen 4). Therefore, since the narratives surrounding the monstrous body are cultural products conditioned by fear, fantasy, and the popular imaginary, they possess the ability to, when reconfigured, transcend said narratives in order to redefine the monstrous category in itself. In fact, Donna McCormack argues that "monsters and the monstrous encapsulate a vast array of possibilities that defy strict categorization or easy definitions," including the category of the human (250). In this way, monstrous bodies and their representation in popular culture constitute relevant commentaries on the lack of historical accuracy when constructing said bodies. Thus, given the definition of the monster as transcorporeal, it supposes a blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human, as the traditional humanist discourse has typically identified the monstrous with marginalised minorities, typically categorised as inhuman and, therefore, transgressive and monstrous. Consequently, in popular culture, the post-modern Gothic positions the monster as "made, remade, and post-(re)made in a reconstitutively historical, narrative, and culture aesthetic" (Koenig-Woodyard et al. 5), but never placed as subjects, only as othered entities. Thus, when revisited through a posthuman lens, the

monster travels from object to subject, from margins to centre and, consequently, the monster category is redefined.

In the novel, Bella Baxter's categorisation as a monster—a "gorgeous monster" (91)—originates in the discourses of the men who encounter her, whose perspectives are provided through letters and the memoir itself. Yet, owing to the novel's hybridity, readers are also granted access to Bella's own letters—titled "Making a Conscience" (103)—through which she gradually becomes the focal point of the narrative: first through her creation in the hands of Godwin Baxter, then through her process of self-subjectification by her own means. As a result, she can no longer be apprehended as a monster, for she no longer occupies the margins of the novel's discursive space; rather, posthumanism allows for her redefinition as a cyborg as coined by Haraway: "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (*Cyborg Manifesto* 5). As mentioned before, for Cohen, the monster operates as a reflective cultural "construct" and "projection" (4). Therefore, monstrosity is a "man-made" social construct that appears as a tool to categorise social anxieties revolving mostly around fear and abjection, especially regarding non-normative bodies mediated by the implementation of technology in all aspects of life. As defended by Haraway, these monstrous bodies, which she defines as "inappropriate/d," are characterised by their being "dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives" ("Promises" 69), thus marked by a difference imposed on them by said narratives. In this respect, the power of the monstrous lies in the fact that, as claimed by Cristie March, "the grotesque can flood the social structures that threaten it" (329). In this way, the monstrous category as a signifier of difference can be deconstructed through the emergence of new non-normative subjectivities and thus configured and framed within posthumanism.

2. The "Gorgeous Monster," Bella Baxter, and Posthuman Subjectivity

Monstrous others are crucial figures in Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature because they represent or embody cultural anxieties. Not only that, but, as stated by Megen J. de Bruin-Molé, "fictional Victorian monsters such as the vampire or the laboratory construct easily become placeholders for the contemporary self" (5). Monsters are, therefore, inherently posthuman because they fundamentally correspond to, as

Braidotti contends, the sexualised, racialised, or naturalised others of society. That is, any individual that challenges the human, white, cis-heteronormative male subject as the centre of life and measure of all things. Braidotti claims that traditional "dualistic schemes of thought" position "Man/reason/culture on the one side and Woman/matter/nature on the other" ("Yes" 9). She also contends that Man is, therefore, "the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet" (*The Posthuman* 2). Thus, posthumanism is crucial in order to consider the monstrous category because it supposes a shift in the way we establish relationships with those human others that have been historically and culturally devalued to the less-than-human category, who can be identified with the monstrous.

It is particularly relevant for my posthumanist reading of *Poor Things* how Braidotti introduces the term of the 'Anthropocene'—that is, the age in which the human has acquired the power to affect all form of life on Earth, thus challenging the way we create relationships with both human and non-human entities in the planet (*The Posthuman* 5)—because one of the main themes in Gothic and Victorian literature is Man's substitution of God as a creator and giver of life. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the famous pioneer of this trope. However, as de Bruin-Molé argues, the monster is no longer an exception: rather, it has moved from the margins to the centre in contemporary culture (5). According to Kohlke and Gutleben, the monster has become a "veritable paradigm of modern subjectivity" (3). Many of the characters in the novel are at first not knowledgeable about Bella's origin, but she is still considered monstrous, especially by the male characters, because of her distinctive subversive attitude, which comes across almost as nonchalant: "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" (53). According to Braidotti, posthumanism is fundamentally concerned with the reconfiguration of subjectivity and the relation to otherness, meaning that posthumanism does not only decentre "Man" as the "measure of all things," but also as the default subject of the Anthropocene: "subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart" (*The Posthuman* 15). That is, Man is considered rational and able of ethical behaviour; the other is not and, thus, not worthy of being included in the human category. Bella Baxter is not only a sexualised, objectified other—already a traditional inhabitant of the margins and not the centre—but also a transgressor of

that which is traditionally considered rational and ethical in a profoundly humanist Victorian society, thus becoming monstrous.

In this way, in *Poor Things*, the creation—the monster—becomes the subject, which is fundamentally posthuman, because Bella Baxter as a technologically mediated body attempts not only against the laws of nature but also against "human law," that is, traditional sexual roles and imposed gender expectations. When analysing "Frankenstein's Problem," Lucy Suchman defines "loss of control over one's desires" as one of the main themes of the fascination with technoscience (2). Bella is, therefore, the representation of this loss of control over technology, but also over women's agency. When analysed through the posthuman lens, the technological other and the sexualised other are equivalent insofar as control over them, or lack thereof, is exercised by their male human counterparts. Bella is the result of the intersection of technological and sexualised alterity: she represents both the male desire for control over technology and over the feminised body. In her letters—appropriately titled "Making a Conscience"—she resonates with the concept of "half person," of hybridity through her historiographical commentary on historical blindness: "'people who care nothing for their country's stories and songs, he said, are like people without a past—without a memory—they are half people.' Imagine how that made me feel!" (Gray 116). Consequently, Bella indirectly acknowledges herself as *half* an identity instead of a *double* identity, even though she is clearly defined by her posthuman doubleness: both human and non-human, both nature and technology.

According to Braidotti, the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised others are reduced to the aforementioned less-than-human category and, therefore, deemed disposable bodies (*The Posthuman* 15). This is relevant because Bella is initially a woman who, in her previous life, was forced to adhere to those traditional social values by her being educated solely to become a "good" wife (Gray 215) but who was unhappy to the point of committing suicide. It is then when her body is picked up by Godwin Baxter and, after replacing her brain with that of her also dead, unborn baby, is resurrected. Consequently, it is somewhat contradictory how her body is disposable until a man, a hegemonic subject, decides it is not. Bella's previous identity as Victoria is what is deemed disposable by Godwin, who completely erases that identity by replacing it with a new one he has created by educating Bella according to his own values and opinions. Godwin himself mentions, at the beginning of the novel, how

"morbid anatomy is essential for training and research, but leads doctors into thinking that life is an agitation in something that is essentially dead. They treat patients' bodies as if the minds, the *lives*, were of no account" (17). Baxter contradicts himself because he never actually considers or takes into account Bella's previous life as Victoria. She is, to him, first a body, then an experiment, then a "daughter." Moreover, this clashes with McCandless's wife's addendum at the end of the novel, which contradicts everything stated by her husband and deems it a patchwork of morbid Victorian fantasies (272). In this way, Victoria's offense comes from, according to Carol Margaret Davison, "a more apt emblem of the 'monstrous' ideal of Victorian womanhood—the infantilised woman" (207). Thus, McCandless fetishises the infantilisation of women through the false portrayal of his wife as a monstrous child that must be taught by men how to be a "proper" Victorian woman.

The question of whether Baxter would have had the urge to carry out the experiment had the corpse belonged to a man remains unanswered throughout the novel. However, it is significantly telling insofar as it displays the profoundly gendered logic behind the creation of Bella. Consequently, it reproduces Victorian patriarchal assumptions that position women as intellectually inferior or incomplete, which, again, corresponds to the trope of the aforementioned infantilised woman, at times considered a source of monstrosity. In the assumption that Bella is a childlike being that requires male guidance and education in order to become a socially intelligible subject, her "rebirth" represents a symbolic reconstruction of femininity in the terms of masculine, phallocentric authority. Therefore, Bella exists as the inferior term within a hierarchical binary: she is constructed by a man, educated by a man and narrated by men, thus continuously articulated through male desire. As argued by Laura Mulvey, "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (11). Moreover, Baxter's description of Bella as a "skilfully manipulated resurrection," a "fine, fine woman" who "owes her life to these fingers of mine" (27), reveals how her body is conceived as a product to be shaped rather than an autonomous entity. Through this language of manipulation, the posthuman tension is revealed: her scientifically mediated existence destabilises conventional gender standards and definitions of humanity. In fact, throughout the novel, Bella actually destabilises this dynamic as she increasingly resists the role assigned to her through the development of her intellectual, sexual, and political autonomy, thus defying, as Zanjani Surena et al. claim, "his

attempts to impose his scientific rationality on her, often questioning the very foundations of his authority" (3130). Therefore, it is crucial to identify, according to de Bruin Molé, the "link" that exists between "Bella's metaphorical construction as a subject and her literal construction by Godwin Baxter" (25). That is, the tension between the *Frankenstein* of it all—the science fiction in the experimentation and physical construction of Bella alleged by McCandless—and the construction of Victoria McCandless's education carried out by the Godwin Baxter she describes in her addendum (252).

Although Godwin Baxter occupies a marginal position in society which stems from fear and abjection regarding his appearance, his monstrosity remains socially negotiable while Bella's does not. Gray frames Baxter through Gothic imagery surrounding the grotesque, as he is described as having a big "ogreish body," "shaggy," "coarse" hair, a "mournful mouth," and a "brow corrugated by three deep, permanent wrinkles" (12), which in turn aligns him with Frankenstein's creature itself. in spite of his feared and rejected place in society, is still an active participant of the traditional binary power relations between men and women. Yet, this corporeal otherness never fully excludes him from masculine power structures and phallocentric authority. His class privilege, education and professional status grant him the privilege of social legitimacy: "he was allowed to come and go as he pleased because he paid his fees regularly, inconvenienced nobody, and had a famous father" (Gray 15). Consequently, Baxter's monstrosity is compatible with patriarchal power, highlighting the asymmetry of monstrosity when embedded in hierarchical gender schemes. Bella, on the other hand, is "physically perfect, but her mind is still forming" (27) and, simultaneously, she is described as a "gorgeous monster" (91) that causes suffering upon the men she encounters. In this way, this contradiction implies that, in Bella's case, the grotesque or monstrous lies not on her physical appearance or any kind of bodily deformity, but on behavioural and sexual transgression. She becomes monstrous because she refuses passive femininity and sexual submission and exercises intellectual curiosity and sexual agency instead. The phrase "all made miserable by one cracked Bell" (Gray 153) refers to the male narrators' anxiety regarding her autonomy: Bella is represented as dangerous and deviant not because she harms men directly or because her corporeity induces fear, but because her refusal to conform defies the gendered hierarchies through which male subjectivity comes to be. Her monstrosity is therefore not a

tangible, inner condition, but a projection imposed upon Bella for challenging normative structures of femininity.

Moreover, scholars like Sidia Fiorato take into consideration the juridical implications of the creation of a new being (287). It is significant to analyse the way, despite his initial objectification of Bella —whether it is as a sexual partner, as McCandless seems to believe, or as something to be studied and educated—Godwin Baxter is the only man in the novel who does not object to Bella's education in a male dominated field—medicine—or to her exercise of free will as a subject. Fiorato claims that, "by making her his heir, Baxter confers upon Bella the status of legal person and the possibility to engage in economic transactions" (288). Therefore, *Poor Things* allows Bella to exercise autonomy and independence both through the choice of her marital partner and by providing medical care to other women (Haase 143). Bella does all this while maintaining her status and Godwin's respect, which culminates with her inheritance of Godwin's fortune. It is, therefore, crucial how *Poor Things*, rather than vanquishing the monstrous protagonist to the margins of society—as many other Gothic narratives, such as *Dracula* (1897) or *Frankenstein* itself, do—ends with Bella's integration into legal, social and economic relationships when Godwin names her his heir, thus "classifying Bella as a legal person and, consequently, integrating her into society" (Haase 141). Instead of adhering to the Gothic trope of the monster that must be destroyed or isolated in order to restore social order, *Poor Things* allows Bella to occupy positions traditionally reserved for normative human subjects: professional authority, economic independence, and institutional legitimacy. Yet, this integration is partially enabled by Baxter's own status as a social other. Although he possesses masculine privilege and scientific authority, Baxter himself exists at the limits of Victorian respectability due to his grotesque appearance, isolation, and controversial medical practices. In this sense, he resembles a Frankenstein's creature as much as a Frankenstein himself, thus occupying an ambiguous position between exclusion and power. Because Baxter is himself marked as abnormal, he is able to recognise in Bella a form of difference that Victorian society would otherwise try to condemn. In this way, *Poor Things* uses the relationship between creator and creation to expose the instability of the monstrous category. Baxter's partial identification with Bella ultimately leads to the emergence of a posthuman subjectivity that challenges the hierarchical binaries—human/monster,

man/woman, creator/creature—upon which traditional systems of power depend.

2.1 The Reconstruction of the *Femme Fatale* as Posthuman

Bella's reconstruction as a femme fatale constitutes one of the novel's central strategies for reimagining posthuman monstrosity. As mentioned before, *Poor Things* and the characterisation of Bella Baxter exhibit an intertextual relationship with texts like *Frankenstein*, but there is also an interplay with biblical and mythological elements. Not only does Bella refer to her creator, Godwin Baxter, with the abbreviation "God"—as I mentioned earlier—but Bella herself is referred to as "Eve" or "Delilah" by one of her lovers, Mr Wedderburn (94). She is said to use her beauty to seduce men and turn them into her "helpless playthings" (87). The monster that adopts the anthropomorphic form of a beautiful woman, that is, the biblical *femme fatale*, is an archetype supported by a patriarchal society and male anxiety surrounding the "dangerous" female figure (Rodríguez Fernández 14). Thus, the *femme fatale* is significantly telling regarding operations of dehumanisation in the techno-mediated world (Suchman 4). Bella is, indeed, classified within the archetype, defined by Marie Mulvey-Roberts as a figure "who encodes the perils of sexual autonomy and aberration" (106), and who serves as a tool to demonise femininity (108). However, she is only classified as such by the men surrounding her, such as Wedderburn, once they are not able to take sexual advantage of her anymore because she will not allow it. As March claims, Bella's body becomes a site for the grotesque insofar as she unsettles the "cultural perceptions of those men with whom she interacts and who have come to expect and rely on naive and socially nonresistant women" (338). That said, Bella is benefitting sexually from him in the exact same way he is, which underlines not only the hypocrisy of the archetype itself, but also its potential to deconstruct the boundaries between male and female roles.

In her PhD thesis "Bringing the Body to Bear on Neo-Victorian Fiction," Ashley Maree Orr claims that, "in contrast to Victorian culture's wilful denial of the existence of female sexuality – and, where denial was impractical, such as in the case of prostitution – its construction as an aberration – these [neo-Victorian] texts frequently engage in explicit and overt portrayals of female sexuality" (25). Godwin Baxter claims that Bella's "menstrual cycle was in full flood from the day she opened her eyes, so she has never been taught to feel her body is disgusting or to dread

what she desires" (69). Thus, the woman that exercises her sexuality outside of the accepted social conventions of marriage, female submission and, crucially, shame is deemed "an aberration," monstrous, because the category arises from social and cultural anxieties regarding sexual transgression of, in this case, Victorian gender roles. As suggested by Anne Williams, the 'female' is "constructed by patriarchy as instability, materiality, sexuality, irrationality, darkness, evil" (94). Moreover, Orr argues there are different ways in which the female body and experiences can be classified as non-normative: "from freakery, to mental illness, maternity, and queer sexuality – their experiences of embodied difference are all heavily mediated by gender; their bodies are subject to surveillance, policing, and correction in ways that are specific to their identification as women" (27). Even when women conformed to this Victorian feminine ideal, at times regarded as the cult of true womanhood, they were still subordinated to men and considered significantly inferior and always secondary to them. This way, as argued by Orr, any woman who did not conform to these social conventions and "transgressed this ideal—through madness or some other display of non-normative female embodiment—were doubly disadvantaged" (28).

We can appreciate this in Bella's previous identity as Victoria: a woman who complied with the demands of the Victorian feminine ideal, yet remained unhappy, oppressed within a society that devalued women to such an extent that Gordon Baxter felt no ethical hesitation in treating her dehumanised body as material for experimentation. Bella—as this "doubly disadvantaged" other—is frequently catalogued as mad and, through her exercise of sexuality—with both men *and* women—in pursuit of social freedom from Baxter and McCandless, she is reduced to a fear-inducing object and, consequently, constructed as a monstrous other: "no normal healthy woman—no good or sane woman wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as duty . . . only debauched women wriggle their hips" (Gray 218). Thus, Victoria's husband, General Sir Aubrey Blessington, represents the conceptualisation of the Gothic *femme fatale* as a threat to "not literal but more symbolic forms of castration: rebellion against their patriarchal roles as dutiful daughters, faithful wives and self-sacrificing mothers" (Williams 91). However, rather than being doubly disadvantaged, Bella transforms her self-assigned sexual freedom and intellectual ambition in a traditionally masculine field such as medicine into an advantage for herself, which ultimately deconstructs the *femme fatale* as a solely sexual, patriarchal archetype.

I argue that *Poor Things* simultaneously invokes and dismantles the traditional figure of the *femme fatale* through its satirical portrayal of those men who perceive Bella as dangerous, therefore critiquing the patriarchal portrayal of women as defined solely by their relationships with men (Surena et al. 3129). Rather than presenting her as genuinely manipulative, Wedderburn's melodramatic description of Bella as a "White Daemon who destroys the honour and manhood of the noblest and most virile men in every age" (Gray 94) undermines his judgement by portraying him as weak, dramatic and ultimately ridiculous. In this way, *Poor Things* constitutes a satire of the patriarchal tendency to construct sexually autonomous women as monstrous threats to male subjectivity. The *femme fatale* displaces the role of the male subject, destabilising the traditional gender hierarchy in which men occupy active positions while women remain passive objects of desire. Bella's sexuality is therefore perceived as threatening not because it is inherently destructive, but because it is role-reversing. The novel further reinforces this connection between female sexual transgression, and monstrosity through mythological intertextuality. Like figures such as Eve or Lilith, Bella is associated with female desire that exists outside male control and is therefore coded as dangerous, unnatural, or even demonic. Wedderburn's claim that his relationship with Bella was "Faustian from the start" (Gray 77) reflects this tendency to interpret female sexual agency through narratives of temptation and corruption. However, *Poor Things* exposes the absurdity of these projections by presenting Bella as a character who does not destroy men through malice but whose existence challenges patriarchal parameters through which these men define themselves. Consequently, the novel transforms the *femme fatale* from a monstrous figure of male fantasy into a posthuman subject whose sexual and intellectual autonomy defies the binary structures that traditionally define femininity as passive and subordinate.

Furthermore, it is relevant how, with the rapid scientific and medical advancements of the Victorian period, the body of the other becomes, aside from the usual fear-inducing object, a fascinating fixation, which is also reflected in the novel. In "Science and the Gothic," Kelly Hurley underlines the "creepy and uncanny" scenario that both authors and scientists explored during the Victorian period in an attempt to "figure monstrosity within scientific terms" (171–72). Bella's body is "othered" not only for its being a female body but also because she is a human, scientific, patchwork creation that goes against, as I mentioned before,

both natural law and human social impositions. This is what turns Bella into a posthuman *femme fatale*. She is identified as monstrous, as evil, and as deviant and unnatural. As Bella becomes the central subject of the novel, she decentres the traditional Victorian humanist narratives that surround her. Consequently, she can no longer be understood as a monster subordinated within the hierarchical binary of human versus non-human. However, in order to place her as a subject, Bella cannot be described as merely human either. While posthumanism contends that all humans are technologically mediated (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* 33), the science fiction surrounding Bella's origin in McCandless's account makes especially evident the fact that Bella is a scientifically modified body who—apart from defying conventional notions regarding gender and sexual roles—challenges the limits of humanity and resists the perceptions surrounding human creation. In this way, Bella is an inherently posthuman subject. Therefore, in MacCandless's account, Bella is manufactured by Godwin—and the men she engages with—in the same way the archetype of the *femme fatale* is manufactured by patriarchal standards of female innocence and sanctity when a woman threatens traditional phallocentric authority by means of her sexuality and reproductive freedom—as well as her singlehood—, all of which are considered deviant, morbid, and uncontrollable, or as it were, monstrous. By developing her sexual curiosity and engaging in sexual explorations, Bella destabilizes the reality of a conventional Victorian environment that employs monstrosity as a way to construct femininity (Mulvey-Roberts 106). Bella is a posthuman *femme fatale* because she blurs the lines between traditional binaries such as the feminine and the masculine, creature and creator, human and non-human, object and subject. She is constructed by two sets of expectations—Godwin's physical and romantic expectations, and society's cultural and sexual ones—but she challenges and defies both.

CONCLUSIONS

Poor Things reimagines monstrosity as a site of resistance that destabilises traditional notions of subjectivity, gender, and humanity. By situating the novel within a neo-Victorian and posthumanist framework, this article has argued that Bella Baxter's hybrid existence challenges the binary structures through which patriarchal and humanist discourse define the human subject. As a technologically mediated body who is non-compliant with gender and sexual expectations, Bella nomadically transitions from

object to subject as the novel progresses. Bella occupies a liminal position between human and non-human, object and subject, creator and creation.

Through its intertextual relationship with *Frankenstein* and other Gothic and mythological narratives, *Poor Things* exposes monstrosity as a cultural construction rooted in anxieties surrounding female autonomy and corporeal difference. However, unlike many Gothic narratives Bella evolves from Godwin's "fine, fine woman" into a politically active, sexually liberated figure, two narratives that, as a patchwork creation like the novel and Bella themselves, compete until she finally asserts agency over her body and mind and redefines herself away from the monstrous category. Her progression from scientific object to autonomous subject demonstrates how the monstrous can function not as a marker of abjection, but as a means of reconfiguring dominant structures of power.

Bella's reworking of the *femme fatale* further reveals how patriarchal discourse constructs sexually autonomous women as threatening or unnatural. Yet the novel simultaneously satirises these perceptions, exposing the fragility of the masculine authority and the patriarchal archetypes that depend upon them. In this sense, Bella's posthuman hybridity ultimately dismantles the hierarchical binaries—man/woman, human/monster, mind/body—that sustain traditional humanist conceptions of identity. In the novel, the male perception of Bella as a monster and a fear-inducing object reveals the limitations of humanist discourse and opens the possibility for hybridity and non-hierarchical forms of being and relating to the other. Bella supposes not only the redefinition of what it means to be human, but also of what it means to be a woman.

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