

# The Porcelain Rebirth: Who Gets to Be Human in the World of Bella Baxter?

In the laboratory of Victorian curiosities, humanity is not a birthright but a craft. Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* offers us a protagonist who is literally stitched together from the wreckage of tragedy. Bella Baxter, a woman with the body of an adult and the transplanted brain of an infant, serves as the ultimate litmus test for the soul.

As Bella navigates a world of velvet waistcoats and rigid social hierarchies, a darker question emerges: is humanity a biological state, or is it a performance that the marginalised must perfect to be accepted?

## The Constructed Woman

Bella is the ultimate “constructed woman.” Unlike the rest of us who are slowly moulded by years of subtle parental influence, Bella is an overnight miracle: she begins as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate made of flesh. To the men who surround her – Godwin Baxter, her creator, and Duncan Wedderburn, her lover – she is initially a luxury object, a creature to be studied, possessed, and curated. As Godwin himself suggests,

“She will be wholly at your mercy with no public opinion to protect her, [...] you are about 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” (Gray 36).

In the world of literature, we often see the female form treated as an aesthetic byproduct of male ambition. Bella subverts this. Because her mind is not yet “poisoned” by the Victorian etiquette of what a woman *should* be, her humanity is raw, unfiltered, and deeply inconvenient. She eats when she is hungry, speaks when she has a thought, and explores her body without the weight of inherited shame.

This reflects our own modern self-curation. Just as Godwin Baxter stitched Bella together, we stitch together our own identities through social feeds, career milestones, and aesthetic choices. We are all, in a sense, constructed versions of ourselves, presenting a finished product to a world that rarely allows for the messiness of a work-in-progress.

## Innocence vs. Social Conditioning

The tension of the story lies in the “civilising” of Bella Baxter. As she travels across the globe, she encounters the polite society that defines humanity through restriction. To be “human” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and arguably today) is to know how to suppress one’s impulses.

We see Bella’s “humanity” questioned most when she refuses to perform femininity correctly. When she screams at the sight of poverty or refuses to conform to the social expectations governing polite behaviour, the world calls her mad or infantile. This suggests a chilling conclusion: in a patriarchal society, a woman’s humanity is often tied to her obedience.

The stakes remain strikingly similar in the contemporary world: we live in an era where authenticity is a buzzword, yet the moment we step outside the boundaries of polite discourse or acceptable emotion, our status is challenged. We are taught that to be a functioning adult is to be a master of suppression. The

moment Bella develops a political mind and a socialist heart, she becomes monstrous to those who wanted her to remain a beautiful, silent doll.

“Dr. Bella McCandless – through her management of the Godwin Baxter Natal Clinic, her Fabian pamphlets and promotion of female suffrage – has been invited to speak on platforms in nearly all European capitals” (Gray 240).

### **The Body Opposed to the Mind**

The central conceit of *Poor Things* – the brain of a child in the body of a woman – forces us to look at the “Body/Mind” duality. Bella’s body is a site of constant negotiation: to the medical world she is a specimen, to the romantic world she is a prize.

However, Bella’s journey is one of reclaiming the biological luxury of pleasure. She treats her body as a vehicle for experience rather than a temple of virtue, thereby transcending the limitations imposed by her creators.

In our world, we often treat our bodies as projects to be optimised, tracked by data, refined by fitness, and edited by filters. We forget that the most human thing we can do is inhabit our skin without the need for an audience. Bella proves that humanity resides in the autonomy of one’s choices, independent of the circumstances of one’s birth.

### **The Performance of Being “Real”**

Ultimately, *Poor Things* suggests that we are all, in some way, constructed. We all wear the masks of our class, our gender, and our era. Bella Baxter is simply the only one honest enough to show the seams.

“Who gets to be human?” The answer in Gray’s work is biting: humanity is a club guarded by the powerful, and the entry fee is often the sacrifice of your true self. To be a “real woman” is a performance that Bella eventually learns to master – but only so she can dismantle the stage from inside.

In the end, Bella is the most human character in the room, not because she was born, but because she chose to wake up. She reminds us that while society may provide the party, we are the ones who must provide the life.

“Where is my child, God?’ she asked” (Gray 191).

### **Reference**

Gray, Alasdair. *Poor Things*. Bloomsbury, 2002.