

PARENTAL INFLUENCE AND THE ELECTRA COMPLEX IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS*

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Abstract: *The paper examines the portrayal of parental dynamics and their impact on the psychological development of the main protagonists in Alasdair Gray's Poor Things through a psychoanalytic lens. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the analysis explores the complex relationships between creators and their creations, as well as the themes of identity formation, autonomy, and the search for parental love. In Poor Things, Bella's unique status as both creator and creation sheds light on Freud's Electra/Oedipus complex and Lacan's mirror stage, as she grapples with issues of agency, autonomy, and the desire for both maternal and paternal figures. By examining the parental dynamics in the novel, the paper aims to illuminate the psychological complexities of the character and the broader thematic concerns of the texts.*

Keywords: *Bella Baxter, identity formation, Electra complex, parental dynamics, Poor Things*

1. Introduction

In a similar vein to Shelley's *Frankenstein* not being science-fiction *per se*, so too does Gray's novel not focus on the science behind the reanimation of the dead. The work that has since its publication been labeled "Frankenstein set in Glasgow," rather gives a portrayal of a different kind of monster while providing still a unique perspective on the human condition and the intricacies of creator–creation relationship. Bella Baxter is the name of the monster in question, the female alter-ego of Frankenstein's monster, a woman who was brought back to life by being given the brain of her unborn child. Herein lies Bella's "monstrous aspect", being at once both her own mother and daughter. Her physical beauty remains untouched, which largely sets her apart from her counterpart in Shelley's novel. However, Bella's physical beauty, as opposed to The Creature's ugliness, does not make her any less of a "monster". As Cohen writes:

The monster is born (...) as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. (Cohen 1996: 4)

While there are arguments to support that Bella is undoubtedly a product of her time, place, and culture, she is a monster not born, rather created through her creator's need for a female companion. This approach to her creation potentially has effects on her overall development, as the creator's attitude and actions shaped her identity and behaviour. Godwin Baxter's excessive protectiveness borders on obsession, resulting in a stifling environment for Bella. This overbearing paternal influence, driven by a sense of paternal duty, impedes Bella's ability to assert herself and define her own identity. We are thus able to conclude that Bella is ensnared by her creator's overprotective embrace which illustrates the profound impact of parental influence on the character's psychological development.

There certainly is an evident influence that the role of a parent has in shaping the psyche of the child. At the moment of her creation, Bella has the brain of a child, despite being grown physically, and as such, requires the nurturing of a parent for any further mental developments. Bella Baxter, in the most literal sense, has the mental capacity of an infant, having been given the brain of her unborn child. She is, essentially, a newborn baby in the body of an adult. Therefore, her creator, the aforementioned Godwin Baxter, is to play the role of the paternal figure. The distinct yet complementary perspectives on the role of parents (or parental figures) are offered by two influential figures in the field of psychoanalysis, namely Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. While Freud's theory emphasizes the primacy of early childhood experiences and the resolution of unconscious conflicts, Lacan's theory introduces concepts such as the mirror stage and the Symbolic Order to elucidate the formation of the self within the familial and societal context. On the one hand, Freud emphasizes the role of unconscious conflicts and early childhood experiences in shaping the child's personality; Lacan, on the other, highlights the significance of language and symbolic interactions in the formation of the self. However, both agree that parental influence is the most influential aspect in the development of a child.

2. Bella Baxter and the quest for identity

As established, Bella Baxter is a reanimated woman with the brain of her unborn daughter. She comes into this state of being after an "attempted" suicide, drowning her pregnant self in a river, which is where Godwin Baxter finds her. Using advanced medical techniques, he performs a series of surgical procedures on her, which ultimately result in her resurrection. However, Godwin Baxter decides to remove the child from her body, and give its brain to Bella. In doing so, he gives the unknown woman another chance to life, as her resurrection comes with no knowledge of her previous one. Bella is, therefore, *tabula rasa*. She is void of any previously learned notions and free to discover the world anew.

This reanimated Bella lacks any knowledge of her previous experiences (including motor skills and language), and as such, may be described as being a newborn in the body of an adult. Her creator, therefore, allows her to be in a controlled environment only, perhaps as a form of protection from external harm, or simply to track her mental development, considering she is, ultimately, an experiment. However, this means that Bella spends her formative "years" with only

her father/creator, which makes her miss out on opportunities for exploration, social interaction, and independent learning. Namely, it is established in the novel that Bella develops mentally in an impressive rate, and that a time span of merely a couple of weeks equals to years in her mental age. Godwin follows Bella's progress by her evolving speech patterns, which are, at first, characterized by simplicity and innocence, reflecting her sheltered upbringing and limited exposure to the outside world. Her vocabulary and syntax are relatively basic, mirroring her youth and lack of worldly experience. Bella's speech, therefore, serves as a narrative device through which her character development and psychological journey are conveyed to the reader, and, as Bella becomes more exposed to new experiences, ideas, and relationships, her vocabulary and language skills start to gradually expand. She ends up using more complex words and expressions, reflecting her growing curiosity and intellectual development. Initially, her social interactions are limited to Godwin, his associates, and the medical and intellectual circles he frequents. This provides her with a sheltered, even idealized, understanding of society. However, a key shift happens when Bella is introduced to the larger social fabric through a series of experiences outside of Godwin's direct influence. During the course of the novel, especially after she elopes with Duncan Wedderburn, Bella meets a wide range of new characters and is exposed to a variety of social contexts. Her decision to run away with Duncan marks a significant shift, as it takes her out of the controlled environment created by Godwin and thrusts her into a more unpredictable and complex world. These experiences push Bella to rethink the innocence and simplicity that defined her early speech and worldview, and further enrich her understanding of the world, expanding her vocabulary, emotional range, and intellectual depth, all of which mark her development as she becomes increasingly aware of the multifaceted nature of human existence.

Therefore, this linguistic progression mirrors her cognitive growth and increasing self-awareness. Just as her speech evolves, so does her understanding of herself and her place in the world, culminating in a moment of self-recognition akin to the pivotal stage in human development described by Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. The mirror stage is a crucial stage in human development during infancy when a child first recognizes their own reflection in a mirror and forms a sense of self-identity. Lacan (2010: 1164) writes: "The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror". Lacan further believes this moment may occur between six and eighteen months of age. However, Bella has already passed this mental age as soon as a couple of days after her reanimation – therefore her moment of experiencing her own reflection – is not untainted. That is, Bella is unable to fully bridge the gap between her internal sense of self and her external reality, so much so that she states: "I have eyes and a mirror in my bedroom, Candle, I SEE I am a woman in my middle twenties and but nearer thirty than twenty, most women are married by then—" (Gray 1992: 74). Lacan (2010: 1165), furthermore, writes that "the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only

asymptotically approach the subject's becoming". This means that the formation of the ego, or sense of self, occurs before it is influenced by societal factors. In Bella's case, having the body of a grown woman and the brain of a child influences the formation of her ego, of the self. Moreover, this seems to further influence the exploration of her sexuality, which plays a big part in Bella's character development. The formation of her ego and the exploration of sexuality seem to be occurring at the same time.

Although this may be seen as a natural and multifaceted process shaped by her interactions with various characters and her own internal desires, it may also be a reflection of her progression as seen by the Freudian psychosexual stages. Freud (1905: 90) writes that "One occasionally comes across remarks upon precocious sexual activity in small children – upon erections, masturbation, and even activities resembling coitus. But these are always noted only as exceptional events, as curiosities, or as horrifying instances of precocious depravity" and continues:

It seems certain that the germs of sexual stirrings are already present in the newborn child and that these continue to develop for some time, but then become subject to a progressive process of suppression, which can itself be ruptured in turn by proper spurts of sexual development, and delayed by individual peculiarities. (Freud 1905: 92)

Bella, however, is not stifled in the exploration of her own sexuality, nor is there any suppression of the same, as Bella has the body of an adult, and therefore no period of latency that may arise from the deferment of her reproductive functions. Her creator so states: "Her menstrual cycle was in full flood from the day she opened her eyes, so she has never been taught to feel her body is disgusting or to dread what she desires" (Gray 1992: 91). In fact, from the latent period of childhood to the onset of puberty and adolescence, she experiences a range of emotions and desires as she seeks to understand and define her own sexuality. Her interactions with parental figures, romantic interests, and societal expectations do contribute to her evolving understanding of herself as a sexual being. In Coe's (1992: 2) reading of the novel, for example, he believes that "for the purposes of Gray's imagination ... women are only defined, only made real, by their relationship with men".

Freud (1905: 109) states that "with the arrival of puberty, changes set in that are supposed to lead infantile sexual life to its final, normal shape. The sexual drive has hitherto been predominantly autoerotic; it now finds the sexual object." Bella redirects her sexual desire towards the closest friend of her creator, who is likewise a doctor and a scientist. In other words, Bella seems to look to the closest image of her creator. Her exploration of her sexuality may also be understood within the context of Freud's Electra complex. The Electra complex is a term used to describe a daughter's unconscious desire for her father, coupled with a sense of rivalry or jealousy toward her mother. Godwin is her creator, father, and primary caregiver, and Bella's early attachment to him is not merely one of filial love, but also an intense psychological dependence. Godwin, as the controlling figure in her life, fulfills both the roles of protector and intellectual guide, and Bella's emotional attachment to him grows as a result of this. Additionally, Bella's interaction with her creator/parental figure, as well as romantic interests, paired with the societal expectations, may reflect

her attempts to reconcile her unconscious desires with societal norms. Moreover, as the Electra complex may be used to analyse the character of Bella, her creator seems to exhibit traits of its counterpart – the Oedipal complex. Freud (1905: 123) states that “a man, especially, seeks after the image of his mother as it has prevailed in his memory since the earliest childhood”. Bella’s creation was, in part, due to Baxter wanting a female companion who would substitute the love of a mother he had never met. This is what the readers are told:

[He] dreamed of a fascinating stranger – a woman [he] had not yet met so could only imagine – a friend who would need and admire [him] as much as [he] needed and admired her. No doubt a mother supplies this want in most young creatures, though rich families often employ a servant to take the mother’s place. (Gray 1992: 64)

Therefore, the purpose of Bella’s creation was for her to fulfill the role of a mother, a purpose she may as well have fulfilled as soon as Baxter reanimated her with the brain of her daughter. However, he states that his feelings are overpowering any other feelings he may have towards her. On the other hand, Bella herself may also grapple with unconscious desires rooted in her relationship with her creator. Freud’s assertion that individuals seek after the image of their parent can be applied to Bella’s complex dynamic with Godwin Baxter. Bella’s existence, born out of Baxter’s desire for companionship and maternal love, further complicates their relationship. While Baxter may have envisioned Bella as a surrogate for the mother he never knew, her autonomy and identity as a separate individual challenge this paternalistic expectation. Her exploration of her sexuality and desires may involve navigating the complexities of her relationship with Baxter, including feelings of dependence, resentment, yet also a longing for independence. At first, we see her innate desires manifest in her wish to marry the man who is the image of her creator, and then a sort of rebellion against her creator takes place in her elopement with a man who is the opposite. However, being away from her creator means that Bella experiences progress in her mental development the most.

This period of separation from Baxter is crucial for Bella’s individuation process. It allows her to explore her own desires and identity outside the shadow of her creator. Initially, her romantic entanglements represent an unconscious attempt to resolve her feelings towards her creator-figure, Baxter. Her elopement and subsequent relationships signify a rebellion against, and a search for an identity separate from the paternal figure’s control. Yet, she does return to Baxter and becomes a doctor of her own, showing a sort of integration of her past with her newfound sense of self.

3. Bella Baxter and Victoria McCandless

There seems to be a general disagreement on the level of agency Bella has in the novel, with some scholars, such as Ibáñez (1999), arguing that Bella’s identity is formed through her interactions with the men around her, particularly her creator, while others, such as Kaczvinsky (2001: 775-779), argue that Bella is, by the end of the novel, a fully liberated woman. Being away from the influence of her creator does prove to be a critical period in her development as an independent individual.

Bella's transition from the Lacanian mirror stage identity – dependent on Godwin's validation – to an autonomous subject navigating the Symbolic Order of society, allows her to confront aspects of life and death that were previously hidden from her, significantly influencing her psychological, and most especially, emotional growth.

The pivotal moment during her travels is when Bella encounters the grim reality of dead babies, a stark contrast to her sheltered life she led under Baxter's care. This exposure forces her to confront the fragility of life and the harshness of the world outside the protective bubble created by Godwin Baxter. The sight of dead babies is particularly poignant for Bella, as it echoes her own unique existence, being brought back to life with the brain of her own dead child. Experiencing such a sight also finally alters Bella's immature language and vocabulary. Up until this point, Bella was using the form of a Shakespearean sonnet to write letters to Godwin, still reflecting her inexperience and child-like behaviour. However, this confrontation with death and the ephemeral nature of life deepens Bella's understanding of her own identity, as well as the complex nature of her creation. This ultimately leads to her finally altering her speech which resembles that of a grown adult. When Bella finally leaves Godwin, she enters what Lacan labels the Symbolic Order, where she encounters the broader social structures and realities of the world. Strecher (2002: 114) writes: "According to Lacan, then, the Symbolic Order (though constituted by ourselves) always intervenes, steps between ourselves and the Other, the object of our desire. This process is always grounded in language, in the intervention via language of symbols between us and the object of our desire." In his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, for example, Lacan furthermore writes:

Next time, I propose to introduce you to the essence of scopic satisfaction. The gaze may contain in itself the *objet a* of the Lacanian algebra where the subject falls, and what specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero. In so far as the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an *objet a* reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance, an ignorance so characteristic of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research. (Lacan 1998: 76–77)

The *objet a* refers to the object of desire, and is a central part of the subject's experience of lack and desire. The *objet a* represents a "punctiform" or fleeting lack in the subject, linked to the notion of castration, symbolizing an absence that the subject constantly strives to fill. Bella's confrontation with death and her subsequent decision to become a prostitute whilst in Paris can be seen as her attempt to assert her identity and autonomy within the Symbolic Order. Her actions reflect a rebellion against the identity imposed on her both by Godwin and society, as she strives to define herself on her own terms. The Symbolic Order, in Lacanian terms, represents the domain of societal rules, language, and law – structures that dictate an individual's place within society. Bella's choice, therefore, to engage in prostitution is not merely an act of defiance, but rather a conscious rejection of the roles and expectations

imposed upon her, thus carving out her own space within the Symbolic. By stepping outside traditional constraints and engaging with this realm, Bella challenges the societal norms that seek to define her, attempting to reconcile her own desires with the external reality that seeks to shape her. However, Bella's quest for autonomy and identity may still be driven by a sense of an unattainable desire. For example, her relationships with men, specifically with Godwin Baxter, might not be about the men themselves, but about what they represent – an elusive ideal of freedom, love, or self-understanding that she herself seems to never be able to fully grasp. There seems to be a perpetual state of desire and dissatisfaction in Bella's life, as she moves from one experience to the next, seeking fulfillment that always seems just out of reach. Her experience as a prostitute represents a radical departure from her past and a critical stage in her journey toward self-realization. It is a period marked by intense challenges and personal transformations as she moves closer to understanding and asserting her own individuality, beyond the shadow of her creator. However, even this experience seems not enough to satisfy Bella. She starts attending open lectures of anatomy, which echoes the environment she was raised in, then upon learning of her creator's illness, decides to come home, to her safe and nurturing environment. Her return to Godwin could be seen as a way of confronting and negotiating her ideal self in relation to the symbolic father figure, as well as an attempt to resolve her character arc.

Krupka (2018: 40) asserts that "all the romantic attractions in *Poor Things* have some level of the *object petit a* in them, yet for most of the characters, their *object petit a* stems from the Other's desire. Arguably, neither of the characters end up actually satisfying their desire." *Object petit a*, as previously mentioned, represents the unattainable object of desire, therefore, the Imaginary Order. It's the "little other" (as opposed to the "big Other," which represents the symbolic order, language, law, etc.). Lacan introduces this concept to explain the elusive nature of human desire – how what we desire is not a specific object but rather the idea or fantasy of fulfillment that the object represents. Godwin Baxter seems to be Bella's ultimate *object petit a*. In fact, it is only when she finds out Baxter is sick that she exclaims: "I will become a doctor on the world's account! [...] I will save some people's lives, if not yours. I will replace you! I will become you!" (Gray 1992: 267). This final decision of becoming a doctor, a one just like her creator, is what brings Bella's search for identity to its final resolution. The influence of her creator father seems to persist, and she follows in his footsteps. Godwin and Bella decide together she needs a husband, therefore she marries his friend, and her first romantic interest, Archibald McCandless, then enrolls into medical school under the alias Victoria McCandless, where she studies to become a doctor. It is clear, however, that Bella does not hone much romantic feelings towards her new husband, though he helps her achieve the idealized image of herself.

One way of resolving internal conflicts and desires, according to Freud's concept of identification, involves adopting the traits or roles of significant figures, in this case a paternal figure. Bella's choice to pursue a medical career and adopt the alias Victoria McCandless illustrates a form of sublimation, where she channels her unresolved desires and identification with Godwin Baxter into

a socially acceptable role. There unresolved desires, however, do not refer to any sexual desires, but to the desires one's *object petit a* represents, in Lacanian version of the same. This, moreover, mirrors the Freudian idea of sublimating one's desires into productive activities. Freud (1905: 93) writes "... the influx of these stirrings does not cease even during this period of latency, though their energy is diverted, wholly or in great part, from their sexual application and directed to other purposes." We have already established that there was no period of latency for Bella, as we see her remain sexually active throughout the novel, therefore her decision to dedicate her life to becoming a doctor in her own right may be seen as a resolution of the Electra complex. Freud's Electra complex involves a girl's desire for her father and eventual identification with her mother. Bella's very creation places her in a position where she simultaneously represents both parental figures, adding a layer of complexity to her development, as well as the resolution of these early conflicts. Having detached herself from Godwin's influence by her travels and inserting herself within the Symbolic Order, Bella does form, to a certain degree, her own sense of identity unrelated to her upbringing; and by choosing a career that aligns with Godwin's ideals, Bella is not only sublimating her desires but also integrating the paternal attributes she admired into her own identity. This aligns with Freud's concept of resolution where the child identifies with a parent after resolving earlier desires. In the case of Bella and her unorthodox creation, which precludes the traditional presence of a maternal figure, means that Bella is compelled to fully forge her own identity, ultimately becoming a distinct and autonomous individual, shaped by her creator's influence yet defined by her own choices and self-determination. This is also reflected in the change of her name, from Bella Baxter, which is given to her by her creator, to Victoria McCandless, a woman in her own right.

4. Conclusion

The subject of my paper was to explore the role a parent, or rather, a parental figure has on the development of the child. Through a psychoanalytic lens, using the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to analyse the multifaceted character of Bella Baxter in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, my aim was to showcase her journey from creation to self-discovery. Similarly to the science fiction of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gray's novel eschews the focus on the science of reanimation, instead presenting a narrative centered on the complexities of creator-creation relationships and the human condition. We examined Bella's "monstrous aspect" as both her own mother and daughter, using Cohen's perspective to argue that Bella represents a cultural embodiment of fear, desire, and anxiety. Bella's development is influenced significantly by her creator, Godwin Baxter, whose overprotective role parallels Freudian concepts of parental influence and Lacanian ideas of the mirror stage. Bella's formative years, spent under Baxter's control, reflect her need for parental nurturing and the resultant stifling impact on her autonomy.

Through a Lacanian lens, Bella's progression aligns with the mirror stage, as she struggles with the disjunction between her internal sense of self and external

reality. Freud's psychosexual stages and the Oedipal/Electra complex further contextualize Bella's exploration of sexuality, which seems inseparable from her identity. Her period of separation from Baxter, including her experiences as a prostitute and exposure to harsh realities, signifies a crucial phase in her individuation process. We also discussed Bella's transition from her creator's shadow to autonomy, culminating in her adoption of the alias Victoria McCandless. This change represents Bella's sublimation of her unresolved desires and identification with Baxter into a productive and socially accepted role. Freud's concept of the Electra complex is used to illustrate Bella's resolution of early conflicts and her development into an independent individual, defined by her own choices rather than her creator's influence. In conclusion, Bella's evolution from Bella Baxter to Victoria McCandless highlights her journey towards self-definition and autonomy, demonstrating the ever-profound impact of parental influence and the complex interplay of psychoanalytic theories in shaping her identity.

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