

Poor Things with Emma Stone: “If I know the world, I can improve it”

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Poor Things is a film set in the late 19th century that follows the sentimental and social education of a young woman obliged to start life over again mentally, as it were, as the result of a peculiar set of circumstances.

The work is inspired by Scottish writer Alasdair Gray’s prize-winning 1992 novel of the same title, although director Yorgos Lanthimos and screenwriter Tony McNamara have considerably altered the original material.

After she commits suicide by jumping off a bridge over the Thames in London, a very pregnant woman—Victoria Blessington (as we much later learn her to be)—undergoes a surgery at the hands of Godwin Baxter, an eccentric scientist and medical school lecturer, and receives her own unborn child’s brain. With the help or hindrance of the various individuals she meets, Bella Baxter—her new name—makes her way, awkwardly, tortuously, toward an awareness of herself and the world.

Lanthimos has previously directed several films, including *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *The Favourite*. None of these was all that appealing, marked by an overall chilly and self-conscious idiosyncrasy, and occasional misanthropy.

Poor Things is a much better work, oriented more sympathetically toward its characters, above all its central figure, and their struggles. It dramatically proves that, despite many obstacles, human progress and advancement are possible. As Bella concludes, after a number of sobering incidents, “If I know the world, I can improve it.”

The film opens (after its brief prologue) with Bella (Emma Stone) now living in the home of the disfigured Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe). The latter hires Max McCandles (Ramy Youssef) as an assistant and informs him, lyingly, that the young woman has “suffered a brain injury. Her mental age and her body are not quite synchronised. Language is coming.” Baxter requires Max to “meticulously note” Bella’s “progression.” The rambling house is complete with odd, hybrid animals, pig-dogs, duck-lambs and the like.

Max proceeds to fall in love with the fascinating, disturbing Bella, who lurches around as though she has just learned to walk. Baxter deflects Max’s initial questions about her history (before subsequently coming clean) and keeps his charge essentially under lock and key. When Max asks, “Has she ever been outside?,” Baxter replies that he has instead created “a perfectly entertaining and safe world” indoors.

As part of her “growing up,” Bella learns more and more words, pushes and battles to see what lies beyond her immediate environs and also discovers the pleasure of masturbation. Max is encouraged by Baxter to ask Bella to marry him, but his primness about premarital sex leaves her vulnerable to the seductions of Duncan Wedderburn (Mark Ruffalo), an unprincipled, womanizing lawyer, hired to draw up a marriage contract.

Wedderburn entices Bella, whom he sees as a “hungry being, hungry for experience, freedom, touch,” to run off with him to Lisbon. She promptly informs Baxter of her plans, “You hold Bella too tight. I must set forth into waters.”

In Lisbon, Wedderburn and Bella fornicate at length (which she amusingly terms “furious jumping”). At first, all goes well in this and other departments. But Bella grows restless for adventure and roams the city, finding “nothing but sugar and violence.” She also embarrasses Duncan in front of respectable people by her unlikely behavior and inappropriate conversation. In their hotel dining room, to the astonishment of onlookers, they perform a mad, improvised dance.

Duncan soon tires of her outings (some of which lead to sexual activity with strangers) and generally unpredictable ways. He invites her to climb into a large trunk, and when she later clammers out of it she discovers they are in a ship at sea. Bella makes the acquaintance of several passengers on board, including the cynical Harry Astley (Jerrod Carmichael). During one of their conversations, Astley rejects her view that it is “the goal of all to improve, advance, progress and grow,” insisting that the notion of improvement “is people trying to run away from the fact we are cruel beasts. Born that way, die that way.” To reinforce the point, Harry offers to demonstrate to Bella “what the world is really like.”

When the ship docks in Alexandria, Egypt, he points out to her a slum that can be seen from their hotel. As the screenplay describes it: “She looks down in horror at a sprawling mess of impoverished, desperate people, mangy dogs, impoverished goats. Squalor, flies and mud.” Bella wants to assist the wretched people somehow, but Harry holds her back. She gives Duncan’s gambling winnings away in an effort to aid the poor, much to his outrage. As a result, the pair are thrown off the ship for insufficient funds, and must wend their way to Paris.

Bella goes to work there in a brothel (“I need sex and money”), which brings about a final break with Wedderburn. In addition to experiencing jealousy and possessiveness, he has been infuriated

for some time by her reading and her new intellectual powers (“You are always reading now, Bella. You are losing some of your adorable way of speaking”). Bella is now “free to study on the world and the improving of it.” Toinette (Suzy Bemba), a black fellow prostitute, offers practical advice and also introduces her to new ideas:

Toinette: Pamphlet. Read. Je suis socialiste. [I am a socialist.]

Bella: What is that?

Toinette: Une personne qui veut changer [A person who wants to change] ... change the world pour le meilleur [for the better]! Make it better. A better world.

Bella: Then I am that too.

Due to Godwin Baxter’s sharply deteriorating health, Max sets out to find Bella in Paris. On learning of her beloved father-mentor’s condition, she returns to London and her “childhood” home. Various secrets finally emerge, including the mystery of Bella’s marriage and former life. An odious, repressive husband emerges at an inopportune moment, an army officer who regularly aims his revolver at the help (“The servants and I have not been getting along. I fear an uprising”). After various further escapades, Bella and those close to her devise new and unusual living arrangements.

Poor Things is an often entertaining and intriguing work. Its look and feel have been carefully worked on. In keeping with the extravagant or exaggerated action, Lanthimos and his collaborators have provided the film, once Bella launches out on her own, with a hyper-artificial, radiant color scheme and décor. This emphasizes the fantastical, unnatural character of the events, but it also reflects the “newness” and brilliance of things to Bella, who is unaccustomed to the daylight (especially of southern Europe) and needs sunglasses on her perambulations.

However, unlike Gray’s novel, which suffers from its somewhat smug, pro-feminist leanings (including in its epilogue where a latter-day Victoria Blessington asserts that the narrative about her suicide and singular rebirth was entirely invented, merely another “morbid Victorian fantasy”), the film adaptation speaks to something broader about the need for people to struggle very hard against the conditions in which they find themselves, and the possibility of overcoming those conditions.

And not merely through personal enlightenment and “self-development” occurring apart from the rest of society and humanity. The turning point in the film, as in the novel, comes when Bella spies the abject misery in Alexandria. She can never be the same, reacting as any honest person, without a vested interest in conditions as they are, would react, with horror and an immediate desire to see things changed (“We must go help them!”). Bella comes to identify herself and her possibilities through her restless, insatiable intervention in life, in accordance with Goethe’s notion that “Man knows himself only inasmuch as he knows the world ... Each new object truly recognized, opens up a new organ within ourselves.”

Stone’s astonishing effort (and Lanthimos’ direction of her) has a great deal to do with the film’s wider scope. *Poor Things* has its irritating and self-conscious moments, but the actress brings tremendous humanity and empathy to the role. It is a generous, many-sided performance, with both humor and pathos, and not at all suggestive of narrow, selfish gender politics. (Heading off with Toinette to a “meeting of socialists” in Paris, Bella tosses off at Duncan, “We are our own means of production. Get out of the way.”)

Bella Baxter receives a good many blows and undergoes numerous indignities, but proceeds through it all without shame or discouragement. This is something of a fantasy, or at least hyperbolic, but a general theme emerges. The film values the damaged and changeable, the hybridized, the mongrelized, those who have undergone pain and alteration, those prepared to endure humiliation. The “upright” bourgeois characters, or those who attempt to hold themselves upright, whole and aloof, are a sorry, miserable lot, condemned to live up to their own inhuman, repressive standards.

It is noteworthy that *Poor Things* tends to take for granted that capitalism and the accumulation of great wealth (along with colonialism and militarism) are abominations.

Unexpectedly, the film is an improvement on Gray’s novel in a number of ways. It is less cluttered, getting more directly to the point. Moreover, Gray had allowed himself to be seduced into backing the reactionary agenda of Scottish nationalism, and remained a believer in “democratic welfare-state Socialism” at a time when the reformist parties that once championed that course had veered sharply to the right. The unnecessarily roundabout and laborious character of *Poor Things* the novel hints at an attempt by the author to distract himself, in the early 1990s, from contemporary political realities.

Lanthimos and his colleagues, now working in and presumably influenced by—directly or indirectly—a situation in which great floods of people are rejecting the status quo, have created a film more socially concrete and emotionally compelling.



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