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The Sexual Politics of Alasdair Gray's "Main" Novels

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine how the subject of sex figures in the writing of Alasdair Gray, and more specifically in his three major novels: *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), *1982, Janine* (1984), and *Poor Things* (1992). The argument is that while the theme has so far gone mostly unexplored in scholarly criticism devoted to Gray's work, it is in fact a dominant element of his literary universe as well as his social and political thought, giving rise to his own unique brand of "sexual politics." After framing the discussion by briefly commenting on the complexity of modern philosophical, cultural and literary discourses on sex, and the nature of Gray's artistic vision, the article explores the novels in question, showing them to be profoundly sex-focused and revealing Gray's own version of the sexual as a deeply political notion.

Keywords: Alasdair Gray, sex in literature, sex in culture, contemporary Scottish fiction, Scottish society

1. Introduction

While Alasdair Gray is commonly considered one of, if not *the* most important contemporary Scottish writer, up until recently his fame has mostly been domestic. This has somewhat changed with the release of Yorgos Lanthimos's film adaptation of Gray's 1992 novel *Poor Things*, which became an international success, garnering several awards (including Emma Stone's Academy Award for her leading role) and considerable media exposure. In the process, Gray's name and his novel were repeatedly brought up, granting him new (if still quite limited) attention from critics and audiences around the world. With regard to Lanthimos's work, almost all critical discussion references the explicit sexual content, exploring the

film's openness and transgressiveness in this regard.[1] Indeed, the Victorian-era set, *Frankenstein*-inspired narrative of a young pregnant woman who commits suicide and is subsequently revived by a scientist, having had her brain replaced with that of her unborn foetus, portrays the reinvention of its heroine in primarily sexual terms: unbounded by societal concerns and conventions, Bella Baxter (re) gains her knowledge of the world through sex – first by means of masturbation, then through a passionate affair with an immoral lawyer with whom she travels the world, and finally as a worker in a Parisian brothel. All these stages of her evolution are unabashedly presented on screen. This, coupled with the director's claims of his and his screenwriter's faithfulness to the source text (which is actually debatable, but for the most part not the topic of the present discussion),[2] naturally creates an image of Gray's book as similarly being centred on the topic of sex.

This is not untrue, and in fact, as I intend to demonstrate, this preoccupation actually extends to all three of Gray's major novels; however, it also seems considerably different in nature from what we see in Lanthimos's film, arguably proving more complex and, ultimately, more extensive. While Gray's output is a frequent subject of scholarly investigations within Scottish studies, and it has been considered from a wide variety of perspectives, this particular aspect of his literary universe appears to have so far gone largely unexplored, and when addressed (mostly in discussions of Gray's second, largely pornographic, novel *1982, Janine*), it tends to be viewed as an element of that universe but not vital to it. Consequently, the present analysis examines the topic of sex in Gray's oeuvre, focusing specifically on his "main" novels – *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, *1982, Janine* and *Poor Things*.[3] In doing so, I seek to establish, on the one hand, how sex figures in Gray's artistic and ideological vision, and on the other, what this profoundly Scottish author, so centred on his country, adds to the vast expanse of sexual discourses offered by contemporary texts of literature and culture.

2. Sex in (Contemporary) Culture and Literature

Being a fundamental, and indeed foundational part of our lives, sex as a theme has been a literary fixture for as long as literature has been around, and while openness on the subject and its explicit treatment would historically often belong to the cultural margins, with sexual content being frowned upon (and, at certain periods, outright banned), over time it has been framed in a wide variety of ways and contexts. In modern thought, the territory of cultural/literary inquiry into sex and sexuality can perhaps be viewed as a spectrum, at one end of which we have a more scientific, anthropological perspective, offering pronouncements on the generalised mechanisms of this sphere of our existence. These inquiries can focus on the physiology of the sexual act (as was for instance the case with the studies conducted by Alfred Kinsey), take a psychological perspective (going back to the

beginning of the 20th century and the work of Sigmund Freud) as well as propose an array of philosophical approaches – represented by figures such as Bertrand Russell, who in *Marriage and Morals* (2016 [1929]) offers his liberal views to challenge Victorian morality, which he perceives as sexually repressed and repressive, and Michel Foucault, whose *History of Sexuality* (1990 [1976]) famously pronounces sexuality to be a social construct. In social anthropological terms, of note is J.D. Unwin's seminal 1934 study *Sex and Culture*, which finds that sexual restraint leads to the evolution of societies, while sexual liberalism results in social entropy.[4] At the other end of the spectrum, we have deeply personal narratives, focusing on nuanced identities and individualised experience, which is arguably the domain of much contemporary literary fiction concerned with the sexual.

Today, in the Western world, sex functions as a theme, and often a central one, for all sorts of literary texts, ranging from writings of a graphically erotic nature, through romantic fiction, to philosophical deliberations on all aspects of the sexual, and from purely genre novels to what we commonly consider literature proper. And while this is nothing new, it can be argued that, with growing cultural and social liberalisation and openness towards the subject, coupled with the increasing emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual, including their sexual identity and life – a perspective characteristic of today's Western individualistic cultures (Hosfede) – we have been witnessing an unprecedented proliferation of sex-driven and sex-centred narratives.

Where then does Alasdair Gray's work from the last two decades of the previous century fall in this context, given how subversive it has been made to look by Lanthimos's film? What significance may sex have for a writer who is considered the founding figure of the Scotland-oriented and politically-charged pre-devolution revival of the Scottish novel?

3. Alasdair Gray's "Total Vision"

If one were to summarise Gray's writing career, one would likely say, among other things, that he was an author deeply obsessive about his themes, and also a literary artist (as well as a visual one) demonstrating what we might term a totality of vision. As frequently noted, Gray was not just a writer, but a maker of books (White; King and Lee; King), responsible for both the narrative content and the form of his works, including the illustrations, the layout, the typography, the blurbs and even, at times, the reviews, creating books that "flood their banks and burst their seams" (King and Lee 216). On the other hand, as indicated above, he was a distinctly Scottish figure, or, to use Donald Kaczvinsky's words, a writer possessing a "genuinely Scottish imagination" (798), focused on making his country and its society the primary subject matter for his literary creations (both fictional and non-fictional). This dual stance has arguably been reflected in Gray criticism, where the majority of studies on his output, both the literary, and, more recently,

the visual one,[5] explore his relationship with the notion of "Literature" and "Art" and/or position him as a highly politically and socially minded author, preoccupied with questions of Scottish identity and history. Regardless of the chosen interpretative framework, however, scholars of Gray's oeuvre generally seem to take their cue from the author himself and with it the broad view, seeking to account for the complexity and comprehensiveness of his vision. This is quite natural and fully understandable given the nature of the work in question – when something is so extensive and intricate, it may seem potentially futile to zoom in on its individual parts and, consequently, risk not accounting for the entire picture. And in Gray's grand scheme of things as laid out by his three "main" novels, the theme of sex may at first appear to be one of these lesser, secondary elements, with, seemingly, only *1982, Janine* making it its primary subject (although that, too, seems somewhat questionable, as even critical engagements devoted to this particular work tend not to depict and discuss the novel's sexual content as its major aspect).[6] That said, I would like to offer two (counter)points here: one is that sex is actually more crucial for Gray's work than it may initially appear, and the second is that by focusing our attention on the singular and its place in the expanse of the author's creative universe, we can actually get a proper sense of the nature of his vision. The former will be explored later in this article, in the sections discussing each of the books in question; to clarify the latter, let us briefly turn to two passages from Gray's foundational debut novel.

The above-noted scope of Gray's vision is clearly demonstrated by his first literary offering, published in 1981. *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, around thirty years in the making, was, rather boldly, Gray's attempt to contain within one piece of writing "everything he knew" (2016, n.p.). It is an account of the protagonist's life, but also of the life of Gray's home city, Glasgow, and, by extension, the Scottish nation. But not only does Gray want to show all he knows – as two highly telling and evocative passages in the novel indicate, he also wants to show it in a very particular way. In the first scene in question, the central character, Duncan Thaw, a young student of art increasingly overwhelmed by his creative imagination, is struggling to sketch Glasgow's Blackhill Locks:

> This was difficult. He knew how the two great water staircases curved round and down the hill, but from any one level the rest were invisible. Moreover, the weight of the architecture was seen best from the base, the spaciousness from on top; yet he wanted to show both equally so that eyes would climb his landscape as freely as a good athlete exploring the place. He invented a perspective showing the locks from below when looked at from left to right and from above when seen from right to left; he painted them as they would appear to a giant lying on his side, with eyes more than a hundred feet apart and tilted at an angle of 45 degrees. Working from maps, photographs, sketches and memory his favourite views had nearly all been combined into one when a new problem arose.

> He had meant to people the canvas with Sunday afternoon activity: children fishing for minnows with jam-jars, a woman clipping a hedge round an old lockkeeper's cottage, a pensioner exercising a dog on the towpath. But the locks now looked so solid that he wanted them to frame something vaster. (Gray 2002, 279)

Then, in the other crucial scene, Duncan clashes with an art teacher over his drawing of a shell. The teacher asks him to just draw what he sees, which leads to the following exchange:

> "I'm doing that, Miss Mackenzie."
>
> "Then stop drawing everything with the same black harsh line. Hold the pencil lightly; don't grip it like a spanner. That shell is a simple, delicate, rather lovely thing. Your drawing is like the diagram of a machine."
>
> "But surely, Miss Mackenzie, the shell only seems delicate and simple because it's smaller than we are. To the fish inside it was a suit of armour, a house, a moving fortress."
>
> "Duncan, if I were a marine biologist I might care how the shell was used. As an artist my sole interest is in the appearance. I insist that it appears beautiful and delicate and should be drawn beautifully and delicately. There's no need to show these little cracks. They're accidental. Ignore them."
>
> "But Miss Mackenzie, the cracks show the shell's nature—only this shell could crack in this way. It's like the wart on Cromwell's lip. Leave it out and it's no longer a picture of Cromwell."
>
> "All right, but please don't make the wart as important as the lip. You've drawn these cracks as clearly as the edges of the shell itself." (Gray 2002, 229)

What emerges from these two passages is an artistic concept in which a thing is described simultaneously from all angles and where it is depicted in a way that is both intricate and simple, with deliberate lack of hierarchy to its elements or, in other words, with everything being of equal importance. Both these excerpts can certainly be viewed as laying out the artistic rule for Duncan Thaw. Arguably, however, it is just as much the literary rule for Gray himself (fittingly so, given that Duncan is Gray as a young man), and one applicable not just to *Lanark*, but to the entirety of his literary universe, and each of its parts.

This holistic perspective on ideas and themes corresponds with other types of holism identified by several Gray scholars: the previously mentioned notion of the book-object, but also an approach to the self – which Stephen Bernstein proposes to term "psychological holism" and identifies as something that Gray's protagonists work towards (2007, 168); and then, further, the inherent link between the individual and the collective. With regard to this final type, Alison Lunden discusses *Lanark* and the systems that operate on both personal and social levels

(115), Scott Hames notes that the novel integrates "the subjective, interpersonal and national" (270), and John Glendening evocatively proclaims that "Gray believes that self-identity and group identity, individual freedom and group freedom, are inseparable and that this basic connection should undergird any political or socio-economic position" (85). These conclusions are certainly crucial in the context of the present discussion, as I hope to demonstrate here that in Gray's literary universe, the significance of sex for the individual always translates into its significance for the collective. That said, only when this notion of holism also extends to the artistic mechanics of the author's vision (as it does naturally) do we get a proper sense of how this convergence of ideas is achieved.

What then would this creative principle, laid out in these two passages from *Lanark*, mean for Gray's treatment of sex, which he recognises and depicts as the foundation and site of life itself – in more ways than just the most obvious, procreative one? The first conclusion we can draw is that it functions in more than one dimension (in fact, in all dimensions simultaneously), taking up different roles and being crucially and inherently inscribed in Gray's total vision. This accounts for the above-mentioned psychological holism and the inherent, organic link between the individual and the collective, but is not limited to them. Another is that all its guises are equally important and all inform the whole. This means that sex as the primary theme of *1982, Janine* is as significant as sex in *Lanark*, where it is but one of the many building blocks of this epic, all-encompassing literary landscape. Let us now turn to the novels in question and explore the centrality of sex for Gray, in all its presence and absence.

4. *1982, Janine*

As previously indicated, Gray's interest in the subject of sex is actually quite evident, with the author openly admitting that "[t]he earliest verses [he] wrote were written mainly out of sexual or adolescent frustration" (2016, n.p.), but it is made especially so with his second novel, *1982, Janine*, published in 1984, in which he makes sex the focal point and foundation of both his narrative and typographical design. This in itself would not be surprising – as it has already been noted, many people write about sex – were it not for the fact that in this book, a pornographic fantasy becomes a vehicle for exploring the protagonist's, Jock McLeish's, bleak existence but also, to go back to that quotation from *Lanark*, to frame something vaster: an examination of Scotland in the second half of the 20th century, and especially under Margaret Thatcher's rule.

This novel serves as a starting point for the present discussion, which, as also already indicated, then spreads outwards to include *Lanark* and *Poor Things*, Gray's third major novel. This means that, chronologically speaking, we begin in the middle – which is quite fitting, if we think about the structuring of *Lanark*. As

its full title indicates, it is made up of four books, but the order of these is 3–1–2–4, with a prologue after Book 1 and an epilogue in the middle of Book 4, because "it's too important to go [at the end]" (Gray 2002, 483).

And since we start with the middle novel, it seems like a good idea to also start at its middle, which is where we reach the book's narrative and typographical climax. Presented on two pages, it takes the form of numerous bits of text rendered in different fronts and taking different shapes aimed towards the centre of each page. Narratively speaking, this is a point at which the protagonist, overwhelmed by the cacophony of voices in his head, attempts to commit suicide. In this way, we are introduced to the first sex-related concept in Gray's literary diagram, namely a convergence of sex and death, of Eros and Thanatos, these contrary yet concurrent fundamental drives of human life postulated by Sigmund Freud in his both seminal and controversial essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," here encapsulated in the notion of "*SUFFUFFUFFUFFUFFUFUCKUCKUCKUCKATING*" (Gray 1985, 184). This link, as we will see, is a running theme for Gray. However, this is by no means the only guise under which sex functions in this novel, called by the writer himself a "sadomasochistic fetishistic fantasy" "full of depressing memories and propaganda for the Conservative Party" (Gray 1985, n.p.). This is a highly accurate account of *1982, Janine*, which is made up of two main narrative strands: one is the protagonist's, Jock McLeish's, fantasy world, where he imagines violent sexual scenarios inflicted upon a cast of his female characters, including the titular Janine. The other is what this fictional world is supposed to serve as an escape from, namely painful memories of Jock's childhood and youth, focusing primarily on his relationship with his parents, including his doubts as to who his real father is, and subsequently with his most important romantic partners, first Denny, his working-class girlfriend at the time of his studies, followed by Helen, his second, middle-class girlfriend whom he leaves Denny for and who goes on to become his wife, and then ex-wife. This personal history is reflected in Jock's pornographic fantasies with deliberate and self-mocking crudeness – a fact laid out in the chapter summaries included in the book's table of contents which introduce, for instance, "A Superb housewife, ripe for pleasure and not atall (*sic*.) like my wife Helen," or "A lesbian policewoman who is not atall (*sic*.) like my mother" (Gray 1985, n.p.). But, as previously indicated, the pornographic narrative mirrors more than just Jock's life as an individual – it also represents his role as a member of society, merging the personal and the national, one's story and a nation's history. Thus, the dynamics of sex are shown to transcend the realm of one man's intimate relationships and become politicised. This is signaled in many ways throughout the text, including the description of chapter 11, which reads: "FROM THE CAGE TO THE TRAP: or: How I Reached and Lost Three Crowded Months of Glorious Life: or: How I Became Perfect, Married Two Wives Then Embraced Cowardice: or Scotland 1952–82." Another instance is a comment anthropomorphising Scotland, depicting her as "shaped like a fat messy woman with a surprisingly slender waist"

(Gray 1985, 281). However, nowhere is it made more explicit than in the following passage, in which Jock's meditation on his personal history violently converges with the realm of the national:

> But if a country is not just a tract of land but a whole people then clearly Scotland has been fucked. I mean that word in the vulgar sense of misused to give satisfaction or advantage to another. Scotland has been fucked and I am one of the fuckers who fucked her and I REFUSE TO FEEL BITTER OR GUILTY ABOUT THIS. I am not a gigantically horrible fucker, I'm an ordinary fucker. And no hypocrite. I refuse to deplore a process which has helped me become the sort of man I want to be: a selfish shit but a comfortable selfish shit, like everyone I meet nowadays. (Gray 1985, 136–137)

Gray makes an ideological statement here by drawing on and linking the two meanings of "being fucked" – being sexually used for someone else's gratification and being, as a result of the former, trapped in a hopeless situation. This discourse shows sex to be a site and form of exploitation, a power dynamic covering all the ways in which we use and control each other, and one equally applicable to individuals and systems.

One notion that naturally comes to mind in this regard is the question of the allocation of gender roles in the novel's "national allegory" dimension, with Scotland portrayed as an abused woman – a topic that has been extensively explored by Kirsten Stirling. In offering a feminist critique of Gray's use of the nation-as-an-objectified-woman trope, Stirling positions the novel's sexual content as dictated by the book's engagement with this very concept, noting that "Gray is aware of the politics of the exploitation of women's bodies" (125).[7] This is certainly an important context (and one that is evocatively revisited in *Poor Things*), but, arguably, it also seems to be only part of the story, which, rather than serving a single gender-based sexual-as-national narrative, sets it within a broader picture of sex dynamics. Stirling's reading can be juxtaposed, for instance, with Jonathan Coe's focus on the novel's 'real' (non-sadomasochistic-fantasy) sex, which, according to him, is depicted in a "deeply sympathetic and compelling" way (64). My point here is that both Stirling and Coe are right, since *1982, Janine* is simply many things. In the novel, the pornographic narrative, Jock's recounting of his life, and his political commentary all converge into one, and the resulting literary and ideological image, or diagram, of sex is all things at once, like the Locks landscape, and at the same time intricate and blunt, like the shell drawing. Early on in the novel Jock proclaims: "My problem is sex and if it isn't, sex hides the problem so completely that I don't know what it is" (Gray 1985, 16). It could be argued that yes, his problem is sex, but also that sex is everything, not in the sense of occupying him completely but in the sense of encompassing all aspects of living among other people, in the most particular and the most general sense, and all the senses in between. We see this in the book's climax, where the voices do cover everything – from screams of ecstasy

and Jock calling for his parents, through the appearance of God and a call for social action, to commentary on the general nature of humanity.

Sex is political for Gray, but not only in the way in which we typically understand it to be political today, by functioning as a site of largely gender-based power dynamics or the conflict between leftist progressiveness and right-wing conservatism: rather, it appears that, for the writer, this comes from sexual dynamics shaping us as society, with good and bad habits reflected in our social and political practices (and conversely – with our politics shaping our intimate relations). Thus, while Cairns Craig is certainly right in arguing that *1982, Janine*'s two narrative strands shed no light on nor enrich one another, because they just repeat the same scenario, and through it, reveal themselves to be equally empty and pointless (186–187), arguably, that in itself is meaningful; the fact that Gray chooses a sexual rhetoric for his political discussion is significant for both and speaks to their inherent interconnectedness. As a result, "private sexual fantasy [proves to be] a re-enactment of the very terms which dominate and repress ordinary humanity" (Craig 186), and "Britain is […] organized like a bad adolescent fantasy" (Gray 1985, 139), a shared dynamic that is hardly surprising, given that, as Jock finally realises, "history is what we all make, everywhere, each moment of our lives, whether we notice it or not" (Gray 1985, 340).

In other words, as Edwin Morgan evocatively puts it, "it is all human, [Jock] discovers, and about Scotland, and Glasgow, and the state of the soul and senses, and the pilgrimages thereof" (97). Finally, it needs to be added that as dark and depressing as much of *1982, Janine* is, it is a journey, and one that actually ends on a hopeful note – the sexual and narrative trajectory goes from a place of repression, frustration, rejection, betrayal, lovelessness and cruelty, to a place of some kind of redemption, fueled by honesty and openness, and a sense of agency, which, Gray indicates, are the foundation not only of good sex but also of good society.

5. *Lanark*

In *Lanark*, sex is also a major, even foundational theme, albeit less explicitly so. Again a dual narrative, the middle part of the novel, which is, as previously mentioned, largely autobiographical, describes the childhood and youth of Duncan Thaw, a precocious boy who grows into a sensitive, socially awkward and intensely imaginative student of art, whose struggles ultimately drive him to suicide. This narrative is framed by another, which Gray himself describes as his "Kafkaesque afterdeath parody of our society" (2016, n.p.), and in which Glasgow turns into its hellish version by the name of Unthank. Here Duncan becomes Lanark, a man with no memory of his past life, seeking to build a lasting relationship with a woman called Rima, and failing, seeking to have a relationship with the son he fathers with her, and failing, and finally attempting to save Unthank from an impending

apocalypse – and failing at that as well. As in *Janine*, both for Duncan and Lanark, sex, in its role as a vehicle for love and the source of new life, is largely, though as we will see not entirely, about frustration and disappointment. And just as in *Janine*, the issue of sex functions on the level of the individual but also simultaneously extends to something broader. This is clearly indicated by the fictional author of *Lanark* (the novel), whom Lanark (the protagonist) meets and talks to in the epilogue, and who proclaims that "The Thaw narrative shows a man dying because he is bad at loving. It is enclosed by your narrative which shows civilisation collapsing for the same reason" (Gray 2002, 484).

Here, too, as in the case of *1982, Janine*, the fact of being "bad at loving" is never limited solely to the sphere of intimacy and interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, the novel's depiction of Duncan's teenage years does focus on sexual repression and confusion, which partly have to do with his peculiarity but also, and more crucially, seem to be a natural effect (and cause) of growing up in an emotionally stunted society, an environment leading him to assume that "[sex] was so disgusting that it had to be indulged secretly and not mentioned to others" (Gray 2002, 165). On the other hand, interestingly, what his subsequent, awkward interactions with girls and pent-up sexual energy ultimately translate into is a heightened artistic drive. Thus, sex spreads to different parts of his life, even turning his primary subject, the city, into an object of desire, as seen in the following excerpt:

> the world of things began to cause surprising emotions. A haulage vehicle carrying a huge piece of bright yellow machinery swelled his heart with tenderness and stiffened his penis with lust. A section of tenement, the surface a dirty yellow plaster with oval holes through which brickwork showed, gave the eerie conviction he was beholding a kind of flesh. Walls and pavements, especially if they were slightly decayed, made him feel he was walking beside or over a body. (Gray 2002, 228)

In this, Gray's narrative may at first glance seem to coincide with J. D. Unwin's findings concerning the creative potential that becomes unlocked through sexual abstinence, but ultimately it powerfully contradicts them. Duncan is unable to contend with or accommodate this energy and it inevitably leads to what Alison Lumsden aptly terms his "personal and societal dissolution" (115). In the end, it is the unfulfilled relationship with a fellow student that becomes a catalyst for his ultimate artistic frenzy, which leads to the climax of the Thaw narrative. Here, sex again becomes a juxtaposition of life and death, as creative vitality and sexual desire converge with what we suspect to be the mid-coitus murder of a prostitute, followed by Duncan's suicide.

Then, in Unthank, Lanark's personal drama with Rima and Sludden, the leader of the clique that Rima is part of and subsequently her lover, again imbues sex with a political aspect. The interplay between the three characters, with Lanark loving

Rima, her leaving him, and Sludden using him by first offering Rima to him and then taking her away, becomes a microcosm of the bad social practices of people who exploit one another, a site of coldness, selfishness, cynicism and unkindness. In that, as previously indicated, the novel uses the topic of sex in much the same way as *Janine* – taking an individual's sexual history and expanding it into a commentary on the dynamics within Scottish society. Moreover, as with both the previous novel and *Lanark*'s Thaw narrative, this story, too, features a climax – this time titled as such (this is the name of chapter 41) – in which Lanark experiences his "best moment" (Gray 2002, 515), spending time with his son. As Bernstein points out, this moment of happiness is immediately preceded (and thus, arguably, made possible) by Lanark partaking in an orgy, which "may not have been love, but it left him ready for love" (Gray 2002, 519; Bernstein 1999, 51). This positive sexual encounter – where he manages to shed his sense of shame and is received with openness and generosity – has an immediate, if brief, positive effect on other aspects of his self, once again underlining the significance of sexual life for personal and social well-being.

6. *Poor Things*

As previously indicated, Lanthimos's film makes Gray's *Poor Things* out to be highly explicit in terms of its exploration of sexuality. Meanwhile, although there is certainly a bluntness to Bella's commentary on her many sexual encounters,[8] because of the novel's structure, where her story is mostly reported through her letters, it does not actually translate into any graphic scenes of a sexual nature. That said, as also already noted, the book's interest in the subject does prove to be extensive and complex, with sex figuring in the novel in a number of ways.

As was the case with *Lanark* and *1982, Janine*, this novel's female protagonist, Bella Baxter, also functions on two planes – as an individual and as a personified allegory of Scotland, which is clearly signaled by the fact that her portrait, featured in the book, bears the inscription "Bella Caledonia" (this, coincidentally, being something that is entirely missing from the film, where the story is actually set in London).[9] At the beginning of the novel, a young English woman named Lady Victoria Blessington, married to an esteemed English general and pregnant with his child, drowns herself in the Clyde. Towards the end of the narrative we learn that this was her response to him impregnating and then discarding a 16-year-old servant. We also learn that her husband refused to meet her sexual needs, considering her strong sex drive a sign of madness, supported in this conviction by the family doctor who argues that "[n]o normal healthy woman – no good or sane woman wants or expects to enjoy sexual contact, except as a duty" (Gray 1993, 218). Thus, once again sex is linked to the giving and the taking of life, a conjunction of Eros and Thanatos, a notion reinforced by the image opening the narrative:

Gray's reworking of William Strang's *Grotesque*, an etching that depicts a naked woman emerging from the mouth of a skull.[10] At the same time, however, sex also again functions as a site and form of enslavement, control and oppression, which can be exercised both by enforcing and withholding it.

The drowned woman is subsequently revived by Godwin Baxter, an odd and grotesque Scottish medical research assistant, who, in a Frankenstein-like fashion, replaces her brain with that of her foetus. Baxter intends this new creature to be his companion, but Bella instead sets her sights on his university friend, the rather docile Archibald McCandless and then, in a bid to grow, evolve, and shape her consciousness, she abandons them both, embarking on a journey with another man, the immoral and debauched Duncan Wedderburn. Bella, like Janine, is a man's construct, created for his satisfaction, but her story is primarily and decidedly one of emancipation, in a way picking up where the previous novel left off. Her education and resultant liberation are firmly based on sex, as explicitly indicated by Gray, who opens the "Making a Conscience" chapter with *Gray's Anatomy*'s detailed, close-up image of the vulva. Bella's evolution involves her experience with Wedderburn, whom she ultimately drives insane with her insatiability, and a subsequent period that she spends working at a brothel in Paris. The latter grants her final and definitive freedom from her husband, who towards the end of the novel comes to reclaim her, as she is able to escape his grasp by identifying and exposing him as one of the clients frequenting the Parisian establishment:

> General Sir Aubrey de la Pole Spankybot V.C., how funny! Most brothel customers are quick squirts but you were the quickest of the lot! The things you paid the girls to do to stop you coming in the first half minute would make a hahahahaha make a cat laugh! Still, they liked you. General Spankybot paid well and did no harm - you never gave one of us the pox. 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! (Gray 1993, 238)

In this way, sex is ultimately confirmed as having the potential to be a positive liberating force, a way towards independence, which again needs to be read in the context of Gray's central allegory: the emancipation of Bella as the emancipation of Scotland. Sex is also a source of knowledge; it allows Bella to grow into a conscious social being, Scotland's first female doctor to graduate from the University of Glasgow – her choice of profession, of course, hardly coincidental. Importantly, the allegorical dimension of the narrative entails that the significance of sex is again shown to go beyond the protagonist's individual experience and to apply as much to her story as to that of the nation. It is presented as a crucial domain where the intimate lives of individuals shape social, cultural and political practices, a dynamic which is brought here into a specifically Scottish context. This perspective seems

to side with Bertrand Russell's criticism of "Victorian values," turning Gray's novel into a political commentary on Thatcher's government.[11] As a result, as in the previous novels, sex is all things – it is a physiological, psychological, cultural and political phenomenon that defines the individual and the collective.

7. Conclusion

Gray's three major novels show the subject of sex to lie at the very core of his literary and ideological vision. Sex, according to Gray, is the foundation and vehicle for all the contradictory forces that drive our lives as individuals and as members of the social world: love and lovelessness, action and inaction, freedom and oppression, knowledge and ignorance, life and death. It is important to stress again that, despite being markedly different, the three texts simultaneously prove highly consistent in their depiction and treatment of the subject, thus testifying to the totality of the author's design. Consequently, we could say that what emerges here is a symbiotic relationship: exploring Alasdair Gray's vision makes us understand his take on sex, while tracing his take on sex illuminates the essence of that vision. And, considered in a broader context, such a perspective on sex can be viewed as a valuable contribution to the vast array of sexual discourses offered by contemporary texts of literature and culture. While Gray's take on the subject contains traces and echoes of several theoretical concepts and frameworks, which might tempt one into reading it through or against them, it could be argued that its primary value lies beyond such considerations. What Gray shows us is that individual experience is crucial but in no way separate for the general cultural, social and political mechanics of the world. On the contrary, it is their very stuff. While this may not be a new thought (indeed, it should not be, given Gray's beliefs about recycling texts and ideas), it is certainly one of which we should be reminded.

Notes

1 For instance, the film's review in *The Independent* opens with the following statement: "There is a lot of 'furious jumping' going on in Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things*. This is the phrase its heroine Bella Baxter (Emma Stone) uses to describe sex. Once she's first stuffed a cucumber inside what she calls her 'hairy business,' a new world of adventure and tragedy opens up for her" (MacNab n.p.). Guy Lodge, reviewing *Poor Things* for *Variety*, notes that "[o]ne crucial day [Bella] discovers what's between her legs, and how good it feels when she touches it" (n.p.). Ryan Latanzio opens his Venice Film Festival review of Lanthimos's work with the words: "Yorgos Lanthimos' 'Poor Things' features more raunchy sex and frank nudity than you've probably seen in a studio-backed feature in a very long time" (n.p.). At the same time, a highly negative review in *Vulture*, authored by Angelica Jade Bastién, also focuses on the

sexual aspect of the film (the piece is tellingly titled "Is *Poor Things* the Best We Can Do for Female Sexuality Onscreen?").

2 In an interview for *The Guardian*, Lanthimos posits, rather cleverly, that the "*essence* [original emphasis] of [the film] is very much in the novel" (n.p.), thus subverting the question of faithfulness to the source text while at the same time admitting that the book has a broader scope than his work.

3 It needs to be noted here that the topic of sex is not to be found only in these novels – it is also, for instance, the primary focus of *Something Leather* (1990). The reason why the present discussion does not extend to that text is twofold: first of all, the prevalent scholarly exploration of Gray has mostly been centred on his "major" works. Although this in itself may be problematic, since this article seeks to contribute to this "main" perspective, it seems to make sense for it to engage with the same source material. Secondly, since Gray himself declared *Something Leather* "perhaps [his] most successful effort to break with [academic audiences]," an attempt driven by his fear "of seeming their property" (2018, n.p.), it appears somehow right to respect his authorial stance.

4 It should be pointed out here that prior to this period, scholarly interest in the topic, too, has been perceived by some as highly limited and mostly negatively biased (Halwani). For a thorough exploration of different academic perspectives on sex and sexuality, see Soble.

5 The disproportion of how much critical attention is paid to Gray's literary output when compared to his visual art has been noted by Rodge Glass in his article "Erasure and Reinstatement: Gray the Artist, Across Space and Form," which is an attempt to provide some more balance in this regard. The same impulse seems to have been driving the 2022 second Alasdair Gray conference titled "Making Imagined Objects" and focusing on the relationship between his literary and visual practices.

6 One such example is Jonathan Coe's "1994, Janine," which discusses sex as one of the parts of the narrative, critiquing it, but not really linking it with other aspects of the book; another is Stephen Bernstein's chapter on *1982, Janine* in his book *Alasdair Gray* (1999), which offers an insightful reading of Gray's novel and notes the interconnectedness of the two plots, examining their shared dynamics, but does not really address the implications of this inherent link.

7 Stirling calls the novel a "post-modern rewriting of MacDiarmid's key poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*" (ii). In offering this critical designation, Stirling subscribes to a (fairly commonly employed) labeling of Gray's oeuvre as postmodern, one that the author himself rejected (on the critical insistence on using the tag and Gray's own insistence on not accepting it, see for instance Alan McMunnigall's "Alasdair Gray and Postmodernism"). This unwillingness to self-identify through an academic or critical discourse is something that the present article seeks to subscribe to in its decision not to anchor its discussion of Gray's writing in a particular theoretical framework.

8 This is evidenced, for instance, by Bella's first letter, in which she matter-of-factly informs Godwin that upon escaping from his house and boarding a train, "[they] wed wed wed, went wedding all the way to London town" (Gray 1993, 105).

9 For an in-depth discussion of the Bella-as-Scotland allegory, see Donald Kaczvinsky's article "'Making Up for Lost Time': Scotland, Stories, and the Self in Alasdair Gray's 'Poor Things'."

10 It should be added here that Strang is falsely cited as the author of the novel's etchings, this being a part of Gray's elaborate intertextual play.

11 For more on this, see "Bibliographic Metafiction: Dancing in the Margins with Alasdair Gray" by Frederick D. King and Alison Lee.

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