

Alasdair Gray (1934)



Alasdair Gray 31.10.97



Life in short

- Born in Riddrie, east Glasgow, 1934
- Working-class family background
- State education combined with autodidactic learning
- 1952 to 1957: Glasgow School of Art, where he also taught from 1958 to 1962
- 1960: began his association with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (arrested in 2001 during a mass demonstration)
- From 60s: worked as a scenery, murals, portrait painter, and as an independent writer

- 1972-1974: involved in a writing group organised by Philip Hobsbaum, including James Kelman, Liz Lochhead and Tom Leonard
- 1968: started writing TV and radio plays
- 1977-1979: Writer in Residence at Glasgow University
- From 2001: joint Professor of the Creative Writing programme at Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities

Works: Novels

- *Lanark* (1981) - *The Guardian*: "one of the landmarks of 20th-century fiction."
- *1982, Janine* (1984)
- *The Fall of Kelvin Walker* (1985)
- *Something Leather* (1990)
- *McGrotty and Ludmilla* (1990)
- *Poor Things* (1992)
- *A History Maker* (1994)
- *Mavis Belfrage* (1996)
- *Old Men in Love* (2007)

Short stories

- *Lean Tales* (1985) (with James Kelman and Agnes Owens)
- *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (1983)
- *Ten Tales Tall & True* (1993)
- *The Ends of Our Tethers* (2003)

Theatre

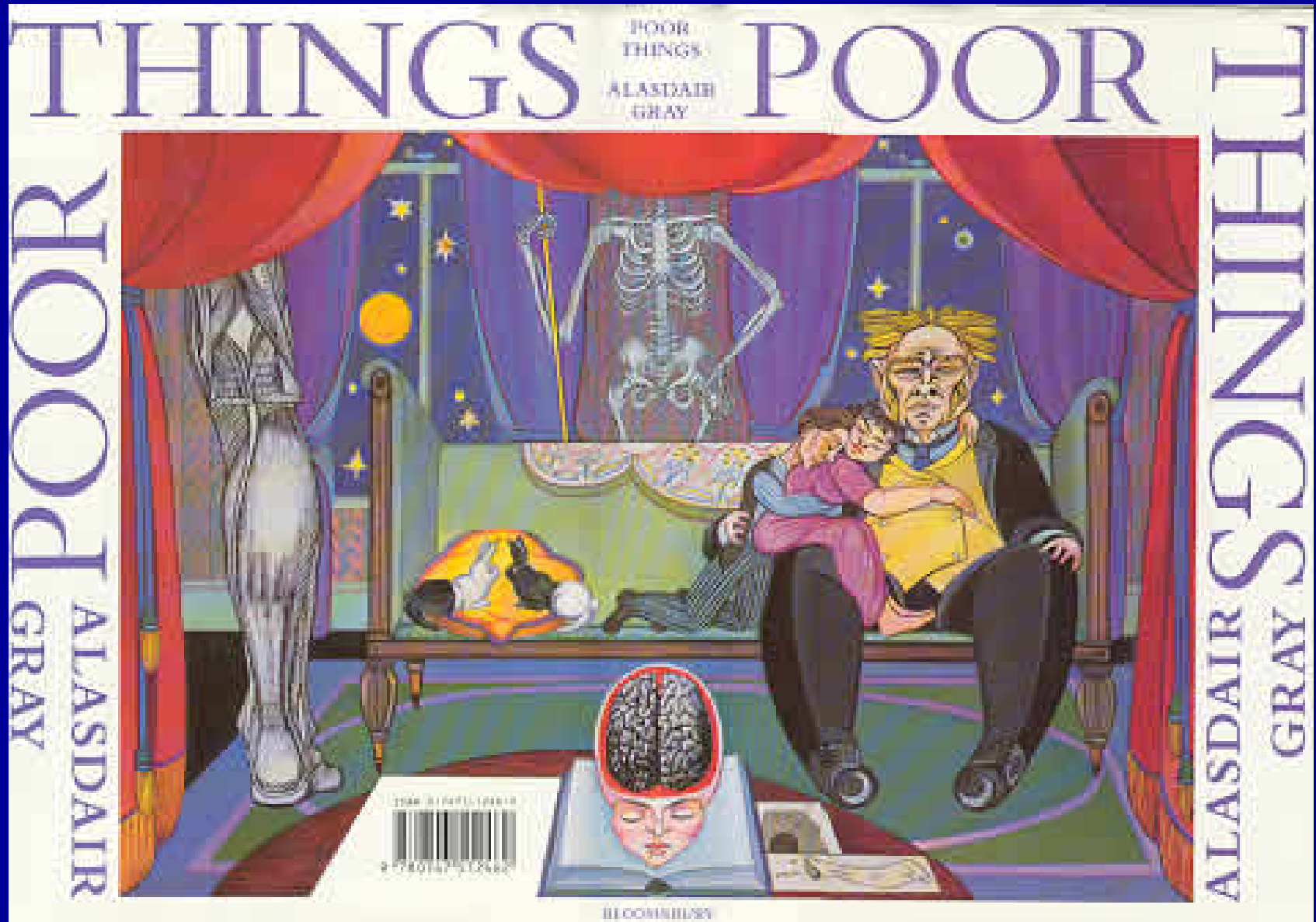
- *Dialogue - A Duet (1971)*
- *The Loss of the Golden Silence (1973)*
- *Homeward Bound - A Trio for Female Chauvinists (1973)*
- *Sam Lang and Miss Watson - A One Act Sexual Comedy In Four Scenes (1973)*
- *McGrotty and Ludmilla (1986)*
- *Working Legs: A Play for Those Without Them (1997)*
- *Goodbye Jimmy (2006)*

Poetry and essays

- *Old Negatives* (1989)
- *Sixteen Occasional Poems* (2000)

- *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1992; revised 1997)
- *The Book of Prefaces* (ed.) (2000)
- *A Short Survey of Classic Scottish Writing* (2001)
- *How We Should Rule Ourselves* (2005)

Poor Things (1992)



Plot and structure: multiple authoring

- Introduction by Alasdair Gray
 - ❖ Gray is editor of the following text
 - ❖ 'discovery' of some papers abandoned in a city-centre street outside a Glasgow law firm by his real-life friends, Michael Donnely and Elspeth King, curators of the local history museum
 - ❖ Late 19^o-century – early 20^o-century papers containing the texts reproduced by Gray (with slight changes)
 - ❖ Etchings by William Strang (1859-1921)
 - ❖ Brief synopsis of main events in McCandless's, Baxter's and Bella/Victoria's lives

(p. XI) [...] the main part of this book is as near to a facsimile of the McCandless original as possible, with the Strang etchings and other illustrative devices reproduced photographically. However, I have replaced the lengthy chapter headings with snappier titles of my own. [...] I have also insisted on renaming the whole book POOR THINGS. *Things* are often mentioned in the story and every single character [...] is called *poor* [...].

I print the letter by the lady who calls herself “Victoria” McCandless as an epilogue to the book. Michael would prefer it as an introduction, but if read before the main text it will prejudice readers against that. If read afterwards we easily see it is the letter of a disturbed woman who wants to hide the truth about her start in life.

Furthermore, no book needs two introductions and I am writing this one.

I fear Michael Donnelly and I disagree about this book. He thinks it a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven, a book like Scott's *Old Mortality* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. I think it like Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*; a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, stout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a friend with a memory for dialogue.

- *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*, by Archibald McCandless M. D. (dated 1909)
 - ❖ Autobiographical account on how he got to know Godwin Baxter (“dwarfish look”; “ogreish body”)
 - ❖ Their friendship – outsider figures
 - ❖ Meeting and engagement with Bella Baxter
 - ❖ Including other texts: e.g. Bella’s letters from her journeys around Europe (after her elopement); other characters’ letters; illustrations from *Gray’s Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical* (1858)
 - ❖ Encapsulating narratives: e.g. Bella/Victoria Blessington’s real story

- *A letter from Victoria McCandless M. D. to her eldest surviving descendant in 1974 correcting what she claims are errors in Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer, by her late husband Archibald McCandless M. D. – dated 1914*
- ❖ Refutation of facts provided by her husband ("poor fool"): she fled from Blessington and sought refuge with Baxter
- ❖ His story is just fiction based on contemporary gothic and romantic motifs: it "positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries".

“You, dear reader, have now two accounts to choose between and there can be no doubt which is most probable [...]. Ever since reading this infernal parody of my life-story I have been asking, WHY DID ARCHIE WRITE IT?” (pp. 272-273)

- Notes Critical and Historical by Alasdair Gray
 - ❖ Including newspaper articles and materials (authentic?) on General Blessington
 - ❖ Documentary material on Glasgow, including maps (Victorian/Imperial doc.; evaluation of its historical changes)
 - ❖ Historical Facts apparently proving Archie's story over Victoria's/Bella's
 - ❖ Material on Victoria McCandless: first woman doctor who graduated from the University of Glasgow

- Her letter to MacDiarmid written after the 1946 general elections (ironic in the 1990s)

“Dear Chris,

So, at last, for the first time this century, we have a Labour government with an overall working majority! [...] Britain is suddenly an exciting country. The anti-trade-union laws of 1927 are being repealed and it seems we WILL get social welfare and national health care for all [...] And we WILL jettison that millstone round our necks, The British Empire! [...] I feel a lot happier.”

"Dr. Victoria McCandless was found dead of a cerebral stroke on 3rd December 1946. Reckoning from the birth of her brain in the Humane Society mortuary on Glasgow Green, 18th February 1880, she was exactly sixty-five years, forty weeks and four days old. Reckoning from the birth of her body in a Manchester slum in 1854, she was ninety-one" (*P.T.* p. 317). (Dialogue Fantasy/History till the end)

The “open-ended dialogue”

“The dialogic nature of consciousness, the dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium” (M. Bahktin)

Postmodern conundrums

- Who is telling the truth, Archie, Bella, Alasdair? Are any of them?
- Neo-Victorian novel? / revisionist parody?: mad Empire Builders; humble housekeepers; self-made men, desperate to prove they are part of High Society; obsessed medics in upstairs laboratories; hapless innocents; hyper-enthusiastic Americans; worthless lawyers; eccentric New Women ...

The Woman Question

“Life for Mother and me was mainly a struggle to keep the family and home clean.” (p. 256-57)

“Mother had taught me to be a working man’s domestic slave; the nuns taught me to be a rich man’s domestic toy” (pp. 258-9)

“I loved him for many reasons. Girls of my age were expected to have husbands, homes, babies. [...] Six months later I had my third hysterical pregnancy and was begging for a clitoridectomy.” (p. 259)

Parodic reversal

- Woman madness (“female malady”) symbolising oppression of woman in society does not apply here
- Wedderburn goes mad and Blessington commits suicide
- Baxter’s phantasy of a new Ophelia, saved by him from madness
- Victoria/Bella: compromise between Jane Eyre (vs idea of chastity) and Bertha Mason (vs uncontrolled irrationality)

- *Parodic pastiche* – Victorianism revisited
- Victoria says that in her husband, McCandless ("without candle"?), she has "a very good wife" (p. 303)
- Bella, self-reflexively: "What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from?" (*P.T.* pp. 272-73)
- Notes: mock version of scholars' historical notes in 19th-century fiction

- "An odd combination of *Pygmalion* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*" (also pointed by Bella p. 272-273)
- “queen” Victoria – parody: first like a child (Victorian patriarchy’s female stereotype), then a socialist reformer writing “the great task of the twentieth century” is “to make a Britain when everyone has a good clean home and is well paid for useful work” (p. 307); a New Woman but quite sentimental

- Combination of realistic and non-realistic narrative in disorienting ways
- Confrontations uttered by different voices whose authority cannot be determined \Rightarrow no conclusion ever reached, no single way of putting the pieces together, subjective ever-fluctuating reality (reader/author involved in the process of creating meaning)

Intertextual webs / Main hypotexts

- The Shelleys Circle
 - ❖ Godwin Baxter – William Godwin, “father” of a form of anarchy, reliant upon reason
 - ❖ Baxter – Mary Shelley/ Frankenstein: all “making” a “monster”
 - ❖ Godwin Bysshe Baxter – P. B. Shelley
 - ❖ Baxter: family hosting M. Shelley in Scotland from 1812 to 1814

- ❖ Victoria's suicide – Harriet Westbrook's suicide in London (both pregnant)
- ❖ Sequel of *Frankenstein*: return of the female monster thrown by Dr Frankenstein in the Orkneys
- ❖ Bella-Mary Wollstonecraft: New Women; scandalous women; “sex-mad” and “erotomaniac” (p. 308) – Godwin / McCandless: manipulative biographers sparing no details?
- ❖ Bella's elopement: Mary Shelley's elopement with Percy

“Gray manages to write a very feminist text, rewriting and then subverting traditional male representations of women through his beautiful ‘monster’ who shocks her society with her unconventionality and open sexuality” (Johanna Tiitinen, 1999)

⇒ construction of new gender relationships

“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, and I cannot CAN NOT treat you like one. I am marrying Candle because I can treat him how I like” (p. 53)

“You are only good for one thing, Wedder, but you are very good at it indeed, a true grandee monarch magnifico excellency emperor lord-high-paramount president principal provost bobby-dazzler and boss at it” (p. 87)

“How lovely, God, to waken all alone, and bath and dress alone, and eat alone. When we get married, Candle, we must spend some time apart to stop us going stale” (p. 122)

“Thank you for giving me life, Father, though from what you say my mother had most trouble making me and you took none at all. Thank you, Sir Aubrey, for releasing me from my father [...]. Thank you for mending me, God, and giving me a home that is not a prison. I will continue living here. And Candle, how good to have a man I need not thank at all, [...] and leaves me alone every day to get on with my work” (p. 232)

“I married Archibald McCandless because he was convenient, and as the years slipped by I came to like and rely upon the man” (p. 251)

“Gray’s narrative [...] seems intensely aware of a kind of incompleteness. His men long for (or obsess about) women and what they can offer or do not offer their lives [...]. That longing, further, is coloured by a wish to be valued by women and what they know, to learn from or join with them”

(Janice Galloway, 1995)

- Condition-of-Britain texts: e.g. Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34)
- Dickens's social yet also entertaining novel (parody of his portrayal of woman as "child-wife"; imitation of Mr Dombey in Lord Blessington, "*a neatly carved, life-size wooden puppet*", p. 202, and in Blaydon Hattersley, the social climber)
- William Morris's works as poet, artist, craftsman, and socialist: intricate cover design, elaborate drawings, various typography

- James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824)
- R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889)

- ❖ Theme of the Double (e.g. p. 77-78)
- ❖ Unreliable multiple narrators
- ❖ Calvinistic heritage (notion of evil; repression of emotions; prostration of flesh)

Further issues to reflect upon

- Challenge to authority = challenge to hegemonic discourses, to how cultural and literary powers may limit individual and national identity and deny marginal voices
- Attack on static literary forms pervading history and literature and accepted as the only acceptable forms of discourse

- Public/official vs local/domestic history

HISTORY: “Big nations are created by successful plundering raids, and since most history is written by friends of the conquerors history usually suggests that the plundered were improved by their loss and should be prepared for it. Plundering happens inside countries too.” (pp. 156-157)

- Bella-Caledonia – search for identity
 - Victoria vs Bella? = Blessington/England/Subjected/Past vs Scottish relations/Scotland/Emancipated/Present?
 - Recovering from trauma – new awakening; nationalist agenda: first amnesia about the past, then choice of the present (Baxter vs Blessington)

➤ John Locke vs David Hume :
self defined as *the immaterial,
continued consciousness of one's
past actions and possible future*
(modern ego)

vs “*the continuity and unity of the
self is a fiction, a creation of the
imagination*” (post-modern ego)

- Bella's death in 1947: India's independence; end of British imperialism? New era also for Scotland?
- But: unpromising finale with Bella tucked away in a basement clinic, alone – failure of Gray's and other Scots' socialist dream?