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***Poor Things* Makes the Wrong People Uncomfortable. Here's Why That Matters.**

by Bridget Bommer for WRIT109GS

God creates woman and names her Beautiful.

Director Yorgos Lanthimos takes this literally in his 2023 film, *Poor Things*, in which a gender-swapped Frankenstein-esque tale follows Bella (Italian for 'pretty') Baxter's navigation of the social construction of the world. Though she has the body of a woman, she possesses the literal mind of an infant thanks to a morbidly fantastical surgery by Godwin (or 'God', to Bella) Baxter.

This film has received high praise, with Bella's actor, Emma Stone, [winning best actress](#) at the most recent Academy Awards. The film boasts 92% [on Rotten Tomatoes](#) and 7.9 [on IMDb](#). I was first introduced to this work per the instruction of one of my Feminist Studies professors, who urged us to use this film to find themes of social construction and agency. After watching the film a few times to thoughtfully write about these themes, I was left feeling shocked that this was chosen to be studied under Feminist analysis— *did no one else feel uncomfortable by its cheap sexual empowerment?*

I first brought my concerns to my professor, who dismissed these and insisted the movie was feminist. "The movie is supposed to make you uncomfortable, that's the point!"

I then turned to my classmates, who watched the same film as I did under the same premise. They all agreed with my professor: *Poor Things* is a feminist masterpiece. "Bella is navigating the world through her relationships with men, and she finds self-agency *within* sex— that's empowerment," one said to me after I brought them my confused concerns.

Sex-positive feminism feels like an oversaturated point to be made in the 2020s, however, and I question my professor's argument about *Poor Things* creating social commentary by making the audience uncomfortable. The imagination of what would happen if Frankenstein's monster were

a woman gets explored in this film as it perpetuates the themes that it tries to be self-aware of under an outdated feminist framework.

I would like to disclaim this commentary is not designed to malign the film as a whole— I believe there's plenty of aspects of this film that deserve the praise and attention it received and if it were less popular, I could have equally written a piece about why this film is great. My goal of writing this is to instead only focus on the feminist arguments being made surrounding this film and why they are largely ineffective.

God creates woman and names her Beautiful. Max McCandles is the first character Bella is introduced to, and the first word he describes her with is “pretty”. Godwin's creature is not a normal ‘monster’ under this Frankenstein guise— there are no screams of horror nor exciting “It's alive!” moment— we instead get a woman, and that carries a different notion.

If *Poor Things* were to share parallels with Mary Shelley's original *Frankenstein*, it would almost be a symmetrical gender-swap: in *Frankenstein*, a female writer (Shelley) creates an unnamed male monster; in *Poor Things*, a team of male writers create Bella. Both mediums tackle similar themes of sublime nature through the experiences of what is essentially a spiritual renewal, yet their ‘monsters’ could not look more different. Shelley's monster is initially driven by the pursuit of knowledge, love, and connection, while Lanthimos' monsteress is initially driven by sexual curiosity.

Maybe this was Lanthimos' point— perhaps his goal was to reflect a mirror onto how women are viewed in society and how women have to navigate these various tropes of men that all want to mold her into something for their pleasure, but simply depicting these patriarchal structures does not suffice as critique nor commentary but instead comes across as a wildlife documentary on the suffering of women. With this, it is making the wrong people uncomfortable: the people who are already aware of this phenomenon.

I understand movies whose goal is to make the audience uncomfortable and in turn inspire discourse over social issues (i.e., *Parasite* (2019), *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *mother!* (2017)),

but the notion of an infantilized baby brain in the body of a beautiful adult woman is not an inherently uncomfortable notion in a culture that values childish characteristics in women and [enforces prepubescent standards of beauty](#).

For better or worse, today's society is very comfortable with sex. "It's no longer radical, or even really necessary, to proclaim that women take pleasure in sex. If anything, taking pleasure in sex seems, to some, vaguely obligatory," writes [Michelle Goldberg](#) for the *New York Times*. In a *BuzzFeed News* article headlined, "These Gen Z Women Think Sex Positivity Is Overrated," one [23-year-old woman](#) said, "It feels like we were tricked into exploiting ourselves." This sex-positive approach is most concurrent with the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s. This is the movement that brought meaningful change in understanding [sexuality](#), [obtaining reproductive rights](#), and bringing more [women into the workforce](#), among many other advances. It was undeniably a crucial step to achieve many liberties experienced today, but the wave most notably ended with the feminist sex wars in the early 80s. This brought forth anti-porn feminism as opposition to sex-positive feminism, which is still at play today in the 2020s. Hookup culture no longer feels liberating and [sex work](#) no longer needs to be encouraged to overcome stigmas.

Furthermore, *Poor Things* is praised for considering the absurdity of social construction. One can't help but wonder, then, why the film shies away from so many social norms that women are subject to while highlighting only one which has already been the subject of public discourse in recent years. For instance, Bella Baxter is smooth and hairless for the entirety of the film besides a well-manicured bush (which even then can be considered adhering to social norms [under 70s beauty standards](#)). Although Emma Stone embodied Bella perfectly, how would the narrative of *Poor Things* have changed if Bella didn't look in accordance with the male gaze? What if she possessed more physical characteristics of an older woman who was not 'in her prime', for instance? Even in our monster stories, [the monstress](#) must remain within the feminine beauty ideal.

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There are so many aspects that make this film worthy of praise: I loved Lanthimos' portrayal of the male characters in this film that each seemed to fill a different flawed trope within patriarchal settings; even within feminist discourse, I loved how the madonna-whore complex is explored as Bella matures and has— for many— a quasi-relatable upbringing that is not to be dismissed.

Despite this, there is still something missing that leaves the audience with a feeling of discomfort— not driven from the provocativeness of the sex scenes themselves but rather how hollow they feel by the end. Bella concludes her story by taking charge of her life and is finally sexually liberated, but is that what it means to be a woman? If this film is to be understood for the sake of feminism, [Angelica Jade Bastién](#) sums it up eloquently: “Watching it for any sort of feminist revelation is akin to craving the salty chill of the ocean and the spray of a wave upon your face, and having to settle for resting your ear against a curling seashell, listening to only the echo of what you truly desire.”