Is it ethical or even helpful to try to impose order on a haphazard existence? Is it right to play God, to steal the limelight from the cosmos? Man used to ponder existence, but with the increasing possibilities of science, we now ponder our power over existence. In “An Experiment with an Air Pump,” Shelagh Stephenson uses symbolism associated with Isobel as a voice of foreboding in a society “enraptured by the possibilities of science” (3). Stephenson associates Isobel with a bird, a pile of bones, and a sheep to reveal the dark side of the “light,” the scientific revolution.

The play commences in 1799 when Fenwick risks the life of Harriet’s bird in order to conduct an experiment with an air pump. Later in the play, Armstrong puts a different life on the line for the “intoxication of discovery” (3). This time the life is human. From the moment Armstrong sees Isobel he wants to “examine her beautiful back in all its delicious, twisted glory” (85). His infatuation with Isobel has nothing to do with matters of the heart, but he proceeds to woo her because of his sheer lust for science.

Upon learning of Armstrong’s motive, Isobel attempts to hang herself. As Isobel lies helpless on the floor, fighting for one last breath, Stephenson illustrates that Isobel’s “heels flutter almost imperceptibly” (92). Later, everyone gathers around Isobel’s dead body much like they did around the fluttering bird in the first experiment. “But this time Isobel, in her coffin, has taken the place of the bird in the air pump” (96). The fact that now a dead Isobel symbolizes the bird implies that this time the experiment has gone dreadfully wrong. The fact that the second experiment fails harbors a much more solemn consequence than if the first had failed. If the bird in the first experiment had died, tears would have been shed only until the purchase of a new bird. Not only does Armstrong sacrifice a human life in the name of science, but he symbolically diminishes all that the bird and Isobel represent. Isobel’s death implies the demise of freedom, will, and humanity.

Stephenson also associates Isobel with a sheep, to represent what can be lost in a future of “industry, science, wealth, and reason” (15). Harriet writes her own play within this play in which the future is exalted as “a new Jerusalem” (15). The sheep, played by Isobel, is a character that represents “pastoral innocence” (16). The past may be seen as an ideal for some, but for young Harriet the past is idle. Harriet believes that “fair play and enterprise are [her] guiding lights, industry and endeavor are [her] saviors” (62). But if we look at the effects free enterprise and industry had on our agricultural past, the sheep becomes a reminder of a serene and simple life choked by the billowing smoke of progress.

As the play jumps from 1799 to 1999, Stephenson associates Isobel with a symbol that represents the ominous possibilities of science. This time presentiment comes in the form of bones. Stephenson relates that the bones, found buried in Tom and Ellen’s basement for close to two hundred years, to Isobel. Not only does Isobel’s necklace turn up with the bones, but parts of the vertebrate and ribcage are missing. The missing bones imply that the back must have been “dissected” (69), perhaps to study certain deformities. While Ellen struggles over
questions surrounding the ethics of her work, Tom cannot seem to get his mind off the eeriness of the bones. Although undetected by Ellen, the ever-present bones serve as a warning. Ellen’s field of work, scientific technology, “starts off as something with all the forces of good behind it” (52). The aim of the technology has the potential to become corrupted either by the “marketplace” (52), or in the hands of those trying to perfect the human race. It is morbidly ironic that the same bones haunting Ellen’s house are those of someone who, in a world foetal diagnostics, may never have a chance to be more than a deformed structure, weeded out by scientists like a bad apple. The bones serve as a supernatural reminder of what can happen if society controls the “invention and conquest of nature” (43).

What Ellen does not fully come to realize in 1999 becomes a stark reality for Fenwick by the end of 1799. At first Fenwick is taken by the possibilities science holds for the future, but by the end of the play he has a much more somber outlook; “I thought it would be a golden night, full of hope and anticipation, and instead, this. Groping blindly over the border in a fog bewilderment” (96). The doubts Fenwick begins to have for the future directly relate to the feeling Stephenson leaves the reader with at the end of the play. Isobel’s role in “An Experiment with an Air Pump” symbolizes a thread of doubt that weaves through a society in awe of progress. The symbolism of the bird, the sheep, and bones, all help Stephenson conjure a feeling of foreboding midst the excitement of the play. We sit on the “threshold” of a scientific revolution overflowing with technological potential. But in the dawn of possibility we must ask ourselves if our actions are for the betterment of the human race. Is the technological future a “new Jerusalem?” (62) “For sheep it’s looking grim” (62)