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A.S. BYATT'S *Possession*

**A "Postmodern Victorian" Novel.**

**BY**

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## INTRODUCTION

The object of this study is the presence of postmodern elements in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*. My purpose is to scrutinize this novel from a postmodern perspective. My study will examine Byatt's writing style and her experimental tendencies. I also intend to talk about A.S. Byatt's treatment of history, that is, how she merges nineteenth century realism with techniques of postmodernism. My aim is to see how the structures of the traditional fairy tale and romance live on in Byatt's work. Furthermore I am going to demonstrate how this novel transforms and playfully manipulate those elements. A.S. Byatt's novel was my first preference because she employs almost all the postmodern styles.

A.S. Byatt was born in Yorkshire. She was educated in Newham College and taught in the Central School of Art and Design. In 1972, she became a full time lecturer in London. She has served on judging panels for a number of literary prizes including the Booker prize for fiction. Her most successful book *Possession A Romance* (1990) won the Booker prize for fiction. A.S. Byatt has been hailed by some as one of the greatest Postmodern novelists in Britain.

### **What is Postmodernism ?**

Postmodernism is a complicated term. It is a set of ideas that only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid 1980's. The features of postmodern culture began to arise in the 1920's with the emergence of the dada movement.. The dada movement featured collage, irony, digression and pastiche. The existentialists also had a major impact on postmodernism. Firstly, postmodernism was a movement in architecture that rejected the modernist "avant garde passion for the new"(Harvey 32) . Modernism in art,

architecture was about rejecting tradition in favor of “where no man has gone before”(Harvey 29).

Modernism was a search for uniqueness and individuality. This concept of modernism was rejected by architectural postmodernism in the 50's and 60's. The postmodernists wanted to maintain some of the elements of modernism while at the same time returning to the classical forms of the past. The result was a Collage approach that combines several traditional styles into one structure. According to postmodernists, meaning is found in the combinations of already created patterns. So what the postmodernist is talking about is basically a playful combination of the past and present. The pattern of postmodernism is seen in the arts, music, architecture literature as well as everyday life. This movement can be outlined in historical terms:

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Premodernism:</b>  | Original meaning is possessed by authority. (for e.g. the Catholic Church)<br>The individual is dominated by tradition.   |
| <b>Modernism:</b>     | The enlightenment-humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favor of reason.   |
| <b>Postmodernism:</b> | A rejection of authority and recognition of plurality and indeterminacy in the world .An emphasis upon anarchic, anonymous experience. It is a re- presentation of the human subject. |

Postmodernism appears in a wide variety of disciplines and areas of study. Its appearance can be seen in architecture, art, literature, music etc.

### **Postmodernism in Architecture.**

The most visible ideas of postmodernism can be seen in architecture. The formalized shapes and spaces of the modernist movement are replaced by diverse aesthetics and styles collide. Modern architecture was the product of the Enlightenment. It had the faults of an “age trying to reinvent itself totally on rational grounds. Modern architecture had all rational substitutes for traditional patterns. Robert Venturi and Lucien Kroll all departed from modernism and adopted the new tendencies. Postmodern architecture is all about a combination of the new techniques with the traditional styles. Charles Jencks defines Postmodernism as a double coding (472). Double coding means alluding to both popular and elite. This is a kind of hybridity (a mixture) which is the essential style of postmodern architecture. Therefore postmodern architecture has the essential double-meaning: It is “the continuation of modernism and its transcendence”. (472). Postmodern architects include: Philip Johnson, Robert Venturi, James Stirling, Ricardo Boffil.

### **Postmodernism in Art.**

Postmodern theorists see postmodern art as a reversal of well established modernist systems, such as the roles of artists versus audience, seriousness versus play or high culture versus kitsch. A postmodern approach to art is a rejection of the distinction between low and high art forms. It favors eclecticism, the mixing of ideas and forms. Due to this rejection, it promotes parody, irony and playfulness.

**Postmodern Music.**

Postmodern music is the music situated after the modern age. The music of post modernity is a symbolic indication of identity whereas modern music is valued for its fundamentals. In postmodern music, the cultural image surrounding the music is important.

Postmodern musical artists

*Classical/Jazz*

John Cage

John Adams

Philip Glass

Lamont Young

Luciano Berio Alfred Schnittke.

*Rock/pop*

The Beatles

Can

Pink Floyd

Wire (band)

The Velvet Underground.

**Postmodernist Fiction.**

Postmodernist writing questions the distinction between fiction and non fiction. Terry Eagleton says: “There is perhaps a degree of consensus that the typical postmodernist artifact is playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid and that it reacts to the autonomy of high modernism and embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock”.(Eagleton).

## Postmodern Stylistics

Contradiction

Permutations (and choice)

Discontinuity

Randomness

Excess

Short Circuit (breaking the frame or exposing literary conventions).

“Like much contemporary literary theory, the postmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts such as unity, totalization, certainty, system, universalization, centre, closure, hierarchy, uniqueness and origin” (Hutcheon 57).

Alternatively, John Mepham, in *Narratives of Post-modernism* argues that postmodernism is a condition of reading a position that undermines the common response that postmodernist writing can be found in modernist writing (like Joyce) or the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Stern). The contemporary Western world is informed by post structuralist theory and so postmodernism is a reading strategy that emerges.

Mepham says that there are four kinds of postmodernist fiction:

1. Historical: a development from or away from modernism
2. Philosophical: “reality” is constructed in and through language  
(See Patricia Waugh “Metafiction” Methen, 1984)
3. Ideological (or pedagogic): postmodernist fiction is defined in terms of its  
Intended effects, that it should “problematise reality”.  
(See Brian McHale, “Postmodernist Fiction”,  
Methuen, 1987).



4. Textual: It uses strategies that foreground the textuality of fiction, force constant reinterpretation by “reframing” and generating “a plurality of worlds”

Therefore the postmodernist fiction is an altogether new literary sensibility and a whole transformation of styles, tendencies and trends.

A.S. Byatt’s novel describes the romance between two nineteenth century poets and the parallel relationship of their two present day biographers. Throughout the novel Byatt makes switches in characters between scenes and the effect is that the narrative is no different for each couple living in different time periods. As a Postmodernist fiction, *Possession* has a pluralism of worlds that coexist. The Victorian world is narrated which has influences on the present contemporary scene. The two worlds seem to exist in the same space and the characters move between them. The two worlds collide in a terrible denouement.

*Possession* by A.S. Byatt .

The plot of A.S. Byatt’s novel follows two modern scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey who examine old documents to discover the truth about a possible relationship between two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte.

What is particularly interesting in *Possession* is the broad scope of genres that Byatt skillfully combines throughout. She makes use of almost all the major literary devices to narrate her story. The novel contains letters, poetry, journals, diaries and scholarly

ing through which the secret affair between the two Victorian poets is revealed. Most chapters begin with a fictitious work by Randolph Ash or LaMotte. Byatt is able to write in different styles. Byatt creates what is often termed as “hybrid genre” by combining several genres into one novel. She blends Mythology, history, romance, a fairy tale and a detective story together in a melting pot. A.S. Byatts novel can be read as a combination of these genres.

Byatt’s novel can be called a “Postmodern Victorian” novel because much of it is made up of the Victorian era. The action of the book takes place in two periods. The main characters, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, are literary scholars living in the 1980’s. Their love story is shared and played out by the diaries, poetry and correspondence of the two poets from the 1860’s. A.S. Byatt models her fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century characters on actual Victorian poets. She makes her characters write in a style which actually seems to come out of the Victorian period. Ash writes dramatic monologues in blank verse like Robert Browning while LaMotte’s style is more like Emily Dickinson. Christina Rossetti and Emily Bronte. Byatts treatment of history shows how the Victorian past can have an effect on the present in Possession. She makes the Victorian past have a mystifying effect on the contemporary scene..

A.S. Byatts novel also makes us aware of the fact that in a postmodern world there is an absence of the whole truth. Possession shows us that no amount of historical enquiry can clear away all the dust of the past. The novel’s final pages entitled “Postscript 1868” tells us of a meeting between Randolph Ash and his daughter Maia, but neither Christabel nor the present day scholars ever know that Maia, the daughter once met her real father. Byatt shows how no amount of literary analysis can disclose every truth.

Byatt's novel can be read as a "polyphonic novel" with its multiple narrative voices. It combines the different voices of the Victorians and the modern scholars in addition to a third person narration. Byatt resurrects the marginalized voices of Victorian women and blends it with the voice of the modern scholars. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" enters her novel. Heteroglossia is a diversity of social speech types, languages and individual voices (Rivkin 31). This happens when many different language systems come together.

The distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types...is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel" (Rivkin 32). Byatt's combination of different voices into a higher unity is a style unknown to traditional stylistics.

*Possession* is a Romance and this genre is explored through the comparative game-like structure of the two relationships investigated in the novel. Byatt challenges the contemporary experience by using the Romance genre. She contrasts the contemporary experience with the nostalgic. Byatt's use of both medieval and modern romance conventions remind the reader that this novel is representative neither of Victorian realism nor of postmodern intertextuality. The novel is a combination of the two.

Byatt's work takes a very different approach. The structure of *Possession* utilizes postmodern techniques but the difference between this novel and most other intertextual games lies in Byatt's attempt to emphasize the honest resurrection of the Victorian voices. She writes Victorian words in Victorian contexts in a Victorian order. Her novel is written in a playful manner but Byatt's purpose within the novel is a very serious critique of postmodernism and its respective philosophies. Through both content and technique, Byatt constructs a very serious game about postmodernism and plays it directly with her readers.

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## Byatt's Story-telling Style.

### A Literary Hybrid.

A.S. Byatt's story telling style is unique because she makes use of almost all literary devices to narrate her story. In her novel, she has two sets of stories. One is set in the present story and the other is in the Victorian period. The Victorian one is narrated through the various literary devices such as, poems, letters, journals, and diaries. Byatt creates a fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century world with the poems, letters and the journals through which the story gradually unfolds. She resurrects the Victorian voices through which the story unfolds. Byatt has the Victorian voices as well as a third person narration to tell her story. In her novel the Victorian plot seems to be the main plot and it dominates the contemporary plot. So Byatt's style is basically to use literary devices to narrate the 19<sup>th</sup> century world which in turn narrates the contemporary story. There is a story within a story in her novel. Byatt makes use of one story to narrate the other story. Byatt weaves her sets of literary works within a literary work and this makes her novel a literary hybrid.

The poems, letters and journals she composes capture the style of the Victorian era. Most chapters begin with a fictitious work by her 19<sup>th</sup> century characters- Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The very first chapter begins with a poem written by the Victorian poet, Henry Ash. This poem shows how Byatt has skillfully written the lines in flowery Pre-Raphaelite tradition.

The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold  
The woman in the shadow of the boughs  
The running water and the grassy space  
They are and were there. At the old world's rim,  
In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit  
Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there  
The dragon Ladon crisped his jeweled crest  
Scraped a gold claw and sharpened a silver tooth  
And dozed and waited through eternity  
Until the tricesy hero Herakles  
Came to his dispossession and the theft. (Byatt 1).

Randolph Henry Ash, from  
The Garden of Proserpina, 1861

att writes the poems in different styles that definitely seem to come out of the  
torian period. She crafts each in their own fashion. This is shown in a poem written by  
ndolph Henry Ash, the Victorian poet.

And is love then more  
Than the *kick* galvanic  
Or the thundering.... (273).

mpared to the writing of LaMotte, the Victorian poetess to whom Ash had been  
iting.

Gloves lie together  
Limp and Calm  
Finger to Finger

Palm to Palm... (306)

seems capture the style of the romantic period, yet each uses language differently. More open and sparse in his writing and LaMotte with more obvious patterns of end rhyme.

poems give us a unique insight into the story. The poem with which the first begins gives us a clue that a major discovery will soon be made.

The dragon Ladon crisped his jeweled crest  
Scraped a gold claw and sharpened a silver tooth  
And dozed and waited through eternity  
Until the tricky hero Herakles  
Came to his dispossession and the theft. (Byatt 1).

poem is followed by a scene in the London library where Roland discovers a letter written by the Victorian poet to an unknown lady. Roland steals the letters and sets out on a journey to discover the truth. So this is how Byatt sets the stage through her literary devices. Instead of starting her narration directly, she begins with a poem which gives the reader hints in advance. Most chapters begin with a poem either by Randolph Ash or Elizabeth Bishop. LaMotte and these poems work as foreshadowing devices.

When we have the letters. The great number of letters is what actually creates the tension. The letters give out a great deal of information, not only to the readers but also to Maud and Roland. It is through the letters that Maud and Roland are able to uncover the secret affair between the poets. It is from their correspondence that we become aware of the fact that LaMotte had sent her poems to Ash.

It does me so much Good-that you should write to me of the  
Melusina-quite as though she were a decided thing-only  
Waiting the accomplishment... (173)

Randolph Ash had also been sending his poems to LaMotte.

"I should like still to send you Swammerdam.  
May I do that, at least? (186.)

The journals also reveal a good deal of information. The journals of Glover  
Blanche, the woman with whom LaMotte had been living tell us that Christabel had been  
regularly receiving letters from Randolph Ash.

**A Journal of Our Home-Life**  
**In our House in Richmond**  
Blanche Glover  
May 1<sup>st</sup> May Day 1858.

"She is much exercised about a long letter which arrived today, which she did not show  
me, but smiled over, and caught up and folded away" (43).

Many different literary systems coexist in Byatt's novel. She combines several literary  
genres. The novel is a Romance, a detective story and a fairy tale at the same time. It  
can be read partly as a Romance because the story involves two contemporary academics  
whose research into the lives of two Victorian poets reveals a love affair between them.  
The same love affair is later shared and played out by the contemporary academics in the  
novel. It is also a detective story in the sense that there is a quest plot in the novel. When  
Richard discovers the letter in the London library, he instantly makes up his mind to



over the identity of the unknown woman. He moves to distant places in search of clues which gradually leads him to the "truth". The story unfolds as the scholars gather evidence of the secret affair between the Victorian poets. It begins as an investigation into the lives of the two Victorians. *Possession* almost becomes the academics "Indiana Jones" as the two scholars embark on their quest.

The novel also includes Mythology. Thus Byatt refers to the myth of "The Fairy Melusina" running throughout *Possession*. This is a bathroom myth, pure and simple which occurs when the knight Raimondin peeks at his fairy wife during her private ablutions. His wife was a fairy who married a mortal to gain a soul. She made a pact that she would never spy on her. In the end he looked through the keyhole and there she was in a great marble bath, from the waist down she was a fish. Byatt uses the story of "The Fairy Melusina" to show that the bathroom is a reflection of one's true self. It is only by spying on Melusina in the bathroom that the knight sees his wife for what she really is.

A.S. Byatt tries to establish a mythic resonance of the bathroom by detailed descriptions of bathrooms throughout *Possession*. These descriptions are highly indicative of the personality of the owner. In fact, almost all the main characters are characterized in terms of their own bathroom or their action in someone else's bathroom. Roland finds Maud's "chill green bathroom" as cold as its chill green owner: "He moved gingerly inside the bathroom which was not a place to sit or lie and soak, but a chill green messy place, glittering with cleanliness...a floor tiled in glass tiles, a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall...towels were systematically folded" (56). As Roland stands in Maud's bathroom, he thinks of his and Val's bathroom back in their little apartment full of old underwear, open pots of paint, sticky bottles of hair conditioner and tubes of shaving foams"(56). This gives us an idea of Roland's life. His life at this point is portrayed like his bathroom-a total mess.Byatt makes use of old myths to explain the

of the contemporary world. She blends mythology with the contemporary scene to show that myths and legends still play a part in our lives. She makes use of the fairy tale myth to explain some of the actions of the modern day characters.

Byatt also incorporates Fairy tales into her novel. She makes her present day characters re-live and perform the parts played by the characters in the tale. It is Byatt's intention to narrate the fairy tale and use it as a parallel to Roland and Maud's story. The fairy tale is symbolic of Roland and Maud's story. In Chapter 4, we see Roland reading "The Glass Coffin" which is a collection of fairy tales for children. The first story he reads is "The Glass Coffin". It is the story of a tailor journeying through the forest in search of work. The tailor comes across a glass coffin in which he sees a princess sleeping. He rescues the princess and wins her hand in marriage. They both lived happily ever after. This is the typical fairy-tale theme in which the hero embarks on a journey to rescue the princess and then they live happily ever after.

Byatt includes these stories in her novel and makes it symbolic of Roland and Maud's story. Roland is like the tailor who sets out on a journey which begins as an investigation. In the process, he meets Maud Bailey and they both get entangled in the quest. Roland's quest to discover the truth about a possible relationship between the Victorians is similar to the tailor's search in the fairy tale. We see that Roland is like the tailor who rescues the princess from the glass coffin. He broke through all the boundaries Maud had created for herself. The princess in the glass coffin is a parallel to Maud because Maud Bailey had confined herself to a fixed space. Her life was trapped within a frame she had created for herself. It was Roland who came by and pulled her out of the confines of her life. In the final chapter we see them together. They have finally confessed their love for each other and we can conclude that "they lived happily ever after" just like the tailor and the princess.

“Roland finally entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him...In the morning the whole world had a strange new smell... it smelled fresh, lively and hopeful.”(507)

Her bathroom is also described as “a chill glassy place glittering with cleanliness...”

Everything in there was made of glass which is somewhat like the glass coffin. Maud was not literally trapped in her glass bathroom like the princess in the fairy tale, but her “soul” was trapped. It was Roland who rescued her soul and opened up a new world for her. The final chapter indicates that they lived happily ever-after like the tailor and the princess

“In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath...”(507).

Therefore, the fairy tale serves as a parallel to Maud and Roland’s story. This is Byatt’s unique story-telling style of using one story as basis for another. It is a story within a story. Byatt’s use of one story as a tool for telling another story is definitely a unique story telling style. The way she narrates a story through other stories or plots makes her novel an absolute hybrid. Byatt creates a new hybrid style which is a combination of various genres, forms and systems.

## **The Victorian World**

Byatt creates a complete Victorian era by resurrecting the Victorian voices in her literary works. It is through these voices that Byatt narrates her story. She invents a fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century world in which there are characters that seem to be living in that era. Byatt rewrites history in her contemporary novel. Her Victorian characters write in a

le that really seems to come out of the Victorian period. Byatt not only creates the  
ams, letters and the diaries in a Victorian style, but also recreates the Victorian mind.  
e makes use of the letters to reconstruct the intellectual world of Victorian England.

In the Victorian age, people were immersed in materialism. There were a lot of  
scientific discoveries as well as the Darwinian theory. This created a lot of problems in  
e society. The people did not believe in miracles anymore. A loss of faith occurred  
att makes Randolph Ash's poetry reflect the Victorian crisis of faith. In Chapter 11, we  
e a poem written by Ash, "Swammerdam". This poem shows the work of scientists and  
biologists. It also reflects his own interest in scientific discoveries.

The Frenchmen, the incomparable Thevenot,  
Who values, like a true philosopher  
The findings of a once courageous man.  
He should have had my microscopes and screws-  
The copper helper with his rigid arms...  
...since fallen man must ail, the doctor's care  
Is ever-wanted, this side of the grave  
But I had other learnings. Did they come  
From scrupulous intellect, or glamorous spell  
...life is one  
I thought, and rational anatomy... (Byatt 202-206)

the great theological debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century come out in their letters. Ash's letter to  
Motte in chapter shows his loss of faith and acceptance of the Darwinian Theory.

...or we might say, as the lovely, as the lovely lines of faith  
that sprung up in the aspiring towers of the ancient ministers  
and abbeys are both worn away by time and grime...He, the

creator if he exists, did not make us and our world...( 164)

Then LaMotte's reply to the letter;

The son of god speaks not in your poem. But the Roman  
Scribe who tells the tale—he the census taker, the collector  
Of minor facts—is he not amazed despite his own inclinations..(166-67).

LaMotte was more interested in the origins of man and was more of a believer. Her poem "Metamorphosis" (161) shows her interest in the origins of man and her rejection of reason.

### **Metamorphosis**

Does the ruffled Silken Flyer  
Pause to recall how She-began-  
Her soft cramped crawling Origins  
Does man  
In all his puffed and sparking glory  
Cast back a thought...  
But both in their Creator's terrible keen sight  
Lay curled and known through timeless day and night (1610)

But Randolph's poems are more inclined towards rationality. He was a scientific man who did not believe in the bible. In the Victorian era, men were more into science while women were confined to their homes. All they could do is read the bible and believe in the stories. Byatt creates the exact Victorian world and through her fictitious letters, she gives voice to vanished minds. Byatt recreates the thoughts of the Victorian mind.

Byatt revisits the past, also by exploring ideas like Feminism, gender equality, le/female relationships. She brings out the voice of the repressed women. In the novel see solitary ladies who were confined to their homes, for example, Blanche and Motte. LaMotte's poems show that she was not happy.

Who are you?  
Here on a high shelf  
In webbed flask  
Hook up my folded self  
Who were you?  
The gold god goaded me  
What do you hope?  
Desire is a dowsed fire  
True love a lie  
To a dusty shelf we aspire  
I crave to die. (54).

he poem is sad showing her unfulfillment. It also shows a lack of identity which was how women were treated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can spot underlying gender issues in almost all of LaMotte's poems. In chapter 5, when Roland and Maud were searching for clues in Sir John's attic, Maud found a poem by Christabel. The poem reveals the way women kept their secrets and were not allowed to say it out in public.

"Dolly keeps a secret  
Safer than a friend  
Dolly's Silent Sympathy  
Lasts without end  
Friends may betray us  
Love may decay

Dolly's discretion  
Outlasts our Day... (82)

oem shows the solitude and secrecy in women's lives. The only companion they  
as the dolls they played with. The non living thing they trusted so much because the  
was hostile and friends betrayed them. In a riddle, we see that LaMotte is afraid of  
her solitude.

"I am my own riddle. Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek or  
steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught  
to dread-oh the terrible tower...I do not advice imagining it  
-but do me the justice of believing...my solitude is my Treasure,  
the best thing I have...(137).

lement of dread can be sensed in LaMotte's poems.

er Poem "Melusina" however, serves the purpose of promoting gender equality  
een Ash and LaMotte (and by extension, between men and women Victorian poets).  
blank verse line from Shakespeare to Milton to Wordsworth has traditionally been a  
implement. A nineteenth century woman to try it would be unacceptable. Byatt  
es her lady poet use the blank verse to dissolve the male/ female hierarchy. Byatt  
vs that the story "Melusina" in epic form is the natural result of the soul exchange.  
tries to promote gender equality by showing that the two poets are able to influence  
other. There seems to be a kind of compromise between the two poets. Byatt makes  
male poet step down from the self consciously, learned and intellectual, dry-minded  
natic monologues and move towards representations of love's experience. In other  
ds the male poet becomes more lyric. We can see an instance of this in Ash's poetry.

“They say that women change: ‘tis so: but you  
And ever-constant in your changefulness,  
Like the still thread of falling river, one  
From source to last embrace in the still pool  
Ever renewed and moving on  
And you-I love you for it-are the force  
That moves and holds the form. (262)

R.H. Ash, Ask to Embla, XIII.

s poem is still in blank verse, but after their love, their newly engendered poetic muse  
ame a single force. This can be seen in the poem written after their love affair.

And is love then more  
Than the *kick* galvanic  
Or the thundering roars  
Of *Ash* volcanic  
Belched from some crater  
Of earth-fire within... (273)

R.H.Ash.

A.S. Byatt’s treatment of history is such that she mixes up the real world with her  
tional 19<sup>th</sup> Century world. She presents the real world through an imaginary world. The  
o worlds collide in her novel. It is as if a wormhole has opened between two parallel  
isting worlds allowing such events to take place. Perhaps the Quantum physicists  
ould agree with her when she makes the Victorian world spill onto the contemporary  
ene. Her merging of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century would probably be accepted by the  
antum physicists. They believe that there are two parallel universes and there are times



when a gateway opens between them. So Byatt's intersection of the two worlds is like the concepts of the physicists. Her interchangeability of lives is justified by the theories put forward by the quantum physicists.

Byatt also mixes up real characters with fictional characters. It is a combination of fact and fiction. What a novel does is to create different characters but Byatt models her Victorian characters on actual Victorian poets. Byatt takes in the postmodern perspective to assert that a source is a source. She shows that novels are not just fictitious. As a result she brings in actual characters.

"The stones I shaped endure"

Melusina, XII, 325

The line in quotation is from "The Fairy Melusina" (289), an epic poem in blank verse written by the Victorian poetess. Byatt chose Emily Dickinson and her poetry as a model for LaMotte's work. Although the poem is written in blank verse of which Emily Dickinson wrote not a line, the famous opening stanza of 341 proves that she could have written in blank verse. Here she has a Shakespearcan concluding quatrain.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes--

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--

The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,

And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round--

Of Ground, or Air, or Ought--

A Wooden way

Regardless grown,

Quartz contentment, like a stone--

This is the Hour of Lead--

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons recollect the Snow

First--Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go--

LaMotte's poems with the dashes are like Emily Dickinson's poems.

Their remembrances haunt us

A trick of a wrist

Loved then-automatic-

Caught at the kist

My warm your cold's food-

Your chill brath my air

It mingles-there-.( 383)

C.LaMotte.

## **The effect of the past on the present.**

Byatt shows that the past can have a tremendous effect on the present contemporary condition. She uses ghosts and depicts reality. The ghosts of the dead Victorian poets seem to haunt the present day scholars in the novel. Byatt shows that no matter where you go, you can never escape the past. The modern day scholars are possessed by the spirits of the Victorian poets. As a result, Roland and Maud almost act out the exact lives of the dead poets.

Take Maud Bailey, for example. We are told that her bathroom is a “chill green glassy place, glittering, a floor tiled in glass tiles, a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall”. Maud’s green towels were systematically folded on a towel heater. This shows that Maud is a modern counterpart of both Christabel and Melusina. Maud’s bathroom described in green watery images is a reflex of Melusina’s verdant pool as depicted in LaMotte’s poem( 289) LaMotte’s poems show the solitude and secrecy in women’s lives. The element of dread seen in LaMotte’s poem is also reflected in Maud Bailey. The same attitude and fear is seen in her. Although she is an independent lady of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she still keeps to herself. Maud is afraid of losing her solitude just as LaMotte. Intrusion was the thing she feared the most.

Byatt adds other dimensions to Maud and Roland’s relationship in several ways. First Roland has Val, his live-in girlfriend. Second they seem to be re-living the past lives of Ash and LaMotte in a fantastic manner. Finally their circumstances do not allow them to easily ignore each other. Although it seems that Maud and Roland will never find a life together, the author brings them together supernaturally. What really makes this love affair sparkle is the connection to the past. The reader does not find out until the end that Maud is related to LaMotte and Roland is related to Ash. All the action began when

Poland brought out the book in the London library. Byatt's intertwining of the past with the present show that the four are connected in some cosmic way.

Perhaps it is because of this connection to the past that Byatt labeled *Possession* a romance. She tried to portray her lovers as surreal. Byatt shows that these modern day characters are somehow supernaturally linked to the Victorians which ultimately lead them to a romance. Byatt shows that the love affair of the Victorian poets has come to life once again in the contemporary world. Maybe the point she is trying to make is purely "romantic", that is, "love never dies". She shows that love is an eternal concept created by the gods. Perhaps this is how Byatt views romantic love. The failed love affair of the Victorians is completed by the modern day scholars. She portrays a sad resolution of Ash's and LaMotte's affair with the last letter found in his grave. But her contemporary characters end up together in a happy resolution. This is the only part in the story that is not influenced by the overpowering force the past.

This is how Byatt makes the Victorian past spill into the present. She recreates the Victorian past by making it part of the modern day characters' lives. She recycles the characters lives in new contexts showing us that the past can have influences on the present. Byatt tries to convey that there is always an inevitability in the world but no one seems to take notice of it. The very title *Possession* proves that Byatt has chosen to use her title for this purpose. The manner in which she uses her title shows her intentions, the contemporary scene possessed by the Victorian era. The word *Possession* pops up numerous times in the novel. "The possession of the stolen letters", the *Possession* of the lovers to each other.

## **the Postmodern Crisis of Narrative.**

### the fallen nature of narrative-fragmentation and Byatt's *Possession*.

Byatt's *Possession* seeks to reconcile nineteenth and twentieth century views of the nature of narrative. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romanticism celebrated the wholeness of vision attained by exploring the fantastic and supernatural while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernism insists upon the fragmented narrative as a reflection of an unruly life. Byatt combines these two different views and creates a whole new style.

Byatt explores the supernatural in her novel. She makes the Victorian poets have an effect on the university scholars. Roland and Maud are haunted by the spirits of the Victorian poets. They eventually imitate the Victorians by falling in love themselves. We also see that Roland has begun to write poetry just like Randolph Ash. As the story progresses, we see that the modern day scholars are no longer in control of themselves. They are driven by some supernatural force beyond their control. It is seen that the love story of the Victorian poets in the 1860's is shared and played out by the scholars in the 1980's. The contemporary scholars are seen to be possessed by the past.

### **The Cyclical time scheme.**

Byatt's blending of the past with the present creates a cyclical time scheme. Byatt's novel starts with a mythical poem, "The Garden of Proserpina".(Byatt 1) . This shows how Byatt dispossesses the past and blends it with the present, thus creating a cyclical time scheme. Like "Proserpina", Byatt rises from the "old worlds rim", "the garden of the underworld"(line 5) to the present only to descend once more. In *Possession*, the cyclical exchange of past and present represents a fall from the Victorian conception of linear time. Byatt moves to the Victorian moment but also switches back to the present moment.

She shows that time does not move in a straight line, but in a cycle. Byatt renews the cyclical conception of time and thus renders the mixture of past and present a positive moment instead of a negative one.

“the truth is my dear Miss LaMotte, that we  
live in an old world, tired world ( Byatt, 181)

When Roland peeps through the keyhole in Maud’s apartment, he gets a postmodern revisioning of “Melusina”. Maud represents her society’s eagerness to “possesses the past” while Byatt’s novel reveals that instead we are possessed by that past. Like postmodern society itself, Maud meditates on her own fragmentation.

Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego  
Maud thought... (273).

Maud realizes eventually that she must consent to a mutual possession in which her past and present have equal claims to each other. Maud finally participates in sexual conversation with Roland. Byatt compares their love making with Herakles theft of the apples from the garden of Proserpina thus cyclically ending the novel where it began.

“In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell.  
It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of  
Shredded leaves...of crushed woods...which bore some  
Relation to the smell of bitten apples.(Byatt 507) .

Byatt follows this sexual possession with a “*PostScript*”. Here, Maya, LaMotte’s child meets her father in a cornfield. It was May, and May represents springtime which is the starting and ending of Byatt’s cycle. The message Ash gives to Chistabel is never

delivered and this shows the end of their love affair. But the child represents a beginning—the reversion to innocence after the fall. So this is Byatt's cycle. She shows that the end is our beginning.

### **Intertextuality.**

Intertextuality has become a major focus in postmodern literary criticism for two main reasons. First its hybrid character, and second the playful tendencies of the textual references. The playful aspect is often highlighted in postmodern works. The writer of postmodern fiction always and inevitably falls prey to intertextuality. They believe that no written or spoken utterance can possibly be free from the influence of all other texts. Intertextuality is basically a reference to other texts by other authors. It is a network of texts where all the texts are interlinked. The postmodern novelist believes that the basis of the novel is not life but other texts. The traditional definition of the novel was that it should hold up a mirror to life. But the postmodern novel holds up a mirror to other texts. It is a pastiche of other works. So what the postmodern novelist does is borrow from other texts.

A.S Byatt's use of intertextuality is evident in her novel. She shows that in a postmodern world, there are no originals. As a postmodern novelist she rejects the notion that the origin of the postmodernist novel is not life but other texts and plots. So Byatt goes to other plots and remakes them. She remakes the Victorian plot in the new context. Byatt's remaking of the past is done through her characters. She does not create new protagonists. Byatt shapes her modern day characters in the shadow of the nineteenth century characters. So by doing this Byatt recreates Victorian characters in the contemporary world.

We see solitary ladies of the Victorian era. For example, LaMotte and Blanche are depicted as women confined to their homes. The poems and riddles by the Victorian poetess LaMotte show the solitude and secrecy in women's lives.

I am my own riddle...you must not seek or steal away my solitude... (137).

The same attitude and fear is seen in Maud Bailey, the present day scholar. Although she is an independent lady, she still holds on to her sanity. Maud is described as a woman who lives in her own world. The way she ties up her hair in a scarf also indicates the barriers she sets for herself. Byatt makes Maud Bailey the modern version of LaMotte in the novel. So this is how Byatt creates her protagonists under the influence of the Victorians.

Byatt also borrows from the Myths and old tales. She has a fascination with myths. She goes to these myths and tales and tries to retain their essence in her contemporary production. In the very first chapter, we see a poem Byatt wrote for Ash, "The Garden of Proserpina". (1) The "tricksy hero" is the image of Roland who discovers the letter in the London library.

"Came to his dispossession and the theft"( line 12).

Byatt has a fascination with the way myths and old tales retain their essence from one telling to the next. This theme surfaces in Randolph Ash's poem "The Garden of Proserpina". The poem compares several mythical gardens and asks whether they are all "shadows" of one true original garden.

...the garden and the tree

The woman in the shadow of the boughs (lines 1-3).



That is why Byatt makes her characters in the shadow of the “other” characters. At the end of the novel, Roland’s re reading of this poem sparks his own gift for poetry.

“taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself” (473).

Roland now connects the independent presence and materiality of words with the networks of metaphor in Ash’s poetry.

Byatt made her character “purloin” the letter just like the short story by Edgar Allen Poe, “The Purloined Letter”. Roland steals the letters in the London library and sets out to uncover the truth. At this point the novel is a detective fiction which echoes the short story, “The purloined Letter” that initiated the detective-fiction genre by Edgar Allen Poe. There is also a reference to “Hamlet” in the letters of Ash.

I am not become any kind of an Atheist, nor yet positivist...  
I wish my fellow men well, and find them endlessly interesting,  
yet there are more things in Heaven and Earth than were created for... (164).

Even the poems she includes in her novel is a reflection of poems by Robert Browning and Emily Dickinson. In the very first chapter we see a poem by Ash. This poem is a dramatic monologue in blank verse which was Browning’s style. LaMotte’s poems are like Emily Dickinson’s poems. Her use of dashes is characteristic of Emily Dickinson’s style.

Or white marbling nakedness  
Frozen—is it--That? (lines 7-8, 383).

*Possession* is characteristic of Byatt's love for intertextual and embedded texts. She borrows from various sources. Byatt's style of using many different genres, for e.g., the detective genre, the romance etc and her use of myths and fairy tales show us that in a postmodern world nothing is original. Just as the postmodern world itself, the novel lacks originality. Everything in it is only a reconstruction of something else. By drawing in stuff from various sources and mixing several genres, Byatt creates a "pastiche". The novel very well reflects the postmodern condition.

As Francis Lyotard defines it "postmodern" as "incredulity towards metanarratives"(482) Byatt goes beyond the metanarratives or the grand narratives and creates a patchwork of other texts and genres. She recycles the earlier genres in new contexts. As a result her novel becomes fragmented. According to Lyotard in his Report on Knowledge, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility in the contemporary post industrial society" (482). So Byatt breaks down the grand narrative into pieces and creates a pastiche. Her use of historical references and different genres, voices and stories is nothing but recognition of the plurality and indeterminacy in the postmodern world.

Byatt successfully creates a literary hybrid by making her fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century characters write poems, letters, journals and diaries and including them in her novel. It is through these literary devices that she narrates the story directly to the readers. Byatt creates an amazing fictitious Victorian world in which she has characters that really seem to come out of the Victorian age. Byatt not only shows the influence of the Victorian past on the contemporary scene, but also brings out the great theological debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the letters. She also makes her 19<sup>th</sup> century characters act out the lives of real Victorian poets. Byatt's use of various genres, historical references and voices reflect the postmodern fragmented world.. Her novel is nothing but a pastiche of several other forms

and devices. She shows that in a Postmodern world nothing is original. The postmodern novel is a patch work of other texts.

Byatt goes to other plots and recreates them in the light of the present. The Victorian plot is recreated and re-presented in her contemporary novel. *Possession* is a very serious game about postmodernism. She creates an intertextual game. Through both content and technique, Byatt constructs a very serious game about postmodernism and plays it directly with her readers. The novel is written in a very playful manner with the mixture of literary works and genres. The story moving back and forth is also suggestive of game playing but an in-depth look into the plot shows us that the novel is actually a deconstruction of the central foundations which uphold postmodern thought. The postmodern plot-coil gradually takes a turn back to the coherent plot.

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## The Postmodern Plot-Coil.

### The random tangle.

A.S. Byatt's plot is a postmodern plot. She has a story within a story, that is, a plot within a plot. Byatt goes to other plots and remakes those plots in her own way. The most striking aspect of her novel is the use of the Victorian age. She creates the Victorian plot and weaves it into the main story. The action of the book takes place in two periods. The two main characters Roland and Maud are the scholars living in the 1980's. They are the ones who investigate the affair of two Victorian poets in the 1860's through their correspondence. There are wheels within wheels in Byatt's novel. Everything is interconnected and all three events are related to one another. The events and the characters are all trapped in this enormous plot-coil created by the author.

The present day characters are seen to be reliving the lives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poets. Roland sets out on a journey to uncover the secret affair of the Victorian poets. He moves to Lincoln from London in search of clues. In Lincoln he meets Maud Bailey, an expert on LaMotte and they both embark on a journey to discover the truth. They travel to places the Victorian poets had visited previously. Roland and Maud travel to Yorkshire and we are told that LaMotte and Ash had once been to Yorkshire on an expedition. Then they move to Brittany where Ash and LaMotte had been united. Chronologically the novel moves across time.

London-----Lincoln-----Yorkshire-----Brittany.

The novel begins with a major discovery in a London library. Then the plot turns to a "quest plot" with Roland traveling to places in search of hard core facts. At this point it is a detective plot. Roland, the detective sets out to find out the truth. The "quest plot" soon

ns to a “chase” when Cropper, a American scholar follows Maud and Roland to Brittany and tries to track them down. The “quest” suddenly becomes an “obsession” when the “other plot” takes over. The “other plot” had been influencing them all along but it completely takes over in Brittany. Here the scholars seem to be possessed by some supernatural forces which finally bring them close to each other. In the process, the characters are changed and their lives are turned around. In the end we see Roland and Maud together. They were supposed to go separate ways, instead they choose to stay together.

Quest-----Chase-----Other plot.

Byatt has two plots in her novel. The characters are trapped between these plots. Her plots are connected to each other. One plot echoes the other plot. Byatt's plot is a plot-coil with everything connected to each other. Byatt moves back and forth switching from one plot to another without letting her readers know. This is Byatt's play in the novel with the story moving back and forth between two time periods. Such a play is a postmodern tendency.

In the beginning, we find Roland in the London library where he discovers the letter. His thirst for knowledge takes him to Lincoln to meet Maud Bailey, an expert on LaMotte. Then the events start connecting. One event leads to the other. Both the scholars move to Yorkshire in search of more knowledge.

**The “other” plot .**

But Byatt creates the “other plot” that is, the Victorian plot which gradually takes over from the contemporary one. The characters seem to be driven by some other force

beyond their control. Soon the quest becomes an obsession. Maud and Roland were no longer in control. They were driven by some otherworldly force. When they were in Brittany, they realized that the investigation had become an obsession.

We must be mad, said Roland

Of course we are mad. And bad...

All obsessions are dangerous...This one's got a bit out of hand. (332)

Now, these two scholars were not only obsessed with the quest, but also obsessed with each other.

“Val thinks we are obsessed with each other”(332)

The plot is now taking a turn to the past. Maud and Roland were retracing the steps of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poets. Together the scholars move to the places the Victorians had visited. Helplessly they feel the spirits taking possession of their lives.

“They had been in Brittany three weeks...they had found themselves on holiday , on holiday together, and for the second time that summer. They had separate rooms- but there was no doubt that there was a marital, or honeymooning aspect to their lingering. Both of them were profoundly confused and very ambivalent about this...’(421)

Both Roland and Maud had run away and were acutely aware of the usual connotations of this act.

This is how Byatt creates the postmodern plot- coil where everything is entangled in a whirlpool. She presents the random tangle of the postmodernist plot but at the same time

: brings in an external force. She pulls her characters out of the random tangle into a coherent plot". This seems to be Byatt's "eternal plot" or the "romance plot". She shows that the plot of the dead lovers has become entangled with the present day scholars. In the beginning they get caught up in the web. We see the ups and downs in their lives. Roland is a man whose life is a complete mess. He is an unemployed individual living in a small apartment rented by his girlfriend. He is a man leading a meaningless life. But after he meets Maud Bailey, his life is changed. The chaos in his life is turned into serenity. Roland gradually becomes inclined to this lady and finally realizes that he has fallen in love"with The plot of the dead lovers finally takes over. Roland realizes that they are driven by some force.

Roland thought partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot but that of those others...(421)

Byatt traces out the postmodernist way of life where every single being is a free-floating element through a never-ending channel.

...being a good postmodernist intention, require the aleatory or the multivalent or the "free" but structuring, but controlling, but driving to some—to what?—end.

Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable(422)

Byatt also states that "falling in love" brings out a person from a "random tangle" into a "coherent plot"

"Falling in love", characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover's history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot.(422).

So Byatt makes her characters fall in love. Roland is no longer the free floating individual he used to be. He has now fallen in love and entered a coherent plot. Byatt takes her characters to a coherent plot or the “romance plot” where they achieve harmony. Maud and Roland’s story ends with a moment in which they are happy. This is almost like the last movement of Beethoven’s last quartet. (Kundera 31) . It is based on two motifs; *Muss es sein?* (Must it be) and *Es muss sein!* (it must be !) In the beginning it is a difficult resolution, a heavy resolution (Must it be?) but in the end harmony is achieved (It must be) .In the beginning Roland’s life is a big confusion and chaos. Then Maud’s arrival into his life brings in all kinds of feelings and emotions. At first Roland finds it difficult to choose between “love” and “reality”, but finally he gives in to love. As a result he comes close to Maud and they are united.

Milan Kundera in his *Unbearable Lightness of Being* showed the co-existence of lightness and weight. In Byatt’s novel it is chaos vs. coherence. Kundera questioned whether weight is positive or lightness splendid and came to the conclusion that “this lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious and most ambiguous of all” (Kundera.5) But Byatt seems to have solved the mystery. She gives her modern day characters a coherent plot where they finally achieve harmony. They seem to have dedicated themselves to a life of peace Byatt tries to find a solution to this notorious paradox of weight and lightness. .Milan Kundera’s characters also find harmony in the end, but the readers already know that they both die in an accident the day after. So what Kundera is trying to show is that a total dedication to any of these philosophies will lead to complete destruction. Kundera’s main protagonist Tomas practiced a philosophy of lightness, but soon became sick with compassion. This “compassion was a burden to him but it was something he could not easily dismiss. “ I’m sick with compassion...it’s that sickness,(compassion) which I thought I was immune to... ( Kundera 30) .In the end Tomas gives in to compassion, that is “weight” which was the cause of his death.



Byatt's handling of the lightness/weight (chaos/coherence) is quite different. She makes Roland and Maud fall in love. This is the coherence/weight Byatt gives them. Roland had also become sick with compassion or love. But Byatt's characters do not end up in a disaster. Their story ends on an optimistic note. We see them together in a brand new world of happiness and peace. Their obsession with the "Romance plot" does not lead them to tragedy. We can guess that they must have lived happily ever-after.

In the morning the whole had a strange new smell...it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful.(507).

Although Roland thinks that they were not made for each other and that they must return to their social reality, the plot of a romance takes over. He becomes addicted to the luxury and sweetness of "Romance". The creamy custard he got addicted to is symbolic of the tenderness of romance. These are things lovers usually have when they go on a date or a couple on a honeymoon.

During his stay he had become addicted to a pale, chilled slightly sweet pudding called Iles Flottantes, which consisted of a white island of foam floating in a creamy yellow pool of vanilla custard. He thought how much he would regret this, how the taste would fade and diminish in his memory. (425).

Roland wanted the romance to give way to "social realism" but somehow it got hold of him. It drowned him in the "creamy yellow pool of the vanilla custard" (425). He falls in love with Maud.

Therefore we can say that Maud and Roland lived happily ever after. Byatt gives her modern plot a fairy tale ending whereas the Victorian plot ends up in a tragedy. The *Postscript* tell us of a meeting between Ash and his daughter Maia, but neither LaMotte

nor the present day scholars ever know that Maia once met her real father. The message Ash gives LaMotte was never delivered. So by simultaneously presenting the two opposite conclusions, Byatt alludes to both postmodernist open-ended plot and the coherent plot. Byatt gives her contemporary scholars a "coherent plot" which is "presently unfashionable"(422) reversing postmodern tendencies. Perhaps this is Byatt's final play in the novel.

### **Deficiencies in the characters.**

The novel has been written in a playful manner but we soon become aware of the fact that it is a deconstruction of a few of the central foundations which uphold postmodern thought. Byatt's purpose within her novel is a very serious critique of Postmodernism. The novel reflects the postmodern condition and any deficiencies in the characters lives can be seen as a deficiency in that particular ideology.

The chaotic condition of the contemporary world can be detected in the modern day protagonist, Roland. Byatt presents the life of Roland at the outset of the novel as being devoid of meaning. Roland lives in the basement of a decaying Victorian house. This setting shows that he lives in a decaying environment. Here Byatt shows that contemporary world is nothing but a decadent and fragmented world. She portrays the decadence of the contemporary society. Rolands decaying Victorian house is probably Byatt's way of conveying to her readers a past is decrepit. Roland is seen to be less than Roland is described as a latecomer who "arrives too late for things that were still in the air But vanished"(10). He always did what was hoped of him, that is, had four A's at A' level etc. Roland was an unemployed individual making a living out of a part-time tutoring and some dishwashing. He did not have a fixed source of income. He tries to get a job but is turned down. Roland's career was just as fragmented and broken into parts as

the postmodern condition. Roland's bathroom in his little apartment also reflects his unruly life. The place "full of old underwear, open pots of eye paint, dangling shorts and stockings, sticky bottles of hair conditioner and tubes of shaving foam"(56). Roland's life at this point is like his bathroom-a total mess.

Roland's relationship with Val can also be regarded as a kind of unsatisfactory and superficial relationship. The depthlessness of their relationship can be seen in the very beginning. When Roland tells Val that he has discovered the letters, Val shows no interest. Roland thought that the discovery would make him a better job prospect but Val bluntly replied that there are no jobs left for him. Val considered him a complete loser even though she claimed to be in love with him.

" there aren't any jobs, and if there are, they go to Fergus Wolff (19)

Although they are living together, a distance has been created over the years. Val also blames him for having so much curiosity about dead people. She is annoyed because she is the breadwinner while Roland just wastes his time researching dead poets.

" And how are you ever going to afford to get  
us away from dripping cat piss...( 20).

The depthlessness of their relationship reflects the depthlessness of postmodern life.

Byatt's construction of the plot can also be seen as a turn away from the postmodern "random tangle". Byatt creates a postmodern plot-coil with everything working in a network, although the overwhelming "Romance plot" gradually takes over. This is a turn back to the past, that is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism which explores the fantastic

and the supernatural. Byatt shows that the plot of the dead lovers has become the plot of the present day scholars. They are possessed by the spirits of the Victorian poets. So Byatt blends the past with the present and finally shows the triumph of the past over the present. She introduces the “real element of superstitious dread” (421) in the “self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist plot coil” (421)

Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure and partly with the real element of superstitious dread...And it is probable that there is an element of superstitious dread in any self-referring, self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror game or plot-coil that recognizes that it has got out of hand. (421).

Byatt also makes her characters fall in love. She takes her characters to a “Romance plot” which is the “coherent plot”. We see Maud and Roland in love with each other. Byatt gives her modern day scholars the plot of a romance.

He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high romance simultaneously,  
A Romance was one of the systems that controlled him... (425)

Byatt states in her novel that the Romance plot is a “coherent plot” which takes us out of the random tangle. So what Byatt does is make her characters fall into a “coherent plot of a romance which works against the present condition. She makes her characters find ultimate meaning in a world of deception and decadence.

“But they are always both frightening and desirable. Falling in love’ combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot”(422)

Byatt traces out the way of life which is devoid of meaning and closure.

...being a good postmodernist intention...coherence and closure are presently unfashionable...422.

She deliberately violates the laws of postmodernist intention and lets her characters achieve harmony in the end. Roland wanted the Romance to give way to “social realism” but somehow it spilled over and drowned him. Byatt gives them a kind of “fairy tale” ending.

...and they lived happily ever-after.

Through both content and technique, Byatt constructs a very serious game about postmodernism. Its hybrid quality, intertextuality and playful tendencies of moving back and forth are examples of postmodern techniques of narration. But towards the end, the novel upsets the unstable decentred nature of postmodern thought. The random postmodern tangle is swept aside and her characters are brought closer to a stable plot. The fragmented narrative, as a reflection of the unruly lives of the characters is surpassed by Romance. Perhaps this is why Byatt labeled her novel *Possession A Romance*. Byatt constructs her novel in line with the conventions of Romance. Her self-conscious creation of the Victorian world in which the poets are in a Romance plot show how Byatt has drawn much of its form from the medieval romance quest. There are characters in love. But love is only one element which is considered to be typical of Romance. There is also the quest which Maud and Roland undertake. These two scholars set out on a journey in search of the hidden truth. Romance as a narrative form can be composed of various elements, such as themes, death, love, resurrection etc. In Byatt's novel the Romance unites with other narrative forms. We see a mixture of forms and genres. The novel is not entirely a Romance. Sometimes it is a detective novel, a fairy tale or even a

historical novel. It is this hybridity that is essentially a postmodern style. Byatt does not entirely employ the conventions of nineteenth century Romanticism exploring the fantastic and the supernatural. She combines the medieval Romance quest with the modern Romance. Byatt recreates the Romance plot and tries to give a new postmodern twist to it.

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## Self-conscious World- Making.

### ombination of the “real” and the ‘fictitious”

Byatt's view of the nature of narrative fiction is that it is both a world which its reader can enter and a voice which its reader should listen to. In her critical writings, Byatt has articulated a “self-conscious realism” (Passions of the Mind 4), in which she balances a real self-consciousness with a belief in the fictional world created by the literary work. Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession* can be discussed as a realization of Byatt's theories about self-conscious realism. The novel is about abstract ideas as much as it is about experiences and emotions.

The novel, *Possession* traces a love-affair between two fictitious Victorian poets. Their story is gradually revealed in a narrative which follows the research of two twentieth-century scholars. So we see that Byatt has created a fictional world with a real world. The characters in the “real” world have a desire to possess and experience the “imagined world.” Byatt presents a world in which her readers can enter and her resurrection of the Victorian voices or her readers can listen to.

\* In her essay “People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to realism in English Postwar Fiction”, Byatt discusses how some writers of the 1960's abandoned nineteenth century realism because they believed it to be a “convention now leading novelists into bad faith” (“Passions of the Mind” 165). In the essay she looks for a synthesis between the two traditions of realism and experiment. For Byatt, realism has the particular value of providing the reader with an easy access to a fictional world, whereas formal play satisfies a more abstract pleasure. It is a novel about poets and literary critics, most of the characters in *Possession* are authors, readers or both. The novel is full of pastiches of

ictorian poetry and postmodern literary criticism and theoretical discussion between characters etc. Byatt also very carefully crafts structures of metaphors and packs them with historical references which gives it the status of a fiction.

It is clear from the sub-title that *Possession* defines itself as A Romance and it draws much of its form from the medieval romance quest. The self-conscious comments by the Victorian characters who frequently compare their situation with the conventions of Romance shows the use of the medieval features.

I have dreamed nightly of your face and walked the streets of my  
daily life with the rhythms of your writing singing in my silent brains.  
I have called you my Muse, and so you are...a messenger from some  
urgent place of the spirit where essential poetry sings and sings.  
I Could call you with even greater truth—my love...It is a love for  
which there is no place in this world—a love my diminished reason  
tells me I can and will do neither of us any good, a love I tried to hide... (193).

Byatt creates a fictitious world of the Victorians and highlights the general interest felt during the Victorian era towards chivalric romance. There is a quest to be fulfilled in the story. Roland tells Maud, “We just needed time. It is our quest” (328), then there are women viewed as princesses in towers, Roland thought of Maud as trapped in a tower. “She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower, and his imagination’s work had been all to make her present...” (277), and men as devouring dragons, “—I thank God for you—if there must be a Dragon—that He was you” (503.) Nathaniel Hawthorne defends romance as a valid literary genre. Romance has, Hawthorne writes, “fairly a right to present the truth of the human heart under circumstances to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing on creation” whereas the realist novel “is presumed to aim at a



ery minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience". The realist fiction imitates life to the extreme, even to the point of claiming that since the purpose of the novel was to imitate human experience, it should abandon the conventions of form and plot. Many late twentieth century theorists, David Dowart, for example, points out how art is still expected to hold a mirror up to nature. He points out how life and nature has been redefined as something fragmented, indeterminate and absurd—and art now is expected to "reflect that fragmentation, indeterminacy and absurdity" ("Literary Symbiosis" 42). Similarly Byatt suggests that many contemporary authors feel that "modern reality" as opposed to "nineteenth century reality" is chaotic, fluid and random and that consequently the realist novel should reflect such undifferentiated reality (*Passions of the Mind*, 178).

But Byatt paints a very different picture in her novel. Her novel neither reflects the conventions of the nineteenth century realist fiction, nor does it reflect the modern reality. Byatt consciously takes the side of Romance and at the same time goes against the logical conclusion of realist fiction. By doing so Byatt's *Possession* draws attention to the discarded qualities of Romance. She tries to recreate the Romance plot by searching for a new beginning to realism. Byatt searches for a way to reincorporate the metaphorical qualities assigned to Romance. Byatt's novel, therefore does not lead to the fractured narratives of the postmodern novel and the resulting loss of mimesis. It is a combination of Victorian realism and modern reality. Her novel does not hold a mirror up to the absurdities and chaos of the contemporary world, but re-creates the 19th century chivalric romance in the light of the present. Byatt's use of both medieval and modern romance conventions remind the reader that her novel is representative neither of Victorian realism nor of postmodern intertextual play, but a combination of the two. Byatt mixes the realistic and the fantastic or romantic in *Possession* and this is what makes her achieve in fiction a unique kind of window into reality. Byatt's novel is a mixture of the present and

ast which makes it a “contemporary classic”, and also a “Postmodern Victorian”

l.

In *Possession*, Byatt parodies scholars and literary critics. Mortimer Cropper is a character who is mentioned throughout the novel. He is an American gentleman who hunts for historical artifacts. Cropper even chases Roland and Maud to Brittany as soon as he becomes aware of their discovery. This man steals stuff owned by famous people and smuggles it to his home country. Cropper is ready to pay any amount of money for the assets. So this is how Byatt makes fun of the scholars and literary critics.

Roland’s discovery made in the London library. Now this turns Roland from a purely textual scholar into both thief and a detective, waking in him a new curiosity about artifacts and their existence beyond textual references. The two scholars, Roland and Maud discuss the metaphors in their view.

Do you never have the sense that our metaphors *eat up* our world?

I mean of course everything connects and connects-all the time- and I

suppose one studies-I study literature because all these connections

seem both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously

powerful... (253).

Roland struggles between a pleasure felt at the endless game of references and a fear of losing his connection to real, physical objects—“things”. Roland is both frightened and attracted by the connections which feels both “endlessly exciting” and dangerously powerful”.

## **The *Postscript 1868***

Most of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* revolves around Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell as the two scholars search for the long hidden relationship between the Victorian Poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The written word takes centre stage throughout this novel as they go through the letters, poetry and journals which lead them on the path to their great discovery- the letter. These written documents further the story along to its very end. Maud and Roland follow this trail of paper to what they can only assume. Byatt shows her readers that the final truth cannot be achieved.

Byatt suggests, "while it was once attractive to think that whatever we say or see is our own construction, it now becomes necessary to reconsider the idea of truth, hard truth, and its possibility" (*Passions of the Mind* 24) . What she proposes is that fiction at its best is formed from metaphorical structures which are also true reflections of reality. In the story, the Victorian poet, Randolph Ash died believing LaMotte had murdered at birth their love child. This is what the modern day scholars accessed through their investigation.

But the *Postscript* of the novel paints a different picture for the readers. Byatt creates a *Postscript* which tell us of a meeting between Ash and a little girl he obviously recognizes as his own daughter.

"He said, I think I know your mother. You have a true look  
of your mother"(509).

But neither Christabel nor the present day scholars will ever know that Maia, the daughter of once met her real father. This is a secret which will always be hidden from the contemporary protagonists. Maud and Roland are unable to dig out the whole truth. By creating the *Postscript*, Byatt shows that in the postmodern world there is absence of the "whole truth". The *Postscript 1868* explores this idea.

"There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.

Two people met on a hot May Day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was."(508).

The truth is that Ash did not die believing LaMotte had killed their child. He actually met his own daughter on a hot May Day. The readers along with the twentieth century scholars only know that the child survived and that the message never reached Ash on his death bed. The hard truth is never accessed by the scholars.

By inserting this third person omniscient narrator at specific points within the novel, Byatt promotes the idea that the true events of the past can never be fully understood. The last words of the *Postscript* tell that the events of that hot May Day is never accessed by the scholars or anyone in the contemporary world. This is what Randolph Ash told his daughter on that hot may day.

"Tell your aunt," he said, that you met a poet, who was looking for the Dame Sans Merci, and who

met you instead, and who sends her his compliments and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new."

"I'll try to remember," she said, steadying her crown.

So he kissed her, always matter-of-fact, so as not to frighten her, and went on his way.

And on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble,

and the lovely crown was broken, and she forgot the message, which was

never delivered"( Byatt, 510-511).

Byatt's construction of the *Postscript* not only creates a gap between the readers and the scholars, it also undermines the initial sense of closure created by the original revelation that Ash dies thinking that LaMotte has killed their child. The *Postscript* shatters the certainty readers have settled on. Although the scholars are still not aware of the "truth", the *Postscript* rearranges the fragmented narrative. Byatt's construction of the initial "false ending" is undermined by another "real ending" which gives an even stronger sense of closure. The shattered puzzle of the narrative rearranges itself in a different, but even more emotionally satisfying and poetically true picture. So what Byatt does in her novel is create an alternate ending which gives us a sense of closure. Byatt intentionally constructs the "real ending" and such a technique is very different from the multiple endings of many other postmodern novels. Byatt states in her novel that "coherence and Closure are presently unfashionable" but at the same time she makes use of those unfashionable techniques in her novel. Therefore it is clear that Byatt's work is basically a mixture of both postmodern techniques and medieval romance conventions.

Byatt claims, "My instinct as a writer of fiction has been to explore and defend the unfashionable Victorian third person narrator who is not playing at being god, but merely

the writer, telling what can be told about the world of the fiction” (On Histories and Stories 102) .This belief is reflected in Byatt’s own choice for the narrative perspective of *Possession*. The inclusion of the three sections during which the Victorian world is narrated directly to the reader is in third person. The *Postscript* is narrated in the third person.

### **Literary Work as an Autonomous Voice.**

As an author, Byatt is constantly mediating works of the past, both by creating pastiches and through including discussions concerning historical works in her own narratives. But unlike the authors of most postmodern metafiction whose self-conscious use of intertexts is meant to break through the illusion of realism, Byatt’s work takes a very different approach. So the difference between this novel and other postmodern novels is Byatt’s attempt to emphasize the honest resurrection of Victorian voices. Byatt narrates her story through the Victorian voices in her literary works. The poems, letters, journals provide an access to the Victorian world. They are written in such a way that they evoke the same intertextual context to which genuine 19<sup>th</sup> century works refer. Byatt recreates the Victorian mind and takes us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century context. This gives the readers the opportunity to recreate the context for themselves, even while they are aware of the fact that they are reading a pastiche created by a postmodern author. Byatt’s aim is not to break through the illusion of realism but to find a new beginning to realism.

Thus in *Possession*, the readings of long lost manuscripts are presented as moments when the voices of the dead are restored to life through the force of imagining. The correspondence between the two Victorian poets brings out the Victorian crisis. Many of the characters in the novel, however, fail in their readings because they lack the necessary respect for the voice being resurrected. They tend to read too much of their own interests

e characters in the novel, however, fail in their readings because they lack the necessary respect for the voice being resurrected. They tend to read too much of their own interests into the Victorian poems, like the American scholar Mortimer Cropper. Ash's reply to Cropper's ancestress concerning Victorian spiritual practices shows the true literary resurrection.

"The Historian and the Man of science alike may be said to traffic with the dead. Cuvier has imparted flesh and motion and appetites to the defunct Megatherium, whilst the living ears of MM Michelet and Renan, of Mr Carlyle and the brothers Grimm, have heard the bloodless cries of the vanished and given them voices. I myself with the aid of the imagination, have worked a little in that line... Mixt my life with, those past voices..." (104).

Byatt's self-conscious realism starts with the same assumption as realism in general, one of the main purposes of fiction is to hold up a mirror to life and to talk about a hard reality by creating simulations of it. But her novel is not representative of Victorian realism nor is it an attempt to dispel the illusion of realism. It is a combination of 19th century realism and the meta fictional techniques of postmodernism. Byatt creates a "hard reality" in her novel at the same time, her novel displays a postmodern self-consciousness about a literary technique and the ways in which authors use unnaturally structured narratives to achieve a "real experience".

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## Conclusion

The chapters of my dissertation has examined Byatt's writing style and her various experimental tendencies. The object of this study has been the presence of the postmodern elements in A.S Byatt's Booker Prize winning novel *Possession*. It has shown how Byatt has employed almost all the Postmodern styles. My aim in this paper has also been to explore Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession* as a "Postmodern Victorian" novel. This paper has dealt with the ways in which the author has utilized aspects of nineteenth century realism in her contemporary work. It has traced out the fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century world the author has created and how she uses the Victorian age for a setting. My purpose is to see how the supernatural and the fantastic spills onto the twentieth century fragmented narrative.

The first chapter of this dissertation analyses Byatt's novel as a literary hybrid and describes her unique story telling style. Byatt has two sets of stories in her novel. One is the present story and the other is the Victorian plot. Byatt narrates the Victorian world through the poems, letters, journals and the diaries she creates. Byatt composes the literary works herself which very well captures the style of the Victorian era. Every chapter begins with a fictitious work. This chapter also shows how Byatt has combined several literary genres in her novel. Her novel can be read partly as a Romance and partly as a detective novel. This chapter describes how Byatt rewrites history in her contemporary novel. Byatt brings out the great theological debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She recreates the thoughts of the Victorian mind in the letters of Ash and LaMotte. Byatt revisits the past also by exploring ideas like feminism and gender equality. She shows that the past can have a tremendous effect on the contemporary scene. The ghosts of the dead Victorian poets are shown to haunt the present day scholars. Byatt supernaturally links the present day characters to the Victorians. Byatt's blending of the past with the

present also creates a cyclical time scheme. This represents a fall from the Victorian conception of linear time. So my first chapter shows how Byatt has recreated and re-presented the Victorian plot in her contemporary novel.

The second chapter focuses on the Postmodern plot coil. The random tangle of the postmodern plot is explored. The way the events are interconnected in the postmodern plot-coil. It also concentrates on the “external plot” which gradually takes over. The way the present day characters are driven by an external force towards the end is described. Byatt gives her characters a “coherent plot” which indicates a reversal of the postmodern tendencies.

Chapter three shows how Byatt blends the real and the fictitious and how she searches for a new beginning to realism. Byatt’s novel does not reflect the fragmented and chaotic contemporary world but recreates the 19<sup>th</sup> century world in the new context. Her novel is a combination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realism with the modern realism. This chapter also analyses the *Postscript* of the novel. The *Postscript* of the novel shows that in a postmodern world there is an absence of the whole truth. It shows that no amount of literary analysis can disclose the truth. Byatt’s construction of an initial “false” ending undermined by another “real” ending gives a sense of closure. This section of the novel is omnisciently narrated while the other parts are narrated through the pastiche of poems and documents.

This technique is very different from the multiple endings of many other postmodern novels. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) by John Fowles, seem to move towards narrative freedom, an ending which denies the reader closure. Fowles theory of “freedom leads to the experimental alternative endings to the novel, which painfully destroy the narrative reality” (*Passions of the Mind* 174). By denying his readers closure Fowles also

dermines the poetic truth of his own novel. This belief is reflected in Byatt's own choices for the narrative structure of *Possession*. That is, the inclusion of the three sections during which the Victorian world is narrated directly to the readers. But unlike Fowles narrator, Byatt's narrator either moves from one era to another within the fictional world or echoes a particularly self-conscious experience of a character. The effect of these techniques is to heighten, not undermine the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the work. Thus, though it would seem natural to include *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the same genre of British rewritings of the Victorian era, Fowles novel is part of an earlier deconstructive paradigm which seeks to perform critical readings of texts.

In another of her essays Byatt recounts her attempt to write the novel *Still Life* (1985) without the networks of interleaved references, without metaphor, concentrating purely on the accuracy of description. During the process she finds that her mind-set simply sees metaphor everywhere and that she was "doing violence to her own mental constitution" (*Passions of the Mind*, 14). The novel finally emerged as a combination of metaphors. In *Possession*, the rewards of the combination of metaphorical structures appears particularly in Roland's growth into a poet.

Byatt's *Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* is a collection of five fairy stories. Two of these stories, "The Glass Coffin" and "Gode's story" appear in Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession*. Just as in *Possession*, Byatt superimposes the fairy tale style on the contemporary scene. But the events in the stories do not turn back to an earlier time, instead the magic of an earlier time is brought into our own. Byatt's fairy tale tone is also heard in her 1990 novel *Possession*. In *Possession* we have "The Glass Coffin" which serves as a parallel to Maud and Roland's story. In *Possession* Byatt makes the magic of the fairy tale is played on the contemporary characters.

Byatt's next novel *Babel Tower* written in 1996 is also much like *Possession*. To read this novel is to be immersed in an overwhelmingly literary experience. *Babel Tower* demands a strenuous intellectual engagement. But *Babel Tower* does not offer itself as easily to the readers as *Possession* did. The novel is not for everyone. The setting is the 1960's, and it is a novel about that decade.

A.S. Byatt's latest novel *The Biographer's Tale* has lots of comparisons to *Possession*. Byatt's search for a new beginning to realism in *Possession* is continued in her latest novel *The Biographer's Tale*. The novel is narrated by a graduate student who suddenly decides at the beginning to escape the world of postmodern literary theory and immerse himself in "real life" by writing a biography of a great biographer. But he quickly discovers that facts can be unreliable and a whole life hard to find. No matter how hard he tries, he unearths only fragments. This novel shows the absence of the whole truth in a postmodern world just as in *Possession*. *The Biographer's Tale*, reads like a parody of all things intellectual. The novel is obsessed with facts, the character in search of facts. It is as much fairy tale as satire. *The Biographer's Tale* is both an academic parody and a Victorian chronicle. As in her 1990 novel *Possession* some of her people are self-important academics.

Most of Byatt's novels are concerned with a literary world. To read her novels is to be immersed in an overwhelmingly literary experience. Byatt's own era that is, our Postmodern era is full of challenges to the individual, in which the subject is in question. But Cropper concludes that Randolph Ash

"turned away, like many, from individual sympathy with dying or dead men to universal sympathies. It was a kind of Romanticism reborn...intertwined with the new mechanistic analysis and the new optimism..." (272)

like Ash, Byatt revives an older literary form and incorporates “new mechanistic analysis” with new optimism not about individuals, but about the necessity of metanarratives of history and subjectivity. Byatt’s novels turn out to be a step backwards towards tradition. Her references back to the Victorian age in *Possession* and *The Biographer’s Tale* display a desire to escape the postmodern world. Byatt’s longing to be in a “real world” is seen in *Possession* and *The Biographer’s Tale*. *Possession*’s final sentence, excluding the *Postscript* describes the morning after Maud and Roland have consummated their relationship as full of “the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh lively and hopeful(551). This death and destruction could be the death of postmodern literary theory upon narrative.

Most of Byatt’s novels are somehow linked to the past. It is either in her use of past narrative forms or in the inclusion of the Victorian age in her contemporary novels. Byatt’s use of the fairy tale style can also be regarded as being a critique of the contemporary societal trend. The magic of an earlier time is brought into our own in Byatt’s novels. Her novel *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* is a collection of five fairy tales and two of the stories in this novel is found in her 1990 novel *Possession*. Byatt’s use of the fairy tale in her novels shows that she not only brings in the fantastic and the supernatural but also merges it with the twentieth century fragmented narrative. Her novels do not wholly reflect the twentieth century fragmentation and absurdity, but open up a gateway to a world lost in time.

Will the next great wave of literary or cultural theory portray our subjectivity in an even more fragmented manner? Or will it attempt like Byatt to assert that, we are instead more coherent and live in a real world than we could ever imagine? A.S Byatt, in a step towards both the past and the future incorporates the metanarratives into this new mechanistic analysis. Byatt is considered to be one of the greatest postmodern novelists in

tain, but her content and techniques are very different from other postmodern novels. Her novels are a step back towards tradition. Byatt's Booker Prize Winning novel *Possession* is an example of her unique blend of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century worlds. It is this mixture of the present and the past that makes Byatt's novel a "contemporary classic" in other words a "Postmodern Victorian" novel. This dissertation is basically an exploration of Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession* as a "Postmodern Victorian" novel.

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