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## Possession as a Fictional Hybrid: A.S Byatt's Tryst with Postmodernism

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A.S Byatt's most successful novel, *Possession: A Romance* (1990), won the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, and has been a great critical and popular success. The story, which is partly a romance, partly a literary thriller, involves two contemporary scholars whose research into the lives of two fictional Victorian poets reveals inextricably linked destinies. Byatt mixes historical fact and fiction in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between them. *Possession* is generally regarded as an emblematic postmodern novel, which shows Byatt's ambivalent relationship with postmodernism.

The novel displays literary qualities associated with postmodernism like: self-reflexivity, discontinuity, heterogeneity, hybridisation, pastiche and parody. It jumps between the present and the past, visiting different discourses and genres. Nevertheless, many critics have noticed that *Possession* largely rejects postmodern theory. Linda Hutcheon argues that problematising—rather than denial or negation—of received truths is one of the operations that most characterises postmodernism as philosophy or criticism. *Possession* through its deployment of romance problematises postmodernism though partially.

The novel begins in 1986 in the Reading Room of the London Library. Set in a university environment with scholars like Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey as its main characters, the novel unravels the secret love affair between two nineteenth century poets; Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The love affair has remained undiscovered until Roland Mitchell, a postdoctoral research assistant at London University, chances on a copy of an unfinished letter written by Randolph in the London library, which sets him on an exciting journey of discovery. Roland and Maud are postmodern, poststructuralist scholars and their theoretical mindsets are continually satirised throughout the novel.

*Possession* challenges postmodernism through a satire of these characters that are afraid to embrace life. Ironically, in the process of discovering the secret love affair they become so involved in the story that they begin to embrace what postmodernism undermines. Both Roland and Maud begin to invest personally in the importance of history, they forget the principle that there is no such thing as an error-free text, and they fall in love, even though they consider love a “suspect ideological construct” (*Possession*: 323). The metanarratives that they view, in postmodern or poststructuralist theory, as flawed, begin to hold meaning for them. Investigating the secret affair allows them to suspend their disbelief. Similarly, although it acknowledges that our understanding of the past is textual, the novel's focus is on a rich past that has many gifts for the present.

In *Possession*, Byatt is more interested in exploring the ways to tell the story of the past than emphasising that our knowledge of the past can only be partial. *Possession* is an experimental pastiche of a variety of literary forms that can be used to narrate the past. It is simultaneously romantic and realistic, while it includes poems, diary entries, letters and fairy stories, all adding to the rich tapestry of the narrative. The novel uses many traditional and newer literary forms. Though the novel embraces postmodern experimentation, but it is also something too complex to be wholly captured by this limiting term. With its commitment to traditional literature and its insistence on more traditional values, such as the power and meaning of narratives, it is not completely postmodern. In *Possession*, Byatt returns to a

world of romance and passion that allows her to hold what is not upheld by postmodern theory.

Possession uses different modes to tell the story of the present and the past as it explores the continuities and discontinuities between them. The present is narrated in a series of broken, awkward dialogues, while Roland and Maud's inner thoughts are dominated by theories that concern even their private lives. Roland considers his definition of self: he "had learnt to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his "self" as an illusion" (502). With their shadowy, abstract conception of identity, it takes a real effort for them to connect on any meaningful level with others. The hesitant, dry dialogues between Maud and Roland are humorously flat and lifeless in comparison to the passionate exchanges between the Victorian lovers. *Possession* draws attention to what Byatt regards as the absurdity and futility of poststructuralist academic enterprise. In contrast, the past is a rich world of epic poems and passionate love letters, while its characters come to life for the reader to know and love them in a way that the postmodern scholars do not.

The novel openly affiliates itself with the romantic movement through its subtitle and symbolism that harks back to a time of medieval Arthurian romance. Seal Court is an imposing Gothic castle, from a distance seen as "a turret, a battlement, white in the gloom" (86), that conceals a hidden treasure within its fortresses that the knight and his lady must rescue. The word "Bailey" in Middle English means the outer wall of a castle (81); Sir George Bailey protects the treasure in his fortress from the prying eyes of those whom he may perceive to be 'dragons'. Romantic forms are used to narrate the past and the present, placing side by side the modern-day and the Hawthornian historical romance narratives to create a form of literary "hybrid" (Hansson 452). Fictional "hybrids" such as this that fuse the postmodern, the conventional and the traditional "destabilise our interpretations of traditional works, and... manage both to reread their tradition and revitalise its twentieth century appearance" (452). The motifs of the early beginnings of medieval romance - the knight on his chivalric quest, escapism, exile, return and adventure - are repeated throughout romantic fiction as they remake themselves in new forms (Saunders 2). Byatt plays with these motifs in *Possession* to place her characters in a textual tradition, while the novel makes use of the common postmodern motif of the quest, illustrating the thread of continuity between past and present.

The novel draws parallels between the lives of the characters who share a love of words and many of the same thoughts and themes that preoccupy their minds. In a postmodern age, little has changed for women who still have to fight to retain their dignity and sense of autonomy. The scholars are drawn to the poets out of admiration and something else that is personally shared. The 'theme' of Christabel's life and poetry was a need to retain her sense of self-possession and live autonomously away from the shadow of male authority. The novel's women share this concern, linking them across the centuries. Maud adopts Christabel's fierce desire to live "circumscribed and self-communing" (102-103) but shies away from willingness to risk, wanting instead to protect herself from any intrusion from the outside world.

In *Possession* Byatt creates a novel that transcends realism yet also owes much to it. The novel's fairy tales mediate a space of playful ambiguity, acting as a celebration of the lasting worlds of myth but including self-conscious reflection on the politics of narrative. Fairy tales and myth are archetypal literary modes where stories can be told and retold. The novel shows how fairy tales can be told, as they are told by Christabel, with an arch-Victorian voice that warns its readers of what will happen, or in a postmodern way that gives the original version a slight twist. In *Possession*, Gode's tale celebrates the ancient oral tradition of storytelling and captures a typical nineteenth century motif in literature of the innocent

infanticide, but at the same time acts as a hidden clue in the postmodern framework of *Possession*.

The device of an omniscient narrator is at once postmodern and not postmodern. Byatt is able to emulate George Eliot's tone while making use of the romantic mode of authorial intrusion in a way that incorporates her postmodern consciousness. *Possession's* elements of romance run concurrently to its realism, while it explores a middle ground between the two forms. The overall 'narrative shape' of *Possession* allows it to encompass the fragmented traditions of style that it attempts to reunite (Shinn 164). *Possession* is a blend of romance and realism; it mixes hard fact and surreal ideality, offering both ways of understanding the world and juxtaposing them.

The novel also dramatises Byatt's misgivings about postmodernism. The creation of postmodernism involved the "dissolution of every kind of totalising narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation" (Connor 9). *Possession* challenges postmodernist theories' devaluation of the metanarratives of history and truth, negotiating a space that reclaims the significance of these things in the lives of characters. *Possession's* present is invigorated by the past that it mirrors. Being in touch with the passion and emotion of the past allows Roland and Maud to connect with these qualities in them. The discovery of the past is a journey toward origins: Maud discovers the truth of her lineage while the others learn more about the poets they emulate, and at the same time deepen their understanding of their own lives. And Roland's journey is principally one of self-discovery. At the novel's conclusion, he has found a measure of professional and personal success and is liberated from his previous sense of failure. The past offers Roland a better understanding of the present and a greater hope for the future.

In *Possession* Byatt negotiates her ambivalences toward postmodernism. *Possession* is expressive of a consciousness that springs from both Victorian and contemporary literature and mediates a middle ground between the two. Byatt is an individualist who remains committed to the traditions of the past and to restoring the colour of the Victorian world, even though these things are old-fashioned. The novel is an exercise in balance; Byatt blends her characteristic erudition with the novel's passion and dry humour, poetry mingles with prose, romance contrasts with realism and the past looms over the present world.

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