

Maria Pamela Peralejo Punzalan

Professor Danilo Francisco Reyes

Literature 251: Development of Fiction

15 October 2007

Intimacy, Irony, Nostalgia & History: An Analysis of A.S. Byatt's "Possession"

Introduction and Plot Summary

Part romance, part speculative history and part literary thriller, A.S. Byatt's critically acclaimed novel "Possession" is revered as a contemporary romance for the thinking reader. The story revolves around Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey — literary scholars — and their accidental discovery of a series of letters exchanged between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, a pair of Victorian poets. Roland and Maud find themselves becoming more and more personally involved in their research as the story progresses, and rather than share their discoveries with their colleagues, the pair seek to uncover the secrets of their subjects on their own. After several setbacks and trials, Maud and Roland manage to trace Ash and LaMotte's romance from its strange beginnings all the way to the bittersweet end — the study ends up deepening their own relationship, and at the end of the story it leads both Maud and Roland down new paths both in their professions and their personal lives.

"Possession" balances itself between Victorian England and the present, exploring the deepening relationship of the two scholars as they trace the love story of their subjects through the documents that they left behind, and seek to possess the truth of the matter for themselves. This paper seeks to analyze and determine the form of "Possession" as a novel and show how

Byatt, through a rich mix of narrative voices and literary conventions, was able to play upon the traditional definitions of a romance and subsequently recreate it for contemporary fiction.

Form & Structure

In order to properly analyze the structure of the novel, let us go into the more modern definitions of the novel as romance. In his essay “The Four Forms of Fiction”, New Critic Northrop Frye pointed out that the romance was the oldest form among the form, and described it as introverted and personal in its mimetic inclination, featuring larger-than-life characters thrust into fantastic and oftentimes unreal situations. Frye and his contemporaries viewed romances as stories that explored the defiance of limits, be they the limits of a single individual or limits imposed by general society and the laws of nature. Subsequently, this idea of the defiance of limits manifests itself in several other ways beyond theme — plot twists and resolutions in a romance novel, for example, have the tendency to take generally impossible turns. Furthermore, the characters of a romance are not to be understood as individuals inasmuch as they ought to be viewed as stylized archetypes, or representations of particular ideals.

Contemporary romance novels have the tendency to use stereotypes or stock characters, and make use of generic, fairy tale-like narrative structures with a liberal use of *deus ex machina* plot twists in order to ensure the return to order and stability by the end of the story. Romance novels at present also tend to deal more exclusively with the subject of love rather than following its traditional thematic on the defiance of limits — this may be due to the fact that Frye’s romance as a form has branched out into several other literary genres, with the popular definition of the romance novel being only one of the many.

“Possession” is closer in form to Frye’s romance than it is to the more contemporary understanding of what a romance novel is. Firstly, some of the ways through which the plot progresses may be viewed as slightly unrealistic or overly convenient (i.e. Maud being a direct descendant of Christabel LaMotte, and therefore the rightful owner of the letters and capable of doing whatever she wished with them). Secondly, there is the customary return to stability and subsequent happy ending, even in the face of great adversity. The novel’s characters, however, are not archetypes — they are ‘realistic’ individuals, each with their own distinguishing features, history and personal motives.

While it is framed in the novelistic tradition of the romance, “Possession” is a combination of several other literary genres, notably that of the detective novel, the mystery thriller, and historical fiction. The elements of detective fiction are made most obvious in the overtly intellectual tone of the “Possession”, along with Byatt’s studied narrative and the methodic processes and analyses that her two main characters apply themselves to as they study the lives of their poet subjects. Not a single detail within the novel is extraneous: everything becomes a clue both for the reader and for the characters that the reader is following. The detective fiction aspect of the novel can also be seen in the way A.S. Byatt supplemented her narrative with letters, poetry, academic discourses and historical documents. This allows the reader to analyze the so-called ‘evidence’ as the characters in the novel themselves would view it. On a related note, Byatt’s narrative style — one steeped in naturalist and realist sensibilities — lends to the novel’s inclination towards detective fiction, as her well-researched, intellectual and lengthy discourses are ideal to the genre’s careful attention to detail. Elements of the mystery thriller are discernable in the plot structure itself, as the novel’s main characters are, from the

very beginning, in a race against time and their other colleagues in possessing the secrets of the Victorian poets and discovering the truth for themselves.

The elements of historical fiction emerge both in the novel's dual plot structure (with the plot involving Maud and Roland at present, and also R.H. Ash and LaMotte in Victorian England), and in A.S. Byatt's masterful blending of real history with speculative and fictional history. According to critics, Byatt "mixes the historically real and the fictional in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between them". The imaginary figures of R.H. Ash and LaMotte are encoded into the lives of real historical figures in literary history, with 'documented evidence' of their existence. There is also the curious coincidences and repetitions in situation, such as Maud Bailey being a direct descendant of Christabel LaMotte, or of Maud and Roland's clandestine flight similar to that of Ash's clandestine journey with LaMotte to Robin Hood's Bay, or in Val's behavior towards Roland echoing that of Miss Blanche towards LaMotte, or of Ellen Ash towards her husband Randolph (following, of course, the discovery of his correspondence with LaMotte) a few centuries back. Furthermore, we have the exploration of narrative and literary traditions along with the desire to portray the eternal development of ideas and changes in the pattern of thought of mankind, two topics that appear to be of particular interest to Byatt as an author.

A final thing of interest to note would be Byatt's use of epigraphs. To quote:

Byatt uses it [epigraphs] as a structural device, primarily for a substrative function, to outline the common themes which formulate in that particular chapter. Each epigraph serves to point the reader to important images or ideas that are going to be expanded upon throughout the chapter. (Wikipedia)

Beyond being a structural device, the epigraphs in “Possession” are also indicative of Byatt’s narrative style, and may be considered as testament to her creativity as a writer, given that most of them are quotations from the works of her fictional poets.

Style and Sensibility

In the previous section of this paper, we mentioned that Byatt’s narrative style is a blend of realism and naturalism — we must further mention that Byatt is known to merge this with the fantastical, and that she commonly alludes to or builds upon Romantic and Victorian themes in her literature. Given its structure and the characters it deals with, “Possession” is, in a way, the best example of these sensibilities. The following quotation best describes the voice that we find in the novel:

Although Byatt's work is steeped in literature and literary allusions, she can integrate these concerns with a metaphorical use of scientific disciplines of various kinds, including the lives of ants, the classification of butterflies and moths, and the Darwinian theory of evolution. She draws... on traditions of the fabulous and the fantastic, but counterbalances these with a strong element of social realism. At the heart of much of her writing is a scholarly and literary consciousness, which often manifests itself in the academic preoccupations of her central characters. (ContemporaryWriters.com)

Byatt is “an effective mimic” of different prose styles and narrative voices, a writer able to metaphorically shed her skin and don others in order to present all sorts of things from all sorts of angles. The aforementioned ‘scholarly and literary consciousness’ manifests itself in nearly every page of “Possession”, from the almost casual literary allusions to the fact that every

principle character in the story is somehow related to the literary academia. It is also evident in Byatt's intimate knowledge of the functions of the contemporary academic world, with its interests and its secret politics. Her treatment of the academia is almost satirical, and "demonstrates an ironic sensitivity not only to the excesses of twentieth-century literary jargon" while echoing back to the "distinctive verse" and prose of the nineteenth century. It appears to serve two functions: to cater to more erudite readers who will know and understand this viewpoint of the academe, and to provide outsiders with an insider's look on how things are really run within the university circles.

The novel's deep sense of history is found not only in the use of 'documentary evidence' and the blending of historical figures with the fictional — it can also be seen in the historicity of each of Byatt's individual characters. As we previously mentioned, readers are not meant to consider the fictional figures in "Possession" as archetypes or representations: each one of them has their own story to tell, and it is always the totality of their lives from the beginning all the way to the present that becomes the reasons behind their behavior in the story. Structurally speaking, it is possible to set a few of the pairs as representative anti-theses of each other (i.e. Roland Mitchell and Fergus Wolf, or Maud Bailey and Beatrice Nest, or James Blackadder and Mortimer Cropper, as will be described in the sections to follow) — this, like the use of epigraphs, is a device that Byatt uses in order to establish theme and context, and it also lends to the idea of history being about repetition and time being cyclical. There is also Byatt's stand on historical and biographical study, in that despite exhaustive amounts of research and documentary evidence, there will always be aspects of the past and historical figures that scholars will never discover. There will always be questions left unanswered, even after the monumental uncovering of secret letters in dolls and the exhuming of long undisturbed graves.

Possession is a romance of the mind, where two individuals can fall in love with each other solely through correspondences and intellectual debate, and where physical contact, exposure and intimacy are but secondary reasons for attraction. This is something shown both in the story of R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte and in that of Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey. Ash and LaMotte trace their relationship mostly through their letters, which is something typical to the times that they lived in; Roland and Maud trace theirs through the study that they engaged in together, which is something that suits them given their past relationships, yet strange given contemporary society's view on love and mating rituals.

“Modern” romance novels are usually written in the first person perspective, or in a third-person limited perspective centered on a particular character or pair of characters — they also have a tendency to be grounded in the realm of the physical, and charged with sexual tension. Byatt, however, uses the ‘old-fashioned’ third person omniscient point of view in order to narrate her story. She places a premium upon the realms of the mind and of emotion, using the physical only as a supplement to the internal workings of her characters and the situations they are in. This allows for a multitude of voices to emerge, and maximizes Byatt's penchant for detail and description. It also acquaints the reader with the thoughts and sensibilities of each of the characters while furthering the thematic of love and possession, which will be elaborated upon in its own section below.

Love & Possession

The thematic of possession in the novel plays itself out in two ways. Firstly, we have the idea of possession in the scholarly sense, best illustrated in the figures of Roland Mitchell (and to an extent, Maud Bailey) and Mortimer Cropper. We are introduced to Roland at the very

beginning of the novel, where we are shown how he is a biographer and literary scholar of Randolph Henry Ash and a research assistant to James Blackadder. Upon his discovery of Ash's letters to Christabel, Roland immediately seeks to uncover the mystery on his own rather than report it to his superior, which was the more prudent and proper way of doing things in the academe. His behavior is, of course, infectious for Maud Bailey, who becomes involved in Roland's study due to the fact that she is a scholar of Christabel LaMotte, the object of Ash's affections. Furthermore, we have Mortimer Cropper, who is juxtaposed against the figure of Blackadder. According to the novel, Blackadder is the more 'proper' literary biographer and scholar, for he is aware of the inconsistencies of historical study and that he will never know and be the master of every aspect of R.H. Ash's life. Cropper, on the other hand, believes otherwise: it shows in his obsessive behavior, with his drive to collect every single trace of Ash's existence, and his need to travel in the poet's own footsteps in order to 'feel' with the poet's own heart and 'see' with the poet's own eyes.

Secondly, there is the idea of possession vis-à-vis the idea of love. Through the omniscient eye of Byatt's narrator, we are introduced to the dynamics of the different intimate relationships connecting the characters together, along with how each one of them has come to define what love is and what a relationship ought to be following their experiences. We have the 'romance of the minds' in the intimacy between LaMotte and Ash, which would have likely stayed on the level of correspondences were it not for the immediate threat of termination from Blanche and Ellen... it appears to be the only 'real' and 'successful' romantic relationship in the story in spite of the fact that it ended in tragedy. Roland's failed relationship with Val and Maud's failed relationship with Fergus stand in direct contrast to the example of the Victorian poets. Ash and LaMotte managed to connect on the level of the mind and of feeling, which were

the very two factors that caused the falling out between Roland and his partner, or Maud and her partner. It was Roland's success in his career with Val's subsequent failure that ultimately ruined their relationship, even though it was something that Roland could not have possibly foreseen or prevented. On Maud's end, it was likely the natural competitive scholarly spirit along with Fergus' chauvinistic outlook towards women scholars (something propagated by the male-dominated academe and something that Beatrice Nest herself may have been a victim of) that started the problems between her and Fergus.

Figures like Leonora Stern and Fergus Wolf appear to view love as something more akin to possession, which is not how the likes of Maud and Roland or the Victorian poets themselves had seen it. Wolf, backed by his very masculine and sometimes chauvinistic opinions towards women and women scholars, seems to consider Maud more of an object that rightfully belongs to him rather than a partner — he even interferes in her affairs with Roland, as he seems to want to be intimate with every aspect of Maud's life and to keep her away from anyone else. Leonora, on the other hand, goes through relationships in a similar fashion to the way one would go through clothes: she takes what she will of them, from whoever can offer, and then moves on to the next. They are not people insofar as they are providers of the means through which she can achieve her desires, at least for the moment. In contrast to sexually potent figures of Leonora and Fergus we have the 'impotence' — or more accurately, the resounding disinterest — of Cropper and Blackadder, who absorb themselves in their studies of Ash. Blackadder's discomfort with Leonora, then, runs deeper than the narrative may show for in light of this analysis. It is possible, however, to view Cropper's obsession with knowing and possessing every aspect of his subject's life as something akin to the sort of love that Leonora and Fergus are familiar with.

Possession, we note in conclusion, whether it is the possession of a physical object, a person, or an idea, is the primary motivation that drives the principle characters and a good number of the supporting cast. The events of the story are all a result of their drive to possess, along with the amount of success or failure they had in doing so.

Conclusion

A.S. Byatt's "Possession" offers its readers both a beautiful love story and a fascinating historical study, framed with learned prose and an exhaustive amount of research. With its multitude of narrative voices, its literary allusions and its distinctive narrative style, one may be hard pressed to say that "Possession" is an easy read fit for all audiences. Its themes, however, are universal, and the strength of the book's message is difficult to deny. Subsequently, it is because of the style in which it is written that it may be possible to use "Possession" as an introduction to literary theory and the frame of mind needed in order to analyze literary works. The novel makes the reader want to speculate and want to ask questions that may or may not have answers in the near future. Furthermore, with its introspection and insight on the nature of love and human relationships, the power of "Possession" lies in Byatt's ability to create authentic, believable characters and use them as a mirror directed towards general society.

Works Cited & Miscellaneous References

FRYE, NORTHROP. "The Four Forms of Fiction".

The British Council: ContemporaryWriters.com. "A.S. Byatt". The British Council.

<<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth20>>

Wikipedia. "A.S. Byatt". Wikipedia < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.S._Byatt >

Wikipedia. "Possession: A Romance". Wikipedia.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Possession:_A_Romance>

Synthesis Notes in Literary Criticism & Theory (Lit 112.1): Romantic and Victorian Literature
and Literary Criticism, compiled under Sir Max Pulan Jr (2005).