

## A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and Historiographic Metafiction

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at studying historiographic metafiction as a new literary phenomenon in the contemporary world through the application of its theories pointed out by Linda Hutcheon to A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. *Possession* is generally regarded as an emblematic postmodern novel in which texts, authors, literary movements of the past are transformed and reflected. They are presented in the form of metafictional narrative, of rewriting, of parody and pastiche, giving them a reinterpretation and recoding in a totally different cultural and literary context.

**Keywords:** Historiographic metafiction, retrospective novel, parody, intertextuality

### INTRODUCTION

Shahriyar instituted a reign of terror, marrying a virgin each day, and handing her to his vizier for execution at dawn. The vizier's daughter Shahrazad, a woman both wise and learned, requested her father to give her to the king. On the wedding night, the bride asked that her younger sister, Dinarzad, might sleep under the bed, and when the king had 'finished with Shahrazad' the girl asked her sister to tell a story to while away the time until dawn. When dawn came the story was not finished, and the curious prince stayed the execution for a night. And the characters in that story told other tales, and those too were unfinished at dawn, and before other dawns gave rise to other tales. And the prince's

narrative curiosity kept the princess alive, day after day. She narrated a stay of execution, a space in which she bore three children. And in the end, the king removed the sentence of death, and they lived happily ever after.

Like Scheherazade, whose tale A. S. Byatt retells, the writers of historiographic metafiction keep putting off the ends of their stories -so much so that inconclusiveness has become a kind of litmus test that distinguishes between serious postmodern historical novels and the bodice-rippers of the romance genre. Of all the hybrid varieties of the contemporary historical novel none is as complex or as intellectually rewarding as that which Linda Hutcheon (1988) has termed “historiographic metafiction.” Like postmodernism, the concept of historiographic metafiction resists simple definitions. Hutcheon defines it as a combination of “argument by poetics (metafiction) with the argument by historicism (historiographic) in such a way as to inscribe a mutual interrogation within the texts themselves” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 42). But this definition tends to obscure the exclusivity of the two terms. Hutcheon and countless others have shown metafiction in itself is not a new form of fiction, as Laurence Sterne’s self-reflexive and humorously digressive narrator in *Tristram Shandy* (1760) attests. However, *metafiction* when combined with *historiography*, or the narrative representation of historical reality, becomes a term that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, commingling both in a distinctly postmodern contradiction.

## **POSSESSION AS HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION**

*Possession* which has been variously labeled “historiographical metafiction” (Holmes, 1997, p. 320), is a hybrid type of historical novel that combines many of the complex narrative techniques characteristic of historiographic metafiction except its ultimate refusal to provide closure. It is overtly metafictional, as the omniscient narrator reveals in the following aside:

It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex. Novels have their obligatory tour-de-force ...They do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading. There are obvious reasons for this, the most obvious being the regressive nature of the pleasure, a mise-en-abyme even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so ad infinitum. (Byatt, 1991, p. 510-11)

Byatt's implied author self-reflexively signals to the reader that this is not only a romance, but a fiction about fiction, reading fiction, and about the power of its infinite intertextual allusiveness.

The first question one asks when reading *Possession* is why Byatt has chosen to re-imagine the Victorian novel. Some reasons for Byatt's interest and that of other writers who have written this type of retrospective fiction are suggested in Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel*. He notes the relative popularity of retrospective novels in the 1980s, speculating that

[p]erhaps it was less that novelists were returning to the fictional verities of the past than making the relations of past and present narratives a matter for self-conscious literary examination. Among novelists, as among historians themselves, the question of the nature of history and history-writing was at issue. (Bradbury, 1993, p. 406)

The nineteenth century is the era to which contemporary writers are most often drawn. For them, the nineteenth century represents a past which is distant but not remote. As Amanda Cooper notes in "Narratives of the Victorian Past" that "to the modern eye the Victorian period holds a critical moment in history as our codes of language, notions of nationality, and theories of self-derive from this point" (Cooper, 1996, p.1). Byatt's preoccupation with the nineteenth century can be explained in similar terms, whereby the process of historical recovery carries with it something akin to a self-discovery, as past and present are realized to be inextricably bound.

Hutcheon, observing this growing interest in historical recovery among contemporary novelists in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, has offered a name for the type of fiction she saw emerging: historiographic metafiction, which she describes as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). She notes that historiographic metafiction is concerned with the relationship between the discourses of history and literature, incorporating a “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (p. 5). This view develops from, among others, Hutcheon’s reading of Dominick LaCapra and Hayden White, who acknowledge the narrative links between historiography and fiction. According to White in *Content of the Form*:

narrative historians need feel no embarrassment about resemblances between the stories they tell and those told by writers of fiction. Historical stories and fictional stories resemble one another because whatever the differences between their immediate contents (real events and imaginary events, respectively), their ultimate content is the same: the structures of human time. (White, 1987, p. 179-180)

Historiographic metafiction, however, troubles White’s distinctions regarding what is real and imaginary, “as historical personages utter fictional dialogue and mingle with other fictional characters. Nevertheless, both history and literature are, in their own way, engaged in an effort to reflect and to understand human experience” (White, 1987, p. 181). “Historiographic metafiction,” Hutcheon writes, “represents a challenging of the conventional forms of fiction and history writing through its acknowledgement of their inescapable textuality” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 129). Thus, the “textualized remainders” of the past with which historiographic metafiction is concerned ensure that such novels focus on history as document or text, and for that reason are attentive to the process of reading and writing. Byatt’s *Possession* deals extensively with fictionally recovered

letters that comprise a large section of the novel, encouraging reader speculation on the accuracy of literary and historical interpretation.

Byatt's reason for choosing to recapture the historical past becomes more apparent when one examines the need this type of retrospective fiction seems to fulfil. As Steven Connor explains in *The English Novel in History*:

every representation of the past is a historicising of the present, making it possible to inhabit or belong to one's present differently. In supplying the needs or confirming the values of the present, novels that deal with history make those needs visible and thus perhaps available for consideration and evaluation. (Connor, 1996, p. 140)

*Possession* is all about trying to better understand the present by means of the past, thereby making it Byatt's most successful novel to date in its ability to articulate with beauty and skill the ideas that have preoccupied her writing. Through *Possession*, Byatt demonstrates the hold that the nineteenth century continues to have on our collective imagination and what emerges from the narrative is our obligation to find a creative voice that is of our time, yet which reflects our inescapable bond to the past.

*Possession* begins with a reference to Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (pp.1725-30), and, by implication, his theory of the cyclical nature of history. Vico's belief in "myth as a primordial form of thought" which literature seeks to recover (Verene, 1994, p. 724) becomes the central focus of the text so that *Possession* can be read as exploring the difficulties of recuperating the historical past. Through her references to the Victorian characters' poetic mythmaking, Byatt introduces her own adaptations of traditional legends and fairy tales. Moreover, like the "Victorian 'Renaissance' paintings and poems ... [that] tell us more about the Victorians than they do about Renaissance Italy" (Fraser, 1992, p. 211), Byatt's recreation and reinterpretation of nineteenth-century culture and society forces us to reassess ourselves and our attitudes toward the Victorians.

To follow the trails of Byatt's complex literary endeavor, one must first acknowledge how she uses parody and pastiche in order to explore the subjectivity of historiography and the influence of nineteenth-century literature and culture upon our own. For Hutcheon, parody is an integral part of all historiographic metafiction and she expends considerable effort trying to redefine parody and its function in late twentieth-century literature and art. In her *Poetics*, she explains:

What I mean by 'parody' here - as elsewhere in this study - is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity. (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 26)

Moreover, Hutcheon in *Theory of Parody* argues that parody has evolved from a narrow association with ridicule or burlesque and that contemporary writers no longer need to be limited by these outdated notions. Part of the problem, as she sees it, is that parody has sometimes been confused with satire because both use irony as a rhetorical strategy (Hutcheon, 1985). Whereas "satire displays a negative evaluation and a corrective intent, modern parody, on the other hand, rarely has such an evaluative or intentional limitation" (p. 54). Hutcheon emphasizes repeatedly that parody, although often ironic, is not necessarily disrespectful toward its subject. Instead, says Hutcheon (1985), the irony present in parody can be:

playful as well as belittling [and] ...critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual bouncing ...between complicity and distance. (p. 32)

*Possession* provides ample opportunity for the reader to be made aware of his or her precarious position between complicity and distance. One can probably assume that the reader who perseveres through more than five hundred pages of a novel such as *Possession* is already kindly disposed toward the Victorian novel, and may even harbor certain nostalgia if not for the historical period itself, then for its literary traditions.

According to Hutcheon, parody does “not destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (Hutcheon. 1988, p. 126). Hutcheon’s definition accurately describes the role of parody evident in *Possession*, in which the nineteenth century functions for the characters as an inspiration and a link to their intellectual and biological forebears, while it is our present-day misperceptions of the past which become the object of the author’s critique. Thus, the entire structure of the novel with its passage back and forth from the present of the 1980s to the previous century is parodic, in that it forces a constant comparison between Byatt’s reproduction of the Victorian novel and our recollections of the *genuine* article. By the same token, *Possession* becomes a seemingly endless generator of intertexts through the use of pastiche which is considered to be an important element in *Possession*.

Pastiche is used to provide the novel’s cultural background and impart the necessary Victorian flavor through Byatt’s careful compilation of details and sources drawn from literature and life. One example of pastiche in *Possession* is the love letters between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash, the fictional Victorian writers in the novel, and the poetry that they are supposed to have written. Furthermore, Hutcheon ascribes to the notion that whereas parody is “transformational in its relationship to other texts,” seeking “differentiation in its relationship to its model,” pastiche operates “more by similarity and correspondence” (Hutcheon, 1985, p.38) in an effort to capture something of the style of the original while working within the same genre. However, both Margaret Rose and Hutcheon agree that pastiche is not

merely parody's lying cousin, and may also be regarded as functioning ironically in certain contexts (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 232-33). Rose turns to *Possession* as an instance where "pastiche and parody are understood in [Byatt's] novel as being hyper-reflective and as partners to a kaleidoscopic irony" (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 231), an observation, given that the pastiched elements are an intricate and important part of the overall parody.

Like all historiographic metafiction, *Possession* is liberally peppered with intertextual allusions and again, the bogus intertexts share the stage with the authentic ones. While in the London Library looking for sources for Ash's *Garden of Proserpina*, Roland discovers the fragments of Ash's first letter to LaMotte pressed between the pages of Ash's copy of Vico's *Principi di una Scienza Nuova* (Byatt, 1991, p. 4). Roland wonders if the letters are "pre- or post *The Origin of the Species*" (p. 7) and if the lady Ash was writing to could have been Christina Rossetti (p. 10). Further, Roland compares the Reading Room of the British Museum to "Dante's Paradiso, in which the saints and patriarchs and virgins sat in orderly ranks in a circular formation, a huge rose, and also the leaves of a huge volume, once scattered through the universe, now gathered" (p. 31). Conversely, Roland thinks of the "Ash Factory," where Blackadder and his research assistants work "hunched in the bowels" of the sulphur and cat urine-reeking basement of the museum, as "the Inferno" (p. 31). Such bogus and authentic intertexts continue to commingle throughout the novel, constantly signaling its fictiveness as well as Byatt's virtuosity and the textual nature of the dead past resuscitated through the reading of the living present.

The novel's first epigraph is taken from the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. This paratextual highlights the creative powers of the genre of the Romance, its inherent potential to transform reality, the writer's freedom to construct the world according to his wish and fancy, as well as the attempt to connect the past, which in Byatt's novel is recurrently reawakened, with "the very present that is flitting away from us" (p. 31). This way Byatt's intention is stated and the romantic context of *Possession* is mapped and validated. This paratext also points to the

relationship between truth and fantasy, reality and fiction, to the fictiveness of the world constructed by the writer. Byatt's double coded text plays with the tension between reality and a fictionalized construct. The fictiveness of *Possession* is also emphasized by the other epigraph to the novel – a long excerpt from the Victorian poet Robert Browning's poem *Mr Sludge*, "the Medium", which closes with the following lines:

How build such solid fabric out of air?  
How on so slight foundation found this tale,  
Biography, narrative?' or, in other words,  
'How many lies did it require to make  
The portly truth you here present us with?' (p. 1)

The secret and extremely passionate relationship of the fictional Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash with the poetess Christabel LaMotte, who remained sunk in obscurity, unfold in parallel with the romance of the two modern lovers Roland and Maud (whose names are derived from the Medieval romance and its Victorian rewritings – *The Song of Roland* and Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem *Maud*) – connecting the past with the present and producing the duality of vision. The author plays with time, constantly moving between the past and the present. These dislocations of time shatter the illusion of reality and highlight metafictionality of Byatt's text. In other words, Browning's *Sludge* voices the obsession of historiographic metafiction writers that is the problems of narrativization and historical representation and the text's self-reflexive signaling of its own fictiveness through the author's construction of a labyrinth of truths and lies.

The majority of *Possession*'s epigraphs consist of Byatt's original ventriloquized renditions of the poetry, prose, letters, and journal entries of the fictional Victorian poets of the novel, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash, as well as fragments from the journals of LaMotte's lesbian partner Blanche Glover and Ash's wife Ellen. Her inclusion of Browning's poetry is multiply resonant and self-reflexive, for Byatt ventriloquizes Ash's poetic historical dramatic monologues which are like Browning's "My Last Duchess," and, further, her fictional character Mortimer Cropper's

biography of Ash is entitled *The Great Ventriloquist*, which simultaneously, intertextually, alludes to both Browning and Byatt herself. Moreover, as Susan Stock Thomas has convincingly argued in “Writing the Self and Other”, the fabricated cycle of letters contained most notably in Chapter ten between Ash and LaMotte is modeled after the real correspondence of Browning and Elizabeth Barrett (Thomas, 1993, p.89-95).

Hutcheon has argued that authors of historiographic metafiction use ventriloquism to parodically install and subvert the structures of canonical literatures of the past for a serious critical purpose (Hutcheon, 1988, p.131). However, Byatt’s ventriloquized Victorian poetry varies from that of historiographical metafiction in terms of parodic intention. The last stanza of fictional Victorian poet-protagonist Christabel LaMotte’s poem “Psyche” is a revealing example of Byatt’s inscription of Emily Dickinson’s breathless dashes and distinctive rhythm:

The Ants toil for no Master Sufficient to their Need  
The daily commerce of the Nest The storage of their Seed  
They meet-and exchange Messages But none to none-bows  
down  
They-like God’s thoughts-speak each to each Without-  
external-crown.  
(Byatt, 1991, p. 178)

Although Byatt concedes that her novel is not an “innocent evocation” of Victorian words, context, and order, she insists in *On Histories and Stories* that she uses ventriloquism, not for a parodic purpose but rather to recreate the voices of the estranged past, “to emphasize at once the presence of the past and its distance, its difference, its death and difficult resurrection” (Byatt, 2001, p. 45).

Further, Byatt plays out her desire to resurrect the textual voices of the past through the actions of the scholar-protagonists of *Possession*’s Maud Bailey and Roland Michell. In Chapter Five, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell discover a cycle of love letters exchanged between the Victorian poet-protagonists, Ash and LaMotte-letters which will

cause a serious re- evaluation of contemporary feminist and post-structuralist scholarship on both the Victorian poets. Caroline Webb points out in “History through Metaphor” how Byatt echoes Virginia Woolf. She states:

It [*Possession*] examines, among other things, like *Orlando*, how character is affected by time and idea, and what it means to speak or write or read, and its story develops not only through the explicit contemplation of the metaphoric force of language, but also through the actual appearance of literalized metaphors within even the modern, apparently realistic tale. In all these things Byatt echoes Woolf’s structure in the similarly titled *Orlando: A Biography*, which latter is, incidentally, as much concerned with romance as *Possession* is with biography. (Webb, 1994, p. 183)

Woolf’s influence is resoundingly clear in the writers of historiographic metafiction, not only her use of metaphor, but also her examination of how the self is affected by time, ideology, and culture, and her prescient perception that our knowledge of history is necessarily textual, incomplete, and inevitably colored by the ideological assumptions of the historian who attempts to objectively narrate it without deviating from “the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth” (Woolf, 2002, p. 131).

Byatt, like Woolf, is a literary critic as well as a novelist, and as such her concern, not only with how we read, but also with how we write about what we read, is reflected as metafiction in *Possession*. Byatt criticizes scholars who read their own ideological assumptions into the words of the texts they analyze:

Modern criticism is powerful and imposes its own narratives and priorities on the writings it uses as raw material, source, or jumping-off point. It may be interested in feminist, or Lacanian, or Marxist, or post-colonial narratives and vocabularies. Or it may play forcefully with the words of the writer, interjecting its own punning meanings. (Byatt, 2001, p. 45)

Likewise, in *Possession*, Maud and Roland's discovery of the cycle of letters exchanged by the Victorian poets sparks the voice of the omniscient narrator to inform the reader that LaMotte's poetry was initially misread by Byatt's invented critic, Veronica Honiton and later by "the feminists":

Veronica Honiton's comments on Christabel's poetry concentrated sweetly on her "domestic mysticism," which she compared to George Herbert's celebration of the servant who "sweeps a room as for Thy laws" ... Thirty years later the feminists saw Christabel LaMotte as distraught and enraged. They wrote on "Ariachne's Broken Woof: Art as Discarded Spinning in the Poems of LaMotte." Or "Melusina in the Daemonic Double: Good Mother, Bad Serpent." "A Docile Rage: Christabel LaMotte's Ambivalent Domesticity." "White Gloves: Blanche Glover: Occluded Lesbian sexuality in LaMotte." (Byatt, 1991, p. 42-43)

Through what she calls a "knowledgeable narrator," Byatt implicitly argues that literary criticism is affected not only by changes in cultural assumptions, but also by scholars who rhetorically project their own political agendas onto their subjects' otherwise innocent words at the same time as she spoofs the use of studiedly-clever titles such as "Good Mother, Bad Serpent" and "White Gloves: Blanche Glover" so prevalent in scholarship today.

In *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt voices the postmodern notion that "we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense-impressions, remembered Incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses" (Byatt, 2001, p. 31). In *Possession*, Roland and Maud exemplify this postmodern model of incoherence:

Roland had learned 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, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. (Byatt, 1991, p. 459)

Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for a susurrations of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial. (p. 273)

Unlike Ash and LaMotte, neither Roland nor Maud is able to proclaim, “I think, therefore I am,” because they have been trained to question the view that the self is autonomous. This is part of the reason they are so attracted to Ash and LaMotte, for the Victorian poets possess the wholeness of a coherent self that they perceive as original and unique, not linguistically programmed or intermittent or merely illusory. In Roland and Maud’s theoretically knowing world, grand passions like that which Ash and LaMotte experienced are undone by language itself: “They were children of a time and culture that mistrusted love, ‘in love,’ romantic love, romance in toto, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure” (p. 458). Fear of exposure, fear of being trapped in the plot of a vulgar romance—yet another controlling signifying system—notwithstanding, Roland and Maud are nevertheless driven by the inconclusiveness of the cycle of letters to find out what happened to Ash, LaMotte, and their illegitimate child:

“Literary critics make natural detectives,” said Maud. “You know the theory that the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel—everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?”

“We need,” said Roland, carefully, “to do this together. I know his work, and you know hers. If we were both in Yorkshire—”

“This is all madness. We should tell Cropper and Blackadder and certainly Leonora and marshal our resources.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. I want to—to—follow the—path. I feel taken over by this. I want to know what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you

came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive." (p.258-259)

Byatt offers a detective story that enlists the reader in Maud and Roland's drive for closure. Maud and Roland discover that, although Ash and LaMotte's affair ended, the poets had a daughter, Maia, who was brought up to believe that LaMotte was her aunt - which also affects Maud's discovery that LaMotte was her great-great-great grandmother. In traditional romantic fashion, all of the contemporary scholars find "true love": Maud and Roland, Leonora and Blackadder; even Roland's disaffected ex-girlfriend Val becomes engaged to a wealthy attorney. Virtue is thus rewarded, and the dastardly materialistic misogynist, Mortimer Cropper, gets a punch in the nose. Yet is the denouement really as simple as this synopsis suggests? After all, a few loose ends are left untied. LaMotte dies not knowing that Ash's wife Ellen never gave Ash the letter in which LaMotte confessed that their daughter Maia had survived. Ash dies not knowing LaMotte had sent the letter or that Maia never delivered his last letter to LaMotte. Neither Roland nor Maud discovers that Ash and Ellen's marriage was never consummated or that Ash found Maia. Only the reader, through the auspices of the knowledgeable narrator, is privy to this information, and it underscores another tenet of historiographic metafiction - that we can only know the past through its incomplete texts. As the knowledgeable narrator tells the reader at the beginning of the Postscript in which Ash meets Maia:

[t]here are things that 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, as though such things had never been (p. 552).

The past that is lost, destroyed, distorted, or goes unrecorded is irretrievable to us, and for this reason, we can never possess it completely. We can only partially penetrate the past's mystery through the fragments of its imperfect texts.

Byatt's attempts in *Possession* to simulate or reproduce nineteenth-century writing styles and patterns of speech contribute to the novel's element of pastiche and are particularly evident in LaMotte and Ash's correspondence. The text's idiomatic shift from the nineteenth century to the present demands a corresponding shift in the reader's expectations from the theoretical, academic plot of the contemporary characters to the symbolical, myth-identified lives of the Victorians. As Connor explains, novelists who use this particular narrative strategy may well be concerned with historical accuracy, but the effect is often to "bring into ironic visibility the distance between past and present" (Connor, 1996, p. 140). By examining the Victorians through contemporary eyes, Byatt seems to be trying to explode some of the myths and generalizations which have come to be associated with them, particularly their prudery and inhibitions and the passivity of women. Monica Flegel refers to the fact that, by means of the folklore base of LaMotte's writing, she is able to "interrogate the beliefs of her Victorian society, particularly those regarding--and restricting women. In "The Fairy Melusina," for example, LaMotte challenges traditional views of the supposedly women of mythology" (Flegel, 1998, p. 415). In contrast to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) which Byatt criticizes in *Passions of the Mind*, saying that "Fowles's understanding of Victorian life and literature is crude and derived from the Bloomsbury rejection of it" (Byatt, 1992, p. 174), *Possession* seems intent on developing an ironic comparison between Victorianism and postmodernism which forces the twentieth century characters into a better understanding of themselves that is directly attributed to a deeper understanding of the historical past. This is not to say that the past is inherently superior to the present, but that the most important lessons about our own time are often understood best when viewed from a distance of time. For Byatt, the Victorians provide that necessary vantage point.

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