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NARRATION TECHNIQUES IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION* AS A MEANS TO PORTRAY A WOMAN

Introductory word

The main purpose set to this paper is to present the influence of this novel's composition on the way in which a female character is portrayed. The complexity of *Possession* by A.S. Byatt enables the author to carry out an in-depth analysis of the female figure, both from the Victorian and the 20th century perspective, and – at the same time – from the male and female points of view, not to mention the way in which the female figure is perceived by people of differing educational standings and various emotional and temperamental structures.

The complexity of narration + plot

To start with, *Possession* as a literary work is characterised by different narrative techniques and it makes use of various kinds of chronicler. In this case, the role of a typical 3rd-person narrator is very much limited, which might initially give the reader the impression of chaos; however, in effect it creates a unique tool for the portrayal of characters, especially a woman.

The starting point for an analysis of the narration techniques employed might be the whole idea of intertextuality, on which the main plot is based. Note that, each chapter is preceded by a quotation from a poem appropriately related to the events described therein. It is somewhat noteworthy that the passages from the poetry are written by characters from the novel itself; that is R.H. Ash and Ch. LaMotte. There are chapters appearing in the form of fragments of a narrative poem, chapters written in the form of the epistolary novel, as well as being presented as passages from diaries. In addition to this mixture of techniques the reader might also become engaged in an analysis of the plot

organisation, which is based on two levels, that is the Victorian and the twentieth-century reality. Interestingly enough, the events from those two disparate times are heavily intertwined and become the great analogy to the differences and similarities between the Victorian and modern women.

Narrators

In general, the diversity of narrators corresponds with the characters themselves, as the majority of them are responsible for telling the story. The primary narrator in the 3rd person singular is the most objective of all, and introduces the 20th-century figure of literary scientist named Roland Mitchell.

His preoccupation with a Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash makes him present the story of Ash's life, women and poetry. At the same time, Mitchell becomes a narrator himself, following the steps of the Victorian poet and revealing his unknown works and relationships. Mitchell gets to know a literary scientist Maud Bailey, and together they travel back to Victorian times.

Their story, which is of an academic character, constitutes the primary plot. Let us point to the fact that – while analysing their sources and travelling to places connected with Ash and his women – the two academics take the reader on a journey through the 19th century world, which actually is the main core of the secondary plot. It tells the story of Ash and Christabel LaMotte – his love, friend and – at the same time – a poet. Their story is shown through their correspondence, their poetry and diaries. The interdependence of the particular narrators might be portrayed by the following chart:

PLOT	19 TH CENTURY	20 TH CENTURY
MEN	Randolph H. Ash	Roland Mitchell
WOMEN	Christabel LaMotte Ellen Ash Blanche Glover	Maud Bailey
TYPE OF NARRATION	poetry diaries letters	traditional 3 rd person narration poetry
INTERTEXTUALITY		

Note that each of the ways that are utilised to tell the story mix and mingle with each other and the figures of the novel provide the evidence of their own worlds. The representatives of the Victorian England are presented when they are subject to exploration by the representatives of the 20th century. During their search, Maud and Roland paint a subjective picture of Christabel and Randolph.

These two worlds overlap each other and reveal their unique portrayal of a woman. In other words, the task is completed thanks to the mixture of the types of narrators.

According to Hutcheon (1980:3–5), resigning from the homogenous and harmonious way of narrating the story has its own explanation; it is a commentary on the linear and chronological narration popular in the nineteenth century; so simultaneously it might be perceived as a criticism of the unimaginative, simple Victorian narration, and as a consequence, a criticism of Victorian times themselves.

Subjective narration vs. women

Among the numerous ways employed of telling the story of Ash and LaMotte, Byatt exploits poetry. It is not merely her way of expressing literary values or showing emotions, but – not infrequently – it is a means of portraying a female. The author exploits the poems by the character named Christabel LaMotte. Her lyrical works frequently begin the chapter, as it is in the case of chapter seven:

*Men may be martyred
Any where
In desert, cathedral
Or Public Square.
In no rush of action
This is our doom
To Drag a Long Life out
In a Dark Room.*
(Byatt 1991:112)

All in all, the above poem fulfils several roles in Byatt's novel. One of the tasks is to present an example of female poetry. As lyrical poems are perceived as one of the most demanding kinds of literature, the quotation of a "female" poem is ample proof that women might be good at creating complex art. In addition to this, this poem is composed by a Victorian woman, which makes it more valuable in the eyes of contemporaries; it shows the role females had to play in Victorian society. In short, they were supposed to sit at home, preferably in a dark place, seen by nobody. Even if they were intelligent and had their own opinion, they were hardly ever given the opportunity to show it. The poem presents a woman by contrasting her with the man. One may find the apparent contradictions differentiating a man from a woman, and – what is more – showing the unequal treatment to which both sexes were subjected. The most striking contrast is the names of the places both male and female might be found:

Public Square Dark Room
MAN WOMAN

Note that a Public Square is associated with an open space, which is frequently associated with freedom, while the room stands for an enclosed territory, limited by walls, or, in a broader sense, by some social or moral rules. In this case the Public Square exemplifies the possibility for a man to make himself visible, to realise his desires and to use his free will. On the other hand, the Dark Room is the manifestation of the restrictions Victorian society put on females. The names of both of the places are written in capital letters, which has a significant influence on the interpretation of these names. The use of capital letters in the name of Public Square might be the reflection of human craving for some space, and the capitals: P and S might symbolise the space. The letters D(ark) R(oom) might enhance the feeling of alienation in a woman. When she is alone, limited to the four walls, she tends to exaggerate her grief and misery.

It is also possible to note the importance of portraying the woman's life by the usage of the expression: *To Drag a Long Life*. The alliterative usage of *L* consonant while reading aloud might emphasise the idea that female life is slow, uninteresting and dull. Furthermore, the verb *Drag*, also written with a capital letter, enhances the feeling that a woman's life in Victorian times was miserable. By quoting the poem by LaMotte, one of the novel's characters, Byatt compares the existence of a nineteenth-century woman to the action of pulling some heavy object with a lot of effort. Such a definition of the verb *drag* is provided by the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1998:394).

Apart from using poetry to portray a woman, the author exploits letters as well. As one may notice, the above quotation is far from being objective, but is seen from a female perspective, so let us have a look at the male point of view, which also refers directly to the figure of a woman. Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte were lovers and – due to the fact that Mr. Ash had a wife – Christabel asked him to send their letters to the *poste restante* as she was afraid that somebody could intercept them. Nevertheless, Ash did not approve of this idea; this is how he refers to it in one of his letters:

I have addressed this, as requested, to the Richmond Poste Restante. I do not wholly like this subterfuge - I do not like the imputed shady dealing of such a step - I find it inhibiting (Byatt 1991:191).

Despite the fact that Ash was a married man, he did not see the necessity of keeping his correspondence secret. Christabel, not involved in any formal relationship, preferred to cover her affair as if she were committing a crime. And again, this feeling might have been caused by the commonly held belief that a woman, whatever she does has to be exceedingly careful. On the other hand, it

proves that a man who commits a betrayal of his wife does not have to keep it in secret. This reference provides an example of the Victorian moral code: a man – in contrast to a woman – has some kind of tacit social permission for a misdeed, while a woman has to be careful in her doings. In the eyes of Ash, Christabel does not have to be scared of public contempt, because he does not care about it, and he expresses his point of view clearly, nevertheless, he agrees to Christabel's request, while simultaneously giving the impression that he did not understand her decision.

Dialogues are the next means to be used by Byatt to narrate the story and to portray a female. The twentieth-century academics, Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell, as well as the other literary scientist, Beatrice, spend many hours discussing the relationship of Christabel and Randolph. Their conversations reflect the position of a Victorian woman. In one of the discussions between Maud and Beatrice the idea of a woman as a writer is shown. It concerns Ash's wife – Ellen:

"I am very keen to know if the wives of these so-called great men-"

"He was a great man in my opinion-"

"Yes. If their wives were content to rest in their husbands' glory or felt that they themselves might have achieved something if conditions had been favourable. So many of them wrote journals, often work, secret work, of very high quality (Byatt 1991:219).

In the above dialogue the woman is seen from the perspective of two twentieth-century females. Because of their gender it might seem only natural that they are amazed by the literary achievements of other women, remaining in the shadow of their husbands. The dialogue is another confirmation of the idea that a Victorian female was less important than a man, even if she was capable of writing excellent works. Maud and Beatrice consider the work by Ellen Ash as a very valuable piece of writing; it gains greater appreciation maybe because the conditions in which it was created were not entirely favourable, as the dialogue suggests. Likewise, the conversation underlines the vast difference between the access to fame for the male community and the development opportunities for female part of society.

To present a contrasting point of view on the female let us look at the discussion on Christabel's figure between Maud, Roland and Sir George Bailey, a man who in the twentieth century occupies Christabel's house. His view on Victorian woman is supported by the idea that only a man is in the position to create something valuable. Sir George defines Christabel as a *would-be poetess*, because she had never worked, only sat in her room and wasted her time writing. In his opinion, the real poet was Ash, simply because of the fact that he was a man (Byatt 1991:93). The discussion shows Sir George's tendency to look down on females without any insight into their abilities. Because of his attitude, both

Christabel's house and grave were in a very poor condition, and both her letters and writings remained undiscovered.

As Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell followed the path of life of Christabel and Randolph, they gradually revealed different aspects of their lives to the public, as they wanted to immortalise their poetry. During one of their academic expeditions they made a rather unusual discovery; Christabel LaMotte not only was a great poet and Randolph Ash's lover, but she also had a close relationship with her roommate, Blanche Glover. Note that her diary provides yet another way to portray the story of a Victorian woman: on the basis of her entries the two contemporary academics assumed that between Christabel and Blanche there existed a lesbian relationship. Blanche was angry with Christabel about her male lover, and – what is more – she had felt ignored since LaMotte started her love affair. Her diary is the evidence that Blanche was going through her most difficult period when Christabel used to meet with Randolph. She both cried and prayed a lot so as to gain Christabel's attention (Byatt 1991:56–58). The situation was accentuated by the fact that a Victorian woman could not fight openly for her rights and ideas; Blanche's diary is an example of the uncovering the feelings in a very emotional way; it is also an extremely subjective kind of narration.

The reader is also provided with narration in the form of a poem by an authentic figure. During one of their long-lasting expeditions Maud shows Roland a collection of some poems, among which there was a work by Emily Dickinson. Her piece concerns the feelings of solitude and alienation typical for a woman. At the same time, it might be an autobiographical poem, as it is widely known that this great American poetess spent her life in one room in her family house. (Byatt 1998: 65) There is a clear reference to the figure of Christabel, who was the representative of a Victorian woman, unable to reveal her poetry and lifestyle to the public, forced to live in a dark room of tight social conventions and all-pervading morality. The poem by Dickinson is further confirmation that a Victorian female was forced to live in the shadow of society, hide her feelings and was doomed to excessive mental suffering.

Not only is the woman portrayed by the usage of different narrative techniques, but rather one is tempted to say that the whole novel is an extended comment on Victorianism. From the very beginning, the Victorian age, seen from the perspective of a twentieth-century academic seems to be dark, gloomy and full of mysteries. The description of Randolph Ash's volume of the poems found by Roland Mitchell in the library is a good symbol of the perception of the nineteenth century:

The book was thick and black and covered with dust. Its boards were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time. Its spine was missing, or rather protruded from amongst the leaves like a bulky marker. It was bandaged about and about with dirty white tape tied in a neat bow (Byatt 1991:1).

For a twentieth-century reader the above-mentioned volume of the book might seem to have been long forgotten. It may signify that Ash was a poet underestimated by his contemporaries, as well as by his modern readership. The description unveils the lack of popularity of Ash's works; nevertheless it foretells the quest for the uncovering the great mystery. The book is also a reference to the Victorian age as seen by the twentieth-century representatives: it is unattractive, not worth analysing and dirty, which makes people abhor touching it. In spite of this, Roland Mitchell decides to follow the steps of Randolph Ash and reveal both his intriguing poetry and life.

In conclusion one may say that all of the above-discussed narrative techniques introduce a great weight of subjectivity. There is no one type of narration that is totally objective. Namely, in *Possession* the characters stand for the narrators, and maybe because of the variety of perspectives from which the female is portrayed, her image paradoxically moves closer to attaining objectivity. If we have one narrator who presents the events in a chronological order, the image of the protagonists is based mainly on his comment. The more different techniques of narration the reader gets to know, the more objective he becomes in depicting the events and persons in his mind.

Female symbols

It is necessary to state from the outset that the depiction of a woman is not conducted by narrative techniques alone; it is also done by presenting several symbolic ideas and objects. The names of the characters carry a symbolic meaning. The life of Blanche Glover, Christabel's friend, a woman, hiding her true feelings towards Christabel, might be identified with her surname, associated with a glove – the object that covers the hand and protects from cold. While carrying out an in-depth analysis of the meaning of this word one might notice that a Victorian woman had to hide herself with her emotions from the outside world like a hand is hidden in a glove from the cold.

The same idea of mystery, hidden secrets and limited freedom is represented by the house in which Christabel spent her life. Maud and Roland visited it and were surprised by its look:

[Roland and Maud] walked and walked, at first along tiled and bleakly lit corridors, under electric lighting, and then along dusty carpets in dark shuttered places, and up a stone staircase and then further up a winding wooden stair, cloudy with dark dust (...) Sir George waved his huge cone of light around the dark, cramped, circular space, illuminating a semi-circular bay window, a roof carved with veined arches and mock-medieval ivy-leaves, felt-textured with dust (...) (Byatt 1991:81).

The description of Christabel's house might be the symbol of a previous *époque* that had passed away, and looks unattractive in the eyes of contemporaries. The house represents the Victorian *époque*, forgotten, covered with dust, mysterious and even scary. The description might resemble the places of a Gothic style: dark, gloomy and unpleasant.

Despite the idea that a Victorian female should not express her thoughts openly, Byatt's novel shows the womanly world clearly, by the means of their poems, diaries and letters. What could not be openly spoken was written down in secret and survived for years to come. Byatt's narration, which is realised on different levels, might be referred to the definition of Linda Hutcheon, who calls the modern kind of narration "the mimesis of process" in contrast to the Victorian linear narration called "the mimesis of product" (Hutcheon 1980:5).

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