

# *A Study of the Narrative Characteristics of English Literature in A.S. Byatt's Novel Possession*

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**Abstract:** British novelist A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, a novel about love, poetry and literary studies, is renowned in the world of literature for its artistic representation of the whole human experience, and the artistry of the novel plays a great role in the writer's successful representation of human experience. This paper attempts to systematically analyse the narrative strategy and content of *Possession* in terms of three dimensions such as narrative hierarchy, time and focus, and to sort out the narrative features of English literature while revealing its narrative characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

A.S. Byatt (1936- ) is one of the most influential, intelligent and imaginative writers of importance in Britain today. Her magnum opus, *Possession*, caused a huge sensation when it was published. It won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction in the UK and the International Novel Award in Ireland in the same year. The subtle plot and unique structure of *Possession* not only make it not belong to the contemporary "exhausted literature", but also become "full of literature" recognised by both sides of the ocean, which also highlights the diverse narrative styles of English literature<sup>[1]</sup>.

In *Possession*, A.S. Byatt not only shows her concern for women's survival and female identity, but also creatively reconstructs the brilliant literary poems of the Victorian period, reveals that contemporary scholars are increasingly caught up in the state of academic identity anxiety, advocates the pursuit of independent subjective identity, and puts forward the necessity of reconstructing women and academic identity.

In fact, the novel breaks the traditional linear narrative and ingeniously adopts a multi-layered and multi-temporal narrative strategy. On the basis of contemporary scholars Roland and Maud's research on two famous poets in 19th century England, the novel cross-narrates some of the living conditions of these two famous poets in the Victorian period and the historical landscape of the time. Then they find the stories of the ancient times of mankind in the historical texts, such as the poems left behind by these two poets and the rewritten mythological texts.

## 2. Three-Dimensional Narrative Dimensions of Possession from Different Levels

### 2.1 The First Dimensional Narrative Level

The first dimensional narrative level in the novel is the narration of contemporary scholars

Roland and Maud. While Roland and Maude are narrating the contemporary reality, Bayeux adopts the conventional and traditional realistic narrative method to dramatise and satirise the western academic world at the end of the 20th century<sup>[2]</sup>. Instead of using imaginative or poetic techniques, Bayeux describes the mundane realities of life through the presentation of typical characters in a straightforward manner. In the story, Roland appears as a typical scholar. His poverty and lack of money, as well as the fact that he has encountered many obstacles in his work, faithfully reflect the situation of contemporary intellectuals.

In the novel *Possession*, A.S. Byatt also portrays another female scholar, Maud, to show readers that sexism in academic research is still unavoidable in contemporary society. The contemporary narrative of the novel is entirely realistic, using the description of typical characters and plots, reflecting the living situation of contemporary intellectual youth and the real shape of real life from one side of society.

## 2.2 The Second Dimensional Narrative Dimension

The description of the Victorian period is developed through the tracking research of two scholars, Roland and Maud. In the process of searching for the historical information of the Victorian period, they gradually found a large number of manuscripts, poetry books, diaries and love letters left behind by the two famous poets of the time, Ash and La Motte. These historical documents not only show the reality of life in the Victorian period, but also give authenticity to the narrative of the whole novel in this period.

As A.S. Byatt puts it in her collection of essays *On History and the Novel*, "Writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, according to Victorian word-word relationships, in Victorian order, is the only way I can think of to show that we can listen to the Victorian dead."

It is from the words of various Victorian historical sources that two contemporary scholars have slowly pieced together the story of the two poets, from meeting to falling in love to falling apart, and then showing readers the spirit of the Victorian period. This kind of narration by finding diaries, letters and other historical manuscripts not only conveys a real feeling for the fictional story in the novel, but also makes the narrative of the novel naturally transition from the contemporary reality to the Victorian narrative<sup>[3]</sup>, which makes the whole novel's huge narration become an organic whole.

## 2.3 The Third Dimensional Narrative Dimension

The narrative of the ancient times of mankind is unfolded through the form of polyphony, mainly by the hands of two Victorian poets, Ash and Lamott, depicting the spirit of the ancient times of mankind to the readers. The two poets devoted themselves to the study of the past and recreated the past history of mankind in their poems, showing the readers the mystery of the ancient times.

As A.S. Byatt says in *On History and Fiction*, "The Victorians were not merely Victorians. They read the past and resurrect it." In the narrative of *Possession*, A.S. Byatt inserts a number of epic poems and fairy tales, such as "Melusine," "The Threshold," and "The Crystal Coffin," among others<sup>[4]</sup>. These myths do not appear as coherent chapters in the narrative structure of the novel, some of them are independent chapters, some of them are just inserted into the beginning of the volume as a pre-chapter quotation, and some of them appear in the chapters. There is no pattern to the narrative of these texts, neither a strict chronological order, nor a succession between the upper and lower content.

In fact, this narrative is deliberately designed by the author. By linking these unrelated elements of the story together, it serves to emphasise the mystery and uncertainty of the ancient historical text in the novel, as well as confirming the author's innovative subversion and reconstruction of the traditional narrative text.

### 3. Narrative voice content analysis in the novel *Possession*

#### 3.1 Narrative mode of voice

In the traditional theory of narratology, the author of a text generally adopts three narrative modes of voice: authorial, personal and communal.

Authorial narrative voice is to give readers an omniscient perspective to narrate the story, which is often considered fictional, but such a narrative voice because of its omniscient perspective will make readers more convinced; personal narrative voice refers to the voice of the narrator who tells his own story, that is to say, the storyteller "I" is also the main character of the story; collective narrative voice refers to the voice of the narrator who tells his own story, that is to say, the storyteller "I" is also the main character of the story; collective narrative voice refers to the voice of the narrator who tells his own story<sup>[5]</sup>. The collective narrative voice refers to the narrative authority given to a group of a certain size, and Lancer further divides the collective narrative voice into three types: a narrator speaking on behalf of the group, the plural subject "we" in the narrative, and individuals in the group taking turns speaking. The collective narrative voice is the one that is usually used by the suppressed group, and is thus in a sense more capable of achieving the discursive authority of the group as a whole.

#### 3.2 Narrative voice in the novel

The narrative voices in the novel *Possession* can be categorised into: authorial narrative voice, individual narrative voice and collective narrative voice. Generally, most literature is dominated by the authorial narrative voice, but A.S. Byatt is unique in that she also makes extensive use of the personal narrative voice, i.e., diary entries, in the novel *Possession*.

In the novel, the author takes the initiative to let the female protagonists stand up and speak for themselves, using their unique female perspectives to look at the people and things around them, and telling their own stories in their own voices, such as the personal narrative voices in Ash and Lamert's love letters and Ellen's love letters, and so on.

In her novel *Possession*, Bayet not only successfully uses the traditional narrative modes of authorial narrative voice and individual narrative voice, but also boldly employs the collective narrative voice, which enables Bayet to successfully establish a voice for women. The collective narrative voice is the first of its kind in feminist narratology, and it is not only a narrative mode of feminist narratology, but also a kind of enrichment and development of classical narratology. It is fundamentally different from the authorial voice or the individual voice, which is usually the collective voice of a marginalised or suppressed group. Throughout the history of women's development, we can see that women have been silenced in male-centred societies. Women living in male-dominated societies are dominated by men and are unable to express their true selves.

#### 3.3 Narrative Features in the Novel

As a female writer, Beate inevitably shows feminist tendency in her creation. In *Possession*, she vividly depicts the phenomenon of women's voicelessness in a male-dominated society. In her novels, we can always experience the alienation and marginalisation of women, and women are forcibly placed in a state of voicelessness.

For example, in *Possession*, the ancient mythological goddess Melusine sits on the rock and sings freely and happily, but as soon as she encounters Ramon, she immediately stops singing, even the goddess is the same, once she encounters a man, she involuntarily loses the right to speak, which can be seen in the social state of women's long-term suppression by men. In the story "The

Crystal Coffin" written by Lamerte, a witch casts a magic spell on the princess and cruelly turns her into a mute and locks her in the crystal coffin for years<sup>[6]</sup>.

The depiction of the Victorian era in *Possession* also shows the repression of women by the male society. For example, Lamert, a very talented poet in the Victorian era, wrote a lot of poems and myths in her life, but her talent and gift were never noticed, which shows that the people in that era completely ignored the voice of women. In the same way as the mythical Melusine, as soon as Lamotte met Ash, her inspiration and creative talent seemed to disappear, and she was unable to write for a long time, which fully demonstrates the phenomenon of the suppression of women's voices in a male-dominated society.

The end of the story of "*Possession*" is surprising, as Maud and Roland eventually discover that Maud is the descendant of Ash and Lamert, and Roland admits that Maud is the central character of the story. In the author's view, the fact that such words come from a man's mouth also suggests the regaining of women's status. Lamott breaks the traditional male-dominated narrative mode and retells the myths and epics of the ancient times with her own words, i.e., she recreates the history of the ancient times with the perspective and voice of women, thus subtly and naturally replacing the male perspective and discourse in the traditional narratives, so that women get the public voice and narrative power they deserve, and breaks the phenomenon of the loss of women's voices in male-centred societies, and regains the narrative voices of women. The female narrative voice has been regained by breaking the phenomenon of female voicelessness in the male-centred society<sup>[7]</sup>.

## 4. Narrative in English Literature from A.S. Byatt's Novel *Possession*

### 4.1 Illusory expression of narrative

The illusory nature of British literary narrative is demonstrated in *Possession*, where the fictional nature of the historical text is reflected in the under-reporting and false reporting of some of the historical facts in the historical sources. Until contemporary scholars Roland and Maud traced the history of the secret affair between Ash and La Motte, Ash had been recognised as a great literary figure of the Victorian era. His works were obscurely worded and highly academic, often making them difficult for readers to understand. But when Roland first saw the manuscript of Ash's letters to La Motte, he found that they were vividly worded and full of affection, and the strong contrast with the previously known Ash prompted Roland to investigate. As a result, the historical text before Roland and others conducted their investigation was missing part of the historical truth, that is, the hidden love affair between Ash and La Motte. This historical fact is erased from the official history, which shows Ash being faithful to his marriage and his married life with his wife, while La Motte has been unknown all her life and is only a single poetess who has occasionally published a few poems. The tracing of this missing history in the novel reflects the great contrast that exists between the historical texts recorded in the official history and the historical events that really happened, exposing the textual and fictional nature of history.

In the postscript of the novel, it is revealed that Ash actually met his own daughter one summer and asked her daughter, Maia, for a strand of blonde hair to put in her pocket watch, whereas in previous novels, scholars have always believed that Ash did not know that his own child was still alive based on the historical information available to him, and believed that the strand of blonde hair belonged to LaMotte. Through this small paragraph in the afterword, the author once again proves that the so-called history is nothing but a historical construction processed by historians, and that people may never know the whole truth of history<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 4.2 Non-linear Representation of Narrative

On a narrative level, A.S. Byatt further deconstructs the authenticity of history by employing non-linear narrative techniques. As we all know, the occurrence of historical events must be naturally continuous, but most of the texts about the Victorian era in the novel are presented in fragments in the form of letters, diaries, poems, and other genres, which are not arranged in strict chronological order of the events, and do not conform to the norms of recording historical texts.

One of the more prominent examples of this is Ellen's diary entry in Chapter 25, recorded after Ash's death. Here the author uses the narrative technique of flashbacks to review Ellen's life, with the beginning of the narrative recording the wife's remembrance and grief for her deceased husband. It later draws the memories back to the time when Lamott and Ash himself confessed to Ellen successively, during Ash's illness, about the secret outings they had both made in Yorkshire and the love they had shared<sup>[9]</sup>. Ellen indicates to Ash that she has known about this for a long time, turning to memories of Blanche's visit to her door to inform her, and then further back to memories of Ellen's own honeymoon with Ash. Ellen reveals in this moment that her life has been a lie, failing to consummate her physical union with her husband due to her fear of sex, but still maintaining the appearance of marital bliss in front of everyone.

The author uses flashbacks to describe several important moments in Ellen's life, which on the one hand can continue the convention of suspense novels, revealing the truth step by step to arouse readers' interest in reading, and on the other hand highlights the fictional nature of the historical text from the side. By the end of the novel, Roland and other scholars have no way to know the real life between Ellen and Ash, and there is no clear evidence to show that Ellen knew about the feelings between Ash and Lamott, thus highlighting the fictional nature of historical texts.

## 4.3 Classic adaptation of narrative

In the novels created by A.S. Byatt, in addition to the rewriting of the classic myth parody, A.S. Byatt also rewrote the content of the classic fairy tale "The Glass Coffin" with the help of Lamott's poem. The Glass Coffin is a very classic story in Grimm's Fairy Tales, which describes a young tailor who accidentally finds two glass coffins and glass bottles in an underground cave. What is even more amazing is that one of the glass coffins contains a castle with many small and exquisite buildings; the other one contains a beautiful princess. The little tailor rushed to rescue the princess. After a series of difficulties and obstacles, they finally live happily ever after. However, this fairy tale was rewritten by Bayeux as follows: after they got married, each of them continued to engage in their own favourite business and hobbies, which is not the traditional meaning of "husband and wife follow each other"<sup>[10]</sup>.

The difference between the original story and the rewritten story lies in the princess's attitude towards marrying the tailor: in the Grimm's fairy tale, the princess believes that her marriage to the tailor is the will of God, and that it is destiny; while in the rewritten story, it is the princess's heartfelt feelings that make her willingly marry the tailor. Although the tailor believes in his heart that it is acceptable for the princess to marry him if she does not want to, the princess chooses to marry the tailor in the end. A.S. Byatt rewrote this fairy tale to express the idea that men and women are equal. She believes that the union of the two sexes should be based on true feelings, not on so-called gratitude, responsibility and other non-emotional factors, and that the only reason for marriage is for two people to love each other sincerely, as the little tailor shows in the story.

At the same time, whether married or not, women had the right to choose and continue their own careers, rather than being submissive and subservient to men. Although this ideal was a fantasy at the time, as the prevailing Victorian view of marriage was based on money and status, Bayeux's rewrite is a satirical take on the gender roles portrayed in this familiar fairy tale. A.S. Byatt's

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### 5. Narrative Features of English Literature from A.S. Byatt's Novel Possession

#### 5.1 Multi-Perspective Characteristics

British literature often uses multiple perspectives of narration, allowing different characters or narrators to tell the story. This type of narrative allows readers to understand the story from multiple perspectives, increasing the complexity and depth of the story. Possession, as a typical work of British literature, is narrated in a way that fully reflects the characteristics of British literature. The novel is told by multiple characters and narrators, which is a common narrative style in English literature. This way allows readers to understand the story from different perspectives, increasing the complexity and depth of the story.

#### 5.2 Non-linear Characteristics

British literature is good at using dialogue and inner monologue to show the character's personality and inner world. Through the characters' words and thoughts, readers can gain a deeper understanding of their feelings and motives. The story of Possession is not told in chronological order, but by using flashbacks and foreshadowing, the story jumps in time. This type of narrative is also very common in British literature and it adds drama and suspense to the story. As a postmodernist novel, its narrative style also fully embodies postmodernism, including the

questioning of the authenticity of literature and history, the reflection on the creation and study of literature, as well as the mixing of different narrative styles, which makes the non-linear characteristics of its narrative content apparent.

### 5.3 Characteristics of Textuality

British literature emphasises authenticity and is good at depicting daily life and social phenomena. Many British writers are known for their deep insight into human nature and society, and their works are often set in the real world, depicting real characters and events. With its complex and inventive narrative, *Possession* is a novel that fully demonstrates postmodernist narrative techniques and contains many texts within texts, including poems, letters and diaries. This is a common narrative style in British literature, which provides additional information about characters, events and themes, as well as adding layers and realism to the story.

## 6. Insights into British Literary Narrative from *Possession*

In *Possession*, the coexistence and dialogue of three historical periods is also one of the most important dialogue structures in *Possession*. "The novel's narrative breaks a single pattern and adopts a multi-layered narrative<sup>[12]</sup>." The novel *Possession* intentionally breaks with the linear chronological structure of the story and replaces it with a diachronic model that allows for the coexistence and dialogue of many voices and discourses. "The three historical periods in *Possession* - the ancient human era, the Victorian era, and the post-modern commercial society - are juxtaposed and referenced to each other, and are both isomorphic in spirit and contrasting in value and meaning." The novel is based on the narrative line of the 20th century, which leads to the narrative line of the Victorian era in the 19th century, and parodies and rewrites a large number of fairy tales and fables in the name of Victorian poets, constituting the three narrative levels mentioned above.

The twentieth-century narrative is set in the academic world, and tells the story of a pair of young scholars, Roland and Maud, who experience an academic archaeology and a postmodern love affair triggered and fuelled by an accidental discovery of a manuscript, while the nineteenth-century narrative tells the story of a fictionalised romance between Randolph Ash, a famous British Victorian poet, and a young unmarried poetess, Christabel LaMothe, who is a young and unmarried woman. The 19th Century narrative follows the untold romance between Randolph Ash, a famous fictional Victorian English poet, and Christabel La Motte, a young unmarried poetess.

The Ancient Times narrative line, on the other hand, has no complete and unified storyline, but is merely a fairy tale-like depiction of vague and uncertain memories that remain in the collective unconscious of mankind. Readers will find that there is no close temporal correlation between these three levels of narration, and the novel's narrative as a whole is not a chronological development pattern in the order of time, but spreads out in all directions with the core of "possession" as the main line, accommodating a multitude of carnivalesque voices and images.

Here, the three distant historical periods of human development are incorporated into the same spatial and temporal structure, generating a strong aesthetic interpretative tension. Melusina and the seamstress in the apotheosis, Lamott and Ash in the Victorian period, and Roland and Maud in the post-modern world form several pairs of mirror images, each in a similar and different situation, with infinite tensions. The mythological Melusina marries a commoner but is transformed into a dragon and snake by her husband's voyeurism, and suffers greatly; Lamotte is widowed for her independence but fails to resist Ash's advances, and gives birth to a daughter and grows old in solitude; and Maud in the modern world is saddened by Fergus' injury and lives a life of isolation.

In English literature, first-person narration is one of the common narrative styles in English

novels. Through the first-person narration of the protagonist, readers can gain insight into the inner world and emotional experience of the protagonist. This kind of narrative makes the readers closer to the protagonist and have empathy and emotional connection with him/her.

In addition, British literary narrative also pays attention to the observation of social phenomena and human nature. British novelists often show their concern and thinking about social problems through the depiction of social classes, moral concepts and interpersonal relationships. They express in-depth analyses and reflections on human nature through delicate narration and characterisation.

Overall, as can be seen from the novel *Possession*, the historical nature of British literary narrative often features first-person narration, multi-perspective narration, social observation and in-depth analysis of human nature, and emphasises dialogue between various historical periods, which adds a unique charm to British literature<sup>[13]</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

*Possession's* rich imagery, twisting plot, and unique narrative strategy have made A.S. Byatt one of the most intelligent novelists of the 20th century, and it has been described as "a novel about literary passion" and "a novel about reading and writing". It has been hailed as "a novel of literary passion" and "a novel of reading and writing". Its complex structure and profound themes have made it an important object in the study of English literature. The author argues that a reinterpretation of the *Possession* novels from a narratological perspective reveals that A.S. Byatt's narrative strategies tend to focus on variety and complexity, and that she uses multiple strands of narrative, the intersection of history and reality, the incorporation of literature and the arts, as well as the use of symbols and metaphors, which in turn creates a rich and engaging work. It is also the presence of these narrative strategies that ultimately allows the reader to think deeply and explore the themes and meanings in the work.

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