

Possession Discussion Questions

Things to keep in mind

- Pay attention to Byatt's use of pastiche and/or "ventriloquism," especially in the Victorian sections. **Pastiche:** A French word for a parody or literary imitation. Perhaps for humorous or satirical purposes, perhaps as a mere literary exercise or jeu d'esprit, perhaps in all seriousness, a writer imitates the style or technique of some recognized writer or work. (<http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/pastiche.html>)
- As you read the poems, prose, and letters of Ash and LaMotte, do you see a difference in their styles of writing? How does their style change depending on genre? Also, what parallels do you see between the main characters and the authors they study?
- There are three female characters of myth and legend referred repeatedly throughout the novel: Proserpina, Melusina, and the Sybil of Cumae. What part does each one play in the story, what are their backgrounds? Why are they introduced?
- What are some of the meanings of the two epigraphs by Hawthorne and Browning that preface the book? How does the theme of "possession" in Browning's dramatic monologue, "To My Last Duchess," link to key themes in Byatt's novel? How does Byatt perhaps imitate Browning's style? What does the first chapter set up, for both characters and readers? What themes are introduced here? What are some of your initial impressions of each of the main characters?

Wednesday, January 20 (pp. 3-296)

1. What are some key examples in these chapters where Byatt blurs the boundaries between the fictional and historical? What purpose does this serve (see pp. 4, 20, and 32)? Likewise, did you note any key examples of inter- or meta-textuality (see p. 92)?
2. "You would make up a whole story. On no real evidence. It would change all sorts of things" (56). What is the significance of this remark? How does it relate to Maud's later observation about the difficulties of capturing "the real thing" in biographies (100)? What is this "real thing"?
3. How would you characterize Mortimer Cropper's studies of/relationship with Randolph Ash (pp. 110, 114, 120, 123)? In what ways does Cropper misread Ash? How does the text set Cropper up as a villain and in what way is this connected to his American identity? How does Cropper's style of biography compare to that of Leonora Stern's depiction of LaMotte (Chap 13, pp. 265-273)?
4. What is revealed about Ash in his letters addressed to Sophia (106) and Priscilla Penn Cropper (116)? What is his view of our "proper" relationship to the past (117)? How does the Victorian view of time contrast with postmodern views (150-51)? What do you make of the various contemporary scholars' attempts to recapture the past by visiting its physical spaces (see pp. 120, 156, 230, 277-83)?

5. How do the letters from Fergus and Leonora represent different approaches toward literary criticism (153-155)? How do these reveal contrasting views of masculine and feminine forms of writing (and gendered ways of reading)? What do you think Byatt is parodying here?
6. What are some of the significant themes and imagery in Ash's poem "Swammerdam" (Chap 11)? How does Ash play with imagination and biography? Ash says Christabel was his muse and influenced the poem. Can you point out her presence or influence?
7. What are some of the various attitudes concerning women's writing (pp. 50-53 and 88)? What about "the feminists" and feminist scholarship (pp. 38, 43, 54, 61)? How has Maud experienced double standards amongst her "sister feminists" (64)?
8. What are your impressions of Beatrice Nest and her work related to the journals of Ellen Ash? How is Beatrice a victim of both patriarchy (127) and current trends in feminist scholarship (129, 240-41)? Is Beatrice a "superfluous woman," like Blanche and Val, and possibly Ellen? What, if anything, do these contemporary and Victorian women have in common?
9. What is revealed about Ellen Ash in her journal (pp. 134-137, 242-252)? What is the relevance of her reading and interpretation of Christabel's *Melusina*? What does Ellen mean when she says, "No one wishes a man to be a Poem" (136)? Ellen reprimands herself concerning her treatment of Bertha: "I have done wrong in her regard. I have behaved less than well" (252). Do you agree with Ellen's self-assessment? Why or why not? What about her treatment of Blanche when she comes to see Ellen?
10. What do we learn about Ash and LaMotte from their correspondence (Chap 10)? How does their "romance" develop? What do they want from each other? What are their views of writing (e.g. Religion and Doubt, p. 181; Truth vs. Fiction, p. 185; women's writing, p. 197)?
11. How do Christabel and Randolph personify themselves (Christabel as a spider, p. 198; Randolph as a knight, p. 199), and how might these reveal a fundamental incompatibility? What does Christabel mean when she says, "No mere human can stand in a fire and not be consumed" (213)? How does this connect to her need for autonomy (204-05)?
12. Maud comments of Ash's letters to Ellen: "It would require quite horrible self-control and duplicity" (235). What do you make of Randolph's loving letters to his wife at home while he is with his "second wife" in Whitby? How do these letters to his wife compare to his correspondence with Christabel? Which one do you feel is the more innocent in their affair, Randolph or Christabel?
13. "A clean empty bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked" (290). What do you make of this dual dream of Roland and Maude? How does it connect to various attitudes expressed by the main characters toward desire, sex, and sexuality (pp. 63, 92, 290, 294-95)? What different forms does desire take in the novel?

Wednesday, January 27 (pp. 297-555)

1. In Chapter 15, Byatt switches to narrating from the third person perspective the details of Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire in 1859. Why is this part of their story given to us directly as opposed to the other indirect perspectives (e.g. letters, journals, biography, literary scholarship, etc.)?
2. The entirety of Chapter 16 is an excerpt from *Melusina*. How does this compare and contrast with Ash's poems? Do you agree that "*Melusina* sounds often as though [Ash] wrote it...Not the subject matter. The style" (288)? What does Roland mean by this? Do you agree? Now that you've read part of the poem, how does it shed further light on Ellen's reading of it in Chapter 7 (134-36)?
3. In Chapter 18, we are given Blanche's suicide note (333-35). What do you think of Blanche now that you've read this? Are you more in sympathy with her than you might have been before? How can you reconcile this note with her visit to Ellen Ash? Why did she kill herself? What, realistically, were her options? Do you think she will attain the immortality she seeks?
4. What purpose does Sabine's journal serve, other than as a plot device? What themes are explored in the journal and how do these connect to the fairy tales inserted throughout the novel: "The Glass Coffin" (65-76); "The Threshold" (166-72); and "Gode's Tale" (386-92)? How do these stories function as meta-tales? What is their significance in the context of women's writing? How might they link to the poem about the dolls in Chap 5 (92-93)? Why would Christabel use the dolls to hide the letters between her and Ash?
5. In Chapter 20, how does Ash's testimony of his "Gaza Exploit" (425) differ from that of Mrs. Lees? What "truths" are withheld from us? Does Christabel's poem on pp. 412-13 provide us with any relevant clues? Who is Geraldine in "Mummy Possesst" (438)? What is the relevance of the title? What are the conflicting attitudes toward women in the poem? What is the speaker's overall tone? Do we gain a better understanding of the "Gaza Exploit" through this textual evidence as opposed to the other sources provided in the previous chapter? Or, is it only the combined effect of all the sources that allows us a fuller understanding? Again, what seems to be missing from the "narrative"?
6. Freedom and autonomy, or self-possession, are highly valued by Christabel and Maud. What does autonomy mean to these characters? Does it have different meanings based on the women's different historical contexts? What does autonomy mean to Roland? Why does mutual solitude and celibacy assume a special importance in his relationship with Maud? How does this contrast with Randolph's and Christabel's affair? Does Randolph follow through on his intention to "teach her she was not his possession" (304)? Is romantic love possible without the desire to possess the "other"? How would you interpret the scene where Maud and Roland "consummate" their romance?
7. How does Chapter 23 play with metafictional strategies to comment on the Romance/Quest narrative? What do you make of the various "couplings" that take place in the latter chapters? How might this be related to the reference to Shakespeare on p. 524?

8. How does the second half of Chapter 20 explore issues of “capitalist and cultural imperialism” (431)? What point is Byatt making here about British history, literature, and imperialism? Ellen Ash wrote her journal as a “defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures” (501). Cropper is literally presented as a ghoul (464), robbing the poet's grave. Beatrice Nest, on the other hand, wishes to preserve Christabel's final letter to Randolph unread. What is the fine line, if any, between a ghoulish intrusion upon the privacy of the dead, and the legitimate claims of scholarship and history?
9. In Chapter 26, what transformations take place in Roland? When he returns to his flat at the end of the novel, Roland decides there is “no reason why he should not go out into the garden” (514). What is the emotional significance of his finally entering the garden? What does the garden represent, for both Roland and in context of other relevant themes woven throughout the text?
10. What do we, the readers, learn from Ellen’s direct point of view in Chapter 25 (485-502) and the postscript (552-55)? As much as the scholars have discovered, one secret is kept from them at the end and revealed only to the reader. What is that secret, and why are we given direct access to the past and thus knowledge that is withheld from the scholars and other characters in the text?
11. “We are driven by endings as by hunger. We must know...” (517) and “We need the end of the story” (541). How does the text both disrupt and satisfy our need for narrative closure? What is the tone of the novel’s ending?