CHAPTER-IV
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EXPLORING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The prodigiously gifted British novelist Antonia Susan Byatt is certainly one of those writers whose reach exceeds their grasp. Her last few novels, such as 1990’s prize winning Possession and 1996’s “Babel Tower”, created not just worlds full of fascinating characters and simulating ideas but worlds within worlds, and they can send a receptive reader’s mind spinning. This chapter deals with her latest novel. This Biographer’s Tale” which again takes us into more realities than one. Her main character is a serious student, a postgraduate young Englishman, narrator Phineas, G. Nanson, decides to abandon his studies as a post structuralist literary critic to become a biographer instead. He’s small in stature, [his name, it tells us almost immediately, indicating his pedagogical bent, derives from the Latin, names for ‘dwarf’] but large enough in intellect to recognize that these days graduate studies in literature may be too confining for someone with a truly inquiring mind. His story churns into action when he quits his courses and at the suggestion of a sympathetic professor, decides to become the biographer of a little known but extremely fascinating British writer, biographer himself, named Scholes- Destry- Scholes. For Nanson, this decision changes everything. Off he goes in rather hair fashion on the trail of
evidence for his new project. This leads him into some extremely interesting situations in research as well as life, and sends him into the arms of two distinctively different women, each attractive and important in her own way. To support himself while he does his research, he takes a job at Puck’s Girdle a travel agency run by two gay Scandinavians, Erik and Christopher, who specialize in dream vacations for travelers with aesthetic interest.

“Want to trace the work of a particular English Stained glass maker across Europe to Assisi? Want is retrace Goethe’s footsteps in his Italian journey? Want to track Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy” and chloride on their German trip? Puck’s Girdle is the place for you;” [BTA: 26]

To begin his scholarly investigations, Nanson places and advertisement in the Time Literary Supplement, through which he meets Vera Alphage, his subject’s beautiful niece, and discovers some fascinating fragmented manuscripts and file cards. Destry Scholes it appears, was making notes on the lives of three possible subjects for future biographies: the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus, playwright, Henrik Ibsen, and Darwin’s cousin, the British scientist Francis Galton. Reading through these manuscripts – three worlds within worlds becomes for Phineas a dream vacation in itself and takes us, as readers along with him into the primitive sub – Arctic with Linnaeus into the theatrical life of the Norwegian playwright and into Southwest Africa with Galton. Somehow, Nanson gets a lot of work
done even while minding the store at Puck’s Girdle and spending time in bed with the lovely Vera. And his quest for material about Destry-Scholes soon leads him to a second woman, the “gold and frizzy and springy, haired” Swedish entomologist Fulla Biefeld, an expert on bees and stag beetles. “With breasts pushing forward and buttocks pushing backwards”, Fulla reminds Nanson of a Picasso ceramic. Nanson’s search for material to make up the life of his subject takes delightful and interesting turns. And his desire to become a real biographer leads him to a lot of self-scrutiny about the business of writing about other lives and one’s own. Nanson’s chosen subject Scholes-Destry-Scholes was himself a biographer of genius. Destry Schole’s magnum opus was a biography of the Victorian polymath Sir Elmer Bole, a famous explorer soldier, diplomat, scientist, travel writer, novelist and poet. In short almost a caricature of a certain British type. As Nanson searches for clues to Destry Scholes life, the novel acquires layers of complexity. Nanson’s finds fragments written by Destry – Scholes about three men: Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. Like Nanson, the reader realizes the identity of these figures only gradually, for the fragments are oblique and mystifying. To his dismay, Nanson discovers that the revered Destry-Scholes has taken great liberties with the facts inventing false incidents and inserting imaginary details. This calls into question the whole issue of biographical accuracy and allows Byatt, who all along
has been taking swipes at poststructural literary criticism to introduce
each observations about the current fad of psychoanalytical biography.
The plot broadens when Nanson falls in love with two women, only one
of the many mirror images in the novel, for Elmer Bole had also married
two women. In addition to the theme of doubles and dopplehangers
Byatt's [Possession; Angels and Insects] familiar preoccupation with
insects myths, spirits metamorphoses and sexuality all come into play.
There is an amatory experience that seems to be consequent upon
reasearching a biography in Kingsley Amis's novel, 'The Biographer's
Moustache', Gordon Scott - Thompson takes his subject's wife to his bed
- as also does Mr. Moon in Tom Stoppard's 'Lord Malquist and Mr.
Moon.' Raphael after in Celia Grittelson's novel titled 'Biography' takes
there the mistress [and possible daughter] of his dead subject, Maxwell
regarding her as created by Maxwell out of love and madness and given
me, his gift. 'Mark Lamming' in Penelope Lively's 'According to Mark'
takes to bed the granddaughter of his subject. The hero of Alain de
Botton's novel, 'Kiss and Tell' decides to write a biography of the next
person to walk into my life, duly investigates 'ordinary person', Isabel
and becomes her lover as well as biographer Julian Ramsay is A. N.
Wilson's 'A Watch In The Night' makes love, in the library, to the
librarian who has allowed him prohibited access to the diaries of the
subject he is researching.
By contrast, the narrator of Henry James story desperately seeking the Asperen Papers at first sees only one means to achieve his object, his spoils: 'to make love to the niece'. But when poor Miss Tina virtually offer herself to him along with the papers, he withdraws immediately 'awkwardly, grotesquely' as he himself writes, leaving her sobbing. He explains, "I couldn't accept the proposal I couldn't for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman ......... doubly a cad.

Phineas Nanson, in The Biographer's Tale, becomes lover of both Vera Alphage, his subjects niece and Fulla Biefeld, who is assisting him in his research. As Phineas searches for the real Destry Scholes his own life takes on a kind of fairy-tale quality. He find himself with not one but two lovers: cool, distant Vera and Fulla the strapping Swedish bee taxonomist, with her earthy smells and explosion of straw-blonde hair. In all of Byatt’s novels, fiercely intellectual characters are also involved in romantic or erotic adventures. Intellectual yearnings and yearnings for love and sexual fulfillment are related. Coleridge was right when he said that the purpose of art was pleasure first, and everything else added. There is a strong dichotomy between the two women Phineas loves. Vera is associated with the moon, the sea, cool colours and glass, Fulla with the sun, fertility pollen and fields. A dry, nervous cipher at the outset, Phineas develops into a character as the tale progresses. He goes from
lovelessness to double love with the taxonomist and a radiologist. The earthy Fulla, “a Scandinavian nature goddess” inducts him into the sensual exterior of life and the organic links that hold it together. Obsessed with bees and beetles, Fulla shows Phineas how human life in dependent upon a fragile ecosystem that philosophers of the self rarely pause to consider in their flights into the existential nature of being. Radiologist Vera who ‘Photographs are invisible lives’ reveals to Phineas the usually invisible world of the inner body, and enables him to venture to the interior of himself.

Fulla and Vera were media that Phineas used to achieve his goal of writing a biography of Destry-Scholes. Phineas entered into sexual relations with both these women who helped him in the bargain by supplying vital links and clues the mess that existed in Phineas’s academic endeavour. Phineas manipulated them sexually and emotionally to extract as much as he could from Fulla and Vera. This particular incident will reiterate the fact:

“My questioning face, my gaping mouth my desperate mostils were suddenly myself in softness – I thought of bats but it was more as though I had plunged into thick fine moss which smelled ferny and animal at once and was suffocating me. I beat out with my hands and encountered soft yielding flesh [under cloth]. I slipped to my kness, losing consciousness and my hands ran down solid thighs,
strong knees, warm muscular. The door opened, and I found myself at the feet of Fulla Biefeld, staring up inside her skirt the slight wiriness of her pubic hair pressing against what appeared to be alternately crimson and emerald knickers [no doubt an effect of the lack of oxygen to my brain]. The stalwart legs were furred with strong, brass-gold hairs. I let myself lose consciousness completely—“I felt it coming over me and went along with it, it seemed the best thing. My nose was alive with Fulla Biefeld’s sex” [BTA : 89]

In the middle of writing the story of his various quests, he explains that he’s not out to write a memoir. Autobiography and memoir are currently fashionable, he says but he finds these “rather repulsive” as literary forms. He is writing in the first person “for the sake of precision, because this procedure allows him to say certain things He is reasonably sure of”. He’s also convinced that “the true literary fanatic “ or “the primeval reader”, is not looking for a mirror, but rather “for an escape route, for an expanding horizon, for receding starscapes, for unimaginable monstrosities and incomprehensible beauties. Also for meaning, for making sense of things, always with the proviso that complete sense cannot probably be made because of the restrictions of small things like death, and the configuration of the folds of our electrically charged, insensible grey matter” [BTA : 28]. Destry- Scholes, Nanson tells, us possessed “the primitive virtue of tilling a rattling good yarn and ....
That other primitive Virtue, the capacity to make up a world in every corner of which his reader would wish to linger, to look, to learn” [BTA :41].

The Biographer’s Tale provides us with a feast of intertwining stories. In the foreground, we read the tale of Phineas Nanson’s present day attempts to uncover clues about Destry-Scholes including the trips he takes, the people he meets, and the women he has affairs with. At the same time we learn scraps about the life of Destry-Scholes, and quite a bit more about the three historical figures, whose lives Destry-Scholes was researching. The passion of Destry-Scholes for these subjects and his approach to the research tells us much about him just as Phineas passion and approach tell us about him. One story resonates off another and another. And we’re continuously reminded of the fragmentary nature of history and the sparse and incomplete information on the basis of which biographers lease their works – the contrast between the life as lived and a life as retold by others perhaps hundreds of years later, based on random clues that survived by chance. When novelists create their characters and biographers re-create their subjects, both types of writers are either explicitly or implicitly applying a theory of personality through which they investigate the selfhood of the person. However, while many examples of novels and biographers in recent decades have emphasized the similarities between the two genres, especially in the area of character
or person as subject, there appears to be no consensus on such a theory. A. S Byatt is a novelist who is particularly concerned with the issue of creation and re-creation of the self. Byatt is well – aware of the underlying patterns for self analysis in everyday language, and tries to match these inherent metaphors with arresting, self- conscious, artistic metaphors that are, nonetheless, connected logically in different ways with the former. Byatt is thus able to articulate in interesting new ways ideas on abstractions concerning selfhood, language biography and creativity. The Biographer’s Tale is the most recent moment in Byatt’s ongoing exploration of these issues. The novel picks up where Possession left off; indeed, The Biographer’s Tale is in many ways an inversion of Byatt’ Booker Prize winning story about Roland Michell, a graduate student whose plodding thesis work takes a career making turn when he makes a series of unexpected discoveries about the love life of a Victorian poet. Michell’s research brings him intellectual joy, true love, and job offers, but Nanson’s attempt to write the life of a great biographer stops painfully short of such rewards He is unable to discover even the most rudimentary information about the biographer whose life story he wants to tell. The few manuscripts and miscellaneous possessions he does find only raise more questions about his subject’s intention and integrity than they answer, and his inability to assess the information he has in hand brings only eventful, frustrated conclusion that biography, like the
rest of academic literary study, is pointless. Where possession bills itself as "a romance", then the Biographer's Tale is an academic anti-romance far from a fantasy of scholarly wish fulfillment Byatt's latest novel is a chronicle of thwarted research, thwarted dreams, and thwarted career.

Shortly after the Biographer's Tale appeared, Byatt spoke of biography as a form of "Possession", explaining her reluctance to write one as a reluctance to be taken over by her subject matter: "I do not wish to spend most of my life on somebody else's life- not one other person's life. But as her publication of a novel about writing biography might suggest, Byatt's relationship to the genre is as complex as her relationship to the word 'possession' itself. If one aspect of biographical "Possession" is the tendency of the subject to overtake the biographer, another is the biographer's tendency to appropriate his subject. Nanson quickly learns that he must manipulate his material in order to make sense of it; he also learns that his subject was himself a master manipulator, one whose scattered remaining papers show a disturbing willingness to slide out of biography and into fiction.

Still another aspect of "biographical possession" is the question of what kinds of knowledge and methodological skills literary scholars ought to possess, a question. The Biographer's Tale pursues at the veiled level of allusion. Though The Biographer's Tale does not rehearse the history of biography, the novel nonetheless knows, or possesses, a great deal of that
history. In shape and substance, the whole shadows A.J.A. Symon’s “The Quest for Corvo”[1934], an autobiography about writing the biography of an artist, author, failed priest and accomplished paranoiac Fredrick Rolfe. The novel is also rich in references to biographical history. The imaginary biography that inspires Nanson to become the biographer’s biographer, for instance, evokes Richard Ellmann and Leon Edel in telling ways: it is written during the 1950s, when Ellmann and Edel both came on the scene, and its author delivers a talk called “The Art of Biography” in 1959, the year of Ellmann’s ‘James Joyce’ and Edel’s passionately argued ‘Literary Biography’.

As a novel haunted by references to the history of biography — references only available to a reader already in possession of that history. The Biographer’s Tale might be said to possess a “biographical unconscious” one whose contents are perhaps all the more meaningful for their being largely unavailable, repressed. Indeed, one of the novel’s most interesting suggestions in that literary studies has lost its way because it has lost biography, that the modern English department is absolutely divorced from the very thing that gives it meaning: intent, careful, patient, creative study of writers’ lives: Study that reaches beyond the flat discursive realm of “textuality” to the people who produced the texts upon which literary critics expend their energy. Such a suggestion will not appeal to readers who do not agree that literary studies as it is
presently practiced leaves anything to be desired, but for those who, like
Byatt, detect a “fatal family likeness” in the work we have been turning
out in recent years, the suggestion that the dispossession of English may
have a great deal to do with its disowning of the author is provocative
indeed. A few decades later, Virginia Woolf coined the term “creative
fact” to express the methodological essence of biography, by telling us
the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so
that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the
imagination than any poet or novelist save the greatest . . He can give us
the creative fact, the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.
Biography and theory are at opposite ends of the literary critical
spectrum, the one occupying the contemptible status of filler
[background], the other standing as the support structure without which
literary analysis cannot proceed. Antipathy to the genre has always been
strong. Rudyard Kipling called biography the ‘higher cannibalism’,
Vladimir Nabokov spoke of it as “psycho – plaggearism”./ In scholarly
circles, literary biography’s emphasis on the writer’s relationship to his
work has consistently run counter to major critical ideas. So antithetical
are biography’s premises to those of the intentional fallacy, the death of
the author, and the rise of poststructuralist skepticism not just toward
facts, but toward the idea of the coherent individual that biography has
become a sign of theoretical inadequacy. The apparent conceptual
poverty of a genre, built on the premise that “lives” can be known has meant that biography has neither a criticism her a following in academic circles. There is no real, shared sense that biographical information might be essential to any responsible critical frame work, nor that biography might itself be a viable critical frame work in its own right. At best, biographies are regarded as useful condensations of primary source material—something to skin if you need some quick and dirty background. We are very far from considering them to be first rate works of scholarship, further still from seeing them as art, although biographers themselves have for decades clamored loudly for both.

The Biographer’s Tale is not itself an argument for biography. But in casting biography as a potential antidote to the “Fatal family likeness” plaguing contemporary literary criticism, Byatt nonetheless asks us to think harder—and better—about biography than we have yet done. The Biographer’s Tale is a literary critique of literary criticism, and as such it poses a distinctly academic challenge: to work out why biography has such a low intellectual status, to ask what that says about the profession’s values, to calculate what is lost when the idea of the “literary life” for which biography is a massive metonymy—matters so little, and to imagine what we might gain by welcoming it into our research, writing and teaching,
In the Biographer’s Tale, Byatt chronicles Phineas’s adventures in the real world who is suddenly disenchanted with post modernism, with its shifty interrogations and paranoid self references. But she also tells a story about stories, about the intersections of fact and fiction and the sometimes disparate, sometimes overlapping roles of author and subject. In his search for Destry- Scholes, Phineas finds that reality can be as elusive, as meaning. Indeed, he uncovers very little about Destry Scholes, what he finds instead almost by accident and quite unwillingly is his own story. Byatt writes about the importance of pleasure in literature, the process of imagining characters and the universal human desire for stories Phineas is most impressed by the absence of the biographer himself from the work and sets out, in tentative fashion to research the life of Destry Scholes, taking especial care to efface himself from the record of his findings.

This is the conceit upon which Byatt bases the remainder of this novel. Everywhere Phineas looks, he finds both too much and too little. His preliminary researches into Destry- Scholes which include him ‘staring emptily and cluelessly at the terraced house in Pontefract’ reveal only fragments. tantalizingly incomplete notes on the taxonomist Linnaeus, the Statistician and Eugeniast Francis Galton and the dramatist Ibsen. Each set of notes seems peculiarly connected, with a puzzling emphasis on mysticism and magic, on solitary and whimsical travelling, on the
behaviour and classification of animals. Each problem sends Phineas pursuing a different line of enquiry, only to find himself stalled and halted, lies "true intellectual passion for coherence and meanings" [BTA : 75] run ragged. All he can be sure of and that not completely, are the events of his own life – the one thing that he means to keep out of his account. In this lucid scenario, Phineas’s hitherto vacant life quickly becomes pregnant with new possibilities thickening and quickening at every turn. He meets Fulla, a Swedish bee taxonomist who helps him out with Linnaean and seduces him as they watch stag bettles jousting in Richmond Park. He beings an intense, silent relationship with the ‘shockingly beautiful’ Vera Alphage, Destry Schole’s niece, who takes him into her attic and shows him her uncle’s suitcase, crammed full of curiosities [including a trepanning instrument, 336 randomly named marbles and a swathe of spooky composite photographs]. He starts working at an alternative travel agent’s called Puck’s Girdle, encountering there a pair of hedonistic homosexuals who organize fantasy holidays on literary themes and a menacing customer who seems to want him to arrange a tour of paedophile snuff movies. His days become a tangle of indeterminacy, his nights a succession of rampant, stalking nightmares. And his biography of Destry - Scholes comes no closer to its starting point. Byatt has Phineas start his tale as an innocent and end it as a writer, his desperation for facts slowly giving way to his
seduction by words. "I was a failure as a semiotician, I do now see. I may be better at writing, now when it is too late, but then I was slow, I did not read the signs," [BTA 96] he admits his tone becoming more conspiratorial as his descriptive writing becomes increasingly metaphorical and sensuous. By the end of the novel, Phineas has abandoned the idea of facts and given himself over to the lure of purple prose, to what Fulla calls "inauthentic fabrics here suspended from authentic books" [BTA : 101]: indeed, his understanding of what constitutes authenticity has radically changed.

The Biographer’s Tale is in many ways a demonstration of the fundamental working of Byat’s own fictive imagination. Byatt said that she couldn’t “make up” a character who was a “portrait” of anyone, living or dead – it’s always cardboardy, or caricature. All her people are combinations of human traits taken from many sources and they only come to life when the character can float loose of the originals. The Biographer’s Tale exposes the primary process of imagining. Byatt read and read about Galton and Ibsen and Linnaeus – whom she picked for no better reason than that they were the three people whom she wanted to find out about, herself. And then she collected the coincidences that made them all human and the idiosyncrasies that made them individuals. Byatt has many wonderful [and wonderfully bizarre] touches in her book, a meticulous amalgamation of the oddities of everyday and academic life.
and lists of history. It is a literary game, in part, and certainly a fictional
take on the difficulties of a biography. It is also a fairly entertaining
novel and as usual Byatt’s writing is impressive. The Biographer’s Tale,
despite its comparative brevity, is hardly less cunningly contrived or
skillfully executed. For all its obsession with facts, this novel is as much
fairy tale as satire, and move dream like than self consciously erudite
Byatt questions the notion of literary purity and points out that a there
volume biography might be translated into a sketchy patchwork of
supposition and confession, and shows us the web of fabrications that
underpins all writing, fictional and non-fictional. Her exceptionally
subtle understanding of these matters combined with her densely
patterned beautifully weighted prose, make her a romancer we should be
loath to do without.

A. S. Byatt has been described as a “Post Modern Victorian”. Her novels
include the best seller “Possession” and “Angels and Insects” which was
recently made into a movie by director Phillip Haas. In an interview
sponsored by San Francisco’s City Arts and Lecture Series, Byatt
discussed “Angels and Insects”, D.H. Lawrence and the challenges of
literary feminism. Byatt began Angels and Insects with a visual image.
She wanted to write a story which combined her obsession with television
naturalism with her obsession with Victorian gothic. She thought one
could make a really beautiful film which compared an ant heap to a
Victorian mansion. And in the middle of the ant heap there’s this large fat white green simply producing children. The question is: Is she the power center, or is she the slave? Byatt didn’t have a plot for a long time it was just this metaphor and it got bigger and bigger. She had this vision of all these slightly sexless female servants, scurrying along the corridors of the gothic mansion like the worker arts. She read a lot of books about ant heaps, and a lot of books about Victorian servant life. The pun on ‘insect’ and ‘incest’ only occurred to her very late as a way of dealing with the plot though it is, of course, also the case with insects in an ant heap. But then she had this further metaphorical idea that there should he a man who wanted to marrying a butterfly and found he’d married the queen of ants by mistake. He was a Darwinian and a determinist, while her father was desperately clinging to Christianity, and a religious lord of the Manor. Darwin had said that there is a kind of autonomism in our choice of mates, a kind of determinism, driving people to choose a mate for beauty rater than for moral reasons. So she wanted to put that in too, and once she got all that in place, the characters didn’t have to have an awful lot of character. It’s driven by the story and the metaphor. Angels and Insects consists of two novellas set in the mid – 19th century. The first, “Morpho Eugenia’ is a Gothic fable that explores the multiple themes of earthly paradise and Darwin’s theories of breeding and sexuality. Biodiversity is often defined as the variety of all forms of
life, from genes to species, through to the brood scale of ecosystems. “Biodiversity” was coined as a contraction of “biological diversity” in 1985, but the new term arguably has taken on meaning and import all its own. The most straightforward definition is “Variation of life at all level of biological organization”. Another definition holds that biodiversity is a measure of the relative diversity among organism present is different ecosystems. “Diversity” in this definition includes diversity within a species and among species and comparative diversity among ecosystems. A third definition that is often used by ecologists is the “totality of genes, species, and ecosystems of a region”. An advantage of this definition is that it seems to describe most circumstances and present a unified view of the traditional three levels at which biodiversity has been identified:

1. Gen**etic** diversity :- diversity of genes within a species. There is a genetic variability among the populations and the individuals of the same species.

2. Spec**ies** diversity :- diversity among species.

3. ecosyste**m** diversity:- diversity at a higher level of organization, the ecosystem [richness in the different processes to which the genes ultimately contribute].

Biodiversity is not distributed evenly on earth it is consistently richer in the tropics. As one approaches polar regions one finds fewer species.
Flora and fauna vary depending on climate, altitude, soils and the presence of other species. In the year 2006 large numbers of the earth’s species are formally classified as rare or endangered or threatened species; A biodiversity hot spot is a region with high level endemic species. Biodiversity found on earth today is the result of 4 billion years of evolution. The origin of life is not well known to science, though limited evidence suggests that life may already have been well established only a few 100 million years after the formation of the earth. Biodiversity has contributed in many ways to the development of human culture and in turn, human communities have played a major role in shaping the diversity of nature at the genetic, species and ecological levels. Biodiversity is what underlines many important ecological goods and services that provide benefits to humans. For all humans, biodiversity is a resource for daily life.

In Angels and Insects, there is an implied parallel between insect and human society throughout. The hero a poor, scholarly entomologist, is taken into a wealthy Victorian family. His life and loves, particularly for the daughter Eugenia and the eponymous species of butterfly, comprise this tale. The second novella,” The Conjugal Angel”, is reminiscent of Possession, Byatt’s 1990 Booker prize winner for fiction, wherein poetry is woven into the narrative, the poem is, Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”, written to mourn the death of Tennyson’s friend. Arthur Henry Hallam,
who was engaged to the poet’s sister Emily – a main character here. This is a philosophical ghost story, bizarre and comic, but since assorted mediums meet real characters, it is difficult to relate to any of them. The two novellas are set in Victorian England one of the unifying elements in the work is Alfred lord Tennyson’s lengthy, celebrated poem In Memoriam, quoted in both novellas and important to the plot of the second. Published in 1850 and immensely popular, the poem addressed numerous victorian concerns in the process of dealing with the poet’s grief over his friend’s death. One of the most important of those concerns for the Victorians and in these novellas is the impact of the work of Charles Darwin and other scientists. The two novellas that compose Angles and Insects share a common minor character, Captain Arturo Papagay. At the end of the first novella, he is the captain of the Calypso, the ship taking William and Matilda to the Amazon. It is the captain’s first command and his words conclude the novella as he tells. William and Matilda, to whom he has brought an unusual butterfly, that what is important is simply to be alive. Ironically, the second novella opens with his life, ten years after his supposed death at sea receiving what she believes to be manages from his sprit. The two novellas explore the place of humans in the universe; they are somewhere, as the title suggests, between angels and insects, are part of both the physical and spiritual worlds. In “Morpho Eugenia”, the society created by human
distinguish them from what they view as lower life forms proves to be a thin veneer covering behaviors very much like and in some cases perhaps worse than, that of primitive humans and of animals. Tennyson’s view of nature as “red in tooth and claw”, quoted in the novella, has replaced the rosier romantic ideal. Byatt, who had previously used the fiction forms of the novel and the short story, here shows considerable skill with the third form, the novella. She relates the two novellas to each other by setting and social concerns, but each is capable of standing on its own. Readers who finds some of her novels difficult because of their length or density will find these shorter works more accessible. The two stories in this book make up one exploration of Victorian anxieties about what it was to be human. *Morpho Eugenia* is a Gothic tale about Victorian religion, sexuality and Darwin’s ideas. The *Conjugal Angel* is also about Victorian religion and sexuality, but in relation to spiritualism, the idea of the Afterlife, and the lives of Tennyson and his sister, Emily.

The *Conjugal Angel* comes second in the book but was written first. It is based on a true story recounted by Emily Tennyson’s granddaughter, Fryn Tennyson Jesse. Emily Tennyson was engaged to marry Tennyson’s brilliant friend, Arthur Hallam, whose sudden and early death left the whole Tennyson family in mourning. Hallam died in 1833 and Tennyson’s great poem, *In Memoriam*, appeared in 1850. Emily, whose
engagement had initially been forbidden by Hallam’s father, now received an allowance from him, so that she need never marry. But in 1842, to a chorus of disapproval from society, in eluding some spiteful mockery from Elizabeth Barett she married Lieutenant Richard Jesse without relinquishing the allowance. Like Tennyson’s brother Frederick and his sister Mary, she became a member of the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem, and in her old age in Margate was told at a seance in her house that she would be joined to Hallam in the life to come. Swedenborg believed that the angels of the innermost Heaven were made up of a man and a woman, eternally joined, in what he called "conjugial" Love.

The Conjugial Angel is a kind of ghost story, turning in the imagination round this real séance, mixing Swedenborg’s visions with the poems of Keats and Tennyson, what is known about the real Hallam with the idea of the dead man forty years later.

*Morpho Eugenia* began with a visual image. Byatt had been obsessed with insect life for many years - especially with the life of ants, and the way in which human beings have anthropomorphised their societies and natures, making morals out of the "sacrifice" of the infertile female "workers" as opposed to the "powerful" egg-laying queen, for instance, or speculating about where the source of decision-making really lay in an antheap - in the individual or the "mind of the nest". She had the idea that
a wonderful film could be made, using a large Victorian house, full of whisking black-clad female workers, and white soft fecund women lying in warm rooms on sofas, alternated with the visions of the interior of anthills the camera can now provide. Byatt had also made a study of the English nineteenth-century Amazonian explorers for an earlier novel, *The Game*, where she was interested in ideas of the Tropics as inimical Nature, full of unrelenting struggle for survival, as opposed to Wordsworthian harmony. She liked these men, Alfred Russell Wallace, W.H.Bates, Richard Spruce, all peaceable and resourceful, occupied not with Empire, but with scientific discovery, with curiosity about the nature of things. So the germ of the story was an explorer who returns and mistakes the nature of the human nest he finds himself in. Byatt then saw that I had a kind of Gothic fable about Darwinian speculations about sexual selection, breeding true to type, inbreeding and outbreeding, which opened up into the terrible anxieties of the time about what human nature was, within Nature, ruthlessly selecting the fittest, red in tooth and claw. [Tennyson's poem informs *Morpho Eugenia* as much as *The Conjugal Angel.*] One thing that never ceases to surprise her is the way stories and ideas seem to attract discoveries like magnets - her heroine was called "Eugenia" [well-bred] from early on, but it was very late that she found in Bates a description of a real Amazonian butterfly, *Morpho Eugenia*, the shapely, the beautiful Eugenia - Morpho is one of the names of
Aphrodite. And Linnaeus's wonderful system of naming butterflies and moths produced all sorts of surprises. She called her hero Adamson because one of his activities - like Bates - was giving human names and attributes to new forms of life in that ambiguous Paradise or Green Hell, the Amazon. Byatt wanted her two tales to be lively - they have their origins in Victorian Gothic and the classic ghost story, as well as in ideas. She has learned a great deal from E.O. Wilson, student of insect societies and human nature. These two stories make a world full of all sorts of creatures, creeping, flying, walking and sailing in glory. The Victorian world was complicated and amazing, and its energy is still startling. Morpho Eugenia is a Darwinian tale. William Adamson finds himself first a guest of and then married into the wealthy Alabaster family. He went on an expedition to the Amazon, but lost near all his possessions and specimens in a shipwreck that he just survived. He is fascinated by insects -- especially, here, butterflies and ants. William Adamson is of a different class and background than the Alabasters. He is also alone -- a stranger in their midst -- while they are ... very close. As the daughter he falls for, Eugenia, explains:

"I love my family, Mr Adamson. We are very happy together. We love each other very much." [AI : 32]

No kidding.
Eugenia tragically lost her fiancé before she could wed; the circumstances of this death are only revealed relatively far into the novella [though they don't come as that much of a surprise]. Eugenia warns Adamson:

*I cannot be loved, Mr Adamson, I am not able to be loved,

it is my curse, you don't understand.* [AI: 76]

But it is to no avail: Adamson wants her. As Eugenia's sister is already engaged there's a nice double wedding and Adamson is welcomed into the fold. Adamson is kept somewhat busy organizing and arranging the accumulated collection of the pater familias, but what he'd really like to do is set out on another Amazonian expedition. Meanwhile, his wife is breeding and breeding -- one of several reasons Adamson feels it wouldn't be right for him to set off just yet. Funny, though, about the kids: as Adamson observes:

"*It is as though environment were everything and inheritance nothing, I sometimes think. They suck in Alabaster substance and grow into perfect little Alabasters -- I only very rarely catch glimpses of myself in their expression --"*[AI: 81]

Throughout the book there's a great deal of contrast with the world of nature, as Adamson sets up and observes an ant-colony with some of the
other children, even writing a book about it. Meanwhile, there's also considerable Darwinian debate. Nature, in these times, is still something of a mystery, and while there are glimpses of its brute truth these aren't always clearly observed or understood. Adamson also finally comes across Eugenia's secret, and quite a dramatic one that is [though well foreshadowed throughout the book -- both the what and the who]. Still, it's a neat turn, and allows Adamson to leave this odd place with someone more appropriate, in all respects, for him. The novella nicely compares civilization with the way animals [specifically insects] live; Byatt does this very well, and from the role of women to laws of nature she offers some remarkable examples, always nicely contrasted with the strange Alabaster world. What weakness there is in the novel is in the somewhat cursory manner many of the human relationships are explored. Adamson's love for Eugenia doesn't fully convince, and Byatt chooses not to consider closely how it evolves after they are wed [in part, no doubt, because Eugenia is meant to be seen as the unassailable queen ant, busy only breeding [and being protected]]. But the novella is still an accomplished, clever scientific fiction. *The Conjugial Angel* is quite a different piece of work. It is dominated by poetry, as Byatt quotes extensively. And, though set in roughly the same time, it is much less scientific-- and more spiritual, or at least concerned.
with spiritualism [and, yes, quite a few spirits float around here].

A character, Mr Hawke, explains:

Swedeborg teaches us, as you know, that true conjugal love comes to us all but once, that our souls have one mate, one perfect other half, whom we should seek ceaselessly. That an angel, properly speaking, joins two parts in one, in conjugal love. [AI:92]

That's a lot to aim for, but its these ideals that the characters are focussed on. Poets appear [if not in entirely real form] -- Keats, for example -- but it is Alfred Lord Tennyson that is the dominant figure of influence, and his In Memoriam the central work. Mourning, death, longing for answers: this and more is creatively addressed here, but it's an odd mix of modern and Victorianism.

"Morpho Eugenia" opens like a women's historical romance and continues like a Victorian novel about love, marriage, society's expectations, nineteenth-century hypocrisy, social injustices, Darwin, and religion. Because the stories in Angels and Insects are set in the 1860s and 1870s and deal with Victorian concerns, reviewers have described the diptych as "resolutely mid-Victorian in tone and content" [Hughes 49], and A. S. Byatt as "a Victorianist Iris Murdoch" [Butler]. The postmodern connection is consequently overlooked. One reviewer, however, sees
continuities between the Victorian novel and postmodernism when he refers to Byatt as a "postmodern Victorian" who finds the grounds of her postmodernity in "an earnest attempt to get back before the moderns and revive a Victorian project that has never been allowed to come to completion" [Levenson 41]. Like the great nineteenth-century novelists, Byatt is a storyteller who continues the Victorian tradition of describing the individual in society, but it does not automatically follow that she exercises her storyteller's authority to present total world visions. [3] "Morpho Eugenia" appears to be double-voiced only in its extensive use of analogy in comparing the world of the Victorian household with that of insects, but even though the narrative seems stable enough, a struggle is going on within the text itself, so that at times narrative and language seem to be at cross-purposes. To read the novella as a postmodern romance--or as a postmodern Victorian novel, if such a hybrid can exist--helps to account for the ambiguities this gives rise to. The prominence of comparisons, analogies, and metaphors places the novella in the tradition of allegorical writing, a quintessentially medieval or Renaissance genre.

A characteristic of the late twentieth century, as well as of postmodern literature, is that certainties are continuously called into question, and thus allegory becomes a suitable form for expression. The model is certainly not alien to postmodernism: on the contrary, allegory is a classic example of double discourse, as well as a textual mode that—like
postmodern literature—avoids establishing a center within the text, because in allegory the unity of the work is provided by something that is not explicitly there. This last point is where postmodern allegories differ from traditional ones, however, because most allegories depend on the existence of a recognized and more or less universally accepted frame of reference outside the text. But where, for example, a Protestant allegorist like John Bunyan could presuppose his reader's knowledge of the Bible, the postmodern allegorist can take no referent for granted. As a consequence, postmodern allegory is notoriously unstable, and a conventional allegorical interpretation of a work like "Morpho Eugenia" becomes impossible, because no single key can explain the meaning of the analogies.

The description of the clash between an aristocratic society and a new, work-oriented one seems to invite a political reading, and the feminization of the insect metaphors suggests a reading in terms of gender struggle. But the apparent transparency of the comparisons is illusory, and the meanings of the analogies remain unsteady. Byatt uses common, even trite, metaphors, but she uses the same metaphor in several different ways, which draws attention to language itself and means that readers will have to reevaluate their interpretation of the text over and over again. Both the figurative—or the hackneyed—meanings and the
literal meanings are present at the same time, and so metaphors and analogies become more than embellishments: they become tools for emphasizing the double voice that is an integral part of language.

Metaphors are indeed highly appropriate postmodern devices, because they are obvious vehicles for ambiguity. A living metaphor always carries dual meanings, the literal or sentence meaning and the conveyed or utterance meaning. In "Morpho Eugenia" the strain between the figurative and the literal meaning is constantly underscored, since ants and butterflies appear both as insects and as metaphors for human behavior.

Using analogy displays the metaphor's reference to the "real" world, and as a consequence, Byatt's technique of offering metaphorical descriptions in the form of analogies ensures that the postmodern vacillation between literal and figurative meanings is constantly present in "Morpho Eugenia." But metaphors are unstable not only because they hover between two frames of reference: their figurative meanings are also shaky. A metaphor induces comparison, but since the grounds of similarity are not forever given, metaphors serve to emphasize the freedom of the reader as opposed to the authority of the writer. This becomes particularly clear in "Morpho Eugenia." Because ants and butterflies are present both literally and metaphorically, the reader is forced to take a closer look at what is embedded in the familiar
comparisons of women with butterflies or human societies with ant communities. Metaphors invite thought because they enforce the understanding that there are at least two sides to everything. "Morpho Eugenia" may at times seem overloaded with metaphors, but since the interplay between metaphorical and literal meaning destabilizes both the novella and the metaphors themselves, this is one of the clearest signs of its postmodernity.

This seems to identify Eugenia as the villain of the story, but the unstable nature of the butterfly metaphor counteracts a single interpretation. At Bredely Hall, butterfly specimens are beautifully laid out in display cases, which emphasizes their status as objects, and in many ways Eugenia and her sisters are objects too, with no other aspiration in life than to make themselves beautiful for a prospective husband. In the world of insects, the use of beauty as a way of attracting the other sex is reserved for the male, but as the Alabaster relative Matty Crompton observes, "this appears to be the opposite to human societies, when it is the woman whose success in that kind of performance determines their lives" [AI: 40]. Eugenia is a victim of a society that has no use for her except as the breeder of the next generation, and to secure her place in this society she has to make herself the object of men's admiration.
Bredely Hall represents a fraction of a society that, according to the history books, was male dominated. In "Morpho Eugenia" Byatt suggests, however, that at least that society's domestic life was controlled by women:

Houses such as this were run for and by women. Harald Alabaster was master, but he was, as far as the whirring of domestic clocks and wheels went, a deus absconditus, who set it all in motion, and might at a pinch stop it, but had little to do with its use of energy. [AI: 76]

In most Victorian fiction, marriage "means the end of sexual adventures but the beginning of social responsibility", and this principle appears to be pared down to its essence at Bredely Hall. But marriage seems to mean nothing more than a socially acceptable way to secure the propagation of the species, and once conception has occurred, the pretense of love is not required. The men at Bredely Hall lead the lives of male ants or drones whose existence is directed solely to "the nuptial dance and the fertilization of the Queens" [AI: 103], and the women become "egg-laying machines, gross and glistening, endlessly licked, caressed, soothe[d] and smooth[ed]--veritable Prisoners of Love" [AI: 102]. "Their ability to produce young gives them their value, and in such a society love becomes an instinctual response leading to the formation of
societies which [gives] even more restricted and functional identities to their members" [AI: 116].

Pregnancy and motherhood metamorphose women's lives, but sometimes this metamorphosis is of a Kafkaesque kind. Eugenia experiences pregnancy as a period of cocooning, but she emerges from her cocoon not reborn as a butterfly but as something resembling an ant queen. With each pregnancy she becomes more and more like the Queen of the Wood Ants:

Like the ant communities it is compared with, the aristocratic society to which the Alabasters belong has no other purpose than to guarantee its own perpetuation. That this involves inbreeding is also highlighted by the comparison. As soon as Eugenia is pregnant, William is shut out of her bedroom to be let in again only when it is time to produce another baby. Quite soon it is clear to the reader that Eugenia has an incestuous relationship with her half-brother, and that William's children, who are so "true to type--veritable Alabasters," may not be William's at all In an ant or bee society, incest is the rule, of course, because there are no other insects in the nests than those produced by the queen.

William finds out about Edgar's and Eugenia's relationship by a message nobody admits to having sent:
"And someone sent for me to come back to the house, today, when I was not wanted. When I was anything but wanted." [ÂI: 104]

Eugenia may appear primarily as a self-indulgent breeding machine, but she is also the victim of a hypocritical society where sex is not talked about, and where women are not encouraged to acknowledge their sexual feelings. To a certain extent, Eugenia's incestuous relationship with her brother is an act of rebellion, a way of eluding the constrictions of her society. There are two sides to everything, and what makes it impossible to come to a final conclusion about how to interpret incest in the novella is that the union between Edgar and Eugenia produces children, whereas their sister, who marries "outside the nest," remains childless. To fill his days, William Adamson agrees to help Matty Crompton and the girls in her charge to make a study of the "social insects." Together they set up a glass bee hive and a glass tank for ants in the schoolroom. The formicary becomes a miniature reflection of life at Bredely Hall. The Victorian household is filled with servants who occupy the place of the worker ants:

The servants were always busy, and mostly silent. They whisked away behind their own doors into mysterious areas into which he had never penetrated, though he met them at every turning in those places in which his own life was led.... They were as full of urgent purpose as the children of the house were empty of it. [AI: 74]
Harald Alabaster believes that the social insects exercise both altruism and self-sacrifice; by implication these virtues govern the lives of his servants as well. William slowly arrives at another conclusion, both about the ants and the household: "most social systems work by mutual aggression, exploitation, the sacrifice of the many not for the whole, but for the few" [Butler]. He is gradually brought to realize that his situation at Bredely Hall in many ways equals that of the Wood Ants who are enslaved by the Blood-red Ants. The slaves lose all sense of their origin and identify completely with the inhabitants of their new nest, to the point where they take part in slave raids against members of their own species. "Men are not ants," however, and William does not have to be trapped in the analogy [106]. Disenchanted with Eugenia, and supplied with the proceeds from the book about ants he has written together with Matty Crompton, he finally breaks out and leaves for the Amazon with Matty as his companion. Ultimately the development and choices of the individual matter, and as a consequence a reading that tries to explain the analogies in universal terms collapses.

Names, you know, are a way of weaving the world together, by relating the creatures to other creatures and a kind of metamorphosis, you might say, out of a metaphor which is a figure of speech for carrying one idea into another.
On the other hand, the insect analogies are used to describe a society usually thought of as completely male dominated, which is a challenge with rather feminist overtones. An important feminist project has been to reveal that language and linguistic expression are not innocent, and in "Morpho Eugenia" Byatt shows that this is true of metaphor as well. Byatt's revitalization of common metaphors points to a feminization of language, so that when the ant hill is presented as a society run and perpetuated by the female of the species, an overlooked component in the familiar metaphorical connection of human and ant societies is laid bare. As a result, an internal struggle occurs in the story between the level of narrative and the level of language. This instability creates a tension in the novella that renders any single political interpretation difficult. Metaphors and analogies, like proverbs, are often given universal significance, and largely go unquestioned. What makes metaphorical expressions interesting, however, is that they are double signs. The discrepancy between the literal meaning of the words and the utterance meaning of the statement, that is, what is being conveyed, gives life to the metaphor. As a consequence, metaphors die or lose their value when the utterance meaning is so automatic it no longer carries dual meaning, and this is when they need to be reetymologized.
The main metaphors in "Morpho Eugenia" are all inherently contradictory. The "people are butterflies" metaphor contains meanings like beauty, fickleness, and metamorphosis, as well as the observation that the perceived similarities between women and butterflies are actually illusory, because only male butterflies flaunt their beautiful colors. The "people are ants" metaphor is questioned in the same way: ants are insignificant, they specialize, they form rigid societies, but they are also predominantly female, unlike the human society to which they are compared. By gendering the metaphors, Byatt has enhanced their instability. The lavish use of metaphor draws attention to the extent to which we are unaware of the attitudes we perpetuate through language itself. The "people are ants" metaphor, for instance, functions as a provocation and questions the male-dominated society it describes. It also questions the kind of separatist feminism that advocates single-sex communities, in that it describes a feminine society that is both thoroughly hierarchical and extremely rigid. More conventionally, it functions as a means of "forcing the thought that seen from a height, watched across centuries, we humans creep and crawl, scratch and burrow like any other low creature moving close to the surface of the planet".
The rather blatant clue given in the name "Alabaster" emphasizes the significance of references to color, "white" in particular, in "Morpho Eugenia." To William, Eugenia's whiteness symbolizes an innocence tied up with his dreams of England and precious by its contrast to the brown colors of the Amazon. The "white lilies" and the "snowy bedspread" in his bedroom suggest an English cleanness very different from "the earth-floored hut" that used to be his home in the jungle. On his wedding night, he is "afraid of smudging her [Eugenia], as the soil smudged the snow in the poem". If the color white is seen as an image of purity, the color brown becomes an image of dirt, impurity, perhaps guilt, in consequence. If, on the other hand, "brown" represents health and Virgin In The Gardenor, the meaning of "white" has to change.

When Matty Crompton is introduced into the story, the darkness of her features is foregrounded:

She stood in the shadows in the doorway, a tall, thin dark figure, in a musty black gown with practical white cuffs and collar. Her face was thin and unsmiling, her hair dark under a plain cap, her skin dusky too. [AI: 27]

Matty has "a quick step" [AI: 36] and her movements are "quick and decisive" [AI: 96], a contrast both in coloring and manner to the languid Eugenia. Her similarity to William with his "mane of dark, shining
Hair" [AI: 9] is obvious, and as William's fondness for Matty grows, the whiteness of the Alabasters takes on a more sinister meaning.

One of William's tasks in the Alabaster household is to organize Harald Alabaster's collection of insects and other specimens, which he does, but with diminishing enthusiasm, because William "wanted to observe life, not dead shells, he wanted to know the processes of living things" [AI: 73]. Bredely Hall is a dying society, and William realizes this as he tries to complete his apparently endless chore. William's reaction as he looks at Harald Alabaster's hands illustrates that "white" stands for death, too:

The hands were ivory-coloured, the skin finely wrinkled everywhere, like the crust on a pool of wax, and under it appeared livid bruises, arthritic nodes, irregular tea-brown stains. William watched the hands fold the wavering papers and was filled with pity for them, as for sick and dying creatures. The flesh under the horny nails was candlewax-coloured, and bloodless. [AI: 90]

England, finally, is white, and the Amazon brown, with everything this might suggest of racism and colonialism. At the beginning, the novella seems to take an imperialist perspective, but such an interpretation collapses as the reversal of the relation between "white" and "dark" becomes clear. "Morpho Eugenia" could very well be interpreted as a
story about Eden and the fall, particularly since William's last name is Adamson. But where is Eden? In Brazil, William thought of England as paradise, but in England, the Amazon is "the innocent, the unfallen world, the virgin forest, the wild people in the interior who are as unaware of modern ways--modern evils--as our first parents" [AI:30] On the other hand, the Amazon is unsafe--there is unchecked growth, unbridled sex, strong feelings, snakes and dangerous insects--but it is alive. If the comparisons between Bredely Hall and the female societies of ants and bees suggest an antifeminist politics, this is countered by the contrast with the Amazon, a place-name with explicit feminist connotations.

The metaphors and analogies in "Morpho Eugenia" embody these "opposing political terms," and thus the politics of the story remain unclear. As a postmodern allegory, "Morpho Eugenia" does not guide the reader toward the disclosure of a final answer but operates on several levels at the same time, introducing meanings that conflict with one another, replacing the monologic message of conventional allegory with dialogue. Postmodern allegorical writing speaks in at least two voices, both of which need to be heard.

This novel has been made into a film

The details
Angels and Insects

Directed by : Philip Haas

Playhouse International

Produced by : Pictures, Samuel Goldwyn Company

A. S. Byatt [novel]

Written by : Philip Haas, Belinda Haas [Screenplay]

Starring : Mark Rylance

Patsy Kensit

Kristin Scott Thomas

Music By : Alexander Balanescu

Cinematography : Bernard Ziterman

Release date : 26 Jan 1996

Running time : 116 Min

PLOT

William Anderson [Mark Rylance], a poor naturalist, returns home to Victorian England in 1864 after having spent years along the Amazon river, where he had studied all kinds of animals, mainly insects. He had lost all his possessions being ship wrecked. Nevertheless he succeeds to marry Eugenia [Patsy Kensit], daughter of the wealthy Alabaster family. With her he starts a family, but a tragic revelation destroys their life.
NOMINATIONS

- Academy Award [1997] for best costume Design [Paul Brown]
- Cannes Film Festival [1995] for the Golden Palm for Best Director [Philip Haas]
- For her role as Matty Crompton Kristin Scott won the Evening Standard British Film Award as Best Actress 1996.
TRIVIA

- The co-writer of the script are a husband and wife team, whose children appear in the film.
- For one scene the actress Patsy Kensit’s costume had to be treated with female sex hormones of moths to make a cluster of male moths swarm her.
- Four days before the shoot date 6000 ants that were transported to the set walked off. Another 6000 ants were obtained ... only to watch as the first batch of 6000 returned.
- The film is considered controversial due to its explicit sex scenes.