



## METANARRATIVE FUNCTION OF ENTOMOLOGY IN ANTONIA SUSAN BYATT'S *MORPHO EUGENIA*

Lili Marinčić,

Tamara Polić<sup>i</sup>

Department of Agritourism,  
Polytechnic of Rijeka,  
Croatia

### Abstract:

Antonia Susan Byatt, described by the reviewers as a “*postmodern Victorian*” (Levenson, 1993) or a “*Victorian Iris Murdoch*” (Butler, 1992) has proved that her writing skill has become something irreplaceable in the postmodern literary world. Her *Possession* has accomplished something that Hutcheon (1988: 20) in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* called “*the actual reception of postmodernism*”, not sociologically limited to mostly academic readers. While in the *Possession* Byatt makes parodies of scholars giving a fair amount of critique of poststructuralist and postmodern attitudes through different narrative perspectives; paradox, ambiguity and self-reflexibility (Hansson, 1999), in *Angels and Insects* she makes a parody of the Victorians or through them, of our own time, fusing conventional and postmodern narrative strategies. Conventional, because she basically tells a story about Victorian naturalists and their fashionable activities at the time. All the rest is postmodernism; the metanarrative usage of entomology, the intertextuality which expands narrative possibilities, the self-reflexibility. The questions this paper deals with are several. Why are the intertexts of entomology metanarratives in the novella *Morpho Eugenia* so profuse to the point of interference? Is it because the insect allegory is an allegory in itself or simply the allegory is so rightfully used that it can go on and on? And finally, is the reader here a literary gourmet or a student listening to the lecture considering that the novella is a mixture of exquisite Victorian setting narratives and metanarrative entomology discourses?

**Keywords:** postmodernism, metanarrative discourses, entomology, allegory, analogy, reader

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: [tamarapolic5@gmail.com](mailto:tamarapolic5@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

Antonia Susan Byatt's neo-Victorian novel *Angels and Insects* consists of two novellas, *Morpho Eugenia* and *Conjugal Angel*, the former soaked metaphorically into entomology and the world of insects.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the use of metanarrative discourses of entomology in the first novella *Morpho Eugenia* and the ways it could be perceived in the postmodernist context.

The first novella *Morpho Eugenia* contains a great amount of entomology discourses combined with many postmodernist technics to the extent that almost escapes its own genre. Eventually, it is safely pulled into an intriguing piece of narrative.

In the story about a nineteenth-century naturalist William Adamson and a reverend Harald Alabaster and their philosophical and scientific differences, there is nothing weird or surprising – those were the common doubts of the Victorian period. It is the “shading” that complicates it – the reverend's constant doubts and only two atheists, Adamson and Miss Crompton overshadowed by somewhat strange and morbid relations inside a rich Victorian household.

*“Morpho Eugenia is firmly set in the past, and there is no visible twentieth-century perspective in the telling. The story is mainly told by an omniscient narrator”* (Hansson, 1999: 453) and is intersected with various metanarrative entomology discourses, fictional texts and naturalist essays. There are moments in the text where the insects' debates between characters grow gradually into longer essays, and that is the point when the reader starts to realize it is the postmodern piece of art she or he is dealing with. It is actually this constant balancing between fiction and science discourse that gives the novella the postmodernist shape. Byatt pours out a lot of naturalist data giving the novel a sort of metanarrative flair, bouncing on and off the literary narrative, plunging into the metafiction.

Furthermore, the direct use of the entomological metaphor gives the reader the sense of “easiness” to understand the message the writer wants to convey. By moving the human society into the 19th century, therefore in the past, and comparing it, or better blending it with such a tiny but omnipresent world of insects, Byatt seems to point out that nothing had or has changed in our human perception of existence, then or now. After all, ants and butterflies, as the Victorian fashionable *passatempo*, are perfect parody agents here. As Hutcheon (1988: 42) says in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: *“The parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this, once again, is the postmodern paradox”*.

## 2. Discussion

The novella is intersected by the postmodernist writing techniques such as intertextual fairy tales or exuberant metanarrative discourses about social insects, mainly ants, bees and butterflies, balancing between analogies and insect discourses.

The story is installed and then subverted, a technique through which it achieves its “popular-academic identity”. Of all the possible kinds of endings of a story, Byatt has chosen a surprise ending with vaguely happy undertones. The winning protagonists, the ones who are leaving the “wrong” going towards the “right” which is uncertain, somehow exteriorly plain ones, are leaving the beautiful and rich to wallow in their own twisted illusion. Therefore, the unconventionally long metanarrative discourses about insects enable not only the bond between those protagonists but also make them true representatives of the Victorian time.

Why has Byatt chosen the past and what kind of relationship with the past can a writer have? In the opinion of Hutcheon (1988: 45) “*the past is always placed critically – and not nostalgically – in relation with the present. The questions of sexuality, of social inequality and responsibility, of science and religion, and of the relation of art to the world are all raised and directed both at the modern reader and the social and literary conventions of the last century*”.

Byatt used the past as a historical context in order to interrogate the present and the past through its critical irony (Hansson, 1999). Victorians seemed the most appropriate for such a task for their time was quite a complex one. In *Morpho Eugenia* Byatt turns these complexities into correlations between insects and humans, Darwinism and Religion, physical and inner beauty, conjugal love and incest and finally the upper social class with the low one.

“*Parodic self-reflexiveness*” which can be so confusing (why using a metaphor and then explaining it), according to Hutcheon (1988) leads to the possibility of literature that has its autonomy as art and at the same time manages to investigate its relations with the social world in which it is written and read. As Hutcheon (ibid.) points out, this kind of contradiction characterizes postmodern art and undermines dominant discourses, but it depends on the same discourses for its very existence.

According to Vanderbeke (2003), in an interview, Byatt said that the idea for *Angels and Insects* began like a visual image. She wanted to write a story that combined her obsession with Victorian gothic and television naturalism, comparing an ant heap to a Victorian mansion, and in the middle of the ant heap, there is this large fat white queen simply producing children. Byatt posed herself a question: is the fat white queen the power centre or is she the slave? This metaphor, the vision of the innumerable, sexless female servants running along the corridors of the gothic mansion like the worker ants, was the central for the story (Vanderbeke, 2003). The answer could be: she is both. This is explained by profuse descriptions of the ant and bee queens – they are fed and taken care of as long as they breed, therefore are useful to society. When they cease to breed, they are left to die of hunger. In *Morpho Eugenia*, paradoxically, procreation turns out to be wrong because it is incestuous. It is obvious that *Morpho Eugenia* gives, at first, the impression of a sweet “Cinderella-type” Victorian setting romance which little by little grows into a deep, double-voiced, allegorical story implying Darwinian and religious differences and taboos like incest and sexual harassment. Allegory is very much implied by the use of the metanarrative function of the social insects’ discourse – the detailed descriptions of bees and ants, as well as butterflies. After reading the story one must notify two things: firstly, the overwhelming descriptions of every aspect of the social

insects' life and reproduction, and secondly the straightforwardness of the use of an allegory.

The analogy between the humans and insects in this novella is more than obvious and this is actually her basic structure around which revolve all sorts of different implications and problems. These are very carefully knitted into the basic story which contains as much intrigue as it asks to "carry" the reader through the almost scientific narrative. First of all, there is the eternal dilemma about the human relation towards religion, whether it is being rejected or accepted. There is also a problem of the impossibility of living according to biblical codes, nor in our "modern" nor in any other society, the Victorian one included. If we are no better than small, insignificant insects, so be it, seems to be the message here.

Byatt makes also a feminist implication in the novella by the numberless analogies between bees and ants societies and humans using the Victorians who seem to resemble our own world and society in all their questioning and humanity. The novella, as Hansson (1999) puts it, almost "*begs for interpretation*" and at the same time, it already has one, not letting the readers interpret the hidden messages by themselves.

What could confuse the reader more than the novella's "self-explaining", is the great number of insect discourses which at some points turn into some kind of scientific saga of the bees' and ants' life and nature. It seems like half of the characters are preoccupied with the insect world while the other half is up to their throats in incestuous sex affairs. The dichotomy here is quite odd: insect – sex, or as Byatt makes a parody using the word game: insect – incest.

The similarities between the insects and humans are many, but here, it is the insects' intelligence that puzzles - how can something so minute and tiny possess the capacity to do exact or very similar things the perfect human creatures do. Those similarities, from the fact that it is the female who breeds and runs the family to those of the males' inclination toward fighting and murdering, could go up to incest which is considered highly immoral and wrong in the human society and yet it is the basic principle of the social insect reproduction. The queen is the focal point as long as she enables reproduction and the woman is its counterpart, which seems to be the analogy here. As long as the woman plays her supposed role, she is worshipped and taken care of. Yet, Eugenia, the beautiful, incestuous Alabaster's daughter is named after the poisonous butterflies *Morpho Eugenia*. Entomology, therefore, seems to be a perfect provider for these analogies in which Byatt then involves the romance – to make the reader enjoy the Victorian atmosphere of halls and its ball-rooms with exquisite narrative:

William Adamson, a young naturalist, after being shipwrecked in the Amazon, returns to England as a guest of the Alabasters at their Gothic mansion at Bredely Hall. That very evening he falls in love with Harald Alabaster's eldest daughter Eugenia who appears to be very beautiful, but also very unhappy. She is, "*like the other members of the Alabaster family 'a pale-gold and ivory creature', almost always dressed in white*" (Hansson, 1999: 456). William, being for ten years among the Amazon Indians, is tempted by Eugenia's whiteness: "*He looked down from his height at her pale face and saw her large eyelids, blue-veined, almost translucent, and the thick fringes of white-gold hairs on their rims.*"

(Byatt, 1992: 6). He asked her to dance and the conversation immediately included the insects, that is butterflies, since his double vision made him compare “*young ladies in their gauzes and laces*” and “*very fine Gothic fan vaulting to the palms towering in jungle, and all the beautiful silky butterflies sailing amongst them*”. He also tells Eugenia that butterflies are not good to eat and that many are poisonous, feeding on poisonous plants, that are in fact male butterflies that are beautiful in order to attract the females.

The analogies with “*butterflies, beautiful but poisonous*” and “*alabaster, angelically white and yet sinister*”, get their true but paradoxical meaning as the story develops.

The first hint the reader gets about how exuberant the insects’ discourses are going to be is when, the day after the ball in Harald Alabaster’s study, William was asked about his future plans. Answering that question, Adamson mentioned two species of ants – the leafcutter ants and the army ants (lat. *Eciton burchellii*) and the third one: “*(...) certain ants that inhabit Bromeliads appear to have affected the form of the plants over the millennia, so that the plants actually seem to build chambers and corridors for their insect guests in the natural process of growth.*” (Byatt, 1992: 34).

Also, we learn that the male is always brighter in colour and more beautiful than the female: for that William has a totally Darwinian logical explanation (the female must be unobserved in order to protect eggs). Alabaster is not able to get rid of the religious doctrine and the sentiment of the time and feels it is all a part of Divine design and a work of the Creator. Byatt here makes that hint explicit enough in the way that the reader is starting to be aware of how many more pieces of information about insects she or he will grasp during the reading.

In *Morpho Eugenia*, there are moments in the text where the insects’ debates grow gradually into longer essays, and that is the point when a reader starts to realize it is the postmodern piece of art she or he is dealing with. It is actually this constant balancing between fiction and science discourse that gives the novella the postmodernist shape. Byatt pours out a lot of naturalist data but she always stops when the reader is overloaded and weaves the parallel love story intrigue on.

The further analogies between bees and ant societies and a country Victorian mansion give a new life to the novella because they also point out that both are run by women, for social insects form predominantly female societies. Therefore, Byatt has to elaborate on the insect world in detail to be able to make the metaphor work.

As Hansson (1999) observes, Byatt begins with butterflies, which are laid out in display cases and made objects of admiration just like Eugenia and her sisters are. Still, they are the pillar of the community as they breed the young and run households, households that exist for their sake. In the insect world, “*everything is run and determined by females, down to the sex of the embryos*” (Hansson, 1999: 458). While the females are made beauty objects, the males are nothing but sex objects “*and the fertilization of the females is the sole justification for their existence*” (ibid.).

This is a kind of situation that confronted with the human society, really challenges the conventional picture of the male-dominated nineteenth-century English aristocracy, and that is why these two worlds – the insect world and the human world – make such a nice dichotomy or better, a metaphor. To challenge or scrutinize that nineteenth century

by using the Victorian world is almost the same as to do it with our own times, very similar to the Victorian one in all its fears and doubts. In this postmodern novella marriage, there is something of a paradox: a certain off-stage game where all sorts of strange and unnatural things happen; the incestuous relationship that breeds perfect children and a perfect loving marriage that breeds none. The beauty as such is cursed and poisonous, so to say, because it brings the isolation, sex-object status and unresolved inner emotions of which Eugenia is a prototype. It seems that, in the end, all the symbols of western, Christian, male-dominated society values are annulled, gone, disappeared, since the "winners" in this story are the poor and plain ones, possessing nothing but their advanced beliefs and knowledge.

Another segment of the comparison with butterflies is its ability to change (from a cocoon to a beautiful creature) and its undergoing metamorphosis is exactly what Eugenia is undergoing, but the other way round; from an admiring beauty to a fat, incestuous breeding machine.

*"She is also a victim of the 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 half-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."* (Hansson 1999: 460).

This seems to involve perpetual breeding, as if becoming the main purpose of all alive, whether it is ants or humans.

*"Quite soon in the novella, 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"* (Hansson, 1999: 459). Again, *"in an ant or bee society, incest is the rule, because there are no insects in the nests than those produced by the queen"* (ibid.).

The metanarrative use of entomology is there and functions as almost as a reminder that the particular novella is a postmodernist piece of art and it sort of wakes the reader up in this wonderfully told intriguing Victorian story. Byatt managed to mould the characters supremely, as the true Victorians through their acts and speech, enhancing the Victorian atmosphere with intertextuality (introducing real personalities such as H.W. Bates, a famous naturalist of the time).

The descriptions of Bredely Hall and its inhabitants are vivid and detailed to such an extent that it creates the impression of three-dimensionality so that the perfect "movie watching" kind of impression is interrupted by the scientifically meticulous, somewhat too exuberant naturalist discourses. Whether they are annoying to some readers or not, depends on the reader's social, cultural or even emotional background, but they are there as some kind of postmodernist traffic signs. The other aspect of the novella's postmodern conception is its obvious and straightforward use of analogies and metaphors. The insect world serves as a device for comparison, obviously. The analogies in the novella are extensified to the point of parody when juxtaposed with the Victorian household and the

insects' societies. When linked with satire, parody can take an ideological dimension. The comparison of the "swarms of useless and disregarded suitors" to the poor, whether they are intellectuals or just plain servants, or comparison of the male-female kinds of beauty which at the end comes to a simple reproduction phenomenon and the everlasting philosophical question – is it all about procreation? The *Morpho Eugenia's* intertextuality, which is achieved by several fictional texts written by the various characters, is not just a "characteristic of postmodern literature" (Hansson, 1999: 454) but it also gives the work the necessary inner relation where "certainties are continuously called into question and thus allegory becomes a suitable form of expression (...) a classic example of double discourse" (ibid.). Postmodern fiction has opened itself towards history and so the historical discourse has found its place in the paradoxical historiographic metafiction.

### 3. Conclusion

By giving us this huge entomological perspective throughout the novella, *Morpho Eugenia* donnishly teaches us stuff, and through innumerable analogies and metaphors, builds gradually the whole picture of an insect-human world, full of contrasts and similarities, using the epoch-making Victorian time and romance storytelling. The queen-woman correlation opens an array of comparisons pointing out stunning similarities between insects and humans, such as fighting, domination, submission, conquest, seduction and wish fulfillingness, making reproduction a sort of self-serving purpose. Thus, the allegory seems to be a perfect means for expressing human nature to this day and we could say the insect interference is so justful here. Although the Victoriana atmosphere is masterfully evoked, the reader senses postmodernism as soon as the entomology metanarration begins, assuming various roles, those of a reader but also of a student or a scholar. It seems that, by using figures of speech and a great amount of naturalistic data, Byatt "confuses" the reader by pouring out the information about the insects, inserting it skilfully as the plot unfolds in some new direction. This could stand for a brilliant postmodern technique of foreshadowing and at the same time of postponing the action in a story – in other words the reader's engagement here shifts from "by default" to studentesque, or from common to documentary – and it is the role changing that makes it so exquisite.

Accordingly, the metanarrative use of entomology has served the purpose of giving the novella a postmodernist flare with its erudite style packed up in the revived Victorian setting. By using two naturalists and representing their mutual passion for entomology which brought them together and set them free, Byatt has treated the literary audience to a happy, yet ambiguous ending.

Hence, we think that the "role" that the metanarrative use of entomology in *Morpho Eugenia* is not to educate but to confuse, not to enrich but to impoverish, turning the literature and the modes of writing into a postmodernist adventure.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### About the Authors

**Lili Marinčić**, MSc in English and Italian languages and literature, obtained her degree from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia. Assistant at the Polytechnic of Rijeka, she currently teaches Italian language in Agritourism and in Mediterranean Agriculture.

**Tamara Polić (PhD)** is a Senior Lecturer at the Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia. She teaches English for Traffic and Transport Purposes and Business English. Obtained her PhD degree in Glottodidactics (Foreign Language Teaching – FLT) from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia. List of all the papers in the Croatian scientific biography (CROSBİ): <https://www.bib.irb.hr/pregled/profil/330>

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