

Angels & Insects Short Guide

Angels & Insects by A. S. Byatt

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Characters

The two novellas that comprise *Angels & 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 wife, ten years after his supposed death at sea, receiving what she believes to be messages from his spirit.

The central characters in "Morpho Eugenia" are naturalist William Adamson, recently returned to England after ten years of studying and collecting butterflies in the Amazon, and the Alabaster family, into which he marries. The Reverend Harald Alabaster, a collector, invites William to visit his family; Alabaster is among those grappling with the notion of God in a post-Darwinian world. He approves of the marriage of his daughter Eugenia to the penniless William. Eugenia, who shares her name with a beautiful and rare butterfly, attracts William because she is also beautiful and hard to capture. Their society does not offer opportunities for young people to know each other except superficially until after marriage, and so William does not learn until after several years of marriage that his wife has had since childhood an incestuous relationship with her brother. Another important character is Matty, who serves as a kind of governess in the large Alabaster household. Matty is intelligent, creative, insightful, and shares William's interest in the social insects. She, like many a Victorian heroine, is unappreciated because she is not beautiful.

In "The Conjugal Angel," the characters are related by their common spiritualist practice. The two spiritualists, Liliás Papagay and Sophy Sheekhy, are not frauds; in fact, both seem to have genuine ability to contact the spirit world. Liliás is distinguished from the others in her circle because she is interested in that world not because of what she might learn about the afterlife but because of what she might learn about life on earth. She is sensible, has a healthy attitude toward sexuality, and shows great concern for her partner and for the others during the seances she helps to conduct.

Sophy is much more talented and fragile than Liliás, and she is unsure whether the visions she continually sees are shared by others, an uncertainty which keeps her at a distance from other people and which lost her a job. Rescued and encouraged by Liliás, she makes her living as a medium, eager to comfort the grieving by establishing contact in the spirit world for them with their beloved dead. Her encounter with the spirit of Arthur, whom she had tried numerous times to speak to for Emily's sake, shows her that her efforts have been cruel to both the living and the dead.

Another important female character is Emily Tennyson Jesse, whose constant companions include her pet raven, Aaron; her flatulent dog, Pug; her husband, Captain



Jesse; and her grief for Arthur. That grief includes a variety of complicated emotions, such as resentment of her brother Alfred who in a sense competed with her for possession of the memory of Arthur and who, through his writing of the most popular poem of his age and her marriage to another man, has won. The tendency of writers to help themselves to the lives of their friends and relatives for characters and events in their works is an idea Byatt mentions in other works.

Social Concerns

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 nature of human life, the existence of God, and the possibility of an afterlife were called into question; "Morpho Eugenia" is more concerned with the relationship of "civilized" human society to primitive and animal societies while "The Conjugal Angel" deals with the relationship of the physical and spiritual worlds.

Both novellas also deal with marriage and family relationships. William Adamson, the central character of the first novella, experiences two major events: his marriage to Eugenia Alabaster and subsequent discovery of her incestuous relationship with her brother Edgar, who is most likely the father of their five children. William tells her bitterly that even animal breeders know better than to breed brother and sister. The Tennyson family is central to the second novella; one of the characters, Mrs. Jesse, was before her marriage Emily Tennyson, sister of the poet and bereaved fiancée of Arthur Hallam, subject of Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam* (somewhat confusingly, Tennyson's wife was also named Emily). She and some of the other characters are unsure about marital and family loyalties and wonder whether marriage should survive the grave. Certainly her and Arthur's families both felt that she should not marry following her fiancée's death, with the Hallams wanting to keep her with them as, she thinks, a sort of pet and her brother Alfred doubting whether she had really loved his friend if she could ever consider marrying someone else. For Mrs. Papagay, a more practical problem exists in that she is uncertain whether her husband, captain of a ship, has died. Another married woman, Mrs. Hearnshaw, has buried five small daughters, all named Amy, and participates with the others in spiritualist activities in an attempt to continue her relationship with her dead children.

Techniques

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 find some of her novels difficult because of their length or density will find these shorter works more accessible.

As she does in many of her other works, works-within-works appear in each novella. In "Morpho Eugenia," Matty Crompton's short story "Things Are Not What They Seem" is included in its entirety along with parts of nonfiction works by William and his father-in-law. In "The Conjugal Angel," Byatt includes illustrations by Victorian artists and quotations from Victorian poems; even her spirits speak in poetry during the seances.

Themes

The two novellas explore the place of humans in the universe; they are somewhere, as the title suggests, between angels and insects and are part of both the physical and spiritual worlds. In "Morpho Eugenia," the society created by humans to distinguish them from what they view as lower life forms proves to be a thin veneer covering behavior 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. In "The Conjugal Angel," an uneasy relationship between the living and the dead develops. Byatt suggests that excessive concern with the afterlife, especially if caused by grief for a lost loved one, is not only detrimental to the living person but to the dead as well. The sad young ghost of Arthur Hallam appears privately to the medium Sophy Sheekhy, apparently unable to rest because of the years of mourning by those who loved him most. She is in fact surprised by his youth, given the age of those who mourn his long-ago death. The stillliving Tennyson appears before the two of them as a ghostly vision, thinking of his dead friend as he prepares for bed.

Clearly Tennyson, his sister, and the Hallam family have inadvertently kept their loved one from eternal rest by keeping him by their extreme grief in the world of the living. The conclusion, in which Emily in a humorous speech says that an afterlife in which she would be united with Arthur rather than her own husband would be "unfair" and in which Captain Papagay returns alive to his wife, emphasizes the theme, stated by the captain at the end of the first novella, that the business of the living is life.

Adaptations

A film by Samuel Goldwyn based on "Morpho Eugenie" but called Angels & Insects was released in 1996. Directed by Philip Haas, it stars Mark Rylance, Patsy Kensit, and Kristin Scott Thomas.



Key Questions

Many comparisons are possible in discussions of these novellas, both comparisons of the novellas to each other and of one or both to other works by Byatt. The Victorian setting, not paralleled here by a modern setting as it is in *Possession*, may stimulate discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of Victorian society and how it compares to modern society.

1. At the beginning of "Morpho Eugenia" William is attracted to the beautiful Eugenia, but at the end he leaves with the much plainer Matty.

What has he learned that allows him to find Matilda attractive?

2. Why does William insist that ants are not like humans? How are ants and humans shown to be similar?

3. Here, as in *Possession*, characters' names are significant. What meanings are suggested by William Adamson, Alabaster, Eugenia, and by the change from Matty to Matilda?

4. The title of Matty's story, "Things Are Not What They Seem," could be the novella's subtitle. What are some things that turn out to be not what they seemed?

5. What is the importance of the subplot involving the young maid Amy?

6. "The Conjugal Angel" mingles real people, such as Tennyson, and fictional characters, such as Lillas.

What is the effect of this combination?

7. Contrast the various marriages and ideas of marriage in the novella.

Where do Byatt's sympathies lie?

8. Why does the spirit of Arthur seek out Sophy when she is alone rather than appearing when called for during the seances? What does he want from her?

9. What are the reasons the various participants in the seance have for seeking out the spirit world? Are they all satisfied at the conclusion of the novella?

Literary Precedents

While both novellas owe a great deal to the Gothic tradition and to the authors such as Darwin and Tennyson who are responsible for the important ideas discussed by the characters, the two have no direct literary precedents.

They are among the most original of Byatt's works.

Related Titles

These novellas are most closely related to *Possession* (1990; see separate entry). The settings and literary concerns of the works are similar, as is the storytelling which characterizes much of Byatt's work. The subject of spiritualism which is introduced in *Possession* is an important part of "The Conjugal Angel," and the two works also share the combination of real and fictional characters.



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