

Possession: A Romance Study Guide

Possession: A Romance by A.S. Byatt

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Contents

Possession: A Romance Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapter 1.....	6
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5.....	10
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	12
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	15
Chapter 10.....	16
Chapter 11.....	17
Chapter 12.....	18
Chapter 13.....	20
Chapter 14.....	21
Chapter 15.....	22
Chapter 16.....	23
Chapter 17.....	24
Chapter 18.....	25
Chapter 19.....	27
Chapter 20.....	29
Chapter 21.....	31
Chapter 22.....	32



[Chapter 23..... 33](#)

[Chapter 24..... 35](#)

[Chapter 25..... 36](#)

[Chapter 26..... 38](#)

[Chapter 27..... 39](#)

[Chapter 28..... 40](#)

[Postscript 1868 Synopsis..... 41](#)

[Characters..... 42](#)

[Objects/Places..... 47](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 49](#)

[Techniques..... 50](#)

[Themes..... 51](#)

[Style..... 54](#)

[Quotes..... 56](#)

[Adaptations..... 58](#)

[Key Questions..... 59](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 60](#)

[Literary Precedents..... 61](#)

[Related Titles..... 62](#)

[Copyright Information..... 63](#)



Plot Summary

Possession: A Romance, by A.S. Byatt, is indeed a romance, but it is also a mystery, a chase, a satire, and both historical and contemporary fiction. All of these elements come together brilliantly in a novel that explores possession in the context of romantic love and in the ethical or non-ethical behavior of biographers.

Roland Michell is an unknown English scholar with a mediocre part-time job as a research assistant. He is completing some research in the London Library when he discovers two unfinished letters written in the hand of the famous Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash. They are stuck between the pages of one of Ash's books and have obviously not been found by anyone else. The letters are written to an unknown woman who is not Ash's wife. Roland recklessly decides to slip the letters into his notebook and essentially steals them from the London Library. It is an unethical decision that could cost him his job, but he is obsessed with finding out the identity of the woman in the letters.

Roland does some sleuthing and finds a potential connection between Ash and a minor poet named Christabel LaMotte. He contacts Maud Bailey at Lincoln University, because she is a scholar of Christabel LaMotte and also a distant relative. He travels to Lincoln to tell Maud about his theory, and she initially dismisses it. Finally, Roland shows Maud his stolen letters as proof, and she reluctantly sets off with him to solve the mystery.

Maud and Roland start at Miss LaMotte's gravesite in Lincolnshire. They meet Lady Joan Bailey near the churchyard when Roland saves her from a precarious situation in her wheelchair. Sir George and Lady Joan invite their new acquaintances to Seal Court for tea as a thank you. The two scholars are a little nervous about their invitation, because Sir George has a reputation for threatening professors with his shotgun when they come around asking about Christabel LaMotte. However, their fears seem unjustified. Sir George and Lady Joan are very cordial. The Baileys discover they are indirectly related to Maud, and they find out that Maud studies Christabel LaMotte and Roland is also a scholar. Lady Joan talks Sir George into giving a tour of Christabel's old room in the turret. During the tour, Sir George allows the researchers to take a closer look at Christabel's things, and Maud discovers a packet of letters hidden under the mattress in a doll crib.

The letters turn out to be a nearly complete set of correspondence sent to and from Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. After some deliberation, Sir George decides to allow Maud and Roland to come to Seal Court in the winter and read the letters. Once they do, they realize there must have been a relationship between the two poets.

Maud and Roland follow clues across England and France, hiding their research from colleagues and lying to friends and lovers about their whereabouts. Their own lives begin to parallel the Victorian poets when they find they are falling in love with each



other. Eventually, other scholars catch on, and the race for clues launches into full swing. Maud and Roland find out that Christabel and Randolph did have a love affair that resulted in her pregnancy and also the suicide of Christabel's lesbian lover, but they cannot find any trace of what happened to the child.

The story culminates at the gravesite of Randolph Henry Ash. An unscrupulous scholar and a greedy heir team up and attempt in the middle of the night to dig up a box that was buried with the famous poet. They are caught in the act by their colleagues. The event happens in the middle of the Great Storm of 1987, so all parties retreat to a nearby inn, where they are marooned by candlelight to wait out the storm. As a group they open the contents of the box and discover the final piece of the puzzle.

Christabel did bear a child, a girl named Maia Thomasine Bailey. Christabel's sister, Sophie, and her husband raised the child as their own. Christabel attempted to tell Randolph the truth when he was on his death bed, but the letter was never delivered to him. What Christabel never knew was that Randolph met Maia by chance one summer day while walking and realized that she was his daughter.

The final discovery has numerous implications, but most importantly, it means that Maud Bailey is a direct descendent of both Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. Therefore, she will most likely retain possession of the documents. Roland and Maud consummate their relationship that evening, but their professional and personal futures are undecided at the close of the book.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Possession: A Romance is a novel about a love affair between two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, in the late 1800s. It is also a mystery about how two scholars in 1987, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, discover the truth about what happened between the poets. Before the book begins, the author provides a couple of quotes by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Robert Browning to set the stage. The quotes talk about romance as a combination of total lies and fabrication, making it clear to the reader that most everything that follows is fiction.

On a September morning in 1986, Roland Michell is in the Reading Room of the London Library. He is studying the famous Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash. Roland is looking through Ash's own dilapidated copy of *Principi di una Scienza* by Vico, and Ash's notes are scattered throughout the book on various slips of paper. He discovers two letters in the book. The letters are drafts Ash wrote to a woman he met at a breakfast for poets, college students, professors, and politicians hosted by Crabb Robinson. The identity of the woman is unclear. Roland decides impulsively to slip the letters in his own book before he returns the book to the librarian.

Chapter 1 Analysis

A.S. Byatt uses an ornamental quote at the beginning of nearly every chapter to point the reader in the direction of the theme for the chapter. The quote for Chapter 1 is from Ash's poem *The Garden of Proserpina*, written by the fictional poet in 1861, and it talks about theft. Theft becomes the major action of this section. The discovery of the two letters initiates the need to solve a mystery about the famous poet Randolph Henry Ash.

Chapter 1 also gives the reader some information about Roland Michell. Roland does not seem to be living up to his potential as a scholar. He has an unfulfilling job that does not pay well or give him any recognition. However, he enjoys research very much. The London Library is one of his favorite places. Roland lives in a dilapidated apartment in London with his girlfriend, Val. Their relationship is not going well.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Roland Michell returns to the flat he shares with his girlfriend Val. He assumes Val is in a bad mood, because she is cooking furiously and does not acknowledge him when he arrives. They sit down to dinner, and Roland begins to tell Val about his discovery of Randolph Henry Ash's letters. Val is not interested at all in Roland's work, and tells him that he is lucky to have things that turn him on. She tells him about the less attractive side of humanity she witnesses in her boring job. She is frustrated that he spends all of his time piecing together a dead man's life while they continue to live in poverty in the real world.

Later that evening, Roland secretly reads the letters again in the bathroom and decides he must try to find out the identity of the woman.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 gives the reader additional background on the characters of Val and Roland. Their sad little apartment is a metaphor for their sad relationship. They had high hopes for it at first, but the result is disappointing. Roland feels like a latecomer. Roland's mother's disappointment in her own life is what propelled Roland to a higher level of education. However, he feels like he arrived too late to do anything very exciting with his studies. Val is also an English scholar, but she drops her dreams and takes up secretarial jobs that will make more money. She describes everything she does as menial. Roland still has hopes for something better, and the stolen letters feed his hope.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Roland goes to the library at Prince Albert College early the next morning and looks at a manuscript of Crabb Robinson's diary. Roland discovers the names of all attendants at Crabb's breakfast, and he is particularly interested in an animated conversation Ash had with Miss Christabel LaMotte. Roland then goes to the British Museum to find Professor James Blackadder. Roland tells Blackadder about the copy of Vico stuffed with notes, but he does not tell him about the two letters he confiscated. Blackadder rushes off to look for himself. Before Blackadder leaves, Roland asks him about Miss LaMotte. Blackadder says that she wrote religious poems, children's stories, and an unreadable epic.

On his way to the coffee machine, Roland runs into his colleague Fergus Wolff and asks him if he knows anything about Miss LaMotte. Fergus is an unintentional expert on Christabel LaMotte, because he once dated Dr. Maud Bailey. Many of Christabel's unpublished papers are kept at Lincoln University at the Women's Resource Centre that Maud Bailey runs. Fergus suggests that Roland contact Maud Bailey. Roland asks Fergus what Maud is like. Fergus gives an ominous reply. He says she "thicks men's blood with cold," (p. 39).

Chapter 3 Analysis

The ornamental quote at the beginning of Chapter 3 is from Ash's Ragnarök III. It describes the creeping Nidhogg that feeds on the root of a tree and makes its nest there. This is a metaphor of how Roland starts at the root with the letters and begins to feed on information to find insights into the life of Randolph Henry Ash. Ash is also the name of a tree.

Several of Roland's academic peers are introduced in Chapter 3, and the reader learns that there is heavy competition related to the possession of documents and new discoveries. Another theme in this chapter is the feminist movement in 1987 as compared to the lives of women in Victorian times. Female scholars in 1987 are treated with a tinge of fear and trepidation by their male counterparts. The author gives a satirical perspective on men's views of these women as roadblocks to discovery more than colleagues. In Victorian times, women were not treated as equals intellectually. Christabel's poem about the fairy Melusina foreshadows upcoming events in the novel and is also a metaphor for the hidden power of women.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Roland takes the train to Lincoln to meet Dr. Maud Bailey. She takes him to the Women's Resource Centre, and he starts his research by reading Blanche's journal. Roland finds something about a letter that Christabel hides from Blanche. Weeks later, Blanche writes about a male intruder who worries her. Roland believes the prowler and the letter writer are both Ash, but he has no proof.

Roland and Maud have a cup of coffee to discuss his findings when the library closes. Roland shows Maud the photocopies of the letters he stole and tells her that no one knows about them. He admits that he stole the originals and has not yet put them back. Maud does not agree with his ethics, but she invites him to stay and continue his research.

Maud offers to drive Roland to Seal Court the next day and he accepts. Roland uses the bathroom first and notes how incredibly clean and tidy it is compared to his messy home. Next, Maud takes her turn in the bathroom and reminisces about her affair with Fergus. She believes that Freud was right when he said that desire is on the other side of repugnance. As Roland settles into bed, he thinks about the fact that Blanche Glover referred to Christabel as the Princess. He feels that Maud, too, is a sort of princess and he has invaded her life, just as Randolph Henry Ash invaded Christabel LaMotte's. He opens *Tales for Innocents* and reads "The Glass Coffin."

Chapter 4 Analysis

The ornamental quote at the beginning of Chapter 4 is part of a poem by Christabel LaMotte that describes a princess in a tower. This image is emphasized twice in the chapter. Roland invades the ivory tower where Maud lives and works, disrupting her daily life and changing her views. Randolph Henry Ash also disrupts Christabel LaMotte's life when he starts to write to her.

Dr. Maud Bailey is seen for the first time in this chapter, and she appears strong, intelligent, beautiful, and almost arrogant. Maud and Roland do not hit it off at first, but the more they discuss the mysterious letter, the more they come together and wonder about the two poets they have been studying.

This chapter is a good example of how the author incorporates the use of various formats, such as ornamental quotes and diary excerpts, to pass the perspective of the story to different characters and allow the reader to discover the clues along with Roland and Maud. The story that Roland reads at the end of the chapter, "The Glass Coffin," can be seen as a metaphor for what Roland would like his life to be. He wants to be useful, to help the damsel in distress, and ultimately to spend his days doing what makes him happy.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Roland and Maud drive through Lincolnshire to the churchyard where Christabel is buried. They find Christabel's stone and then walk up the hill to look at Seal Court. They notice a woman stuck in a wheelchair. Roland offers assistance and eventually dislodges a stone in the wheel. She introduces herself as Joan Bailey and soon they also meet her golden retriever and then her husband, Sir George. She invites Maud and Roland into Seal Court where she pours tea, and Sir George quizzes Maud about the Norfolk Baileys. Sir George asks Roland about his profession, and he explains that he is a research student, and he is working for an edition of Randolph Henry Ash. Sir George says that they had a poet at Seal Court once, but Roland probably would not like her. Maud admits that she does, and she is currently writing about LaMotte.

Lady Joan talks Sir George into showing Maud and Roland Christabel's room. In the room, Maud discovers a wooden box beneath a doll's bed containing two sets of letters. The three treasure hunters return to Lady Joan with the letters, and she is delighted with their discovery. Lady Joan wants to let Roland and Maud read the letters, but Sir George decides to seek advice before handing them over. They part company with the promise that Lord and Lady Bailey will let Maud and Roland know their decision when they make it.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The discovery of the letters in this chapter is a central clue to the mystery. The frustration that Roland and Maud now face is that the letters are not technically in their possession. They have to wait to find out what Sir George wants to do with them.

Lord and Lady Bailey are introduced. Lady Joan Bailey is confined to a wheelchair. Sir George is a crabby and opinionated old man, but it is obvious that he has a deep affection for his wife. He is very distrustful of academics, because they have shown up from time to time and seem to have no regard for the living family that occupies Seal Court. Joan Bailey is more of a romantic, and she is excited about the discovery of the letters. She is an ally to Maud and Roland.

The theme of oppression of women in Victorian times is demonstrated in several ways in this chapter. Christabel LaMotte's gravestone says more about her father than it does about her. Also, the small circular room where Miss LaMotte lived out the remainder of her life seems like a prison. Finally, Sir George does not take Christabel LaMotte's poetry seriously, but he is a big fan of Randolph Henry Ash, because he was famous and male.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Professor Mortimer Cropper is in the bathroom on the outskirts of Preston secretly photographing letters that are thought to be written by Randolph Henry Ash. The next morning, Cropper is treated to a lavish breakfast by Daisy Wapshott, the owner of the documents. Cropper tells Mrs. Wapshott that he is willing to pay a very good price for the documents, and they will be well-preserved.

Prof. Cropper leaves the house in his black Mercedes and travels the highway daydreaming about writing his own biography. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were collectors of rare items, and he has followed in their footsteps. Cropper's great-grandparents built a beautiful home in the style of a southern mansion in New Mexico, and Cropper lives there with his mother.

Cropper arrives at Barrett's Hotel. He has mail waiting for him, so he sits by a fire in a leather chair in the bar and sorts through his letters. After Cropper finishes reading his mail, he returns to his suite and re-reads his stolen photographs of the documents. Then Cropper phones Beatrice Nest and talks her into having lunch with him.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The ornamental quote at the beginning of Chapter 6 is from *The Great Collector*, written by Randolph Henry Ash, and it exemplifies the main character of this chapter. Mortimer Cropper is obsessed with possessions. He wants his collection in New Mexico to be the biggest and the best.

Most of this chapter is exposition, giving background on Mortimer Cropper's life through his musings about writing his own biography. Cropper is wealthy and successful and extremely driven, to the point where ethics are ignored. Cropper's outward superiority stems from a feeling of family inferiority and lack of respect. He is very driven to make his mother proud and far exceed the successes of his colleagues.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Beatrice Nest has been editing Ellen Ash's journals for a very long time with no end in sight. In the 1950s and 1960s, Beatrice's students think of her as motherly. In later years, her students assume she is a lesbian. As she gets older, she is stereotyped as threatening because of her size. Roland visits Beatrice and asks if she knows if Ellen Ash ever said anything about Christabel LaMotte. She finds a reference that Ellen read *The Fairy Melusina* in 1872. Roland asks if he can read Ellen's journal entries on it, and Beatrice allows it if he does not leave her office. Cropper shows up to take Beatrice to lunch, and Roland is left alone. He discovers that Ellen thoroughly enjoyed reading *Melusina* and felt that the general public would probably not recognize Christabel's genius.

Roland goes back to his apartment and finds he has received a letter from Joan Bailey telling him that she and her husband, George, sought advice and they would like to invite Roland and Maud to come to their home and examine the letters. Roland is excited at the idea of finally reading the letters and also nervous. Roland notices through the basement window that Val has arrived home in a red Porsche with a very well-dressed man. The man says that Val was not feeling well, so he gave her a ride home. He leaves, and Val tells Roland that the man fancies her and wants her to go to Newmarket with him. Roland is not jealous and says that it may do her some good, which upsets her. They have a short argument and then cling to each other for comfort. They love each other, but as Val says, they are growing apart because of too little money, too much confinement, and too much anxiety.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The first several pages of Chapter 7 are exposition. They provide a short biography of Beatrice Nest. The chapter uses simile to provide various menacing images of Beatrice Nest. She is like a spider or a giant octopus. However, the reader finds out why Beatrice is perceived as such, and sympathy for her character is created. Beatrice Nest is limited by her position in the academic world. Ellen Ash is limited in the role of being the wife of a genius. Christabel LaMotte is limited in her literary success and ability to live independently. The author points out that these women share a common feeling of disappointment and boredom.

Ellen Ash's journal entries provide a first person account of her life without commentary. This format is used often in this book. A small bit of narrative gets Roland from the Ash Factory back to his flat in Putney, but then the same discovery technique is used again when Roland opens his mail. The letter from Joan Bailey is printed in its entirety. The mood darkens when Val returns home, and the remaining narrative provides insight into

the unraveling of Roland and Val's relationship. They cling to each other for comfort, but they know their relationship is unhealthy.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Maud and Roland are in the frigid library at Seal Court reading the letters. Their collaboration does not start off well. The two scholars disagree on how to proceed. Maud wants to only read Christabel's letters, and she wants Roland to only read Ash's letters. Roland does not like that idea, but he finally gives in. Something that Maud reads sticks with her. Christabel uses a riddle in one of her letters to compare herself to an egg, perfectly safe in her shell. She implores Ash not to set her free.

Maud returns to Seal Court early the next morning and they resume their work. By midday, Lady Joan suggests that Maud stay overnight because of the treacherous weather. Maud agrees to stay, and after a full day of work, Maud and Roland go upstairs to their rooms early to give the Baileys some privacy. Roland believes that they will discuss what they read that day, but Maud dismisses him at the top of the stairs. In a comical mishap at the bathroom door, Roland sees Maud's long, blonde hair for the first time, and there is electricity between them when they say good night.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The author builds tension in this chapter, because the main characters are finally reading the letters, but there are very few clues given as to the content. The reader gets glimpses of parts of letters and a bit of a poem by Christabel LaMotte, but it is not enough to satisfy growing curiosity about the nature of the relationship between Ash and LaMotte. The majority of the chapter is about the characterizations of Maud and Roland.

Maud thinks of Roland as meek and is not kind to him. Roland does ruffle Maud's smooth exterior, though. Roland feels helpless and no longer in control of his own research. The use of figurative language is found throughout this chapter to describe the once opulent and now freezing and decaying Seal Court and to describe the moods of the main characters. A good example is the simile on page 147—"She shook off her concentration as a dog shakes off water." Another example of figurative language is on page 163—"The bathroom was cavernous, built somehow under eaves, which sloped away, leaving a kind of bunker beneath them, in which were heaped maybe thirty or forty ewers and washbasins of an earlier day, dotted with crimson rosebuds, festooned with honeysuckle, splattered with hug bouquets of delphiniums and phlox."



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

This chapter is an extract of a story by Christabel LaMotte called "The Threshold." It appears without comment.

An old woman sends a child off on a journey. She tells him not to deviate from the path and go forward resolutely. She says that the land is enchanted, and he will be tempted by many images. The child sets off but has a very difficult time finding his way. As darkness falls at the end of the day, he sees three standing stones, and three ladies appear from behind the stones. The three women are beautiful, one gold, one silver, and one almost gray or transparent. The third woman is not nearly as brilliant or shiny as the other two sisters, but the child chooses to go with her, as they always do in fairytales. She offers the child the Herb of Rest. The third sister takes him on a journey toward a kingdom that is not bright or shadowy, but has an unchanging light.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The author provides this story as a sort of intermission. It is placed in a part of the book when the two main characters have just gone to bed, so it is almost a bedtime story. Once again, A.S. Byatt uses a story written by one of the main characters to accent what is going on in the overall novel. The tale is called "The Threshold." Maud and Roland are on the threshold of an important literary and historical discovery as they read the letters. The reader is also on a threshold, because the next chapter will reveal the text of the letters.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The correspondence between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte is given in chronological order in this chapter. Their letters begin professionally as two poets enjoying a literary dialogue. Christabel and Randolph come to admit that they trust each other. Ash admits to LaMotte that he ventured close to her house when he went to the park with his friends. She writes back that maybe they should stop corresponding for fear of impropriety. Ash replies that their letters harm no one. Christabel thinks there is danger in writing Ash, and she cannot be his muse. Ash responds that he believes she can be both muse and poet.

Ash is hurt that she has not responded to the poem and recent letter he sent. LaMotte writes that she never received them and knows now that they were stolen by her companion. She is angry at Blanche for stealing the letters and wants to apologize to Ash in person. Ash's next letter describes the wet, rainy day that they met in the park. He does not like the fact that they have to sneak around, but he is recopying Swammerdam for her and will send letters as requested to the Richmond Poste Restante. LaMotte does not like the subterfuge either. Nevertheless, they meet again in the park. Ash's next letter describes their first embrace and declares his love for her. Christabel is afraid that the fire of their love will consume her. Her solitude is threatened, and without that, she is nothing. Ash wants to steal one bit of happiness before they must end their relationship. They have opened a Pandora's Box, and their final letters are short bursts of desire and longing and fear and anger.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter is one of the climaxes of the book, because the question of whether or not there was a relationship between Ash and LaMotte has been unanswered for 172 pages. A.S. Byatt gives the letters over to the reader to view unblemished by third person commentary. The reader becomes the detective and is privileged to see the correspondence exactly as it is read by Roland and Maud. This important piece of the puzzle is revealed through the points of view of Christabel and Randolph in their letters to each other. The literary dialogue between the two poets reveals that there was a romance, but just how far it went remains unanswered.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

A section of the poem *Swammerdam*, by Randolph Henry Ash, is displayed in this chapter. It is set in Germany in 1680. Swammerdam is 43 years old and near death. He goes back over his disappointing life in his final hours. He has tried to learn the origins of life and used microscopes to look at a whole new world of insects and microorganisms. His discoveries on the law of metamorphosis have landed on deaf ears. Everyone thinks he is insane. His father kicked him out on the street. None of his peers want anything to do with his findings. He has ended up a beggar. Swammerdam compares himself to Galileo. Galileo discovered the heavens, and Swammerdam discovered a universe in the reverse direction. He wonders if Galileo was equally in awe and fearful of God's creation.

Chapter 11 Analysis

A.S. Byatt gives the reader a breather after the emotion-filled previous chapter. This intermission is a portion of the poem *Swammerdam*, by Randolph Henry Ash. It is set in verse and is not purely entertainment. It foreshadows the trip that Christabel and Randolph take to Yorkshire in which Ash collects microscopic samples. Swammerdam makes a life-altering discovery, but he cannot force others to pay attention. Christabel and Randolph discover each other, and their love is life-changing for them, but they are unable to follow through with it because they cannot break out of the strict rules of society.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Roland and Maud have not heard from Seal Court. They meet in Richmond, which was the home of Christabel LaMotte and Blanche Glover. Roland and Maud believe that Christabel may have accompanied Ash on his natural history expedition to Yorkshire. They piece together a timeline and read copies of Randolph's letters to Ellen during his trip. Roland suggests that Maud contact Beatrice Nest to look at Ellen Ash's journals, and she does so. Ellen writes mostly about household duties, but she mentions that Ash is on an extended trip, and he sent her a brooch made of jet from Whitby. In a later entry, Ellen says she received several urgent letters from a woman who wants to meet with her. The crazed woman also came to her house. She writes that she cleared up the matter, but no specifics are given. Maud finds the letter from the urgent woman and discovers she is Blanche Glover. Beatrice sees on Maud's face that she has made a discovery. Maud says she is not exactly sure if she found anything important. On her way out of the office, Maud has an uncomfortable encounter with Fergus Wolff.

Maud and Roland regroup and decide to go through the writing of both poets to dig up more clues. They find two almost identical lines in *Ask to Embla* by Ash and *Melusina* by LaMotte. Maud and Roland agree that they need each other to get to the truth. They decide to go to Yorkshire together to find more clues.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 uses a combination of third person narrative, dialogue, and first person accounts through Ellen Ash's diary and Blanche's letters to move the story along. The chapter starts out with an awkward reunion of Maud and Roland. They have not seen each other in several months, but they have become co-conspirators in a way by keeping their discovery a secret.

A dialogue scene between Maud and Val on the telephone and then between Val and Roland in their flat adds tension to the story. Val's jealousy is a bit of a foil to Maud and Roland meeting again. Val does eventually relay the message to Roland that Maud will be at the Museum the following day, but her anger comes through in her sarcasm. The encounter between Beatrice Nest and Maud is described in a narrative filled with figurative language. The simile on page 238 is a perfect example—"Maud and Beatrice began badly, partly because they found each other physically unsympathetic, Beatrice like an incoherent bale of knitting-wool and Maud poised and pointed and sharp."

The journal portions of the chapter draw a clearer picture of Ellen Ash from her own first person narrative. It is possible that she is not quite as dull as everyone thinks.

The dialogue between Maud and Roland at the end of the chapter is an eerie parallel to Christabel and Randolph. They do not want to seem like people who go off and have

affairs, but they have a very good reason for lying to their friends and lovers about going to Yorkshire together.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Chapter 13 begins with a section of Ash's Ragnarök. Ask and Embla are man and woman. They were made and named by the gods. They are the first example of true love, and they recognize love in each other.

Maud and Roland book rooms at the Hoff Lunn Spout Hotel. They have allotted five days to work. Maud gives Roland some of Leonora Stern's writing on LaMotte to read. Leonora describes extensive sexual undertones in LaMotte's female images. Roland finally puts aside the reading for the night and wonders if one always has to imagine sexual meaning in something as simple as a pool of water. Maud starts to read Cropper's *The Great Ventriloquist* in her room before going to sleep. She thinks some biographies are more about the biographer than the person.

The next day Maud and Roland walk near the sea and discuss their thoughts on what they have studied. They have no idea what they are looking for on this trip. They walk well together. Both of them have a quick pace. Maud and Roland go on to Whitby where Ellen's brooch was purchased. They go into a shop that sells jet jewelry, and the owner of the shop asks to look at Maud's pin on her turban. The shop owner says it dates to before 1861. Roland points out that it may be a family heirloom. Maud found it in a button box, and no one else wanted it.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Leonora Stern and Mortimer Cropper are given voices in this chapter when Roland and Maud read portions of their books. The result is two-fold. The book excerpts reveal more about what leading academics thought of the writings of LaMotte and Ash, and they also tell a little bit more about the personalities of Leonora and Mortimer. Leonora is fixated on finding sexual meaning behind every line of Christabel LaMotte's poetry. Mortimer Cropper talks about himself as much as Randolph Henry Ash in his biography.

The dialogue between Maud and Roland highlights their own personal questions and ideas. Roland is beginning to wonder why they have to come up with a metaphor for everything they study. He wonders if they are starting to diminish the real world in some way. Maud thinks that reality changes with time. People like Freud bring their ideas into the world and perception is changed forever.

Randolph Henry Ash speaks in this chapter, as well. A letter he writes to Ellen describes what Maud and Roland see on their walking tour.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Roland and Maud enjoy their walk on the second day much more than the first. Roland has been reading *Melusina*, and he is convinced Christabel visited Yorkshire. Maud has been reading *Ask to Embla*, and Roland is happy to hear that she likes the poetry. Maud and Roland continue their walk after lunch and come to a spot where the light reflected from water on a cave roof looks like fire. The same exact scene is described perfectly in *Melusina*.

Roland and Maud decide over dinner to take the next day off and go to Boggle Hole. It has nothing to do with Ash or LaMotte, so it will give them something new to view with no hidden meaning. Roland likes the funny name. The next day is beautiful, and they are pleasantly surprised to find Boggle Hole is filled with wildflowers. They have a simple picnic and talk more about their personal lives. Roland asks Maud about why she covers her hair. She tells him that she was booed by women at a conference, because they thought she dyed it to please men. She shaved her hair short for awhile. Then Fergus talked her into growing it out again. Now she has it long, but she puts it away. Roland says simply that life is too short, and she should let her hair breathe. She takes his advice and lets it down in its golden splendor.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Another letter from Ash to his wife sets the stage for what Roland and Maud will see the next day in Yorkshire, and it also shows how the trip of Roland and Maud and that of Randolph and Christabel parallel each other. When Maud reads a portion of *Melusina* out loud to Roland, it is obvious that they are standing on the same spot that Christabel and Randolph once stood.

Dialogue between Roland and Maud in this chapter brings them closer together. They speak much more personally about their lives and previous relationships. Maud and Roland have also gotten to a point where they respect each other intellectually and value one another's opinions. This could be another parallel to Christabel and Randolph. There is a lot of description in this chapter. The landscape of Yorkshire comes to life through the metaphors and other figurative language used in third person narrative, in Christabel's poetry, and also in Randolph's letter to his wife. One can not only see the countryside, but smell, taste, and feel it through the various descriptions given.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

This chapter is a flashback, and it fills in the blanks of Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire. It is hard to tell if they are traveling companions at first, but as they get further away from their home they begin to speak, and he takes her hand. Ash brought a ring for Christabel, a family ring that belonged to his mother. Christabel had the forethought to bring a ring as well, also a family heirloom. She decides to wear them both and fits them together on her finger. When they arrive at the inn, they are taken to their rooms and then have dinner in a private dining room. Ash notices that Christabel does not act like a wife. She watches him like a bird who is trapped. He decides that he will show her that she is not his possession.

Ash tells LaMotte that she can turn back at any point. She disagrees and says that it is too late to turn back. They walk by the sea and discover that they walk well together and share a quick pace. During the daytime, Christabel helps Randolph collect specimens, and she sings like the sirens on Filey Brigg. They have long, passionate nights together. One day they go to a place called Boggle Hole on the spur of the moment, just because they like the name. The two lovers wish they could to stop time, but they know they cannot.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Chapter 15 uses a flashback to fill in parts of the story that documents cannot provide. The narrative gives a glimpse of what really happened between the two lovers. The description of Ash and LaMotte on the train fills in many details of how they dress and what they look like physically. There are also parallels to Maud and Roland. Christabel and Randolph walk together very well. They share a quick pace. Maud and Roland are good walking partners, too. Christabel and Randolph visit Boggle Hole, just because they like the name. That is exactly what Maud and Roland do, and they have no idea Christabel and Randolph were ever there. Christabel is compared to the princess and the pea in her high bed. Maud is compared to the princess and the pea in the high bed at Seal Court.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The poem by Christabel LaMotte called *The Fairy Melusine* takes up the entirety of Chapter 16. An exhausted knight named Raimondin of Lusignan wanders on horseback on the moors. He is fleeing the random death of his Lord by his own hand. He wishes himself to die. The knight and his horse descend some rocks for a long time and eventually hear the sound of falling water. The knight hears a silvery melody in the water and continues to descend, even though the path is getting narrower.

He finds a hollow cave hidden behind the falling water and sheltering a pool. In the pool is a smooth rock, and on the rock a beautiful lady sings softly to herself and combs her golden hair. When she sees him, she stops singing. They stare at each other for a long time, and it seems as though his pain goes away. The knight tells her who he is and that he is tired and sore from traveling and only wishes to have a bit of rest and drink from the pool. The woman says she knows who he is and who he may become. She offers him a cup of water. The knight takes a long drink from the cup, and his face becomes as bright as hers. He now belongs to her, and she smiles.

Chapter 16 Analysis

This poem is a sample of Christabel's work, and it shows the influence of her trip to Yorkshire in her description of the cave, the waterfall, and the sheltering pool. The tale also describes the mysterious attraction between a man and a woman that is paralleled in Roland and Maud, and Randolph and Christabel. There are other parallels, as well. All three women have golden hair. Christabel sings by the ocean like a siren when she is with Randolph. Maud has been described in several chapters as brushing her golden hair in a similar way to the Fairy Melusine. Fate brings these couples together, and it seems there is nothing they can do to stop it.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

James Blackadder is working on a footnote for Mummy Possest, which is Ash's work of 1863. Blackadder finishes the footnote and then goes back and crosses out various parts of what he wrote. He is starting to think that most of his work consists of writing things down, depersonalizing them, and then erasing them completely.

Fergus shows up in Blackadder's office looking for Roland. Blackadder tells him that Roland has the week off. Fergus continues to follow the trail to Roland's flat and visits with Val. She thinks that Roland is off somewhere looking at a book for Blackadder and should be back on Wednesday. Val confirms that both Maud and Roland went somewhere around Christmastime to look at a manuscript. Fergus asks Val if Roland left a number. He did not this time, but he did when he went to Lincolnshire. Fergus asks if she still has the number. She finds it for him, and then he offers to take her to dinner to cheer her up, and she agrees. Fergus calls the number later and gets Sir George. Sir George confirms that Maud and Roland were there about the fairy poet.

The current Lord Ash is very frail and ill, and he does not like Cropper as much as he likes Blackadder. Therefore, Cropper takes an alternate route and has lunch with Hildebrand Ash, the oldest son and next heir. Cropper's main purpose is to get his hands on some of the items the Ash family still has in their possession. After lunch, Cropper walks the streets of Soho and runs into Fergus Wolff. Fergus tells Cropper that Roland Michell seems to have discovered some letters, and Blackadder does not know anything about them. Cropper suggests they get a cup of coffee to discuss it further.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The chase scene gets going in full swing in this chapter through a series of dialogue sections and descriptive passages. Fergus Wolff, Mortimer Cropper, and James Blackadder all join in the search for clues about a connection between LaMotte and Ash. They attack the mystery from different angles, and their findings add more information to the overall story.

Blackadder looks into Ash's connection with Hella Lees and her séances in his research. Fergus Wolff, spurred on by jealousy and a sense of competition, starts to track down where Roland and Maud have been and where they might be at present. Cropper is, as usual, working on an angle to obtain more possessions, but he is drawn into the chase when Fergus tells him there may be a new discovery, and Blackadder does not know about it yet. The tension builds as scholars begin to unite on a hot new trail of discovery.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Maud is in the Women's Studies Resource Center looking through the tiny bit of information available on Blanche Glover. She is surprised by the arrival of her friend and colleague Leonora Stern who has come to visit. They go back to Maud's flat, and Leonora shows her a letter she recently received from Dr. LeMinier, a French student of women's writings at the University of Nantes. LeMinier is working on a nearly unpublished writer named Sabine de Kercoz who was a distant cousin of LaMotte. Dr. LeMinier states that in autumn of 1859, LaMotte visited Sabine and her father in Fouesnant.

The next day, Maud goes into Lincolnshire to shop with Leonora. Cropper calls on Sir George at the same time. Sir George does not give any information to Cropper, but he does take Cropper's card when a large sum of money is mentioned. Later on, Maud is crossing Lincoln Market Square when Sir George bumps into her. He is livid, because he has just been to see his solicitor, and he thinks Maud was withholding the fact that the letters are worth a fortune. He storms off, and then Leonora wants an explanation.

Sir George's solicitor, Toby Byng, calls Blackadder's office to find out the market value of an unspecified number of letters from Ash to an unidentified woman. Blackadder is angry, because he knows Cropper has more money to buy the documents. He is also suspicious of Roland. Paola sneaks away and calls Roland to warn him. Roland leaves his flat without explanation and finds a call box to contact Maud. They secretly decide to go to France to solve the mystery.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The poem by Christabel LaMotte at the beginning of Chapter 18 alerts the reader that the first portion of the chapter will be about Blanche Glover. Further clues are given in the first person form of Blanche's suicide note and in an excerpt of a newspaper article concerning the suicide.

Narrative passages give more exposition on the life of Leonora Stern. They provide information on what Leonora looks like physically and also her various sexual exploits and her career thus far. Leonora is a larger than life persona in many ways. She is a good friend of Maud's, even though her over-sensuality makes Maud uncomfortable. The excitement increases when Leonora shares the letter she received from Dr. LeMinier. Maud is very excited to share this new discovery with Roland, but she wants to throw Leonora off the scent and distract her from following up on the clue. She, too, has become possessed with the outcome.

Everything seems to be unraveling quickly for Roland and Maud as their colleagues and friends piece together parts of the story and start to demand explanations. The tension

is reaching an unbearable height, and they decide to escape to France to hopefully reach a conclusion. The frantic phone dialogue between Maud and Roland exemplifies their fear and excitement of nearing the conclusion of their research.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Maud and Roland are in a cabin below sea level on the Prince of Brittany bound for France. They feel giddy and reckless over their next step to solve the mystery. Maud says that people would probably be more understanding if they were obsessed with each other instead of being obsessed with solving the mystery of Ash and LaMotte.

When they arrive in France, Maud sets up a lunch with Dr. LeMinier. Dr. LeMinier gives Maud a copy of the journal Sabine wrote during the time Christabel was staying with her family. The next day Roland and Maud drive through Brittany to Finistère and book hotel rooms at Le Cap Coz Hotel where they spend the next three days reading Sabine's journal.

The rest of the chapter is Sabine's journal. Sabine writes that she started a journal at Christabel's suggestion, because she wants to be a poet. Sabine's first entries describe her family home on the coast of the Atlantic. She says that Christabel arrived in a terrible storm. She fell out of the carriage into Sabine's father's arms and said in Breton, "Sanctuary." Sabine does not like Christabel at first. She has never met anyone before who makes simple acts of kindness seem like deadly intrusion.

On Christmas Eve, Sabine, Raoul, and Christabel go to church. During the service Sabine sees Christabel touch her belly in a way that reveals she is pregnant. Sabine understands now why she needs sanctuary. When Sabine tries to speak to Christabel about her condition, she is deflected. Sabine speaks to her father, and he says he knows no more than she does. They worry that Christabel is mad and could kill herself and the child. Then, Christabel disappears for two days. Sabine and her father go crazy searching for her, but on the morning of the third day she reappears, thin and very pale. When Sabine and Raoul ask her about what happened, she forbids any further conversation.

Chapter 19 Analysis

An interesting parallel starts off Chapter 19. The excerpt of Christabel's story of the drowned City of is immediately followed by a scene in which Maud and Roland are on a ship in a cabin below sea level. They could be drowning literally and figuratively. Their situation is getting out of hand, but they continue to move forward anyway, as if they do not see the rising waters. Maud and Roland share a strange and comfortable intimacy in their sneaky plan to stay ahead of their colleagues and solve the mystery first. The sexual tension between them continues to build.

The remainder of the chapter comprises the journal entries of Sabine de Kercoz. The reader discovers what happens through Sabine's firsthand account. This first person narrative gives a detailed description of where Sabine and her family live and also of the



emotions that surround Christabel's visit to their home. Sabine's use of visual imagery to describe her home and surroundings is very striking. Her description of how her homeland sings with the wind also adds an aural piece to the picture. The Breton landscape and lore are intertwined in a rich history that balances somewhere between reality and legend, and Sabine describes throughout her journal how both parts weave in and out of her daily life.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Cropper gives a lecture on the "Art of the Biographer" and calls scholars, the press, and even the US Ambassador to attend. Cropper's lectures are very well-orchestrated to the point of seeming like a magic show. In his lecture, Cropper reveals that letters between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash have been discovered, and they may change that field of study dramatically. He asks very publicly that the letters be made available for all to read.

After the lecture, Cropper follows a connection between his own ancestor and Christabel LaMotte. It leads him to Ash's work called *The Great Ventriloquist*. He rereads Ash's account of a trip to Mrs. Hella Lees for a séance. Cropper wonders if LaMotte was at that same séance and starts to look for evidence to back up his hunch.

Blackadder is doing his own research. He reads a portion of Mrs. Lees book called *Shadowy Portal* and discovers that Christabel was a member of the Vestal Lights, a group of women seeking information about the spiritual. The book confirms that Christabel is present on the day when Ash disrupts the séance at the home of Miss Judge. Mrs. Lees writes that Ash ran to one of the women of the Vestal Lights and kept asking her where the child is and what she has done with the child.

Blackadder is invited to appear on a late night TV news program called *Events in Depth*. When he shows up at the station, he discovers that it is very difficult to distill Ash down into a five minute sound bite. Leonora Stern is the LaMotte scholar to be interviewed at the same time. While the two professors are in make up, Leonora gives Blackadder a bit of advice. This is his chance to sell Ash and make him sexy. Blackadder follows her advice and feels guilty afterward, but Leonora thinks he did a great job and offers to buy him a drink. She claims she knows where Maud went.

Chapter 20 Analysis

A poem by Christabel LaMotte is the ornamental quote heading Chapter 20. This poem describes a haunting connection with the spirit world, and it sets the mood for the chapter which is mostly concerned with a connection between LaMotte and Ash and a medium named Hella Lees.

This particular puzzle piece takes shape from two angles, the research of Mortimer Cropper and that of James Blackadder. The two professors do not have a complete scenario formed in their minds, but they each follow the lead of Hella Lees. Cropper starts with a letter that leads to Ash's recounting of a séance in his book *The Great Ventriloquist*. Blackadder looks at the same event through the eyes of Hella Lees in her book called *Shadowy Portal*. The two opposite accounts of the same day provide a full picture for the reader of what actually may have happened.

The dialogue between Blackadder and Stern as they prepare for the show reveals a building friendship and collaboration that may help both of them in the long run. They decide to team up in a common dislike for Cropper and a desire to find answers to the unsolved mystery. The dialogue is comical in the way it takes two very different people and turns them into partners.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

This chapter exhibits part of *Mummy Possest* by Randolph Henry Ash. In the poem, a medium is trying to train a young girl to become an apprentice and assistant in her séances. She starts by telling the girl she has a mysterious gift and wins her trust by practicing with her to build her talents. She develops camaraderie with the girl and makes her believe they are legitimately contacting the dead.

Little by little, the medium reveals to the girl various tricks they need to perform during séances to make people believe they are contacting loved ones. She speaks of their calling as a kind of art. It makes people feel better, so there is no harm. They will also make a tidy profit. She dismisses the girl's unwillingness to lie by telling her that they are just helping the truth to come out and weaving a story to ease pain and make people feel better. Next, she instructs the girl to eavesdrop when serving tea, so they will learn more information about their clients. The poem exposes séances as fraudulent magic shows.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The poem *Mummy Possest* is a first person narrative from the viewpoint of a medium speaking to her protégé. It is a bitingly satirical view of how mediums really operate and trick their clients into believing they are really communicating with the dead. The medium in this poem is portrayed as evil and manipulative. The piece reflects Ash's distaste for the entire profession and his disgust at how the public flocks to them to try to speak to their deceased loved ones.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Val and Euan are at a horse race at Newmarket. Their horse wins, and they celebrate with another owner, Toby Byng. A conversation ensues about the names of the horses, and Euan mentions that Val is interested in literature. Toby tells them of his client who has a bunch of love letters from two Victorian poets in his possession. He explains that the letters sparked an academic competition, and American and British scholars are fighting over who should ultimately own the documents. The wheels start turning in Val's mind, and she makes the connection through Blackadder and Cropper to Maud and Roland.

Val is surprised by this new information, because it is academically based. She has believed all along that Maud and Roland had an affair and disappeared to be together romantically. She thought the research was just a convenient lie. Euan asks her why she cares, because it is over between her and Roland anyway. Euan wants Val to be happy, and she admits that she is not very good at being happy and will probably mess up his life. He says that choice is up to him.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Chapter 22 is a short exposition chapter to bring Val, Euan, and Toby into the final chase. The three of them have not had much to do with the discovery of clues to this point, but their collective knowledge of events will provide a key to the climax of the story. So far they are outsiders to the central events of the plot, but this chapter foreshadows their integral involvement in the conclusion.

The chapter also reveals that Val's life has changed dramatically in the months since she was last seen. She seems to be much happier in her relationship with Euan and blossoms in the wealthy lifestyle Euan shares with her. Euan's love for her is obvious. Val is almost mistrustful of her current situation, because it is too good, but Euan lets her know that he will not desert her.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Maud and Roland are at Baie des Trépassés talking about the drowned city of Is when they see Leonora and Blackadder walking across the dunes. They quickly rush back to their hotel unseen. Upon returning, they notice a black Mercedes leaving the hotel lot and realize Cropper has also arrived. They know they have done nothing wrong, but they do not want to fight it out with the other scholars. Maud and Roland decide to leave quickly and let the others quarrel amongst themselves as they find out the rest of the story.

Maud and Roland have been in France three weeks. During their time together they have developed a sort of unspoken closeness. Roland wonders if they will have a relationship back in the real world. They are very different. She is upper class, and he is lower middleclass. Roland thinks that their difference in social status makes him feel as though he is in a romance novel. However, the arrival of Stern, Blackadder, and Cropper turns the romance into a chase story.

Leonora runs into Cropper's Mercedes in the parking lot when she and Blackadder return. They agree to talk about the car damage and their desire to find Maud and Roland over dinner. The dinner is not enjoyable. Cropper is angry because he is not the first to find the new clues. He seems to take it personally, as if the ghosts Ash and LaMotte have kept this secret from him. The next day, Cropper's damaged Mercedes overtakes Leonora and Blackadder's rental car on the road. He is speeding off to catch up with Maud and Roland. Leonora and Blackadder know they will never catch up, so they decide to stop and have a picnic.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Chapter 23 creates a melancholy mood and at the same time increases the excitement of heading toward the climax of the book. Roland and Maud are melancholy, because their three weeks of tentative romance on the coast of France are coming to an end. Their feelings of melancholy parallel those of Christabel and Randolph when they have to leave Yorkshire.

The chapter is also filled with excitement, because Maud and Roland narrowly miss running into their colleagues. They have not done anything illegal, but they do not want to spoil enjoyment of sharing the mystery between just the two of them. It will not be the same once everyone is involved.

Leonora, Blackadder, and Cropper build tension in their race to catch up with Roland and Maud. Cropper is increasingly frustrated and rash in his decisions. He is doing whatever he has to in order to win the race, including driving a broken-down car at full speed to catch up with Roland and Maud. Leonora and Blackadder are a little more

relaxed and comical in their approach. They agree that Cropper is a little crazy, and they decide to enjoy each other's company and not rush home, because they know they cannot possibly catch up to Maud and Roland.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Roland and Maud are back at her flat in Lincoln. Euan MacIntyre calls and invites them both to dinner. They are surprised, but they accept. When Maud and Roland arrive for dinner, they are met by Euan, Val, and Toby Byng. Euan has an idea about Christabel and Randolph that he would like to discuss. Euan and Toby looked in some old deed boxes, and they found a piece of paper that Christabel dictated to her sister Sophia on her deathbed. It leaves all of her books and papers and copyrights to Maia Thomasine Bailey. Maia is Maud's great-great-great grandmother. So Euan and Toby believe that Maud is the true owner of the letters. The group thinks through their options. They agree the letters should not go to Cropper, but they want to find some way for Sir George to profit so that his wife can at least get a new wheelchair. If the documents go to the British Museum, Maud could have the microfilms, and Joan could get a wheelchair.

When Roland and Maud return to Maud's flat the phone rings, and it is a very agitated Beatrice Nest. She explains that she overheard Cropper in the library speaking with Hildebrand Ash about digging up the graves of Ellen and Randolph Henry Ash to find a box that may contain some very interesting information. Beatrice does not want Ellen Ash disturbed. Maud explains that Roland is with her, and they will discuss the matter and call Beatrice back in the morning. The next day they phone Euan, and he believes that Maud, Roland, Val, and he should all go to London and discuss a plan of action with Beatrice.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Roland has a mounting sense of frustration and irritation in Chapter 24. The chase is spiraling toward its climax without his input. It seems as though everyone took over, and he is merely watching on the sidelines. He dislikes eating meals he cannot afford and living off of Maud's salary, and he feels like an observer. He was the first one to make the discovery. It should belong to him primarily. The sexual tension of dinner with Val and Euan also adds to Roland's feelings of discontent. Maud does not know why Roland is unhappy and gently tries to make him feel better with little success.

Chapter 24 uses quick dialogue and short paragraphs of narrative description to increase the pace of the chase. Cropper is up to something sinister, and the other characters need to come together to foil his plot. Roland is also unsettled about his future, and he needs to resolve his feelings.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Ellen Ash's journal entry of November 25th, 1889 comprises the first part of Chapter 25. Ellen writes that she is sitting at Ash's desk at 2:00am. She cannot sleep. He is dead. She feels better sitting among his things, because his possessions seem to carry a bit of the man she loved. Randolph instructed her to burn some personal items, because he did not want them to be picked over by contemporary biographers. She is burning some things, but there are items she cannot burn, because they do not belong to her.

There is a brief excerpt from one of Cropper's books that fills in the details of the funeral, and then the next scene in the chapter takes place on November 27th, 1889. It is the night before Ash's funeral, and Ellen looks through Randolph's things and finds an airtight specimen box. She has a very important decision to make. Ellen sits down with a letter addressed to her from Christabel LaMotte and a sealed envelope. The letter from Christabel leaves a sealed letter her hands. It was meant to be given to Randolph, but Ellen was not willing to disturb his peace at the end. She has always known about Christabel. Her husband told her the truth eventually, but she knew long before he told her. Ellen considers burning the sealed letter. She remembers her own honeymoon and how fearful she was and unable to consummate their marriage. Randolph stayed with her, even though they were not truly man and wife. She thinks now that Christabel was more of a wife to him than she was. At least she gave him a child, however briefly.

She concludes that she does not want to know what is in the sealed letter and she cannot destroy it. Ellen puts it in the specimen box, along with the golden hair and the interlocked strands of her hair with Randolph's. She also includes a bundle of love letters she saved from her husband. She wonders if she will write Christabel one day and tell her he died in peace. She knows that in the morning she will bury the black box with her husband.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Chapter 25 creates a mood that is heavy with sorrow and difficult decisions. Ellen is mourning her one true love, and she is filled with indecision and regret and loss. Randolph Henry Ash and Ellen Ash had the forethought to dispose of sensitive documents, because they did not want biographers searching for scraps of gossip once they were gone. They accurately predicted future events.

The chapter gives an account of Randolph's final days through the eyes of Ellen Ash. It starts with her journal entries and then moves to descriptive narrative of what happened from Ellen's point-of-view. It also includes excerpts of letters from Christabel and from Randolph Henry Ash that form the background for Ellen's decision to bury sensitive information with her husband. Ellen feels incapable of burning or even reading

documents that were not truly her possessions, but she does not want them to be found by strangers, either.



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Chapter 26 begins with an excerpt from Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina*. This part of Ash's poem speaks of the garden as a place where all poets come. Roland returns to his flat and finds out from a neighbor that their landlady had a stroke and was taken to Queen Mary's Hospital. Roland enters his dark flat and goes through the pile of mail that has accumulated. He reads replies from job applications first and is surprised to find three letters of acceptance. Roland realizes that it takes others to recognize one's own existence and value.

Roland thinks about how his life has changed since he discovered Ash's letters. He reads *The Golden Apples* again and hears Ash's voice in the words. Roland laughs out loud when he realizes that Ash started him on this quest. He starts to connect the words on a list he made in Lincoln, and he realizes how they all tie together. Roland thinks that Ash was saying that words are important. The language of poetry is significant. Roland walks around in the small garden behind his flat. He is not sure why he feels so happy. Is it because he now has a professional future? Is it because he finally has some time to himself? Words start to flow from Roland's mind. His poetic voice has been released.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Randolph Henry Ash's riddle parallels Roland's life. He has come full circle. He is going back to the beginning, back to his flat where he lived when the story began. Roland literally ends up in a garden and he sees that he is not at an end but at a beginning. He has a bright future ahead of him. The most important transformation for Roland in this chapter is that he finds his voice.

The entire chapter, other than Ash's poem at the beginning, is written from the point of view of Roland. The reader follows him through his transformation, celebrates with him when he reads his acceptance letters, and experiences his first walk into the forbidden garden.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

Maud, Val, Euan, Roland, Blackadder and Leonora Stern gather at Beatrice Nest's house. There are various tensions between guests, but they are subdued for the greater good. Euan starts the discussion by explaining that he is there as sort of a legal adviser to Maud, who is the rightful heir to the letters. Everyone debates where the letters should ultimately reside. Blackadder asks how they were found in the first place, and Roland and Maud are forced to tell the sequence of events. Roland returns the original letters to Blackadder who promises to return them to the British Library.

Then Beatrice Nest tells the group what she overheard Cropper talking about with Hildebrand Ash. They are plotting to dig up the graves and find a box they suspect holds important artifacts. The group agrees that they are going to have to catch Cropper and Hildebrand in the act. Euan tells everyone that he made some calls and found out that Cropper and Hildebrand are staying in a pub near the graveyard. Cropper and Hildebrand do not know Val and Euan, so they will go and spy on them and then warn the others if they make a move. After the meeting, Roland leaves with Blackadder and apologizes for his deception. Roland says his actions are unacceptable, but he felt possessed by the story. Blackadder offers Roland a full-time research fellowship on Ash.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Chapter 27 may be described as the pep rally before the climactic scene. Everyone comes together to foil Cropper, the antagonist in the plot. They pool their information and make a plan. The ornamental quote at the beginning of the chapter, provided by Randolph Henry Ash, describes the human need to plow toward the finish line. The collective group in this scene makes plans to finish the race.

The chapter is told mostly in the third person narrative, as if the reader is watching the meeting and listening to the discussion. Blackadder and Roland make amends to each other and so do Maud and Leonora, but Roland and Maud barely speak to one another during the meeting. Euan is giddy with excitement, because he feels like he is playing a part in a detective story. Val is radiant, because she has found a healthy relationship.



Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

It is Mid-October, and there are few visitors at the Rowan Tree Inn. Cropper and Hildebrand have been there a week crafting their plan. At one o'clock in the morning, they sneak out of the Inn and drive to the cemetery. The two men start to dig, and a huge storm rolls in. Cropper continues in spite of the weather and finally finds the box. He tries to take the box back to the Mercedes and his path is blocked by the storm. Eventually, the two men discover they have been caught in the act by Roland, Maud, Leonora, Blackadder and Beatrice Nest.

The scholars finally make it back to the inn, and the power is out, so they adjourn to Cropper's room by candlelight and open the box to find out the end of the story. They discover the strands of hair, the packet of love letters, and the one unsealed letter addressed to Ash. It is handed to Maud to read. She immediately recognizes the writing as Christabel's. In the letter Christabel tells Ash that they have a daughter who is married and healthy and happy. She explains that she had the baby in a convent in Brittany and gave it to her sister Sophia to raise as her own. The group realizes that Maud is descended from both Ash and LaMotte and owns everything.

Maud and Roland sit side by side on a four poster bed talking late into the night. Maud tells Roland why she turns cold at the thought of a romantic relationship. Because of her good looks, she has been made to feel like a possession in previous relationships. Maud understands Christabel's desire to have a certain amount of self-possession or autonomy. Roland and Maud reveal their love for one other. They make love, and he takes possession of her. Finally, there are no boundaries, and the two are one.

Chapter 28 Analysis

The climax of the story takes place in this final chapter. Cropper and Hildebrand ironically plan their theft right in front of Val and Euan. They do not recognize the couple as spies, even though they see them at the cemetery and at the inn. The chase reaches its height dramatically in the midst of a huge storm. Cropper and Hildebrand are caught in the act, and the final puzzle piece is revealed.

The image of the men digging in the cemetery in the storm starting on page 537 is full of figurative language that taps into all five senses. The reader almost feels drenched when the group of scholars finally makes it back to the inn.



Postscript 1868 Synopsis

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There are some aspects of stories that do not get written down. This is one of them. Two people meet on a hot day in May of 1868. A man with a beard and a straw hat is out for a walk, and he comes across a young girl playing. She tells him her name is Maia Thomasine Bailey, but she prefers to be called May. The man tells May that he knows of a waterfall named Thomasine, and Maia was the mother of Hermes. So the man concludes that she has a very wonderful name. He recites to her some poetry. The girl says she has an aunt who likes poetry, but she does not. He says that is too bad, because he is a poet. She asks the man if he knows how to make daisy chains, and he tells her he will make her a crown for a May Queen. He asks for a lock of her hair in return. She gives it to him tied in a bit of blue cloth.

When they part ways, the man asks May to give a message to her aunt. The little girl plays with her brothers on the way home and breaks the daisy chain and forgets all about the message. The aunt never knows the two met.

Postscript 1868 Synopsis Analysis

The postscript is written from a third person perspective. It tells a story about a man and a child. It is written very simply and almost innocently, but it carries with it the emotion of deep regret and sadness when one knows the entire story of the 28 previous chapters.



Characters

Roland Michell

Roland Michell is a part-time research assistant to Professor Blackadder. He is 29 years old. Roland graduated from Prince Albert College, London in 1978 and received his PhD at Prince Albert College in 1985. He is a small man with a lot of soft, black hair and brown eyes. He tends to look tired and feels that his life is a disappointment. He does not really care what others think of him, though, so he is not self-conscious.

Roland met his girlfriend, Val, when he was 18 years old. They started taking classes together, joined the same clubs, became romantically involved, and moved into a one-room flat together in their second year. They have been stuck in the relationship ever since. Roland's father was an official in the County Council, and his mother was an English graduate, but she is disappointed with everything around her, including Roland and his father.

Roland discovers the letters that ignite the mystery of the book, and he is one of the main characters who follow the clues through to their conclusion. Roland starts out as a meek and unremarkable scholar at the beginning of the novel, but by the end of the novel he finds his voice and has a much stronger sense of self and a bright future ahead of him.

Dr. Maud Bailey

Dr. Maud Bailey runs the Women's Resource Centre at Lincoln University. She is a beautiful but untouchable woman. She had a romantic relationship with Fergus Wolff that left her disappointed and preferring celibacy to romance. Maud is an expert on Christabel LaMotte and a leading feminist scholar. She is tall, blonde, wears little make up, and is very graceful. Maud teams up with Roland Michell when he tells her of his discovery, and they work to solve the mystery together. They are an unlikely pair, but they become more attracted to one another as the story progresses. Maud learns when the mystery is solved that she is a direct descendent of both Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. She transforms throughout the book from a cold and remote person to a trusting lover and the heir of an important discovery.

Randolph Henry Ash

Randolph Henry Ash is a famous Victorian Poet. He has dark brown, almost black hair, and rough, black brows. He dresses elegantly but not extravagantly. Randolph wrote the letters that Roland discovers years later in the London Library. Randolph has a reputation as a dedicated and loving husband. He actually has a turbulent affair with a poet named Christabel LaMotte which results in an illegitimate child that is ultimately



raised by his lover's sister. He meets the child once in his life and realizes sadly that she is his own.

Christabel LaMotte

Christabel LaMotte is a little-known Victorian poet. She is a petite woman with light hair, large, even teeth, a pointed chin, green eyes, and very pale skin. Christabel is not exactly beautiful, and her face has very sharp features. Christabel dresses elegantly, if not in the height of fashion. She lives with her lesbian lover until she has an affair with Randolph Henry Ash and bears a child as a result of the affair. Her lesbian lover commits suicide, and Christabel ultimately lives out her days as a spinster with her sister and family. Her child is raised by her sister as if it was her own.

Professor James Blackadder

Professor James Blackadder is a 54-year-old descendant of Scottish schoolmasters. He looks very gray. He has gray skin and longer gray hair. He usually wears a tweed jacket and corduroy pants. Blackadder does not smile very often. He has been editing Ash's Complete Works since 1951, and he is a discouraging and dedicated scholar. Blackadder became an expert on Randolph Henry Ash out of guilt at a time when Ash was not very popular. He wrote his PhD on Ash and was talked into editing the Complete Poems and Plays in 1959. He thought it was a one-time event, but it has turned into a life calling. Blackadder wonders what his life would be like if he had chosen a different path, but he is genuinely interested in Ash and his work.

Val

Val is Roland Michell's girlfriend. She has straight brown hair and a pale face, and she is intelligent, scholarly, and very hard on herself. Val is shy about sharing her opinions and unsure of her intellectual ability, so she takes menial jobs as a secretary to make money and gives up on any dreams of becoming a paid scholar. Val's mother lives on social security in Croydon. Her father is in the Merchant Navy, and she has not seen him since she was five years old. Val is stuck in an unfulfilling relationship with Roland, but she eventually breaks free and finds true happiness with Euan MacIntyre.

Euan MacIntyre

Euan MacIntyre is a solicitor who is in love with Val. He meets her when she comes to his office to work as a typist. Euan is wealthy, charming, good looking, and successful, and he truly loves Val. He treats Val like a princess and also helps to hatch a plan that ultimately solves the mystery of the relationship between Ash and LaMotte.



Professor Mortimer P. Cropper

Professor Mortimer P. Cropper is a Randolph Henry Ash scholar from New Mexico. His collection of Ash memorabilia is probably the largest in the world, and he is obsessed with obtaining as many historical objects as possible. Prof. Cropper has a fine featured face, perfectly cut silver hair, gold-rimmed half-glasses, and a long, lean, and trim body. He is very American and sticks out when traveling in England. Cropper is so obsessed with getting things that belonged to Ash that he is willing to lie, cheat, or steal to get what he wants. He is caught in the act of grave robbing at the end of the novel.

Fergus Wolff

Fergus Wolff is Roland Michell's contemporary and competitor, though he is a little older than Roland. Fergus is sometimes brilliant and loved by his teachers, but he is not always accurate. Roland actually likes Fergus personally, even though they compete for the same jobs and grants. Fergus has blond hair cut long on the top and short in the back. He is attractive and tall with bright white teeth and bright blue eyes. Fergus had a relationship with Maud that ended badly, and he is now jealous of Roland for spending time with her.

Dr. Beatrice Nest

Dr. Beatrice Nest is an Ellen Ash scholar. She has an office in the Ash factory. Beatrice has been editing Ellen's journal for publication for a very long time. She is a heavy, solid woman with a large bosom and wide hips. Beatrice has crimped white hair that is fixed in a roll with loose strands sticking out all over. Cropper thinks of Beatrice as the white sheep obstructing the way in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. Blackadder thinks of her as a fat, white spider in her lair. Feminists see her as an octopus guarding her hoard. Beatrice is mostly misunderstood and helps Roland and Maud to find important clues along the way. She is present when they make the final discovery.

Prof. Leonora Stern

Leonora Stern is a professor from Tallahassee. She is interested in editing Christabel LaMotte's letters, but has not gotten very far. Leonora is a very large and majestic woman in all directions. She has olive skin, an imposing nose, a full mouth with a hint of African ancestry, and shoulder length thick, black, wavy hair. Leonora has French Creole and Native American ancestry. She is divorced and has a 17 year old son named Danny from an affair with a hippie poet. She left the hippie for an Indian woman professor and has had a string of female lovers since. Leonora is a force to be reckoned with, but she is a good friend to Maud. She is present at the climax of the story when the final clue is read.



Sir George Bailey

Sir George Bailey currently lives at Seal Court with his wife, Joan. He is a descendent of Christabel LaMotte. Sir George is a small, cantankerous man who initially does not like academics poking around his house looking for information on Christabel LaMotte. He is distrustful and takes his time in making his decision to allow Maud and Roland to read the letters they find in Christabel's room. Sir George feels betrayed by Maud and Roland when he discovers that the letters may be worth a lot of money. Sir George is desperate to make his wife comfortable, because she is in a wheelchair. He could also use some help fixing up Seal Court, but he does not have the money.

Lady Joan Bailey

Lady Joan Bailey is an elderly woman in a wheelchair. She has a large, moon-shaped face dotted with brown age spots, big pale brown eyes, and smooth, gray hair pulled back at the sides. Lady Joan lives in Seal Court with her husband, Sir George. She is a romantic and becomes an ally to Roland and Maud. She is often a calming influence on her husband.

Dr. Ariane LeMinier

Dr. Ariane LeMinier is a French student of women's writings at the University of Nantes. Dr. LeMinier is working on a nearly unpublished writer named Sabine de Kercoz who wrote a few poems in the 1860s and four unpublished novels. Kercoz was a distant cousin of Christabel LaMotte. LeMinier finds a connection to LaMotte through Sabine's letters and journals, giving Roland and Maud another piece of the puzzle.

Sabine de Kercoz

Sabine de Kercoz is a distant cousin of Christabel LaMotte. She is an aspiring poet and novelist and writes extensively in her journals and letters about Christabel's visit to her family's home in 1859. She is 20 years old, unmarried, and living with her father when Christabel comes to their home in 1859. She provides important information in her journal confirming that Christabel was pregnant in 1859, and that is why she stayed with them.

Toby Byng

Toby Byng is Sir George's solicitor. He gives Sir George advice on financial matters. Toby follows up with Blackadder on the value of the letters between Christabel and Ash. Toby is also a partner of Euan MacIntyre in part ownership of a racehorse. Euan and Toby realize they both have a connection to the discovery of the letters, and they come



together to help Roland and Maud finally solve the mystery. Toby is thin, freckle faced, and he has curly, fair hair along his ears and is bald on top.

Paola

Paola is Blackadder's clerical assistant. She is pale and has long hair pulled back in a rubber band and big glasses. Paola is indispensable to Blackadder. He could not get anything done without her. She is smart and knows what is going on in the academic world. Paola is also a good friend. She warns Roland that people are looking for him and gives him a head start when the chase for the final clues gets into full swing.

Hella Lees

Hella Lees is a popular medium in the mid to late 1800s. Both Ash and LaMotte visited her and attended her séances. Hella is a somber, Roman-looking matron. Ash tries to expose her as a fraud, and she retaliates in her book called Shadowy Portal.

Hildebrand Ash

Hildebrand Ash is the next heir in line in the Ash family. He is the oldest son of frail and now very sickly Lord Ash. Hildebrand is in his 40s and not a very intelligent man. He is happy, balding, and a little pudgy. Hildebrand has had a variety of jobs and not much success in any profession. He has buried ambitions in histrionics and is very interested in Cropper's offer for him to give lectures on Randolph Henry Ash across the United States. Hildebrand is hurting for money at the moment, and Cropper eventually talks him into becoming a grave robber to dig up artifacts that are rightfully his as a direct descendent of Randolph Henry Ash.

Crabb Robinson

Crabb Robinson is an elderly intellectual in the 1800s. He is good humored and self-deprecating and enjoys surrounding himself with the literary geniuses of his day. He hosts a breakfast where Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte meet for the first time.

Daisy Wapshott

Daisy Wapshot is the wife of the deceased Mr. Rodney Wapshott, who was the son of Ash's godchild, Sophie. Daisy lets Cropper see letters that her husband inherited when his mother died. She is a bosomy lady and very hospitable. She is considering selling the letters to Cropper for his collection.



Objects/Places

London Library

The London Library is one of Roland Michell's favorite places and also where he discovers the first two letters that send him on his quest to find out more about a possible affair between Ash and LaMotte.

British Museum

The British Museum is in Bloomsbury. Professor Blackadder's office, which is also called the Ash factory, is located in the lower regions of the museum. The British Museum houses many of Ash's manuscripts, which Ellen Ash gifted to the museum.

Val and Roland's Flat

Val and Roland's flat is between Piccadilly and Putney in the basement of an old Victorian house. It is painted apricot and white to brighten it up and furnished with used furniture, two desks back to back, makeshift bookshelves made of planks of wood and bricks, and posters on the wall. It was described to Val and Roland as a garden flat when they considered renting it. The end of the room has a window that opens to a beautiful backyard garden. However, they were told after they moved in that they are not to go into the garden. The ceiling smells like cat urine from their landlady's numerous cats.

Lincoln University

Lincoln University is where Maud Bailey works. It has white towers and lots of tiles that fly off in high winds, which occur frequently on the flat landscape. The layout of the campus looks like a chessboard. Lincoln University is where the Women's Resource Centre is located. Maud runs the resource center, and it houses many of Christabel LaMotte's writings.

Maud Bailey's Home

Maud Bailey's home is on the bottom floor of a red brick Georgian house on the edge of the town of Lincoln. She has two large rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. The building used to be offices, and the University actually owns the house. Maud's home has clean white walls, white lamps, a white dining room table, white sofa, and an off-white Berber carpet. Every other furnishing in the room is a brilliant color. There are no pastels in Maud's home.



Two Unfinished Letters

Two unfinished letters written by Randolph Henry Ash and hidden away in one of his books are the clues that start the entire story. Roland discovers them at the London Library, and his discovery sets off the search for more clues to the lives of LaMotte and Ash.

Croysant le Wold

Croysant le Wold is a village in Lincolnshire near Seal Court where Christabel is buried in the churchyard of St. Etheldreda.

Seal Court

Seal Court is the home of Sir George and Lady Joan Bailey. It is a Victorian Gothic house with turrets and battlements, and it is in a state of disrepair. The Baileys only live on the bottom floor. The kitchen has been redone for Joan and her wheelchair, and they keep up the surrounding woods, Joan's garden, and a Victorian garden. The rest of the house has been closed off to save money.

Yorkshire

Yorkshire is the location of the affair between Ash and LaMotte. They escape the city and spend a romantic month together here. Roland and Maud travel to Yorkshire to retrace the steps of Ash and LaMotte.

Le Cap Coz

Le Cap Coz is a hotel in Finistère near where Sabine used to live with her family. It is near where Christabel finds sanctuary in her time of need. Maud and Roland find this hotel in the quiet bay of Fouesnant, where they spend three days reading Sabine's journal.

The Rowan Tree Inn

The Rowan Tree Inn is a mile outside of Hodershall where Cropper and Hildebrand Ash make plans to dig up the box from Ash's grave. The old inn was built of flint and slate in the 18th century.



Social Sensitivity

With parallel plots in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Possession* includes social concerns common to both eras. The use of the two plots highlights similarities as well as differences between the two periods.

The role of women is one of the major social concerns in the novel.

Very few options are available to the Victorian characters in conventional society; some of the female characters chose to live outside of those restrictions. Not one of the Victorian women is ultimately happy or self-fulfilled, however, suggesting some of the inadequacies of Victorian society. The Victorian characters are pressured less by outer than by inner restrictions, so completely have they accepted and absorbed their society's standards. The modern female characters, on the other hand, generally have far more choices than their Victorian counterparts, but some of them still tend to fall into Victorian roles such as "the woman behind the man" or "the damsel in distress." By the end of the novel the young women are able to free themselves and to establish relationships in which they are loved and their equality and individuality are acknowledged.

Another related social concern is sexuality. The Victorian married couple, the Ashes, have a sexless marriage because of the wife's ignorance and terror of sex; she is thirty-six when they marry but is unable to consummate the marriage on their honeymoon, despite her husband's gentleness and patience, or afterwards. They remain married, and any other alternative would have been unacceptable in their society; the unfairness to the husband, who had no reason before the marriage to expect that it would exclude sex and therefore children, is obvious to a modern reader. Moreover, after his death many years later, Ellen Ash realizes that she had spent all her time and energy during her married life trying to compensate her husband for the lack of sex. She is contrasted with two other female characters, her own housemaid and the poet who becomes, briefly, her husband's lover, both of whom in accepting their sexuality become pregnant and therefore social outcasts. Both the male and female characters suffer from their society's attitude toward sexuality.

The modern characters enjoy far greater sexual freedom, both because of their society's tolerance and because sex no longer leads inevitably to childbirth. The greater freedom has not always resulted in greater happiness, however; the characters have had meaningless, unsatisfactory sexual relationships. Byatt shows her Victorian characters unable to find happiness because their society is concerned primarily with the institution of marriage even if any particular marriage is sexless or loveless; love and sex, conversely, are unacceptable outside of marriage. The modern characters are free to establish personal relationships on whatever basis they choose.

Techniques

Possession is a unique combination of literary techniques in which two separate but related stories are told simultaneously. The Victorian story is told through a variety of Victorian narrative techniques, while the modern story resembles the ever-popular adventure formula.

The Victorian story is told primarily through the letters, journals, and literary works of the characters, with occasional omniscient narration. Richard Jenkyns, reviewing the novel for the Times Literary Supplement, particularly praised Byatt's writing of the letters and poems. The epistolary style works well to characterize the lovers and to chronicle the beginning, growth, and end of their relationship.

In subtitled the work "A Romance," Byatt was referring not only to the love stories but to the adventure embarked on by Roland and Maud, an adventure which takes them around England and to France as they follow clues. Unlike the other modern characters, who have a variety of reasons for their interest in the Victorian writers, Roland and Maud are on a scholarly quest for truth; they unexpectedly find personal rewards including their relationship with each other.

Another technique which adds to Byatt's Victorian world is the frequent mention of real people in association with her fictional characters. As the novel opens, for instance, Roland finds Randolph's drafts of his first letter to Christabel in a copy of a real work, Giambattista Vico's *Principles of a New Science of Nations*. The letter refers to meeting the lady at the home of Crabb Robinson, a real person; Roland even wonders whether Randolph's mysterious correspondent might be the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti. Putting fictional characters among real people is a technique that works particularly well in this novel.



Themes

Romantic Love is Not a Possession

Love cannot be owned or kept. In this book, Christabel and Randolph are deeply in love, but they cannot be together because of the strict moral rules of the Victorian period. They want the bliss of their one month affair to continue, but they cannot stop time, and they have to return to their own lives. They are only able to capture true love for a few brief weeks.

When Randolph learns that Christabel is pregnant, he tries desperately to find her and any evidence of the child, but Randolph does not own Christabel. She makes her own choice to let her sister, Sophia, raise the girl as her own. Christabel does not want Randolph to take possession of their child and assimilate her into his family. The tug-of-war of possession means ultimately that neither Ash nor LaMotte is able to be a parent to the child.

Maud Bailey feels that because of her good looks men treat her like a possession when she enters into a romantic relationship. It makes her turn cold when she is not treated as a person in her own right, and she begins to choose celibacy over relationship. It is only when she falls in love with Roland that she discovers that love does not mean one has to become a possession.

Powerful Women Are Misunderstood

Christabel LaMotte uses this theme often in her poetry. She believes that Melusina, Medusa, Dahud, and many other women of legend are portrayed as evil because they have power. Christabel points out that Melusina is a good mother, a faithful wife, and a handy woman, but because she has special powers, she is feared and chastised. Christabel is also criticizing a Victorian society that does not allow women to reach their full potential. Women cannot support themselves. They must be subordinate to their husbands. They certainly should not write poetry that is raw and full of emotion.

Ellen Ash reduces her power in order to fit in. She beats a man at chess, and he cannot believe it is possible and tells her she is not bad for a woman. Ellen also defers to her famous husband. She is a very intelligent woman, but she must not appear publicly to be smarter than Randolph Henry Ash. He is the one who should be in the spotlight. Ellen purposely diminishes her power to fit in to a Victorian society.

The 20th century shows traces of this same theme. Maud Bailey is slightly feared because she is beautiful and intelligent. The feminists make fun of her long, blonde hair, because they believe she dyes it to please men. Maud is held back from her authentic self, because she does not fit within the normal parameters of beauty or intelligence.



Beatrice Nest is also misunderstood. In college, she wants to write a paper on Randolph Henry Ash, but her professor suggests she take the more appropriate and safer route of writing an edition of Ellen Ash, because it does not require independent thought. She is compared to a spider and an octopus when she protects her work, and because she is not married, everyone assumes she is a lesbian. In her later years, she is thought of as menacing, which could not be further from her true nature.

Possessions Are Not Everything

One who avidly collects the possessions of famous people in history may be forfeiting their own life for a pile of relics. Mortimer Cropper is a good example of this theme. He is obsessed with obtaining possessions and keeping them in his collection for posterity. Cropper hangs his entire reputation on how many artifacts he is able to collect. When it comes down to it, he is left with nothing but dusty objects.

Professor Cropper loses his dignity and his ethics when he fixates on gaining possessions at any cost. He is willing to cheat an elderly woman, make false promises, and ultimately dig up a grave to get what he wants. In this novel the author takes a satirical look at the obsession of collectors and points out that they are left with nothing. They have no romance, no friends, no passion other than collecting, and they are living in the past.

Significant Topics

The title Possession is a one-word summary of the novel's themes; with its many meanings, "possession" is an ambiguous word, meaning to own something as well as meaning the object owned. Another meaning is the state of being possessed, that is, obsessed or controlled by spirit or other forces. To the Victorians, "possession" also had sexual meaning. All of these meanings are explored in the novel, and the relationships among them lead to the novel's major theme: It is impossible to possess without being possessed. The only real and important type of possession is self-possession.

The physical possession of importance in the novel are the relics of long-dead Victorian poets which are collected by some of the modern characters. These characters, all literary scholars associated with various American and English academic institutions, compete for ownership of the property of the poets and ultimately for "ownership" of the poets themselves. Even one of the characters who has in the past looked down on those who admire everyday possessions if they were owned by the great finds himself stealing letters written by Ash. Ironically, the fact that so many different people or institutions own the literary relics means that no one has the whole picture or the whole truth about the writers; the novel's conclusion suggests that complete knowledge of the dead, even when they were people of a highly literate age who committed most of their thoughts and actions to paper, is impossible.

Moreover, the modern characters become possessed by the very things they seek to possess. The poets they study were a man and woman who thought and read widely,



but the scholars are themselves the narrowest of specialists, unable to see the relative importance of their work in the larger field of literary study or of life itself.

They become single-minded in their search, willing to sacrifice their own principles and relationships for minor academic triumphs. The "Ash factory" is the nickname of the part of the British Museum in which the work on the definitive edition of Ash's poems and plays is carried on. Roland Michell thinks of it as the Inferno because it is below ground and hot but does not recall that Dante depicted souls in hell as suffering punishments that fit their crimes, being less punishment for evildoing than the natural result of individual choices. Those in the "Ash factory" are there by choice.

Those who try to possess other people likewise find themselves possessed.

Randolph Ash falls in love with Christabel LaMotte and wants to possess her; as he is already married, all he can offer her is an affair, along with his mother's wedding ring to wear on their Yorkshire "honeymoon." He possesses her sexually but is aware that in a larger sense it is she who possesses him. Their few idyllic days together are paradoxically the cause of the end of their relationship. That relationship is like that of the mythical Melusina, subject of a long poem by Christabel and similar to the story of Cupid and Psyche: to attempt to possess or know the beloved in ways he or she has prohibited is to lose the beloved. The friend (and possibly lover) with whom Christabel lives, Blanche Glover, likewise attempts to possess and thus loses Christabel.

Spirit possession is part of the Victorian plot and further supports the theme. Spiritualism, attempts to contact the dead by means of a medium, was a common Victorian practice; one of Ash's poems, "Mummy Possesst," is a dramatic monologue spoken by an experienced medium to her new young assistant. Although fraudulent, the medium justifies herself by claiming that she does no harm and actually brings comfort to her clients. Ash in one of his letters describes a seance he attended as "trickery," but a letter written by Christabel shows that she too had participated in seances. Both seek forgiveness from dead people for whose death they feel responsible and thus are themselves possessed by those spirits.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *Possession: A Romance* is constantly passed around among the main characters. The letters are the first clue of the novel, and they are written from the points of view of Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. Blanche Glover's letters to Ellen Ash and her suicide note provide her distinct point of view. Journal entries provide the point of view of Ellen Ash or Christabel's cousin, Sabine. Academic books are also quoted and give the points of view of Mortimer Cropper, James Blackadder, and Leonora Stern. Even the medium, Hella Lees, gives her point of view when Blackadder reads a portion of her book and it shows up in a chapter.

Narrative scenes and dialogue give alternating points of view as well, depending on what characters are involved in a scene. Even when a chapter is written in third person narrative, it feels as though the reader is part of the action, because the rest of the book is filled with firsthand accounts.

This technique of passing around the point of view may sound haphazard, but it works extremely well, especially for a mystery. The reader collects a variety of perspectives, and then the puzzle fits together at the end. There is no one predominant point of view, so the events are seen from many angles.

Setting

The novel takes place in England and France during in the late 1980s and in the 1850s and 1860s. The setting is the same, but there are two parallel timelines. Maud and Roland follow clues from London to Lincolnshire to Yorkshire and then to the coast of France and back. The story starts in the academic world at the London Library and the British Museum. It then travels to Lincoln University and branches out to the countryside from there. Maud and Roland travel to Seal Court in Lincolnshire where they discover the majority of the correspondence between LaMotte and Ash.

Roland and Maud also journey to Yorkshire to follow in the footsteps of Ash and LaMotte. The earthy countryside provides a bountiful backdrop for description for the Victorian poets, and it also allows the modern day academics to make connections to prove Ash and LaMotte were in a certain location.

Roland and Maud also travel to Finistère near the Bay of Fouesnant in France. This is where Christabel carried her child to term and lived with her cousins Sabine and Raoul. The scholars read Sabine's journal entries and walk in the same places as Christabel while they piece together the mystery.

The final setting is outside of Hodershall in England where Randolph Henry Ash and Ellen Ash are buried. The grave robbers are caught in the act in that wet autumn



churchyard, and most of the main characters read the final clue in the Rowan Tree Inn nearby.

Language and Meaning

The two Victorian main characters are poets, so their world is filled with metaphor and legend. Their writing is rich in description and verbose. Victorian times were steeped in a search for knowledge and understanding, so their writing is a result of much reflection and intelligent thought. It is also extremely formal.

Randolph Henry Ash is interested in studying the origins of life, so there is a large amount of scientific language and meaning around microorganisms, metamorphosis, rock formations, and anemones. He collects specimens of all types and he is constantly pondering science and spirituality.

The main characters in the present day portion of the novel are mostly academics, so their language is also very high brow. They study words and meaning for a living, so their language is full of intelligent thought and comparisons to a variety of literary sources. There is very little slang, as most of the characters are middle to upper class and work at universities.

The overall language and meaning of the book is sophisticated and literary-minded. It is also highly descriptive.

Structure

A.S. Byatt uses a variety of structures in this book in a seemingly random fashion. An ornamental quote is often provided at the beginning of the chapter to point in the direction of a particular theme. Straight narrative connects the story, but it is interlaced with journal entries, newspaper articles, letters, poetry, book excerpts, stories, and dialogue. The structural devices change to give the impression that the reader is discovering clues along with the main characters.

The formal structure of the book varies from chapter to chapter and within each chapter. There could be a portion of dialogue, and then one of the characters picks up a book, and the next few pages are comprised of the text from the book. In another example, a scholar may be reading a letter from the 1800s, and then she is interrupted by a colleague and jolted back into the 20th century for several pages of dialogue.

The structural timeline is not in chronological order. It bounces back and forth between the 1800s and the 1980s in parallel stories. The sequence is laid out as scraps of information are discovered, and that rarely happens in a perfectly organized fashion. It keeps the reader hanging until the postscript, when the mystery is completely solved.



Quotes

"He felt as though he was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity—not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge." Chapter 5, Possession, p. 92.

" 'You know, if you read the collected letters of any writer—if you read her biography—you will always get a sense that there's something missing, something biographers don't have access to, the real thing, the crucial thing, the thing that really mattered to the poet herself. There are always letters that were destroyed. The letters, usually. These may be those letters, in Christabel's life. He—Ash—obviously thought they were. He says so.' " Chapter 5, Possession, p. 100.

"All of us have things in our lives which we know in this brief, useful allusive way, and neglect deliberately to explore. Mrs. Cropper sat in the desert and made it blossom and flower by power of will and money. In his dreams of her Professor Cropper always lost his sense of proportion, so that she loomed large as his capacious entrance hall, or stood hugely and severely astride his paddock. She expected much of him, and he had not failed her, but feared to fail." Chapter 6, Possession, p. 118.

"Reading those poems, she obscurely knew, offered her a painful and as it seemed illicit glimpse of a combination of civilized talk and raw passion which everyone must surely want, and yet which no one—as she looked round her small world, her serious Methodist parents, Mrs. Bengtsson running her University Women's Tea Club, her fellow-students agonizing over invitations to dance and whist—not one seemed to have." Chapter 7, Possession, p. 127.

"I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither, but the mistress of a very small household, consisting of an elderly poet (set in his ways, which are amiable and gentle and give no cause for anxiety), myself, and the servants who are not unmanageable." Chapter 7, Possession, p. 136.

"Friendship is rare, more idiosyncratic, more individual and in every way more durable than this Love." Chapter 8, Possession, p. 146.

"What makes me a Poet, and not a novelist—is to do with the singing of the Language itself. For the difference between poets and novelists is this—that the former write for the life of the language—and latter write for the betterment of the world." Chapter 8, Possession, p. 147.

"Tell me you know—and that it is not simple—or simply to be rejected—there is a truth of Imagination." Chapter 10, Possession, P. 186.

"He said—I am the Truth and the Life—what of that, Sir? Was that an approximate statement? Or a Poetic adumbration? Well—was it? It rings—through eternity—I AM—" Chapter 10, Possession, P. 186



"It is odd, when I think of it, that in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways—in life it is much otherwise." Chapter 12, *Possession*, p. 248.

"I think a kind of softness has overcome modern life. De Balzac says that the new occupations of men in cities, their work in businesses, have turned women into pretty and peripheral toys, all silk, perfume and full of the fantasies and intrigues of the boudoir. I would like to see silk floss and experience the atmosphere of a boudoir—but I do not want to be a relative and passive being, anywhere. I want to live and love and write. Is this too much?" Chapter 19, *Possession*, p. 369.

"I think it must happen to men as well as to women, to know that strangers have made a false evaluation of what they may achieve, and to watch a change of tone, a change of language, a pervasive change of respect after their work has been judged to be worthwhile. But how much more for women, who are, as Christabel says, largely thought to be unable to write well, unlikely to try, and something like changelings or monsters when indeed they do succeed, and achieve something." Chapter 19, *Possession*, p.380.

"She says Romance is a land where women can be free to express their true natures, as in the Ile de Sein or Sid, though not in this world." Chapter 19, *Possession*, p. 404.

"I will write here, for I am ashamed, and yet it is an interesting part of human nature, that it is impossible to love where there is such lack of openness." Chapter 19, *Possession*, p. 408.

"How true it was that one needed to be seen by others to be sure of one's own existence." Chapter 26, *Possession*, p. 508.

"Women in childbirth cry out exceedingly against the author as they see it of their misfortunes, for whom a moment's passion may have no lasting reminder, no monstrous catastrophe of body or of soul." Chapter 28, *Possession*, p. 543.

"Did we not—did you not flame, and I catch fire? Shall we survive and rise from our ashes? Like Milton's Phoenix?" Chapter 28, *Possession*, p. 546.

"I—I've analysed it. Because I have the sort of good looks I have. People treat you as a kind of possession if you have a certain sort of good looks. Not lively, but sort of clear-cut and—" Chapter 28, *Possession*, p. 549.

Adaptations

An abridged version of the novel is available on Random House Audiobooks. On two cassettes, it is read by Alan Howard.



Key Questions

This, the most popular of Byatt's works, is a novel full of ideas which would lend themselves well to group discussions. Vintage Books, which publishes the paperback edition of *Possession*, has also published a "Reading Group Guide" to the novel, a pamphlet available in bookstores or by calling 1-800-793-BOOK. The pamphlet includes thirteen discussion topics, brief Byatt biography and bibliography, and suggested further reading of poetry related to the novel, on the Victorian period, and other similar novels.

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Christabel and Blanche?
2. What are the attitudes of the various modern characters toward the discovery and ownership of the letters of Christabel and Randolph? What accounts for these different attitudes?
3. How is the story of Melusina appropriate to Christabel herself? What other relationships are there between the Victorian writers and their works?
4. A review criticized the modern characters as being less lifelike than the Victorian characters. Is this a valid criticism?
5. Readers who expect a conventional, happy ending for the Victorian love story are disappointed that Christabel breaks off the affair. Why does she do so? What makes a happy ending impossible?
6. What are the similarities between the Victorian and the modern lovers?
7. The cover painting used in both cloth and paper editions of the novel is *The Beguiling of Merlin* by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

How does the subject of the painting relate to the novel?
8. What is the purpose of the inclusion in Ellen Ash's journal of the story of her housemaid Bertha's pregnancy?
9. Why does Ellen Ash bury Christabel's last letter, unopened, with her husband? What is Ellen's attitude toward the love affair?
10. Some of the modern characters squabble over whether the literary remains of English writers should remain in England; ironically, the English characters conduct their argument from the British Museum, storehouse of treasures from around the world which in some cases are the subject of similar disputes. Does it matter in which country the items are housed? Why?



Topics for Discussion

Are you the Poet or the Poem or both?

Describe the difference between feminism in the Victorian age, in the 1980s, and today.

Discuss parallels between the two main romantic couples in this book: Roland and Maud and Christabel and Randolph.

The word possession is used in a variety of ways in this book. Describe some of them.

Discuss the differences between men and women as perceived by characters in this book.

What is your view on right to privacy for public figures?

Discuss the use of legend and myth in this novel.

Which character do you most identify with and why?

Literary Precedents

Frequently *Possession* has been compared to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which also has a Victorian setting and a somewhat similar pair of lovers. Most of those comparing Byatt's novel to Fowles's, however, seem to have the film version of the earlier novel in mind. In that version, the Victorian story is given a modern parallel in the form of modern actors playing the Victorian characters in a film and thus offers the same sort of contrast between the two periods.

Both novels have a Victorian man faced with a choice between a proper fiancée/wife and an unconventional woman who becomes his mistress.

Nevertheless, *Possession* has been rightly praised for its originality; its sense of familiarity seems to come more from Byatt's use of the techniques of the Victorian novel and from her Victorian characters than from its relationship to any specific previous novel.

Related Titles

The *Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994), a collection of short stories, contains two stories from *Possession*: "The Glass Coffin" and "Gode's Story." Readers had frequently requested the separate publication of the stories, which were a popular part of *Possession*. "The Conjugal Angel," the second of the two novellas in *Angels & Insects* (1992), is Byatt's work most like *Possession*. Similarities include the nineteenth-century setting, the interest in spiritualism, the combination of real and fictional characters, and the literary focus (which deals with Tennyson and his poem *In Memoriam*).

Babel Tower (1996) uses a bookwithin-a-book (*Babbletower*) framing device, as does *Possession*. By juxtaposing the active story with the framed story, Byatt represents a whole society trying to come to terms with new values, much the same way Victorian values are contrasted with modern values in *Possession*.



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