

The Virgin in the Garden Short Guide

The Virgin in the Garden by A. S. Byatt

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Characters

the center of *The Virgin in the AtGarden* is the Potter family. Bill, the father, is a difficult husband and father: domineering, temperamental, opinionated. He is Head of Department at Blesford Ride School, a boys' school, and is considered to be an excellent teacher. His wife Winifred is a woman who seems to have been worn out and worn down by living with a demanding husband, whom she seems to understand and accommodate but not to love, and three children. All three children are intelligent but otherwise are very different from each other.

Stephanie is a teacher, Frederica is finishing school, and Marcus attends his father's school. Stephanie and Frederica, with their female versions of male names, share their father's literary interests while Marcus is a mathematical genius; Frederica and Marcus both have acting ability, although Marcus refuses to repeat his initial theatrical success.

Stephanie's marriage to a clergyman named Daniel Orton, Frederica's involvement with Alexander Wedderburn and his play, and the visionary experiences Marcus shares with teacher Lucas Simmonds are of central importance to the plot, social concerns, and themes of the novel. An important character, who is involved professionally and personally with all the members of the Potter family, is playwright Alexander Wedderburn. As a writer he is a professional observer, and he has a good deal of insight into other people while sometimes failing, ironically, to have the same insight into himself.



Social Concerns

Set in 1952, the year of Elizabeth II's coronation (after a brief prologue set in 1968), *The Virgin in the Garden* has as a major part of its plot the casting, rehearsals, and performance of a play written by one of the characters about Elizabeth I. The differences in the two times but similarities of human nature are major concerns of the work.

Sexuality in most of its forms is chief among the work's social concerns.

Premarital, marital, extramarital, and homosexual relationships among the characters cause complications of the plot and suggest the problems that such relationships have posed throughout human history.

Family relationships are also important in the novel. A family is at its center, and the relationships among its members are complex and troubled.

The difficulty inherent in family relationships is also seen among the other characters, as is the necessity of young people's breaking away from their families to live their own lives, even if doing so causes some estrangement.

Education and religion are two other concerns. Most of the characters either teach, attend, or are otherwise associated with a particular school, and the goal and form of education is a major issue along with student-teacher relationships. The concern with education is not limited to formal education but with all sorts of extracurricular learning. Much of what the reader sees the Potter children learn results from experience. Of equal importance is the issue of religion; an important character is a clergyman, two others have visions which they believe to be spiritual (others consider them signs of mental illness), and one character is violently opposed to religion. Byatt points up ways in which these two important institutions, education and religion, are not meeting the needs of the characters.

Techniques

Byatt's most notable technique is her moving back and forth among her major characters throughout the novel; in three consecutive chapters in the first part of the novel, the first word in each chapter is the name of a different character. The closely related subplots add to the complexity as well as unity of the novel.

Byatt also makes use of an omniscient narrator, which gives the novel the sense of being not exactly modern, appropriate for the setting. It also allows for more complete character development than would otherwise be possible. Her focus is interior even during important events such as a wedding, describing the characters' thoughts rather than external actions.

Themes

Some of the important themes of the novel are suggested in its title, *The Virgin in the Garden*. A number of possibilities for the identity of the virgin and of the garden are offered in the novel; secular, mythological, and historical readings of the phrase are all possible. In Elizabeth I's day, Byatt's playwright character says, there was a richness of symbolic meaning, and people thought in symbolic terms. His play about the first Elizabeth is in sharp contrast with the televised coronation of the second Elizabeth which most of the characters watch together.

The medium has changed, and with it the message. The modern world, with its insistence on literal meaning and its view of sex as all-important, seems ultimately less able to satisfy humans, and the characters in the novel are almost all in search of greater meaning.

Another related theme, which appears elsewhere in Byatt's work, is that the life of the mind can offer satisfaction as great as the life of the body; only the virgin can remain in the garden. Byatt illustrates this theme both through the life of Elizabeth I that is the plot of the play-within-the-novel and through the character of Frederica Potter, who plays the young Elizabeth.

Much of the novel's concern is the growing up of the Potter children, especially Frederica. Each is shown becoming involved with a person who will change the course of his or her life.



Key Questions

The interrelatedness of the plots, characters, and themes of this novel and the many issues it raises should provide numerous topics for group discussions. Those who have read Byatt's later and more popular novel *Possession* (1990), analyzed (see separate entry) will be interested to compare Byatt's first novel to it.

1. This novel did not sell very well until after the success of *Possession*. Is *The Virgin in the Garden* worth reading for its own sake, or is it mainly of interest as the first novel of the author of *Possession*?
2. What are some of the meanings of the title: what virgins, and what gardens, does Byatt suggest?
3. One of the many relationships Byatt suggests is pointed up by having Frederica Potter cast as the young Elizabeth in Alexander's play. What is the relationship between the life of Elizabeth I and that of Frederica Potter?
4. Why does Stephanie marry Daniel Orton? How does her choice contrast with her sister's, and what is Byatt suggesting by those different choices?
5. What are the different attitudes toward sexuality which Frederica encounters? Why does she decide to lose her virginity to Edmund Wilkie rather than to Alexander Wedderburn?
6. What sort of experience does Marcus Potter have? How might an earlier age, such as the Elizabethan, have viewed such an experience, and why does it differ from the modern views?
7. One of the reviewers praised Byatt's depiction of the period of Elizabeth II's coronation. What details make that depiction especially vivid?
8. Why does Alexander become involved with Jenny? with Frederica?
9. Is Frederica too precocious to be a believable character?
10. What is the purpose of the prologue in the National Portrait Gallery?

Literary Precedents

Byatt's chapter titles refer to many earlier literary works: "Women in Love," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Much Ado," and "Comus" are all chapter titles, referring respectively to works by D. H. Lawrence, John Keats, William Shakespeare, and John Milton.

The reference to Lawrence is a particularly important one to the novel, and the characters themselves allude to his novels. The Potter sisters have some similarity to the sisters of *Women in Love* (1920), but Byatt's fictional world is more complex than Lawrence's. The characters express some contempt for Lawrence's view of relationships, which they see as too simple and dishonest.

One of the difficulties of this novel is the many literary allusions. Byatt once said in an interview that she had a problem with knowing whether her readers would be likely to have read the works she alludes to in her novels.

Of all her works, *The Virgin in the Garden* seems most likely to puzzle readers who have not read a great deal of English literature.

Related Titles

The *Virgin in the Garden* is the first of a planned tetralogy. *Still Life* (1986), Byatt's next novel, continues the story of the Potters. The prologue of the second novel, like that of the first, is a brief scene in which Frederica, Alexander, and Daniel gather at a London art gallery. *Still Life* moves from its 1980 prologue to 1953 and shows the young Potters experiencing the consequences of the choices they made and the experiences they had in the first novel. It chronicles Stephanie's ultimately tragic domestic life, Frederica's Cambridge education, and Marcus' struggle to achieve normality. *Babel Tower* (1996) is the third in the quartet.



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