



# Neo-Victorian Novel and Empowerment:

A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*

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## I . Introduction: The Neo-Victorian Novel and Genealogy

Drawing on her academic interest in the history and culture of the Victorian period, Antonia Susan Byatt (A. S. Byatt) explores nineteenth-century England from a postmodern perspective. Byatt's novels explore historical discourses that have either been censored or ignored by history; they also cast light on developments springing from the era, the full consequences of which could not have been clear to the Victorians themselves. Many of her novels - including *The Children's Book* (2009) that was listed for the 2009 Booker Prize, *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), *Possession: A Romance* which won the Booker Prize 1990, and a book of two novellas, *Angels and Insects* (1992) - seek to reconstruct the historical values of the nineteenth century. These writings belong to the emerging sub-genre of the British novel, the neo-Victorian novel, which revisits the Victorian era in order to explore the setting, content, customs, and values, a strategy embraced by other authors such as John Fowles, Peter Carey and Jean Rhys. The neo-Victorian novel embraces a

double-time structure that views the twentieth- and twenty-first-century by investigating its roots in the culture of the nineteenth century. A recurring element in these neo-Victorian texts is their shared interest in investigators, collector and scholars: those who seek to reconstruct the historical values of the nineteenth century. In this way, neo-Victorian texts play with the reader's sense of both past and present, connecting the Victorian era to the contemporary world.

Byatt's latest novel, *The Children's Book* exemplifies one of the most successful neo-Victorian approaches to the subjective retelling of the Victorian past with twentieth-century writing techniques. *The Children's Book* explores how the modern notion of childhood was invented in the Victorian era, particularly through the rise of children's fiction. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the novel is that it emphatically underlines the existence of those historical and political discourses that subtly took new shapes and forms for survival as the Victorian era transitions into the twentieth century. Her fiction implies that the accumulation of historical facts may never be fully, totally completed, that a hoard of objective knowledge, however large, remains an arbitrary collection of stories that amounts to a fictional reconstruction or restoration. Byatt leads the reader to discern the discontinuities and punctures in the narrated history, with the aim of highlighting the gaps among the distinct historical layers that make up the narratives of her work.

Throughout her work pervades the influence of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Byatt draws inspiration, in particular, from Foucault's idea of history as genealogy. For instance, she

openly acknowledges that *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) grew out of her “first reading of Foucault's remarks on Linnaeus and taxonomy in *Les mots et les choses*” (*Tale* 305). Foucault's conception of history is seen as indicative of the decline in traditional forms of historical and political discourses. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault takes a first step toward developing his own brand of genealogy by opposing the totalistic view of history as a single, unified entity, and argues that history is a combination of discontinuous events and discourses that provide a “whole interplay of representations that flow anonymously” (137). Through the analysis of archeology and strata of which history is composed, Foucault claims to show that history is not a continuous whole, but an accumulation of independent segments that, like strata, come in distinct layers.

Byatt's fiction similarly engages in a process of reclaiming chronological historical events into the complexity from which they were originally formed. The prominent feature of Byatt's neo-Victorian text is that she maintains an infinite clash and tension in her novel by exposing the reader to contradictory and paradoxical aspects, combining the desire to reach a single absolute truth with the desire to see that same concept collapse. This allows the reader to acknowledge the impossibility of relying on totalized historical knowledge. Byatt's viewpoint leads her readers to recognize the historical debates that frame her novels in an attempt to think through this infinite paradox.

In the same context, the neo-Victorian texts and Byatt's story explore the idea of an unstable relationship between the past and

the present. History, after all, has become an infinite series of discourses that grow, diverge, and converge, continuously opening up new possibilities. Timothy Gauthier, in *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*, observes that the exploration of this paradox inspires a great deal of Byatt's neo-Victorian stories:

Much of Byatt's fiction is haunted by this dilemma. She or her characters can construct systems, but they are systems raised on linguistic foundations that have no "real" basis in the world. Her characters remain intrinsically aware of the arbitrariness of choosing one method of categorization over another and of the illusory semblance of order or correspondence constructed by the taxonomer through language. Words bestow similarity and stability upon what is essentially a chaotic and mysterious world. (30)

*The Children's Book* reveals the paradoxical coexistence of both the nineteenth-century faith and the twentieth-century skepticism and doubt. Deploying the strategy of paradox, Byatt's neo-Victorian novels resist giving one simple answer to the conflicting discourses in question.

In this regard, Byatt's neo-Victorian fiction fully embraces the idea of infinite discontinuity that Foucault proposes, and undertakes to perceive time as fragmented layers which fabricate the Victorian past. As Gauthier puts it: "Byatt channels the voices of the past," "in a sense that we can know the 'whole' truth" (21). Byatt's neo-Victorian project rejects the concept of history and memory as uniform, absolute, and complete. On the contrary, by breaking that continuum, Byatt's text enables the reader to see how, like all other

philosophies across the centuries from the beginning of the nineteenth century, those contemporary ideas and beliefs that people now possess have evolved, by tracing its genealogical lines. Tracing the genealogical lines of these ideas and beliefs, neo-Victorian fiction retrieves the obscured discourses of the Victorian past that have helped to shape the modern world into what it is today.

This essay discusses A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*, with a special focus on how the novel works as a genealogical frame that renders a history open to discussion and contestation. The essay traces the process in and out of which evolved the Victorian notion of childhood that is familiar and still popular, as well as more complex historical and political undercurrents. It also looks into the character's quests that aim to deconstruct dominant historical discourses and re-construct ideological assumptions in and about the Victorian era. In doing so, the essay examines how the neo-Victorian novel provides strategies for empowerment against totalizing pressures that have continued into the contemporary world.

## II. Genealogical History and Power: *The Children's Book*

*The Children's Book* serves as a perfect tool with which to analyze both the neo-Victorian sense of genealogical history and its concurrent dissection of power. One of the first things to note is that Byatt tries to convey a vast arrangement of historical and social information that intersects with the last years of the Victorian era

and up to the end of the First World War. The book consists of four chapters titled “Beginnings,” “The Golden Age,” “Silver Age,” and “The Age of the Lead.” As the novel deals with the years between 1895 and 1919, it depicts political and social changes that swept the world in those years. Additionally, the sheer diversity of the characters featuring in it functions as a social panorama that illustrates a large number of challenging ideas.

The novel starts with Tom who is the oldest son of Olive and Humphrey Wellwood. When Tom discovers a runaway working-class boy Philip Warren in the basement of the South Kensington Museum (the would-be Victoria and Albert Museum) which is owned by Major Prosper Cain, Olive adopts and takes Philip into her storybook world. As a famous children's book writer, she has created a book for each of the household's children; each tale includes her four children - Tom, Dorothy, Phyllis and Hedda, - and Griselda and Charles, children of Humphrey's brother, Basil. Olive's tales follow each child's life as they grow up in the midst of the terror and horror of the First World War. Since these tales reveal the power that has shaped children's life openly and secretly, *The Children's Book* also functions as a genealogical framework for exploring distinct historical discourses that are articulated around certain clusters of power relations. With the benefit of hindsight, Byatt is able to draw on Victorian events as a knowledge-power nexus that echoes beyond the period in question and into the contemporary world.

For the genealogical analysis that she performs in *The Children's Book*, Byatt recognizes newly emerging discourses that interfere and

struggle with one another within one single period or during the lives of a family and their children. The focus in the novel is laid primarily on the newly emerging social conception of childhood and how, with its emergence, our understanding of the Victorian society changes drastically. Byatt describes the change in child-rearing that took place during the late-Victorian era in these words:

Children in these families, at the end of the nineteenth century, were different from children before or after. They were neither dolls nor miniature adults. They were not hidden away in nurseries, but present at family meals, where their developing characters were taken seriously and rationally discussed, over supper or during long country walks. And yet, at the same time the children in this world had their own separate, largely independent lives, as children. (39)

Childhood becomes socially reconstructed especially through the rise of children's fiction, as exemplified by Olive Wellwood. Under the roof of the Wellwoods house on the Kentish Weald, named Todefright - a wonderfully achieved emblem of the particular piece of late nineteenth century, - Olive exercises power over the children through her stories:

Olive had never supposed for one moment that fairies or spirits existed. She lived most intensely in an imagined world peopled by things and creatures that drew their energy and power from other human imaginings, centuries and centuries of them—or alive and going about their purposes when she was not “making them up,” or watching them in her mind. (261)

In this world of inventive power, children are supposed to be the inhabitants of a walled garden who never want to leave or change it. The children inhabit a place in between, are nurtured on stories that “made the worlds of fairytale and adventure which were nevertheless real” (432). Alongside this fantasy world, however, is an impending sense of darkness and danger, a frightening sense of unease that intrudes from outside the walls of the garden.

This increasing unease and guilt of children is what Byatt highlights the most. The chapter “Silver Age” is of particular importance as it functions as a threshold into the twentieth century. Byatt comments on the various new discourses on childhood:

In the Silver Age, which is less written about, [. . .] The Fabians and the social scientists, writers, and teachers saw, in a way earlier generations had not, that children were people, with identities and desires and intelligences. They saw that they were neither dolls, nor toys, nor miniature adults. They saw, many of them, that children needed freedom, needed not only to learn, and be good, but to play and be wild. (565)

From “Silver Age” on, Byatt focuses on how many theories of children and childhood of the Victorian era begin to see that “the thoughts of children resembled those of ancient people's phantastical, mythological thinking” (568). Borrowing from Carl Gustav Jung's analysis of children, for instance, Byatt tells the reader that instead of being nature-given, the concepts of children as sweet, gentle, or carefree have actually been socially constructed:

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The human soul was layered, from the roots of the mountain to the conscious tip. The child lurked and cavorted in the lower levels, occasionally rising like captured Persephone, to sport in the flowery meadows. (568)

She suggests that people start to recognize the fact that the great writing for children of the time actually is also read by and written for grown-ups: thus, children as depicted in traditional children's book are, in fact, those who are given the "alter ego" (541).

Tracing the evolving concept of childhood in the Victorian era, Byatt depicts her new children with various personalities of their own. "[F]ear, desire, panic" (452) seem to be the key concepts to characterize these new children with in *The Children's Book*. Byatt plays with the elements that are removed from the dream world; adventure, danger, darkness, and evil. Children, here, are threatened by a new form of knowledge, new fears, and they delicately embrace their experiences. The new breed of children in this novel do not want to abide themselves with hiding, lying, concealing and pretending to be lovely little children in a beautifully walled garden. The Wellwood family's two eldest children, Tom and Dorothy, and Charles, Basil and Katharina Wellwood's eldest son, are the chief representatives of a new children's identity that emerges from this re-constructed notion of childhood. These children have their own secret movements to escape from the over-dramatized and romanticized world of the children's book of the era.

Since Olive the storyteller represents the controller of the concept of childhood not unlike a puppetmaster, so too she controls her son Tom to create an idealized child character for her story:

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[Tom] was part of an idea she had of an English family, the children running wild in safe woods, in dappled sunlight, the parents smilingly there, when they came home, scratched and breathless, from the Tree House and its simple secrets. They had all been one thing, the whole graduated string of busy children, all the same [...]. (523)

However, Byatt leads the reader into looking at events from Tom's perspective. Tom resents Olive's tale "Tom Underground" as well as J. M. Berrie's *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. Tom's resentment is the result of a troubled inner self, of belonging to a mother who uses him to create characters for her tales. Tom senses that "the Garden of England was a garden through a looking-glass, and had resolutely stepped through the glass and refused to return," and the children have all been "absorbed by daily life and ever so slightly confined and constricted" (523). Unlike Peter Pan, Tom makes the inevitable progression from childhood to adulthood with its shocking realizations and eventually decides to commit suicide. It is ironical that Tom is buried three weeks after Olive's tale-turned-play *Tom Underground* opens successfully on New Year's Day 1901. It seems as if Olive's writing, turning Tom's experience into fiction, ruins Tom's fragile sense of identity as a child. Nevertheless, unlike the old Victorian type of children who are fleeting away into the wood and returning to home with lifelong lessons, Tom, representative of a new kind of child, decides to commit suicide by walking into the waves.

Dorothy, too, persistently opposes her mother's need for fantasy. Although the income from Olive's books keeps her very comfortably

housed and dressed, Dorothy also feels “fear of a trap, fear of something unseen” (540). Like Tom, she is a sensitive and delicate creature, being able to realize the darker side of life. In Olive’s Dorothy-inspired tale about Peggy and Mistress Higgle the shape-changer, Mistress Higgle loses her power to change shapes in the end:

Dorothy meant not to read it. But did, Mistress Higgle’s hedgehog-mantle—and with it her magic—had been stolen, Dorothy read. It had been stolen folded away, in its secret window open, and the spiny jacket nowhere. All the dependent furry creatures in the house—the mouse-people, the frog-people, the little vixen—had lost the power to change shape, because the thorny integument had vanished. Who was responsible? The story stopped there. (539-40)

Without any further succeeding stories, Olive’s Dorothy-tale is stopped and Olive’s accompanying letter to her tale merely adds: “I thought about you [Dorothy] a lot, and since writing stories is what I do, I wrote the one I still think of as yours. You don’t write to tell me how you are” (540). The power of these stories over children forces them to remain as they are, not to grow, change or realize their adult place in the real world. Nevertheless, instead of following a romantic vision of comfortable household and marriage, which is a constructed and expected domesticity, Dorothy is far more driven by anger. Her anger in turn translates into her struggles for women’s rights and her determination to become a doctor. Dorothy ponders, “how interesting flesh and bone is, how interesting the

growth of a child from a seed is” and makes a decision about her career path with her own “willpower and intent” (576).

While Dorothy becomes a young woman who pragmatically thinks and sets her own way to live, Charles is the one who realizes that the shadowy and thicker reality is hidden under the real world, and thinks about how he can “get out of the dreamland” (254). He firstly decides to re-name himself Charles/Karl who has a double face and a double mind; one from the era's imaginary children, and the other from his secret self. His secret self, Karl, instead of being squeezed and shaped into the available meaning of children, directly faces “the moral and political meaning of the word, the dream of justice, the dream of a future life, Utopia” (252). By depicting children as shifting, instable, and unpredictable beings, Byatt takes children out of the invented and re-constructed identity imposed on them.

The other feature that Byatt genealogically traces is the relationship between the contemporary perception of the Victorian age as deeply conservative, and the modern acknowledgement of its more radical undercurrents such as the Fabian Society and the Arts and Craft Movement. These political and social movements play a crucial role in *The Children's Book*, even though they have been somewhat forgotten in the tendency to view the Victorian as predominantly an era of social conservatism. Byatt, however, reminds us that there was a widespread upsurge of interest in both anti-modern and extremely progressive political and social ideas during the later Victorian period. The Fabian society, which aimed at the gradual, non-revolutionary transition to socialism, was particularly strong in the period between 1880 and 1914. Fabian ideas, rooted in the late

Victorian period, became pre-eminent in the Edwardian era. Even within the Fabian society, however, there were important struggles between the anarchists and state socialists, and even more animosity between reformers from the inside and socialist revolutionaries outside of the Society. Furthermore, they split over their different responses toward The Boer War (1889), which broke out of the tension between the Boers and their repressive British government.

*The Children's Book* overturns our conception of the Victorian period by showing the health and vitality of these radical, progressive movements. Charles/Karl is a radical anarchist, Olive and Humphrey Wellwood and even the local pastor Frank Mallett have left-wing Fabian ideas, whereas Basil Wellwood, Humphrey's brother, is a conservative who works for the bank. Throughout the whole length and breadth of *The Children's Book*, there are different layers and systems that, reflecting Foucault's view of society as a zone of competing discourses, define the late Victorian period and the early part of the twentieth century as they are represented in the novel. Each layer has its own language and structure and its dominant power system. Even within those particular settled systems, again, there is contestation going on - the point being that, while the Victorians we imagine today did exist, there were a number of alternative, co-existent subcultures and ideas that we may have forgotten about. In this way, *The Children's Book* provides visible and readable historical tracks that show how such discourses could have been formulated, accepted, or denied within certain notions and regimes that have become dominant in the Victorian era, so that readers can question what powers and purposes have functioned to

characterize the Victorian period as inherently conservative and conformist.

Foucault's analysis in *The History of Sexuality* offers a key concept to define the relationship between history and power in terms of repressive power. Ideas about children have not been historically experienced; rather, they have been deliberately selected and employed by the Victorians. Foucault refers to the false, easy stereotype of the Victorian era as a time of simple denial of sexuality, as the "repressive hypothesis":

It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and should be made to disappear upon its least manifestation -whether in acts or in words, Everyone knew, for example, that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it, why one closed one's eyes and stopped one's ears whenever they came to show evidence to the contrary, and why a general and studied silence was imposed. These are the characteristic features attributed to repression. (Foucault, "We Other Victorians" 293)

Foucault argues that this hypothesis is a gross simplification in that discourses on sexuality, far from being repressed, have proliferated from the seventeenth century up to now. According to Foucault, there was "a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (302) in this period, all competing with political power, and each specific discourse is "different from one another both by their form and by their objects" (302). Opposing the view that the Victorian period was purely repressive, he goes on to say in "The

Deployment of Sexuality” that it is people in power that first conformed to this coded type of discourse:

[T]he family as an agency of control and a point of sexual saturation: it was in the “bourgeois” or “aristocratic” family that the sexuality of children and adolescents was first problematized, and feminine sexuality medicalized; it was the first to be alert to the potential pathology of sex, the urgent need to keep it under close watch and to devise a rational technology of correction. [...] the child surrounded by domestic servants, tutors, and governesses, who was in danger of compromising not so much his physical strength as his intellectual capacity, his moral fiber, and the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class. (Foucault, *Sexuality* 120-21)

Foucault claims that individuals internalize the norms and monitor themselves in an effort to obtain their controlling power. The notion that children are innocent and pure is actually a self-reinforced, self-reasoned, and self-forming discourse because it was truly necessary to make them integrated into a certain way of thinking and behaving. Sexual policing was not about repression; it was an effective tool of self-discipline designed to protect and empower bourgeois society, “a defense, a protection, a strengthening” (123). Thus, it means that children were not only controlled as objects of the Victorian codes of morality but simultaneously they became self-monitoring and self-disciplining subjects, since the internalizing of these powerful discourses on sexuality re-produces more power as rewards.

*The Children's Book* similarly engages in opening up the discussion

of the notion of children. The novel traces those grown-ups who affirm the repressive power over children and establish the limitations for their children. Byatt here sets up a crucial metaphor, the puppets, since the puppet dolls have been carved and manipulated, and shape-changed. Puppets are a central metaphor of power over children to the extent that the puppet-show consists of adults – “one of the actors had taken the strings into his own hands” (545) – and puppet children who have no choice but to act out the given norms and morals. As the dominant discourse has depicted children as the most innocent and gentle kind, they are the dutiful puppets accompanied by the adults’ fingertips. Instead of looking at the puppet show with elegance and grace, however, Byatt shows how children in her novel talk about freedom of the body against the repressive notion which is “so subtle, so terrible, a dramatic representation of those lies” that reduces a grown child to “a puppet and a doll, jerked about by the strings of a failed concept of duty, on a Home that was truly a Doll’s House” (426).

There are significant numbers of scenes that show how the children actually think about “sexual freedom, freedom of the body” (427) and behave out of dominant discourses that forcibly shape them. Charles/Karl, the most resistant to the repressive discourse, is more actively engaged in the “moral knot that he was beginning to recognize. [B]elonging to something, believing in an idea, meant perhaps conceding assent to things that were, outside the belief, ludicrous or horrid” (371). He is positively exposed to talk about “sex, with wit, indignation and a kind of social fervor that was new to [him]” (367).



The novel traces the younger generations' sensual entanglements that are thrown into dramatic contrast to all those who know that these entanglements can amount to nothing. Prosper Cain's son Julian talks about love, and wonders what it would be like to love freely and wildly, comparing his imagined love to the universal ideas about it. Instead of confining oneself to mere imagining, "new children" in the novel openly discuss love with one another, saying "I want love, of course, someone. To love and be loved" (366). Philip's sister Elsie Warren, who "had reached an age where every surface of her skin was taut with the need to be touched and used" can also be seen as a new child who has "the moral problem of the fate" (398). The fact that she is going to have a baby without a proper marriage becomes a topic of discussion among the new children - a topic which would have been denied and reduced to silence by the repressive discourses of the Victorian era. Even some adults help her to keep the baby. Contrary to the images of children socially constructed and projected onto them, the children in *The Children's Book* are always exposed to the discourses on such supposedly forbidden issues as sex, women for sale, and how much sex matters in the modern world that is now opening before them.

The political conception of the Victorian age as deeply conservative and repressive can also be traced back to the upper class's hegemony in accepting the prohibition and disallowance issued from the dominant political power. It is obvious that a certain power ruled over these undercurrent political movements and spread popular conformity to the power for the purpose of relief and insurance. The substantial gap - between the perception of Victorian era's conservativeness and

Byatt's descriptions about the modern acknowledgement that the era's widespread upsurge of interest in various political movements – enables us to link the intensification of the interventions of power to manipulate the discourse and deployment of it. For it ensures the integration of social relations that is economically useful and politically stable. In this way, *The Children's Book* illustrates the discursive explosion of the nineteenth century beyond its dominant power–matrix and shows a more complicated and radical undercurrent that has since been obscured by the traceable ideology. “Everyone went out into the tamed and changing earth, and made camps” (569).

The guilds of craftsmen and anxious social thinkers in temporary shelters, these camps and campers are all destined to accentuate one of the Victorian period's essential traits, its conservatism. According to Foucault, “the world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value” (“Genealogy” 89). *The Children's Book* clearly shows a certain level of “doubt, suspicion, uncertainty” (660) by showing how history is discontinuous and instable: there are always competing historical discourses with power embedded in them.

### III. Neo–Victorian Novel and Power

Neo–Victorian novels actively engage in the postmodern rejection of a single totalizing narrative of art forms and in its deconstruction

of dominant social discourses. These novels urgently look back at the nineteenth century, knowing that this period provided the roots of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, soon to be exemplified by the horror and terror of two World Wars. Working with the benefit of hindsight, Neo-Victorian authors become able to see what happened in the first half of the twentieth-century as the consequences of the Victorian mind-set. These years saw the rise of some infamous totalitarian regimes that were in many ways the legacy of the Victorian past. Totalitarianism in the new century was exemplified by German Fascism and Soviet Communism whose ideologies share in common the dissolution of individual identity in and under a dominant whole. As Hannah Arendt astutely observes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), the core source of these totalitarian regimes is their ideology which provides a single answer to the past, present and future. This ideology, in turn, allows the regime to control the nation more effectively.

Byatt's neo-Victorian novel traces the roots of these totalitarian ideas and provides a number of tools for resisting them, such as creating moments of unsettlement, instability, in an effort to engage the reader's political awareness. Byatt's interpretation of the relevance of the Victorian era to the contemporary world can be traced back to Foucault's choice of title for his chapter "We Other Victorians" in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*: "For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continued to be dominated by it even today" (292). Taking together overlapping themes of power and genealogy in Byatt's neo-Victorian novel, it is possible to see how the text provides strategies for

resistance to totalizing pressures that have continued – sometimes openly, sometimes more secretly – into the contemporary world.

As such, Byatt makes the main plot of *The Children's Book* dwell upon the difficulty of managing the archive and the power embedded in it. This neo-Victorian text resists totality, questioning the system of power and who gets to control the past. In the novel, Byatt resists the totalizing power through a genealogical examination of the evolving notion of childhood that emerges in the Victorian period, as well as by highlighting the more complex historical and political undercurrents at work. Accordingly, the novel works as a genealogical frame within which to look at a history where various powers overlap and conflict with each other. It is against the naïve and populist view of the repressed and conservative Victorian period that Byatt paints this far more complex and realistic picture of that time. Byatt thus concentrates on portraying the disputes, struggles, and instability of totalized knowledge and history.

Destroying the totalitarian attitude is the goal of a main character, Charles (or as he later becomes known, Karl). Feeling the terrifying disparities and cracks in society, Charles/Karl reacts to the historical and political movements by questioning the totalizing unity of the tyrannical regime. As a result, he embraces the discordance of the time:

Charles/Karl was also preoccupied with his double identity. He saw more both of the politically agitated and of the raffish sides of life in Schwabing than the young ladies did. [. . .] He listened to slogans, “Unity is princely violence, is tyrannical rule. Discord is popular violence, is freedom” (Panizza). Intense

analogies were drawn between hidden destructive parts of the soul, and the excitement of peasants and workers in mobs. It was dangerous to deny such impulses—violence, conspiracy, revolution, murder became necessary and desirable as the tyrannical state was opposed and overcome. (Byatt, *Children* 551)

Charles/Karl's flight into the world of the anarchists and his rejection of the totalized regime are in stark contrast to his comfortable upper class upbringing. Charles/Karl is a son of Basil Wellwood, an official of the Back of England. However, he rejects those future possibilities his parents desired and laid for him, even though he had done moderately well at Eton, an elite British school for boys. The secret reason he went to Eton, he decides, was to “learn to argue, and observe the ruling classes at their most absolute, and consider how to thwart their purposes” (254). He even spends parts of his vacations secretly attending meetings of the Social Democratic Federation and Fabian Society, thinking “the moral and political meaning of the word, the dream of justice, the dream of a future life, Utopia” (252). *The Children's Book* gives an excellent depiction of the world of paradox and complexity. As the readers are immersed in the images of the genteel and lucky Wellwood children with their eternal prosperity, these images begin to be betrayed. The novel destroys their dreamy appearance and the world of opulent decadence through the lending eyes of Charles/Karl.

Through these characters and strategies, Byatt repeatedly excludes completion and wholeness, constantly pointing out the

contradictions and complexities that allow for the work of resistance. This resistance, in turn, becomes the basis for the intellectual improvement of her characters as well as enabling them to discover new possibilities and different perspectives. Thus, she questions how the characters' attitudes toward each other and their subjects change throughout the story. Suzanne Keen, for instance, explores how Byatt's characters are improved as a result of their various quests. As Keen puts it, Byatt's neo-Victorian novels "endorse the procedure of shifting the candle in order to reveal a new set of facts and answers invisible until the questing researcher changes the center around which events arrange themselves for interpretation" (44). Byatt skillfully negotiates between the two extreme poles of settled unity and unstable complexity until she seems to reach anti-totalitarian conclusions at the end: this is a strategic feature commonly found in her four neo-Victorian novels. And yet, these texts refuse to offer a closure, thereby demanding the readers to question the given facts and findings and (re)solve the apparent contradictions and riddles so that they can come up with meanings and values of these texts themselves.

*The Children's Book*, though it ends in fragments for the life after 1918, definitely opens up new possibilities for its characters. It is worth recalling the last chapter of the novel, since it is set against a broad historical perspective, encompassing all the complex problems ranging from the English underclass, the Anarchist movement, the Fabians, the Socialists, the Boer War, banking scandals, and women's suffrage, running from 1895 through to the end of World War I. *The Children's Book* closes with the world where "[n]o trains

ran, letters went unanswered” (878) after the end of the First World War. Yet again, against these unsettling events, the novel starts drawing what life after “May 1919” (872) could become. Byatt promises a new beginning for a lost generation at the survivors’ dinner table that forms the very final page of *The Children’s Book*. In this last scene, the author provides glimmers of hope as “Katharina lit the candles which had been brought out for the occasion, and stood in silver candlesticks” (878). Characters sit quietly around the dinner table waiting for Katharina to serve the food:

Katharina asked Wolfgang if he would like more soup, [. . .] She gave more soup to her frail and bony son, and to his wife, she gave more soup to Hedda, [. . .] and to Ann. She gave more soup to Dorothy, who gave more to Philip, who said it was delicious. Delicate dumplings lurked beneath the golden surface on which a veil of finely chopped parsley eddied and swayed. Steam rose to meet the fine smoke from the candles, and all their faces seemed softer in their quavering light. (879)

Despite horrors in the loss of life and innocence throughout the novel, *The Children’s Book* ends with a dinner with silver candlesticks and heartwarming food, the survivors of the war and an infant at table. Marriages are made, children are born, and familial ties are strengthened in unexpected ways, sketching the characters’ new possibilities for life. Byatt’s novel is revealed to offer endless layers of interpretations that subvert any notion of totality. It impresses us with all the playful experiments in open-endedness

that forever promise a new beginning.

#### IV. Conclusion

The fundamental question that triggered this essay was who controls the past, and, as a result, who controls the present and future. Furthermore, to what extent is it possible for the novel to give readers a clearer picture of the past in terms of visible and readable historical genealogies? On these accounts, A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian novel, *The Children's Book*, urgently looks back at the Victorian era to show how the techniques of power exercised over discourses and behaviors are precisely the product of conflicting discourses. Far from undergoing a process of Victorian restrictive totalization, these conflicts remain unresolved and thus connect the past to the contemporary world.

With the aid of this genealogical analysis of totalizing power in terms of how it is deployed and manipulated to form a dominant archive of knowledge, Byatt's neo-Victorian novel provides a model of resistance. It does so by making the arbitrariness and complexity of history open to discussion and contestation. Byatt explores why certain epistemes and regimes have become dominant, why certain complex discourses about the Victorian period have been buried, and what power and purposes have functioned to characterize the Victorian period. Aside from the fact that Byatt shows it is impossible to avoid ambiguity and incompleteness, the most meaningful experiment in her work is the playful attitude with which she reveals



the social reality of totalizing discourses in the Victorian era. The same playfulness is equally present in her narrative of resistance embodied in her characters' quest, which memorably creates frequently unsettling and unexpected results.

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■ **Key Words**

A. S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, Neo-Victorian novel, genealogy, empowerment

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■ Abstract

## Neo-Victorian Novel and Empowerment: A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*

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This essay aims to explore A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian novel in terms of her genealogical analysis of totalizing power focusing on how it is manipulated and deployed to form a dominant archive of knowledge. In doing so, it also examines how history can be used as genealogy to question and re-examine ideological assumptions about the Victorian era in *The Children's Book* (2009). The essay brings together these overlapping themes of power and genealogy to show how the neo-Victorian novel provides strategies for empowerment and resistance to totalizing pressures.

■ Key Words

A. S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, Neo-Victorian novel, genealogy, empowerment

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