

## **“Beings of secondary order”: Framing and intertextuality as narrative tools in A.S. Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”**

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### **Abstract**

Antonia Susan Byatt’s long-standing concern with the interaction between reality and art manifests in many of her texts. For instance, her most widely acclaimed novel, *Possession*, examines the post-modern preoccupation with the past and history through flagrant use of intertextuality and embedded tales. The story discussed in this paper, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” also employs the device of narrative framing in order to achieve metafictional aims. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is an exhibition of Chinese boxes: it engulfs the reader with stories built upon stories, tales descending into tales. Byatt achieves the effect of ontological flickering, Ingarden’s “iridescence,” by means of highlighting the constructed character of the embedded stories and, at the same time, placing the main plot line on the uncertain ground, as it slides between fairy tale and realist fiction, but does not decidedly advance towards magic realism. The insecurity of generic borders in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” seems to illustrate Italo Calvino’s claim that “literature does not recognise Reality as such, but only levels.” Byatt’s protagonist is a narratologist, one of “beings of secondary order” who feed on stories and live by retelling tales. But she is also a self-reliant individual, who understands that the act of retelling “allows the teller to insert him- or herself into the tale.”

**Keywords:** metafiction, fairy tale, narrative, A.S. Byatt, intertextuality

### **1. Introduction**

From the very opening of her story “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” A.S. Byatt establishes in the reader specific narrative expectations and begins to play with them. The title loosely suggests an Oriental fantastic tale and the story commences in the following way:

Once upon a time, when men and women hurtled through the air on metal wings, when they wore webbed feet and walked on the bottom of the sea, learning the speech of whales and the songs of the dolphins, when pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions

of Texan herdsmen and houris shimmered in the dusk on Nicaraguan hillsides, when folk in Norway and Tasmania in dead of winter could dream of fresh strawberries, dates, guavas and passion fruits and find them spread next morning on their tables, there was a woman who was largely irrelevant, and therefore happy. (Byatt, 1995, p. 95)

The phrasing used in this passage confounds the reader with the diversity of associations it brings: expressions such as “once upon a time” and “there was a...” direct our expectations towards a fairy tale genre, “songs of dolphins” and “pearly-fleshed and jewelled apparitions” have a supernaturally fantastic undertone, “hurtl[ing] through the air on metal wings” and wearing “webbed feet” are metaphoric signals of a contemporary setting, the juxtaposition of “Texan herdsmen” and “houris,” reinforced by its alliteration, indicates the confrontation of the West and the East, while the irony of the final phrase, “largely irrelevant, and therefore happy,” suggests a possibility of a strong feminist commitment of the ensuing text.

This paper looks upon the issues signalled by the story’s opening sentence, trying to analyse Byatt’s narrative strategies which abuse the generic patterns of storytelling in order to frustrate the reader’s expectations and evoke the impression of the constructed character of her text. Through extensive use of intertextual references and narrative framing of stories within stories, the writer emphasizes the metafictional dimension of her fiction, indicating that literature largely relies on rewriting. This narrative approach also dramatizes the function of the reader in the creation of a literary text.

## 2. Context

Antonia Susan Byatt started her literary career in the 1960s, and her name was initially associated with realist prose. Her later work, though, decidedly departs from realism and becomes increasingly experimental; for instance, in her most widely acclaimed novel, *Possession: A Romance* (1990), she examines the postmodern preoccupation with history through flagrant use of intertextuality and narrative framing. The author of eleven novels and five collections of short fiction, Byatt remains one of the most eminent British writers of the present day. Meandering between the worlds of the real and the fantastic, her fiction is preoccupied with issues such as literary representation, historiographic metafiction, and empowerment of women.

“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is the longest story in the collection of the same title published in 1994; the unifying motif of the collection is that each of the stories is based on rewriting fairy tale motifs. The protagonist of the “The

Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is a British narratologist, Gillian Perholt, who tries to redefine herself after her husband has abandoned her for another woman. She travels to Turkey to give a paper at a conference on “Stories in Women’s Lives.” In Istanbul she buys an old glass bottle; when she wipes it clean, a genie comes out to grant her three wishes. The genie (or actually the djinn, because the story draws the reader into Muslim mythology) is of an unexpectedly peculiar nature, and so are Gillian’s wishes. The story develops in a manner which disrupts established narrative patterns and defies the readers’ usual expectations.

### 3. Chinese boxes

The Ankara conference in which Gillian participates is devoted to various narrative representations of women’s fates and to different functions that the act of storytelling, or its effects, may fulfil in women’s lives. Gillian’s paper analyses the story of Patient Griselda, which comes from “The Clerk’s Tale” in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, a narrative recounted by the “Clerk of Oxford, who took it from Petrarch’s Latin, which was a rendering of Boccaccio’s Italian” (Byatt, 1995, p. 107). This narrative layering, to a large extent, corresponds to the narrative structure of Byatt’s story: “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” comprises many stories embedded in other stories, on many levels. In fact, the main frame story, summarized above, constitutes only about a quarter of the whole text; most of the narrative consists of interpolated tales and digressions. Choosing Chaucer as a point of reference seems apt: after all, *The Canterbury Tales* is a work which itself employs the pattern of a frame story embedding many tales recounted by many different narrators. Obviously, Byatt is self-consciously aware of the meta-fictional consequences of such a structure and she uses it with a well premeditated intention.

The multi-layered narrative structure which involves stories embedded into other stories is discussed by Gérard Genette in his seminal work *The Narrative Discourse* (1983).<sup>1</sup> Genette (1983, pp. 228–234) distinguishes between three main narrative levels: the extradiegetic level, remaining ontologically above the main storyline, including the teller of the main story; the intradiegetic level, which comprises the world of the main story; and the metadiegetic level, the level of the interpolated stories. The metadiegetic level can break up into various separate layers, varying in degree, and this is what the reader faces in “The Djinn in the

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<sup>1</sup> Byatt playfully casts Genette himself as a character in her story; both him and Tzvetan Todorov, another eminent narratologist, attend another conference in which Gillian participates.

Nightingale's Eye." For instance, we can discern four degrees of layering when we register that Byatt's story (level i) quotes from Gillian's conference paper (level ii), which quotes from *The Canterbury Tales* (level iii), which includes "The Clerk's Tale" (level iv).

The textual strategy which utilizes several layers of embedding, in narrative theory often referred to as Chinese box structure, is a major device employed by postmodernist fiction. A special subcategory of this multi-layered embedding technique is *mise-en-abyme*. Brian McHale (1987, p. 124) provides its lucid definition:

A true *mise-en-abyme* is determined by three criteria: first, it is a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation *resembles* . . . something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this "something" that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation *reproduces* or *duplicates* the primary representation as a whole. (emphasis original)

A universally recognized literary example of *mise-en-abyme* is *Hamlet*, with its playlet, "The Mousetrap," which parallels the main axis of the tragedy. Byatt self-consciously signals the importance of this narrative strategy to her story, as she places one of its scenes in Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, whose entrance mosaic employs *mise-en-abyme* in form of a visual depiction of the very church, in miniature, offered to Jesus and Mary (the painting dating from the times when it was still a Christian cathedral). Most importantly, though, the story extensively employs *mise-en-abyme* to emphasize its thematic preoccupations: many of the texts embedded in the main narrative – conference papers, stories told by Gillian to the djinn, or by the djinn to Gillian, stories told by other characters, or stories read by them – in some way relate, more or less directly, to the personal situation of the protagonist. Also, Gillian attends the conference entitled "Stories in Women's Lives," and this theme coincides to a significant degree with the theme running through the whole story. She gives a paper on the miserable life of Griselda, unobservant that it clearly reflects several aspects of her own life. In more general terms, one of key issues raised by Byatt in her story, both through Gillian's case and through micro-narratives embedded on lower levels, is that of independence and empowerment of women and of contemporary feminine identity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist readings of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" can be found in critical texts by Webb (2003), Renk (2006) and, to a certain extent, Bulamur (2011).

#### 4. Metafictional dimension

Underscoring the iconic nature of *mise-en-abyme*, McHale (1987, p. 124) sees it as “one of the most potent devices in the postmodernist repertoire for foregrounding the ontological dimension of recursive structures.” “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” self-consciously exploits the metafictional potential of this literary strategy, organizing its narrative framework around several emblematic Chinese boxes. For instance, in a patently self-ironical example of *mise-en-abyme*, Byatt’s chooses to examine the issue of literary narrative representation of the world in a story featuring *narratologists*, who during a scientific conference themselves discuss the “construction of reality” performed by “the narrative imagination” (Byatt, 1995, p. 135). As they are situated in a context that emphasizes their self-reflexive relation to the act of storytelling, they are ironically called “being[s] of secondary order” (Byatt, 1995, p. 96), which only reinforces the metafictional status of their presence in the narrative text.

In essence, the metafictionality of multi-layered stories hinges on the foregrounding of the textual dimension of literary narratives over the (traditional) mimetic one. As Patricia Waugh (1996, p. 15) argues, the reader of metafictional narratives which feature several interdependent levels is “presented with embedded strata which contradict the presuppositions of the strata immediately above or below. The fictional *content* of the story is continually reflected by its *formal* existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of ‘textuality’” (emphasis original). Hence, through pursuing the strategy of narrative framing, Byatt achieves in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” what McHale (1987, p. 180) calls an effect of “ontological flickering”, a form of “ontological oscillation” aptly described by Roman Ingarden’s metaphor of the “iridescence” (McHale, 1987, p. 32) effect. Byatt highlights the constructed character of the embedded stories, yet, at the same time, she undermines the reality of the main plot line, which, because of her blatant use of the supernatural, hovers between a realistic story and a fairy tale, but does not entirely advance towards magic realism. Jessica Tiffin (2006, p. 62) notes that by means of embedding fairy tales in her fiction Byatt makes sure the reader can “no longer . . . sink into the comforting mimesis of narrative,” but is instead “forced to confront the tale’s structured status and to acknowledge the reciprocal influences of frame narrative and embedded artefact.”

At the same time, Byatt’s use of the Chinese box structure – practised by her copiously in other works as well: both in her prominent novel *Possession* and in numerous short stories – does not merely indicate metafictionality, but fulfils other functions as well. First, as Alfer and Edwards de Campos (2010, p. 110) point out, it “foregrounds the persistent operations of emplotment as the structural

equivalent of fate.” This is especially true for stories which, like “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” rewrite classical fairy tales and utilize their conventional plot patterns: their characters realize that their fate is predetermined just like the plot of their story is “already fixed along predictable narrative lines”. Then, embedding stories within stories also reflects the multi-layered structure of the reality as it is available to human perception and as it transfers into representation. This is clearly expressed in Italo Calvino’s (1997, pp. 120–121) claim: “literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only *levels*. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which the various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only the levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognizes *the reality of the levels*.” Thus, by dint of operating the Chinese box narrative structure, Byatt is able, in a clearly postmodernist fashion, to question the existence of a single and unified reality.

## 5. Intertextuality

A sense of a constructed nature and a multiple, fragmentary character of human reality is also evoked in Byatt’s story through her extensive use of intertextual references. A passage quoted in section 3 above speaks of the story of Griselda, a figure of a maid illustrious for her meekness and patience, who, as Byatt’s protagonist observes, originated in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Griselda, or a character based on her, has later frequently reappeared in European cultural folklore: not only in Petrarch’s *Historia Griseldis* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, mentioned in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” but in numerous other literary texts by authors including Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope and Caryl Churchill, or even in operas by Alessandro Scarlatti and Antonio Vivaldi. By means of making her narratologist protagonist discuss the textual position of such a universally recognized character as Griselda, Byatt accentuates the potential of intertextuality in structuring narrative works.

Literary theory owes the term intertextuality to Julia Kristeva, whose late 1960s studies develop upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and polyphony. As Hutcheon (2003, p. 126) puts it, Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality emphasizes “the irreducible plurality of texts within and behind any given text” and moves the focus of the literary debate away from the author towards “textual productivity.” Certainly, one of the landmarks of this debate is Roland Barthes’s (1977, pp. 142–148) essay which establishes his influential notion of “the death of the Author.” Barthes negates the assumption of the author’s boundless dominance over the literary text, affirming the “readerly” potential of the recipients.

He locates the origin of the text not in a “unified authorial consciousness,” but in “a plurality of voices, ... other utterances and other texts” (Allen, 2003, p. 72). Certainly, as a late-1990s narratologist, the heroine of Byatt’s story is conscious of the significance of Barthesian theory for her (textual) reality.

In fact, it is not only the woman’s profession, but also her name that automatically situates her within an intertextual frame. Her surname, Perholt, obviously evokes the name of a French fairy tale writer, Charles Perrault, who himself authored a version of Griselda’s story. Moreover, the protagonist’s first name, Gillian, which in the second part of the story is transcribed as Djil-yan, brings to mind a djinn, a supernatural creature from Eastern folk tradition, textualized by *The Arabian Nights*. Such a designation locates the heroine in a fairy tale dimension, which stresses her ontological status as an artifice, an invented character, a “being of secondary order” in another sense. At the same time, though, the name of Gillian Perholt, an amalgam of references to Eastern and Western folk tales, is also one of numerous signifiers which position Byatt’s story in the middle ground between the two cultural traditions. The textual signals of this kind appearing in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” are quite bountiful. Part of the story takes place in Istanbul, a place which is geographically spread between two continents and which historically as well as culturally belongs to two realms: Hagia Sophia, a Christian cathedral turned into an Islamic mosque is again emblematic here. Similarly, the name of Gillian’s Turkish scholar friend, Orhan, alludes to Orhan Pamuk, an internationally recognized Turkish novelist whose works often discuss the influence of the conflict between Eastern and Western values on contemporary Turkish identity.<sup>3</sup> Overall, Byatt flamboyantly recalls in the story a prodigious number of intertexts, either naming them directly or alluding to them. They represent either the Western – like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* or Mann’s *Death in Venice* – or the Eastern cultural tradition – like the Koran, *The Arabian Nights* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. One of the intertextual references, *The Thief of Bagdad*, an American silent movie starring Douglas Fairbanks and based on the Arabian Nights tales, has a special position, as it represents a reductive, Orientalist Western gaze. The multiplicity and frequency of intertextual allusions in Byatt’s story, which creates the impression of obtrusiveness, clearly accentuates Barthesian surmise that “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other” (Barthes, 1977, p. 148).

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<sup>3</sup> When Byatt’s story was published, in 1994, Pamuk already enjoyed noticeable recognition in the West. Naturally, his popularity was further boosted when he was granted the Nobel Prize in literature in 2006.

## 6. Repetition with a difference

Aware of the ironic potential of postmodernist intertextuality, Linda Hutcheon (2003, p. 40) recognizes it as an efficient strategy by means of which fiction can foreground the constructed character of the reality. The critic considers the discourse of intertextuality in postmodernist fiction to be “parodically doubled” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 128), and claims that parody is an essential postmodernist artistic form. Noting that parody “both incorporates and challenges” its object (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 11), she further argues that the manner in which postmodern writers use parody demands that we revise its definition and understand it as “with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 26). In this way, the natural consequence of planting intertextual references in the text is focusing the reader’s attention on how the story relies on previously structured narrative patterns and how it consciously, and meaningfully, departs from them.

A.S. Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” engages in its narrative structure the patterns of several literary genres, but the one which is most intensively exploited is that of a fairy tale. As the reader of the story can see from its opening sentence, quoted in the introduction to this paper, the narrative endeavours to apply a postmodern strategy of a repetition with a difference, thus conveying its ironic and critical distance to the established model. Technically, the reader is invited into the realm of the fantastic, but most of the expectations established by the usual patterns of the fairy tale genre are frustrated already in this first sentence: (i) it sets the plot in the present day, introducing elements of contemporary technologies, (ii) it juxtaposes the cultural traditions of the East and the West, and (iii) it suggests a possibility of a feminist undertone. Byatt relies here on the fact that the genre of fairy tale, typically patriarchal in its main assumptions and built on flagrant gender stereotypes, is a perfect material for postmodernist ironic rewriting which has a feminist agenda. When the writer revisits traditional folk tale themes with a feminist critical attitude, she follows in the footsteps of her literary predecessors who centred on the issue of female empowerment in their rewritings of fairy tales – one of the most notable examples from British fiction being Angela Carter’s collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1995).

Yet “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” does not merely *depart* from fairy tale patterns: it is actually a realistic story which only features some motifs typical of this genre. Still, even if it incorporates supernatural elements, they are reverted quite against the reader’s expectations. It is most conspicuously seen in the narrative status of the three wishes granted to the protagonist by the djinn. The choice of the wishes is markedly influenced by the fact that Gillian, as a narratologist, is aware that typically the outcome of the three wishes in fairy tales is not advanta-



geous to the wishers: the wishes “have a habit of twisting the wishers to their own ends” (Byatt, 1995, p. 160) and the autonomy of choice is only illusory, because fairy tale readers realize that “the possible leap of freedom” is inevitably accompanied by “the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed” (Byatt, 1995, p. 259). In an feat of self-conscious irony, Gillian undermines the conventional act of making three wishes: only her first wish is centred on herself; in the second one she makes the djinn directly involved, as she asks him to love her; finally, she renounces the last wish, ceding it to the djinn.

## 7. Conclusions

In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” Byatt lavishes the reader with a profusion of intertextual references and multiplicity of narrative levels. Both intertextuality and Chinese box structure function as metafictional strategies, enabling her to achieve the effect of ontological flickering, which highlights the constructed character of the narrative reality. The ontological stability of the story’s world is further problematized by its wavering between the realistic and the supernatural. Byatt also pursues an exemplary postmodernist goal: aware that “intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 126), she emphasizes the significance of the reader’s role in creating the meaning of a literary text.

Byatt’s protagonist, Gillian Perholt, is a narratologist; she belongs to the group of “beings of secondary order,” *re*-tellers of tales, who are *indirectly* involved in the narrative process. Narratologists, as Gillian believes, “work by telling and retelling tales. This holds the hearer from sleep and allows the teller to insert him- or herself into the tale” (Byatt, 1995, p. 106). Yet, Byatt’s story suggests that not merely narratologists, but all literary narrators are “beings of secondary order,” inasmuch as literary storytelling quite inevitably, to a significant extent, originates in the act of retelling. The narrative structure of “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” through its flagrant, or even obtrusive, use of strategies of embedding and intertextuality, indicates that literature generally relies on retelling and rewriting.

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