

**Neo-Victorian Sexual De[f|v]iance:  
Incest, Adultery, Breaking the Virginity Taboo  
and Female Sexual Agency in A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia'**

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**Abstract:**

This essay analyses the way Byatt's novella is shaped by (neo-Victorian) Gothic by borrowing the concept of 'abhumanness' to focus specifically on Eugenia Alabaster. I argue that Eugenia's conflation of deviance and defiance is an intellectual investigation into the biological and ethical nature of desire. Hence, Eugenia's incestuous relationship with her half-brother Edgar and her marital relationship with William Adamson are read in the context of gendered exploitation in order to analyse Victorian sexual politics in relation to the neo-Victorian investigation into Victorian sexual deviance. Eugenia's deviant/defiant sexuality is thus read as a subversive form of Victorian female sexual agency and a way to break both the incest taboo and the virginity taboo. Finally, Eugenia's sexual behaviour is discussed against the backdrop of past and present anthropological and psychiatric approaches to sexuality, which I argue have cross-fertilised Byatt's own exploration of what constitutes sexual deviance in the novella.

**Key Words:** abhuman, A.S. Byatt, Darwinism, female sexual agency, Gothic, incest, 'Morpho Eugenia', neo-Victorian fiction, perversion, virginity taboo.

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In her 1999 essay '*Angels and Insects*', A.S. Byatt describes 'Morpho Eugenia' as

a Gothic tale about Victorian religion, sexuality, and Darwin's ideas [...] a kind of Gothic fable about Darwinian speculations about sexual selection, breeding true to type, inbreeding and outbreeding, which opened up into the terrible anxieties of the time about what human nature was, within Nature, ruthlessly selecting the fittest, red in tooth and claw. (Byatt 1999: para.8)

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Byatt's critics tend to agree that 'Morpho Eugenia' belongs to the postmodern Gothic (see Shiller 1997: 538), a genre that has been theorised as re-emerging "cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises" (Hurley 1996: 5). In this light, Byatt's description suggests that her novella is shaped by ongoing present-day – that is, neo-Victorian – cultural anxieties over human nature, explored through religious, sexual, and evolutionary discourses and ideas inherited from the nineteenth century. As Catherine Spooner points out in *Contemporary Gothic*, "Gothic texts deal with a variety of themes just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Gothic novels just achieved popularity" (Spooner 2006: 8). Hence, by interrogating the past Byatt exposes its burdens on the present, namely by highlighting the provisional nature of the self through the novella's preoccupation with the female protagonist's changing (pregnant) body, and the latter's ambivalent Gothic construction as 'other' or 'abhuman' (see Hurley 1996: 3).

The focus of these speculations is one of the two female protagonists, Eugenia Adamson (née Alabaster), who ultimately proves both victim and perpetrator, sexploited and sexploiter. Hence, Byatt's novella problematises the trope of gendered exploitation on several counts, so as to interrogate the Victorian gendered politics of sexual (em)power(ment) vis-à-vis the neo-Victorian investigation into Victorian sexual deviance from contemporary perspectives. I am particularly interested in the Byatt's examination of Eugenia's paedophilic and incestuous use by her brother Edgar, the protagonist William Adamson's own objectification of Eugenia, and both Edgar's and William's potential sexploitation by Eugenia in order for her to beget children, since I argue that Eugenia's deliberately ambiguous, potentially amoral conflation of deviance and defiance promotes Byatt's intellectual investigation into the nature of desire by exploring its biological foundations as well as its ethical limits. In fact, Byatt's configuration of Eugenia as a locus of conflicting sexual desires, which prefigures a re-examination of the Victorian patriarchal family with regards to its sexual dynamics, renders explicit female sexual deviance in the form of unexpected or even illicit sexual behaviour, while it also examines female sexual defiance via the intentionally ambivalent, potentially subversive explanation underlying that behaviour. In this sense, I would argue, the

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novella produces a critical reading of deviance in the context of the remarkably uncensorious Victorian medical discourses, which emphasised the biological foundations of sexual desire and deviance. At the same time ‘Morpho Eugenia’ deploys a contemporary, neo-Victorian awareness of those discourses’ ethical limits, which were still in the process of being codified in the late nineteenth century.

Consequently, this essay analyses Eugenia’s deviant/defiant sexuality in its triple manifestation: the subversive form of Victorian female sexual agency; the breaking of the incest taboo; and the breaking of the virginity taboo. In order to do that, Eugenia’s sexual behaviour, as well as the reason she gives for it, is examined against the backdrop of past and present anthropological and psychiatric approaches to sexuality. By these means Byatt ultimately questions the extent to which individuals in general – and women in particular – are ever truly autonomous subjects, and the extent to which they can ever escape trans-historical patterns of exploitation.

### **1. Of Insects and (Wo)Men: The Limits of Abhumanness**

In ‘Morpho Eugenia’, the Gothic’s anxiety about human nature and its differentiation from the animal kingdom on account of reason, morality, and self-control is accentuated by Darwinian speculations about sexual selection and sexual exploitation. Both the notion of “a relativistic precarious sense of subjectivity” and the futility of escape from sexual violation, of course, are staple motifs of the Gothic, and in the case of neo-Victorian Gothic texts, such as ‘Morpho Eugenia’, these anxieties are explored through the characters’ and readers’ own “temporal convergence/difference and even collapse into the Victorians as ourselves-as-other” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012b: 9). Not least, we become implicated in the text’s own politics of othering sexploitation, as female sexuality is primarily mediated through the objectifying ‘scientific’ gaze of the naturalist William Adamson, Eugenia’s suitor and later husband.

Evolution and the anxiety over human nature with regards to morality and sexuality are Victorian issues that Byatt self-consciously revisits in her neo-Victorian narrative. In this sense, Byatt’s practice of storytelling “does not separate the literary from the critical imagination, but rather aims at a thoughtful and deliberate commingling of these two ways of seeing and describing the world” (Alfer and de Campos 2010: 3-4). In fact,

the novella indirectly produces a critical reading of Darwin through an imaginative interaction with the intellectual world he inhabited (see Alfer and de Campos 2010: 149). This world is recreated through the discussions between the Reverend Harald Alabaster and his house guest and later son-in-law, the natural scientist and self-professed Darwinist William Adamson. Modelled on English naturalist Henry Walter Bates, who became famous for his eleven-year expedition to the rainforests of the Amazon (from where he sent back eight thousand new species, mostly of insects), William also emulates Bates in his attempt to write a scientific account of that expedition, a task he hopes to complete in the Alabaster household. William's and the Reverend's talks regard the role of God and/or Nature in creation and, particularly, the Darwinian drawing of analogies between ants and humanity, in which "the parallels between insect and human life start on the physical level of resemblance and quickly extend to social organisation and the social and sexual division of labour" (Shuttleworth 2001: 153). Fittingly, in 'Morpho Eugenia', it is thus Eugenia's contested sexual and maternal body which instantiates the Darwinian threat to established cultural certainties.

On the other hand, there is a critique of what might be termed the 'sexual world' of the so respectable seeming Alabaster household. Female power and agency are therefore paradoxically both facilitated and severely circumscribed by sexual (dis)obedience within the specific cultural context of gendered constructions of nineteenth-century femininity, which Byatt simultaneously re-inscribes and subverts through the trope of sexploitation. Thereby Byatt's novella "create[s] a multiplicity of differing perspectives – a polyvocal tapestry rather than a series of monolithic pronouncements from an authoritative professional reader" (Alfer and de Campos 2010: 149). I argue that, like William, we as readers are forced to continuously revise our assessments of Victorian sexuality and sexual mores on account of the gradual revelations of Eugenia's paedophilic and incestuous abuse by Edgar and of William's own exploitative objectification of her, as well as Eugenia's own sexually exploitative manipulations of William.

In the nineteenth century, new scientific discourses such as Darwin's evolutionary theory, psychiatric theories on insanity and sexual perversions, and pre-Freudian psychology broadened cultural anxiety by demolishing conventional Victorian notions on the human condition as radically as did the period's Gothic fiction. At the same time, the Gothic moved humanity

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itself towards what Hurley, after the writer William Hope Hodgson, designates as an ‘abhuman’ condition (see Hurley 1996: 3).<sup>1</sup> In the context of her discussions of the Gothic body, Hurley has extensively used this term to refer to a subject who is “a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (Hurley 1996: 3-4). The prefix *ab-* thus signals the movement beyond a place or condition (in this case, humanity), signifying loss as well as a simultaneous threat and/or promise, since ‘moving beyond’ is also moving towards a still unspecified (and hence possibly advantageous or improved) place or condition. Reading *Eugenia* as an exemplar of the Gothic’s abhuman subject, I argue, enables a more productive decipherment of the underlying theme of sexploitation that runs through ‘*Morpho Eugenia*’.

When Darwin’s evolution theory radically destabilised the boundaries between human beings and animals, men were no longer the distinctive species of the animal kingdom. If human origin was indeed similar to animal origin, then it could also be studied by zoologists, embryologists or microbiologists. These scientists found structural internal likenesses between human and animal bones and muscles through dissection; they brought forth evidence on how the history of human evolution had always been the story of gestation; they proved that man, like any other organism reduced to its most basic components, was but an agglomeration of protoplasm globules – “the physical basis or matter of life” (Huxley 2003: 130), as T.H. Huxley put it in his essay ‘On the Physical Basis of Life’, published in 1869. Hence it comes as no surprise that the relationship between outer appearances and inner realities was revised and rendered problematic by way of the scientific analysis of the human body.

Actually, in the nineteenth century, evolution was appropriated into the religious domain when the Anglican Church felt the urge to replace Darwin’s natural selection with the idea of a divine selection, so that the human race could still be regarded as God’s utmost achievement, the perfected product of a biological process of development conceived by God. This is precisely what Reverend Alabaster, the spokesperson for the anxiety over the human condition in ‘*Morpho Eugenia*’, conveys when he tries to assuage his disquiet with regards to the descent of man: “I know my answer – it is – if God works at all he works in the ape towards Man – but I cannot measure my loss, it is the pit of despair itself” (Byatt 1995: 60).

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Some Victorian thinkers, such as T.H. Huxley and H.G. Wells, opposed this appropriation by arguing that if humankind had begun to exist by way of a random combination of natural processes, it would not be able to assure its own stability and continuity. Like other species, it could either recede into a lower life form or progress towards a higher life form, or even vanish from Earth altogether, since Nature would be ethically neutral, not being compelled to privilege the human race over others. In Reverend Alabaster's words, such a world based on random mutation would be one "in which angels and devils do not battle in the Heavens for virtue and vice, but in which we eat and are eaten and absorbed into other flesh and blood" (Byatt 1995: 59). In these terms, sexuality itself becomes little more than a gross form of predation rather than an embodied expression of spiritual love, with the Reverend Alabaster envisaging "a chimpanzee [...] clutching its hairy offspring to its wrinkled breast – and is this love made flesh?" (Byatt 1995: 59-60). Prophetically, for the novella's later revelations, female sexuality is reconfigured in gross abhuman terms.

In a later scene, again trying to hold onto his religious belief in the face of the new scientific discoveries of his time, the Reverend muses that "we may imagine [...] a Creator" very precisely because, created in God's image, humans too "have an indwelling need to make works of art which can satisfy no base instinct of mere survival, or perpetuation of the species, but are only beautiful, and intricate, and food for the spirit" (Byatt 1995: 58). It is arguably ironic that it should be both a clergyman and Eugenia's father who, however indirectly, introduces the linking of female beauty to exploitative sexual selection by males in the text. In fact, this passage foreshadows Darwinian thought, explored later in the novella, with regards to sexual selection by its implied comparison between beautiful man-made works of art and beautiful divine creations, both human and animal. The two are symbolically combined in Eugenia as both the cultural construct of ideal womanhood and the novella's eponymous butterfly, whose distinctive feature is natural beauty, something that is implicitly gendered for Darwin (see Beer 2000: 197).

William is a good example of a man who gives primacy to beauty over mental charms, since he chooses Eugenia for her beauty, not out of any moral reasoning or because he even knows her or likes her. Almost invariably, he thus objectifies Eugenia: "She is so beautiful, [...] – so very beautiful – and – and – *perfect* – that she cannot be long without finding –

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some worthy partner” (Byatt 1995: 46). Yet, although he finds it both easier and more reasonable “to believe in” what he terms “a mindless natural force” (Byatt 1995: 59), he still insists on wanting to believe in love. As a result, he wilfully blinds himself to his own sexual predatoriness vis-a-vis women, as evinced by his memory of his callous sexual use of the non-white women during his time in the Amazon.

Although her heroine was called Eugenia (‘well-bred’) from a very early stage, Byatt explains that she only found Bates’s description of a real Amazonian butterfly much later on: “Morpho Eugenia, the shapely, the beautiful Eugenia – Morpho is one of the names of Aphrodite” (Byatt 1999a: para. 8). As the outward representation of Aphrodite, Eugenia will conquer William by parading her shapeliness, just like beautiful male butterflies do when courting a female. It is ironic, given his inside knowledge of butterflies, that William should not notice the fact that females do not initiate courtship, when he prophetically states that “Mr Darwin believes the beauty of the butterfly exists to attract his mate” (Byatt 1995: 58). William’s wording – “his mate”, not her mate – signals Byatt’s gendered inversion of Darwin’s concept of sexual selection as “the advantage which certain [male] individuals have over other individuals of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction” (Darwin 1981: 256). In her morphing representation of Eugenia, Byatt effectively brings to light Darwin’s findings with regards to female sexuality in the insect world and, by implication, self-consciously thwarts Victorian assumptions regarding female sexual passivity.

Eugenia’s beauty is so overwhelmingly seductive that she dazzles the senses “as a boat is inside the drag of a whirlpool, or as bee is caught in the lasso of perfume from the throat of a flower” (Byatt 1995: 53). However, her metaphorical representation as colourful butterfly conceals a harmful secret that may assume two different guises, both related to the natural world and both explored in Eugenia’s figuration: protection or attraction between the sexes (see Darwin 1981: 391-392). In fact, her sexual use of William and her incestuous relationship with Edgar both metaphorically reconfigure Darwinian’s findings regarding butterflies, since Eugenia will find protection via the respectability provided by marriage against the sexual attraction she appears to feel for her half-brother.

William’s growing obsession with Eugenia’s beauty, encouraged by his fascination with sexual selection, thus assumes transgressive Gothic

overtone, appropriately paralleled in Darwin's evolution theory. As Hurley argues, Darwinism described "a bodily metamorphosis which [...] rendered the identity of the human body in a most basic sense – its distinctness from the 'brute beasts' – unstable" (Hurley 1996: 56). This led to two apprehensions: firstly, that man might not be totally evolved, which would be as good as saying that man was still, at least in part, an abhuman entity; and that instead of tending towards perfection, human evolution might be reversible, meaning that "the human race might ultimately retrogress into a sordid animalism rather than progress towards a telos of intellectual and moral perfection" (Hurley 1996: 56). Byatt makes these Victorian fears central to 'Morpho Eugenia', where exploited and exploitative female sexuality exposes both William and Edgar's base animal natures and the latter's degenerate disregard for moral values and human decency.

Byatt complicates the sexploitation theme with regards to the role of female (sexual) agency, likewise analysed through naturalistic imagery. In her essay '*Angels and Insects*', Byatt explains that the novella aptly began with the visual image of an actual ant-heap that would also become a metaphor for a Victorian mansion, combining her interest in television naturalism and her obsession with Victorian Gothic (Byatt 1999a: para. 5). Reverse anthropomorphism plays a vital part in this concern, since her novella is an exploration of having human beings – namely, the Alabaster household – behaving like ants rather than investing ants with human morals and attributes. Byatt speculates whether the Queen ant is the power centre of the ant-heap or, conversely, a slave. This question – which also points to Byatt's awareness of the neo-Victorian debate over female writers' heroine/victim characters – will be central for my reading of Eugenia's sexuality. Is Eugenia, identified with the power centre – namely, "the 'powerful' egg-laying queen" (Byatt 1999: para.5) – or the slave? Is she defiant or deviant? Or is she both, and if so, to or with whom?

Byatt plays this ambiguity to maximum effect in Eugenia, whose reverse anthropomorphism proves as dangerous to herself as to her husband. Quite critical of anthropomorphic personifications, "or whimsical parallels between insect armies, rulers and 'servants' with human hierarchies" (Byatt 2000: 80), Byatt has chosen instead to attribute non-human characteristics and qualities to her female protagonist in order to speculate "about where the source of decision-making really lay in an anthheap – in the individual or the 'mind of the nest'" (Byatt 1999: para. 5). In this sense, William is also



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portrayed as a drone who in all likelihood never manages to impregnate the Queen – if reverse anthropomorphism is to be taken at face value, no matter William’s objections: “Analogy is a slippery tool [...] Men are not ants” (Byatt 1995: 100). Discussing striking similarities between ant and human behaviour with the scientifically-minded governess Matty Crompton, William responds to her query as to why her ants die regardless of all the care she bestows on them with the explanation that “ants are social beings: they exist, it appears, only for the good of the whole nest, and the centre of the nest is the Queen ant whose laying and feeding the others all tend ceaselessly” (Byatt 1995: 37). In an unconsciously significant prolepsis, he adds that the Queen’s power only lasts as long as she is young and continuously produces offspring for the benefit of the nest; hence her value purely resides in her sexual capacity and “her brood” (Byatt 1995: 37). Human society likewise values Eugenia as a woman for her ability to procreate and thus perpetuate the family line, with her beauty serving this sexual selection. This could be deemed a form of sexploitation – woman as breeding machine – and reductionist objectification to mere bodily function. Ironically, of course, this is exactly what she herself engages in via her ‘degenerate’ incest, only it is the Alabaster rather than Adamson line she helps perpetuate.

This human as ant analogy is evocative of human regression to a lower evolutionary stage and implies Eugenia’s non-human characteristics, as well as her lack of human specificity. Moreover, Eugenia is using her husband for sex both for her own sexual gratification and for duplicating her chances to get impregnated (either by him or by Edgar), just like the Queen ant does in an ant colony. There is again strong emphasis on naturalistic imagery to describe Eugenia’s bed as a “dark, warm nest, almost suffocating, its heat increasing” (Byatt 1995: 68). Similarly, her pregnant body, which “swelled slowly, developing large breasts and a creamy second chin, as well as the mound she carried before her” (Byatt 1995: 70), is the corporeal mark of Eugenia’s abhumanness through its suggestion of half-animalism.

A comparable transformation happens to Edgar Alabaster and William Adamson, since notwithstanding their differences, both men will metaphorically be morphed into male ants. Edgar becomes “a specialised male”, whose whole existence “is directed *only* to the nuptial dance and the fertilisation of the Queens”, whose sexual organs, “as the fatal day

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approaches, occupy almost the whole of their body” (Byatt 1995: 103). Like the drones, Edgar has been “pampered in the early stage of [his] life, [a] tolerated pretty parasite, who dirt[ies] and disturb[s] the calm workings of the nest, who must be fed on honey-dew and cleaned up after in the corridors” (Byatt 1995: 103). As much is indicated by his rape of the servant girl Amy and the fact that his mother is left to clean up his ‘mess’ by dismissing the pregnant girl and sending her to a workhouse. However, Edgar is not rejected after impregnating the Queen, unlike William, who becomes “unnecessary and unwanted [...] beaten back for the most part from the door of [his] home nest, and driven away to mope and die in the cooling evenings” (Byatt 1995: 103).

The inescapable irony is, of course, that the defender of Darwinism, and himself a determinist, is determined to marry the butterfly and discovers too late that he has married the Queen ant by mistake, a female that is the object of desire of all males (see Shuttleworth 2001: 153). In fact, Eugenia mimics the sexual behaviour of Queen ants during their nuptial flight: like them, Eugenia is also sexually active in the way she attracts the male(s) and, like them, she afterwards withdraws in order to build her nest. This mimicry, which is one of the peculiar aspects of analogy in the study of the natural world, turns Eugenia into what Byatt calls “walking analogies, walking metaphors” (Byatt 2000: 119). As Matty Crompton quite fittingly suggests in a word game through her intended pun on ‘insect’ and ‘incest’, incest takes place in insect societies, namely those of the ants she studies in collaboration with William. In addition, this pun also draws William’s (and the reader’s) further attention to the similarities between Eugenia and the Queen ant. Thus is anthropomorphism subverted: rather than ants displaying human characteristics, it is human beings who behave like ants, in what is a regressive step back at several levels.

According to Darwin’s definition of analogy, a true relationship between dissimilar entities can indeed be pointed out (see Darwin 1981: 34-106, 214-252). Hence William’s perception of Eugenia’s bed as “a soft nest” and of her new-born babies as “two eggs in a box” is paradoxically validated by his use of words more suited to animals – ants – than to human beings (Byatt 1995: 67, 70). Inescapably corporeal, Eugenia’s body is the site of several sexual transgressions, in the attempt to materialise the gothicness of the abhuman body by targeting femininity, variable sexuality and morphic fluidity as the markers of abhumanness (see Hurley 1996:

125). This is moreover another metaphor on the creation of metaphors (see Byatt 2000: 120), deeply connected to one of the quasi genetic ‘embryos’ of ‘Morpho Eugenia’, namely Maurice Maeterlinck’s anthropomorphic description of a Queen ant after her nuptial flight in *Vie des Fourmis* (1930). In ‘True Stories and the Facts in Fiction’, Byatt explains her own vision of ants as the Not-human/Other, emphasising that “we should be careful before we turn other creatures into images of ourselves” (Byatt 2000: 114-115). Yet via William’s perspective, Byatt nonetheless invites her readers to draw just such analogies, only to subsequently deconstruct them through her key figuration of the sexploited Eugenia as an abhuman figure.

## 2. A Neo-Victorian Angel in the House: Female Sexuality

‘Morpho Eugenia’ renders problematic the contradiction that fragments the double conception of the feminine during the Victorian period in its figuration of Eugenia as the embodiment of conflicting meanings of public chastity and private transgression. This is also articulated in the novella via its Gothic staging of Eugenia as an abhuman figure, unquestionably female but arguably a “fully human” subject (see Hurley 1996: 4). Hence, Eugenia’s particular form of sexploitation with regards to her husband is heightened by the apparent contradiction between Eugenia’s public embodiment of the proverbial Angel in the House and her private figuration as fallen woman, in what I argue is Byatt’s critique of the gendered construction of femininity in the nineteenth century. In fact, Eugenia is a veritable neo-Victorian angel in the sense that she subverts both Victorian assumptions regarding female sexual passivity and contemporary informed guesses about Victorian sexual mores. In this sense, Byatt’s novella decisively participates in the neo-Victorian reshaping of texts as cultural *Doppelgänger*s of the Victorian period, since they both mimic and challenge nineteenth-century exegesis (see Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014: 1-2).

On the one hand, Victorian representations of women tend to categorise them into disembodied angels or animalistic demons, pushing them into the sexual polar extremes of either asexual beings or sexual predators. Furthermore, the cultural construction of woman as the Angel in the House tightly corseted both women and men to the social conventions and normative behavioural standards that defined the relationship between them. In conformity with the purity code, which separated the chaste wife

who sublimated love from the fallen woman who ensnared men with her body, Victorian wives should be able to distinguish love from sex in order to save their husbands from harmful sensuality or sexual passion by sexually submitting to them while spiritually elevating them.

In the novella, however, the wife does not fulfil the spiritual role assigned to and expected from her, a concern obliquely voiced by William in the first months of his marriage: “certainly he expected some kind of intimate new speech to develop between himself and his wife, and expected her, vaguely, to initiate it” (Byatt 1995: 69). If the Victorian exaltation of (married) love was “partly an apologia for sex in a period when sex was [...] closely connected with emotions of [...] religious guilt and shame” (Houghton 1957: 391), the neo-Victorian self-conscious re-engagement with nineteenth-century socio-cultural legacies is fundamentally concerned with the exposition of sexual transgression and subversion (see Kohlke 2015: 151), as articulated in the novella’s treatment of married love. Byatt’s multi-layered discussion of the darkest, most lurid family secrets hidden behind the respectable façade of domestic harmony tempered by moral values is thus embodied in Eugenia’s double construction as both sexual predator and prey, sexplover of her husband and sexploited by her half-brother.

On the other hand, *fin-the-siècle* Gothic fiction ambivalently negotiated the tensions between nostalgia for the fully-human being and enjoyment of the prospect of a monstrous becoming as an expression of the ongoing epistemological crisis of human identity (see Hurley 1996: 4). Through its re-engagement with the abhuman subject, neo-Victorian Gothic fiction can be said to self-consciously widen that gap by focusing on the tropes of sexual transgression and sexploitation. In the case of Byatt’s neo-Victorian fiction, this is nowhere more apparent than in ‘Morpho Eugenia’. Unlike *Possession*, whose sex scenes have been argued to be extremely coy or reticent, hence “re-enacting the constraint exercised in mainstream nineteenth-century literature” (Kohlke 2015: 155), in this novella Eugenia’s sexual deviance/defiance in its manifold manifestations of female sexual agency, adultery, and incest is amply chronicled with modern openness and detail.

Hence, Byatt re-enforces the Gothic eroticisation of the female white body, an example of which can be found in William’s musing that Eugenia “was white all over. Even her nipples must be white. He remembered Ben Jonson. ‘O so white! O so soft! O so sweet, is she!’” (Byatt 1995: 66).

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Likewise, Byatt draws on the symbolic meanings of white as the colour of passage in the sense of initiation and the colour of vampires, shrouds and spectres (see Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996: 1105-1106) in Eugenia's portrayal as an abhuman figure. White defines her, both with regards to her outer garments, her skin colour and her name, since Eugenia is also Alabaster, "a kind of funerary urn" (Byatt 1990: 137). Like the stone, Eugenia Alabaster is characterised by her marble whiteness, which emphasises her connection to death, while it also points to what Hurley designates as "the vulnerability of the white body" as far as the refinement of the race is concerned, "less a sexual object than a representation of whiteness at its 'best'— [...] the purest race, subject to the insidious envy and rage of lesser, dark-skinned peoples" (Hurley 1996: 140, 141). It evokes the double meaning of 'well-bred' as someone who is educated and has a polished social behaviour, on the one hand, and has the pedigree of a superior blood-line and race, on the other. Eugenia's white body thus pointedly contrasts with darker female bodies, supposedly in a lower or less evolved stage of development. Fair-skinned Edgar Alabaster does not fail to make this connection when he contemptuously tells the darker-skinned William Adamson: "You are underbred, Sir, you are no good match for my sister. There is bad blood in you, vulgar blood" (Byatt 1995: 62).

Therefore, William associates Eugenia's white body with an analogous 'white' sexual experience, virginity, foregrounding the Victorian discourse on women that Byatt challenges in her ambivalent construction of Eugenia. In fact, her white body leads at least William to assume that she is the guardian of the chaste, contained sexual behaviour to be expected in the Victorian wife, while the reader knows through William's description of their wedding night that Eugenia does not behave in the way a nineteenth-century virgin girl was expected to behave. Unlike many ancient civilisations in India, Japan, and China, in which female sexuality and sexual pleasure were openly written about, as the *Kama Sutra* (arguably the most well-known ancient treatise on sex and sexuality in Western contemporary culture) can attest, female desire and sexual pleasure were a taboo in Victorian society. Female sexuality would be re-assessed by Freudian psychology during the first decades of the twentieth century, and later by mid-twentieth-century sexologists and second-wave feminists, a fact that does not appear to have escaped Byatt in her neo-Victorian depiction of Eugenia's sexual behaviour. In effect, Freudian psychosexual studies on

female virginity would indicate that the first sexual act was often synonymous with frustration for a woman and that it was necessary that some time elapses before the sexual act was repeated in order that the woman's original frigidity vanished and she might start to feel sexual pleasure (see Freud 1991b: 274). This is clearly not so in Eugenia's case.

Actually, Eugenia's sexual behaviour does not fit the sexual passivity assumed to be typical of the Angel in the House, although she is never (publicly) depicted as carnal or voluptuous. On the contrary, she is repeatedly described as "a good girl" by her parents (see Byatt 1995: 15, 28, 46) and as a tragic figure by her younger sister Enid. Quite significantly, Enid tells William very early on in the narrative that Eugenia was to be married when her fiancé "died quite suddenly" – only later will the reader know this is in fact a euphemism for 'committed suicide' – adding that Eugenia "is only just recovering" from that "terrible shock" (Byatt 1995: 6). Yet she remains silent on Eugenia's part in her fiancé's untimely demise, since he actually killed himself upon discovering her incestuous relationship with Edgar. Drawing on the Gothic staging of incompatible perceptions of femininity such as angel and beast (or spectre) side by side in the same text, Byatt blurs the line between them in her ambivalent portrayal of Eugenia. Moreover, Byatt invites the reader to follow her over boundaries that she has deliberately rendered invisible: Byatt renders problematic the gap between Eugenia's deceptive outward appearance as the 'good girl' her parents repeatedly assure William (and the reader) that she is, and her behaviour within the Alabaster household, which effectively disqualifies that assumption.

More significant still, in view of the novella's later revelations, is William's assessment of Eugenia as an ethereal figure who might be "smutched" (his word on three different occasions, the second one on his wedding night) by the fact "that he was too muddled and dirty to think of her" (Byatt 1995: 31, 67, 150), due to his prior, animalistic carnal knowledge of Amazonian females. The idea that "he did not come to her pure" further troubles him on his wedding night, although he opportunistically concedes that the things he had learnt with the mulattoes "might have its uses" with his wife (Byatt 1995: 67). Eugenia's sexual behaviour, together with William's fears of sexually polluting her and his concern regarding the purity code, suggest an interesting gendered transfer of expected sexual roles.

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This spurious virgin's behaviour stands in sharp contradiction to Victorian celebrations of married love by assuming male overtones of sexual aggressive desire, in which Eugenia is repeatedly the initiator of the sexual act in which she clearly finds gratification. Conversely, William submits to Eugenia's sexual ardour as much as the idolised Victorian chaste wife would yield to her husband's desires. The remarkable absence of textual evidence of William's sexual reactions, as well as his concern with *his* lack of purity, also seem to substantiate the idea that they have switched sex roles. Likewise, the sexual irony of the fact that William was afraid of hurting Eugenia on their wedding night, conflated with his extraordinary unawareness of his white virgin bride's sexual forwardness, especially given his prior sexual knowledge of 'brown' experienced Amazonian females, is not lost on the (knowing) reader. Byatt thus re-negotiates the tensions between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian understanding of self and other, as well as their distinctive treatment of what really went on behind closed doors. Thus, the novella's consistent displacement of sexual energies throws into question Victorian sexual mores, something that is emphasised still more by the fact that readers never gets access to Eugenia's feelings and emotional responses, while they have ample evidence of her sexual behaviour. For example, the wedding night, described through William's eyes, lets the reader imaginatively inhabit William's mind but not Eugenia's, which remains a secret to both her husband and the reader.

The novella's conflation and subversion of the construct of angelic wife with the female virginity taboo at once decodes Eugenia's sexual behaviour on her wedding night as a mark of sexual experience. Her lack of expected embarrassment at finding herself half-naked in front of her new husband, prior to her supposedly first sexual encounter, sharply contrasts with William's embarrassment and nervousness, again reminiscent of an inversion of expected sexual roles. Byatt appears to retain Michel Foucault's discourse on the qualification of the female body as "thoroughly saturated with sexuality" in her construction of Eugenia (Foucault 1990: 104), who is the subject of the sexual act, the 'doer' instead of the 'done to'. This is evinced in the rendition of Eugenia's sexual encounters with her husband. Conversely, with regards to Edgar it is more problematic to see Eugenia in the role of active 'doer' when one considers that she has been groomed into the role of abuse victim from a very early age. This fact is substantiated by

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the total lack of description of the siblings' sexual encounters, which remain tantalisingly beyond the reach of textual depiction throughout the novella.

While challenging Victorian polar constructions of women, the novella also exposes paltry male sexual behaviour which, nevertheless, partly conforms to constructed social expectations. It is, therefore, tolerated or even accepted, such as William's sexual dalliance with the Amazonian females and Edgar's sexploitation of female servants. By choosing to infuse race and class undertones in her exposition of two arguably unquestioned means of patriarchal sexploitation of underprivileged women in the nineteenth century, Byatt also effectively problematises questions of race and class alongside those of gender.

In the Alabaster household, Edgar is well known by family and servants alike for his sexual proclivities regarding women in general and housemaids in particular. William is naturally excluded from this knowledge as, despite his marriage to Eugenia, he feels more than a servant but less than a family member, much less a master. Edgar is as much aware as William of the latter's hovering status within the Alabaster household. This fact is revealed by his heavily hinting at William's lack of knowledge with regards to the goings-on in the house because of his bookish interests, while literally being caught with his pants down. Hence William's surprise when he hears Edgar being described by their brother-in-law Robin Swinnerton as a satyr, a man whose lascivious appetites will only leave alone the most respectable young ladies. Robin further adds that Edgar's sexual tastes tend to the "rough and tumble" kind (Byatt 1995: 106). This is hardly surprising considering that his usual preferred sexual partners are women of a much lower social class, upon whom he may inflict his unwanted attentions with no consequence other than their becoming pregnant. This particular form of class sexploitation doubly victimises his prey, as his blatant and unashamed rape of little Amy shows: forced to submit to being sexually abused by the master's son, most probably out of fear of losing her position, Amy is nevertheless dismissed when she gets pregnant by Edgar. The fact that William witnesses the girl's pain and Edgar's finger marks at her mouth to muffle her whimpering belies Edgar's description of consensual intercourse. Despite that, Amy is contemptuously objectified by Edgar as "a nice little packet of flesh" (Byatt 1995: 107), whose heart beats faster when he feels for it and whose mouth opens eagerly to receive his kisses, a clear blame-shifting discourse that construes the



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victim as seductress who invites sexual violence due to her provocative behaviour.

This is not so in the case of William Adamson, who may also be guilty of objectifying women but who never forced himself upon them, no matter their social class or race. In fact, Byatt has declared that she likes the nineteenth-century naturalists, on whom she has modelled William Adamson, because these men were “all peaceable and resourceful, occupied not with Empire, but with scientific discovery, with curiosity about the nature of things” (Byatt 1999: para.7). However, William’s behaviour in the Amazon belies this assumption, seeming to suggest that the colonial man for whom natives are ‘the other’ and, consequently, potential sexual commodities, lives side by the side with the naturalist whose major concern is scientific advancement. The opening ball scene is a good example of this, at the same time as it serves as an exercise in metaphorically anticipating the drones’ and Queen ant’s nuptial flight that William will describe later on in an essay. While dancing with Eugenia, an eligible woman on account of race and class, who is “both proudly naked and wholly untouchable” in her low-cut ball gown (Byatt 1995: 6), William feels as sexually aroused as he felt while dancing with non-white women in the Amazon. For him, the purpose of dancing is to arouse male desire, much as the aim of the drones’ nuptial flight is mating and impregnating the Queen.

Regardless of their metaphorical status as prospective or ineligible Queens, women are paradoxically objectified by William’s gaze. They may be demure and sweetly innocent ladies, who decorously dance with their partners, or “olive-skinned and velvet-brown ladies of doubtful virtue and no virtue”, who feel no qualms about vigorously grabbing and nuzzling their dancing partners and have “shameless fingers” (Byatt 1995: 5, 7). However, despite their racial, social, and sexual differences, all these women are regarded as sexual objects to be acquired with more or less effort. The only difference is the way William chooses to act towards them: in the Amazon, he gave in to his arousal as dancing became ever more sensual with the Amazonian natives. Conversely, with Eugenia he feels uncomfortable and shifts inside his borrowed suit, so as to hide “the unmistakable stirrings and quickenings of bodily excitement in himself” (Byatt 1995: 6), quite the gentlemanly approach to such a delicate predicament.

Although William resembles Edgar in his lack of concern regarding the possibility of having sired illegitimate children and in his objectification

of women as willing bodies to be taken, the men have different reasons for their callous sexual (ab)use of women. For William, it is race that is uppermost in his sexploitation of non-white women: he admits to having had sex with several “golden, amber and coffee-skinned creatures” in the course of his expedition in the Amazon (Byatt 1995: 106), non-white women for whom he does not profess any kind of feeling other than sexual attraction. Their skin colour disqualifies them to become eligible as wives, although he feels no scruples at fathering children on them in the colonial tradition of white men siring mixed-race children on their black women slaves and concubines.

In contrast, for Edgar sexploitation is mainly a question of social class, since he feels it is his prerogative as a member of a higher social class to use his own vision of the feudal right of the *jus primae noctis* upon the women he preys on. Servant girls are easy targets for a man so lacking in moral values because, not being ladies, they do not have anyone to claim reparation and have to fend for themselves. However, unlike William (whose exotic sexual encounters never seem to have been forced on his partners), Edgar does not stop at rape to satisfy his lust and is wholly unmoved by the knowledge that he will wreck his unwilling partners’ lives. Sex seems to be nothing more than a vicious exercise in power over the weaker women on whom he imposes himself, humiliating and degrading them through sexual violence. In view of their different perceptions of sex, it is hence singularly surprising that it should be William who equates sex with male power, despite his concern at the potential violence implicit in women’s sexual initiation: “How the innocent female must fear the power of the male, he thought, and with reason, so soft, so untouched, so untouchable” (Byatt 1995: 66-67).

### 3. On Sexual Perversion/ Perversity, Sexual Deviance/ Defiance

Is Eugenia aware that as an adult she is responsible for her actions? Or does she let herself be guided by pure animal instincts? Is she biologically confined to the female destiny of breeding children – in her case, regardless of any moral constraints? Or has she been culturally hard-wired to believe that incest is – like her half-brother Edgar has always maintained – “perfectly *natural* and so it was, it was *natural*, nothing in us rose up and said – it was – *unnatural*” (Byatt 1995: 159)? These questions seek to address the way Byatt attempts to portray a reshaped perception of the

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(neo-)Victorian household (see Llewellyn 2010: 134). In order to answer them, the novella resumes the contemporary debate on the role of nature and nurture in shaping human behaviour via the analogy of Eugenia as Queen ant.

Hence, in order to further characterise Eugenia's sexual signature, the history of sexual transgression will be briefly considered against the backdrop of past and present anthropological and psychiatric approaches to sexuality in order to understand their implications in the novella. In fact, social and cultural anthropology's acceptance of other cultures on their own terms decreases reductionism in cross-cultural comparison, namely on the subject of incest. Conversely, psychiatric approaches have produced an epistemology of transgression that at once transformed the specific tropes of erotic deviance by reifying them within an analytical framework (see O'Malley 2006: 213). Taken together, anthropological and psychiatric outlooks have hence cross-fertilised Byatt's own exploration of what constitutes sexual deviance in the novella.

In her construction of the seemingly respectable extended Alabaster household, Byatt seems to have drawn on Foucault's argument that the nineteenth-century family is, to a certain extent, just a monogamous and conjugal cell in which children marry but do not leave the parental home. However, when considered in its metaphorical representation as an ant-heap, the illusion of Alabaster monogamy and conjugality vanishes in the implications of sibling incest, as several textual clues seem to suggest in their emphasis on the Alabaster genetic type even prior to the actual discovery. Since it constitutes a sum of powers and pleasures, family is steeped in multiple fragmentary mobile sexualities, so much so that the growth of perversions "is not a moralizing theme that obsessed the scrupulous minds of the Victorians. It is the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures" (Foucault 1990: 48). At the turn of the century, in Freudian terminology, the main perversions or "sexual aberrations" (Freud 1991a: 45) had crystallised into specific categories such as sexual inversion, sadism, masochism, fetishism, or exhibitionism.

This suggested, on the one hand, that the perversions meant nothing *per se*, as in itself any perversion could be considered a 'normal' impulse which had been diverted in its function due to either an inborn or socially determined rationale. They only acquired relational meaning when

compared to the broadly uninvestigated paradigm of reproductive sexual relations. On the other hand, it was thus possible to speak of perversions as both natural and social, as sexologists and psychiatrists “used a holistic biomedical language that transformed behaviour into sexualized, natural forms of individuality” (Nye 1999: 143). In fact, although incest was not theorised within the range of the sexual perversions at the end of the nineteenth century by sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, Richard von Kraft-Ebbing or Sigmund Freud, Byatt has appropriated the psychiatric discourse on the perversions in its treatment in the novella. Hence, incest is deployed in ‘Morpho Eugenia’ within the *fin-de-siècle* medical understanding of the individuality of human sexuality and its profoundly biological nature (even more so when considered within the textual framework of the Victorian family as an ant-heap). In so doing, Byatt has indeed used nineteenth century medical knowledge to describe Eugenia’s incest, but with a psychiatric awareness of the treatment of perversions that more properly belongs to the twentieth century.

In effect, Byatt appears to have drawn on Freud’s discourse on the more extreme perversions, such as coprophagia or necrophilia, which are so far removed from the ‘normal’ that they cannot avoid being pronounced as pathological: “the sexual instinct goes to astonishing lengths in successfully overriding the resistances of shame, disgust, horror or pain” (Freud 1991a: 74). As in Freud’s assessment of the more uncommon perversions, incest is configured in the novella as a playful, “perfectly *natural*” game (Byatt 1995: 159). Eugenia’s earlier cited description is significant in its multi-layered (re)construction of incest. It implies that the adult Eugenia has not changed her point of view regarding actions she started to engage in as a child. Therefore, she still need not take responsibility for those same actions even as an adult woman, evading accountability, since merely engaging in a habitual, ‘taught’, and supposedly harmless practice. Yet her words also suggest that Byatt creates Eugenia as a nineteenth-century person, who feels incest to be natural because her story is set before psychiatric discourse re-classified incest as unnatural.

In this passage, Byatt openly plays with the implied connotations of the adjective ‘natural’ as ‘normal’ or socially sanctioned conduct, on the one hand, and as biologically innate behaviour, on the other, mirroring the way “it is possible to speak of the perversions as both social and natural kinds at the turn of the century” (Nye 1999: 143). At the same time, Byatt re-

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engages with the period discussion on the importance of biology and culture in shaping human responses. Within the framing perspective of the ant colony, Eugenia's mating with her half-brother Edgar prefigures instinctual driven behaviour, in which the Queen's sole biological function is to produce offspring. However, in the human social sphere, the siblings' sexual relationship is translated as Eugenia's paedophilic and incestuous use by Edgar. Hence, the Alabaster household as an ant-heap paradoxically challenges the Victorian understanding of home as a safe haven. In fact, if considered within the context of Victorian morality and the ideological construction of family and home as "a shelter from the anxieties of modern life, a place of peace where the longings of the soul might be realized [...] and therefore also a sacred place, a temple" (Houghton 1985: 343), the Alabaster household as a human nest is identified as a locus of danger and perversion, quite the reverse of the safety provided by the ant-heap.

Given the inescapable conflation of sex with guilt within the Western religious framework, at a time when even 'normal', marital sex was publicly sanitised (while a parallel engagement with sexploitation via sexual subcultures, pornography, and prostitution took place in private), moral judgment was remarkably absent from the medical discourse on sexual perversions. Therefore, the term 'perversion' itself would later be contested as inadequately censorious by both the British sexologist Havelock Ellis in his multi-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928) and by Sigmund Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Conversely, Ellis proposed the notion of "sexual equivalents" or "at all events equivalents of the normal sexual impulse" as a descriptive term to be complemented by the concept of "sexual symbolism" as the key to the process of rendering all perversions intelligible (Ellis 1999: 5). By explaining the emotional value that some objects or acts, the aptly-named symbols, had acquired over the psycho-physical mechanism of the patient's sexual process, Ellis purported to illuminate the way by which these symbols' cached dynamic power deflected from the usual adjustment to a beloved person of the opposite sex (see Ellis 1906: 5). Freud further endeavoured to demonstrate that, far from being restricted to the category of abnormal people, the sexual traits associated with perversion are indeed common to human sexuality more generally (see Freud 1991a: 74-76). Paradoxically, these apparently plural and tolerant approaches to the investigation of human sexual variety are echoed in the novella's blatant

preoccupation with scientific curiosity and discovery in the animal world rather than the human world, as epitomised by William's inquiring interest in ant societies.

In the study *Psychopatia Sexualis* (1886), the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing drew an important distinction between 'perversion' of the sexual instinct as disease and 'perversity' in the sexual act as vice, which will be central in illuminating Eugenia's incestuous relationship. By qualifying vice as intentional in direct opposition to disease as involuntary, von Krafft-Ebing emphasised the noticeably biological makeup of human sexual behaviour (see von Krafft-Ebing 1999: 149). Although he is not referring to incest, his discourse is applicable to the configuration of incest as a perversion of the sexual instinct. He remarks on the "perverse emotional colouring of the sexual ideas" that engender pleasurable sexual feelings where they would normally be "physiologically and psychologically accompanied by feelings of disgust" (see von Krafft-Ebing 1999: 149), a rationale that can also be applied to incest. This is more easily the case, von Krafft-Ebing argues, if the pleasurable feelings inhibit any otherwise corresponding perceptions of revulsion, or if there is a total lack of all notions of morality and law which makes it impossible that any opposing ideas may subsist (see von Krafft-Ebing 1999: 149). However, as he emphasises, this absence is fundamentally found "where the wellspring of ethical ideas and feelings (a normal sexual instinct) has been poisoned from the beginning" (von Krafft-Ebing 1999: 149).

This seems to apply in Eugenia's case, as she admits to William when he discovers her in bed with her brother. To infringe on the prohibition against incest means breaking the interdiction of speaking on the subject. However, in Eugenia's case it also means that she cannot fail to acknowledge the adulterous aspect of her incestuous relationship, since she ultimately betrays her husband with her own brother, a concurring deviation in her case. Moreover, by committing adultery, Eugenia implicitly denies that "the state of marriage enables man to live a human life in which respect for taboo contrasts with the untrammelled satisfaction of animal needs" (Bataille 1986: 220). Although she rationally knows that incest is wrong, emotionally and physically she insists that she never felt bad about it. In this case taboo, which Freud defines as a very ancient yet intangible prohibition manifested through imposed interdictions against the most intense desires of

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humankind (see Freud 2005: 12), did not force Eugenia to abstain from, rather than act on, her censored wishes.

Furthermore, Eugenia's discourse also makes clear that she does not experience either the physical horror or the psychological repugnance that prominently feature in popular notions of incest, which are fittingly contested by anthropological research. In fact, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, "there is nothing more dubious than this alleged instinctive repugnance, for although prohibited by law and morals incest does exist" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 17). He further questions the alleged universal horror of incest as the origin of the prohibition on the counts of physiology and psychic tendencies as postulated by a large group of sociologists and psychologists by claiming that "to explain the theoretical universality of the rule by the universality of the sentiment or tendency is to open up a new problem, for in no conceivable way is this supposedly universal fact universal" (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 17). Anthropology also contests the notion that incestuous relationships are a universal taboo, because the offspring may be deformed, insane, or markedly ill in other ways (see Lévi-Strauss 1969: 16). Moreover, it is hard to explain its asserted physiological abnormality, since the prohibition against incest is a privileged synthesis of nature and culture, simultaneously inscribed within natural, spontaneous, universal tendencies and instincts, and culturally specific, historically contingent, coercive laws and institutions (see Lévi-Strauss 1969: 31-32). Hence, Byatt's neo-Victorian re-interpretation of the taboo of incest explores its moral confines within the specific framework of psychiatric discourses on sexual perversions and anthropological discussions of incest.

The link between the given name Eugenia and eugenics, as the study of methods to facilitate human reproduction and improve breeding, also contains a clue to the biological status of Eugenia's children. In Portuguese, this connection is self-evident, since Eugenia as a female name and 'eugenia' as a science are homonymous words. Hence, the reader is confronted with a progeny of physically perfect children, "who revert so shockingly to the ancestral type" (Byatt 1995: 151). On the one hand, this fact hints at the biological possibility of incestuous relationships producing physically healthy children, as anthropological research has asserted. On the other hand, in Darwinian terms, it seems to suggest that Edgar Alabaster's genes were stronger than William Adamson's, thus deserving to be carried on into the next generation (see Darwin 1981: 325). Finally, to return to the

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opposition between humanity and abhumanness, Eugenia's offspring may be construed as the heralds of a new evolutionary stage. However, it is still unknown whether the children will stand at a higher or lower step, a more or less human stage than that occupied by their mother.

#### 4. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian (Un)Certainties

In 'Morpho Eugenia', Byatt demonstrates that her neo-Victorian fiction goes well beyond historical fiction that is set in the nineteenth-century. Her novella is "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). In her construction of Eugenia, Byatt reinterprets what really went on behind the sanctified marriage door in a way no (respectable) Victorian author, let alone a female Victorian author, ever could. Hence, Byatt's neo-Victorian narrative does not shy away from the depiction of very graphic female orgasms, experienced by the assumedly asexual Victorian wife. Moreover, it interrogates sibling incest in the context of a very specific matriarchy (that of ants), which has insidiously infiltrated the supposedly patriarchal Alabaster household, whose *pater familias* is no less than a reverend.

The novella also critically engages with nineteenth-century culture and society by discussing the cultural mayhem experienced by those who tried to balance their religious faith against the backdrop of the disturbing scientific discoveries of their time. Its questioning of Victorian ontological givens regarding gender and, specifically, the cultural construction of female sexual identity crucially bears after-witness to the unrecorded, real Victorian women who privately, if not socially, escaped the cultural corset of the patriarchal polarisation of women into angels or fallen women. Byatt's portrayal of Eugenia effectively talks back to the Victorian angels who were secretly sexually active, as well as to the socially accepted, respectfully married women, who nevertheless sustained deviant relationships in the *inner sanctum* of their own homes.

Eugenia is both a socially deviant and a sexually defiant woman: her on-going incestuous relationship with her half-brother Edgar falls into the first category, since it had already cost Eugenia her former fiancé. Furthermore, incest does not induce any moral qualms even once she marries William, thus becoming an adulteress in the process as well. On the other hand, her sexual agency and the fact that she is no longer a virgin



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when she marries defy the normative constructions of female sexual politics of her time, hence fitting the latter category. As a result, the novella's main achievement is its ability to recapture "a kind of biological determinism characteristic of post-Darwinian evolutionary theory" in its portrayal of deviance (Nye 1999: 143), as well as its consistent refusal to frame incest within the context of the ethical principles of a time when incest was still beyond taboo, since psychiatric discourse had not yet pronounced it unnatural. Conversely, 'Morpho Eugenia' insists on the exploration of the meanings of incest in the Victorian era, paradoxically displaying William's horror regarding human incestuous relationships vis-à-vis his scientific acceptance of incest in insect life. At the same time, the novella deploys Eugenia's compliance with a sexual relationship which is natural within the confines of the ant-heap, but is unnatural for William (and the contemporary reader).

Byatt's particular handling of neo-Victorian Gothic in her construction of Eugenia, I argue, defuses the "voyeuristic re-victimisation of female characters" that might compromise "neo-Victorianism ethical agenda of bearing after-witness to unrecorded traumas of the socially marginalised" (Kohlke 2012: 222). Although trauma has been theorised as a possible explanation for the abhuman condition (see Hurley 1999: 4), Byatt does not stage Eugenia's abhumanness as a response to the only traumatic event the reader is acquainted with, namely Eugenia's former fiancé's suicide after his discovery of his intended bride's incestuous relationship with Edgar. In this light, Eugenia's deviance seems to precipitate another deviant act, i.e. her fiancé's suicide, suggesting the insidious spread of contamination by deviance. Just as crucially, Eugenia's own ambiguous description of her relations with her half-brother refuse to define her sexual initiation while still a child as definitively traumatic, as readers might expect. Despite her father's fear that "life went out of her, to some extent, and has not come back" (Byatt 1995: 46), long after her fiancé's sudden death, the reader infers that Eugenia mourns the discovery of her secret rather than the loss of the man who could have fulfilled her biological destiny of becoming a respectable wife and mother. Instead of a recorded trauma, there is the marked ambivalence of a woman who, whether one likes her or not, has managed to both have her cake and eat it by being at once a slave (to her sexual pleasure) and the power-centre of the ant-heap (the fertile female

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around whom two males revolve to give her children), (un)consciously both deviant and defiant.

### Notes

1. This term, first coined by William Hope Hodgson in his 1912 horror novel *The Night Land*, refers to several different species of intelligent beings evolved from human beings, who interbred with alien species or adapted to altered environmental conditions. Either way, the abhuman were seen as degenerate or downright evil by those living inside the Last Redoubt, managing to artificially preserve their human characteristics, although thereby less fitted to survive the new world.

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