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A VISUAL BRIDGING OF BODY AND MIND IN AN INFORMED-BY-SCIENCE AND RELIGION FICTION: A.S. BYATT'S *A WHISTLING WOMAN*

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Abstract

British novelist A.S. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman*, the final volume of *The Frederica Quartet* (1978-2002), does not just conclude a story spanning almost twenty years, but it also mirrors elemental opposites like science and religion, body and mind, visual and the verbal against a background of the social upheavals of the 60s. The focal point of the novel, a conference on 'Body and Mind' enables Byatt to problematize the dichotomy of associating body with women and mind with men revisiting the dilemma built on the constraints of marriage and motherhood and having an intellectual, independent existence as a woman in the whole quartet. While uncovering those conventions that especially determine the fate of women through the protagonist of the tetralogy, Frederica, Byatt casts her narrative net even wider with scientific and religious discourses organized around students, university authorities, scientists, anarchists and religious cult members outlining the social and cultural atmosphere of the late sixties. In compliance with new trends in science, introduction of television and visual culture of the period, the pictorial representations, ekphrastically integrated works of art turn into key narrative devices to elucidate the interwoven plots opening gateway to the defining moments, ideas and figures that are inherent in the sub-narratives and at the same time reverberate Byatt's high regard for art and science.

Keywords: *Body, Mind, Science, Religion, Byatt, Visual arts.*

A.S. BYATT'IN *A WHISTLING WOMAN* ROMANINDA BİLİM VE DİN EKSENİNDE BEDEN VE ZİHNİN GÖRSEL BİR BİRLEŞİMİ

Özet

İngiliz yazar A.S. Byatt'ın Frederica serisinin (1978-2002) son romanı olan *A Whistling Woman* sadece yaklaşık yirmi yıla yayılan bir hikâyeyi nihayete erdirmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda sosyolojik değişimlerin yaşandığı 60'lı yıllar fonunda bilim ve din, beden ve zihin, görsel ve sözel gibi temel karşıtlıklara ayna tutar. Romanın odak noktası olan 'Beden ve Zihin' temalı konferans, bedeni kadınla, erkeği ise zihinle ilişkilendirme ikilemini işaret ederken bütün seri boyunca dikkat çekilen evlilik ve anneliğin kadına getirdiği kısıtlamalar ve entelektüel, özgür bir birey olma sorunsalını tekrar gündeme getirir. Byatt bir yanda, hikâyenin ana karakteri olan Frederica üzerinden kadınların geleceğini belirleyecek bu eğilimleri ifşa ederken, anlatı ağını genişleterek öğrenciler, akademisyenler, bilim adamları, anarşistler ve dini topluluk üyelerini merkeze alan bilimsel ve dinsel söylemlerle 60'ların sosyal ve kültürel havasını gözler önüne serer. Dönemin bilimsel yenilikleri, görsel kültürü ve televizyonun ortaya çıkışına uygun olarak, romana entegre edilen görsel temsiller, ekfrastik olarak betimlenen sanat yapıtları, Byatt'ın bilim ve sanata olan düşkünlüğünü yansıtırken, önemli anlar, fikirler ve figürlere farklı bir bakış açısı getirerek iç içe geçmiş hikâyeleri aydınlatan temel anlatı araçlarına dönüşmüş olurlar.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Beden, Zihin, Bilim, Din, Byatt, Görsel sanatlar.*

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A.S Byatt's *A Whistling Woman* (2002) is the fourth installment of *The Frederica Quartet* that begins with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985) and *Babel Tower* (1996). The whole quartet is a journey forming the identity of Frederica in a society where certain roles are already determined with a special focus on women and the constraints obtruded upon them. In Walezak's words "the quartet was her response to the tension between social reality and intellectual ideality" (2018:115). The protagonist of the story Frederica, as a single mother, lives in London, enjoys the success of her book *Laminations* and she hosts a TV show on BBC named *Through the Looking Glass*. Alfer and Campos assert that the third novel *Babel Tower* depicts a world in the grip of individualism and the resulting fragmentation of society and its languages, *A Whistling Woman*, by contrast, is deliberately organized around larger groups of characters and is centrally concerned with the bigger and collectively shaped narratives that affect their lives (2010:79-80). The events of the novel take place in 1968 England which does not just designate women's liberation movements of late 60s but the year 1968 remains one of the most tumultuous years in history, marked by historic achievements, shocking assassinations, a much-hated war, a spirit of rebellion that swept through countries all over the world and the beginning of television age. Accordingly, "the novel dramatises, on closer inspection, a complex ideological conflict played out between different groups of people with different sets of beliefs that reaches far beyond its immediate relevance to the students, university authorities, scientists, anarchists and religious cult members that make up its cast" (Alfer and Campos, 2010:81). Mirroring the counter culture of the sixties, with a conference on the relations between body and mind taking place at a university and being abruptly interrupted with student protests, Byatt develops a complex narrative structure with different metaphors belonging to religious, scientific, academic, social and cultural issues of the late 60s. In completing her *roman fleuve* with *A Whistling Woman*, what is worth enquiring about Byatt is her fondness of words and pictures and how they are connected with the characters she has created as she turns to illuminating, *ekphrastic* works of art (literary descriptions on visual works of art) to discuss the dilemma of body-mind, marriage, motherhood and the ability to think and imagine through Frederica while outlining the social and cultural atmosphere of the period with different sub-narratives built around science and religion through the characters Gerard Winnjebel, Joshua Ramsden and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock.

A.S. Byatt's novels are the "mirrors within which disciplinary and generic opposites such as humanism and religion, art and science, or critical and creative writing reflect each other" (Brown, 2007:55). *A Whistling Woman*, published in 2002 which marks the time period Byatt is preoccupied with science, an interest in the etymology of life and Darwin examining the biological and social factors in evolution theory, and that prompts her to reference scientific papers and give prominence to characters dealing with science like Gerard Winnjebel. Wijnjebel is the Vice-Chancellor of the University and he is organizing an academic conference. Byatt starts the novel with visual references to Rembrandt and Mondrian etchings in Wijnjebel's study room:

Some of the Rembrandts had come with him from Holland, and other he had bought after the war...[...] His favourite, perhaps, was 'Student at the table by candlelight' with a pit of darkness and a bright small flame. He had Rembrandt's only etched still life, a conical shell, *Conus marmorens*, it spirals closest to the onlooker's eye, its surface pattered like a dark net thrown over bone. He also had a copy of a work known as 'Faust in his study'. The old man in his cap looked through gloom at a lit window where a mystic had pointed. It pointed at a floating apparition of three concentric circles, scattering brightness. The inmost one was crossed with Christian INRI in its segment. On the outer ones was written:

+ADAM + TE + DAGERAM + AMRTET + ALGAR + ALGASTNA++¹

No one had ever explained this writing. Wijnjebel's cabbalist grandfather had tried and been baffled, like the rest. He himself had an idea about it, from time to time, but they never worked. (Byatt, 2002:27-28)

The quotation refers to three specific etchings, *Student at a Table by Candlelight* (1642), *Conus marmorens* (1650) and *Faust in his Study* (1652), in Wijnjebel's study room that could be interpreted in such a way that it is possible to find traces of the central events that help to shape the key ideas in the novel built around a religious community and a scientific conference.

¹ INRI was appropriate as a Socinian substitution for the Holy Ghost. The four Gospels of the New Testament mention INRI as the symbol hung on Christ's cross by order of Pontius Pilate to announce the crime for which he was condemned. Taken from the Latin "Jesus Nazareus Rex Judaeorum," or "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," the monogram or entire phrase was frequently included in paintings or prints as part of the iconography of the Crucifixion. As a reminder of Christ's Passion, INRI also alluded to the Atonement, or humankind's reconciliation with God through Christ's sacrifice. (McHenry, 1989: 11)



Fig. 1. Rembrandt, *Student at a Table by Candlelight*, 1642, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Rhode Island

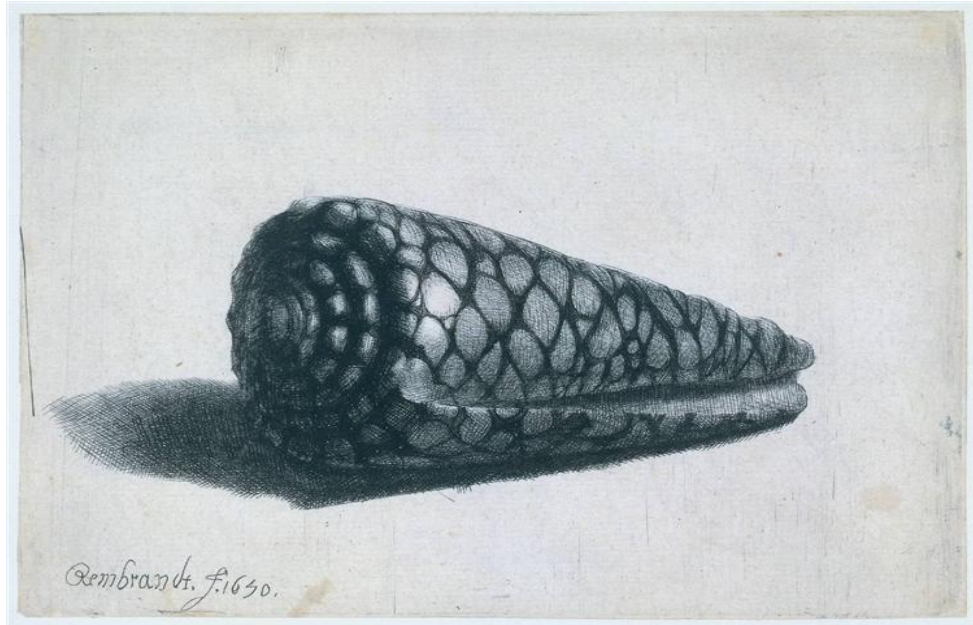


Fig.2. Rembrandt, *The Shell (Conus marmoreus)*, 1650, Private Collection

The central figure in *Student at a Table by Candlelight* and his uneasy, musing mood corresponds to Wijn Nobel's state of mind. "He was planning a conference on Body and Mind. His desk was covered with neat lists of possible speakers (and listeners). His mind drove towards inclusiveness" (Byatt, 2002:28). As well as the planning and execution of that conference, his distressed marriage might also be represented in that brooding man Rembrandt portrayed in the 17th century. In time, having no children makes Gerard retreat into "Fibonacci spirals and a study of word order in sentences in several languages" while Eva was mostly drunk and sick and

told everyone that “she was a sacrificial victim of her husband’s ambition, his self-absorption, his worldly success” (Byatt, 2002:36).

The etching of a shell in *Conus marmorens* brings to mind snails and the genetics of life as according to Karin Leonhard’s observations, interest in collecting shells becomes a popular pastime in the 17th century and then it forms the basis for the science of conchology (2007:179). She reveals that the colored speckles, lines and structures on seashells resembled the markings on tigers and leopards, and the iridescence of mother of pearl, whose mutable colours are akin to those of peacock feathers and butterfly wings, are the features that were found painterly and gave rise to shell still life painting (2007:180). Alexandra Cheira explains that Byatt’s lifelong interest in science is embedded in her critical works like the article “Fiction Informed by Science” published in *Nature* and fictional works like the last volume of Frederica quartet (2017:104). In her work “Soothsaying Song Thrushes and Life-Giving Snails: Motifs in A. S. Byatt’s *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*”, Jennifer Anne Johnson remarks a further note saying that Byatt takes delight in discovering that there is a link between snails and their shells; “snail functions both on a literary level as symbol of life and in a scientific sense, as a means of studying genetics and neuroscience” (2010:58). For Byatt, the whole idea of the study of the snails is first introduced by relating an ancient name for snails which is *helix* to the spiral form of the snail and the spiral of the DNA (Pereira, 2014:500). Especially after Darwin’s theories on the origins of life, defining humans in relation to religious, Biblical narratives is replaced with scientific ideas. In her work “Ancestors” published as an essay in *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt supports this idea saying, “Human lives used to be thought out in terms of the Biblical narrative. Related narratives were made of the significance of lives – the allegory of Everyman, of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the saints’ lives and Confessions against which the Bildungsroman formed itself in turn” (2000:65). Byatt furthers her claim saying, “Darwin’s patient experiments on adaptations, selection, inheritance, created a very different narrative of human origins” (2000:65). Byatt’s curiosity about human origins develops a scientific scope and many characters who deal with such matters are vocalized dynamically in the last volume. Alfer and Campos comment that Wijnnobel enjoys “speculating about the possible links between genetically inherited neurological structures and the human capacity for language” (2010:73), which is based on the idea that the genealogy of snails can be read on their shells. They also put emphasis on some popular science writers of the 1970s who generate controversy by suggesting that human behavior and culture might be determined by genetic factors. It is possible to relate this to the focal point of the ‘Body and Mind’ conference, which is to explore whether identity is constructed or determined. According to Lena Steveker, Byatt’s novels suggest that female life in post war middle class England is determined by a gender difference which exclude married women, especially mothers, from an intellectually satisfying ‘life of the mind’ (2009:67). In a sense the novel problematizes the dichotomy of associating body with women and mind with men as a social norm that patriarchy constructs. While outlining the social and cultural atmosphere of the period, Byatt uncovers the conventions that especially determine the fate of women since the first novel. Frederica’s evolution from a young, self-centered girl reaches a crucial turning point in *Babel Tower* in leaving her husband, getting a divorce and starting a new life. In *A Whistling Woman*, Frederica seems to have completed her progress to a strong, self-sustained, working mother. Starting with *A Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt designates female autonomy addressing similar debates and dichotomies and with an inclusion of an academic conference, she creates the opportunity of evaluating that concern in a professional circle. Byatt’s choice of a shell drawing is not random as the scientific debates on human life being fated or constructed could be conveyed through a snail shell image which is closely linked with scientific researches on life. The discussion is also projected into the focal point of the novel concerning women within the context of body and mind which is an influential factor in the process of the formation of identity.



Fig. 3. Rembrandt, *Faust in his Study*, 1652, The Uffizi Gallery, Florence

For Alfer and Campos, Byatt might be suggesting that “our literary narratives are shaped by our belief narratives and that, in the contemporary age, these belief narratives are likely to be supplied by science and religion” (2010:83). Therefore, the scientific discourse is countered by a religious narrative hinted at in *Faust in his Study* etching. The central figure is a man whose gaze is directed to a circle with letters inscribed on it, in a study room furnished with books, papers and a table just like in Wijn Nobel’s study. There are many attempts to decipher the etching, Rembrandt’s motivation in depicting such a scene and what the inscribed letters might mean. But Deni McIntosh McHenry’s “Rembrandt’s Faust in His Study Reconsidered: A Record of Jewish Patronage and Mysticism in Mid-Seventeenth Century Amsterdam” might be the most benignant and elucidatory work as apart from the most accepted interpretations built around either magic and alchemy or *Dr Faustus*, McHenry proposes a more convincing theory which is about the doctrines of a Dutch immigrant religious sect founded by Faustus Socinus in Holland. McHenry highlights the tie between Jewish Kabbalah in scriptures and the Jews of Amsterdam which at the time might have inspired Rembrandt as the circular inscription contains names of God and angels in Kabbalah. Apart from the conference that occupies a great place in the novel, *A Whistling Woman* also deals with a religious community gathered away from London life, academics or science, under the leadership of Joshua Ramsden. The fate of that cult is disastrous as Joshua’s quest for light and his ultimate fall recalls Dr. Faustus, whose dangerous quest for power and knowledge also brings about a dramatic downfall.

Joshua Ramsden has a tragic past, having witnessed the murder of his mother and sister by his father, who is subsequently executed. Joshua remembers his father sending him postcards, one of which had a biblical reference from the book of *Genesis* 22, 6, 7 and 8. Those are some of the accounts of Abraham’s story:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and took the fire in his hand, and a knife: they went both of them together. And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here I am, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. (Byatt, 2002:100)

Joshua, known as Joshua Lamb, inevitably questions the possibility of a sacrifice that his father had to offer in order to save him as Abraham had saved Isaac. After the Holocaust, Joshua is raised in a village community by people who teach him Latin, the love of God, and Old Testament stories, one of which is Noah and the Deluge. "Joshua was praised for imagination, when he painted his ark on a stormy night in inky water, with a lantern at the prow and a silver of the moon in the sky" (Byatt, 2002:102). They also draw angels with huge wings; Miss Manson brings pictures of angels by Van Eyck, Giotto and Fra Angelico when it comes to painting "the boy with the wood on his back, the man with the knife, the angel, the ram caught in a thicket by his horns" (Byatt, 2002:103). Joshua cannot help displaying his contempt for illustrating Abraham's story. In the biblical story, God wants to test Abraham's faith and obedience and asks him to sacrifice his son. Although Abraham sets out to sacrifice Isaac, he is stopped by an angel which is the exact moment Rembrandt portrays in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635). When Joshua sees that picture, the narrative voice renders a fully ekphrastic depiction as the image is brought immediately before his eyes:

He knew that it was Rembrandt's version of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The angel leans out of black thunderclouds. Its right hand grasps Abraham's strong wrist. The curved knife, sharpened horribly clean, hangs forever in free fall across the landscape. Abraham's bearded face, intent on what he has set out to do, startled in his nerves by the apparition, is turned up to the angel, away from the boy. The boy naked except for a loincloth, lies back on the firewood. He has no face, Abraham's left hand, brown skin on white, is clamped like a sucker, over the whole upper head of the boy. The head is forced back, smothered, so that the man cannot see the boy's face and the boy cannot see the knife. What can be seen is the stretched white throat. Murder and pity. (Byatt, 2002:105)



Fig. 4. Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635, Hermitage, St Petersburg

Byatt gives a long and detailed visual description of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, emphasizing the emotional effect it leaves on Joshua, who stares at the painting with an overwhelming and appalling pity. He himself links his father's postcard with the Genesis reference to the Rembrandt painting and his ultimate survival. The painting mirrors

what Joshua's fate could have been yet he becomes the ram that his father symbolically offers instead of a sacrifice, which explains his last name 'Ramsden'.

Joshua also remembers when his aunt used to take him to morning church prayers and, in particular, the framed reproduction of Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb from Ghent* (1432) over the altar.

The Ram or Lamb stood, benign but judicial, on a scarlet table, its head emitting effulgent gold in rays. Lovely angels knelt around it. From a neat hole in its breast a spout of blood poured itself neatly and perpetually into a gold cup, a crimson pool rimmed with bright yellow sparkings. The sight of the round hole in the fleece and flesh made the boy feel nauseous. It was, the man believed, round about this time that he had started to see the blood running down surfaces in gout, in clotting rivulets, in fast moving sheets. Over the white-washed walls of the church, over the glass in the frame covering the Mystic Lamb. (Byatt, 2002:113)



Fig. 5. Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, 1432, Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent

The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, also known as the *Ghent Altarpiece*, is attributed to two brothers, Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, who are early Flemish painters. Byatt's pictorial render and its impact on Joshua refer to only one section of the work which consists of twelve panels. The Lamb most often represents Jesus in Christianity and in the picture it could be an allusion to Jesus' sacrifice for mankind. It is at this time that Joshua meets religion, reading the book of Joshua in the Old Testament and writing holy books.

He was asked to believe that God had become the impotent hanging man on the dark tree, the ghostly friend had breathed himself into flesh and blood and had become a burnt offering, a sacrificial Lamb, the bloody food not of the ghostly enemy but of the Lord of Hosts, the avenger of blood, who, sated with this flesh, would stop stoning and burning and burying alive. (Byatt, 2002:115)

This explains his visions of blood, especially when he has epileptic fits. Hence, a different version of body and mind conflict is represented by Joshua as he represses his memories as a means of overcoming the crisis deriving from his tragic past but on the other hand tries to control his body, which might explain his avoidance of flesh, sex or sleep. Yet the epileptic fits might symbolize his failure in reconciliation or finding harmony. He starts reading St Augustine, who was a Manichee, his concept of nature and evil being that God is infinitely good and powerful but human desire lets dark forces in (Byatt, 2002:123). So, Joshua acquires a new concept of the Christian faith, Manichaeism, and starts to eat and sleep less, abstains from sex and kills nothing. Byatt builds a

narrative around the religious cult of which he becomes the spiritual leader at Dun Vale Hall and some of the familiar characters being drawn into it. Alfer and Campos remark that “Manichaeism’s story of an epic battle between darkness and light mirrors Ramsden’s troubled sense of the reality and power of evil in the world, and it appeals to his followers, who crave a heightened spiritual intensity in their lives” (2010:80). Accordingly, Ramsden does not just head for his own fall but also taking with him some of his followers, purged in the fire at the end of the novel.

Winnjebel’s room also hosts Mondrians which might signify another community Byatt builds a narrative around, that is the Anti-university act. Although Byatt does not refer to a specific work, she opts to elaborate on the general principals of his art:

Mondrian believed that everything – the sum of things – could be represented by these three colours, with black, white, and grey, within the intersections of verticals and horizontals. The colours were signs, denoting all the colour in the world, symbolizing everything, purple, gold, indigo, flame, blood, earth, ultramarine, even green which Mondrian could not bear to look at. The straight lines represented the refinement of spiritual vision. They were the intersections of the infinite flat horizon, and the infinite vertical, travelling away from earth into the source of light. They avoided the tragic capriciousness of the dreadfully particular curves of flesh, or even of the changing moon. The vertical line was taut, and was the tension in all things. The horizontal line was weight and gravity. The figure of the Cross was the meeting of vertical and horizontal, an intrinsic form of the spirit. (Byatt, 2002:28)

As made clear in the quotation, Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) is best known for reducing shapes and colors to their simplest forms like lines, rectangles and squares and everything could be represented in colors like red, blue, yellow with black, white and grey. Like other modernists, Mondrian also moves beyond naturalistic depiction and focuses on the ability to express ideas abstractly which according to him would provide a true picture of reality. Winnjebel thinks of Mondrian’s art as “mad in its man-made purity” (Byatt, 2002:28). As for picking primary colors, “like the Rembrandts, it represented his country in his own mind” (Byatt, 2002:28). Byatt states that Mondrian also lived in Hampstead between 1938 and 1939 “painting severe black and white grids with discrete peripheral rectangles of red, yellow and blue” (28). Because he lived amongst the English for a while, and knew they were adversaries of the extremes, he might have chosen such colors and plainness that would remind him of his country. Winnjebel having such works by Mondrian, and Byatt’s emphasis on the possibility that Mondrian might have been influenced by his experiences of war, could be linked with the Anti-university and their extreme acts that reach a climax at the conference.

Mondrian lived in London for two years during wartime and the letters he exchanged with his friends Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson reveal his perspective on the war, his commitment to his work, his plans for writing an article entitled “Art shows the Evil of Totalitarian Tendencies” and his experiences during the London Blitz, provided by Sophie Bowness in her work “Mondrian in London: Letters to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth” (1990:785). Although it may not necessarily be a war, the Anti-University act at the conference and the destruction they cause mirrors a war scene. The marchers burst into the auditorium, throwing eggs, fruit, stones and books. Small fires and battles soon break out across the campus and create such a scene that: “There were very small fires in the hall – slowly burning neat heaps of books, which Frederica recognized. Skoob. An art-form” (Byatt, 2002:371). referring to John Latham’s popular Skoob Towers which is piles of books that he set fire to. Latham questioned traditional forms of art and structures in unusual ways as “this so-called art form is associated with destruction rather than creativity” (Hicks, 2010:91). In accordance with the changing atmosphere of the time period, that allows for alternative renderings of art despite being highly controversial, Byatt refers to a very recent trend in art and even likens the scene to it.

The summer of 1968 that brought student marches and banners also led Frederica to give up teaching. The new trend among the students obviously demands release from the oppression of imposed ideas, and for them the past is to be abolished. Frederica is now hosting a TV show on BBC named *Through the Looking Glass*. Frederica can be said to embody the movement of British television in the sixties from the margin into the centre of culture, but since she is also a single mother, her character is meant to represent the changing condition of women in British society during the decade (Cambiaghi, 2005:235). Television was already a huge change for the viewer of that period as it revealed images in motion. However, for Frederica, who is no longer able to teach her novels and written texts, they enter an age “when language becomes subordinate to images” (Byatt, 2002:48). For Johanna Hartmann, this resulted in consequences of various dimensions that pertain to literary production,

distribution and consumption as the changed forms of human experience impact the way literature manifests itself in changed aesthetics and new forms of literary work (2015:130). According to Wilkie, television is going to change everyone's consciousness, "the politics of the future would be conducted in these small boxes" (Byatt, 2002:47), he says "rhetoric would go, must go and was going" (Byatt, 2002:47). Modern age allows and enhances new experiences and what Byatt does in the last volume corresponds to that. Hartmann also notes that the effects of the new age suggest a comparison with what Walter Benjamin described in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Benjamin analyses social, cultural, and technological changes over the first decades of the 20th century and makes an inference that reproduction leads to the loss of 'aura' as the work of art lacks a unique presence in time and space. Television would be another extension of reproduction without aura, yet its framed form and interactive function, introduces a recontextualized visual medium of expression in the modern age. In her work, *Modern Ekphrasis*, Emily Bilman quotes from Erwin Panowsky who recognizes that works of art have a communicative and functional purpose and stresses the importance of the viewer's freedom of perception in appraising a poem or a painting (2013:8). In line with these views, what Byatt does with *A Whistling Woman* beyond combines images with verbal projections. In keeping with the modern age, Byatt manifests new forms that highlight the communicative function.

When it comes to how Frederica utilizes that interactive and highly functional aspect of television, Mara Cambiaghi in her work "The Gendered Memories of Frederica Potter: A.S. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman*" says that:

While new trends in science, education, television, visual culture and counter-culture of the Sixties affect life in England during the decade, television becomes the most prominent medium for addressing public argument and discussion. The novel does indeed show this gradual transition towards visual culture, when women's issues first enter television, reflecting changes in cultural values and society. (2005:227)

That gradual transition towards visual culture is best represented with Frederica's show and the topics she debates with her guests accordingly address matters of particular importance to women. In one of the episodes of her show, Frederica's discussion topic is creativity. Frederica's guests are Hoder Pinsky who is already invited to Wijnobel's conference, and Elvet Gander, a psychoanalyst. A copy object of a Picasso ceramic makes all three laugh, as the narrator describes:

The clay pot was curved and full-bellied, standing on hen's claws, with a cockscomb over its delicate beaked spout, and the pointed breasts and pleated navel of a human woman. Its handle was a curved tail. It was made in white earthenware, dabbed with smoke and black paint; it had wicked staring eyes, and pretty nipples, and a flurry of wing-opinions. (Byatt, 2002:156)

For Frederica, "it was a solid, tangible metaphor. Hen-in-woman. Woman-in-hen" and likewise Pinsky speaks of it as "cock-hen-woman-vase" (Byatt, 2002:157). Picasso's works of ceramics and pottery comes towards the end of his career, after visiting a pottery exhibition in the South of France. Although he started with simple objects like flats or bowls, in time he created pieces like the vase, mixing human figures with animals whose anatomical parts formed the handle. Most of those human faces that he blends with animal forms are women. While questioning marriage, domesticity and motherhood, this time, Byatt provides a three-dimensional visual that the characters discuss and an ekphrastic depiction that draws an analogy between a woman and a hen, recalling birth and productivity. For Uhsadel, Frederica's life is determined by attempts to reconcile body and mind, to achieve emotional and intellectual fulfillment (2005:94). Frederica's proclamation of "I want to think" (Byatt, 2002:138) is a testimony to that need of working and having intellectual activity which pervade the quartet and reach a climax in *A Whistling Woman* as Frederica has a new voice which is enabled by television, a modern device of visual culture.

At the conference on body and mind, one of the speakers stands out for Frederica. Working at the biology department of the University of North Yorkshire, Luk Lysgaard Peacock studies snail populations and in his room at university he is "comfortable" with "a poster of the Matisse snail on the wall" (Byatt, 2002:174). For Luk, studying genetics changes his outlook on life completely but what is intriguing is the fact that as Frederica labors to reconcile body and mind dichotomy, Luk achieves it for religion and science. As a child, Luk was a devout Christian; however, as an adolescent his belief grew weaker and thinner upon the happening of a particular incident.

One day, walking amongst the trees in a wood, in sunlight, he had an intense flash of vision, which because of his education he compared to the Pauline flash on the

road to Damascus. Except that what he saw – what was revealed by the brilliance of the ordinary light – was that the stories they had told him were stories and were not true. And when he saw that, suddenly everything was differently real, shining with clarity, which particularity, and with a mystery which was to be a calling. He saw flies and worms, leaves and roots transfigured because they were not transfigured, they were what they were. He thought of his religious faith as a horny lens over his eyes which were now washed clean. (Byatt, 2002:187-188)

That moment of enlightenment for Luk is redolent of St Paul and his conversion as referred to in the quote. St Paul's conversion from a persecutor to an apostle of Jesus has been most famously illustrated in Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* (1600) and *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* (1601) although there are some other notable painters like Albrecht Dürer, William Blake and Pieter Brueghel the Elder who depicted similar scenes.



Fig. 6. Caravaggio, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, 1600, Odescalchi Balbi Collection, Rome



Fig. 7. Caravaggio, *Conversion on the Way to Damascus*, 1601, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

Paul is known to be on his journey to Damascus in order to arrest followers of Christianity. However, his conversion happens on the way and becomes a miracle story across the centuries, affecting art and literature. The way Byatt narrates Luk's story, his moment of religious ecstasy, sounds quite similar. Although what Luk goes through is the exact opposite experience, turning away from religion, he still feels the same epiphany, gains new perspective and state of mind on life. At the conference, Luk's speech aims to provide perspective on human structures being fated or designed by society. Luk argues in his paper that "in ultimate biological terms the losers are redundant males, despite the fact that in human society women have been compressed by males" (Campbell, 2004:250). At the very end of the novel, Frederica finds herself pregnant by Luk and what should not go unmentioned is the fact that of all the men Frederica has been with, Luk is the one who respects her most as a woman. Frederica is so impressed by his paper that she begins thinking that the world is bigger and there are new metaphors worth searching for. That also marks an important decision in her life as she decides to continue her career in television instead of becoming a writer and sets out on a journey to famous museums in Holland. She goes to The Hague "to film Vermeer's *View of Delft* (1660), which Frederica knew from reproductions, and from Proust's descriptions of the death of Bergotte in front of it, but had never seen" (Byatt, 2002:417). While sitting in front of the *View of Delft*, she falls into a deep but brief sleep. When she wakes up, "the light in the dark room had appeared to be coming from the painting, had indeed come liquid through the window and been reflected off its surface" (Byatt, 2002:419). Frederica identifies with Vermeer "who had set himself problems only he could solve, and had solved them, and made a mystery" (Byatt, 2002:419). Having the dilemma of telling about her pregnancy, Frederica decides to go after Luk and tell him the truth as that epiphany moment culminates in her.



Fig. 8. Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, 1660, Mauritshuis, The Hague

To conclude, with *A Whistling Woman*, Byatt completes her quartet that spans a period of almost two decades, from 1953 to 1970. Byatt's fondness of visual arts could be interpreted as having various functions in each book, but the common ground that these novels share is the way in which ekphrasis serves as a medium to explore the verbal and visual representations that place women in relation to their social worlds and display female identity in progress through Frederica in particular by means of an aesthetic combination of word and image. With *A Whistling Woman*, Frederica achieves sexual, social and cultural freedom, and as a thinking woman she is not narrowed to the roles of mother and wife, a situation which reinforces the possibility of female autonomy in Britain during the 1960s and 70s. Frederica's journey of forming an identity evolved on many levels and with *A Whistling Woman*, it is accompanied by alternative storylines in which the action involves several plots and different groups of people with different sets of beliefs woven into the story. With a wide range of characters and several sub-plots offering connections with social, religious, cultural, scientific contexts, Byatt displays a narration that is rich in visual allusions and intertextual references. Ranging from Rembrandt's etchings to Mondrian, Van Eyck and a Picasso ceramic, Byatt presents an elaborate visual patterning that provides illuminative and binding interpretations and lay foundations for a transition to visual culture. With a conference on body and mind as the focal point, Byatt extends earlier issues that run through the quartet which enables to discuss the dichotomies of thinking minds and feeling bodies concerning women, and also in accordance with the changing atmosphere of the sixties, her acquisitions on the origins of life, science and religion are given an insight through visual elements that Byatt uses as frameworks to link key ideas and moments, mark and enhance their significance.

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Visual Sources

Figure 1: Rembrandt. Student at a Table by Candlelight. 1642. Rhode Island School of Design, Rhode Island.

https://risdmuseum.org/art-design/collection?search_api_fulltext=Student+at+a+Table+by+Candlelight

Figure 2: Rembrandt. The Shell (Conus marmoreus). 1650. Private Collection.

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/rembrandt/the-shell-conus-marmoreus-1650>

Figure 3: Rembrandt. Faust in his Study. 1652. The Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/a-scholar-in-his-study-faust#&gid=1&pid=1>

Figure 4: Rembrandt. The Sacrifice of Isaac. 1635. Hermitage, St Petersburg.

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Figure 5: Van Eyck, Jan and Hubert. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. 1432. Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent.

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Figure 6: Caravaggio. The Conversion of St. Paul. 1600. Odescalchi Balbi Collection, Rome.

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Figure 7: Caravaggio. Conversion on the Way to Damascus. 1601. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/caravaggio/conversion-on-the-way-to-damascus-1601>

Figure 8: Vermeer, Johannes. View of Delft. 1660. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

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