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'As if by Magic'

(Kate Atkinson)

Postmodernist Aspects in Kate Atkinson's Fiction

Wien, 2004

List of Abbreviations

AW   *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

BS   *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*

EW   *Emotionally Weird*

HC   *Human Croquet*

LC   *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

KHM   *Kinder – und Hausmärchen*

TL   *Through the Looking – Glass, And What*
Alice Found There

TS   *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,*
Gentleman

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a study of the postmodernist aspects in the fiction of the contemporary British writer Kate Atkinson. Her first two novels, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Human Croquet* alternately present the lives of the two narrators and protagonists, Ruby Lennox and Isobel Fairfax, as well as large parts of their family histories. Atkinson maps out the fluctuating fortunes of several generations and portrays an intricate web of tangled stories and episodes. As a result, the past permeates the present through a cyclical temporality and the emergence of trans – generational family symbols. That past and present interpenetrate each other with fluid ease leads to Atkinson's characteristically postmodernist concern with the concept of history. Moreover, fantasy and reality are merged in Atkinson's fiction. Through her employment of fantastical themes and motifs, the author undermines and subverts the ideologies inherent in many fairy tale retellings. Apart from displaying characteristics of postmodernist storytelling, Atkinson's novels are also defined by the postmodernist scepticism towards entities such as reality, truth, stability, body, self, identity and language.

As with most new movements in cultural history, postmodernist art has not always met with the undivided approval of the public, as, for instance, Michael Craig – Martin's 'An Oak Tree' has demonstrated in the Tate Modern.[1] Although Craig – Martin's sculpture exemplified postmodernist concerns in the form of challenging the institution of the gallery and parodying the arbitrariness of naming as well as Duchamp's "ready – mades", it might confirm critics' frequent castigation of postmodernism as an elitist phenomenon, which is very selective regarding its audiences.

In contrast to this, Kate Atkinson's novels have both been acclaimed by the world of literary criticism and have been financial successes with the British public. In creating novels which both merit literary analysis and which are delightful to read, Atkinson has traversed the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between postmodernist theory and the public.

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[1] 'An Oak Tree' is a glass of water placed on a bathroom glass shelf. A series of questions and answers accompanies the object, through which the artists states that the glass of water is, in reality, an oak tree. 'An Oak Tree' was first displayed at the Rowan Gallery, London, in 1974. For information compare Manchester, on:
http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=27072&tabview=text&text type=10

1.1 Kate Atkinson

Kate Atkinson was born in York in 1951 as the only child of parents running a surgical and medical supply shop in Stonegate. Kate went to a private primary school and afterwards attended Queen Anne's Grammar School in York. She studied English Literature at Dundee University. In 1973 Atkinson married a fellow student and gave birth to her first daughter the following year.

After graduating from Dundee with a master's degree in 1974, she researched a postgraduate doctorate on American Literature. Atkinson often describes the failure of her thesis as her own personal catalyst which helped her to become a writer. Atkinson embarked on a various number of jobs, ranging from legal secretary to, most famously, that of a chambermaid,[2] and finally returned to Dundee University to teach English there. In 1982 she married a Scottish teacher and had another daughter by him. She now lives in Edinburgh with her two daughters.

Atkinson started writing in 1981, at a rather difficult period in her life, when her PhD - thesis was not accepted. She decided to become a professional writer after she had won the Woman's Own short story competition with her text "In China" in 1988. In 1995, Atkinson published her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, which was produced from a series of short stories. The novel won the prestigious Whitbread Award that year, as well as the Boeker Prize in South Africa and became the Book of the Year in France. Other acclaim for her work followed when the piece "Snow Feathers" was shortlisted for the Bridport Arts competition in 1990 and "Karmic Mothers = Fact or Fiction?" won the Ian St. James Award in 1993.

Atkinson's second novel, *Human Croquet*, was published in 1997 and became the New York Times Notable Book of the Year. In the following year, Atkinson also received the EM Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Atkinson's last novel to date, *Emotionally Weird*, was released in 2000. It received mixed reviews, but was another international bestseller.

In addition to her novels, Atkinson has continued to write short stories and commercial fiction. Furthermore, she has also produced work for radio, such as ("This Dog's Life") or ("A Partner for Life") as well as for television ("Karmic

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[2] Compare, for instance, Ellison, Mike. "Rushdie Makes It a Losing Double." *The Guardian* January 24, 1996 and Conaghan, Dan. "Family Saga Beats the Odds to Win Whitbread". *Daily Telegraph* January 24, 1996.

Mothers") and stage. *Abandonment*, released in 2000 is her first full – length play. Atkinson's most recent work is a collection of short stories entitled *Not the End of the World*. A fourth novel, *Case Histories,* is in progress.[3]

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2. POSTMODERNISM

There is hardly a term in contemporary cultural theory, which is more ubiquitous and more widely used, yet harder to define and delimit than postmodernism. The meaning of the concept is far from clear, as the semantic field that has become associated with the phenomenon has a wide range of connotations. Moreover, as McHale has pointed out rather sarcastically, 'Nobody likes the term' (McHale, 3) perhaps for the reason that postmodernism is a vague, nebulous and complicated concept, which is assigned to such seemingly contradictory signifieds as the designs of rooms, buildings, magazines or newspaper articles, the making of films, records, documentaries or all forms of art, intertextuality between these forms, as well as general tendencies towards (self) - reflexivity, anti – teleology, the decentring of the subject or 'the collective chagrin and morbid projections of a post – War generation of baby boomers confronting disillusioned middle age' (Hebdige, 181), only to give a few examples.

Because postmodernism is attributed to so many different areas, it is enjoying the status of a commonplace buzzword in both academic circles and in popular, broad – stream culture, resisting clear definition. It reaches into a multitude of subjects and disciplines, including architecture, music, film, visual art, literature, sociology, fashion, technology and the sciences. Indeed,

> [a]ttempts at defining postmodernism are notoriously unsatisfactory. So much as that it has become a standard move in the game of defining postmodernism to say that attempts at defining it are notoriously unsatisfactory. (Niall, 63)

The term postmodernism both refers to a group of thinkers who have attempted to deconstruct and subvert traditional Enlightenment values and concepts, as well as to cultural products that are informed by these theories and by a critique of postmodern living conditions. An interesting aspect of postmodernism is the close connection and alignment between postmodernist thought and theories with postmodernist art. The works of postmodernist artists often seem to arise out of and manifest the philosophical, sociological and political climate of postmodernist ideas.

The theoretic fabric of postmodern thought is constituted by a number of philosophers, linguists, sociologists and critics, who have contributed to

postmodernist thought in what is frequently termed the 'rise of theory'.[4] However, postmodernism's conceptual framework is also strongly influenced by theories such as Foucault's works on discourse and his archaeology of history as well as Lacan's theories of desire. Moreover, postmodernism also heavily depends on Derrida's theories of deconstruction and other poststructuralist concepts. Furthermore, as will be shown later, modernism is one of the major influences in postmodern thought.

Generalizing to extremes, postmodernism is essentially determined by relativism in every field, concerning both representations, systems, language and reality. It is therefore often described as a concept which is determined by fragmentation and provisionality, performance and instability as well as multiplicity. Postmodernist critics have referred to postmodernism as a structure which is dispersed, twisted, divergent and coiled as opposed to being a hierarchical and ordered system. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, find a fitting figurative representation of postmodernism in the rhizome, an aborescent structure that is unpredictably organized.[5]

Primary and frequent targets of subversion of postmodernism are therefore structures, systems and representations which are unified, centralistic or hierarchical. As Hutcheon remarks, postmodernism especially attacks the ideals of liberal - humanist culture, rooting in thoughts of the Enlightenment. As a result, postmodernism challenges concepts which:

> have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, centre, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 57)

Since postmodernism undercuts these traditional Enlightenment values, including the idea of human emancipation, it favours local instead of universal, regional instead of general forms of structure. Postmodernism therefore rejects what Lyotard terms metanarratives, which are overall systems of legitimation. For postmodernist critics and artists Lyotard's concept of postmodernism's refusal of metanarratives entails, for instance, a critique and deconstruction of concepts such as history,

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[4] Compare Butler, 5-12.
[5] According to Deleuze and Guattari, "the question is whether plant life in its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic. Even some animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other."(6 - 7)

subjectivity, reality, ideology, and language as a form of objective representation of "reality".

In order to limit the term postmodernism in its scope, it is, moreover, important to differentiate between the concepts of postmodernity and postmodernism. While postmodernity is aimed at describing socio – economic, political and cultural conditions of contemporary society, postmodernism is a term that 'describes the broad aesthetic and intellectual projects in our society, on the plane of theory around since the 1960'. (Woods, 10) Whereas postmodernity is, for instance, characterized by the rise and revolution caused by electronic technologies of communication as well as by an increasingly post – industrial economy and a society dependant on information, postmodernism as a term, for example, refers to a novel which raises awareness to itself as a linguistic construct.

Definitions of postmodernism range from the historical, which links postmodernism chronologically to modernism or other periods, to the political, which sees postmodernism as either complicit with or radically challenging late capitalism to tacit definitions, which simply evade the question of definition.

Many definitions of the phenomenon, however, rest on postmodernism's relationship to modernism[6]. Whereas postmodernity can easily be said to stand in a chronological relationship with modernity, postmodernism's relationship to modernism has been widely contested and discussed. Basically, there are two sets of theories explaining the inter – relationship between the two concepts.

Some critics see modernism and postmodernism divided by a clear cut from each other, the prefix "post" representing a marker which places postmodernism as a period historically after modernism. Both opponents and supporters of postmodernism have adopted this view. Hassan, for instance, groups postmodernism and modernism in two columns divided by binary opposites such as 'Purpose/ Play, Design/Chance or Hierarchy/Anarchy'.[7] However, attempts at classifying postmodernism's relationship to modernism as neatly as that radically contradict postmodernism's postulated determination to deconstruct and subvert any attempts at organising in the form of binary opposites.

Other critics, however, have opted for a more complex connection between postmodernism and modernism. It could be argued that postmodernism functions as

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[6] Because it would take too much space to elaborate on modernism here, I want to refer to Wood's definition of the concept. Compare Woods, 6 – 8.
[7] See Hassan, 91 – 2.

an intensification and extension of modernism. According to one of postmodernism's most ardent opponents, the British literary critic Terry Eagleton, postmodernism is a continuation of modernism, and the differentiation between the two cultural practises rests solely on ideologies which are essentially complicit with late capitalism.[8]

Lyotard's definition of the term postmodernism, an aesthetic one, is maybe most radical. In his influential *The Postmodern Condition*, he claims that modernism paradoxically presupposes postmodernism:

> A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (Lyotard, 79)

Postmodernism has, therefore, been seen both as a reaction to, a continuation of and a response to modernism. Following Hutcheon, I will see postmodernism's relationship to modernism as a contradictory one, in that postmodernism both rejects aspects of modernism as well as employs some modernist themes and strategies. Hutcheon, for example, argues that postmodernism rejects modernism's idea of the autonomy of art and the separation of art from life, as well as its expression of subjectivity. On the other hand, postmodernism intensifies and re – explores aspects of modernism such as its concern with self – reflexivity, irony and its challenge of realist representation.[9]

While modernist artists still believe in the existence of an outside reality, but contest the presentation of reality on the subjective level, reality itself becomes a slippery concept for postmodernism and therefore ceases to be a reliable point of reference. As McHale notes, while modernism is mainly concerned with epistemological problems, postmodernism highlights ontological insecurity.[10] In contrast to modernism, postmodernism does not lament fragmentation or incoherence and rather celebrates chaos.

Apart from the general difficulty of delimitating labels of epochs, which is always highly problematic, the historical construction of the concept of postmodernism is considerably complicated by the differing opinions on how modernism is related to postmodernism. As a result of this discussion, the borderline and construction of the caesura "postmodernism" has been pushed back in recent

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[8] Compare Eagleton, 20 – 44.
[9] See Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 43.
[10] Cf. McHale, 3 – 11.

years. Lucy Niall, for instance, argues that postmodernism is actually an enlivenment of Romanticism, by claiming that it contains Romanticism's most important aspects.[11] Since the sixties saw a gradual change in society towards postmodernity, however, most critics also trace postmodernism's origin historically there. Although the term only gained wide popularity outside academic circles in the 1980s, critics like Ihab Hassan and Susan Sonntag also wrote about the new phenomenon as early as the 1960s.

While critics of postmodernism often stress its threatening and anarchic side, reading its relativism and openness for multiple interpretations negatively and thus overlooking that relativism is not necessarily to be equalled with nihilism, others have stressed its ambivalent connection with contemporary culture. According to Hutcheon, for instance, postmodernism does not seek to destroy the ideas it challenges, but questions them from within the cultural centre. As a result, postmodernism argues from contemporary culture and society and thus reveals humanist – liberal ideals as human constructs.[12]

To sum up, postmodernism can therefore be seen as a phenomenon which is characterized by its scepticism towards any closed, centred or hierarchical form, structure or organization and aims at the 'undercutting of an all – encompassing rationality.' (Woods, 10) Postmodernism challenges liberal - humanist positions and assumptions by using them, and therefore uses and abuses, employs and subverts concepts and ideas at the same time.[13]

2.1 Postmodernist fiction

Research on postmodernism is very unevenly divided between the various disciplines and subjects. While there is an inappropriate amount of theory in some areas, such as architecture, visual art or cultural theory, others such as law and the social sciences have been relatively neglected. One of the most prolific areas of postmodernist criticism alongside architecture has been produced in the field of literary criticism. According to Butler, the form of the novel is especially receptive for postmodernist theories:

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[11] Cf. Niall, VI – 82.
[12] Compare Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 57 – 8.
[13] Useful introductions to postmodernism, for instance, include Woods, 1 - 17, Butler, 1 – 61 and Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 1 – 57.

> It is not surprising that the novel has borne a disproportionate amount of the burden of being "postmodern", because its hitherto usual "discourses" – in the relationship of author to the text, its apparently liberal or "bourgeois individualist" construction of unified character, its relationship to historical truth – lay it at so many points open to a postmodernist critique. (Butler, 73)

Postmodernist novels indeed contest the conventions of realism and mimesis. Postmodernist fiction first made its appearance in the 1960s, a time when the novel was thought to be in decline and crisis, and the realist mode was felt to be outdated and exhausted. In his famous essay of the same title Barth announces "the Literature of Exhaustion", which for him had used up the conventions of realist fiction. He stressed that new ways of exploring reality had to be found in contemporary writing.[14]

At the edge of the "end of writing" authors such as Federman and Barth therefore searched for new ways of representation. It has to be stressed, however, that what is conveniently labelled as postmodernist fiction is far from a homogenous movement, but one which emerged in several waves and currents and which comprises a multitude of authors as different as Auster, DeLillo, Pynchon, Fowles, Vonnegut, Hawkes, Gass, Kosinski, Brautigan, Coover, Barthelme and Katz, among many others. Although postmodernist fiction has mostly been termed an American – European phenomenon, writers such as Silko, Erdrich, Vizenor, Kingston, Tan, Marquéz, Borges, Brink, Morrison or Rushdie have also used postmodernist devices in their novels.

The new kind of literature appearing in the 1960s has been given various names, among them, for instance, 'fabulation'[15], which stresses the resistance to the concept of reality of some literature produced at that time, 'metafiction', which refers to the self – reflexivity of postmodernist fiction and 'historiographic metafiction'[16], which emphasises the occupation of postmodernist fiction with history.[17]

While postmodernism describes the period of literature that emerged from the 1960 onwards, it can also stand for a set of devices and techniques which are prominent in most of these works. According to Woods, postmodernist fiction seeks out to :

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[14] See Barth, 19 – 33.
[15] Compare Scholes, 1 – 9.
[16] Cf. Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 105 – 124.
[17] See Woods, 50 – 1.

subvert its own structural and formal bases … which implied that reality only existed in the language that described it, with meaning inseparably linked to writing and reading practices. (Woods, 52)

According to Waugh, who terms this self – awareness of the literary product metafiction, it is the 'term given to fictional writing which self – consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.' (Waugh, 2)

As stated above, postmodernism often challenges perceived metanarratives. Postmodernist fiction subverts and deconstructs systems of legitimation. Metanarrratives frequently function over the retellings of popular stories. Most retellings adhere to a restricted number of culturally received, conservative metanarratives, which have the objective 'of maintaining conformity to socially determined and approved patterns of behaviour, which they do by offering perceptive role models, proscribing undesirable behaviour, and affirming the culture's ideologies, systems and institutions'. (Stephens/ McCallum, 3 – 4) As a result, postmodernist novelists are often sceptical about traditional forms of narration, such as fairy tales, and revise them in their fiction.

Another important aspect of postmodernist fiction is its problematizing of history. Alongside changes in historiography itself, postmodernist fiction questions the status of history as a form of objective representation of reality by stressing the similarities between history and fiction. The postmodernist novel challenges and tries to expose historiography as another grand narrative. Critics of postmodernism often claim that postmodernist fiction creates the past only as a kitschy form of nostalgia, and has therefore contributed to the fact that the past has become irrelevant and meaningless in contemporary culture.[18] In contrast to viewing postmodernist writing complicit with the "death of history", Hutcheon sees the occupation of postmodernist fiction with history as a productive interrogation:

> The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstates historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. (Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 89)

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[18] Compare Woods, 54 – 55.

In Hutcheon's view to parody is not to destroy the past, but to enter into a productive relationship with its representations, which reveals the discursively and ideologically constructed nature of the same. [19]

Another notion which the postmodernist text often challenges is that of the unified self and integrated consciousness, which also extends to fictional characters. As developed by Deleuze and Guattari, the new postmodern self is 'organized round concepts of plural and multiple identities and decentred or displaced consciousnesses.' (Woods, 30) Postmodernist characters are often revealed as textual constructs, so that the notion of a unified, rational and autonomous subject in fiction is challenged.

As postmodernism borrows the notion that everything is text, there can also be no preference for a special kind of text and thus no hierarchical relationships or superiority of texts such as literary or scientific discourse as opposed to popular texts. Postmodernist fiction thus deconstructs the borderline between high literature and "low" texts. This has often led to a mixture and merging of discourses in postmodernist fiction, with novels often taking on discourses from non- fictional fields. Moreover, postmodernism's radical rejections of fixed boundaries of any kind has also led to a deconstruction of borderlines between different genres, so that literary styles have become more fluent and slippery.

Postmodernist fiction, furthermore, frequently exploits intertextuality. According to intertextual theories, the meaning of a literary product does not depend and rely on an extralinguistic reality, but on other texts. Every text has thus to be situated within a network of textual relations.

> Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext. (Allen, 1)

Intertextuality is a term coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s. By combining Saussurean and Bakhtinian concepts of language and literature, Kristeva strongly questions the autonomy of the text. Another supporter of intertexuality, Roland Barthes, speaks of the impossibility of living outside the infinite text[20] and points towards new ways of viewing authorship and the process of reading.

Intertextuality is an important technique of postmodernist authors. Extracts from diverse contexts are often weaved into postmodernist novels, thus

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[19] Cf. Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 87 – 105.
[20] Compare Barthes, 59.

exemplifying the interconnectedness and interdependence of texts. Forms of intertexuality range from intertextual citations to the employment of conventions of whole literary genres. Incorporating themes from and allusions to other texts does, however, not mean that postmodernist intertextuality is just copying from received texts. On the contrary, postmodernist literature enters into a productive and parodying relationship of questioning and subversion with its intertexts. [21]

Frequently, metafictional devices in postmodernist fiction highlight questions of ontological insecurity. Postmodernist texts and narratives as well as characters are therefore often destabilized to foreground the ontological structures of the text. The reader is disoriented both in connection to the literary text itself and to the world outside, the concept of "reality" is blurred on both levels. In answer to modernism's strict split between art and life postmodernism, as a result, challenges boundaries between fiction and non – fiction, thus highlighting postmodernism's concern with questions of ontology.

To sum up, elements which play a key part in postmodernist fiction are its narrative fragmentation and reflexivity, its self - conscious play with structure, language and formal devices, thus challenging realistic representation, a questioning of the relationship between narrative and subjectivity, as well as a decentring of the subject, its elimination of the boundaries between popular and high art forms and a preoccupation with the way history is constructed as well as an incredulity towards all systems of representation.[22]

In the following thesis I will demonstrate how Atkinson's two novels *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Human Croquet* display elements characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Starting with postmodernism's incredulity towards

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[21] For intertextuality compare Allen, 1 – 94 and Intertextualität, 1 – 30. Intertextuality is an essential device in Atkinson's work and would merit an analysis of its own. While she borrows and thereby subverts the conventions of genres, such as fantasy literature or science – fiction, novels also provide significant intertexts in Atkinson's work. As will be seen from the following work, intertexual allusions interlink with the major themes in Atkinson's fiction. Intertexts include, among many others, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking – Glass, And What Alice Found There,* Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu*, Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, Stroker's *Dracula*, Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Alcott's *Little Women,* Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Melville's *Moby Dick,* du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Emily Bronte 's *Wuthering Heights*. Children literature intertexts include C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* and Nesbit's *The House of Arden .* Other consequential intertexts in Atkinson's work are Shakespeare's plays, and especially his romantic comedies. Julie Sanders has provided a valuable analysis about the influence of Shakespeare's oeuvre on Atkinson's work. Compare Sanders, 66 – 83. What is more, Atkinson's intertextual allusions also include non – literary art such as Munch's 'The Scream' and Preraphaelite paintings like Millais' 'Ophelia' or Rossetti's 'Beata Beatrix'.
[22] For postmodernist fiction compare: Woods, 49 – 66 and Butler 69 – 73.

metanarratives I will demonstrate how Atkinson is disrupting the reading of received fairy tales in her novels, as well as questioning traditional concepts of history. Moreover, it will be outlined how Atkinson uses postmodernist narrative devices and how her portrayal of unstable entities produces an ontological insecurity.

3. CONTESTING METANARRATIVES

In his *Postmodern Condition*, which famously was designed to give a report on knowledge, science, literature and the Arts in the 20th century, Jean Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern as an 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. (Lyotard, XXIV)

According to Lyotard, metanarratives are concepts that reconcile rules of justification into an overall sanctifying legitimation. These metanarratives mask contradictions and discrepancies which are to be associated with any social structure or organization. Lyotard sees the postmodern age characterized by a delegitimation process, in which small narratives substitute these grand narratives.

Borrowing from Wittgenstein's theory on language games, Lyotard claims that discourses are made up of different rules and are therefore incommensurable. As a result, no single legitimation can encompass all possible language games and can therefore not function as an overall model any longer.

Classic metanarratives and models of explanation such as Marxism or that of the human emancipation have therefore lost their credibility resulting in 'a fragmented society with many different and incompatible moral and social codes.' (Williams, 34) As Lyotard puts it:

> [i]n contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, post-modern culture – the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (Lyotard, 37)

Although Lyotard's theories have often been read as totally deconstructing human liberalist culture, Lyotard never pronounced that metanarratives have ceased to exist. On the contrary. Lyotard maintains that their legitimating function fails sometimes, but not always. According to Lyotard metanarratives have to be recognized as human constructs. To highlight their discursive production, however, does not correlate with denying them any meaning in contemporary society. For Lyotard, linkage is necessary, but not the direction of linkage. Language games which can link other language games therefore still exist, but there is no longer an all – encompassing metanarrative.[23]

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[23] Compare Lyotard, 3 – 67.

Following on from Lyotard's theories, postmodernist fiction seeks to subvert totalising explanations and representations. Informed by a scepticism against these closed or hierarchized systems, postmodernist novelists, for instance, challenge metanarratives which are transmitted over stories, such as in fairy tales. Moreover, postmodernist fiction subverts the perception of history as an objective representation of reality.

3.1 Retelling Fantasy

A metanarrative can therefore be described as a totalising narrative schema which organizes and arranges cultural knowledge or experience. Such metanarratives are often also transmitted via the retelling of narrative units. In particular, the retelling of stories in children's literature can be instrumental to important cultural functions in society.

> The existential concerns of a society find concrete images and symbolic forms in traditional stories of many kinds, offering a cultural inheritance subject to social conditioning and modification through the interaction of various retellings. Although the notional significance of a story is thus potentially infinitely intertextual ... it is also arguable that the processes of retelling are overwhelmingly subject to a limited number of conservative metanarratives – that is, the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience. (Stephens/ McCallum, 3)

As a result, by retelling a limited sample of stories, including biblical literature and religious stories as well as myths, hero stories, medieval romances, oriental stories, Robin Hood material, modern classics and folk and fairy tales, cultural codes and values are transmitted.

While some retellings can be traced back to an original source, most rely on other retellings such as film versions of famous fairy tales or stories. A fairy tale such as Cinderella might therefore originate in Perrault's or the Grimms' versions, the Disney adaptation, pantomime performances or a combination of the above.

As a result, retellings seldom reproduce the original cultural signification of the pretext and are governed by a limited set of culturally accepted, frequently conservative metanarratives, which have the function of upholding conformity to socially constructed and approved patterns of behaviour. The metanarrative thus

functions by providing role models, and disciplining deviant behaviour, thereby strengthening the ideologies, systems and institutions of a certain culture. [24]

However, as has been shown above, metanarratives have been revealed to be human constructs and are not fully functioning any longer in contemporary society. As a result, traditional pre - texts have come to be questioned in postmodernist retellings. Postmodernist fiction often deconstructs received story material by its reversions, and subverts presumptions and ideologies inherent in classic pretexts or received retellings.

> … even the most revered cultural icon can be subjected to mocking or antagonistic retellings. The resulting version is then not so much a retelling as a re - version, a narrative that has taken apart its pre- texts and reassembled them as a version which is a new textual and ideological configuration. (Stephens/ McCallum, 4)

In her two novels *BS* and *HC*, Atkinson similarly subverts and deconstructs received fantasy literature[25] and especially fairy tales. As a result, she also challenges the ideologies and presumptions inherent in fantasy and fairy tales in her work.

3.2 A Note on Fairy Tales

Folk and fairy tales have enjoyed a widespread popularity for thousands of years. Some critics even trace the origins of these tales back to the megalithic period[26], but the oldest known fairy tale is "The Doomed Prince", recorded in ancient Egypt around 1300BC. [27] Fairytales often go back to Oriental or Roman story material.

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[24] See Stephens/ McCallum, 3 – 10.

[25] According to Jackson, fantasy includes such contrasting forms as myths, fairy tales, legends, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction and horror stories. In Jackson's opinion, a wide definition of fantasy is that it rejects and resists realistic representation. Its most important aspect is therefore its refusal of definitions of "real". Fantasy threatens to subvert conceived structures of power, thus sharing points of contact with postmodernism. However, Jackson also warns to see fantasy as a subversive genre per se, stressing that fantasy can either exemplify or expel subversive traits. See Jackson, 11 – 19.
Clute and Grant argue similarly that 'a fantasy text is a self – coherent narrative which, when set in our reality, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it … when set in an otherworld or secondary world, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible in *the otherworld's terms*.' [capitalization removed] (*Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, VIII)

[26] Cf. Zipes, 5.

[27] Some critics opt for a strong distinction between folk and fairy tales. Jack Zipes, for instance, sees the oral, performance – based, ephemeral folk tale as totally contrary to the written, text – based, canonized fairy tale. According to Zipes, the original folktale has been transformed into the literary fairy tale under the influence of the bourgeois public sphere. Increasing industrialization and mass – media entertainment have further strengthened this trend. Compare Zipes, 1 – 20. Similarly, Lüthi distinguishes between 'Volksmärchen', which have been transmitted orally and 'Kunstmärchen', which can be traced back to an individual author. Compare Lüthi, 5.

The *Gesta Romanorum*, an influential collection of allegories, fables and stories was first published in 1473 and provided an inspiration for many authors, including Shakespeare, during the following centuries. Giambattista Basile's collection *The Pentameron*, a compilation of 50 fairy tales, published in 1634, likewise became an important source for later writers.

The next development in the history of the fairy tale manifested itself in a revival of the tales in France in the late 17th century. An important collector of fairy tales, Charles Perrault, began to compile fairy tales at the end of the 17th century. His collection *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé; avec des Moralitez* (1697) contains versions of "Sleeping Beauty", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard". As the title suggests, Perrault's stories were all equipped with a moral, which favoured the development of the fairy tale into nursery literature. In the following centuries, fairy tales were more and more relegated to the sphere of children's literature. Another important figure of that time is Madame d' Aulnoy, who first introduced the character Prince Charming in her story "The Blue Bird". The English translation of her *Les Contes de Fées* into *Tales of the Fairys* in 1699 gave the English fairy tale its name.

While the fairy tale had been discredited by Enlightenment thinkers, it experienced a thriving revival in Germany during the Romantic period. German poets and authors such as Wieland, Brentano and von Arnim began to occupy themselves with orally transmitted song and story material in order to preserve an important part of cultural inheritance. Since Brentano also encouraged others to record stories, the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm began to systematically collect and stylise folk tale material. They finally published the material in the two editions of the *Kinder – und Hausmärchen (KHM)*, in 1812 and 1815 respectively.

The enthusiasm which greeted the Grimms' endeavours also led others to collect, among them Croker in Ireland, Chambers in Scotland, Asbjörnsen and Moe in Norway and Bechstein in Germany. Most of these compilations, however, only consolidated the collection of fairy tales.

Another important contributor to the fairy tale genre is Hans Christian Andersen. While he also started out to collect folkloristic material, he ended up creating stories of his own, cumulating them in his collection *Eventyr og Historier*.

However, since most compilers of folk and fairy tales have stylised and reworked their oral material, it is quite difficult to retrieve their original form. Moreover, I think that folk and fairy tales can be regarded as a thematically continuous genre. Therefore I will not differentiate between the two.

The translation of Andersen's work into English in 1846 led to a renaissance of the fairy tale in Britain. While many authors such as Robert Browning and Sara Coleridge were experimenting with the form, the British pantomime developed its distinct characteristic, frequently utilising storylines from popular fairytales.

After the 1860s fairy tale features were often mixed with other forms, such as in Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).[28]

Apart from these classic compilations, the reception of fairy tales in contemporary Western culture has been massively governed by the film industry. Whilst few film adaptations of popular fairy tales try to be literarily faithful to a certain pretext, most adaptations substantially reinterpret it. The influential Disney adaptations of fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Cinderella* (1950) or *Snow White* (1937) have especially had the effect to 'narrow and redefine what modern children (and adults) know as the folk tale (or the fairy tale), and what meanings they ascribe to the folk tale.' (*The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, 162) These two main influences for a large part shape consumers' notions of expectancy regarding fairy tales.

That fairy tales hold a continuing grip on the imagination can be shown by the fact that they have been retold in Western Europe in a number of discourses with particular strength, ranging from novel retellings of fairy tales to films, which use popular fairy tale tropes. Moreover, fairy tale motifs and allusions enjoy a widespread popularity in advertising, which shows that most of the audience must be familiar with traditional fairy tale conventions.

Fairy and folk tales constitute an especially prominent target for reversions of postmodernist fiction[29] because of their formulaic nature. They include, for instance, recurring and stereotyped patterns of action, such as the overcoming or solving of problems. Specific to the fairy tale are also themes like the victory of a seemingly small or weak member of the community over a strong one or the discrepancy between appearance and reality.

Furthermore, fairy and folk tales include a rather fixed set of characters, who are neither complex, nor do they develop. These include predominantly the hero or heroine and their antagonistic or supporting figures. Characters are often so generally portrayed that they do not have distinct names but are rather characterized

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[28] See Lüthi, 47 – 62, Warner, XII – XV, Rölleke, 34 - 51 and *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 330 – 333.
[29] See, for instance, Bacchilega, Christina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales*.

by designations of their functions, such as "queen" or "witch". Furthermore, characters can be easily classified into stereotypically good and evil ones. In addition, the dualism of the fairy tale also provides for an easy distinction between beautiful and ugly types.

Fairy and folk tales are connected with a formulaic opening and closure, in that they have both fixed beginnings and endings. What is more, fairy tales often have preferences for certain colours and numbers. Red, white and black alongside golden and silver are, for example, frequently used in fairy tales, where the predominant number used is three.[30]

Pointing to the importance of fairy tales for culture and society, Warner remarks that they 'powerfully shape national memory; their poetic versions intersect with history, and … underestimating their sway over values and attitudes can be as dangerous as ignoring changing historical realities.' (Warner, 410)

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[30] Compare Lüthi, 25 – 33.

4. FAIRY TALES IN ATKINSON'S FICTION

Kate Atkinson employs fairy tale material in a number of ways in both *BS* and *HC*. Whereas fairy tales are constantly accompanying Ruby and Isobel in the course of the novels, they also constitute an important overall thematical element in Atkinson's fiction. The heroines of both novels, Isobel and Ruby, are strongly influenced by fairy tales. Both girls grow up with fairy tales and have internalised traditional role models mediated through them.

Ruby, for instance, has got a *Snow White* clock, tells her teddy fairy tales when she feels frightened and accompanies her family to a traditional fairy - tale pantomime of Hansel and Gretel one Christmas Eve, which follows conventional stereotypes:

> … the plot's unstoppable – the witch is burnt to a heap of charred rags and ashes, the wicked stepmother's pardoned, children reclaimed. Hansel and Gretel discover the witch's treasure chest, overflowing with emeralds, diamonds, opals, rubies … sapphires … The Good Fairy sends a shower of glitter from her wand so thick that when I put out my hand I can touch it. (*BS*, 183)

The pantomime supports the theory that fairy tales are frequently distorted in their retellings, as the performance has been slightly altered to include 'an elf, a panda, a cow and a plucky village youth'. (*BS*, 182) Likewise, the original version by the Grimms did not feature the fairy mentioned in the extract above. In its retelling, Hansel and Gretel as depicted by Ruby has been commercialised, and presented alongside traditional fairy tale conventions. According to Zipes, such versions are 'used ultimately to impose limitations, on the imagination of the producers and receivers.' (Zipes, 9)

Similarly, the protagonist of *HC*, Isobel, is confronted with a pantomime performance of 'Jack and the Magic Beanstalk' by the Lythe Players, a group of amateur players constituted mainly by her neighbours. In the Lythe Players' version, the fairy tale includes a dancing cow played (partly) by Isobel's friend Eunice.[31]

Moreover, fairy tales are an important influence in Isobel's childhood since both her mother Eliza and the neighbour, Mrs Baxter, tell Isobel fairy tales. In addition, Isobel makes extensive use of fairy tale imagery in her narration, often

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[31] Cf. *HC*, 235.

comparing characters or situations with traditional fairy tale settings. Furthermore, Isobel's expectations towards life and her world - view are mostly shaped alongside fairy tale conventions.

While fairy tales form an important part of both Ruby and Isobel's childhood experiences and equip them with a pattern to classify and comment on their experiences in later life, Atkinson also explores and exploits the conventions of the fairy tales she uses. Frequently, she employs this material with an ironic effect, forcing the reader to rethink their original expectations of the story. At other times, Atkinson employs characteristically dark fairy tale themes such as incest and murder to expose the underlying dynamics in her own novels. This is especially true for *HC*, where Eliza's fate and Audrey's abuse are revealed only gradually as the story unfolds.

As a result, Atkinson uses fairy tale themes in a characteristically postmodernist fashion. While she alludes to fairy tale motifs in order to enrich her fiction, she also strongly questions the ideologies inherent in them, and thus deconstructs the metanarratives transported in many fairy tale – retellings. Whereas Atkinson is threatening stereotypical fairy tale conventions such as the fairy tale image of the changeling, simple dualistic gendered roles, sentimentalised clichés of romance and the closure of marriage as the happy ending, she also employs some themes derived from fairy tales.

In the following, I will exemplify how Atkinson constructs as well as deconstructs familiar fairy tale topics and expectations.

4.1 The Lost Children

A fairy tale motif that frequently appears in the fiction of Kate Atkinson is that of children who are raised outside their biological family. The "misplacement", abandonment or loss of children is part of an extensive subtext of displacement in *HC* and *BS*. Alongside lost objects and memorabilia, the author's landscapes proliferate in changelings who are found at doorsteps, toddlers who are snatched from their pram and abandoned children as well as legally adopted offspring.

As Isobel remarks when she finds a baby on the doorstep, 'it brings with it myth and legend – Moses and Oedipus and the fairy's changeling.' (*HC*, 153) Isobel here highlights that the changeling is an essential fairy tale theme. Folkloristic

material frequently features fairies stealing human infants and replacing them with non - human changelings or doubles.[32]

4.1.1 Esme/ Violet Angela/ Eliza

As Warner remarks, fairy tales frequently 'play to the child's hankering after nobler, richer, altogether better origins, the fantasy of being a prince or a princess in disguise ...' (Warner, 210) According to this tradition, Angela Violet alias Eliza in *HC* is of the firm belief that she must have the wrong parents:

> … I must have been stolen from my real parents, I wasn't meant to be with these ignorant, dreary people, I was meant to be a princess wearing expensive finery and beautiful dresses, and living in a castle on top of a hill with *hundreds* of servants. (*HC*, 327)

Ironically, Viola has *really* been stolen from the affluent de Brevilles. Esme disappears in a rather farcical scene, in which the maid in charge abandons the infant in a park because she has seen a footman who has spurned her. If she had not been stolen, Esme would indeed have led a very comfortable life, and as an only child would have inherited the de Brevilles' 'huge tracts of farmland in Wiltshire, their orchards in Kent, their fields of barley in Fife, their fields of coal in Yorkshire and a swathe of elegant buildings in Mayfair.' (*HC*, 313 – 4)

However, Esme is snatched from her pram by the religious Maude Potter who, having just lost a baby, believes that the abandoned baby is a present from Heaven.

> Yes, the baby had come down to earth like a fallen cherub. Or, now Maude becomes very fanciful, a gift child, like little Thumbelina, a present from the fairies … nightclothes tumbled from the Gladstone to make room, a little nest, a walnut shell … (*HC*, 320)

The fairy tale imagery in this extract serves Maude to delude herself that the criminal and illegal nature of Esme's abduction is predestined by fate.

While, in the beginning, Herbert and Maude are proud parents of their foster child, Esme does not develop according to the Potters' expectations. Esme grows into a teenager that manifests character traits quite distinctive from what Maude wished for. For example, she tries to burn Beryl, the neighbours' daughter, with her hands bound to a tree. When Herbert sexually abuses his foster child and buys her

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[32] Compare *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 178. For the heavy subtext of doubles and doppelgangers in Atkinson's fiction see below.

'bags of boiled sweets to make up to her' (*HC*, 326), Esme learns that 'they'd give you anything to do it with them'. (*HC*, 328) She employs this connection between sex and money in a Lolita – like way in the whole neighbourhood and finally runs away from her abusive family to become a professional prostitute.

> 'Changeling,' Maude Potter said out loud to herself as she put the week's laundry through the wringer in the wash – house out back. That's what happened when you picked up a child without knowing anything about it. For all she knew that baby in its lace – clad finery had been placed in that pram, in that park, especially to fool them. As some kind of trap. (*HC*, 325 – 6)

Whereas Maude has used the word 'changeling' in the extract above to designate a gift from heaven, it has now become an essentially abusive term.

What is more, Eliza's nebulous origins are even further complicated by the fact that at another point of the novel gypsy origins are being alluded to. We are told that because Irene could not bear children, Sir Edward de Breville simply bought a child in Paris to mollify his wife. As a result, the identity of Esme/Angela Violet/Eliza becomes even more intricate and confused, which leaves the reader in an uncertainty as to where she *really* came from.

4.1.2 An Anonymous Baby

As mentioned above, Isobel in *HC* finds a baby on the doorstep of Arden one day. The child has been left in a box with a tag that asks the recipients to look after it.

Although Isobel is at first not sure whose baby it is, she somehow feels that it might be Audrey Baxter's child. Audrey is Isobel's friend and lives next door. Since the baby comes complete with a 'shawl as white as snow and as full of cockleshells as the sea' (*HC*, 155), we know that it must be Audrey's baby, as Mrs Baxter has been knitting a shawl of the same fabric earlier in the novel, which is 'as delicate as a cobweb in a pattern of cockleshells and 'silver bells''. (*HC*, 68) We are also told that Audrey has been sent to post the shawl to Mrs Baxter's sister in South Africa. Moreover, Audrey displays especially tender mothering instincts when near the child.

The gruesome details which led to the baby's conception are revealed only gradually in the novel. In the end, Isobel is convinced that the baby must actually have been fathered by Mr Baxter, and is therefore the product of incestuous sexual

abuse.[33] Alluding to the fairy tale "Donkeyskin", in which a daughter clothes herself in the hides of animals and runs away to hinder her abuse by the hands of her father, Isobel announces that Audrey 'really should have put on her catskin coat and fled as far as she could from Mr Baxter before we got to this dreadful state of affairs.' (*HC*, 282) Mixing fairy tale and mythical motifs derived from the stories of Danae and Rapunzel, Isobel comments on Mr Baxter's treatment of Audrey.

> Mr Baxter, despite Mrs Baxter's protestations, has decided that Audrey isn't ever going to grow up. If Audrey does develop womanly curves and wiles then Mr Baxter will probably lock her at the top of a very high tower. And if boys ever start noticing those womanly curves and wiles then it's a fair bet that Mr Baxter will kill them, picking them off one by one as they attempt to scale the heights of Sithean's privet and shin up the long golden –red rope of Audrey's beautiful hair. (*HC*, 26)

Since Isobel has alluded to the fairy tale status of the changeling earlier, the revelation that the baby results from an incestuous affair subverts the mystical nature associated with a found child. In addition, in also alluding to Oedipus, Isobel has already unwittingly hinted at the incestuous origins of the baby.

4.1.3 Ruby

Although not displaced as an infant, Ruby in *BS believes* that she has not got the mother she deserves and must have been exchanged as an infant. Ruby's hopes that her "genuine" mother might come back are strongly influenced by romantic fairy tale images.

Already as a pre – natal narrator Ruby criticizes her mother and as soon as she is born she seriously questions her parentage. She decides that Bunty is not her "real mother" while maintaining that the same must be 'roaming in a parallel universe somewhere, ladling out mother's milk the colour of Devon cream'. (*BS*, 42) Already as an infant, Ruby therefore rejects her mother and finally assumes that:

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[33] Incest is a recurrent thematic thread in Atkinson's novels. In *BS*, Nell, for instance, suspects that her sister Lillian's baby has been fathered by their brother Albert. Since the baby is described as having 'angelic blond curls' and 'baby - blue eyes' (*BS*, 48), it closely mirrors descriptions of Albert with 'golden curls like an angel and eyes the colour of forget – me nots'. (*BS*, 76) Nell thus deduces Edmund's parentage by his physical appearance. In *HC*, Sir Francis enters a sexual relationship with his ward Margaret, who might also be his illegitimate daughter. When Eliza works as a prostitute, she sleeps with Sir de Breville, who might or might not be her father. Another case of hidden incest is Isobel's passion for Malcolm Lovat, who unbeknown to Isobel, is her stepbrother. In Atkinson's third novel, *Emotionally Weird*, the protagonist Effie turns out to be the child of the siblings Effie and Laclan.

> I have decided to make the best of things. I've been given the wrong mother and am in danger of embarking on the wrong life but I trust it will all be sorted out and I will be reunited with my real mother – the one who dropped ruby - red blood onto a snow – white handkerchief and wished for a little girl with hair the colour of a shiny jet – black raven's wing. (*BS*, 43)

While Ruby refers to fairy tale imagery in this extract and compares her situation to that of "Snow White", the parallel is far from justified as Snow White's real mother has died in the fairy tale, while Ruby is not content with the motherly attentions of her own parent. Because Ruby compares her mother to a romanticized fairy tale mother, and therefore to perfection, the comparison can only turn out to be against Bunty's 'autistic mothering'. (*BS*, 374) As Parker suggests, most fairy tale retellings provide only two stereotypical roles for women: Since Bunty is not the perfect mother, 'she inevitably falls short of Ruby's ideal, and is consequently cast in the role of wicked step – mother.' (Parker, 58)

Ruby clings to the hope that the irascible and insensitive Bunty is not her mother until the end of *BS*. When Ruby suffers a mental breakdown at the end of the novel because she has been confronted by Mr. Belling, Bunty's lover, she again suspects that she is a changeling.

> And perhaps also in the Lost Property Cupboard, I think to myself … there I will find my real home, the one where a fire always twinkles in the hearth and a brass toasting – fork hangs ready and a kettle sings on the hob and the battered old armchairs are pulled up into a cosy circle and my real mother's needle flashes in the firelight as she plies it, in and out, in and out, and begins her story, the story of how her real child, the blood – red jewel, was replaced in the cradle by a changeling ... (*BS*, 323 – 4)

The reader is at first tempted to believe Ruby that Bunty is an incompetent mother, since Ruby meticulously lists all her maternal deficits and deficiencies. However, Ruby's first person narration also produces an unreliable and highly solipsistic view of the events. Since Bunty is always contrasted with a romantized picture of ideal motherhood, she cannot fulfil Ruby's expectations. Ruby, for instance, suppresses the memory of her twin sister's death and therefore cannot understand that her mother is in mourning when she comes back from her aunt's. Similarly, when Ruby's sister Gillian has been run over by a car, Ruby relates Bunty's mourning rather wryly and sarcastically: 'Bunty wasn't the full shilling for a while. It was surprising just how much Gillian's death had affected her.' (*BS*, 189)

As Parker notes, *BS* therefore also presents a position which is opposed to Ruby's view by depicting Bunty's story in the footnotes. Bunty's mothering is

depicted and defined by the perceived standards of rearing children of the time and by the poor mothering she herself received as well as by her personal unhappiness. Trapped in a marriage to adulterous George, Bunty has the primary responsibility concerning the children and the household and is often expected to look after the shop in addition.[34]

While Bunty is not able to show her feelings to her children, the novel suggests that she genuinely loves them. Ruby, however, feels that their relationship is defined by 'an invisible umbilical cord between us that can stretch but never contract.' (*BS*, 203) Nevertheless, when Ruby survives the fire and Bunty embraces her, 'for once, the invisible cord between us shrivels and shirrs to nothing … ' (*BS*, 215)

Despite Ruby's announcement that Bunty is not her real mother, the mother and daughter – bond is frequently alluded to by images and metaphors in the novel. Both Ruby and Bunty favour the colour red and both are metaphorically connected to Baum's heroine Doherty in *The Wizard of Oz*.[35] Moreover, the image of the mirror, which is also strongly linked to the idea of the doppelganger, symbolically connects Ruby and Bunty. Ruby has a very unsettling feeling at Ted's wedding when she sees her mother 'reflected to infinity in the mirrors – a disturbing vision of a mother who seems to go on for ever.' (*BS*, 292) When her mother dies, Ruby thinks that she has finally extricated herself from her memory. However, as she attends Bunty's funeral she remarks that:

> I had thought that when she dies it would be like having a weight removed and I would rise up and be free of her, but now I realize that she'll always be here, inside me, and I suppose when I'm least expecting it I'll look in the mirror and see her expression or open my mouth and speak her words … (*BS*, 375 - 6)

As a result, while Atkinson uses the fairy tale image of the changeling in connection with Esme/ Violet Angela/ Eliza, who might or might not have been the de Brevilles' baby, she subverts the mythical nature of changelings both in Ruby's and the anonymous baby's case. Atkinson employs fairy tale imagery to deconstruct the myth of the perfect mother. For Ruby in *BS*, arguing that Bunty is not her real mother saves her from entering into a productive relationship with her, and from trying to understand the origins of Bunty's insensitive mothering. By depicting Bunty neither as a particularly good nor an awfully bad mother in *BS*, the simplistic

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[34] See Parker, 53 – 6.
[35] Compare Parker, 62 – 3.

dualism of most fairy tale retellings is deconstructed and becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the mystical evocations of the changeling contrast strongly with the actual, gruesome origins of Audrey's child. In a way characteristic of postmodernist fiction, Atkinson therefore utilizes and subverts the changeling motif.

4.2 Evil Stepmothers and Absent Mothers

Another trait characteristic of many fairy tale retellings is a dichotomised view of gender. As mentioned above, fairy tales often only offer two stereotypical roles for women. They can either function as a model of perfection, or are relegated to the sphere of evil.

As Warner remarks, the fairy tale heroine or hero's mother frequently dies at the beginning of the story. While one important fairy tale theme is therefore the absence of the biological mother, many fairy tales exchange her with a wicked stepmother. In addition to witch characters, the stepmothers, as a result, constitute the other end of the spectrum of possible female roles in many fairy tale retellings.

The topos of the evil step –mother is historically motivated and takes its roots in medieval law, in which children of an earlier marriage were privileged over those of a subsequent marriage. Moreover, the fairy tale theme of wicked stepmothers has been intensified by medieval misogynist discourses on witches, so that the roles of the stepmother and witch often correlate in fairy tales.

An intensive study on the topic has shown that stepmothers in the Grimms' *KHM* are without exception wicked. Indeed, the Grimms even changed fairy tales in which the biological mother acted as the antagonist of her own children, such as the original versions of "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White", into tales in which a wicked stepmother takes the actual mother's place.[36]

More recently, the topos of the wicked stepmother has also been intensified by film adaptations of fairy tales such as Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella*, (1950) which 'concentrate with exuberant glee on the towering, taloned, ravenhaired wicked stepmother … ' (Warner, 207)

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[36] Compare Wodiczka, 132 – 4, Warner, 202 - 240 and Görner, 33.

<u>4.2.1. Alice and Rachel</u>

In *BS*, traits of the evil stepmother abound in the description of Rachel. Rachel's story is related in the footnotes, as she is the stepmother of Ruby's grandmother. Nell is biologically Alice' daughter, but her mother has run away with a French travelling photographer and has thus abandoned her six children Ada, Lawrence, Tom, Albert, Lillian and Nell. Because the children have been told that Alice has died, she is soon lifted into mystical realms in her children's imagination.

While Rachel, Alice's plain cousin, has only come to help Frederick in the household, she soon wishes to 'clean the cottage of the lingering spirit of Alice Barker' (*BS*, 128) and to take her place. Rachel is the evil step – mother par excellence because she brutally beats the children, shears off Ada's long locks and generally thinks that the children 'were a disgrace, unruly and sullen.' (*BS*, 129)

Moreover, the correlation of Rachel with the evil step – mother is further strengthened by the fact that Alice Barker's wedding ring won't fit Rachel's fat finger.

> Rachel [was] … unconsciously twisting the gold ring on her finger round and round, trying to loosen it. She knew when he put it on her finger that it was Alice's ring – with a piece put in to accommodate her thick finger – but she hadn't said anything, a wedding – ring was a wedding – ring, after all, no matter how you came by it. (*BS*, 133)

Extending fairy tale conventions of the true bride's elimination through a fitting shoe, Rachel's finger does not suit Alice's ring. In fairy tales this is often a marker for a person metaphorically not fitting into a certain social role. Like Cinderella's wicked stepsisters, who cannot wear the offered shoe, Rachel does not fit into Alice's life, and can therefore not function as the mother of Alice's children.

Alice's children resent Rachel and especially Ada, the oldest child, tries to fight her. The two opponents are frequently described in a fashion reminiscent of Carroll because '[s]ometimes Ada would hold Nell in her arms like a baby and Ada and her stepmother would face each other across the kitchen like rival queens.' (*BS*, 136)

Both have developed different strategies of undermining their antagonist. While Rachel takes her power from domestic work, Ada reverts to storytelling. She often narrates fairy – tales to her younger siblings in which wicked stepmothers are punished in order to keep up their hope of their real mother coming back. After she

has given young Albert a piece of toffee, she 'told him the story of Snow White and her wicked stepmother, and many other stories too in which the new usurping mother had to dance for ever in red – hot iron clogs.' (*BS*, 135) But whereas Ada's stories climax in the righteous mother coming back, Alice never returns.

Nevertheless, Ada has internalised fairy tales conventions to such a degree that she imagines her mother fetching her when she dies of diphtheria. Standing in the snow with her bare feet, but not feeling cold, similar to the fairy tale 'Sternthaler', Ada is transported into a fairy tale land where the flakes of snow seem to resemble 'downy feathers off the breasts of soft birds, or angel's wings'. Finally she is flying towards the sky where 'at the heart of it was her mother, her arms outstretched to welcome her.' (*BS*, 141)

4.2.2 Eliza and Debbie

Isobel in *HC* is another character in Atkinson's fiction who has internalised conventional fairy tale stereotypes. Clearly, Isobel views her situation alongside the traditional fairy tale opening, in which the biological mother dies at the beginning of the story. Eliza never returns when she goes for a walk in the forest during a family picnic. As a result, Isobel and her brother Charles idealize Eliza in retrospect. Just like Alice's children, who have stylised Alice to the perfect mother after her disappearance, Eliza has acquired mythical qualities in her children's imagination.

> Invisible, she has grown sublime – the Virgin Mary and the Queen of Sheba, the queen of heaven and the queen of night in one person, the sovereign of our unseen, imagery universe … (*HC*, 29)

While Eliza is thus 'an unreal woman' and 'slipping the bonds of reality' (*HC*, 25), Isobel casts her stepmother Debbie automatically in the role of the wicked stepmother. Although Debbie tries hard to gain her foster children's affection, Isobel and Charles reject her from the beginning. Refusing to accept Debbie as a role model Isobel, furthermore, frequently regrets her mother's absence.

> I have no pattern for womanhood – other than that provided by Vinny and Debbie and no – one could call them good models. There are things I don't know about – good skin care, how to write a thank – you letter – because she was never there to teach me. More important things – how to be a wife, how to be a mother. How to be a woman. If only I didn't have to keep on inventing Eliza (rook – hair, milk-skin, blood-lips). (*HC*, 63)

Isobel distinctly shows her dislike of Debbie by describing her as the 'fat, wan substitute that four years ago 'our dad' chose to replace 'our mum' with'. *(HC*, 29 – 30)* By actually putting the term 'mum' in inverted commas, Isobel not only questions the term per se, but also Debbie's maternal function, and even denies her the concept of "mother". As a result, the imagery through which Isobel describes Debbie is essentially derogatory. Her stepmother is the 'Debbie – wife with brown permed curls, little piggy eyelashes and stubby fingers that end in bitten – off nails.' Moroever, Isobel depicts Debbie as having 'eyes the colour of dirty dishwater' and a voice that 'contains flat Essex marshes washed with a slight antipodean whine'. (*HC*, 30) At another point in the novel, Isobel remarks that:

> Why does everyone except Debbie want to disappear? Perhaps we should encourage Gordon to take up magic again – practise the vanishing trick on Debbie, or better still saw her in half. (*HC*, 214)

While Isobel rejects Debbie for a large part of *HC*, she is finally reconciled to Debbie when she learns that Debbie has resuscitated her after her accident. Debbie metaphorically gives life to Isobel a second time and therefore earns Isobel's acceptance.

> I feel differently towards her since she saved my life, as if somehow by giving me life a second time I could permit her to have a maternal role now. (*HC*, 352)

4.2.3 A Wicked Witch

As mentioned above, the simple dualism of many fairy tale retellings divides female characters strictly into two categories. Whilst one of the wicked roles available to women in the fairy tale is that of the stepmother, the other one is that of the witch.

In *HC*, Isobel's aunt Vinny exemplifies distinctive traits of the stereotypical old hag riding on a broom. She is portrayed as the archetypical witch in the novel. Vinny is old, wrinkled and ugly, solely accepts a hoard of cats as her company and hates Gordon's children. Isobel therefore describes her nonchalantly as 'vinegary Vinny, the reluctant relative', and 'the aunt from hell.' (*HC*, 184)

The correlation between Vinny and a stock character from a fairy tale is strongly suggested by her physical appearance, which evokes associations with witches.

> Her bones have turned to polished yellow ivory, her skin to shagreen. Shagreen enamelled with imperial – purple veins. Warts grow on the backs of her hands like lichen. Her breath is as full of sighs as a bagpipe. (*HC*, 58)

Whereas Isobel and her friends associate flowers with lilies or roses and jasmine, Vinny suggests plants such as 'gorse, wort, and bladderwack'. (*HC*, 41) When Gordon emigrates and the Widow dies, the housekeeping is left to Vinny's care. Under her domestic regime, the formerly well – tended garden of Arden also strongly resembles a witch – garden.

> The garden had become home to toad and frog, mouse and mole and a million garden birds. The nettles were waist – high, the soil latticed with ground – elder and a tangle of brambles was slowly clawing its way across the garden towards the back door. (*HC*, 205)

The extract above contains a number of elements which are frequently part of discourses on witches. In particular, toads, frogs, elders and nettles are often associated with them.

Moreover, when Mr Rice, the Fairfaxes' lodger tries to mollify Vinny with a present, we hear from Isobel that he buys her 'black lace – ups – witch's shoes'. (*HC*, 59) At another point in the novel, Vinny is indirectly compared to the trinity of witches from *Macbeth*:

> Vinny appears to have taken over the cooking again and is stirring a large pot (requisitioned once as a witches' cauldron for the Lythe Players' production of Macbeth) in which a calf's brain is simmering. (*HC*, 220)

Further establishing a connex between Vinny and a fairy tale witch, her wardrobe is strongly reminiscent of the one in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Similar to Lewis' book, in which the wardrobe contains an entrance to the paraxial realm of Narnia, Isobel feels that Vinny's 'cavernous wardrobe [is] big enough to house another country.' (*HC*, 60) While Lewis's Lucy enters the world where the white witch rules through the Professor's wardrobe, Isobel equally seems to get lost in the wardrobe of Vinny's since she asks 'have I climbed into the wardrobe and *disappeared*?' (*HC*, 62)[37]

In addition to having the physical appearance of a witch, Vinny also seems to possess magical powers in *HC*. At one point, the dog, for instance, lays his head on Vinny's lap, 'its expression suggesting it's giving up its soul to Vinny'. (*HC*, 149)

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[37] Compare Lewis, 9 – 15.

Moreover, Vinny seems to be gifted with the power of foresight, because she announces the presence of people at the door without the ringing of the bell. Without shifting out of her seat, Vinny tells Isobel to open the door thrice. Isobel first finds a dog, then a baby and finally her reputedly dead father at the doorstep. As a result, Isobel describes Vinny as 'staring into the flames of the fire like an old sibylline cat.' (*HC*, 205)

In addition, Isobel stresses Vinny's role as a stock fairy tale character further by contrasting her with a heroine in a fairy tale. Because Vinny's physical appearance does not correlate with the codified patterns of attractiveness usually associated with fairy tale princesses, Isobel ironically assumes that Vinny could not function as the heroine in a fairy tale. When her mother, the Widow, dies, Vinny occupies the best bedroom in the house and 'complained that the mattress was killing her – which made them think of the Princess and the Pea (although Vinny would have been better cast as the pea rather than the princess)'. (*HC*, 184 – 5)

Still comparing Vinny to a witch, Isobel finally relates that Vinny in the end shape – lifts into a cat:

> Vinny lasted the whole century, outliving both Gordon and Debbie, lingering on in Arden with the support of a succession of home helps. She celebrated the millennium and a hundred years of Vinnyhood by turning into a cat – small, tortoiseshell and disappearing into the night. Probably. (*HC*, 373)

Although Vinny is portrayed like a fairy tale witch in most of *HC*, a re - evaluation of her character ensues when she helps Debbie to deliver the unexpected baby Renée towards the end of the novel. As a result, Vinny shows her connectedness with the Fairfax family and demonstrates that she cares about its members.

To sum up, Atkinson both employs and subverts the fairy tale stock characters of the evil stepmother and witch. While using the topos of the evil step - mother concerning Rachel in *BS*, who is drawn alongside stereotypical lines, Atkinson also problematizes the female role in fairy tales through her description of Debbie and Vinny in *HC*. Isobel can only enter into a relationship with Debbie when she looks beyond the dichotomised views of gender transmitted through many fairy tale retellings. Moreover, Vinny only outwardly appears to be a witch, but shows her regard for her family when she helps Debbie deliver her baby. As a result, Atkinson deconstructs a metanarrative found in many fairy tale retellings, in that she subverts the binary opposites between good and evil femininity.

4.3 Domesticity

Themes and motives taken from domesticity are another interesting subtext in Atkinson's fiction. Reactionary fairy tale retellings mostly feature traditional women roles, which imply that keeping house is a normative and socially encoded obligation for the good fairy tale heroine and mother. The conventions of fairy tales also link idealized versions of womanhood and motherhood with that of the stereotyped housewife.

As Cooperman states, 'family dramas invariably get worked out in the domestic realm.' (Coopermann, 175) Atkinson, as a result, uses domesticity to depict the malevolent power inherent in home life, as well as to subvert the connection between the capable housewife and the successful mother.

4.3.1 A Martyred Housewife

In *BS*, Ruby is abhorred by her mother's lacking domestic abilities, and is especially revolted by her cooking. Bunty herself suffers under what she regards as the oppressive and paralysing side of domesticity.[38] Ruby's mother has high standards of preparing food and, for instance, thinks 'shop – bought cakes … a sign of sluttish housewifery'. (*BS*, 22) Nevertheless, since neither her husband nor her children, including Ruby, appreciate her daily work, Bunty sees domesticity as tedious and unrewarding.

> I spend my entire life cooking, I'm a slave to housework – chained to the cooker … all those meals, day after day, and what happens to them? They get eaten, that's what, without a word of thanks! (*BS*, 24)

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[38] Interestingly, both female characters in *BS* and *HC* share the widespread conviction that knowledge about domestic care and childrearing can be acquired from books. Bunty, for instance, draws her ideas on education from the childcare section of *Everything Within* (*BS*, 18), and her cooking tips from *Perfect Cooking* (*BS*, 78), Bunty's mother, Nell, takes pride in her *Dyson's Self Help* book and Nell's stepmother, Rachel, derives her wisdom from the *Everyman's Book of Home Remedies* (*BS*, 46). In *HC*, Vinny reverts to cookbooks with exotic – sounding meals in order to impress her new lodger, Mr Rice, among them her mother's *The Housewife's Handy Book*, *Aunt Kitty's Cookery Book*, *Everything Within* and *The Modern Housewife's Book*. (*HC*, 198) Moreover, Mrs Baxter takes her entertainment hints from *The Home Entertainer*, which among other games also contains Human Croquet, after which the novel is named. (*HC*, 49, 204) The fact that so many characters take standardized advice in connection with domesticity suggests that keeping house and childrearing are strongly shaped by dominant contemporary social ideas.

Ruby expresses Bunty's relation to domestic chores in religious vocabulary, which indicates martyrdom. Bunty, for instance, 'pushes her hair back from her forehead in a centuries old gesture of suffering' (*BS*, 175) while she is peeling potatoes. Moreover, Ruby refers to her mother as the 'Martyred Wife' (*BS*, 170) and as 'Our Lady of the Kitchen' (*BS*, 179), thereby ridiculing Bunty's attempts at gaining sympathy for her situation.

As Coopermann notes, 'food reflects and reinforces … social dynamics, it plays a crucial role in family life.' (Cooperman, 59) Indeed, the war over the Kingdom above the Shop, as Ruby satirically describes her parents' quarrels, is mainly led over, with, or through the medium of food. It is therefore not surprising that meals or the preparation of the same often lead to farcical conflicts in the Lennox family.

Special festivities generally put a double strain on Bunty. As a result, Ruby is especially hesitant to enter the kitchen on Christmas Eve, as her mother's discontentment with her situation manifests itself quite strongly at this time.

> Cautiously, I open the door. The kitchen feels warm but it doesn't fool me. Frost glitters everywhere, on the new English Electric washing machine, on the humming refrigerator and the Kenwood Chef mixer. You can almost see the atmosphere in here like thick, cold smoke spreading out from George and Bunty, figures of icy sovereignty in their Kingdom Above the Shop. (*BS*, 173)

Bunty and George's disputes are mainly led over food. Bunty cooks and serves meals and George criticises them. As a result, Bunty's cooking instruments are often depicted as arms by Ruby. When her mother is especially outraged, the potato peeler, for instance, is Macbeth - like 'moving like a dagger through the air'. (*BS*, 176) In another scene, Bunty throws a pancake onto the wall, which 'seems awfully symbolic somehow, especially as it was George's pancake.' (*BS*, 229) Finally, mirroring the duchess' cook's favourite pastime in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 'the frying pan whizzes through the air towards George's head.' (*BS*, 229)

Although we learn that George has been in the Catering Corps during the war, he never endeavours to cook. Indeed, as Ruby notes, this is complicit with the dominant gender roles of the 1950s.

> George … settles back into his chair to watch Bunty making his cup of tea (well, this is 1959). He clears his throat and spits into his handkerchief just as Bunty puts the cup and saucer in front of him with a glazed expression on her face. This is the expression she wears when she picks up George's

socks, handkerchiefs and underpants (wearing rubber gloves) and drops them into a bucket of Dettol to soak before they are allowed to join the rest of our barley – sullied washing in the English Electric. (*BS*, 176)

Bunty's relation to domesticity only changes after her daughter Gillian's death, when she is continually on tranquillisers. She finally enters an era of what Ruby calls 'domestic carelessness' (*BS*, 201), in which even preparing a meal becomes a 'Health and Safety nightmare ... in her chemically sedated state.' (*BS*, 209) Moreover, Bunty reverts to buying birthday cakes instead of baking them herself, and announces that she is finally 'cooked out'. (*BS*, 229) Ironically, Bunty causes the fire which burns down the family house and shop by leaving the iron on the ironing board.

When Bunty leaves home for some time because her husband is having one of his numerous affairs, George leaves the children with his lover Doreen. Doreen starkly contrasts with Bunty in that she 'produces big, hearty meals of the stew – and - dumpling variety' (*BS*, 157) and allows the children to eat fish and chips every day. Because Bunty is cast in the role of the stereotypical wicked stepmother, her failure to provide the food Ruby likes, further strengthens her correlation with a stock fairy tale character in Ruby's eyes. In contrast to this, Doreen's 'hearty' food stands metaphorically for her ability to seemingly provide maternal warmth. When Doreen replays Alcott's *Little Women* with the children, Ruby indeed remarks that she 'makes a splendid 'marmee''. (*BS*, 160)

Cynically commenting on the fact that Bunty often calls Ruby Pearl (after her dead twin sister), Ruby announces, 'if Bunty doesn't come back we can have a new mother, Auntie Doreen for preference, a mother that will remember my name.' *(BS*, 161) However, as the family comes back from the vacation, they also find Bunty returned. As a result, Auntie Doreen grows 'as unreal as Mary Poppins herself' (*BS*, 164) in Ruby's imagination.

Whereas Ruby criticizes Bunty's housework as a child and teenager she realizes that she too has not inherited the 'housework genes' (*BS*, 354) when she is working as a chambermaid in a hotel in Edinburgh.

> I can never polish up my mirrors the way Kathleen can or get my baths free of their grainy deposits. My hoofer clogs up, my sheets wrinkle, my coathangers disappear. (*BS*, 354)

The fact that Ruby is equally inept at housework allows for a re – evaluation of Bunty's failure in domestic terms. The connection between the perfect mother and

the successful housewife that many fairy tale retellings construct is, therefore, subverted.

4.3.2 Rachel and Alice

Moreover, the fairy – tale correlation between housewife and mother is complicated by the contrasting experiences of Frederick's wives, Alice and Rachel. While Alice experiences domesticity as a constraint and a burden, Rachel derives a kind of power from keeping house.

Alice is born as the daughter of an affluent family who lose their wealth when she is fourteen. After both her parents' suicide, she is forced to earn her living as a schoolteacher until she accepts Frederick's offer of marriage. As a result, Alice's previous life has not prepared her for the toils of domesticity and motherhood.

> The woman, flushed with the heat from the kitchen range, pauses every now and then to straighten her back and run her hand across her forehead. She kneads the small of her back with her fists. She has a toothache. Her belly, swollen with the next child, keeps getting in the way of breadmaking. (*BS*, 30)

In contrast to Alice, Rachel's mother has married down in life, so that Rachel is already employed as a scullery maid at the age of ten. Consequently, she is a clever and crafted housewife.

Alice's garden 'has been dug out of the unpromising chalky soil and rows of undersized cabbages and carrots can be seen, wilting in the dry earth.' (*BS*, 30) In contrast to this, after Rachel has taken Alice's place she soon 'had a real garden going with potatoes and brown onions, rhubarb and carrots, and dark – green crinkled savoys.' (*BS*, 131)

Atkinson invests domesticity with a certain power in her fiction. It is portrayed as an empowering and seductive activity, which can greatly influence people. Stressing the importance of food preparation, Frederick, for instance, courts his future wife Alice 'with … curd cheese and peach jam'. (*BS*, 32)

Moreover, Rachel uses her domestic abilities to cajole Frederick into marrying her. When Frederick, for instance, comes back from hunting one day, Rachel is scrubbing the floor. Enticed by his wife's cousin performing the act of

cleaning, Frederick admires her 'huge backside, tilted towards him as she knelt washing the stone floor.' (*BS*, 128)

In addition, Rachel takes exquisite delight in her domestic successes and sees them as the centre of the web of power she is spinning around Alice's family.

> The pantry, cool and dark, was the heart of Rachel's new life – the shelves were weighed down with her clever housewifery – jams and pickles and chutney, big glass jars of raspberry jewels and gooseberry globes, a fat leg of ham, a bowl of brown eggs, flagons of rhubarb wine, puddings, both sweet and savoury, wrapped in cloths. (*BS*, 133)

While Alice is, therefore, portrayed as an unsuccessful housewife, Rachel is a good housekeeper and a clever gardener. However, whereas Alice can be described as a relatively good mother (up to the point where she abandons her children), Rachel, on the other hand, is the personification of the wicked fairy tale stepmother. As a result, Atkinson further disrupts the link between the perfect mother and the good housewife.

4.3.3 Debbie and Mrs Baxter

Another diametrically opposite pair of housewives are Debbie and Mrs Baxter in *Human Croquet*. Debbie is an essentially distressed housewife. While she obviously tried hard to be an adequate mother to her stepchildren, expectations as to what her new home would be like are disappointed. Because she is rejected by Isobel and Charles and neglected by her husband, Debbie finds refuge in excessive and obsessive domesticity aimed at the chaotic sphere of Arden, the Lennoxes' house. Isobel cynically comments that one day she expects to find Debbie 'in the hearth separating lentils from the ashes'. (*HC*, 46) Debbie seems to be of the opinion that being a good mother can be equated with being a competent housewife.

In contrast to next – door neighbour Mrs Baxter, however, who is clothed in the vocabulary of domestic success in the novel, Debbie's housework efforts inadvertently fail. Since Isobel is strongly influenced by fairy tale conventions, her suspicions that Debbie cannot function as her mother are confirmed by her poor housekeeping.

> The house does seem to conspire against her – if she buys new curtains then a plague of moths will follow, if she puts down lino, the washing – machine will flood. Her kitchen tiles crack and fall off, the new central – heating pipes rattle and moan and bang in the night like banshees. If she polishes everything in a room then the minute she leaves, the particles of dust will

come out of their hiding – places and regroup on every surface, sniggering behind their little hands … She tries to grow vegetables in the garden and produces instead mandrake – rooted carrots and green potatoes. Greenfly and blackfly crowd the air like locusts, her runner beans are stunted, her cabbages are yellow, her pea – pods empty, her lawn as blighted as a blasted heath. (*HC*, 46)

In contrast to this, Mrs Baxter's garden 'buzzes with honey – bees and is smothered in flowers - beanstalks … touch the clouds and each white curd on her cauliflowers [is] as big as a tree'. (*HC*, 46)

Besides, the dissimilarity between Mrs Baxter and Debbie is especially pronounced concerning their culinary arts. The kitchen is 'the most malign place in the house for Debbie' (*HC*, 48), and even a barbecue 'sounds like an invitation to disaster'. (*HC*, 57) In contrast to this, Mrs Baxter's cooking is an endless succession of culinary delights.

Since successful domesticity has maternal connotations for Isobel, Mrs Baxter functions as a surrogate mother for Isobel in *HC*. In contrast to Debbie's ample body, which Isobel depicts as 'fat' (*HC*, 29), Mrs Baxter's curves are a safe and protective haven for Isobel. Since Isobel strongly associates Mrs Baxter with the food she prepares, even her body is clothed in food imagery.

Today … Mrs Baxter … is wearing a sun – dress with brightly coloured red and white candy stripes … It has thin red shoelace – straps and a lot of Mrs Baxter's flesh is on show – her fat arms and dimpled elbows and the voluptuously maternal cleft of her cleavage in which pink cake crumbs have lodged. Mrs Baxter's skin has turned to the colour of cinder toffee from working in the garden and she's covered in big freckles like conkers. She looks hot to the touch and I have to stifle a desire to jump down into the chasm of Mrs Baxter's bosom and get lost there for ever. (*HC*, 81 – 2)

At another point in the novel, we, moreover, hear that Mrs Baxter 'favours neutral colours – oyster, taupe, biscuit and oatmeal'. (*HC*, 64) This metaphorical correlation of food with a woman's body is further extended when Isobel imagines that Mrs Baxter might one day turn into a cake, a 'vanilla sponge, soft and crumbly and full of buttercream'. (*HC*, 81)

While fairy tale conventions would imply that Mrs Baxter is a good mother because she is a capable housewife, they would also suggest that Debbie's shortcomings in keeping house make her an ineffectual mother. Nevertheless, these analogies are paradoxically turned upside down at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that Mrs Baxter could not hinder her child's abuse. Debbie, on the contrary,

gives Isobel the kiss of life at the end *HC*, which reconciles Isobel to Debbie's maternal role.

4.3.4 The Dark Side of Domesticity

As mentioned above, while subverting the correlation between the competent mother and the accomplished housewife, Atkinson also stresses the manipulative power of domesticity. According to Coopermann, the ritualistic nature which is inherent in every act of domesticity can also provide an excessive malevolent power.

> Those who keep a house and care for a family also wield the power to admit chaos and toxins, to neglect a living thing, to let it die. (Coopermann, 168)

In both possible and maybe imaginary versions of Mrs Baxter's murder of her husband, for instance, the murder weapon is connected to her domestic chores. In one of the scenarios, Mrs Baxter's fastens her husband's exitus with a kitchen – knife.

> I grow suddenly aware of Mrs Baxter in the doorway, standing perfectly still, like a statue. She must have left the room and come back in again because in her hand she's holding a carving – knife. (*HC*, 282)

When Mrs Baxter has delivered the final blows to her husband, the correlation of domesticity with his death is further reinforced by a description of Mr Baxter clutching his stomach in disbelief. As he removes them, his hands 'are bright red. Not the red of holly berries. Not the red of poinsettias. Not the red of robins' breasts nor the red of tomato ketchup. The red of blood.' (*HC*, 283) By thus contrasting the brutal reality of the situation with everyday kitchen vocabulary, Atkinson heightens the gruesome and gory details of the murder.

In another version of murdering Mr Baxter, his wife poisons him with a mushroom soup. Alluding to a fairy tale witch who prepares a potion in a cauldron, Atkinson again points to the cursing and destroying side inherent in domestic work.

> She makes Daddy's soup with a lot of care, slicing the onions into moons and stirring them round and round in the frothing yellow butter … When the new – moon onions are soft and yellow Mrs Baxter adds the mushrooms, little cultivated buttons that she's wiped and chopped in quarters. When they're all nicely coated in butter she adds the big flat horse – field mushrooms that grow in the corner of the Lady Oak field … She stirs the fleshy slices around until they begin to wilt a little and then she adds the olive – coloured fungi that also grow in the field but are not nearly as common – a treat for Daddy, for this is Mrs Baxter's special recipe for mushroom soup. (*HC*, 348 – 9)

The calmness and minuteness with which Mrs Baxter is preparing the soup again strongly contrast with the grisly act of murder. The fact that Atkinson uses the word 'Daddy', which is normally associated with a loving designation for a parent, equally heightens the cold-bloodedness of Mrs Baxter, and gives the scene a macabre touch.

To recapitulate, Atkinson undermines the fairy tale correlation between the good mother with the successful housewife in her depiction of Bunty, Alice, Rachel, Debbie and Mrs Baxter. Nevertheless, Atkinson also stresses the malevolent power inherent in acts of domesticity, and, as a result, employs this theme to heighten gruesome and macabre moments in her fiction.

4.4 The Language of Hair

Moreover, Atkinson subverts the norms of physical appearance attributed to many fairy – tale heroines. As Marina Warner shows by tracing the history of the discourse on hair, it is one of the most important means of characterizing a person.

> The language of the self would be stripped of one of its richest resources without hair … the dressing of hair in itself constitutes a mark of the human. (Warner, 371)

The colour of hair is an essential indication for a heroine in many fairy tale retellings. With the exception of Snow White, who has black hair because of her mother's wish, fairy tale heroines tend to have blonde hair. Disney adaptations of fairy tales like *Cinderella* mostly also star heroines with blonde hair and have therefore entrenched blondeness as a sign of beauty deeply into the perceptions of the viewers.

However, blonde hair is not only an outward attribute in the fairy tale discourse but also carries distinct markers of a value system. Blondeness, and with it outer attractiveness, are frequently linked with conventionally admirable inner qualities and goodness. Thus, blondeness combines 'beauty … love and nubility, with erotic attraction, with value and fertility …' (Warner, 367)

Playing with this fairy tale convention, but also transgressing the boundaries of realistic fiction, Atkinson leaves the reader in the dark as to Ruby's physical appearance in *BS*. Her hair colour is not specified at any point in the novel. Although

we know that Ruby's sister Gillian is blonde and Patricia has dark hair, Ruby herself is never qualified in terms of her outward form in the novel.

In *HC*, however, Atkinson deconstructs the fairy tale conventions concerning the colour of hair. As Isobel's assessment of her own and her friends' bodies shows, she has clearly internalised the clichéd fairy tale categorizations of hair colour. Comparing them and herself to chocolate squares which have failed quality control in a factory, she contrast herself and her friends with Hilary and Doherty Walsh, who appear to be pictures of perfection.

> We are all mis – shapen in some way, inside or out … Why don't I have friends of Nordic beauty - tall and golden and normal? … Hilary and Dorothy are both big clever blondes who look as if they've just stepped out of a Swiss milking parlour … Good - looking boys, who are studying dentistry and law and look as if they're members of the Hitler Youth, hover around Hilary and Dorothy like wasps round a jam – jar, keen to study their biological perfection. My chances of ever being like them are zero. Next to them, I'm a chimney – sweep, a walnut – skinned beggar girl. 'What very *black* hair you have, don't you Isobel?' Hilary remarks one day … stroking a finger over her porcelain ('English Rose') cheek, 'And such dark eyes! Were your parents foreign?' (*HC*, 43 - 4)

Isobel's hair is black and she is therefore considered 'foreign'. Because Hilary and Dorothy's hair is blonde, Isobel feels inferior to the two girls. The Walsh sisters possess a beauty which is – according to fairy tale conventions - superior to Isobel's own physical appearance. What is more, Isobel's internalisation of fairy tale norms also keeps her from becoming Hilary's friend. The only relation that seems to be possible between Isobel and Hilary is that of rivalry between women who are in love with the same man. As Isobel later sums up Hilary's life, she notices that she has overlooked Hilary's humanness by stressing her perfect outer appearance.

> Hilary became a solicitor, married a doctor, had two children, divorced the doctor, married a journalist, had another child … became a barrister, divorced the journalist, became human. Became my friend. (*HC*, 372)[39]

But Atkinson also provides a contrasting ideal to fairy tale blondeness in *HC*. Apart from Eliza, whose black hair and "foreignness" is an element of additional attraction to Gordon[40], Sir Edward de Breville's wife is equally desirable because she deviates from traditionally accepted ideals of beauty. Lady Irene de Breville is an

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[39] This brief summary of Hilary's life mirrors Atkinson's words in a BBC interview in 1999, in which she states that 'I like plot, I like hatching, matching and despatching everybody as quickly as possible'. Compare Naughtie, on:
 http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/books/club/behindthescene/transcript.shtml
[40] See below.

Argentinean cattle heiress by birth, who reminds Sir Edward of Jezebel, Salome and the Queen of Sheba. He cannot fail to notice the difference between his newly – wed wife and the eligible English women of the time. Indeed, Sir Breville has been looking for someone 'more exotic, more outlandish'. (*HC*, 314)

> She unwound the long black hair that curled to her waist and stepped out of her clothes and raised her arms above her head to display her body to her new husband … [who] thanked God for French mothers – in – law who educated their daughters so well … For an untimely second, Sir Edward had a vision of a roomful of stone – cold English roses lying stiffly between the nuptial sheets like effigies, an entirely unwelcome vision immediately banished by the sight of his new wife gliding towards him. (*HC*, 315)

Atkinson, as a result, deconstructs the codes of physical attractiveness which dominate many fairy tale retellings by demonstrating how Isobel's internalisation of the same undermines her self – confidence as well as by providing divergent ideals of beauty.

4.5 Deconstructing Romance

An additional element frequently transmitted through fairy tale retellings are conventional ideas of romance. In generalized romanticised schemas adolescent heroines' waiting and dreaming of romantic love are glamorised and supported by fairy tale motifs such as elegant balls or the heroines' deliverance from threatening situations by the hands of Prince Charming. Besides, paradigms which are shaped by romantic traditions normally climax in nuptial bliss.

In Atkinson's novels *HC* and *BS*, the characters' expectations concerning their future boyfriends and husbands are often shaped by these romantic ideals.

4.5.1 Alice

Alice, Ruby's great – grandmother in *BS,* for example, has clearly internalised portrayals of romantic love. Married to the abusive drunkard Frederick and mother of six children, Alice still aspires to the ideals of fairy tale romance. When the French travelling photographer Monsieur Armand therefore convinces her that she is designed for a better life, she intentionally and wrongly interprets his request to elope with him. However, as Ruby informs us, his offer is in reality an

invitation to disaster, loss, hair – tearing grief and downright ruination which my silly great – grandmother misread completely as an opportunity for her true nature – so stifled and suffocated by drudgery and penury – to escape and fly free. (*BS*, 342)

As Ruby after her, Alice is particularly drawn to Monsieur Armand 's foreign accent and enticed by 'the rococo exotica of Monsieur Armand's vowels.' (*BS*, 341)

However, Alice is soon freed from romantic ideals when Monsieur Armand fails to provide for her with his itinerant photography. A photographic studio, which he sets up in Glasgow, equally proves a financial disaster. As a result, the pair embark on what is intended to be a short stay in France. Nevertheless, Alice's attempts to return to England are thwarted by Armand's bankruptcy and his stay in jail, Alice's bout of pneumonia and finally the First World War. Deterred until the end of the war, it is not for several years that Alice finally manages to return to England. She now starts an obsessive search to retrieve her abandoned children. However, Rachel and Alice's children have moved to York in the meantime, so that Alice's prolonged attempts to find them are not successful.

As a result, we hear that Alice 'lived long enough to regret more or less everything.' (*BS*, 344) Left destitute by the death of Monsieur Armand, Alice is ironically forced to look after other people's children. She dies 'an old lady surrounded by her photographs and a collection of plaster saints' (*BS*, 348) during an air raid on Sheffield in the Second World War.

4.5.2 Bunty

Bunty in *BS* equally yearns for romantic ideals and waits for a fairy – tale prince to come and rescue her from her dull life. Experimenting with differing personalities based on more or less conventional characters such as Deanna Durbin, Scarlet O'Hara and Greer Garson, the adolescent Bunty sees the Second World War as a chance for adventure.

Bunty hopes that the war will provide her with exciting experiences and 'it didn't really matter whether it was the unbelievably handsome man or a bomb.' (*BS*, 95) Besides, Bunty's dreams are strongly influenced by fairy tale conventions.

> … she daydreamed furiously about all the exciting things that were going to happen to her in the future – like the charming, unbelievably handsome man who would appear from nowhere and sweep her away to a life of cocktails, cruises and fur coats. (*BS*, 92)

However, since Bunty's wartime love, Buck, gets hurt in battle and is sent home to Kansas, Bunty sees her chances for romantic love dwindling as the war is drawing to a close. Bunty therefore marries George, because 'the possibilities were beginning to fade and all those coins tossed in the air were falling back to earth with a clatter in rather dull and predictable positions.' (*BS*, 108)

After a brief affair with their neighbour, Mr Roper, 'exactly the kind of man my mother dreams about' (*BS*, 232), and her husband George's death, Bunty is still allured by the possibility of romantic love and begins to date Mr. Belling. Ruby cynically informs us that he is 'Bunty's Prince Valiant – Bernhard Belling, who has a plumbing supplies business somewhere in the nether regions of Back Swinegate.' (*BS*, 316)

4.5.3 Ruby

Like her matrilineal forbears, Ruby is similarly attracted to the conventions of romantic love. She, for instance, imagines her future wedding in terms of fairy tale imagery.

> The church will be illuminated by banks of tall white candles and all the pews and side chapels will be decorated with gardenias and trailing dark – green ivy and waxy – white lilies like angels' trumpets. My antique – lace dress will fall in drifts of snow and it will be garlanded and swagged with rosebuds as if the little birds who helped Cinderella dress for the ball had flown round and round me, nipping and tucking and pinning … I will be spotlighted by a single, dusty shaft of sunlight. The congregation will be drowning in rose petals and all the men will be in elegant morning dress … (*BS*, 286)

That Ruby's daydream about connubial bliss is, moreover, strongly influenced by film adaptations of fairy tales can be seen by the fact that she imagines stage directions like 'I will be spotlighted by a single, dusty shaft of sunlight' and describes her ideal wedding in visual codes strongly reminiscent of Disney's adaptation of 'Cinderella'.

Like her great – grandmother Alice, Ruby falls in love with a foreigner. In accordance with romantic conventions, Gian – Carlo Benedetti is 'a beautiful boy with green eyes and blacksatin hair' and 'cheeks as sharp as knife blades'. Moreover, his 'nut – brown skin looks as if it will smell of olives and lemons'. (*BS*, 355) Similar to her great – grandmother, Alice, Gian – Carlo's foreign language is

an additional element of attraction to Ruby, so that it seems to her that the Benedettis are 'tossing mysterious words at one another like flowers.' (*BS*, 355) Although Ruby has criticized Alice's light-hearted consent to Monsieur Armand's proposal at an earlier point in the novel, she also views Gian – Carlo's offer of marriage as a manifestation of romantic fate and is guided into thinking that he is genuinely in love with her.

> And later that night, when the café is closed, he proposes to me over a seething cappuccino in dreadful, halting English. I wilfully misinterpret all the signs and believe that a magnificent kind of destiny has revealed itself to me (unaware then the reason he asks me is because he is only a distant cousin Benedetti and about to be deported … (*BS*, 357)

Contrary to her romantic expectations, however, Ruby ends up running a chip – shop in Forfar with Gian – Carlo, who is considerably ampling out during the years. While Ruby at first associates Italian with flowers, she soon finds herself screaming 'at him in Italian, in words that sound as if they are embroidered with blood'. (*BS*, 355)

In contrast to her ancestors, who all decide that they have been leading the wrong life, but cannot extricate themselves from their situations, Ruby finally divorces Gian – Carlo and finds her vocation in single motherhood and translating.

4.5.4 Isobel

Resembling Ruby's adolescent waiting and dreaming, Isobel in *HC* is also considerably impressed by the conventions of glamorised fairy tale courting and marriage. In contrast to Ruby, Isobel, however, also subverts sentimental clichés by ridiculing them.

At the beginning of the novel Isobel, for example, mocks the importance of the sixteenth birthday for romantic conventions and also satirizes psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales.

> … it's my birthday, my sixteenth – the mythic one, the legendary one. The traditional age for spindles to start pricking and suitors to come calling and a host of other symbolic sexual imagery to suddenly manifest itself … (*HC*, 23)

Isobel is in love with Malcolm Lovat, who in Isobel's opinion regrettably does not 'understand that we are destined for each other, that when the world was new we were one person, that now we are an apple cleft in two …' (*HC*, 52) With his

'Roman nose, the dark curls, the long lashes' (*HC*, 55) Malcolm adheres to the physical codes of a fairly tale beau, but is unfortunately not interested in Isobel. Although Isobel never learns that Malcolm is her half – brother, the reader is provided with the information that Eliza is Malcolm's biological mother, which gives Isobel's physical longing for Malcolm retrospectively an incestuous streak.

Although Mrs Baxter is trapped in an unhappy marriage to the grim Mr Baxter, she nevertheless is the character in *HC* who most strongly believes in the fulfilment of fairy tale dreams. When Isobel, for instance, voices her doubts as to her romantic future, both her friend Carmen and Mrs Baxter reassure her.

> 'Oh, it'll happen to you one day,' Carmen says airily. 'It happens to everyone – you fall in love, you get married, you have kids, that's what you do … someone will come along.' ('Oh, one day,' Mrs Baxter says, equally assured, 'your prince will come [she almost breaks into song] and you'll fall in love and be happy.' (*HC*, 160)

Besides, Mrs Baxter's remarks in the above extract are strongly informed by the Disney adaptation of *Snow White* (1937) and its famous song "One Day My Prince Will Come", which has become a classic. Both Carmen and Mrs Baxter stress the romanticised fairy tale heroine's passivity and dependency on other figures. That Mrs Baxter takes her convictions from a song which has become a sentimental cliché further undermines perceived fairy tale conventions.

When Isobel is invited to a Christmas party at the Walshes' house, Mrs Baxter readily agrees to sew Isobel's dress for the occasion and thus symbolically acts as Isobel's fairy godmother.

> In the pattern – book it seemed like the dream – dress, the kind that's so sublimely gorgeous that the girl inside it is transfigured into a ravishing beauty – the focus of all the eyes in the room. (This is never true, as we know, but that doesn't stop people believing in it.) I might have done better to go and wish under the Lady Oak for my three dresses (one is never enough) – the first as silver as the moon, the second as gold as the sun and the last one the colour of the heavens, sprinkled with silver – sequin stars. (*HC*, 230 – 1)

Alluding to romanticized fairy tale motifs of elegant balls and Cinderella's marvellous three ball gowns, Isobel compares herself to a fairy tale character.

In contrast to Cinderella, however, Isobel ends up looking like a 'huge pink amoeba'. (*HC*, 231) What is more, Isobel's experiences at the Walshes' party do not mirror a Cinderella – like plot. After nearly being overlooked at the door, Isobel finds out that she hardly knows anyone at the party. While she tries to enter

conversations with people who are clearly not interested in her, Isobel hears how her dress is compared to 'a strawberry tart'. (*HC*, 259)

When she becomes the centre of attention for Richard Primrose's friends, Isobel is deluded into thinking that the notice given must be due to her fairy – tale dress, which is finally 'weaving its magic' and has transformed her 'into a magnetically attractive person.' (*HC*, 259) However, Isobel quickly realizes the boys are only interested in her because Richard has told them that she is not too particular about her sexual partners. As a result, Isobel is finally chased into the garden by a hoard of boys shouting obscene remarks after her. In a satirical and at the same time macabre reworking of 'Cinderella', Isobel loses her shoe in the garden. But whereas the prince in the fairy tale is not intending sexual abuse, the adolescent boys pursuing Isobel are obviously bent on raping her. Further subverting romanticized versions of 'Cinderella', Isobel gets ruby-tackled and induces a severe rib injury. In her farcical yet gruesome attempt to escape the boys, Isobel's fairy tale dress as well as her fancy shoes hinder her progress, so that when she loses one of her shoes, she kicks off the other. When Isobel is finally trapped at the end of the Walshes' garden, magic realism works to transform her into a tree and makes her thus invisible for Richard's friends.

Atkinson, as a result, deconstructs romanticized retellings of 'Cinderella' by paralleling them with Isobel's experiences at the Walshes' party. Through the context of shoes, Isobel's Cinderella – like flight is, furthermore, linked to the general heavy subtext on shoes in Atkinson's fiction, which likewise deconstructs romantic fairy tale conventions.

4.5.5 On Shoes and Suitors

The image of the shoe is an influential and recurrent fairy tale topos in Atkinson's fiction. According to Bettelheim, the shoe, and especially the slipper, is an important fairy – tale symbol.

> … for over two thousand years … all over the world in much loved stories the female slipper has been accepted as a fairy – tale solution to the problem of finding the right bride … (Bettelheim, 269)

The idea of the slipper in the above context is, of course, most commonly found in different versions of the 'Cinderella' variety, which have enjoyed a wide popularity all over the world. Bettelheim argues that the tale might have originated in China,

where virtue was associated with small feet, leading to the common social practise of shoe – binding. In different versions of Cinderella, the slipper that finally identifies the right bride is made out of different materials. Perrault substituted the furry shoe with that of the slipper made of glass, probably based on his confusion of the terms *verre* and *vair*, which are homophones in French.[41] In all versions of the tale, however, the slipper eliminates the true bride.

In *BS*, Ruby employs this fairy tale motif to criticize the shoes her mother bought for the special occasion of Ted's wedding:

> You know from looking at them that they'll be worn once and never again. She crams a foot into one of her new shoes with all the determination of an ugly sister. 'You could cut your toes off', I suggest helpfully. (*BS*, 278)

While the fairy tale symbol of the shoe functions as an allusion in the extract above, Atkinson takes up this romantic notion of recognition of the true bride more extensively in her second novel *HC*.

The symbol of the shoe is, for instance, an important element during Isobel's parents' first meeting. Gordon and Eliza encounter each other for the first time after a building has been bombed due to an air raid in the Second World War. After Gordon has carried Eliza out of the burning building, she sends him back to retrieve her lost shoe.

> My shoe, I've lost my shoe, and Gordon laughed and dashed back into the bombed – out building and actually found the shoe. He knew it was ridiculous but he didn't care. She put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself while she put the shoe on. Her grimly naked foot was slim with a ballerina's arch and blood – red toe – nails – erotic and incongruous amongst the broken limbs and wreckage … (*HC*, 240)

In the above passage, Atkinson evokes the shoe as a fairy tale symbol. Gordon's retrieving of Eliza's lost shoe is reminiscent of a romanticized fairy tale theme. As a result, Eliza alludes to 'the age of chivalry' after Gordon has come back with her expensive shoe.

> My hero, she smiled as he placed her gently on the pavement. My hero, she said and Gordon was lost, drowning in her whisky eyes. The age of chivalry, bomb-dusted Eliza murmured, is alive and well. (*HC*, 93)

But while Atkinson is playing with the 'Cinderella' image of the shoe, she is subverting it at the same time. Whereas the shoe in 'Cinderella' is used to find the right and unblemished bride, the reader knows that Eliza is not the upper – class

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[41] See Bettelheim, 236 – 277.

woman Gordon takes her for, but a prostitute who was meeting with her pimp in the bombed building. Atkinson, therefore, drastically undermines the idea of the "age of chivalry" and heroism as informed by fairy tale conventions and strongly questions their validity in contemporary discourse. Moreover, she also questions the metaphor of the fitting shoe as the identification of the right partner in life.

What is more, the fairy tale symbol of the shoe is further challenged by the fact that a certain shoe also plays a relevant role in Eliza's murder. When Isobel finds a stray shoe under Vinny's bed, both Isobel and Charles believe it to be their mother's. Significantly, the shoe is one of a pair that Eliza has worn the day she disappeared, although Isobel and Charles have repressed the details of this specific day and therefore cannot remember the shoe. Just as Cinderella's lost shoe points towards her whereabouts, in a way this shoe reveals the mystery of Eliza's disappearance. But while Cinderella's slipper is a romanticized and conventional fairy – tale symbol, Eliza's shoe is more like a piece of evidence in a murder trial. That the shoe contains information as to Eliza's fate is mirrored linguistically through Isobel's description of the shoe, in which she uses the adjective 'dead' twice. Thus, Isobel's designation provides hints towards the "disappearance" of Eliza. In Isobel's description the shoe is decorated with 'a strange piece of matted fur stuck to it, like a piece of dead cat.' Moreover, the shoe is characterized by a 'little nest of dead fur.' (*HC*, 61) [42]

Together with the other memorabilia that Isobel and Charles discover, including Eliza's powder compact, a handkerchief and a lock of her black hair, the shoe plays a crucial role in the novel, insomuch as her children try to reconstruct Eliza through the accumulation of these possessions. For Isobel and Charles the shoe has a significance comparable to a religious relic.

> We know, in our bones and our blood, that the shoe has travelled through time and space to tell us something. But what? If we found its partner would it help us find the true bride ('it fits, it fits!') and bring her back from wherever she is now? (*HC*, 62)

The recurrent allusion to 'Cinderella' in the extract above again heightens the comparably macabre fate of Eliza.

Charles and Isobel have repressed the memory of the fateful day on which their mother disappeared. In a flashback, Isobel recounts the experiences of the day as her younger self. During a family picnic Isobel and Charles are left alone by

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[42] Interestingly, Cinderella's shoe was originally a furry one. Compare Bettelheim, 251.

Vinny, Eliza and Gordon, who one by one disappear into the forest. When the children finally venture into the forest to search their relatives, the aforementioned shoe is actually revealed as a crucial requisite in Eliza's murder. While the children are stumbling around in the forest, they discover Eliza's shoe, which obviously has been steeped in blood:

> It was a shoe, a brown suede shoe, the heel bent at a strange angle and the little mink pom - pom dampened by something sticky so that it lay flat and limp like a wet kitten and the rhinestone was a dull gleam in the dying light. (*HC*, 128)

In this extract, Isobel's naïve interpretation of the pom – pom of the shoe as a 'wet kitten' darkly contrasts with and thereby heightens the cruel actuality of the murder. The description of the fur on the shoe as a kitten is also connected to Isobel's later evaluation of it as a 'dead cat'. However, the 'dying light' in the extract again points towards the fact that Eliza has been murdered. When Isobel and Charles finally come across the corpse of their mother in the forest, the previously found shoe won't fit her swollen foot any more.

> … Charles did his best to put the shoe back on her elegantly arched stocking-foot. It was as if her feet had grown while she slept. It was so difficult getting the shoe back on that Charles grew afraid that he would break the bones in Eliza's feet and eventually he gave up the task … (*HC*, 129)

In an additional analepsis on the topic which is recounted from Eliza's point of view, the shoe is definitely portrayed as the murder weapon. When Eliza confronts her lover, Mr Baxter, with the fact that she wants to terminate their relationship, she is killed by him with a shoe.

> He had one of her shoes in his hand. She looked down at her feet in surprise, she only had one shoe on. He lifted the shoe up, it had a very thin heel … Her feet wouldn't move, she had to move, she turned and started to run but he was on top of her, hitting her with the shoe on the back of the head … 'Please don't,' but he grabbed hold of a handful of hair and yanked her head forward and began to hit her skull again with the heel of the brown shoe, grunting with the effort. Again and again he hit her, long after the trees around grew dim and Eliza had slipped into blackness. (*HC*, 340 - 1)

While the shoe symbolizes recognition of the true partner for life in many fairy tale retellings, Atkinson, as a result, powerfully twists the reader's expectations and depicts Eliza's shoe as the murder weapon.

Although Atkinson is thus deconstructing the symbol of the shoe as employed in fairy tale retellings, the metaphor of the unfitting shoe also highlights

Eliza's inability to integrate into her family and her social environment. Eliza does metaphorically not fit into the social role that she is designed for. Like Rachel in *BS*, whose fingers are too fat to squeeze into Alice's wedding ring, Eliza's swollen foot won't fit her shoe when Charles tries to put it back on. This can, as a result, be associated with the fact that she has unsuccessfully adopted her role as a mother and housewife. Although Gordon is at first attracted to Eliza's mysterious origins, he finally rejects her when he learns that she has worked as a prostitute before their marriage.

Furthermore, Atkinson also strongly deconstructs the fairy – tale convention of the shoe through Isobel's experiences at the Walshes' Christmas party in *HC*. As mentioned above, Isobel has been lured to the party under a false pretence. When she finally discovers the boys' designs and runs away into the park, she loses a slipper in a revision of Cinderella:

> I sprint across the grass as fast as I can but my movements are hampered by the heels on my shoes and the large volume of pink I'm wearing, and I haven't got very far when Graham does a rugby tackle on me, sending me crashing on to the frosted grass of the lawn. His hand slips down into the bodice of my dress, determined apparently on this particular goal, but I manage to jab him hard in the ribs with my left elbow and he rolls off me, yelping with pain. I have lost one of my shoes by now, and I hastily kick of the other one as I scramble to my feet. (*HC*, 261)

While the fairy tale Cinderella steals from the ball and accidentally leaves a shoe behind, Isobel's tragi-comical flight in the park is hindered by her fancy shoes. As a result, she simply removes both shoes.

To sum up, Atkinson debunks ideas of romantic fairy tale love in both *BS* and *HC*. Characters who have internalised such sentimentalised clichés inadvertently fail in their quests to find happiness in her fiction. Alice, Bunty and Ruby all aspire towards romantic ideals, but are greatly disappointed by reality. While Isobel in *HC* ridicules fairy tale conventions, she is also strongly influenced by them. Atkinson, therefore, portrays romantic ideals as escapist and nostalgic, and deconstructs them as a projection for the future. Moreover, Atkinson also subverts the fairy tale convention of the shoe as a means to eliminate the true bride through reworking the topic in *HC*.

4.6 Happily ever after?

While marriage is often a narrative resolution in fairy tales as well as in realist fiction, one of Atkinson's most recurrent themes is the subversion of marriage as a climax of the fairy tale heroine's yearning for romantic love. Defying romantic tradition, Atkinson refuses to portray marriage as a happy ending. Thus deconstructing fairy tale conventions, her fiction has undeservedly been under heavy criticism for being 'anti – family'.[43] Atkinson deeply questions the validity of marriage as a social and ideological resolution in contemporary society.

4.6.1 Bunty and George

That marriages seldom constitute a happy ending contrary to fairy tale conventions is especially evident in the portrayal of the marriages in *BS*. Ruby's mother, Bunty, is, for instance, trapped in a marriage with adulterous George, who leaves the prime responsibility concerning domestic work and childcare to Bunty and frequently asks her to "mind the shop" in addition. The two continuously quarrel about George's affairs and the fact that he often leaves during the day without a perceptible reason.

While the juvenile Bunty still daydreams about the romantic potential of the Second World War, she soon loses her illusions after the war when her war time love, Buck, returns to America. Because no other possibilities present themselves, Bunty accepts George's offer of marriage. However, the marriage is not described as connubial bliss ever after. Prenatal narrator Ruby cynically comments that 'My poor mother's very disappointed by marriage, it's failed to change her life in any way, except by making it worse.' (*BS*, 13)

Bunty's experience as a wife is additionally complicated by her relation to sex. She is deflowered by Sandy with 'bulging thyrotoxic blue eyes' (*BS*, 96) at her sister's wedding. When the soldier promises that he will marry her on his next leave, Bunty is tempted into thinking that 'this was true love'(*BS*, 98) and finally gives in to his seduction. Nevertheless, Bunty experiences the encounter like being 'at the mercy of an octopus' (*BS*, 98) and feels disgusted 'particularly as he banged

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[43] Compare, for instance, the reviews Kelly, Jane. "What is the Point of Men – Who Needs Them?" *Daily Mail* January 25, 1996 and Neil Andrew. "All Chattering – But No Class." *Daily Mail* January 25, 1996. As Parker rightly notes, while Atkinson's fiction is deconstructing romanticized ideals of marriage, it is not unsympathetic to men in general. See Parker, 79.

her head off the drainpipe in his excitement …' (*BS*, 98) As a result, Bunty begins to view sex in terms of animalistic imagery, as the comparison with the octopus demonstrates. Extending the animal metaphor further, Sandy reminds Bunty 'of a nice dog'. (*BS*, 96)

Equally disastrous is Bunty's sex life with her husband George. The following extract characterises the couple's differing ideas of sex.

> The snort arouses a primitive part of his brain and he flings out an arm, pinioning Bunty to the bed, and starts exploring whatever bit of flesh he has chanced to land on … Bunty manages to wriggle out from under George's arm – she's already had to endure sex once in the last twelve hours … more than once in a day would be unnatural. (*BS*, 12)

Bunty's correlation between animals and men is, moreover, strengthened by her acquaintance with the family butcher Walter.

> In Bunty's private animal lexicon (all men are beasts) he is a pig, with his smooth, skinny skin, stretched tightly over his buttery, plump flesh. (*BS*, 20)

Since Walter is flirting with Bunty while cutting up parts of meat, Atkinson also draws a parallel between the female and the animal body. Employing ambiguous phrases like 'Nice piece of red meat, eh?', while he 'winks salaciously' (*BS*, 20) at Bunty, Walter likewise strengthens this association. Furthermore, we hear that he has frequently 'cornered her behind the sausage – machine in the back of his shop.' (*BS*, 21) While Bunty's body is therefore compared to a piece of meat, Bunty also associates male genitalia with meat.[44]

> … the kidney, now being tossed from one hand to the other by Walter, bears an odd resemblance to a pair of testicles. (Not that 'testicles' is a word she's very familiar with, of course, she belongs to a generation of women which was not very au fait with the correct anatomical vocabulary.) (*BS*, 21)

Because Bunty associates sex with animal images, and feels that her body is equated with meat, her relationship to George is additionally complicated.

Despite their continual strife, however, Bunty in a way redeems her marriage to George posthumously when he dies at her brother's wedding party. When Ruby finds her father dead on top of a waitress, Bunty is seen 'kissing him with all the passion of a new bride.' (*BS*, 299)

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[44] Interestingly, male genitalia are also compared to meat in *HC*. Isobel, for example, announces that the 'relation of dead poultry to male genitalia is still something of a puzzle to me …' (*HC*, 253) Moreover, Isobel's friend Carmen also draws parallels between the male reproductive organs and 'a plucked turkey and its giblets'. (*HC*, 56)

4.6.2 Nell and Frank

Nell, Bunty's mother, is another woman disappointed by married life. After Nell's first fiancée Percy has died, she falls for Jack, who is described in similar terms as Gian - Carlo Benedetti, thus suggesting that Nell and her granddaughter Ruby share a preference for a certain type of physical appearance in men. Like Ruby's later husband, Jack is depicted as having 'thick, dark hair' (*BS*, 48) and skin a 'polished walnut colour' (*BS*, 49) as well as 'high, sharp cheekbones … like razor – clam shells.' (*BS*, 50)

Like her daughter Bunty, Nell falls in love in a World War. However, unlike her daughter's lover, Jack is killed in battle after previously having impregnated Nell's sister Lillian. Since all her previous lovers have died, Nell accepts Frank's offer of marriage, who after the War is determined

> to lead the most undramatic and ordinary life possible where the only problems would be from a teething child or greenfly on the floribunda rose he fancied growing by the front door of the house … (*BS*, 75)

In this dull and ordinary setting, Frank and Nell have their five children Clifford, Babs, Bunty, Betty and Ted. Because the shy Nell is mainly characterized by her motherhood in the novel, Ruby depicts her as a person whose 'entire life is defined by her relationship to other people'. (*BS*, 22) That Nell did not marry Frank because she loves him, can also be seen from Bunty's later remarks on her parents' married life. For example, she states that she 'couldn't recall ever having seen her own mother and father do more than exchange a slight peck on the cheek.' (*BS*, 93)

Similarly to her daughter Bunty, sex is also linked to unpleasant experiences for Nell. When Nell accompanies her son Ted to the Lake District, she muses on the events of her honeymoon. In an analepsis, Nell recounts the memories of her younger self.

When Frank and Nell arrive in the Lake District, Nell's inner feelings are metaphorically projected outside, as they arrive at a 'gloomy hotel' on 'a hot, stuffy night'. (*BS*, 166) Like in Elizabethan drama, the coming events are foreshadowed in natural phenomena, so that 'heavy weather was a physical force, crushing the top of her skull down'. (*BS*, 166) The personification of the weather is an important feature here, because it symbolically stands for Nell's reading of her surroundings as threatening and evil. Moreover, Ted is also associated with the weather.

> … he was on top of her like a lead weight, heavier than the weather, pressing her down. Would he do this every night of their married life? Would there be no relief from his thick cotton pyjamas and his prickly little moustache and that other part of his anatomy that she had to turn her eyes away from because it was so embarrassing. (*BS*, 166)

In addition to the weather, Nell also begins to link sex with a hornet that is in their room, the buzzing of which she first believes to be 'in her head'. (*BS*, 167) Nell therefore connects sex with Frank with a dangerous insect. The buzzing of the insect is also related to the threat of war in the novel, as it is a symbol for the Zeppelin attacks, which frequently play a part in *BS*. For Nell, the hornet, therefore, becomes a 'huge monster of a wasp, a great mutant black and yellow thing droning steadily like a Zeppelin'. (*BS*, 167) [45]

4.6.3 Eliza and Gordon

Atkinson also questions the validity of marriage as a final narrative resolution in her second novel *HC*. While Gordon and Eliza's marriage at first seems to be the fulfilment of Eliza's romantic expectations, reality quickly resumes Eliza's general ennui with life. As mentioned above, Gordon first meets Eliza in the Second World War when he rescues her out of a burning building. However, Gordon's exciting side is something that Eliza drastically misses after the war.

> Life in the ever – after wasn't as happy as it should have been. Life, in fact, was *a bloody bore* … Gordon was no longer a hero, no longer flying in skies of any colour. He'd wrapped himself in his long white apron again and turned himself back into a grocer. Eliza was disappointed by this civilian transformation. (*HC*, 101)

Frustrated and disillusioned by their married life, Eliza sarcastically compares Gordon to the 'prince – in – waiting to some vast grocery empire.' (*HC*, 101)

Eliza and Gordon's married life is further complicated by Gordon's mother, the Widow, who also lives in Arden and Vinny, Gordon's sister, who has a place of her own, but spends nearly all her time in Arden too. The Widow's Victorian ideas of family life starkly contrast with Eliza's liberal attempts of education. As a result, family conflicts frequently erupt around the questions of child nutrition and housekeeping, which Eliza categorically refuses.

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[45] The Zeppelin seems to be a trans – generational metaphor for danger in the novel. Nell's brother Tom, for instance, is greatly injured by a Zeppelin attack in WW I. Moreover, Ruby dreams of the apocalypse and of Zeppelins during the shop fire. Compare *BS*, 211.

> Eliza said nothing, but if you were close enough to her, you could hear the voodoo words she was incanting under her breath, like a swarm of bees. The widow wiped the crumbs of cake from her fingerbones and left the table. (*HC*, 104)

What is more, the Widow cannot understand that her son Gordon is fascinated and eroticised by Eliza's exotic body.

> Eliza was a miracle, her human geography sublime – the long curve of body, the hills and vales, her face buried in the pillow so that all he could see was the forest of black curls on her head. The matching copse of hair between her thin legs, the extraordinary cupolas with their dark – brown aureoles – the kind of breasts that Englishwomen would have been embarrassed by, the kind of breasts that Gordon had only previously seen on foreign prostitutes. … The smell of her – perfume and tobacco and sex. The taste of her – perfume and tobacco and sex and salt – sweat. (*HC*, 243)

When Eliza marries into Gordon's family, both the Widow and her daughters Vinny and Madge are jealous of Eliza's physical appearance and the fact that she is confident about her sexuality.

> Madge experienced a convulsion of envy as she noticed how thin Eliza's ankles were beneath her unpatriotically long skirt. Like bird – bones. Vinny wanted to snap them. And her neck like a stalk. Snap. (*HC*, 92)

Because of Eliza's immaculate body, the Widow feels that she cannot compete with her for her son's affection.

> And in her room, the Widow took off her layers of strict underwear and viewed her saggy, baggy wrinkled body with her ancient dugs and her chicken neck and cursed Eliza. (*HC*, 244)

While Gordon is eroticised by Eliza's body, Eliza is increasingly irritated at his attempts to father another baby. When Gordon, for instance, tries to seduce his wife on their son's bed, she 'jabbed her elbow hard into his ribs and kicked him with her heel on his shin, so that he fell back on the bed in surprise and pain.' (*HC*, 113)

Since Eliza's continued attempts to move out of Arden and away from the Widow and Vinny fail, she begins a clandestine relationship with their neighbour, Mr Baxter and is finally killed by him in the woods.

> It had just been a game really, she was bored and he was there, so nearby, so keen. And the sex with him was so … dark, there was a certain attraction in that. Gordon was so … wholesome. And that had been so wonderful at first, she had really loved him. Such a hero. But he couldn't keep on being a hero, more's the pity. She got restless. That was why she'd taken a lover, a little bit of fun, a little bit of power. Now it was a game she couldn't stop. (*HC*, 337)

To recapitulate, Atkinson undermines the romantic expectation that marriage produces happiness ever after, as it is propagated by many fairy tale retellings. The marriages of Bunty, Nell and Eliza fail for complex reasons and therefore cannot be regarded as adhering to fairy tale conventions. What is more, marriages of minor characters in *HC* and *BS* are often tragic too. In *BS,* for example, Alice is 'quite unable to face the unwashed clothes, unfed children and unsatisfied husband that comprised her lot in life' (*BS*, 339) and therefore elopes with Monsieur Armand. In *HC*, Lady Mary Fairfax runs away from her aggressive Elizabethan husband when she learns that he sexually abuses his foster child Margaret. In Atkinson's fiction, marriage can, therefore, not be equated with a happy ending but is rather an instrument which brings out differences between the couple.

Isobel fittingly summarizes Atkinson's view on marriage as a narrative closure.

> But then, do happy families exist, or happy endings come to that, outside of fiction? And how can there be an ending of any kind until you die? (And how can that be happy?) (*HC*, 217)

Atkinson employs fairy tale motifs in a fashion characteristic of postmodernist fiction. By using typical fairy tale themes such as the motive of the changeling and stock fairy tale characters like the wicked stepmother and the evil witch she deconstructs dichotomised views on gender common in many fairy tale retellings. Besides, Atkinson also subverts fairy tale codes of physical appearance and conventions such as the correlation between good femininity and domesticity as well as sentimentalised clichés of romantic love and marriage as a narrative resolution. By challenging metanarratives generally transmitted over the retellings of fairy tales, Atkinson asks the reader to become more aware of romantic expectations towards fiction.

5. THE WILDERNESS OF STREETS

As mentioned above, postmodernism categorically rejects and subverts categorizations in binary opposites. In Atkinson's fiction, one of the most endurable dichotomies in the Western literary tradition is deconstructed. A vital and recurrent metaphor in *HC*, the function of the forest is re – evaluated through Atkinson's depiction of it. For a long time, the forest has been connected to irrationality, pastoral themes and mythology, as opposed to the rationality and logocentrism of culture and civilization. While Atkinson – in a characteristically postmodernist fashion - invests in this dichotomy, she also subverts it through the depiction of the forest in *HC*.

The forest is frequently associated with concepts of myth and magic because tree and forest are also essential fairy – tale motifs. The forest is often linked with a form of threatening enchantment in the fairy tale. Just like Hansel and Gretel, many fairy tale characters are subjected to the fear that a forest can inspire. On the other hand, a forest is often a place which empowers fairy tale characters and provides them with solutions for their problems. While subverting the motif of the fairy – tale forest in a typically postmodernist way, Atkinson also plays with the old dichotomy between nature and civilization.

In *HC*, Isobel frequently invokes traditional mythical perceptions of trees and forests. While she is not interested in the particulars of photosynthesis, which are taught in school during a biology lesson, she is fascinated by the mythical association that trees elicit. Isobel, for instance, remarks that '[t]o the Druids the tree was the link between heaven and earth.' (*HC*, 44) She thus rejects the scientific explanations for romanticized mythical evaluations of trees. Moreover, she also often alludes to the Nordic tree of life, Yggdrasil, which in Norse mythology connects Heaven and Earth.[46] Connected to this concept is the Major Oak in the novel, which outlives many generations of Fairfaxes and thus constitutes a transgenerational linking element in *HC*.

When asked to draw a cross – section of a leaf to exemplify the processes of photosynthesis, Isobel rather produces a 'mystical tree that comes from somewhere deep inside my imagination'. (*HC*, 139) Then she muses over her artwork and thereby again suggests a multitude of mythical association with trees.

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[46] Compare Cotterell, 250 – 1.

Perhaps this is the tree of life or Eve's knowledge tree? Zeus' own Dodona oak or the great oak sacred to Thor? Or maybe Ysggadril, the ash, the world tree, that in Norse mythology forms the whole round of the globe – its branches propping up at the sky roof above our heads … (*HC*, 139)

References to trees abound in *HC*, and Atkinson intentionally plays with the dichotomy between nature and culture throughout the novel. When Isobel starts her narration at the beginning of the world, she also tells of the forest of Lythe that used to occupy the place where Isobel lives now.

Here, where this story takes place (in the grim north), here was once forest, oceans of forest, the great Forest of Lythe. Ancient forest, an impenetrable thicket of Scots pine, birch and aspen, of English elm and wych elm, common hazel, oak and holly, the forest which once covered England and to which, if left alone, it might one day return. (*HC*, 12)

This extract is a piece characteristic of postmodernist fiction because it mixes different styles of discourse with fluid ease. While Isobel assumes an essentially fairy tale voice by using phrases such as 'here was once', and while she offers a magical vision of the future, she also numerates the different species of trees in a systematic and scientific fashion. Isobel, therefore, plays with the traditional dichotomy of nature versus culture. What is more, she portrays the forest as the abode of the magical and inexplicable. Even when the forest is cut down, Isobel informs us that 'there was a secret mystery at the heart of the heart of the forest.' (*HC*, 13)

Some say there were fairies in the forest – angry, bad – tempered creatures … ill-met by moonlight, who loitered with intent on banks of wild thyme listening furiously to the encroaching axes. Where did they go when the forest no longer existed? And what about the wolves? What happened to them? (Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there.) (*HC*, 13)

Isobel portrays the forest as a place where mysterious and fantastical beings reside and frequently repeats, in the course of the novel, that 'just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there'. By using phrases such as "some say" the forest is further relegated into the sphere of irrationality and mysteriousness.

When the forest is finally completely cleared away, Maurice Smith has houses built on the site. Each street is symbolically named after a different kind of tree, and the link with the mysteriousness of the forest is thus retained.

Streets with broad pavements and trees, lots of trees – a canopy of trees over the tarmac, a mantle of green around the houses and their happy occupants. Trees that would give pleasure, that could be observed in bud and new leaf,

unfurling their green fingers on the streets of houses, raising their sheltering leafy arms over the dwellers within … The forest of trees had become a wilderness of streets. (*HC*, 19)

The personification of the trees in the passage above is linked to the subtext of metamorphoses in Atkinson's fiction. Despite the removal of the forest, the forces that link it to the language of myth and fairy tales seem to have been preserved, so that 'if you listened carefully, you could imagine the wolves howling.' (*HC*, 19)

As Sanders notes, the mysterious secret of the forest also extends to the sphere of the Fairfaxes' house, Arden.[47]

The house of Arden seems to contain within itself its own locational history, the potential for magic and the power to disorient which is constantly associated with the forest throughout. It appears to conspire against those who resist its power. (Sanders, 70)

As mentioned above, the Lady Oak, which now grows in the middle of the streets in Isobel's neighbourhood, is a symbol of continuity in the novel. It has witnessed the days of Isobel's forbears such as the Elizabethan Sir Francis Fairfax, who has his mansion built deep in the forest of Lythe. Shakespeare, who is employed at his court, allegedly carves his initials into the tree. At that time, the Lady Oak is a young tree 'that once stood at the heart of the heart of the forest and now guarded its entrance'. (*HC*, 15) Invoking associations with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we hear that the Lady Oak stood at 'the heart of the heart of the forest'. By comparing the realm the Lady Oak oversees with the colonial infernal topography of Conrad, Atkinson again conjures up themes of irrationality and mysteriousness.

Following a vital dichotomy in European literature, Atkinson portrays the forest as a place where secret and hidden danger as well as power resides. However, as a further analysis will show, Atkinson also subverts the binary opposites of forest and civilization.

5.1 Lady Mary Fairfax

The female body is frequently linked to trees through the processes of metamorphosis in *HC*.[48] Atkinson additionally stresses this correlation through

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[47] By naming the Fairfaxes' house Arden, Atkinson invokes the essential Shakespearean intertext of *As you Like It*. The correlation is insofar significant as Shakespeare's play is built on the dichotomy between the court and the forest of Arden.
[48] See below.

interlinking some women characters with the mysterious nature of the forest. However, she also subverts this interrelationship.

The description of Sir Francis' wife, Lady Mary, is deeply enigmatic at first sight. She is depicted as a creature 'whose beginning and end were veiled in mystery'. (*HC*, 15) According to various accounts, Mary one day arrives out of the forest 'dressed in nothing … but her silk – soft skin …' (*HC*, 15) Mary's (unknown) origins are therefore mystified and strongly connected to nature, so that a connection between her and nature is assumed. The fact that Lady Fairfax likes to wear green and natural colours, and '… was strangely fond of wandering into the forest …' (*HC*, 16) heightens this conventional connection. Furthermore, there are allusions that Mary possesses the ability to shape – lift into a 'timid hart'. (*HC*, 16)

When Lady Fairfax mysteriously disappears, various fantastic possibilities are hinted at. The shape - lifted Mary might have been killed unintentionally by Fairfax himself, who returns home one day with 'a fine plump doe shot through the heart …' (*HC*, 16) Another account of her disappearance is given by a kitchen girl, who

> claimed she saw Lady Fairfax disappearing from underneath the Lady Oak, fading away until her green brocade dress was indistinguishable from the surrounding trees. (*HC, 16)*

In the following centuries, Lady Fairfax is 'occasionally sighted, dressed all in green, disconsolate and gloomy, and occasionally with her head under her arm for good effect.' (*HC*, 17) Evoking this mythical description of her heiress, Isobel also sees 'the black shape of a figure walking across the field. I could swear it has no head.' (*HC*, 85)

Through linking Mary Fairfax with the magical and irrational powers traditionally associated with the forest, her character is transferred into a mythical, fairy tale realm. It is, however, only the foreign inscription of her identity through hearsay and rumour that turns her into this mystical creature, who can both shapelift into does and finally disappears merging with a tree. While the reader is lured into believing Atkinson's elaborate magic realist devices at first hand, we learn a divergent "truth" at the end of the novel, when Mary can relate her own story.

The story of Lady Mary Fairfax is strongly reminiscent of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Although set in Elizabethan times, the episode of Mary Fairfax and Lawrence's novel share a number of features. Both ladies fall in love with their husbands' game – keepers and finally elope with them. Like Lawrence's

Mellows, Atkinson's Kavanagh is also a proud man who 'thinks himself a gentleman'. (*HC*, 359) Both Mellows and Kavanagh own a secluded hut in the forest, where they like to be on their own. The first encounter between the two lovers is, as with Lawrence, set in the forest.

> The first time we spoke was in the wood. I knew him well by then, our paths had crossed many times in the great forest, each time he bowed low and did not speak so that I began to wonder if he was dumb. But he was a man of few words, unlike our Master Shakespeare … (*HC*, 361)

While Lady Chatterley encounters Mellows washing himself, Lady Fairfax chances upon Kavanagh felling a tree and swimming in a pond.

> … I was able to view Master Kavanagh at work, chopping down a tree half – felled in the great winter storms. He was stripped of leather jerkin, and of his sark also, so that I was able to admire the fine brown skin of his back with its coat of sweat, like dew and the black curls of his hair lying damply on his neck … I followed Master Kavanagh deeper into the forest and when he left the path I left the path also and when he divested himself of his nether garments it would have taken a deal more than self – will to turn my head and not watch him dip himself in the cool black pool where the flag irises waved and the frogs were startled. (*HC*, 363)

But while Lady Chatterley is pretending to be 'rather annoyed; why should she be made to stumble on these vulgar privacies?' (*LC*, 70), Atkinson's Mary Fairfax takes gratification from the spectacle and the fact that Master Kavanagh knows he is being watched. While Mellows in *LC* clears the table conscientiously if not minutely as Connie enters his hut for the first time[49], Atkinson parodies this scene by exposing the pair's mutual passion.

> First the burnt – out candle went flying with a great clatter and then the rotten apple went rolling to the far corner of the room. And heaven only knows what happened to the loaf of bread. Then there was no more speaking, only the exquisite moans and dreadful sighs that must accompany such violent delights. (*HC*, 365)

By using Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley* as an intertext, Atkinson subverts the connection between Mary Fairfax and the mysteriousness of the forest. The forest is not so much the place where Lady Fairfax becomes a magical and mysterious creature, but rather a realm where she first seeks refuge from her paedophilic and abusive husband.

> I was often in the forest, it was the only place in my lord's domain where peace still reigned, for there was no peace to be had in the sty that was my

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49 Compare *LC*, 121.

lord's house. I was not mistress there, the lord of misrule had sway. (*HC*, 361)

When Sir Francis finally impregnates his ward Margaret, who also might have been his illegitimate daughter, and the same commits suicide by hanging herself from a tree, Mary decides to elope with Master Kavanagh. Pursued by a furious Sir Francis, the pair manages to escape him by throwing the valuable jewel Mary has received as a wedding present into the forest.

To sum up, Atkinson first invests in the dichotomy between culture and nature by portraying Mary Fairfax as a mythical fairy – tale creature, who is magically empowered by the forest. However, in a later account of her story, Mary's connection to the forest is re – evaluated and demystified. As the real cause of her "disappearance" is revealed, the connection between the mythical forest and Lady Fairfax is deconstructed.

5.2 Eliza

Moreover, the magical and mythical nature associated with the forest is also linked to Eliza in *HC*. When Eliza marries Gordon, she is 'as slender as a willow, as straight as a Douglas fir' (*HC*, 92) and her hair is also described in natural imagery, so that it is '[b]lack as a crow, a rook, a raven.' (*HC*, 93)

Further stressing Eliza's animalistic side, she locks herself into her room during Isobel's birth. When the door is broken open, the Widow is shocked to see that the navel chord has already been gnawed. This event further strengthens Eliza's wild and irrational nature. In addition, Eliza describes the new - born Isobel in essentially arborescent imagery as ' … a little May bud. A new leaf' (*HC*, 101) and hopes that she will 'blossom and grow.' (*HC*, 100)

While Eliza is associated with the wildness and irrationality of the forest in the novel, Gordon's mother, the Widow, desperately tries to get rid of the wilderness and natural chaos produced by the trees surrounding Arden. With her Victorian values, ideas of strict order and efficient housekeeping, the Widow is portrayed as the antagonistic force to Eliza, who enjoys playing with her children in the tumult of autumnal leaves.

> Eliza watched the Widow sweep up leaves on the black lawn. The Widow brushed furiously at birch and sycamore and apple, but the leaves were

coming down like rain and every time she managed to make a pile the wind whisked them up in the air again. (*HC*, 102)

Whereas Eliza is thus, like Mary Fairfax, connected to the mysterious side of the forest, it is also the place where she is forever lost to her children. When Eliza is straying away from the family picnic, her clandestine lover, Mr Baxter, crushes her skull with one of her high – heeled shoes. When the Fairfax family are on their way to the family picnic on the bus, the imagery of trees already foreshadows the tragic outcome of the day:

> The big branch of a sycamore snapped unexpectedly against the window in front of them, rattling its dead leaves that were like hands … (*HC*, 119)

In this extract, the equation of trees with humans is further extended. While women in the Fairfax family are frequently said to possess the ability to shape – lift into trees, trees are also personified in *HC*. The phrase 'dead leaves', moreover, points to the subsequent murder of Eliza. Of course, the passage also alludes to the fact that Gordon crashes Eliza's skull against the trunk of a tree previous to her encounter with Mr Baxter.

When Isobel and Charles are left alone in the forest, they enliven the worst possible scenario of existential fear for every child. Eliza, Gordon and their aunt Vinny have all left the picnic site for the wood. When the children decide after hours of waiting to search for their relatives, the forest appears more threatening to them because they associate it with fairy – tale imagery. The forest is again combined with mysteriousness, chaos, and unnamed threats. For Isobel and Charles, the forest is frightening because of its ' … strange sounds – screeches and whistles – that seemed to have no earthly origin. Twigs snapped and crackled and the undergrowth rustled malevolently as if something invisible was stalking them.' (*HC*, 131)

Since Isobel and Charles associate the woods with the fairy tale forest[50], they also identify with fairy tale characters. Imitating Hansel and Gretel's technique of orientation in the woods, Charles suggests a similar procedure.

> 'We could scatter the crumbs,' he said, 'and find our way back.' Their only blueprint for survival in these circumstances, it seemed, was fictional. They knew the plot, unfortunately, and any minute expected to find the gingerbread cottage – and then the nightmare would really begin … She was so hungry that she would have eaten a gingerbread tile or a piece of striped candy window – frame, even though she knew the consequences. (*HC*, 130)

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[50] As mentioned above, another influential intertext in this chapter is the fairy tale 'Cinderella'.

Finally, Isobel and Charles find their mother's corpse leaned against a tree.

> She was lolled against the trunk of a big oak tree, like a carelessly abandoned doll or a broken bird. Her head had flopped against her shoulder, stretching her thin white neck like a swan or a stalk about to snap. Her camel coat had fallen open and her woollen dress, the colour of bright spring leaves, was fanned out over her legs. She had one shoe off and one shoe on and the words to *Diddle – diddle dumpling* ran through Isobel's head. *(HC, 128 – 9)*

The childlike description starkly contrasts with and therefore reinforces the brutality of the murder. Furthermore, the gruesomeness of the scene is also increased by the fact that Isobel remembers the lyrics of a lullaby when seeing her dead mother's body. The children think innocently that their 'sleeping mother … refused to wake up' (*HC*, 129), while Isobel gives us the clue that '[o]nly the dark red ribbons of blood in her black curls hinted at the way her skull might have been smashed against the trunk of the tree and broken open like a beech – nut or an acorn.' (*HC*, 129)

While Mary Fairfax, one of Isobel's matrilineal forebears, reputedly vanished into a tree, Eliza's crushed and maltreated body equally seems to melt with the trunk it is leaned against. When the children finally leave their mother's corpse and set out to find their other relatives, they turn around and 'couldn't see Eliza any more, only a pile of dead leaves against a tree.' (*HC*, 130) While a magic realist reading of this episode would have Eliza vanish or merge with a tree, the "real" story is revealed later in the novel, when a gory discovery is made during road construction works.

> Not long after they'd started clearing the first trees someone spotted a long bone poking through the soil in the shovel of a JCB. The forensic pathologists eventually recovered nearly a whole skeleton from the spot that must have once been in the heart of the heart of the forest. A woman who died a long time ago, they said, too long for them to be able to say how she died, everything but the bones had decomposed and foxes had disturbed the body. (*HC*, 374)

Although the woman in the extract is found with the gypsy ring which Gordon gave to Eliza one Christmas, Isobel refuses to believe that the corpse in the wood is in any way related to her mother, 'for I never thought of her as dead …' (*HC*, 375)

Whereas Atkinson therefore links Eliza with arborescent imagery and thereby with the irrationality and potential for magic of the forest in *HC*, the reality of her murder in the wood deconstructs her assumed relationship with mysterious and magical forces.

To encapsulate, while Atkinson employs the traditional dichotomy between the irrationality associated with the forest and the rationality linked with culture and civilization, she also subverts this binary opposition by demystifiying the forest.

6. HISTORY AS FICTION – FICTION AS HISTORY?

As mentioned above, according to one of postmodernism's most influential thinkers, Jean – Francois Lyotard, the postmodern can be characterized by its incredulity towards totalising explanations and representations.

Postmodernism, as a result, also challenges the concept of history, which critics regard as another metanarrative, as it greatly interlocks with aspects of culture and nationality. Together with a rethinking from within the discipline, postmodernism has problematized the historical approach to the past, questioning its methods, frames and assumptions.[51] Whereas the historian in former times was believed to possess unmediated access to the past, in a post – representational era the writing of history is merely a subjective reconstruction of the past based on ideology. Postmodernism views historiography, therefore, not as an objective representation of the past, but as subjective construction of a version of it based on discursive and ideological parameters. Postmodernism challenges concepts of history and historiography in a number of ways.

Firstly, postmodernist critics stress the similarities between historiography and fiction, thus deconstructing borderlines between fictitious and academic discourses. Since both forms of representation depend on linguistic structures, they are also subject to the general unreliability of language postulated by poststructuralists. According to the influential thinker Hayden White, historiography, for instance, resembles fiction in its use of 'tropical' discourse. In his opinion historiography employs essentially fictitious devices and approaches by utilizing poetic language based on metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony[52]. Moreover, the historian presents history in a form which follows tragic, comic, satiric or romantic conventions. [53]

> The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variations of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. For example, no historical event is *intrinsically tragic*; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view of from within the context of a structured set of events … Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value – neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic,

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[51] Compare Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 89 – 105.
[52] Compare White, *Metahistory*, 50 – 7.
[53] See Ibid, 19 – 25.

comic, romantic, or ironic … depends upon the historian's decision to *con*figure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure of mythos rather than another. (White, *Tropics,* 84)

As a result, the superiority of the "real" historic discourse over the fictitious discourse is subverted. For White, the distinction between the two depends not on 'choosing between objectivity and distortion, but rather between different strategies of constituting 'reality' …' (White, *Tropics*, 22)

Apart from applying narrative structures similar to a novelist, the historian also utilizes forms of argumentation which are always inextricably bound up with a certain ideology. Historiography can, therefore, no longer claim to constitute a transparent record of the past, but is highlighted as a cultural and idiosyncratic construct by postmodernist critics.

Postmodernist fiction often alludes to the weakening of boundaries between fiction and history by the inclusion of historical figures into novels. As McHale notes, historical realist novels also include historical characters. However, the inclusion of historical characters in realist fiction is governed by subtle rules. Firstly, these historical 'realemes' are not allowed to contradict official historical records. As a result,

freedom to improvise actions and properties of historical figures is limited to the 'dark areas' of history, that is, to those aspects about which the 'official' record has nothing to report. (McHale, 87)

Secondly, historical novelists generally try to capture the historical culture at the specific time they describe, including the ideology, attitudes and tastes of the period. Besides, the logical and physical reference points of the realemes have to be in concordance with those of the real world. In other words, they have to describe events that are principally possible.

In contrast to this, postmodernist writers who incorporate historical figures in their fictions do not try to pretend that there is no difference between their worlds and history, but intentionally foreground this clash. Postmodernist authors often contradict official records of history, thus creating what McHale terms 'apocryphal history'. (McHale, 90) Furthermore, postmodernist authors often include striking anachronism in their worlds or they integrate fantastic events into their portrayals of history, thus contradicting the last rule of the realistic historical novelist.

According to McHale, there are two ways in which apocryphal history can challenge official history. Firstly, it can supplement the official record by "additional" information and accounts. Secondly, it can entirely contract and thus violate and displace the record of the past. If postmodernist fiction is restricting its historical elucidations to the dark areas of the past and thus following realist historical conventions, it often does so with an essentially parodying effect. [54]

Secondly, postmodernism also emphasises that writing history always includes a choice. The historian has to make a selection about which events to include and which to neglect in his account. Since the complexity of the past denies the possibility of representing it exhaustively, there is not one single view on the past, but a plethora of different interpretations. According to Hayden White, we have to 'recognize that there is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but that there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation.' (Hayden, *Tropics*, 47)

What is more, postmodernism criticizes the fact that historiography is traditionally only interested in exclusionary narratives that centre on the privileged groups of the past. Postmodernism, as a result, tries to evade the dominant discourse in historiography and is interested in the marginalized and peripheral areas of the past. Following postmodernism's incredulity towards "centre" critics therefore often occupy themselves with groups that have been marginalized in historical accounts. In postcolonial discourse critics such as Spivak, for instance, attempt a representation of those not part of the colonial elite. [55]

Following postmodernism's subversion of centre, postmodernist fiction frequently endeavours to represent the histories of people absent in the official records of the past. Postmodernist fiction favours microhistories over metanarratives and depicts regional history. Moreover, postmodernist authors often focus on the incommensurability of past experiences. History in the postmodernist novel is therefore frequently a plural and contradictory concept which challenges canonized accounts of history.

Last but not least, postmodernist critics also problematize the sources of history. Because there is no direct way of approaching past experience, the historian has to deduct their evidence from sources, which mostly take the shape of

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[54] Compare McHale, 84 – 96.
[55] Compare McLeod, 191 – 5.

textualized documents. Since textual documents are, like all texts, subject to the unreliability of language, the construction of history is further complicated.

> If the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces … then the writing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of complex intertextual cross – referencing that operates within (and does not deny) its unavoidably discursive context. (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 81)

Expanding this scepticism towards the sources of history, postmodernism is also suspicious about institution which store these documents of the past, including archives and museums. Alongside challenging the metanarratives of history, postmodernism questions and subverts the idea of institutions that *create* legitimising discourses about the past.

Consequently, postmodernist fiction challenges the representation of historical sources by deconstructing their interpretation and also subverts the idea of institutions such as museums.

The preoccupation with the concept of history is a characteristically postmodernist concern. While historiography used to be understood as a means of providing objective records of the past, postmodernists have deconstructed it as another grand narrative. Whereas some critics see postmodernism's employment with and problematization of the past as nostalgic and complicit with what they term the "death of history", others have seen it as a productive interrogation of the concept of history. For Hutcheon, for instance, challenging the past does not necessarily mean to deny it. According to her, parodying the past 'is both to enshrine the past and to question it.' (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 126) Moreover, for Hutcheon postmodernism's occupation with the concept of history provides the possibility of challenging representations per se.

> In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand and present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation. What this means is that postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition: the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody … (Hutcheon, *Politics*, 58)

In her novels *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Human Croquet* Atkinson similarly challenges the status of history as a transparent representation of the past and, as a result, subverts traditional concepts of history. In *BS*, she chronicles a fragmented history of England from the 19th century onward through the eyes of Ruby's matrilineal forbearers. Although Atkinson has chosen a fictional setting for

HC, references to English history also abound in her second novel. By highlighting the similarities between fact and fiction and by problematizing the dominant discourses of historiography as well the sources of history, Atkinson challenges traditional representations of the past in a manner characteristic of postmodernist fiction.

6.1 Fact or Fiction?

In Atkinson's novels, fiction and history interpenetrate with fluid ease. Atkinson's work mirrors the postmodernist concern with the deconstruction of the boundaries between literature and historiography by suggesting their mutual constructions.

In her first novel *BS*, Atkinson evokes the problematic nature of the representation of the past through the so-called footnotes. These recount a series of tales from the lives of Ruby's ancestors. As Parker notes, the form of representation Atkinson uses highlights the construction of history. The narrator who chronicles these incidents at first appears to be a third person omniscient one, but actually it is Ruby who relates the footnotes. Since Ruby, however, proves to be a rather unreliable narrator, Atkinson also calls the accuracy of the footnotes into question and thereby problematizes the idea of historical knowledge.[56] By using an essentially unreliable narrator mediating the past, Atkinson also stresses the connection between storytelling and history, fact and fiction.

Moreover, Ruby herself questions the official records of Yorkshire history with the following statement.

> In this street lived the first printers and the stained – glass craftsmen that filled the windows of the city with coloured light. The Ninth Legion Hispana that conquered the north marched up and down our street, the *via praetoria* of their great fort, before they disappeared into thin air. Guy Fawkes was born here, Dick Turpin was hung a few streets away and Robinson Crusoe, that other great hero, is also a native son of the city. Who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction? (*BS*, 10)

In the extract above, Ruby blends both "historical" figures, such as Guy Fawkes and Dick Turpin and the fictional Robinson Crusoe into the history of York. She puts these figures on one level in the narrative, and thereby emphasises the similarities between the construction of history and fiction. As a result, Ruby raises the postmodernist question of how we are to differentiate between accounts of the past

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[56] See Parker, 44.

and other, fictitious accounts. Since both are fabricated through the medium of language, they share a similar unreliability.

At the end of the novel, Ruby likewise blurs the distinctions between fact and fiction. Since she is a poet, Ruby has decided to write a cycle of poems on the family tree.

> There will be room for everyone – Ada and Albert, Alice and Rachel, Tina Donner and Tessa Blake, even the contingent lives of Monsieur Jean – Paul Armand and Ena Tetley, Minnie Havis and Mrs Sievewright, for they all have a place amongst our branches and who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction? (*BS*, 382)

Furthermore, Atkinson also emphasises the affinities between history and fiction in *HC*. Like Ruby in *BS*, Isobel is – contrary to her declaration - also a highly unreliable narrator. While she relates some of the chapters entitled "PAST" in *HC*, the representation of the history is further complicated by the fact that not all passages are related by Isobel herself. Most of the other accounts are told by a nearly omniscient narrator, but the passage "The Original Sin" is clearly not part of Isobel's narration.[57] Besides, Isobel's historical accounts are qualified by her subsequent revelation that she has become a writer of historical romances, which questions the veracity of the tales she has narrated in previous chapters.

In the first chapter of *HC*, Isobel gives a short satiric historical overview from the creation of the world to the history of the Fairfaxes of the present day. She also narrates the story of Mary. Mary is the wife of the Elizabethan explorer, adventurer and soldier Francis Fairfax, who has his manor house built in the original forest of Lythe. The similarities between fact and fiction in this chapter are alluded to because Isobel is vague and nebulous in her narration of Mary's story. The passage mostly rests on accounts that depend on hearsay, many sentences open with the words "some say".[58] In a parody on Jane Eyre[59] Isobel relates that

> [s]ome also said that he had a beautiful child wife, herself already with child, locked away in the attics of Fairfax Manor. Others said the woman in

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[57] For a discussion of aspects of narration see below.

[58] See *HC*, 13 – 7.

[59] As Julie Sanders notes, the name Fairfax is an important fictional and historical intertextual feature in *HC*. Apart from being historical reality – the Fairfaxes were a prominent family, a member of which Andrew Marvell has dedicated a poem to - the designation also mirrors *Jane Eyre*, in which the male protagonist is called Fairfax. (Compare Sanders, 83) Another parallel between *Jane Eyre* and *HC* is evidently that both protagonists have a "mad wife in the attic", but whereas one is purely fictional, the other one is fictional reality. While Fairfax' mad wife in the attic is never able to recount her situation from her point of view, Atkinson allows Lady Mary her own interpretation of events at the end of the novel. She thereby both parodies and subverts Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre.*

> the attics was not his child wife but his mad wife. There was even a rumour that his attics were full of dead wives, all of them hanging from butcher's hooks. (*HC*, 14)

As can be seen from the above extract, Atkinson here blends elements of fiction and fairy tale – allusions to "Bluebeard" and *Jane Eyre* - with what she presents as "historical accounts" of the Fairfax family. That the family history mostly rests on legends and tales and is strongly influenced by fiction and fairy tale strengthens the subversion of the historical narrative per se. Furthermore, Atkinson also underlines the similar constructions of historiography and other narrative forms.

Moreover, Atkinson also accentuates the parallelisms of history and fiction by demonstrating that historical accounts are not necessarily true. When Isobel's ancestor Sir Francis Fairfax travels to the New World in *HC*, he brings back accounts influenced by the ideology of his time.

> This Francis was a soldier and an adventurer. He had even made the great grey ocean crossing and seen the newfoundlands and virgin territories with their three – headed monsters and feathered savages. (*HC*, 14)

This extract points to the ideological construction of the past, which serves specific political purposes. By creating the fiction of monsters in the New World, colonial discourses dehumanise and depersonalise the native inhabitants of America and thus relieve the colonizers from the responsibility of treating them as human beings.

Furthermore, the passage also emphasises how language can be used to manipulate and how it can be misused by ideology. The phrase 'newfoundlands', for example, points to the colonizers' belief that the American land is not possessed by its native inhabitants, but has been "found", and can therefore be annexed without paying attention to property rights.

What is more, Atkinson also demonstrates how the representation of history can serve the ideological function of constituting a national sense of the past. Ruby's Ye Olde England calendar, for instance, portrays an essentially anglocentric view on Britain's past[60]:

> This ye olde England is not a country we're well acquainted with in our family – page after page, month after month, of thatched cottages, distant spires, haywains and milkmaids. It is also a fund of useful titbits of information – how else would I know when 'Dominion Day' was? Or the anniversary of the Battle of Hastings? (*BS*, 223)

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[60] Atkinson deconstructs this idea of an anglocentric past by frequently highlighting the hybridity of the concept of "Englishness". In *BS*, there are continuous references to Roman, Saxon, and Viking history, which pervades the novel in the form of the house ghosts living Above the Shop.

By showing how historical accounts can be influenced by personal and ideological interests, Atkinson highlights the fact that history does not provide a transparent and objective record of the past.

6.1.1 Meeting the Bard

As mentioned above, postmodernist authors frequently include historical figures in their novels and thus violate the norms of traditional realist historical fiction. As a result, the interconnectedness between fiction and historiography is emphasised through an ontological disturbance.

For example, Atkinson employs this technique of parodying in *HC,* when we hear that Queen Elizabeth I visits Sir Francis Fairfax's manor house in the forest of Lythe during an outbreak of the plague. Furthermore, legends and rumours relate that Fairfax might have been Queen Elizabeth's clandestine lover and that the queen has borne him an illegitimate child. In the following extract, Isobel tries to untangle the interrelated threads of fact and fiction.

> It is fact, not rumour, that the Queen stayed at Fairfax Manor in the course of escaping an outbreak of plague in London, sometime in the summer of 1582, and was observed admiring the butter – yellow quince and flourishing medlar trees and dining on the results of a splendid early morning deer hunt. (*HC*, 14)

However, Atkinson is clearly parodying the conventions of historical realist fiction and historiography. While she keeps to the norms of historical fiction in that she is inscribing "dark" areas of history, a fusion of legend and history again points to their similar emplotments. The Fairfax Manor described in HC *is* of course fictional. By grafting a historical person, Queen Elizabeth I, into her narrative, Atkinson therefore stresses the affinities between literature and historiography.

What is more, Atkinson also transports William Shakespeare into her fictional universe in *HC*. He is employed as the private tutor of Sir Francis Fairfax' ward, Lady Margaret. In again adhering to the norms of historical realist fiction, Atkinson thus provides an explanation for Shakespeare's "Lost Years", but at the same time parodies these conventions.

While Isobel in the 20th century thinks Shakespeare 'beyond all possible measure' (*HC*, 65) and is fascinated by his plays, her ancestress, the Elizabethan Mary Fairfax, views the Bard alongside different criteria. For her, the talkative

Shakespeare 'gabbled like a goose' (*HC*, 361) and is furthermore 'something of a weasel'. (*HC*, 366) When his student Margaret is impregnated by Sir Francis Fairfax, Atkinson's Shakespeare pities her situation, but nevertheless keeps on flattering his paedophilic and abusive employer. By thus differentiating between the historical person Shakespeare, who is depicted as an entirely unsympathetic figure, and his works, Atkinson deconstructs popular depictions of the historical Shakespeare, who 'has been as subject to romanticised rewritings as his all – pervasive texts'. (Sanders, 75) Through depicting Shakespeare as an opportunistic and obnoxious figure, Atkinson also demystifies Shakespeare to a certain extent as a vital part of the canon of anglocentric literary history. As a result, she also questions the reliability of popular receptions in history and literary history.

In thus subverting a key figure of the British literary canon, Atkinson also deconstructs a part of essentially English history and demonstrates how the reception of Shakespeare's work might have intermingled with lacking historical descriptions of his character, thus producing a portrayal that is more fictional than historical.

We encounter Shakespeare a second time in *HC* when Isobel is watching the Lythe Players' production of the *Dream* from her window. Utilizing magic realism, Atkinson lets him suddenly materialize out of thin air on Isobel's bed. Shakespeare's physical appearance in this scene again strongly contradicts the images transmitted of him in historical discourse, as he is 'slightly greasy' (*HC*, 356) and portrayed as having dirty fingernails. When Isobel wants him to verify her reading of his plays, ('It *is* all about death, isn't it?')(*HC*, 356), Shakespeare only shrugs and seduces Isobel on her bed. As a result, Atkinson again demystifies Shakespeare the man and challenges historical representations of Shakespeare as an unattainable genius.

To sum up, Atkinson emphasises the similar constructions of historiography and fiction. She problematizes the nature of the historical record by merging fact and fiction in both her novels *HC* and *BS*. What is more, Atkinson further deconstructs the boundaries between historical and fictional discourses by inserting historical personages into *HC*. As McHale notes, '[t]here is an ontological scandal when a real – world figure is inserted in a fictional situation, where he interacts with purely fictional characters … ' (McHale, 85)

As a result, since she blends history with fiction in her work, Atkinson clearly refers to the current postmodernist debate about the parallelisms of historiography and fiction.

6.2 Contesting the Dominant

As mentioned above, postmodernist fiction is frequently concerned with the incommensurability of "histories", thus highlighting the plural and contradictory nature of past experiences.

Atkinson deals with this aspect in her depiction of several characters' experiences during World War I in *BS*. While Nell, Ruby's grandmother, and her sister Lillian experience the war from the home perspective, their brother Albert and his friends Jack and Frank directly face the war in the trenches. The men's experience on the front clearly diverges from that of those at home, where the idea of the war is strongly influenced by British war propaganda. Not only are these experiences incompatible with each other, but the men also find it difficult to "correct" the women's view on the war.

When Nell and Lillian, for instance, receive letters from the front, Albert never 'wrote much about the war itself and battles and skirmishes seemed to pass with little apparent involvement from any of them.' (*BS*, 55) Furthermore, when Frank comes home on leave, he feels that his war experiences are impossible to relate at home:

> … Frank found himself unexpectedly tongue – tied. He had thought there were a lot of things about the war he wanted to tell them but was surprised to discover that the neat triangles of bread and jam and the prettiness of the little blue forget – me – nots somehow precluded him from talking about trench foot and rats, let alone the many different ways of dying he had witnessed. The smell of death clearly had no place in the parlour of Lowther Street. (*BS*, 57)

Besides, when Nell's fiancée Jack comes home on leave for a week, Nell is annoyed with him because she cannot understand that his war experiences depress him and reproaches him for the fact that he 'just sat at the table, sullen and morose, so that Nell nearly lost her temper with him for being so inconsiderate towards her.' (*BS*, 68)

As a result, Atkinson stresses that the past is too complex and heterogeneous to represent it adequately, so that accounts of past experiences can

only be fragmentary and multifarious. Because of the problematic nature of the historical narrative, there can be no overall model of representation, but just histories in the plural, which overlap, but do not correlate with each other.

Linked up with the incommensurability of past experiences is postmodernism's interest in the areas normally neglected by mainstream historiography. In *BS*, the conventions of the inclusion and omission of past events as practised by historiography are ridiculed through Ruby's history teacher Janet Sheriff,

> … who fell in love at the beginning of our A – Level History course and forgot to teach us large chunks of the European syllabus. Only when we were sitting our exam did we discover that there had been terrible battles and bloody revolutions of which we knew nothing. (*BS*, 355)

In accordance with postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives, Atkinson therefore presents us with accounts that lie beyond the official records of the past. Whereas the traditional historical approach is centred on national politics, Atkinson narrates the story of Ruby and Isobel's ordinary forbears, thus presenting a history from the margins. Atkinson follows postmodernism's demand for local microhistories instead of metanarratives.

Events that normally epitomize traditional historical importance frequently only function as a setting for the farcical skirmishes, the smaller disasters and joys of the Lennox family life in *BS*. Atkinson demonstrates that world history can sometimes be overshadowed by scrimmages between relatives. Bunty and George, for example, invite their relatives on the day of Elizabeth II' s coronation, because they are the first to possess a television set. However, the historical occasion is continually interrupted by a baking contest between the Lennox women and discussions about the British monarchs' correct succession line. In a parody of political history, moreover, the members of the Lennox family form fractions and parties, each supporting a different theory about George IV's predecessors. Furthermore, when the Lennox family finally collects to watch the climax of the coronation, Ruby's sister Gillian has other things on her mind.

> Gillian bounces back into the room at this moment, desperate to show everyone her pirouettes, and flashes in front of the Ferguson just as the crown is being perched on the queen's head so that a resounding shout goes up of, 'God Save the Queen!' and 'Get out of the bloody way, Gillian!' (*BS*, 85)

Furthermore, another hallmark of history in the 1960s is lost on the members of the Lennox family, since they are too occupied with a family quarrel on the day of Kennedy's assassination. Ruby, who is the only one to at least hear the news of his death, only keeps listening to take her mind off the family situation.

> When I hear the news that Kennedy had been shot, I am the only person remaining seated at the dining – room table, listening to the news on the radio to distract myself from the fact that (in order of disappearance) Patricia, Bunty and then George have all abruptly left the table in the course of an argument … (*BS*, 240)

Another example of a family gathering overshadowing an event which is conceived as defining of the era is the wedding of Bunty's brother Ted in *BS*. When forced to name a date by his long – term girlfriend, Ted has fixed his marriage 'as far in the future as he could' (*BS*, 285), which happens to be 30th July 1966. Of course, this is unfortunately also the venerable day when England played a Word Cup Final against Germany (and won the title for the only time in their history.) Instead of attending to his new bride on the reception party, Ted and all the other men are therefore transfixed in front of a TV set in a separate room. After the furious Sandra and her mother have herded the men back to the buffet, a farcical conflict ensues, in which Ted falls, slapstick – like, into the wedding cake.

Moreover, Ruby frequently stresses the superior importance of her personal family history over canonized official history by borrowing designations from historical terminology. When the family shop and home burn down in a fire caused by Bunty leaving the iron on the ironing board, Ruby, for instance, alludes to the Great Fire of London in the 17th century by calling the incident the 'Great (and truly terrible) Pet Shop Fire'. (*BS*, 172) Besides, she depicts her parents' continual strives and quarrels as the 'Cold War (more of an Ice Age really)'. (*BS*, 175) Furthermore, Ruby refers to the time after sister Gillian's death as the 'After Gillian era – 1960 AG'. (*BS*, 201)

To recapitulate, Atkinson emphasises the incommensurability of the past through her depiction of differing experiences of World War I and questions the validity of dominant historical discourses by portraying history outside the official historical records in *BS*.

6.3 Traces of the Past

As mentioned above, postmodernist fiction is often critical about the sources of history and questions their validity of recording the past.

In *BS*, Ruby frequently laments that the past is vanishing without leaving traces. Her imagination leads her back to the past ages of York. Indeed, York is a city vibrant with history.

> Everyone has left something here – the unnamed tribes, the Celts, the Romans, the Vikings, the Saxons, the Normans and all those who came after, they have all left their lost property – the buttons and fans, the rings and torques, the *bullae* and *fibulae*. The riverbank winks momentarily with a thousand, zillion, millions pins … The past is a cupboard full of light and all you have to do is find the key that opens the door. (*BS*, 379)

While Ruby, in this extract, suggests that the past can be made accessible through its sources, *BS* at the same time problematizes this idea.

Edward VIII's coronation jug, which is produced during the Lennox family meeting on the day of Elizabeth II's coronation, demonstrates how unreliable historical sources can prove to be.

> Coronation memorabilia begins to pour out of every nook and cranny now – my father's Edward VIII Coronation jug, an item commemorating an event that never took place thus giving it a curious philosophical value … (*BS*, 82)

Furthermore, Atkinson deconstructs historical source material by demonstrating how sources can be manipulated through political and ideological interests. In *BS*, Atkinson highlights how media such as films can be used to create a certain concept of history.

When Jack comes home on leave from World War I, he and Nell go to the cinema to watch a documentary film about the Battle of the Somme. However, the soldier's experiences differ starkly from the transmitted cinematic visions of smiling soldiers and a peaceful atmosphere.

> All the Tommies were smiling and laughing as if the war was a great joke. … Of course, they were smiling for the camera, you could almost hear the cameraman saying, 'Give us a smile, lads!' as the columns trudged past on their way to the Front. They all turned and waved and smiled as if the Somme was no more than a day's excursion. The film showed a lot of preparation – the troops on the move, the barrages of guns. You saw the guns firing and in the distance you could see little puffs of smoke like clouds. Because there was no sound, the Somme seemed like a very peaceful battle. … Then there were a lot of shots of German prisoners being offered cigarettes by British Tommies, and of the walking wounded of both sides

limping through trenches, but there wasn't very much of the actual battle in between … on the whole the battle of the Somme didn't seem to have many dead and you were left wondering where they were. (*BS*, 68 – 9)

The extract above shows how sources of historiography can be manipulated and thus distort reality. Of course, the film is a superb example of British wartime propaganda and a representation of war constructed for those on the home front.

6.3.1 Deceptive Photographs

Moreover, Atkinson also questions the validity of photographic representation as a source for historiography. In Atkinson's fiction photographs often prove very unreliable sources for reconstructing the past. Connected to the heavy subtext of memory in *BS*, photographs turn out to be as fickle as memory itself.

A series of photographs which Ruby's great - grandmother Alice has taken by Monsieur Armand before she elopes with him are passed on from generation to generation of the family and therefore constitute a linking element in the novel. In the photograph made of Alice, she 'gazes out inscrutably across time' (*BS*, 28), thus mirroring how photographs are part of the past and the present at the same time. However, the clever photographic arrangement hides the fact that Alice is eight – months pregnant with her youngest daughter Nell. Only when Ruby removes the frame and scrutinizes the back of the photograph she finds a date, which reveals Alice's condition at that time.

Similarly, the double set of photos which Bunty keeps of Ruby reveals its hidden message only when Ruby finds out about the death of her twin sister Pearl. Since Ruby represses the memory of her sister's death, she is convinced for a large part of the novel that Bunty keeps two identical photographs of her. When she finally learns about Pearl's drowning, Ruby recognizes that one pair of the set actually shows her dead twin sister.

> I opened the silver locket and there again were the two pictures of me as a baby that I had found once before in Bunty's bedside table and it took me a long time, staring hard at the twin images in the diptych, to realize that one of them wasn't me at all, but my sister. (*BS*, 328)

Moreover, photographic representations in *BS* frequently contrast with personal memory. For instance, when Nell looks at the photograph of her former fiancée

Percy, who died of a burst appendix, she finds her memory of Percy strangely divergent from the photograph.

> Nell found it strange looking at Percy in the photograph because in real life he had seemed so distinctive and different from everybody else, but here he had the same vague, slightly out – of – focus features as the rest of the team. (*BS*, 47)

In *HC*, Charles and Isobel are dejected because there are seemingly no traces left of their mother's existence, since the Widow and Vinny tell them that there are no photographs of Eliza.

> It's as if Eliza never lived, there are no remnants of her life – no photographs, no letters, no keepsakes – the things that anchor people in reality are all missing. Memories of her are like the shadows of a dream, tantalizing and out of reach. (*HC*, 28)

Comparing their memory of Eliza with a photograph, Isobel relates that 'the picture … of her in their heads was beginning to fade a little more each day, like a photograph undeveloping …' (*HC*, 180) Just like Nell and Lillian, who find the lost photographs of their mother Alice and their family only after Rachel's death, Isobel also discovers hidden photographs when her aunt Vinny dies.

> When I was clearing out after Vinny had gone I found a whole box of photographs – photographs not just of the Widow and her family and her ancestors, but of Charles and Gordon and me – and Eliza, a treasure trove of Eliza. An Eliza forever young, forever beautiful, squinting against the sun or laughing in the back garden. I wept for days over my newly found mother. Although in some ways the photographs made her even more unreachable and mysterious … (*HC*, 375)

However, as Isobel states, the photographs little contribute to elucidating the past, but rather render Eliza even more mysterious in Isobel's imagination.

Atkinson therefore strongly questions the idea that historical sources can construct an objective record of the past, because they can be manipulated by political and personal interest. What is more, Atkinson also undermines photographic representation by demonstrating that photographs can prove to be unreliable sources which may strongly contrast with memory.

6.4 Rewriting the Past

Atkinson further complicates the concept of the past in her fiction by continuously rewriting past events and thus portraying the past as a slippery, not necessarily stable concept.

In *HC,* for instance, the past is continually adjusted, changed, modified and corrected. Events already narrated are revised at other points in the novel. After Eliza's murder in the woods, Charles and Isobel are told at first that their mother is in hospital. Lateron, however, Eliza is reported to have eloped with her lover by the Widow and Vinny. Whereas many versions of her disappearance are given, Eliza's corpse is in reality decomposing in the forest.

Moreover, when Gordon leaves home because he thinks he has killed his wife, stories of his disappearance are projected and then again replaced by other narratives, which leaves Charles and Isobel, but also the reader unsure as to what is true or not. At first, the children are informed that their father had to go on a business trip, but soon after the Widow tells the children that Gordon has gone to Heaven. When Isobel and Charles want the Widow to verify his death, she only replies that their father is 'not dead exactly' (*HC*, 178), which leaves Charles and Isobel even more confused as to his whereabouts. Vinny finally acquaints them with the fact that 'Gordon had died of a bronchial infection, in a London fog.' (*HC*, 179) Utterly rewriting Gordon's death, however, their father returns alive and well after seven years of absence. In a pun on *Hamlet*, Gordon is 'perhaps the first known traveller to return from the undiscovered country.' (*HC*, 207) As a result, Gordon's story is revised once more into a sudden attack of amnesia and a resulting stay in New Zealand.

Furthermore, the reader is at first tempted to believe that Gordon has murdered his wife Eliza, because he makes the following revelation to Isobel.

> … at last he's going to tell me about Eliza. About how beautiful she was, how much he loved her, how happy they were, what a terrible mistake it was when she walked off, how she always meant to come back – Instead I can feel his gaze through the gloom as he says in a flat voice, 'I killed your mother.' (*HC*, 236)

Because the narrative breaks off at this point and is only continued a chapter later, the reader assumes that Gordon has killed his wife. When the chapter is resumed after an interlude in the past, however, Gordon rectifies that he meant that he has

killed Eliza's spirit. The fact that Gordon is not Eliza's murderer is further supported by subsequent revelations in the novel, which suggest that Mr Baxter has killed Eliza out of jealousy.

To sum up, Atkinson mirrors postmodernism's incredulity towards clearly defined categories by portraying the past as a fluid concept in her fiction. What is more, the flexible description of the past also serves to induce a sense of ontological insecurity. As Mc Hale notes, by narrating and then unnarrating events, postmodernist novels are '… laying bare the processes by which readers, in collaboration with texts, construct fictional objects and worlds.' (McHale, 100)

6.5 Simulating History?

Jean Baudrillard, another influential postmodernist thinker, who has always rejected the label postmodernist, and yet has become to be known as the "high priest" of postmodernism, has written his most renowned work on the processes of simulation. Basing his theories on seminology, Baudrillard argues that reality has been replaced by signs which construct the real as simulations. Reality has therefore been supplanted by something more than real, which Baudrillard calls hyperreality.

According to Baudrillard, the increasing circulation of signs resulted in their dominance and finally in their replacement of the reality they originally referred to. In the three consecutive stages of counterfeit, production and finally simulation, the sign becomes hyperreal. In his influential work on Disneyland Baudrillard states that the amusement park has become a mirror to the real America, and an alibi for the American population.[61]

In Atkinson's *BS*, the York of the novel is equally transformed into such a Disneyland construct, a reduplicated city of Englishness, where history as a distorted narrative is the main attraction. Similar to Barnes' *England England*, York at the end of the novel becomes a simulation cleverly constructed for tourists, and the museum of the title of the novel.

When Ruby comes back to England after staying in Scotland for a long time, she especially notices the changes that have affected the York of her childhood.

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[61] Compare Baudrillard, 1 – 7 and 12 – 14.

> It seems like a fake city, a progression of flats and sets and white cardboard battlements and medieval half – timbered house kits that have been cut and glued together. The streets are full of strangers – up – market buskers, school parties and coach parties and endless varieties of foreigner … it's like one big, incredibly expensive souvenir shop. (*BS*, 377 - 8)

To encapsulate Atkinson's occupation with the concept of history, she undermines history as an objective record of the past in her fiction. In a truly postmodernist fashion, Atkinson interweaves fact and fiction in her novels *HC* and *BS* and, as a result, points to the similar constructions of historiography and literature. This is especially achieved by grafting historical personages into her novels. What is more, Atkinson also presents past experiences as incommensurable, and therefore contests the traditional discourses of the past by favouring microhistories over metanarratives. Besides, Atkinson challenges the validity of historical sources by exposing their unreliability and receptiveness for personal and ideological manipulation. Last but not least, history is portrayed as a fluid and slippery concept in Atkinson's fiction, and her depiction of York in *BS* mirrors the postmodernist concern with the processes of simulation.

7. POSTMODERNIST STORYTELLING

7.1 Metafiction

As mentioned above, metafiction is an important aspect of postmodernist fiction. Since the concept of language as a transparent mirror of extralinguistic reality has been subverted, postmodernist fiction rejects mimesis and aims to expose the processes at work during linguistic construction.

A possibility to stress the creation of fiction and the problematic connection between language and reality is constituted by metafictional devices. As Waugh demonstrates, metafictional practises can take various shapes, ranging from intertextual allusions to other literary works or entirely different fields of discourse to play with typographic devices. That metafictional devices, however, draw attention to the fabrication of fiction, does not mean that they negate reality per se.

> Metafiction functions through the problematization rather than the destruction of the concept of 'reality'. It depends on the regular construction and subversion of rules and systems. Such novels usually set up an internally consistent 'play' world which ensures the reader's absorption, and then lays bare its rules in order to investigate the relation of 'fiction' to 'reality'… (Waugh, 40 – 1)

Self – reflexivity is, of course, not a new device in literary history. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Fielding's *Tom Jones* show indications of this phenomenon. While metafiction is a postmodernist form, it also has an important precedent in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which Waugh calls 'the prototype for the contemporary metafictional novel'. (Waugh, 70) Besides, *TS* is an important intertext in Atkinson's work, and an especially significant influence in *BS*. In contrast to its historical antecedents, the postmodernist form of metafiction is, however, more pronounced and employed more frequently than before. Moreover, it often results in the typically postmodernist ontological insecurity. While Waugh states that metafictional devices are central to the novel genre as such, she therefore also sees metafiction 'clearly emerging as the dominant characteristic of the contemporary novel *as a whole*.' (Waugh, 68)

Whereas some critics regard metafictional techniques as a symptom of the decadent exhaustion of a dying genre, Waugh understands metafiction as an important invigorating input, which serves to rejuvenate the genre of the novel.[62]

In Atkinson's novels, metafiction functions both over the exploitation of footnotes and the commentary of characters on the construction of the fiction they are part of as well as over stylistic strategies, including the utilization of different typefaces and page layout.

An interesting metafictional aspect of *BS* is, for instance, the use of footnotes, which are inserted into the main narrative of Ruby's life and serve to relate incidences in her ancestors' lives or trace the history of objects connected to the family history. By inserting an essentially academic device into a work of fiction, Atkinson highlights and questions differences and similarities between two seemingly contrary forms of discourse, thus stressing postmodernism's challenge of the status of academic texts as objective forms of representation.

Atkinson is, however, also parodying the conventional usage of footnotes in academic texts. This is achieved by confusing the relationship between the footnotes and the main narrative. While the footnotes "explain" the origins of objects and gestures in Ruby's life, their importance exceeds this function. In the academic tradition, the footnote is used to give supplementary information or commentary. Atkinson's footnotes, however, flout this convention because they are sometimes longer than the main text. Moreover, the main narrative is enlightened by the episodes and scenes in the footnotes and would not be comprehensible without the additional information provided. By using footnotes in *BS*, Atkinson therefore uses a metafictional device which draws attention to the construction of the novel, but also deconstructs the usage of footnotes in academic discourse.

Another substantial metafictional device, which strongly unsettles and confuses ontological levels in Atkinson's fiction, is the direct commentary on the narrative by the characters in her novels. When Vinny announces once more that someone is at the door and Isobel raises the objection that there is no perceptive indication of this fact, Vinny responds in the following way.

> 'That doesn't mean there isn't somebody there,' she says. (Isn't this the way the Dog was introduced into the story? I must be having déjà vu, one more alarming little snag in the fabric of time, I suppose.) (*HC*, 151)

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[62] Compare Waugh, 63 – 67.

By using the word 'story', Isobel here self – consciously situates herself within Atkinson's fiction. Although Isobel is, of course, a fictional character in a novel, Isobel's realization of her fictional status is paradoxical. As a result, the reader is made aware of the processes of the reconstruction of the fictional world in the novel.

What is more, Isobel frequently criticises her author's fictional universe. When Isobel is continuously changing between the different layers of worlds in the novel, she, for instance, remarks that '[t]here should be some rule about time warps (no more than one per chapter, for instance)'. (*HC*, 229)

At another point in the novel, when Isobel is increasingly irritated by her disorientating experiences, she asks herself a plethora of questions.

> Have I actually succeeded in calling back yesterday? Have I stepped in the same river twice? Is the whole dreadful day going to happen again? Isn't it enough to have had the nightmare once without repeating it? How many rhetorical questions can I ask myself without getting bored? (*HC*, 275)

In the above extract, Isobel both questions her own behaviour as a fictional character and the construction of the fiction she is part of.

Other metafictional techniques in Atkinson's fiction are achieved through graphic means. When Isobel unexpectedly finds the anonymous baby on her doorstep, the reader is, for instance, presented with a page which is empty except the words 'A Baby!' (*HC*, 152) written in especially large font. Equally, when Esme's maid finds her pram empty, another page announces 'No Baby!' (*HC*, 321) in a similarly large size. The fact that both announcements are written in an especially large font, ironically mirrors the fictional characters' surprise and astonishment at the disappearance and sudden appearance of a baby – though not the same – and makes it satirically visible. However, this device also makes the limits of fiction apparent, because manipulation of white space cannot imitate or visualize the fictional characters' amazement. Atkinson therefore uses this metafictional means to disturb her fictional universe and thereby to highlight the construction of fiction in general.[63]

Borrowing a further Shandyan technique[64], Atkinson also uses different typefonts in her novels. In *HC*, for instance, the passage in which Mr Rice metamorphoses into an insect is printed in italics. Atkinson thus sets the passage off

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[63] Graphical metafictional devices are most pronounced in Atkinson's third novel, *Emotionally Weird*. When Effie closes her eyes in order not to see a dog run over, we are presented with half a black page. See *EW*, 69. This is strongly reminiscent of the utilization of entirely black pages in *TS*. Compare *TS*, 29 – 30.

[64] See, for instance, *TS*, 33 – 35.

and in a way separates it from the main narrative. Through this metafictional device, another ontological level of the passage is suggested and this can be read as an indication that Isobel is only imagining Mr Rice's transformation. Besides, this metafictional technique is even more pronounced and pushed to extremes in Atkinson's third novel, *Emotionally Weird*, in which the more or less valuable literary products of a students' creative writing class all acquire different type fonts and thus intersect with and completely confuse the main narrative.

Another example of Atkinson's graphic metafiction is a cross-section of a leaf drawn by the narrator Isobel during one of her biology lessons.[65] The drawing is an imitation of a real leaf and has thus an iconic function. Because the drawing is a real representation of a leaf, the ontological layers of fiction and reality are confounded. If Isobel can manipulate the material pages on which her fictional story is written, her position in the fiction in which she functions as a character is confused. Atkinson thus stresses the materiality of the book and therefore also disturbs the ontological boundaries between reality and fiction.

Moreover, Atkinson also breaks with a taboo of the novelistic genre by incorporating an illustration, which shows a game of Human Croquet, at the end of *HC*. While McHale notes that the use of illustrations and drawings was a common usage of nineteenth – century realist novels, modernism has cleared the novelistic text from illustrations.[66] Because illustrations are, furthermore, normally part of non-fiction books, Atkinson is again challenging distinctions between fictional and non-fictional discourse. Thus transgressing the conventions of the novel, Atkinson confounds the nature of the text as a fictional product, and therefore also calls the dichotomy between reality and fiction into question.

To recapitulate, the metafictional devices and strategies Atkinson employs provoke the foregrounding of the linguistic medium. According to McHale, metafiction thus creates an 'ontological flicker' (McHale, 148), which helps to highlight different layers of world and words in the fictional text. The metafictional devices prevent the reader from fully reconstructing the projected world. As a result, the process of reconstruction per se is subverted and questioned. The reader is reminded of the materiality of the book. Furthermore, the ontological boundaries between fact and fiction are challenged in a way characteristic of postmodernist fiction.

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[65] Compare *HC*, 138.
[66] See McHale, 187 – 9.

7.2 Narrating the Self

Atkinson's protagonists in *BS* and *HC*, Ruby Lennox and Isobel Fairfax, both display characteristics of postmodernist narrators, in that paradoxes in their narration highlight their status as fictional constructs.

As with metafictional devices, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*[67] is a pervasive intertext in Ruby's narration. While we hear that the author of *Tristram Shandy* is one of the Lennoxes' house ghosts and the '*scratch – scratch* of the Reverend Sterne's quill' (*BS*, 10) can sometimes be heard above the shop, Sterne's 18th century novel also forms part of Patricia's A – Level reading list.

> Patricia entertains us by reading aloud from *Tristram Shandy*. Bunty shifts uneasily in her front seat because all eighteenth – century prose sounds smutty to her and she has trouble believing it's on Patricia's A - Level reading list. Every so often she glances behind to check we're not sniggering at something dirty … (*BS*, 251)

Apart from these intertextual allusions, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is also a thematic influence in *BS*. Both novels, for instance, start the narration with the conception of the protagonists. [68] A paradoxical pre – natal narrator is a device which contests the conventions of realist fiction. As a result of this parody, the construction of fiction is stressed in a manner characteristic of postmodernism. Ruby, for instance, announces that

> I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall. The clock … counts me into the world. (*BS*, 9)

Similarly, a clock is also an important object in the equivalent chapter in *Tristram Shandy*, because the narrator's mother famously asks her husband whether he has winded up the clock and thus interrupts the reproductive act.[69] Unlike Sterne's satirical tone in this passage, however, Atkinson's narrator relates the details of her

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[67] As Parker suggests, Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* share a number of parallels. They are, for instance, both "picaresques, novels that relate a journey or quest and possess episodic plots that feature farcical events. Both texts are fictional autobiographies set in York … and digress from the main narrative to relate aspects of family history. Both feature fractured narratives that jump backwards and forwards in time. Tristram and Ruby are both first person narrators who claim an omniscience that is undermined by their subjective and selective point of view." (Parker, 24) In addition to that, however, Atkinson also undermines and deconsturcts Sterne's novel by providing an alternate view on the traditional Bildungsroman. See Parker, 28.
[68] See *TS*, 5 – 6.
[69] Cf. *TS*, 6.

own conception quite wryly and cynically. While Shandy's parents are both 'equally bound to it' (*TS*, 5), the scene between Bunty and George does not suggest mutual participation.

> I'm begun on the first stroke and finished on the last when my father rolls off my mother and is plunged into a dreamless sleep, thanks to the five pints of John Smith's Best Bitter he has drunk in the Punch Bowl with his friends, Walter and Bernard Belling. At the moment at which I moved from nothingness into being my mother was pretending to be asleep – as she often does at such moments. My father, however, is made of stern stuff and he didn't let that put him off. (*BS*, 9)

Ruby is a first person narrator who also possesses traits normally associated with a third person omniscient narrator. She is informed about past events of the family history and recounts what is happening to other characters, who are spatially distanced from her. During Ruby's birth, she, for instance, informs us that '[m]y absent father, in case you're wondering, is in the Dog and Hare in Doncaster … ' (*BS*, 40) What is more, Ruby frequently alludes to future events, such as her sister Gillian's death.

But Ruby's narration also displays aspects of considerable unreliability. Ruby flouts the boundaries of conventional narration. Although she is informed about large parts of the family history, she represses details and events related to her own life. That Ruby, for example, represses her twin sister's death, also calls the accuracy of other parts of her narration into question. What is more, Ruby frequently interrupts the narration. When she has been fighting with her sister over a toy, for example, she admits that the 'rest of the day is a bit of a blur - I suspect I have concussion.' (*BS*, 88)[70]

Moreover, there is a considerable discrepancy between the eloquent narration Ruby provides as a pre – natal narrator, and her actual linguistic competence. Already in Bunty's womb, Ruby uses rare, archaic, foreign or complex Latinate terms. She, for example, muses on her parents' shouting 'Shop!' when they enter the house and asks herself whether they are 'addressing the shop in the vocative case ("O Shop!") or naming it in the nominative?' (*BS*, 17) At a later point

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[70] See Parker, 30 – 4. Parker offers two more elements in Ruby's narration which suggest unreliability. This is, firstly, Ruby's 'hyperactive imagination" (Parker, 34) and, secondly, her misinterpretation of events. Cf. Parker, 34 – 9. However, the fusion between reality and fantasy in Atkinson's fiction need not be read as a characteristic of Ruby's unreliable narration, but as a postmodernist aspect which concerns the novel as a whole. Moreover, Ruby's "misinterpretation", as when she describes the loss of baby David as a "minor distraction" (*BS*, 260) is, in my opinion, a wilful misinterpretation of events, that is, a cynical comment on how the Baby David is not of interest to Ruby.

in the novel, however, Ruby informs us in the following way about her linguistic competence.

> I already have an astonishingly mature vocabulary list of ten words: Teddy is on my list of vocabulary, along with: Mummy, Daddy, Pash (Patricia), Gug (Gillian), Gamma (Nell), Bye - bye, Shop!, Dotty (an all – purpose word that covers anything else) … (*BS*, 86)

A similar gulf exists between some of Ruby's observations, which are seemingly uttered from an adult perspective, and other parts of her narration, in which Ruby's narration seems to confirm expectations as to her age. As Parker puts it, Ruby therefore "speaks as a child, but not like a child." (Parker, 31)

> I haven't discussed with anyone this new phase of the Cold War (more of an Ice Age really) between our parents but then Gillian and I rarely 'discuss' anything – she shouts, I ignore her. And Patricia, since entering adolescence, is incommunicado. I don't have the right words anyway - I won't have the right vocabulary for several years. (*BS*, 175 - 6)

To recapitulate, Atkinson creates a characteristically postmodernist narrator in Ruby. Her unreliable narration is full of paradoxes, which flout conventions of realistic fiction, and thereby point towards the construction of fiction in general.

Similarly, Isobel proves a highly paradoxical and unreliable narrator in *HC*. Like Ruby, she is a first person narrator who also possesses aspects normally associated with a third person narrator. At the beginning of the novel, Isobel parodies the opening lines of Melville's *Moby Dick* by announcing, 'Call me Isobel. (It's my name.) This is my history. Where shall I begin?' (*HC*, 11) That Isobel chooses the term 'history' over the more conventional story is important, since it again points towards the confusion of boundaries between history and fiction in *HC*. Consequently, Atkinson questions the conventions of both history and storytelling.

In the first chapter of the novel, Isobel describes the beginning of the world by intermingling religious belief with historical accounts and scientific theories derived from astrophysics, astronomy, geology and palaeontology. Atkinson thereby parodies teleological and strongly logocentric ideas of the beginning of the world such as in the Bible, as '[t]his is how it begins, with the word and the word is life.' (*HC*, 11) Furthermore, Isobel also includes highly scientific extracts on the origin of the universe, such as 'clouds of gas in space begin to condense into galaxies and stars, including our own Sun.' (*HC*, 11) Atkinson consequently satirizes the findings from various disciplines. As a result, an essentially

postmodernist amalgam of ideas from different discourses is provided. Isobel continues her narration by declaring that:

> I am Isobel Fairfax, I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and the end. The beginning is the word and the end is silence. And in between are all the stories. This is one of mine. (*HC*, 20)

Although Isobel thus announces her status as an omniscient narrator, she is, like Ruby, not reliable concerning events which are part of her own past. Isobel, for example, represses the memory concerning her mother's death. This also casts doubts on the accuracy of her representation of other events in the novel. While Lubitz notes that Isobel's narration *is* the alpha and omega of narration in the novel in the sense that it comprises all the stories in *HC*, she also draws attention to the fact that Isobel's story is strictly speaking not the last text in the book, as Atkinson includes game instructions for Human Croquet and an illustration at the end of *HC*.[71]

Moreover, Isobel's claim that she is an omniscient narrator is further undermined by the fact that she is randomly slipping in and out of alternate worlds and parallel universes, and completely loses her ontological reference points in the novel. Isobel is lost in worlds where the only security is the fact that nothing is secure any more and therefore frequently questions her own sanity. Of course, this also subverts her proclaimed status of an omniscient narrator.

Furthermore, Isobel's status as an omniscient narrator is subverted by the intrusion of a Scheherazade figure into her narration. When Isobel regains consciousness after her coma, she is of the belief that there is another patient in her room.

> I know this other patient from somewhere. I hear her voice, strange and hypnotic, weaving its way through the white cotton wool that they've wrapped my glass body in. Her voice fills the intervals between nurses and consultant's rounds, visitors and sleep. After days, possibly weeks, maybe years, I realize that she's telling me a story. She is my own Scheherazade, she knows everything, she must be the storyteller from the end of the world. But how does it begin? (*HC*, 309)

As a result, Isobel changes from narrator to narratee. The fact that she is told a story whose beginning she does not know further undermines her status as a proclaimed omniscient narrator. As McHale stresses, Scheherazade figures can be associated with infinite regress in storytelling.

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[71] Compare Lubitz, 113 – 118.

> … Scheherazade ['s] … existence, inside as well as outside the fictional world, depends upon her continuing to tell stories. As long as she produces narrative discourse, Scheherazade lives; at the moment her discourse falters or stops, she will die. Here, quite graphically, life has been equated with discourse, death with the end of discourse and silence. (McHale, 228)

Isobel ends her storytelling in *HC* with a renewed declaration of her narrative omniscience. After she has given alternate possibilities of the end of the world, Isobel imagines the last day on earth.

> On another day the final leaf falls and no more buds come. In the beginning was the word, but at the end there is only silence. I am the storyteller at the end of time. I know how it ends. It ends like this. (*HC*, 378)

By equating silence with the end of the narration, Isobel parodies and at the same time indicates the end of her own narration. As mentioned above, however, silence does not come with the end of Isobel's narration, and, as a result, her status of an omniscient narrator is deconstructed.

To sum up, Atkinson creates two characteristically postmodernist narrators in Ruby and Isobel. Both narrators are highly unreliable and their storytelling displays paradoxical qualities, which are not commensurable with their seemingly omniscient narration. By portraying her narrators in this way, Atkinson challenges the conventions of realistic fiction and raises the reader's awareness as to the creation of character formation and fiction in general.

8. ENTERING LAYERS OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

According to McHale, modernist fiction in particular raises epistemological questions, which centre on the interpretation of the world and the subject's place in it. Postmodernism is also concerned with epistemological implications, but especially asks ontological questions.[72]

> … postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like … 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? … (Mc Hale, 10)

As a result, postmodernist fiction often disrupts the reader's ontological security by destabilizing the fictional universe constructed earlier, thus complicating both levels in the narrative and outside of fiction.

In Atkinson's fiction ontological insecurity is provided through the portrayal of secondary otherworlds as well as through the depiction of time as a slippery concept and the representation of unstable identities and metamorphosing bodies. What is more, Atkinson also questions the reliability of language itself.

8.1 Spaces of Paradox

As expounded above, Atkinson frequently employs themes from fantasy literature. While she deconstructs conventional fairy tale themes transmitted over traditional retellings, she also employs motifs from fantasy. An especially important intertext in this connection is the work of Lewis Carroll.[73]

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[72] See McHale, 3.

[73] Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* are pervasive intertexts in Atkinson's fiction. The author has frequently stressed and invoked the importance of Lewis Carroll's work for her imagination and creativity since her childhood. As an only child, Atkinson found comfort in the insanity of the Alice - books, which she re-read at least once a week for five years. Consequently, Atkinson states reading Carroll 'probably formed my idea of what a good book should be'.
(Dickson, on: http://www.geocities.com/kateatkinson14/alice.htm) Moreover, she states that all her three novels are based on the Alice series in 'one way or another'.
(Bunce, on: http://www.geocities.com/kateatkinson14/weird_int.htm), so that they become an important influence in her writing.

As McHale notes, 'postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic … and it draws upon the fantastic for motifs and *topoi* …' (McHale, 74) In postmodernist fiction, fantastical influences are therefore frequently merged with the postmodernist scepticism towards "reality", thus provoking a disruption of the reader's ontological security.

According to Jackson, fantasy has an ability to present an entirely different realm, where the securities of the real are eliminated.[74] Examples are, for instance, the worlds of Narnia and Oz or the marvellous worlds Alice enters through a rabbit hole or through the looking – glass. For McHale, the construction of such secondary universes in postmodernist fiction creates a "dual ontology" between the normal world and the fantastical realm. The production of this dual ontology, as a result, destabilizes the reader's sense of reality.[75]

Similarly, Atkinson often includes such spaces behind the mirror in her fiction, thus destabilizing her projected worlds and foregrounding questions about their ontological construction.

8.1.1 Alice

Atkinson, for example, produces an ontological disturbance through a fantastical event in the story of Ruby's great – grandmother Alice, whose name can be read as an intertextual reference.

When absolutely exhausted with domestic drudgery, her drinking husband and her hoard of children, Alice collapses and has an out – of body experience.

> And then – and this is the really interesting bit of my great – grandmother's story – something strange begins to happen to Alice. She's about to enter her own private wonderland for she suddenly feels herself being pulled towards

Compare Clark, on:
http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,449048,00.html and Parker, 22 – 3. In *BS*, Ruby's figures of speech often originate in Carroll's worlds. For instance, she compares her grandmother Nell to 'a dormouse with her head in her empty dish' (*BS*, 182) and her dad's fading smile when he is confronted with his runaway wife to that of the Cheshire – cat. Compare *BS*, 162. Carroll's fiction also figures in Isobel's narration. For example, she compares her brother Charles to the 'mad March hare'. (*HC*, 45) Moreover, the 'frog- faced' (*HC*, 256) boy who receives the guests at the Walshes' party is strongly reminiscent of the frog – faced footman in *AW*. Furthermore, Atkinson's second novel, is actually named after a sequence in *AW*, in which the Queen of Hearts and her court enjoy an unconventional game of croquet played with hedgehogs and flamingos. Besides, as the following discussions will demonstrate, Carroll's fiction and Atkinson's novels share a number of interrelated themes.
[74] Cf. Jackson, 42 – 6.
[75] Compare McHale, 73 – 83.

the marigolds on a straight, fast trajectory; it is automatic and entirely beyond her control and she has not time to think as she is sucked on her giddy journey towards the heart of a flower that looks like the sun … Alice experiences a cool rush of air on her face and when, with an effort, she opens her eyes, she finds herself floating in a forget – me – not blue sky, some thirty feet above the cottage … What the world has lost in sound, it has gained in texture and Alice floats through a shimmering vibrating landscape where the colours that were previously washed out by the sun have been restored with a vivid, almost unnatural depth. (*BS*, 33 – 4)

Significantly, Alice is called back from her fantastical experience through the approaching noise of Monsieur Armand's cart. Because of her marvellous adventure, Alice is convinced that she has to change her life, which also makes her highly receptive for Monsieur's later plea to elope with him.

Since Atkinson has let Isobel relate Alice's story in a realistic way up to this point, the fantastical intrusion into the fictional universe produces the effect of an ontological disturbance. When the fantastical intrudes into the story, two separate spaces are produced. As a result, the reader is disoriented towards the fictional realm constructed so far.

8.1.2 Ruby

Similarly, we also encounter the construction of such a secondary space later in *BS*, when Ruby falls down the Lost Property Cupboard, an event which links her to her great – grandmother Alice.

Inspired by the fact that Ruby is the monitor of the Lost Property Cupboard in school, she develops the theory of a great metaphysical cupboard, in which a person's misplaced possessions but also qualities and character traits are stored. After her suicide attempt, Ruby goes down this Lost Property Cupboard, which is a fabrication of her imagination.

As Parker remarks, Ruby's experiences in the Lost Property Cupboard are modelled on Alice's fall down the rabbit hole.[76] Indeed, the intertexual references to *AW* even reach down to the linguistic level.

Down, down, down. I hurtle down through space and time and darkness. Sometimes I accelerate and I can feel the centrifugal force strapping the organs to the inside walls of my body. Down and down towards the stars that are twinkling at the end of the world and I pass a voice that's saying "Aye, bottomless"… (*BS*, 325)

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[76] Compare Parker, 22.

Carroll's Alice also falls '[d]own, down, down' (*AW*, 11) into the Rabbit Hole. Like Alice who 'had plenty of time as she went down to look about her …' (*AW*, 10) Ruby also slows down and regardless of the laws of gravity 'start[s] to float as if attached to an invisible parachute.' (*BS*, 325)

While Alice 'looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book – shelves …' (*AW*, 10), Isobel finds that her Lost Property Cupboard is full of the memorabilia of her own life, such as 'things petrified in stone and dolls and spoons', 'Patricia's panda and Gillian's Sooty and Granny Nell's old Ecko radio'. (*BS*, 325)

Through indirectly evoking the idea of storing, Atkinson also alludes metaphorically to the concept of memory. While Carroll's rabbit hole stores and contains things which are not necessarily related to Alice and might rather be associated with a schoolroom, Isobel's cupboard is full of personal, private things, which points to the fact that we enter her private memory. Since she has been confronted with the fact that Pearl has drowned, this is Ruby's only way to overcome the trauma of her twin sister's death.

While Ruby's descent down the Lost Property Cupboard can thus be read as a communication with her unconscious induced by her drugged state, it is also an element that strongly destabilizes Atkinson's fictional universe and highlights aspects of ontological insecurity.

8.1.3 Isobel

Whereas secondary spaces, which threaten the ontological security of the fictional universe are temporarily produced in *BS*, Atkinson's fusion of reality and fantasy in *HC* leads to a complete loss of temporal and spatial reference.

In her second novel, Atkinson juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure, which the protagonist Isobel seems to enter randomly. Some of the worlds Isobel visits have a fairy – tale like nature, others are clearly derived from science – fiction, some seem to be induced by time travel, and yet others only differ minutely from what Isobel believes to be reality. As Isobel changes from one world into another, she increasingly loses the reference points which help to construct her sense of reality.

When Isobel is on her way home from her neighbours, she is, for example, suddenly projected into the past.

> I turn round to close Mrs Baxter's gate and when I turn back round again – the most extraordinary thing imaginable - everything familiar has vanished – instead of standing on the pavement I'm standing in a field. The streets, the houses, the orderly lines of trees are all gone. (*HC*, 50)

In this temporally displaced realm, Isobel meets Maurice Smith, the architect of the houses on the Street of Trees, who is about to begin the construction of Arden, Isobel's home. From him we hear that Isobel has stranded in the year 1918. However, Isobel's experience only lasts for a few minutes and she is again seemingly restored to her perceived reality.

A second time travelling experience leads Isobel back into the time when the Gleblands 'Ye Olde Sunne Inne' was a new pub. As the characters she encounters look like 'extras from *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*' (*HC*, 77) one can assume that Isobel has landed in the Elizabethan era. Since Isobel has been time – travelling for the second time, she already recognizes that her received codes of interpretation of the world cease to be valid.

Apart from these time travelling experiences, Isobel also enters paraxial realms, which are strongly reminiscent of the world Alice encounters behind the mirror. For example, when Isobel enters the dining room one day she finds it slightly altered. Comparing herself to Alice, Isobel begins to question her own sanity.

> Consider the dining – room, for example. I walk into it one day and find it has a quite different air, as if it's changed in some subtle and inexplicable way … That's what it's like in the dining - room, only more so, as if, in fact, it isn't really our dining – room at all. As if the dining – room is a looking – glass room, a facsimile, a dining – room pretending to be the dining – room … No, no, no, this way utter madness lies. (*HC*, 79)

Furthermore, Isobel experiences disturbing episodes clearly derived from science – fiction themes[77]. When she enters the conservatory of Arden one night, she

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[77] Atkinson frequently parodies the conventions of science – fiction through the portrayal of Isobel's brother Charles in *HC*, who is obsessed with the 'mysteries of the unexplained world'. (*HC*, 32) His special interest is the inexplicable disappearance of people, which he mostly explains through vast conspiracies, dematerialization or alien kidnapping.

> Mysterious disappearances are his speciality – he documents them obsessively in lined notebooks ... cataloguing the vanished – from ships and lighthouse keepers, to whole colonies of New World Puritans … The category that excites him most, unsurprisingly given our parents' tendency to disappear, are the individuals … (*HC*, 32 – 3)

Fittingly, Charles ends up as a director of cheap science – fiction films, which acquire a considerable cult status after some years.

witnesses a scene which recalls extraterrestrial kidnappings in science – fiction films.

> Then suddenly the whole conservatory is filled with a weird green light, a fluorescent neon green, coming from above. The green light is moving, passing over the house, descending to hover over the garden. It's like a huge green jellyfish, pulsing with energy. White lights like arc lights seem to move around at random inside it, causing to pulsate more … I feel dizzy, gravity isn't working properly for me, I'm going to become detached from the ground, rise up like a slow rocket, out of the hole in the conservatory roof. I forget to breathe. My whole body is being sucked up into the green jellyfish, I'm several feet off the floor. (*HC*, 228 – 9)

As McHale demonstrates, postmodernist fiction and science – fiction share a number of features, which has led to extensive borrowing from postmodernism to science – fiction and vice versa. According to McHale, postmodernism and science – fiction are both governed by an ontological dominant, which makes science fiction into 'postmodernism's noncanonized or 'low art' double, its sister- genre …' (McHale, 59) Postmodernism, as a result, utilizes science fiction themes such as the spatial as well as temporal displacement of characters. Time travels are, for instance, a popular theme in contemporary postmodernist fiction.[78]

In trying to untangle the starting points and reasons for her fantastical experiences, Isobel actually becomes increasingly unsure as to what she can be sure about. Similar to Alice, who is becoming more and more confused by a world which is 'obstinately unpredictable and indecipherable' (Haughton, Introduction to Lewis, Xii), Isobel equally starts to doubt her ontological points of reference:

> … if the laws of physics have been overturned there's no reason for things to remain constant from one experience to the next. Chaos could break out at any moment. Probably has … Maybe this is my own form of the moon illusion, maybe I've got the wrong set of references and am misinterpreting the phenomenal world? (*HC*, 77)

The experiences in time wraps and in paraxial realms slowly unsettle Isobel's sense of the "real" and therefore also undermine the general concept of reality in *HC*. In a truly postmodernist fashion, Atkinson subverts the boundaries between secondary universes and the fictional "real" and thus also foregrounds their ontological structure. With increasing insecurity, Isobel gradually loses her faith in her own sanity.

> Are there other people who are dropping in and out of the past and not bothering to mention it in everyday conversation (as you wouldn't)? But

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[78] See McHale, 59 – 68.

let's face it, if it comes right down to it, which is more likely – a disruption in the space – time continuum or some form of madness? (*HC*, 79)

Other such displacing experiences include Isobel's time travels to the home of Vinny's adolescence and a temporally distorted realm, in which Isobel visits a sheer endless forest, in what seems to be the beginning of the world or 'the end, when all the people have gone and the forest has reclaimed the earth.' (*HC*, 159) Since Isobel has landed in a realm where the human construct of time is irrelevant, the concept of time, which has already been greatly confused by the loss of chronology in the novel, is further deconstructed. This episode further destabilizes any sense of reality in the novel, so that Isobel, well aware of the slings of postmodernist fiction, asks herself the following questions.

> Why am I dropping into random pockets of time and then popping back out again? Am I really doing it or am I imagining I'm doing it? Is this some kind of epistemological ordeal I've been set? (*HC*, 159)

Finally, in what can be described as the climax of Isobel's fantastic adventures, she relives Christmas Day[79] in three consecutive chapters[80], all with minor or major variations, but all ending in Malcolm Lovat's death. When Isobel notices for the first time that she is repeating yesterday, the dichotomy between reality and dream is entirely lost.

> Perhaps I'm dreaming my life. Perhaps I'll wake up and find I'm a butterfly. Or a caterpillar. Or a mushroom, a mushroom dreaming it's a girl called Isobel Fairfax. (*HC*, 275)

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[79] Atkinson frequently destabilizes and subverts the concept of Christmas as a family - connecting festivity in her fiction. In both *HC* and *BS*, Christmas is a day of catastrophes and disasters for Atkinson's dysfunctional families. In *BC*, a specific Christmas starts out rather badly since George and Bunty are having a quarrel of galactic dimensions. After the ensuing traditional Christmas Pantomime, Ruby's sister Gillian is run over by a car and dies. In *HC*, Christmas is the day which Isobel relives four times with differing, yet always catastrophic outcomes. In one of the Christmas sequences, Mrs Baxter stabs her husband with a kitchen knife, after she has learnt of his incest with their daughter Audrey, and then buries the corpse in the garden. Since Eunice, Carmen and Isobel try to find a way of disguising Mr Baxter's murder as suicide, they make the following sarcastic suggestions.
> Carmen proposes that we take Mr Baxter to the casuality department of Glebelands General and say that he fell on the knife. 'While carving the turkey?' Eunice snorts with derision. If he'd been smaller we could have dragged him over the hearth and immolated him on the fire. 'And say what?' Eunice says sarcastically. "That he fell down the chimney when he was delivering the presents?" (*HC*, 284)

[80] Interestingly, Atkinson has described the film *Groundhog Day*, in which the protagonist relives the same day a number of times, as one of her favourite films. Compare Reading Group Guide for Human Croquet, on :
http//readinggroupguides.com/guides/human-croquet.asp

In one of the sequences of Christmas Day, entitled "There is another World but it is this one"[81], Isobel wakes up in a parallel world which constitutes the fulfilment of all her wishes, as she has entered a paraxial realm where death does not seem to exist. As will be demonstrated below, this sequence is also strongly linked with the fantastical topos of the doppelganger.

While Atkinson's paraxial realms are often modelled on Carroll's spaces behind the mirror, Atkinson ads an additional postmodernist twist to her narrative in *HC*. Carroll's worlds can conveniently be explained away as dream constructs from which Alice can wake out of if she chooses, but Atkinson complicates the distinction between dream and reality to a greater extent by blurring the boundaries between them. Even after Isobel's marvellous experiences have been blamed on her accident and the subsequent coma, the reader cannot be sure whether her travels into these realms were a paranoiac fantasy, a delusion produced by Isobel's dormant mind, a true foreshadowing of events to come or experiences lived through in paraxial realms. When Isobel finally wakes up from her coma, she once again compares herself to Alice.

> It's like Alice waking up and finding she dreamt the looking – glass world. It is difficult to believe that all those things that seemed so real have not happened. They felt real then, they feel real now. (*HC*, 351)

Further unsettling the sense of stability and reality in the novel, however, Atkinson alludes to the fact that Isobel's adventures might not just have been fabricated by her comatose mind, but might actually have happened in a parallel realm. This is especially suggested by the many correlations and parallels between what Isobel experienced during her prolonged unconsciousness and the reality she wakes up to.

> I am home for May. By June I feel almost normal. Whatever that is. Although still a little confused by the different versions of reality. The Dog, for example, is delighted to see me and is virtually the same Dog as before, but not quite … Its brown eyes have turned blue and its tail is shorter … It's these little differences that are the most puzzling to me, like having permanent *déjà vu*. (*HC*, 352)

Extending Carroll's play with the uncertainty of parallel worlds, Atkinson leaves the reader in doubt as to on which level on the narrative to locate the secondary universes she projects. In this way, Atkinson blurs distinctions between her worlds and, as a result, creates spaces of paradox characteristic of postmodernist fiction, which bring the ontological construction of her fiction to prominence. Through

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[81] Cf. *HC*, 297 – 309.

confusing spatial and temporal reference points, reality is depicted as nothing more than a textual operation.

While Atkinson uses these destabilizing spaces only sporadically in *BS*, Isobel's fantastic experiences constitute an important thematic element in *HC*. The nature of Isobel's marvellous travels is never resolved, and the reader is unsure whether to believe that these experiences can be attributed to Isobel's wandering hallucinations, a great universal hoax, which the title *Human Croquet* suggests, or the unstable concept of "reality" itself.

When Isobel sums up her experiences in the novel, she is also reviewing the general attitude of ontological destabilization which dominates *HC*. She recapitulates that

> … reality is a relative kind of thing, like time. Maybe there can be more than one version of reality – what you see depends on where you're standing. (*HC*, 348)

8.2 Disturbing Time

As the discussion of the concept of history in Kate Atkinson's novels *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Human Croquet* has demonstrated, the past is continually re-evaluated and altered in both novels, which also considerably complicates the notion of time. Just like the ideas of space and reality, time becomes a fluid concept in Atkinson's fiction.

In *BS*, time is linked to the heavy subtexts of memory and family history in the novel. Ruby's great – grandmother's clock is a recurrent object in the novel and a thread running through *BS*. While the clock measures conventional linear time, it is also linked to a cyclical time, which records the births and deaths of Ruby's family. While Ruby is conceived to the strokes of the clock, her grandmother's sister Ada dies finding refuge in 'the tick – tock of her mother's clock'. (*BS*, 141) Although the chronometer has been heavily damaged in the pet shop fire, Bunty decides to keep the clock, which suggests its importance as a symbolic family item. Besides, after Bunty's death, Patricia endeavours to take her great – grandmother's clock to Australia. However, 'by the time she finally gets back to Melbourne it will have stopped for good.' (*BS*, 381) By introducing the concept of natural and cyclical time, which contradicts the conventional

measurement of time, Atkinson subverts the linearity of the concept and thereby also exposes the human construction of time.

The destabilization of linear time is, furthermore, especially evident in *HC*. In order to stress linear time as a man - made construct, Isobel repeatedly puns on concepts and metaphors of time.[82] For instance, she plays on the expression to 'find time'.

> Find time? Where might it be located? In space? (But not in the great void, surely?) At the bottom of the deep blue sea? At the centre of the earth? At the end of the rainbow? If we found time would it solve all our problems? (*HC*, 140)

Moreover, Isobel's frequent changes between different time continuums disturb and complicate the concept of time. As a result, the temporal reference points in the novel become highly unreliable. In one of her time travels, Isobel, for example, visits a realm where linear time seems to be an insufficient concept of categorisation.

> I'm standing in the middle of an impenetrable thicket of Scots pine, birch and aspen, of English elm and wych elm, common hazel, oak and holly, stranded in the middle of a great green ocean. It might not be the past, of course … But it feels like the past, it feels as if the clocks have gone right back to the beginning of time, the time when there was still magic locked in the land. (*HC*, 158)

Because a clock – defined time must fail to provide valuable insights into her present situation, Isobel reverts to suggesting a dating influenced by mystical parameters, so that she dates her the time as one in which 'there was still magic locked in the land'.

Although Atkinson's alternate portrayals of "Past" and "Present" already confound the chronological order of the narrative, the concept of time is further problematized through Isobel's time travels. As Sanders notes, Atkinson employs 'textual allusions to the past [which] complicate the present, and break down … any firm sense of boundaries or parameters.' (Sanders, 68) This affects the portrayal of history, temporality and time itself. The past, however, is also a far from stable concept in *HC*, since it ranges from temporarily (yet?) indefinable realms to the 16th century, as well as to Isobel's own past. The fact that *Human Croquet* both

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[82] See, for example, *HC*, 31, 75, 159, 228, 235, 264.

begins and ends with a chapter called "Streets of Trees", also suggests a cyclical time scheme in the novel, which subverts linear notions of time.[83]

Due to her disorientating experiences, Isobel begins to associate time with a mutable and fluid substance. In one of her successive Christmas Day sequences, Isobel offers that '[p]erhaps time has changed state again, now it is a solid, a great block of ice that has us trapped, frozen inside like flies in amber.' (*HC*, 273) What is more, parodying myths of women weaving fate with the fabric of time, such as the Greek Klotho, Lachesis and Atropos or the Roman Fatae, Isobel also compares the concept of time to a woven material.

> What is the fabric of time like? Black silk? A smooth twill, a rough tweed? Or lacy and fragile like something Mrs Baxter would knit? (*HC*, 79)

To sum up, Atkinson considerably deconstructs the concept of linear time in *HC*. Clock – defined time is subverted both through the alternate portrayal of unstable pasts and presents in the novel, as well as through Isobel's unexpected projections into different time continuums. Since the temporal reference points in the novel are thus undermined and confounded, an ontological insecurity is created. As with spatial reference, Isobel is so utterly disorientated with the incoherent and chaotic phenomenon of time, that she demands a re- evaluation of it, which pays attention to the slipperiness of the concept.

> Perhaps there are molecules of time that we don't know about yet – invisible, rarefied molecules that look nothing like ping – pong balls – and perhaps the molecules of time can rearrange themselves and send you flying off in any direction, past, future, maybe even a parallel present. (*HC*, 156 – 7)

8.3 Identities in Flux

A further ontologically disturbing element in Atkinson's fiction is her depiction of fluid identities and bodies. Postmodernist fiction is frequently concerned with the postmodernist notion of the destabilized subject. While Enlightenment concepts propagate ideas of a unified and stable self, postmodernism threatens this humanist notion of the self, and rejects notions of it as coherent and continuous. The self has

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[83] Compare Sanders, 70 – 73.

thus been threatened and "decentred" by postmodernist thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida and Lacan.[84]

As a result, postmodernist fiction, for instance, frequently employs the fantastical motif of the doppelganger, thus highlighting the slippery construction of identity. Moreover, the unity of character is further deconstructed by the portrayal of shifting and metamorphosing bodies. The body can not only be seen as a physical entity, but also as the carrier of identities. By depicting bodies which have no stable form, postmodernist fiction also destabilizes the concept of the unified and stable character. In *BS* and *HC*, the portrayal of doppelgangers as well as altered and transformed bodies, therefore, destabilizes the projected ontological structure of the fictional world.

8.3.1 My Double – My Self?

As mentioned above, the mirror often functions as an entrance to a paraxial realm in fantastic fiction. Furthermore, the mirror is symbolically linked to the literary theme of the "other". This idea of the doppelganger[85], one of the uncanny themes in fantastic fiction, is strongly connected to issues of multiple identity.[86] In *HC*, Atkinson utilizes the fantastical doppelganger motif both on a thematic as well as on a subtextual layer in the novel and thus deconstructs notions of the stable and unified self in a fashion characteristic of postmodernism.

Multiple identity is, for instance, a thing frequently discussed and expounded on by characters in *HC*. Influenced by his obsession with paranormal phenomena, Isobel's brother Charles often ponders the possibility of doppelgangers. Furthermore, Isobel's stepmother Debbie actually thinks that her family is gradually being replaced by accurate replicas of themselves. Isobel's analytic friend Eunice, as a result, diagnoses Debbie with Capgras's Syndrome, a disorder which makes the patient believe that the people around them have turned into robots.

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[84] Compare Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 159.

[85] The doppelganger is an extensive and pervasive theme in Atkinson's fiction. In her latest collection of short stories, entitled *Not the End of the World*, for instance, the main character of "Evil Doppelgängers" TV critic Fielding is blank about whole hours of his life, but gets congratulated and scorned for his behaviour during this time. In the end, he wakes up in a London allay in a pool of his vomit only to find his presumable doppelganger in bed with his despotic boss Flavia. Compare *Not the End of the World*, 184 – 217.

[86] Compare Jackson, 43 – 50 and 82 – 95.

What is more, when Gordon comes back from his seven years of absence, his children question his identity, since they have been told that their father has died.

> 'Perhaps it's not Daddy at all?' Charles conjectured quietly at the time. (For it's true neither the exterior nor the inward man resembled that it was.) But if it wasn't him then who was it? 'Somebody *pretending* to be Daddy – an impostor.' Charles explained, 'Or like in *Invaders from Mars* where the parents' bodies get taken over by aliens.' Or perhaps he was from the parallel world. A looking – glass kind of father. (*HC*, 37)

Alluding to the fact that the doppelganger is both a fantastical and a science – fiction theme, Charles strongly casts doubt upon his father's identity.

Whereas the doppelganger and the idea of multiple identity is a major topos in *HC*, Isobel is the character in the novel who proves to have the most unstable and decentred self. Indeed, various people continuously tell Isobel that they have seen her in different places at the same time [87], which points towards her having (possible?) doppelgangers in the book. While Isobel's experiences in paraxial realms as well as her time travels have destabilized the spatial and temporal reference points in the novel, the disturbance of Isobel's character further undermines received perceptions of reality. As a result, Isobel is extremely confused as to her own identity.

> What if these things are real though? What if, say, I really do have a double? … Who did she see? My self from the parallel world or my *doppelgänger* in this world? … We know who we are but not who we may be. Maybe. Maybe not. (*HC*, 212 – 3)

In an additionally disorientating episode, Isobel wakes up as a different version of herself in one of the three Christmas Day sequences. Characteristically, Isobel notes the changes in her appearance when she approaches the 'large cheval – mirror'. (*HC*, 298) Mirrors have a long symbolic tradition in Western societies and are linked to discourses about models of perception, truth and language. As has been indicated above, mirrors often function as the entrance to paraxial worlds and are tropes linked symbolically to the idea of the doppelganger. When Isobel meets her self in another world in the Christmas day sequence, she therefore looks into the face of an "other", which challenges the unity of her character.

> I'm also the same and yet not the same. Some differences are obvious - my hair, for example, is much better tended than usual – but there are subtle changes that are more puzzling. Is it just my madness or do I look, well (how can I say it?), happy? What's wrong? (*HC*, 298)

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[87] See *HC*, 68, 212.

Apart from the fact that she owns a collection of cosmetics as well as an assemblage of fashionable clothes, Isobel is most surprised at her 'transformation into a perfectly normal – looking person.'(*HC*, 298)

As Lubitz observes, Isobel's doppelganger embodies ideas of a stereotypically idealized notion of womanhood in this sequence.[88] While the "normal" Isobel feels inferior to girls like Hilary and Doherty because of her physical appearance and is ashamed of her family situation, Isobel in this paraxial world is the embodiment of perfection, from well – kept hair to a stable family background. What is more, even the ontological boundaries between life and death have been dissolved, as the dead Widow and Eliza have rejoined with the other family members. Isobel therefore meets her idealized "other" in the mirror. Nevertheless, Isobel questions the validity of this reality and with it her divergent self. Atkinson thus again highlights the ontological insecurity of the novel. Even during her experience, Isobel is sceptical about whether her experience is true or not.

> This is neither past nor future – this, surely, must be my parallel life, the one where everything goes right. The one where real, right justice prevails … The one that should only exist in fiction … This is pure wish fulfilment. We are an ideal family. We are a happy family. I am living the perfect plot, but what will the ending be like? (*HC*, 300 - 1)

By using words such as 'fiction' and 'plot' Isobel, moreover, draws attention to the fact that the world she is visiting is actually too good to be true and must be a fictional construct, and not a real entity. Since all of Isobel's world(s) is a fictional construct, as she is, of course, a fictional character in a novel, this adds a metafictional postmodernist twist to *HC*.

8.3.1.1 Twins

Another topos strongly linked to the theme of the doppelganger is the appearance of twins in fantasy literature. In *TL*, for instance, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Carroll's querulous twins, are indistinguishable but for the writing on their collars.[89]

Since identical twins frequently undermine concepts of identity, they constitute – similar to the concept of the doppelganger – an element of ontological disturbance in postmodernist fiction.In *BS*, Ruby's family seems to possess a certain

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[88] Cf. Lubitz, 139 – 143.
[89] Compare *BL*, 156.

disposition towards conceiving twins. Alice and Daisy, Ruby's cousins, for instance, are a pair of identical twins. What is more, Ruby's grandmother Alice has given birth to the twins Ada and Wilhelm, although Wilhelm has died as a child. Ruby herself, of course, also had an identical twin, but she represses the memory of her twin sister Pearl because of her tragical death.

In *BS*, the idea of the identical twin is frequently associated with uncanny and threatening imagery. This equation arises out of the interchangeable visual appearance of identical twins. Since the twins' physical appearances cannot be told apart, the foreign construction of their identities can seldom be untangled from each other. Thus the slipperiness of the concept of identity per se is revealed. Isobel, for example, voices these considerations during a family meeting when talking about her cousins.

> Daisy and Rose play little part in anything – small and perfect, they are a self – contained world. They are dressed identically, they finish each other's sentences (when they condescend to speak, that is, for they have their own private, secret language), and they look at you with the kind of cool, level gaze that would get them bit – parts in *Invaders from Mars*. (*BS*, 84)

Daisy and Rose's similarity, and the fact that they can only be told apart by a small freckle under the chin, irritates and frightens Ruby. Indeed, they appear to be identical doppelgangers of the same person.

As a result, during her "exile" with her aunt, Ruby experiences the twins as threatening, as 'the twins from hell' (*BS*, 111), 'the cabal of two' (*BS*, 123), who might be 'an alien life form … [who] sucked me up on board their spacecraft … and are now going to conduct a series of barbaric experiments on me.' (*BS*, 111) At another point, Ruby fears that her cousins are skilled in voodoo, have made a puppet of her, and are now going to 'practise telekinesis on it at night'. (*BS*, 123) Yet another one of Ruby's fears is that Rose and Daisy are going to miniaturize her and put her into their Victorian doll – house.

When Ruby again encounters Daisy and Rose on Ted's wedding, Daisy has grown an identical freckle to Rose, so that they are now entirely indistinguishable for Ruby, who sums up her feelings by comparing herself to Carroll's Alice.

> Horror! I want to lift up a fingernail and scratch at it to see if it's real, but I'm too much of a coward. I stare from one to the other in a state of serious confusion; I feel as if I've just stepped through the looking – glass and can't find a mantelpiece to hang onto. (*BS*, 291)

The twins' identical physical appearance confuses Ruby's ontological reference points. Not being able to differentiate her cousins, as a result, constitutes an uncanny element for Ruby. Because the correlation between a certain bodily appearance and a corresponding identity is thus deconstructed, the construction of identities per se is subverted in *BS*.

Ruby's fear of her cousins leads her child imagination to associate the twins with horror themes mostly derived from science fiction. In connection to that, Daisy and Rose also meet an appropriate end, since at the end of the novel, they are rumoured to still live together and never leave their flat in Leeds, because they think that aliens are communicating with them via television.

Although Ruby represses the memory of Pearl to the end of the novel, references to her twin sister abound in *BS*. Pearl's presence in the novel functions over the evocation of Ruby's identical doppelganger, whom she frequently senses near her. Already in Bunty's womb, for example, Ruby notices that she has a feeling 'as if my shadow's stitched to my back, almost as if there's someone else in here with me …' (*BS*, 15) and ask herself whether she is 'being haunted by my own embryonic ghost?' (*BS*, 15) Moreover, during the coronation family meeting, Ruby is surprised by her astonishing mobility.

> Here there and everywhere, I don't know how I move so fast – one moment I'm standing by the television set, the next I'm hurtling through the passage to the kitchen. If you blinked you'd almost think there was two of me. (*BS*, 79)

Ruby only retrieves the memory of her twin sister Pearl after her confrontation with Bunty's lover, Mr Belling, who accuses her of killing her sister. Ruby's subsequent suicide attempt projects her into the Lost Property Cupboard, a metaphor for her unconscious. Ruby finally finds the memory of Pearl at the bottom of this Lost Property Cupboard. Falling out of the darkness, she meets 'the one who is my twin, my double, my mirror, wreathed in smiles, saying something, holding out her little arms to me, waiting for me …' (*BS*, 331) Since Pearl constitutes an important part of Ruby's own identity, the novel also questions the idea of the unified and stable self. Ruby feels that there is something amiss during a great part of the novel and only regains her sense of self when she is confronted with the memory of her identical double, Pearl.

To sum up, Atkinson confounds the issue of the construction of identities by introducing both doppelgangers and identical twins into her fiction.

Since the correlation between physical appearance and identity is thus confused, the notion of the self is complicated and problematized.

8.3.2 Unstable Bodies

8.3.2.1 The Pains of Growing

Atkinson crowds her fiction with forms of inconsistent and unstable bodies. In *HC*, ontological insecurity arises not only out of the metamorphosing and shape – lifting of bodies, but also from the fact of natural growth, which Isobel experiences as a threatening process, which alienates her from her habitual reference points. Again fantastical literature, and especially Carroll's *AW* and *TL* provide influential intertexts for Atkinson's work.

Although Isobel is naturally growing and not experiencing the extensive and sudden changes Alice's body is subject to[90], she frequently conceives her adolescent growth as threatening and unfamiliar. This also leads to Isobel's dissociation and detachment from her body. Isobel's feelings are therefore often likened to Alice's, whose body expands and shrinks at the most unexpected moments.

When Alice in *AW,* for instance, disturbs the court hearing that is to determine who stole the Queen of Hearts' tarts, she has to justify her growing body to the dormouse.

> 'I can't help it,' said Alice very meekly: 'I'm growing.' 'You've no right to grow here,' said the Dormouse. 'Don't talk nonsense,' said Alice more boldly: 'you know you're growing too.' 'Yes, but *I* grow at a reasonable pace,' said the Dormouse: 'not in that ridiculous fashion.' (*AW*, 98)

Similarly, when Vinny cares for the children after their mother has died and their father has left the country, she most heavily complains about the fact that Isobel and Charles are growing. Vinny is surprised at the pace of the children's growth and wishes that they simply would stop it altogether and thus – like the dormouse - assumes that Isobel and Charles can control their increase in height and size.

> One of the aspects of surrogate motherhood that never ceased to astound Vinny was the fact that children grew. If the Chinese could have developed a system of whole body binding, Vinny would have been their first

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[90]According to Jackson, Alice's body is subject to physical changes to her body by 'eating, drinking, laughing, crying, dancing, entering, leaving. Her human body becomes a 'thing', an object, which shrinks, extends, transforms.' (Jackson, 143)

customer. 'You can't have grown!' she screeched every time Isobel displayed stubbed toes from too tight shoes or Charles's thin red – freckled wrists poked out from blazer cuffs. She would have had them, if she must have had them at all, as midgets. There was no right size for a child in Vinny's eyes, of course, apart from grown – up and gone. (*HC*, 186)

But while Alice famously asserts that 'I never ask advice about growing' (*TL*, 184), Isobel does not feel at ease with her adolescent body. Indeed, she describes her growing body in grotesque imagery, which reveals her detachment from it.

My human geography is extraordinary. I'm as large as England. My hands are as big as the Lakes, my belly the size of Dartmoor and my breasts rise up like the Peaks. My spine is the Pennines, my mouth the Mallyan Spout. My hair flows into the Humber estuary and causes it to flood and my nose is a white cliff at Dover. I'm a big girl, in other words. (*HC*, 23)

While Atkinson puns on the long literary tradition of the equation of a woman's body with geographical features in this passage, she also captures Isobel's estrangement from her own body. Through the extended metaphor of geographical measure Isobel expresses a teenager's feeling of an expanding, unfamiliar and threatening body.

The concept of a body that is not the right size also points to the heroine's inability to function in a certain social environment. When Ruby in *BS* is a bridesmaid for her uncle Ted and his bride Sylvia, she is standing between Sylvia's little relatives and feels like 'Alice when she grew tall, a huge outsize girl crammed in amongst identical smaller ones.' (*BS*, 287)

Using Carroll's work as a strong intertext, Atkinson subverts the connection between physical appearance and identity in her fiction. Isobel in *HC* is faced with ontological insecurity which is due to her rapidly changing bodily form during puberty. Already strongly destabilized by the possibility of alternative realities and doppelgangers, Isobel's body proves to be far from a stable concept. As a result, Isobel's changing outer appearance is also linked with her insecurity to lose her identity in a world where nothing seems to be stable and permanent.

8.3.2.2 Metamorphosis

The metamorphosing and shape – lifting of bodies in Atkinson's fiction is an additional bewildering and disorientating element. Metamorphosis is also an

important part of fantasy literature and an essential fairy tale theme[91]. Atkinson uses these intertexts with a characteristically postmodernist attitude and thus creates a sense of ontological destabilization. In Atkinson's fiction magic realism allows for frequent transformations of physical appearance. Metamorphosing bodies are an especially influential theme in *HC*. Evoking the fact that there is no permanence on earth, Isobel informs us that

> [e]verything dies, but gets transformed into something else – dust, ash, humus, food for the worms. Nothing ever truly ceases to exist, it just becomes something else, so it can't be lost for ever. Everything that dies comes back one way or another. And maybe people just come back as new people … (*HC*, 156)

Correspondingly, when Isobel's brother Charles cannot be found one morning, Isobel firmly believes that he has shape – lifted into the dog she has just found on their doorstep. Her proof of this transformation is that there is 'something in its expression … the clumsy paws … the big ears … the bad haircut…' (*HC*, 72), which reminds Isobel of her brother. Moreover, the dog positively responds to Charles' nomenclature. Evoking the Grimms' fairy tale "The Six Swans"[92], in which a sister has to rescue her six brothers from the enchantment into swans by making shirts of nettles, Isobel comments on Charles' situation.

> I suppose a better sister would have set about weaving him a shirt from nettles and throwing it over his furred – over body so that he could be released from his enchantment and resume his human form. (*HC*, 72 – 3)

Another metamorphosis in the novel, which is strongly reminiscent of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung,* is the magic realist transformation of the Fairfaxes' unwelcome lodger, Mr Rice, into a huge insect. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Mr Rice is a travelling salesman and wakes one morning from an uneasy night of bad dreams to find his body metamorphosed into that of an insect. Moreover, both men at first think that their shape – lifting is only an elongation of their nightmares. Furthermore, both Mr Rice and Gregor Samsa have difficulty to control their bodies due to their physical changes. Samsa as well as Rice especially note the changes in

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[91] Jackson argues that while metamorphosis always has a teleological function in the fairy tale, shape – lifting in other subgenres of fantasy tends to be arbitrary and without meaning. Compare Jackson, 72 – 82.
[92] See *KHM I*, 251 – 6.

their legs[93], and both men also lose their human voice for the buzzing of insect noises.[94]

While Gregor Samsa metamorphoses on a normal day in his working life, Mr Rice intends to leave Arden on the respective morning in order to escape from paying the overdue rent of the last three months. The transformation of his body, however, makes his escape unexpectedly difficult.

> Mr Rice screams, but it is a silent scream – all he can hear is an almighty buzzing in his head. He catches a hundred glimpses of himself in the mirror, oh no … it can't be … this is another nightmare from which he will wake very soon. Surely? He tries to move … It's impossible to co – ordinate so many arms and legs, or maybe they're just … **legs** … The window is open, it is just possible, Mr Rice thinks, that he could squeeze through that space. The smell of Mrs Baxter's apple sauce cooking and a pile of dog excrement down in the garden are like a siren song to Mr Rice as buzzzbuzzzz-buzzzzzzzzzzzz he pushes his big body through the gap and unfolds his iridescent wings … (*HC*, 144 – 5)

Ironically, Isobel has hoped at the beginning of the novel that 'some day … he will wake up and find that he's been transformed into a giant insect' (*HC*, 25), and Debbie has described their obnoxious lodger Mr Rice as a 'real insect'. (*HC*, 146)

Another important intertext in connection with shape – lifting and transforming bodies in *HC* are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Significantly, Isobel is translating the *Metamorphoses* at school and informs us that that in Ovid 'you can't move for people turning into swans, heifers, bears, newts, spiders, bats, birds, stars, partridges and water, lots of water.' (*HC*, 163)

Isobel is especially fascinated by the story of Phaeton's sisters[95], who metamorphose because of their excessive mourning for their dead brother. In a highly dramatic translation, Isobel renders the transformation of their bodies into trees. She is especially interested in the silencing of their human voice by transformation, which symbolically stands for their final dehumanisation.

> Then, slowly, slowly, the bark crept over their faces, until only their mouths remained and their mother rushed from one to another, kissing her daughters in a frenzy. Then, at last, they bid their mother one last terrible farewell before the bark closed over their lips for ever. (*HC*, 163)

Ovid's story of Phaeton's sisters becomes an important intertextual influence in *HC*, and the novel includes copious examples of the transformation of female bodies into

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[93] Compare Kafka, 3 and *HC*, 144.
[94] See Kafka, 3 – 25.
[95] Compare Ovid, II, 340 – 366.

trees. This extensive subtext of arborescent metamorphosis is also linked to the general connection drawn between women and trees in *HC*.

What is more, these shape - liftings draw attention towards the generally slippery concept of the body in the novel, and thus provide for a postmodernist subversion of stable forms.

Using another field of imagery, Isobel, for example, compares her growing body to that of a tree.

> I am nearly two yards high in my bare feet. A gigantic English oak (quercus robustus). My body a trunk, my feet taproots, my toes probing like pale little moles through the dark soil. My head a crown of leaves growing towards the light. (*HC*, 24 – 5)

Moreover, when Gordon plans to cut down an old elder which is growing too near to the house, Isobel warns that he 'should be careful, witches have been known to disguise themselves as elders.' (*HC*, 48 - 9) Ironically, the felled tree will cause Isobel's subsequent coma, on which most of the plot of the novel is "blamed". Furthermore, there are rumours that Isobel's ancestress, Lady Mary Fairfax, might have been able to shapelift into a tree and Eliza is likewise often linked to arborescent imagery.

While the transformations of Isobel's matrilineal forbears into trees are thus alluded to, Isobel herself has a similar experience at the Walshes' Christmas party. As mentioned above, Isobel is lured to the party under a false pretence. She is finally chased by Richard Primrose's friends into the Walshes' vast garden. Pursued to the edges of the garden, Isobel comes to a dead end. Magic realism therefore allows Isobel an Ovidian metamorphosis into a birch.

> I feel sick from exertion and can't raise a scream no matter how hard I try. … I can't even move, my legs feel as though they're full of lead shot and my feet are rooted to the ground. One of the boys ... runs straight up to me and stops, the mad Dionysian light in his eyes turning to confusion … But when I glance down at his hand, I see that where my left shoulder should be, where my right shoulder should be - where my entire body should be, in fact – is the silvery, papery bark of birch. My arms are stiff branches sticking out from my sides, my previously bifurcated legs have turned to one solid tree trunk. I would scream now, but my mouth won't open. Call me Daphne. (*HC*, 262)

In order to hinder attempts at sexual violence, Isobel's body sheds its human form and thus shapelifts beyond recognition like the Ovidian heroine's[96]. Furthermore,

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[96] Compare Ovid, I, 452 – 567.

Isobel also loses "voice", and thus also the essential link between language and human identity. Besides, Isobel's change of corporeal form is connected with the novel's general evasive and unreliable concept of body, which can be fragmented and altered beyond recognition. Atkinson thereby challenges and unsettles the construction of identity relying on the correlation between material forms and subjects.

Indeed, as Isobel summarizes Atkinson's approach to the concept of corporality in her fiction, '[e]verything in the whole world seems capable of turning into something else.' (*HC*, 156) Atkinson's work is concerned with the ambiguous nature of the construction of identity. Through the inclusion of intertexts ranging from Ovid to Carroll, Atkinson subverts the humanist notion of the self as unified and coherent, and thus exemplifies an essentially postmodernist concern. Themes such as doppelgangers and identical twins intensify the intricate nature of the self. Besides, the frequent metamorphoses in *HC* make the body an inconclusive and unstable entity, which cannot be contained by realistic boundaries. Since the corporal form is strongly linked to constructions of identity, Atkinson further challenges portrayals of the self as stable and consistent. This leads to an additional undermining of the layers of ontological security in Atkinson's fiction.

8.4 In Labyrinths of Words

Since both world(s) as well as bodies and selves prove evasive concepts in *HC*, the last barrier to complete ontological insecurity is provided by language itself. However, Atkinson also questions the stability of linguistic structures in a way characteristic of postmodernist fiction.

As mentioned above, postmodernism is defined by its incredulity towards any closed representational system. While language was formerly thought to be a transparent medium of representation, postmodernism uncovers it as an unstable cultural construct. Derrida's theories on deconstruction are, in this respect, the most important influence on postmodernist thinkers. Stressing the inherent relativism of the language system, Derrida postulates that

> philosophy and literature in the Western tradition had for too long falsely supposed that the relationship between language and world was … well founded and reliable … This false 'logocentric' confidence in language as the mirror of nature is the illusion that the meaning of a word has its origin in

the structure of reality itself and hence makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind. (Butler, 17)

As a result, language does not mirror but construct and distort reality. Besides, the possibility of the existence of a stable or permanent reality outside the text simply disappears, and reality itself becomes a system constituted by the accumulation of signs, words, texts and discourses.

The arbitrariness of language is most obvious in connection with the conventions of naming. In Atkinson's fiction, characters frequently question the origin, significance and meaning of names and thereby also subvert language as a transparent representation of reality.[97]

In *BS*, Ruby calls attention to the cultural construction of names by revealing how names are associated with certain attributes. Shortly after her conception, she questions whether Bunty's name fits to her maternal function.

> 'Bunty' doesn't seem like a very grown – up name to me – would I be better off with a mother with a different name? A plain Jane, a maternal Mary? Or something romantic, something that doesn't sound quite so much like a girl's comic – an Aurora, a Camille? (*BS*, 9)

In Atkinson's *BS* and *HC*, characters often invoke their names in times of crisis in order to self – consciously assert their identity. When Ruby in *BS* is born and hears her name for the first time, she proudly affirms her new identity with the stable meaning that a name seems to provide. 'My name is Ruby. I am a precious jewel. I am a drop of blood. I am Ruby Lennox.'(*BS*, 44)

However, since names are arbitrary linguistic constructs, they cannot generate a stable identity. Characters in Atkinson's fiction frequently fear that their identity is threatened by their loss of names. While Alice in *TL* is lost in the wood in which things have no names and in a bout of nominal aphasia cannot recall her own name[98], Ruby fears for her identity at several points in the novel and tries to regain a stable feeling of self through evocations of her name. When Ruby is, for example, exiled to her aunt's after her twin sister's death, she tries to assert herself by repeating her name. She wants to 'confirm my existence to myself with a growing sense of panic – my name is Ruby Lennox ...' (*BS*, 111)

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[97] Again, Lewis Carroll's *AW* and *TL* are consequential intertexts for Atkinson. Carroll's nonsensical creation of names and his fondness of linguistic aberration unsettle the gap between language and reality, but especially challenge the conventions on naming. What is more, naming often constitutes the basis for jokes in Carroll's fiction. Another influence is Walter Shandy's obsession with selecting the right name for his first – born. Compare *TS*, 43 – 47.

[98] Compare *TL*, 151 – 154.

In *HC*, Isobel's comments on her name also reveal the arbitrariness of nomenclature.

> Is – o – bel. A peal of bells. Isabella Tarantella - a mad dance. I am mad, therefore I am. Mad. Am I? Belle, Bella, Best, never let it rest. Bella Belle, doubly foreign for beautiful, but I'm not foreign. Am I beautiful? No, apparently not. (*HC*, 23)

By thus punning on the linguistic constituents of her name, Isobel draws attention to the random process of naming. Moreover, she also questions the reliability of language in general, as well as its capacity for mirroring a reality that is independent of linguistic structures. In Isobel's interpretation, the rationalist Cartesian dictum thus becomes a declaration of postmodernist randomness and madness.

When Isobel slowly regains consciousness after being comatose for a long time, the relationship between signifier and signified is again evaluated and called into question.

> They are obsessed with my name, 'Isobel, Isobel', they call out to me softly, urgently – stroking my cheek, pinching the skin on the back of my hand, 'Isobel, Isobel,' moving my toes and tapping my wrist, 'Isobel, Isobel.' They are trying to make me myself by naming me. (*HC*, 307)

In this extract, Isobel again questions whether her name, a linguistic construct, can induce a stable sense of self. While her relatives are trying to call Isobel back from her coma through rhythmically evoking her name, Isobel rejects the idea that her name holds the power to establish a sense of identity.

Moreover, Atkinson also subverts names as constitutive elements of identity in her portrayal of Isobel's mother in *HC*. Eliza is renamed several times in the novel. As a child, the de Brevilles call her Esme. When Maude snatches her from her pram, the toddler is christened Violet Angela. In order to stress her discontinuity with the her past, Isobel's mother is given the new identity of Eliza Jane Dennis by Dick Landers, her pimp. Moreover, the nature of Eliza's origins are further confused by the hint that the de Brevilles have bought her in Paris. As a result, Eliza's names cannot provide a stable sense of identity, and even when she dies, Eliza's self is an entity open to interpretation.

> And that was the end of Eliza. Or Violet, or Violet Angela, or little Lady Esme. Or whoever she was. (*HC*, 341)

Atkinson reveals the process of naming as a cultural and linguistic construction in her fiction. Names cannot provide for an identity, even if the characters in *HC* and *BS* often evoke their names to reassure themselves, they are a slippery and arbitrary

concepts. Atkinson is thus concerned with the typically postmodernist scepticism towards language.

To sum up, Atkinson destabilizes her fictional universes by introducing factors that produce ontological disturbances. Ontological insecurity arises from her depiction of secondary realms, which produce a disorientating double ontology, as well as her representation of time as an evasive concept, the portrayal of unstable selves and changeable bodies. Last but not least, Atkinson also subverts language as a transparent medium of representation and especially questions the conventions of naming.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed postmodernist aspects in Kate Atkinson's novels *Human Croquet* and *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. It has been demonstrated how Atkinson uses strategies which are characteristic of postmodernist fiction. These include the employment and deconstruction of ideologies inherent in the metanarrative fairy tale, such as the subversion of the motif of the changeling and the undermining of stereotypically gendered roles in fairy tales as well as the challenging of the codes of physical appearance transmitted frequently in fairy tale retellings. Moreover, Atkinson disrupts the conventions of romance and the traditional fairy tale resolution of marriage as the happy ending. Furthermore, the conventional dichotomy between irrationality and mysticism associated with the forest and rationality and logocentrism connected to culture and civilization is upset.

Another typically postmodernist concern in Atkinson's work is the subversion of the metanarrative history. By stressing the similarities between history and fiction, the inclusion of historical characters into her fiction as well as a questioning of historical source material, Atkinson exposes the discursive and ideological construction of history and contests dominant discourses in historiography. In addition, metafictional devices and Ruby and Isobel's paradoxical narrations highlight the creation and construction of fiction.

What is more, Atkinson's work exemplifies postmodernist considerations in that it rejects ideas of reliability, stability, immutability or coherence. Through the depiction of unstable world(s), the portrayal of the concept of time as fluid, the description of unstable selves and bodies, and the subversion of linguistic structures themselves, Atkinson destabilizes her projected fictional universes and creates elements eliciting the characteristically postmodernist ontological insecurity. As Isobel proposes in *Human Croquet*, '[p]erhaps there really is no permanent reality, only the reality of change.' (*HC*, 275)

10. INDEX

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