A.S. Byatt’s Possession A Postmodernist Perspective Analysis

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Abstract
Antonia Susan Byatt’s Booker Prize-winning novel Possession is one of the best Metafictional examples, which incorporates multiple voices and narrators, intertextuality, irony through juxtaposition, use of anachronism and critical parody, refusal chronology and dialogic polyphony of various voices that focus on the plurality of truth. Moreover, the plethora use of epigraphs and episodes are magnificently employed in the novel. In fact, all of these aspects shape the novels that are entitled to be postmodernist.

It is intended in this paper to examine the structure of the novel; i.e., illustrating the postmodern aspects such as the use of intertextuality, epigraphs, past and present, and the unattainability of truth. Besides, Byatt criticizes the role of women in the Victorian era, and elaborates the passive roles that women had in their societies. Such a criticism, as the paper sheds some light on, is considered a dominant theme in the postmodernist novels. Accordingly, Possession is one of the richest texts that provide ample material covertly and overtly ready to examine against the postmodernist aspects.

Keywords: Byatt, Possession, Postmodernist novel, intertextuality, pastiche, historiographic metafiction, metanarrative, parody.

Introduction
There are certain aspects which characterize the literary works of postmodern fiction; one of these aspects is “return to history”, that is revisiting of Victorian texts, themes, and settings which many recent English novels deal with. It is worth...
noting that revisiting Victorian texts does not mean, in this respect, imitating the Victorian texts; rather revising them with the perspectives of the present cultural moment. Postmodernism celebrates fragmentation that’s why postmodern fiction is rich with the use of epigraphs, intertextuality. Accordingly, readers cannot grasp one meaning of the text; rather the texts are highly open for different interpretations. Besides, in postmodern fiction there is no logical end that the reader can reach.

Byatt’s Possession is an imaginative approach to Victorian history and historiography. Thus, it is considered a persuasive historiographic metafiction in contemporary British literature. The main characteristic of the novel is the interweaving of historical and literary sources of the Victorian era.

The intertextuality reinforces the conversations and critique of the Victorian world in general in all of its aspects whether social, political, sexual, women figures…etc. Byatt, in Possession, breaks the traditional literary narration style and techniques by presenting the paradox of fictionality/reality and the present/past. She has employed the epigraphs in different chapters to respond to the Victorian past from a twentieth century standpoint. In other words, the past occasionally exists on the same plane as the present and, thus, the events of the past and present are firmly linked in cause and effect relationship. The narrative of Possession is complex due to the play of intertextuality by which Byatt was able to comment on the Victorian aspects. Moreover, she discards the Victorian literary convention of a fixed ending in romance.

Generally speaking, Possession is a novel that presents two parallel stories; love affair between fictional Victorian poets (R. H. Ash & C. LaMotte), and the discovery of that love affair by modern textual critics (Roland & Maud) who themselves fall in love during their quest for the truth. In fact, the stories of love journeys of both couples speak to each other and, thus, create meaning in their relation and problematic connections.

Linda Hutcheon defines the works of historiographic metafiction as “those well-known popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon, 1988, P5). Postmodernist novelist who uses the historiographic metafiction is aware of both history and fiction as human construct. He/she, in fact, knowingly engages the reader in a dialogue with texts of the previous century; by doing so, the past and present is connected. Hutcheon calls the modern kind of narrative as the mimesis of process, in contrast to the Victorian linear narration which is called “the mimesis of product” (Hutcheon, 1980, P5). Thus, Byatt narrative can be referred to the definition of “the mimesis of process” as it consists of multiple narrating level. (Ibid). Possession has been differently labeled; it is labeled as “historical metafiction”, “neo-Victorian novel”, “a postmodern romance”, and “fairytale romance”. (Fletcher, 2008, 19; Mitchell, 2010, 94). Possession, as Byatt intends to reveal, is not a romance, rather a fiction about reading fiction; i.e., a story within a story. In fact, Byatt clearly states that her novel Possession is about “ventriloquism, love for the dead, the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits” (Byatt, 2000, 45).

The postmodern novels pay a lot of attention to both fiction and history as these elements are well challenged by us in order be able to dig the past and form a new understanding of it. Such novels (postmodernist ones), in fact, install and then blur the line between fiction and history and claim to historical events and personages. Accordingly, Byatt’s play of intertextuality in Possession foretells that fiction and history cannot be separated. Also, there is a high possibility one can make from such history. As they search the present for the truth, the protagonists (Roland & Maud), in Possession, become the primary instance and marginal figures in the text. Maud and
Roland live the lives of the dedicated scholars and their quest into the past brings them into romantic pursuits, and thus has affected their own life and career as well. Byatt claims that she finds herself in the past especially Victorian era "I am becoming infected by the Victorian sonorous reasoning of person, just when I had come to believe that I was finding a style of my own, entirely freed from poststructuralist clutter" (Cited in Gutleben, 2001, P185).

**Intertextuality:** Bakhtin applies the term “hybridity” to: Any "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981, 358).

That hybridity is signaled as a universal term to include a variety of different types of double-voiced, double-language or double-style. Roland Barths writes, “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, [and] contestation” (Cited in Rose, 1993186). Bakhtin adds, "the word in language is half someone else's…. "(McKeon, 2000, P 349). Intertextuality is highly significant concept of postmodern fiction. Thus, “Intertextual fiction”, Nash argues, is genuinely pluralistic in its orientation, with reference to utterance outside it and to the material within it” (Nash, 1993, P153). Byatt's *Possession* displays a various and intriguing range of narrative structures, among them the heavy use of the intertextuality. Hutcheon's demonstrates that the gap between past and present is closed by the appearance of the postmodern intertextuality. So, past and present are netted along with fiction and reality. (See Hutcheon, 1988). *Possession* is an attempt to re-build a bridge between past and present through the channel of metafiction and history. Although the Victorian's world is not fully produced, there is much to be gained as narratives pave and create alternatives. Intertextuality, then parodies another text to serve as a background upon which the novel is written.

*Possession* is considered a complex text that has different narrative techniques; the role of a typical third person narrator is very much limited which gives the reader an impression of chaos. The idea of different narrations creates a unique tool for the portrayal of characters especially women. The main plot of the novel is totally based on the concept of intertextuality that is represented by the different narration techniques. Thus we have different characters narrating the event in the novel; that is to say we have different voices represented by Roland/Maud (20\textsuperscript{th} Century voice), and Ash/ LaMotte (19\textsuperscript{th} century voice). In fact, characters in the novel are responsible for telling the story; this reflects the diversity of the narrators. Roland, 20\textsuperscript{th} C Post PhD researcher, is considered the primary narrator in the third person singular. He presents the story of Ash’s life, women and poetry and at the same time he becomes a narrator himself by following the steps of the Victorian time.

By pursuing his deep search, Roland meets a literary scientist, Maud Baily. Then, they unite their efforts and travel to the past (Victorian times) to discover the truth behind Ashe’s secret letters to LaMotte. Events are presented in the form of poetry written by characters from the novel itself, i. e., Ash and LaMotte. In addition, chapters are written in different styles, and passages are written from the diaries of the protagonists. The different kinds of narration of the novel is obviously intended by the novelist to present the differences and similarities between Victorian and modern times. Readers become aware of the interaction of the plot, and the plot organization that is based on two time periods: past and present.
Intertextuality plays a vital role in Byatt's *Possession*; within its text a multitude of different contexts and references is taken from Victorian writers and then interwoven with the present time context. *Possession*, then, is a multi-faceted language: language of Victorian's letters given by Ash and La Motte and the speeches of fictional characters. Moreover, the novel is seen as a juxtaposition of high and low, past and present, history and fiction. Intertextuality also appears between text and context within the novel. That relationship is carried on by using, epigraphs, direct quotations and references and Byatt's mimics. Of course using these devices- Byatt's intention of using those introductory paragraphs and quotation- is to add a glimpse of reality behind her fiction and to give the historical background against which the novel can be understood.

**Epigraphs:** Epigraphs in *Possession* are significantly important as they are used to manifest the common theme in each chapter of the novel. In fact, they guide the readers to the important images or the central ideas which are well established in the chapters. Besides, epigraphs are used to introduce the main theme of the novel. For instance the epigraph of the first chapter is a vivid good elucidation which incorporate the reader with events of the novel. These things are there. The garden and the tree The serpent at its roots, the fruit of gold. The woman in the shadow of the boughs The running water and the grassy space. (Byatt, 1990, P 503)

What is there in the chapter is best be understood by its epigraph. Quotations and references, on the other hand, become as double -voiced. Inserted those voices within the text of the novel structure, introduces different world views that illuminate one another. The presence of the Victorian echoes is significant to postmodern novels. They, in fact, serve as introductory opening and as initial voices that give the tune of each chapter, and also to acknowledge its significance in relation to the course of the narration. Quoting Browning in her introductory epigraph, Byatt celebrates both the poets’ contribution to the world knowledge and the essence of the past. Thus through Ash, Byatt asserts:

“...There are indeed more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. But they will be found out I believe,...through long and patient contemplation of the intricate workings of dead minds and live organisms, through wisdom that looks before and after, through the microscope and the spectroscope...” (Byatt, 1990, P 117).

Traditionally speaking, characters, plots and themes in a novel can be tackled straightforwardly or ironically through the use of epigraphs. It must be noted, though, that these implications do not affect the work of art aesthetically. So epigraphs constitute, Gutleben argues, “a claim of lineage, kinship, of "genealogy""(Gutleben, 2001, Pp 17-18). It is worth noting, as it has been remarked earlier, that most of the epigraphs used in *Possession* are presented in the form of poetry, letters and diaries of Ash and La Motte. Thus, the social and sexual problematic nature of the Victorian era are clearly laid bare through these epigraphs. Byatt represents the Victorian world in a postmodern way by the means intextuality. The metanarrative of history is effectively created in *Possession*. Nevertheless, past is an essential element of the present and its other worldly force seems to boost the present day characters in the direction of recognizing the past.

Thus Maud and Roland plan to make a trip to the Boggle Hole which happened to be that the Victorian lovers had been to. Besides, their trip to the jewelry shop to buy a present help them to come across the fact that La Motte owned that brooch:
"I know. I never thought. I mean, this brooch has always been there. I never thought to ask where it came from. It—it looks quite different in this shop. Among these other things. It was—it was a joke of mine." (Byatt, 1990. 283).

The play of intertextuality expands the narrative skeleton of the Victorian novel. Thus, the letters and poems of the Victorian lovers (Ash & LaMotte) can represent the subtext which functions to move the reader from plot into subplot. This is in fact facilities to move from present into past freely.

Possession addresses the role of the poet using references both to nature of love and these sence of creative inspiration. In order to achieve her goal (to legitimize a critique of Victorian notions), Byatt places the narrative in the Victorian times period.

In Chapter Six, Byatt uses the juxtaposition of fabricated epigraphs of her invented Victorian poets (Ash and LaMotte). His taste, that was his passion, brought him then to bourgeois parlours, grey and grim back rooms, all redolent of Patriarchal teas, pacing behind a lustrous, smiling Jew, all decorous, 'twixt brute mahogany, (Byatt, 1990, P 103).

Byatt uses Possession as a central metaphor to order intertextual patterning in the novel. She is a novelist and a literary critic whose main concern not only how we read, but also how we write about what we read. Roland thinks of the Ash factory where Blackadder and his research assistant work “hutch in the bowels” of the sulphur and cat urine reeking basement of the museum.” (Byatt, 1990, P 31). Throughout the novel, Byatt uses bogus and authentic intertexts which indicate that readers are dealing with a fiction that there must be a genius novelist master mind behind its creation.

The protagonists Roland and Maud are ex-centric. Thus Roland is in the marginalized position of a doctoral student who must serve Blackaffier’s interest, and he, at the same time attempts to maintain secrecy over his plans to publish his discovery about the Victorian poet Ash so as to establish himself professionally and obtain centric positive in academia. On the other hand, Maud hides her blond hair under a turban because she is even marginalized by her fellow feminist accusations that her hair is seductive to men. Possession presents the relationships between writer and readers outside and within the fiction. The omniscient narration in Chapter Fifteen and Twenty Five (Postscript) affects the events of the novel since it supplies a good deal of introduction not contained in those letters, dairies, and poems. As a result, readers of the novel know more than the modern scholars do about the Victorian characters. Throughout the omniscient narration in Chapter Fifteen, the extra-readers learn that Ash and LaMotte spent “a day … in a place called Boggle hole, where they had gone because they liked the word.” (Byatt, 1990, P 311).

In Chapter Twenty Five, we, as extra-textual readers, expect that the omniscient narration will dispel all the mystery in Possession, and thus we all feel disappointed when the context of the sealed letters are kept secret until fictional/readers, detective Mortimer Cropper literary unearths it from the grave.

Towards the end of the novel, the contemporary scholars resolve the fate of the illegitimate child of the Victorian poets through the discovery of the last letter that LaMotte had sent to Ash. In that letter LaMotte reveals the truth that she has concealed for twenty-eight years (since their brief love affair) that their daughter is alive and she got married and had a beautiful boy. However LaMotte’s letter is considered very significant “All History is hard facts—and something else—passion and colour lent by men. I will tell you—at least—the facts.” (Byatt, 1990, P 542). LaMotte is aware
that she shaped the history she narrates the same Roland does. Unfortunately, her
letter never reached Ash, i.e., he never got the fact. Instead, the fact was actually
buried with Ash. However, the 20th century scholars read the letter.

It is worth mentioning in this context here that most of epigraphs used in
the novel are Byatt’s original ventriloquized renditions of poetry, prose, letters of
the fictional Victorian poets (LaMotte and Ash). Besides, some of the epigraphs are
fragments from the journals of LaMotte partner Blanche Glover and Ash’s wife
(Elle). However, two epigraphs, placed before the first chapter of the novel, are
intertextually authentic – Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Preface to The House of Seven
Gables and fragments from Browning’s “MrSludg, the Medium”. (Byatt 1990, ix, xi).

Past and Present: In possession the past and present serve as politically significant
periods. By blending the past and present in the narration, Possession establishes a
recurring account of the events, and the alternating temporal structure reveals the
continued domination of the past. Byatt makes the connection between the past and
present by setting up two parallel sets of the characters in both time periods. However,
it must be noted that knowing the past truthfully can never be granted as far as the
postmodern novel is concerned. “In many ways” Gutleben argues,
“a comparison between the past and the present, the nineteenth and the twentieth
century, is precisely what [Possession] invites us to do, structured as it is a diptych
displaying on one of its panels a Victorian scene and on the other portrait of the
1980s” (Gutleben, 2001).

Throughout deploying texts of the past within the metafictional narrative, Byatt
re-writes and represents the Victorian world in a postmodern context. Freedom is the
theme with which Byatt composes her novel. Thus, the omniscient Victorian novel is
no longer of importance to the 20th century narrators. The characters in the novel are
much free and like the modern human being are somehow free. Lena Steveker
considers Possession a ‘memorial novel’ as “it is engaged in exploring the cultural
present within the context of the cultural past of the Victorian Age”. (Cited in Mitchel
2010, 32).

The opening of the novel shows that the Victorian age is seen as dark, gloomy
and full mysteries. A good example of this perspective is best explained through
Ash’s volume of the poems which are found by Roland in the library. Roland explains
to Maud that he takes Ash’s letters from the library “because they were alive” (Byatt,
1990, P56). He introduces, then, the idea of living past: “The book was thick and
black and covered with dust …”. (Byatt, 1990, P4).

The description is highly significant as it shows how the Victorian age is seen
by the 20th century scholars. Ash’s book is described as unattractive, not worth
analyzing and dirty which makes people detest touching it. It also indicates that this
book has been forgotten, and Ash was a poet underestimated by his contemporaries as
well as his modern readership. Most importantly, the book foretells the quest for
uncovering the great mystery.

Possession throws doubt upon the fact that we can trace the past from its
documented traces. It raises the question of how we know the past by extending it to
demonstrate history’s capacity to provide a partial rendition of it. It also indicates that
most lives are not open books; therefore, traditional histories have no way of
documenting secrets. As a result, the force of the past on the present becomes so
strong that the reader often cannot tell which couple the narrative refers to. Byatt, by
using the pronoun “they” and “the man and the woman” might indicate the falsenesses
of bringing both past and present into a streamline. Moreover, certain objects are used
to merge the present and the past such as LaMotte brooch (which Maud wears), Ash’s
pocket watch (which Cropper owns). Roland’s portrayal of the past as a present-day and the parallel of the two couples force construct a recurring time frame that opposes the stifling linear time frame. Thus, in the novel, Roland and Maud are described “paced well together”, (Byatt, 273) and in the Victorian narrative Ash tells LaMotte “We walk well together our paces suit” (ibid, 304) suggesting a strong parallel between the two couples. In other occasion Roland refers to Maud as a “princess suffering the muffled pea”, whereas Ash refers to the mattresses upon which LaMotte sleeps as “separating a princess from a pea” (ibid, 307). Roland suggests that “were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others.” (Ibid, 456). He, then, realizes the connection between him and Maudas the present couple, and Ash and LaMotte as the past couple. The past and present accordingly invites to modify the narrative style and update it. Moreover the double plot structure of the novel (20th C. academics investigating the truth of the fictional Victorians dramatize, Hadley asserts, “the relationship between the present and the past.” (Hadley, 2010, 4). However, past is privileged rather than the present which we may think the case is (Ibid, 124).

Byatt combines the Victorian moment of fragmentation with contemporary postmodern conceptions of narrative. She renews the recurring notion of time and make the combination of past and present a positive experience. Finally, Byatt’s argues, in her selected essays On Histories and Stories that “we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it.” (Byatt, 2000, 11).

**Unattainability of the truth:** In contrast with the quest of the truth and search for a source of tautological knowledge unattainability of the truth is considered as one of the noticeable and common aspects of postmodernism. Possession does not fulfill, in this regard, the promise of the Victorian romantic and personal development. It, rather, challenges the coherent structure of knowledge sought by Roland and Maud. In Possession, Byatt intends to clarify the fact that past cannot be knowable and the quest to reveal the truth of the past is misdirected. Thus the two academic literary scientists do not discover the truth of the Victorian secret love of Ash & LaMotte as the end of the novel reveals, rather they will always remain in the dark. In order to complete their investigation, Maud and Roland choose to flee and leave others behind. In fact, their vanishing and mysterious nature echo their Victorian counterparts.

Thus, LaMotte dies not knowing that Ash’s wife, Ellen, did not give the letter in which LaMotte confessed that their daughter, Maia, had survived. Ash, on the other hand, dies not knowing that LaMotte had sent the letter or that Maia did not deliver his last letter to LaMotte. Besides neither Roland nor Maud discover the fact that Ash and Ellen’s marriage was never consummated or that Ash found his illegitimate daughter Maia. Thus only the reader, through the hints of the narrator, knows this information and it underscores another tent of historiographic metafiction, i.e., we know the past through its complete texts. The protagonists Roland Maud parallels the inner-frame protagonist LaMotte and Ash in terms of romance, intellectual and personality.

During their effort to discover the truth of Ash and LaMotte relationship, Maud and Roland have discovered a very significant truth which is the close relationship between LaMotte and her roommate-Blanch Glover. LaMotte diaries proved another way to portray the story of a Victorian woman. Thus the 20th century literary scientist have concluded, based on the entrances of the diary, a special affair between LaMotte and Glover; this is true at least according to Glover’s emotions towards LaMotte. During the course of the novel, Glover has gone through her most difficult and sad
times due to the relationship of the two lovers (LaMotte and Ash). She thinks that Ash has taken LaMotte away from her. Thus she cried and wished to get LaMotte’s attention back. Accordingly, she commits suicide as she could not resist their relation anymore. Maud shows Roland a collection of some poems written by Emily Dickenson—an American poetess spent her life in one room on her family house—which concern the feeling of loneliness and estrangement typical for a woman.

The two Victorian lovers have not enjoyed their relationship and, eventually, have no chance to meet. LaMotte spends the rest of her life alone feeling guilty for Glover’s suicide. Moreover, she is unable to mother her child. She has been destructed because of that illegitimate relationship. In one of her letter, she writes to Ash “I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth. But since that might not be—and is granted to almost none—thank God for you” (Byatt, 546).

In order to unveil the truth of the past, the 20th scholars and others have to “dig up—the Ashes.” Consequently, it is possible to find out “what is in the box.” (Byatt 476). The novel concludes with the fact that truth or, to be more specific, absolute truth is impossible.

The final section, or Postscript, to the work could possibly reveal the possibility of a complete knowledge of, or return to, the past. Thus Byatt makes it clear that historical inquiry conducted by the 20th century researchers can not clear away all the dust of the past. In “postscript 1868”, Ash meets his daughter Maia thinking that she is LaMotte’s niece and gives her message to LaMotte. However, Maia forgets to tell the message. As a result, neither LaMotte nor the researcher ever known that the daughter has met her father. Byatt shows that letter stealing and literary analysis cannot reveal mysteries. The 20th C. academics’ desire to quest the truth of the Victorian’s love affair ends with privileging the latter. This implicitly indicates that the truth in the novel is of no big interest compared to the real significance of the past. Unattainability of the truth is well revealed in the Postscript “There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.” (Byatt, 552). In the Postscript, Roland and Maud believe that they could discover the truth if they open Ash’s coffin. However, readers discover a scene that is lost to all characters in the novel except Ash and Maia. The truth of reality is, then, unknown or, at least, not totally known. The end of the novel reveals that the 20th researchers will never reach or discover the truth and the end of the Victorian love story remains unclear. Thus Byatt intends to clarify the fact that the only tangible truth in Possession is “Do you know—the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination. Whatever the absolute Truth—or Untruth—of that old life in death—” (Byatt, 186). Regardless of the truth untruth that reader may come up with, the novelist has been successful in condensing a special kind of relationship—that is of a romance-between her text and her readers. That relationship is what makes the novel quite special in discovering different worlds, characters and facts. Mitchel puts it as “[T]he Romance of [Byatt’s] subtitle refers not only to the affairs between her two pairs of central characters, it refers also to the romance between the text and reader. (Mitchel, 2010, 10).

Historigrophic metafictional novels reveal that truth and falsity are not applicable to postmodern literature. Tzveton Todorov argues that “literature is not a discourse that, can or must be false … it is a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test or truth; it is neither true nor, false, to raise this question has no meaning this is what defines its very status as fiction” (Todorov, 1981, P18).
Linda Hutcheon claims that postmodern fiction suggests that, to re-imagine or re-write the past in fiction of history is to call it up to the present. Both past and present, then, have a mutual meaning to foreground the postmodern fiction and both of them are represented with metafictional self-consciousness (Hutcheon, 1988, P109). Byatt's *Possession* as a postmodern fiction suggests that there only truths in plural, and not only one truth. Historicographicmetafiction, then,is regarded as a combination of history and fiction. Accordingly, both of them are narratives that can be examined against their different structures. That interaction between history and fiction gives a meaning of rejection of the claims of both authentic and unauthentic representations.

**Conclusion**

Possession is a complex, multifaceted, multileveled postmodernist commentary on the Victorian romance with compelling and often very moving characterizations. The novel indicates that the Past might be considered invaluable to the contemporary world; however, the past proves that it is not only worth investigating but also worth rich in what it reveals. Fiction and history are blended to create a new understanding of the past and the present as well.

The quest of knowledge pursued by the contemporary academics results in discoveries that affect the past, present even allocate for shaping the future. Thus, the huge passion for the past form a postmodernist view that affect our understanding and perception. The story within the story swings the readers between two different worlds, and puts them in a position allow them to have multiple judgments, truths and interpretations.

Also the outstanding variety of the narrative technique employed in the novel is facilitated mainly due to the postmodernism tools with which the novelist is best equipped with. Thus, intertextuality, pastiche, epigraphs, historical metafiction, and unattainability of truth are skillfully used by Byatt to present her ideas and concepts in shaping an outstanding and brilliant postmodernist novel that can compete all limits. Possession invites the reader to compare and contrast the past and the present and find out the possibility of what conclusion(s) or outcome(s) can be reached.

**Works Cited**


