

**Postmodernism and multiple worlds in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’
by John Fowles**

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to tackle what I consider to be the most important aspects of John Fowles’ **The French Lieutenant’s Woman**, exploring the concepts of existential authenticity, intertextual organization, temporal organization, space, historicity, materialized into a plethora of mythic quest archetypes in a Godgame literary manner. I will try to analyse these issues following two main coordinates: a horizontal one, as a matter of form, (aimed both at the literary analysis and the translation chapter), and a vertical, unseen part, that of metafiction and metalanguage. In a nutshell, all the elements that pinpoint Fowles’ uniqueness as a stunning novelist always fidgety and mischievous, always an eye-opener to his readers, never ceasing to amaze. The horizontal perspective, the form, could be used in class as basis for teaching translation or literature to bilingual classes.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman can be defined not as a literary island but as an important part of Fowles’ subtle, mythical and anachronistic writing, dwelling upon timelessness as closely linked to metafiction.

The imagery is prismatic, mirroring multiple realities, within the boundaries of Baudrillard’s ‘simulacrum’ even mentioning a ‘liquidation of all referentials’ (Baudrillard 167), leading to a fantastic non-dependence of images and a confusingly floating effect like that of a dream.

A first glimpse at this novel could be either a misleading travel to a dim and distant past that is the Victorian world of the 1860s or a perfect historical reproduction. Yet, it is not so, since it then proves to become a 20th century rendition in an unstable and postmodern context. Hence, the charm of perusing it from cover to cover.

It is apparently a book about another time and place, it is a book about otherness revealing certain truths and values of 19th century life, but it is also a book about illusion and trickery. On the one hand, the author recreates a remote realm of the past, while, on the other, he rips it apart, showing it to us in dribs and drabs. The novel actually deals with how we create the world, instead of how we perceive it, being concerned with the relationship between life and art and how they influence each other, (which can be identified as its theme). Last but not least, it comes to prove to John Fowles himself, that he is almighty and in total control as to the outcome of his literary artifact a master of puppets (intrusive narrator).

By and large, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* ‘belongs to a new category of prose fiction, it carries fiction into the fields of comparative cultural history and sociology, recalling the

Shakespearian statement governing *The Magus* 'All the world's a stage' and offering a 'mysterious tour through Victorian England, with Fowles the guide.' (Wolfe 124)

It is an enigmatic novel, its power of creating controversy stemming from Fowles' experimentation with narrative devices. After all, metafiction is fiction about fiction which is what this novel is about.

The plot is a stunning one, with time functioning multidimensionally, there are always two time perspectives, even if the action is linear, which is what creates the suspense, keeping the reader abreast, as the events seem so unrealistic in their realistic Victorian cloak, where such inner conflicts as those depicted would have proved impossible at the time.

Actually, the plot evolves around the progression of the characters' identities, who 'act' at times by unconsciously adopting certain voices, in a multiplicity of selves and a reconstruction/deconstruction process.

The main issue is the reconstruction of the Victorian Age, which lies within the basic problems of representation and Saussure's theory of the arbitrary relationship between sign and signifier. In this respect, Victorian life goes to show that it is one out of an infinite supply of truths in a merry-go-round of realities which makes human spirit want to break loose and find its identity.

The writer turns the situation upside-down by telling the reader that the reality he has just been acquainted with is not true. This is the voice of the postmodern, the deconstruction, and thus we step into technicality, experimenting and examining the nature of narrative techniques, while the obsolete Victorian concepts are translated into contemporary ones (the mirroring technique of past into present, 1867-1967).

The beginning of the book is strikingly romantic, a mixture between the traditional atmosphere of *Lyme Regis* and the image of a mysterious woman, almost the very idea of a recurring dream, standing on *The Cobb*, gazing into the distance. The real transposition of planes occurs when Sarah's face has such a strong impact on Charles' mind that it brings about a dislocation, which Fowles subtly calls 'trespassing':

'Charles felt immediately as if he had trespassed as if *The Cobb* belonged to that face, and not to the ancient borough of *Lyme*.' (Fowles 13).

This statement mirrors not only Sarah's character but also the very essence of the book. In terms of form, the excerpt is purely Victorian, yet, in terms of meaning it is whatever we want it to be: psychoanalysis, technicality or simply metaphor.

The sentence 'the Cobb belonged to that face' is so unstuck in any moment in time that it can lead to loads of interpretations, it makes Sarah the rebel, the outcast, the universal

woman we step into historicity, into' transworld identity '(Eco), we step into myth, we are henceforth beginning to revisit worlds and myths of dim and distant time dimensions.

The novel is set in the small town of Lyme Regis, England, an idyllic place, close to the sea, a romantic location. The characters are all stereotypes, they are characters that once were alive in other books, complying with certain standard rules of the Victorian character. The book unfolds in a permanent antithesis between the characters' development, this time in contrast with the plot driven novel which is banned, totally deconstructed.

Undoubtedly, any character analysis starting point should be around Sarah. To motivate my statement, I would just mention the reader's surprise I experienced at my first encounter with this antagonistic character, mysteriously pervading the structure and atmosphere of the whole novel.

Like Todd in *The Floating Opera* by John Barth, she has a floating ego, finding temporal stability in the masks she successively undertakes. These masks could be balanced against Sarah's proteic character, the apolynian / dionissian fluidity of her nature.

Sarah, the pariah of the story, the scarlet letter, chooses to be rejected since her story is not true. Becoming an outcast seems vital to her survival. She is free, able to choose her own line of story, unlike Charles who lives only a pretense of freedom.

She is diagnosed as a melancholic, 'obscure melancholia' in Doctor Grogan's words:

'We know more about the fossils out there on the beach than we do about what takes place in that girl's mind. There is a clever German doctor who has recently divided melancholia into several types. One he calls natural. By which he means one is born with a sad temperament. Another he calls occasional, by which he means, springing from an occasion. This you understand, we all suffer from at times. The third class he calls obscure melancholia. By which he means, poor man, that he doesn't know what the devil is it that causes it.' (F.L.W. 134

Postmodernist works can be said to deconstruct any logic, be it spatial or chronologic. Time is no longer a succession, it is the Shakespearian 'out of joint' logic or Billy Pilgrim's being 'unstuck in time'. Historical time is deconstructed, in an unknown dimension, that of the 'simulacrum', we deal with a timeless continuum or a time-space compression which bans each and every aspect of chronology, leading to fragmentariness:

'An author uses a multiplicity of codes, with various degrees of deliberateness... The levels of analysis can be conceived as a series of semiotic strata, in which each level is a result of the application of a set of transformational rules. A variety of displacements are possible...Great novels have always been to some extent

metafictions or anti-novels.’ (Onega, Garcia Landa, 8). By metafiction we mean ‘fiction which experiments with its own form as a way of creating meaning. Instead of taking reality or realism for granted, the reflexive novel explores the epistemological foundations of both. Metafiction can be defined as a way of writing, or more precisely as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction.’(Onega 21)

Another dimension of postmodernist artifacts would be something that reminds me of the ‘play-within-a-play’ technique, spanning ages, from Lawrence Sterne or Shakespeare to John Barth or Vonnegut, which is the meta-narration, which is a narrative within the narrative framework, as an ironic form of intertextuality, a game on reality and mimetic representation, thus blurring the fine line between reality and fiction and raising the issue of identity and its deconstruction. I strongly believe that all these aspects are rooted in a long historical chain of human experiences and if we look closely into the matter, this type of literature is what Alfred Adler would call ‘the sum of all our experiences’ it is actually mankind at a loss.

Space becomes stratified and sliced into the physical the conceptual and the intertextual dimensions. If the former two have been identified in modern novels, the latter, the intertext can be claimed by postmodernists to a greater extent. According to Brian McHale:

‘An intertextual space is constituted whenever we recognize the relations between various texts or categories, but none is more effective than the device of borrowing characters’. (McHale 47)

I dare compare intertextuality with Virginia Woolf’s ‘vessels of communication’, but the concept gains here a much broader and complex perspective as it spans all possible dimensions. (be they intertextual or extratextual). This novel is much more than meets the eye, it is an extraordinary experiment on human mind, as well as an exquisitely technical book, written by a mastermind, piercing dark and profound corridors of the mind.

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