

Indeterminacy in Themes of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract: John Fowles is a famous contemporary novelist, whose novels suit both refined and popular tastes and are widely loved by readers and critics alike. Among his novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is considered as his masterpiece. Fowles uses indeterminacy as a postmodern technique to create the indeterminate character images and plots of the novel. The readers surely will find out the different themes that are represented by the indeterminate character images and plots. The multiple themes are represented mainly in two ways. One is Fowles' severe attack on the repressive Victorian Age, and the other is about the existential theme—Sarah and Charles's pursuit of freedom.

Key Words: John Fowles; indeterminacy; themes

John Fowles is one of the most important writers in contemporary British literary world. His masterpiece *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel that suits both refined and popular tastes and is widely loved by readers and critics alike. Since its publication, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than one year, at times jockeying with *The Godfather* for the number one position. By 1977, it had sold over 3 million copies. Critics probe into the novel from different aspects such as postmodernism, traditional historicism, neo-historicism, existentialism, and feminism etc. It is easy for us to see that critics have neglected indeterminacy, one major postmodern aesthetic characteristic embodied in this novel. Fowles, as one of the contemporary novelist who faces the account that novels of the World War II have exhausted their forms,

realizes that the creation of novel meets serious challenge—how to use new creative ways to represent the realities of the 20th century and the life experience of people. John Fowles experimentally uses indeterminacy to create multiple themes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Indeterminacy is a complicated category in which the subjects are hesitant and only do relative thinking. John Fowles himself placed postmodernist novels in historical perspective:

The so-called “crisis” of the modern novel has to do with its self-consciousness. The fault was always inherent in the form, since it is fundamentally a kind of game, an artifice that follows the writer to play hide-and-seek with the reader. In strict terms a novel is a hypothesis more or less ingeniously and persuasively presented—that is, first cousin to a lie. This uneasy consciousness of lying is why in the great majority of novels that the novelist apes reality so assiduously; and is why giving the game away—making the lie, the fictitiousness of the process, explicit in the text—has become such a feature of the contemporary novel. Committed to invention, to people that never existed, to events that never happened, the novelist wants either to sound “true” or to come clean. ^[1]

Fowles also mentions that “there are no intervening gods, no absolute truth or reality, and that any weltanschauung—social, cultural, intellectual, religious, aesthetic—that says there are and consequently gives man a feeling of security and certainty is inimical to authentic human existence.” ^[2]

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles quotes a lot of works and theories of Marx, Engels and Hardy and vividly recaptures the English Victorian Age in the first 11 chapters; however, in Chapter 12 the author promptly asks: “Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?” ^[3] Immediate reply in Chapter 13 is “I do not know.” ^[4] The narrator is not only an omniscient one but an artist, novelist, teacher, historian and critic as well. From this we may know the writing of novel do not have the precious seriousness of constructing a Victorian novel, so the writer does not consider the wholeness of the novel and the determinate story can not be achieved, and not one single definite theme can be achieved to cover the whole story. Since there is no definite theme to express, readers could only find the fictional indeterminate narrative.

The multiple themes represent mainly in two ways. One is Fowles's severe attack on the repressive Victorian Age and how Sarah from inferior social position and Charles from noble class attain their freedom in the 19th-century England, a society which has no freedom at all. The second one is existential theme—Sarah and Charles's pursuit of freedom.

I. Severe Attacks on the Repressive Victorian Age

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a novel based on the middle of Victorian Age, and like many critical realistic writers of 19th-century Fowles severely attacks the social evils of Victorian Age. The most notable characteristics of the age is its conservativeness, self-important and hypocritical in ideology and ethics.

No wonder Salami says: "There is the traditional suspension of plot and the sudden shift in situation from chapter in chapter, which suits the form of serialization." [5] Like the Victorian novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has the sudden change of situation to attract the interests of the reader by leaving some hints or space for the readers to imagine what is going to happen in next chapter. For example, in this novel, Chapter Three informs the readers of Charles's family background and his childhood experience, and Chapter Four switches to talk about Mrs. Poulteney. The following chapter turns to describe Ernestina. Therefore, it seems that there is no tight connection between chapters, but the purpose of Fowles's arranging a loosely-knit structure is that this fits the tradition and custom of Victorian fiction.

Another noticeable use of the style of Victorian fiction is Fowles's employment of epigraphs of various kinds and the poetry of Hardy, Arnold, Tennyson, and Clough. He is able to "[...] reconstruct, represent, and colonize the cultural milieu of the Victorian Age by the representation of aspects of its literary world." [6] The writings by Darwin and Marx about social changes are widely quoted in these epigraphs. In this way, these epigraphs "range from the real documents of Victorian history to other writings from Victorian literature." [7]

By imitating the above characteristics, Fowles reveals the hypocrisy, conservativeness of the Victorian society. Another way of attacking the repressive

society is to construct typical repressed character—the heroine Sarah and hypocritical Mrs. Poulteney. From the omniscient narrator's description, we know that Sarah Woodruff is a fallen woman who comes from a poor family. Although she receives good education, her inferior social position still forces her to work as governess out of economic necessity. She is an outcast of the town. She is recommended by the town's vicar to work for the tyrannical Mrs. Poulteney by compromising her personal freedom when Mrs. Poulteney wants to take care of one irreproachable moral character. She cannot do what Mrs. Poulteney regards as bad and immoral.

The hypocritical Mrs. Poulteney is in fact one typical hypocrite of the Victorian society. The reason why she wants to show her piety is just she believes in hell. She is afraid that the charity she has given is not adequate for her to live in Heaven after death because she knows that she is not equal to Lady Cotton in the contest for piety. However, her hypocrite is just clearly shown by her seemingly good intention. She requests Sarah should be “preferably without relations. The relations of one's dependents can become so very tiresome.”^[8] Mrs. Poulteney's hypocrite can also be shown through her treatment to her servants. In the requirement for choosing Sarah, she has mentioned she must consider her servant, so Sarah must be of irreproachable moral character. However, while she is quite concerned about her tidy environment, she cares nothing about the extremely dirty kitchen of her servants, for it is just the place where servants work.

On another level, the imitation of the omniscient narrator who has absolute control over his Victorian characters is another technique Fowles uses to expose people in Victorian society just like those observed characters have no freedom or subjectivity. In the 19th-century Victorian fiction, the omniscient narrator is a very typical characteristic of its literary form. J. Hillis Miller puts that “[...] this convention is so crucial to nineteenth-century English fiction, so inclusive in its implications, that it may be called the determining principle of its form.”^[9] Fowles intentionally adopts the omniscient narrator to reflect that the Victorian people are repressed because they live under a supervising god, Victorian morals and manners.

Ernestina is one of those Victorian women who have to bear all constraints and

repression her society puts on her. Through the description of the omniscient narrator, she has been raised exactly in accordance with the Victorian standards for women. Born in a wealthy family, she also has been trained to view the society as so many rungs on the ladder, this reducing her own to a mere step to something supposedly better. Her engagement with Charles is something more than love for Charles, and it contains her longings and pursuit for the upper class. And when Charles discusses with Ernestina on her prospect of marrying him after losing his inheritance of Winsyatt, she however, tells him sarcastically: "It's quite impossible that I should marry a mere commoner."^[10] She has revealed her own class-consciousness as one who seeks to improve her social position. But Fowles argues, "She cannot be blamed, of course; she had been hopelessly well trained to view society as so many rungs on a ladder."^[11] This reflects the narrator's blames on Victorian social institutions, inscribing human being within a hierarchy of classes.

It is clear that in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles vividly recaptures the hypocritical and repressive Victorian Age through employing typical Victorian writing techniques and illustrating two typical characters. He successfully gives severe attacks on the repressive Victorian society.

II. The Existential Theme

Man is not blind of the banality and absurdity of everyday life and their intellect and their passion to exist are the driving forces, propelling them forward to freedom. "The ordinary man and woman," Fowles has said, "live in an asphyxiating smog of opinions foisted on them by society."^[12] Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is the freedom to choose. Existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. In the formulation of the 20th-century French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, existence precedes essence. This means that we are thrown into existence first through our actions. This slogan is opposed to the traditional view that essence precedes existence, according to which we are seen as having a given

nature that determines what we are and what our ultimate purpose or value is. Fowles himself says in an interview: "I'm interested in the side of existentialism which deals with freedom; the business of whether we do have freedom, whether we do have free will, to what extent you can change you life, choose yourself, and all the rest of it." [13]

The heroine Sarah is what Fowles tries by every means to convey the existentialist thought. In other word, Sarah is the epitome of the existentialist idea in the novel. She is the one who purposefully seeks social freedom out of the repressive Victorian society. She dishonors herself by choice as well as by circumstance. She makes others believe she has been deserted by a French lieutenant. Because the whole town is dominated by petty provincialism, nearly all the people in the Lyme are against her because of her disregard of the convention, which is stale and suffocating.

However, it is not easy for a woman to pursue freedom in the Victorian society. The Victorian Age is an age where women were sacred. As a woman who is born into a poor family, Sarah has no other choice but to work as a governess after she manages to get the best education she could have. But being educated above her class does not bring her any fortune, but miseries, together with her profound gift to understand human being—she can see through the hypocrisy and stupidities. As B. N. Olsen puts it, "Her education conspires with her intelligence to produce the pariah; she has been given the trapping of a lady without the social standing; she has been forced out of own class without being raised to the next." [14]

Since Sarah is the promulgator of freedom in the novel, it is very natural for her to refuse Charles's offer of marriage in order to remain free. For Sarah, marriage inevitably involves possession, and she believes that sexual possession is a potential threat of freedom; "I do not wish to marry because... first, because of my past, which habituated me to loneliness... I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage." [15] Although she is exiled from proper Victorian society, she typifies the "[...] growing breed of woman gaining emancipation during the late nineteenth century, the time of this novel." [16] She is

a symbol of the new age of freedom: "Indeed it was hardly Sarah he now thought of—she was merely the symbol around which had accreted all lost possibilities, his extinct freedom."^[17] Sarah makes her own image of the woman who no longer needs an outward uniform.

Charles is another case Fowles creates to show man's pursuit of freedom. Different from Sarah's purposeful exile of herself, Charles is the one who passively finds the meaning of freedom. Sarah teaches Charles the meaning of freedom through manipulating, planning and constructing events. Compared with Sarah, Charles's situation is no better. Financially speaking, he may be better than Sarah. It is just that before he met Sarah, he is not aware of the fact. He is a petty nobleman by birth for he would have inherited his uncle's title if he had not been disinherited. He does not really like "his" class and this is one reason that he travels so much and indulges himself so much in so many absurd relationships with women. He is engaged with Ernestina, the only daughter of a wealthy businessman, which is common in those days when the British Empire is on its rise. Their engagement itself is common too for at that time in history, the titled need money and the rich need titles and a marriage between them is quite convenient for both parties.

Charles is guided by Sarah although he first regards Sarah as a poor and inferior one and tries to save her. Every time he encounters Sarah, he finds something new—his newly found sexual desire, his new conception of his life, etc. Charles is also awakened through love and sexuality. He is guided by Sarah who adopts an attitude which is incompatible with the Victorian moral standards. He gradually realizes that the society he lives in is like a machine without passion and without imagination. The people in it are bound by the tradition, responsibilities and customs. When his proposal is refused by Sarah, Charles comes to understand a little bit why Sarah would rather cast herself away from the mainstream of the society. The society is inhuman, and it is like a prison. Then Charles will go on to find his freedom and self on his own. He also understands that if he chooses to go on his life as the way the Victorian society sets for him, he will certainly go dying with his class, and die before his mortal life ends.

In these processes, Charles remains very passive compared with Sarah. It

seems that Fowles deliberately puts Charles into a foul predicament. Sarah not only achieves her own freedom but is also able to grant the same freedom to Charles. She also functions as a force providing existential impetus to Charles and the age he lives in. Even her sexuality liberates Charles and makes him understand freedom, the meaning of love. Sarah represents the entire age of emancipation for women. Just like Fowles concludes in the last chapter: "For I have returned, albeit deviously, to my original principle: that there is no intervening god beyond whatever can be seen, in that way, in the first epigraph to this chapter; thus only life as we have, within our hazard-given abilities, made it ourselves, life as Marx defined it—the actions of men (and of woman) in pursuit of their ends. The fundamental principle that should guide these actions, that I believe myself always guided Sarah's, I have set as the second epigraph."^[18]

By presenting the two themes together, Fowles represents a fictional world which disrupts the conventions so that the reader will question the constructed convention, and thus the indeterminacy in themes is produced.

Notes:

- [1] McSweeney, Kerry, *Four Contemporary Novelists: Angus Wilson, Brian Moore, John Fowles, V. S. Naipaul*, London: Scolar Press, 1983, p. 6.
- [2] McSweeney, Kerry, *Four Contemporary Novelists: Angus Wilson, Brian Moore, John Fowles, V. S. Naipaul*, London: Scolar Press, 1983, p. 106.
- [3] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 79.
- [4] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 80
- [5] Salami, Mahmoud, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, London & Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992, p. 107.
- [6] Salami, Mahmoud, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, London & Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992, p. 107.
- [7] Salami, Mahmoud, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, London & Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992, p. 111.
- [8] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 26.

- [9] Miller, J. Hills, *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, George Elliot, Meredith, and Hardy*, Cleveland: Arete, 1979, p. 63.
- [10] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 195.
- [11] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 189.
- [12] Fowles, John, *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company Inc., 1964, p. 10.
- [13] Campbell, James, "An Interview with John Fowles", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17. No. 4. Ed. Linda Baker, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, Autumn, (1976), p. 466.
- [14] Olshen, Barry, *John Fowles*, New York: Federic Ungar Publishing Co., 1987, p. 74.
- [15] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 335.
- [16] Huffaker, Robert, *John Fowles*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980, p. 92.
- [17] Huffaker, Robert, *John Fowles*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980, p. 248.
- [18] Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 366.