**Review Article**

# John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman:* Critiquing Victorian Values through Metafiction

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**Abstract:** This article explores John Fowles' employment of Metafiction in the *French Lieutenant's Woman*. It makes the case that Fowles' metafiction is motivated by the author's postmodernist desire to comment upon, undermine and critique the dominant and authoritative narratives in history, the understanding of history and in literary history. Fowles' novel's metafiction critiques the Victorian ideology through interweaving metafictional elements into a novel set in the Victorian era and, at least initially, following a conventional kind of plot premise. The Victorian ideology is critiqued through a metafictional reimagining of tropes of Victorian fiction. The novel breaks through the constraints of Victorian fiction in such a way as to fragment itself into multiple conflicting endings. Each of these endings violate the conventions of Victorian fiction in form and content, whilst remaining historically rooted and plausible. The multiple endings expose the fictitiousness of the novel and express John Fowles' beliefs about the absurdity of human social life.

**Keywords:** John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, metafiction, Victorian, critique.

## INTRODUCTION

Metafiction is a very important theme of postmodern literature and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is one of the most important metafictional English-Language novels. This article will analyse *The French Lieutenant's Woman*'s employment of the stylistic device of Metafiction. First the article gives a brief synopsis of the plot with its use of metafiction and explores John Fowles' motivations for using it. The article goes on to give a brief literary review of the different interpretations of this novel's metafiction. Then, it will present the main metafictional elements of the text with examples.

John Fowls is one of the few English writers of the twentieth century to produce stylistically experimental work, which received both popular and critical acclaim. He was named by the Times newspaper as one of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was a great success, a critically well-received best seller. It was published in 1969. It went on to be translated into many languages. In 1981 it was adapted into a critically acclaimed film starring Oscar winners Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons. In 2006 it was adapted into a play which toured the UK and in the same year it was adapted for British radio. It has also received much critical attention. It is "[o]ne of the handful of post-war English novels to have undergone a canonization process" (Bényei 1995, p. 121). The book deals with the 19th century conception of femininity and myth of masculinity. These are explored with the use of metafiction, psychoanalysis and historical, cultural analysis. Fowles' innovative use of metafiction

### 1. Plot Summary

The story is set in the 19th century. It happened in in the coastal town of Lyme Regis, England. So, we can see the subject and material belong to the Victorian era. There are three main characters in the novel. They are the

protagonist Sarah Woodruff, the titular French Lieutenant's woman; Charles Smithson who is a baronet, an orphan financially dependent on his uncle and an amateur palaeontologist. Another character is Ernestina Freeman. She is Charles' fiancée and the daughter of a wealthy tradesman. The novel portrays a kind of love triangle. Charles faces a choice between Sarah or Ernestina. Ernestina offers financial security. Woodruff offers something he recognizes to be a more genuine love. His choice of Ernestina is the most practical for nineteenth century sensibilities, but also the "wrong" choice for a nineteenth century novel, in which the romance overcomes the love/money dichotomy through some fortunate twists of fortune leading to falling in love and enjoying financial improvement simultaneously. The choice of Ernestina is not seriously entertained because for Charles to fall in love with her would be cliché. The novel explores in greater detail the different ways Charles can be interpreted to choose Sarah. This novel draws on Fowles' extensive knowledge of Victorian era literature. He brought many of the conventions of these period novels to ruthless critique. The ending of *The French Lieutenant's* Woman famously breaks all the rules of Victorian novel writing.

At Lyme Regis on the Dorset coast Charles Smithson, a young upper-class paleontologist, is struck by a solitary female figure standing at the far end of the Cobb, a stone jetty, staring out to sea. He learns she is Sarah Woodruff, an enigmatic governess ostracized by the community for her purported relationship with a French sailor who has since deserted her.

Although Charles is already engaged to Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, he becomes infatuated with Sarah. "Sarah … lances her way into Charles's imagination, imprinting there her face, indeed her whole being…She is ontologically doubled in the novel, and in a very real sense she inhabits Charles, haunts him" (Tarbox 1996, p. 97). He arranges several clandestine meetings with Sarah. Sarah tells Charles her story and asks for emotional and social support. At this time, he learns that his inheritance is in jeopardy; his wealthy uncle has become engaged to a young woman. This raises the possibility of him fathering a son, who would become heir to Charles' uncle's estate. Meanwhile, Charles servant Sam has fallen for Mary, the maid of Ernestina's aunt. Charles faces the decision of sticking with Ernesta or pursuing Sarah instead. He chooses Sarah and advises her to leave Lyme for Exeter. In a change of heart Charles heads to his father-in-law in order to inform the latter of his uncertain inheritance. Yet Charles stops in Exeter, intending to visit Sarah. The narrator who has frequently intervened in the story so far interrupts Charles and supplies alternative endings to the story.

In the first possible ending Charles decides against visiting Sarah. He returns to Lyme-Regis, reaffirming his love for Ernestina. They enter into a, not particularly happy, marriage arrangement. Charles gets a job working for Ernestina's father. The narrator comments that Sarah's fate is omitted from this ending. On one occasion Charles mentions to Ernestina that he had some encounter with the "French Lieutenant's Whore" without going into details. The narrator says this possible ending is little more than Charles' daydream.

Before the second and third endings the narrator appears in the novel as a character in Charles' railway compartment. He tosses a coin to determine the order of presentation of the other two possible endings, stressing their equal likelihood and credibility.

In the second ending Charles and Sarah consummate their affair in a moment of passion. "Charles discovers that, despite having played the role of fallen woman, Sarah was in fact a virgin. She thus combines both halves of the Victorian typology: at exactly the point when she ceases to be a virgin she begins for the first time to appear to have been one" (Conradi 1983, p. 65). As a result, Charles decides to terminate his engagement to Ernestina and send a letter of proposal to Sarah. Charles's servant Sam fails to deliver this letter and Ernestina's father, enraged, publicly shames Charles as a philanderer. His uncle marries and fathers a son so Charles loses his inheritance. Charles travels abroad around Europe and America to escape the stigma and depression of his failed engagement and disinheritance. Sarah, who never received the proposal letter moves to London without informing Charles. After two years Charles's Lawyer finds Sarah and arranges a reunion. Charles learns that Sarah has moved into the house of the pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She is enjoying a bohemian life of artistic creation. She introduces Charles to the child of their affair and he nurses the hope that he can renew his relationship with her.

In the third ending the narrator turns his pocket watch back fifteen minutes. Events unfold in the same way as in the second ending but in this reunion Charles and Sarah do not get on well. The parentage of the child this time around is not clarified and Sarah is uninterested in renewing their relationship. Charles leaves the house and intends to return to the United States. He harbours the suspicion that Sarah has been lying to him and manipulating him.

All of these endings reflect different speculations Charles has held about Sarah, readers which the readers have been encouraged to successively entertain along with Charles throughout. "His reading of her moves from victim of romantic impulses to victim of a narrow-minded society to manipulative, selfish marriage wrecker. The last image settles more firmly when, having broken his engagement and returned to Exeter, he discovers that she has vanished"

(Foster1994, p. 82). Sarah's ability to transgress between these conflicting interpretations liberates her from the constraints of a Victorian stereotype.

## 2. Introducing Metafiction

Critics agree that The French Lieutenant's woman, used the unconventional narrative technique of metafiction to critique the social mores of the Victorians and their literature from a twentieth-century perspective. This section focuses on the narrative technique of metafiction applied in this novel.

Meta is a prefix. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, this prefix means showing or suggesting an explicit awareness of itself or oneself as a member of its category. It is cleverly self-referential. Therefore, we could understand metafiction this way: it concerns writing about writing. It makes the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader. In other words, Metafiction makes the act of composition its own subject. In addition, metafiction deliberately transgresses the convention of the reader's "wilful suspension of disbelief" which characterised literature before the postmodernist writers. So, metafiction is a style of narrative that tries to tell the readers that fiction is made up and is not an illusion of reality. Metafiction recognises and *demonstrates* that all writing is an artifice of the author in accordance with his or her own ideas. Additionally, it often employs pastiche and anachronism to comment on other fictions and the convention of fiction writing generally. Here we need to clarify these two terms. The first one is pastiche. A pastiche is something such as a piece of writing or music in which the style is copied from somewhere else, or which contains a mixture of different styles. The second term is anachronism. An anachronism is something in a book, play, or film that is wrong because it did not exist at the time the book, play, or film is set. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* employs both pastiche and anachronism as metafictional devices. Their effect is to "to shock and subvert [the readers'] presuppositions and envisagement based on the willing suspension of disbelief as traditional realism has so far succeeded in generating" (Ji *et al.*, 2013p. 2054).

## 3. John Fowles' Motivations

In his *Notes on an Unfinished Novel* Fowles remarks upon his general metafictional strategy in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* - "You are not trying to write something one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write. And: Remember the etymology of the word. A novel is something new. It must have relevance to the readers now - so don't ever pretend you live in 1867; or make sure the reader knows it's a pretence"(Fowles 1977, p. 136). He wants to make sure that the readers do not believe in his make-believe world and wants them to be aware that it is a pretence. This involves "an affirmation of the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence" (Janik 1995, p. 162).

The general motivation for the metafictional trend in postmodern literature was the development of the view that social life had become saturated by media to the extent that its only authentic referent was itself. No longer was media seen as a mask of an underlying reality such as class war, racial hierarchy or a conspiracy theory but it was seen as making its own reality. Authors could no longer claim to be offering an authoritative narrative of reality, rather they offered mini-narratives that conflicted and could not be ordered into a "correct" interpretation. Fowles' metafiction is postmodern in the way it tries to expose the prejudices and one-sidedness of the ideology of its characters, for example: Charles' modern naturalism disguises sexist elitism. Or another example, Ernestina's conservative Protestantism disguises her sexuality and social climbing ambitions. Fowles makes use of metafiction to the end of criticising the hypocrisies of Victorian culture and its literature; its patriarchy and elitism. He also uses metafiction to demonstrate the power of free choice and the absurdity of the happenstances of life. Depending upon how the narrator, or the reader, chooses to end the novel Charles' and Sarah have very different lives. Yet the novel emphasises that this is an arbitrary and creative choice. Charles, as a fictional character, is not allowed to have the determinate end to his life story which all the protagonists of Victorian literature enjoy. The multiple endings do not suggest "a plurality of possible stories," but "are a programmatic denial of the reality of any" (Byatt 2001, p. 174). None of the alternative endings offer the satisfying or cathartic closure that was the normal conclusion of a Victorian novel either. In the first, pretend, ending Charles has a dream of choosing Ernestina, the practical choice that is nevertheless wrong for a Victorian novel because he does not love Ernestina. It is dismissed as a dream. In the second ending Charles leaves Sarah with hopes of renewing the relationship but the narrator stops short of telling the marriage and happily-ever-after ending of a Dickens novel for example, because of the interruption of the third ending. In the third ending Charles is suspicious and embittered but neither he nor Sarah is brought to the catharsis of a passionate struggle or suicide, the tragic ending of a Hardy novel for example. Rather, Charles is left feeling that this was a frustrating and futile episode in his life in which he has other more important things to do.

## 4. Metafictional Element of Anachronism

The most common metafictional element of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the frequent interventions of the narrator. The narrator repeatedly makes metafictional comments through anachronistic remarks. The book is full of them. Here follows a few examples. In Chapter Three, when giving description of Charles, John Fowles writes: "Though

Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him out of the future of the airplane, the jet engine, television, radar......" Ernestina is introduced in Chapter 5, the narrator says that she "died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" (Fowles, 1992, p. 28). The narrator says of Sarah that "she was born with a computer in her heart" (47). When Sarah sleeps with Millie, the narrator says: "I doubt if Mrs. Poulteney had ever heard of the word lesbian" (128). In chapter fifty-seven, when Mary, the ex-maid of Ernestina's aunt, comes by, the narrator remarks "...I am sure the young woman whom I should have liked to show pushing a perambulator (but can't, since they do not come into use for another decade) had never heard of Catullus..." (275). These technologies, and social mores belong to later times and the 20$^{th}$ century. In bringing them up Fowles shatters the illusion that this is a piece of nineteenth century literature. In conventional Victorian literature the narrator would never make remarks about times later than the times of the events of the story because they are distracting from the plot; "many of the effects play on the gap between historical explanation and secrecy, with the folly of narrative wisdom itself on display" (Conradi 1983, p. 72). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* uses anachronistic remarks to remind readers that it is a meditation on the contrivances of Victorian literature. The novel compares the technology and ideas of the novel's Victorian characters with the technology and ideas of contemporary readers, which reminds readers when it was written and for whom. Yet at the same time the novel refers to contemporary historical personalities. For example Charles works in the same library as Karl Marx, and Sarah Woodruff lives with the Rossettis. In this way "the fictional characters…are given the same ontological status as the 'real' characters [and] the 'real' characters who exist or existed are fictionalized" (Lee 1990, p. 46).

## 5. Metafictional Element of Historical Citations and Personages

A more subtle metafictional element is Fowles' frequent references to other literature that expressed the Victorian worldview. He opens chapters with quotes from famous Victorian writing. To give one instance of this, this is how the first chapter begins, "Stretching eyes west Over the sea, Wind foul or fair, Always stood she Prospect-impressed; Solely out there Did her gaze rest, Never elsewhere Seemed charm to be. —Hardy, "The Riddle" (Fowles 1990, p. 1). So, "the research necessary for historical fiction is laid bare by extensive quotations from sources, rather than being invisibly woven into the narrative" (Alexander 1990, p. 128). In quoting Victorian literature Fowles is making a comment upon it. Charles meets Sarah in a romantic setting which readers are encouraged to imagine in the same way Victorian literature would have them imagining it. The reader is thus made explicitly aware that this is Fowles' intention.

## 6. The Metafictional Element of Multiple Endings

The most explicit metafictional element from the novel is the way it splits into several different alternative endings. The narrator says he is unable to control the story "I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy" (Fowles, 1992, p. 81). In explaining this change the narrator admits that the whole story depends upon his decisions but that his decisions are determined by character development "I thought...that it might be more clever to have him stop...and meet Sarah again. That is certainly one explanation of what happened; but I can only report—and I am the most reliable witness—that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself" (81).

At the end Charles decides to board a train to find Sarah. At this point the narrator physically steps into the story, into Charles' train compartment. "The latecomer muttered a "Pardon me, sir" and made his way to the far end of the compartment. He sat, a man of forty of so, his top hat firmly square, hid hands in his knees regaining his breath." (Fowles 1992, p. 317) This middle-aged man is John Fowles himself. The narrator asks "what the devil am I going to do with you?" (317) The narrator decides the order of Charles' separate possible fates with a coin toss. Of course, in real life only one sequence of events can be realised. In presenting several possible endings Fowles reminds readers that his novel is not like real life, that his characters only exist in a fiction with an undecided ending. Yet he also exposes the absurdity of life. Charles' and Sarah's lives are made very different depending upon which arbitrary choice Charles makes.

Each of the endings the novel entertains violate the conventions of Victorian literature by making use of some classic tropes and deviating from them in important ways. Charles' dismissed daydream ending happens at about two thirds of the way into the novel. It follows the line of the practical choices Victorian upper-classes were wont to make when facing such predicaments and was an ending fitting for a conventional popular novel of the time. The narrator dismisses it by saying it is a "thoroughly traditional ending" (339). The preservation of financial security and class-status were conventionally considered to be of primary importance for Victorians of Charles' status. The novel's narrator speculates that this is one reason for the prevalence of extramarital affairs amongst the elites of those times. However, because this conduct was considered a deeply immoral taboo in those times, it was deemed to be an unacceptable compromise for public discourse and therefore Victorian literature would often portray the characters who conducted affairs as villains and seek more romantic solutions for their protagonists. These would sometimes involve some convoluted and fortuitous turn of events, intrigue and triumph whereby the hero and heroine would find some way to choose a pure love in marriage together whilst avoiding the loss of money and status. So, for example a series of bizarre revelations at the end of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) enable the main characters to marry and

live happily ever after, escaping the potential scandals of charges of low birth and incest that would have led to disgrace and disinheritance otherwise ensuing. It is important to note that Oscar Wilde's play was a comedy. The fortunate revelatory happenstances are too far-fetched for a serious ending. This suggests that to the Victorian mind happy endings were very often perceived to be unrealistic.

The happy reunion ending involves the hero choosing love here instead of status after many tribulations and confusions caused by misfortune. But the narrator does not allow this ending to come to its full conclusion. It ends with hope rather than marriage. In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), for example the relatively low-born heroine succeeds, against extremely inopportune odds of traditional upper-class elitism, in securing the love and marriage of a wealthy lord. With this ending she rises in status and enters into a loving marriage. Such a happy ending is available to Sarah as Charles remains a man of means (he has the money to travel the world despite not marrying Ernestina and being disinherited by his uncle) who can offer her and her child the security of a household if they wed. Yet she does not seize this opportunity. Sarah's reunion with Charles is not a passionate renewal of vows of commitment. It is rather an amicable and undecided meeting. A hopeful ending is not a happy ending. Besides, the reader is deprived the opportunity to tarry with it because the third ending comes hot on its heels.

The frustrating ending of Charles angry with Sarah is perhaps the least like a Victorian novel ending of all. It is a take on the tragic ending because it is not a happy one. But tragedies in Victorian literature usually have more dramatic or depressing endings, focussing on passionate self-destruction or dissoluteness. So, for example in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) the protagonist turns against financial security and status in his romance. He insists upon pursuing a scandalous relationship with his cousin. He is utterly ruined by a series of appalling misadventures, including the loss of his lover, arising from this disastrous course. The frustrating ending also overthrows traditional Victorian sexual politics "Fowles has reversed those premises supporting his model of creativity and gender by showing us male sexuality (Charles's) colonized by a female artist (Sarah) for inclusion in a text of her own devising… By the time Sarah, apparently in full possession of an independence guaranteed by creative triumph, tells Charles that he cannot marry her" (Cooper 1991, p. 112-113).

# CONCLUSION

Fowles' innovative use of metafiction makes an important contribution to the history of literature for, unlike the experimental postmodern metafiction that preceded it in America and Britain, it is employed, not for its own sake, but for the sake of historical critique. This signifies a decisive shift in storytelling form, an inspiration for other postmodern authors like Julian Barnes and Ian McEwen. The use of metafiction in historical fiction has now become mainstream. With Fowles' innovation, metafiction has opened up new vistas for the interpretation of history, a way of making a creative fiction out of historical literary investigation itself. It has enriched our communication with the past and added a new layer onto historicism. Just as *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* narrator applies 1960s values onto an interpretation of the Victorian era modern readers are invited to apply their contemporary values onto Fowles' 1960s reading with the reminder that they too will be judged.

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