

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN AS METALITERATURE

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*Abstract: The paper aims at demonstrating that the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles is a perfect instance of meta-literature. Starting from the idea that meta-fiction is not an imitation of reality we have attempted to highlight the fact that instead of hiding the disparity between fiction and reality, it exposes it. There are two striking features in John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. One is the heteroclit range of narrative techniques that the author makes use of, his novel being like a Babel tower of literary elements and styles. And the other one refers to the identity of the narrator which seems to be paradoxical as, on the one hand, he considers himself to be omniscient in the vein of pure Victorian literature but, on the other hand, he meddles incessantly in the story, revealing himself. All this being carefully looked into, the paper shapes up a theory of the plurality of voices along with the open ending provide the perfect environment for the "old" to continue within the "new" and for the reader to participate actively in the making process of fiction about fiction not about reality, which is the nature of meta-fiction itself.*

Keywords: meta-literature, inter-textuality, narrative omniscience, historiography, meta-fiction

"I do not know. The story I'm telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God" (Fowles 95) This is one straightforward, unequivocal assertion that the author makes, assuming thereby his intention to take his narrative beyond the realm of literature, twisting the plot to meta-literature.

First and foremost, one must come to terms with the concept of meta-literature. Metaliterature along with metafiction are two terms formed with the prefix *meta* which means "pertaining to a level above or beyond". Therefore, it is literature that describes literature and fiction that describes or analyzes fiction.

According to a theorist like Patricia Waugh, "metafiction is a kind of fictional writing which continuously draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality". (Waugh 2) Nonetheless, in the words of John Barth, "metafiction is a novel that imitates a novel rather than the real world". Fowles refers to fiction as "world as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was."

By saying so, metafiction is not an imitation of reality and instead of hiding the disparity between fiction and reality, it exposes it.

At a meta-literature level, the world of fiction created by the author gets defragmented, dismantled, with the sole purpose of joining the pieces together again.

Not only does the author question his own authority as narrator but he also makes the reader analyze some other aspects of his fiction than the plot itself. At some point he even boasts about his novel having two endings. One ending tailored to the taste of Victorian readers, as the couple Sarah- Charles is joined in holy matrimony. On the other hand, the other alternative ending suits the liking of modern readers since it links the plot to the past. In

this view, Charles is made to break up with Ernestine just to provide him with the opportunity to better himself as an individual, liberated from the constraints of marriage.

From another perspective, the novel might be approached as a history book containing facts of life, historical events and characters. Besides being a metafiction, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is more precisely a historiographic metafiction. This term was coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. According to Hutcheon, in "A Poetics of Postmodernism", the works which are considered to be historiographic metafiction are "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages". Therefore, it is the process of re-writing history through a work of fiction.

In terms of plot, the story in the novel is quite simple. The novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a late twentieth-century novel about two couples, Charles Smithson, his fiancée Ernestina Freeman, and his lover Sarah Woodruff. Sarah was allegedly seduced and abandoned by a French lieutenant but Charles gets to discover, when making love to her, that she was actually a virgin. He decides to give up his old life and start a new one by Sarah's side. He then breaks his engagement with Ernestina but sadly enough Sarah disappears and cannot be found for two years. When he finally finds her, Charles is given two options: marry her or Ernestina. This is where meta-fiction comes in place as the two characters are the embodiments of two eras, the Victorian and the Modern.

As far as features of narrative technique are concerned, there is one controversial issue which arises and gives food for thought to critics and readers alike. That is the problematic identity of the narrator.

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It is just an opportunity for the author to analyze alternative representations of the world. To this aim, he assigns to the reader the part of both fictional character, able to intrude in the narrative, and investigator, skilled at probing the hidden referential elements. These are again significant features of meta-literature. All this is made clear in Chapter 55 in the train scene where the reader gets to realize that the character he is being told about in the first place and who is minutely described by the narrator is actually the narrator himself:" Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is not quite the same as the two above. But rather, what the devil I am going to do with you? So, I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight upon which he is about to engage. That leaves me with two alternatives. I let the fight proceed and take no more than a recording part in it; or I take both sides in it." (Fowles 409)

Similarly, the narrator meddles in the unfolding of events with apparently insignificant details such as the crack in the Toby jug that Sarah bought in Chapter 36: "The Toby was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged." (Fowles 280)

By means of all these intrusions, the narrator does not only question his own identity but he also loses it. As Patricia Waugh puts it "The more the author appears, the less he or she exists". This means that each and every time the narrator takes part into the fiction his

own identity is called into question. In the end, “the language of the text produces him as much as he produces the language of the text”. (Waugh 133)

Providing the reader with two different endings of his novel, the author declines his authority and admits to being on a personal quest for identity. The sense of self is explored by means of novel identities. The world of fiction is the proper environment conducive to achieving a sense of identity. In his novel, Fowles does not create the illusion of reality per se but provides the readers with guidelines in order to make them aware of that illusion. The twentieth-century perspective upon a nineteenth-century plot is the path to achieving this. The narrator detaches himself from the plot and changes perspective empowering the reader to interact with fiction: “I have disgracefully broken the illusion? No. My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. Fiction is woven into all, as a Greek observed some two and a half thousand years ago ... But this is preposterous? A character is either “real” or “imaginary”? If you think that, hypocrite lecteur, I can only smile. (Fowles 97)

In Chapter XIII for instance, Fowles says: “...a planned world ... is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live” (Fowles 96) This is a solid proof of his declining the authorial omniscience and of his claiming of meta-fictional traits as the only tools meant to liberate him from literary constraints. By giving up on the objective omniscience as an author, Fowles asserts and assumes his meta-fictional vent brought about by a post-modern mind frame.

An important opposition which is tackled throughout the novel is that of reality and fiction. Through a metaphor this opposition is deconstructed in that of the reader vs. narrator. The former is seen as fictional due to the multiple interventions in the text which raise doubt regarding the identity and trustworthiness of his messages. Consequently, the reader becomes the only real figure, as he or she is placed in reality whereas the narrator dwells somewhere in between.

What is of utmost importance for the understanding of the literary construction of the novel is the concept of Intertextuality. Most theorists agree that metafiction is an intertextual technique used for self-reflexive, identity purposes. Consequently, we may say that by using metafiction Fowles did it with a view to achieving a sense of identity for himself as an author who was keenly aware of his intertextual powers. His use of epigraphs, like the riddle in Chapter I is a clear illustration of intertextuality. Both the epigraph and the title of the poem itself “Riddle” are meant to shed light on the mysterious character Sarah Woodruff who is a riddle in herself. “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.” (Fowles 3) The fact that throughout the book there are epigraphs, footnotes and quotes draws attention to its status as a narrative, breaks the illusion and try to reconstruct the Victorian era underlying that the past cannot be represented as it really happened. (Valentova 45)

All in all, as metafiction aims at creating a different universe, other than the common-sense world of everyday reality, Fowles states that this can be achieved “by preventing the reader from settling into any given context and by making him or her aware of possible alternatives to this “commonsense reality” (Waugh 90). There is no ultimate truth, no good or bad points of view, only multiple perspectives. The intertextuality, the plurality of voices along with the open ending provide the perfect environment for the “old” to continue within the “new” and for the reader to participate actively in the making process of fiction about fiction not about reality, which is the nature of metafiction itself.

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