

El Posmodernismo y la era victoriana en "The French Lieutenant's Woman"

Autor: Lorenzo Cerviño, Susana María (licenciada en Filología inglesa, Profesora de inglés en educación secundaria).

Público: Profesores de enseñanza secundaria de inglés. **Materia:** Lengua inglesa (programa bilingüe). **Idioma:** Español.

Título: El Posmodernismo y la era victoriana en "The French Lieutenant's Woman".

Resumen

En "The French Lieutenant's Woman" Fowles presenta una novela del siglo diecinueve narrada desde la perspectiva del siglo veinte con una finalidad clara: denunciar la hipocresía del pasado. Fowles analiza el impacto de la era victoriana en el triángulo amoroso entre sus personajes al tiempo que el movimiento posmodernista irrumpe en la novela para sorprender técnicamente al lector. Los poderes quasi-divinos del narrador le serán arrebatados para ofrecer a sus personajes libertad de elección. La libertad narrativa es un claro reflejo de la libertad de los personajes quienes, con ayuda de las técnicas metafictivas, lograrán romper con la sociedad victoriana.

Palabras clave: Posmodernismo, metafemismo, metaficción, anacronismo, moralidad victoriana, submundos.

Title: Postmodernism and Victorian England in "The French Lieutenant's Woman".

Abstract

"The French Lieutenant's Woman" is a novel based on the nineteenth century but narrated from a twentieth century perspective to denounce the hypocrisy of the past. Fowles is concerned with the effects of Victorian England on the love triangle between his characters at the same time that Postmodernism breaks into the novel to give the reader a new technical surprise. The narrator's god-like powers are undermined to give his characters freedom to choose. This freedom in narrative choices echoes the characters' determination to break free from Victorian society and its expectations of morality and order.

Keywords: Postmodernism, metafiction, anachronism, Victorian morality, sub-worlds.

Recibido 2016-03-07; Aceptado 2016-03-09; Publicado 2016-04-25; Código PD: 070015

In 1966 John Fowles and his wife Elizabeth moved to a farm near Lyme Regis, Southern England, which later became the background to his most acclaimed novel: "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*", published three years later in 1969. Influenced by French Naturalism and Existentialism after majoring in French and German at Oxford University, Fowles began to admire individual freedom. The lack of innovation in literature after the Second World War had led many English writers to confront the conservative approach to the novel. John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" had already announced that realism had nothing to offer to writers willing to experiment with new literary forms. The term metafiction slowly began to gain acceptance among writers and literary critics who wanted to leave behind old-fashioned realistic techniques and as a result the term Postmodernist fiction came into existence.

ANACHRONISM

The process of story-telling was immediately integrated into the development of the story itself and the author's god-like powers became undermined. "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*", an apparently Victorian novel set in England in 1867, is one of the best exponents of Postmodernist fiction. Its nineteenth century background soon overlaps with twentieth century England: computers, Hitler's invasion of Poland or the invention of the atom bomb relentlessly intrude into Fowles' world. The result is amusing. The temporal distance gives rise to surprising effects that make the readers laugh. There is a cultural and temporal shock of which the author takes advantage to make a substantial use of the strategies of irony and parody. The projection of a twentieth century perspective into the past is achieved by the continuous incursions of present social advances and technological innovations. Historical events are misplaced in time through anachronism, a narrative technique by which the past and the future both merge and which serves to give shape to a new structure fragmented by multiple endings and intrusions by the novelist.

The structure of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been problematized as a consequence of the temporal dimension of the novel. The temporal distance between the nineteenth and the twentieth century world from which the story is narrated helps to construct a parody of the past. There are continuous glimpses of twentieth century England into

Victorian society. The introduction of anachronistic features constitutes a source of irony. In a sudden way the twentieth century bursts into Fowles' fiction disorienting the reader, annihilating the image of the world that has been depicted so far, therefore destroying the fictional frame in which we think to be immersed.

With his novel set in mid-nineteenth century England, Fowles laughs at the previous century from a twentieth century point of view and the author, with a personality of his own, uses anachronism to enter his own fiction and to move freely from the present to the past in order to play a critical role, often impersonating a minor character in the story, though always taking a primary role in the novel.

John Fowles' remarkable treatment of life and art together with his innovative recreation of the sense of life in Victorian society is not important itself. It is important insofar as this pastiche of a nineteenth century world responds to one of the principles of Postmodernist fiction: a parody of the past. The setting of "*The French Lieutenant's Woman*" runs parallel to an era when the British Empire was coming to an end. Morality, tradition and religious beliefs had started to fade away and Victorian society began to be described from the point of view of a twentieth century narrator whose aim was to denounce the hypocrisy of the past. These changes in society needed to be accompanied by changes in the treatment of the narrative world. The tidy picture that realistic fiction had been presenting with linear progression and closed endings was then replaced by a more chaotic structure. Characters, settings, a variety of endings or the narrator himself became victims of the convulsion that Postmodernism had on the narrative world. As a result the reader becomes involved in the construction of the novel as a product. The novel's realistic wrapping is soon replaced by a multiple-layer Postmodernist framework at the same time that Victorian morality is eroded by the loss of the Empire.

CHARACTER ROLES

Characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are closely connected by the pillars of Mid-Victorian England and overwhelmed by the triumph of religious sexual duties. Ernestina embodies the prototype of the sexless, impassionate woman. She is an example of chastity and purity, the repressive and suffocating model expected and followed in Victorian England, as well as the prototype of a society that rewards a perfect moral behavior. Mrs. Poultney, with her pernicious ideas about sex, sets herself up as the model of a rigid system of values that limits the characters' personal freedom and leads individuals to the repression of their natural instincts. This extreme moral behavior borders on ignorance. The tyranny and despotism with which she has been portrayed reflect the deep conviction that mid-Victorian society survives within a system where morality and appearances have precedence over true natural feelings. Both female characters and antagonist settings in the novel are logically intertwined to give rise to the sense of duality that breaks apart Victorian society and its principles.

Women characters clearly respond to the sense of duality that the novel tried to present: on the one hand Ernestina Freeman, the embodiment of the Victorian lady (the perfect mother and wife typified in nineteenth century England) and on the other hand Sarah Woodruff, the Postmodernist character that displays the decay of the Empire. Her life takes place a hundred years ago but her attitude moves away from the traditional, submissive role women were forced to play. Sarah is ahead of her time and in this sense she is closer to the twentieth century world from which the story is narrated. She stubbornly refuses to conform and to fit in and therefore lives life on her own terms.

There is a prominence in the novel on the evolution of male characters and the awareness of their individuality. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reexamines metafeminist work. Sarah is the facilitator of the male character's conduct. Her conflicting relationship with Charles allows him to be in control of life choices. He ends up without a partner in one of the endings, after losing Sarah and after his rejection of a conventional marriage with Ernestina, though acknowledging his power to speak as a free man. Sarah is liberated and she sets Charles free. Charles' choices echo Sarah's choices. Charles' freedom to choose his own destiny is a mimesis of Sarah's approach to the ideal of freedom. Sarah, abandoned by a married officer at the beginning of the novel and Charles, abandoned by Sarah at the end of the novel, are the pieces of this vicious game based on sexual and religious tensions where Charles ends up as a castaway, isolated but free. Such conflicting tensions between Sarah and Charles strongly confront puritan sexual duties.

Sarah, a mysterious woman who acts as an evil force in this love triangle Sarah-Charles-Ernestina is both a symbol of what is forbidden and a representation of an unconventional role. As a dark lady in disguise, she tries to separate Charles from Ernestina. Fowles uses her as a device to criticize Victorian attitudes and the male representation of women. Through this character Fowles tries to denounce the hypocrisy rooted in the hypersensitive world of Lyme Regis, forever

poisoned by unhealthy traditions and a pernicious system of values. Sarah lives in an old society that feels overwhelmed by her sexual freedom and clandestine love affair with a married man.

The contrast between the natural and the social world (overt and covert recognition) plays a crucial role in the portrayal of the characters' world. Both nature and society have been presented with a clearly defined functional purpose. The sexual act between Sarah and Charles can only take place away from the repressive moral system that the enclosed world of Lyme Regis represents. As a result the forest becomes their expansion of freedom. Only in the forest can Charles find the seeds of the transformation that will lead him into a new life. He finds himself unable to give free rein to his natural instincts due to the responsibilities imposed by morality in a burdensome manner. Society and nature therefore become the representation of repression and freedom respectively.

Women characters have been portrayed with a similar functional difference. Charles has been led to a conventional marriage with Ernestina, although within himself he feels a strong sexual attraction towards Sarah. Each of these women symbolizes one aspect of the sense of duality in Victorian England: repression and passion, duty and desire, what is permissible and what is banned. As compared with the sexless Ernestina we have the passionate Sarah. These two women are the embodiment of the surface and deep structure of Victorian double standards. Characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* live in a world where public image governs their lives, where nature is under the veil of hypocrisy, where sexuality is dominated by duty and sincerity is censored.

Religion remains a powerful force for the Victorians. Individuals are under the pressures of religion. Let us take Sarah as an example, the image of the "fallen" woman for her violation of the principles of tradition. Even the sexual act is approached from the perspective of religious duty. Brutality and repugnance are the two terms that best describe Ernestina's resistance to it. Sexuality shows all kinds of restrictions, such as Charles' repentance after the consumption of the sexual act with Sarah with the subsequent transgression of the principle of chastity. Sin became a permanent threat to the Victorians, although with different results at the end of the novel.

The plot of *"The French Lieutenant's Woman"* can be described as highly melodramatic, which helps us to explain the Victorian realistic approach to the novel. Some examples are Sarah's agonizing look, her mysterious past and alleged love affair with a married man, frequent melancholic breakdowns, walks to the Dairy alone, secret and accidental encounters in the forest (traditionally associated with sin and temptation), together with Ernestina's conventional swoon or even the exchange of clandestine letters. Some of these features eventually merge with the 1860s sensation novel. These are in essence some of the aspects that allow Fowles to give shape to the sense of life in the Victorian novel while consciously playing with the narrative technique.

STRUCTURE

Fowles makes the structure of *"The French Lieutenant's Woman"* problematic, destabilizes our expectations, exploits the narrative technique to his own ends and puzzles the reader; in other words, he plays with convention. He challenges the narrative tradition and calls into question the principles upon which the nineteenth century novel is based. The narrative world widens its horizons. In contrast to the safety that characterizes the Victorian novel, in *"The French Lieutenant's Woman"*, the problematic nature of fictional form turns into a structure consisting of fragmentation, multiple endings, parody, intrusions by the author, in essence, the features that define Postmodernist fiction. The organized picture described by Victorian literature is now replaced by confusion and chaos.

The Victorian world is evaluated from the point of view of a twentieth century narrator. The author intrudes into his fiction to clear up some aspects of his narrative style. Fowles soon discloses his intentions, as in chapter thirteen. His potential to master the narrative structure lies in the adoption of the principle of freedom. In Fowles's words "... with freedom our first principle, not authority." (Fowles 1987: 86). Freedom turns out to be a key concept that extends to everything in the novel:

- To his characters, who must have a life of their own. They are no longer puppets.
- To the reader, who is expected to take part in the process of creating and processing the novel.
- To the narrator and to the author, whose twentieth century knowledge intrudes into the fictional world.

Freedom turns out to be the mainstay of the novel. “*The novelist is still a god, since he creates*” (Fowles 1987: 86), but the principle of authority has undergone an important change. The narrator’s previous “quasi-divine” or god-like powers are going to be questioned and replaced by freedom to choose, to fragment and to intrude.

Fowles’ narrative structure does not follow the traditional pattern represented by Victorian fiction, in which events follow a linear progression until we reach the end and in which we passively follow the development of the story. According to Ian Gregor (1991) in his book *Reading the Victorian Novel*:

“The reader can relax and look forward to a reading experience unimpeded by fragmentation, compression or ambiguity. As a travelling companion the author, and the text, will rarely involve the reader in any kind of compromising discussion. The reading will be enclosed within a fiction that moves reassuringly to its inevitable “safe” end.”

POSTMODERNIST READERS

In Fowles’ novel, by contrast, the reader is expected to make a greater effort. The passive reader of the Victorian novel is now replaced by a reader of whom a more active behavior will be required in the interpretation and configuration of the narrative structure. Their expectations of passivity and uninvolved observation will be taken away. Readers become the target of the author’s insults, turning into “*hypocrite lecteurs*”. This close relationship sustained with the reader is essential to make the novel work. The text of “*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” provides a variety of endings. These three endings offer the reader three different possibilities among which they should choose. The configuration of an ending depends on the reader’s choice. The reader of the Victorian novel has access to a finished product. In “*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*”, on the other hand, the reader is encouraged to finish this product. Multiple endings become in essence multiply exclusive.

“True multiple-ending texts are obviously related to the forking-path narratives in which mutually exclusive possibilities have been jointly realized.” (McHale 1991: 109)

The reader thinks that everything that has been narrated in the story is true, but later on he realizes that he has been deceived, as in chapter forty-four, where his uninvolved observation is denied. The future has been devised in Charles’ imagination. We are shocked when we are presented with an ending in the middle of the novel, and we are again shocked when the author makes it clear that what is considered to be an ending is nothing but the product of the character’s imagination. We are offered the prototypical Victorian ending where Charles chooses a conventional marriage to Ernestina and two endings that, though different, are more closely related to the idea of freedom that has been defended throughout the novel. Charles, by breaking up his engagement with Ernestina, leaves behind the system of values that characterize Victorian life. Although in one of these two endings both Sarah and he separate definitively, Charles has had the chance to make the most of his freedom. There is therefore a proliferation of endings as compared with the unique closed ending of Victorian fiction. As a consequence such aspects as worlds or reality will be reassessed in the novel.

REALITY

Charles is aware of the confusion between the real Sarah and the image of Sarah that has been created in his mind. Sarah also fictionalizes her own life by inventing a melodramatic past. As a result the author casts doubts upon what is meant by reality. Human beings tend to fictionalize and “dress up” their lives. The boundary between reality and fiction is therefore almost non-existent. We cannot define reality if our lives are fictional worlds that we make up and transform as we please. This confusion serves to explain why the term unreality seems to be more appropriate.

SUB-WORLDS

“*The French Lieutenant’s Woman*” is characterized by the creation and proliferation of different worlds:

- The worlds that characters build up, such as Charles’ construction of the future, also known as sub-worlds in Postmodernist fiction.
- The world in which the fictional characters exist and into which the twentieth century author intrudes to talk about the creation of fictional form. In this world real features of the twentieth century world invade a nineteenth century fictional context.

The reader has the disquieting sense that what is happening can be altered in subsequent pages, as in chapter sixty-one. The author intrudes into his fictional world to give us a new technical surprise. We go back to the starting point where the narrative structure is going to diverge in order to offer us a new ending. These intrusions call into question the position that the author occupies. He appears in the shape of a secondary character, an impresario. There is a change or confusion of roles.

CONCLUSION

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the process of creating a story interrupts and intrudes into the narrative world. Fowles destroys the traditional conception of the novel by means of fragmentation or by intervening in his own fiction, by sitting in front of Charles and wondering what to do with his character. The maker is in front of his creation. We move away from a typical linear order. The novel does not meet the traditional expectations of reality. We are presented with a narrative within a narrative where the novelist writes about the process of writing itself. The sense of complacency will be suspended to give rise to an under-cover narrator who, like a policeman, controls his creatures' behaviour deceiving and manipulating our expectations of reality and order. The novel's self-awareness is a reflection about the state of life and the state of art. Plot devices give way to narrative devices. The breaking up of morality is followed by the breaking up of the narrative structure. Chaotic lives and chaotic structures, confusing relationships and confused readers is in essence what John Fowles' novel is all about.

Bibliografía

- Barth, J. (1967). "The Literature of Exhaustion." In John Barth, ed., *The Friday Book: Essays and other Non-fiction*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- Fowles, J. (1969). *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Picador.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Gregor, I. (1980). *Reading the Victorian Novel. Detail into form*. London: Vision Press.
- McHale, B. (1991). *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Muthusivam, P. 2013. *The Significance of Victorian Background in The French Lieutenant's Woman of John Fowles: a Case Study*. International Journal of Research in Applied, Natural and Social Sciences. Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 93-98.
- Qiming Ji. 2013. *Freedom in "The French Lieutenant's Woman"*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 3, pp. 2052-2060.
- Sanders, A. (1994). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.