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"THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN"
AS A TRADITIONAL VICTORIAN NOVEL
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"The French Lieutenant's Woman" is a novel written in 1969 [1, p.7]. The interweaving of historical and literary sources of Victorian era are characteristics of the novel. American Libraries Magazine describes this novel as one of the "Notable Books of 1969" [2, p. 276-277]. *TIME* magazine chose the novel as one of the 100 best English-language novels published between 1923 and 2005 [3].

John Fowles is associated with the historiographic metafiction as well as Umberto Eco. Eco and Fowles published well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.

The action in this novel takes place 100 years before it was published. John Fowles reconstructs the atmosphere of the Victorian epoch. Throughout the novel the omniscient narrative voice alongside a series of footnotes seem to objectively reflect his difficulties of controlling the characters, the conventions that are expected of a Victorian novel and analysis of differences in 19th century customs and class. The narrator often returns to discussions of high importance in literature of the period, like the theories of Charles Darwin, the radical politics of Karl Marx, and the works of Matthew Arnold, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Thomas Hardy [4]. But the aim of Fowles is to show the deconstruction of the Victorian novel because after the World War II the interest to literature of "Golden Age" began to grow. John Fowles had his own critical view upon this epoch.

The controversy with the Victorian "picture of the world" is conducted in the "The French Lieutenant's Woman" on different levels: philosophical, textual, narrative, psychological, moral. Describing the insides of the Victorian period, the author uses phenomena that are appropriate for the 20th century. Here are some examples of them.

"...As full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo..." [5, p. 2]

Henry Spencer Moore (1898 – 1986) was an English sculptor and artist. He was best known for his semi-<u>abstract</u> monumental bronze sculptures which are located around the world as public works of art. [6] The action of the novel takes place in the mid-nineteenth century while Henry Moore was born in 1898 and his early works were done in twenties of the 20th century.

"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..."[5, p. 6]

It is clear, that airplanes, jet engines, television, radars did not exist in the 19th century, at the time of the novel. Speaking about airplanes, the <u>Wright brothers</u> flights, which took place only in 1903, are recognized as "the first sustained and controlled heavier-than-air powered flight". [7] The first demonstration of

the instantaneous transmission of images, that is television, was performed by Georges Rignoux and A. Fournier in Paris in 1909. [8, p. 451] Radar was secretly developed by several nations before and during World War II. The origin of the word "radar" was coined in 1940 by the US Navy as an acronym for "radio detection and ranging". [9]

Even more late phenomena connected with World War II are mentioned in the following examples.

"There would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady…"[5, p. 9].

The Gestapo was the official <u>secret police</u> of <u>Nazi Germany</u> between 1933 and 1945. The Gestapo men were allowed to <u>arrest</u> people that offended the government in any, even insignificant, way. The government could use the secret police to accuse and arrest anyone they wanted without being questioned. [10]

"And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" [5, p. 12]

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, one week after the signing of the <u>Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact</u> . [11]

"A gentleman in one of the great houses that lie behind the Undercliff performed a quiet Anschluss — with, as usual in history, the approval of his fellows in society."[5; 38]

The Anschluss denotes the joining of <u>Austria</u> to <u>Germany</u> which took place only in 1938.

The author also resorts to some facts connected with literature, the manner of writing. The proof of that are the following.

"She possessed none, I may add, because they were all sold; not because she was an early forerunner of the egregious McLuhan." [5, p. 16]

Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911 –1980) was a Canadian philosopher of <u>communication theory</u> and a <u>public intellectual</u>. His work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of the study of <u>media theory</u>, as well as having practical applications in the advertising and television industries. [12]

"…Like so many worthy priests and dignitaries asked to read the lesson, an unconscious alienation effect of the Brechtian kind…" [5, p. 25].

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) first used the term in an essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" published in 1936, in which he described it as "playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious." [13, p. 91]

Why Mrs. Poulteney should have been an inhabitant of the Victorian valley of the dolls we need not inquire [5, p. 39].

John Fowles refers to Jacqueline Susann's bestseller "Valley of the Dolls" which was written in 1966.

The second feature of this novel is that Fowles uses postmodern techniques and strategies to produce the parody of Victorian fiction. As M. Bradbury says "The French Lieutenant's Woman" is "*both a formal imitation of the Victorian novel and an elegant endeavor at assessing the historical and mental difference between such a story and a modern reader – involving the construction of the consciousness of the*

world of a hundred years ago and the consciousness underlying the whole society and producing a kind of cultural unity between the inner and the outer world." [14, p. 284]

Fowles admires the works of those writers he imitates but he sometimes adds his own thoughts and ideas.

Dickens's use of his voice varies greatly, but for the most part it is heard in social and moral condemnation of the evils of society. Certainly, the reader can find this voice in "The French Lieutenant's Woman" where the writer discusses social problems of the Victorian Age.

Fowles also adopts Thackeray's tone in ironic comment on character and situation in "Vanity Fair". But Fowles goes farther in Thackeray's puppet dialogue with the created characters and he writes about the courses the characters have taken when in fact they haven't – clear demonstration of his control and manipulation. In the true spirit of the Victorian novel the reader is drawn into the discussion of the characters. It should be noted that one of Fowles's favorite devices is to tease the reader by suggesting what his characters did and then having them do the reverse. It serves to remind that we are reading fiction, which holds up the mirror to reality but can never be reality itself.

Fowles also picks up George Eliot's moral comments and indicates the alternative lives his characters might have led.

All great Victorian novelists (Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy and others) use their own voices so much that they often succeed in becoming a character in their own novels.

The same can be said about Fowles's 20th century narrator who briefly turns into a character in Chapter 55. The narrator appears as an overdressed impresario who enters a train carriage with Charles and turns back the watch and thus narrative time. His description resembles the writer's appearance "*a massively bearded face… a man of forty or so*" [5, p. 403]. The narrator sits in his protagonist's first-class apartment on his railway journey to London and asks himself "*what the devil I am going to do with you?*" [5, p. 405] Ultimately, he decides to give the reader two possible versions of the ending and not to allow him to choose between the two endings.

Fowles uses different modes of narration in "The French Lieutenant's Woman". The narrative structure of the novel is highly traditional or Victorian as well as self-conscious or postmodernist. He combines both the omniscience of the Victorian novel with a freedom of action and expression for his characters – which postmodernist writers see as paramount. Fowles, as a highly self-conscious postmodernist man of letters, constantly breaks fictive illusion and comments directly on the action, the character's motives and possibilities and explains how things might have been different.

The novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman" has multiple endings, a technical trick which could only belong to a postmodern novel. It is a common postmodern device which gives the writer the opportunity to stress fictional character of his literary text. Multiple endings remind the reader once again of the fact that he or she

is reading fiction, in which the author is free to think of any ending he likes and even give more than one ending to his work. The first, typically Victorian, ending parodies the conventions of the Victorian novel, in the form of which "The French Lieutenant's Woman" is written. Fowles makes the reader think that this ending is not very probable in real life. The second two endings allow the writer to appear in the novel as one of its characters. The appearance of the author in his literary work is also a typically postmodern device. Fowles does not miss the chance to converse with his reader, discussing different endings of the novel. He invites the reader to think more deeply about the fate of the main characters of the novel and to choose the ending he or she likes. Multiple endings once again show that the novel is double coded, that it is written in the twentieth century using the conventions of the Victorian novel of the 19th century.

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