

Ambiguity in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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John Fowles' sense of humour, subtle irony and his admiration for the magic power of art generated ever new interpretations of ambiguity in his major works and in his non fiction. His *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an excellent example in this respect and I would like to approach his presentation of ambiguity in the above novel in its relationship to the principle of the freedom that allows for other freedoms to exist, the thesis of the reality as real as but other, viz., more real than the reality that exists and the problematic meeting of pre-modernist, modernist and post-modern fiction in this novel.

John Fowles' interest in the individual's need for freedom results in characteristic modes of expression and technical solutions which help him rewrite both traditional stereotypes and contemporary theoretical, scientific or technical developments. John Fowles' books simultaneously reflect on contemporary non-literary aspects which influence the individual's possibilities in the twentieth century and stress the peripheral status of the existential in the context of the aesthetic alternatives described.

This authorial attitude directs attention to the inherent ambiguity clearly formulated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, where John Fowles declares that his main or 'principal' concern is not with authority but with freedom and that he is ready to sacrifice the exclusive quality of the two above categories and 'democratise' them: "The novelist is still a god, since he creates [...] in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (*F. L. W.*: 97).

In the same novel John Fowles actually declares that freedom and authority are not exclusive of one another, rather he asserts that they are inclusive of different interpretations, and thus can become the source of constant (dis)ambiguity. This is so because freedom is not defined qua freedom but it is declared to be a category that allows for other freedoms, which means that there is a 'central' if not a dominant form of freedom, which can give permission for other forms of freedom to exist. This formula also suggests that the author is ready to share his freedom with some of his characters and it even formulates the

possibility that the artist's freedom can benefit from the partial results of his characters' search for freedom.

The key formula could be that Sarah Woodruff has access to her author's creativity which translates that John Fowles and Sarah have the ambiguous, possibly interchangeable status of author-character or character-author in the novel. John Fowles not only stresses the centrality of ambiguity in this novel, but also obsessively questions its influence on the novel as a genre.

When John Fowles discusses freedom in the proximity of authority, he asserts that the novelist's authority is maintained with the modification that it allows for other authorities. This paradox is present in nearly all his works but *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is perhaps the best example in this respect. This is so as the novel is a vigorous 20th century variant of the Victorian novel, which presents its 'lead' against a realistically described nineteenth century social, philosophical and historical background which is occasionally reinterpreted and fragmented by the fictionally theoretical comments and two intrusions by the twentieth century novelist; thus we can say that one of the most important protagonists in the novel is the novel itself.

This also means that in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the authorial intrusions, a series of theoretical sections, as well as the multiple endings, employ the Victorian material as the very subject and object of theoretical and practical, of fictional and real examination and experiment. This relatively complicated situation does not undermine the possibility of a 'perfect' Victorian novel, but John Fowles signals his conviction that this solution is merely one among many, as in his interpretation the author's dominance is just one of the numerous aspects that influence the fictional material.

Analysis, experiment, dissolving the boundaries between literary history, theory or fiction writing as well as the role and presence of the author become possibilities which are asserted, exercised and also questioned as fictional material in the novel and John Fowles even dedicates chapters thirteen and sixty-one to the theoretical discussion of the above aspects. The form could be termed fictional essay, or fictional theory.

The above paradox results from the very nature of John Fowles' interpretation of fiction, as in his concept the fiction of all periods has reflected on itself to a certain degree (Fowles 1977: 137). This introspection gains prominence and is made into a visible process in the so-called self-reflexive novel fashionable in the second half of the twentieth century (Waugh 1984: 162).

His characters are in an extremely difficult situation because they exist in an ambiguous world, a Victorian one which nevertheless is dominated by postmodern interpretations, and this ambiguity results in a double-voiced rhetoric and a dimension where the rules of the world 'as real as the world that is' make sense only for those protagonists who know that Victorian certainties are being challenged by the intrusion of postmodern avalanche of doubts.

To create this sort of useful ambiguity John Fowles employs different Victorian and earlier works of art, scientific or social approaches freely as a kind

of 'raw' material in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the author and the title character manipulate them freely so it does not surprise us that the title of the novel is not consistent with its plot. If I interpret the plot in a conventional way I have to admit that it is extremely, perhaps too simple. Ernestina Freeman, the only child of a rich businessman and Charles Smithson a young man of aristocratic extraction are walking on the beach when the young man catches sight of poor Tragedy, a mysterious woman. This meeting is going to change the fates of the three participants in the ménage. Charles proposes to Ernestina and even discusses the financial terms of their marriage with his would be father in law, but meetings with Sarah Woodruff motivate him to first try and help the desperate woman, an action which later leads him into an illicit affair with her. The conventional ending to this story reconciles Charles to Ernestina and Sarah Woodruff disappears from their happy Victorian married life. But the novel has other endings in store and this means that the ending both occurred and it did not....

John Fowles even apologizes for having offered his readers a flat ending and a collection of essays as a novel, but this is also an impossible possibility. The cause and effect principle remains intact and the somewhat ambiguous credibility of the story will stand the test of even the most critical reader in the end due to a series of technical subtleties John Fowles employs. The novel abounds in explicit authorial intrusions, which loosen the steady Victorian context and this narrative strategy allows for two more solutions to the conflict, which establish, and emphasise the central role of the French lieutenant's woman in the above-summarised first section.

This situation directs our attention to the liberal handling of the fictional material, which results in promises the novel does not honour. There is no seducer in the novel and for most of the novel we witness a young virgin's preparations to become somebody's woman rather than a fallen woman's struggle to fight against the attacks of Victorian society. In fact, all predictable interpretations are undermined because Sarah's status does not make sense, cannot make sense, to most of the nineteenth century characters in the novel.

The title promises to offer the life story of a tragic figure seduced and abandoned, or further abused, terrorised and humiliated by a merciless seducer. Yet, as I have just argued, in the novel there is no seducer, no acts that humiliate a weak innocent woman. On the contrary, we discover that the French lieutenant's woman is the result of Sarah's 'creativity' and she becomes a seductress who manipulates Charles Smithson. The harvest of the seeds of ambiguity is sweet and sour as our interpretation of her status is partly the result of expectations generated by our knowledge of the Victorian fictional variants of the theme, but the possibility of some sort of progress or deviation from these principles has been asserted by the time we try to make sense of the situation.

The above discrepancy between the promise formulated by the title and the actual events, which construct the plot, can be interpreted as a kind of warning addressed to the reader. The shocking revelation, that Sarah Woodruff is still a

virgin, and that her status as a fallen woman, is the result of her own ‘fiction’ created in the company of John Fowles alters the nature of the book considerably.

Her determination to confront a prejudiced and hostile Victorian environment is conventional enough, but it becomes the source of creative ‘play’ and the same can be said of the novel, which is and is not Victorian. Thus Sarah Woodruff’s career most notably demonstrates that she differs from other Victorian heroines through her, and her creator’s choice of the form of rebellion, and the same can be said about the novel itself.

With a bit of exaggeration we could say that she employs the power of tradition and stereotypes for her own benefit while projecting herself into a characteristic Victorian conflict she simultaneously amends the nature and character of the predictable fictional medium as well. The formula, the power of her ‘authorial’ will is fully justified, as in chapter thirteen John Fowles claims that he has no genuine control over his characters’ acts as once they achieve their own identity they enter into a dimension over which the artist has no control or has very limited authority:

I can only report – and I am the most reliable witness – that the idea seemed to me to come early from Charles, not myself. I must respect it, and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real. [...] There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. (*F.L.W.* 82)

Yet Sarah has an ambiguous status as although she lives in the Victorian period, her material existence is determined by the given physical and historical dimension of the novel and at the same time she is the ‘accomplice’ of the twentieth century novelist. The complexity of the novel stems partly from this first platform of ambiguity, suggested by the fact that the environment she exists in is one she manages to both inhabit and evade with the help of her creative power and the support of the twentieth century novelist. Of course her creative power is the product of John Fowles’ imagination, but the author insists on this sense of ambiguity.

The ambiguity element is essential at this point as she is a pariah, an outcast in the given microcosm, yet she is the only character who is aware of the nature of the situation and benefits from ambiguity and her career occasionally can be identified as near-identical with the process by way of which John Fowles imagines, plans, organises, writes and offers up his fictional material to the readers of his book.

This state of affairs constantly reminds us that we are discussing a novel, which is constructed on the principle of ambiguity as it is and it is not a Victorian one. Sarah’s dual existence, her ambiguous nature, is determined by the unavoidable shadow of tradition, as well as by her, her author’s and ‘their’ novel’s rebellion against a ‘once’ admittedly ideal world or mode of

presentation. Sarah gains her right to dismiss Victorian illusions in a Victorian world because she is at the same time, admittedly, the product of twentieth century imagination and thus John Fowles formulates his and her right to dismiss the limits of both Victorian and twentieth century fiction by demonstrating that fiction is centuries old and eternally fresh and young simultaneously.

Through this duality the novel extends the power of creative, artistic imagination to the domain of cultural dimensions other than literature to demonstrate that the illusion of art changing life has to and can be maintained. This illusion is clearly formulated by John Fowles in the very title of one of his essays, which announces in loosely Cartesian terms "I write therefore I am" (Fowles 1964: 5-12), which could be an excellent explanation of Sarah and the 'life' she is creating for herself and her consorts in the company of John Fowles.

Sarah Woodruff's greatest power stems from her creative manipulation of already existing social, moral and most notably fictional patterns and the tempting quality of the image she creates of herself is, as Pamela Cooper rightly puts it "a constant *fata morgana* of great influence" (Cooper 1991: 62).

The innocent woman who either falls in love with a man, or is simply seduced or raped by a man and thus becomes a pariah has been a common topic in world literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Hester Prynne*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess d'Urberville* revealed already functioning social and moral stereotypes of the respective periods in America and Britain. These tragic figures were victims of hypocrisy, social and moral ignorance, but in John Fowles' novel the victim is a victimiser and relevantly she creates this ambiguity for reasons we have already discussed.

The above anachronistic elements, the underlying sense of ambiguity, become explainable and organic through the chapters of John Fowles' fiction, which discuss theoretical aspects concerning the novel and the novelist. Sarah's 'writing' of her own fate also enables the novel to reveal the process by way of which the 'dominant' character deconstructs the myth of both the pure woman and that of the fallen woman and thus the fallen woman can be interpreted as the pure woman and the pure woman can be equated with the fallen one. This is also the case in Thomas Hardy's *A Pure Woman* as well, but John Fowles' intention is to suggest that a mysterious and beautiful woman's version of her own miserable or dignified fate is a valid possibility.

This possibility belongs to the domain of illusions, but creating valid interpretations of reality as illusion is part of human nature and of fiction and functions as a perfect source of useful ambiguity. David W. Landrum writes that John Fowles employs this technique to help the reader assess his or her personal reactions to the events related:

As certainties crumble one after another, restoration and emancipation pattern that eventually extends from the characters in the novel to the author, the reader, and the text itself. Incessant shifting from one centre

to another, followed by the dislocation of each newly established centre, gives the novel much of its rhetorical energy and provides it with a unifying thematic dimension that substitutes for a formulaic thesis. (Landrum 1996: 103)

Occasional theoretical intrusions into the fictional material support the ambiguous nature of the material, and function in the sense suggested by Bradbury's idea that the novel imposes at least two readings from the perspectives of all three explicitly formulated endings (Bradbury 1993: 178).

We are quite often reminded that we are reading a text, which is different from traditional variants in that its achievements have to be assessed at a theoretical level as ambiguity if we are to employ the most relevant interpretations it suggests. One has to read the novel, simultaneously, as an exciting twentieth century interpretation of its Victorian grandfather and as the grandfather's critique of how his grandchildren are wasting the once praised, accepted stable values of the 'domain.'

Of course all the members of the extended 'family' of fiction (ethics, science, history, literary theory, contemporary fiction, or poetry) have a say, but none of them 'wants' to take the responsibility for anything that might or has gone wrong. Yet, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not a fictional comparative cultural study of the second half of the Victorian period and of the twentieth century. The most provocative aspect of the novel is that Sarah's art, or imagination makes of life an uglier existential dimension than it actually is because she builds up her official image of a multitude of possible roots of negative aesthetics. Yet the moral verdict of the Victorian world turns against the whole period as in its concept a young woman's love for a man is sin, her fidelity and longing to see him again is not compatible with Victorian morality, her tragedy is translatable as prostitution and the names given to her are Tragedy, the French lieutenant's woman, and ultimately the French lieutenant's whore.

She generates her 'public image' and when the underlying sense of ambiguity is revealed the result is a more flexible interpretation of the artificer's, that is her and her author's, possibilities. The above thesis is documented by the verifiable fictional fact brilliantly demonstrated by Katherine Tarbox, who states that the multiple endings of the novel mainly reflect on Sarah's possibilities (Tarbox 1988: 72).

The fact that Sarah is playing the role of a fallen woman and is determined to confront the hostile environment through the false image she designs and enacts highlights another relevant aspect regarding the insistence of the Fowlesian meta-realistic novel on the potential values of such ambiguity. Once Sarah's pretence is revealed the novel can start discarding its false interpretation as a traditional but limited Victorian novel and it directs our attention to its postmodern, willingly ambiguous 'identity'. This 'expertise' includes Ernestina

and Charles's marriage, the shocking meeting of Sarah and Charles, and the impossibility of any kind of meeting of Charles with either woman.

The gain is as obvious as the authorial intention 'written' in the novel because the reader also learns that fiction has the power to incorporate essay writing, philosophy, history, science, religion, literature, the theory of the novel and, more importantly, display its quality as an artistic process in progress where any conclusive, definite ending is false and only stems from too much respect for or abdication to stereotypes.

In "Hardy and the Hag" John Fowles justifies his option for the multiple ending solution not on the basis of objective critical reasons but writes that he considers it to be more fertile to his whole being as a writer. In the same essay John Fowles makes an interesting statement regarding Charles's status and the author's relationship with his male protagonist: "I wrote and printed two endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* entirely because from early in the first draft I was torn intolerably between wishing to reward the male protagonist (my surrogate) with the woman he loved and wishing to deprive him of her [...]" (Fowles 1977: 145).

The dangers of this kind of manipulation are also formulated in the novel. Charles Smithson, the 'clean angel' (Angel Clare) of the novel is in a more delicate and difficult situation than Sarah Woodruff because although he senses the 'mythic aura' that defends her against the whole world he cannot abandon his convention bound interpretation of a still acceptable pattern of behaviour. This means that the 'surrogate' is a Fowlesian projection of Victorian mentality still active in the mind of twentieth century artists. This is a reflection of the ambiguity John Fowles had been uneasy with all his life. It is easy to demonstrate that Charles' mentality is both Victorian (as he is ready to discuss the financial aspects of his marriage with his prospective father in law, or has no respect for Sam) and rebellious (his views, and his attitude towards Sarah).

These aspects are consistent with the ending suggested in chapter forty-four, but John Fowles simply calls this ending a work-hypothesis, a might have been solution and the fairly traditional ending is offered up only to be rewritten. John Fowles' sympathy for Charles is limited, the author shows his surrogate as the first existentialist following the coffin, which carries the corpse of his extinct Darwinist convictions yet he is not free to imagine and to create or to construct the world he would like to live in.

As the second and the third endings seem to suggest this 'authorial' ambition we may say that Charles, the 'surrogate', is enslaved by verifiable dimensions of the material world and is incapable of living in an illusion because he cannot sense the value of ambiguity relentlessly reformulated by Sarah and John Fowles. This is a very interesting sort of alliance between the author and his female protagonist against his surrogate. Charles Smithson revolts against art, very late in the novel, in the house of the Pre-Raphaelite artist and thus demonstrates that there is no hope for him to change, although he senses his status as a 'fossil'.

In fact, at the level of the plot Sarah Woodruff's strategy is successful because she refuses to accept the conventions of her contemporary society and she willingly disregards the spirit of the period. Sarah Woodruff pretends to be a fallen woman, a miserable victim of her uncontrolled passion, a possible mistress, a woman who is ready to marry the man who renounces the financial advantages offered up to him by life, a muse for artists, and finally a woman liberated by her status in all respects. This strategy generates her mobility as a fictional character and the transformation of her status is interpretable as freedom if her new possibilities are weighed against the lack of mobility of the other characters or of 'the world other than the world that is'.

First, of course she has to pretend that she is bad, because her status as a bad woman guarantees her the freedom to credibly suggest all the above 'unfulfilled promises' and to provoke discussion of related moral, ethical, social and aesthetic problems. She does not actually lie because Charles, similarly to the other characters, formulates questions, which comprise 'prefabricated' answers. She admits that she admired the lieutenant for his courage, but that she sometimes feels that he had nothing to do with the wreck and that he was the devil in the guise of a sailor. Her answer has to be considered, and can only be weighed in the light of Charles's question: "Miss Woodruff, I detest immorality. But morality without mercy I detest rather more. I promise not to be too severe a judge" (*F.L.W.* 136).

The question is not formulated in the interrogative; it is a statement, a verdict. Charles' text implies her 'immorality' and although he assures her of his sympathy, the cruelty against which he offers to defend her is comprised in the very formula he employs. As Sarah employs stereotypes to construct her image these discussions also strengthen her 'apartness' from the other character, whose verdicts she seems to justify through her acts and thus they can merely reflect on her assumed status.

Thus Sarah's decision to abandon Charles produces uncertainty as to her moral worth, but certainly not with regard to her aesthetic function, a formula made possible by her ambiguous status. Her illogical but possible solution to become an apprentice to a Pre-Raphaelite painter directs our attention to her fictional career as a kind of 'muse,' and its identifiable contribution to the novel's flexibility. Her status as a muse is compatible with Sarah's 'illogical' strategies and also explains why Charles, the scientist cannot understand her ambitions, actions and feelings.

Her impersonations, or masks contribute to the 'loopholes' in her career, - the fallen woman, mentor of the perplexed Darwinist, mistress of the first existentialist, apprentice to a Pre-Raphaelite painter and above all the secret ally to the author god. As we have seen this strategy is visible both at the level of the plot and with regards to her ambiguous status. The above series of pretence simultaneously broadens and limits the possibilities of the characters populating the novel and of the fictional material itself.

Even the concept of a chronologically interpretable, 'objective' definition of time is dislocated and her status assumes a timeless quality. This process of dislocation is an essential element of the novel and the weird sense of continuity as discontinuity is supported by at least three variants or reflections of John Fowles.

First, John Fowles is present as novelist-god who analyses both the form in which he writes and himself writing in this form. This novelist-god also tempts the 'hypocrite lecteur' into participation on the basis of the artist's argument that we are all novelists. Second, John Fowles actually becomes a character in the novel because in his last two conversations with the reader he is no longer a narrative voice, but is a physically described character who enters Charles's first-class railway carriage and has the look of an omnipotent god, a prophet. Later we see him loitering on the Chelsea embankment, he is rather 'foppish and Frenchified' and he is convinced that the world is his to possess. These variations compensate for Charles Smithson's deficiencies, who is after all, the 'surrogate' of the novelist, that is, he can be interpreted as the third variant of John Fowles in the novel.

The above reflections seem to contribute to Sarah Woodruff's superior status, whose freedom is reckoned to be of her own construction. When she explains her status to him Charles Smithson can only revolt against art and the New Woman. The curious thing about this situation is that she has been acting out her 'supremacy' through pretence, which is conventionally not a positive category but in chapter sixty, where she reveals the fact that she is a muse, she is honest. Charles Smithson's reaction suggests that this final meeting makes him realise that the two worlds they live in are incompatible.

Yet, in chapter thirteen and on various other occasions John Fowles makes it clear that he 'also' manipulates the Victorian world he is creating and thus, her right to pretend and create her fate and to manipulate those around her, Charles Smithson included, is asserted and approved by the author. The problem of honest direct communication between characters or characters and author is not settled in the novel.

The question of literary influences, which support the novel, has been discussed repeatedly, and most critics insisted on real, interpretable elements of 'identity' between John Fowles novel and the poetry of Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen (Palmer 1975: 74). The spirit of the novel and John Fowles' interpretation of the nature of literary influence as discussed in his essay on Franz Kafka leads me to reinterpret the freedom of the novelist's fiction even with respect to the literary influences that admittedly shaped his material:

All I want, indeed, is to keep the choices open and not see would-be writers self-driven into some sort of creative (more accurately, imitative) process whereby they feel they must stake their little claim and then defend it for the rest of their days. Increasingly human

freedom lives in human art, and we cannot tolerate- it is the one and only thing we must never tolerate- any outer-imposed restriction on artistic methods and aims. That, after all, remains very possibly the deepest and most paradoxical moral in Kafka's haunting darkness. (Fowles 1970: 122)

Since Sarah challenges her existence in the present with an imaginary interpretation of her past, the 'outer-imposed' concept of any past is undermined. This manipulation is important for her as the past could oblige her to give up her status as a free woman and false dictates could turn her into a Tess-like victim. Thus she is granted the freedom to ignore social ties and expectations and she consciously assumes the invisible 'scarlet letter', which in the inverted logic of the novel becomes the source of her integrity, dignity and results in her self-conscious acts of freedom. In more pedestrian terms she understands too well that being bad can help her be different from other women of her social standing.

The context of the novel encourages me to assert that she wants to enjoy the advantages of being bad and this is another relevant cause, which leads her to enact the role of the fallen woman. Sarah Woodruff is a bad woman by Victorian standards, and she is not only aware of her sexuality, but as the French lieutenant's woman she also makes of it a symbol. Thus she deliberately contradicts the established social and moral attitudes of her time as a Victorian heroine, and also challenges the interpretation of her practices by twentieth century critics. I consider thus that John Fowles deliberately creates the symbol of the woman who has 'whole sight' (Fowles 1981: 35) because she is able to understand and manipulate the other both as the eternal man and as a member of the society of a given age. Her imaginative side endows her with the powerful talent of being humble and proud, miserable and happy, dominated and dominant, an emblem and a creative centre, simultaneously or alternatively.

When she makes of her sexuality an emblem, an act, which actually mystifies social and private longing for joy, she dismisses the static and irrelevant aspects of a conventional definition of happiness. John Fowles avoids marriage between Sarah and Charles as a narrative solution, because in the Victorian context marriage could be the source of a wife's misery. John Fowles' intention is to fictionalise the power of the private domain as opposed to the torture-room quality of an exterior world haunted by false principles.

It is also important to remember that, due to the emphatic role of ambiguity in the novel, when Sarah Woodruff projects her sexuality into a story about seduction she also casts herself in the role of the femme fatale. Thus she turns the prejudice of the world against the society that creates those prejudices and Charles Smithson cannot be an exception. The first existentialist is seduced by her and has to discover that what he understood as his free choice is actually the result of manipulation and Sarah is not a victim, but a seductress and ultimately a free woman. Her final apparition as a muse is compatible with the world of unhappy romance, which is the product of her creative imagination. She seems

to have gained new possibilities to fight against all the attacks coming from the exterior world because she wants to maintain the freedom provided by the fictional variant of her existence.

Due to the ambiguity principle at work Sarah also challenges the myth of the prostitute as she has an authentic status both as a pure woman and as a fallen woman. The image of the fallen woman is created by her and this means that she 'enacts' free authorial will. She is a character and the author's secret sharer and thus she challenges historical and contemporary imagination simultaneously with the result that she discards her authenticity.

This logic is an essential aspect on many accounts. First she is John Fowles' accomplice, a co-author, she inhabits the imaginary world of the novel and thus she discards the authenticity both of the Victorian novel and of its twentieth century rewriting.

Sarah can avoid becoming a victim because her figure embodies knowledge of earlier fictional experience and also because John Fowles is tempted to declare that the artist and the creative process could be interpreted as two interchangeable elements of freedom; the French lieutenant's woman, the creator of her own image, can perpetuate the illusion of other freedoms. Thus through her talent, creativity and her author's support Sarah Woodruff can evade the typical Victorian fate which awaits fallen women.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ambiguity becomes a major influence and art becomes the dominant source of the conflict. John Fowles considers that the Victorian material should be as genuine as possible even at the level of style *The French Lieutenant's Woman* documents the authorial intention to write a Victorian novel as the artists of that period could not write it. John Fowles reveals his intentions with respect to the contemporary novelist's creative journey in the world of an old tradition:

To what extent am I being a coward by writing inside old traditions? To what extent am I being panicked into avant-gardism? Writing about 1867 doesn't lessen the stress; it increases since so much of the subject matter must of its historical nature be 'traditional.' There are apparent parallels in other arts: Stravinsky's eighteenth-century rehandlings, Picasso's and Francis Bacon's use of Velázquez. But in this context, words are not nearly so tractable as musical notes or brushstrokes. One can parody a rococo musical ornament, a baroque face. Very early on I tried, in a test chapter, to put modern dialogue into Victorian mouths. But the effect was absurd, since the real historical nature of the characters is hopelessly distorted. (Fowles 1969: 16-17)

The essentially Victorian dialogue coexists with the 'avant-garde' narrative and the result is a twentieth century author's experiment with nineteenth and twentieth century art. It really does not make any sense to try and impose any sense of hierarchy with respect to the relationship of the concepts and

accompanying technical and artistic solutions. It is exactly this unambiguously ambiguous character that gives vigour to the book. To reveal this twofold identity of the material John Fowles alternates the Victorian material with meta-fictional chapters like in chapters thirteen and the last two ones. John Fowles' discourse and register contribute to the dynamics of the fictional material by reproducing exactly the kind of tension he was writing about in the essay I quoted earlier.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Sarah Woodruff deceives Charles Smithson as she creates her own identity by way of fiction. She manages to manipulate all the characters of the novel aided by her mentor and creator which is possible in the novel through John Fowles' two explicit and numerous implicit intrusions into the fictional world of the novel. The novelist-god blends techniques earlier employed by Henry Fielding, William Makepeace Thackeray and Lawrence Sterne to reveal and explain the novelist's omnipotent status and at the same time John Fowles modifies them by promising a Victorian novel which is also 'nouveau roman' in style.

Mahmoud Salami makes an instructive inventory of the different critics' reactions to the presence of the Victorian element in the novel (Salami 1992: 103-108), Malcolm Bradbury, in his "The Novelist as Impresario" (Bradbury 1993: 174-191) explains that John Fowles' appearance as an impresario in the novel is a meaningful 'intrusion' and the fact that he appears on the stage to set the clock back in order to transform the futures of his two central characters leads to a loss of confidence on the reader's part and strengthens his awareness of the relevant status of ambiguity in the novel.

On the basis of experience provided by some later John Fowles novels I consider that he attempts to pass off a 'private mythology' of himself, primarily because Sarah gains uncensored authority over her fictional world and can be explained as the fictional variant of John Fowles writing his novel. She manipulates and abandons the author's surrogate and employs her possibilities discussed at a fictionally theoretical level by the novelist god. She 'rewards' Fowles as she contributes to her author's 'private' authority over tradition, literature, legend, and myth while creating the fiction within fiction dimension, the core of ambiguity in the novel. Her transformation from a fallen woman into a muse is supported by conventional technical elements characteristic of Victorian fiction. The first glimpse the reader and Charles catch of her establishes her as a near mythical figure, who is ready to confront the power of the waves, the storm and her loneliness and these easily identifiable symbols of coexistence of nature, man and spiritual power can be interpreted as very early foreshadowing of her metamorphosis into a muse.

Consequently, Sarah Woodruff can be interpreted as an artist figure who devises a new 'view and rule of life' by which she gains the right to rule not only her fictional existence but the fictionally real world as well. Yet, as John Fowles focuses on the primary importance of the human acts, conflicts and images in his novels, the theoretical and artistic themes formulated through self-reflexive

sections are subservient to his concern for the human characteristics of his characters.

The Victorian Age, especially from 1850 on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas. One can almost invert the reality and say that Camus and Sartre have been trying to lead us, in their fashion, to Victorian seriousness of purpose and moral sensitivity. (Palmer 1975: 78)

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles applies the fictional arsenal of the Victorian novel, to demonstrate that he can write the Victorian novel as the artists of the period could not write it. He sets out to demonstrate that the genre re-employed can preserve its full vigour and demonstrate its eternal youth, a thesis of great relevance for John Fowles' art beautifully written in *Mantissa*.

The principle of ambiguity is woven into the texture and the structure of the novel as the preserved integrity of the Victorian novel is visible in the style, the basic structure, the character realisation and the essentially realistic mode of the different sections of the novel, yet the overall structure contradicts the promise formulated by the parts. The flow of the plot proper is interrupted by the author's comments on the condition of fiction or the relationship between the author and his characters. John Fowles intrudes into the novel to provide a traditional Victorian ending to Sarah and Charles's story but at the same time he declares that other endings are possible.

I consider the exceptional quality of the novel to be produced by the inherent ambiguity which governs the novel, the cunning twentieth century authorial attitude implanted into the Victorian 'body'. The oft-quoted passage about the contemporary novelist's main or 'principal' concern being not with authority but with freedom is also quite telling in this respect as it results in 'interdisciplinary' diversity, which requires introspection. Sarah is the only authorial agent, who can guide writer, fictional writer, surrogate, the 'hypocrite lecteur' through the labyrinth, which hides the secret illusion of art writing life and life creating art.

Thus the self-reflexive narrative is made into a visible process and as a result John Fowles' 'Victorian' novel becomes a fine example of the so-called self-reflexive novel fashionable in the second half of the twentieth century.

John Fowles makes of Sarah a 'ghost' of the past and a living presence and similarly the difference between the authorial and the narrative 'I' becomes subject to, occasionally visible, manipulation and the world of this novel, the world as real as but other than the world that is, is shown as being "at a second remove from reality" (Fowles 1988: 47) due to the ambiguity inherent in the authorial intention to both manipulate the aesthetic distance and maintain the illusion that life can write life and life can write art.

However 'democratic' John Fowles may claim to be, the result is almost always that the artist's authority as the writer of the respective piece of fiction

remains intact. John Fowles explains his artistic dilemmas, shares his intentions with us, declares the autonomy of his characters yet he retains his status as the author of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Yet, conventional morality and art have no redemptive power in John Fowles' novel, the humiliations and failures of traditional literary discourse can lead to some character's (and implicitly individual's) imprisonment in mistaken interpretations of the role and possibilities of 'art and morality'.

Sarah Woodruff's metamorphosis from a fallen woman into the free woman is written into the metamorphosis of the Victorian novel into postmodern fiction which has the ambition to present both life and art in fiction, in a form of art Mantissa called very old and eternally young.

The French Lieutenant's Woman breaks with its openly declared and thoroughly constructed 'existence' as a Victorian novel and therefore it can assume the status of a novel freed of the limitations that might arise from the 'high art' because the author has managed to cut the roots.

The organising principles, which determine the structure of the plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, are embedded in the plot of the novel and the structure, the design and the process by way of which it is written assumes the same importance, or role of a fictional character. The endings, the chapters which discuss theoretical aspects regarding the novel as a genre are convincing illustrations of this thesis with regards to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

John Fowles' novel assumes its status as fiction describing the value of ambiguity due to the 'co-operation' between author and character. The filming of the novel supports my thesis regarding the search for freedom, and the partial successes of this search for characters, author and fiction. John Fowles tells us that the novel was accepted as the basis of a Hollywood film after he managed to convince the producers that it is not exclusively a Victorian story. Following this 'incident' Harold Pinter wrote the script of the film and a studio publicity man turned up in London during the filming of the novel and "demanded to know why nothing had been done about the novelization of Harold Pinter's script" (Fowles 1981: 35). John Fowles found the studio publicity director's ignorance hilarious, but I consider the incident to demonstrate the flexibility, or freedom inherent in the novel, and the comprehensively articulated value of ambiguity.

Sarah Woodruff is a kind of secret sharer due to John Fowles' thesis that freedom and authority are not exclusive of one another and should be thought of as being inclusive of different interpretations. Let me finish by quoting D. H. Lawrence's essay on the morality of the novel for I consider his rationale supportive of my interpretation of the authorial and fictional situations I have discussed in this paper:

And that's what you learn, when you are a novelist. And that's what you are very liable not to know, if you are a parson, or a philosopher, or a scientist, or a stupid person. ... As for the words and thoughts and sighs and aspirations that fly from him, they are so many tremulations

in the ether, and not alive at all. But if the tremulations reach another man alive, he may receive them into his life, and his life may take on colour, like a chameleon creeping from a brown rock on to a green leaf. ... The whole is greater than the part. And therefore, I who am man alive, am greater than my soul, or spirit, or body, or mind, or consciousness, or anything else that is merely a part of me. I am a man, and alive. ... For this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog. The novel is the book of life. (Lawrence 1936: 135)

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