

法國中尉的女人一書中的哲思

曾貴祺

摘要

享譽國際電影小說大法師及法國中尉的女人的作者，英國作家約翰傅敖斯已於今年病逝，享年 79 歲。本文除具紀念哲人之意，也在探討其代表作後設小說法國中尉的女人一書中的哲學思維。首先，此小說中的男女主角對生命意義的追求，致終歸於虛無與荒繆，實屬典型的存在主義。再則，小說中的語言呈現後設小說多面的語言哲學，諸如「上帝的遊戲」、「寫實主義」、「反諷」、「拼湊」、「仿擬」、「自我反射」等。凡此種種皆為本書文字藝術價值的精華所在。

關鍵詞：約翰傅敖斯、法國中尉的女人、存在主義、上帝的遊戲、寫實主義、反諷、拼湊、仿擬、自我反射。

Philosophical Thinking in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Paul Tseng

ABSTRACT

John Fowles, author of *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, has died at the age of 79. His 1969 book, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, made him a best-selling author on both sides of the Atlantic. In memory of his great literary achievements, this paper is designed to explore the philosophical aspects of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which is of paramount importance to Fowle's literary career. First, we can see the existential vanity of the main characters' worlds. It seems that their pursuit of the meaning of life leads to nothingness and absurdity in the social mechanism of the nineteenth-century Victorian age. Second, it is pointed out that the linguistic performance of the novel is excellent in such aspects as God's

game, parody, pastiche, realism, irony and self-reflexivity. Actually, existentialism and language philosophy create the novel's supreme value in the literary career of John Fowles, a permanently memorable name in the history of postmodern literature.

Key Words: John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, existentialism, God's game, parody, pastiche, realism, irony, self-reflexivity

I. Introduction

“Writer John Fowles, author of *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, has died at the age of 79. His 1969 book, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, made John Fowles a best-selling author on both sides of Atlantic.”¹ This is the breaking news from BBC Web site this year. John Fowle's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was a new kind of historical novel with layers of truth, fantasy and self-awareness. It was made into a multi-Oscar nominated film, starring Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons. Indeed, this novel is of paramount importance in Fowles' literary career. And this paper is designed to research *French Lieutenant's Woman* in the perspective of its existentialism and language philosophy. Naturally, some questions are raised when we meditate on the philosophical aspects of this postmodern novel. Such kinds of questions are as follows. What is its world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world it projects? How is a projected world structured? Based upon these philosophical questions, I intend to probe a significantly profound existential world in this novel as well as its ontological aspect of the artistic language.

¹ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2880967.stm>

II. Diachronic depiction of the novel

First, I will diachronically depict a microcosm world of this novel, showing its existential significance and analyzing the language philosophy. The initial chapter of the novel opens with an excerpt from Thomas Hardy's poem "The Riddle," which seems to describe the French Lieutenant's Woman. She appears as an anonymous figure on the seashore, tragic and full of mystery. She is dressed in black and is staring at the sea; she appears to be a typical woman driven mad with grief by a lover who has left her. Actually, the identity of the woman is as mysterious as a riddle. Likewise, her world view needs to be explicated both by the reader and the narrator. Here, it should be noted that the narrator is the persona of Fowles himself. He both observes and manipulates his characters, as we will see later in the novel.

Later, Chapter 9 presents an account of how Sarah manages to live with Mrs. Poulteney and is even able to attain some measures of freedom. And then, Mrs. Fairley spies on Sarah and reports to Mrs. Poulteney what Sarah does and where she goes on her day off. And at the close of the chapter Mrs. Fairley reports to her mistress that Sarah is now engaged in a scandalous behavior: she frequently takes a walk to Ware Commons. This uninhabited and secluded patch of land was often used by couples as a meeting place, which resulted in its infamous reputation. In Chapter 9, we can see that in the mechanism of the nineteenth century, Sarah wants to seek her own freedom, ensuring the unique identity of herself. And her frequent visits of Ware Commons can be seen as a gesture of rebelling the conservative tradition of the Victorian Age. She walks there on purpose with an intention of humiliating herself to become a social outcast, and then to gain her own existential freedom, breaking the bondage imposed on the Victorian women.

However, as Chapter 13 opens, Sarah is depressed after her encounter with Mrs. Poulteney, for Mrs. Poulteney has accused her of the wanton behavior: she has been seen on Ware Commons. And then there is an important digression by the author. Fowles, the narrator, interrupts his story to discuss the process of his writing as well as the autonomy of his characters. Concerning the autonomy of characters, the authorial intervention and the dialectical role of the narrator, I will discuss them in the second part of this paper.

Chapter 16 mentions another encounter between Charles and Sarah on the cliffs above the sea. While climbing the rocks in search of fossils, Charles again meets Sarah. And they discuss, with some embarrassment, Sarah's history. In this chapter, it can be seen that Sarah begins showing her identity to Charles by fiction making.

From Chapter 18 to Chapter 21, Charles again meets Sarah by the seashore, quite unintentionally. She gives him two fossils she has found, and then tentatively turns to him for his help. She wants him to hear her full story.

Charles and Sarah meet again in Chapter 20 as they agreed to do, and Sarah reveals the story of herself and the French Lieutenant. His ship was wrecked not far from the shore. Captain Talbot brought the survivors ashore, and Lieutenant Varguennes, whose leg was seriously injured, was nursed in the captain's home. Sarah, who was the governess for the Talbots' children, helped to nurse him. However, as he recovered, he began to take an interest in Sarah, and he teased and flirted with her. Sarah's knowledge of French was limited, and Varguennes spoke little English. After his recovery was complete, the Lieutenant traveled to a neighboring town to board a ship for home. He told Sarah to meet him there so they could say their farewells. Sarah stated that she did follow him, but found him staying at a

disreputable hotel. At that point she realized how shallow he really was, and she also realized the true nature of his affection for her. But then, in an odd combination of defiance and despair, she gave herself to him, knowing that she would never see him again, and knowing that she did not want to see him. However, it's doubtful whether Sarah really gave herself to the French Lieutenant as the plot unfolds later.

Chapter 30 is a flashback to Sarah's earlier confrontation with Mrs. Poulteney, which led to her dismissal and sudden disappearance.

After Sarah goes to Exeter, she takes up residence at Endicott's Family Hotel, a rather disreputable place in the poorer section of town.

From Chapter 45 to Chapter 46, at Exeter, Charles decided to stop for the night to visit Sarah. Charles finds Sarah's hotel and goes to her room, where she is resting an injured foot. And then, they embrace and, finally acknowledging their passion, he carries her to bed.

As he gets up and proceeds to get dressed in the next room, he discovers blood on himself. At first he thinks he has injured himself, but then realizes that Sarah was a virgin. He suddenly understands fully that everything she said and did was based on a lie. She had never given herself to Varguennes. It is here that we see the other side of Charles' concept of her. Now, instead of seeing her as an angel, Charles can only believe that she is a wicked woman who for some unknown reason wanted to seduce him.

Charles leaves Endicott's Family Hotel, walking rapidly down a street in a poor section of Exeter. He passes a church and is drawn to it. In that church Charles kneels and mumbles a prayer to himself, but the image of Sarah keeps rising before him. After returning to the hotel, Charles washes out his bloodstained garments and then writes Sarah a letter. He gives the letter to Sam to deliver. He plans to go to

Lyme and break his engagement with Ernestina, and then return to Exeter for Sarah.

And it is noted that as Charles prays in the church,

He seemed as he stood there to see all his age, its tumultuous life, its iron certainties and rigid conventions, its repressed emotion and facetious humor, its cautious science and incautious religion, its corrupt politics and immutable castes, as the great hidden enemy of all his deepest yearnings. That was what had deceived him; and it was totally without love or freedom...but also without thought, without intention, without malice, because the deception was in its very nature; and it was not human, but a machine. (349-350)

Upon knowing that he was deceived by Sarah's fiction making of her affairs with French Lieutenant, Charles has such kind of mood and meditation, utterly doubting Sarah's true identity in the mechanism of the Victorian Age. And as to the concept of virginity, the narrator seems to hold that it's absurd.

Therefore, the narrator contrasts the behavior between the maid Mary and the innocent Ernestina:

Mary...was not an innocent country virgin, for the very simple reason that the two adjectives were incompatible in her century. The causes are not hard to find....The prudish puritanity we lend to the Victorians, and rather lazily apply to all classes of Victorian society, is in fact a view of the middle-class ethos....The hard—I would rather call it soft, but the fact of Victorian rural England was that what a simpler age called “tasting before you buy” (in today's words, premarital intercourse) was the rule, not the exception. (214)

Judging from this quotation, we can see that a premarital intercourse in Victorian rural

England is the rule, not the exception. Fowles adopts the realistic technique by which he narrates the plots as if all these events and characters were essentially real.

In addition, after a long digression of depicting Charles' trip to the both sides of the Atlantic, finally in Chapter 60, the author portrays the first of two possible endings of the story. In this version, Sarah is found residing in London under the name of Mrs. Roughwood. Charles believes her to be employed as a governess for a family, but it turns out that she is an assistant and an artist's model for Mr. Rossetti, a well-known artist.

However, Sarah is not to be won easily though. She refuses to marry Charles, and when he asks her why, she obliquely states that she simply wishes not to marry.

Charles is stunned when she admits that she saw his advertisements inquiring about her and that she moved and changed her name because of them. He is ready to leave when she begs him to stay long enough to meet someone, a "lady" who will explain her motives to him. Charles asks her where the "lady" is, and she points at the child. Rather dramatically, Charles realizes that it is his and Sarah's child. Sarah comes back a few moments later, and they embrace. Whether or not they will ever marry is not certain, but the story ends with the couple finally united, and the love strengthened by all they have gone through.

This ending fulfills the romantic convention in which the lovers are finally united after a long period of trials and separations.

In Chapter 61, Fowles intrudes for the last time, posing as a sort of theater director who takes great pleasure in manipulating his characters to achieve different roles.

However, in the other possible ending, we return to the scene in Rossetti's house, but we are back at the point where Charles believes he has been betrayed. And again, utterly disgusted with himself and with the woman he allowed himself to fall in

love with, Charles leaves. He sees the child in the arms of a young woman as he exits but takes no further notice of it.

The above is a brief flashback of the whole picture of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. And the following is my comments on it as well as on its narrating technique, namely, its language philosophy.

III. Existentialism in the novel

Among the main characters in this novel, Sarah, I think, is, in some sense, very existential. Indeed, her situation and her dealing with the male protagonist Charles are very absurd. First, she lies to him, telling that she is the so-called French Lieutenant's Woman. In other words, she had an affair with that man, and even gave herself to him. This proves, in the end of the story, to be a lie. I wonder why she lies to the world to make herself a social outcast. And if she wants to seek true love, how can she lie to Charles, seduce him, and eventually abandon him in one of the possible endings? What's the meaning behind this absurd story? Why can't Sarah show her true being and struggle for her transcendental world?

On the other hand, it's also absurd for Charles to justify himself in trying to redeem Sarah. In fact, instead of redeeming Sarah, he is trapped and puts himself in a tragic situation. Breaking his engagement with Ernestina, he commits adultery, ruins his own future prosperity and traps himself in a hazard. This seems sarcastic, absurd, and meaningless, resulting in nothingness.

In addition to portraying the existential pursuit of the meaning of life, this novel shows forth itself by presenting an artistic expression form, which, in a way, is its value and essence. Transforming the ontology of the traditional narrative fiction, John Fowles creates a new way of expressing the dilemma of human existence.

Banishing the omnipotence and omniscience of the author, John Fowles imposes “limited” autonomy to the characters, who can even engage in a dialogue with the author, and intrude upon the arrangement of the plots. Moreover, John Fowles uses the technique of parody by which he uses many historical elements to create the authentic aura of the Victorian Age. However, he also makes use of the elements of the modern world. In this way, he creates a mixture of facts and fiction in his narration. It also deserves our attention that he uses situation irony to point out the absurdity of Sarah’s dilemma—being her true self to pursue true love or being a false being only to gain nothingness in real life.

IV. Language philosophy

A. parody

And concerning the language technique devices such as “parody” and “open ending,” I would like to adopt Patricia Waugh’s view. In her *Metafiction*, she points out that throughout the fiction, real documents are referred to. She takes the description of Sarah’s unpacking at Exeter as an example. In that description, the narrator meticulously describes each article that she takes out. It seems that the narrator uses the structures of nineteenth-century realism and historical romance. Of course, we know that what we are reading is not real, but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment. We tend to read fiction as if it were history. By actually appearing to treat the fiction as a real historical document, Fowles employs the convention against itself. (32-34)

Moreover, Patricia Waugh argues that the text draws the reader’s attention to its process of construction by frustrating his conventional expectations of meaning and closure (22). And she asserts that Fowles makes the reader explicitly aware of his or

her role as a player. The reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, having to choose an ending, becomes a player in the game, one very much modeled on the Heideggerian game of being (42).

B. Situation irony

As to the irony part mentioned above, I would like to further illustrate it. There are some situation ironies in this novel. For instance, Sarah is seen as a “poor tragedy” (13) in Victorians’ eyes. However, she is not really a poor tragedy; she is endowed with the ability of seeking freedom from all obstacles. Though she is a woman, Sarah, from an inferior position in society, manages to capture and control a man, Charles, psychologically and sexually. She spurns him in the end, leaving him to the “deserted embankment.”

In the process it is she, not Charles, who is the seducer: the “poor girl” leads “the gentleman” astray all the time. Charles, seemingly in the position of control, is in fact controlled by himself. When Charles goes to Dr. Grogan’s place to ask for advice about Sarah, the doctor says that Sarah has planned all the things to seduce him. Charles says, “In other words, I have been led by the nose” (179).

C. Self-reflexivity

Furthermore, as a metafiction, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in the aspect of theory, mirrors its own process and reflects abundant imagination. Actually, generally speaking, metafiction is self-reflexive, mixing reality and imagination. Metafiction mirrors its own process and reflects essential human imagination. It also admits that novelistic reality is constantly fictive and is a created illusion. In this aspect Patricia Waugh shows her insights,

“Metafiction” is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Fowles mixes reality and fictionality together in the plots. He considers the process of writing to be very important; therefore, he includes discussible problems of creating fictions in his novel.

And again it is pointed out that Fowles uses a linguistic device of parody to construct a simulacrum of the reality. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles uses a lot of true elements like historical facts to imitate the conventional historical writing of Victorian novels. The real places such as Lyme Regis, the Cobb, the Undercliff, and Ware Commons exhibit the true elements of the novel. The historical personages such as Marx, Hitler, and Gabriel Dante Rossetti, also indicate historical facts. In addition, Fowles uses masses of inserted genres—epigraphs, documents, footnotes, poetry-- to express the historical context of the novel, to display his Victorian knowledge, and even to form a linguistic mode.

D. realism

And as mentioned above, besides creating a mixture of facts and fiction, the author even employs the device of realism. Indeed, Fowles, on the part of language, makes use of realism. Just as Serpil Oppermann comments on Fowles's use of realism,

Indeed the abundant social and literary documentary references to the

Victorian era deliberately invoke the reality principle. The social and political history of the nineteenth-century England and the literature of the time are not only richly documented, but also intensely realized by detailed physical descriptions and characterization to create a sense of historical authenticity. (92)

However, Oppermann thinks that Fowles “makes his novel a metafictional exercise of historical imagination...But, his novel is not at all a historical novel in its formal resemblance to the Victorian novel” (94). Fowles also grants his character a lot of autonomy, so the reader tends to assume that all the characters are real persons, not fictional ones.

Moreover, in terms of the autonomy of the character, like Sarah, Charles also does a lot of fiction-making. He creates fiction to escape from his real world. In Chapter 45, the narrator tells us that, “Charles was no exception; and the last few pages you have read are not what happened, but what he spent the hours between London and Exeter imagining might happen” (266). Charles has imagined a plot in Chapter 44 which he creates in mind when he travels from London to Exeter. He plays the role of a novelist and tries to explain his real life to the reader. In this novel, the narrator, the characters and the readers can imagine their world and their real lives. Such fiction-making is natural and essential in the writing.

Comparatively speaking, Sarah, as clever as she is, intends to make herself a social outcast by her own fiction making of her affair with French Lieutenant. “...that she was far less mad than she seemed...or at least not mad in the way that was generally supposed. Her exhibition of her shame had a kind of purpose; and people with purposes know when they have been sufficiently attained and can be allowed to rest in abeyance for a while” (68). By alienating herself with society, she can attain her

purpose—living a life without any bondages of social values. Despite other people's discrimination, she is privileged to give herself a free rein in choosing the style of human existence.

E. God's game

Sarah and Charles both gain the autonomy in the will of the narrator, who is the persona of Fowles himself. He both observes and manipulates his characters in the so-called God's game. John Fowles' conception of God's game means that the novelist acts like God in his narration of the fiction. He says in Chapter 13 of *French Lieutenant's Woman* that "There is only one definition of God; the freedom that follows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition."

Here, I will discuss the conception of God's game in terms of the Bible. In Genesis, God created man, who was put in front of two trees—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. The former is symbolic of God's eternal life, while the latter, human civilization, which is a provision for man's existence on the waste land of faith, namely, a wandering life without God. Man, as a creature, can choose his way, deciding whether he will obey God or not. He has a privilege to choose eternal life ; however, he also can ignore God's words, building up his own urban, human civilization to live a self-sufficient life. Indeed, on the one hand, Jehovah God is so omnipresent and omniscient that he can create, arrange and determine everything and every situation. Take the king of ancient Egypt (Pharoah), for instance. According to Exodus, the great Jehovah can harden his heart to ignore Moses' persistent petitions and the numerous wonders arranged by God so that he kept impeding the exodus of the Israelites. In Romans of the New Testament, we can see that the only reason for the emperor to reject the Israelites' pleas is that God

makes his heart hardened. This means that God arranges the whole world situation and determines human history. However, on the other hand, man is ordained to preserve his autonomy, his free will. Take the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, for instance. The death and of the Lamb, a symbol of Christ, is prophesied in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah. The crucifixion of the Lamb is pre-ordained and arranged by divine will with regard to the date, place and way. However, according to the four gospels in the New Testament, the realization of the divine plan is through the “obedience” of Jesus Christ. In other words, he has freedom to determine whether he will follow Father God’s will or not. As a creature, he has a privilege to interrupt, rearrange, or follow God’s plan. Before he decides to follow God’s will, he, according to written history, has prayed three times. In these prayers, he engages in a dialogue with the Planner, the divine Creator to co-determine his fate. This principle of God’s game can be applied to the plots arrangement in *French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Likewise, Charles can have his own partial autonomy determining whether he will respect the writer’s will or not. And he can also undergo a dialogue to engage in the so-called “fusion of horizons” with his creator, the author. It is believed that the philosophy of narration can be reflected not only in the Bible but in metafiction.

Besides the above-mentioned fiction making, we can also see Charles’s autonomy in the will of author in the following quotations. “...that the idea seemed to me to clearly from Charles, not myself. It is not only that he has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it, and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real.” (98) “When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy.” (98) “We wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the

world that is. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine.” (98) Judging from the above quotations, we can figure out that the author seems to be engage in a dialogue with the character, letting him own partial autonomy to co-arrange the plots of the text.

This kind of dialogue and negotiation is deeply associated with the definition, the ontological part, of metafiction. In *Metafiction*, Currie defines metafiction as a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject. The borderline between fiction and criticism has been a point of convergence where fiction and criticism have assimilated each other’s insights, producing a self-conscious energy on both sides. (2) In addition, the author also stands on the “borderline” defining a novelist as God Who can play God’s game in creating the fictional world.

And in considering this aspect in the light of language itself, we can see that language is no longer considered as a passive means of reflecting a coherent, meaningful and objective world, for language is already figurative, not transparent. Actually, most postmodern critics agree that language constructs rather than reflects reality. That is, the boundary between fiction and the outside world it refers to is blurred.

F. pastiche

In addition, it also deserves our attention that the language in *French Lieutenant’s Woman* is a pastiche. Regarding this point, Waugh’s comments are of significant importance.

the language of fiction appears to spill over into, and merge with, the instabilities of the real world....There is no one privileged ‘language of

fiction.’ There are languages of memoirs, journals, diaries, histories....These languages compete for privilege. They question and relativize each other to such an extent that ‘the language of fiction’ is always, and often covertly, self-conscious. (5)

The mixture of different genres makes the fiction a pastiche, one of the linguistic features of postmodern fiction. John Fowles seems to try so hard to mix all these elements of literary materials together to construct his fictional world.

V. conclusion

In conclusion, we can see the existential vanity of Sarah’s and Charles’ worlds. It seems that their pursuit of the meaning of life leads to nothingness and absurdity in the social mechanism of the nineteenth-century Victorian Age. Second, like a well-wrought artistic urn, the linguistic performance of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is excellent in such aspects as God’s game, parody, pastiche, realism, irony, and self-reflexivity. Actually, existentialism and the language philosophy create this novel’s supreme value in the literary career of John Fowles, a permanently memorable name in the history of postmodern literature.

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