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The French Lieutenant's Woman:
The Underscore on "Freedom" within Restriction, Fowles' Bridge between Realities

Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality...But the chief argument...is to show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one...

- John Fowles

The vast verdure, the whispering sea, the azure of the heavens; Lyme Regis in all its deceitful beauty, masking the harsh and bitter reality of Victorian society, is a fixture of John Fowles' multi-layered, artfully crafted novel The French Lieutenant's Woman. The social struggles within this small pocket of Victorian Britain distinctly portray a much darker image. Fowles weaves the unspoken boundaries of the nineteenth century throughout his work just as they were nuanced in the Victorian attitude. The elements of postmodern literature, such as multiperspectivism, allow The French Lieutenant's Woman to break through the limits of the Victorian social infrastructure and bring forth the evolutionary characteristics of Charles and Sarah. As the reader pictures their struggles with a twenty first century framework, Fowles' twentieth century perspective grapples with distant Victorian society to create a bridge between three centuries of shifting ideologies.

In a similar manner, Karel Reisz, director of the film adaptation, tackles the concept of the bridge with the innovation of a film within a film. Reisz accurately captures the visual atmosphere of a nearly foreign era, while implementing screenwriter Harold Pinter's dual dialogue with Charles and Sarah as well as Mike and Anna, attempting to seize our attention just as Fowles' literary faculty. Unfortunately, the film adaptation lacks the depth provided by the

text and falls short of thrusting the focus beyond parallel love affairs. The film's challenge in meeting the standard of the novel is interesting, however, because it is an intimation of our own societal restrictions.

The French Lieutenant's Woman, in literary and motion picture form, indicates the inability of society to fully free an individual and its inadequacy to support such person. Fowles molds a reflective man, discontent with simply accepting what the prevailing mindset has chosen as his position, and an independent and progressive woman, unfit for Victorian society. However, Fowles is also trapped by what is acceptable and by the lines already drawn in the invisible realm of the status quo, only one hundred years subsequent to his story. Consequently, he does not achieve a truly revolutionary liberation for his characters because he himself must function within the boundaries, even if on the fringe. As a director, Reisz is also confined to the reality of the twentieth century which, though more emancipated than the nineteenth, is still inhibited by public attitude and constraints within the form of media. Thus, Fowles' bridge not only connects the evolution of attitudes between centuries, but ties the remaining, and perhaps permanent, restraints in the society of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

In this essay I will begin by investigating how the concept of freedom is formed in The French Lieutenant's Woman and the strategies used by Fowles. Taking the resulting factors, I will then examine how they are, or are not, addressed by the film adaptation. This will be followed by an analysis of what lies behind what is seen as the freedom of Fowles' novel and, finally, how they correlate to the reality of the society the reader belongs to and the red herring that is freedom.

The Bridge by Multiperspectivism

The façade of freedom emphasized by Sarah's character is put forth by Fowles' implementation of literary postmodernism. Postmodern multiperspectivism essentially forms the reader's relationship with The French Lieutenant's Woman, with Fowles as the lens through which the reader views the novel, and Fowles beyond the position as the author. This constitutes the bridge. Fowles anticipates the contemporary perspective as a postmodern author and places his expectations of the reader's response into the creation of his own role in the "cast" of his novel. His presence fosters the illusion of his authorial freedom, which in turn allows the freedom of his characters. Fowles stresses, "...novelists write for countless different reasons... Only one same reason is shared by all of us: *we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is.* Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine" (96). This leads the reader to believe, either by his control or by the naturally organic development of his story, the pursuit and/or attainment of his characters' emancipations are plausible if not absolute.

Multiperspectivism merges the reader's perspective with Fowles', transferring his authorial confidence in the freedom of possibility, the randomness and chance occurring in existentialism, to the reader. Fowles suggests the novelist, though still a god because he is creator of his novel, is not the all-knowing omniscient god "of the Victorian image", but one with freedom as his first principle (97). Thus, the reader is caught; hooked by the author's confirmation the liberty of his fiction is made real, bolstered by the idea the story is variable and unpredictable even to its creator. Fowles furthers the assurance of freedom by the complexity of character relationships, inviting numerous perspectives for the reader to view as autonomous characters as well as entities created through Fowles. "We also know that a genuinely created

world must be independent of its creator... It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live” (96). Sarah’s deviation from society also marks some deviation from Fowles’ authority, and leads the reader to believe the freedom and originality she sees in herself must exist. Fowles ties the reader’s view to Sarah’s self reflection, all the more trapping him/her into perceiving freedom as a reality. When Charles questions Sarah’s manipulative actions, effectively transforming his destiny, Sarah cries, “Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained” (355). The implication of impulse and randomness supports the idea she exists and acts outside the constraints of Victorian society and even beyond Fowles’ power. Once again, Fowles reinforces the humanity and mystery within Sarah’s behavior, bonding her struggle with the reality of human choice, to blur the disparity between the reader and Sarah through the common conflict with decision and free will.

The film adaptation of The French Lieutenant’s Woman accordingly allows the viewer to not only distinguish Mike, Anna, Charles, and Sarah individually, but analyze Charles through Mike and Sarah through Anna. Though the director is not as noticeably present within the film as Fowles in his novel, Reisz is embodied by Mike and Anna as contemporary actors personifying their roles as well as conveying their twentieth century perspectives on their nineteenth century characters. However, because the intricacy of the story and the short-lived growth of Charles and Sarah are over-simplified by the film, the conception of supposed choice and free will in Fowles’ novel is not fulfilled by multiperspectivism¹. The film’s absence of the novel’s depth and weight on character evolution and freedom, nevertheless, addresses a critical aspect of the novel:

¹ The film’s inability to express the existentialism of The French Lieutenant’s Woman is ironic considering its production in 1981, twelve years following Fowles’ progressive novel. It is also necessary to note, though twelve years may seem brief, the novel marked the end of the 60s, while the film marked the beginning of a second succeeding decade. This evidences the progression of time does not equate nor connote progression of a movement social or otherwise.

Sarah's unusually advanced attitude losing momentum, an indication of the reality that is the end to the progress of self.

The Bridge by Artifice of Freedom

Just as stagnation is seen in many facets of life (intellectual achievement, moral and philosophical revelation, emotional fervor and zeal) The French Lieutenant's Woman exhibits this deterioration of progression in Sarah. The reader is presented with a pariah, supposedly conscious of her actions and influence, creating her own ostracism and misery. Charles comes to the realization "her maneuvers were simply a part of her armory, mere instruments to a greater end" (453). Eva Mokry Pohler's critical essay also addresses Sarah's purposefulness. "...the narrator attributes Sarah with the power of creating [her] myth. She is, in every way-as the narrator himself says-'in pursuit of [her own] ends' (365, emph. Dickens's)." Sarah's intent and existence outside of Fowles' power is difficult to question when Fowles imparts, "...what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and [he is] not at all sure where she is at the moment" (406). He himself is uncertain of her activity, so she must be acting on the basis of existential chance. Tony E. Jackson states in his article "Charles and the hopeful monster: postmodern evolutionary theory in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman.' (protagonist in book by author John Fowles)", "We can see that she plans, but as to the extent of her plans and as to the motives of her plans, Fowles leaves us with an enigma." Yet, Sarah's plans unravel, concluding she no longer desires to possess Charles, whom she spent the majority of the novel yearning for². How incredibly anticlimactic!

Sarah's submission to reality diminishes the freedom she clutches in the process of conquering Charles. When Charles confronts Sarah about her situation in the Pre-Raphaelite

² This is based on the third and final possible ending due to its more open, unconventional conclusion; thus, suggesting a greater and broader "freedom".

home she replies, "I now live in a world where loneliness is most easy to avoid. And I have found I treasure it. I do not want to share my life...I never expected to be happy in life. Yet I find myself happy where I am situated now...I am to see it as precarious, as a thing of which I must not allow myself to be bereft" (450-451). Sarah has moved past the character Jackson describes as "simply able 'to understand [others], in the fullest sense of that word'" which he contends, "the fullest sense of the word does not include the ability or necessity to consider rationally. The new kind of self has not learned to be perceptive in her distinctive manner. Rather, she simply is this way, naturally, just as she is naturally isolated and alienated." By the final ending, Sarah has gained some rationale, no longer the inexplicable woman striving for self-efficacy through functioning outside of the acceptable Victorian community without "the ability or necessity to consider rationally" (Jackson). Sarah accepts the invitation of the Pre-Raphaelite community as an unusual and auspicious circumstance; and in consequence, ends her impulsive behavior, her mysterious means to some end even Fowles is unsure of.

The reader unknowingly accepts Sarah's resolution as characteristic of her previous existential behavior, of freeing herself through exclusion, because she simply shifts from individual reclusion to a cohesive assembly of outcasts. The Pre-Raphaelites, however, were not necessarily operating outside of Victorian society, but like accommodative movements, worked within the system to change the fundamental ideals. Therefore, Sarah's original exiled status is not translated by the position of her newfound collective. "...Sarah seems to perceive that her evolution has come to a halt...she chooses territory over love, the present over the past" (Scruggs). Nevertheless, this perception does not evidence Sarah's freedom. It is more an affirmation of her comprehension of the limits to reality. Her happiness arrives when she exists within the boundaries, becoming domestic and gentle.

The film adaptation does not achieve Fowles' façade of freedom, but confirms the same concept: reality is not existential. Anna and Mike's embodiment of Sarah and Charles' passionate relationship prove they are bound by society. Anna is conflicted by her love for Mike and her knowledge of his obligations and already situated family-life. The conclusion of the film shows Anna internally changing her mind, choosing to quickly leave instead of waiting for Mike and whatever may have become of their relationship. The humanity of Harold Pinter's scripted character is ironically more restricted than Fowles' Victorian outcast. Sarah is aware of Ernestina's presence, and though she acknowledges Charles obligations, Sarah does not prevent his impulsive desires. Anna's adherence to rationale sheds light on the Sarah of the novel. The decline of Sarah's evolution stems from the manifestation of reason in her character. Though Sarah does not outwardly concede she is now functioning as a part of society, Fowles suggests this through her situation in the final ending.

The Bridge into the Twenty First Century

The French Lieutenant's Woman is undeniably Fowles' implementation of postmodernism. However, the strategic use of postmodern techniques and allusions to existentialism serve only to validate the reality of boundaries and restrictions. Fowles, himself, is limited to reality, and as a result cannot form a character that remains outside its boundaries. "The fundamental principle that should guide [*the actions of men in pursuit of their ends*], that [Fowles believes] always guided Sarah's" is that "true piety is *acting what one knows* –Matthew Arnold, *Notebooks* (1868)" (461-462). If the reader takes Fowles' suggestion to substitute 'piety' with 'humanity', one is not left with the conclusion his characters act on freedom, nor that Fowles, or even mankind, acts by complete autonomy. Fowles inadvertently debunks the possibility of true liberty in existentialism because if we act on what we know, and what we

know is the reality molded by society and its limitations, we are acting not by freedom but by our societal accommodation to the lack thereof. The film does not fulfill the motion picture incarnation of Fowles' complex work, but operates as a contemporary filter on the progression of Sarah and the self-inflicted end to such advancement. The film links the permanence of the pseudo-freedom in the reality of Fowles' depiction of the nineteenth century, to its presence in the twentieth in his authorial power and the power of the director and screenwriter. The interrelation of the two centuries is extended to the twenty first century by the germ imparted by The French Lieutenant's Woman, in which man cannot separate himself from reality, and thus is not truly liberated. By acting on what he knows, man is trapped, removed from freedom, imprisoned by his knowledge that society is not free.

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