
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Virtual and Reality: Postmodern Narrative in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism, a product of the latter half of the 20th century's postmodern society, has captivated the literary thought world with its compelling presence. John Fowles, a distinguished contemporary writer, is renowned for the experimental and innovative postmodern narrative techniques in his literary creations. This paper explores the postmodern narrative skills in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, focusing on the character Sarah to unveil the novel's themes of freedom and independence.

KEYWORDS

Postmodern narrative; The French Lieutenant's Woman; Freedom.

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1. Introduction

In the latter half of the 20th century, Britain witnessed the emergence of a new wave of writers employing postmodernist creative techniques, among whom John Fowles (1926-2005) holds a notable reputation. Initially, Fowles was a teacher and became a full-time writer after the success of his debut novel *The Collector* (1963; filmed 1965), leaving his teaching position behind. Besides fiction and non-fiction, Fowles also made significant contributions to poetry. Over his decades-long career, he authored several acclaimed works such as *The Collector*, about a shy man who kidnaps a girl in a hapless search for love, which was an immediate success; *The Magus* (1977; filmed 1968), which centres on an English schoolteacher who struggles to discern between fantasy and reality after befriending a mysterious local man; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969; filmed 1981), arguably Fowles' best-known work, is a love story set in 19th-century England that richly documents the social mores of that time. Since his first publication, Fowles' works have garnered extensive attention from critics both domestically and internationally, with many of his novels adapted into films and TV series. However, domestic scholarly research on John Fowles is still in its infancy, primarily focusing on film adaptations and critiques. In terms of literary analysis, studies on Fowles' novels, as indexed in academic journals and theses, mainly revolve around exploring themes in relation to feminist theory. As a believer in existentialism, Fowles' themes often delve into the essence of individual existence, with his works celebrated for their portrayal of freedom and independence. Fowles' narratives extensively depict how protagonists navigate the absurdity, ugliness, and cruelty of the real world in their quest for existential essence and freedom. Given the literary context of Fowles' era, the postmodern narrative art in each of his works, especially *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is particularly noteworthy.

Postmodern literary creation refers to the experimental novels and narrative arts that emerged in the mid-20th century, especially after World War II, as a literary genre that emphasizes the subversion of traditional narrative structures, styles, and themes; postmodern authors frequently use fragmented narratives, meta-fictional techniques, blurred character boundaries, and timelines, as well as a deep exploration of language and symbols, representing the era's complex understanding of life through successful literary practices. These works tend to question the nature of reality and truth, revealing the complex relationship between subjective experience and objective reality. Avant-garde writers, with their spirit of experimentation and change, broke away from the rigid conventions of realism and modernism, forming a distinctive postmodern novelistic style (Hassan). In the post-60s British

literary scene, techniques such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, parody, collage, adaptation, and intertextuality from modernism and postmodernism were extensively employed by writers. The blending of different styles and texts, rooted in the tradition narrative of the novel, enabled more powerful expressions and developments, with John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* standing as a classic example of the period's novelistic artistry.

The French Lieutenant's Woman tells the story of a young Victorian gentleman named Charles, who encounters a mysterious woman clad in black named Sarah atop the cliffs of a small English town called Lyme. Sarah scorned and ostracized by society due to her alleged affair with a French lieutenant, is dubbed "The French Lieutenant's Woman." Despite being engaged to another woman with wedding plans underway, Charles finds himself irresistibly drawn to Sarah's unique charisma. As Sarah shares her past ordeals and experiences with Charles, their clandestine meetings soon commence. Their secret liaison is eventually threatened with exposure when Charles's servant spies on them. Disregarding societal judgments, Charles breaks off his engagement, only to find Sarah has vanished to an unknown destination. However, this narrative unfolds as a "play within a play," where the story is adapted into a film of the same name. The actors portraying Sarah and Charles, Anna and Mike, respectively, maintain a similarly ambiguous romantic relationship off-screen, leading to an intriguing and unexpected conclusion. This paper analyzes the novel's postmodern narrative techniques and thematic depth from the perspectives of intertextuality, metafiction, and multiplicity in narrative construction. This paper analyzes the novel's postmodern narrative art and thematic implications from three aspects: intertextuality, metafiction, and multiplicity of narrative construction.

2. Intertextuality and Parody: Deconstructing Postmodern Political Discourse

Intertextuality, a concept first introduced by French critic and novelist Julia Kristeva (1941), refers to the relationship of mutual referencing between two or more texts. French structuralist literary theorist Gerard Genette (1930–) later incorporated intertextuality into the narrative strategy of literary creation. Theorists with a deconstructive approach have intertwined intertextuality with feminist, new historicist, and postcolonial literary theories, endeavoring to embed intertextuality within the framework of deconstructive literary criticism (Chen Pan).

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles begins each chapter with quotations from novels and poetry by other authors. A closer examination reveals that these introductory texts subtly mirror the content of the novel itself. For instance, the poem "The Riddle" by English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), quoted in the first chapter, reads: "Looking westward out to sea, beyond yon ocean brim, / The wind's or gentle or unkind, she's always there, hope-filled within; / Her gaze, forever fixed afar, on shores where charms are found." This poem, seemingly out of place, resonates deeply with the subsequent description of the enigmatic woman—Sarah: "On the dim and bending breakwater another figure was present... Standing on the seaward side, the body was evidently leaning against an ancient cannon's barrel, rooted like a ship's mast. Cloaked in black, her garments fluttered in the wind, yet she remained immovable, staring out at the sea..." (Fowles 2). The portrayal of Sarah through this poem evokes an aura of mystery, melancholy, and solitude. Fowles interweaves a plethora of literary texts, positioning various texts in relation to one another. Through the act of reading and recalling previous texts, readers unconsciously apply their understanding of these texts to the novel, supplementing the unspoken content of the new text with the rich meanings and cultural elements of the old. This results in a paradoxical interplay where old and new texts mutually interpret, repel, and depend on each other, enriching the narrative with layers of complexity and depth.

Parody, another mode of ironic narrative in this novel, is one of the most intentional and analytical literary techniques, reflecting the novel's postmodern framework. As a frequently used narrative strategy, parody achieves successful effect in critique, satire, and negation of traditional, historical, and contemporary values through exaggerated, distorted, and mocking imitations of historical events and characters of classical literary works. This process often accompanies intertextuality, creating a layered and interwoven narrative style (Monik). In the former part of the story, John Fowles' focus shifts towards the new modern era of the 20th century, incorporating elements of that century, such as airplanes, radar, and television, thereby establishing a stark contrast in eras: "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: what would have astounded him was the changed attitude to time itself. (46)" As the reader is immersed in the scenery and elements of the 20th century, Fowles suddenly transitions to the 19th Victorian era. In the parodic narrative of the novel, Fowles extensively uses historical documents to mimic and reproduce the Victorian ambiance as depicted by 19th-century British realist novelists, meticulously portraying London and Lyme Bay. The depiction of Lyme town under Fowles' pen serves as a microcosm of the previous era: women in 19th-century Britain still lacked the vote right, even being commodified as transactional goods, as the novel mentions, "and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds—a few shillings if you wanted her for only an hour or two (98)." The 19th-century British society remained devoutly religious, with churches proliferating faster than at any prior time, yet "and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (145)." These series of descriptions induce a surreal illusion in the reader as if the current reading material is a novel providing an objective, detailed report about the Victorian era, leading readers to mistakenly believe Fowles to be a

contemporary of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen. The Victorian era's hypocrisy and ignorance are fully reflected in their uninformed and judgmental ridicule of Sarah.

Through the 19th-century parody, the author ingeniously criticizes the hypocrisy, ignorance, and moral decay of Victorian society while simultaneously reflecting on the modern society of the 20th century. This sophisticated engagement with both the past and present eras not only showcases Fowles's adept use of parody and intertextuality but also underscores the enduring relevance of examining societal values through a critical, postmodern lens.

3. Metafiction: Play within a Play

Metafiction, also known as self-conscious or self-reflexive fiction, represents another principal narrative form within postmodern literature. Its reflexivity is not exclusive to postmodernism but is distinguished by a heightened level of "self-awareness" compared to traditional novels. Patricia Waugh made a seminal contribution to the definition of metafiction in her 1984 publication, "Metafiction," where she posits, "Metafiction is a term for novel writing which systematically and self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Through a critique of its own construction, such creation not only focuses on the foundational structures of narrative but also explores the potential fictitiousness of the world outside literary works (Tan Guanghai)." Unlike traditional novels, the hallmark of metafiction lies in its self-awareness, blurring the nebulous boundaries between illusion and reality, disrupting the logical and chronological order of novel writing, and unveiling the inherent fictiveness of the novel. Within metafictional works, authors often make sudden appearances, sometimes emerging unexpectedly to comment on current events and, at other times, weaving through the narrative as narrators, authors, and characters. They intermittently introduce their literary contemporaries into the narrative. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author frequently intersperses personal reflections and reminds the reader of the story's fictitious nature. The novel's fictiveness is twofold: character and plot. Firstly, the fictiveness of the character is largely embodied in the portrayal of Sarah, around whom much of the narrative, including the title, revolves. Unlike most traditional novels that portray protagonists positively, Sarah is depicted almost exclusively from the perspectives of others. Described as beautiful, mysterious, pessimistic, and scorned, her "story-like" aura fascinates Charles as if she were an ethereal being, neither angel nor demon, and her existence is ambiguous. Sarah is presented as an enigmatic figure whose character is shrouded in mystery. The author later reveals that Sarah is merely a fictional character within this metafictional work. Secondly, the plot's fictiveness is intriguingly highlighted through the "play within a play" narrative concerning the emotional entanglement between Sarah, Charles, and his fiancée. As readers intensely follow the narrator's perspective, the author shifts the narrative in Chapter Twelve, revealing the fictitious veil, stating, "If you had gone closer still, you would have seen that her face was wet with silent tears." The narrator seems to really stand outside Mrs. Poulteney's residence, witnessing Sarah's tears, yet claims an inability to truly understand Sarah's inner thoughts, eventually asserting, "I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and "voice" of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes (89)." The author continually intersperses his voice from outside the story to remind readers of the fictional content, urging them not to believe the truth.

The metafictional elements of the novel reflect this by constantly challenging the reader's perceptions and expectations. Just as metafiction plays with the idea of the author's control over the narrative, Sarah's actions challenge the societal norms and expectations imposed on her. She refuses to conform to the roles prescribed to her by the society of Lyme Regis, embodying the rebellious spirit of the novel's narrative structure. John Fowles, through his metafictional narrative, intervenes directly in the story, offering alternative plots or commenting on the characters' decisions. This intrusion mirrors Sarah's determination to control her destiny, defying the Victorian era's constraints. By doing so, Fowles highlights the constructed nature of characters within the literature, much like Sarah's constructed persona within the town—a woman marked by scandal yet fiercely independent and self-aware. Fowles's such experimental form, which includes playing with narrative voice and structure, aligns with Sarah's quest for identity beyond societal expectations. Just as the novel breaks away from traditional storytelling, Sarah seeks to break away from traditional female roles. The metafictional elements underscore her struggle for autonomy and self-expression in a society that seeks to define her.

To conclude, the metafiction of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* serves as a mirror to Sarah, reflecting her complexity, defiance, and quest for self-determination. By employing metafictional techniques, John Fowles not only engages in the nature of storytelling and creation but also delves deep into the exploration of identity, freedom, and the constraints imposed by society. Through Sarah, the metafictional novel explores the themes of rebellion, the search for self, and the fluidity of identity in a way that challenges both the characters and readers to question their perceptions and beliefs.

4. Dual Narrative Construction

In postmodernist literature, the narrator's identity and perspective shift with the characters' circumstances and psychological changes, presenting character images that the author cannot fully control. John Fowles, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, challenges the mainstream realist novel's adherence to a singular narrative perspective, arguing that it significantly constrains the depiction of characters. In this novel, Fowles employs two distinct narrative voices to comprehensively portray the protagonist, Sarah: third-person narration and first-person narration. The first-person narrative "I" serves as both a narrator within the story and a character involved in the narrative process, influencing the novel's development. However, a notable characteristic of the first-person perspective is its inherent limitation; readers are only privy to the focused character's viewpoint, generating suspense. Fowles uses traditional first-person narrative, allowing the narrator "I" to intervene in the storytelling process and comment on the content and creation of the novel. Sarah appears as an enigmatic woman through Charles's eyes, her mysterious allure captivating him from their first encounter. Despite being labeled a prostitute, she embodies a freedom lacking in women in the male-dominated society of the time. At the end of the novel, Sarah leaves Charles for America, where her artistic talent flourishes, achieving both spiritual and financial independence. Supported by her strong spirit and financial autonomy, Sarah pursues a vision of love based on equality and freedom, laying the groundwork for her to change her life and break societal prejudices (Jin Bing).

On the other hand, although an omniscient narrative adds to the portrayal of Sarah, it only shapes a part of her image from an observer's perspective. The rest of her psyche remains unexplored, relying on readers' interpretation. The third-person narrative offers an omniscient, god-like viewpoint, controlling the narrative for readers. This traditional narrative mode, where the all-knowing narrator both speaks and observes, can inspect events from any angle, delve into any character's inner thoughts, and occasionally adopt an internal perspective to appear as an observer. However, in the eyes of the townspeople, the third-person narrative paints Sarah as a woman of immoral conduct, subjecting her and the French Lieutenant's relationship to harsh judgment, even though these accusations are baseless.

In summary, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* utilizes two different narrative voices to inform readers of specific events occurring within a particular time frame while simultaneously employing introspective commentary voices to constantly remind readers of the narrative's unreliability. The dual narrative approach allows Fowles to delve deeply into Sarah's character, presenting her as a complex individual who cannot be easily categorized or understood. Through one narrative thread, we see Sarah through the eyes of Charles, the protagonist, which gives us a certain perception of her as mysterious and perhaps victimized. Through another narrative lens, we get closer to Sarah's own perspective, feelings, and motivations, which might differ significantly from how others perceive her. This duality mirrors Sarah's own struggle with her identity and society's expectations, showcasing her as a multifaceted character with desires and thoughts that defy simple explanations. All in all, this dual narrative construction not only enriches the storytelling but also deepens the exploration of themes such as freedom, love, and societal norms, reflecting the novel's intricate layering and the complexities inherent in deciphering truth and fiction.

5. Conclusion

Postmodernist novels unveil the instability, uncertainty, discontinuity, disorder, fragmentation, and abrupt changes existing within society. They advocate for the transformation and innovation of narrative forms, emphasizing the openness and plurality of postmodern narratives and tolerating differences. John Fowles, as a pioneering postmodernist writer, utilizes postmodern narrative techniques in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to reveal themes of freedom and independence. Firstly, the author employs metafictional narrative to oscillate between fiction and reality, pulling readers back to the present and engaging them in the liminal space between the fabricated and the real. Secondly, through the use of intertextuality and parody as ironic narrative strategies, readers can delve into the hidden messages between citations and the main text, understand the novel's plot and characters' psychology, and experience the contrast between the Victorian era and postmodernity.

In summary, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as an experimental and subversive postmodern historical fiction "meta-novel," manifests its theme of "freedom" through a series of postmodern narrative techniques, including parody, intertextuality, and dual narrative construction. It reveals how Sarah, a lower-class woman from the Victorian era, dares to challenge the patriarchal society, embarks on a journey of self-discovery, and pursues independence, equality, and freedom amidst an absurd, ugly, and harsh reality. Her quest for spiritual liberation profoundly impacts the awakening of contemporary female consciousness.

Thus, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* stands not merely as a narrative but as a beacon of postmodern literary exploration. It intricately weaves together the fabric of historical imagination with the threads of postmodern innovation, presenting a rich tapestry that challenges conventional storytelling and societal norms. Through Fowles's adept manipulation of narrative forms and thematic depth, the novel serves as a pivotal work in the landscape of postmodern literature, offering insights into the complex interplay between history, society, and the individual's quest for autonomy and identity.

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