
**FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*: BEYOND THE
(IM)POSSIBILITY OF KNOWING THE PAST**

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Abstract: This paper will explore the importance of history and its relationship with fiction in the new-historical genre, with special reference to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Although Fowles himself does not want to depict this novel as historical, the interpretation of the novel from the perspective of new-historicism demonstrates that history and the possibility of knowing the past are very important concerns for Fowles. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is generally viewed by critics as an exemplary historiographic metafiction. Still, we offer evidence that this novel represents a neo-Victorian (a subgenre of new-historical) novel which both follows the conventions of a classical historical novel and violates these conventions. Despite the fact that the novel suggests that the notion of history as a discipline based on facts becomes problematic, it at the same time implies that historical knowledge may be attained. As it follows from the novel, history should not be seen as linear, uninterrupted and certain, but as heterogeneous and unstable. The contemporary concept of history encompasses a number of versions and dimensions of the past, which is the very condition of historical knowledge. As a typical new-historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* emphasizes the link between history and fiction. The novel implies that they are based upon similar principles. According to Fowles, history has many various uses. This means that the author's intent is not only to illuminate similarities, differences or superiority of past and present, but to highlight certain concerns which permeate all historical and literary epochs, such as freedom, duty, sexuality, a misunderstanding between the sexes. In other words, this novel suggests that history for Fowles is horizontal rather than vertical. Moreover, Sarah and Charles may be interpreted as characters who attempt to transcend history. Their love story, choices and dilemmas are perceived as timeless, eternal, and their evolution consists of rejecting imposed roles, labels and molds in favor of reaching the state of existential awareness. In doing so, they become free from the constraints of history, not willing to shape their lives upon the principles of narrative, which determine both history and fiction. Reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman* proves to be a learning experience. Fowles's intention is to inspire the reader to abandon conventional reading and take part in the creation of the novel. This novel is an exemplary participatory fiction since the three possible endings invite the reader to assign his own meaning to the story and fill in the gaps that Fowles deliberately leaves.

Keywords: history, fiction, new-historical (neo-Victorian), past.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although Brian McHale (1987) emphasizes that the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological, whereas the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological, this article adopts the position that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), an exemplary postmodernist novel, deals with epistemological questions. However, this novel implies that the nature of knowledge in postmodernism has changed. In contrast with earlier movements, when the fundamentals of knowledge (so-called "meta-narratives") were not questioned, contemporary literature is characterized by questioning of meta-narratives such as reality, past, history, etc. Linda Hutcheon (1991), one of the leading theorists of postmodernism, claims that these concepts exist, but that they have to be redefined and understood as constructs, not as natural phenomena. However, Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction deals with the problems of representation, whereas the objective of this paper is to highlight the fact that representation of history is still possible in contemporary literature. This article interprets *The French Lieutenant's Woman* not as an exemplary historiographic metafiction, but as a new-historical (neo-Victorian) novel. By comparing and contrasting its distinctive features with those of historiographic metafiction and the historical novel (its precursor), our objective is to demonstrate that Fowles's novel is a symbol of the revival of historical consciousness after the two world wars. The notion that history shapes human experience is one of the implications of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which undoubtedly succeeds in expanding the historical consciousness of the reader. However, as it follows from Fowles's novel, historical thinking makes us prone to shape our life experience according to narrative principle, which reflects the state that Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson attempt to transcend.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The French Lieutenant's Woman is interpreted as a historical novel due to its double setting, its successive reference to two historical periods separated by a temporal distance of an entire century. Critics usually focus on its

experimental form, on devices and techniques that define it as a postmodernist novel. However, this paper attempts to indicate that Fowles's novel does not only deal with the problems of representation (its central postmodernist feature). The starting hypothesis of this research is that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* attempts to meaningfully rewrite the past. As we view this novel as belonging to a hybrid genre, one which combines the characteristics of history and fiction, we begin with a brief overview of the relationship between history and fiction from the eighteenth century to the present moment. This enables us to detect similarities between *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and a typical historical novel. However, Fowles's masterpiece allows for experiments and innovation, which determines it as a new-historical (neo-Victorian) fiction, a proliferating genre that inspires a heated debate on the (im)possibility of knowing the past in the present. Finally, so as to round off Fowles's view on history, we have to mention his attitude that history is horizontal rather than vertical. This leads to the conclusion that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is both historical and attempts to transcend history. The author attempts to emphasize that timelessness should be valued more than time.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History and the past are important topics in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The novel seeks to point out the uncertain and provisional nature of both literature and history, among which there is a strong resemblance (Tica, 2021). In order to understand the specific relationship between history and fiction, we have to go back to the eighteenth century, when history was part of literature. Then it was considered natural that history employs various narrative devices and strategies so as to achieve the effect of an amusing story. However, after the French Revolution, history was established as a separate scientific discipline. Scholars found it necessary to make a distinction between history and fiction. Therefore, history was defined as a discipline dealing with facts, whereas fiction was defined as dealing with the untrue, the fictional. As Mitchell (2010) states, during the course of the nineteenth century, history was associated with rationalism and objectivity, whereas fiction was linked to inspiration and subjectivity. Departure of history from fiction was considered necessary in order to secure its scientific status. Therefore, attempts to establish clear boundaries between these two fields did not take into consideration that both history and fiction are based upon empirical data. Still, in spite of such endeavors, at the beginning of the nineteenth century a new literary genre saw the light of day, a genre which "violated an especially sensitive border" (Ferris, 1991: p. 139) between history and fiction. It represents a hybrid genre in which different purposes of history and fiction are combined. The supposedly most important objective of fiction, that of amusement, is subordinated to the final goal of history – that of presenting the real, the truth (Ferris, 1991). In the twentieth century some critics, for example Frederic Jameson, claim that it is no longer possible to think historically. However, the second half of the twentieth century is marked by a proliferation of historical fiction, which is named new-historical. Writers of this type of fiction suggest that great historical events of the twentieth century (such as two world wars) had a great impact on people. They began to question the notion of history as progress, but have become increasingly aware that life experience is to a great extent shaped by historical events.

In postmodernism, history is no longer perceived as a discipline whose goal is the realization of the truth about the bygone events which is based on facts. We can access the past only through texts whose nature becomes problematic. Both history and literature are viewed as being dependent on the perspective of the author, as well as on his/her choice of events and interpretation. Moreover, the linear nature of history becomes questioned in contemporary literature. There is no longer only one history, but its many versions and facets. This does not mean that history does not exist; only that it becomes impossible to know it in its totality and variety. As Cora Kaplan (2007) suggests, "what we knew as 'history' has become a kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled" (p. 3). According to Hutcheon (1991), this plurality of (hi)stories should not be perceived as tragic; indeed, the uncertainty and heterogeneity of discourses and truths is "the very conditions of historical knowledge" (p. 67).

The French Lieutenant's Woman was published in the sixties, which mark the beginning of a period of renewed genuine interest in the Victorian era. The novel has two settings, Victorian and contemporary. This is highly important and the juxtaposition of the two settings emphasizes the link between the past and present, enabling the reader to get a more thorough understanding of each. Here, in practice, the similarity between history and fiction comes to the fore. The aim of a historian is to establish a connection between the past and the present (Hutcheon, 1991). The historical novel has the same goal. The narrator deals with both the events from the past and the present in order to bridge the temporal gap between the contemporary reader and the distant past. The author of a historical novel, similarly to a historiographer, is determined to link the past with the present in order to understand each of the two better. As David Gross (1978) propounds, sometimes the best method to illuminate a phenomenon from the past is to compare or contrast it with a present phenomenon. Kornelije Kvas (2021) persuasively argues that simultaneous dealing with past and present enables the reader to acquire an expanded and comprehensive historical

horizon of the discourse. But the real question is – what is Fowles’s intent in simultaneous reference to past and present? Critics such as Brantlinger, Adam, and Rothblatt (1972) and Vukićević Garić (2015) propose that this is in accordance with postmodernist fashion to define something in opposition to something else. However, we do not agree with such a conclusion. Fowles does not attempt to represent either the past or the present as superior/inferior. Rather, his endeavor is to emphasize the fact that each period has its positive and negative features, but that they also share certain concerns and anxieties. In doing so, the author does not try to mock or condemn the Victorian age, but to emphasize that the shortcomings of the Victorian era “are shared by our age and by all ages” (Tarbox, 1988, p. 78). Furthermore, the author’s intent is to question the “(im)possibility of knowing anything about past events from a contemporary perspective” (Hutcheon, 1991, p. 47). Our attitude and knowledge of the past is undoubtedly influenced and shaped by our present circumstances. However, it should not be forgotten that temporal distance makes us more objective in our understanding and interpretation of the past. Passage of time ensures that bygone events do not arouse strong sentiments, which certainly helps in being impartial, which is a crucial requirement for a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the past. As Mitchell (2010) suggests, although contemporary historical novels emphasize the problematic nature of the knowledge of history, they in a nutshell “remain committed to the possibility and value of striving for” (p. 36) a meaningful recreation of the past. She correctly notices that a great number and success of neo-historical fiction testifies to the reader’s desire for the knowledge of the past. Its various representations of the past do not have to be viewed as hindering our final and total understanding of the past. After all, there is no total and final truth, but there are its various facets and dimensions which definitely broaden our historical consciousness and knowledge in general.

Unfortunately, neo-Victorian novels are sometimes interpreted as adopting a nostalgic attitude towards the past, whereby nostalgia is equated to longing for the past that never was. However, the relationship between the past and present is much more complex. Neo-Victorian novels critically engage with the notion of “the Victoria”, and this critical attitude implies a relationship that is simultaneously ironic and nostalgic (Vukićević Garić, 2015). Therefore, the Victorian age is simultaneously perceived as a potential source of modern identity and an age of hypocrisy and conformity. This two-faceted portrayal of an ambiguous period such as Victorian opens up new, unprecedented possibilities for representation. On the one hand, such an attitude confirms the ancestral link with the past. On the other hand, depiction of the Victorian era as oppressive and hypocritical challenges the received notion of Western culture as one associated with epistemological progress (Holtz, 2020). Such a perspective perfectly reflects a poetics of postmodernism to adopt a position somewhere between acceptance, refusal and interrogation. Or, as Krombholz (2013) sums up, neo-Victorian fiction manages to arrive at “subversion of master narratives and a neo-conservative return to those narratives”.

Although Fowles (1998) himself claims that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not a historical novel, the fact that this novel has two settings separated by an entire century and his endeavor to view the past in the light of the present perspective implies that history is one of central concerns of Fowles and this novel. Ela Ipek Gunduz (2017) points to the fact that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* can be characterized as both a historiographic metafiction and a new-historical novel. Linda Hutcheon (1991) in her influential study *The Politics of Postmodernism* cites *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as the first historiographic metafiction, a genre that is simultaneously historical and self-reflexive. The intent of this genre is to redefine the concepts of history and fiction, aiming at emphasizing their similarities. Still, this article affiliates Fowles’s novel with a broader scope of a new-historical novel. The starting hypothesis is that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* possesses the qualities of a classic historical novel, but that it allows for innovations (Olk, 2017). In doing so, it simultaneously follows the conventions and violates them.

Although the trend of re-creating the Victorian past is relatively new, Claudia Olk (2017) points to the fact that since its very establishment as a genre, a historical novel incorporated two-dimensional setting, being aware both of “the time they are set in and the time at which they are written” (p. 31). Moreover, as a neo-Victorian novel (subgenre of a new-historical novel), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* deals with the question of what is to be incorporated in the re-creation of the past. On the one hand, this novel follows the conventions of a classical historical novel by incorporating historical information about the Victorian age, such as description of dress and furniture, style of writing, adherence to a typical plot of the nineteenth century novel, etc. On the other hand, the novel suggests that the crucial part of its re-creation of the Victorian past is dealing with its major concerns and anxieties. Although Hutcheon (2004) claims that the novelty of historiographic metafiction is the fact that its protagonists are marginalized and powerless characters, Johnston and Wiegandt state that the protagonist of a historical novel has always been a character with little or no influence on the general course of historical development (Johnston & Wiegandt, 2017). Therefore, the plot of Fowles’s novel corresponds to a classical plot of a historical novel that focuses on the characters that are greatly influenced by the specific conditions of their historical time, whereas they are not important historical figures. Furthermore, Lukacs (1983) depicts a historical novel as a genre that deals with periods of great, cataclysmic change. Taking this into consideration, it seems that it coincides

with another distinctive feature of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Sarah Woodruff is a female character and a member of the working class. Her gender and her class mark her as a figure whose position is unstable and prone to great pressures at this specific point in history. Whereas the first half of the nineteenth century denotes an era when modern assumptions about conduct, gender and sexuality were created, the second half of this century symbolizes a period of awakening and questioning. In fact, both settings of this novel, 1867 and 1967, mark periods of transition and considerable change. Both years stand for eras of doubt, questioning and redefinition, for ages when the old myths could no longer satisfy people and their strivings: “they knew, in short, that they had things to discover, and that the discovery was of the utmost importance to the future of man” (Fowles, 2004, p. 49).

Apart from incorporating some characteristics of a traditional historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as a representative of a neo-Victorian (a subgenre of new-historical) fiction, violates the conventions of its forerunner. One example of this violation is Fowles's determination to end his novel in an unconventional way, offering the reader three instead of one ending of the story. Second, this novel simultaneously rewrites Victorian history and emphasizes its uncertainty and instability. No matter whether historical accounts are based upon memory or texts, their verifiability is problematic. Memory is generally acknowledged as unreliable, whereas historical texts are perceived as epistemologically problematic with the advent of postmodernism. Third, Tarbox (1988) correctly notices that Fowles does not view history as vertical, but as horizontal. He does not only challenge the conception of the Victorian era as a period of development, he also challenges the notion that the twentieth century stands in a superior position in comparison to the nineteenth century in terms of progress. As Vukićević Garić (2015) asserts, according to Fowles, all periods have their positive and negative sides. Still, there are some eternal, timeless concerns and anxieties that permeate all historical and literary epochs. As implied by this novel, some of these eternal topics include sexuality, existential awareness, as well as fundamental misunderstanding between the genders.

As Del Ivan Janik (1995) maintains, new-historical novels emphasize “the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence” (p. 162). In Fowles's view, knowledge of history and its principles is important because history, as well as fiction, make it clear that we make sense of our life experience through stories. This means that our perception of the world depends upon narrative principles. Awareness that history and stories we have internalized shape our experience, determine the way we perceive the world, may and should be used to become free of the constraints it imposes upon an individual. However, not each individual is capable of doing this on his/her own. For example, Charles, though at the bottom of his being senses that he is not living an authentic life, needs help of a “magus” (Fowles's term) in order to reject his false assumptions and roles and reach freedom. On the other hand, Sarah Woodruff has accomplished an authentic identity through trial. She has realized that our identity is not stable and coherent, but that people tend to limit themselves by fitting their attitudes and beliefs to the existing types and roles. Sarah realizes that the truth, the essence of experience cannot be narrated. Therefore, she wants to “fall out of narrative requirements” (Tarbox, 1996, p. 95) in order to become free and find the truth. She deliberately plays the role of a fallen woman, and then dispels Charles's illusions about having sinned with Vargueness. Charles is not able to comprehend Sarah's motivation and intent to the very end of the novel. He is not aware that Sarah attempts to free him of his constricting roles, assumptions and attitudes. Sarah is simultaneously a historical character and a figure which stands outside history since she does not belong to it. She is historical because her life experience is affected by the conditions of the historical period she is placed into. However, she is determined not to fit into the existing types of women. In doing so, she becomes an unreadable element of the Victorian age, a character who cannot be comprehended and who does not want to be understood, not even by herself. Explanation, an attempt to reduce the essence of life experience to words deprives life of its mystery, of its beauty and lure. Sarah deliberately chooses not to fit into the requirements of the gender narrative of her time; hence, history cannot contain her (Fletcher, 2003). With the help of Sarah, Charles succeeds to “overcome history. And even though he does not realize it” (Fowles, 2004, p. 257). Their love story, choices and dilemmas are perceived as timeless, eternal, and their evolution consists of rejecting imposed roles, labels and molds in favor of reaching the state of existential awareness. Whereas Sarah denounces the role of a governess, the label of a fallen woman and the convention of marriage, Charles is forced to give up his role of a gentleman and Sarah's benefactor. Sarah has succeeded in bringing him to the condition he cannot compare with his internalized stories. Only such a condition reflects a truly free will and the level of existential awareness Fowles considers desirable.

In an interview conducted by Katherine Tarbox, Fowles (1988) claims that the function of fiction is both to amuse and to teach. Therefore, in his opinion, the goals of fiction are similar to that of history. But it has to be underlined that Fowles's method of teaching is unusual and unconventional. Throughout the novel, the narrator entertains the reader, not so much with a loving story, but with the simultaneous observance and breaking of conventions. The disguised author plays not only with the protagonist, but with the reader's expectations, attempting to inspire his evolution into the evolved reader. Fowles, who erases the clear boundaries between the fictional and the real world,

wants the reader to learn from the characters. Therefore, whereas Sarah plays with Charles, the author plays with the reader – he challenges the reader’s assumptions and beliefs. In doing so, Fowles seeks to train the reader not to judge by appearances. As it follows from the novel, nothing is as it seems to be. Hence, the reader is invited to participate in the creation of the novel. That is exactly the reason why Fowles leaves the novel with three possible endings. The author should not be expected to assign his own meaning to the story – the meaning has to be assigned by each reader separately. For Fowles, it is crucially important to leave the novel unclear and ambiguous – the task of the reader is to solve the mystery and fill in the gaps in the story (qtd. in Tarbox, 1988).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the claims that historical thinking is impossible in contemporary time, the interpretation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* from the perspective of new-historicism testifies to the “opening up of history to the field of fiction” (Mitchell, 2010, p. 38). The relationship between history and fiction is the subject of intense debate in critical circles, and it is in this heated debate that this paper intends to participate. Our starting hypothesis is that history is one of central motifs in Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. However, the author attempts to teach the reader of the need to redefine the notion of history, which is no longer perceived as linear and uninterrupted. History in postmodernism has numerous facets and various uses. Proceeding from the assumption that affiliating this novel with the genre of historiographic metafiction does not fully reflect the intertwining of history and fiction, we offer evidence that Fowles’s masterpiece perfectly fits into the genre of neo-Victorian (new-historical) fiction. As such, it simultaneously adopts some features of a typical historical novel and allows for innovation. The novel suggests that the past and present overlap and influence each other. However, the emphasis is not so much on the similarities/differences or superiority/inferiority of either past or present. The author attempts to highlight eternal, timeless concerns and anxieties present in all historical and literary epochs. In doing so, he is pointing at the everlasting topics. Fowles’s excellence is in creating both the character of Sarah and the novel that are simultaneously historical and beyond the grasp of history. Sarah and the novel are historical in terms of their background/setting, which are full of historical details that link them to a certain historical moment. However, the novel suggests that these data are superfluous and insignificant. What is important is what lies beneath the surface, the core, the essence. The novel tackles these crucial themes that are present independently of a specific historical period. In that manner, the emphasis is not on time, but on timelessness (Tarbox, 1988), which explains how it is possible for both Sarah and the novel to be historical and to transcend history at the same time.

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