



Post-Modern Parody in
John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman
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Abstract

The French Lieutenant's Woman continues to be one of the "Notable Books of 1969" and the most popular novel written by the British novelist John Fowles. It signifies one of the best metafictional examples that embraces multiple voices of narrators, metafictional paratextuality, irony through juxtaposition, use of anachronism and critical parody. Since its publication it brought to public attention of a different interpretation of Victorian, sexual and literary conventions. The novel discusses the troubled relationship of gentleman, Charles Smithson, and the mysterious independent woman, Sarah Woodruff, with whom he falls in love. The novel parodies the Victorian social, cultural and literary work of art. The novel also receives much attention as an important feminist document because of the contrast between the independent Sarah Woodruff and the more stereotypical male characters, Charles Smithson. I would argue in this paper that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a juxtaposition of the conventions of two eras, Victorian and modern novel to become a double-voiced discourse, in which postmodern parody plays its significant role. I would also discuss Hutcheon's meaning of



postmodern parody that differs from the old meaning of parody as the former marks with productivity rather than ridiculing and opens the text up to different interpretations. Moreover, the paper will shed light on Victorian hypocritical treatment of woman character by comparing the double-image of the heroin Sarah Woodruff.

Introduction

“You honour your father by imitating him,

Just as we honour an author by the same means.

For what we virtuously imitate we approve and admire”

Peter Ackroyd, *English Music* 1992

Many aspects characterize the literary works of postmodern fiction; one of these aspects is the use of parody by revisiting Victorian texts, themes, and settings. It is worth noting that returning back to Victorian texts does not mean, in this respect, a blind imitation of the Victorian literary convictions. Rather, it means revising them with the perspectives of the modern cultural moment. Often, the literariness of the postmodern novelists is signaled by the presence of parody. Behind their works stand other texts against which the postmodern work of art is measured. Postmodernism, moreover, celebrates fragmentation which makes postmodern fiction rich with the use of epigraphs, intertextuality and dialogism. Accordingly, readers cannot grasp one meaning of a text, rather the text is highly open for different interpretations. Thus, in postmodern fiction, there is no logical ending that we as readers can reach (Lyotard, 1979)

In her book *A Theory of parody* Linda Hutcheon, parody is defined as “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text [It] is another form of formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks differences rather than similarities” (1985:9). Postmodern parody echoes past works in order to borrow a text to evoke its cultural and social milieu.



Parody, in a postmodern sense, becomes a bilingual synthesis, which is different from monolingual forms like pastiche or adaptation that brings no synthesis and reveal no respect for the parodied text. Fowles in The French Lieutenant's Woman, shows much respect to Victorian manner and mode. The reader, then finds his judgment is not related to negatives, but to mix both ages to form new and productive kinds of parody, which tends to reorganize and reconstruct, but not necessarily a deconstruction, of the borrowed material. (Rose, 1993: 203- 208). Hutcheon mentions a strategy for the use of parody in the postmodern work of literature. To her, parody "is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text." (Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, 2000:6).

It can be argued that John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman is an imaginative approach to Victorian history and historiography. Thus, it is considered a persuasive historiography metafiction in contemporary British literature. The main characteristics of the novel are the interweaving of historical and literary sources of the Victorian era.

In The French Lieutenant's Woman, Fowles reinforces the conversations and critique of the Victorian world in general in all of its aspects, whether social, political, sexual, women figure, etc. He breaks the traditional literary narration style and techniques by presenting the paradox of fictionality/reality and the present/past. By using postmodern literary parody the cultural and theological assumptions of the two ages, modern and Victorian, are compared. He has employed epigraphs in different chapters to respond to the Victorian past from a twentieth century standpoint. In other words, the past occasionally exists on the same plane as the present and, thus, the events of the past and present are firmly linked in cause and effect relationship (Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody, 2000:12).



In the narrative mode, the Victorian omniscient narrator is criticized by the announcement of freedom in the novel: "There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedom to exist" (Fowles, 1969:99). Characters in the novel are not fully controlled by the novelist. The omniscient narrator no longer stands as all-knowing or godlike to command the characters. So they all possess the freedom of choice.

Parody, also appears as the most significant kind of double-voice discourse in Fowles' construction of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. To both, Victorian novel and postmodernism, parody is directed to serve dialogism between past and present and even perhaps to the relationship between the text and the reader. In Bakhtin's conception, Parody, "is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, languages and styles, actively and mutually illuminate one another" (Bakhtin, 1981:18).

Borrowing from recognized Victorian figures, or what Gutleben calls them "the voices of masters", do not serve the purpose of a blind imitation or for comic effect, but they serve with the novels in which they are used a serious thematic, aesthetic or ideological links. Traditionally, these epigraphs or voices establish ironic connection with the characters, themes or plots and they do not affect the work of art aesthetically (Gutleben, 2001:18). Considering the dual epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, one finds that they are selected from the main Victorian poets, scientists, prominent figures and novelists. Fowles employs these epigraphs to function as reinforcement for not only the Victorian culture but also as a conversation between past and present. Thus, past plays an important role in contemporary fiction just like the rare-view mirror importance to the driver (Ibid).

Post-modern parody

Let no one parody a poet unless he loves him. Sir Theodore Martin Cited in Lind Hutcheon A theory of parody



Traditionally and more precisely by many dictionaries and encyclopedias, parody is defined as a tool of imitating other works for the comic and ridiculing purposes. The comic sense of parody, for example, is suggested by the OED as "An imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect". In *Parody and Metafiction*, Margaret Rose, moreover, argues that parody is "the critical quotation of preformed literary language with comic effect" (1979: 59). These definitions insist on the comic effect of the term parody. That comic side may compare, by means of contrasting, between the original text and the new, the serious with trivial, high with low, ancient and modern or pious and impious, only to amuse the reader.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, many critics become extremely conscious of the importance of parody in the development of literary works. By time parody had given us a perspective that it is simply another way of devaluating the objects of imitation or even achieving irony between past and present is unattainable. In the poststructuralist era, the function of parody is reassessed by critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson. For those poststructuralist writers, reimagining past or using old styles and themes such as love, detective stories and traditional myths in more contemporary contexts, serves a serious purpose. Postmodern parody, then not only referring to those authors and styles, but it gives us a creative imagination and sensibility to show a distance between the past and present (Hutcheon, *A Poetics Of Postmodernism*. 2004).

One important feature of postmodern art is the extensive use of parody. Of course, Parody in its newest sense, was realized by Linda Hutcheon in her 1985 book *A Theory of Parody*. As opposed to traditional sense, postmodern parody can be differentiated in its seriousness and creativity: "it enshrines rather than mocks the parodied text" (Hutcheon, 1991: 228). In her point of view, postmodern parody "is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the





limits and the power of representation in any medium”(Ibid).She improves that postmodern parody has a double coded representation. It “legitimizes” and “subverts” the parodied text (Ibid, 231).

Postmodernism,actually, provides Hutcheon a power to redefine the old understanding of parody as a “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Cited in Duvall.ed,2002:10). The dialogue, Hutcheon asserts,of past and present, new and old brings a belief in change within continuity.Thus,the signal of distance and difference can be seen in Fowles' *The French Lieutenants' Woman*in which the conventions of the Victorian and of the modern novel are juxtaposed .Fowels compares his novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with other Victorian novels not only to imitate or toquote, but to recontextualize and to synthesize in a respectful manner(Hutcheon,1985 :31).

Parody as Polyphony

In postmodernism, it is possible to believe that a text is not a product of a single voice or author, or it can stand alone; rather, any work of literature can be seen in relation to other texts.Roland Barths writes: “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, and contestation” (Cited in Rose, 1993:186). So,referring to other texts or authors undermines the concept of monologism or self-sufficient totality asBakhtin puts that "the word in language is half someone else's" (cited in McKeon, 2000, 349).Postmodernism, thus shows much respect to Victorian novels and culture, since it is a source of understanding the present by re-imagining and comments on the past using irony and parody.Bakhtin adds, that parody is not a criticism of an original, but a dialogical dimension in literature closely related to intertextuality.Therefore, parody is seen as a function rather than a form that relates one text to another and one language to another (Goranzon and Florin 1991:95).



There is no doubt that Victorian culture equipped John Fowles with a rich material whose different components could be re-imagined in the new text so as to take benefit from their artistic power and to challenge their validity in present time. Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, thus, is the breakdown of the monologic unity of the artistic pole. It emphasizes the dialogism or double-voiced discourse. In Bakhtin's philosophy, parody is the primary means of producing polyphony. *The French Lieutenants' Woman* is an excellent example of the heterogeneity of voices by which the reader is able to think of its heterogeneity. In this respect, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is open up to the past to interrogate, challenge and to subvert it (Ibid).

To parody the Victorian literary tradition, each chapter of *The French Lieutenants' Woman* begins with epigraph(s), taken from different Victorian figures such as Thomas Hardy, Mathew Arnold, Charles Darwin, Jane Austen and many others. In fact, the use of epigraphs in *The French Lieutenants' Woman* is considerably significant as they are used to manifest a conversation between the past and present and also to provide an additional voice by which the reader be able to understand the theme of each chapter. In this way Fowles' borrowing from canonical Victorian writers do not serve a comic contextualization, rather they establish a serious thematic, aesthetic or ideological links (Gutleben, 2001: 17)

Fowles begins *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with a poetic image of a mysterious woman taken from Thomas Hardy's "The Riddle" "Stretching eyes west over the sea, wind foul or fair, always stood, she prospect-impressed; solely out there did her gaze rest, never elsewhere seemed charm to be" (Fowles, 1969:). In chapter nineteen, the epigraph is taken from Darwin's, "The Origin of Species" to impose a scientific reality upon fiction. In Chapter Thirteen, the sociological studies display the Victorian social problem of prostitution and sexual double standard. Additionally, epigraph quoted from Karl Marx's *Zur*





Judenfrageto highlight the theme of freedom throughout the novel "Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationship to man himself." (Ibid). These metafictional paratextualities emphasize the role of different social, cultural and scientific realism within fiction.

The landscape of the past, then, could be seen as a double voice by looking to the historical past and its literary conventions. As far as the narrator is concerned, Fowles reinvents himself as a character in the novel to form another authoritative voice in its polyphonic level. It seems in any case natural to look back at the England of a hundred years ago within a somewhat ironical eye.... So I have written myself another memorandum: you are not the 'I' who breaks the illusion, but the 'I' who is a part of it" (Fowles and Relf, 1998).

Feminist Parody

Gutleben argues that postmodern fiction or what is called neo-Victorian fiction's return to the nineteenth century signifies a nostalgic repeated "to propose a new model for the present as if it were not able to progress and had to turn around and step back" (Gutleben, 2001: 8). Then, parody facilitates the making of such a new model. In this sense, literary, national, cultural or personal can properly define itself in comparison to what it perceives to be its past or its relationship with that past. Neo-Victorian fiction does not simply revisit issues such as race, sexuality, prostitution, pornography or hysteria in order to either shock or serve the current market (Ibid 2001: 11). It, therefore, engages with those themes because they present problems that are as fundamental to "Western societies" today as they were in the nineteenth century. Hence, neo-Victorian fiction functions as a literary space in which such issues can be critically explored for contemporary contexts. Certainly, many postmodern texts, among them *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, thematize the parodic relationships between women's pasts and presents which have become characteristic of contemporary feminism. Postmodern





parody serves to highlight the parallels between two feminist movements, their shared interest in how fragments of the past shape their present, and how an acknowledgment thereof can lead to fruitful re-definitions of established customs and politics. Neo-victorian fiction may thus well be – and, potentially, continue to be – a genre that enables contemporary feminist writers to combine third-wave politics and literary form. (Bradbury, 1993:38)

Sarah Woodruff is portrayed to accentuate the theme of emancipation in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The purpose is to criticize Victorian sexual inequality and to employ a parody of Victorian literary conventions. In this parodic writing form, Fowles expresses his belief in freedom through characterizing Sarah as a fallen woman, different to many heroines in Victorian novels. 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.

Sarah Woodruff as a New Woman, not only challenges the Victorian virgin/whore dichotomy, but more significantly she is new to her fresh dressing style. Her new looking, rejecting the contemporary female clothing style, produces a shock in Charles's mind when meeting Sarah again in Rossetti's house predicting her emancipation from the Victorian social triteness and sexual constraints:

And her dress! It was so different that he thought for a moment she was someone else. He had always seen her in his mind in the former clothes, a haunted face rising from a widowed darkness. But this was someone in the full uniform of the New Woman, flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions of female fashion (Fowles, 1969:423).

The wretched endings of "impure" heroine, such as death or insanity, in Victorian traditional novels are altered. Apart of being the victim of male dominated regulations; Sarah reappears in 1869, in a completely different image as a new woman. She finds her true identity





and the achievement of her selfhood in the house of Pre-Raphaelites. Moreover, Fowles abandons the Victorian literary convention of a fixed consummate ending in a romance (Casagrande, 1987:153).

The second final ending is important and tenable for the feminist point of view since Sarah reborn as a New Woman. She rejects the marriage institution and the patriarchal dominated society and her role in the Victorian culture. She, in this ending, is no longer a woman who marries shame, yet a distinctive emancipator possessing her selfhood (Muthusivam).

Sarah, like Hardy's Tess in *Tess of d'Urbervilles*, is culturally and sexually exploited and condemned for her impurity by Victorian patriarchal society. Fowles argues that Sarah "represented a reproach on the Victorian Age. An outcast. I don't know her crime, but I wished to protect her" (Bradbury, 1977:162). As a parodic writing, therefore, Fowles rejects the traditional plot and subverts Victorian literary convention of a fallen woman's fate. Sarah is sexually abused by the society, but the ending is different in which Fowles does not follow the storyline of Hardy. He modified the Victorian literary writing of a fallen woman's destiny. Once again, Sarah as a New Woman rejects the bondage of marriage with Charles. The tragic ending of the conventional passive role of the heroine is subverted and modified to form a postmodern paradox in which Fowles, imitates and questions the Victorian Age and as Hutcheon argues, "to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it" (Hutcheon, *A theory of Parody*. 1985:126).

Omniscient Narrator

Ironically and within the polyphonic level, the main difference between the Victorian narrator and postmodernist narrator is that the former could tell the story without any self-consciousness whereas the latter is aware of the forms of the novel. As a most successful postmodern device, Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reconstructs the voice



of the past through the first person narrator in which there is a mixture of two ages.

As defined by Patricia Waugh the *The French Lieutenant's Woman* belongs to metafictional novels in which Fowles employs a self-conscious novelist narrator. It is not only a self-reflexive writing process, but also the use of an omniscient narrator in traditional Victorian literary conventions. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles imitates the omniscient role of Victorian novelist for the purpose of parody and self-reflectively and to criticize the Victorian novelist's infinite awareness of his character, since the authors in Victorian literary works always stand omniscient to order the actions of characters and analyze the minds of their characters. Accordingly, the Victorian godlike authority is deconstructed and criticized with the intrusive novelist. In Fowles' fiction the reader is presented with the hybrid voices, which form the critique that postmodernism advanced against traditional points of view (Duvall, 2002).

In an interview with John Fowles shows that he "never feels quite at home as the omniscient narrator" (Fowles and Vipond 1999:40). Traditionally, an omnipresent or a godlike narrator is a person who knows everything. But this idea has no longer appeared in the postmodern literature. Living in the age of Roland Barthes, Fowles identifies himself with the individual's freedom in which the idea of omnipresent narrator is deconstructed from different levels. Firstly, the scope of the novel is widened by adopting multiple viewpoints. Secondly, there is a direct invitation for the reader to participate and give his ideology in choosing a suitable ending. Thirdly, Fowles' experimentation may be innovative and might have even set the trend for the upcoming novelists:

There is only one definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedom to exist. And I must conform to that definition. The novelist is still a god, since he creates... what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the





newtheological image, with freedom our firstprinciple, not authority". (Fowles 97)

Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*parodies the conventional narrative mode using the Victorian omniscient narrator. But when the plot progresses the narrative mode undergoes a transformation. The omniscient narrator is subverted by the presence of the intrusive author. The narrator immediately announces that there will be multiple endings and that he knows nothing about the mind of his characters:

I preached earlier on of the freedom characters must be given.

My problem is simple... what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed.

But what the protagonist Sarahwants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment. (Fowles; 317)

What has changed is thatwe are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient anddecreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our firstprinciple, not an authority (Fowles, 97). Accordingto Fowles, this procedure is necessary to create the impression that his charactersare really free: "We wish to create worlds as real as, but other than theworld as it is.... We also know that a genuinely created world must be independentof its creator; a planned workl... is a dead world."(Fowles, 81).

Throughout the postmodern intrusive narrator *The French Lieutenant's Woman* incorporates a unique etherealperspective, whose twentieth-century mode frames and comments on the Victorian story.Its main mysterious heroin Sarah Woodruff, whose undecided reputation places her as " an outsider within". She is both marginalized by her Victorian society and at the center of its attention (Lenz, 2008:41).Fowles'*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is, therefore, a parodically omniscient echoes certain Victorian popular writers and intrusive narrator who violates the flow of the Victorian omniscient narrator –it is a revision of Victorian convention in the light of twentieth century outlook (Onega, 1989:77).



Conclusion

One of the best examples of postmodern parody is Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which embraces Victorian social, political and literary conventions as its background. For Fowles, recalling past is valuable just like a rare view mirror also important for the driver.

Also to parody certain style or author does not mean to commit plagiarism or ridicule that author or style, rather to repeat and to produce a new text or document. To parody, is both to enshrine and to question the past. So, we admire and honor the author by repeating his style and theme just like honoring our father when we imitate him. Consequently, postmodern parody becomes a hybrid tool in which Victorian / modern, past / present and fictionality / reality are mingled together to produce a new and modern literary form.

The quest for identity, pursued by the heroine Sarah Woodruff, leads her to the process of rebirth as a New Woman. So, Fowles deconstructs and reconstructs the Victorian traditions in a modern outlook. As readers, there is a direct invitation to compare and contrast past and present to find out the fruit of conclusion

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