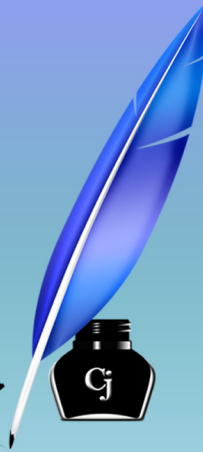


ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

June 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- III

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

**Managing Editor**

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Narration: Roles, Complexity and Problems of Readers in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Aishwarya.C.G  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
University of Madras  
Chennai-600005  
Tamil Nadu, India

Aristotle defined narrative as a work with a plot. He believed that the plot is the element in a literary work (Onega and Garcia Landa 1). But what gives a proper structure to the plot is the narration. Narration forms the basis of any other literary work and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not an exception to the rule. It would not be an exaggeration to state that narration plays a greater role in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* than in any other novel. It constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs an idea, challenges the tradition, criticizes, reveals the plot and takes the novel out of its traditional boundaries. As the narration takes on multiple roles, it poses a challenge to the readers' accustomed style of narration.

Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a work that serves as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism, combines the narrative techniques characteristic of both movements. The narrative structure of the novel is non-linear. The actions are not chronologically arranged and the narration moves back and forth. Every chapter of the novel is an episode by itself and is more in fragments than a whole. There is no beginning, middle and end and the novel does not move on the basis of cause and effect as in the traditional novels. The narrative tense includes both the present tense and past tense. The plot is set in the Victorian period, more precisely in the year 1867, but the approach to the novel is very modern as Fowles brings together the elements of both Victorian and Modern fiction. This fusion of eras leads to many complexities because setting the plot of the novel in a bygone age demands a historical authenticity from the novelist in terms of the contemporary life style, literature and other kinds of scientific and industrial developments, which must be incorporated into the novel. Fowles does this in a masterly way in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He creates the atmosphere of living in the Victorian age through many elements of the narrative such as epigraphs at the beginning of every chapter and portraying characters with typical Victorian qualities. The epigraphs selected are excerpts from Victorian Literature and have one to one correspondence with the actions that take place in every chapter. For instance, the epigraph of the first chapter is a quote 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. (qtd. in Fowles pg.3)

This epigraph describes a woman always gazing at the sea. This excerpt occurs at the beginning of the first chapter while a brief description of Sarah appears at the end of the chapter:

But where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that sombre, curving mole. It stood right at the seaward most end, apparently leaning against an old cannon-barrel up-ended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day. (Fowles 5)

When the reader encounters this passage at the end of the first chapter, it is understood that it serves as an introduction to character Sarah Woodruff. Thus, the role of narration is not only confined to conveying the plot but functions as a technique to introducing the themes and characters. As Fowles constructs the Victorian world, he also deconstructs the age that he creates in the novel. For instance, sexual repression is one of the important features of the Victorian age. Even, in literature written in the age, it is easy to find descriptions on their act of coitus can be found. Besides, no character analyses his or her sexual feelings explicitly in conventional Victorian fiction. One's interest in sex and expressing it was considered as a social taboo. In this novel, Fowles shows how Victorians are sexually repressed through the character of Tina Ernestina. She stands in front of the mirror, looks at herself and indulges in narcissistic contemplation. But while she does so, she imagines herself as being wicked. The narrator comments on this aspect of Victorianism:

It was not only her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all that

gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles. She had once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind...she sometimes wondered why God had permitted such a bestial version of Duty to spoil such an innocent longing. Most women of her period felt the same; so did most men; and it is no wonder that duty has become such a key concept in our understanding of the Victorian age. (Fowles 29-30)

Having exposed the idea of repression, the narrator shows through the character of Charles Smithson how prostitution was at its peak during the Victorian era. After having searched for Sarah Woodruff for months, Charles indulges in physical pleasure with a prostitute named Sarah to release his frustration. When he meets Sarah Woodruff after a brief lapse of time, they make love without entering into marriage, defying the idea of Victorian convention. Thus, the narration is used as medium to deconstruct this aspect of the age. It should be noted that premarital sex is common in the Modern age and has been both explicitly and implicitly portrayed in modern writings. Rejecting Victorian conventions, the Modern era allows freedom to discuss sex and in turn the people do not face any kind of sexual repression. Sarah and Charles' act of lovemaking shows how the narration has been used to view the Victorian era from a modern perspective.

Mention must be made about the unusual construction of three endings in the novel. It is a difficult exercise since the plot cannot move back and forth. Even if this difficulty is overcome, the novelist has to avoid making the different endings contrived.. Thus, in the first ending, the narrator shows Charles confessing the happenings between Sarah and him to Tina Ernestina and marrying her, though he knows that she is not the right person for his life. In the second ending, Charles confesses everything to Tina Ernestina, asking her to call off their engagement and the story ends happily with his marriage to Sarah. In the third ending, Charles meets Sarah but Sarah's life is totally changed. She is independent, develops an interest in her life and leads a happy life. On seeing that Sarah no longer needs him, Charles leaves the place and goes ahead with his life without regrets. Sarah is presented as an impostor in the final ending for abandoning Charles. These three endings bring out the various themes of the novel. The first ending (Charles marrying Tina Ernestina) shows an individual who, as a part of the society, has to abide by the rules of the time he lives in. The second and the third ending highlight the theme of freedom and individuality, the individual's will to govern his life and to act independently. The multiple endings are possible only in a non-linear narration and it shows a gradual evolution of narration from the beginning till the end of the novel.

The narration, without any distortion or ambiguity, brings out the dualism present in the novel. The universal tendency of thinking in terms of binaries is reflected in the narrative of the novel and in the presentation of characters. In addition to the characters representing an idea, they stand for certain universal binaries. The binary of

rational/emotional is represented by Sarah and Tina Ernestina respectively. The former acts as a rational being in taking decisions about her relationship with Charles Smithson whereas, the latter is very emotional. When Charles asks her to cancel their marriage, Ernestina loses her control and gives into an emotional outburst. Mrs Poulteney and Dr Grogan stand for the binary of religion/science respectively. Mrs Poulteney is religious, frightened by the very thought of entering hell after death and indulges herself in philanthropy and Dr Grogan has a scientific approach to life and believes in the ideas of Charles Darwin. The clash between the binaries of individual/society is also evident throughout the novel. Man is caught between the two extremes of individual and society and wavers between these two extremes, undecided on whether to abide by the conventions of society or to give importance to his individuality. This dilemma is found in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: Charles Smithson wavers between his individuality and the society both in his personal and professional life. He falls for Sarah Woodruff but is bound to marry Tina Ernestina due to the conventions of marriage as governed by societal norms. By profession, he is a paleontologist but his individual interest is threatened by the norms of society as Mr Freeman urges him to take up his business for the well-being of his daughter Miss Freeman (Tina Ernestina). His conflict is unresolved from the beginning till the end. Though the narrative offers one ending with the triumph of individuality and the other with the triumph of society over the individual, one cannot settle for either and conclude that the dilemma of the individual and society is resolved.

The narration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* challenges the conventional narration. The very idea of Author-God is subverted, though the narrator starts the novel in a traditional narration mode, like any other omniscient narrator in a conventional novel. But, as the plot evolves the narration also undergoes a transformation. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator presents himself objectively but later becomes intrusive. When acting as an intrusive narrator, he is entirely detached from the actions and the age in which the novel is set. Later, he intrudes as a character, commentator and as a critic. As a commentator, he refers to the story and characters in history. For instance, when he describes Ernestina, he notes that she was born in 1846 and died on the day Hitler invaded Poland. As a character himself, he appears as a bearded stranger in the train, standing next to Charles and immediately announces that there will be multiple endings and tosses a coin to choose the ending that should be presented to the readers first, followed by the other two endings. The intrusion in the narration and weaving multiple endings into the novel is Fowles' revolt against the conventional narration.

Fowles personally does not identify himself with any religion. In this novel, he places much stress on an individual's freedom and overthrows ideas such as God and religion. Traditionally an author is a person who gives out a message like God and in fact, the author has been referred to as 'Author-God' (Barthes 167). So the overthrow of God points to the idea of defying the authority of the omniscient narrator. In Chapter Thirteen

of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, through the voice of the narrator, the novelist says:

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 (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (Fowles 97)

Here, Fowles is widening the scope of the novel, by challenging the omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent narrator and by projecting the narrator as different personalities. Fowles' experimentation may be innovative and might have even set the trend for the upcoming novelists, but on the other hand, it draws mixed responses from the readers and makes reading a complex activity. The readers encounter problems with grasping the story because of the experimentation in the narration. The reader, who has been trained to look for a story in a novel, expects a story with a cause and an effect as in the conventional narration, but since the narration does not offer what is always expected, a reader is startled. To gather the meaning of the story, they are compelled to re-read the text multiple times. Thus, encountering discontinuous narration makes the readers remain as active readers and not turn merely into passive readers, since the reading involves profound mental activity. Nothing is apparent to readers who do not wish to think about and process what they read.

Though the role of an active reader is a healthy role, the individual capacity of the readers differs. Further, there are two kinds of readers: readers who wish to perform a literary analysis of the text and the readers who only look for pleasure and entertainment. The role of the reader as an active or passive one differs based on the purpose behind the reading. The reader who reads the text for the sake of literary analysis and intending to bring out various perspectives, interpretations and to pursue research on that particular text takes delight in reading it several times, whereas this is not the situation with a reader who reads it for pleasure. The readers, who plainly read for the sake of entertainment at leisure time, take no delight in reading the text more than once. Hence, when they read it for the first time, they expect the novel to be intelligible as they seek meaning in the work. To them, a re-reading of the work is of no use as they are not going to pursue research on the novel. When it is read for pleasure, the novel is expected to run smoothly, without offering any kind of difficulties to the readers. The fragmented narration gives unnecessary mental strain to the readers, who only read for pleasure.

As a result, there is a possibility that the readers may discard the text and recommend others against reading the particular novel. Above all, any interest in reading the other works of the novelist may be lost. Such a danger is particularly high in the genre

of fiction since it is the widely read genre among all kinds of readers than prose, poetry and criticism. In connection especially with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrative technique poses a great challenge to both the types of readers: those reading for pleasure and those who intend to perform a literary analysis of the novel. While considering a literary analysis, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Emma* (1816) is easier to analyze than John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The novel also challenges those who read for pleasure due to the complex fusion of multiple elements in the narrative. The multiple roles that the narration plays leave the reader baffled while trying to gather the meaning. Secondly, the various literary references within the narration may appear irrelevant to those who do not possess any previous knowledge of literature. For example, as mentioned earlier, the epigraphs and the footnotes inserted at the beginning and at the end respectively serve no purpose for the readers who read for entertainment. If Fowles extols or criticizes the entire Victorian age, these readers may not understand because in the first place they may not have adequate knowledge about what Victorian era itself and may lack the ability to connect the epigraphs with the Victorian age. Whatever the novelist insinuates through these elements in the narration would remain incomprehensible to them. Fowles conveys certain ideas by insinuation because whatever he has to say cannot be implicit within the kind of narrative technique he has chosen. Combining multiple elements in the narrative compensates for the limitations of the technique as a whole but it reduces the opportunity for the readers to capture the crux, essence and life of the novel.

The multiple endings of the novel are an unexpected turn in the narration. When the reader expects the novel to get over with the first ending on the page 341, the narrator appears immediately on the very next page and says that what had happened in the previous two chapters did not happen in the manner the readers had believed it to happen. He also adds, "... 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. To be sure he did not think in quite the detailed and coherent narrative manner I have employed; nor would I swear that he followed Mrs Poulteney's post mortal career in quite such interesting detail" (342). It is then that the readers realize that they have been deceived by the narrator. The other two endings do not appear immediately but the readers have to travel a long way from the first ending to the other two endings. Thus, it is clear that it is a revolt against the traditional narrative and the readers, and even those who read the novel for its literary merit will find it uncomfortable because their minds have been conditioned to expect certain techniques when they read. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narration enables the readers to be conscious of what they read. The readers are consciously reminded by the writer that they are reading a fictional work where everything is just an outcome of the author's imagination. The reader confronts a new voice directly conversing with them and justifying what Fowles does in the novel. It is this voice that while conversing to the reader says that he refuses to go into the mind of

Sarah Woodruff. This might appear as a way of interrupting the readers from the primary story line. This leads to another question about the relationship between the writer and the reader. When so many complications are seen in the narrative, it appears as if Fowles had only thought about only a limited group of readers and that too those who read for the purpose of doing further research or a literary analysis on his novel. It can be said that there is a definite place for the writer-reader relationship when the book is read seriously. Fowles himself does not seem to negate this idea in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons: for money, for fame, for reviewers, for parents, for friends, for loved ones; for vanity, for pride, for curiosity, for amusements: as skilled furniture-makers enjoy making furniture, as drunkards like drinking, as judges like judging, as Sicilians like emptying a shotgun into an enemy's back. (Fowles 96)

It is apparent that readers are important and their response to his work is even more important. Certainly, he does not limit the scope of the novel but invites readers to participate in the novel. At the same time he remembers his position as a novelist and constantly reminds the readers that they are just reading a novel, preventing them from being immersed completely in the novel. It is because of the significance that he attaches to the reader's response that he provides three different endings in the narrative and leaves the choice to the readers to choose the ending by themselves. When the reader encounters the first ending and finds the narrator saying that this is not the way that the novel is to end, it would appear as if the reader is deceived but the narrator does not leave the plot abruptly and asks the reader to end it by himself. What Fowles offers through the narrator is freedom to the reader and he admits this in the course of his narration of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: "but I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word" (95). Roland Barthes, a well-renowned poststructuralist announced the 'death of the author' and encouraged the reader's response and interpretations to the text in his critical essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). Fowles appears to be very clear of what Barthes has said and goes one step further in offering the liberty to the readers by himself.

Generally, it is the readers who take the liberty but here Fowles himself offers such a liberty. This kind of liberty can be offered to the readers only through the kind of narrative that Fowles has used in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The traditional narration gives no chance to the readers to participate in the plot, but makes the readers passive. This is the same even with readers who read for the purpose of research and those reading for pleasure. It is because of the active role of the narrator-writer. On the other hand, the fragmented narration enables the readers to remain active and watch the plot with attention, making them active and drawing them into the novel, creating a sense

of togetherness between the writer and the readers. The intrusions that Fowles makes in between the narration might be a diversion to the readers from the plot but it is only for the benefit of the non-literary readers that he makes things clear, because the literary-reader can easily understand the techniques without any explicit explanations. However, this is not the case with those for pleasure, which is why Fowles interrupts in between the narration.

In this way, the fragmented narration of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents the novel as fragments but offers life to the novel. The novel is superior to other genres like poetry, prose and drama because it sees man as a whole living being (Lawrence 288-289). Doubtlessly, Fowles gives life to his novel through his narration. The traditional novels have an air of simplicity in narration and in narrative structure. Simplicity in structure and narration are appreciable but not lively as they present no challenge to the readers or reviewers, but Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* achieves a lively quality by the fragmentation in its narration and also for the amount of labour that it cost the readers to gather what the novel is all about. T.S.Eliot in "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) states that tradition lies not in blindly imitating what has been written by the predecessors but should involve an individual's talent, which will stand apart from the imitation that has been done for generations in writing (Eliot 294). What T.S.Eliot has said seems to be true in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles has detached himself from the tradition that has been vogue in years. Simultaneously, he has not failed to establish his individual talent. What he has worked out with the narration in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* serves as an example for Fowles as a creator of the neo-tradition.

### Works Cited:

#### Primary Source

Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London. Vintage, 2004. Print.

#### Secondary Sources

Barthes, Roland. "Death of the Author." Trans. Geoff Bennington. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Eds. David Lodge and Nigel Wood. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: Pearson, 1988. 164-68. Print.

Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and Individual Talent." *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. New York: Longman, 1981. 69-76. Print.

Lawrence.D.H. "Why the Novel Matters." *English Critical Texts*. D.J.Enright and Ernst De Chickera. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009. 286-292.Print.

Onega, Susan, and Jose Angel García Landa. *Narratology: An Introduction*. New York: Longman, 1996. Print.