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***Author-Narrator in John Fowles' The French
Lieutenant's Woman***

Asst. Prof. Ra'ad Ahmed Saleh*

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John Fowles (1926-2005) in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) seems to be obsessed with eighteenth and nineteenth century novel tradition. Bernard Bergonzi has rightly declared that "no matter how unflinchingly the novelist may try to deal with wholly new kinds of experience, he can't escape being influenced by the novels that have been written before him" ⁽¹⁾. Fowles uses in his novel the traditional nineteenth century plot to convey to his readers the love affairs between Charles and Sarah. This paper focuses on the traditional omniscient author-narrator who is similar in many aspects to narrators used by Fielding and Sterne with some modifications. The narrator appears in several voice guises, but what is new about this narrator is that Fowles uses a twentieth century narrator commenting on nineteenth century events and characters. The first-person narrator is widely used by novelists before. A good example here is the hero of Dickens' novel, *David Copperfield* (1850) personified by David. Or the narrator may be a peripheral observer such as Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), or a minor character like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1922) ⁽²⁾, whereas in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), the 'I' which appears in the text almost always refers to the author who interludes occasionally in the text.

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The first sentence of the book sets the time and the place in the late March 1867, "on pier jutting into Lyme Bay that largest bite from underside of England's out-stretched southwestern leg ... " ⁽³⁾. It also sets the angle and object of our interest : "a local spy" might focus his telescope on a couple strolling towards a black figure of a woman who is leaning against a unopened barrel at the end of an ancient quay, facing the sea. She is the woman called "whore" (by some), who had been abandoned by the French lieutenant, Varguennes. But though she is the

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object of scorn, she is interesting enough to make people offer her work. But rather than choosing to work for kind employers, she chooses to be the personal assistant to the most prudish woman in town, Mrs. Poulteney, who exercise complete control over her servants' moral and physical lives. ⁽⁴⁾ Fowles models this image as traditional as a century ago. She, the unpended cannon, and the sea form a trilogy of elements on the ancient quay, counterbalanced by another threesome, the strolling couple and the eye of the observing spy, our author ⁽⁵⁾. The couple is the protagonist Charles Smithson and his fiancée, Ernestina. The woman in black is Sarah Woodruff, the fallen woman of the title. Smithson meets and falls in love with Sarah, the social outcast because of the affairs she has supposedly had with a French lieutenant. Throughout the novel, Smithson is increasingly torn between Sarah and Ernestina, between respectably rich virgin and a woman with an alleged past.

The frankly omniscient narrator, who usually describe "the story as if capable of seeing events which concerns his character even to the extent of knowing their innermost thoughts and motives" has well high disappeared from modern fiction, and the author seems to disappears all together leaving the reader alone to indulge in the illusion of the text ⁽⁶⁾. Unlike the modern novelists, Fowles uses what Wayne C. Booth calls the omniscient "reliable narrator" who speaks and acts in accordance with norms of his author. ⁽⁷⁾ But what distinguishes this narrator from other traditional narrators is that Fowles, as mentioned before, uses a twentieth century narrator commenting on Victorian events and characters. For this reason, Fowles' narrator is capable of certain techniques and devices to enable him to achieve his mission successfully. One of his devices simply involves stressing verisimilitude to an unseemly extent ⁽⁸⁾. The author-narrator of the novel refers to Sarah, the heroine of the text, that she is:

... intelligent, but her real intelligence belongs to a rare kind, one that certainly pass undetected in any of our modern test of the faculty ... she has some sort of psychological equivalent of the experienced horse dealer's skill, the ability to know almost at the first glance the good horse from the bad one; or as if, jumping a century, she was born with a computer in her heart.

(p.52)

Here, the author-narrator uses a twentieth century trait to describe a Victorian character "born with a computer in her heart". He also writes of Mrs. Poulteney, Sarah's patroness that:

She was an opium-addict – but before you think I am widely sacrificing plausibility to sensation, let me quickly add that she did not know it. What we call opium, she called landanum ... It was, in short, a very near equivalent of our age's sedative pills.

(p.92)

The author-narrator inserts himself occasionally, as he is going to do several times. In the novel, the first person pronoun 'I' comments and directs the reader's attention to a certain aspect. Fowles uses this technical device of the omniscient author-narrator to summarize the action and to direct our attention to its significance. We have to distinguish between the authorial comment which is truly helpful in its way, dramatic because it clarifies and enriches our experience of characters and situations in the novel, and the comment which seems dogmatic and intrusive⁽⁹⁾.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author is always present in different guises in his novel. Existentialist critics, like Jean-Paul Sartre, completely reject the "authorial intrusion" and he thinks that if we suspect for a moment that the author is behind his scenes, controlling the lives of his characters, they will not seem to be free. Sartre calls for novels that are not viewed as "products of man" but as natural products, like plants or events⁽¹⁰⁾.

Another device used by Fowles is his preference to historical figures whose fame is subsequent to the events of the novel, such as Marx and Hitler. We are told that Ernestina "was born in 1864 and died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" (p.27), and Mrs. Poulteney that "would have a place in Gestapo for the lady" (p.20), and Charles knew nothing of the "beavered German Jew" whose "first volume of *Das Kapital* was to appear in Hambury" (p.12). References to the historical figures raises a question about human condition and the Victorian interpretation of an answer, and they also define a view of the historical process seem as deterministic force, a view on which Fowles depends⁽¹¹⁾. Moreover, references to figures like Marx and Hitler are not accidental. Fowles refers to the totalitarian dogmas that swept Europe during the twentieth century. The head of the totalitarian regimes used to play 'God' to their people which consequently led to freedom denial. Likewise, Fowles

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plays 'God' to his characters; yet a crucial distinction is to be noted here that while Fowles considers characters' freedom as part of his own, the heads of the totalitarian regimes do not share him this attitude⁽¹²⁾.

Frequently, the author-narrator intrudes and comments on a controversial topic to create certain dialogues between two different ages. One finds, for example, paragraphs contrasting Victorian and modern issues of sex, progress and others that have the effect of judging each age as lacking in some way. For example, let us consider the working of a paragraph mediating on strangers:

Yet this distance, all those abysses unbridged and then unbridgeable by radio, television, cheap travel and the rest, was not wholly bad. People knew less of each other, perhaps, but they felt more free of each other, and so were more individual. The entire world was not for them only a push or a switch away. Strangers were strange, and sometimes with an exist, beautiful strangers. It may be better for humanity that we should communicate more and more. But I am a heretic, I think our ancestor's isolation was like the greater space they enjoyed: it can only be envied. The world is too literally too much with us now.

(p.108)

Here the Victorian and the modern stand in dialogue with on another. Once again, the 'I' appears in the text and by such a technique, Fowles creates an interplay which broadens and deepens the implication of his text.

Narrators usually differ according to the degree and kind of the "aesthetic distance" that separates them from the author, the reader and the other characters of the story. Booth declares "that in any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author-narrator, the other characters and the readers"⁽¹³⁾. But Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and through his usage of the author-narrator has narrowed this distance, which sometimes disappears altogether. Fowles as an author-narrator inserts himself occasionally and directs the reader's attention to certain topics. He, for instance, comments on the theory of the novel. Chapter 12 ends with this Victorian rhetorical question, "who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?" Chapter 13 opens with:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. The characters I created 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 ... 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.

(p.95)

Fowles frankly refers here to a convention which is commonly accepted in the nineteenth-century fiction "that the novelist stands next to God". On the other hand, Fowles provokes his reader by referring to the French post-modernists who refuse any authorial intrusion and the author's "play God to his characters". 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." (p.95) Until this point, the novel is still more or less a conventional historical novel. But now the work suddenly transformed into a metacommentary on the theory of the novel, from a modern perspective ⁽¹⁴⁾. Fowles on one hand refers to the novelist as 'God' to his novels, on the other hand he emphasizes the fact that his characters have freedom of choice and they are not mere "puppets" in the hand of the novelist. He believes that "a planned world is a dead world" and it is only "when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live". (p.96) He writes of Charles' free will "when he left Sarah on the Cliffedge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he didn't; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy". (p.96) The same effect is achieved by conceding his characters a degree of privacy ⁽¹⁵⁾; "whether they met the next morning in spite of Charles' express prohibition I don not know" (p.98). The author-narrator links his own freedom with that of his characters:

In other words, to be free myself, I must give him [Charles] and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedoms as well. There is only one definition of God: The freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition.

(p.97)

Here the author-narrator considers the freedom of his characters as an integral part of his own, so he grants his characters a degree of privacy and free will.

The narrative structure of the novel does not allow us to know Sarah's thoughts or motivation, besides what we see through the eyes of Charles Smithson, or through the undisguisedly masculine eyes of Fowles, as the author, or as the bearded "narrator-character" ⁽¹⁶⁾. This is, in fact, part of the privacy to Sarah by her author. Her true character and conventions promise to be revealed in a series of confessions, but these confessions

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cannot be removed from their rhetorical situations; one of which sexual and intellectual frustration dictates the story and its interpretation⁽¹⁷⁾.

Finally, the author-as-character also appears in the novel. This technique is used earlier in the autobiographical novel where the story of a person's life is written by the person himself/herself. The protagonist is mostly the author telling his/her own story. But in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author appears as a minor character at the end of the novel. In chapter 55, the author suddenly jumps into the events and appears as a maniac "with a massively beard face" sitting opposite Charles in the train and gazing at him. For Charles that man is with a peculiar look:

Sizing, ruminative, more than a shade disappearing as if he knew very well what sort of man this was ... It was time that, unobserved, he looked a little less frigid and authoritarian a person, but there remained about his features an unpleasant aura of self-confidence or if not quite confidence in itself, at least, in his judgements of others, of how much he could get out of them, expect from them, tax them.

(pp.404-405)

The author himself clothes himself in a physical presence in the fictional world of the novel to be close to his characters and decide their future. The author wants to end his novel here:

I have already thought of ending Charles's career here and now; at leaving him on entering on his way to London. But the conventions of the Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the conclusive ending: and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given.

(p.405)

Fowles who is playing a Victorian novelist is conscious that an open end does not suit the "conventions of the Victorian", so he postpones the ending of his novel.

The author-as-character reappears for the second time at the end of the novel in the guise of a stout impresario looking back at Mr. Rosstti's house in Chelsea, where Sarah is working as a model. She has a position undefined but somewhat mandated by the world of art to which she now belongs. The author-as-character puts back expensive watch one quarter or an hour to provide himself "with an excuse for being late at his next appointment" (p.462). Malcolm Bradbury comments on this episode and describes it as the novelist "in one of his most likeable guise"⁽¹⁸⁾. The author's occasional appearance in person is not something new in the

novel tradition, it has its antecedents in the obtrusive Thackerayan stage-manager⁽¹⁹⁾. The tendency in the author-as-character and the authorial intrusion have been rejected strongly by modern critics. Chekhov, the Russian writer, emphasizes the writer's objectivity and neutrality towards his characters and he says that the artist "should be not the judge of his characters and their conversations but only an unbiased witness"⁽²⁰⁾.

The three alternative endings to the *French Lieutenant's Woman* strongly suggest, if synthesized, concurrent possibilities rather than end states, and can be interpreted to imply Fowles' rejection of a narrow mimesis⁽²¹⁾. The first, traditional Victorian 'happy' ending, in which Charles is reunited with Ernestina, is Charles' day-dream during his train ride back from London. The ending is rendered implausible by the implied author's repeated comments that suggest his indifference to this conclusion.

In the second ending, Charles finds Sarah and meets their child, Lalage. The narrative suggests that the two lovers will be reconciled. However, the implied author then suggests that he can rewind time to provide another, final, and therefore privileged alternative ending. In the third ending of the novel, Sarah rejects Charles and any form of conversational existence. Charles realizes that the mythic Sarah is beyond the restrictive bounds of convention and that he is unable to solve her like a logical problem, She is 'not a symbol',

Is not one riddle and one failure to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone or to be given up after one losing throw of the dice; but is to be, however, inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumbed, salt estranging sea.

(p.469)

The final words in the novel remind the reader of the mechanistic nature of industrial London's heart, to which Charles must return. Finally, John Fowles concludes *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by offering his characters from the trap of his own plot and imagination, in which they have been contained.

NOTES

Author-Narrator in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
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1. Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: MacMillan, 1970), p.20
2. Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Essex: Longman, 1984), p.143
3. John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Toronto: Brown & Company, 1969), pp.3-4. All in text page references are to this edition.
4. Rachel Anne Sokolov, *Confession, Power and Gender in The French Lieutenant's Woman and Alias Grace* unpublished M.A Thesis. (Missouri: Truman State University, 2001), p.42
5. Gilbert J. Rose, *The French Lieutenant's Woman: "The Unconscious Significance of a Novel to its Author"* *American Image*, XXIX (Summer, 1972), p.166
6. Gray, p.134
7. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p.156
8. A.J.B. Johnson, *Realism in the French Lieutenant's Woman: Journal of Modern Literature*, VIII: 2 (1980-1981)
9. Quoted in Booth, p.51
10. Rose, p.167
11. Johnson, p.293
12. Robert Burden, "The Novel interrogates itself: Parody as Self-Consciousness in Contemporary English Fiction" in *The Contemporary English Fiction*, Malcolm Bradbury & David Palmer (eds.), (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 148
13. Booth, p.166
14. Burden, p.161
15. Johnson, p.298
16. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (London: OUP, 1973), p.257
17. Sokolov, p.45
18. Bradbury, p.258
19. Quoted in Booth, p.69

20. Frederik N. Smith, "The Ending of the *French Lieutenant's Woman*: Another Speculation on the Manuscript" *Journal of Modern Literature*. XIV:4 (1988), p.583

21. [URL:http://www.jstar.org/stable/10.5699/yearengstud](http://www.jstar.org/stable/10.5699/yearengstud)

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المؤلف-السارد في رواية (عشيقة الضابط الفرنسي) لجون فاولز

أ.م. رعد أحمد صالح

المستخلص

يبدو ان جون فاولز (١٩٢٦-٢٠٠٥) كان مهوسا بالتقليد الروائي السائد في القرنين الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر في روايته "عشيقة الضابط الفرنسي". فقد كان برنارد بركونسكي محقا حين قال "مهما حاول الروائي التعامل مع انواع جديدة من التجارب الا انه لا يستطيع تجنب تأثير الروايات التي كتبت قبله". ويستعمل فاولز في هذه الرواية نوعا من الحكمة كان رائجا في القرن التاسع عشر ليوحي لقراءه علاقة الحب التي كانت تجمع بين تشارلز وسارة. في هذا البحث يتم التركيز على السارد- المؤلف العارف بكل الخفايا والذي يشبه في العديد من النواحي شخصية السارد التي يستخدمها كلا من فيلدنك وستيرن مع وجود بعض الاختلافات البسيطة. حيث يتخفى السارد وراء اقنعة متعددة ، الا ان الجديد بالامر ان فاولز يستخدم سرده بتسمية حديثة لكي يعلق على احداث وشخصيات من القرن التاسع عشر. لجأ الروائيون في السابق الى استخدام شخصية السارد المتكلم وافضل مثال على ذلك هو شخصية البطل في رواية "ديفد كوبر فييلد" لدكنز عام ١٨٥٠ والتي جسدها ديفد. كما يمكن ان يكون السارد مراقب عرضي للاحداث مثل شخصية مارلو في رواية "قلب الظلام" للروائي كونراد عام ١٨٩٩، او ربما شخصية ثانوية مثل نك كاراوي في رواية "كاتزبي العظيم" سنة ١٩٢٢ للكاتب فتسجرالد. بينما نرى في رواية "عشيقة الضابط الفرنسي" الظهور المستمر لأننا والتي تشير الى المؤلف الذي يتدخل احيانا في النص.