

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

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Original scientific paper

DOI: 10.31902/flj.45.2023.13

UDC: 821.111.09-31Foulz Dž.

Abstract: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is generally acknowledged as a postmodernist neo-Victorian novel. Presumably, it parodies Victorian conventions and represents a critical comment on the Victorian age. However, the aim of this research is to problematize the claim that the relationship between the Victorian and the postmodern age in this novel is much more complex. Fowles attempts to link these two apparently very different periods. The nineteenth century represents the source of English identity and an undeniable influence on the present. Nonetheless, the present also influences the past. The events which took place during the course of the twentieth century changed the way we conceptualize the past. Fowles implies that the past does not exist – what does exist is our deconstruction of the past. Still, Fowles reaches beyond this deconstruction. He believes that a novel should introduce something new and authentic. One of the key postmodernist concepts is that parody and irony represent the only possible originality. Still, apart from parodying the conventions of both the nineteenth and the twentieth century, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* deals with existentialist dilemmas that might be applied to both periods.

Keywords: Fowles, neo-Victorian, postmodernism, past, present, history, convention, existentialism, freedom

Introduction – At the Crossroads of Historical and Literary Epochs

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was published in 1969. This period is generally characterized by a revival of interest in the "golden age" of English history and literature – the Victorian age. Two world wars that took place during the course of the twentieth century redefined the way Fowles and his contemporaries conceptualized the past. This concept has been questioned in the neo-Victorian genre. Although *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is generally acknowledged as a forerunner of a neo-Victorian novel, this article adopts the position that it is a typical representative of this genre. As Heilman and Llewellyn

explain, the key feature of a neo-Victorian novel is its critical engagement with the phenomenon of “the Victoria” (4). Indeed, Fowles’s novel “challenges received (and potentially erroneous) notions about the Victorian age and values” (Krombholz 120). Presumably, the aim of a neo-Victorian novel is a critique of Victorian social, moral and literary conventions. However, this paper is attempting to demonstrate that a crucial part of the endeavor of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is to simultaneously question and reinforce the conventions it challenges. It has two social contexts, which inevitably overlap and influence each other. The present mingles with the image of the past in neo-Victorian novels, blurring the boundaries between them: Fowles’s narrator “juxtaposes nineteenth and twentieth century modes of thought, feeling, and behavior, enabling each to comment upon and qualify each other” (Holmes 205). In that manner, as Krombholz suggests, neo-Victorian novels reveal as much about the past they attempt to rewrite as the present (123). *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* suggests “an uneasy relationship with the past” (Krombholz 128). The Victorian age is simultaneously represented as the source of contemporary attitudes towards gender and sexuality and is reflected on as the age of conformity, oppression and hypocrisy. The returns to the past suggest that there are similar anxieties in the present time, and we look back at the past in an effort to understand them better. As Bowler and Cox propound, our frequent looks at the past may symbolize the projections of our present concerns and dilemmas (10). If that is the case, then the past may be only a means of solving our present issues from a safe distance.

As Fowles claims, “A novel is something new. It must have relevance to the world’s now” (1998, 15). Fowles chooses to set the plot into 1867, but he informs the reader that he writes about events in 1967. The aim of his double social context is not only to take a critical perspective towards both the Victorian and contemporary age. Fowles’s intention is to point at universal themes which permeate both the past and the present. The period that followed the discoveries of scientists such as Lyell and Darwin was a period of turbulence and reconsideration. In “Notes on an unfinished novel”, Fowles compares the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century with the bombs of the twentieth century. The effect of these findings was the same – “society faced an urgent need to find ‘new myths’ to replace the inadequate ones it had inherited” (Stephenson 15). Similarly, Vukićević Garić points to other common features of the two apparently very different periods. First, 1960s and 1860s denote eras in which women’s awareness of their subordinate position in society was growing. Sarah

Woodruff is a symbol of “feminist awareness” (Vukićević Garić 181), of a woman conscious that she lives in a society that attempts to limit and mould her according to conventional roles and labels. Second, the 1860s mark the beginning of the collapse of traditional Victorian values. Growing dissatisfaction resulted in the gradual change in ethics that took place at the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the post-war years were marked by a radical redefinition of moral values. In the 1960s, the social debate about various kinds of freedom reached its climax (Vukićević Garić 180). The quest for freedom is the leitmotif of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, which is one of the “constants that resist the flux of history” (Vukićević Garić 183).

The fact that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was written in the sixties is highly significant. The post-war years stand for the transitional period not only when it comes to historical, but also literary epochs. In contrast with modernism, which arose as a reaction against the Victorian conventions and mores, post-war years were characterized by a reaction against modernism. Passage of time provided the necessary distance for a detailed and impartial analysis of the Victorian age. Therefore, it should be emphasized that, although neo-Victorian fiction offers a critical comment on the repressive and conformist aspect of Victorian age, it also exudes nostalgia for “the seriousness and moral purpose of the Victorian world” (Kaplan 95). The position of neo-Victorian fiction is complex and may be summarized as an effort to take a critical attitude towards both the nineteenth and twentieth century. In contrast with the Victorian age, modernity does not symbolize just an endeavor towards “a classless and multicultural society” (Kaplan 5). It also suggests sexual liberation, which turns sexuality into a banal and trivial issue. Sexuality is one of major concerns for Fowles. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is often interpreted as a sexual novel, not only due its dealing with Victorian prostitution and depiction of a sexual intercourse. The novel implies that sexuality was a very important issue for Victorians that owed its lure partly to its taboo status. In the modern age, sex as a topic is too present in everyday life. This omnipresence deprives sexuality of its lure, of its mystery. Adopting such an attitude towards sexuality, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* exhibits one of the main characteristics of the neo-Victorian genre – “tacit agreement with the potentially problematic aspects of the Victorian world view” (Krombholz 119–120). Dealing with topics of class rigidity and sexuality is a crucial part of a dialogue between the past and the present in the novel. On the one hand, Fowles criticizes Victorian conventions and class rigidity. On the other hand, the novel indicates the potential threat of sexual liberation. As Kaplan suggests, Fowles makes an excellent

observation that contemporary time “suffer[s] as much from the hypocrisy of liberation as the Victorians did from the effects of repression” (Kaplan 98). This complex position on the topic of sexuality is an outstanding example of the endeavour of a neo-Victorian novel to simultaneously subvert and return to the Victorian values (Krombholz 121).

Aleksandra Jovanović maintains that Fowles’s “literary prose rests at the crossroads of realism, modernism and postmodernism” (12). We have to bear in mind the fact that many critics view postmodernism as deepened modernism. As Fišić observes, the fragmentation of the world is recognized in both modernism and postmodernism. However, whereas modernist writers attempt to find a meaning in the fragmented world, there is no such attempt in postmodernism. What matters is discourse and nothing but discourse. Text becomes independent even of the author (Fišić 44). *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is depicted by Linda Hutcheon as a “kind of summation of metafictional techniques” (1978, 81), and historiographic metafiction is one of the columns of postmodernist poetics (Jovanović 48). Still, there are a number of characteristics of this novel that belong to modernism and realism. Stephenson discerns in Fowles’s protagonist’s quest for freedom a similarity to a modernist Bildungsroman (9).¹ Moreover, he adds that though Fowles insists that his novel is independent of him, the narrator is omnipresent in the novel. This omnipresence, along with the theme of thwarted love between members of different social classes, is typical of a realist novel (Stephenson 13).

In a true postmodernist fashion, there is a hybridity of genres in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. In the first twelve chapters this novel resembles a typical realist novel. However, the narrator then chooses to dispel the illusions of the reader. In the thirteenth chapter the reader finds out that the narrator lives not in 1867, but in 1967. The postmodern characteristics of the novel begin to manifest themselves: irony, parody, self-referential and self-reflexive nature, the death of the author. In order to be authentic, postmodernist novels experiment with form. Parodying the conventions of previous periods, they reach that highly desired originality and authenticity. Linking the Victorian age to the contemporary era, Fowles escapes the trap of creating a pseudo-Victorian novel, but creates a twentieth century version of it (Gunduz

¹ Richard Lynch cites similarities between *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and *Great Expectations*, which leads him to the conclusion that the first may be interpreted both as a classic Bildungsroman or a parody of this form (58).

64).² On the whole, this novel is in a way a game designed by the narrator. The narrator plays with the reader's expectations, with the genres, with blurring the boundaries between imaginary and real, and between past and present.

The Past versus the Present, the Real versus the Imaginary

In contrast with modernist writers, history becomes an important issue in postmodernism. As Banarjee propounds, writers "can hardly proceed without a sense of history". There is nothing new and extraordinary, she claims, in returns to and dialogues with the past. What makes neo-Victorian so distinctive is not its interest in the past, but its metafictional quality, its postmodernism (Banarjee par. 10). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is frequently cited as an exemplary historiographic metafiction.³ Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as "novels which are intensely self-reflexive, and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages" (1991, 5). In addition, Holmes claims that historiographic metafiction is concerned not only with the past events, but also with the "methods by which we know the past" (111). The implication is that we learn about the past from texts, from traces of the past in the present. Although we look back at the past, we cannot reach the real past, only its construction. As Hutcheon propounds, we cannot escape from the constructedness of the past (1991, 58). The concepts of past, history, fiction and reality are elaborated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The narrator raises the question of whether reality exists:

You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it [...] fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf – your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of Homo Sapiens. (Fowles 2004, 87)

² Fowles states in "Notes on an unfinished novel" that *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* originality is in the fact that it deals with a sensitive and harshly censored issue in the Victorian age – that of sexuality. Although he praises Victorian novelists, he accuses them (with the exception of Hardy) for not dealing with this topic. Therefore, this novel is not about something "one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write" (Fowles 1998, 15).

³ For example, Gunduz quotes Fowles's novel as the first historiographic metafiction "because of its separation of historical and literary sources" (62).

Postmodern discourses express an incredulity of grand narratives (Stephenson 9) such as history, past, reality. This distrust does not refer to the existence of these concepts. However, postmodernism emphasizes the need for redefinition of these concepts. In a true neo-Victorian fashion, which discerns that history, fiction and reality are human constructs (Schiller 54), the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* denies distinctions between reality and fiction. Fowles implies that his characters are as real as any living person. He attempts to create a new reality in his fiction. Unlike modernists, who lament the notion that reality is no more real than fiction, Fowles, like a true postmodernist, accepts such a realization (Fišić 47). The author first questions and redefines the concepts of past and reality, and then builds upon this redefinition so as to explain his concept of fiction. According to him, authors tend to "create the world as real as, but other than the world that is" (1998, 82). The striving of the novelist is compared to the striving of the historian, whose aim is not to write about history, but to create "a plausible historic text" (Munslow 149), which depends on the historian's choice and interpretation of referents. Indeed, as Tica asserts, there are a number of characteristics due to which history "bears a strong resemblance to literature" (378). Whereas history was defined as a scientific discipline based on facts in the nineteenth century, postmodern historiography challenges such a definition. As Hutcheon notices, "Facts are events to which we have given meaning" (1991, 57). Therefore, it is not hard to conclude that history depends on the perspective of a historian, who selects the referents and interprets them in a certain way. In that manner, his position is similar to the position of a writer, who chooses the events he is dealing with in the novel and how he is going to interpret them. Both history and a novel are featured by narrative mastery (Hutcheon 1991, 64).

Postmodernism adopts the position that there is not only one acceptable version of history. There is no universal past since each person has his/her own version of an event. There are many versions, which differ since they are based upon different perspectives of historians. Tica correctly notes that historiographic metafiction is "determined to establish whose history survives" (377). Since the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are "the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (Hutcheon 2004, 114), it becomes clear that this genre provides space for those who are absent from the official (in this case, Victorian) history. In accordance with its postmodernist framework, Fowles's novel rejects the accepted version of history and deals with the (hi)stories of the powerless and invisible. Sarah Woodruff is a typical representative of the marginalized due to

her humble origins and because she is female. Her story enables the reader to look at the other side of the Victorian age. By “juxtapos[ing] what we think we know about the past with an alternate representation” (Hutcheon 1991, 71), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* recreates the past it writes about. It deals with the topics prohibited in the Victorian era, such as prostitution, the great social evil of the Victorian period. The novel implies that history lies in the cracks and corners of official history which hide the stories of the repressed and marginalized. For the author, it is essential to sort out this messy past in order to understand the present. As Hutcheon asserts, historians’ most important goal is to “establish a relationship between the past and the present” (1991, 70). The narrator of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has the same intent. By challenging traditionally held notions and offering a positive representation of the marginalized, such fiction may be a potential source of social change (Krombholc 121). In that manner, the achievement of historiographic metafiction goes beyond the intention of correcting the history. However, as Krombholc suggests, although fictional returns to the nineteenth century do add previously absent layers to the representation of “the Victoria”, the comprehensive understanding of the Victorian age proves impossible to be arrived at (126). There is no absolute truth, but many versions of the truth that depend on the choice of signifiers and the perspective of the historian/novelist.

As Hutcheon propounds, postmodern fiction simultaneously questions and confirms the established literary, social and historical conventions (1991, 2). The narrator of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* reveals his intention to challenge traditional literary conventions, such as “authentic and absorbing story, omniscient narrator and one definite ending” (Vukićević Garić 180). However, it may be argued that his open agreement with the premise of Roland Barthes that discourse is written independently of the author is deliberately misleading.⁴ Although the narrator claims to be ignorant of the inner state of his characters’ minds, the fact is that he enters the minds of all his characters but Sarah’s. Therefore, the author is not dead, only his function has changed, as

⁴ Fowles states that his novel is independent of his intrusions. Contrary to the authors of realist novels, who claim authority and manipulate the story, Fowles believes that “This is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedom to exist” (2004: 86). For him, the creative process does not tolerate limitations set up by the author – the story overwhelms the author and he yields to it. Therefore, he cannot choose the destiny of his characters – their actions are the consequences of their characters.

suggested by his appearance as a character. Secondly, though the plot of the novel may be interpreted as a parody of the plot of a Victorian novel, it certainly proves absorbing and “secures the place of the novel in history” (Vukićević Garić 180). By mixing the elements of different literary movements, Fowles attempts to prove that there are no limits in contemporary age. One of the most disputed ways of his game with the reader is his reluctance to offer a traditional closure of the plot. Instead of one, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has three endings. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Fowles does not end his novel in a conventional way, he undoubtedly directs the reader to view the third ending as the most probable. When it comes to social conventions, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* questions Victorian conformism and oppression and praises Victorian seriousness and moral earnestness. The novel suggests an uneasy attitude towards Victorian society, an attitude in which “irony is inevitably mixed with nostalgia” (Vukićević Garić 181). History is also de-naturalized as a human construct. However, the novel does not question the existence of history and the past. The narrator suggests that the past and history do exist, but emphasizes the need for their redefinition. In that manner, Fowles proves his excellence with his complex attitude to the established norms and conventions, which are simultaneously challenged and reinforced. Furthermore, the narrator introduces the reader not with an official history, but with an alternative history, history of the marginalized. His intent is not that of a historical novelist, who wants his readers to learn about the past. The narrator’s aim is to make the reader realize that his/her present is inextricably linked to the past. There is no clear boundary between them, they overlap and influence each other. The neo-Victorian genre points to the fact that the past should not be forgotten and put aside as irrelevant. In fact, the temporal distance allows for an unbiased and comprehensive understanding of the past. This understanding implies not only realization of the advantages and disadvantages of the past. Reading literature and history together for postmodern writers suggests a shift from “learning about history to learning from history” (Tica 379). It may be argued that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* adopts the position that the past is the teacher of life. The novel implies that the past teaches us not to repeat its errors. Still, the emphasis is not only on the diversity of the past and the present. There are universal topics which bother people of all periods, such as themes of duty, and freedom and sexuality. Freedom is the leitmotif of Fowles’s fiction. His literary oeuvre suggests that the choice between freedom and convention is timeless, eternal. Freedom is the

indispensable factor in the dialogue between the past and the present in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Freedom and Existential Awareness

Although Fowles himself states that this novel originates from a vision of a woman who is an embodiment of “a reproach on the Victorian age” (1998, 13), this novel does not imply that Fowles’s age is in any way superior to the age he looks back on. As Hutcheon asserts, Fowles makes us aware of the temporal gap between the narrator’s age and the setting of the novel, but he “is not telling us that change is improvement or even that we are so very different from the Victorians” (1978, 84). Similarly, Dana Schiller points out that Fowles’s aim is not to represent either the past or the present as superior to the other period, but to emphasize their common qualities: “common humanity, shared strengths and shared failings” (555). *The French Lieutenant's Woman* indicates that there are similar existentialist dilemmas in the past and present. This research is an attempt to point out not only the fact that the present is related to the past, but also the fact that striving for freedom is a universal theme that permeates fiction both in the past and in the present.

As stated by Holmes, Fowles’s insistence on an “authentic self” is more characteristic of existentialism than of postmodernism since individuality is either denied or deconstructed in postmodernism (66). The influence of existentialism on Fowles’s oeuvre is acknowledged by Fowles himself, particularly of the French existentialists such as Camus and Sartre (qtd. in Campbell 459). In his interview with James Baker Fowles attempts to explain his existentialist concept. It is common knowledge that Fowles studied at Oxford. Fowles describes Oxford as an escape from the rigidity and conservatism of mainstream British society. Oxford was the place where “the individual was paramount, not the nation” (qtd. in Baker). There Fowles got interested in existentialism, though he states that existentialism only “quickened the feelings that would have emerged anyway” (qtd. in Baker).

Freedom for Fowles represents the ability of an individual to decide which path he/she is going to take. In his opinion, the bourgeois way of life, typical of both the Victorian and modern times, introduces the concept of duty, which denotes the choice that is most obvious, but not the choice that was always the right one. In a way, he finds a similarity between the Victorians and his contemporaries. There is a similar unrest in both eras, a feeling that dominant myths and conventions are no longer able to satisfy people and meet their needs:

They sensed that current accounts of the world were inadequate; that they had allowed their windows of reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation; 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, 49)

Although Fowles asserts that critics often exaggerate the influence of existentialism on his literary oeuvre, he claims that he is “interested in the side of existentialism that deals with freedom: the business of whether we do have freedom, whether we do have free will, to what extent you can change your life, choose, yourself, and all the rest of it” (qtd. in Campbell, 466). Indeed, freedom is the question which motivates the quest of self-realization of Fowles’s characters (Jovanović 16). Charles is at the crossroads of his life. He is torn between the life expected of him and the life he desires. Charles realizes that he differs from most of his contemporaries. After his engagement to Ernestina Freeman, he begins to question himself whether marriage to a conventional middle-class woman will bring him happiness:

It was a fixed article of Charles’s creed that he was not like the great majority of his peers and contemporaries. ... So? In this vital matter of the woman with whom he had elected to share his life, had he not been only too conventional? Instead of doing the most intelligent thing had he not done the most obvious? (Fowles 2004, 114)

The starting point of his dissatisfaction with his life and choices is the moment he meets Sarah Woodruff. Sarah, or “the French lieutenant’s woman” is diametrically opposite to most of the Victorian women. Ernestina, though described as beautiful, is also commented on as “characterless, a little monotonous with its one set paradox of demureness and dryness” (Fowles 2004, 113). Sarah, with her aura of mystery, with her directness of look, thought and language, represents a sort of challenge, an invitation to a life of excitement and unpredictability. She poses a danger since she makes Charles aware of a certain deprivation. She reminds him that marriage to Ernestina, a well-to-do daughter of a prominent merchant, will be “a fixed voyage to a known place” (2004, 114). Charles becomes terrified of such a realization of his life as pre-determined and devoid of challenges. Therefore, he starts to think about Sarah, not only as an object of desire, but as a symbol of mystery and freedom. He sees that freedom brings excitement, but also that freedom implies a “feeling of terror” (2004,

296). Sarah's face, as Charles notices, is not beautiful, but it is unforgettable. In contrast with Ernestina, who is a prototype of a Victorian girl, who "behaved always as if habited in glass: infinitely fragile [...] encouraged the mask, the safe distance" (127), Sarah is a symbol of "an intelligence, an independence of spirit [...] a determination to be what she was" (2004, 105). Surprisingly, Sarah enjoys her state of an outcast, since she discerns freedom in her fictional "stumbling". In opposition to women like Ernestina, Sarah, with her intelligence and directness "behind her façade of humility, forbade [...] the mask, the safe distance" (127).

As Fowles suggests, "Existentialism is not a philosophy, but a way of looking at, and utilizing, other philosophies" (qtd. in Hutcheon 1978, 85). It implies a question of whether we have a freedom of choice. The realization that there is always a choice is crucial for the process of self-realization. However, we have to be aware of the consequences of each alternative. Majority of people internalize the conventions of their age. Charles Smithson discerns the hypocrisy and repression in his narrow-minded social environment and sets on a journey of self-knowledge, a quest for an alternative. This journey begins at the moment when he realizes that he is not willing to live as he is expected to. If he marries Ernestina, he is going to attach himself to a world based on possession. If he starts an affair with Sarah, life will be unpredictable and exciting: "What he felt was really a very clear case. You know your choice. You stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honour, self-respect, and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified" (Fowles 2004, 314).

In order to attain freedom Charles has to "reject the notion of possession as the purpose of life" (Fowles 2004, 295). Although he succeeds to break off his engagement with the prosperous Ernestina, he does not realize until the end that he has to reject the notion of sexual possession as well. Charles is willing to sacrifice his reputation, but Sarah remains a mystery to him until he meets her at Rossetti's house. Only then does he understand that she values her freedom the best. Diametrically opposite to a typical Victorian girl, she does not want marriage – marriage is for her a symbol of sexual possession. As Hutcheon suggests, although Charles naively supposes that he set himself free by breaking his ties with the bourgeois society, the last meeting with Sarah makes him realize that freedom is painful (1978, 93). To be free means not to impose oneself on anyone, not even the person you love. Sarah sets Charles on the journey of self-recognition and freedom, but chooses to leave him in the end, free and terrified.

Sarah Woodruff is an embodiment of Fowles's concept of freedom. In a way, she is closest to the author, since she invents her life, revises her past in order to become free and independent of the society. Hutcheon correctly concludes that Sarah is "the greatest fiction maker of the novel" (1978, 88). On the one hand, Sarah resembles a postmodern historian since she carefully selects referents in order to create a plausible version of her past. On the other hand, she willingly makes up the story of her fall so as to parody Victorian morality. After she becomes an outcast, she is free to choose her own destiny: "I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing. I am hardly human any more. I am the French lieutenant's whore" (Fowles 2004, 153). By calling herself "The French lieutenant's woman", she points to the fact that Victorian women were observed in relation to their fathers, husbands, lovers. Marriage meant that a woman had to relinquish her identity and become the shadow of her husband (Fišić 46). However, Sarah does not want to belong to anyone, she is "No-One's Woman" (Hutcheon 1978, 88). She is independent, free to choose her own destiny, not willing to limit herself through marriage.

Sarah Woodruff's main "problem" is her unwillingness to be looked at through the prism of gender and class stereotypes. The characters from her surroundings (including Charles) attempt to affiliate her with certain etiquette, a type. Sarah is described by others as a governess, a fallen woman, a mysterious woman, a mentally unstable woman. They all attempt to reduce Sarah to her essence, to label her. However, Sarah resists labeling of any kind. She does not want to conform to roles and types and know her own essence. As Lynch notices, Sarah has two simple wishes: "to be who she is and to be happy as she is" (63). By refusing to conform to society, its expectations and generalizations, Sarah exhibits a high level of existential awareness. In contrast with her, Charles, who likes to think of himself as ahead of his contemporaries, does not abandon the Victorian assumptions about gender and conduct (Tarbox 62–63, 77–78). Even when he thinks that his acquaintance with Sarah has radically changed him, his attitudes do not differ much from the attitudes of Mr. and Miss Freeman. He still conceptualizes marriage as "the purpose for which woman was brought into creation" (2004, 353). Taking into consideration his internalization of the Victorian world view, it makes sense that Sarah rejects him. It seems that a long and thorny way is ahead of Charles, the way of rejecting conventions for the sake of self-realization.

Conclusion

The specificity of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* lies in the fact that it has two social contexts. It refers both to the Victorian age (1867) and contemporary age (1967). Therefore, this novel cannot be interpreted as only a critical comment on the Victorian era. Fowles's complex endeavor is to adopt a critical perspective towards both the nineteenth and twentieth century. In contrast with modernism, which arose as a reaction against the conventions and mores of the Victorian age, the post-war years symbolize the period which provided the distance necessary for a comprehensive analysis of this controversial era. On the one hand, the novel implies that Victorians were conformist and oppressive. Sexuality was a taboo, an issue not written about in realist novels. Fowles deals with themes of sexuality and class rigidity. On the other hand, the novel suggests that contemporary age lacks Victorian seriousness and moral purpose. It indicates the potential threat of sexual liberation, which as a consequence tends to deprive sexuality of its lure, of its mystery.

In a true postmodernist fashion, Fowles questions and redefines concepts of history, past, reality, and fiction. He blurs the distinctions between them. It is essential for us to realize that these concepts are constructs. History and the past are no more real than fiction. Additionally, all these concepts are textualized. As it follows from the novel, there is not just one acceptable version of history/the past. There are many different versions, which depend on the perspective of the historian, as well as on the choice of the traces of the past. The aim of history and fiction is not to write about the past/reality, but to create a plausible version of them. Accordingly, Sarah is compared to a historian who selects the referents and creates not a factual, but a plausible version of her past. By making up her moral lapses, she simultaneously symbolizes the freedom of a novelist and parodies Victorian conventions.

Two social contexts of the novel mix, comment and influence each other. However, Fowles's intent is not to qualify either of them as superior. By juxtaposing their characteristics, Fowles aims at pointing at their common features. One similarity between these two apparently different periods is the fact that they symbolize transitional periods, the periods marked by dissatisfaction with prevailing attitudes and the search for alternatives. According to the author, the question of existential freedom is a universal topic which permeates the fiction of all periods. Charles Smithson, who embarks on a spiritual journey, is on the long and thorny path of self-recognition. His affair with the unconventional and elusive Sarah inspires him to see his life as

unfulfilling and devoid of challenge and excitement. Sarah takes on the role of his teacher on the issue of freedom. The first lesson that Charles learns is that there is always a choice. We are in position to choose between our duty and our personal wishes and goals. The second lesson is a more serious and painful one. Charles has to realize that freedom is painful and that it includes rejection of the notion of possession. For most of the novel, Charles is a conventional rebel who renounces his social position, but still adheres to Victorian assumptions about gender and sexuality. His condition in the end of the novel embodies Sartre's concept of existential freedom. Sartre associated freedom not with security, but with "anguish over our responsibility in choosing" (Lynch 351). The novel implies that the quest of freedom is painful, but worth the effort. Following Sarah's and Charles's example, Fowles's reader is encouraged to rise against the conventions, find out who he/she is and become the forge of his/her own destiny. In the contemporary world, where nothing is secure and stable, an individual has to think for him/herself, cherishing existentialist self-awareness and the ability of suspecting as his/her greatest virtues.

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ДИЈАЛОГ ДЕВЕТНАЕСТОГ И ДВАДЕСЕТОГ ВЕКА У ЖЕНСКОЈ ФРАНЦУСКОЈ ПОРУЧНИКА ЦОНА ФАУЛСА

Женска француског поручника (1969) Цона Фаулса се генерално тумачи као нео-викторијански постмодернистички роман. По свој прилици, овај жанр има за циљ пародију викторијанских конвенција и представља критички коментар на викторијанско доба. Међутим, циљ овог истраживања је проблематизација тврдње да је однос између прошлости и садашњости у роману много сложенији. Фаулс настоји да повеже ова два наизглед потпуно различита периода. Деветнаести век представља извор енглеског идентитета и има непорециви утицај на садашњост. Међутим, и садашњост утиче на прошлост. Догађаји који су се одиграли током двадесетог века променили су начин на који концептуализујемо прошлост. Фаулс имплицира да прошлост не постоји – постоји само наша деконструкција прошлости. Ипак, Фаулсов роман превазилази деконструкцију прошлости. Он верује да роман мора да донесе нешто ново и аутентично. Један од кључних постмодернистичких концепата је да пародија и иронија представљају једину могућу оригиналност. Међутим, поред пародирања конвенција деветнаестог и двадесетог века, роман се бави и егзистенцијалним дилемама које се могу применити на оба периода.

Кључне речи: Фаулс, неовикторијански, постмодернизам, прошлост, садашњост, историја, конвенција, егзистенцијализам, слобода.