

# Genre and Gender Identity in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Raluca Lucia Cîmpean

Transylvania University, Brasov, Romania

## Abstract

*This study focuses on the novel and feature film The French Lieutenant's Woman. It analyzes the source of the novel's originality and discusses the main cinematic adaptation strategy at work. I argue that the source text is an extended metaphor of the reading and writing process, and that behind the revision of the Victorian literary tradition, Fowles dramatizes the shift in fictional representation and in the interpretation of a literary work from an author-centered perspective to a reader-oriented point of view. Finally, I contend that the ultimate message and merit of both the novel and the film is to have promoted an interpretative liberty of choice which subsumes a blurring of the borderlines between fiction and reality.*

*Keywords: film adaptation, neo-Victorian fiction, reader-oriented criticism, John Fowles, metanarrative, revisionism*

I interpret the myth of the temptation of Adam in this way. Adam is hatred of change and futile nostalgia for the innocence of animals. The Serpent is imagination, the power to compare and self-consciousness. Eve is the assumption of human responsibility, of the need for progress and the need to control progress. The Garden of Eden is an impossible dream. The fall is the essential process of evolution. The God of Genesis is a personification of Adam's resentment. Adam is stasis, conservatism. Eve is kinesis, or progress. Adam societies are ones in which the man and the father, male gods, exact strict obedience to established institutions and norms of behaviour, as during the majority of periods of history in our era. The Victorian is a typical such period. Eve societies are those in which the woman and the mother, female gods, encourage innovation and experiment, and fresh definitions, aims and modes of feeling. The Renaissance and our own are typical such ages. (Fowles, *Aristos* 165–166)

Nothing would encapsulate the essential message of Fowles' masterpiece better than this adage taken from the author's collection of aphorisms published five years prior to the release of the much-celebrated novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Ironically and self-ironically, the all-encompassing biblical metaphor casts the main characters in three archetypal roles – Adam, Eve and the Serpent – only to reinterpret them from the point of view of modern-day anthropology and science and to morally upset the traditional balance and distribution of 'sin' and 'guilt'.

A classic example of metafiction, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* became the source of Karel Reisz's film adaptation (1981), which has been recognized as a masterpiece in its own right. Building on the novel's multiple endings, Harold Pinter's script weaves two narrative strands, a Victorian and a contemporary love story. The self-reflexive dimension of Fowles' novel is thus echoed and reinforced by the film's structure, with the period drama at the core of and reflected upon by the contemporary on-set affair. The actors Anna and Mike, embodied by Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons, prolong their respective impersonation of Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson behind the scenes in what becomes a short-lived romance, a reflection on gender relations – on the page, on the screen and in real life – and an open-ended debate on the nature of film adaptation. What better way to perpetuate cinematically the nature of this Ur-neo-Victorian novel than to have a second, ontologically superior narrative foil the source text? Anna and Mike adapt to the parts they have been assigned to the point of near identification, crossing fictional boundaries – or, rather, bending them creatively and, ultimately, humanly. Sarah's choices reflect Fowles' artistic creed, while Anna's final decision nuances the characters' identity crisis and adds a complementary touch to the 1980's cinematic depiction of femininity.

This paper explores *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) to interrogate the source of its originality, which I believe resides in genre revision and, subliminally, gender portrayal; it also touches upon the film adaptation of the novel to argue for its clever development of the novel's essential message. The feature film adopts the novel's liberating spirit and adapts it to the cinematic medium. The result is a meta-adaptation or a meditation on the process of adaptation. As it is the case with all neo-Victorian novels, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the second such example after the publication of Jean Rhys' 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, appropriates the Victorian paradigm, this time with a focus on the literary tradition. A twist is added to the narrative strategy, in the sense that the vehicle for argumentation is a woman whose artistic nature and eventual salvation and affirmation through art and the working of her own imagination advance a highly innovative message regarding life's literariness. The Victorian key principle of representation is thus radically upset to the point where the (rhetorical) question is no longer about how much fiction refracts reality but how much reality itself refracts fiction. Building on this interrogative conclusion, the film dramatizes precisely this dilemma shared both by the two protagonists, at the diegetic level, and by an enlightened third-person narrator and an emancipated reader, at the extradiegetic level.

The film director and screenwriter made a further leap of artistic faith similar to the original authorial stance and used a contemporary (1980's) framework. By using the cross-cutting strategy, they challenge genre expectations and expectations of cinematic gender portrayal and deliver the ultimate argument for film adaptation as an art form and not as

something that is qualitatively inferior to the source text, as per the traditional view. The critical discourse is therefore purged of issues related to fidelity and qualitative comparisons between the novel and its cinematic counterpart, and it begins to gravitate around the concept of intertextuality. In Imelda Whelehan's words, "for many people the comparison of a novel and its film version results in an almost unconscious prioritizing of the fictional origin over the resulting film, and so the main purpose of comparison becomes the measurement of the success of the film in its capacity to realize what are held to be the core meanings and values of the originary text" (Whelehan qtd. in Allen 205-206).

The film is more than an echo of the novel; it is a statement in its own right: not a reflection of, nor even an elaboration on, but a valuable companion to the source text. The film goes beyond issues of faithfulness or betrayal in relation to the original species (pun intended), and instead of building on simplistic binary oppositions, it explores the grey space in between. It is tangential to the novel and asymptotically close to it, which is why it does manage to capture the novel's major theme: the obsession with originality and, by extension, with authorship and authority.

Fowles' novel belongs to the category of postmodernist fiction which Linda Hutcheon has aptly termed "historiographic metafiction". On the one hand, it is concerned with the mid-Victorian past, historical and literary, and with the way it has come down to us. On the other hand, it feeds on itself; it is simultaneously world-reflecting and self-reflexive (Hutcheon 41). The Victorian author's omniscience is just a mask that the postmodernist author ironically puts on in order to create an illusion of a thorough account, takes off from time to time, when he chooses to behave according to the modernist code, or wears at a rakish angle when he draws attention to the fact that he is writing "in the age of Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet" (Fowles, *French* 95).

The two dimensions are cleverly interwoven, and the result is a novel that spins a conventional story about married life in Victorian England within the boundaries of the Victorian literary tradition even as it calls into question those same boundaries. It does not challenge them qualitatively, but draws attention to the epistemological bias of this (and, by extension, any) artistic code, and to the necessity to both abide by it and flaunt it, as a form of survival and thus adaptation. The Darwinian principle is ironically referred to at both the diegetic level, with the male protagonist Charles' enthusiasm for Darwin's evolutionary theory, and the extra-diegetic level, with the reader's ongoing awareness of their role as "just a reader" of "just a story". The difference between the realistic rhetorical device of appealing to the audience's judgment and feelings and its ironic postmodernist counterpart is that the former fosters the suspension of disbelief, whereas the latter exposes it. The attitude required of the reader is no longer to trust the author so as to be able to enjoy the illusion that he is creating, but instead to accept the dialogue the author is proposing over a given subject-matter and over the means available for its enactment.

In this case, the subject-matter involves a love triangle: Charles Smithson, a thirty-two year-old eligible bachelor of means and noble extraction, is engaged to be married to the much younger Ernestina Freeman, the only daughter of a prosperous merchant. Enter Sarah Woodruff, a young governess of superior education and feeling, who has recently lost her job and the respect of the community of Lyme Regis because of an immoral liaison she is said to have had with a married French lieutenant. Charles meets and falls in love

with Sarah, an unconventional, remarkable woman who welcomes his affection. Much of Sarah's appeal to Charles lies not in her being meek and mild, as might have been expected in the given situation, but in the fact that she stands up for herself and assumes "some sort of equality with him" (Fowles, *French* 42). She confirms for him the rumours people have been circulating about her and the French officer and trusts him with the reason why she gave herself to a man she knew did not share her feelings or have honorable intentions. The explanation Sarah offers strikes Charles as an extreme gesture: she knew she was hopelessly different, too educated to marry a social equal and too low on the social ladder to marry up, and that her relationship with her contemporaries was past mending. All she needed was the means and motives to make people publicly acknowledge her as an out-cast. Morality, together with Duty, was probably the most highly esteemed Victorian value, and it is no wonder that Sarah chose to deflate exactly this social construct:

I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people should point at me, should say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore – oh, yes, let the word be said. So that they should know I have suffered, and suffer, as other suffer in every town and village of this land. I could not marry that man, so I married shame. I do not mean that I knew what I did, that it was in cold blood that I let Varguennes have his will of me. It seemed to me then as if I threw myself off a precipice or plunged a knife into my heart. It was a kind of suicide. An act of despair. Sometimes I almost pity them. 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, *French* 175)

Sarah's confession throws Charles into a split state of mind: he empathized with the officer Varguennes and enjoyed her vicariously, and he sympathized with Sarah and wanted to protect her. He only recognized in her a woman capable of passionate gestures, but failed, for the time being, to appreciate her imaginative mind.

This episode anticipates their brief but passionate affair, which reveals Sarah to be a virgin and a liar, and adds to her aura of mystery. Charles is too fascinated with a woman who is so unlike anyone else (man or woman) he has ever met, and who validates and illuminates his own existential doubts, to care to really understand her reasoning for her behaviour. He breaks off his engagement to enable him to marry Sarah and is willing to bear all the social repercussions of his breach of trust, but Sarah chooses to leave him without a word. Years later, she decides to re-enter Charles' now ruined life. She has become an accomplished painter and an independent woman. But before he makes the most radical decision of his life, Charles is allowed to exercise his imagination and to picture for himself and the reader the kind of future he would share with Ernestina, which is virtuously and righteously happy/Victorian. This is the first ending the novel supports; it is ontologically inferior to the other two because it is the figment of a character's imagination. What the implied author suggests is that some of us are better storytellers than others. Such is the case of Sarah, who not only makes up a far more gripping narrative than Charles's, but does it in such a way as to lend it so strong a touch of the real that it can compete with life itself. She leads Charles into believing that everything she has told him is the naked truth, she staged their meeting at the hotel in Exeter to the last detail, playing the appealing

fallen woman/innocent victim, only to let him discover that she has never been the French lieutenant's woman, and, what is even more confusing, only to disappear as quickly and mysteriously as she has stepped into his life. Charles's drama is not so much that he has lost Sarah and his social status, but that he cannot understand Sarah's final gesture. Nevertheless, even in his self-imposed isolation and lonely travels, he is closer to Sarah than ever, because he too has assumed the role of an outcast:

When he had had the great vision of himself freed from his age, his ancestry, and age, and country, he had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile. He no longer much believed in that freedom, he felt he had merely changed traps or prisons. But yet there was something in his isolation that he could cling to; he was the outcast, the not like the other men, the result of a decision few could have taken, no matter whether it was ultimately foolish or wise. (Fowles, *French* 428)

The second and the third endings occur toward the end of the story and belong equally to the implied author and to the reader. In the second ending, Charles finds Sarah in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house and the two are happily reunited through their daughter Lalage, much to the gratification of a sentimental audience. In the third ending, Charles rejects Sarah's suggestion that they be just friends and chooses to give her up for good instead of surrendering once again to a woman who appears not to understand that the essence of love lies in sharing one's best self with the loved one. This ending shows Charles as a man of his own, who "has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness on which to build... has already begun to realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, 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" (Fowles, *French* 467).

It is up to the reader to decide which ending to prefer – although, from a purely hermeneutic point of view, they are not mutually exclusive. Their common denominator lies in the idea of self-discovery and accomplishment as the premise of happiness. Sarah and Charles would not have made a happy couple before either of them has undergone a rite of passage, admittedly initiated and led by Sarah. By the same token, both Sarah and Charles have a better chance to find happiness or at least peace of mind separately. Their freedom-of-choice anxiety invades the extra-diegetic space and faces readers with a similar existential dilemma: is an audience more likely to be gratified by a traditional happy ending than by an aesthetically motivated resolution, and is the possibility to choose cause for an anxiety of interpretation? Fowles suggests that this does not necessarily have to be the case. For him "the best existentialism tries to reestablish in the individual a sense of his own uniqueness, a knowledge of the value of anxiety as an antidote to intellectual complacency and the realization of the need he has to learn to choose and control his own life" (Fowles, *Aristos* 122).

Sarah illustrates this principle in that she defies the dead dogma of her age and builds for herself the kind of life she would like to lead, even if that has involved a detour that

denied her immediate relief. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that she realizes that she is different and exhibits her non-conformity even though that makes her a social outcast. Charles, too, experiences the “anxiety of freedom”, a process out of which he emerges as a self-conscious man, able to stand up for his choices even if that results in social disgrace. The reason why in the third ending Sarah and Charles fail to form a couple is because they have both grown to cherish their independence to the extent that compromising their individuality is not a choice. After all, a relationship is an organization in miniature, and an “existentialist never belongs, as every organization wants its members to belong” (Fowles, *Aristos* 123).

However, the protagonists’ behaviour is gendered only at the story level, where Sarah’s defiance may very well be in line with an incipient form of feminism and Charles’ non-conformism is the mark of an enlightened modern scientist – and it would be no surprise if in their next fictional life she would be a suffragette and he a supporter of the movement. Sarah is the agent of her and Charles’ process of evolution, adaptation and survival. As the implied author notices in one of the very few insights into her personality, Sarah reveals herself as a blending of “passion and imagination”. Indeed she is the character who turns to the best possible account her potential for speculation and imagination, which leads the critic Kerry McSweeney to argue that “the power to create deceptions and illusions makes Sarah something of a John Fowles-type of novelist”, for Fowles has described the novelist as “a dealer in possible hypotheses, a confidence trickster”, and the novel as “a hypothesis more or less ingeniously presented” (111). There is a clear parallel between the way in which Sarah and the author treat Charles and the reader respectively: Sarah lies to Charles and indirectly admits to her deceit, in the same way as John Fowles builds his narrative on the metafictional practices of both “sounding true” and “coming clean”. From an extradiegetic perspective, Sarah may be considered the representative of the neo-Victorian author in the text as well as the text itself – in Barthes’ jargon a “writerly” text, i.e. self- and audience-generated, whose meaning is constantly being made and *meant* either by revision or by review (Barthes 4).

Transposing the novel’s self-reflexivity, especially manifest in its multiple endings, was the greatest challenge the film adaptation faced. Without this defining dimension, the film would merely have been yet another period drama, and it would have greatly departed from the book’s innovative message. The solution that the director Karel Reisz – and especially the screenwriter Harold Pinter – found not only captures Fowles’ and the text’s creative duplicity but matches it with its own doubleness by juxtaposing the Victorian story and the story of making a movie based on that story. Due to the medium’s specificity, however, the novel’s most distinctive feature was represented in the form of crosscutting. The film alternates a 1980’s reality involving the making of a movie with the Victorian, dated, reality of the film being made (Palmer 188). The apparent minimal ontological hierarchy at work in Pinter’s project is contradicted at a deeper level by several instances in which the framing contemporary story is contaminated by the Victorian drama and the Victorian story is invaded by the foil narrative, which suggests the interconnectedness of art and life and the ultimate futility of methodological distinctions between them. The fictional couple of Charles and Sarah is replicated by the less fictional actors Mike and Anna and their own affair. Furthermore, as Imelda Staunton argues, Reisz’s and Pinter’s answer

to the adapting dilemma posed by Fowles' novel consisted in having the actors Mike and Anna go to the source story and "become Victorian" to the extent that in the end Mike feels nostalgic about a time and an aesthetic world he has helped recreate (Whelan 276). When, in the final scene, Charles realizes that Anna has left the party and him without even saying good-bye, he calls out Sarah's name, not Anna's.

Ultimately, the novel and the film adaptation elude the binary male/female opposition, transcend even a tolerant gender juxtaposition, and move toward a celebration of individuality and individual agency as the key to personal fulfillment and toward an erasure of the real/ fictional antinomy.

### **Bibliography**

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller, New York: Blackwell, 1990.
- Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Boston: Little Brown, 1969.
- . *The Aristos*. Revised edition. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- McSweeney, Kerry. *Four English Novelists: Angus Wilson, Brian Moore, John Fowles, V.S. Naipaul*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982.
- Palmer, Barton R. "From Obtrusive Narration to Crosscutting: adapting the doubleness of John Fowles' Novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Authorship in Film Adaptation*. Ed. and an introduction Jack Boozer. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. 179–202.
- The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Dir. Karl Reisz. Perf. Meryl Streep, Jeremy Irons, Hilton McRae, Emily Morgan. United Artists, 1981.
- Whelehan, Imelda. *Neo-Victorian Adaptations. A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*. Ed. Deborah Cartmell. Oxford, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 272–291.

*Address:*

*Facultatea de Litere*

*Universitatea Transilvania*

*Bulevardul Eroilor, 25*

*Brasov, 500030*

*ROMANIA*

*aluca.cimpean@gmail.com*

*Raluca Lucia Cîmpean has a PhD from Karls Ruprechts University, Heidelberg, Germany. She was visiting lecturer at Tufts University and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, from 2011 to 2015. She is currently affiliated with the American Studies Department, Transylvania University, Brasov, Romania.*