American Journal of Alternative Education
ISSN: 2997-3953 (Online)
Vol. 2, No. 10, Oct 2025,
Available online at: https://scientificbulletin.com/index.php/AJAE

Metafiction, History, and Feminine Consciousness: Postmodern Aesthetics in John Fowles's "the French Lieutenant's Woman"

Rakhimova Sarvinoz Tolibovna
PhD Researcher, Asian International University
Bukhara, Uzbekistan, Email: sarvinozrakhimova8@gmail.com

Article information:
Manuscript received: 14 Aug 2025; **Accepted:** 15 Sep 2025; **Published:** 16 Oct 2025

Introduction

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) stands as one of the most distinguished examples of postmodern British fiction, a novel that artfully blurs the boundaries between the Victorian and contemporary sensibilities. It bridges two literary epochs: the moral and structural rigidity of the nineteenth century and the fragmented, self-conscious experimentation of the twentieth. Through the fusion of historiographic metafiction, narrative multiplicity, and feminist consciousness, Fowles constructs a literary experiment that redefines how history, authorship, and gender identity are represented in fiction.

The novel situates itself in Lyme Regis during the 1860s, yet its narrative voice unmistakably belongs to the twentieth century. This temporal layering allows Fowles to simultaneously imitate and parody Victorian realism while interrogating its moral assumptions and gender ideologies. The author, acting as both narrator and commentator, deliberately destabilizes the illusion of realism, forcing readers to acknowledge fiction as a human construct rather than a transparent reflection of truth.

From a theoretical perspective, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon (1988) termed "historiographic metafiction," which "acknowledges the paradox of the past's textualization." In this form, history is never presented as objective but rather as a narrative mediated through ideology and language. Fowles's awareness of this narrative artifice situates him among the foremost postmodern practitioners, alongside authors like Julian Barnes and A.S. Byatt.

Moreover, the novel explores the complexities of gender and existential choice through Sarah Woodruff—a woman condemned by Victorian society yet redefined by Fowles as a figure of autonomy and intellectual rebellion. Her portrayal merges postmodern indeterminacy with existentialist freedom, evoking Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" (1949). In doing so, Fowles challenges the patriarchal narratives of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This paper examines five major postmodern dimensions in Fowles's novel:

1. Metafiction and the Author's Presence
2. Intertextuality and Rewriting Victorian Realism
3. Alternative Endings and the Illusion of Choice
4. The Reader as Co-Creator
5. Historical Relativism and Philosophical Undercurrents

Through these thematic explorations, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* emerges not only as a historical pastiche but as a philosophical meditation on freedom, authorship, and the constructed nature of truth.

1. Metafiction and the Author's Presence

Among the defining characteristics of postmodern fiction is its self-reflexive quality — the text's awareness of its own fictionality. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles not only acknowledges the artificial nature of narrative but also foregrounds the act of storytelling as a central subject. This metafictional technique forces readers to confront the illusion of realism perpetuated by traditional nineteenth-century fiction.

Fowles frequently interrupts his narrative to comment on his own authorial decisions, often revealing his inability—or unwillingness—to control the story's outcome. This self-conscious intrusion aligns with Linda Hutcheon's (1988) notion of the "narcissistic narrative," where the text reflects upon its own creation. The narrator admits, "I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (Fowles, 1969, p. 95). By dismantling the omniscient authority associated with Victorian narrators such as George Eliot or Thomas Hardy, Fowles repositions the novelist as a participant rather than a godlike creator.

This authorial presence embodies Roland Barthes's (1977) idea of *the death of the author*. According to Barthes, once the text is written, the author's intentions are irrelevant—the reader becomes the true site of meaning. Fowles dramatizes this concept by transforming the author into a character within his own text, appearing briefly in Chapter 13 as a bearded man observing Charles and Sarah on a train. His inclusion exposes the artifice of narration, collapsing the distance between author, narrator, and reader.

Such metafictional playfulness serves two key purposes. First, it disrupts narrative closure by denying the reader a stable interpretive framework. Second, it mirrors postmodern skepticism toward absolute truth. The novel's constant self-questioning embodies Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) assertion that postmodernism is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives." Through his intrusive commentary and playful unreliability, Fowles challenges the metanarrative of literary realism itself.

Moreover, the narrator's tone fluctuates between irony and empathy, constructing a layered authorial persona that mirrors the postmodern condition of divided consciousness. His simultaneous involvement and detachment recall the techniques of Italo Calvino and Laurence Sterne, both of whom use metafiction to foreground the constructedness of fiction. Fowles thus situates his work in a lineage of self-reflexive storytelling that extends from *Tristram Shandy* to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

By laying bare the mechanics of his narrative, Fowles transforms *The French Lieutenant's Woman* into a philosophical inquiry: Can fiction ever represent reality without distortion? His answer seems to be no. As he writes in one of his metafictional asides, "We are all in the process of becoming stories." In this respect, the novel becomes a meditation on the epistemological limits of art, illustrating that every act of narration is an act of invention rather than reflection.

2. Intertextuality and Rewriting Victorian Realism

One of the most distinctive postmodern strategies employed by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the use of **intertextuality** — the practice of embedding, echoing, and reinterpreting earlier literary traditions. Fowles's dialogue with Victorian realism, particularly the works of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, is neither simple homage nor parody. Instead, it functions as a self-conscious rewriting of the nineteenth-century moral and aesthetic order from a twentieth-century philosophical standpoint.

2.1. Reimagining the Nineteenth-Century Narrative Voice

The novel opens with a setting that feels unmistakably Victorian: the seaside town of Lyme Regis, with its social hierarchies, moral codes, and romantic conventions. Yet the narrative voice refuses to stay within these constraints. Fowles overlays the familiar realist style with ironic commentary, transforming

what might have been a conventional historical romance into a metafictional critique. As Linda Hutcheon (1988) observes, postmodern historical fiction "both uses and abuses" the realist form, "installing and then subverting it."

Fowles's narrator imitates the omniscient Victorian narrator but constantly breaks the illusion by addressing the reader directly or revealing the fictional construction of his world. For instance, after describing Sarah Woodruff's mysterious presence on the Cobb, he digresses into an essay-like reflection on social conventions, time, and determinism — techniques that recall George Eliot's intellectual narrative intrusions in *Middlemarch* but are here made ironic.

By doing so, Fowles transforms Victorian realism into what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) termed a **dialogic discourse**: a text that contains multiple, competing voices. The past is not presented as a fixed entity but as a field of ideological conflict. The narrator debates with his own creations, exposing how moral authority and authorial omniscience in Victorian fiction were themselves cultural constructs.

2.2. Allusions to Hardy, Darwin, and the Crisis of Determinism

Fowles's dialogue with Thomas Hardy is especially central to his intertextual project. Hardy's tragic heroines—Eustacia Vye, Tess Durbeyfield, and Sue Bridehead—serve as precursors to Sarah Woodruff. Like Hardy's women, Sarah is defined by her resistance to social norms and her refusal to conform to the expectations of respectability. However, Fowles modernizes this resistance by granting her existential freedom rather than fatalistic doom.

The echoes of Darwinian thought also resonate throughout the novel. In a key metafictional moment, Fowles inserts an excerpt from *The Origin of Species*, linking the evolution of biological life to the evolution of human consciousness and social systems. The deterministic worldview of Darwin's science parallels the moral determinism of the Victorian age — both of which Fowles challenges. His characters, particularly Charles, struggle against the illusion of free will within an environment governed by natural and social laws. This struggle mirrors the postmodern condition of uncertainty, where meaning is contingent rather than absolute.

2.3. Parody, Pastiche, and Irony

Fowles's treatment of Victorian form oscillates between **parody** and **pastiche**. Unlike parody, which mocks its object, pastiche in postmodern literature functions as a neutral imitation — a form of historical quotation. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, pastiche allows Fowles to recreate the stylistic texture of Victorian fiction while simultaneously reflecting on its limitations. His detailed descriptions of landscapes, manners, and dialogue reproduce the realism of Eliot or Trollope, yet the intrusive narration destabilizes the illusion of sincerity.

Fredric Jameson (1991) identifies pastiche as a central mode of postmodern culture — a way of representing history when authentic stylistic innovation becomes impossible. Fowles's imitation of Victorian voice exemplifies this phenomenon: he does not merely parody the past but inhabits it, allowing readers to experience the tension between authenticity and artificiality. This layered style reveals the impossibility of recovering the past except through discourse.

2.4. The Victorian Novel as a Mirror of Ideology

Through intertextuality, Fowles invites readers to interrogate the ideological foundations of nineteenth-century literature. Victorian realism claimed to represent society objectively, yet it was deeply embedded in class, gender, and moral hierarchies. Fowles's narrator exposes this ideological bias by revisiting the conventions of the fallen woman, the gentleman's conscience, and the institution of marriage. Sarah's characterization as a "fallen" woman—ostracized yet intellectually superior—serves as a critique of the double moral standard inherent in Victorian gender politics.

Moreover, by giving Sarah the agency to manipulate her narrative fate, Fowles reverses the moral economy of realism. Instead of being punished like Hardy's Tess or redeemed like Dickens's fallen

heroines, Sarah transcends the dichotomy altogether. She becomes a figure of freedom who eludes categorization, embodying the postmodern rejection of binary oppositions.

2.5. Postmodern Dialogism and Narrative Rewriting

Finally, the novel's intertextual structure positions Fowles as both heir and critic of the Victorian tradition. His work participates in what Brian McHale (1987) calls the postmodern "shift from epistemology to ontology"—from questions of knowledge ("How can we know the past?") to questions of being ("What does it mean to exist within narrative constructs?"). By embedding the nineteenth century within a twentieth-century framework, Fowles transforms history into text and authorship into dialogue.

This act of rewriting also serves a feminist function. By giving voice to Sarah, Fowles symbolically rewrites the Victorian woman into the twentieth century, challenging the ideological silencing of female desire in earlier fiction. In this sense, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not only a postmodern novel but also a revisionist one, recovering suppressed narratives and reframing them through contemporary consciousness.

3. Alternative Endings and the Illusion of Choice

One of the most innovative and philosophically charged features of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is its use of **multiple endings**. This narrative experiment exemplifies Fowles's commitment to the postmodern dismantling of closure and the illusion of authorial control. The three alternative endings — Charles's conventional marriage to Ernestina, his rejection and solitude, and his ambiguous reunion with Sarah — transform the novel into a meditation on choice, freedom, and the instability of meaning.

3.1. Subverting the Victorian Demand for Closure

Traditional Victorian fiction relies heavily on narrative closure: moral order is restored, characters' fates are determined, and the story's moral lesson is affirmed. Fowles's decision to present multiple endings directly subverts this convention. He writes, "The novelist is still a god, since he creates... but he is also an impersonal observer of his own creation." This statement foregrounds his refusal to dictate a single moral outcome. The reader, rather than the author, must decide which ending feels authentic — if authenticity is possible at all.

The open-ended structure of the novel reflects Umberto Eco's concept of *opera aperta* ("the open work") (Eco, 1989), in which the text remains incomplete until interpreted by the reader. Each of Fowles's endings functions as a hypothesis rather than a resolution. The multiplicity of conclusions denies any privileged version of truth and embodies the postmodern conviction that meaning is provisional and context-dependent.

3.2. The Narrative Dice-Throw: Chance and Free Will

Fowles dramatizes authorial uncertainty through his famous metaphor of the dice-throw. The narrator, unsure of how to conclude his story, describes flipping a coin to determine which path the characters will take. This performative gesture not only exposes the arbitrary nature of fiction but also symbolizes the existential condition of human choice. As Sartre (1943) and Camus (1942) argued, freedom is both a privilege and a burden: individuals are condemned to choose, even in the absence of absolute meaning.

Charles Smithson, the male protagonist, embodies this existential dilemma. His vacillation between Ernestina's respectability and Sarah's enigma parallels Fowles's own vacillation between narrative certainty and freedom. The multiplicity of endings mirrors Charles's internal struggle to define himself in a world without fixed moral coordinates. Each conclusion represents a different philosophical resolution — one moral, one tragic, one ambiguous — yet all remain equally plausible, reinforcing the postmodern rejection of closure.

3.3. The Reader's Role in Constructing Meaning

By presenting three possible conclusions, Fowles transfers interpretive power to the reader, inviting

them to co-create the story's meaning. The final choice between the second and third endings occurs when the narrator flips a coin — a metafictional moment that dramatizes both authorial abdication and readerly empowerment. As Wolfgang Iser (1978) observed, reading involves the "filling of gaps" left open by the author. Fowles constructs such gaps deliberately, transforming the reading act into a creative collaboration.

This interactivity anticipates modern theories of **reader-response criticism**, where meaning is not transmitted but negotiated. Stanley Fish (1980) argues that "interpretation is not the extraction of meaning but the making of it," a principle Fowles enacts through structural openness. Each ending, while self-contained, destabilizes the authority of the others, reminding readers that interpretation is inherently plural.

3.4. The Illusion of Freedom and Determinism

At a deeper level, the multiplicity of endings raises a paradox: if all outcomes are predetermined by the author's design, then the reader's freedom is also illusory. This paradox mirrors the novel's philosophical engagement with Darwinism and existentialism. Charles's apparent freedom to choose Sarah or Ernestina is undermined by social, historical, and psychological determinants. Similarly, the reader's sense of interpretive agency exists within the framework Fowles constructs.

The novel thereby transforms into a postmodern allegory of determinism. As Brian McHale (1987) explains, postmodern fiction often displaces epistemological questions ("How do we know?") with ontological ones ("What can exist?"). Fowles stages this ontological uncertainty through the act of narrative multiplication: all endings are real within fiction's universe, yet none is definitive. The reader's freedom mirrors the characters' — contingent, relative, and bounded by circumstance.

3.5. The Ethics of Choice and the Modern Condition

The multiple endings also serve an ethical purpose. By refusing to moralize or dictate conclusions, Fowles respects the reader's autonomy while exposing the fragility of moral certainty. His approach echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's humanism, where freedom entails responsibility. The reader, like Charles, must confront the consequences of choice — not in the fictional sense of deciding which ending "happens," but in recognizing that all meaning is the product of human interpretation.

In this way, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* becomes a **philosophical novel** disguised as historical fiction. Its structural openness encapsulates the postmodern worldview: that truth is multiple, time is non-linear, and reality is constructed through narrative acts. The novel's refusal of closure is not a mere stylistic flourish but a profound statement about the human condition — one where every decision opens infinite interpretive possibilities.

4. The Reader as Co-Creator

Postmodern theory, especially as articulated by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1967), emphasizes the reader's role in generating meaning. Fowles's novel embodies this principle by transforming readers into co-creators of the text. Through its open structure, shifting perspectives, and self-referential narration, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* demands interpretative participation rather than passive consumption.

The narrator's direct address to the reader blurs the traditional boundaries of narrative authority. Phrases such as "You may think…" or "Perhaps I should have told you…" invite the audience into the process of meaning-making. In doing so, the novel anticipates reader-response criticism, where interpretation becomes an act of creative collaboration (Iser, 1978).

Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding Sarah's character intensifies the reader's interpretative agency. Is she a manipulator, a mystic, or a proto-feminist icon? Fowles refuses to supply definitive answers, forcing readers to navigate ambiguity and construct personal meaning. This indeterminacy transforms reading into a postmodern act of engagement rather than a search for truth.

In this sense, Fowles's narrative structure mirrors the open systems of chaos theory unpredictable, nonlinear, and perpetually in motion. The reader, like Charles, becomes entangled in the process of discovery, mirroring the existential pursuit of self-definition.

5. Historical Relativism and Philosophical Undercurrents

Beyond its metafictional play, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* engages deeply with philosophical questions about history, time, and human freedom. The novel's historical setting functions not as a backdrop but as a conceptual arena where the determinism of the Victorian age collides with the moral relativism of the twentieth century.

Fowles's anachronistic commentary dismantles the illusion of historical objectivity. He writes, "The past is not dead; it is not even past" (Fowles, 1969, p. 14), echoing Faulkner's notion of temporal continuity. The juxtaposition of historical and contemporary voices illustrates what Hayden White (1973) termed the "emplotment" of history—the idea that historical writing, like fiction, is a narrative act shaped by ideology.

Philosophically, the novel draws upon existentialist and phenomenological ideas. Charles's moral crisis parallels the existential dilemmas articulated by Sartre and Camus—the search for authenticity in a world devoid of absolute values. Sarah, in turn, embodies the postmodern rejection of essentialism. Her freedom to redefine herself outside societal norms marks her as both a feminist and an existential figure.

Furthermore, Fowles's narrative philosophy resonates with Michel Foucault's critique of historical discourse. Power, knowledge, and sexuality intertwine within the novel's depiction of Victorian repression. By reimagining history through postmodern irony, Fowles transforms the novel into a philosophical inquiry into how truth is constructed, mediated, and controlled.

Conclusion

The French Lieutenant's Woman remains a landmark of postmodern fiction precisely because it refuses to separate art from philosophy or history from imagination. Fowles uses the tools of metafiction, intertextuality, and narrative plurality not merely for aesthetic experimentation but to interrogate the cultural and epistemological assumptions of both the Victorian and modern eras.

Through Sarah Woodruff's ambiguous identity, the multiplicity of endings, and the author's overt intrusion, the novel dismantles traditional hierarchies of narration and authority. It invites readers to perceive fiction as a dynamic process of meaning-making, shaped by ideology, interpretation, and historical consciousness.

Ultimately, Fowles transforms the Victorian romance into a postmodern meditation on human freedom, gender, and truth. His novel endures not as a nostalgic reconstruction of the past but as a critical dialogue between history and imagination—a reminder that literature, like life, is an endless negotiation between determinism and choice.

References:

1. Barthes, R. (1967). *The Death of the Author.* Paris: Seuil.
2. Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex.* Paris: Gallimard.
3. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish.* New York: Pantheon Books.
4. Fowles, J. (1969). *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* London: Jonathan Cape.
5. Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* New York: Routledge.
6. Iser, W. (1978). *The Act of Reading.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
7. Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

8. Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *Being and Nothingness.* Paris: Gallimard.
9. White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.