Existential Freedom in The French Lieutenant’s Woman

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to trace the philosophical implication of John Fowles’s literary texts to explore the organic link between existential freedom and his writing of The French Lieutenant’s Woman. Fowles is dealing here with three kinds of freedom: social, individual and narrative. The author first interprets Fowle’s concern of freedom from social support. Then the author is devoted to the study of individual freedom. Finally, the author goes on to argue that narrative freedom is a metaphor for freedom from God, a precondition for existential freedom. Fowles’s FLW bears his philosophical assertion that freedom of will is the highest human good.

Introduction

John Fowles has always been concerned with the general issue of human freedom, by which he means the freedom of individuals from the constraints of society and institutions. The first novel Fowles wrote was The Magus, in which the philosophy that contributed to his self-exploration, and that helped him to articulate his emerging, individualist views, was existentialism. The Aristos, Fowles’s book of aphoristic philosophy, earned him the label “existentialist”.

As the reader comes to Fowles’s work in greater detail, he will find a theme recurring consistently: the importance of freedom. FLW is probably the best of Fowles’s works examining closely on this subject. Freedom in Fowles’s work is not the only voice: strong claims are also made for its apparent antithesis, responsibility. But the author of the thesis contends that at the deepest level Fowles’s fictional practice bears out his early philosophical assertion that freedom of will is the highest human good.

Literature Review

Critics are also inspired by the single most important theme of Fowles’s work: the importance of freedom. According to Simon Loveday, freedom forms part of the substance of Fowles’s treatment of the Few and the Many[1]. Kerry McSweeney declares the open endings necessary in an existential text to avoid confirming belief in an overall plan in things[2]. Richard P. Lynch asserts that it is the absence of a role that defines Charles as a character moving toward existential freedom[3].

Scholars have done marvelous work in studying FLW from different literary approaches, including that of existentialism. But literary critics who are concerned with existential freedom only interpret a certain aspect of Fowles’s freedom, either from the narrative traits of the novel itself, or from the authenticity of the characters. As Fowles is labeled as a philosophical writer, it is necessary to have a panoramic view of his concern of freedom.

Tenets of Existential Freedom

Man is condemned to be free. The freedom, however, means that the individual comes to find himself free from any guidance or protection. Therefore the bitterness of freedom embraces human existence. Man is not free from conditions. But he is free to take a stand in regard to them. Besides, man’s will to choose to act plunges him into unremitting quest—moving from one alternative to another. The underlying meaning suggests that freedom can be creative. According to Kaufmann, it remains to be seen how that victory can be won—how freedom can become creative[4]. Man is
aware of his freedom in his anguish. It is in anguish that freedom is in its being and in question for itself. For Sartre, man first exists, and then he defines himself. Man is what he “conceives” and “wills himself to be”[5].

**Freedom: The First Condition of Action**

It is important to make clear that motive is not the first condition of an action, but freedom is. The motive is understood only by the end, by the non-existent. The motive is therefore in itself negative. Causes and motives have meaning only inside a projected ensemble, which is precisely an ensemble of non-existents.

**Fowles’s Concern of Existential Freedom**

Fiction, according to Fowles, is a tool for learning, an art form that should promote discovery by an individual reader, with an existential awareness and ecological consciousness. He wishes to teach or convert his readers, or at least he hopes that they will evolve.

Fowles compares Victorian concern with Darwinism to modern worry over nuclear destruction. The more sensitive Victorians felt infinitely isolated, and, by the 1860s, some sensed the crumbling of social, religious, and philosophical structures. Charles and Sarah are among the few Victorians who look into the void. But Charles suffers to discover the emptiness he is facing.

**Social Freedom**

As has been made clear, there are ways to describe Fowles’s freedoms but only in relative terms. The different groups of which individuals are a part influence their orientation toward the conflict and toward other parties involved. According to Fowles, to be human in such a society means, first of all, to be cast into the social interplay of estimation that decides as who we are. Freedom, therefore, consists first in social freedom.

**Sarah’s Socialization Process**

Simple living in the Victorian age is enough to render socialization an unsteady process. The year 1867 witnessed John Stuart Mill’s attempt to persuade Parliament to grant voting rights to woman (calling into question assumptions about gender), the publication by Carl Marx of the first volume of *Das Kapital* (calling into question assumptions about social class), and the Second Reform Bill, which gave the vote to workers in the towns and virtually doubled the total number of voters.

In a word, conditions sufficient to undermine Sarah’s socialization existed both in the world of reference that provides the background to the novel and in her personal life in the narrative. There is no alternative social reality available to her until the end of the novel. There is only the option of pretending to be what she is not (the French lieutenant’s woman) as a means of rejecting socialization in a social reality she cannot accept as a verification of her identity.

**Charles’s Social Freedom in Progress**

Sarah’s description of her new community gives rise to questions about Charles’s options. Charles wears his Darwinism as comfortably as Ernestina wears the latest fashions. In page 107, Charles likes to see him as different, “not like the majority of his peers and contemporaries”[6], and he reveals that he and a selected few—Dr. Grogan, for instance—are advanced thinkers (132). The terms intellectual or Darwinist have about the same reality when replied to Charles as governess does when applied to Sarah, which are convenient constructs for those who do not quite fit into mainstream Victorian categories.

Social freedom, an indispensable part of Fowles’s view of relative freedom, is the ability to choose between supporting social groups which strengthen one’s identity. Charles, having liberated himself from the stereotypical upper-class life, is still in search of his social group. Charles’s social freedom is in progress. He sees that he does not belong to the Victorian society either, and he is on his way to some undefined freedom.
Individual Freedom

Fowles takes pains to explain that freedom must be limited by the mystery of hazard and the privilege of responsibility. For him, what a person has genetically inherited, or how his parents treated him when he was an infant matters. But the most important aspect of freedom is how he interprets and responds to the world around him at each given instant. At each moment, a person is free to choose what he will do and be. Individual freedom is the core concept that lies behind the ideas of self-actualization and self-discovery.

Charles’s Transfigured Subjectivity

Constructed by both Victorian and modern narrators, Charles is a character who is dominated by his social conventions, particularly in his attitude towards women. Early in the novel he tells Ernestina that the main thing he lacks is mystery and romance: “I wish you hadn’t told me the sordid facts. That’s the trouble with provincial life. Everyone knows everyone and there is no mystery. No romance”. But significantly she replies: “the scientist, the despiser of novels” (14). He escapes from the puritanical atmosphere of Ernestina into the spontaneous world of Sarah, who challenges all fixed rules in society.

Sarah’s Attraction to Charles

Fowles’s understanding of human existence allows Charles to obtain individual freedom that he has absorbed through Sarah, who is the genuine advocate of existentialist principles in the novel. An understanding of Sarah’s attraction to Charles is indispensable to an understanding of the novel’s various themes. She creates her own role of an outcast; she is not like other outcasts who are afraid to seem so. She herself demands the epithet of an outcast, a “whore”, because it makes her free from all Victorian conventions. When Ernestina describes her as “poor tragedy…the French Lieutenant’s…woman” (12), Sarah herself prefers “I am the French Lieutenant’s Whore”(153). Throughout these constructions and fiction-making, she achieves freedom and is able to grant the same freedom to Charles and others in the novel.

A Quest for Individual Freedom

Despite the ignominy and pain of his decision, Charles continues to renew it even when he begins to lose hope of finding Sarah. At last, when he confronts her again (in the third ending), his refusal to accept her implied offer of a relationship on her terms is evidence of the self-sufficiency which he has developed.

Through his own lonely suffering, Charles has learned what Sarah’s has taught her: the way to exist within the hazard of the existential void, through reliance upon self-awareness. In this sense, Charles surpasses Hardy’s deterministic view by showing how to live under such an uncertain scheme of existence.

Narrative Freedom

Fowles experimented with narrative form to some extent in FLW—particularly in the autonomy of the characters, triple endings, and in its use of a twentieth-century narrator for a novel set in the Victorian period. Like many Victorian novels, FLW is constructed by an omniscient narrator who communicates the entire narrative, and who always intrudes in order to make various comments on the characters.

Free Authorial Intrusions

The death of the author, according to Roland Barthes, means the termination of the author’s dominating presence in the text. The authority or the domination of the author is what is being attacked by Barthes. To give the text an author is to impose a limit on that text. FLW is left free of any systematization where the reader is asked to fill in the gaps. The novel becomes entirely open, plural, capable of change, and free of any authoritative interventions so that the reader will be able to enjoy freedom and participate in the production process.
Autonomous Characters

The Victorian disguise is a means of attacking the omniscient and godlike narrator; it is also another way of promoting freedom by showing that the narrator does not necessarily dominate every text in the novel. His characters do not listen to the direction of their creator but act of their own accord. The narrator says: “When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not. He gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy” (86). The narrator stresses here that the idea of not going to Lyme has “come clearly Charles, not myself” (86). Indeed the narrator emphasizes, on various occasions, that he does not control his narrative, and he does not plan events.

Alternative Endings

The author emphasizes that the entire narrative structure of the novel is itself an act of freedom concerning all participants in the fiction. As Sarah frees Charles from his Victorian conventions, so the narrator frees the reader from the restrictions of the omniscient, godlike narrator and provides him with the possibility of being a character in this fiction. Like Charles, the reader must face the anxiety of freedom by himself without the help of the narrator and without his authorial domination. The reader must undertake the task of linking the various layers of texts, epigraphs, fiction with history, and most importantly the two epochs within which the novel is submerged. The epigraph to the novel, which virtually equates freedom and humanism, is a profoundly significant comment upon both life and art.

Conclusion

With or without the Nobel Prize, Fowles’s place in the literature of English novel is singular and durable. As a philosophical writer, he has always been concerned with human freedom. The major lesson of his fiction is that individual existential freedom, the insistence upon one’s right to an authentic personal destiny, is the highest human good. In FLW, his most important work, Fowles is dealing with three kinds of freedom: social, individual and narrative.

Freedom is at the very core of FLW: deprivation of freedom proves fatal. Man needs to be awakened from this existential torpor, and Fowles proposes that fiction in itself is the great awakener, the great teacher. Each of Fowles’s novels ultimately educates the reader, and tells the same story of the survival of individual freedom. The real art of Fowles lies in his showing the different ways by which an individual can come to know and be himself, despite formidable handicaps and pressures to conform. To study the art of John Fowles is to study how fiction humanizes mankind.

References