

Deconstruction and Subversion: The French Lieutenant's Woman under the Perspective of Postmodern Deconstruction

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Abstract: Postmodernism is a movement that begins in the 20th century. The movement involves many fields, such as philosophy, art, and literature. The novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel which was born in that period. As a metafiction, it has the feature of deconstruction that can be seen in the structures of the novel. At the same time, the deconstruction can be seen in the plots of the novel as well. The novel can be regarded as a typical work of postmodernism and deconstructionism. And this paper focuses mainly on revealing various deconstruction phenomena in the novel and tries to help readers to understand metafiction and deconstructionism better.

Keywords: The French Lieutenant's Woman; Postmodernism; Deconstructionism.

1. Introduction

The French Lieutenant's Woman is a famous metafiction by John Fowles, which tells a love triangle story. The main plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be summarized. Charles Smithson, a young, pleasant, well-educated Victorian, is engaged to Ernestina Freeman, a pretty but shallow girl who represents the Victorian ideal of womanhood that is, she is chaste, repressed, and ignorant. (Patrick Brantlinger, 340) Later Charles falls in love with Sarah Woodruff, the French Lieutenant's Woman, who seems to be a "fallen woman" but only because her impulse towards freedom and her instinctual knowledge of sexuality leads her to appear as one, not because she is "fallen." Charles has lost Ernestina but has not clearly gained Sarah. Many scholars have analyzed the novel through different perspectives, such as the narrative technique, existentialism, deconstruction, etc. This paper also analyzed the novel through the perspective of deconstruction. Chu Lijiao, Liu Dongyan(2010), and Zhang Xiaocai(2012) have already analyzed the novel through the perspective of deconstruction. And Liu and Zhang (2010) claimed there is deconstruction in the relationship between the male and female. Chu (2012) got the same result as Liu and Zhang, but she had more finding than the earlier two scholars. She added the deconstruction of author authority and traditional thoughts in novels. However, unlike the previous studies, which analyzed the deconstruction of the relationship between male and female and the author's authority this paper added two new parts, namely, the deconstruction of the relationship between masters and servants and the deconstruction of the traditional novel written style. And the first part of this paper discusses the development of deconstruction, and the second part is about the deconstruction shown in the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The last part is a short conclusion of this paper.

2. The Origin and Development of Deconstruction

French philosophic thoughts were quite active and productive. Western world can no longer stand the

conservative structuralism, which led to the birth of deconstruction. Though the scholars in that period of time didn't use the term deconstruction, their deconstructing thoughts can be seen in their theories.

According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Deconstruction is a critical theory in literature that claims to "subvert" or "undermine" the assumption that the system of language is based on grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text. (Abrams, 77) Many scholars contribute to this theory, such as, Jacques Derrida, Ronald Barthes, and Michel Foucault etc. Among the three scholars, the French thinker Jacques Derrida is the originator and namer of deconstruction. His basic points about deconstruction can be seen in the following three books, and they are: *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*. These three masterpieces were the foundation of deconstruction. Derrida doubted some main concepts of Saussure's in his three masterpieces, then truth, God, authority, and morality were doubted. According to Derrida, the signified which matches the signifier had already disappeared. And the specific meaning of text was unclear, therefore, the deep structures that structuralism relies on are no longer here. (Zhu Gang, 301) It should be noted that Derrida never wants not only deconstruct the structuralism itself but also the culture it stands for, namely, logocentrism. There are some features of deconstruction: (1) no absolute authority or center. (2) no supposed design. (3) all the traces are disordered. (4) no absolute truth. (5) the world is pluralistic. Their features are quite different from structuralism. However, though Derrida advocates deconstruction, he doesn't want us to deconstruct or subvert the tradition completely. Thus, he explained the relation between initiation and tradition, which can be seen in his *Writing and Difference*. In the book, he claimed that new things broke from the old or traditional but would return to the old or traditional. The other two scholars who were mentioned at the beginning of this part didn't use the term deconstruction, but their theories had already been penetrated by deconstruction. For example, the theory of power and discourse of Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes' stress on readers in the reading process. Besides, both Michel Foucault

and Derrida were not intend to apply their theories to literary analysis, but it must be recognized that their theories do work very well in the field of literature. This is why Derrida's deconstruction was later largely welcomed by American universities.

The zeal for deconstruction later spread to America. But the American deconstruction is a little bit different from the French one. One of the most different points is that the American one emphasizes the connection between the literary text and deconstruction. (Zhu Gang, 305) They use deconstruction to analyze the disharmony in the text, but they never intend to find some specific meaning to replace the meaning that comes from structuralism, they pay attention to the conflicts in the text only for the joy of reading.

Of course, there are some other critics who refused to accept deconstruction or criticized Derrida. For example, Heyden White believes that Derrida's deconstruction is a kind of disaster for Western critic field.(White, 85-108) Foucault also pointed out that Derrida was sunk into the literary text, though it is mentioned that Derrida never intended to use his deconstruction to analyze literary text. Besides, Marxism criticized deconstruction for believing it's a kind of escapism. It did try to fight against reality, but it can never fight against modern capitalism. No matter how others try to reveal its disadvantages, we have to recognize that it is a thought which has already rooted in the Western world (Zhu Gang, 307), which can never be resisted.

3. The deconstruction in The French Lieutenant's Woman

There are many phenomena of deconstruction in The French Lieutenant's Woman. This part mainly talks about the deconstruction and the subversion in the author authority, the male-central society and the traditional master-servant relationship, and the traditional novel form.

3.1. The breaking from author authority

The deconstruction of author authority can be traced back to Nietzsche's "God is dead" which influenced Foucault and Barthe who wrote *The Death of Author* and *What is an Author* respectively. Barthe supported his thought from the perspective of linguistics, and claimed that language can work by itself instead of being guided or driven by authors. In other words, authors are neither the source of writing nor the planer of writing.(Wang Mingan, 248-251) As for Foucault who wrote *What is an Author* gave his point that author can't be ignored, but it was not so much important as we thought. He tried to undermine the power or right of authors instead of abandoning them.(Wang Minagan, 261) Both Foucault's and Barthe's statement have the taste of deconstruction. The *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was written in 1960s, therefore, it can't prevent from affecting by deconstruction.

Since *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the masterpiece of metafiction, its breaking from author authority can be clearly seen in its definition. In the book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh points out that "metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality." (2) And its features can be summarized as the following two words: self-consciousness and uncertainty.

In the novel, the writer Fowles' authority is largely

deconstructed. He shows readers his writing process and admits his uncertainty of protagonist's fate and thoughts. For example, in chapter 13, Fowles wrote the following words: "I don't know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I care never existed outside my own mind..." (41) It is often believed that authors could create a world with their pens, and when readers are reading, it's easy to sink in the story. But Fowles didn't try to that. He always reminded his readers in his book that the book is fictional, and it had nothing to do with their reality. Therefore, the distance between readers and text had been created. Besides, the author didn't give readers a certain ending, instead he gave readers several open endings. Thus, it gives readers a chance to join the creation process, which means readers can choose anyone ending which he thinks it is proper. Therefore, the author authority is deconstructed.

3.2. The Breaking from Traditional Novel Form.

The traditional novel usually has linear line plot, a certain ending which makes the whole story plots a circle. But the novel deconstructs the tradition for giving readers open endings instead of a specific ending. At the same time the plots are not always goes in the time line. Another writing technique in every innovative in this novel which can be seen at the beginning of each chapter. At the beginning of each chapter, the story is not directly told. Some poems of Alfred Tennyson, news from newspaper or excerpts from books, which makes readers confused about the novel itself. Take chapter twelve as an example: the beginning is written like "In what does the alienation of labour consist?" (Fowles,36) and "And was the day of my delight As pure and perfect as I say?"(Fowles,36)The first excerpt comes from Max's Economic and Political Manuscript while the second quotation comes from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Is this book a novel or a collection of social news? When readers are asking such question, the author's goal has been reached. The subjectivity of novel has been deconstructed. The author intends to blur the boundary between novel and other genres.

3.3. The deconstruction of female-central relationship

The novel was set in Victoria age, so it is very important to pay attention to the female status in that period of time. In Victoria age, women didn't have any rights. They couldn't decide their own lives, and their future. They were told that the final goal of their lives is to marry a good man so few of them were aware of their own value. They lived under the control of their fathers, after marriage, they lived under the shadow of their husbands. Besides women should behave decently. Victoria novelists had already described these phenomenas in their novels. For example, in Charles Dickens' *The Great Expectation*, the female character Estella who is adopted by Mrs. Havisham, married a rich man not for true love but money. Mrs. Havisham plays both the role of a father and a mother. She wants to accumulate money, so she makes Estella's marriage a chip to gain money. Literature can be regarded as a mirror of society. From the novels at that period of time we can know its social situation.

Though Sarah is a woman who lives in Victoria age, she is a not a typical Victoria woman. She never wants to be the one who is submissive to the man. She doesn't care how others think of her, she even doesn't try to stop the spreading of the fake rumor of her and a French Lieutenant. Such rumor is

definitely big news news in Lyme. She breaks the chain that locks women, at least, she breaks the chain that locks her, which can be seen as a sort of deconstruction of the rigid rules that put on women. She challenges the so-called tradition. The deconstruction of male dominant sexual relationship. Sarah seems like a weak and helpless woman, but in fact, it is she who controls the relation with Charles. She decides when and where to meet Charles, and Charles goes to meet her even though he knows it is immoral for he has already engaged with Tina. At last, when Charles knows that Sarah is still a virgin, he is totally shocked. He wants to be responsible to what he has done to Sarah, but Sarah refuses him and escapes before his returning to the inn. She doesn't want anyone to decide her life or marriage, and refuses to be defined. Sarah has an absolute dominant position in this relationship. Charles is played and used from the beginning to the end. The symbol of power in Lyme is the doctor. When he claims that Sarah has depression and need to be sent to asylum, Charles, as a respective noble young gentleman, helps to exculpate for Sarah who is refused by almost all the people in the little town. In a word, unlike Tina who pays much attention to Charles and cares too much about how Charles thinks of her and his mood. However, Sarah never does so. Sarah tries to deconstruct both male-central society and male-central sexual relationship, though she may not successfully deconstruct the male-central society.

3.4. The change of the servants

Charles has a servant called Sam who almost follows Charles everywhere. However, Sam is not the servant we thought. He can do many things that are not allowed for servants. As a black, he can wear fashionable clothes as he likes, and earn his own money. And he is not absolutely loyal to his master. He has his own standers of judgement, he wouldn't be completely submissive to his master. After knowing Sam falls in love with the maid Marry, Charles reminds him that he should pay attention to his behaviour and the eyes on him and Marry. But Sam doesn't obey his master and still meets Marry secretly. It is known to all, the black used to be slave of the white, and they couldn't decide their marriage. For example, the George in Uncle Tom's Cabin. Though he has already married Eliza, his master orders him to marry another female slave for forbidding him to frequently going to the farm where Eliza lives in. Unlike George, Sam can choose the girl he loves. Besides, in the last part, when the disagreement happens between him and Charles, Sam shows strong dissatisfaction towards Charles. When Sam knows Charles can not inherit from his uncle, and Charles tries to break the engagement, he says the following words to Marry:

“Don't cry, my darling, don't cry. I've 'ad enough of hupstairs. They're no better'n us,' He gripped her by the arms. 'If 'is lordship thinks like master, like servant, 'e's mistook, Mary...I'll leave 'is hemploy.'” (Fowles, 160)

Sam does do what he says to Marry. Charles thinks that as a servant of him, he can dismiss Sam as long as he wants. However, to his surprise, Sam “dismisses” him before his dismissal to Sam, which makes Charles extremely angry. A servant dare to leave his master without his Master's permission! The position of servants have already changed,

they are not completely obey their masters. And they even criticize their masters behind them. It is a kind of deconstruction of masters' power. In fact, the change of relation between masters and servants happened even before Fowles' time. The development of society and industrialization gave more chances to people. It becomes hard for middle class and up class to hire servants, for those servants can even earn more money in factories with dignity. It is called Servant Problem. Even Virginia Woolf used to be left out in the cold by her servant. The same thing happen to Tina as well. The relationship between Marry and Tina is very subtle, envy and disdain exist between them, though they seem get along well with each other.

4. Conclusion

The novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a metafiction and a typical post structuralism novel. Therefore, there are many phenomenas about deconstruction in this novel. The deconstruction of the novel structures brings open ending and non-linear story line to the story. The deconstruction of the authority of author makes the author appear in the story and show readers the process of writing. The deconstruction of male discourse can be seen in what Sarah has done to Charles. And Sarah's rumor, to some extent, is a kind of challenge or deconstruction to Victoria tradition. The way Sam gets along with Charles shows that servants are deconstructing the power of their masters'. And the same thing happens to Marry and Tina.

Deconstruction happens everywhere. It can not only seen in literary fields, but also the other fields in our society and many aspects of our daily life. It can not resisted. The novel in this paper is only a very small aspect of it, and there are many other aspects which are worth exploring.

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