

## Original Paper

# The Dialogism in The French Lieutenant's Woman

Li Xin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Hebei University, Baoding, 071000, China

Received: May 5, 2023

Accepted: May 20, 2023

Online Published: May 22, 2023

doi:10.22158/jecs.v7n2p150

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v7n2p150>

### **Abstract**

*The French Lieutenant's Woman is the English novelist John Fowles' representative work, which shows the author's concern on the theme of freedom through the romantic entanglements of the hero and heroine, using special art of dialogue. Based on intensive reading and exhaustive textual analysis, applying Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, this paper analyzes the dialogic features of this novel from two aspects: the great dialogue among the author, the readers and the characters, and the micro-dialogue in the characters' inner worlds. The findings are helpful for readers to have a better understanding of The French Lieutenant's Woman from a new perspective and feel Fowles' and Bakhtin's respect for human values.*

### **Keywords**

*Dialogism, Bakhtin, John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman*

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 John Fowles*

John Robert Fowles is a famous and an outstanding English novelist and essayist in the 20th century. Many of his fictional works have been translated into different languages, and several of them have been adapted into films. In 2008, The Times newspaper ranked Fowles "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945" (Goosmann, 2014). In Fowles' novels, pursuing freedom and independence is an eternal motif, which deeply demonstrates the anxiety, hesitation and pain of human for obtaining existence and freedom in an absurd, ugly, cold and real world to us. Besides, he not only explores human freedom in a thematic sense, but also integrates these thoughts into narrative consciousness. By using parody, multiple narrative perspectives, open ending and other narrative or writing techniques, Fowles fundamentally subverts the traditional roles and positions of the authors, characters and readers, letting them cooperate freely. And Fowles' innovation of his novels in form also provides a diversified and flexible direction for the development of contemporary novels. During his 40-year writing career, John Fowles has had six novels and a number of non-fiction works. His masterpieces are The Collector

(1963), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and *The Magus* (1965).

### *1.2 The French Lieutenant's Woman*

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* vividly tells a story about how the heroes pursue freedom both mentally and physically during the process of fighting against traditional values and mundane moral standards. In a deeper level, the author using dialogues as a unique technique provides heroes with freedom of choices, respective outlooks of the world and different ideologies, which liberates them from the passive position of traditional novels and makes them become truly independent individuals. Thus, it is the fact that Fowles creates a fictional world with different voices and consciousnesses. Based on intensive reading and exhaustive textual analysis, this paper illustrates the dialogic features of this novel, under the guidance of Bakhtin's theory of dialogue. This study can help readers have a better understanding of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* from a new perspective and feel Fowles' and Bakhtin's respect for human values.

## **2. Bakhtin's Theory of Dialogue**

Bakhtin (1984) believes that "Everything else is the means, and dialogue is the end. One voice alone concludes nothing. Two voices are the minimum for life, the minimum of existence". For Bakhtin, where there is consciousness, there is dialogue. According to him, all the novels are just "dialogues" in disguise. In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* published in 1961, he outlines the development of dialogic features in Dostoevsky's novels and divides the dialogue in literature into two categories: great dialogue and micro-dialogue.

### *2.1 Great Dialogue*

According to Bakhtin (1984), "all relationships among external and internal parts and elements of his (Dostoevsky's) novel are dialogic in character, and he (Dostoevsky) structured the novel as a whole as a 'great dialogue'". That is to say, there are potential dialogic relationships among every element in a dialogic novel. This kind of dialogic arrangement of a novel is called great dialogue. Bakhtin (1984) points out that "Dostoevsky, with great subtlety, transfers onto the plane of literary composition the law of musical modulation from one tonality to another. These are different voices singing variously on a single theme". Thus, because of the existence of great dialogue in the structural level, every elements of the dialogue novel seems to be at variance but actually in harmony.

### *2.2 Micro-Dialogue*

For Bakhtin (1984), a person's inner life is also a small dialogue. He thinks that "ultimately, dialogue penetrates within, into every word of the novel, making it double voiced, into every gesture, every mimic movement on the hero's face, making it convulsive and anguished; this is already the micro-dialogue that determines the peculiar character of Dostoevsky's verbal style". From this we can conclude that the double voices in the language and ideas reflecting the characters' internal debate are called the micro-dialogue. This internal dialogue forms a major part of the dialogicality in the novel and shows that a character is an independent individual in terms of thought and speech.

In fact, the great dialogue and micro-dialogue in the novel are inseparably connected with each other as a whole. They penetrate into each other.

### 3. Dialogic Features of the Novel

#### 3.1 Great Dialogue

Great dialogue refers to the dialogic relationships of a novel in the structural level, thus, we can analyze it from the following aspects: dialogues between the author and characters, between the author and Readers, and among the characters.

##### 3.1.1 Dialogue Between the Author and Characters

Bakhtin (1984) in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* points out that "the dialogic relationship between author and characters is a new kind of artistic position, which affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability and indeterminacy of the hero". That is to say, the dialogic relationship between author and characters let the characters get rid of the author's control and express their own truths which are free from the author's domination. At this time, the author not speaks about a character, but with the character. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles presents such an equal dialogic relationship between the author and characters.

There are two examples, Sarah and Charles. Fowles (1970) gives Sarah her independence to narrate her own story in her own voice and her own way. At the beginning of the story, Sarah is described as an enigmatic figure and even the author raises such questions that who is Sarah and out of what shadows does she come. Moreover, there are no definite evaluation made by the author towards Sarah and readers know Sarah all from discourse of other characters and Sarah's own words and deeds. From the above, we can see that Sarah's whole story and characteristics are expressed by Sarah herself. Fowles (1970) gives his character Charles freedom too, mainly lying in the fact that Charles could act out of the author's plan. When Charles leaves Sarah on the cliff edge, the author orders him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But Charles did not, he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy (Fowles, 1970). Just like Fowles (1970) said in the novel: "I can only report--and I am the most reliable witness--that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself." Besides, in the fifty-fifth chapter, the author arranges an interesting meeting between him and Charles. The author disguises as a bearded man sitting in the same carriage as Charles. Keeping scrutinizing Charles, he thinks about how to deal with this character (Fowles, 1970). The problem is that he is clear what Charles wants, but he is not sure what Sarah wants and where Sarah is (Fowles, 1970). Thus, the author decides to give the characters freedom and let them to choose their own life, the result of which is the novel has three endings. These two examples is the great dialogue between the author and his characters.

In summary, the author gets out of the traditional way of ending the story, but let the characters decide their own ending. This kind of dialogic relationship between the author and characters shapes independent and developing characters.

### 3.1.2 Dialogue Between the Author and Readers

Bakhtin (1984) thinks that Dostoevsky's works are great works because Dostoevsky would put himself in relation to the readers in "a dialogic position with equal rights". Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is also such a great work because it is the work of dialogue between the author and the readers. One important way Fowles (1970) applies to set up a dialogic relationship with the readers lies in that he often intrudes into the story and tells the readers his writing process. For example, in the thirteenth chapter, the author, using the first-person pronoun "I" and addressing the readers as the second-person pronoun "you", has a conversation with the readers. He tells the readers that "he doesn't control these characters because his first principle of writing a novel is freedom not authority". Thus, when reading the story, readers have to stop at some point for the reason that they are suddenly interrupted by the author who is constantly telling the readers his self-reflection of his writing. Another way Fowles applies to have dialogue with the readers is his arrangement of open ending. There are three endings in this novel. The first ending appears in the forty-fourth Chapter. Charles doesn't go to the hotel where Sarah is waiting for him. He finally marries Ernestina, living out his whole life with her as a tradesman. And no one knows what happens to Sarah. From the forty-fifth Chapter to the sixtieth Chapter, the author gives the second ending. Charles returns to the hotel and has sex with Sarah. After long consideration, Charles decides to marry Sarah and breaks the engagement with Ernestina. However, due to his servant Sam's betrayal, Sarah doesn't receive Charles' letter and then disappears. After two years' searching, Charles finally finds Sarah at a painter's house. At that time, Sarah has given birth a daughter for him. Three of them are reunited at the second ending. In the last Chapter, there is the third ending. After two years' searching, Charles finally finds Sarah living in the painter's house, enjoying an artistic life. But Sarah doesn't tell him about their child and refuses his proposal, because she doesn't want to be anyone's wife, but just herself, living happily and freely. Ultimately, though Charles leaves with a broken heart, he decides to pursue the life that he really wants and have a new start in America. By the three endings, the author leaves the readers room for imagination. The uncertainty and the indeterminacy of Sarah and Charles give the readers freedom to choose their own ending of the story, which could show their own special understanding of the novel. Thus, we can say that the author's intention and the readers' understanding are having a great dialogue.

In summary, Fowles often intrudes into the story to interact with the readers and gives three different endings, which provides an opportunity for the readers to participate in creating this novel. This kind of dialogic relationship between the author and the readers gives the readers freedom and room to think and imagine.

### 3.1.3 Dialogue Among the Characters

Bakhtin (1984) points out that "In the novels, the major characters and their worlds are not self-enclosed and deaf to one another; they intersect and are interwoven in a multitude of ways". That is to say, the characters are not closed unities but interact with and influence each other in a dialogic novel. In Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the author doesn't give any definite evaluation

towards a character, and readers could know he or she from his or her discourse with other characters, which “makes the characters demonstrate a kind of unfinalizability and indeterminacy” (Chen, 2005). One example is the main protagonist Sarah who is a mysterious figure. Instead of having an overall picture of Sarah, every character has his or her own special understanding of Sarah in his or her own dialogic relationship with Sarah. The traditional people living in the little town of Lyme thinks that Sarah is a French lieutenant’s jilted mistress and a “poor Tragedy” (Fowles, 1970). Right-minded Doctor Grogan at the beginning believes Sarah is the victim of gossip (Fowles, 1970), however, after Charles tells the truth of his encounters with Sarah, Doctor Grogan affirms that Sarah is a wily woman who wants to arouse Charles’ sympathy towards her by hurting herself (Fowles, 1970). As for Charles, his opinion of Sarah changes as the plots develops. The first time they meet each other is in the wood where they have their dialogue freely. At that time, when Sarah talks about her desire for freedom and asks the questions: “Why am I born what I am; Why am I not Miss Freeman” (Fowles, 1970), he thinks Sarah’s talk about freedom is incomprehensible. For him, Sarah is just an innocent, fragile victim and an abandoned woman whom he wants to help. And then, after their sexual intercourse, Charles gets to know more about Sarah and realizes that she is not what people are talking about. Thus, he decides to marry Sarah, but Sarah leaves him. The last time they meet each other again is two years later. When Charles asks Sarah again to marry him, Sarah refuses again. She gives her reason: “I have since seen artists destroy work that might to the amateur seem perfectly good. I remonstrated once. I was told that if an artist is not his own sternest judge he is not fit to be an artist. I believe I was right to destroy what had begun between us. There was a falsehood in it” (Fowles, 1970). That is to say, the reason why Sarah refuses Charles is that she believes their love is imperfect and wrong. At that time, Charles eventually realizes that Sarah is a free individual with acute vision and unruly nature as him. However, even in the end, Charles still cannot understand her or cannot judge whether Dr. Grogan’s assertion is correct or not. For Charles, he has no idea why Sarah has forged the lie about her and the French lieutenant or why she tricks him into having an affair with him. Just as Sarah herself says: “Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained” (Fowles, 1970). Thus, although there are many different images of Sarah in the author’s eye, the readers’ eyes and the other characters’ eyes, none of the images can be equated with Sarah herself.

In summary, Fowles often lets his characters in this novel have direct conversations, from which we could know different aspects of a character. This kind of dialogic relationship among the characters is a good way to shape them.

### *3.2 Micro-Dialogue*

In Bakhtin’s view, dialogue not just exists in the structural level, staying on the surface, but also penetrates into every word and sentence, even the characters’ consciousness, which is so-called micro-dialogue. It mainly involves the dialogue between a character and different voices, including the dialogue in a character’s own consciousness and the dialogue between a character and the environment (Xiao, 2002). In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the micro-dialogue is mainly reflected in the

protagonist Charles' internal dialogue and his dialogue between the social environment.

In the eighteenth chapter, the two protagonists Charles and Sarah meet on the grass at the edge of the cliff for the third time. When Sarah asks Charles for help to get out of trouble, he is ambivalent and there are two voices in his heart. He wants to assist Sarah, but he is more afraid that doing this would damage his reputation and image. Just as the author describes in the novel: Charles was horrified; he imagined what anyone who was secretly watching might think. He stared at her, glanced desperately round, then moved forward and made her stand, and Charles had, with the atrocious swiftness of the human heart when it attacks the human brain, to struggle not to touch her (Fowles, 1970). From this micro-dialogue, we can know clearly the conflicted inner world of Charles. Another example is in the forty-eighth chapter. After having an affair with Sarah, Charles is chucked out of the hotel. At that time, he cannot explain the behaviour that he has done and "a dialogue began to form, between his better and his worse self: I did not do it. I was led to do it. What led you to do it? I was deceived. What intent lay behind the deception? I do not know. But you must judge" (Fowles, 1970). From this we can see that Charles' internal dialogue provides us with a more vivid and stereoscopic figure who struggles between reason and emotion, evil and good, and responsibility and lust. Besides these, the author also gives Charles the opportunity to interact with the social environment. In the forty-ninth chapter, Charles writes to Sarah to express love. Charles says: "A premonition that it was folly to enter into that arrangement has long been with me--before ever you came into my life. I implore you, therefore, not to feel guilt in that respect. What is to blame is a blindness in myself as to my own real nature" (Fowles, 1970). These sentences seem to be Charles' inner monologues, however, in fact he is communicating with the intrinsic traditions, rules, social ethics and moral. He realizes that having concluded the engagement with Miss Ernestina and having an affair with Sarah are immoral, so he can't forgive himself. Meanwhile, to ease his sense of guilty towards Miss Ernestina and rationalize his relationship with Sarah, he intentionally says that concluding the engagement is stupid in the letter. Thus we can see Charles is arguing with the secular ethics, which could reflect the inner thought of a character in a complicated society.

In summary, Fowles arranges the micro-dialogue of his characters in this novel, which makes his characters' images become more solid and attractive and provides the readers with a better way to understand and know a character.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Human world is not a dead and silent world, but a world with different voices and consciousness (Li, 2001), so does the world of a dialogic novel. This paper is dedicated to the exploration of the multiple voices and consciousnesses in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* based on the dialogue theory of Bakhtin, which can help us better understand it from a new perspective and feel Fowles' and Bakhtin's respect for human values. The major findings are as follows.

By analyzing the great dialogue among the author, the readers and the characters and the micro-dialogue of the characters, we can find that Fowles creates a truly genuine polyphonic fictional world like the works of Dostoevsky where the characters are individuals with their own ideas and an equal position as the authors' and their personal images are vivid and solid. This kind of writing technique also gives the readers freedom and room to imagine and interpret this novel, which is a good way for them to participate in the novel creation.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt22727z1>
- Chen, G. X. (2005). Dialogue and Freedom: an Analysis of the Art of Dialogue in The French Lieutenant's Woman. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2(18), 145-152.
- Fowles, J. (1970). *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. New York: Signet.
- Goosmann, B. (2014). *Biography of John Fowles*. Retrieved from <https://www.fowlesbooks.com>
- Li, Y. Z. (2001). Modern Significance of Bakhtin's Theory of Dialogue. *Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*, 2(9), 51-56.
- Xiao, F. (2002). Bakhtin's "Great Dialogue" and "Micro-Dialogue". *Russian Literature & Arts*, 5(17), 70-73.