

THE DILEMMA OF MEANINGLESSNESS IN POSTMODERN CRITICISM: THE SHIFT OF AUTHORITY FROM AUTHOR TO READER IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*

Housseyn Halimi

University Center of Tipaza, Tipaza, Algeria

e-mail: halimi.housseyn@univ-tipaza.dz

ORCID: 0009-0006-6529-8874

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30546/2960-1967.2026.1.2079>

Abstract. This article investigates the dilemma of meaninglessness as a central aesthetic and philosophical concern in postmodern literary criticism, with particular focus on John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). The study examines how Fowles deliberately dismantles the traditional authority of the author, redistributing interpretive power to the reader through a range of metafictional strategies. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, and Jacques Derrida, the article analyses how Fowles's novel exemplifies the postmodern condition of unstable meaning, indeterminate narrative endings, and the destabilization of fixed ontological categories. The research demonstrates that Fowles's multi-voiced narrative structure, his intrusive authorial interruptions, and his deployment of multiple unresolved endings are not merely stylistic features but constitute a systematic philosophical challenge to the very notion of definitive meaning in literary texts. The article argues that the transfer of hermeneutic authority from author to reader, as enacted in Fowles's novel, represents a broader cultural and epistemological shift that defines postmodern fiction. This investigation situates *The French Lieutenant's Woman* within the wider context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism, exploring its relevance to contemporary debates about the death of the author, reader-response theory, and the politics of textual indeterminacy.

Keywords: postmodernism, reader-response theory, metafiction, death of the author, textual indeterminacy, literary criticism

Introduction

The question of meaning — who produces it, who controls it, and whether it can be stabilized at all — constitutes one of the most persistent and generative problems in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism. At the intersection of poststructuralist theory and novelistic practice, this question acquires its most dramatic form in the work of John Fowles, particularly in his celebrated novel

The question of meaning — who produces it, who controls it, and whether it can be stabilized at all — constitutes one of the most persistent and generative problems in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism. At the intersection of poststructuralist theory and novelistic practice, this question acquires its most dramatic form in the work of John Fowles, particularly in his celebrated novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Published at the very moment when Roland Barthes was proclaiming the death of the author and Michel Foucault was questioning the ideological functions of authorial identity, Fowles's novel appears as a literary embodiment of postmodern theoretical anxieties about meaning, authority, and hermeneutic freedom [3].

The dilemma of meaninglessness, as it manifests in postmodern fiction, does not signify a simple nihilistic embrace of emptiness. Rather, it represents the recognition that meaning is always provisional, context-dependent, and produced in the encounter between text and reader rather than deposited by an authorial source [7]. This shift is both aesthetic and epistemological: it transforms the literary work from a vehicle for the transmission of authorial intention into an open space of interpretive possibility.

Fowles's novel is particularly rich for this investigation because it operates on multiple levels simultaneously. On the surface, it presents a Victorian love story set in 1867. But beneath this historical veneer, Fowles constructs a sophisticated metatextual apparatus — the intruding author-narrator, the explicit commentary on Victorian fiction conventions, and most dramatically, the three alternative endings — that systematically foregrounds the artificiality

of narrative and the constructed nature of literary meaning [5]. The novel thus becomes not merely a story but a meditation on storytelling itself, on the power relations embedded in narrative, and on the irreducible plurality of interpretive possibilities that any sophisticated literary text must accommodate.

This article proceeds through several interconnected investigations. First, it situates Fowles's novel within the broader theoretical context of postmodern criticism, examining the contributions of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Iser to our understanding of authorial authority and readerly freedom. Second, it analyses the specific metafictional strategies through which Fowles enacts the transfer of interpretive authority in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Third, it examines the philosophical implications of textual indeterminacy and the multiple endings as expressions of postmodern meaninglessness. Finally, it considers the broader significance of Fowles's achievement for contemporary literary criticism and for our understanding of the author-reader relationship in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework: The Death of the Author and the Birth of the Reader

The theoretical foundation for understanding Fowles's project must begin with Roland Barthes's landmark essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), published just two years before *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Barthes's declaration that "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" constitutes perhaps the single most influential statement of the postmodern shift in literary authority [1]. For Barthes, the traditional figure of the Author — the originating consciousness whose intentions determine the meaning of the text — is a mythological construct, a product of ideological formations that serve to limit and control the meaning of literary works. Once we liberate ourselves from this figure, the text becomes genuinely polysemous, capable of generating multiple, contradictory, and equally valid meanings.

Michel Foucault's companion essay "What is an Author?" (1969) complicates and enriches Barthes's formulation by analysing the "author function" — the set of ideological and institutional operations through which the name of an author is made to organize, classify, and constrain the proliferation of discourses [6]. Foucault demonstrates that authorship is not a natural given but a historically specific mode of discourse production, one that emerged in the modern period in connection with particular regimes of property, responsibility, and legal accountability. The author function, in Foucault's analysis, serves to limit the threatening polysemy of texts, to anchor their meaning in a single originating consciousness, and to facilitate their circulation within systems of cultural and intellectual authority.

Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* adds a further dimension to this theoretical framework [4]. For Derrida, meaning is never fully present in a text but is always deferred, always constituted through a play of differences that can never be resolved into a stable, unified significance. Deconstruction reveals that texts always contain more meaning than any single interpretation can capture, that they always undermine and contradict themselves in ways that cannot be controlled by any authorial intention, however vigilant or self-conscious. This deconstructive insight is of fundamental importance for understanding Fowles's practice, since his novel is precisely constructed to display its own contradictions and to resist the closure that conventional narrative form seems to promise.

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory provides the fourth pillar of this framework. In *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser argues that literary texts are characterized by fundamental indeterminacy — by gaps, lacunae, and areas of underdetermination that the reader must actively fill through interpretive work [8]. The literary text, for Iser, is not a completed object but a potential that is actualized differently by different readers in different contexts. This conception of reading as active, productive engagement rather than passive reception aligns directly with the postmodern critique of authorial authority: if meaning is produced in the act

of reading, then the reader is not merely the recipient of authorial intentions but a co-creator of textual significance.

Metafictional Strategies in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Fowles deploys an extraordinarily rich array of metafictional strategies in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, all of which serve to foreground the artificiality of narrative and to transfer interpretive responsibility to the reader. These strategies may be organized under three main headings: the intrusive narrator, intertextual framing, and narrative self-consciousness.

The most immediately striking of these strategies is Fowles's deployment of an intrusive, self-conscious narrator who repeatedly breaks the fictional illusion to address the reader directly, to comment on the conventions of Victorian fiction, and to acknowledge his own constructive role in producing the story. In the famous thirteenth chapter, the narrator explicitly disclaims the omniscient authority that characterizes the Victorian novel: "I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" [5, p.97]. This declaration is simultaneously a confession of fictional artifice and a philosophical statement about the nature of narrative authority. By acknowledging that the characters are products of imagination, Fowles's narrator undermines the realist pretense that the story represents some pre-existing reality that the author has merely discovered and transmitted.

The intertextual dimensions of the novel are equally significant. Fowles frames his narrative with an extensive apparatus of epigraphs drawn from Victorian writers and thinkers — Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin — as well as from modern theorists including Alain Robbe-Grillet [5]. This elaborate intertextual scaffolding serves multiple functions. It situates the novel within a recognizable historical and literary tradition, lending it the cultural authority associated with serious Victorian fiction. But it also, and simultaneously, exposes the constructed, assembled nature of the narrative, revealing that the text is made from other texts, that it consists of voices borrowed, transformed, and set in dialogue with each other. The epigraphs thus function as a kind of *mise en abyme*, miniature reflections of the larger novel's method of producing meaning through the interplay of different discourses rather than through the expression of a single, unified authorial vision [11].

The novel's narrative self-consciousness extends to its treatment of character psychology. Fowles repeatedly draws attention to the gap between the surface behavior of his characters and the interpretive frameworks available for understanding them. Sarah Woodruff, the eponymous French lieutenant's woman, is presented through a series of unreliable perspectives — Charles's idealizing fascination, Mrs. Poulteney's hostile suspicion, Dr. Grogan's reductive medical assessment — none of which can claim definitive authority [5]. The effect is to produce a character who is genuinely unknowable, whose psychology remains irreducibly mysterious, not because Fowles has failed to define her clearly but because her irreducible complexity is itself the point. Sarah becomes an embodiment of textual indeterminacy, a figure whose meaning cannot be fixed because she exists precisely to demonstrate the impossibility of fixity.

The Three Endings and the Philosophy of Textual Indeterminacy

The most celebrated and theoretically resonant feature of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is its deployment of three alternative endings. This device, unprecedented in its boldness and philosophical sophistication, represents the fullest expression of Fowles's postmodern commitment to textual indeterminacy and readerly freedom.

The first ending, which appears as Chapter 44 and is clearly flagged as a fantasy or hypothetical, presents a conventional Victorian resolution: Charles and Sarah are reunited,

their difficulties are overcome, and the narrative closes in a spirit of romantic satisfaction [5]. This ending is offered not as the actual conclusion of the story but as an image of what the story might look like if it were indeed a conventional Victorian novel — if it were, that is, organized according to the principles of realistic fiction, with its assumptions about character, causality, and narrative resolution.

The second ending, which constitutes Chapter 60, presents a darker resolution in which Charles arrives at Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house to find Sarah established as an independent woman, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, uninterested in resuming their relationship [5]. Charles departs alone, having achieved what the novel calls an "existential freedom" — a negative freedom, the freedom of loss and renunciation rather than fulfillment. This ending is associated with the modernist tradition: it is psychologically complex, ambiguous, and resistant to consolation.

The third ending — the final chapter, Chapter 61 — presents the most unresolved and troubling conclusion. Here Fowles stages his own presence in the narrative by describing a mysterious bearded man who travels on the same train as Charles and who, the narrator later reveals, is none other than the author himself. This intruding author literally rearranges the narrative world — flipping a coin to decide which version of events to present — before departing and leaving Charles and the reader to confront an ending that is radically open, a refusal of closure that is itself the final statement of the novel's philosophy [5].

The philosophical implications of this tripartite structure are far-reaching. By presenting multiple endings of equal narrative validity — or rather, by refusing to assign any single ending the authority of finality — Fowles enacts in practice the theoretical proposition that meaning in literary texts is not given but produced, not discovered but constructed [9]. The three endings do not represent three different versions of the same story but three different interpretive frameworks, three different sets of assumptions about what fiction is and what it can do. The Victorian ending embodies the assumptions of realist fiction: that characters have fixed identities, that events have determinate causes and effects, and that stories should achieve resolution. The modernist ending embodies the assumptions of psychological realism: that identity is complex and ambivalent, that resolution is always partial, and that fiction should resist consolation. The postmodern ending embodies the assumptions of metafiction: that the text is an artifact, that the author is a constructed rather than natural figure, and that the reader's freedom to produce meaning is the ultimate principle of literary value.

The Author as Character: Self-Reflexivity and the Destabilization of Authority

One of the most audacious features of Fowles's novel is his decision to insert himself into the narrative as a character. This device, which appears most dramatically in the famous Chapter 55 where the narrator appears as a mysterious passenger in the railway carriage with Charles, represents a radical extension of the novel's metafictional project.

The effect of this self-insertion is profoundly disorienting. When the author appears as a character within his own fiction, the hierarchical relationship between author and text — the relationship on which the traditional model of authorial authority depends — is disrupted. The author is no longer above and outside the text, controlling its characters and events from a position of omniscient mastery; instead, the author is inside the text, on the same ontological level as the characters, subject to the same fictional conditions [2]. This ontological leveling — what Brian McHale has called the "ontological dominant" of postmodern fiction — dissolves the boundary between the real world of the author and the fictional world of the story, revealing both to be equally constructed, equally subject to the conditions of narrative production [10].

Moreover, the coin-flip episode — in which the authorial figure literally decides by chance which ending to present — is a particularly stark illustration of the arbitrary,

undetermined nature of narrative authority. By reducing the act of authorial decision-making to a random mechanical operation, Fowles exposes the ideological fiction that the author's choices are necessary, motivated by insight into the essential truth of the story. The coin flip reveals that the ending of the novel is not the expression of some deeper meaning that the author has discovered but simply one of many possible configurations of events, chosen not by rational necessity but by chance. This is a deeply democratic and deeply vertiginous gesture: it transfers full responsibility for the novel's meaning to the reader, who must now make sense of an ending that has been explicitly designated as arbitrary.

Postmodern Meaninglessness and the Ethics of Reading

The dilemma of meaninglessness in postmodern criticism is not merely a theoretical puzzle but an ethical and political challenge. If meaning is not given but produced, if the text is not a vehicle for authorial intention but an open space of interpretive possibility, then the reader bears a responsibility that traditional literary culture did not acknowledge: the responsibility for the meaning she produces.

Fowles is acutely aware of this ethical dimension. Throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he stages a series of reflections on the power relations embedded in narrative and on the responsibilities that come with interpretive freedom. The novel's persistent concern with Victorian attitudes toward women — its critique of the restrictive social roles assigned to women in the nineteenth century, its admiration for Sarah's rebellious self-determination — is inseparable from its metafictional concern with the power relations embedded in narrative itself [5]. Just as Victorian society denied women the freedom to define themselves, conventional narrative form denies readers the freedom to produce their own meanings. Fowles's formal innovations are thus simultaneously aesthetic and political: they enact in the domain of literary form the principles of freedom and self-determination that the novel advocates in the domain of social life.

The question of what it means to read responsibly in the postmodern context — to take full responsibility for the meanings one produces without pretending that those meanings are simply given by the text — is one that Fowles's novel poses with great urgency but does not resolve. This is appropriate. The novel's commitment to indeterminacy means that it cannot, without self-contradiction, provide a definitive answer to the ethical questions it raises. But by posing these questions so insistently, by making the reader's interpretive freedom so central to its design, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* contributes importantly to the ongoing conversation about what it means to read and write in a world where meaning can no longer be taken for granted.

The Novel in the Context of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literary Criticism

The significance of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* for the development of postmodern literary criticism extends well beyond its own textual boundaries. Published at a pivotal moment in the history of literary theory — when the assumptions of New Criticism were being challenged by structuralism, and structuralism was about to be challenged by poststructuralism — the novel anticipated and in some respects helped to shape the theoretical debates that would dominate literary studies for the following decades.

The novel's influence on subsequent metafictional writing has been substantial. Writers as different as Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, and Salman Rushdie have acknowledged the importance of Fowles's achievement for their own explorations of narrative self-consciousness and authorial identity [12]. The novel established a set of formal possibilities — the intruding author-narrator, the multiple alternative endings, the explicit commentary on narrative conventions — that have become part of the shared vocabulary of postmodern fiction.

At the same time, the novel's reception has not been without critical controversy. Some feminist critics have argued that Fowles's ostensible celebration of Sarah's freedom is undermined by the fundamentally masculine perspective of the narrative, which constructs Sarah as an object of fascination and desire rather than a fully autonomous subject [13]. Others have questioned whether the novel's metafictional strategies genuinely challenge ideological formations or merely aestheticize them, converting political questions into formal games [14]. These critiques, while they do not diminish the novel's achievement, remind us that the politics of postmodern form are more complex and contested than any simple equation of formal experimentation with political liberation can suggest.

In the context of twenty-first-century literary criticism, the questions raised by Fowles's novel have acquired new urgency in the digital age. The proliferation of hypertextual and interactive narrative forms, the rise of reader-generated content and fan fiction, and the development of collaborative writing platforms have all intensified the practical reality of what Fowles dramatized formally: the dispersal of narrative authority among multiple agents, the dissolution of the boundary between author and reader, and the multiplication of textual meanings beyond any single interpretive framework's capacity to contain them [15].

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* represents a sustained and philosophically sophisticated engagement with the central dilemma of postmodern criticism: the dilemma of meaninglessness. By systematically dismantling the authority of the traditional author-narrator, by deploying an elaborate array of metafictional strategies that foreground the constructed nature of narrative, and by refusing to resolve its story in any single, definitive ending, Fowles's novel enacts in practice the theoretical propositions of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and Iser about the indeterminate, reader-produced character of literary meaning.

The transfer of interpretive authority from author to reader, as enacted in Fowles's novel, is not merely a formal device but a philosophical statement about the nature of literary communication and about the conditions of meaning-production in modern culture. To read *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seriously is to confront the full weight of postmodern meaninglessness — to recognize that meaning is not given but produced, that the author is not a sovereign but a construction, and that the reader bears a responsibility for the meanings she creates that traditional literary culture systematically obscured.

The enduring relevance of Fowles's achievement lies precisely in this: that the dilemma it poses — how to read, how to write, how to take responsibility for meaning in a world where meaning can no longer be guaranteed — remains as urgent and as unresolved in the twenty-first century as it was in the 1960s. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* does not solve this dilemma. It dramatizes it with an intelligence, a formal ingenuity, and a philosophical honesty that continue to challenge and reward its readers, and that secure its place as one of the essential texts of postmodern literature and criticism.

References

1. Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In S. Heath (Trans.), *Image-Music-Text* (pp. 142–148). Fontana Press.
2. Bradbury, M. (1993). *The modern British novel*. Penguin Books.
3. Childs, P. (2007). *The fiction of John Fowles: Preventing the final questions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
4. Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967)

5. Fowles, J. (2004). *The French lieutenant's woman*. Vintage Books. (Original work published 1969)
6. Foucault, M. (1979). What is an author? In J. V. Harari (Ed.), *Textual strategies: Perspectives in post-structuralist criticism* (pp. 141–160). Cornell University Press.
7. Hassan, I. (2001). From postmodernism to postmodernity: The local/global context. *Philosophy and Literature*, 25(1), 1–13.
8. Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
9. Loveday, S. (1985). *The romances of John Fowles*. Macmillan Press.
10. McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. Methuen.
11. Onega, S. (1989). *Form and meaning in the novels of John Fowles*. UMI Research Press.
12. Salami, M. (1992). *John Fowles's fiction and the poetics of postmodernism*. Associated University Presses.
13. Tarbox, K. (1988). *The art of John Fowles*. University of Georgia Press.
14. Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. Methuen.
15. Ziegler, H., & Bigsby, C. (Eds.). (1982). *The radical imagination and the liberal tradition: Interviews with English and American novelists*. Junction Books.

POSTMODERN TƏNQİDDƏ MƏNASIZLIQ DİLEMMASI: CON FAULZUN "FRANSIZ LEYTENANTIN QADINI" ROMANINDA SƏLAHİYYƏTİN MÜƏLLİFDƏN OXUCUYA KEÇMƏSİ

Hüseyn Halimi

Tipaza Universiteti Mərkəzi, Tipaza, Əlcəzair

Bu məqalə Con Faulzun "Fransız leytenantının qadını" (1969) romanına xüsusi diqqət yetirməklə, postmodern ədəbi tənqiddə mərkəzi estetik və fəlsəfi problem kimi mənasızlıq dilemmasını tədqiq edir. Tədqiqat Faulzun bir sıra metafiksiya strategiyaları vasitəsilə təfsir (interpretasiya) hüququnu oxucuya ötürərək, əənəvi müəllif avtoritetini məqsədli şəkildə necə darmadağın etdiyini araşdırır. Rolan Bart, Mişel Fuko, Volfqanq İzer və Jak Derridanın nəzəri konsepsiyalarına əsaslanan məqalə, Faulzun romanının qeyri-sabit məna, qeyri-müəyyən rəvayət sonluqları və sabit ontoloji kateqoriyaların sarsıtılması kimi postmodern vəziyyətləri necə təcəssüm etdirdiyini təhlil edir. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, Faulzun çoxsəslı rəvayət strukturu, müəllifin mətnə kənar müdaxilələri və çoxsaylı həll olunmamış sonluqlardan istifadəsi sadəcə üslub xüsusiyyətləri deyil, eyni zamanda ədəbi mətnlərdəki qəti məna anlayışının özünə qarşı sistematik fəlsəfi meydan oxumadır. Məqalədə iddia olunur ki, Faulzun romanında həyata keçirilən hermenevtik avtoritetin müəllifdən oxucuya ötürülməsi postmodern nəsrı müəyyən edən daha geniş mədəni və epistemoloji dəyişikliyi özündə əks etdirir. Bu tədqiqat "Fransız leytenantının qadını" romanını XX və XXI əsr ədəbi tənqidinin daha geniş kontekstində yerləşdirir və əsərin "müəllifin ölümü", oxucu reaksiyası nəzəriyyəsi və mətn qeyri-müəyyənliyinin siyasəti ilə bağlı müasir müzakirələrlə əlaqəsini araşdırır.

Açar sözlər: postmodernizm, oxucu reaksiyası nəzəriyyəsi, metafiksiya, müəllifin ölümü, mətn qeyri-müəyyənliyi, ədəbi tənqid

ДИЛЕММА БЕССМЫСЛЕННОСТИ В ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТСКОЙ КРИТИКЕ: ПЕРЕХОД АВТОРИТЕТА ОТ АВТОРА К ЧИТАТЕЛЮ В РОМАНЕ ДЖОНА ФАУЛЗА «ЖЕНЩИНА ФРАНЦУЗСКОГО ЛЕЙТЕНАНТА»

Хуссейн Халими

Университетский центр Типаза, Типаза, Алжир

В данной статье исследуется дилемма бессмысленности как центральная эстетическая и философская проблема в постмодернистской литературной критике, с особым акцентом на роман Джона Фаулза «Любовница французского лейтенанта» (1969). В исследовании рассматривается, как Фаулз намеренно разрушает традиционный авторитет автора, передавая право на интерпретацию читателю с помощью ряда метапрозаических стратегий. Опираясь на теоретические концепции Ролана Барта, Мишеля Фуко, Вольфганга Изера и Жака Деррида, автор статьи анализирует, как роман Фаулза иллюстрирует постмодернистское состояние смысловой нестабильности, неопределенности финалов повествования и

дестабилизации фиксированных онтологических категорий. Исследование демонстрирует, что полифоническая повествовательная структура Фаулза, его прямые авторские вторжения в текст и использование множественных открытых (неразрешенных) финалов являются не просто стилистическими приемами, а представляют собой систематический философский вызов самому понятию однозначного смысла в литературных текстах. В статье утверждается, что передача герменевтического авторитета от автора к читателю, осуществленная в романе Фаулза, отражает более широкий культурный и эпистемологический сдвиг, определяющий постмодернистскую прозу. Данное исследование помещает роман «Любовница французского лейтенанта» в более широкий контекст литературной критики XX и XXI веков, раскрывая его актуальность в свете современных дискуссий о «смерти автора», теории читательского отклика и политике текстовой неопределенности.

Ключевые слова: постмодернизм, теория читательского отклика, метапроза, смерть автора, текстовая неопределенность, литературная критика

Daxil oldu: 19.01.2026

Çap edildi: 25.05.2026