

Zach Tomaszewski  
ENG 760J  
Dr. Glenn Man  
16 Oct 2005

### **Overt Narration in the Film *The French Lieutenant's Woman***

John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is known for its overt narration. The film adaptation has not attempted to match this narration directly. However, it has still maintained a very overt style by adding a framing story to comment on the main inner story. I believe the film primarily achieves its overt narrative style in four ways: by maintaining a distinct visual style for the framing story, by revealing and emphasizing the process of story creation, by foreshadowing and commenting on the events of the inner story, and by juxtaposing scenes from the two stories in order to highlight certain similarities and differences. Although this overtness may initially distance us from the main story, the use of juxtaposition and cross-story commentary eventually binds the two stories together into a single emotional whole.

#### **Modern Scene Style**

The primary storyline of the movie is the love affair of the Victorian characters Charles and Sarah. However, this affair is presented as the contents of a modern movie (incidentally, also titled *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) being made by the actors Mike and Anna, who are also having an affair together. Scenes of this framing modern story of the actors Mike and Anna are interspersed throughout the film with scenes of the Victorian story of the characters Charles and Sarah.

The modern scenes have a few notable style elements. Generally, the transition from the Victorian story to the modern is quite sudden. The modern scenes interrupt the main plot, breaking our immersion in it, distancing us from the Sarah-Charles story. This jarring, interruptive effect is

heightened by the fact that the modern scenes are generally more starkly and brightly lit. They all contain notable white elements—sheets, curtains, clothes, and objects—usually present in the first shot. They also tend to contain a lot of background noises, usually modern in nature—loudspeaker voices, telephones, stereos, helicopters.

These style elements of white objects and distracting background sounds clearly mark the modern story. The rehearsal scene between Mike and Anna in a white conservatory has few of the modern elements, yet the actors assume the roles of Charles and Sarah for part of the scene. Similarly, one scene in particular in the Victorian story contains these modern elements. This is the final scene in which Charles tracks down Sarah where she is living as Mrs. Roughwood. It takes place in a very bright, white room, and contains continuous piano music seemingly from another room in the house. Yet this is the scene where, after Mike/Charles pushes Anna/Sarah down too hard, the two actors come out of their roles somewhat before continuing the scene. The style of the scene provides further evidence that this scene should be viewed as part of both the modern and the Victorian storylines.

### **Revealing the Creation Process**

In some of the same ways that the novel's narrator discusses his act of narration and story generation, the film's framing story shows us the creation of the Victorian story. The first scene of the film is of Anna dressed as Sarah getting a makeup check. A director's voice asks Anna if she is ready, the scene is prepared, a clapboard is presented, and the credits begin as Anna becomes her character Sarah.

Besides the simple reminder of seeing the actors as themselves in the modern scenes, we receive further reminders that the Victorian story is a constructed fiction. When Mike and Anna rehearse a scene together, their rehearsal cuts directly into the finished Victorian scene. At one point, Mike converses with Anna while in Charles' costume. In another scene, Anna confirms the choices made for

Sarah's costume for a coming scene, commenting, "I'm going to like her in this."

There are also some subtle indications in the style of the acting--Mrs. Poulteney's over-the-top sternness, Ernestina's formalness, Sarah's aloof manner of speaking. This awareness of actors playing roles is of course most obvious in the last Victorian scene after Mike/Charles pushes Anna/Sarah. Anna laughs shortly; Mike looks at her worriedly and nearly whispers to her. Then both gradually resume their roles and finish the scene.

### **Commenting on the Story**

Besides serving to continually remind us that Sarah and Charles are constructed roles, the modern scenes take this a step further by providing subtle commentary on their story and by foreshadowing scenes and events that have not yet happened.

Early in the film, Anna jokes, "They'll fire me for morality. They'll think I'm a whore." This mirrors the fact that the people of Lyme think Sarah is a loose woman; it also foreshadows Sarah's dismissal by Mrs. Poulteney for impropriety after she is seen on the Undercliff. Later, Anna discusses Victorian prostitution statistics with Mike and comments how unemployed women like Sarah would have few other options. She also mentions (foreshadows) the coming graveyard scene.

Many of Mike's statements to Anna reveal facts about the main story's future events and structure. When talking to Anna on the phone, he exclaims "The film's nearly over!" Later he says of the Windermere shoot, "But that's our last scene!" Anna and Mike also mention past events, such as Mike's "You weren't in your hotel room... in Exeter", and Anna's "Well you just had me, in Exeter."

But besides commenting solely on the Charles-Sarah story, many of Mike and Anna's comments can apply to *both* stories. For instance, just after the love scene between Charles and Sarah, Anna is leaving on a train. Mike, seeing her off, says "I'm losing you." This is true in that Sarah is just about to leave Charles in Exeter; but Anna is also starting to distance herself from Mike.

When Mike exclaims “But that's our last scene!”, this turns out to apply to him and Anna as well—their relationship ends in the same room that Charles and Sarah's does. At this ending, when Mike calls "Sarah!" out the window after Anna, we see that, for Mike at least, Sarah and Anna are very much the same person. As he tells Anna on the phone, "Either way, I love you." One interpretation of this is that he loves her in either story, as Anna or as Sarah.

There is also an interesting instance of commentary upon the modern story itself. At the party at Mike's, Davide asks "Have they decided how they are going to end the movie yet?" On the surface, this refers the movie being made by Mike and Anna; but it's also a question of the movie we are watching--how will Mike and Anna end up?

### **Juxtaposition**

As we've seen, the lines of dialog above can take on double meanings, providing commentary on both stories. But the simple placement of modern scenes also offers some implicit commentary of the Victorian scenes. It does this through either an interesting comparison or contrast with the surrounding scenes.

In the first modern scene, Mike casually answers the phone from Anna's bed, despite the fact that this reveals to the crew that they are together. This scene comes immediately after Charles' proposal to Ernestina, in which, though overcome with emotion and supposing a sprig of ivy is mistletoe, they can still can't bring themselves to kiss, but only energetically embrace each other. This juxtaposition provides a contrast between the modern and Victorian sexual attitudes.

When Anna, half-asleep with Mike, speaks Davide's name, it reveals that she has previous ties. It becomes clearer that she and Mike are not simply having a tryst they would like to keep private, but are having an affair. This scene follows the graveyard scene where Charles and Sarah hide behind a stone wall to avoid being seen by churchgoers. Mike and Anna's affair serves to highlight the growing illicitness of Charles and Sarah's meetings.

On a white stoney beach, Mike asks Anna why she is sad, but she says she's not and looks away. This follows the scene in which Mike listens to Sarah's story about the French Lieutenant. In both, Mike/Charles fails to fully understand Anna/Sarah's emotions or motivations; she remains an elusive yet desirable mystery to him.

While talking to Anna before she leaves for London, Mike grips Anna's arm and tells her that he must see her again there. This comes after the scene in the Undercliff barn in which Sarah and Charles kiss for the first time. Though he sends her with money to Exeter, the following scenes show Charles anxious and edgy in London, trying not to think about Sarah. In both stories, Mike/Charles is driven to distraction by his desire for Anna/Sarah, and we see this presented back-to-back.

The series of three short modern scenes showing Anna making a quick visit to the costume shop reveals a free woman in town, defining her role. As we learn later, they thematically stand in somewhat for the missing scenes of Sarah's life. These views of Anna are interspersed with images of Charles with the investigator, his lawyer, the judge, and wandering the streets of London. He too is redefining himself in a way (losing his right to be called a gentlemen, etc.), but his experience is much more somber than Anna's (and, by extension, Sarah's).

Besides the juxtaposed comparison between scenes, there are also some elements that "bleed over" from one story into the other, providing a juxtaposition of the two stories within a single scene. For instance, Sarah speaks of envying the position of Charles' betrothed, Ernestina. Later, Anna tells Mike's wife that she envies her garden (and apparently the things that go with it--a house, children, a settled life).

At the final cast party, Mike, who is trying to catch up with Anna, passes by the actress who plays Ernestina with a quick couple hugs. He leaves her behind appearing somewhat dejected. In a small way, this mirrors Charles' treatment of Ernestina in favor of Sarah, despite Ernestina's love for him.

Certain elements, such as the soundtrack, also cross the borders between the two stories. For instance, after Anna hangs up the phone with Charles in her hotel room, we hear "Will Ms. Sarah Woodruff urgently communicate her whereabouts to..." before the scene changes to Charles' investigator reading the newspaper ad. When looking for Anna at the cast party, Mike pauses in the makeup room with his hands on Anna's wig and we hear Sarah's musical theme.

The two most striking cross-overs happen near the end. The first of these is in the final Victorian scene when the roles of Charles and Sarah slip for a few seconds, and we see only Mike and Anna in their costumes. The second is when Mike calls, not "Anna!", but "Sarah!", out of the window. It is these two moments when the two stories really become the same story. This is particularly intriguing considering, for so much of the movie, the modern scenes serve as overt narration, breaking our complete immersion into the Victorian story. Yet by the end of the film, we've come to care for both stories, and can see them as two facets of a very similar struggle.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, we have seen how the modern scenes provide overt narration of the Victorian story. They are stylistically different and often interrupt the action, constantly reminding us that the Victorian story is only a construction. This narration foreshadows and comments upon the events of that story, breaking our immersion in it; but in doing so, it also comments on itself. As the film progresses, the two stories become more and more similar to each other, with themes, emotions, and elements bleeding across the border between them. Cross-story story commentary and various juxtapositions reveal more comparisons than contrasts between the stories. Elements from one story are used as substitutes for the other: using the rehearsal itself for the first part of a Victorian scene, allowing Anna's costuming trip to thematically hint at Sarah's new life in London, and revealing Mike's love for the fictional character Sarah projected onto the physical Anna. What starts out a separate, jarring, and distancing frame

around what we perceive as the primary story gradually weaves itself into that story. And so, by the end of the film, we find that, whether in spite of or because of its overtness, the "narration" is as important to our experience of the text as the "story".

### **Works Consulted**

- Chatman, Seymour. "A New Kind of Film Adaptation: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Dir. Karel Reisz. Juniper Films/United Artists/MGM, 1981. (CBS/Fox Video, 1984.)
- The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Dir. Karel Reisz. Juniper Films/United Artists/MGM, 1981. (MGM DVD, 2001.)
- Man, Glenn K. S. "The Intertextual Discourses of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *New Orleans Review*. 15:2 (Summer 1988): 54-61.