

VICTORIAN VS. MODERN: MODALITY IN THE LANGUAGE OF *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN* BY JOHN FOWLES¹

ABSTRACT: Beside his ingenious plots, vivid characters and mysterious settings, British author John Fowles is famous for his creative language games. His novels often tell us about male and female role, as well as the *desirable* and *undesirable* actions in society. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, his most prominent novel, he successfully combines traditional Victorian style with modern/postmodern one, the former symbolizing restraints imposed upon the characters, the latter their genuine emotions and desires. The aim of this paper is to analyze modality as one of the most interesting tools in illustrating these two opposed principles.

Keywords: epistemic modality, deontic modality, ideology, Victorian, modern.

Introduction

John Fowles is one of the most significant authors of the 20th century, his work being critically positioned between modernism and postmodernism. He spent years working as a language teacher before starting his literary career which resulted in masterpieces such as *The Collector*, *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, all three of which were made into successful movies.

Fowles is well-known as a writer whose characters are extremely vivid and lifelike which makes it impossible for a reader not to identify with at least one of them. In his brilliant dialogues and monologues, Fowles often portrays the character's inner struggle, torn between his or her own desires and the society's expectations. This is exactly the case in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* which is considered to be his most remarkable novel.

The French Lieutenant's Woman tells the story of Sarah Woodruff, a *modern* young woman trapped in the Victorian age, seemingly too intelligent to be comprehended by the society. Her open-mindedness causes her to be rejected by the people around her, labeled as immoral and disgraceful. When she meets Charles Smithson, a promising young man about to marry a typical Victorian girl, she changes his life completely and makes him dependent on her shameful charm and, apparently, irresistible coldness.

¹ This paper was written as a part of the exam in English Modality supervised by professor Ivana Trbojević Milošević (University of Belgrade Faculty of Philology, Doctoral Studies)

In this novel, Fowles particularly demonstrates his language skills by mixing the modern/postmodern style with the traditional Victorian one. He even includes himself as an active *part of the story*, constantly reminding us that everything we read is made up, which does not make his characters any less vivid and convincing. We can notice the use of modality at numerous points in the novel in both the uptight Victorian speech and the loose, modern one, so the aim of this paper would be to point out to these uses and analyze Fowles's language a little deeper.

The Notion of Modality

According to Portner, “modality is the linguistic phenomenon whereby grammar allows one to say things about, or on the basis of, the situations which need not be real” (Portner 2009: 1). He recognizes the two main types of modality – epistemic (referring to knowledge) and deontic (referring to right and wrong according to some system of rules) (Portner 2009: 2). Fintel (2006: 1) claims that “a modalized sentence locates an underlying or prejacent proposition in the space of possibilities”. We should also mention the concept of dynamic modality which Portner (2009: 87) sees as the one that “thinks of meaning as a kind of action” or is able “to produce certain changes”. Having this in mind, modality can serve as a significant tool for uncovering hidden meanings in both everyday speech and a literary text.

Modality in the Novel

In this paper, we shall try to illustrate the application of epistemic and deontic modality in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with the aim to reflect the *desirable* and *undesirable* in the Victorian society on one hand, and the characters' true needs and feelings on the other hand. Another interesting point is that the whole novel might be considered modalized, since we are constantly reminded of the writer's views on his characters and the situations surrounding them. This kind of subjectivity, according to Lyons (1982: 102),² undoubtedly falls into the category of modality. We can see traces of modality in the beginning itself, where Fowles introduces us to the lovely town of Lyme Regis which he knows very well and is the setting of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: “Primitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as Henry Moore or Michelangelo; and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass. I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write; though the town of Lyme has, and the test is not fair if you look back towards land” (FLW³: 10).

² Taken from Maynard (1992: 13).

³ *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

The Victorian

Given the fact that one of the ways to give a non-factual statement (a statement which points out that what is said is not a fact) is quotation, we might as well say that each chapter of this novel starts with a form of epistemic modality. Namely, Fowles starts each chapter with a quote from a work of literature or a document from the Victorian age, and thus gives us a hint of what to expect in that particular chapter. An example of this phenomenon is a quote from *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age* which states that, back in the days, there were more women than men in the British population, which brought women to the state of panic of not getting married (12). It is needless to say that young Ernestina lived in this fear, too. However, the anxiety came to an end when our protagonist Charles came into her life as a desirable husband-to-be.

“I should have thought you might have wished to prolong an opportunity to hold my arm without impropriety.” (12)

This is what the rigid miss Ernestina says to her fiancé. We can see the case of so-called *double modality* which represents a face-saving act in her case. She cannot possibly say “I thought you wished to hold my arm a little longer” – instead, she creates a sort of distance by adding modality to her speech. She has to be well-mannered and moral all the way, so “she should have thought” that he “might have wished” to have physical contact with her. Finally, the most important part is that this contact should not be sexual in any way (though she uses the polite word – “impropriety”), since we shall discover that Tina is, actually, horrified of sex (“... it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all the gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles. She had once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind”(34)).

Badran (2002) questions ideology through modality claiming that “all texts are essentially ideological” (152). Following his claim that modality “is a valuable tool for the analysis of ideology” (153), we can use it to explore the ideologies that most prominent characters of the novel like to present to the public, or keep within themselves.

Charles is a self-proclaimed Darwinist who likes to consider himself extremely progressive unlike his peers. “I confess your worthy father and I had a small philosophical disagreement”(13) says he to Tina in her own Victorian manner (not stating anything directly, of course). On one hand, the writer suggests Charles's narrow-mindedness and unnecessary self-confidence by telling us that “When he returned to London he fingered and skimmed his way through a dozen religious theories of the time, but emerged in the clear ... a healthy agnostic” and claiming that “laziness was, I am afraid, Charles's distinguishing trait” (20, 21).

Sarah is, however, a mystery for the womanizing Charles. It is quite unusual that she was a servant to Mrs Poulteney, a typical Victorian old lady prone to moralization. There are numerous examples in which Fowles tries to acquire the

Victorian *language* to speak somewhat sarcastically of this woman, but let us use this paragraph where she speaks about a certain man named Frederick:

“Doubtless. And his advice would have resembled mine. You may rest assured of that. I know he was a Christian. And what I say is sound Christian doctrine” (28).

We might as well say that Mrs Poulteney takes a position of authority here by *allowing* Mrs Fairley not to worry and, indirectly, *ordering* her to follow her Christian doctrine. This may be considered an example of deontic modality.

“But she suffers from grave attacks of melancholia. They are doubtless partly attributable to remorse. But also, I fear, to her fixed delusion that the lieutenant is an honourable man and will one day return to her. For that reason she may be frequently seen haunting the sea approaches to our town” (39).

This is a common opinion of Sarah in the town of Lyme Regis, while the statement is quite modalized. Of course, it is highly expected that Sarah's sadness is due to remorse for breaking the Victorian *rules*, but also due to girlish illusions that *the prince charming* will come back for her. There is no doubt that she is expected to have reactions similar to Ernestina's, since there is no greater *tragedy* than being abandoned by a man.

“Mr Forsythe informs me that you retain an attachment to this foreign person,”(41) says Mrs Poulteney to Sarah. We may say that this is an example of a factual statement, since everything said by the Victorian society is considered true. Mrs Poulteney is also avoiding to refer to the French lieutenant directly, thus trying not to get *dirty*, while she makes sure that Ms Woodruff has a Bible to help her redeem for her sins. “You have surely a Bible?”(41), says she in an authoritative manner, thus imposing her values upon Sarah. This is why this statement can also be considered an order – a deontic request to follow a certain rule.

Generally speaking, the words of Mrs Poulteney are quite interesting for research into modality. She is able to cunningly impose her will upon people by giving highly modalized indirect statements which sound quite polite and uptight. When she preaches to Sarah of her former lover, she says: “I wish you to show that this ... person is expunged from your heart. I know that he is. But you must show it” (47). She is also not a particular fan of Ernestina, thus she makes a *logical* assumption (inference) of her fiancé, too: “Ernestina she considered a frivolous young woman, and she was sure her intended would be a frivolous young man; it was almost her duty to embarrass them” (102). Mrs Poulteney, clearly, has a presupposition of herself bearing a high moral and intellectual value, which is why she is *eligible* to make fun of the individuals at a *lower* level.

However, let us focus a little on the relationship between Sarah and Charles. We have already mentioned that, as soon as he met her, Sarah became an irresistible mystery for the male protagonist. He cannot help going to the same places as her just to see her and speak to her. In his mind, he has an idea of helping her.

“Miss Woodruff, let me be frank. I have heard it said that you are ... not altogether of sound mind. I think that is very far from true. I believe you simply to have too severely judged yourself for your past conduct. Now why in heaven's name must you always walk alone?” (123).

Charles is, here, giving a counterfactual statement – though he has heard of her reputation, she chooses to take it as not true. At the same time, it seems that he is also putting himself in an authoritative position, implying with his “Why *must* you walk alone?” that she *shouldn't* do that. On the other hand, “Sarah seemed almost to assume some sort of equality of intellect with him; and in precisely the circumstances where she should have been more deferential if she wished to encompass her end” (140). Once again she has broken *the rules*, but Sarah, “as addicted to melancholia as one becomes addicted to opium” (153) does not seem to mind it. Before she brings doom into his life, Charles gives a deontic statement to Sarah: “We must never meet alone again” (181), though it is pretty clear that this order is not going to be fulfilled.

“I do not love her. How could I? A woman so compromised, a woman you tell me is mentally diseased. But ... it is as if ... I feel like a man possessed against his will – against all that is better in his character” (220).

We may as well say that, in this statement, Charles is using both deontic and epistemic modality. By saying “How *could* I?” he is, in a way, *ordering* himself not to be in love with Sarah. On the other hand, he is clearly expressing his opinion of her being compromised (which can be seen as the opinion of the society).

“*Sarah*: I shall never see you again.

Charles: You cannot expect me to deny that.

Sarah: Though seeing you is all I live for” (250).

We may notice that, here, Sarah is giving a commissive statement (making herself obliged to do a certain thing), though, at the same time, she manipulates Charles by saying that she only lives to see him again.

Further in the novel, we may realize that Sarah has no problem defying authority, even the acrimonious Mrs Poulteney:

“*Sarah*: I dare to ask to know why I am dismissed.

Mrs Poulteney: I shall write to Mr Forsythe. I shall see that you are locked away. You are a public scandal ... I *command* you to leave this room at once.

Sarah: Very well. Since all I have experienced in it is hypocrisy, I shall do so with the greatest pleasure.

...

Mrs Fairley: You wicked Jezebel – you have murdered her!” (237, 238).

The example of deontic modality in this intense dialogue is clear in the old woman's words, though we may notice it in Sarah's, too. She gives a *command* to herself to leave the room full of bitterness and hypocrisy. She shall respect the relevant “body of law or the set of moral principles” (Fintel 2006: 2), which are, in this case, her own.

On the other hand, Charles's acquaintance, doctor Grogan, is worried about him:

“My one remaining fear, my dear Smithson, is that she may follow you to London and attempt to thrust her woes upon you there. I beg you not to dismiss this contingency with a smile” (312).

In this statement, Grogan takes an epistemic approach to express the possibility of Sarah *stalking* him, while, on the other hand, he is trying to *impose* his advice upon him – by using the verb *beg* he is trying to get closer to Charles and show understanding, which would, hopefully, make him consider what he has been told. However, the doctor cannot stop the tragedy which shall soon follow.

“Charles: I must break my engagement.

Sarah: I ask nothing of you. I cannot. I am to blame ... I wished it so ... I wished it so ... I know you cannot marry me.

Charles: I must. I wish to. I could never look myself in the face again if I did not.

Sarah: I have been wicked. I have long imagined such a day as this. I am not fit to be your wife” (339).

This is what happens after their fatal, sexual encounter - Charles decides to end his engagement, although Sarah does not request that from him. On the contrary, she has no intention of making him marry her and has given herself to him for the sake of *her own* joy, contrary to all the Victorian principles. Even though he likes to pose as a liberal and progressive individual, Charles, however, cannot cast aside his Victorian principles and is determined to *do the right thing*, follow the rules, and thus gives the determined deontic statements. Sarah's statements, on the other hand, can be considered epistemic in this case, since she does not give herself commands – just expresses her views on life.

Charles shall proceed with his intentions, however. He says to Ernestina: “... I have, after many hours of the deepest, the most painful consideration, come to the conclusion that I am not worthy of you” (361). We may as well say that Charles uses *irrealis* (according to Frawley (1992: 387, 388), the phenomenon in which “the reference world does not coincide with the expressed world”, that is, “nonfactual reality”) in this statement, since, as readers, we are familiar with his true feelings and events that took place before his speech. Of course, Tina's reaction is fierce, so she immediately reminds him that her father is able to ruin his life and reputation, which falls into the category of dynamic modality.

In his postmodern manner, Fowles offers three different endings for the novel, the last one of which may be considered particularly interesting for the purpose of this paper. After years of frantically looking for Sarah, Mr Smithson realizes that she has been in London all along, seemingly content with her life.

“You do not understand. It is not your fault. You are very kind. But I am not to be understood ... And I should not be selfish if I said, knowing I cannot love you as a wife must, you may marry me?” (431, 442).

Charles considers Sarah selfish and is thus unable to understand her urges. On the other hand, in her own, modern world, Sarah believes that a wife *must* love her husband (it is a sort of rule or obligation in her mind, a good example of deontic modality) and marrying the one of whom she does not feel that way, would, actually, be selfish. By not saying “you *may* marry me” she does not give Charles the *permission* to do so, and, in her way, prevents further *harm* to herself and him. Even though this ending is not a typical happy one, we can find a certain dose of optimism in it, which we shall analyze further in the next chapter of this paper.

The Modern

We are well-aware of the fact that modern and postmodern literature considers the reader an active part of it – he or she is here “to appreciate its formal qualities, be aroused by a suspense filled plot, or suffer emphatically the vicissitudes of its fictional characters” (Miall 2002: 2). The elements of so-called *modern* language are mostly present in Fowles's *dialogue* with the reader. He explains to us at times why he is writing, as well as why he attributes certain qualities to a character. The whole novel rolls in front of our eyes like a movie, while Fowles's digressions are also one of the things that make *The French Lieutenant's Woman* an irresistible work of literature.

The writer will often state his *opinion* of the protagonists he creates:

“Though Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him out of the future of the aeroplane, the jet engine, television, radar: what would have astounded him was the changed attitude to time itself” (17).

In this statement, Fowles not only presents us Charles's opinion of himself, but also makes an epistemic assumption of what would have happened if he had been born in another century. He uses the third conditional to state the speculation which helps us understand the main character better when it comes to his *progressive* views.

As far as the fierce Mrs Poulteney is concerned, here we also witness the writer's attitude towards her. He claims that “there would have been a place in Gestapo for the lady; she had a way of interrogation that could reduce the sturdiest girls to tears in the first five minutes ... Her only notion of justice was that she must be right” (26). This is an example of the use of dynamic modality to describe the woman's abilities, while he clearly tells us about her cruelty by assuming that there might have been a place in Gestapo for her had she lived in the century in which he lives.

“Charles did not know it, but in those brief poised seconds above the waiting sea, in that luminous evening silence broken only by the waves' quiet wash, the whole Victorian Age was lost. And I do not mean he had taken the wrong path” (75).

This statement pretty much sums up the whole Fowles's view on the Victorian Age, the primary victim of which Sarah is, and then Charles. Though a reader may be prone to judging the female protagonist, we may as well consider the modern/postmodern age and the actions of people now and then we might develop a better understanding for this character.

"I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God ... Perhaps you suppose that a novelist has only to pull the right strings and his puppets will behave in a lifelike manner; and produce on request a thorough analysis of their motives and intentions" (97).

Fowles obviously believes that we have certain assumptions and expectations of him as an author, though he wants to break them, showing us that the Victorian manner does not necessarily have to be the *right* one – his statement of an author standing next to God may be treated either as a non-factual or counterfactual one.

Furthermore, he touches upon the subject of Sarah sleeping next to a girl called Millie. The author immediately states the assumption on what the modern society's opinion on this subject would be, but he distances himself from it and offers the proven statement on the Victorian views:

"There must have been something sexual in their feelings? Perhaps; but they never went beyond the bounds that two sisters would. No doubt that here and there in another milieu, in the most brutish of the urban poor, in the mot emancipated of the aristocracy, a truly orgasmic lesbianism existed then; but we may ascribe this very common Victorian phenomenon of women sleeping together far more to the desolating arrogance of contemporary man than to a more suspect motive. Besides, in such wells of loneliness is not any coming together closer to humanity than perversity?" (156).

"What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two ... Where there was an enormous progress and liberation in every other field of human activity; and nothing but tyranny in the most personal and fundamental" (258, 259).

Fowles continues his *debate* with the reader. A well-known supporter of sexual freedom and acting according to one's will, the writer is, in a way, criticizing the Victorian society and we can assume that he is taking Sarah's side. After all, Fowles himself claimed that his female characters were dominant to male ones which led to some critics labelling him as *a feminist* (Vipond 1999: 211). In this particular example, he used epistemic inference to teach us the truths about *the old*, and *the modern* society and appeal to us to be more understanding towards women's motives and desires.

Charles had spent almost two years searching for his obsession, Sarah, and finally came to the conclusion that she is a self-sufficient woman which left him devastated. Even though Fowles “pities the detective who would have had to dog him those twenty months” (407), “however bitter his destiny, it was nobler than that one he had rejected” (409). This shows us that, although Charles had been through hell, this was nowhere near the hell he would have accepted to live in had he married Tina. The *modern* option is the superior one – even though one is judged, reaching their own individuality is far more valuable than conforming to the society.

“For I have returned, albeit deviously, to my original principle: that there is no intervening god beyond whatever can be seen, in that way, in the first epigraph to this chapter; thus only the life that we have, within our hazard-given abilities, made it ourselves, life as Marx defined it – *the actions of men* (and of women) *in pursuit of their ends*” (445).

By quoting Marx Fowles wants to tell us that, even though broken at the moment, Charles has finally reached a sort of uniqueness, a true self-consciousness which Sarah had already had, and this might even help the reader do the same or at least understand these two characters more profoundly.

Conclusion

Fowles is a master of language whose books are widely read, years after his death. His novels have touched many not only because of his lifelike plots and characters, but also because of his unique style, able to tell from different perspectives and, at times, give only hints of what the reader is supposed to conclude in the active approach to modern/postmodern literature.

Although we have only used some of the numerous examples of applying modality to convey different meanings, we can conclude that Fowles succeeded in portraying the Victorian and modern way of thinking through his language. His using language devices such as modal verbs, conditional and various adverbs to portray the *subtlety* of Victorian language and defining the *right* and *wrong* is ingenious, although there is still so much room to *read between the lines* and discuss his brilliant style.

“In general back home we say what we think. My impression of London was – forgive me, Mr Smithson – heaven help you if you *don't say* what you *don't think*,”(412) says Fowles, leaving the reader wondering if anything has changed since the Victorian age when it comes to unleashing one's true views on moral and society.

REFERENCES

- Badran, Dany. 2002. *Ideology through Modality in Discourse Analysis*. Nottingham: The University of Nottingham.
- Fintel, Kai von. 2006. *Modality and Language*. Detroit: MacMillan Reference USA.
- Fowles, John. 1969. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.
- Frawley, William. 1992. *Linguistic Semantics*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Maynard, Senko K. 1992. *Discourse Modality: Subjectivity, Emotion and Voice in the Japanese Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Miall, David S. 2002. *Literary Discourse*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.
- Portner, Paul. 2009. *Modality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vipond, Diane L. 1999. *Conversations with John Fowles*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Katarina P. Držajić

VIKTORIJANSKO NASUPROT MODERNOM: MODALNOST U JEZIKU
FAULSOVE ŽENSKJE FRANCUSKOG PORUČNIKA

Rezime

Pored briljantnih zapleta, neodoljivih likova i misterioznih mesta događanja, britanski pisac Džon Fauls poznat je i po svojim kreativnim jezičkim igrama. Njegovi romani često govore o muškoj i ženskoj ulozi, kao i poželjnim i nepoželjnim postupcima u društvu. *Ženska francuskog poručnika*, Faulsov najpoznatiji roman, uspešno kombinuje tradicionalni viktorijanski stil pripovedanja sa modernim/postmodernim, gde pri tom prvi simbolizuje društvene stege nametnute junacima, a drugi njihove iskrene emocije i želje. Cilj ovog rada je da analizira modalnost kao jedan od najinteresantnijih načina ilustrovanja ova dva suprotstavljena principa.

Ključne reči: epistemološka modalnost, deontička modalnost, ideologija, viktorijansko, moderno.