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THE EMANCIPATION OF THE VICTORIAN HEROINE

CONTRASTING APPROACHES IN MEREDITH, HARDY AND FOWLES (WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO FOWLES)

Eva Vonková

Progressive views on the emancipation¹ of woman appear in English literature earlier than in George Meredith (Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot), but he was the first to take the emancipated woman as a central character of the novel (*Diana of the Crossways*, 1885). In spite of this, his conception of the "emancipated" woman remains subject to idealistic prejudices.

Thomas Hardy had a deeper insight into the situation of women (Sue in *Jude the Obscure*, 1896). It is more the insufficient maturity of his philosophy of life than the absence of creative profundity that fills the gloomy and hopeless conclusion of the novel.

Almost a century later the contemporary writer John Fowles selects a very similar subject (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1969). Thus he has the advantage of the distance of time, while the two preceding authors have that of the immediate response to controversies of their days. The novelists' approaches to the Victorian heroine and her emancipation mirror the moment in which the respective work of fiction appears,² although the period factor is not of course the only influence working.

1.

From the standpoint of half-a-century later Meredith places his heroine Diana Warwick in the Early Victorian era when the rising bourgeoisie brings the "puritan" morality. He accordingly still conceals sexual relationships under his artistic devices. He departs from traditional norms in his heroine: she prefigures the battle between intellect and the senses, leaving her husband and marrying a second time after his death.

¹ I conceive emancipation as a setting free from "social, political or moral restraint" arising naturally from the economic basis. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 336.

² At this point I am induced to refer to Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan and Co., 1970), Preface, who is discontented with the notion of the novel as "a complex but essentially self-contained form, cut off from the untidiness and discontinuities of the world outside".

Having found a second husband who would not seek to enslave her, Diana fulfils her existence. One might agree with J. B. Priestley that "the only hope for her is to ally herself with a stout, sensible man, and him she finds in Redworth, who will give her stability and direction".³ However, her misfortunes are not "the natural results of her frailties",⁴ which omits the conformist way her emancipation is solved (she cannot reform society and escapes into personal happiness).

Holding the similar opinion that Diana herself is responsible for her difficulties, some of the critics see "a major technical mistake in totally avoiding a sensible explanation of the motive for Diana's action in betraying her friend Dacier, although this betrayal is the turning point of the plot".⁵ But this deed is explained psychologically: she is afraid of losing independence (both that of an objective character — financial — and that of a subjective character — independence of Dacier) and she uses all possible means to retain it.⁶ The novelist finds the real reason for her fear in the existing circumstances, to which Stevenson testifies: "Meredith's thesis was that even so brilliant a woman as Diana was incapable of acting discreetly because the false position of women in society rendered her unstable."⁷ It is the necessity of realizing this that causes the heroine to be remote to the present-day reader.

It is as if Diana really could not act independently in politics because of the betrayal: her emancipation is again linked to idealistic reliance on the generous guidance of a man. For that reason she should "become a suitable wife and a comrade for man"⁸ and to realize her womanhood to the highest degree — she should have the freedoms of intellect, the emotions, and social life, which the writer prefers to her economic liberation. The fact that the heroine is pre-eminent precisely in cultured society fits in with his purpose of observing the personal development of a woman, but limits a broader vision of woman's changing role. Thus the new ideal of a woman who completes her emotions by intellectual power is his main contribution to the emancipation of the Victorian heroine.

The conception of the heroine is reflected in Meredith's creative process:

(a) Being a sensitive observer of the practically contemporaneous scene, the novelist in fact portrays womanhood determined by the age. As he is more concerned with the true definition of woman than with her emancipation as such, the novel may also be considered a psychological one. However, the psychological aspect is not very highly elaborated,⁹ even if

³ J. B. Priestley, *George Meredith* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵ Margaret Conrow, "Coming to Terms with George Meredith's Fiction", in George Goodin, ed., *The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 191.

⁶ See George Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways* (London: Constable, 1915), pp. 371, 425.

⁷ Lionel Stevenson, *The English Novel. A Panorama* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1960), p. 406.

⁸ According to Marie Moll, this is the essence of Meredith's feminism, quoted from C. L. Cline, "George Meredith", in Lionel Stevenson, ed., *Victorian Fiction. A Guide to Research* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), p. 343.

⁹ This is conspicuous in Diana's success in captivating men. I think the possible argument that Meredith means it as a hyperbole will not stand.

it enables the heroine to act out herself (only Redworth can be taken for the mouthpiece¹⁰); she is not manipulated in order to be "emancipated".

(b) Meredith's experimental method approximately corresponds to his imaginative projection of the ideal woman. It includes both the intellectual approach, founded on practical realism and opposed to selfish sentimentalism, and the emotive approach originating from the romantic angle. Hence the novel contains a generally recognizable miscellany of elements, each presented with poetic capacity — philosophical, psychological, conversational elements, which I associate with his realism, and tragic, comic, tragicomic, lyric elements, which I associate with his romanticism.

All the innovations, whether in matter (the new apprehension of the heroine) or in manner (the preliminary step to Joyce's disintegration of prose¹¹), are based on the reserved approach of the writer who distances himself from his time. They imply moreover that he does not insinuate himself into the readers' favour, which also helps to emancipate the heroine because it breaks through the accepted conventional values of those days.

2.

Thomas Hardy presents a current contemporaneity, the Late Victorian era when the aristocracy no longer stands for an ideal. He directs his attention to the working man whose intellectual companion the heroine becomes.

But in contrast to Meredith, Hardy desires to change all spheres of her existence, not exclusively the moral code. Inevitably Sue Bridehead surpasses Diana — capable of social analysis, she rejects the Victorian values: the law supported by religion, the useless learning (of Christminster), forced intercourse carried out in marriage (obtaining a divorce, she re-marries the same husband only after she yields to conventions and financial difficulties).

It is the sexual freedom to follow or refuse sexual relations that the heroine regards highly in her emancipation. She is sometimes considered to be of a cold nature on account of this,¹² which would obviously reduce her personality. It is worth realizing what the novelist's purpose was. It seems to me that he intended to create a female character acceptable for the day, that is a self-controlled Puritan, but also to show that the double moral code produces the gap between her own wishes and her sexual behaviour to Jude. The result should have been "the least sensual woman

¹⁰ See J. B. Priestley, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

¹¹ C. L. Cline sums up the argument of Donald S. Fanger in "Joyce and Meredith: A Question of Influence and Tradition" (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1960): "The influence is observable in the lyricism of the two, in the use of the interior monologue, and in a dislike for well-ordered plots. But what was undisciplined in Meredith was disciplined by Joyce." (*Victorian Fiction*, p. 342).

¹² For instance Irving Howe mentions D. H. Lawrence, who "quick to see in Sue Bridehead the antithesis of his idea of the woman, writes of her with a fascinated loathing", "On Jude the Obscure", in Ian Watt, ed., *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 442.

without inhuman sexlessness" (VI, iii), as Hardy characterizes Sue through Jude.

The heroine demands besides the right to love, the freedom to be loved without any restricting obligations. This is another reason for her dislike for traditional marriage, and she lives outside of it. She takes responsible care of her family and children, even of a step-child, in this arrangement.

Thus the character of Sue approaches that of a completely emancipated figure among the Victorian heroines. When she collapses, it is not because of her psychological nature,¹³ but merely so the writer could stress that women emancipated before their time seldom escaped. She is destroyed by the society in which she cannot cope with life (the death of her children) and her tragedy is one "of unfulfilled aims" — her emancipation is thwarted, like Jude's desire for education.

Hardy comes to the conclusion that both men and women can be enslaved by the standards of society: "That's what some women fail to see, and instead of protesting against the conditions they protest against the man, the other victim." (V, iv). It is as if he rejected emancipation because it diverts attention from social problems.

Owing to this fact the conception of the emancipated heroine is not so evident in Hardy's creative approach as it is in Meredith's. The social aspect prevails and finds expression on realistic grounds, adequately secured by the epic construction.

The other tendencies are subordinate to the realistic method. I mean by other trends the romantic components (such as poetic imagination or religious and cultural symbolism¹⁴) and the inclination to naturalism (manifested in the variety of details or in the inconsolable mood of the book). In contradistinction to naturalistic doctrines, the action is not directed by the Irony of Fate but by the social cruelty that determines the position of woman definitively. Hence the realistic conception of the heroine is again decisive, approached as she is both in a naturalistic manner (as the result of heredity — unsuited for marriage — and of environment — degraded by lower social origin) and realistically (she suffers due to society), she signifies "a generalised human situation in history and neither (what it is generally assumed to be) a purely personal tragedy nor (what Hardy appears to have intended) a philosophic comment on Life in general and the fate of Woman in particular" in the final outcome.¹⁵

Viewing his material realistically from the social standpoint, the writer in the spirit of the 19th century novel rather turns to life than to technical innovations (except the plot which is composed of "a series of seemings"). Unlike Meredith, he does not experiment: he ingeniously elaborates his

¹³ Mr. Howe suggests: "She is promethean in mind but masochist in character and the division destroys her, making a shambles of her mind and mere sterile discipline of her character. She is all intellectual seriousness, but without the security of will which enables one to live out of the consequences of an idea to their limit". *ibid.*, p. 441.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the symbolic reality in *Jude the Obscure*, see Lance St. John Butler, *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 136-148.

¹⁵ The way Arnold Kettle perceives another Hardy heroine, Tess, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1974), vol. 2, p. 48.

material.¹⁶ This is evident in a highly developed system of contrasts stemming from the contradiction in the main idea (the high ideals of man, including the emancipation of woman, that are "killed" by the existing conditions formulated in "the letter").

At least two more concerns, besides the social, are characteristic of Hardy's approach — the psychological and human. The tragedy of the emancipated heroine is very impressive by means of the former. The latter enables the novelist to strive for a human, "emancipated" world. His noble humanism is not marred by his "obscure" pessimism. He is prevented from finding the solution for lack of distance of time, therefore he cannot conquer "the coming universal wish not to live".

3.

John Fowles lives in the 20th century, when the problem of indissoluble marriage has retreated. He is not predominantly involved with it, unlike Hardy or Meredith; he rather suggests marital, notably sexual stereotypes that disturb him.

Consequently his heroine Sarah Woodruff does not regard matrimony as the only existing prospect of her life, in spite of the Mid-Victorian setting: she begins in the world of a very stable society, in the provincial town Jane Austen wrote about in *Persuasion*, and ends in the modern bohemian circle which is the background of the later Pre-Raphaelite movement. I shall return later to her personal development, with which her emancipation is closely connected.

But Sarah's capacity to form her own judgments follows undoubtedly even from this rough outline of her growth. She displays it in the peculiar power to appraise others intuitively, which enables her to discern and simply analyze even the hypocrisy of the period. She is somehow inexplicable in her insight and she looks "more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth than any proper fragment of the petty provincial town" in the very opening scene. This indicates that Fowles does not abandon his old adherence to the mythic¹⁷ and he creates in his heroine a myth of liberty, of a sort. Hence he admits she personifies "a swarm of mysteries" (ch. 47) and that "modern women like Sarah exist and I have never understood them" (ch. 13), which conveyed to a general level means, as Gindin has it, that "the author, with self-deprecation, acknowledges that he may be simply transferring his own inabilities to understand the enigmatic female into the safety of a historically locatable story".¹⁸

The "enigmatic" can be easily replaced here by the "emancipated". Then the writer's confession is one of the brilliant moments which show that the heroine is emancipated before her time; the facts that she is nearly

¹⁶ Critical interest devoted itself deeply to the architectural balance of his novelistic structure.

¹⁷ Notably *The Magus* (1966) is interpenetrated with the mythic apprehension of reality.

¹⁸ James Gindin, "John Fowles", in James Vinson, ed., *Contemporary Novelists* (London: St. James Press Ltd., 1973), p. 423.

considered mad and it is planned to put her into an asylum (a detail of clinical psychology) and "she would have been at home" in America where "the emancipation movement was already twenty years old" (a sociological detail from ch. 59) are further such moments.

Fowles admires women with their own individuality. Therefore he lets Sarah attract Charles so fatally; he ascribes to her passionate emotions and considerate comprehension, he explicitly writes of her as "completely feminine" (ch. 16). In this he seems to assure the reader that she is not deprived of her womanhood by free thought. Rather vague and abstract attributes signal her independent spirit; they partly establish the allegory of mythic freedom, but it is as if they also assisted the contemporary literary trend of weakening the character's position in the novel. Those tokens of the emancipated heroine merge into the central idea of the book — the quest for one's own authenticity, from which she is not deterred by adverse economic conditions. Having left the position of governess in which she sensed herself cut off from family happiness by caste barriers, she pretends to be a fallen woman guilty of a relationship with the French officer (hence the title of the novel), so as to achieve independence by means of her intentional isolation:

"I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human any more. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore!" (ch. 20).

Inevitably the "virtuous" small town feels endangered by her, for she actually attacks it in its own principle — pretence.

Sarah makes use of the same law in the next stage of her emancipation when she manipulates Charles in order to release him from social conventions. But one thing, out of many, illustrates that he never extricates himself from them entirely: in the second version of the novel where he might be expected to make some advance he does not accept a free union with her, which he could if he cared for the relationship itself, like Hardy's hero Jude.

Accordingly the heroine in the last stage of her emancipation does not choose the man who would remind her of the limitations of those days but knowledge of her role in life.¹⁹ Reaching the position she belongs to, she realizes herself and thus succeeds in search of her own authenticity while Charles has to resume it. When he finally meets her in bohemian surroundings, her emancipation is completed and she has "the full uniform of the New Woman, flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions of female fashion" (ch. 60). She identifies herself with the New Woman ideal not only in appearance but also in opinions — she does not wish to

¹⁹ If I used Robert Detweiler's terms of possessive relations (with which I am acquainted from the abstract of his article "The Unity of John Fowles's Fiction", *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 1:2, March 1971, 3-4, published in *Abstracts of English Studies*, vol. 16, item 1990), the heroine, as she is the possessor, selects self-possession, not possession or the eventual possibility of being possessed. This underlines at the same time that the novelist is against possession as the only sense of life.

marry. Habituated to solitude by the past pressure of society, she feels happy in the present situation unchanged; she would not be taken as she really is outside of the unconventional environment and she knows it.

At this point the matter of the emancipated woman unexpectedly breaks down the historical surface of the novel: the heroine symbolizes "cruel but necessary (if we are to survive — and yes, still today) freedom" (ch. 48). She has to get rid of the restrictions successfully so that a more human world and relationships might be attained, as the leading motto expresses.²⁰ Thus the idea of women's emancipation upheld by the philosophical conception of the heroine becomes a part of a wider context, that is to say of the further development of mankind,²¹ which is guaranteed by the freedom of both men and women.

It is the freedom theme that influences Fowles's creative method substantially. "Freedom to break rules" being the essence of his art,²² he experiments with all components of his novel by giving them "autonomy" (ch. 13). He liberates the reader from passive acceptance and tries to hold equal conversation with him; he uses novelistic techniques in the way of a commentator; he unfolds events unexpectedly, especially in the anti-climax as late as the last quarter of the book when the heroine is revealed not to be "the French Lieutenant's Woman" at all, notwithstanding the fact that the reader has been given references to this striking disclosure (such as "She knew, or at least suspected, that there was a physical pleasure in love.", ch. 19, where the word "suspected" provides us with the clue).²³ Sarah concentrates on herself the surprising turns of the plot, which stresses her fundamental position in the novel. She also focuses various attitudes towards the emancipated woman taken by the symbolically conceived characters (Charles stands for the nobility, which is leaving the historical scene, Mr. Freeman for the modern business entrepreneur, Ernestina for an ideal woman of the age, Mrs. Poulteney for provincial "public opinion", etc.). But being representative types and fictitious, the characters are by no means diminished; they act out of their own nature, supplied with the same independence as the other essential parts of the book.

The author himself, forced to write — at least seemingly — in the convention that "the novelist stands next to God" (ch. 13) by the historical foundation of his work, departs from that tradition:

(a) He becomes one of the characters. He moves freely in the contour of the past (he accompanies Charles) and in the present (he introduces 20th

²⁰ Fowles believes that "the periods when men begin to pay attention to feminine values are always ones of social and political advance", "A Novelist Looks at Politics", *Morning Star* (September 22, 1979).

²¹ This is consistent with Fowles's opinion of male and female roles in history and also applied in the characters of Sarah and Charles: "Men tend to look backwards, women look forward. I associate men usually with fixed order, an intense dislike of change, women with the very reverse." (ibid.).

²² Ibid.

²³ Mr. Gindin observes this phenomenon in complexity: "Part of the pleasure in reading Fowles's work inheres in appreciating a highly sophisticated detective process, a piecing together of clues and references that carry a thematic meaning." (op. cit., in *Contemporary Novelists*, p. 423).

century modes of thinking); he is also concerned with a sort of transition between them (he conforms to Victorian days in appearance, while he changes as the time of action progresses and he comes near to what "he really is" in the concluding chapter). Nevertheless he as a personality remains indistinct, preserving a touch of mystery that ought to be respected. It is as if he wanted to suggest that the authorial intentions are not always to be understood and thus to put a serious obstacle in the way of any critical attempts.

(b) The book is not concluded omnisciently; as a result the novel has three endings. The traditional end is presented first (ch. 44), modernized by an anti-traditional look into Mrs. Poulteney's after-life. The remaining two versions are alternatives (explained in ch. 55); the one is associated with the present perspective (the male hero apparently finishes the quest for his authenticity), the other with the perspective of the future (the male hero will resume his search) and the latter is felt more plausible, not only because in the writer's words, "the tyranny of the last chapter" makes it seem so.

However, the existence of three endings is also coherent with the moments of surprise, as it is a display of opportunities in life and, as Gindin has pointed out, "a demonstration that three different possible resolutions, each characterizing a different possible perspective itself historically definable toward the events of the novel, could be thoroughly consistent with the issues and characters Fowles has set in motion".²⁴ The three dimensions mentioned fill the work with the plasticity of space and enable the reader to know and recognize the world; this knowledge is indispensable in order to make it more human, which is the writer's main purpose.

The past perspective, the frame of the present and future perspectives, equals Fowles's conception of history. Being illusory to a certain extent, history complies with possibilities of fiction.²⁵ But in contrast to the contemporary tendency in English prose, he cannot be reproached with idealizing the past. Disapproving of pretence, he criticizes the whole era:

"its tumultuous life, its repressed emotion and facetious humour, its cautious religion, its corrupt politics and immutable castes [...] the deception was in its very nature; and it was not human, but a machine." (ch. 48).

The past dimension is set against the present one. The novelist recognizes that sentimental apprehensions of reality still exist while attitudes to time and discovery are different; he finds the function of sex in contemporary society to be equal to that of Church dogmas in the Victorian world. He imbues the whole book with similar parallels. The constant confrontation of both ages causes him besides to write traditionally, as I have pointed out, and in new ways, which influences his language: he presents a Dorset

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ This illusoriness contains one source of danger — it can lead to speculating upon historical reality. For instance confront ch. 35 about Tryphena Sparks with F. B. Pinion's conclusions: "That she [i. e. Tryphena Sparks — E. V.] was ever Hardy's mistress is without solid foundation." Thomas Hardy's Alleged Son", *Notes and Queries* (18 : 7, July 1971, 255—256), quoted from *Abstracts of English Studies* (vol. 15, item 1108).

dialect or Cockney speech on the one hand, and uses much of the modern terminologies (psychological, biological, aesthetic, sociological, artistic ones) on the other hand. He produces an interesting effect by combining diverse vocabularies — for instance he describes love in the words of poetry and in the terms of clinical psychology (ch. 31).

The perspective of the future is linked up to what Fowles considers to be of a timeless value. He celebrates above all freedom, the broader condition of the emancipation of woman, that it brings a great many possibilities, such as knowledge, experience and love. He therefore rejects the Sartrean despair of life; full of “mysterious laws and mysterious choice” (ch. 61), life has its own poetry and meaning, and “acting what one knows” (ibid.) should be its basic rule. This emphasizes his humanism, which elevates him above an unsound patriotism and a specialization in which people cease to comprehend one another, which leads him to insist rather on the harmonious development of humanity than on an imperfect moral code.

However, the three perspectives seen through the mixed kaleidoscope of quotations, reflections give much pleasure to the present-day reader with an ample range of knowledge but impoverish the latter-day reader who has to compare the ages of the Victorians, of the writer and of his own with things of indeterminate value. That there can be too much even of a good thing holds completely good here. In return, the dimensions result in a specific semi-historical novel and release the author from the tyranny of the genre. As a matter of fact he is aware of the problems both in experience and in craftsmanship which the modern novelist has to face.

I have not mentioned one important feature of Fowles's approach so far. The novel might be considered a modern version in the Hardian tradition, to a certain extent, with the exception of the appeal to intellect (by means of knowledge of arts, sciences and the established system of values). Like Hardy, he also impresses the feelings, he also presents the male character in an epic and (slightly) tragic posture. When he invents his heroine, he thinks of Sue whom Sarah resembles in her unpredictable free mind, courageous enough to distance itself from traditional prejudices, which is most evident in her sexual fulfilment beyond marital limits.

In contrast to Sue, Sarah is a successful feminist. According to Fowles, women were not always tragic. Being in the right when they wanted to develop their personalities, they had to liberate themselves from a hostile epoch, otherwise the present-day level of progress could not be achieved. This is his new contribution to the problem of the emancipation of the Victorian heroine, which, completed by his fascinating command of creative devices and procedures, places the novel among the very remarkable works of contemporary English literature.

EMANCIPACE VIKTORIÁNSKÉ HRDINKY

Autorka článku sleduje emancipaci viktoriánské hrdinky a způsob, jakým se její koncepce promítá do uměleckého postupu romanopisců tehdejší a dnešní doby.

George Meredith (*Diana z Rozcestí*, 1885) vytváří nový typ hrdinky, která doplňu-

je své city inteligencí. Obdobným způsobem se v jeho tvůrčí metodě spojuje intelektuální a emotivní přístup.

Thomas Hardy (Sue v *Neblahém Judovi*, 1896) podřizuje emancipaci ženy sociálnímu zřeteli, který v duchu kriticky realistického románu převažuje a jemu slouží promyšlená stavba díla.

Současný autor John Fowles (*Francouzova milenka*, 1969) myslí při vytváření své hrdinky na Sue, její osud ale není tragický - některé ženy totiž musely svou osobnost rozvinout úspěšně, jinak by se nedosáhlo dnešního stupně pokroku. V tom spočívá jeho moderní přínos k emancipaci viktoriánské hrdinky, umocněný dokonalým zvládnutím tvůrčích prostředků, jež osvobozuje z tradičního způsobu psaní.