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### A Medley of Texts: John Fowles' *A Maggot*

**Abstract:** John Fowles has been one of the most eminent representatives of formal experimentation in the contemporary English novel. His novels deal with the core issues of human existence and also provide a critique of the methods of construction of fictional texts. The present paper analyses one of Fowles' masterpieces *A Maggot* (1985), an ideological fantasy which marks the journey of five travellers to a remote upland in the northern part of Devon. The journey dates back to 1736 and the travellers are referred by means of epithets at the beginning and their names are revealed as the story proceeds. As the story unfolds, the reader feels entrapped by the text as the facts revealed by the characters are untrue. Their identity, names, mission and relationship to one another, are all shifting masks. The paper draws on the concept of intertextuality to underscore how Fowles weaves his narrative from a

plethora of already existing texts thereby questioning the accepted notions of originality, authorship and stable meaning.

**Keywords:** Intertextuality, Postmodernism, Historiographic Metafiction, Bakhtin, Fowles

In the prologue, Fowles refers to his novel as “a maggot”. The written text, according to the writer himself, is “a maggot...the larval stage of a winged creature” (Fowles, 1985:5) with the ability of turning into a beautiful butterfly in the hands of the reader. The author further clarifies that the title of the novel is taken from the archaic sense of the word that means “whim”, “quirk” and “obsession” of even a snatch of music. Another meaning of the word “maggot” becomes visible later in the novel when Rebecca uses it to describe a white oblong machine that appears to be a spacecraft. The prologue and epilogue to *A Maggot* are parts of Fowles’s narrative strategy of subverting the conventional narrative and mixing authoritative, personal and real narrative with that of a capricious kind that permeates the novel. These extra texts constitute a kind of historical, authentic and a real narrative supplementing a fictional one. Fowles addresses the problematic question of the author, debating whether to leave the narrative “neatly finished”, or to complement it in a quasi-Derridian fashion. This sway to supplementarity is both to authenticate the narrative and to enact the process of textual creation. Fowles does not leave these texts concluded but keeps them animate.

*A Maggot* is a self-reflexive, meta-fictional novel and fits the description of historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing which, according to Linda Hutcheon:

makes a claim to some kind of (newly problematized) historical reference. It does not so much deny as contest the “truths” of reality and fiction... Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by

which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel (Hutcheon, 1988:40)

The various texts from 'The Gentleman's Magazine', constitute the novel's self-reflexiveness and the approach in which illusion is broken. Illusion is undermined by showing what genuine documents of history look like and how history is different from fictional history. *A Maggot* is a metafiction which exposes the problems and exalts the possibilities of its own medium. Lee is a story-telling substitute for Fowles within the fictional world of the book. By overtly performing a duplicate of the novelist's mission and unfolding stories which entice the reader as they trouble us with their indeterminate ontological status, Lee makes us more aware of what is at stake in our engagement with the book and with the other narratives that enlighten and form our lives. That Fowles intends Lee to act as his surrogate is made clear in the epilogue in his comments to the Shakers, the religious movement foreshadowed in Lee's visionary experience and founded by the real historical figure Ann Lee, whom Fowles imagines to be the daughter of his entirely fictional character Rebecca:

Something in Shaker thought and theology...has always seemed to me to adumbrate the relation of fiction to reality. We novelists also demand a far-fetched faith, quite often seemingly absurd in relation to normal reality; we too need a bewildering degree of metaphorical understanding from our readers before the truths behind our tropes can be conveyed (Fowles, 1985: 456).

Fowles' work strikes a wise, middle-ground between meta-fiction and realism, formal experimentation and story-telling. He supports the educational and entertaining ends associated with the novelist's skill, seeking novel ways of reinforcing them by using metafictional techniques that engage the reader in the production of meaning. The novel can be interpreted as an emblem of relationship between the author, text and the reader. The relationship between the organizer- Bartholomew, the cave experience, and Rebecca, the recipient of the wise play,

symbolizes the relationship between the novelist, the discourse and the reader. Fowles is of the view that if the reader is sensitive and thoughtful then the novel will be a virtual reality.

*A Maggot* foregrounds the textual nature of history by presenting itself as an assorted mixture of various kinds of documents. The novel features both segments of the narrative in the manner of the eighteenth century realistic novel and discursive reflection of a self-consciously literary narrator. It is an amalgamation of metafiction and realism. The invasive devices like shifting tenses, partially omniscient narrator, the entries from the Historical Chronicle, counterfeit newspaper entries like ‘Little Miss Catechism’, and the epilogue give the effect of a novel in progress. The realistic style meticulously records every fleeting detail enabling the reader to penetrate the imaginary world. *A Maggot* is a medley of texts which has been described by Frederick Holmes as “part detective story, part science fictional, part gothic horror tale, part history of dissent (History, Fiction and the Dialogic Imagination: Frederick Holmes)”. The novel incorporates diverse kinds of documents, some of which Fowles has taken from reliable, eighteenth century sources and some of which he has composed to masquerade as eighteenth century text. In the former category are excerpts from the “Historical Chronicle” for 1736 of the Gentleman’s Magazine and a satire culled from the same periodical titled “Pretty Miss Catechism”. The extracts from “The Gentleman’s Magazine” are arranged chronologically along the development of the investigation as a counterpoint to the interrogatory text. In the latter group are newspaper reports of the death of one of the novel’s characters, personal letters, and transcripts in question and answer form of the sworn testimony which the barrister Henry Ayscough elicits from several characters in the process of investigating the disappearance of his employer’s son: Mr. Bartholomew. There is also the register of the accumulated evidence that Henry sends to the duke in a series of letters, which, instead of providing a solution for the case, casts even deeper darkness on it. This mixture of a varied kind of discourses ascertains that the reader is offered the “genuine” material as it was

received by the barrister from various witnesses. The testimonies prove to be contradictory, containing both factual and imaginary evidence. The truth stays adamantly masked.

In the novel Fowles stresses the association between freedom and creative imagination and by casting his protagonists in the role of a surrogate novelist, he celebrates the novel as a vehicle for the imagination's transforming power. His statement in the prologue on one of the meanings of the book's title leaves no doubt that *A Maggot* itself is meant to serve as a prototype of such metamorphosis: "A *Maggot* is larval stage of winged creature, as is the written text, at least in the writer's hope." (Fowles, 1985:5)

The discourse of the novel starts with the third person narrative and then changes into a series of question-and-answer sessions led by barrister Henry Ayscough. Most of the novel unfolds through Ayscough's persistent inquiry. The question-and-answer narrative technique in the novel emphasizes the disagreement and differences between truth and lies. Hutcheon argues that this technique "foregrounds the conflict between truth and lies, differing perceptions of truth, facts and beliefs, and truth and illusion." (Hutchoen, 1988:47).

In the novel there are number of unanswered and irresolvable contradictions. On a formal level, the novel holds in tension the conventions of history and fiction. One of its main narrative structures is that of question and answer, a structure that foregrounds the conflict between truth and lies, differing perception of truth, facts and beliefs, truth and illusions. The whole novel works to problematize the binary certainty--- truth that one believes and the truth that is incontestable. It oscillates between the binaries of fact and fiction, truth and false, real and unreal. There are other unresolved thematic contradictions: the absent hero known as 'His Lordship', is both a scientist and believer in theories of the physical world that are "more phantasies than probable or experimental truth" (188). Christianity and paganism are also played off against each other constantly in the novel, and the narrator's interest in the Shakers comes from the fact that they too have been perceived in contradictory ways:

Orthodox theologians have always despised the sect's doctrinal naivety; orthodox communists, its fanaticism; orthodox capitalists, its communism; orthodox communists, its superstition; orthodox sensualist, its abhorrence of the carnal; and orthodox males, its striking feminism (456).

The novel is composed of two parts---the content and its analysis. The content consists the first part of the narrative which begins with the journey across the moor and ends with the death of Dick while as the declaration by various characters can be interpreted as textual analysis. All the fantasies and incredible events: the first vision of Stonehenge, the meeting with the female Trinity, the meeting with God, the Father and Jesus Christ and time travel are all recounted by Rebecca and lie outside the content.

In the novel the characters have different backgrounds which are reflected in their use of language. The language of Jones is completely different from the barrister, Henry Asycough. He is rebuked by Henry for speaking a vulgar tongue in his testimony. "And enough of thy barbarous gibberish" (Fowles, 1985:213). The difference between the two:

is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense, rather it is dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other ( Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981:76).

The speech of the characters is fashioned in the eighteenth century language deploying usage such as "thy", "thee" and "thine". This archaic speech is entirely different from the modern narrator. Salami observes that Fowles:

"defamiliarizes", refreshes the reader's "habituated perception" of ordinary languages, draws attention to the devices, to the artifice, and "estranges" the means in which the novel's 18<sup>th</sup> century text is produced.(Salami,1992:221).

This communication between the different classes/ hierarchies is deployed by Fowles in order to reconstitute the eighteenth century and to construct a critique of it. This, in the words of David Lodge, provides:

an indissoluble link between the linguistic variety of prose fiction, which [Bakhtin] called heteroglossia, and its cultural function as the continuous critique of all repressive, authoritarian, one-eyed ideologies (Lodge, 1988:136).

In *A Maggot* the despotic ideology in question is the vestige of feudalism, with its precept that all social change is evil, and is fiercely defended by Asycough. But it is not merely the explicit opposition of Lee and her sect which prevents the monologic discourse of aristocracy from holding an uncontested sway. A challenge to its dominance is mounted by the mere existence within the novel of heteroglossia. The novel presents us with the regional dialects of Devon and Wales, the writing and the speaking styles of aristocracy, the deferential speech patterns of those who serve them, the language of the legal system and the stage, the specialized, tendentious vocabulary of Protestant dissent, and even the modern jargon of a twentieth-century world which his characters take for granted.

In Bakhtin's terminology, this novel can be described as dialogic or polyphonic as it is an agglomeration of different discourse, voices, dialects and points of view. The novel relativizes history by offering a multiplicity of perspectives on how the past ought to be interpreted. Of the many perspectives, two incompatible ones are particularly important: those embodied by Henry Asycough and Rebecca Lee. Asycough's scientific pursuit for conviction is at odds with the view of history that Fowles wishes to support and that Lee's mysterious orientation gives rise to. Fowles associates each of these characters' approaches to the truth with a broad range of attitudes about politics, religion and life in general. Asycough is a rational, empirical, legalistic, authoritarian conservative and misogynistic whereas Lee is intuitive, imaginary, artistic, visionary, democratic, feminist and revolutionary. Asycough is obviously meant to be

seen as a representative of the early eighteenth century men of reason and neo-classical tradition whereas Lee, as the novel's epilogue makes clear, anticipates romantic individualism and reliance on feeling and intuition .

Although as an artist Fowles clearly values the visionary/ imaginative mode of Lee more than that of the rational/ scientific one of Asycough, his handling of the conflict is truly dialogic in that the narrator of the novel refuses to silence the very formidable opposition or to resolve the debate in favor of Lee. While the narrator does at times editorialize against Asycough's bullying tactics and reactionary nature, he declines to usurp the barrister's dominant position in the text, the bulk of which is situated in the question-and-answer format which he imposes and to a large extent controls. The narrator speaks only in those briefer sections which are composed in the manner of a conventional novel and even there it is just one of the several limited perspectives. Fowles does not grant his narrator psychological and spatial omniscience but restricts his proximity to the characters. For example, the narrator is as much in the dark as the reader concerning the enigmatic motives and character of Bartholomew and the narrator is also unaware of the crucial happenings in the cave.

The reconstruction of the eighteenth century is heavily dependent on the dialogue and the way in which it is articulated by each speaker. This dependency on dialogue also means the undermining of the authority of the omniscient modern reader. Seymour Chatman emphasizes the role of the reader in the dialogue of the novel. He stresses that an implied reader should do more inferring than any other kind. This act of inferring, according to Chatman, means that:

the reader must divine for himself the illocutionary forces of the sentences spoken by characters to each other, that is, what they "mean" as a function of what they *do* in the context of the action, since there are no direct reports of that doing. It is as we were supposed to supply, metatextually, the correct verb tag---"complained," "argued," "pleaded,"---to characterize the speech act (Chatman, 1978: 175-76).

When the dialogue is deployed the omniscient narrator does not make any commentary but leaves the reader to concentrate entirely on what is being enunciated and to determine with relative freedom his/her position in relation to the narration. Norman Page argues that the strength of the dialogue “lies in its being more direct and dramatic than authorial exposition” that is, the structure of cross-examination “has a directness, a sureness and a sense of purpose”(Norman Page, 1973:14). It is through dialogue that the major aspects of the novel are revealed. The reader does not know what happened in the cave. S/He knows nothing about the destiny of the missing characters. The mystery is revealed through the dialogue of the witnesses. It is through dialogue that the reader is able to apprehend the meanings of the situations that are in the text instead of receiving such information from an authoritative narrator. The text thus becomes open and refuses to be monologic. The reader drives her/his own way through the text and invalidates the intention of the author. The dialogic structure of the novel foregrounds its essential role in subverting monologic, homogeneous narratives and confirms its ambitious expansion into the realm of a postmodernist poetics.

*A Maggot's* open-ended, dialogic nature supports its obvious thematic bias in favor of the egalitarian political subtext of religious dissent. “You would talk in religious terms in the 1700s and the 1600s”, Fowles has said, “but you were really talking politics” (qtd in O’Conner, 1985:11). The clash of voices and points of view in the novel demonstrate what Bakhtin perceived to be the implicitly pluralistic and democratic tendencies of all novels. Rebecca Lee is herself aware that her religious and political conflict with established authority is in part a clash of languages and of the different mental worlds which they brought forth. She correlates her disagreement with Ayscough with what she terms their separate and opposed “alphabets”. For example, after she has testified that Bartholomew was transported from the cavern to heaven in a “maggot”, the following exchange takes place between her and Ayscough:

Q. Can you deny that he may have left some otherwise than in your engine?

A. I cannot, in alphabet; in mine I can, and do.

Q. You say, he was brought to your June Eternal?

A. Not brought, he is returned. (385)

This reveals that the difference in the vocabulary of Lee and Asycough and the way of speaking reflects the conflicting mindsets and methods of apprehending the truth.

Fowles leaves the text suspended so that the reader can provide his/her own solution. There are number of unresolved texts and dilemmas in the novel particularly about Rebecca. On the structural level, the novel problematizes convention of the interrogation. It resists unambiguous interpretations and closure and suggests that to impose finality on narratives is to falsify the existential uncertainty which is an inescapable part of being alive. The novel, though set in the eighteenth century, is intent on demonstrating the pastness as well as the presentness of that era. This implies that eliminating the pastness of the past has another salutary effect, that of destroying its deterministic power over the present and thereby freeing the individual to fashion his or her own identity, as Bartholomew hopes to do by refusing the fixed part written for him by his own past by his aristocratic origin:

They knew nothing... We moderns are corrupted but our past, our learning, our historians; and the more we know of what happened, the less we know of what will happen; for as I say, we are like the personages of a tale, fixed it must seem by another intention, to be good or evil, happy or unhappy, as it falls. Yet they who set and dressed these stones lived before the tale began, Lacy, in a present that had no past (144).

Bartholomew realizes that it is not wholly possible to annihilate the past or to evade being conditioned by it. History might well be an imperfect construction of human beings and not an objective truth but it has an undeniable reality which Fowles acknowledges. As Lacy reports, Bartholomew finally concluded that one's freedom is relative and limited:

he answered that we may choose in small things as I may choose how I play a part... but yet must at the end, in greater matters, obey that part and portray its great fate, as its author creates (145).

Changing the medium of the metaphor from authorship to imprisonment, the narrator of the novel articulates that matter concisely when he states that most of us are “equal victims in the debtors’ prison of History, and equally unable to leave it”(231).

There are about three possibilities of solutions which are offered by the text. The first one is the satanic one, according to which the duke’s son, Mr. Bartholomew, Dick and Rebecca take part in a satanic ritual in a cave beneath Devon moors, which result in Mr. Bartholomew’s vanishing and death of Dick. According to the second version which is a celestial one, these three are led into the cave where they find a maggot in which Rebecca has a dream of Heaven (June Eternal) and sees Mr. Bartholomew metamorphosed into God’s son, becoming herself the counterpart of the Holy Ghost. The third solution explains the disappearance of Mr. Bartholomew as murder. However, the hypothesis of suicide cannot be totally discarded among the variety of personal interpretations of the fact.

Frederick Holmes points out that “in terms of Russian Formalism, the effect of Fowles’s refusal to introduce a solution is to thwart the reader’s ability to deduce the whole *fabula* or story from its *sjuzet* or plot” (History, Fiction and the Dialogic Imagination). Fowles’s narrative is unconventional in the way Chatman describes, it actually undermines the concept of *fabula* and corroborates Peter Brook’s assertion that “the apparent priority of *fabula* to *sjuzet* is in the nature of mimetic illusion, in that the *fabula*---‘what really happened’--- is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjuzet*, which is all that he ever directly knows.” (Brooks, 1985: 13). Brooks appear to mean that since the events of narrative fiction are at least in part the authors’ fabrication, there is no anterior reality to which the *sjuzet* at every point corresponds. But Todorov’s detective fiction has traditionally created a powerful

illusion of the independent reality of the *fabula*, the crime which has already occurred and which must be reconstructed in the *sjuzet* by the detective in order to be solved. Todorov argues that the second order of the story, the detective's inquest, "has no importance in itself but serves only as mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (Todorov, 1977:46). Fowles destroys this hierarchy as his detective fails to determine the details of the crime. The stories told by the narrator and the characters who testify before Ayscough do not add up to one uniform happening or events that take place.

*A Maggot* being a historiographic novel challenges the conventions of narrative. It represents the real history of Shakers, addresses the problems of subjectivity and freedom, demonstrates the impact that takes place between different texts deployed in the narrative and ultimately contests the question of class, race, gender and ideology. Postmodern metafiction has looked upon both historiographic and fictional accounts of the past in order to study the ideological writings of difference as social inequality. In *A Maggot* the twentieth-century narrator fills in the background of the eighteenth century's sexism and classicism as it is needed in order to explain his character's actions such as the "crudely chauvinistic contempt" of the middle-class English lawyer, Ayscough, for his poor Welsh witness, Jones. We are told that the roots of such contempt lie in the real religion of the century, the "worship, if not idolatry, of property ...this united all society but the lowest, and dictated much of its behavior, its opinions, its thinking", including its notion of justice (233). Like many other postmodern fictional works this one is not content to say something about the past and stop at that. This novel forges a relationship with the present:

Jones is a liar, a man who lives from hand to mouth...he is the future and Ayscough the past; and both are like most of us, still today, equal victims in the debtors prison of History, and equally unable to leave it. (237)

The ideology of post-modernism is paradoxical, for it depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical, nor is it truly oppositional. But this does not mean it has no critical clout. The Epilogist of *A Maggot* may claim that what we have read is indeed “a maggot, nor an attempt, either in fact or in language, to reproduce known history” (449), but that does not stop him from an extended ideological analysis of the eighteenth century social, sexual, and religious history.

The novel focuses attention on history not only because it is set in the eighteenth century but also because one strand of the plot involves Ayscough’s attempt to reconstruct the past. The bulk of the novel consists of an inquiry into the disappearance of the Bartholomew following a strange journey to a cavern in Devonshire, where an enigmatic series of events take place. This setting recalls famous Marabar Caves in E M Forster’s *A Passage to India* but the ambiguity about what happens there to Adela Quested is mild compared to the radical uncertainty about what causes Bartholomew to vanish and his servant, Thurlow, to kill himself. Adela seems to foreshadow Rebecca in helping to produce different conflicting versions of events of what really happened to her in Marabar Caves, the result of which is the criminalization of Dr Aziz. Fowles declines to dramatize directly the events which take place in the cave. Rebecca claims that she always tells the truth. She tells Ayscough: “Whether thee believe me or not, I do not care, ’tis truth” (309). The only available report of the extraordinary affair is the unreliable testimony of Rebecca Lee, the lone witness. What calls into question the veracity of her account is not only the fascinating nature of her tale of visiting a heavenly city in a flying saucer or “maggot” but also the fact that she had earlier told Jones an entirely different, contradictory version of the story in which she unwillingly participated in a Satanic orgy. Rather than supplying definitive answers about the real nature of Lee’s experience of the cave and Bartholomew’s fate, Ayscough’s inquiry only raises questions. The reader is open to interpret Lee’s testimony as proof of intention to deceive, a phantasm, a mystical dream, or an

encounter with beings from a different world. None of these interpretations accept sufficient corroboration to become authoritative. Even the arch empiricist Ayscough is eventually forced to acknowledge that the cloud of anonymity surrounding the events in the cave cannot be cleared away.

### **Conclusion**

Despite Fowles's concern to set the novel in a definite and detailed historical context, his strategy focuses attention on the fictional properties of the narrative as imaginative creation. His methods compel us finally to consider the novel according to the criteria other than mimetic adequacy or correspondence to the historical fact. The reader must not judge the literal truth of Lee's stories but their imaginative richness as metaphors for psychological conditions.

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