



An Interpretation of Sarah's Madness in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* from the Perspective of Michel Foucault's Theories about Madness

Zhang Duan *

Postgraduate student studying in Beijing International Studies University

Received: 15 July 2020

Accepted: 28 August 2020

Published: 01 September 2020

Abstract

The French lieutenant's Woman is a novel by the English writer John Fowles, which has had a wide and lasting influence in the world since its publication. In the novel, the image "the mad woman" Sarah, almost throughout the book, is one of the important clues of the novel. In his work *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault, a famous French philosopher and sociologist in the 20th century, elaborates that madness has entered "a completely moral universe" and presents four forms. By means of Foucault's theoretical interpretation of four types of madness, this paper aims to analyze and interpret the madness shown by the "mad woman" Sarah. In the novel, indirectly, Sarah's madness is actually a fusion of four forms of madness that Foucault refers to, a kind of protest against the repression and confinement from the Victorian social "moral machines" towards humanity, and a long hard way of her seeking freedom.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; Four Forms of Madness; Sarah's Madness; Freedom

How to cite the article:

D. Zhang, *An Interpretation of Sarah's Madness in The French Lieutenant's Woman from the Perspective of Michel Foucault's Theories about Madness*, *J. Hum. Ins.* 2020; 4(3): 136-139, DOI: 10.22034/jhi.2020.115265.

©2020 The Authors. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

1. Introduction

John Fowles is a prolific writer with a career spanning more than 40 years. Many of his novels are bestsellers. Among his numerous works, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, published in 1969, is the most praised by critics and readers.

In the novel, the author describes the love story between Charles Smith, a young British aristocrat living in the Victorian Age in the 19th century, and the heroine Sarah Woodruff. Charles in the small town of Lyme comes across the temperamental and mysterious woman Sarah. Sarah is eccentric, rather solitary by nature and is considered by the local people as a lunatic. Also, due to her resultless love with a young French Lieutenant when young, she is labeled as the "the French lieutenant's woman". After experiencing several brief contacts with Sarah in the Lyme town, Charles is attracted by Sarah's distinctive personality, and gradually falls in love with this mysterious woman. He finally breaks off the engagement with his fiancée Ernestina in order

to be with Sarah. After having sexual intercourse with Sarah, Charles is surprised to discover that Sarah is a virgin. Everyone thinks they would have a happy ending, but Sarah's departure leaves the reader with a lot of imagination. The author goes out of his way to set three different endings for the end of the story...

The domestic researches on *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is very rich. They are mainly focused on such perspectives as existentialism, feminism, postmodernism, metafiction techniques and features, character image analysis, comparative study of this novel and corresponding adapted movies, etc. Also, there exist other research directions like ecofeminism, social historical criticism, deconstruction, Jung's archetypal criticism, Lacan's theory of three realms, Foucault's power discourse theory, Marxism, social Darwinism, romantic and transcendental tendency and so on.

The author finds that, on the one hand, scholars turning their research point on the application of

* Corresponding author email: m8851a6b766@163.com

Foucault's theory to the interpretation of this work are few and far between. On the other hand, among these very narrow range of studies applying Foucault's related theories, almost all use Foucault's power discourse theory to analyze this novel. However, very few people do their discussions from the perspective of Foucault's theory about madness. Therefore, based on Foucault's classification of madness into four forms, this paper explores and analyzes Sarah's madness property in detail, which to certain extent provides a fresh perspective for further studying this novel, and thus is of great significance.

The body of this paper consists of four parts. Each part respectively corresponds to Foucault's description of four forms of madness. Combining Sarah's madness properties in this novel with Foucault's theories, the author probes into the relationship between both, so as to better interpret Sarah's madness image and achieve a profound grasp of this novel.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault sorts out the history of literature, art and philosophical studies since the European Renaissance and points out that madness has entered "a completely moral universe" and presents four forms: madness by romantic identification, madness of vain presumption, madness of just punishment and madness of desperate passion. At first glance, Sarah's madness does not seem to fit neatly into any category, but at an indirect level it seems to be a fusion of these four forms [1]. Therefore, the existing correlation between the two provides some potential rationality for the research of this paper.

2. Part One Madness by Romantic Identification: Sarah's Yearning for Individual Freedom

Foucault defines this first form of madness as, "Its features have been fixed once and for all by Cervantes... 'We owe the invention of the arts to deranged imaginations; the *Caprice* of Painters, Poets, and Musicians is only a name moderated in civility to express their *Madness*.' Madness, in which the values of another age, another art, another morality are called into question...". It can be seen from this that Foucault's madness by romantic identification comes from deranged imaginations and is characterized by the phenomenon of madness in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

Don Quixote's madness shows a kind of virtual madness, one that is completely apart from the outside world. He tries to use the spirit of chivalry to change the unreasonable status quo, which in his era is obviously close to a dream [2]. However, behind his impractical madness is a kind of essence of self-belief and the glorious embodiment of rationalism. And likewise, in this novel, Sarah's

yearning for and pursuit of individual freedom includes such manifestation of this kind of madness. "She had taken off her bonnet and held it in her hand; her hair was pulled tight back inside the collar of the black coat—which was bizarre, more like a man's riding coat than any woman's coat that had been in fashion those past forty years..." [3]. Sarah does not care at all what she wears or looks like. Due to her unsocial and strange behavior, which is different from what is socially acceptable to ordinary women at that time, she is labeled as "madness" in the worldly view at the time.

In the Exeter Family Hotel, "She made the tea. Small golden flames, reflected, gleamed back from the pot in the hearth. She seemed waiting in the quiet light and crackle, the fire thrown shadows..." [3], Sarah can enjoy a fantastic vision of freedom. She can immerse herself in her own room and carefully play with her belongings, which is arguably Sarah's most satisfying and enjoyable moment in the whole novel.

After making love with Sarah, Charles tells her that he will marry her. However, Sarah says, "...I am not worthy of you." [3], expresses her further words "I have been wicked. I have long imagined such a day as this. I am not fit to be your wife", and finally Charles left with disappointment and confusion [3]. As for Sarah, letting Charles having herself fully shows her seeking for freedom and happiness, which cannot and will never be equal to be his wife. She will never get stuck in the "palace of marriage" like other women. She considers it as a deadly trap rather a kind of happiness.

When Charles asks Sarah for the reason why she may not be his wife, Sarah cannot give him the explanation and just says, "Now I know there was truly a day upon which you loved me, I can bear ... I can bear any thought ... except that you should die" [3]. Seeing Charles's showing truthful love for her, Sarah thinks that it is enough and satisfying. And she is ready to take all the responsibilities and risks. Putting on the coat of "shame", by means of the cover, Sarah manages to attract and control Charles [4]. When witnessing Charles's true love for herself, her pursuit and fantasy for freedom makes her willing to give up everything, which presents such madness by romantic identification.

3. Part Two Madness of Vain Presumption: Showing Extreme Uncompromising Attitudes Towards Other Women's Wretchedness for Lack of Freedom

Foucault argues that, there exist a second form of madness, "...it is with himself, and by means of a delusive attachment that enables him to grant himself all the qualities, all the virtues or powers he lacks. He inherits the old *Philautia* of Erasmus. Poor,

he is rich; ugly, he admires himself; with chains still on his feet, he takes himself for God...”.

“Sometimes I almost pity them. I think I have a freedom they cannot understand” [3], Sarah seems to enjoy being solitary as she chooses to use her bad reputation “against herself”. Disguised by the appearance of madness, by bravely and sincerely doing self-analysis, Charles, in an uncompromising attitude, shows her sympathy for those lacking in freedom.

Sarah’s madness, in a form of self-imposed exile, drifts out of the social hierarchy. She witnesses the harsh and hypocritical social norms of the Victorian Age, and sees other women, represented by Ernestina, fall victim to the environment of the patriarchal system [5]. She despises them, and she sympathizes with them, too. In her eyes, they lost the most important freedom belonging to a woman. From this point of view, even though she is poor and called “whore”, she gains her own freedom.

Under the cover of “shame and madness” is in fact a manifestation of embracing truly free aloofness and hubris [6]. She can use all the strategies in her relationship with Charles to actually control the progress of the relationship with Charles, such as the place where they meet, time, etc., as well as her initiative to have sex with Charles. Sarah actively seeks out sex, downplays the worship to chastity and marriage and thus gains a sense of biological and identity equality with men. By taking control of her body, Sarah rebuilds herself, which also upends the Victorian notions of sexual relations and morality. Sarah has always been the subject of action in the process of self-liberation and pursuit.

4. Part Three Madness of Just Punishment: Suffering from Pains from Soul and Truly Telling the Pursuit of Freedom from Heart

Foucault points out that, “the madness of just punishment, which chastises, along with the disorders of the mind, those of the heart...The justification of this madness is that it is truthful. Truthful since the sufferer already experiences, in the vain whirlwind of his hallucinations, what will for all eternity be the pain of his punishment...”.

On one hand, Sarah, who walks in public as a madwoman, is always a confused individual. Subject to rumors from the outside world, Sarah pays no attention to dressing and his behavior. Every time Charles sees her, she is always in a mess or inappropriate appearance. When asking Charles for understanding and help, she exhibits her confusing and unexpected behaviors, “...she did,

with a forestalling abruptness, the most unexpected thing. She sank to her knees” [3].

On the other hand, as she recounts to Charles her experience with the French lieutenant, she is soberly aware that, “What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. I shall never have children, a husband, and those innocent happinesses they have” [3]. Because she has realized that due to her unsocial and mad way, she has been standing on the wrong side of the Victorian moral machine and the social rules, that she is worthless, and that she is hardly a human being [7]; At the same time, Sarah also realizes that since she chooses to live in this society in the form of a “shame”, she is sure to suffer from great mental tortures: she will be punished greatly from this era, will be inflicted with eternal pains, and will never have marriage and happiness.

“...madness, in its wild, untamable words, proclaims its own meaning; in its chimeras, it utters its secret truth; its cries speak for its conscience...” [8]. Sarah’s madness is true from the bottom of her heart. With her crazy madness and crying fantasy, “I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people should point at me, should say, there walks the French Lieutenant’s Whore—oh yes, let the word be said” [3]. By this, Sarah is announcing to Charles that she struggles to break the moral shackles of false ethics, and pursues the meaning of free and independent life, although Charles may consider it as a disorder appearance from a lunatic.

5. Part Four Madness of Desperate Passion: A Filling and Consoling of life Aiming at Seeking the Lost Freedom

According to Foucault, “Love disappointed in its excess, and especially love deceived by the fatality of death, has no other recourse but madness...but this punishment is also a relief; it spreads, over the irreparable absence, the mercy of imaginary presences; it recovers, in the paradox of innocent joy or in the heroism of senseless pursuits, the vanished form...”.

Sarah is full of passion for freedom, but under the background of the Victorian Age’s hypocrisy, she loves freedom but cannot get it [9]. And the restraint of social rules and suppression of ethics make it difficult for her to pursue freedom. Since her arrival in the house of Mrs. Poulteney, she has entered what Foucault calls “the Great Imprisonment”.[†] “...Let us imagine the impossible, that Mrs. Poulteney drew up a list of fors and againsts on the subject of Sarah...” [3]. Mrs.

madman is put in prison. Sarah’s life in the house of Mrs. Poulteney is like such because she greatly suffers from the oppression from both the Master and the servant. Her is greatly inflicted with tortures at both spiritual and physical level. She almost completely her true freedom.

[†] In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault records the history of madness in western society from the perspective of archaeology, and divides the attitude of western society towards madness into three stages: the Middle Age and the Renaissance; the Classical Age; Modern society. The classical era is also known as the age of great imprisonment. Madness is at this stage persecuted as the opposite of reason, and the

Poulteney is peremptory and hypocritical. She uses false social values to control Sarah in every way, and uses “hegemony” in discourse to brutally treat Sarah to stand out her authority. Under such circumstances, Sarah is greatly tortured without freedom. Being hard to bear, she resorts to madness, the only way for her, to shackle the fetters by Mrs. Poulteney and go out of the purgatory to find freedom.

In Victorian Age, the madness shown by For Sarah, is regarded as heretical and abnormal by society. However, for Sarah, madness itself is a freedom [10]. It is “shame” that keeps her alive in the world. Madness for her is also a kind of filling and consolation for life. With the help of madness, she manages to make the noble Charles approach her step by step and show love for her. By means of madness, Sarah intends to cover her irreparable lack of freedom, which not only her but all the Victorians do not have, and hopes to regain her true freedom.

6. Conclusions

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault points out that madness is not so much a product of nature as a product of culture and society. Madness is not a disease, but a sense of alienation over time. By means of Foucault’s classification of madness, the author interprets the madness of the heroine Sarah in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and finds that the madness shown by Sarah presents four types also: Sarah’s yearning for individual freedom; showing extreme uncompromising attitudes towards other women’s wretchedness for lack of freedom; suffering from pains from soul and truly telling the pursuit of freedom from heart; a filling and consoling of life aiming at seeking the lost freedom. These four forms of madness shown by Sarah just integrate and interpret Foucault’s argument that madness is the integration of four forms [11]. With the pursuit of individuality and freedom and fantasy, Sarah transforms it into a madness by romantic identification; Despising or pitying other women of his time who have fallen victim to hypocritical ethics, Sarah shows her brave pursuit of freedom with such madness of vain presumption; Aware of her misfits in the society will suffer from the eternal pain from the heart, Sarah shows a righteous punishment of madness; In search of freedom, Sarah resorts to a kind of madness of desperate passion to fill and comfort her life. The mad image of the heroine Sara in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* fits well Foucault’s classification of the forms of madness in *Madness and Civilization*.

Madness is more about fighting, and a will to fight against social injustice and darkness [12]. As Sarah’s hard way to seek freedom, madness, as Sarah’s disguise, is borrowed by her to challenge the traditional order, and it is Sarah’s effective opposition to the confinement mechanism of Victorian society. Foucault’s theories of madness provide a new perspective for re-understanding Sarah’s image. Through the exploration of Sarah’s madness, it is undoubtedly of positive significance to deeply feel Sarah’s resistance to the hypocrisy of Victorian society and her unremitting pursuit of individual freedom.

References

1. Yu, L. 2010. Madness’ and ‘Alternate Histories’: On the Counter-historical Narration in Harold Pinter’s Screenplay *the French Lieutenant’s Woman*. *Journal of Nanjing University of Science and Technology* 23.2 71-75+118.
2. Holmes, T. 1970. Don Quixote and Modern Man.” *The Sewanee Review* 78.1: 40-59.
3. Fowles, J. 1969. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. New York: New American Library.
4. Lin, S. 2019. Pursuing Freedom on the Lonely Road: Interpretation on Sara’s View of Happiness in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. *Journal of Harbin University* 40.8: 81-84.
5. Long, H. 2016. A Free Wonder Flower Blooming in a Repressive Environment: An Interpretation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* from the perspective of feminism. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering* 37.4: 49-51.
6. Li, Y. 2017. Pursuing the Meaning of Existence in Madness—Interpretation of Sara in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. *Overseas English* 16: 171-172.
7. Lynch, R.P. 2002. Freedoms in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’. *Twentieth Century Literature* 48.1: 50-76.
8. Foucault, M. 1965. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Random House.
9. Brantlinger, P., Ian, A., Sheldon, R. 1972. The French Lieutenant’s Woman: A Discussion. *Victorians Studies*. 15.3: 339-356.
10. Renk, K. 2015. Erotic Possession, the ‘Phantasm’, and Platonic Love in Two Neo-Victorian Novels. *Critique* 56: 576-585.
11. Gao, W. 2016. Analysis of the Characters’ Madness in Lolita.” *Language Education* 3: 83-88.
12. Zhang, Z. 2014. Getting out of madness discourse: On Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*. *Hunan Social Sciences* 6 (2014): 28-32.