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*“In the social jungle of human existence,
there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity”.*

Eric Erikson

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	7
2	Theoretical Background	8
2.1	Postmodernism	8
2.1.1	Definition(s)	8
2.1.2	Postmodernist Fiction.....	10
2.2	The Concept of Identity	13
2.2.1	Definition(s)	13
2.2.2	A Brief History of the Term	14
2.2.3	Identity in Postmodernism	15
2.2.4	Narrative and identity construction	19
3	Michael Frayn: <i>The Trick of It</i>	21
3.1	The Epistolary Novel.....	21
3.2	The identity of JL	23
3.2.1	Narrative situation	23
3.2.2	The narrator Dunnett	26
3.2.3	Reliability of the Narrator	29
3.2.4	Time	30
3.2.5	Language	32
3.2.6	Separation, Isolation and Obsession.....	33
3.2.7	JL's identity construction	35
4	John Fowles: <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i>	39
4.1	The Neo-Victorian Novel	39
4.2	Who is Sarah?	41
4.2.1	The Victorian aspect of the novel	41
4.2.2	Language	43
4.2.3	The Narrator	44

4.2.4	Freedom as a major theme.....	46
4.2.5	Charles Smithson.....	49
4.2.6	Sarah Woodruff.....	51
5	Angela Carter: <i>Nights at the Circus</i>	56
5.1	Magical Realism	56
5.2	Fevvers: Is she fact or is she fiction?.....	58
5.2.1	The power of narration	58
5.2.2	Time and History.....	60
5.2.3	Performativity.....	62
5.2.4	Other Female Characters	65
5.2.5	Walser.....	69
5.2.6	Fevvers	71
6	Conclusion.....	76
7	References	78
8	Index	83
	German Abstract.....	84
	Curriculum Vitae	85

1 Introduction

The search for personal identity is more relevant than ever. The range of different identities to choose from is continuously increasing, although the definition of what constitutes identity is still highly controversial. In the course of the 20th century, the concept of a fixed, inherent identity was replaced with the notion of a fluid, multifaceted identity. Individuals no longer possess a stable “self”, but rather occupy different roles. Thus, Waugh (3) argues that “the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels”. She claims that in creating imaginary worlds literary fiction can help us understand how our reality is similarly constructed (18).

The novel provides an especially suitable literary form to study character, because the novel and its origins are intrinsically tied to individuality. Lukacs (qtd. in Bray 4) suggests that “the novel in general portrays interiority and a search for personal identity in a world where no fixed meaning or truth outside the individual exists any more”. This postmodern world with ontological uncertainties is highlighted in postmodern fiction and renders the analysis of fictional characters more complex but also more fascinating. The thesis thus analyzes three postmodern novels, Michael Frayn’s *The Trick of It*, John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*. In order to compare the construction/deconstruction of identity, the analysis focuses on the central female figures of the novel, JL, Sarah Woodruff and Fevvers, respectively. Moreover, the novels represent different (postmodern) genres.

The first part of the thesis provides the theoretical background necessary for further analysis. It tries to define the terms postmodern and identity and illustrates the importance of narrative in the construction of identity. The second part of the thesis concentrates on the analysis of the construction/deconstruction of the female identities of the central female characters in the novels. The analysis will show the techniques used to construct the highly complex female identities and gives an account of contemporary female identity construction in the real world.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Postmodernism

„Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon 1). Trying to define Postmodernism in a simple, straightforward fashion is a more than serious challenge, since there are only a few other theoretical concepts causing more controversial debates. A complete analysis of the term would by far exceed the limits of this thesis. Therefore, the following chapter will give a brief overview of the most important aspects of the postmodern theory, culture and fiction.

2.1.1 Definition(s)

The word postmodernism is associated with concepts like fragmentation, irony, difference, discontinuity, plurality and disruption. These are indeed postmodern features, but postmodern discourse, as well as the term itself, is fragmented and marked by plurality. To find a simple, uncontroversial definition is impossible, since postmodernism has been defined by a variety of scholars in different ways. It has been described as “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* xxiii), which is famously defined as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). Du Gay calls it “a form of reflection or state of mind that rounds back upon the modern itself” (xii) and Linda Hutcheon, in her influential book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, thinks of it as a cultural practice using a parodic mode of self-conscious representation. In addition, Frederic Jameson, one of postmodernism’s objectors considers it to be “a little more than a transitional period between two stages of capitalism” (*Postmodernism* 416).

Defining the postmodern not only poses a problem, but “this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge”. Also, “postmodernism [...] often seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them” (Malpas 4). Although the terms postmodernism and postmodernity have already been discussed in the 19th century, the postmodern concepts and ideas gained immense popularity in the 1970s, 80s and 90s in Europe and Northern America. As a critical theory, the postmodern influenced and interacted with nearly every discipline from politics, history and sociology to feminism, philosophy and literary criticism.

A distinction has to be made between the structural, sociological term postmodernity and the cultural, aesthetic term postmodernism. Postmodernity refers to a specific cultural context or

historical epoch that resulted from cultural, economic and social changes in the second half of the 20th century due globalization, the collapse of communism, the growth of the mass media and the decline of political and religious traditions. (see Malpas; du Gay) These changes mark the transition from modernity to postmodernity. Zygmunt Bauman powerfully illustrates the difference between modernity and postmodernity by asserting that “Modernity built in steel and concrete; postmodernity in bio-degradable plastic” (“Pilgrim” 18). Postmodernism, on the other hand, is more concerned with questions of style and artistic practises. A clear cut distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity is, however, impossible, since every text emerges from culture. As Jameson argues, postmodernism “is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also [...] a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order” (“Consumer Society” 113).

Still, a much more complex distinction exists between the concepts of modernism and postmodernism. Critics do not agree on the relation between the two movements and neither consider postmodernism a radical break from modernism, an intensification of certain characteristics of modernism or a mixture of both. As postmodernism is the result of the social and cultural condition of postmodernity, so is modernism the result of the social conditions of modernity in the late 19th and early 20th century. Modernism is an aesthetic movement trying to capture the modern sense of fragmentation and alienation that were brought about by transformations on all levels of society (Snipp-Walmsley 409). As a set of artistic practices, modernism challenges and rejects traditional elements and forms and emphasizes subjectivity, reflectivity and fragmentation.

One example for the continuation of tendencies from modernism in postmodernism is the focus on fragmentation. Postmodernist art continues to represent fragmented, discontinued forms, but with in a different feeling. Postmodernism celebrates fragmentation as a liberating break from traditions and fixed systems of belief, whilst modernism mourns the loss of unity and belonging (Barry 81ff). Other aspects of modernist practices are fiercely rejected by postmodernists and represent a radical break from modernism. Modernism’s asceticism and minimalism, for example, is criticized by postmodernists as being elitist. This is why postmodernism bridges the gap between high and popular art and “thrives on surplus and promiscuous excess” (Snipp-Walmsley 410). The postmodern can, therefore, be seen as both a continuation of and a break from modernist tendencies and “follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism” (McHale 5).

A number of critics had an impact on the development of postmodernism, like John Barth, Ihab Hassan, Jürgen Habermas, David Harvey and many more. Two theorists have, however, had an especially important part in the formation of the theory of postmodernism. Firstly, in his influential book *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean- Francois Lyotard explains the postmodern condition as incredulity towards metanarratives upon which societies are founded. Metanarratives are stories or ideas that provide explanations of knowledge or legitimize actions. Lyotard's disillusionment with grand narratives explains the postmodern sense of scepticism and disembeddedness. Secondly, in his book *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard further developed the notion of a postmodern age in which truth is an illusion and reality has been lost. He asserts that the postmodern age is the age of the hyperreal in which there is no relationship between sign and reality. Snipp-Walmsley concludes that "in a nutshell, postmodernism attacks the ideas of a stable, autonomous being and the possibility of grounding our knowledge in certainty and truth" (408). This continual ontological uncertainty is reflected in postmodern art, especially in postmodern literature.

2.1.2 Postmodernist Fiction

Postmodern fiction typically defamiliarizes, by means of parody, pastiche, fantasy, magic realism, what we take for granted in social and literary convention; it cultivates the unconscious, the irrational, and the absurd, for comedic purposes; it focuses on technology, especially the ubiquity of communications systems; it rereads the past, concentrating on dominant narrative models by which accounts of history are constructed; it utilizes metafiction to analyze language as a signifying system and to foreground literary codes that structure fiction; it favors textual indeterminacy as a way of indicating the complexity and opacity of contemporary science. (Gasiorek 193f)

In this quote, Gasiorek illustrates the multiple themes and strategies of postmodern fiction. According to him, the term postmodern is, however, of limited usefulness in categorizing fiction, since every postmodern writer engages differently with the aforementioned postmodern themes (207). To classify novels as postmodern serves a "useful heuristic purpose; but their range and complexity ensures that they will always exceed such categorizations" (208).

The term postmodernist fiction is as complex as postmodernism itself. Although there are a number of postmodern features in literature, there is no fixed set of criteria to define a postmodern text. Generally, postmodern fiction reflects on the condition of postmodernity in that it performs a critique of fixed ideologies and philosophies and challenges culture's norms and assumptions. Lyotard famously argued that

[t]he postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: The text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged [...] by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. (*Correspondence* 15)

A work of art “can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent” (*Correspondence* 13).

So, not every text written in the second half of the 20th century is postmodern. Rather, postmodern fiction can be identified through the use of various techniques that defamiliarize and question the relation between fiction and reality. McHale (9) sees the difference between modern and postmodern fiction in a shift from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one. Modernist fiction foregrounds questions about the accessibility, circulation or limits of knowledge through devices like the interior monologue or multiple points of view. In comparison, postmodernist texts deploy strategies that are concerned with ontological problems, like “What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (10). He claims that a variety of techniques used in postmodernist fiction highlight these questions about the distance between the fictional and the real world and their plurality.

Such strategies include parody, pastiche and metafiction. These techniques can also be identified in the novels covered in the analysis part of this thesis. “Parody”, according to Hutcheon, “is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (11). For her, parody is not used to ridicule a text but to critically engage it with its underlying ideology. So, a parody works within the norms and conventions of the dominant ideology in order to subvert them. Parody “sets up a dialogical relation between identification and distance” (35) and is, therefore, used to respond to and challenge the past and notions of subjectivity. Pastiche, along with the blending of different styles and genres, is another strategy foregrounding intertextuality.

Metafiction represents an especially powerful tool for an analysis of the relation between fiction and reality. It explores how language creates meaning, disillusions the reader through ruptures in the story and explores its own fictional nature. Patricia Waugh asserts that metafiction “reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday ‘reality’. [...] ‘Meta’ terms,

therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers” (3). Linda Hutcheon introduces the term historiographic metafiction, which designates postmodern metafiction that focuses on the narrative construction of history. Historiographic metafiction will be further examined when discussing John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

2.2 The Concept of Identity

2.2.1 Definition(s)

The term identity is not only widely used in everyday language but also in a vast variety of academic disciplines. It is a core concept in psychology, philosophy, cultural sciences, social anthropology, political sciences and other fields of the humanities. Despite the term's growing popularity, there is no satisfactory, overall definition of identity or the self. As Bruner argues, identity remains a "surprisingly quirky idea – intuitively obvious to common sense, yet notoriously evasive to definition" (63).

In 1983, Philip Gleason already established what is also true for 2014: "Those who write on [identity] matters use [the word identity] casually; they assume the reader will know what they mean. And readers seem to feel that they do – at least there has been no clamor for clarification of the term. But if pinned down, most of us would find it difficult to explain just what we do mean by identity" (910). Although capturing the present meaning of identity is more than difficult, scholars from various disciplines have tried to accomplish this task and produced definitions of the terms identity and self. In addition, they deal with specific identities like personal, cultural, gender, national or social identities.

Social psychologists Stryker and Burke, for example, use the term identity "with reference to parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (284). In philosophy, identity can be equated with sameness and personal identity with a set of properties (Olson). Political identity, according to Smith can be defined as "the collective label for a set of characteristics by which persons are recognized by political actors as members of a political group" (302). The question of what the concept of identity entails is answered differently in every discipline and across time. Stuart Hall aptly claims that the concept of identity is "not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one" and that identities are constructs "produced in specific historical and institutional sites with specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (*Cultural Identity* 3). When identities are constructed in a specific place and time with certain purposes and strategies, it is self-explanatory that scholars record such a variety of identities and identity definitions. Hall's definition of identities as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (6) best captures the flexible, changing, socially constructed character of identity.

2.2.2 A Brief History of the Term

The term identity as it is applied today only came into use during the 1950s, when it gained popularity as an analytical concept in the social sciences. Identity derives from the Latin word *idem*, meaning the same, and denoted the sameness of a person or a thing. In this context, it has been used since the sixteenth century and is still used in various fields of Mathematics (see Gleason 910f).

Although the concept of Identity as a social-science term emerged in the 20th century, the question of the self and of belonging poses a problem since the beginning of modernity. Zygmunt Bauman (“Pilgrim” 18f) and Stuart Hall (“Cultural Identity” 281) both argue that, in the eighteenth century, social transformations induced a new individualism that resulted in a new conception of the self and the individual. Hall claims that this new individualism originated in a break with the past and its traditions and structures, and marks the birth of the modern subject along with the problem of identity. Identity is no longer a ‘given’ but a ‘task’, since class and gender no longer predetermined one’s place in society (Bauman, “Globalizing World” 4f).

Additional changes in the 20th century, then, resulted in a shift from a unified, stable conception of identity to a fragmented, de-centred notion of identity. Hall, in “The Question of Cultural Identity”, distinguishes between three conceptions of identity in the history of the modern subject: the identity of the Enlightenment subject, of the sociological subject and that of the post-modern subject. The Enlightenment subject, a result of the emerging individualism, was conceived as a “fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose ‘centre’ consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or ‘identical’ with itself – throughout the individual’s existence” (275).

As the individual subject became more and more involved in the culture and society of the modern world, an interactive conception of identity developed that “bridges the gap between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ – between the personal and the public worlds”. There is still an ‘inner core’ in the subject, but it is formed and modified “in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer” (276). In the last stage, the postmodern subject has fragmented, multiple and sometimes contradictory identities and these identities are “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (277).

2.2.3 Identity in Postmodernism

As already mentioned, the notion of identity has significantly changed in the last half of the 20th century and has gained immense popularity and fascination. Zygmunt Bauman even claims that “identity has now become a prism through which other topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted” and that the identity discourse is representative of the state of modern societies (“Globalizing World” 1). He makes modernity responsible for exposing the “fragility and unsteadiness of things and [throwing] open the possibility (and the need) of reshaping them” (2).

Many critics (Bauman, Hall, B. Simon, Elliot) share the view that identity in our times is essentially de-centred and dislocated due to the impact of modernization, globalization and postmodernity in the second half of the 20th century. Modernity and especially Postmodernity is characterized by discontinuity, plurality and disembeddedness. Postmodern influences did not only transform our way of thinking but also resulted in the fragmented conception of modern identities and a crisis of identity.

Hall tries to map the transformations in modern thought who finally lead to the postmodern conception of identity by describing five advances in social theory and the humanities. Firstly, re-readings of Marxist works in the 1960s made people question the individual’s agency. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx and Engels 595). The individual acts “on the basis of the historical conditions made by others into which they were born” and, therefore, is not the agent of history. Marx famously argued that the subject is essentially a product of his/her environment and that it is not the “consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx and Engels 4). Marx and Engels’ theories thus provide a first opposition to the notion of a universal essence of man.

Secondly, Freud refuted the unity of the self through his theories of the unconscious. His argument that “our identities, our sexuality, and the structure of our desires are formed on the basis of the psychic and symbolic processes of the unconscious” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 286) had a tremendous impact on modern thought. Again, the individual is portrayed as not having the full power over his/her actions, since the unconscious and not reason controls his/her thoughts and actions. In addition, as identity is formed over time, it is no longer an innate characteristic but rather an on-going process that is never completed.

“Psychoanalytically, the reason why we continually search for identity, constructing biographies which knit together the different parts of our divided selves into a unity, is to recapture this fantasized pleasure of fullness” (288).

The third step in dislocating the self is connected with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and his theories of language. He argued that linguistic signs do not have a fixed meaning and that the meaning of words derives from their relation to other words. In addition, “there are always supplementary meanings over which we have no control, which will arise and subvert our attempts to create fixed and stable worlds” (288). Language does not only resemble identity in its instability and flexibility, but also in its cultural constructedness. Saussure claims that language is a social product that is at the centre of our culture and is also determined by this culture and its rules.

A fourth de-centring can be found in the studies of Michel Foucault. He identifies a new power, which unfolded in the nineteenth century and is concerned with “the regulation, surveillance and government of, firstly, the human species or whole populations, secondly, the individual and the body. This power is the product of new collective institutions that aim at disciplining modern populations. Hall includes Foucault’s theory as one step in the evolution of the postmodern subject because of the paradox that, “the more collective and organized is the nature of the institutions of late-modernity, the greater the isolation, surveillance and individuation of the individual subject” (289f).

Finally, the emergence of feminism and other social movements in the 1960s concludes the five great conceptual shifts towards de-centring in modern thought. These movements not only fragmented politics into various social movements but also gave rise to identity politics, because every movement appealed to one particular social identity. Moreover, feminism “opened up to political contestation whole new arenas of social life – the family, sexuality, housework, the domestic division of labour, child-rearing, etc.” and foregrounded the formation of gendered identity (290).

Though the post-modern age has seen more transformations and structural changes, the five strands of thought mentioned by Hall have, without a doubt, had a tremendous impact on the way identity is conceptualized. The destabilization and dislocation of the self from society and itself leaves the individual in a state of uncertainty. There is no longer one fixed place in society, no unified self, but various identities that are constantly being reshaped. Erik H. Erikson famously called this insecurity ‘identity crisis’. The term originally signified the

mental medical condition of losing a sense of sameness and continuity. As this loss affected more and more people, the crisis of identity now denotes the problem with (post)modern identities in general.

Identity's instability and unpredictability generates ambiguous reactions (see Bauman; B. Simon). On the one hand, the decline of traditional identities triggers anxiety and fear. The lack of fixed social roles and the never-ending task of finding one's place and identity in life are more than frustrating. Baumann argues that the problem is the individual's disembeddedness that forces "men and women to be constantly on the run, promising no rest and none of the satisfaction of 'arriving', none of the comfort of reaching the destination where one can lay down one's arms, relax and stop worrying" ("Globalizing World" 6). The individual once struggled to reach his/her identity of choice. Now, the problem is which identity to choose and how to keep an identity in a time when things are instable and unpredictable and the idea that 'nothing counts anymore' is omnipresent. On the other hand, the break from the past and the breaking down of boundaries liberates identity from old restrictions and breeds hope and ambition. One's identity is no longer predestined but can be changed and restructured because 'anything goes'. Every form of identity is possible as "humans are free to self-create" (3).

Whilst old identities are either abandoned or being reshaped, the range of new identities is constantly increasing due to globalizing trends. Globalization is a key word when discussing identity in the twentieth century, as it is intrinsically tied to modernity and postmodernism. For Giddens, globalization "concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance' with local contextualities" (21f). For him, a major feature of globalisation is the separation of time and space. In modern societies, distances and time-scales are compressed so that individuals can be influenced by societies or other individuals that are not 'present' but far away (18). This changing time-space relation had a major impact on the conception of cultural identities, since "all identities are located in symbolic space and time" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 301).

Other processes and aspects of globalization influenced cultural and national identities, too. Hall claims that the global trends in consumerism, economy and culture lead to a fragmentation of cultural identities, to the so-called global post-modern.

Cultural flows and global consumerism between nations create the possibilities of 'shared identities' – as 'customers' for the same goods, 'clients' for the same services, 'audiences' for the same messages and

images – between people who are far removed from one another in time and space. (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 302)

So, globalization broadens the range of different identities we can choose from even more. This ‘cultural supermarket’ effect, as Hall calls it, makes available identities that are placed in another time or another place. However, the globalizing forces of media, communications and culture, on the other hand, also reduce cultural diversity and cause cultural homogenization. As Elliot and Gay state, “it seemed difficult [...] to track sign of cultural difference and identity diversity in a world increasingly dominated by the News Corporation, CNN and Yahoo [or Google]” (xiv).

Alongside the globalizing trends, Giddens (21f) recognizes a tension between the local and the global. People still live in a local world but are influenced by global trends, thoughts and systems so that “phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global” (187). Some critics even see the ‘global’ replacing ‘local’ identities. But Hall (“Cultural Identity” 302f) argues that globalization does not only bring along global homogenization but also a new interest in difference, ethnicity and the local. So, neither the local nor the global forms of identities dominate but rather a new relation between the two is established. An important aspect of the division between local and global identities is national identity. As with local identities, critics observe a weakening of national identities in the globalizing processes. Since the range of different identities increases, national identities can be replaced by local identities, such as regional or community identities, or by more global identities. However, national identities are unlikely to be abolished but rather taken apart and reassembled in order to create new identities of hybridity (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 304). Robins agrees that “Globalization is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: it is a matter of inserting a multiplicity of localities into the overall picture of a new global system” (34).

To sum up, various processes of modernization and globalization have changed the conception of identity in the second half of the 20th century and lead to a de-centring view of identity. Elliot and du Gay present a survey of the postmodern notion of identity by saying that identity construction “involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self as fluid, fragmented, discontinuous, decentred, dispersed, culturally eclectic, hybrid-like”. Moreover, as postmodernism means the collapse of grand narratives, identity becomes “principally *performative* – depthless, playful, ironic, just a plurality of selves, scripts, discourses and desires” (xii). So, identity can be viewed as a performance or an activity. Therefore, Baumann

and Hall, for example, suggest the use of the concept of identification instead of identity, because identification signifies the never-ending, incomplete process of searching for identity.

2.2.4 Narrative and identity construction

It's like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time.

That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.

— Patrick Rothfuss, *The Name of the Wind*

Narrative constitutes an important aspect of human nature. Social psychologist Wolfgang Kraus (“Identität“ ch.2) supports narrative psychology’s claim that narration is “ein[] grundlegende[r] Modus der sozialen Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Narrationen sind in soziales Handeln eingebettet“. This is why narration is closely connected with identity construction. Due to the changes in postmodern society, the individual has a fragmented self and multiple different attachments it has to manage (Kraus, “Negotiation” 129). The individual’s task is to create coherence and to reorganize these multiple selves. This is done through narrations, since the subject organizes his/her self, memory and experiences in narrative form (Kraus, “Identität” ch.2). As Currie observes, “The only way to explain who we are is to tell our own story, to select key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narrative” (17). Narrative has not only played a big role in the formation of personal identities, but also in the formation of large-scale identities like nation. In order to establish a stable nation identity, the storage and recording of common myths and historical memories is crucial (Cobley 38).

Kraus, therefore, understands the self as “processed, socially embedded, and readable through self-stories in which it discursively manifests itself”. These self-stories serve as a connection between different identities and help create the coherence of the individual needs. They are, however, not fixed constructs but change according to audience and purpose and can be regarded as “work in progress” (“Identität” ch.2). Kraus also highlights the process of negotiation in the formation of identity. In self-stories, people express closeness or distance from certain collective identities, but this closeness or distance has to be evaluated by and negotiated with their audience. People can not only state their belonging to a collective identity but their position in society or in a group, which has to be “negotiated, tested, confirmed, rejected or qualified again and again” by others (Kraus, “Negotiation” 130).

However, the subject not only positions him/herself through the content of the narration but through various other levels. “Identitätsstrategische Bewegungen” are brought into focus (Kraus, “Identität” ch.2).

Identity construction is not only at stake when somebody is explicitly talking about him- or herself, but also when seemingly referring to other subjects, since even then positions have to be taken and stories constructed. Questions of when to bring up a story, how to frame it, what to leave out and what to integrate, are all relevant for negotiating position and affiliation. (Kraus, “Negotiation” 130)

The idea of identity construction through narration facilitates the comparison between real people’s identity and the identity of fictional characters. Characters are constructs, like self-stories, but they “are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modelled on the reader’s conception of people and in this person-like” (Rimmon-Kenan 33). Mark Currie observes that the person-like form of the fictional character is part of the illusion of fictional narrative and that “we make interferences about characters like we make about real people” (17). Similar to real people, fictional characters can also have multiple flexible identities, since they are based on human beings. However, no character matches the complexity and changeableness of real people (Abbott 129).

Characters and characters’ identities are constructed on various levels of a text, since characters are inextricable from the text. They are described by a network of character-traits. As direct definition is less frequently used in contemporary fiction, personality traits and identities are constructed through indicators. “In principle, any element of the text may serve as indicator of character and, conversely, character-indicators may serve other purposes as well” (Rimmon-Kenan 59). The analysis part of this thesis will examine these indicators of character on various levels of the text and infer character identities from them.

We can never fully understand a character (as we cannot fully understand another human being), therefore we can only make inferences. Abbott highlights the active role of the reader in the construction of a character by arguing that characters are “some of narrative’s most challenging gaps” and that “it may eventually turn out that an interpretation of the narrative stands or falls on how we fill this gap. In short, external causes are usually easy to spot; it is the causative chemistry *inside* that is hard to figure. We cannot see inside character. We must infer” (126). So, the question is not only where to find indicators, but what to make of them.

3 Michael Frayn: *The Trick of It*

3.1 The Epistolary Novel

The epistolary novel, a novel composed of letters, diary entries and/or other types of periodic writing, reached its height in popularity in the 18th century in Europe with works like Richardson's "Clarissa" or "Pamela". According to Bray, the genre of the epistolary novel is often regarded as an "isolated, digressive episode in the history of the novel" (1) and merely a 17th and 18th century phenomenon. Altman (3), however, claims that the epistolary form of the novel has been explored by writers in various periods and especially the end of the 20th and the 21st century has seen the revival of the epistolary form, not only due to the invention of fax machines, e-mails and text messaging. Steven King's "Carrie", "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, "Bridget Jones's Diary" by Helen Fielding or "We Need To Talk About Kevin" by Lionel Shriver are only a few examples of contemporary epistolary novels that gained worldwide recognition.

There are various explanations for the decline of the epistolary form at the beginning of the 19th century. The major cause is generally understood to be a change in the form and types of novels, the rise of realism, of historical novels and of the 3rd person narrator. The epistolary form was considered unsuitable, especially for realist fiction, since it did not present an objective view on reality (Martens 100). But exactly this subjective point of view is important for the development of the novel, whose purpose is to "make available to the reader another person's state of consciousness" (Perry 135).

Bray claims that the epistolary form's representation of consciousness was perceived as its weakness, since it was seen as presenting a "relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity". However, he argues that the epistolary form helped develop "increasingly sophisticated ways of representing individual psychology" (1). In addition, Bray contradicts Perry's claim that letter fiction consists of "the outpourings of lavish consciousness heightened by suffering and isolation" (114) and so represents thoughts immediately put down on paper by arguing that the representation of consciousness in epistolary novels is not that "unmediated and transparent" (Bray 10).

In 1989, when "The Trick of It" was published, the letter no longer functioned as primary means of communication as it did in the 17th and 18th century. So, the question arises why contemporary authors like Michael Frayn still use the epistolary form for their works, although letters are no longer a vital part of our lives. One of the major advantages of the

epistolary form is its insight into the mind of the character(s) and its ability to explore subjectivity. Thoughts and feelings are put on paper rather immediately, since the fictional form of letter collections imitates real correspondences.

The Encyclopedia Britannica claims that the epistolary novel was used in the 20th century in order to “exploit linguistic humour and unintentional character revelations” (“epistolary novel”). Especially for postmodern writing, the letter provides a well suited form for displaying the ambiguity and illusion present in the postmodern world.

Letter fiction provides an allegorical treatment of problems commonly associated with postmodernism: the misleading materiality of the signifier; the dialogic nature of discourse; the triangularity of communication; the dialectic between private self and the public sphere; the similar dialectic between speech as presence vs. writing as absence; and the questionable status of “non-fictional” writing. (Beebe 205)

Altman argues that by choosing the epistolary form of the novel “the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers” (4). So, not only does the writer use the letter to produce meaning, but the reader also makes use of the letter in order to interpret epistolary fiction. A writer of epistolary fiction deliberately chooses the epistolary form in order to use the letter’s characteristics for his/her purpose. These characteristics influence the action, characters and themes of the work. Therefore, the epistolary form of the novel will play an essential role in the analysis of the characters’ identity construction.

3.2 The identity of JL

3.2.1 Narrative situation

As already mentioned, “The Trick of It”, as an epistolary novel, features a first person narrative situation and a first person narrator. The first person narrative situation corresponds with Genette’s term homodiegetic narrator, which denotes a narrator that is part of the story. In addition, the narrator talks about situations from his own life and his own experiences and thoughts, which makes him an I-as-protagonist narrator or autodiegetic narrator. This analysis, however, concentrates on the identity of JL, not the narrator Richard Dunnett. But, since the events of the story and the other characters are seen through the eyes of the limited narrator, his identity and relationship to JL are essential. Dunnett’s subjective point of view as a character in the story is the only source of information about JL’s identity. In order to analyze JL’s identity, we, therefore, have to have a close look at the narrator’s identity, too. In addition, Dunnett’s description of other characters is always also an implicit self-characterization that gives insight into his attitudes and values.

Autodiegetic narration appears most often in autobiographical works and diary novels. Although some similarities can be found between autobiographical fiction and the genre of the epistolary novel, they differ in quite a few points. Autobiographical works may have the same narrative situation and also give insight into a character’s intimate thoughts and feelings, but, in contrast to the epistolary novel, the narrator of an autobiographical work already knows the end of the story before he starts narrating. This temporal structure is one of the characteristics of the epistolary novel. The narrator, like Dunnett, does not know how the story is going to unfold in the course of the narration. In an interview with Field, Frayn says that,

What really attracted me to writing a story in letters is the question of placing the narrative in time. In traditional narrative you tell a story by starting at the beginning and going through to the end, and so, though your standpoint as a narrator is after the story has finished, the artifice, the convention, is not to reveal at the beginning of the story what you already know. The more you think about it, the odder this is. The advantage of doing it in letters is that your standpoint is at the end of each letter, so the narrator, too, can be genuinely surprised by the developments in the story.

Lodge also points out this advantage of a novel in letters, which “chronicle an ongoing process” (23). Unlike many other novels, the narrator does not have to artificially create

suspense by revealing the story piece by piece but is “genuinely surprised” by what is happening to him.

The novel “The Trick of It” has been published in 1989 and was Frayn’s first novel since the publication of “Sweet Dreams” in 1973. When asked about the long time span between the publications of the two novels, he replied that he had the feeling of losing some “authorial voice”. In his opinion he “got around the problem in *The Trick of It* by writing the story through a character” (Field). Thus, any authorial voice is omitted and all events are narrated solely by the main character of the story.

There also exist a number of similarities between the epistolary novel and the diary novel. The diary novel also features a first person narrator. In addition, the two genres are structurally related, since both present periodic writing and are “particularly suited to the description of events that took place in the recent or immediate past and to the expression of present thoughts and feelings” (Martens 77). Moreover, the two genres are similar in their temporal structure. Like the narrator of an epistolary novel, the narrator of a diary novel has no knowledge of the ending of his/her story and each letter or diary entry represents a new stage in the mind of the narrator.

In contrast to the epistolary novel, however, the diary novel is supposed to be private and does not address a fictive reader. Although the typical diary entry starts with “Dear Diary”, the entries are not intended for an audience. As the narrator of a diary novel does not have to pay attention to a reader or addressee, feelings and thoughts may be more unmediated. In a letter novel, the addressee influences the content and style of the letters and may play a role in the plot. As Martens (78) argues, there are degrees of involvement of the addressee. Especially in an epistolary novel with only one writer, the fictive reader may affect the plot and style of the letters in various degrees.

In “The Trick of it”, the addressee influences the plot only to a very small degree. The Australian friend does not give direct advice like other confidants in classical epistolary novels and seems at times to be “a mere ear for the reception of confidences” (Martens 78). However, even if the addressee is a mere confidant, “a letter is always addressed to a specific addressee, whose anticipated response conditions the discourse, and makes it rhetorically more complex, interesting and obliquely revealing” (Lodge 23). It could be argued that the events in the life of the friend present some kind of subplot, which is only referred to in every

other letter. The narrator asks about the friend's girlfriend, thanks him for his letters, wishes him a merry Christmas and congratulates him on his marriage and on the birth of his baby.

It seems, however, that all these references to the life of the narrator's friend were written entirely out of politeness. Dunnett, for example, writes, "Oh bugger! I should have asked how Diane was! No, I shouldn't. Because she's not called Diane. [...] I shall think of her as D. How's D?" (Frayn 67). Also, near the end of the novel, he quickly inserts the following sentences at the end of a letter, "O, I should have said earlier – best wishes. It must be due any day now" (125). These and many more instances enforce the feeling that the narrator does not really want to know how his friend's life is going but just includes sentences like "Are you well? And D? And Charles?" (114) because they represent a convention in letter correspondences.

The Australian friend, whose name is never mentioned in the book, directly affects the main plot only when he, his wife and their child pay Dunnett and JL a surprise visit. But even this visit is only mentioned on two pages (84 and 85) before the narrator continues talking about his experiences with his wife. So, the addressee in "The Trick of It" only plays a minor role in the plot and serves mainly as confidant and collector, which will be dealt with later in this chapter.

In addition to the addressee, a second very important difference can be made between the epistolary novel and the diary novel. The letter can play a part in the plot. Letters may be opened by someone who should not read them, they may arrive late or may not arrive at all. As Duyfhuizen (1) argues, "all epistolary narratives contain a double narrative". There is the narrative of the events, but also the frame narrative of the transmission of the letters, which report these events. One example, where this frame narrative can be seen is at the beginning of the letter on page 21, where the narrator writes, "I was immensely irritated by your letter. Entirely the wrong tone. This is because you wrote it before you received my last letter, which I wrote *after* meeting JL. [...] I'm sorry. It's not your fault. It's the Paleolithic slowness of aircraft between England and Australia" (Frayn 21).

The narrator also mentions the process of writing the letter and posting it. "I shall just have time to post this letter in that post-box on the corner of Dirac Drive [...]. Or rather before I *don't* drop it into the post-box. Because I'm not sending it, am I" (20). Since this frame narrative is essentially epistolary, the author increases the authenticity of the novel by

including letters that arrive late and passages where the narrator talks about writing them. William Gass argued,

In every art two contradictory impulses are in a state of Manichean war: the impulse to communicate and so treat the medium of communication as a means and the impulse to make an artefact out of the materials and so treat the medium as an end. (qtd. in Waugh 14f)

“The Trick of It” can be called a metafictional novel, since it “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”. It includes a number of strategies of metafiction, like “a celebration of the power of the creative imagination, [...] a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality”, an exploration of the arbitrary linguistic system, frames and frame-breaks and the construction and deconstruction of illusion (Waugh 2).

3.2.2 The narrator Dunnett

The epistolary novel, as already argued, focuses on the inner life of the narrator, his subjective perspective, and it “emphasizes the psychological angle of view” (Perry 119). Everything written in the letters reflects the narrator’s personality, also descriptions of other characters, since every altero-characterization also presents an auto-characterization. In choosing the epistolary form with only one correspondent, Frayn consciously heightens the narrator’s self-centeredness. Not only the narrative form of the letter, in which one person reflects about past events, but also the content of the letters indicate a certain egocentricity. “Phone. Ringing. Hold on. No. Just some student having a breakdown” (Frayn 26). There are only a few traces of other characters and, although Dunnett is obsessed with JL, he does not provide a lot of information about her.

His indifference towards other people can be observed in the following two examples. Firstly, Dunnett only takes a minor interest in the life of his friend in Australia. His questions about the friend’s wife and child seem to be a mere politeness and convention. Also, he constantly forgets the wife’s name, but would not admit it. In the letter written in the train, he blames the train for not spelling the name right, although the reader, by this time, already knows the narrator and his inability or refusal to remember names. “Did I ask after Diane Davida – oh this bloody train! – your *copine* in French Lit. – Daniela?” (Frayn 52). Secondly, no other character is important enough to mention his/her real name. His wife’s sons, who are part of the family after their marriage, are still only referred to as 2s. The addressee, his best friend, is

also denied a name and even JL's real name is never mentioned, which establishes a distance between them from the start.

Along with his egotism comes a feeling of superiority, of vanity. Dunnett would say, for example, that he is "an angel sent by God" (49) and that he is nearer JL than her sons or her ex-husband. "The sons had left by this time – they had an important party to go to. (That's the difference between mere sons and someone who's teaching your books, you see.)" (48). In order to show his superiority over the ex-husband, Dunnett calls him by various nicknames, like "Used Books" and "Dirty Books". The same strategy is used in connection with his academic colleagues and his family. The "Bald Eagle", "Pope John" or "La Beldam Sans Merci" (7) are all members of his department. According to Moseley, using nicknames "helps enliven accounts of departmental life" (68), but it also shows that Dunnett does not take them seriously.

The relationship with his rivals, other scholars studying JL, is more complicated. Moseley argues that "Dunnett is a complicated mixture of professional insecurity and arrogance" (67). The first time he mentions them, the reader already senses some kind of anxiety, of insecurity that is expressed by sarcasm.

I don't know why I call them rivals. That's not how I think of them. Fellow-specialists. Comrades in arms. I expect my esteemed colleague Vlad the Impaler is always masterfully sweeping his specimens off on joint family holidays in Tuscany before he puts them into the killing-bottle and pins them into his collection. And I'm sure that creepy little woman from somewhere in Pennsylvania who can't spell heuristic, Dr Stoff, or Swoff, or whatever she's called, is over here every summer with little jars of home-made arse-salve, weasling her way in to dinner. (Frayn 2)

Dunnett is, therefore, especially proud that he spent a night with JL. "In one huge bound, it occurred to me, I had overtaken the dreaded Impaler. He hadn't got this far in his researches" (19). His insecurity, however, reaches beyond the academic field. After spending the night with JL, he writes, "I can see already, for instance, even before this instalment leaves my hand, that I ought to have stayed and escorted her into breakfast" (28). And when she does not reply, he is devastated. "I've been washed up on the beach and forgotten about. [...] I'm going to spend the rest of my life in this dreadful place. I'm going to die here" (ibid.).

In the course of the novel, the anxiety felt towards his rivals and JL turns into jealousy and paranoia. The first signs of jealousy can be detected after the new book is finished. Dunnett cannot help feeling that "their" child is actually only his wife's child, because he can find no

traces of himself in it. He is deeply disappointed that he has not contributed anything to the marvellous new work. “What’s happened to all the great drama on the stairs? I thought that’s what she was writing about. I mean when I rushed up and tackled the madwoman. When I made her the Ovaltine. Why has she forgotten about *that?*” (79).

When Dunnett realizes that the book has been written entirely without his influence, he tries to advise his wife in her writing. He is desperate to contribute to her work no matter how. He proposes something a bit more postmodern with an “ironic self-awareness” (87), since he is convinced that no one knows JL’s work better than he does. Of course, Dunnett is offended when the agent and the publisher do not like his changes and even forwarded the transcript to other specialists. Moreover, JL has decided to write a book about his family including his mother but not him, which makes Dunnett write, “[s]he’s abandoning me for my mother” (128). He realizes that he has no impact on JL’s writing at all, so he tries to write a novel himself. “Part of my aim is to demonstrate that any bloody fool can do it” (108).

The anxiety he experiences at the beginning of the novel towards his rivals develops into pure paranoia at the end of the novel. He is situated in an academic, personal desert as well as an actual one. Already in Abu Dhabi, Dunnett hears about a fellow academic who wants to write a study about JL and starts imagining this academic reading his letters. “But why does he want her letters? You don’t need letters to write a critical study. I think he has his sight on something biographical” (113). He cannot stand the thought that someone else is writing JL’s biography and also reads his letters. “Can you read my handwriting, by the way?” (114) is a sentence put in the letter for the young academic to read. His paranoia goes so far that he advises his friend to burn his letters so that nobody will ever read them. He quickly revokes his decision when he realizes that the letters are everything that is left of his life. In writing his letters, Dunnett has not only constructed a piece of literary work, but he also constructed his life. Waugh (24) claims that “for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one’s ‘reality’”.

Plot, structure and language of the novel work together to create the picture of an obsessive, egocentric, paranoid and insecure academic. Although he is also a husband, step-father and son, he puts his role as a critic on top of everything else. Dunnett does not really care about his mother until she is the subject of JL’s new work. His mother only occupies a few lines at the beginning of the novel. “Sorry about your mother. Mine is on the blink, too. Knee this time” (40). He may not even have mentioned his mother’s death if it was not JL who cared for

her in her last months. Most interesting is, however, his relationship with his wife and the priority of his identity as a critic above that as a husband. If it was not for his career as a critic, he would probably never have married JL, since it was the seriousness of her works that he came to love, the “tradition of literature as a moral force” (56). He hopes to gain insight into her life as a writer but is deeply disappointed.

3.2.3 Reliability of the Narrator

Unreliability can be detected if there is a discrepancy between the story and how the story is told. Moreover, the narrator’s story may also violate generally accepted norms and truths, which indicate unreliability. A first-person narrator is essentially unreliable, since his perceptions are always subjective and his knowledge is limited. It is, however, difficult to determine if a narrator is unreliable when he is the only voice in a novel. In a letter novel with more than one correspondent, an unreliable narrator can more easily be identified, because the reader also perceives the story from other points of view. The narrator’s voice “can be broken into contrasting expressions of his personality” (Martens 77). In a novel like “The Trick Of It”, where we have to rely on the perspective of only one person, it is harder to identify if the narrator is insincere. Richard Dunnett does not violate any physical laws or cultural norms, but he can still be seen as an unreliable character.

Firstly, Dunnett constantly adjusts events he has narrated. He, for example, writes that he escorted JL to her room after she lectured at his university. “A brief handshake at her door, another of the smiles and I was walking back to my own rooms”. A few sentences later, he claims that he heard the Milk Man on his way home. “Hold on, though, you think. Don’t put this letter in the envelope just yet. Write a P, you urge me, and then an S. Let’s discuss this a little further. Because, with your usual acute eye for the text, you have noticed a tiny discrepancy in the account above” (Frayn 11). By the fictive thoughts of the addressee, which are basically the narrator’s own thoughts, his lie is exposed. Here, the addressee’s anticipated response does clearly influence the discourse.

It can be argued that by admitting to have been untrue, the narrator becomes more reliable, especially since he reveals the truth shortly after. “It gave us a great deal of pleasure. Didn’t it, dear? Yes, she says. What, darling ...? Yes, my wife joins me in expressing our heartfelt thanks and appreciation. Actually she doesn’t, because she’s upstairs working. I made that bit up” (62). In this passage, the narrator confesses that his conversation is imaginary straight away. There are, however, other passages that enforce the narrator’s unreliability. On page 15,

Dunnett relates that he bought condoms in the Student Union between the seminar and dinner, but on page 25 he admits,

And don't say But everyone saw you buying those Durex Fetherlite. That was all rubbish. No one saw me buying any Durex Fetherlite, because I didn't buy any. They don't have Durex Fetherlite in the machine in the Student Union. (I've been saving up that crushing little rejoinder for a rainy day, and a rainy day it now is.).

At this point, the reader may wonder what else the narrator has left out or narrated falsely. In addition to deceiving the reader, the narrator also deceives himself. He states that he was in London because of a rally and just happened to be in JL's neighbourhood. In his account of how he got to ring JL's doorbell, neither the reader nor he himself can be deceived by such an unsuccessful denial.

Well, now. In the first place I wasn't standing in the street, I was walking along it. I was just going to ring her bell, on the off-chance, in passing, just as anyone might, if they found themselves in the locality of some old acquaintance... Yes! I genuinely was in the neighbourhood...! How? Because I had to go up to London for a rally. [...] Was the rally outside her house? No, of course it wasn't, but I had to go on from the rally to this other thing [...] Exactly, it was pure chance. These things happen. They certainly do. (44f)

So, in addition to a first person narrator being unreliable by definition, the narrator in "The Trick of It" enforces this characteristic by giving false accounts of the story and by trying to deceive himself. Also, the second half of the letter correspondence is missing, as well as JL's perspective on the story that might shed light on the credibility of Dunnett's accounts. It is, therefore, important not to take the narrator's words for granted, especially when it comes to his portrayal of JL.

3.2.4 Time

Time represents an important aspect in epistolary novels. Bray argues that the "epistolary narrative [...] oscillates between unity and disintegration of self" (16). Similarly, Stanzel said, "the characteristic feature of the quasi-autobiographical first person narrative situation is the internal tension between the self as hero and the self as narrator" (qtd. in Bray 17). These two selves, the narrating I and the experiencing I, are divided by time. The narrative distance is usually very small in epistolary novels and diary novels, since the narrator usually writes about his experiences shortly after he experienced them. So, apart from the postmodern notion of a disintegrated self, the narrator in epistolary novels already has two distinct identities from the start.

The relation between these identities, the experiencing I and the narrating I, can reach from identification to complete estrangement. In “The Trick of It”, the narrator usually identifies with his past self and does not significantly change in his personality, also because the narrative distance is extremely small. Still, Genette argues that a first person narrator may focalize through his past self. “Here, the narrator is at one and the same time still the hero and already someone else: the events of the day are already in the past; the feelings of the evening or the next day are fully of the present, and here focalization through the narrator is at the same time focalization through the hero” (qtd. in Bray 18). So, the two selves are always distinct, since one cannot write about and experience an event at the same time. Genette’s claim corresponds with Altman’s argument that there is no epistolary present. “The epistolary present is caught up in the impossibility of seizing itself, since the narrative present must necessarily postdate or anticipate the events narrated” (Altman 127).

Not only authors of popular 18th century epistolary fiction like Richardson wanted their novels to feature “at the moment”- writing to give the reader access to the intimate thoughts and feeling of the narrator directly after an event (Bray 19f). Frayn also wants to convince the reader of the letter’s immediacy. The narrator even manages to somehow do the impossible and write about an event at the time it is happening and therefore falsifies Altman’s argument. “What makes me want to hammer my fist on the table... Phone. Ringing. Hold on” (Frayn 26). Since the ringing of the phone presents a longer event that does not need the action of the narrator, the narrative present can, in this case, be grasped. Other passages are not that instantaneous but still present a very narrow time span between experiencing and narrating. “More of this right now. Come running all the way back to the kitchen to tell you. She’s not asleep at all” (49).

One reason for why an author may stress the immediacy of the letters may be to understand the writer’s “sensitivity, the whims of emotions, and the succession and evolution of his innermost feelings” (Visconti qtd in Bray 19). So, in contrast to other novels with a first-person narrator, novels that feature periodic writing may give an account of the state of mind of the narrator more successfully. In addition, it shows the process of identity and character development. In autobiographical fiction, for example, the narrator may look back on the events and remember his feelings and thoughts, but he will never be able to fully reconstruct his state of mind at the time of the event. Frayn makes use of this characteristic of epistolary fiction and shows the process of the narrator’s and JL’s identity construction and the development of their relationship.

3.2.5 Language

In the relationship between the narrator and JL, language plays an important role, since both of them work in the field of literature, one as a writer, one as a critic. Language also tells a lot about the narrator's character and intentions and is one of the main sources of humour. The metafictional nature of the novel is enforced, since the text features "an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions [... and] a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing" (Waugh 2). Throughout the novel, Dunnett wants to establish an equality between him and his wife. He tries to write as she does but fails, since he lacks the ingredients to become a successful writer. Lodge explains the extensive use of metaphors, adjectives and adverbs by saying, "The narrator must vividly convey the comedy of his plight, but he cannot be allowed true eloquence, for that would contradict his inability to master the "trick of it"" (Lodge 24).

Dunnett struggles to come up with eloquent phrases and paragraphs but exaggerates, as can be seen in the following example. "And so, with the sea breaking on the rocks, and the orchestra thundering, and the eerie horrors howling, and the little white scruples scrupling in thinly in the wind, I will bring this mighty missive to a close" (Frayn 20). Also, on page 41, the narrator goes a bit too far in stating that "forgotten questions and meaningless answers passing each other somewhere over the Indian Ocean at thirty thousand feet – an image of human communication. Of love and literature and life". Statements like these make the reader wonder again if Dunnett really only writes to his friend or has another audience in mind. But exactly this combination of philosophical questions and literary metaphors with everyday objects or situations creates comedy.

In the following example, the narrator combines JL's sadness and exhaustion after the fight on the stairs with a simple cup of Ovaltine, which produces a rather comical scene.

She sat down in a little heap at the kitchen table with her head cradled in her hands, gazing down into the Ovaltine like an exhausted child. I watched her discreetly across the table. The smile had gone forever. That unblinking gaze was turned now not on the souls of men but on some dark vision in the depths of the Ovaltine. (48)

After phrases like the "unblinking gaze", the "souls of men" and "dark visions", the reader expects words like "ocean" or "sky" to end the sentence. Instead, the narrator chose "Ovaltine" and proves again that he does not have what it takes to become a writer like his wife.

One rather peculiar metaphor is used near the end of the novel. On page 75, the narrator treats his wife's new book like a newborn baby after his friend told him about his new "real" baby. "I now feel very guilty that I didn't send you a card to announce the happy event at our end [...] Ten pounds five ounces, our little monster". The comparison of the new book with a baby not only shows his disinterest for his friend in Australia but also the significance of JL's new work for his life. The arrival of the new novel presents a milestone and a turning point in his life and in their relationship. Again, the narrator creates comedy by relating every aspect of pregnancy and child birth to the birth of a new book. "It's a difficult time for the father, don't you think?" (75). He relates, "I talk about our book and dandle it fondly on my knee. I even occasionally change a dirty spelling" (76).

3.2.6 Separation, Isolation and Obsession

Separation and Isolation are recurrent themes in epistolary fiction. Without a separation of the correspondents there would be no need to write letters. According to Perry, separation also enables the characters to perform "a self-conscious and self-perpetuating process of emotional self-examination which gathers momentum and ultimately becomes more important than the communicating" (117). Apart from the addressee's visit and the occasional polite questions about his wife and son, the Australian friend performs only the function of a confidant. He is the only person the narrator can talk to. Dunnett imagines whole conversations with his friend in which he discusses decisions and events, which do not depict the addressee's personality but Dunnett's consciousness.

Moreover, Altman argues that an epistolary novel can only exist if the letters are collected and that "the epistolary confidant is most fundamentally an archivist" (53). Dunnett relies on his confidant to collect and archive the letters, since he is convinced that his correspondences will one day be important enough to be published. "cf., if you've forgotten who DB is, my letter to you approx. MDLXIX in what will surely one day be my *Collected Correspondence*" (Frayn 2). His letters seem to be so important that he even wants his friend to destroy them so that the young academic writing a study about JL cannot use them. The fact that his friend keeps his letters in a safe place is unquestionable. So, when he hears that his letters have been lost, his world is falling apart, because they provide his "entire literary remains" (5).

If the letters are lost, however, how is the reader able to read them? The Australian friend may have lied and collected the letters, also they may have been found again. This metafictional paradox cannot easily be explained and once more shows the difference between fiction and reality and the construction and deconstruction of a fictional illusion. The question of the

editor and how the letters became available, as well as its relevance for the narrator show the power of the letter and its significance as a medium of transmission. According to Duyfhuizen (12), “[t]he letter collection is a powerful weapon primarily because it documents transgressive behavior”.

Apart from separation, the epistolary novel highlights isolation. Most letter writers are somehow isolated. In the classical epistolary novel of the 17th and 18th century, women were locked in their chambers, but “at the most basic level it speaks to the deeper truth that people are locked in their own skin, in their own consciousness” (Perry 107). In “The Trick of It”, the narrator is clearly locked out of his wife’s creative process and alienated from the rest of society. He “had become a displaced person, shunted from one transit event to the next” (Frayn 33) and feels excluded from the writing process.

In addition, Dunnett tries to isolate his wife from the rest of society, especially from other academics interested in her work in order to have her (and her works) for himself. “I shall take particular pleasure in seeing off all the other academic bloodsuckers” (59). Since moving to the country does not prevent people from getting in touch with JL, they move to Abu Dhabi, where the air is clean of agents, publishers and film producers. In spite of this isolation, the relationship between Dunnett and his wife still deteriorates until it is finally made clear to him that he will never be able to partake in or influence JL’s work. “But you don’t own the words I say or the thoughts I think, and you never will, and you never can” (118).

Obsession also plays an essential role in “The Trick of It”. Dunnett is obsessed with JL’s work, with her as a person and finally with his letter collection. Perry claims that letter fiction is often repetitious, since the writer wants to write himself out of an obsession (113). The narrator’s predisposition for obsessions can already be detected in his dealing with JL’s mismatching underwear. He even confesses becoming obsessed with the new book’s draft that has been sent to another academic. And finally, his obsession about his letters and the young scholar, who wants to write a study about JL, demands his whole attention and questions the confidence in his addressee. “Or perhaps you have already given him my letters – sold him them – I hope you stood out for a good price – and dare not mention it” (Frayn 117).

Separation, Isolation and Obsession are themes often dealt with in epistolary fiction, since they are central to the process of letter writing. Frayn makes use of these characteristics in order to characterize his narrator as an isolated, obsessive person who is locked in his own

world of literature with little relation to the real world. Apart from creating humour, his comparison of JL's new book with his friend's baby highlights this characteristic. "The precious bundle was put into my arms six weeks before Charles James etc. saw the light of day, and I should be happy to share with you the experience I have gained of fatherhood" (75). Dunnett is an odd character and his reactions to the events of the plot underline his peculiarity. It is not only his unreliability that is striking but also his distorted judgment.

3.2.7 JL's identity construction

Since JL's character is only seen through the eyes of the narrator, we can only analyze her identity in reference to the narrator's identity. It is, however, hard to distinguish between truth and lie, because Dunnett is not only unreliable because of his subjective view as a character in the story, but also because he likes to exaggerate and make up stories. What is really striking is that JL's own words are rarely present in the novel, although Dunnett is obsessed with her. Nearly every conversation that is written about in the letters is made up by the narrator. "I didn't improve on things: I just made the whole damn thing up from start to finish. We never had any such conversation" (107). Throughout the novel, JL remains a mystery to the reader and the narrator. We do not get any insight into her feelings and thoughts. One reason is, without doubt, the narrator's lack of interest in JL as a person. He elaborates on her works and even on her underwear, but shows little interest in her state of mind. After the incident on the stairs, for example, he gives more thought to the situation as being "the very heart of the literary process" than to the actual incident.

The first thing the reader learns about JL is that she is "absolutely ordinary" (6). The use of these words is rather surprising, because we know that the narrator has spent his lifetime studying her works. He describes her outward appearance as "matronly" (54) and "without worldliness and neatness" (31). In contrast, he considers her to be "The Queen! Yes! That's what she's like! Or rather, she's what the Queen would be like if the Queen were less like the Queen. [...] She is *our* Queen – by the Grace of God Defender of the Fiction, Empress of Character and Sovereign of the Blessed Plot" (7). It seems as if Dunnett is only interested in his wife's profession and her seriousness. He tries to describe her outer appearance and the character traits he admires about her, but fails and always comes back to the features relevant for a MajWOOT (a major writer of our times).

To a large extent, JL's identity is constructed through means of contrast to the narrator's identity. While the narrator is essentially self-conscious and insecure, JL is "quietly and unshakeably right" (7) and "at peace with herself" (8). Also, she is a caring person who likes

to talk and listen to people, what cannot be said about Dunnett. He is annoyed by his wife's engagement with his family members, who are little more than bugs to him. "The majwoot has picked up old buckets and boxes in the dark corners of my life and found all those creatures creeping about. [...] We've been crawling all over England shaking their feelers" (68).

One of the main contrasts in the novel is, however, that between the writer and the critic. JL's profession as a creative writer and Dunnett's job as academic critic are responsible for the beginning but also the end of their relationship. There is an ongoing struggle in the novel whether there is equality between the novelist and the critic. At the beginning of their relationship, Dunnett writes that "for that short time she knew me. She knew me as I knew her, and we were equal" (19). But already after the night at the university, the balance seems to shift, because it is Dunnett who starts writing letters to JL, sending her flowers and visiting her in London. In London he, for the first time, becomes aware that she does not read anything he has published. "I read every word she writes, even though not a single one of them is about me. She reads not a single word I write, even though most of them are about her. Well, to hell with it" (35f). It becomes clear that Dunnett is dependent on her work and her as a person, whereas JL represents independence as a writer and a woman.

In his letter from the night before his marriage, Dunnett thinks he will "be able to protect her privacy" (58) by moving to the country with his wife. He is not rescuing her out of mere altruism, however. He is convinced that his marriage will give him an enormous advantage over his rivals and other academics, because his bride is "forsaking all others" (59). In the course of the events Dunnett becomes more and more aware that he has no insight at all into the mind of his wife and more importantly in her creative process. "Then she leans forward over the desk, and the shadow abruptly swells, violently pregnant with sudden thought. But what the thought is remains as shadowy as the head that thinks it" (65). The absence of her voice in the novel also makes it difficult for the reader to see more than this shadow.

JL locks herself away physically, which makes him recognize that "[t]his is life with a Majwoot – it's largely life without a Majwoot" (63). On the other hand, JL also refuses to talk about her work with Dunnett, which makes him feel jealous and secluded. "How would you feel if you found your wife standing on the roof and shouting through a megaphone to the whole of Melbourne about bizarre horrors and miseries which she'd never so much as hinted at to you in private?" (78). His feeling of exclusion heightens when the new book is finished, which does not include any references to him. Also, JL does not accept the changes to the

novel he has suggested. The deterioration of their relationship can already be noticed when he shows his insecurity about JL's decision of marrying him. He calls her decision arbitrary and sudden and slowly loses the confidence he had at the beginning of their marriage. Losing the job at the university proves another step on a downward spiral, which leads him to Abu Dhabi. On the flight to Abu Dhabi, Dunnett already confesses, "Here I was, falling into nothingness, already forgotten about, while she sailed along in first class with her headset on" (101).

Dunnett's exclusion from her world of literature maddens him, but her decision to write about his family and, again, excluding him marks a turning point in his life and relationship. He finally realizes that he and his wife are not as equal as he thought. "[W]e were not aboard the same train. We were on parallel tracks, gazing through the glass at each other, only a few feet apart, as if sharing a compartment" (102). It seems as if he finally gives up the idea of interfering in his wife's work. That is why he tries to write a novel on his own. Frayn argues that "the world of the novelist and that of the writer overlap but are not the same" (Field) and, in spite of Dunnett's efforts, he has to admit that "academic criticism is irrelevant to creativity" (Moseley 69).

She's never accepted what *I* do; she's always despised my trade. Well, for a start I think she was amused that I wrote and lectured about her works, was even slightly flattered, though she never read a word of what I wrote. But the amusement settled into contempt, and the flattery into distaste. And when she spurned my trade, she spurned me. (Frayn 127)

Cohen (qtd. in Moseley 89) claims that the marriage portrayed in the novel reflects the argument that "[w]e love the other for the thing we lack". Dunnett loves JL exactly because she has something he lacks. She has got the special ingredient necessary to become a MajWOOT, she has the trick of it. Although Dunnett at some stage of his development thinks he has found out the trick, he, in the end, has to acknowledge, "[a]fter all these years I still had not the slightest idea how the conjuring trick was done. And this time I'd seen the whole performance going on right in front of my eyes – and that's what maddened me. In slow motion. Month by month, nothing hidden" (123f). One example of his lack of the trick is naming. When they want to change the name of their road, he remarks, "[a]t this point I reach the end of my imagination. [...] Whereas she, of course, is naming away in her books all the time. Names, names, names and never a second thought. That's one of the differences between us" (64).

“The Trick of It” is essentially a novel about a literary critic and his subjective perception of the world. By choosing the form of an epistolary narrative, Frayn consciously also chose the latter’s characteristics, its structure, patterns and themes, which help portraying the development of the narrator’s thoughts and feelings. Frayn said that

[w]hat the novel is about is not just the writing of books, it is about the opacity of other people's mental processes--about how hard it is to see what's going on inside somebody else's head. You would like to know how other people feel, how other people think, so all the time you have to make projections, but you can't in fact know. (Field)

By using the letter form, we cannot see the thoughts and feelings of other characters apart from the narrator. Even JL, his wife and the subject of his work, remains not more than a shadow. We only get glimpses of her character. She is a hard-working woman, a mother of two sons, divorced and independent. But since the narrator considers himself above all a critic, he is not able to consider his wife anything else than a Majwoot. From the beginning of their relationship until the end of their marriage, he can only think of her as novelist and neglects all other roles she may play in her life and in his. As mentioned before, he is more interested in being at the heart of the literary process than being with JL as a person. All attributes he admires in her are attributes needed to write novels. As a normal woman she is ordinary to him, but as a writer she is the Queen. Her identity is divers and she is at times writer, wife, mother and caretaker. Still, the narrator concentrates on her identity as writer, since the real person remains a mystery to him. She also remains mysterious for the reader, since her voice is very rarely present. The narrator’s identity together with JL’s missing voice in the novel make JL’s character serve as the embodiment of the creative writer.

4 John Fowles: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

4.1 The Neo-Victorian Novel

Neo-Victorian fiction emerged in the second half of the 20th century and designates fictional rewritings of the Victorian era. Most critics mark the beginning of the genre with publications like Jean Rhys' *Wilde Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). The last decades of the 20th century and the 21st century saw an ever increasing interest in the Victorian past and Neo-Victorian fiction. The Man Booker Prize shortlist, for example, shows that Neo-Victorian novels such as *Possession* by A.S. Byatt or *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters not only achieved popular but also critical success (Hadley 1f).

The question why the Victorian past exerts such fascination may be answered by the position they occupy in relation to the 20th century (7). The Victorians are far enough away from the present so that they no longer have a powerful influence over contemporary culture and politics. Moreover, the distance is far enough to show differences in life-styles and culture. Sex and sexuality is an aspect often referred to when speaking of the differences between the Victorian culture and contemporary culture. Still, the Victorians remain present in Britain through buildings, structures and institutions from the Victorian era (ibid.).

As Neo-Victorian fiction is a subgenre of historical fiction, an essential aspect is its engagement with the past and the distinction between history and fiction. These concerns also link Neo-Victorian fiction to postmodern fiction. Although not all Neo-Victorian novels use postmodern features, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* clearly is a postmodern work. Hutcheon uses TFLW as an example of 'historiographic metafiction', in her opinion, the typical postmodern form. Historiographic metafiction denotes "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 5). Hutcheon also engages with the question of history in postmodern fiction by arguing that historiographic metafiction acknowledges that history and fiction are both human constructs.

The Neo-Victorian novel as well as historiographic metafiction and historical fiction in general, share a concern for both, the past and the present, since the work is set in the past but written and read in the present.

With one foot in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth, these [Neo Victorian] texts highlight the need to understand neo-Victorian

fiction within both its contemporary and its Victorian context. Even those novels that are located wholly in the nineteenth century, however, incorporate an awareness of the contemporary position of the writer and reader since as historical fictions neo-Victorian novels necessarily adopt a dual relationship to the past. (Hadley 15)

This dual relationship reveals both the continuities and discontinuities between past and present. Forster (67), also, claims that TFLW is not a parody or a copy of a Victorian novel, but an exploitation of the form that emphasises the contrast between the centuries. The Neo-Victorian novel, therefore, is as much about the past as it is about the present, since “it requires that historical context in order to interrogate the present (as well as the past) through its critical irony” (Hutcheon 45).

4.2 Who is Sarah?

4.2.1 The Victorian aspect of the novel

The Victorian setting of Fowles' novel is essential for the novel's plot and themes. The author recreates the Victorian era using various narrative strategies. Firstly, Fowles' novel imitates the structure, the characters and other aspects of the Victorian novel. Mrs Poulteney, for example, represents the stereotypical Victorian old widow, a hypocritical, deeply-religious woman, who can be found in numerous Victorian novels. She is described as an "incipient sadist" for whom "there would have been a place in the Gestapo" (Fowles, *Woman* 20f). Sam, the Cockney manservant, as well as Ernestina, the proper young lady, also represent common 19th century stereotypes. In addition to the characters, the author also borrowed 19th century language and themes. The novel contains numerous discussions on popular Victorian topics like duty, faith vs. science, Darwinism, the decline of aristocracy, psychiatry, or the blooming consumerism. These topics and literary conventions help reviving the Victorian era.

Secondly, Fowles extensively quotes from real works in order to bridge the gap between history and fiction. These quotes, along with sociological studies, anachronistic references and the narrator's metafictional comments, however, rather destroy the illusion that the novel depicts reality. Waugh (31) argues that "the alternation of frame and frame-break (or the construction of an illusion through the imperceptibility of the frame and the shattering of illusion through the constant exposure of the frame) provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction". So, Fowles, at first, constructs a familiar reality and then deconstructs it using metafictional and postmodern strategies (like parody and pastiche) in order to demonstrate the constructedness of reality. Waugh (13) observes that "the defamiliarization proceeds from an extremely familiar base".

As already mentioned, an essential aspect of the novel is the difference between past and present. Many aspects of Victorian culture, like language, fashion but also modes of conceptual thought, are considerably different to our culture. Stetz (19) claims that Fowles establishes distance between the present and the past "using precise descriptions of clothing as a chronological marker". On the first few pages, Ernestina is described as a young lady

dressed in the height of fashion, for another wind was blowing in 1867: the beginning of a revolt against the crinoline and the large bonnet. [...] The colours of the young lady's clothes would strike us today as distinctly strident; but the world was then in the first fine throes of the discovery of aniline dyes. (Fowles, *Woman* 4f)

In addition to the importance of clothing in recreating the past, the quote also shows the impact of the narrator, who constantly “reminds us both of our temporal and philosophical difference from the Victorian world and of the author’s ever-present control of the narrative” (Kaplan 90).

Especially the Victorians’ attitude towards sex and sexuality is emphasised when talking about differences between the centuries. The Victorian age is generally considered a repressed age in terms of sexuality (see further Foucault) and positioned as inferior to the present. Fowles, however, questions the superiority of the present sexual attitudes over the past and argues that beauty and love are constant. He talks about Ernestina’s “ageless attraction” (*Woman* 267) and that during a shared look between Sarah and Charles “the moment overcame the age” (252). The seriousness and importance of sex is also constant, “the difference is a vocabulary, a degree of metaphor” (270). Since Fowles borrows the language of his novel from 19th century romances, sex as an event is barely present, but it is “an everpresent, quasi-pleasurable, but always agonistic discourse” (Kaplan 89).

Fowles even goes as far as saying that we may be more frustrated with sexuality than the Victorians, since we are bombarded with sex on a daily basis. Moreover, we have destroyed a sense of mystery and thereby destroyed a part of the pleasure (Fowles, *Woman* 270f). Fowles also demonstrates that our sexed age lacks part of the innocence of the Victorians. When Sarah and Mary sleep together in one bed, the reader is tempted to think of them as lesbians, but Victorians did not know this concept. “A thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867” (158). The author makes it clear that even if the Victorian age was sexually repressed, this does not mean that the modern age is sexually free and superior.

The novel offers a number of other links between the past and the present, as, for example, the constant battle between the self and society or between individual and totalitarian schemes (Foster 76f). Duty, the “agreeable conformity to the epochs current” (Fowles, *Woman* 51), is opposed to personal freedom. Loveday (62) claims that Charles has to choose between the Few and the Many. By choosing Sarah, he chooses the Few and an emancipation from society’s bonds. In addition to constant abstract ideas like love and freedom, parallels in human behaviour and character between the centuries can be detected. Charles’ form of the gentleman or scientist is recurring in all ages, for example, since it’s qualities can be traced back to the knights in the Middle Ages and forward to the modern computer scientist (Fowles, *Woman* 297f).

The French Lieutenant's Woman reveals both differences and parallels between past and present. Fowles suggests that “not only the Victorians had faults, but there are faults shared by our age, by all ages” (Tarbox 78), therefore, we should not feel superior in any way. He uses the Victorian setting in order to interrogate the present. Hargreaves (285f) concludes that one function of the Victorian context of the novel is “to flesh out not just the past but the present too, illuminating and troubling our assumptions about periodicity, literary fashions, and modes of conceptual thought. The Victorians are, in some way perhaps, as ‘Contemporary’ as we are ‘Victorian’”.

4.2.2 Language

As a metafictional work, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* points out the arbitrary nature of language as well as language's importance in creating reality. The different accents and registers help characterizing figures in the novel and do not only mark different geographic spaces but are also a marker of social status. While Mrs Poulteney or Ernestina speak upper-class Victorian English, Sam and Mary, as servants, use their regional dialect. The relation between language and social status is manifested in Sam, who aims at climbing up the social ladder. He represents a new emerging class of servants and anticipates a change in the social structure. “And he showed another mark of this new class [‘snobs’] in his struggle to command the language. [...] But his wrong a’s and h’s were not really comic; they were signs of a social revolution” (Fowles, *Woman* 43).

Charles’ use of language marks a typical feature of the Victorian upper class. He has various different modes of talking depending on the occasion and the listener.

Charles, as you will have noticed, had more than one vocabulary. With Sam in the morning, with Ernestina across a gay lunch, and here in the role of Alarmed Propriety ... he was almost three different men; and there will be others of him before we are finished. We may explain it biologically by Darwin’s phrase: *cryptic coloration*, survival by learning to blend in with the surroundings – with the unquestioned assumptions of one’s age or social caste. (145)

It becomes clear that the roles Charles occupies in various situations determine the way he speaks. These roles mark the different identities he adopts. Charles can be seen as just another postmodern character with a fragmented self, who is constantly in the process of searching for a unified identity.

Language is also used to establish a contrast between Charles and Sarah. Charles conforms to the norms of society and speaks from behind the mask of formality. Tarbox (62) claims that

Charles “construct[s] barriers with [his] own words in [his] adipose bantering, to keep truth or depth of feeling away”. Sarah, on the other hand, communicates a lot through looks and gestures and her language is much more direct and honest. Charles is bewildered when Sarah openly contradicts him, since “[a] woman did not contradict a man’s opinion when he was being serious unless it were in carefully measured terms” (Fowles, *Woman* 143). Moreover, Sarah makes him abandon his distancing, dishonest language. “Very few Victorians chose to question the cryptic coloration; but there was that in Sarah’s look which did. [...] They encouraged the mask, the safe distance; and this girl, behind her facade of humility, forbade it” (146).

Charles is unsure how to communicate with Sarah. Tarbox (63) suggests that Charles “has no language to use with her” and that “there is no formula for dealing with her as there is with Ernestina, Sam or Mr Freeman”. He often lapses back into formal language, as after the passionate kiss in the barn. Also, the note he sent her after they spent the night together features a post script that reads as follows: “On re-reading what I have written I perceive a formality my heart does not intend. Forgive it. You are both so close and yet a stranger – I know not how to phrase what I really feel” (Fowles, *Woman* 374). On the last pages of the novel, Charles recognizes “what had always been dissonant between them: the formality of his language – seen at its worst in the love-letter she had never received – and the directness of hers” (451). Language, therefore, is an essential aspect of the characterization of both, Charles and Sarah.

4.2.3 The Narrator

An especially interesting feature of the novel is its modern, 20th century narrator. He is, above all, an intrusive narrator with his intrusive comments, references to Victorian social and political history, and explanatory footnotes. By breaking into a scene he destroys the illusion that the story is real. Most critics rightly consider him an omniscient narrator, although he lacks important information about Sarah. Not only does he seemingly know everything about Darwin, Marx and European history, he also has insight into most characters and their subsequent lives. That is why the narrator can, e.g., tell that Ernestina dies on the day Hitler invades Poland (Fowles, *Woman* 28) or that Mrs Poulteney goes to hell (341). In scenes like these, the narrator clearly parodies the omniscient nature of his narration.

In addition, the narrator “enjoys playing a game of appearances” (Tarbox 68) with the readers in order to point out their false assumptions. A lengthy scene, for example, describes Charles’ unnecessarily equipped clothes for collecting fossils. The narrator, thereby, “prompts a feeling

of superior judgement in the reader, then derides him for his condescension” (ibid.) by saying, “[w]ell, we laugh. But [...] their folly in that direction was no more than a symptom of their seriousness in a much more important one” (Fowles, *Woman* 48). He makes the reader feel one way and then condemns him/her for feeling that way. As a consequence, the reader is forced to revise his/her assumptions of how reality and truth are constructed. The narrator, according to Kaplan (90), turns his audience into pupils with the “teacherly voiceover” and wants them to not judge by appearances as many characters in the novel do.

Yet, the narrator relies heavily on appearances, since he reveals himself to be a voyeur. In various scenes in the novel he zooms in on the (mainly female) characters as through a camera lens or telescope. The first impression of Sarah, Charles and Ernestina on the Cobb is given in exactly this mode of description:

The local spy – and there was one – might thus have deduced that these were two strangers, people of some taste, and not to be denied their enjoyment of the Cobb by a mere harsh wind. On the other hand he might, focusing his telescope more closely, have suspected that a mutual solitude interested them rather more than maritime architecture. (Fowles, *Woman* 4)

The narrator also enters Sarah’s hotel room in Exeter through the window after first describing the town and the houses. Tarbox (82) claims that the narrator undermines his own integrity when taking on a voyeuristic stance.

He also undermines his authority over the story and the characters in various ways. On the one hand, he considers himself a god, since he is the creator of the novel’s world. In chapter 55, the narrator enters this world as a passenger in the train, who has the “look of an omnipotent god” (Fowles, *Woman* 408). The second time he enters the novel, he has not changed and still “regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes” (465). On the other hand, the narrator wants to make the reader believe that he is not the typical omniscient narrator used in Victorian novels. In the prominent chapter 13, he pleads for autonomy and freedom for the characters in spite of their fictionality.

The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (97)

He suggests that a ‘real’ world needs to be independent from its creator, because “a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world” (96). This is why he grants

every character a certain extent of freedom. The author, however, is only playing games with the reader, as characters in a novel cannot really be free, but are obviously his creations.

The narrator's struggle between god and bystander is most evident in the character of Sarah. He makes no secret of her being his creation and remarks that "I will not make her teeter on the window-sill" (93) or that a certain gesture is "the first truly feminine gesture I have permitted her" (281). It becomes clear, however, that the narrator is only able to control her actions (if only occasionally), but not her thoughts. In chapter 13, he answers his question "Who is Sarah?" with "I do not know". He deliberately bans the reader from her thoughts and thereby grants her the utmost freedom. Sarah's thoughts and motives have to be filled in by the audience, since "I report, then, only the outward facts" (98).

The narrator refuses to explain Sarah, just as Sarah refuses to explain herself. "Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained" (358). Her independence is essential to Sarah, but Michael ("Sarah" 230) poses the question whether "a female character can be free within a work of fiction that denies her a point of view". In addition to not explaining Sarah's point of view, the narrator also refuses to choose an end to his story and leaves it for the reader to decide. He is unsure what to do with Charles and concludes that

Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight – but in fact fixes the fight, letting that want he himself favours win. [...] So I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight about which he is about to engage. [...] The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. (409)

This quote explains the narrator's reason for giving three distinctive endings to the novel, which will be discussed later. As the creator of the novel's world, the intrusive narrator destroys the illusion and exposes the artificiality of the story. Additionally, he tries to convince the reader that the characters in his story are not merely his inventions but have a mind of their own. Especially Sarah is pictured as an essentially independent character which, yet, has no voice of its own. The resulting mystery surrounding Sarah challenges the reader but also accounts for the enormous success of the novel.

4.2.4 Freedom as a major theme

Fowles' concern with human freedom is not only evident in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but in numerous other works like *The Magus* and, obviously, *The Collector*. Lynch (50) and many other critics see this freedom defined in the context of existentialism. Fowles, himself,

asserts in his famous essay *Notes on an Unfinished Novel* that Sarah and Charles are existentialists before their time (141), since “the Victorian age, and especially from 1850 on, was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas” (140). Freedom in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* can be divided into personal freedom and narrative freedom. The last chapter has already dealt with narrative freedom, which is the independence of characters from the author. Sarah has been the main example for this narrative freedom, since she is as independent from the narrator as possible. She also portrays the struggle for personal or social freedom. Lynch (51) defines this concept as a way of choosing an identity.

Sarah deliberately tells stories about her life in order to be freed from the norms of society. She chooses her role as social outcast by telling the story of Varguennes and her apparently lost virginity. She, thus, stands outside Victorian society, which allows her a great amount of freedom (Waugh 126). “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” (Fowles, *Woman* 176). Lynch (53) argues that due to Sarah’s imperfect socialisation, she cannot find a position for herself in Victorian society and asks “Where am I not ill placed?” (Fowles, *Woman* 251).

Her only option is to pretend to be a fallen woman, who has ignored (and still ignores) social conventions. She creates a fiction about herself in order to be free until she can achieve real social freedom. She became “a “nothing” for a time as a way of rejecting what was available to her as an identity”. “Her fictionalizing is not self-delusional, then, but rather conscious and purposeful” (Lynch 71, 63). At the end of the novel, Sarah has found this freedom and an identity she can accept. “I am happy, I am at last arrived, or so it seems to me, where I belong” (Fowles, *Woman* 453). On the contrary, Charles has, at the end of the story, not achieved an identity of his own.

The three different endings of the novel also relate to narrative freedom. Fowles offers three possible endings for the reader to choose from and, thereby, refuses to end his novel, since “[c]losure would end the “game” that provides a sense of freedom” (Lynch 67). Most critics agree that the first ending is the least plausible, since the narrator himself calls this ending too abrupt, arbitrary and lacking consonance. Charles’ return to Ernestina conforms to Victorian ideology. Loveday (59) believes that

[t]his is obviously not a possibility Fowles approves of, but it is a possibility nonetheless, and if the novelist is to allow his characters

their freedom this must include the freedom to do things he heartily disapproves of.

In the second and third ending, Sarah has found personal freedom and her role in society, in contrast to Charles, who is still trapped by his Victorian assumptions and social constraints. Sarah is no longer a fallen woman, which greatly surprises him. “He saw nothing; but only the folly of his own assumption that fallen women must continue falling – for had he not come to arrest the law of gravity? He was as shaken as a man who suddenly finds the world around him standing on its head” (Fowles, *Woman* 445).

The second ending with the reunion of Sarah and Charles can be considered “the triumph of the Victorian-romantic side of Charles’ personality” (Loveday 59). In this ending, Charles has a role in life again, as he is suddenly partner and father. The language of the last paragraphs in chapter 60 with the tearful eyes and the meaningful silence make the second conclusion almost seem like the parody of a Victorian romance. Lynch (69) claims that the unsatisfactory nature of the second ending and the fact that Charles borrowed freedom from Sarah, since he, himself, has not achieved one make a third ending necessary.

The third conclusion provides a more open end to the story, since, after Sarah’s rejection, Charles has to find a new identity. He feels that “their positions were strangely reversed” (Fowles, *Woman* 447). Just like Sarah, he now has to start fresh and find a role in life. He is now truly independent from other people and from society. “So it is the absence of a role that defines Charles as a character moving toward “existential” freedom” (Lynch 70). He is also in the process of finding social freedom. In this aspect, the novel parallels a *bildungsroman* with the protagonist on the way to a new, unknown identity (57). Like many other critics, Scruggs (97f) argues that all three endings are equally plausible and that all three are authentic “in that each reflects a fictional universe intimately tied to a specific historical period and the characters’ relationship to it”. Moreover, the endings force us to admit that “no single aesthetic reality will ever be truly mimetic, truly representative of the complexity of human life”.

Fowles presents the reader with three endings for various reasons. First, he wants to maintain the illusion that his characters have the power to decide between different endings to their stories. The narrator refuses to give a fixed closure and take away the energy, because he already established that “a planned world [...] is a dead world” (Fowles, *Woman* 96). Second, the open ending frustrates the readers’ generic expectations and makes them fix the fight by themselves. “He desires in his fiction to allow the reader the same psychoanalytic

reconstructive experience as the protagonist, with its attendant, sometimes uneasy freedoms” (Tarbox 9). The novel is, thus, an example for postmodernist fiction’s favour of textual indeterminacy to indicate the complexity of contemporary society (Gasiorek 194).

4.2.5 Charles Smithson

The lack of Sarah’s point of view in the novel makes an examination of Charles’ character necessary. Since her thoughts are absent, the only impressions we get of her come from the narrator or Charles. The narrator refuses (or is unable) to look into Sarah’s mind and can only narrate from the outside. Similarly, Charles finds it very hard to interpret Sarah due to the lack of information. Since he has no access to her thoughts, he has to “interpolate her state of mind from her actions, expressions, and words” (Michael, “Sarah” 229).

In addition, he also projects onto Sarah his submerged feelings and attributes emotions and intentions to her (Tarbox 64). Thereby, he creates his own version of Sarah to make her fit into established categories. Towards the end of the novel, he “became increasingly unsure of the frontier between the real Sarah and the Sarah he had created in so many such dreams” (Fowles, *Woman* 432). In the course of the narrative, Charles’ interpretation of her continuously changes with every bit of information he receives. Hargreaves (282) observes that the novel, amongst other things, deals with

the instability of narrative truth when its kaleidoscopic nature is revealed, [...] how ‘truth’ is vulnerable to different versions of itself, [...] how credibility and legitimacy are conferred – and of course confused – through the hierarchies of social and professional status.

Sarah proves to be unpredictable, sometimes contradictory and unable to classify (Tarbox 81f). Charles regards her as fallen woman, damsel in distress, manipulator or villain. Especially Sarah’s role as Charles’ mentor or guide towards existential freedom has been in the focus of many critics. Waugh (124), for example, claims that Charles “has to be led by Sarah Woodruff [...] to a recognition of what freedom entails”. Similarly, Foster (74) thinks that “Charles is brought to consciousness through the agency of a woman he admires but cannot understand”.

At the beginning of the novel, Charles occupies a conformist role in society and tries to be the perfect Victorian gentleman. He feels, however, that his life lived in “tranquil boredom” (Fowles, *Woman* 13) is going nowhere and expresses doubts about his marriage with Ernestina. He realises that “[h]is future had always seemed to him of vast potential; and now suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place” and wonders if, “[i]n this vital matter of the

woman with whom he had elected to share his life, had he not been only too conventional?" (130). His doubts are enforced when he meets Sarah. Her unorthodox nature evokes at the same time incomprehension and admiration. Charles is amazed by her due to "the combination of mystery, isolation, victimization, and assertiveness" (Foster 72). He is, yet, also shocked by her nonconformist behaviour, but even more by society's harsh response to this behaviour.

The story of Varguennes and Sarah's resulting position as outsider in society evoke sympathy in Charles and make him challenge society's rules. He realizes that his assumptions and codes of conduct are antiquated and foolish. "Slowly he began to understand one aspect of Sarah better: her feeling of resentment, of an unfair because remediable bias in society" (Fowles, *Woman* 412). He suddenly becomes aware of the problems of his own time: "its stifling propriety, its worship not only of the literal machine in transport and manufacturing but of the far more terrible machine now erecting in social convention" (150). Tarbox (2) argues that Charles and Sarah, at the beginning, lead inauthentic lives. They, both, wear masks to conceal their true identity. Sarah does this deliberately so that she is not restricted by Victorian norms, whereas Charles plays a role as a substitute for true identity.

He is "temporarily blinded by the customs and fashions of his own time, and thus looks upon life with tunnel vision" (6). Sarah, however, is able to see through the roles people play. She "saw through people in subtler ways" and "saw them as they were and not as they tried to seem" (Fowles, *Woman* 53). In the course of the novel, Charles' vision is expanded so that he can see that "[a]ll those painted screens erected by man to shut out reality – history, religion, duty, social position, all were illusions, mere opium fantasies" (207). These new revelations lead to a deconstruction of Charles' identity as Victorian gentleman and leave him in a state of confusion and anxiety. The culmination of this "mess" is the night with Sarah, when, after their sex, "all lay razed; all principle, all future, all faith, all honourable intent" (354). Moreover, Charles finds out that Sarah was still a virgin and that the story of Varguennes was a lie, which heightens his confusion.

By telling the story of Varguennes, Sarah has achieved a sense of freedom. Like Sarah, Charles has freed himself of the bonds of society by breaking the engagement with Ernestina and becoming an outsider as well. This freedom is, however, coupled with misery. The narrator explains that "[h]e had not the benefit of existentialist terminology; but what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom – that is, the realization that one *is* free

and the realization that being free is a situation of terror” (343f). Since he is free and no longer occupies a fixed role in society, he now has to reconstruct himself.

During Charles’ stay in America and in the second ending, his identity relies heavily on Sarah. He imagines rescuing his damsel in distress and escaping society together. “[H]e had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile” (430). This is why Lynch (69) argues that Charles has found no freedom of his own but just borrowed freedom from Sarah, whereas, in the third ending, he “may be attempting a true assertion of fictional/ existential freedom by rejecting the playing of intertextual roles entirely”. Many critics also believe the third ending to be the most probable, because Charles moves towards authentic existential freedom.

In the third ending, Charles has to start fresh, since he is as alienated from society as Sarah was at the beginning. “And at the gate, the future made present, found he did not know where to go. It was as if he found himself reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories. But with the baby’s helplessness – all to be recommenced, all to be learnt again!” (Fowles, *Woman* 468). He has to reconstruct himself and he has to find an identity for himself. Corresponding to the postmodern notion of identification as a continuous process, Charles’ search for identity and personal freedom is also described as a choice to be made over and over again. In the dialogue between Charles and an imaginary figure, he is told that “you thought when you came to this city, did you not, to prove to yourself you were not yet in the prison of your future. But escape is not one act, my friend. [...] Each day, Charles, each hour, it has to be taken again” (365). And, although he has, in the end, lost everything, “he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build” (470).

4.2.6 Sarah Woodruff

Charles may be the protagonist of the novel, but Sarah Woodruff is, without a doubt, the central figure. Numerous works have been dedicated to the interpretation of her fictional character, which is a more than challenging undertaking for two reasons. Firstly, the narrator refuses to let the reader look into Sarah’s mind. Due to the lack of her point of view, we are left with the narrator’s description of her actions and Charles’ interpretation of her. Secondly, Sarah even remains distant when she speaks, because, just as the narrator, she refuses to explain herself. Foster (81) understands Sarah and her narratives as texts to be read, which present different interpretations for different audiences.

The ever-present question “Who is Sarah?” drives the characters in the novel as well as poses a challenge for the readers, since they, similar to Charles, have become “a little obsessed with Sarah ... or at any rate with the enigma she presented” (Fowles, *Woman* 128). Throughout the novel, new information about Sarah makes Charles and the audience re-evaluate their opinion about her. Fowles, thereby, creates numerous possible interpretations of Sarah. In the opening scene of the novel, Sarah is standing alone at the end of the Cobb in a harsh wind. She is wearing black clothes and, before even mentioning her real name, she is called “poor Tragedy”. This nickname is the most prominent among people in Lyme Regis (apart from “the French lieutenant’s whore”).

The vicar, who tells Sarah’s background story, considers her a “most distressing case” and “most deserving of charity” (33). Sarah is, without a doubt, a victim of society. The narrator partly blames her education for her failure in society, because her father provided her with an education for a higher class to which Sarah was not able to rise. Moreover, she is socially stranded with no family or support structure (Foster 71). However, not only her fate makes her a victim, but she, herself, decides to take on the role of the fallen woman who married shame. Before Mrs Poulteney, for example, she appears with “her only too visible sorrow” (37) and also Charles, at first, considers her a victim of Varguennes and society.

He, however, senses that her sadness is just a facade. “It became clear to him that the girl’s silent meekness ran contrary to her nature; that she was therefore playing a part” (103). The narrator also talks about her “usual mask of resigned sadness” (245). As already mentioned, Sarah’s story about Varguennes is a lie. She deliberately mimics the fallen woman in order to stand outside Victorian society. She even literally falls down before Charles in the Undercliff (Fowles, *Woman* 118). She claims that “I knew no other way to break out of what I was” (176). She shapes her own identity as an outcast, since she does not want to be trapped in a patriarchal society that restricts her freedom. As “poor Tragedy”, she also evokes sympathy and a desire to protect in Charles, who is made to believe he has to rescue the innocent damsel in distress. It is the mixture of innocence and guilt that fascinates him.

Besides standing outside society, Sarah is also depicted as standing outside history. Fletcher argues that she exceeds the Victorian age in that “she stands outside of her age as a critical observer” (105). Especially her timeless look is often referred to. After one of these looks, the narrator states that “[w]e can sometimes recognize the looks of a century ago on a modern face; but never those of a century to come” (Fowles, *Woman* 181). Still, Charles notices Sarah’s “clairvoyant” power in a smile he describes as a “seeing into the future” (375). Foster

(77) also claims that Sarah's stare is "almost otherworldly; that world, of course, is the twentieth century". The timelessness of her nature is enforced by her description as a figure or symbol rather than a 'real' character.

On the first pages of the novel, she is presented as an "other figure" and a "figure from myth" (Fowles, *Woman* 5) even before her name is mentioned. Charles also tends to deal not with Sarah, herself, but with a figure he created in his mind. He often admits that it is not Sarah he thinks of, but "some emotion, some possibility she symbolized" (130). Michael ("Sarah" 231) observes that "[b]ecause Sarah is depicted exclusively through male perspectives [...], her portrait remains a construct of masculine ideology and Sarah retains the status of object, figure, or symbol rather than of a whole female character". It seems as if Charles is unable to see or deal with the real woman, since he lacks knowledge about the female sex. According to Foster (80), "Charles' mystification throughout the novel is largely a product of the Otherness of women". Sarah can, therefore, also be seen as a symbol for 'woman'.

Since she is the male representation of a woman, many male myths about women are used to describe her. She is a "siren" or "Calypso" (Fowles, *Woman* 143) that lures Charles away from his conservative life. Mrs Fairley calls her a "wicked Jezebel" (247) and towards the end, Charles considers her "the one Eve personified, all mystery and love and profundity" (423). Thus, Sarah "stands for 'woman' – timeless, unchanging, mysterious" (Lovell 120). Michael ("Sarah" 235) argues that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* falls short of being a feminist novel, because Sarah is caught within a male ideology and has no existence outside the male perspective. In contrast, Zare (184) considers Sarah a protofeminist owing to "her independence and contempt for society's artificial rules". The question whether the novel is a feminist work or not largely depends on the interpretation of Sarah's character and thus presents itself as difficult as the analysis of her identity.

In addition to being a symbol of womanhood, Sarah also signifies freedom and independence. In her role as French Lieutenant's Woman, she is freed from many restraints of Victorian society, since she is labelled a fallen woman. As an outcast and a rebel, Charles associates Sarah not only with freedom but also with unpredictability and adventure. She acts as an embodiment of things banned like "romance, adventure, sin, madness [or] animality" (Fowles, *Woman* 352). Already in the beginning of their relationship, Charles is not attracted to Sarah, herself, but to "some possibility she symbolized" (130). In the first ending, she additionally symbolizes "his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms, his never-to-be-taken journeys" (336), since he has chosen to marry Ernestina. Sarah's status as a symbol largely derives from the

fact that Charles attributes emotions and thoughts to her and that Sarah's own thoughts remain absent. Additionally, Sarah's mental health is often questioned. Especially Dr. Grogan suggests that she suffers from melancholia and compares her to Marie de Morell, a hysteric schemer. It is impossible for Charles and the reader to discern Sarah's motives and find out if she really is in love with Charles or only uses him for her own needs.

Tarbox (65f) suggests that Sarah remains a mystery because Charles projects onto her his submerged feelings. "He foists upon her all the repressed contents of his psyche, making of her all the things he would like to be, the sum of his unrealized potential. But this transference causes her to become an abstraction". However, not only Sarah is the product of projection, but Charles also attributes characteristics to Ernestina. While Sarah represents the rebel or "dark woman", Ernestina is the ideal Victorian woman. The narrator and Charles highlight the contrast between the two women on every occasion. Sarah wears dark, masculine clothing, whereas Ernestina is always dressed in the height of fashion. Sarah is Charles' intellectual equal, while Ernestina is just monotone and dry. And most importantly, Charles' sexual feelings towards Sarah are described as passionate, but he kisses Ernestina "with lips as chastely asexual as children's" (Fowles, *Woman* 83).

Sarah's personal freedom is intrinsically tied to her sexual freedom making her a sex symbol in Charles' eyes. Zare (179) argues that "Sarah's rebelliousness [is] inseparable from her intense sexual feelings and attractiveness". When Charles finds her sleeping in the Undercliff, he associates her with women sleeping in his bedroom in Paris and remarks that "[t]here was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay" (70). His erotic feelings towards her are increased when she reveals the story of Varguennes. By telling her story, Sarah makes Charles a voyeur to her sin (Tarbox 74) and further fascinates him by her darker side.

He saw the scene she had not detailed: her giving herself. He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down; just as Sarah was to him both an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman. Deep in himself he forgave her her unchastity; and glimpsed the dark shadows where he might have enjoyed it himself. (Fowles, *Woman* 177)

Not only has she deliberately sinned, but she is not ashamed to confess it. Her role as a whore is as appealing to him as her role as the innocent victim. These contradictory aspects of her personality make her a woman of perfect male fantasy. She is a femme fatale, since she fulfils contradictory male desires and is both seductress and virgin (Waugh 126).

As a postmodern writer, Fowles not only undermines the authority of the author and of the final ending, but also of the definitive interpretation (Waugh 13). Sarah's identity is constantly shifting since she occupies a different role in nearly every scene. That is why Kaplan (98) believes that "Sarah Woodruff is less a coherent or credible character in the novel than a cut-up or montage of types and anti-types of the feminine arranged to suggest a new prototype for thinking gender". Meredith Brooks neatly captures these multiple types of the feminine in her song "Bitch":

I'm a bitch, I'm a lover, I'm a child, I'm a mother
I'm a sinner, I'm a saint, I do not feel ashamed
I'm your hell, I'm your dream, I'm nothing in between
You know you wouldn't want it any other way. (Brooks)

Sarah is, indeed, all of the above and much more. She is fallen woman, victim, symbol, abstraction, whore, villain and, after all, a mystery. With the character of Sarah Fowles demonstrates, like Michal Frayn, how difficult it is to know another person. Moreover, the author presents identity not as coherent but as a continuous process with numerous roles to play.

5 Angela Carter: *Nights at the Circus*

5.1 Magical Realism

The term Magical Realism was coined in the 1920ies to describe a new trend in German painting ('Magischer Realismus'). It was then applied to works of Latin American authors. Magic(al) Realism combines realism and the fantastic and blurs their distinction. Novels written in this mode of expression treat ordinary events as if they were fantastic and extraordinary events as if they were ordinary (Stoddart 35). In other words, "the marvelous [sic] seems to grow organically within the ordinary" (Faris 1). Magic Realist fiction is especially important and most widespread in postcolonial cultures with authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie.

In Magic Realist fiction, extraordinary events are included in a realistic environment and narrated with as much detail as realistic events. Since the magic and realist elements often come from different cultural traditions, Magical Realism merges not only realism and the fantastic but also fact and fiction as well as traditional and modern cultural history. It is multicultural in its structure and history and, therefore, provides an ideal narrative mode for postcolonial writers. It is, however, not only a postcolonial mode but is used worldwide as a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality and history (Bowers 1). Especially postmodern writers (like Angela Carter) have taken on the Magic Realist mode of narration because of its transgressive power.

Bowers (69) claims that Magic Realism "provides a means to attack the assumptions of the dominant culture and particularly the notion of scientifically and logically determined truth", because "it brings into view non-logical and non-scientific explanations for things". The lack of a fixed truth also brings into question historical assumptions. That is why also non-postmodern writers, especially postcolonial Magic Realist writers, take on a postmodern approach to history and consider history (as well as truth and reality) a construct rather than an established fact. Salman Rushdie (25), for example, states that "[h]istory is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge".

Another link between postmodernism and Magic Realism is the reader's function as co-creator of meaning. The magic elements in magic realist texts disrupt our sense of logic. The reader is confused as to the status of those magic elements. Faris (17) claims that "the

contemporary Western reader's primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character's dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle". So, the fantastic elements disrupt reading habits and need the participation of the readers, who become co-creators of the text (9).

Stoddard (36) argues that "magical realism, then, enables Angela Carter to make observations about society, gender and the power of myth, and she is particularly sceptical about any construct that has been naturalized and accepted without question". Time and space are two of those constructs that are undermined in Magic Realism and in *Nights at the Circus*. Especially time is presented as a relative concept that is perceived differently around the world. It becomes clear why Bowers (1) considers magic realism so apt to discuss alternative approaches to reality, time, and truth to that of Western philosophy.

5.2 Fevvers: Is she fact or is she fiction?

5.2.1 The power of narration

In *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter vividly demonstrates the transgressive power of Magic Realism and narration in general. Her novel not only challenges traditional concepts like reality or gender, but also focuses on the act of narration and “the ways in which we construct ourselves and our world by narrative means” (Finney). As illustrated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, telling stories, especially telling stories about oneself, is an essential aspect of identity construction. Fevvers’ ‘autobiography’ in Part I of the novel is such a self-story. Her opening narrative makes Fevvers an active agent in her own identity construction. Sceats (86) considers it “both their [Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s] constructed history and a narrative about the construction of Fevvers herself [that] identifies some of the forces at work in the construction of female identities”.

With a voice that “clanged like dustbin lids”, Fevvers starts narrating the story of her life beginning with her mysterious origins: “for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*” (Carter 3). Thus, Fevvers establishes right at the beginning her status as half human and half mythical being and makes Walser as well as the reader ask “Is she fact or is she fiction?” Finney argues that Fevvers is “at once an original and an already established narrative type”, since she is, on the one hand, the stereotypical busty blonde performer and, on the other hand, a mythical bird-woman with wings. It is the ambiguous nature of her being and her status as enigma that appeals to Walser and the reader.

Fevvers, in collaboration with Lizzie, narrates their story with such eloquence and rhetoric skill that it has a hypnotic effect on Walser.

[A]s the women unfolded the convolutions of their joint stories together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place; or a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherezades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night. (Carter 43)

Fevvers’ autobiography consists not of a thousand, but of various small stories including her time as Cupid and Winged Victory in Ma Nelson’s brothel, the story of her first flight, her work in Mme Schreck’s establishment and many others. She “deliberately flirts with the boundary between truth and nontruth” (Michael, “Nights” 497), so that, in spite of his distinctive scepticism, Walser becomes a “prisoner of her voice” (Carter 47) that reminds him

of a siren's voice. Finney observes that Fevvers "shares with Homer's fabulous female creatures their hypnotic attraction – and their potential destructiveness". Walser, at one point, actually feels faint and panics due to Fevvers' overwhelming bodily presence.

It is after the story of Fevvers' first flight that Walser loses his sense of balance, because "[a]lthough he was not an imaginary man, even he was sensitive to that aghast time of the night when the dark dwarfs us" (Carter 39). Fevvers first tries to fly in the middle of a midsummer's night after observing little pigeons' attempts at flying. Just like the opening narrative, her first successful flight through the night is only accomplished with Lizzie's help. The story of this significant night is told "as a night fable" (Russo 149) that disconcerts even the disbelieving Walser. Finney claims that Fevvers' "greatest gift is not her ability to fly off the solid ground, but to retell the story of her flights of fancy that leave the ground of fact to which Walser is bound by his scepticism". This argument highlights not the story itself, but the act of narration and its power over the listener and the reader.

However, not only Walser is caught up in the narrative. The reader, too, is made to believe even the most improbable events. One of these events is Fevvers' escape from the Grand Duke that "constitutes one of Carter's most brazen instances of narrative manipulation in the book" (Finney). Fevvers is only able to escape by taking advantage of the Grand Duke's weakness for her.

She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner – mercifully, it landed on its wheels – as, with a grunt and a whistle of expelled breath, the Grand Duke ejaculated. In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment and clambered aboard. (Carter 226)

Everything happens so fast that it seems as if Carter also takes advantage of the readers' lapse of consciousness in order to get away with such an impossible incident. As soon as Fevvers leaves the Grand Duke, we are already caught up in the next narrative transporting us to Siberia and towards even more impossibilities.

Another event that defies the laws of physics is the tigers' disappearance after the train's demolition.

And, as for the tigers, as if Nature disapproved of them for their unnatural dancing, they had frozen into their own reflections and been shattered, too, when the mirrors broke. As if that burning energy you glimpsed between the bars of their pelts had convulsed in a great

response to the energy released in fire around us and, in exploding, they scattered their appearances upon that glass in which they had been breeding sterile reduplications. (242)

The tigers' vanishing is explained so vividly that it makes sense in spite of its improbability. Finney observes that "this surrealistic phenomenon is as intellectually convincing as it is mimetically impossible".

Fevvers' escape from the Grand Duke and the tigers' disappearance are only two instances that demonstrate the power of narration and how words can make us believe anything. Fevvers' remark at the end of the novel - "To think I really fooled you!" (Carter 350)- is, thus, not only addressed at Walser but also at the reader. Carter claims that this final statement "is inviting the reader to take one further step into the fictionality of the narrative, instead of coming out of it and looking at it as though it were an artefact" (Haffenden 91). The author refuses to solve the enigma Fevvers presents and celebrates her fictive illusion, because "[w]ell-told narrative is powerful enough to expose its own procedures to the light of day and yet be confident in its ability to plunge the reader back into the nighttime world of fictionality" (Finney). It is the combination of fact and fiction that accounts for the power of Fevvers' narrative and of Carter's novel in general.

5.2.2 Time and History

As already mentioned, Carter aims at undermining the ideologically naturalized. Time is one of these concepts that have been naturalized in western culture. By manipulating time and chronology, the author "underlines the fact that even time, which seems so tied up with natural laws, is not universally understood in the same way and is therefore seen as being subject to ideological variations of conceptions and use" (Stoddart 36f). Disruptions of time and space are often employed in magic realist works in order to present non-Western approaches to time, reality, and truth. Moreover, these discrepancies demonstrate the power of narrative over our sense of time (Finney).

The concept of time is present in the novel in the form of Ma Nelson's clock depicting Father Time. The clock is "the sign, or signifier of Ma Nelson's little private realm" (Carter 30). Müller (158), in accordance with Kristeva, argues that linear time is a 'male' construct that can be disrupted by the female principle. Thus, Ma Nelson's realm represents an alternative world within Western culture in which time lies in the hands of women. The clock does not display time as a continuous, linear process, but shows "the dead centre of the day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm

of time” (Carter 30). It is, therefore, an example of this female principle that presents a different approach to time and chronology.

Moreover, Ma Nelson’s clock grants Lizzie the power to tamper with the logic of time and space. In Fevvers’ dressing room at the Alhambra, Walser gets more and more discomposed because Big Ben strikes midnight three times in a row. “The time outside still corresponded to that registered by the stopped gilt clock, inside. Inside and outside matched exactly, but both were badly wrong” (58). In the envoi, Lizzie and Fevvers admit that they played a trick on Walser that night, but the question remains how the two women were able to meddle with Big Ben’s mechanism. Müller (156) claims that the vertigo Walser experiences in the dressing room is an aspect of the time-lapse he perceives. Time is a means of structuring reality, so when it is manipulated, Walser feels insecure and disoriented.

For the prisoners of Countess P’s House of Correction, however, time only serves as a “reminder of imprisonment and paralysis” (Müller 159). The big clock is a symbol of authority in the prison “that regulated their risings, their feedings, registered every slow minute of incarceration” (Carter 249). Only after Olga and her fellow inmates made contact with the female wards, their conception of time and of the clock changes. It “ticked the time of another lifetime, another place, above the gateway that grew each day larger in their imaginations until the clock and the gateway that had signified the end of hope now spoke to them of nothing but hope” (255). The clock is finally destroyed during the prisoners’ uprising and so is no longer the symbol for their stasis.

The conception of time in the Shaman’s world is the most extreme in the novel. The tribe lives outside of time, outside of history and outside of logic and reason. “You could not even say they were exiles from history; rather, they inhabited a temporal dimension which did not take history into account. They were a-historic. Time meant nothing to them” (Carter 314). The absence of time and history seems to provide a certain degree of freedom, but since “nothing had ever changed in their world, nothing ever *would* change” (314f). The people from the Shaman’s tribe have no possibility of action due to their restrictive environment. In addition, they lack self-determination and agency over their identities, since they do not have a history to resort to (Müller 160).

The three examples from the novel show that “like language, temporality is an arbitrary device structuring experience” (162). For Lizzie and Fevvers, for example, only a week has passed since they lost Walser in Siberia. Walser, however, has grown a lengthy beard in the

meantime. Lizzie's explanation for this phenomenon is that "Father Time has many children" (Carter 322f), which implies that time is not universally conceived the same way. Thus, Carter manages to undermine one of the most naturalized concepts of Western culture and illustrates that "[i]magined time coexists in our consciousness with measured time" (Finney).

Nights at the Circus also addresses the constructedness of history, since "in altering 'our habits of time and space', a peculiar postmodern enterprise, magical realism challenges too a certain conception of history" (Johnson 78). Fevvers' life story includes historical facts and various meetings with famous historical characters like Toulouse-Lautrec or the Prince of Wales. So, the narrative as well as Fevvers herself hovers on the borders between fact and fiction. It is "a kind of fantasy history, weaving its stories in and across the gaps, silences and pregnant shadows of recorded fact" (Waters viii). Especially interesting is the historical setting of the narrative that lies on the border between the 19th and the 20th century. "For we are at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history" (Carter 8).

Day (173) claims that the late nineteenth century "is associated with the issue of emergent women's rights, and was a critical phase in the dawning of consciousness about and agitation for women's rights". Fevvers is born into this phase and identified as "the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground" (Carter 25). Day (175) observes that the fantastic elements of the novel (Fevvers' wings for example) do make sense in this specific historical context. The setting is also crucial for Fevvers' identity construction. She invokes and subverts numerous patriarchal stereotypes and myths that arise from a specific cultural tradition, like the Angel in the House, the working girl, the Virgin Whore and others. Evidently, the novel "engages intertextually in a complex and allusive way with the constructed nature of literary and gendered history and mythology" (Childs 106).

5.2.3 Performativity

Nights at the Circus also highlights the role performance plays in the construction of identity. Colonel Kearney's circus presents us in Part II with various forms of performances and many critics have connected it with Bakhtin's theory of 'carnivalization'. The circus constitutes a carnival and many other spaces in the novel (like the whorehouse) function as surrogate carnivals (Michael, "Nights" 507). Mikhail Bakhtin (34) argues that "[t]his carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things". A carnival is thus "a space within

which the dominant hierarchical system and its laws and prohibitions are suspended” (Michael, “Nights” 507).

An example of the upside-down world of the circus is the blurring of boundaries between human and animal. The Strong Man “grunts” and “bellows” and the Ape Man’s woman is beaten “as though she were a carpet”, while Sybil, the oracular pig, is treated like a human being and the Educated Apes are studying diagrams on a blackboard. Also, Buffo the clown wears a bladder as a wig. “Think of that. He wears his insides on his outsides, and a portion of his most obscene and intimate insides, at that; so that you might think he is bald, he stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss” (Carter 134). Fernihough (104), however, states that the circus “serves, ultimately, to reinforce social hierarchies, not to subvert them”, because women, clowns and other marginalized groups are still abused.

The carnival subverts hierarchies, but only temporarily. The clowns may be celebrated in the arena, but they are restricted to the marginal spaces of society and are accommodated in Clown Alley, a “rotten wooden tenement where damp fell from the walls like dew” (Carter 134). The clowns, themselves, are attended by despair as much as their lodgings, because “not infrequently there is no element of the *voluntary* in clowning” (137). Buffo’s explanation of the art of clowning exhibits an essential connection between performance and identity. On the one hand, the clowns have a rare privilege that grants them (momentarily) the perfect freedom: “We can invent our own faces! We *make* ourselves” (141). Walser experiences a similar feeling when he first dresses up as a clown.

Walser’s very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque. (119)

On the other hand, once the clowns have decided upon a face, they are condemned to perform. The mask is permanent and takes over their identity: “And so my face eclipses me. I have become this face, which is not mine, and yet I chose it freely. [...] And what am I without my Buffo’s face? Why, nobody at all” (141f). In contrast to Walser, who actively decides to be someone else, the clowns can no longer experience the freedom of the mask. J. Simon (163) claims that for the clowns “[m]asquerade is no longer a ‘self-conscious re-enactment’, nor a free choice, but a substitute for the autonomous self”. They lose themselves behind the faces that “possessed the formal lifelessness of death masks” (Carter 134).

Performance thus entails the freedom to be someone else, but also poses the danger of losing your identity in the role you are playing. However, the clowns not only lack the potential to change their identity, but to change anything in the world. J. Simon (160) calls them “the embodiment of stasis in the novel”, since they are:

licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act, so that the baboushka back at home could go on reddening and blackening the charcoal even if the clowns detonated the entire city around her and nothing would really change. Nothing. The exploded buildings would float up into the air insubstantial as bubbles, and gently waft to earth again on exactly the same places where they had stood before. (Carter 177)

Like the circus, they exhibit carnivalesque features in that they create chaos, but ultimately leave things as they were. “You’d seen the proof, that things would always be as they had always been; that nothing came of catastrophe; that chaos invoked stasis” (ibid.).

A different connection between performance and identity is present in the figure of Fevvers. “Her history is a history of being looked” (Dimitrijevic 120), since she has always been performing. In Ma Nelson’s brothel, she played Cupid until her wings start to grow and she begins posing as Winged Victory. After the closure of the brothel, she is exhibited in Madame Schreck’s museum of women monsters and, thereafter, becomes a high-trapeze artist. Already in her teenage years, she reflects on her status as apprentice in “*being looked at*” (Carter 23): “Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?” (42). Even her opening narrative resembles a performance. This ‘autobiography’ is so accurately calculated with a “pause of three heartbeats” (100), for example, that Walser can only admire Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s rhetoric skill: “What a performance! Such style! Such vigour!” (104).

Fevvers constructs herself through her initial performance and, throughout the novel, exhibits “that silent demand to be *looked at*” (328):

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.
She was twice as large as life and succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!
LOOK AT ME! (13)

She, therefore, needs an audience in order to establish her identity. This becomes apparent after the train is blown up in Siberia. Without the eyes of others, especially Walser, Fevvers’

body begins to deteriorate. Her wings lose colour and her shape sags so that “the tropic bird looked more and more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life” (321). She starts to fade away and lose her self-confidence, since her identity depends on Walser’s gaze. “The young American it was who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true. She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes” (324). Only when she puts on her performance again by spreading her wings in front of Walser and the tribespeople, Fevvers is restored to her old self.

Her plumage rippled in the winds of wonder, their expelled breaths. Oooooooh! [...] She cocked her head to relish the shine of lamps, like footlights, like stage-lights; it was as good as a stiff brandy, to see those footlights, and, beyond them, the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was. (344f)

Fernihough (94) argues that the reader expects Fevvers to reveal her real self beneath the mask, but only discovers that “Fevvers’ identity is constituted in and through performance, with Walser as the prime audience”. Especially her gendered identity is performative. Day (181) claims that Carter rejects the notion of an essential womanly nature and that Fevvers’ origin is “a metaphor for the idea that gendered identity is something that is not given but is made and can be remade”. Fevvers, indeed, often reveals the constructedness of her femininity. In her “mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor” (Carter 4), for example, she is depicted taking her false eyelashes off. Carter thus adopts a notion of gender that is constructed similarly to identity: textually, historically and performatively (Sceats 86).

5.2.4 Other Female Characters

Nights at the Circus includes many life stories of other (mainly female) characters. Day (183) claims that the novel is a *herstorical* novel, since it gives a voice to women, especially to outcast groups like prostitutes, women ‘monsters’, or female prisoners. In addition, female countercultures within the dominant patriarchal culture are depicted (Russo 141). Ma Nelson’s whorehouse constitutes one of these female worlds. Her academy is a “wholly female world” that is “governed by a sweet and loving reason” (Carter 42). During the day, the prostitutes engage in “intellectual, artistic or political” (43) tasks and they are all connected by “invisible bonds of affection” (49). Furthermore, they are described as “poor girls earning a living”, because “[n]o woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity” (42). Carter thus challenges the conventional notion of whore as polar opposite of good woman and feminist, since the women are all “suffragists” (41).

Lizzie also stresses the parallels between whore and wife when she asks “What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?” (21). She highlights the economic oppression of women with sex as business transaction not only in the brothel but also in marriage. The term whore thus becomes ambivalent. Michael (“Nights” 505) suggests that “[t]he prostitute comes out ahead in the novel, precisely because she is depicted as more aware of her position within an economic system in which all women necessarily participate”. Part of this economic system is Mme Schreck’s museum of women monsters. In contrast to the brothel, this female world is dominated by terror and coldness. The women freaks are put in niches in a damp vault in order for male customers to gaze at their unnaturalness. However, Fevvers remarks that “there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them” (Carter 70).

The girls “Down Below” all had “hearts that beat, like yours, and souls that suffer” (79). Fevvers questions the notion of what is natural, since “it was those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we. For what is ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, sir?” (68). Madame Schreck, “Our Lady of Terror” (61), casts the women freaks as museum objects and exploits women as well as myths of women. Russo (141) claims that women like Mme Schreck “organise and distribute images of other women for the visual market”. Fevvers aptly calls the museum thus a “lumber room of femininity, this rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (Carter 78) and observes that it is indeed only an idea the customers are paying for: “I would watch the shivering wretch who had hired the use of the idea of us” (79). The sleeping beauty and the silent Cobwebs, for example, embody the idea of the female loss of agency. In addition, the black servant Toussaint is rendered speechless, which represents the oppression of racial minorities (J. Simon 174f).

By telling the life stories of various abused women, Fevvers gives them a voice and prevents their stories from getting forgotten. “Think of him [Walser] as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we’ve yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been” (Carter 338). An example for such a tale is the life story of the Wiltshire Wonder, one of the freaks in Mme Schreck’s museum. Her father being the “King of the Fairies”, she is “not three foot high” (73, 66). As a child, the Wonder was sold to a chef that made her hide in and jump out of cakes. After a terrible incident involving candles and fire, she is adopted by a rich family, where she finally finds a “happy harbour” (76). One Christmas eve, however, she watches dwarves on stage and dreams of a “world in miniature, a small, perfect, heavenly place” (ibid.). The Wonder decides to follow the small men, who use her and then abandon her

penniless. "I fear they did not treat me kindly, for, although they were little, they were men" (77).

The story of Mignon is also marked by male violence. Mignon's father killed her mother and then drowned leaving her and her sister in an orphanage. After running away from the orphanage, she lives on the street until Herr M. finds her and takes her in. Herr M. is a famous medium, who uses Mignon for his illusion of summoning female ghosts. Due to her haggard body and face, she impersonates the dead very successfully. Their trick, however, is revealed so that she, thereafter, works in a bar where she meets the Ape-Man and becomes his wife. The Ape-Man was a "drinking man, hard, tacit, violent", who would "beat his woman as though she were a carpet" (164, 133). Her body thus was "mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings" and marked by "fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises" (150).

Michael ("Nights" 513) remarks that the novel does not only "point out the oppression of women by a male-dominated system, however; it offers potential solutions". The Wiltshire Wonder, for example, finally reconnects with her adoptive parents, who "wept with joy to have her restored to the bosom of the family after so many years" (Carter 99). It is also love that has changed Mignon into a self-confident, active subject. When she joins the Princess in her act, the two women quickly fall in love and "cherish in loving privacy the music that was their language, in which they'd found the way to one another" (196). Sceats (90f) argues that Mignon at first is entirely performance, but slowly moves away from performance, which is manifested in her singing.

When we first heard her sing, in my room in the Hotel de l'Europe, it sounded as if the song sang itself, as if the song had nothing to do with Mignon [...]. That was before she became a woman. Now she seized hold of the song in the supple lasso of her voice and mated it with her new-found soul, so the song was utterly transformed and yet its essence did not change [...]. (Carter 292)

"Love, true love has utterly transformed her", Fevvers asserts. The liberating power of love is again depicted in the story of Olga and the women's prison. Olga starts a relationship with her guard, Vera, by touching her hand. This touch leads to an exchange of love notes and the mutual desire instantly spreads across the whole asylum:

Desire, that electricity transmitted by the charged touch of Olga Alexandrovna and Vera Andreyevna, leapt across the great divide between the guards and the guarded. [...] The stale air of the House of Correction lifted and stirred, was moved by currents of anticipation, of expectation, that blew the ripened seeds of love from cell to cell. (254)

After an uprising, the prisoners alongside the guards set out for the Siberian vastness in order to found a “female Utopia”, a “republic of free women” (284). Although lesbianism provides a solution for Mignon, the novel “does not view a separatist lesbian community as a final answer to the problems faced by women within a male-centered culture” (Michael, “Nights” 517). Lizzie points out the impossibility of a separation of the sexes when she asks, “What’ll they do with the boy babies? Feed’em to the polar bears? To the *female* polar bears?” (Carter 284).

Lizzie is an indispensable character in the novel. She “exists unadorned as a kind of maid or sidekick in the drama of the star performer” (Russo 152), but as Fevvers’ foster mother she plays an essential role in Fevvers’ development. Lizzie is “a tiny, wizened, gnome-like apparition, who might have been any age between thirty and fifty” (Carter 10). She is depicted as a perfectly rational person, although she is able to perform “her ‘household’ magic” (234) with the contents of her handbag. Fevvers’ and Lizzie’s relationship is strong but not always untroubled. Many critics, including Michael (“Nights” 492), observe that Lizzie and Fevvers represent two different strands of feminism. While Fevvers, as the New Woman, embodies “a subversive utopian feminism”, Lizzie serves as an example of a realistic Marxist feminist generation. In the Envoi, Lizzie admits that the letters from Russia to England included secret information about the struggle in Russia. She thus actively works “behind the scenes to effect a revolution” (Russo 152).

Moreover, Lizzie acts as a didactic feminist voice in the novel in that she “undercuts the high-flying rhetoric of the new age woman” (151f). Like a “watchdog” (Carter 29), she watches over Fevvers and challenges her enthusiastic ideas about Walser’s transformation, for example:

‘I’ll sit on him [Walser], I’ll hatch him out, I’ll make a new man of him. I’ll make him onto the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century –‘

Lizzie detected a note of rising hysteria in the girl’s voice. ‘Perhaps so, perhaps not,’ she said, putting a damper on things. ‘Perhaps safer to plan ahead.’ (334)

Moreover, Lizzie is sceptic about Fevvers’ optimistic view of the new era when “all the women will have wings” (338f):

‘The doll’s house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of

the new, the transformed –‘

‘It’s going to be more complicated than that,’ interpolated Lizzie.
‘This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future,
I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and
then we’ll discuss it.’ (339)

Russo (154) calls the relationship between Fevvers and Lizzie a “difficult friendship and an improbable but necessary political alliance”. Lizzie provides the novel with a Marxist feminist point of view and, together with Mignon, the Wonder, Olga, and other female characters, she represents the many female voices that have been forgotten in the course of history. However, Carter also includes stories of male characters like Toussaint, Colonel Kearney or Buffo. In the introduction, Sarah Waters (viii) observes that “*Nights at the Circus* does not belong to ‘authentic history’. It offers, instead, a kind of fantasy history, weaving its stories in and across the gaps, silences and pregnant shadows of recorded fact”. By offering a multiplicity of historical perspectives, the novel thus also brings into question historical assumptions (Bowers 76f).

5.2.5 Walser

As already discussed, Fevvers’ identity is constructed through performance. That is why an analysis of her character has to take into account her audience, especially her primary audience Walser. Fernihough (99) even claims that “our mistake as readers has been to try to locate the ‘problem’ of Fevvers’ identity in her anatomy instead of her audience” and concludes that “[b]y the end of the novel Fevvers has not changed so much as Walser”. Thus, Walser’s transformation has to be examined. In Part I of the novel, Walser, the 25 year old American journalist, interviews Fevvers for a report called ‘Great Humbugs of the World’. In the course of his career, he has already travelled the world and has embarked on various adventures. Still, his self remains “unfinished”.

There were scarcely any of those little, what you might call *personal* touches to his personality, [...] Walser had not experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. (Carter 7)

Moreover, Walser is a sceptic who embodies the “professional necessity to see all and believe nothing” (6). He does not believe Fevvers to be a real bird-woman and tries to expose her as a hoax. However, Fevvers’ performance in the Alhambra and her autobiography make him temporarily dismiss his rationality. When Fevvers uses her wings, Walser “almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow

over the ledge of the press box” (15). Also, her act with all the “portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon” and its limitations made him “briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief” (15f). In her dressing room, he quickly gets caught up in Fevvers’ narration and becomes a “prisoner of her voice” (47). Again, he is discomposed by Fevvers, whose eyes exert such an attraction that he has to give “his mind a quick shake to refresh its pragmatism” (31). Walser gets so tangled up in the story that “[t]he hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him” (89). Finney claims that it is “the consequent lack of belief in himself that makes him vulnerable to her [Fevvers’] superior linguistic skill”.

While Walser acts only as passive listener and recording instrument in Part I, his role in Part II changes. As a clown, he becomes a performer himself and experiences “the freedom that lies behind the mask” (Carter 119). This “vertiginous sense of freedom” also makes him experiment with imaginative writing for the first time.

Russia is a sphinx; St Petersburg, the beautiful smile of her face. Petersburg, loveliest of hallucinations, the shimmering mirage of the Northern wilderness glimpsed for a breathless second between black forest and the frozen sea. Within the city, the sweet geometry of every prospect; outside, limitless Russia and the approaching storm. [...] St Petersburg, a city built of hubris, imagination and desire... (111)

Although these first attempts are overloaded with adjectives and hyperboles, they show Walser’s beginning interest for the impossible, for the fantastic. Still, he is untouched by experience and does not even realize he has fallen in love with Fevvers: “Unaccustomed to love, he diagnosed the effects of a sleepless night when his heart banged at the sight of her” (182).

Walser’s journey with the circus takes a drastic turn when the train is blown up. He loses his memory along with his entire sense of self and is taken back to the state of a child. In the Siberian wasteland, a Shaman takes him in, who is convinced that the deranged Walser is meant to be a Shaman himself. The once rational being now lives in a dream, partly due to his amnesia, partly because of the hallucinogens.

So, as Walser recovered from the amnesia that followed the blow on his head, he found himself condemned to a permanent state of sanctified delirium – or, would have found himself condemned, if he had been presented with any other identity but that of the crazed. As it was, his self remained in a state of limbo. (301)

Walser is made to enter the world of magic realism, where “there existed no difference between fact and fiction”. In this world of dreams, Walser slowly regains his memory and wonders whether there is a “world beyond this place” (308).

Then he would sink into troubled introspection. So Walser acquired an ‘inner life’, a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own. If, before he set out with the circus in pursuit of the bird-woman, he had been like a house to let, furnished, now he was tenanted at last, even if that interior tenant was insubstantial as a phantom and sometimes disappeared for days at a time. (308f)

It is the wind of wonders accompanying Fevvers and her plumage that also fully restores Walser. Finney argues that he is restored “not to the material world, but to the ambiguous world of narrative”. Fevvers, indeed, observes that “he was not the man he had been or would ever be again”, since someone had “hatched him out” (Carter 345). He has undergone a transformation in that he “took himself apart and put himself together again” (348). Finally, after he has been intimate with Fevvers, his accounts of the events change and he begins to experience these events as experiences: “All that seemed to happen to me in the third person though, most of my life, I watched but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again” (348f). Walser’s spiritual journey from a representative of the material world to an inhabitant of the world of narrative once again highlights the importance of illusion and imagination in life. Just like the reader, “he has to learn to accept illusion as playing as valid a role in human life as fact” (Finney).

5.2.6 Fevvers

“[I], just like Helen of Troy, was hatched” (Carter 3), Fevvers reveals right at the beginning of the novel. With this confession, Walser and the reader embark on a quest for Fevvers’ identity. The question “Is she fact or is she fiction?” is omnipresent and surrounds Fevvers with an air of mystery. The possibility of her being a hoax is one of the reasons for her worldwide fame, since “[i]f she isn’t suspect, where’s the controversy? What’s the news?” (9). Walser’s attempt to reveal Fevvers’ secret in an interview is met with an overwhelming narrative that is both autobiography and tall tale. In her narrative, Fevvers deliberately hovers on the border between truth and lie and it becomes clear that she does not only cross biological boundaries.

By telling her own story, Fevvers becomes an active agent in her self-definition and defies “the traditional appropriation of women’s lives and histories endemic in Western, male-

centered culture” (Michael, “Nights” 497). In the first part of the novel, Fevvers and Lizzie act as the active speakers, while Walser performs the part of the passive listener. Fevvers thus asserts authority and occupies a traditionally masculine role. Her masculine characteristics can also be observed in other parts of the novel. It is, for example, Ma Nelson’s sword, a classical phallic symbol Fevvers has carried since her days at the brothel, which provides her with a sense of security. Moreover, her “strong, firm, masculine grip” (Carter 103) is mentioned and the way in which she “shook out a last few drops [from a hosepipe] in a disturbingly masculine fashion” (193). In addition, her Brobdingnagian proportions make Walser wonder for a moment, “is she really a man?” (37).

Fevvers is “altogether an ambivalent figure who threatens traditional binary categories” (Michael, “Nights” 499) like femininity and masculinity or object and subject. She embodies both feminine and masculine characteristics and also deconstructs the subject/object opposition. As a performer, Fevvers is posing as an object for the (prominently) male gaze and she has, indeed, “performed in meretricious spectacles her entire life” (Russo 137). In Ma Nelson’s brothel she posed as Cupid and Winged Victory before she was ‘exhibited’ in the museum of women monsters and employed at the circus. However, she is fully aware of her role as spectacle and uses this knowledge for her own good. J. Simon (168) observes that “Fevvers exploits the scopic economy which merges vision, knowledge, power and desire to her own advantage when she turns herself into a spectacle”. Similarly, Michael (“Nights” 500, 509) claims that, “[a]lthough Fevvers objectifies herself, she remains a subject by constructing her own objectified image” and that “she creates herself as the object of her spectators’ desires and is thus both subject and object of desire”.

As a winged woman, Fevvers embodies various female myths and patriarchal stereotypes. She was hatched like Zeus’ daughter Helen in Greek mythology, whose mother Leda was seduced by Zeus disguised as a swan. As a child, she poses as Cupid, but when she develops a pair of wings during puberty, she takes on the new role of Winged Victory. In the course of her life, she is identified as “Virgin Whore” (Carter 61), ‘Angel in the House’, “Angel of Death” (79), symbol of female liberation, “atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm” (88), “rejuvenatrix” (94), “Valkyrie” (175) and many more. However, the novel “both inscribes and subverts myth in Fevvers’ body” (J. Simon 152). Unlike the Winged Victory, she has two arms in addition to her wings. Moreover, she is no typical angel in the house, since she farts, belches and stuffs herself with “table manners of the Elizabethan variety” (21).

At close quarters, it must be said that she looked more like a dray mare than an angel. At six feet two in her stockings, she would have to give Walser a couple of inches in order to match him and, though they said she was divinely tall, there was, off-stage, not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar. (9)

“Everything about this creature is sublime excess“, Russo (137) asserts. From her wings, her size, her voice, her appetite and smell to her vulgar manners, she celebrates excess and transgression and deconstruction of the traditional female image. Also, her greed for money is highlighted in various parts of the novel (“Her pupils narrowed down to the shape of £-signs” Carter 201).

Fevvers is both mythic and mundane, which is reflected in her stage names ‘Helen of the High-wire’, ‘Cockney Venus’, ‘Madonna of the Arena’ or her voice, which is that of a “celestial fishwife” (47). She is portrayed as a mythic symbol and a physical being, because Carter “insists on the *embodiment* of the subject” (Malina 98). Johnson (80) claims that the author thus “exposes the tension between the idealized representation [...] and the often physical reality behind mythic images”. Similarly, Russo (151) argues that Fevvers reveals the hard work necessary in the creation of illusion and suggests that “the Victorian working girl is not the angel (in the house), and the novel is in many ways about working girls”. The effort Fevvers puts into her act is mentioned by Walser, who thinks: “First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise” (Carter 15).

As a mythical symbol, Fevvers displays not only the physical being behind the symbol, but also highlights the danger these myths of femininity pose for women. Mr Rosencreutz is one of the first to take advantage of Fevvers ambiguous nature (J. Simon 153). He buys her away from Mme Schreck and turns Fevvers into a symbol of femininity that will grant him eternal youth. Rosencreutz, as a Rosicrucian, both admires and fears Fevvers and her exaggerated version of womanhood, since his vision of femininity is a combination of positive and negative characteristics:

Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species [...] Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposing states through the mediation of your ambivalent body, reconciler of the grand opposites of death and life. (Carter 92f)

Rosencreutz' plan of sacrificing Fevvers fails, because she is able to escape with the help of her sword and her wings. Similarly, the Grand Duke wants to resolve her ambiguities and trap Fevvers in the role of an object or toy in his collection. "You must know I am a great collector of all kinds of *objets d'art* and marvels. Of all things, I love best toys – marvellous and unnatural artefacts" (220). Fevvers is close to becoming the Grand Duke's next artefact and is only able to escape by performing an erotic show for the Duke. Both Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke try to objectify Fevvers and force her "into the position of static object to be viewed and dominated" (Michael, "Nights" 501). She would have been robbed of "her ability to narrate her own story and so determine her own destiny" (Finney), but Fevvers already states at the beginning that she rejects her victimization by men: "I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* forever!" (Carter 42f).

Fevvers is faced with her worst identity crisis in Part III, when she is in danger of losing herself in the emptiness of her surroundings and in Walser's unconscious eyes. In contrast to Olga and Vera, who welcome the white world of Siberia as a tabula rasa ("a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished" 257), Fevvers is overwhelmed by the void. "But there she stopped short for the notion that nobody's daughter walked across nowhere in the direction of nothing produced in her such vertigo she was forced to pause and take a few breaths" (332). The movement towards remote places like Siberia also suggests a movement away from logic and reason. As Fevvers' singularity slowly dissolves, she also loses grip of her identity, since it is "performance itself, the relationship with an audience, [that] imbues her with her special identity" (Sceats 93).

Similarly to Walser, Fevvers has also transformed in the course of events. She is no longer on a quest for money ("Sometimes the lengths to which I'll go for money appal me" 233), but is eager to find Walser in order to restore her identity and make him into her 'New Man'. When she encounters Walser in the Shaman's hut, however, he is still hallucinating with eyes that "seemed to have lost their power to reflect" (343) so that she suffers a major crisis of identity:

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection of Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (344)

Fevvers is in danger of losing her sense of self, since "[s]he felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea" (343). Dimitrijevic (136) argues that in the world of the Shaman,

“which is made up of ideas and apparitions, she exists only as an abstraction” and is thus bereft of her singularity (“No Venus, or Helen, or Angel of the Apocalypse, not Izrael or Isfahel ... only a poor freak down on her luck” 344). Like Rosencreutz or the Grand Duke, the Shaman’s mythology tries to turn Fevvers into an idea or a symbol. A symbolic woman, however, has no individual personality (Day 177). Luckily the audience’s gaze can restore Fevvers’ sense of self as well as Walser’s mind.

With Fevvers, Carter created a highly ambiguous figure, whose origin and identity remain a mystery. Her multifaceted, fluid identity is constructed by both Fevvers herself and her audience. Michael (“Nights” 508) claims that “Fevvers is able to create the being that others see her to be”. It is impossible to determine a fixed identity, since she is constructed out of multiple (mutually exclusive) opposites: woman and bird, whore and virgin, feminine and masculine, object and subject, myth and material body, fact and fiction. This ambiguity is irresolvable for the reader, so that he/she has to accept the fact that Fevvers’ identity can never be pinned down. The paradoxes embodied by Fevvers not only create confusion but are also the reason for her worldwide fame, since “[i]f she isn’t suspect, where’s the controversy? What’s the news?” (9). Regarding the question “Is she fact or is she fiction?”, Fernihough (105) asserts that “Fevvers’ great triumph is that she is *both*”.

The novel and especially Fevvers destabilize the boundaries between traditional Western oppositions like object/subject or fact/fiction and work “against – or soar above – our deeply ingrained binaries” (Malina 128). An important binary in this context represents gender. Childs (100, 106) even identifies Carter’s works as part of the project “to demythologize the naturalized fictions surrounding gender and sexuality”. So, *Nights at the Circus* represents a distinctively feminist novel, because it reveals the constructed nature of “literary and gendered history and mythology”. Fernihough cleverly compares Fevvers’ wings and Butler’s notion of gender in that she maintains that both are “neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived” (Butler qtd. in Fernihough 105).

6 Conclusion

Postmodern fiction explores, amongst others, the constructedness of reality and calls into question naturalized concepts like history and gender. These features were also found in the three novels analyzed and contribute to the construction of the female figures' identities. A comparison of the strategies used to construct these identities reveals interesting similarities.

The female characters' identities depend to a large extent on the subjective point of view of a male character in the novel. JL, for example, is only seen through the eyes of the narrator Dunnett. Her own words are not present, so that the reader has to rely on Dunnett for information about her identity. Thus, JL's identity continuously changes throughout the novel along with the narrator's mood and his feelings for her. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Sarah's words may be present, but her thoughts are still absent from the text. That is why her identity has to be deduced from Charles' and the male narrator's account of Sarah. Both are, however, unable to interpret her behaviour and to pin down her identity. Since Fevvers tells her own story, she is the female figure we know most about. But, as her identity is constructed to a large extent through performance, she is again dependent on her audience which is mainly male.

Moreover, all three novels use the special characteristics of their genre in the construction of female identity. The epistolary novel's autodiegetic narration gives insight into the narrator's intimate feelings and thoughts but lacks any other characters' point of view. In addition, a novel in letters features an interesting temporal structure where the narrator does not know the end of the story at the beginning, and it highlights themes like isolation and obsession. The Victorian setting in Fowles' novel is also essential for the themes and the plot of the novel. It demonstrates the social constraints on women, the link between the past and the present, and stresses the freedom of choice also displayed in the three endings. Magic realism's emphasis on the combination of fact and fiction again shapes the novel as well as Fevvers' identity. It reveals the power of narration along with the constructedness of naturalized Western concepts like history and reality.

LJ, Sarah and Fevvers may be constructed in very different ways, but their identities resemble each other in many aspects. In proper postmodernist fashion, their identities are fragmented and fluid. Although the male characters want to put them into categories like virgin, whore, angel, or devil, it is impossible to determine a fixed identity for all three female figures. They play multiple roles during their life, often simultaneously. JL, for example, is only seen as

writer by Dunnett, although she occupies much more roles in her life. Charles is also trying to find Sarah's fixed identity in order to better interpret her but has to realize that this search yields no answers. Both women remain a mystery for the male characters and, apparently, also for their male authors. However, Fevvers' identity is also indeterminable despite the female author. To sum up, the female identities in the novels depict a continuous process that is too complex for other people to fully understand.

Apart from the fact that it is extremely difficult to know another person, the novels' analysis has also shown that not only our identities are socially constructed. Other naturalized conventions like time, gender or reality are similarly created. Thus, Waugh (19) argues that

the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as *writing*, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized.

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8 Index

- defamiliarization 42
- epistolary novel 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 33, 34, 79
- feminism 7, 15, 70
- freedom 43, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51, 52, 54, 55, 63, 65, 66, 72, 79
- gender 12, 13, 56, 59, 60, 67, 78, 79, 80
- genre 5, 11, 24
- globalization 8, 14, 16, 17
- historiographic metafiction 11, 40
- history 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 21, 40, 42, 45, 52, 54, 58, 60, 63, 64, 66, 69, 71, 78, 79
- Hutcheon 7, 10, 11, 40, 41
- identity 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 29, 31, 35, 36, 38, 45, 48, 49, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 60, 64, 65, 66, 67, 71, 73, 74, 76, 77, 79, 80
- intertextuality 11
- isolation 33, 35
- language 9, 11, 12, 15, 28, 32, 42, 43, 44, 45, 49, 64, 66, 69
- literary process 35, 38
- Lyotard 7, 9, 10
- magic realism 9, 59, 73
- Magic Realism 58, 59, 60
- metafiction 9, 10, 11, 26, 40, 41, 42
- metanarratives 7, 9
- modernism 8, 10
- narrative 18, 23
- Neo-Victorian fiction 40
- Nights at the Circus* 5, 58, 59, 60, 64, 65, 68, 71, 78
- parody 9, 10, 41, 42, 49
- performance 18, 38, 65, 66, 67, 69, 71, 72, 77, 79
- postmodern fiction 5, 9, 10, 40, 79
- postmodernism 7, 8, 14
- reality 5, 9, 10, 11, 21, 26, 28, 34, 42, 44, 46, 47, 50, 52, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 75, 79, 80
- reliability 29
- roles 5, 12, 16, 38, 45, 51, 52, 56, 80
- sarcasm 27
- sexuality 14, 15, 40, 43, 78
- social status 44
- The French Lieutenant's Woman* 5, 11, 40, 44, 48, 54, 79
- The Trick of It* 5, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31, 34, 38
- time 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 36, 37, 38, 46, 47, 48, 51, 56, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 72, 73, 80
- Victorian era 40, 42
- Waugh 5, 11, 26, 28, 32, 42, 48, 51, 56, 80
- wings 60, 64, 66, 67, 71, 72, 75, 76, 78, 83

German Abstract

Diese Masterarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Konstruktion der weiblichen Identität in drei ausgewählten postmodernen Romanen. Sie analysiert die Techniken, die von den Autoren verwendet wurden um die jeweilige weibliche Hauptfigur zu charakterisieren.

Im Laufe des 20sten Jahrhunderts veränderte sich der Begriff der Identität und stellte nicht mehr fixe, sozial gegebene Rollen dar, sondern wurde zu einem komplexen sozialen Prozess. Speziell in der Postmoderne, die unter anderem von Pluralismus, Dekonstruktion und Instabilität geprägt wird, stellt sich die Suche nach der eigenen Identität als problematisch heraus. Im ersten Teil der Arbeit werden zuerst die Begriffe Identität und Postmoderne erläutert und dann deren Relation zum Erzählen beschrieben.

Der zweite Teil der Arbeit analysiert die Konstruktion/Dekonstruktion der weiblichen Identität in Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Die Romane weisen alle typische postmoderne Charakteristika auf und gehören verschiedenen Genres an, dem Briefroman, dem historischen Roman und dem Magischen Realismus. Zusätzlich zu den Identitäten der ProtagonistInnen und den Erzählern wurden auch die genre-spezifischen Merkmale und Themen untersucht, die die Konstruktion der weiblichen Identität maßgeblich beeinflussen.

Zuletzt wurden die Identitäten der weiblichen Hauptfiguren JL, Sarah Woodruff und Fevvers verglichen und, obwohl die Konstruktion der Charaktere auf verschiedene Weise erfolgte, wurde interessanterweise festgestellt, dass sich die Identitäten der Frauen in einigen Punkten gleichen, wie zum Beispiel in ihrer Struktur. Das Selbst der weiblichen Hauptfiguren wird als vielschichtig, unbeständig, wandelbar und vor allem als sozial konstruiert dargestellt. Des Weiteren werden auch andere Konzepte wie Geschichte, Gender oder Realität als konstruiert beschrieben, was deren Konstruktionsprozess auch in der realen Welt offenlegt.

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