

Ambiguity has often been considered an enriching aspect of literature. Discuss what has been gained or lost by the inclusion of what you define as ambiguity in the works you have studied. [Tess of the D'Urbervilles and The French Lieutenant's Woman]

Ambiguity, or the quality of allowing room for interpretation, is not an uncommon feature in novels. In literature, ambiguity can be employed in a number of different ways, whether in the author's use of vague language and description, or in the concealment of a character's identity and feelings, or by obfuscating the details of a particular situation or event. As is strongly evident in Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", however, ambiguity exists not only in the events of the novel itself, but also in Hardy's own apparent ambivalence towards his subject matter, his era (the Victorian era), and his heroine (Tess). Similarly in John Fowles' "The French Lieutenant's Woman", the presence of ambiguity allows us to form our own opinions of the 19th Century Victorian society that Fowles depicts, making it even more interesting as Fowles wrote with historical hindsight in the 20th Century. Because of the element of ambiguity surrounding the opinions of these authors, we lose the capacity to settle on a definite resolution, but gain the choice to make our own judgments, and, through the process of forming our own judgments, gain insight into the conventions and views that bound 19th Century society.

Ambiguity is a defining feature in "The French Lieutenant's Woman". Fowles' depiction of his central female figure, Sarah, is shrouded in mystery and ambiguity. Throughout the novel, we find ourselves asking (as even the narrator himself asks midway through the novel): "Who is Sarah?" It is this mystery surrounding Sarah that keeps Charles, the society of Lyme, and us as readers intrigued. Sarah herself declares that she is "not to be understood," and in this sense, the ambiguity surrounding her character is not a general 'vagueness', but rather an intentional portrayal of her as an enigma. Fowles never reveals her inner thoughts or intentions to his readers: we only see her through Charles' observations or through her interactions with other characters in the novel. She is depicted as "a fallen woman," an outcast of society due to her alleged affair with the French sailor Varguennes (although we learn later on that Sarah never gave herself to him). As readers, we are never fully allowed to understand why Sarah calls herself "The French Lieutenant's Whore" or why she almost revels in her role as "poor Tragedy." Even the reasons given by Sarah are not fully comprehensible – on the one hand she says that her position as a "fallen woman" has "set her beyond the pale" and given her "a freedom that other women can never understand," but on the other hand, she cannot answer Charles on why she embraces society's false condemnation of her, only uttering: "I don't know, don't ask me." Fowles does not allow Charles to understand her, and neither does he allow his readers to comprehend her actions. It is Sarah's mystery, and the ambiguity surrounding her thoughts and intentions, that gives her freedom from the conformity of 19th Century Victorian society. Fowles himself had felt constrained in the 20th Century, and in writing his novel, he sought to explore the conformism of the even more stratified Victorian age – the epitome of conformism and oppression. In this way, Sarah becomes a symbol of independence, overtly challenging the conformism of the Victorian age. She is, in Charles' words, a "remarkable woman," a "New Woman" that challenges the social norms of society and seeks her own self-fulfillment. Thus, in the ambiguity surrounding Sarah, we may lose our ability to fully understand her character, but gain insight into the conformity of the Victorian Era and in Fowles' belief of the autonomy of the individual.

Similarly in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", the nature of the central female character is likewise ambiguous. Although Tess is a "flesh and blood character" (unlike the enigmatic symbol that is Sarah) there is a certain degree of ambiguity surrounding the question of her purity that forms the basis of the novel. Tess is, on the one hand, "pure and virginal," and on the other hand, a "temptress." Perhaps the aspect that is most vague in Hardy's portrayal of Tess is his description of the events that occur in The Chase, the night of Tess' defloration. Hardy was already very much limited in what he could write; the sensitive nature of the topic

of Tess' sexual encounter meant that any direct reference to the event would be shocking to Victorian readers (and disallowed from being published). This 'forced' ambiguity in itself becomes reflective of the restrictive society that Hardy lived in. Nevertheless, it can be said that Hardy was purposeful in his ambiguity and used it to challenge the moral conventions of his time. Hardy describes the night in the Chase wood: "upon the beautiful feminine tissue [Tess' body], sensitive as gossamer, practically blank as snow yet, traced a coarse pattern it was doomed to receive." Hardy does not tell us if Tess is consenting in the act, leaving it up to his readers' interpretations. However, he gives subtle indications that Tess did not participate in the act willingly: Tess is the passive object "upon" which an act of defilement is wrought, and a "coarse pattern" is traced, implying rape, as opposed to a gentler seduction. Hardy's use of the adjective "doomed" suggests that Tess would have become a receptacle for Alec's lust in one way or another. Upon close reading, Hardy seems to be suggesting the Tess cannot be blamed for her "loss of purity" as she scarcely had any power over the situation. Through his ambiguity, we come to a more nuanced (albeit delayed) understanding of Hardy's sympathy for his titular heroine.

If nothing else, the title's addendum, "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented" is hardly ambiguous; Hardy makes it clear that he believes Tess is "pure" and unjustly condemned, leaving us little room to question his particular views on Tess' purity. That being said, Hardy remains ambiguous in the body of his novel, allowing for the variance of opinion in his contemporary C19 readers on whether Tess is "pure" or "impure," "Pauline" or "pagan." After all, he says that Tess' "sins" were "not sins of intention, but sins of inadvertence." On the one hand, Hardy absolves Tess from blame, asserting her purity of "intention", but on the other hand, Hardy allows room for interpretation, as Tess' actions (or lack thereof) are still deemed as "sins." Although we can be certain that Hardy believes Tess to be pure, the ambiguity within his novel shows us that in general, C19 Victorian society believed otherwise – and it is through this ambiguity that Hardy gains the ability to critique and challenge his society's inflexible definition of morality.

In contrast, the 'ambiguity' that is apparent in Fowles' work is in his unique narrative and provision of three different endings. Fowles allows room for his readers to make their own interpretations and judgments and decide how they want the story to end. In the first ending, Charles resists the temptation to stop in Exeter, and returns to Ernestina after his visit to his uncle in London, and "did not live happily after." This ending would have been the most acceptable to Victorian readers; however, Fowles writes in the 20th Century and his purpose did not lie in recreating a Victorian novel. Fowles tinkers with contingency and tells us: "the last few pages you have read are not what happened," and takes us back in time to illustrate the two separate responses and their consequences. In the second ending, Charles reunites with Sarah and the two presumably marry and live together after; however, Fowles utilises these two endings as contrasts against his delayed final ending – where Charles leaves, "never once looking back." Fowles' employment of this technique is vastly different from Hardy's; as an author steeped in the early 19th Century, Hardy did not have this same flexibility to tamper with the temporal elements of his novel or adopt this postmodern narrative. However, what both authors give us is choice. It is only in this delayed final ending that Charles "find himself reborn," gaining "an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness on which to build." Fowles shows us that Charles has finally started to embark on an existentialist journey towards understanding away from the conformist ideals of his society. He has been led by Sarah, whose transformation, unlike Charles', is predominantly physical, for now she has the "full uniform of the New Woman, flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions." Fowles is ambiguous in that he does not tell us which ending is the "right" ending; he only asserts that the last "is not the less plausible ending," ultimately leaving the decision up to the readers. Although we lose the definitive ending, Sarah, Charles, Fowles, as well as us as readers, gain a choice. It was Fowles' intention to give his readers a choice as to which ending they prefer, allowing us to gain insight into our own beliefs and judgments.

Similarly, Hardy's ambiguity allows his readers to gain a better understanding of their own moral standings. Tess begins to take shape in each of our minds – whether she is “more sinned against than sinner” or plainly “pure” depends on our own definitions of morality and our individual appraisals of her conduct. Hardy is vague enough to allow his readers to either castigate Tess, or sympathise with her. This extends to his other characters as well – although Alec is seen as an antagonistic character in the novel, Hardy is also ambiguous about his thoughts and intentions. Alec is, in his own words, “a damn bad fellow” and in Tess' words, the force that makes her life “black with misery,” but also is at the same time sympathetic towards Tess and not unkind towards her. After defiling her, he declares that “he is ready to pay to the uttermost farthing,” and although this can be construed as another one of his endeavours to make Tess his “pet,” he shows that he is not entirely devoid of concern for her. When he meets her later on in the novel, he calls her “the one victim for which he has no contempt,” acknowledging that she is a victim even as her own husband Angel cannot come to do so. That being said, Alec is still very much forceful, controlling, and a “damn bad fellow.” When Tess rejects him he turns violent, exclaiming: “Remember, I was your master once! I will be your master again!” This ambiguity surrounding Alec's character offers the readers an opportunity to sympathise with the antagonistic Alec; in this manner, ambiguity allows for the multi-dimensional development of characters.

Ambiguity is critical in both Hardy's and Fowles' novels, allowing them to convey their views about the conventions of 19th Century society and also allowing them to portray their characters in different lights. It is their use of ambiguity that sustains their readers' interest; although we lose the capacity to fully understand their characters or settle on a definitive resolution, we gain the choice to make our own judgments. As Fowles himself writes, “the trouble” is when “there is no mystery” – it is through this “mystery” in both novels that we gain a better understanding of ourselves.