

**San Jose State University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Alison L. McKee**

---

1992

**She Had Eyes a Man Could Drown In: Narrative,  
Desire, and the Female Gaze in The French  
Lieutenant's Woman**

Alison L. McKee



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/alison\\_mckee/23/](https://works.bepress.com/alison_mckee/23/)



## **She Had Eyes A Man Could Drown In: Narrative, Desire and the Female Gaze In *The French Lieutenant's Woman***

In *Reading for the Plot*, a study of the complex structuring of meaning and desire which narrative performs and plays out, literary critic and theorist Peter Brooks observes that desire enables the very existence of the signifying chain of narrative meaning.<sup>1</sup> He draws upon Freud and Lacan in particular to support his claims, viewing their writings on life, death and desire as metatextual commentaries on the form their own narratives take and on the nature of narrative in general. Though Brooks confines his field of inquiry to literature, his formulations about “the play of desire in time” which narrative articulates seem to me to apply equally well to cinematic as well as literary narratives.<sup>2</sup> As a feminist who studies and teaches both literature and film, then, I write this article with a specific goal in mind: that of investigating various ways in which different narrative theories might be borrowed from literary studies and brought to bear upon feminist film theory, particularly upon the still-influential Mulveyian model of spectatorship first posed some seventeen years ago in 1975.<sup>3</sup> This article is not, therefore, an examination of the process by which John Fowles’s novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) was adapted into film in 1981, nor is it a comparison between or among Fowles’s novel, Harold Pinter’s screenplay, and Karel Reisz’s film of the same title. Instead, it is a reading of the film as a kind of allegory of the workings of desire in narrative as conceived by Brooks. Desire as a mechanism of narrative is explicitly thematized in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as the erotic desire expressed between the two protagonists. This sexual desire is mediated by the gaze, which is necessarily the subject of all films at some level and an overt subject of this one. Contrary to the Mulveyian formulation of the gaze in narrative cinema, however, it is the female rather than the male protagonist who is associated with the active, desiring look in this film and who functions as the controlling force within the narrative. There are, of course, other things to be said about *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, other hypotheses to be advanced, other theories which might be brought to bear on one’s study of this film. My project here is not to exhaust the possibilities but rather to open up the field of inquiry and to demonstrate the usefulness of working

toward a productive cross-fertilization of film and literary theory. It is my hope that such cross-fertilization will give rise to an increased understanding of the workings of narrative in general—cinematic, literary or other—and to a greater awareness of the kinds of critical narratives we ourselves construct about the various texts which come under our gaze.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is structured as a nested narrative (or what I shall call a nested narrative for the moment) which we watch as a film-within-a-film. That is, we watch two actors, Mike and Anna (Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep), portraying Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff in a film (also called *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) set in 1867 England. The basic plot of this internal drama revolves around Charles's obsession with Sarah, an enigmatic, disturbed woman who is rumored to have fallen in love and slept with Varguennes, a wounded French lieutenant who was once in her care. She enralls Charles and comes between him and his fiancée, Ernestina Freeman (Lynsey Baxter), the daughter of a respectable, wealthy, middle-class merchant. Known by the townspeople of Lyme only as "Tragedy" or "the French Lieutenant's woman," Sarah remains throughout most of the film in the clutches of what a Dr. Grogan (Leo McKern) calls "obscure melancholia." Charles fights his obsession with her but eventually gives in to his desire and takes her to bed, discovering in the process that Sarah is not, in fact "the scarlet woman of Lyme," as she calls herself, but a virgin. He leaves her to break his engagement to Ernestina so that he will be free to marry her, but upon his return he finds that Sarah has disappeared. A fruitless three-year search for her leaves him shattered; then word comes from his lawyer that she has been found. After an emotional, violent episode in which Charles confronts a new Sarah, purged of all sign of melancholia, the two are reunited and the scars of the past are presumably healed.

Interspersed throughout this tale are twentieth-century sequences in which Mike and Anna discuss and rehearse parts of the internal drama. Like Charles and Sarah, they, too, are in love and involved in an affair; Mike, however, is married and Anna has a French lover. Their relationship simultaneously comments upon and mirrors that of Charles and Sarah until the nested narrative and framework become inextricably intermingled. Mike loses Anna to Davide, her lover, and unlike Charles, he remains alone at the film's conclusion.

It is when Charles encounters Sarah in the film within the film that the nineteenth-century narrative truly begins, and it is brought to life by the gaze which both inspires and expresses desire.<sup>4</sup> Charles sees Sarah for the first time on a windy day as he is walking with his fiancée. She is standing at the far end of a curving stone pier which is being battered by waves and wind, and despite Ernestina's protests, Charles runs out along the pier, concerned for the woman's safety. In response to his calls, the woman turns slightly and stares at him over her shoulder, and at that moment the diegetic sound of wind and waves quiets as Carl Davis's haunting score comes up on the soundtrack. Like Charles a moment before, she is shot from the shoulders up, and when the camera returns to him, it moves close to record and emphasize his instant, wordless response to her gaze. Still the diegetic sound is muffled as a reverse shot close-up reiterates Sarah's look; again Charles's reaction is recorded. As he watches, she pulls the hood of her cloak more tightly about her face and slowly turns away to stare out to sea, denying him further access to her gaze.

In order to understand this exchange of glances as the authentic beginning of Charles's and Sarah's narrative—in the Brooksonian sense—it is necessary to examine Brooks's comments about narrative beginnings in general. He takes as the departure point for his remarks Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) which, he asserts, "constitutes Freud's own masterplot, the essay where he lays out most fully a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end . . . ultimately he is talking about the very possibility of talking about life—about its very 'narratability.'"<sup>5</sup> Finding that Freud's essay "offers the most probing inquiry into the dynamics of the psychic life,

and hence, by possible extension, of texts,"<sup>6</sup> Brooks observes that:

plot starts (or must give the illusion of starting) from that moment at which story, or "life," is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration . . . [Narrative desire is] the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention.<sup>7</sup>

While Brooks's narrative model and notion of desire are somewhat troubling in that they are predicated almost exclusively on a male sexual paradigm which ignores questions of sexual difference, they are nevertheless useful in dealings with narratives which enact or comment upon classical nineteenth-century narrative trajectories.<sup>8</sup> In the silent exchange of gazes which occurs between Charles and Sarah on the pier, then, the plot is born as Sarah's look awakens desire in Charles and initiates forward movement.<sup>9</sup> His response is articulated in a gaze that reflects both sexual desire and a wish to decipher the enigma she represents (plot, or the twisting linearity of narrative, evoked visually in the curving line of the pier upon which Sarah stands), but after only a few seconds she turns away, breaking the gaze and frustrating Charles's attempts to look longer at her. Such a break is necessary, according to Brooks's model, if the narrative is to continue: were Charles permitted to decipher the enigma with his look immediately, the narrative trajectory would be "[a] straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end—which would be the collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death."<sup>10</sup> This pattern of the broken gaze recurs throughout the film and allows the prolongation of narrative as it seeks its proper end.<sup>11</sup>

A consideration of the gaze in any film narrative owes a certain debt to Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in which she discusses the fetishistic gaze of the male protagonist in classical Hollywood film. The roots of her discussion lie in the psychoanalytic terrain which surrounds the castration complex, which Mulvey describes in the following terms:

Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference. . . . Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the reenactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object . . . or else complete disavowal of castration by . . . turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.<sup>12</sup>

According to Mulvey's scheme, it is man who is active bearer of the look, woman who is passive spectacle. While Mulvey's explanation of spectatorship works for much of classical Hollywood cinema, however, it does not account for the deployment of narrative power which the look enacts in the 1981 Reisz-Pinter film. Instead, the film functions as a kind of commentary upon the conventional pattern of looking which Mulvey describes and ultimately inverts it. At first, the film seems to follow the classical pattern closely. Sarah evokes in Charles not only desire but an anxiety that shatters his composure and prompts him to try both avenues of escape to which Mulvey refers, shifting from one to the other in an effort to master Sarah and the anxiety she provokes. His first course of action takes the form of investigation, which leads to his attempts to save her; his second manifests itself in attempts to transform Sarah into pure spectacle, attempts which are expressed cinematically through structures of shot-reverse shot and close-up. I suggest, however, that Charles's anxiety should be read not in terms of the castration complex *per se*, but rather as an emblem of the chaotic, formless energy which propels narrative toward its death and of the ever-present potential of narrative to collapse, to end too soon. Through the power of her gaze (the gaze of the female rather than the male protagonist), Sarah initiates the narrative. It is she, rather than Charles, who is the active controller of the look and of the narrative whose enunciation the look mediates.

Charles tries twice to "save" Sarah, his first attempt taking the form of listening to Sarah's story of her affair with Varguennes, the French lieutenant. A visit to Dr. Grogan has persuaded Charles that if Sarah can speak of her unhappy affair, she will be cured of her "obscure melancholia." Speaking, or narrating, does not prove to be the cure that Dr. Grogan believed it would be, however, for Sarah's narrative is a false one: in telling the story, she remystifies herself in a web of fiction and becomes even more of an enigma to Charles than she was before. In highly self-conscious fashion, Sarah tells her tale of desire and seduction in an unmistakable effort to seduce Charles, spinning her story and finally gliding in a circle around him, drawing him in, as he sits huddled against the trunk of a tree. At the end of her tale, she even begins to take down her hair as she speaks of giving herself to Varguennes. Although Charles clearly desires her, seduction is postponed (he reaches out to touch her shoulder, snatches his hand back, and whirls around to fold his arms): satisfaction of desire (culmination and end of plot) is deferred in order to prolong the life of the narrative as it seeks its proper end.

As the preceding sequence demonstrates, Sarah is never simply victim or threat to Charles but rather both at once: even as he tries to save her, he is frightened by her. Thus, before his second attempt to rescue her, and even before his first, he makes an obvious effort to control her with his gaze, to neutralize the threat she represents. This is best expressed by the pattern of shot-reverse shot and the use of close-ups. His first meeting with Sarah on the pier discussed earlier exhibits such a pattern. Through the use of shot-reverse shot, our gaze becomes identified with that of Charles: in this sequence, close-ups which function as reaction shots of Charles are filmed from an oblique angle, while close-ups of Sarah are shot from Charles's point of view, so that she stares directly into the camera. Here and elsewhere, Charles tries to transform an active force into passive spectacle, to deactivate it and neutralize his own anxiety. Later, he watches Sarah from a distance through a spyglass as she walks through a wood, and again our gaze overlaps with his as he glances through a portable telescope in an effort to objectify and control her.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah, however, resists all such fetishistic gazes in two ways: by deliberately turning away (as in the scene on the pier) and by returning the look, thereby neutralizing the objectifying gaze (although she cannot see Charles in the woods, she feels his eyes upon her and glances for a moment in his direction). Mulvey writes that:

the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle.<sup>14</sup>

In this film, however, the split between spectacle and narrative (if such a binary split exists) collapses: it is Sarah *as* spectacle who initiates the narrative and makes things happen, she who subverts the active role of the male and emerges as the representative of narrative movement. As we shall see, she not only stimulates story into narrative but also chooses the time and manner of that narrative's death.<sup>15</sup>

The power that the male gaze conventionally connotes is frequently undermined not only by Sarah's rejection or return of a male gaze but also by the *mise-en-scène* of the film which repeatedly frames Charles within the restricting confines of windows and doorways while emphasizing Sarah's relative freedom. In a sequence of shot/reverse shots toward the beginning of the film, Charles observes Sarah walking along the cliffs above the sea; her freedom of movement and the bright colors of the landscape form a vivid contrast to Charles's own stillness as he watches her from the dark doorway of a nearby dairy. He is framed in similar fashion in the doorway of a makeshift shelter on the Undercliff during a clandestine meeting with Sarah in which he has been discovered by his manservant; again the series of shot/reverse shots between Charles and Sarah articulate the former's sense of entrapment and passivity and the

latter's relative freedom, the former's nervousness and repression and the latter's expressive sexuality (evoked in the tousled red hair that hangs in disarray to her shoulders) which refuses to be contained by a male gaze. Sequences which frame Charles in the manner described above and suggest his relative impotence when contrasted with Sarah (or her various surrogates) are numerous, the most notable of which include: 1) Charles's recollection of his first encounter with Sarah on the pier, as he stands at the window of his lodgings which overlook the sea; his recollection takes the form of a single shot which reiterates her direct look at him, and its reverse shot is one of Charles behind the glass and cross-hatchings of his window, his hands touching the panes as if to reach out to the image he has recollected; 2) Charles's desperate search for Sarah in London's dismal industrial and red-light districts, in which he is framed in the window of his coach as he watches women leaving a factory and framed again later as he watches a prostitute with hair and coloring reminiscent of Sarah's.<sup>16</sup> In addition, similar shot/reverse shot sequences can be found in the twentieth-century segments in which a passive and constrained Mike is framed in windows and doorways while Anna lounges in bed or drives away from Mike with her lover. Whether they occur in the nineteenth- or the twentieth-century segments, however, these sequences function to locate the power of the gaze with the female rather than the male characters.

The only point at which Charles *seems* truly active (capable of engendering narrative movement) is when he attempts once more to "save" Sarah. He has arranged for money to be sent to her to allow her to escape Lyme for Exeter. He visits her in Exeter at her hotel, and once there, he gives in to the desire he has been fighting throughout the film and takes her to bed, calling her by her first name for the first time. Sarah has planned and hoped for his visit, and at the conclusion of the sequence, her seduction of Charles is finally complete.

The significance of this scene lies in the partial demystification of Sarah through the process of naming. Prior to this sequence Sarah is known by the townspeople of Lyme as either "Tragedy" or "the French lieutenant's woman [whore]"; she is never called by her first name, and when Charles speaks to her he addresses her only as "Miss Woodruff."<sup>17</sup> In this sequence, however, the physical act of penetration is accompanied by Charles's discovery that she is not, in fact, the French lieutenant's "whore" but a virgin, and for the first time he calls her by her given name. Intercourse stands in here as an emblem of penetration, both sexual and narratological: Charles (at least partially) penetrates the enigma, demystifies the woman, and reveals her "true" identity, which is stated simply as "Sarah." Paradoxically, she is purged of her fictitious identity as "the scarlet woman of Lyme" through her loss of virginity, which in another context might be seen as a taint or stain. When she reappears at the conclusion of the internal narrative, she is reborn: she has created a new life for herself and a new identity as well.

Whether Charles is actually responsible for this process of demystification and rebirth, however, is debatable. Although Charles sleeps with Sarah and names her, it is she who has engineered the seduction which allows the naming to occur, it is she who has brought the narrative to this point. Moreover, Charles's efforts to demystify her are not entirely successful: shortly after this sequence she disappears, necessitating a three-year search before she is found again. Sarah's disappearance, like her denial of Charles's gaze on the pier, is essential to the prolongation of the narrative. It is, in fact, another version of the rejection of the too-intimate gaze. Desire has been consummated and death threatens to still the narrative. In order to avoid a narrative breakdown, Sarah must disappear, thereby creating another tension or irritation that will revive the plot. The tension now takes the form of Charles's ambition to find Sarah and suffices to carry the narrative through to its proper end.

Brooks speaks of the prolongation of narrative "as an ever more complicated postponement or *détour*" which allows the narrative to "seek illumination in its own

death."<sup>18</sup> In his discussion, he turns to the work of William Empson and makes an observation about the phenomenon of the subplot:

The development of the subplot . . . usually suggests (as William Empson has intimated) a different solution to the problems worked through by the main plot, and often illustrates the danger of short-circuit. The subplot often stands as one means of warding off the danger of short-circuit, assuring the main plot will continue through to the right end.<sup>19</sup>

I suggest that in order to understand the narrative of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in its entirety, it would be productive to view the twentieth-century sequences in which Mike and Anna appear as forming a kind of subplot that works through potential short-circuits which threaten to rupture the union (or reunion) of Charles and Sarah (the right end toward which the narrative progresses). They form a kind of mirror image that is both like and unlike that which it reflects and which functions as a repository for the anarchic, short-circuiting impulse of narrative.

This idea of the structure of nested narrative as expressing a different version of a single tale is borne out by the *mise-en-scène* of the film. Mirrors, reflections in windows, and graphic representations of the self recur throughout both plot (the nineteenth-century sequences) and subplot (the twentieth-century sequences). There are mirrors scattered throughout the houses of Mrs. Tranter, Mrs. Poulteney, Dr. Grogan, and Charles (both in Lyme and in London); there is also a mirror in Sarah's room at Endicott's Hotel in Exeter. These mirrors may remain unobtrusively in the background as part of the decor, or they may resonate with meaning(s) in single shots, as when Sarah sketches her own likeness from a mirror image or glances at her reflection at Endicott's as she plans Charles's seduction. The reflected image as a signifier of fragmentation or multiplication of selves is repeated in the subplot: the hand mirror in which Anna views herself costumed as Sarah in the opening shot of the film, the dressing table mirror in Anna's hotel room, Mike's reflected face in the window, the mirrors at the fitter's, and on the Windermere set in which Anna studies herself. Just as the look becomes a metaphor for the creation and maintenance of the narrative's forward movement, so reflections become visual metaphors for the structure of the film, for plot and subplot, for the repetition and variation which engenders narrative meaning.<sup>20</sup>

Brooks observes that "it is characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge."<sup>21</sup> His association of short-circuit with truncated sexual energy is crucial to an understanding of desire as motivator of the signifying chain in all narrative and in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in particular: "The possibility of short-circuit can of course be represented in all manner of threats to the protagonist or to any of the functional logics which demand completion; it most commonly takes the form of temptation to the mistaken erotic object choice."<sup>22</sup> Not only is the film's narrative threatened by premature discharge and cessation of desire (a threat neatly expressed by Charles's hasty orgasm in the consummation scene in Exeter), it is also endangered by Sarah's and Charles's temptations to false sexual partners. These potential short-circuits, then, are "deactivated" by the external drama. Functioning as subplot, the twentieth-century sequences enact the potential short-circuits of the internal drama, thus purging it and ensuring the reunion of Charles and Sarah.

The false partner to whom Sarah is attracted and from whom she must be rescued is Varguennes. It is in the external narrative, or subplot, in the incarnation of Anna, that she has succumbed to the false sexual partner, represented there by Davide. Like Varguennes, he is French, and Anna's affair with him, like Sarah's (fictitious) affair with Varguennes, begins before we ever meet the characters. The affair is real, however: Anna's relationship with Davide predates her affair with Mike and has never been broken off. It is her illicit relationship with Mike, then, that marks her as a "whore," though he is, presumably, the man she truly loves. The subplot thus siphons

off and enacts the wrong choice that Sarah threatened to make at one time. Anna, not Sarah, becomes, in effect, the French lieutenant's woman, for she succumbs where Sarah does not, thereby eradicating any hope of lasting happiness when she encounters Mike.

Charles, unlike Sarah, is presented with temptation to what appears to be not one but two false erotic partners; only one, however, represents a genuine threat. In characterizing the false partner, Brooks writes that it "may be of the 'Belle Dame sans merci' variety, or may be the too perfect and hence annihilatory bride."<sup>23</sup> Sarah, who captivates and entralls Charles, would appear to be this first type, a siren or a *femme fatale*. It is only her (false) reputation as a "scarlet woman" that marks her as a siren, however. Once she divests herself of her identity as the French lieutenant's woman, she is revealed as the erotic partner with whom Charles must seek to be reunited.

The real false sexual partner to whom Charles is drawn and who does represent a potential site of narrative short-circuit is Ernestina Freeman, Brooks's "too perfect . . . bride":

Throughout the Romantic tradition, it is perhaps most notably the image of incest (of the fraternal-sororal variety) which hovers, as the sign of a passion interdicted because its fulfillment would be too perfect, a discharge indistinguishable from death, the very cessation of narrative movement. . . . Incest is only the exemplary version of a temptation of short-circuit from which the protagonist and the text must be led away, into detour, into the cure that prolongs narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Although Charles and Ernestina are not, of course, literally brother and sister, Charles behaves toward her as he would toward a sister. Their relationship is passionless, in direct contrast to Charles's and Sarah's relationship. When Ernestina accepts his proposal of marriage, he cannot bring himself to kiss her but instead embraces her awkwardly, almost violently, as if feigning a passion he does not feel. In a later scene, he kisses her chastely on the brow, and when Ernestina silently offers her lips, he hesitates and then kisses her reluctantly. Furthermore, there is a suggestion at one point that if he marries Ernestina, his relationship with her will become, on some level, an incestuous one. In a meeting with Charles, Mr. Freeman comments upon Charles's forthcoming marriage to his daughter and speaks of the future:

FREEMAN: You know I have no son?  
CHARLES: I do, sir, yes.  
FREEMAN: Well, this is doubtless not the time to talk about it, but if you ever felt disposed to explore the world of commerce, I would be delighted to be your guide.

The implication here is that Charles will take the place of the son Mr. Freeman never had when he marries Ernestina. He cannot do this, however, without also becoming, in some sense, her brother. It is thus necessary to the life of the narrative that he be led away from Ernestina toward Sarah, toward that figure which represents and ensures narrative movement, and this is exactly what happens: he is literally drawn away from Ernestina's side when he sees Sarah for the first time on the pier and attempts to rescue her.<sup>25</sup>

It is the subplot which enacts the potential short-circuit Ernestina represents and which frees Charles from the threat of incest; this threat is worked out through Mike's marriage to Sonia. Although there are no overtly incestuous overtones to this marriage, Sonia is linked to Ernestina (and thus to the "annihilatory bride") through the mediating presence of envy, repressed by Sarah but expressed by Anna. Though Sarah denies her envy of Ernestina to Charles, it finds its expression in the twentieth-century subplot during the cast party, when Anna tells Sonia she envies her gardening ability (it would be more to the point for her to say she envies her the husband *in* the garden). Like Ernestina, who is frequently filmed in or near her garden in Lyme, Sonia, too, is



associated with a domesticated, ordered Nature. Sarah, on the other hand (and thus Anna as well) is more closely allied with larger, untamed natural spaces (the woods, the sea). She is a less orderly, less "perfect" figure than Ernestina and, paradoxically, a less dangerous one. The threat of the too-perfect bride is displaced from the main plot to the subplot, in which fiancée has become wife. A potential site of short-circuit is thus neutralized, and Charles and Sarah are free to reunite as the narrative completes its search for the right end.

This very idea of a proper end, or death, of a narrative is explicitly considered in the film as it draws toward its conclusion, and it becomes a matter of some concern to those within the film. In the last third of the film, the (artificial) distinction between internal and external plot begins to collapse as nineteenth- and twentieth-century sequences are juxtaposed in increasingly shorter segments, the film switching from one time frame to the other with far greater frequency than in the earlier portions of the film. This cross-cutting creates a sense of urgency, for the breakdown between the two supposedly separate narratives occurs at a point when both face the prospect of rupture: Charles cannot find Sarah, and Mike and Anna are nearly finished with the shooting of their film. At the cast party, Davide expresses curiosity about the (internal) film's conclusion and seeks to know what form it will take:

DAVIDE: Have they decided how they are going to end the movie?

MIKE: End it?

DAVIDE: I hear they keep changing the script.

MIKE: Oh no . . . where'd you hear that?

DAVIDE: Well, there are two endings in the book: a happy ending and an unhappy ending, no?

MIKE: We're going for the first ending—I mean, the second ending.

DAVIDE: Which one is that?

MIKE: Hasn't Anna told you?

What has been evident throughout the nineteenth-century sequences now manifests itself near the end in a twentieth-century sequence: she who has stimulated story out of quiescence into narratability controls the signifying chain at both its origin and its end. It is Sarah (Anna) who determines when and how the narrative will conclude, whether the conclusion will be happy or unhappy.<sup>26</sup> Sarah tells Charles's lawyer her address so that his client may find her and a reunion may take place. She thus brings about a happy ending. In the subplot, however, Anna returns to Davide, leaving Mike alone. Since it is this strand of the narrative that has enacted the short-circuits, its proper end is necessarily an unhappy one.

Although the outcome of the two endings is different, both of them culminate in an identical shot. The last image of the internal drama is of Charles and Sarah in a small rowboat emerging out of a dark tunnel into light. Ahead of them lies a still, clear lake suggestive of peace and tranquility. This image is repeated as the external narrative draws to its own close. The setting is Windermere, and a large cast party is being held outside at night to celebrate the end of the film. Mike slips away in search of Anna, making his way to the room where Charles reunited with Sarah. Deserted camera equipment and props occupy the room as the sound of a car engine catches Mike's attention. He moves quickly to the window, wrenches it open and cries, "Sarah!" The sound of the engine fades away, and Mike turns from the window to sit alone in the dark, the camera capturing his movements in long shot. The final credits for the film begin, and then the image of Charles and Sarah moving through a dark tunnel into light is repeated. However, the camera, which had remained just inside the tunnel the first time, now emerges completely, and darkness gives way to illumination before the film fades to black. In both instances this final image functions as a metaphor for the death of the narrative. The passage through the darkness of the tunnel is a passage from life to death, from a state of narratability to one of quiescence. At the moment that Charles and Sarah reach the end of the tunnel, there is illumination,

a birth of meaning conferred and confirmed at the moment of closure.

In his consideration of repetition in narrative, Brooks writes:

Repetition, remembering, reenactment are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing, of course, that we cannot. All we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does.<sup>27</sup>

By calling Anna "Sarah" as she drives away, Mike repudiates her decision to return to Davide, the false erotic partner, and attempts to invoke a realm in which his union with her was not blocked. This realm is, of course, the narrative space of the film-within-the-film where Anna is known as "Sarah." She does not respond to his cry, however, and his second attempt to invoke that realm is a reenactment of the tunnel sequence, or the happy ending—hence what I would label the subjective repetition of that scene. Mike replays time so that he will not lose Anna. It is a return to an earlier moment in the narrative, as well as a return to an earlier historical period, a perversion of time in a futile effort to halt the forward movement of the signifying chain and to master the plot. He rejects the end Anna imposes and chooses one that he prefers in defiance of the plot that entraps him. The moment is one in which forward movement is forsaken for repetition, and for repetition which engenders a collapse of narrative space and time: if the image is simultaneously one of birth and death, of beginning and of ending, there is no more distance for narrative to traverse. The repetition of the tunnel sequence seems to exist outside of time, then: appearing under the end credits, it functions as a denial of closure altogether, a last desperate stand against the final fade to black which all narratives simultaneously desire and dread.

Alison L. McKee

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Random House, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Brooks xiii.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in the Autumn 1975 issue of *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, and reprinted a number of times since in different anthologies of film theory.

<sup>4</sup> Another gaze gives birth to the twentieth-century narrative which punctuates Charles's and Sarah's tale, a gaze which is a complexly layered overlapping of the look of the camera, the look of the film's audience (which is indistinguishable from that of the camera) and Anna's look at her own image in a hand-mirror which reflects back to her an image of Sarah Woodruff. These three "looks" are articulated in the opening shot of the film, and in their very simultaneity they suggest the complexity of the film's narrative structuring of nineteenth- and twentieth-century segments—segments which should be viewed as the plot and subplot of a single narrative, as I will argue, rather than as two related but separate narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks 96-97.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks 90.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks 103.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of Brooks's model, see Jay Clayton's "Narrative and Theories of Desire," *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1989, vol. 16, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Poulteney, the hypocritical religious zealot to whom Sarah is briefly companion, seems to recognize and fear the power which Sarah's gaze commands and informs her in a voice made shrill with distaste that her "staring out to sea is provocative, intolerable and sinful." The implicit play on words (sea/see) and the well-chosen adjective "provocative" suggest both the sexual and the narrative significance of looking in the film.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks 104.

11 The importance of the look as erotic and narrative charge is emphasized in the rehearsal sequence between Mike and Anna of a later scene in the film: MIKE: "I suddenly see you. You've got your skirt caught in the brambles. I see you, then you see me. We look at each other, then I say: 'Miss Woodruff.'" ANNA: "All right." MIKE: "Right. I see you. Get your skirt caught in the bramble. Right. Now I'm looking at you. You see me. Look at me." ANNA: "I am." MIKE: "Miss Woodruff!" ANNA: "I'm looking at you."

12 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 205.

13 Charles is not the only character in the film to spy upon women with telescopes. Dr. Grogan has a stationary telescope prominently displayed in his rooms, and when Charles comments upon it, Dr. Grogan tells him, "I use it to keep an eye out for mermaids." As his conversations with Charles make clear, Dr. Grogan looks upon Sarah as a siren who lures Charles away from convention and duty (embodied in the form of his fiancée) toward danger.

14 Mulvey 204.

15 I would also argue that while our gaze occasionally coincides with Charles's own, as discussed above, it is not immutably aligned with his look. Spectatorial identification is structured not only by one's relation to the image but also, I believe, by one's relation to narrative movement and its figures, as articulated by the succession of images unfolding in time. This is an area of film theory which has needs to be explored in greater detail.

16 Charles follows this prostitute into a building after a mute exchange of glances which recalls Charles's and Sarah's first meeting on the pier in Lyme and underscores the active power of the female (rather than the male) gaze in this film.

17 That Sarah bears the name of a genre ("Tragedy") is doubly significant insofar as it both suggests a narrative trajectory which is formulaic in nature and charts the course of the twentieth-century sequences which function as a kind of repository for the tragic elements of the plot.

18 Brooks 103.

19 Brooks 104.

20 There are, of course, many other elements in the film which link the nineteenth- and twentieth-century strands of the narrative, in addition to the *mise-en-scène*: editing, structural similarities of each strand, repeated phrases of dialogue, sometimes with very little variation. In addition, there are repeated phrases and postures within each of the two narrative threads. Most notable in this last category are the conversations between Charles and Sarah, and Charles and Ernestina regarding the "worthiness" of themselves or others as lovers and their inquiries of one another as to the authenticity of the others' love: Charles to Sarah, referring to Varguinness, the French lieutenant: "If he does not return, he was not worthy of you"; Ernestina to Charles upon his breaking their engagement: "Are you saying you have never loved me?" Charles: "I am not worthy of you"; Sarah to Charles during their reunion in Windermere: "I forced myself on you, knowing that you had other obligations. It was unworthy . . ." Charles: "Are you saying you never loved me?"

21 Brooks 109.

22 Brooks 109.

23 Brooks 109.

24 Brooks 109.

25 It is interesting to note both the similarities and differences between Sarah's and Ernestina's patterns of looking in the film. Both oscillate between an averted gaze and a direct glance in their interactions with Charles (the sequences in which Charles attempts to introduce himself to Sarah as they walk along the cliff, and in which Charles bids Ernestina farewell before he goes to London, are two productive points of comparison). In Ernestina, the pattern assumes the conventional dimensions of the gaze of the coquette: there is an intent to entrance and attract. In Sarah, there is the intent to seduce: her averted gaze and her direct glance are more pronounced than Ernestina's, and their effect is more powerful and more hypnotic.

26 In a conversation between Davide and Anna in Pinter's script which was dropped in the film, Davide asks Anna, "Have they decided what they want to do with the end?," to which she replies, "I've decided." Harold Pinter, *The French Lieutenant's Woman and Other Screenplays* (London: Methuen, 1982) 83.

27 Brooks 111.