

The Moral and Literary Contexts of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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The French Lieutenant's Woman exists on two levels. Its author, John Fowles, is primarily concerned with a moral context, with the "real life" thoughts and actions of his characters. But Fowles is also concerned with the literary context of his book; Fowles experiments with the novel form and theorizes about the role of the author. This book is, indeed, "metafiction": it both tells a story and comments on how the story is told.

Yet while all critics agree that Fowles is speaking on two levels, very few agree on exactly what he is saying. Some see his book as a study in female psychology (Miller, Shields, Warburton). Others claim that Fowles is trying to establish a new, revolutionary style of literature (McDaniel, Scruggs, Tarbox). Still others portray *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as an illustration of Marxism (Landrum). And at least one Christian critic has analyzed the book through the lens of biblical theology (Bowen).

But whatever approach they may take, most critics seem to believe that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a work of feminism. They see the novel's moral context as a critique of the woman's role in a chauvinistic world, expressed in the rebellion of Sarah Woodruff. Leading this school of thought, Deborah Byrd asserts that Sarah's complex personality makes the book a superior feminist novel; she claims that any reader who finishes the novel comes to understand Sarah, and thus feminism as well. Byrd and her fellow critics take the literary context to be equally feminist. From their point of view, the book's general ambiguity and its triple ending reflect the subjectivity of a feminine mind.

Now, it cannot be denied that the book is full of feminist issues. And subjectivity is a trademark of feminist literature—one need only look to Virginia Woolf to understand why. Even so, I must maintain that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not, in fact, a feminist book. My argument will be presented as a response to a critical article by Magali Cornier Michael, which I have found to be one of the more perceptive and comprehensive analyses of this novel written to date. Furthermore, I will suggest that both the moral and literary contexts of the book target a theme often overlooked by the critics. I believe that this book aims not at feminism, but at existentialism.

The Feminist Issues

Let us begin by examining the evidence that is usually used to support the book's feminism. Most of this evidence centers on the person of Sarah Woodruff, the mysterious and manipulative outcast. Because she was born poor but educated to be refined, Sarah has been (up until the beginning of the story) trapped between the upper and lower class. The narrator states that "To the young men of the [class] she had left she had become too select to marry; to those of the one she aspired to, she remained too banal" (48). As a result, Sarah is overcome by

loneliness. Apparently working under the philosophy that is better to be scorned than to be ignored, Sarah lets her village believe that a visiting French officer has seduced her. This is where Sarah stands when Charles first meets her: she is rejected by society as a whore and a lunatic.

Though Charles is already engaged to a woman who is perfect by all of the standards of the day, he is intrigued and attracted by this mysterious woman who spends hours staring out to sea. Time passes, and her depth and passion continue to make him obsessed with figuring her out; and indeed, it seems that he is so obsessed with her precisely because he cannot understand her. Charles begins to see his fiancée Ernestina as shallow and immature in comparison with Sarah. Sarah eventually confides the story of her past to Charles, and she begs for him to understand her reasons for doing what she did. But when Charles claims that he does understand, Sarah replies: "You cannot, Mr. Smithson. Because you are not a woman. Because you are not a woman who was born to be a farmer's wife but educated to be something . . . better. . . You were not born a woman with a natural respect, a love of intelligence, beauty, learning . . ." (138).

Still Charles continues to be drawn to the siren-like outcast. Thrown off balance by the loss of his expected inheritance and his continuing disillusionment with Ernestina, Charles impulsively has sex with Sarah--only to find out that she is a virgin. In a flash he realizes that the story of her seduction was a lie. And when Sarah refuses to explain why she has treated him this way, Charles storms out of the room and out of her life, hurt, shocked, and above all confused.

From this point on, Charles—and the reader—can only guess what Sarah's motives really are. Clearly, she has been manipulating him from the beginning; but there is never an answer to the ever-present question, "why?" The book ends with two different versions of the story, one in which Sarah marries Charles, and the other in which they separate forever.

Feminist issues can be plainly seen throughout this plot. Questions arise everywhere: What is a woman's place in her class and in her society? Should the goal of a woman really be to find a husband? Are women equal to men in power and intellect? How far is a woman allowed to go in getting back at the male-dominated system that has decreed her place? Can men ever actually understand women? And, though perhaps not so obvious, there lurks behind the story a question darker still: How many real women feel as rejected and misunderstood as Sarah Woodruff? In the disclosure scene, after Sarah has ended her history, Charles says to her, ". . . if every woman who'd been deceived by some unscrupulous member of my sex were to behave as you have—I fear the country would be full of outcasts." And, with a thundering and terrible simplicity, Sarah replied, "It is" (145).

Added to these plot-centered gender issues are the numerous references that Fowles makes to Victorian feminist and pro-feminism thinkers. In an article entitled "'Who is Sarah?': A Critique of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* Feminism," Magali Cornier Michael notes the novel's citations of John Stuart Mill and the women's suffrage movement in England (225). To these I would add Fowles's depiction of the issues of prostitution in the city and sexual frigidity at home. Fowles also slips several blatantly chauvinistic opinions into the minds of his male characters. When Charles first begins to notice Ernestina's immaturity and shallowness, he thinks to himself, "After all, she was only a woman. There were so many things she must have never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children" (107). Later, when Dr. Grogan is trying to convince Charles that Sarah is mentally ill, he tells him, "You must not think she is like us men, able to reason clearly, examine her motives, understand why she behaves as she does" (127). Finally, as an excuse to himself for not telling Ernestina about his involvement with Sarah,

Charles rationalizes that “Ernestina had neither the sex nor the experience to understand the altruism of his motives” (134).

It is therefore undeniable that Fowles has packed his novel with feminist issues. But how, then, can it be maintained that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not a feminist book?

A Heroine Without a Voice

In her aforementioned article, Michael argues that Fowles has attempted to write a feminist novel. But she also sees that the mind of Sarah herself is never disclosed to the reader; Sarah talks little, and Fowles’s all-seeing, all-knowing narrator-god never gets inside her head. All understanding of her personality, then, must be drawn from interpretations of her action; and most of these interpretations are filtered through Charles, Dr. Grogan, and the undeniably male (and undeniably biased) narrator. Michael asserts that “although [Sarah] has a speaking role and is thus a participant within the plot, she remains ambiguous. Sarah is the central figure rather than the protagonist . . .” (225). It is true that many of these biased and unreliable interpretations of Sarah are written with irony, but Michael argues that this irony is so subtle that it is missed by the average reader. Michael thinks that, torn between wanting Sarah to give the reader insight into the female mind and wanting her to be an object of mystery, Fowles ultimately lets her mysterious side win out. Thus he turns her into an anti-character, and destroys the potential value that she could have offered to the reader (228). As for the two final endings, Michael notes that only Charles’s understanding of the last scene is ever given; both endings are still wrapped up in male ideology, and therefore neither ending can be chosen as the “right” one. Michael concludes her argument:

The novel ultimately fails either to allow a place for woman’s voice, which could open up the potential for woman’s self-portrayal outside of male ideology as well as initiate critique of male ideology, or to make its inherent exposure of male myths and ideology explicit If only feminist or pro-feminist readers can see the novel’s feminism, then I think that Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* falls short of being a feminist novel.(235)

Although I agree with Michael that Fowles has not given Sarah her own voice and therefore that the novel cannot be truly feminist, I disagree with her claim that Fowles actually intended to make the book feminist. I believe that a closer examination of the text will show that Fowles does not “fail” to let Sarah speak her mind—he absolutely refuses to let her be understood!

Fowles is very calculating in the manner in which he denies Sarah her own voice. She speaks very little, on the whole, depriving the reader of much solid evidence with which to get at her thinking. However, it is her ambiguous speech that gives her the mystery which Charles (and the reader) finds so intriguing. But though her speech is fascinating, a close look at the novel will show that she really doesn’t say that much at all. When she does talk, she is often merely reacting to what someone else has said to her. There are only seven scenes in the entire book in which Sarah talks for a time substantial enough for the reader to gain much insight into her mind. These are the two meetings with Charles in the Undercliff (chapters 16 and 18), the disclosure (chapters 20 and 21), the meeting in the barn (chapters 31 and 33), the sex scene (chapters 46 and 47—although she really only says enough to refuse to explain herself!), and the two final endings (chapters 60 and 61).

To put into perspective how little Sarah actually says apart from these seven scenes, note that she speaks only thirty-three sentences in the first thirteen chapters. These thirty-three sentences have an average length of six words; almost all of the lines are brief responses such as “It’s no matter, sir,” “To do with me?” and “What have I done?” Of the thirty-three, only eight (one during a meeting with Charles, and the other seven in a cluster during a chastisement by Mrs. Poulteney) illuminate Sarah at all. These lines are:

“I prefer to walk alone.” (74)

“But how was I to tell? I am not to go to the sea. Very well, I don’t go to the sea. I wish for solitude. That is all. That is not a sin. I will not be called a sinner for that.” (79)

Those are the only lines that have given the reader insight into Sarah’s personality by the thirteenth chapter. And yet Sarah and Charles have already met, Mrs. Poulteney is puffing herself up for another dismissal, Ernestina (in Charles’s eyes, at least) has begun the downhill slide into mediocrity, and both Charles and the reader have made up their minds that they do indeed like Sarah, that they are intrigued by Sarah, and that they must find out more. So much as happened, and yet the audience hardly knows anything at all about the leading lady.

Fowles is even more tight-fisted about Sarah’s thoughts than he is about her speech. His narrator does not enter her mind at all, as he does with his other characters; and while this may at first seem merely an oversight on Fowles’s part, further reading shows that Fowles is making a point not to explain Sarah. Every interpretation of her action is disclaimed as the narrator’s own belief. These interpretations come less in the vein of the usual authorial, “She is thinking this,” and more with the peculiar distance of “From what I can see, she must be thinking that.” Sometimes, when the reader does seem to be getting Sarah’s thoughts, a few pages later these ideas will be shown up as the narrator’s own impositions upon Sarah of what he thinks is going on. We are told, for example, that Sarah accepts the position with Mrs. Poulteney for two reasons: that “Marlborough House commanded a magnificent prospect of Lyme Bay” and that “She had exactly seven pence in the world” (36). But soon afterwards, the narrator turns around and tells us, “I gave the two most obvious reasons why Sarah Woodruff presented herself for Mrs. Poulteney’s inspection. But she was the last person to list reasons . . .” (46).

In fact, there are only a handful of times in the whole book when the narrator gives us what are unarguably Sarah’s own thoughts. One of these few instances occurs at the end of the infamous chapter 13, where the narrator gives Sarah’s reasons for having walked out in plain view of the dairy, where she had been forbidden to go. It is interesting that this unique entry into Sarah’s mind comes exactly one page after the narrator has said, “I report, then, only the outward facts” (82).

What is more, Fowles explicitly states that he refuses to read Sarah’s mind in two key passages. The first comes when, watching Sarah stand at her window in the middle of the night, the narrator asks, “Who is Sarah?” (80)—implying that even he does not know who she is or how her mind works. He then launches into a discourse about literary theory and the freedom of characters, and about how it would be almost immoral for him to force her to explain herself:

Certainly I intended at this stage [*Chap. Thirteen—unfolding of Sarah’s true state of mind*] to tell all—or all that matters. But I find myself suddenly like a man in the sharp spring night, watching from the lawn . . . I know in the context of my book’s reality that Sarah would never have brushed away her tears and leaned down and

delivered a chapter of revelation. She would instantly have turned . . . and disappeared into the interior shadows.

But I am a novelist, not a man in a garden—I can follow her where I like? But possibility is not permissibility. Husbands could often murder their wives—and the reverse—and get away with it. But they don't. (81)

Then, when Sarah has rented a room in Exeter all by herself, the narrator watches her making a cup of tea and wonders once again what she is thinking. And, though he is the omnipotent god of his story, he says again, "I no more intend to find what was going on in her mind as she firegazed then I did on that other occasion when her eye welled tears in the silent night of Marlborough House" (221).

Incomprehensibility and the Moral Context

While Fowles does not give an objective reading of Sarah's thoughts, he certainly does not prevent his other characters from trying to interpret what she is thinking. Dr. Grogan, Mrs. Poulteney, Ernestina, and especially Charles all impose their own readings on Sarah's personality. But here Fowles is being very sly; these unreliable interpretations are fed to the reader in such a way that they will most likely be swallowed whole. I believe that Fowles intends the reader to accept these interpretations as if they were really coming from Sarah herself—and that Fowles also intends the reader to become increasingly perplexed by the conflicting theories as the book progresses.

Let us examine the text once again to see how this technique is accomplished.

When Sarah asks Charles to listen to her story, Charles goes to old Grogan for advice. The doctor tells him that Sarah is suffering from "melancholia," a mental disorder that would later be named hysteria—and, in our day, depression. He reads from a medical account about melancholia to try to convince Charles that Sarah fits the profile:

"It was as if the woman had become addicted to melancholia as one becomes addicted to opium. Now do you see how it is? Her sadness becomes her happiness. She wants to be a sacrificial victim, Smithson. Where you and I flinch back, she leaps forward. She is possessed, you see." He sat down again. "Dark indeed. Very dark." (127)

The reader accepts this analysis and begins to see Sarah as a hysterical and slightly deranged woman. The reader continues to wonder whether Sarah does indeed have melancholia, until a minute or two after she and Charles have had sex. Then Charles, still lying in bed with her, says:

"You cannot mean I should go away... You cannot forgive me so much. Or ask so little."

She sank her head against the pillow, her eyes on some dark future. "Why not, if I love you?" He strained her to him. The thought of such sacrifice made his eyes smart with tears. The injustice Grogan and he had done her! She was a nobler being than either of them. (276)

But as soon as Charles realizes that he has been deceived, that everything has been a masquerade, this view of Sarah is torn apart as if by a lightning bolt:

And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mold them to their evil fancies. . . . these, and a surging back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in the La Ronciere appeal, filled Charles' mind with an apocalyptic horror.

Charles leaves the hotel in rage and in confusion, and before long he has found his way into an empty church and is praying to God desperately for understanding. One half hour and one imagined conversation with Christ later, Charles emerges from the church with new comprehension:

He began to understand Sarah's deceit. She knew he loved her; and she knew he had been blind to the true depth of that love. The false version of her betrayal by Varguennes, her other devices, were but stratagems to unblind him; all she had said after she had brought him to the realization was but a test of his new vision. (288)

This last explanation of Sarah's actions is indeed the most convincing one given so far. Even so, the fact remains that over a short period of time, the reader's view of Sarah had changed drastically. Each time, the view is not one offered by an all-knowing narrator, but it is merely an unreliable interpretation made by a character in the story. However, the reader—not knowing any evidence that would contradict the interpretation of Sarah—can do no better than assume that the latest understanding does describe the real Sarah. But which interpretation is true? It seems to me most likely that some of each is true. But I believe that Fowles does not want his readers to be able to figure Sarah out at all; by carefully planting hints and enigmas, and by refusing to give Sarah her own voice, he has not created a character who cannot possibly be really understood. Surely Magali Michael is right in saying that Sarah is not an antagonist—she is an anti-character.

Taking this knowledge (that the reader is not meant to understand Sarah) back to the book, one can see many pieces fall into place. The word “understanding” (usually in the context of “not understanding”) shows up so many times that the reader should have been warned from the beginning that Fowles was up to something. Early on, the narrator has stated that Sarah's essence is “understanding and emotion” (52). When the narrator gives his discourse on literary theory in chapter thirteen, he interjects, “Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them” (80). The narrator describes Charles as he walks home from his late-night discussion with Dr. Grogan: “Charles, the naturally selected . . . was pure intellect, walking awake, free as a god, one with the unslumbering stars, and understanding all. All except Sarah, that is” (132). After the relating the story of her seduction by Varguennes, Sarah tells Charles, “. . . what I beg you to understand is not that I did this shameful thing, but why I did it” (142). After the love scene, Charles writes a letter to Sarah hoping that she will accept him as her husband. He begins by saying, “My dearest, One half of me is inexpressibly glad to address you thus, while the other wonders how he can so speak of a being he yet but scarcely understands” (290). Even when Fowles himself enters the plot as the god-author incarnate, the preacher on the train, he puzzles over how he should end the story: “My problem is simple—what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear . . .” (317). And while it is obvious that Charles does not understand Sarah in the third ending of the book, the first two

endings leave her equally uncomprehended. In the first, Charles never sees Sarah again (and thereby never again has the chance to try to understand her). And in the second ending, although she agrees to marry him and everything is pointing to a “happily ever after” conclusion, Charles is still left in the dark:

At last she looked up at him. Her eyes were full of tears, and her look unbearably naked. Such looks we have all once or twice in our lives received and shared; they are those in which worlds melt, pasts dissolve, moments when we know, in the resolution of profoundest need, that the rock of ages can never be anything else but love, here, now, in these two hands’ joining, in this blind silence in which one head comes to rest beneath the other; and which Charles, after a compressed eternity, breaks, though the question is more breathed than spoken.

“Shall I ever understand your parables?” (360)

As I have stated before, the fact that Sarah does not have her own voice in the novel demonstrates that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not a feminist book. And because I am convinced that Fowles has, as it were, carefully edited Sarah’s voice out of the soundtrack, and that he has intentionally made her impossible to fully comprehend, I am forced to conclude that he never intended it to be a feminist book at all. Though feminist issues abound, they are simply not “the point.” The constant failure of characters and reader alike to understand Sarah points not to a critique of male ideology, as Magali Michael argues, but to something else entirely. Fowles could have written a feminist novel had he wished, but he had something else in mind. Because Sarah is incomprehensible and therefore cannot be the true protagonist, that protagonist must be Charles. And if the story is focused on Charles, and not on Sarah as everyone had been cleverly led to believe, then the prevailing theme of the story must be not feminism, but existentialism. At one point in the book the narrator comments that “a human being cannot but see his power of self-analysis as a very privilege in the struggle to adapt” (234). But Charles is not able to succeed in analyzing Sarah—and yet, adapt he must. Fowles has written a book that portrays a man forced to act without fully comprehending his situation.

Why, then, did Fowles pack his book with feminist issues? It seems to me that he raised these issues because he did think they were important. However, though Fowles hurls the questions out at the reader, he doesn’t offer any answers. He refuses to give answers, in fact, in exactly the same way that he refuses to give answers about Sarah’s mind. Fowles apparently sees life as an endless string of questions, of choices; though the “right” answers often cannot be known, an answer must still be given and a choice made.

This is precisely the philosophy with which Fowles ends his novel:

[Charles] has begun to realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone, or to be given up after one losing throw of the dice; but is to be, however inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city’s iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea. (366)

One Minor Diversion

Before continuing any further, I need to address one objection that is sure to arise at my dismissal of the feminist nature of this novel. “Fowles himself,” someone will surely point out,

“said several times that he cannot understand Sarah. He even said that he has never been able to understand real women like Sarah. If the author knows that he cannot understand his heroine, and admits as much in his book, doesn’t that make the book a feminist novel after all?”

I still must answer such an objector in the negative. While Fowles claims that he finds Sarah incomprehensible, he has no such problems with his other female characters. The narrator-god of the novel moves in and out of these women’s minds with ease: chapter 5 describes Ernestina with all her childishness and sexual repression, the thoughts of the diabolical Mrs. Poulteney are laid bare in chapters 6 and 9, and Mary—quite an important character, even if she is no Sarah Woodruff—is explained in chapters 11 and 17. The reader should note that these women do play significant parts in the story; what is more, Ernestina and Mary give rise to feminist issues of their own. They have not been allowed voices merely because they are not important or interesting enough to be “real” and therefore mysterious. Because Fowles explains all of the other women but still makes Sarah impossible to understand, I must stick with my previous conclusion—that feminism is not the reason for Fowles’s silence on Sarah’s part.

The Three Endings Revisited

I have made the point that Fowles seems to believe that an answer must always be given and a choice always made, even when the “right” answer is unknown. It seems to me that the necessity of a choice can be seen nowhere better than in the book’s triple ending. In the first ending, Charles never makes love to Sarah; he marries Ernestina, and though he does not live “happily ever after,” he gets by on “irony and sentiment” and eventually learns to love his wife (264). Alternatively, once Sarah’s seduction has taken place, Ernestina is thrust out of the picture, and Fowles-in-the-flesh dooms Charles to two more endings with the flip of a coin. In the second of the three endings, Charles finds Sarah again, and, after enduring a barrage of objections that she cannot marry him, he wins both Sarah and their two-year-old daughter, Lalage. However, the third and final ending finds Charles eventually collapsing under Sarah’s all-too-convincing barrage; Charles leaves Sarah behind forever, and goes off to start his life over again as best he can.

More critics seem to discount the first two endings as obvious shams, and default to the third, more modern and existentialist ending. However, a few critics still claim that all three are equally credible. Michael, along with others, recalls the fact that Fowles himself seems to endorse both of the last two endings with equal force. While trying to decide how to let his characters live out their own decisions, he says, “The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. That leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the ‘real’ version” (318).

While most critics have taken these lines to be facetious, Michael takes Fowles seriously. However, she maintains that all three endings are equally to be rejected on the grounds that all three are equally wrapped up in male ideology. None of the problems are solved in any of the endings; no comprehension of Sarah is achieved. Charles remains chained to his own preconceptions about women (234).

However, it seems to me that one of the three endings must have happened, regardless of Charles’ male ideology. Though Fowles plays god, he is not about to suspend the reality of his novel, wag a finger in Charles’ face, and say in a disapproving tone, “You haven’t learned to think like a female yet. That’s it! I’m dooming you to be frozen forever in the middle of the

book.” The three endings portray all possible results that could come from the events that Fowles has set in motion. Either Charles marries Ernestina, or he marries Sarah, or he remains alone.

Although the first ending comes in the form of a daydream, I believe that it is just as valid a possibility as the other two—possibly even more valid than the second ending begins, Charles is almost completely divided between his desire to follow through with his engagement to Ernestina and his desire to run to the mysterious Sarah. We could just as truly say that he has reached the midway point between duty and passion, between convention and individuality. Charles starts the book as a slave to Victorian convention, but ever after meeting Sarah, he gradually shrugs off the bonds of his society. Though he was once as petrified as the test that he collected from the Undercliff, he has now begun to evolve and adapt. But he has not yet fully made that transition into passion and individualism and existentialism. At the beginning of chapter 43, it seems to me that Charles is just as likely to choose petrification as he is to choose adaption. And by the end of the chapter, as the daydream of the first ending begins, Charles’s thoughts take precisely this form: “He was one of life’s victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history, stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil” (262). This ending could very well take place; the main reason that readers are so quick to reject it is that it brings the story to such an abrupt and unfulfilling halt. Still, it is no less probable for that.

Most reasons for rejecting the middle ending focus on the seeming incongruity of Sarah’s actions. After spending the whole book rebelling against control and fighting for her own right to live as she wishes, the Sarah of this ending gives up all her hard-won freedom and individuality for marital bliss. But while this may seem incredible, I see several factors that contribute to the possibility of this happy ending. First, when we reach the middle ending, Charles is no longer the huffing-and-puffing chauvinist that he once was. He still wants Sarah to marry him, of course—he has not enlightened himself out of loving her—but he has shown signs that Sarah has re-educated him. Back in Lyme, Dr. Grogan counsels Charles one last time to be wary of Sarah’s motives. (Note that this is after the critical revelation in the church.) Charles replies:

“I have taken that into consideration As I have the cloud of obfuscating cant our sex talks about women. They are to sit, are they not, like so many articles in a shop and to let us men walk in and turn them over and point at this one or that one—she takes my fancy. If they allow this, we call them decent, respectable, modest. But when one of those articles has the impertinence to speak up for herself” (310)

It is possible that Charles has freed himself from his male ideology after all, and that, seeing that he is at least moving in the right direction, Sarah decides to accept him.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that Sarah did want a husband—and wanted one desperately! Though we are told that Sarah turned down several suitors for their shallowness, at one point she demands of Charles, “Why am I born what I am? Why am I not born Miss Freeman?”—thereby implying that she wishes she were engaged to Charles (116). During the disclosure scene she reveals her agonizing loneliness and her envy of married women. She says that, living in the house of Mrs. Talbot and taking care of her two children, she was “allowed to live in paradise, but forbidden to enjoy it” (138). Her loneliness and wish for a husband are in fact the two factors that allow Varguennes to seduce her. But she discovers that Varguennes is a scoundrel, Sarah says, “I could not marry that man. So I married shame” (142). And when she has given herself to Charles, even though she is on the point of sending him away, Sarah tells

him, “You have given me the consolation of believing that in another world, another age, another life, I might have been your wife” (278).

Unless we assume that every word Sarah ever speaks is deceitful, we can be sure that she honestly wants to marry Charles—at least until she loses him for those two mysterious years. During those two years, Sarah comes completely into her own; she emerges strong and self-sufficient. All traces of the “melancholia” which once seemed to drive her are now gone. Did she also lose the wish for a husband during those two years? It is possible—but in no way certain. While she does gain individuality, she also gains a daughter. And who is to say whether even the most forward-thinking feminist in that era would not have leaped at the chance of marriage to the father of her child, especially when the man sincerely loved and respected her? Furthermore, while some may feel that Sarah has been revolting against male authority all along and has no reason to give in now, it seems more likely to me that she has been revolting against control in any form. She revolted against being controlled by Mrs. Poulteney and even the kindly Mrs. Talbot just as fiercely as she rejected control by Charles and Dr. Grogan. With these uncertainties in Sarah’s personality, can this second ending really be discounted as unrealistic?

There is also a structure that ties the three endings together, and hints that Fowles meant for them to be equally plausible. In the middle of the book, with his head spinning from the new revelations of Sarah’s disclosure, Charles begins to doubt the sincerity of his love for Ernestina. He tells Dr. Grogan that he feels that he is not made for marriage (a sentiment which Sarah, too, repeats on more than one occasion). When Grogan forces him to reexamine his doubts, Charles says of Ernestina, “She understands so little of what I really am” (180). What he does not tell the doctor is that he fears she will never understand him.

We can only assume that this doubt remains with Charles in the first ending, in which he follows through with his engagement and makes Ernestina his wife. We have already established that for him to choose Ernestina would be possible; and if he did so, her inability to understand him would be a sufficient cause for the irony that follows him to his grave.

An even greater irony, though, is that the situation between Ernestina and Charles that I have just described is a mirror image of the one between Charles and Sarah portrayed in the middle ending. We have already noted that, even in winning Sarah, Charles does not understand her. If she does in fact choose to stay with Charles, Sarah faces marriage to a man who may never understand her—just as Charles faced marriage to a woman who may never understand him. Charles is caught between the two women; the same doubts that make him question his future with Ernestina cause Sarah to put up such an insistent string of objections to marriage in the last two endings.

But at the same time, the mirror imaging of Charles and Sarah’s situations gives credibility to the middle ending. If Charles could overcome his doubts and marry Ernestina, then Sarah could overcome her own doubts and marry Charles. The ending could even be truly happy; just as the first ending implies that Charles learned to love Ernestina dearly, so Sarah may learn to love Charles in all of his ignorance of her true nature.

Finally, two comments made by the narrator may shed light on Fowles’s reasons for portraying three equally valid endings. At one point, the narrator states that all writers share the same motivation: “we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world is” (81). And at another point, the narrator points out Charles’s inconsistency as he acts one way toward Sam, another toward Ernestina, and yet another way toward Sarah. The narrator comments that “he was almost three different men; and there will be others of him before we are finished” (118).

It seems clear to me that Fowles has set before Charles three paths up which his life may climb. All three are equally possible—and even equally probable—but he can only choose one. What is more, Charles has no way of knowing which path is the best. Yet he still must choose, and live with results of that choice.

Which leads us to another question. Charles must have chosen one of the three courses of action—but how can we tell which ending was the “real” one?

The Literary Context

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exists on two levels—that it has both a moral and a literary context. So far, I have argued that the moral context is concerned primarily with existentialism and the necessity to act without full knowledge; I have also argued that this necessity of blind choice plays out in the triple ending which Fowles has set before Charles. Now, finally, I can move to the literary context of the novel.

As he sat on the train preparing to set the final two endings into motion, the narrator made a very clever analysis of the role of the author:

Fiction usually pretends to conform to 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 favors win. And we judge writers of fiction both by the skill they show in fixing the fights (in other words, in persuading us that they were not fixed) and by the kind of fighter they fix in favor of. . . .

But the chief argument for fight fixing is to show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one—whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will. (317)

In one sense, Fowles has put the reader into the same existential quandary in which Charles languishes. That quandary is, in its simplest terms, which of the three equally realistic endings to pick as the “real” one. Like Charles, the reader is being forced to decide without completely understanding his surroundings. All of the problems of the novel's moral context are translated into the real world in the literary context—and whether the reader has liked Fowles's philosophy or not, he is forced to conform to it. A choice must be made. Even to refuse to make the choice at all, to believe that none of the endings are true, only leaves the reader hanging, unfulfilled, unsatisfied.

But the true brilliance of this book is that Fowles has actually thrown the task of “fighting-fixing” onto the reader himself. Just as Fowles knows that any writer merely writes from his own philosophy, he also knows that every reader interprets from his own philosophy. In the passage above, Fowles states that a pessimistic writer will give a book a pessimistic ending; what he doesn't write is that a pessimistic reader will read pessimism even into an optimistic ending.

And so, with the knowledge that readers fix fights in their own minds just as much as writers fix them on the printed page, Fowles does something unprecedented in the world of literature. He forces his readers to choose their own ways of interpreting the book; he holds his readers responsible for the meaning that they take away. And at the same time he forces his readers to be aware of the choice that they are making.

In the end, anyone who reads *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will only be forced to come away with the view of the world which he already held. But perhaps that view will be

clarified in the reader's mind. Perhaps he will see his beliefs for what they are, and perhaps he will understand the necessity of enduring the flood of incomprehensible choices that might otherwise sweep him away. Indeed, the reader may find that his vision has been made clear. For, like Sarah's, all of Fowles's stratagems have worked to unblind him.

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