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Hindsight and Sexuality in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of English Literature Course Work Masters

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2012

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Abstract

The following thesis investigates the role of hindsight and sexuality in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles. In this instance I look closely at the two main characters of the novel, namely Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff, and I show the varying levels of freedom that each character displays in a Victorian world. Sarah Woodruff exemplifies a modern woman living before her time and Charles exhibits signs of a man who has the potential to discover an existential awareness of himself in a duty bound environment. I show that the relationship between these two characters is fraught with sexual tension and in this regard I argue that John Fowles uses his hindsight to make a comment on the lack of change that sexuality has undergone since the Victorian era. Fowles is deeply concerned with freedom and in this regard he attempts to provide his characters with certain freedoms that only a 20th century novelist (as opposed to a 19th century one) could give them. Examples of this are illustrated in my argument by showing the way in which Charles relates to Sarah on both an emotional and a sexual level. Fowles is also clear in this regard that while the Victorians repressed their sexual desires this does not mean that they did not, in fact, have (and act upon) those desires. I incorporate Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* whose argument uses the idea of confession in order to illustrate the ways that individuals living in both the 19th and 20th centuries interpret their sexuality.

Introduction

And if you are wise you will never pity the past for what it did not know, but pity yourself for what it did.

John Fowles, *The Magus* (1966)

It is a common human practice to look back at the past and make it better or worse for the purposes of our current desires. We either yearn for a simpler time or we think of ourselves as the luckier ones. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles uses his position in the 20th century to make a comment on society in the 19th century. This thesis shows that while Fowles uses his gift of hindsight to write a novel concerned with the freedom of the individual subject (or lack thereof) in the 19th century, he also acknowledges that not much has changed between the time of which he writes, and the time from which he writes, in the sense that a constant desire to find a process that helps assign meaning to existence prevails, regardless of the century.

Fowles shows in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that the Victorians were embedded in a society in which the search for meaning was easily resolved (and, therefore, largely repressed) by the rigid power of the church. It was readily acknowledged by the Victorians that an omniscient God was keeping watch over all and that their behaviour would be effectively judged in the afterlife. Similarly, in Victorian literature, the all-seeing, all-knowing author/narrator is in complete control of his fictional world and the characters he has created to inhabit it. Furthermore, s/he is privy to the complete inner workings of his/her characters. Fowles could only have written *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in the 20th century because he incorporates literary devices that are in keeping with a modern approach to literature. In creating a novel written in the 20th century that tells a Victorian story, Fowles uses his position as a post-modern author to illustrate the differences between novels of the 19th and 20th centuries. The greatest difference emerges not in terms of how its

characters relate to each other and the world around them – Fowles illustrates that not much has changed with regard to this – but rather in terms of how the author relates to his own position in the meaning-giving process.

In other words, the author can now use his position of power, not to impose rigid regulations on his characters, but rather to provide them with a sense of freedom in the hazardous fictional world of the 20th century. Unlike an author of the 19th century, Fowles can relinquish absolute control over his characters and realise, along with his narrator, that there are certain characters to whom he simply cannot gain complete access. On the one hand, as a 20th century author Fowles is in the beneficial position of being able to include, for instance, a sex scene between two Victorians in literature, which was something he could never have done if he was writing in the 19th century. On the other hand, Fowles shows that the difference between those living in the 20th century and in the 19th century lies not in the fact that we are the more advanced, but rather that we have more freedom to explore what the Victorians could not. The omniscient narrator of the 19th century has been replaced by a narrator who cannot access the inner life of some of his characters. This narrator must step aside so that his author, who himself is not in complete control of his characters, can help him assign meaning to the fictional world.

The fact that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is set in a time shortly after Darwin had published his *Origin of the Species* is significant. At this time, society was changing dramatically for the Victorians. An explanation of life was no longer clean cut and the creation story had been replaced with the blasphemous notion that human beings had evolved from apes. In many ways, Fowles is describing the shift that occurred when people began to realise that the discourse that erupted around Darwin was overthrowing religious theories and replacing them with a radically difficult alternative. The idea that human beings evolved from a carefully structured system based on 'survival of the fittest' did not bode well in a society that was more inclined towards spirituality than science as a means of explaining the meaning of existence.

This analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* focuses on the characters of Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff, both of whom live in the Victorian age, but see to varying extents beyond its rigid systems of repression and religious theology into a modern existentialist view of humanity. In Charles and Sarah, and the relationship between them, Fowles sets up an opposition: on the one hand, there is the Victorian belief in the good of a life dedicated to duty, dictated by religious doctrine. On the other hand is the 20th century understanding of the individual, constantly striving to understand the world from an existential point of view, free from the bounds of religious and social duty. For Charles (who, ironically, sees himself as something of a scientist in the novel, and therefore a modern man) the process of becoming free and enduring the exile that freedom ultimately places on its subject is a profoundly difficult journey. Although Charles is constantly trying to calculate what is going on in the world around him, he is initially resistant to comprehending anything. Sarah, on the other hand, shows signs of an existentialist awareness throughout the novel and her status as an outcast enhances her ability to engage compassionately with the world through suffering, insight and imagination.

The lives and relationships of the minor characters in the novel are not discussed in detail in this thesis. However, the idea that women were imprisoned in their clothing and their homes during the Victorian era is supported by other female characters in the novel, such as Charles' fiancé, Ernestina, and Mrs Poulteney, Sarah's one-time employer. Sarah's mottled past and her behaviour, in particular her brave wanderings on Ware Commons, are directly contrasted with this. While both Ernestina and Mrs Poulteney remain in keeping with typical gendered assumptions that women were domestic and innocent, Sarah steps in as the exception to the Victorian rule and, as a result, is a mystery to the other characters in the novel. She is free – not only as a woman, but also as a human being. It is Sarah who teaches Charles how to acknowledge desire and exile himself from a world of duty and responsibility. Although Charles fancies himself a scientist, he must learn how to engage with the world as an existentialist so that he may experience freedom in the same way that Sarah does.

Much of the difficulty Sarah's Victorian contemporaries have in understanding her, and hence the root of her position as an exile among them, stems from her apparent refusal to conform to the

norms around sexuality in the Victorian era. Her alleged history of promiscuity with Varguennes, the French Lieutenant, and, later in the novel, her sexual encounter with Charles, defy the strict teachings of the church against intercourse before marriage and any open display of sexuality (particularly in women). Her behaviour is problematic also in terms of the general rule of silence that prevailed around the subject of sexuality in the Victorian era. Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) provides a framework for an investigation of the way that human beings relate to sexuality in both the 19th and 20th centuries and supports the idea that sexuality is transformed into discourse in both eras via the notion of confession. Confession was associated predominantly with God and the church in the Victorian age; it is an equally important part of human expression in the 20th century, although it has been transformed into a secular confession with psychology as its 'god' rather than the Christian God of the 19th century. This analysis, therefore, probes further Fowles' attempts to show us how careful we need to be of taking a position of superiority over any previous age.

Owing to his ability to employ hindsight, the 20th century narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* takes on a tone of knowing irony with regard to the Victorian world that he describes and he is often fairly scathing of the Victorians' antiquated ways. However, he is also undermined by the presence of Sarah Woodruff. The narrator remains, in a Victorian sense, as confused and bewildered by this character as any in his Victorian world. Sarah performs in the novel as an actress would, adjusting her behaviour to different Victorian environments. She even goes as far as to lie, and what emerges is the sense that Sarah lives her life according to the realisation of her own (existential) needs and desires, an attribute that makes her compatible with the unknowable forces at play in a hazardous 20th century text. However, we are never invited to judge her behaviour because Fowles is feverishly protective of her.

Fowles is showing that although we have learned how to approach life from an existentialist perspective, we are still embroiled in human relationships and in encounters with an Other that we can never fully penetrate. Fowles himself cannot truly know Sarah Woodruff because he believes that in order for him to be free himself he must also allow his characters their privacies and their freedoms. In this regard, hindsight plays a significant role in the novel because Fowles uses it to highlight his

most important concern: that freedom is of utmost consequence in any age. The fact that Charles Smithson must learn what it means to choose between living a life of duty or a life of freedom is an important part of the way in which Fowles assigns his novel with a sense of existential choice. According to Fowles, the individual must have courage in order to live a free life because it is a much more difficult existence than a duty-filled one. The fact that Sarah Woodruff is an existentialist living in an age before existentialism was possible in society shows that there are always people that will choose freedom over duty, regardless of the age in which they live.

Freedom and hazard are perhaps the most important elements in Fowles's fiction and in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* they are complicated by the Victorian context in which Fowles is writing. The author of fiction does not simply relay facts to his reader; he interprets the world and then presents this interpretation so that his reader may garner his/her own meaning from the text. Thus, the reader interprets an interpretation and he/she is free to make up his/her mind about what the author is trying to say. This is certainly the case with *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Fowles invites his reader to become involved in his/her own existential process during which he/she is inducted into mystery, enigma and contingency. It is only within the liberated 20th century that Fowles could provide his reader with these freedoms and my argument shows that, while human desire and human interaction is still largely embedded in the same social workings of the 19th century, there is great benefit in having hindsight in the sense that a story can now be told with freedom as its ultimate concern.

Chapter 1

Marino saw the rose as Adam might have seen it in Paradise, and he thought that the rose was to be found in its own eternity and not in his words; and that we may mention or allude to a thing, but not express it; and that the tall, proud volumes casting a golden shadow in a corner were not – as his vanity had dreamed – a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers* (1934)

The novel opens with two characters, namely Charles Smithson and his fiancé Ernestina Freeman, walking along the quay of Lyme Regis in the year 1867. While the characters are described in sophisticated Victorian dress the language used to describe both the quay and the characters has a distinctly modern tone. In describing the quay, Fowles immediately makes it clear that this will not be a conventional Victorian tale. This is illustrated by incorporating the first glimpse that the reader has of the 20th century in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

Primitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo; and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass. I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write; though the town of Lyme has, and the test is not fair if you look back towards land.

(Fowles, 1969:10)

The above paragraph is illuminating for two significant reasons. Firstly, the artist Henry Moore was not born until 1898 and so an author writing in 1867 would not have been aware of his curved female sculptures that embodied a consciousness of modern art. Secondly, it is the first time that the reader comes into contact with a narrator who is writing from the vantage point of the future. It is also the first time that the narrator makes his authority questionable. By asking the question “I exaggerate?” (Fowles, 1969:10) the narrator is situated in the precarious position of being unreliable. The reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is therefore told from the first chapter that although the setting of the novel is Victorian, the narrative structure will be of a different nature.

The unreliable narrator (or author) emerged in the 20th century as a result of the radical changes that occurred in society with the onset of Modernism. The idea of absolute truth that pervaded much of the Victorian era was replaced in the modern one with a confused search for meaning and a belief in natural science as opposed to religious doctrine. The two World Wars had left the individual in a state of confusion and God in the conventional sense could no longer provide the safety that people needed in order to survive in a markedly damaged world. The narrator of the Victorian novel seems to know all the answers and behaves in such a way as to deliver fixed meaning to the reader. It is in equal opposition to this that the post-modern author emerges as a fallible and unreliable voice in the narrative.

It can therefore be argued that, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, there are four main characters, all of whom play a modern role in a Victorian context. Charles Smithson, Sarah Woodruff, John Fowles and the narrator all function as variations of modern voices in a shifting Victorian society. I would like to suggest that the 20th century narrator appears in the chapters in which third person point of view is used to explain the details of the Victorian world that the novel uses as its setting. I would also like to suggest that John Fowles interrupts his narrator with his own first person narration. Within the narrative structure of the novel, the chapters shift from third person narration to first person observations on the world as it was and as it now is. John Fowles is himself, therefore, a character in the novel, not only in the sense that he features *physically* as a character, but also in the way that he makes philosophical comments on issues of freedom and sexuality in both our age and the age in which the novel is set. The use of a 20th century narrator and the interruptions of John Fowles himself to tell a seemingly Victorian story helps the reader to relate to the various modern themes with which the novel is attempting to deal.

The first chapter of the novel provides a good explanation of how Fowles stages the narrative structure in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He begins the chapter with a third person narrative voice. His description of the walk that Charles and Ernestina take along the Cobb entails a depiction of Lyme Regis in much the same descriptive tone that a Victorian novel might use. Juxtaposed with this, however, is a distinctly different observer who impinges on the scene. Someone, “the local spy” (Fowles, 1969:10), is making his own assumptions about the two characters. In other words, there is a presence watching Charles and Ernestina. This “eye in the telescope” (Fowles, 1969:10) is not the eye of the narrator, but rather the eye of John Fowles, who is constantly watching (and attempting to understand) his characters. The shift of narrative voice between narrator and author is a narrative device introduced at the beginning and used throughout the novel, providing the novel with a structure that makes the reader aware from the outset that there are various voices telling the story.

In the final paragraph of the chapter the narrator states that:

. . . where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that sombre, curving mole . . . Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood

motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day.

(Fowles, 1969:11)

The figure spied by the telescopist on this “blustery morning” (Fowles, 1969:9) in Lyme Regis is none other than the enigmatic Sarah Woodruff. According to Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* started as a “visual image” (1969:13). The image of a woman occurred to him while still half asleep in bed one morning (Fowles, 1998:13) and although he was initially resistant to it there seemed to be something about the woman that would not let him be (Fowles, 1998:13). The “mysterious” (Fowles, 1998:13) and “vaguely romantic” (Fowles, 1998:13) image was one of a woman who stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea:

The woman had no face, no particular degree of sexuality. But she was Victorian; and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian age. An outcast. I didn’t know her crime, but I wished to protect her. That is, I began to fall in love with her. Or with her stance. I didn’t know which.

(Fowles, 1998:13-14)

The fact that the ephemeral figure spotted through a telescope in the first chapter of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* bears a distinct resemblance to the image of the Victorian woman who appeared to Fowles as an image that he could not ignore clarifies that the figure is Sarah Woodruff. For this reason I have argued that it is John Fowles, as opposed to another fictional character, who is watching his characters through a telescope as the novel begins.

From a structural point of view the novel introduces Sarah as seen through the eyes of Charles and Ernestina. When Charles initially observes Sarah at the end of the quay he asks Ernestina who the figure is. Intrigued from the first moment, Charles is initially inquisitive about the behaviour of the ephemeral woman. In her description of Sarah’s circumstances to Charles, Ernestina uses various names attached to Sarah in order to give Charles a sense of why the woman is an outcast. She is known as both “poor Tragedy” (Fowles, 1969:14) and “The French Lieutenant’s . . . Woman” (Fowles, 1969:14) by the villagers of Lyme and, according to Ernestina, she is a little mad (Fowles, 1969:15). However, when Charles approaches Sarah to enquire after her safety at the edge of the quay

she turns to him and looks at him in such a way as to undermine his Victorian sense of superiority over the fairer sex. She seems to look *through* him as opposed to *at* him.

This look of Sarah's is significant because, in many ways, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel that attempts to look through the past as opposed to simply describing it in historical detail. The narrator offers modern commentary by stating that "it was not so much what was positively in that face which remained with him [Charles] after that first meeting, but all that was not as he had expected; for theirs was an age when the favoured feminine look was the demure, the obedient, the shy" (Fowles, 1969:16). Sarah thus immediately functions in opposition to the feminine role that Victorian society attempts to give her. The narrator offers a physical description of her, stating that her face was not beautiful "by any period's standard or taste" (Fowles, 1969:16), but was an "unforgettable face, and a tragic face. . . there was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness" (Fowles, 1969:16). The idea presented here is effective in showing that although Sarah is seen by her Victorian contemporaries as a fallen outcast there is something about her that is resistant to the age in which she lives. She stands with her back to society and is seemingly unafraid of the eyes that cautiously watch her.

As Charles and Ernestina withdraw from Sarah on the cold Lyme Regis quay there is a wonderful moment of irony as Charles mockingly says to Ernestina: "'I wish you hadn't told me the sordid facts. That's the trouble with provincial life. Everyone knows everyone and there is no mystery. No romance.'" (Fowles, 1969:16). The narrator is having a bit of fun at Charles's expense here. The 'provincial life' that Charles refers to is in fact the one into which he will be entering if he marries Ernestina – a life of typical Victorian repression and overbearing religious authority. Ernestina epitomises the archetypal Victorian lady in both temperament and physical charms. The narrator of the novel illustrates this by explaining that Ernestina

had exactly the right face for her age; that is, small chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. You may see it still in the drawings of the great illustrators of the time – in Phiz's work, in John Leech's. Her grey eyes and the paleness of her skin only enhanced the delicacy of the rest. At first meetings she could cast down her eyes very prettily – as if she might faint should any gentleman dare to address her.

(Fowles, 1969:31)

The language that is used to describe Ernestina is reflective of the direct contrast that the narrator wishes to make between her and Sarah Woodruff. If Ernestina is demure and innocent, then Sarah is defiant and worldly. Instead of casting her eyes down, or looking away from Charles on the quay when she first encounters him, Sarah flashes him a look that facilitates a direct contrast to the coy behaviour that Ernestina adopts as her feminine mystique: “Again and again, afterwards, Charles thought of that look as a lance; and to think so is of course not merely to describe an object but the effect it has. He felt himself in that brief instant an unjust enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished” (Fowles, 1969:16). Ironically, we see that Charles is speaking of the wrong woman when he states that there is no ‘mystery’ or ‘romance’ concerning Sarah’s circumstances. It is also only once Charles becomes involved in a relationship with Sarah that he begins to see the flaws in Ernestina.

After his third meeting with Sarah on Ware Commons, where they have engaged in their first proper conversation, Charles returns to the company of Ernestina in the Assembly Rooms of Lyme to watch a concert. It is in this scene that the Victorian Charles begins to fade and something far more intriguing takes root in the gentleman’s mind. We are told that he “had become a little obsessed with Sarah. . . or at any rate with the enigma she represented” (Fowles, 1969:127) and it is in the stifling Assembly Rooms with the inane company of Ernestina and her aunt that Charles begins to “feel sorry for himself – a brilliant man trapped, a Byron tamed; and his mind wander[s] back to Sarah, to visual images, attempts to recollect that face, that mouth, that generous mouth” (Fowles, 1969:128). Moments of existential doubt start to unsettle Charles in this scene; he admits to himself that he is attracted to Sarah and that she makes him aware of a “deprivation” (Fowles, 1969:129) he had otherwise never acknowledged. These observations are significant because the narrator of the novel is showing his modern reader that Charles has a lot to learn from the time that the novel opens to the time that he eventually realises the cost he will have to pay for remedying his sense of deprivation. The fulfilment of deprivation that I refer to is also directly related to the ‘mystery’ and the ‘romance’ that Charles will come to experience from his relations with Sarah.

It is also important to note that the small amusement Charles has at the expense of Ernestina's story concerning Sarah at the start of the novel begins to make way for an irritation towards his fiancé that epitomises a gendered Victorian assumption about women. Charles does not allow himself to become openly irritated with Ernestina in the Assembly Rooms because she is, after all, "only a woman. There were so many things she must 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. All would be well when she was truly his; in his bed and in his bank . . . and of course in his heart, too" (Fowles, 1969:129). Again, the narrator is providing a mockery of sexual dynamics in the Victorian age. Charles still believes, despite his 'modern' belief in Darwin as opposed to God, that a woman is an object to be procured and possessed by her male counterpart. I will discuss this issue in more detail at a later stage, but it is a significant point with regard to my current analysis because it is directly associated with the way that Sarah teaches Charles how to view the world from a modern perspective as opposed to a Victorian one. She is the woman he can never fully possess and it is for this reason that Charles becomes embroiled in an existential crisis that is highlighted by his 20th century narrator making a mockery of him.

The comic eye that the narrator of the novel adopts when discussing Charles is shown, for instance, when he refers to Charles feeling sorry for himself because he is seemingly a 'Byron tamed'. Earlier in the novel, the narrator describes Charles as having "all the Byronic ennui with neither of the Byronic outlets: genius and adultery" (Fowles, 1969:22). The narrator thus undermines Charles and he is often discussed at the beginning of the novel as a philandering fool. In his second year at university he "had drifted into a bad set and ended up, one foggy night in London, in carnal possession of a naked girl. He rushed from her plump Cockney arms into those of the Church, horrifying his father one day shortly afterwards by announcing that he wished to take holy orders" (Fowles, 1969:20). This attitude towards Charles is both playful and ironic – in many ways the 20th century narrator is simply parodying a typical Victorian gentleman and Charles is the unlucky bearer of this burden. The tone of the narrative is therefore funny at times and the narrator uses his hindsight in order to illustrate the silliness of the repression that pervaded the Victorian era. The fact that the woman with whom

Charles is caught has ‘plump Cockney arms’ is itself a humorous image and the narrator takes the issue one step further by suggesting that Charles, the ‘scientist’, even toyed with the notion of ‘taking Holy Orders’.

While the narrator takes a tone of mockery with regard to Charles, he is far more tentative when it comes to Sarah Woodruff. He resists any attempt at describing her thoughts or explaining her behaviour. Sarah is initially described to the reader (and to Charles) in the first chapter of the novel when she is standing on the Lyme Regis quay looking out to sea. The next mention we have of her is in a discussion between Mrs Poulteney and the vicar of Lyme. The character of Mrs Poulteney is illustrative of a Christian woman whose interest lies more in the appearance of Godly charity than in the act of kindness itself. She is described by the narrator as a woman who had “two obsessions: or two aspects of the same obsession. One was dirt – though she made some exception of the kitchen, since only servants lived there – the other was Immorality” (Fowles, 1969:25). The fact that she allows her kitchen to be dirty ‘since only the servants lived there’ is illustrative of her attitude toward the lower classes living in her home:

Butlers, footmen, gardeners, grooms, upstairs maids, downstairs maids – they took just so much of Mrs Poulteney’s standards and ways and then they fled . . . when you are expected to rise at six, to work from half past six to eleven, to work again from half past eleven to half past four, and then again from five to ten, *and* every day, thus a hundred-hour week, your reserves of grace and courage may not be very large.

(Fowles, 1969:25)

According to the narrator there would have been a place in the “Gestapo for the lady” (Fowles, 1969:26) and it is into these unfortunate circumstances that Sarah enters as a topic of interest and conversation. Mrs Poulteney mentions to the vicar that she is in need of a companion, a woman of “irreproachable moral character” (Fowles, 1969:29) who has no relations. She should, however, be someone who has “come upon adverse circumstances” (Fowles, 1969:29) so that Mrs Poulteney can be seen as a charitable Christian woman who wishes to help those less fortunate than herself. It is without hesitation that the vicar suggests Sarah Woodruff. In considering the matter Mrs Poulteney is provided with a character assessment of Sarah that is relayed to her by the vicar.

The information that the reader initially receives with regard to Sarah is clouded with omissions. We are told that she is a Charmouth girl who was trained as a governess (Fowles, 1969:37) and was employed as such by the Talbot family. While working for the Talbot family Sarah is exposed to a wounded French Lieutenant by the name of Varguennes, who manages to charm her. When the French Lieutenant has recovered and he wishes to return to France he leaves the Talbot household and Sarah requests leave to follow after him (Fowles, 1969:39). Although the French Lieutenant promises to return and marry Sarah, he is shown to be a “heartless deceiver” (Fowles, 1969:39) who never returns from France. As a result, Sarah stands at the land’s edge watching the sea, hoping he will someday return for her. In his telling of the story the vicar is clear that Sarah is “not insane” (Fowles, 1969:39) but that she “suffers from grave attacks of melancholia” (Fowles, 1969:39).

Sarah is therefore kept at a distance from her reader for the first six chapters of the novel. The only access we have to her is through other people and their telling of her unfortunate circumstances. Contrary to Ernestina’s statement that Sarah is “a little mad” (Fowles, 1969:15), in the second chapter of the novel we hear later from the vicar that Sarah is, in fact, not insane. Rather, she is said to suffer from ‘grave attacks of melancholia’ and the reader is placed in a position where an explanation for this sadness is complicated by the feeling that Sarah is a modern woman living in a Victorian setting. Throughout the novel Sarah is aligned with the unfortunate circumstances of her love affair with the French Lieutenant. However, her sadness is also later revealed to be associated with her sense that she desires more from the world than her circumstances will allow. In a conversation with Charles on Ware Commons, she says to him: “You were not born a woman with a natural respect, a love of intelligence, beauty, learning . . . I don’t know how to say it, I have no right to desire these things, but my heart craves them and I cannot believe it is all vanity” (Fowles, 1969:165-166). Sarah is expressing signs of a person who wishes to live in a world in which her desire for beauty, art and intelligence is not condemned.

The notion of hindsight is significant here because, when Sarah says that she has ‘no right to desire these things’, the modern narrator is making a comment on the fact that it was considered

‘vanity’ for a woman to desire beauty and intelligence in the Victorian age. In stark contrast to Ernestina and Mrs Poulteney, Sarah exhibits a need for something more than her 19th century world offers her. It is also, therefore, important to note that the first proper encounter that the reader has with Sarah is in an interview with Mrs Poulteney. Sarah is placed in a stifling environment with a typically repressed Victorian mistress so that the narrator can illustrate Sarah’s modernity as opposed to Mrs Poulteney’s antiquated theology. In the contrast between Sarah and Mrs Poulteney, the modern reader is offered a glimpse into the difficult situation of a woman who lives a life of freedom as opposed to tradition in Victorian society.

Significantly, Sarah initially manages to charm Mrs Poulteney, primarily with her reading voice (Fowles, 1969: 41). As a moral Christian woman Mrs Poulteney is horrified by the circumstances of Sarah’s case and she is adamant that the sinner be adequately repentant, which Sarah at first appears to be - so “castdown, so annihilated by circumstance” (Fowles, 1969: 41). However, Mrs Poulteney and Sarah soon come to loggerheads when Sarah refuses to give up walking alone on the Lyme quay, seemingly in wait for the return of the French Lieutenant. So adamant is Sarah to retain this pastime, that she even offers to leave Mrs Poulteney’s employ should they not reach an agreement: “Mrs Poulteney was inwardly shocked. Once again Sarah’s simplicity took all the wind from her swelling spite. The voice, the other charms, to which she had become so addicted!” (Fowles, 1969:67). Sarah thus acquires a “kind of ascendancy of suffering over Mrs Poulteney” (Fowles, 1969:68) and, although she is ultimately dismissed from the lady’s household as a result of her desire to walk freely on Ware Commons, Sarah is presented with discretion, kindness and a high degree of emotional intelligence in the miserable household.

An example of this can be found in the scene in which Sarah sleeps alongside one of Mrs Poulteney’s young maids. One night Sarah overhears the sickly girl weeping and she goes into her room to comfort her. According to the narrator this “was not too difficult, for Millie was a child in all but her years; unable to read or write and as little able to judge the other humans around her as a dog; if you patted her, she understood – if you kicked her, then that was life” (Fowles, 1969:155). Sarah is kind to Millie, she allows her to sleep in her bed and she takes care of her when she is sick. Sarah

nurtures and cares for others even in an environment that is not conducive to it. Sarah, therefore, does not simply mould to her environment, but maintains a sense of independence even in the most uncomfortable of situations. In terms of the way that the narrator handles her, we also see that he remains careful not to divulge too much information concerning her interior world. We see her adapting intelligently to her surroundings, but we are never told how she feels while in Mrs Poulteney's home.

While the narrator is careful with Sarah, John Fowles is protective of her. Both these approaches to Sarah facilitate a sense of mystery around her that is maintained throughout the novel. It is impossible to attach fixed meaning to her and in this regard she functions on an interesting level in the narrative structure. As a mysterious and romantic figure she resists possession from the male characters that surround her. The narrator cannot possess her because he has no access to her interiority, John Fowles abdicates authorial control over her and Charles is constantly confused and 'bewildered' (Fowles, 1969:140) by her. From a structural point of view it is noteworthy that the novel deals with Sarah in much the same way that a post-modern text deals with the problem of how to assign fixed meaning to anything. By remaining mysterious and unknowable, Sarah resembles the modern problem of how we are to know anything at all. Due to the fact that we never fully understand Sarah or her actions, we are also forced to ask ourselves whether or not a novel can offer rigid answers to human questions. Sarah is suggestive of post-modernism in the way that she remains a mystery to all that encounter her. She forces the narrator, John Fowles, Charles Smithson and the reader to ask questions about the nature of individuality, yet she does not offer herself as the knowable answer to these inquiries.

The novel illustrates the above argument in many significant ways. My reader will remember that the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* describes Sarah without full access to her interior world. He can describe her as someone might describe a friend, or even a close relative, yet he is never granted access into her mind:

Sarah *was* intelligent, but her real intelligence belonged to a rare kind; one that would certainly pass undetected in any of our modern tests of the faculty. It was not in the least analytical or

problem solving, and it is no doubt symptomatic that the one subject that had cost her agonies was mathematics. Nor did it manifest itself in the form of any particular vivacity or wit, even in her happier days. It was rather an uncanny – uncanny in one who had never been to London, never mixed in the world – ability to classify other people's worth: to understand them, in the fullest sense of that word.

(Fowles, 1969: 57)

The fact that Sarah's intuitive capabilities are described by the narrator as an 'uncanny ability to classify other people's worth' is particularly interesting with regard to the way in which she is handled within the text. The narrator appears to be as fascinated by Sarah as Charles Smithson is, despite the fact that he is writing from a point of view that is modern as opposed to Victorian. At no time in the novel does he gain access as to the reasons why Sarah behaves as she does. He discusses her ability to see others as they were and 'not as they tried to seem' (Fowles, 1969:57), yet he himself appears incapable of offering any profound insight into who she is, as opposed to how she seems. As far as the narrator, and hence the reader, is concerned, Sarah's behaviour is erratic as she sways between being a companion to Mrs Poulteney and visiting the wild undercliff of Ware Commons in order to quieten her sadness. In the domestic context of the Poulteney household Sarah is seemingly downcast and obedient. Her only rebellion appears in the form of her walks on Ware Commons, yet within the boundaries of the house she adheres to the formality of Victorian life. No explanation is given by the narrator for the contrast between his descriptions of Sarah in a domestic environment and his observations of Sarah when she encounters Charles on Ware Commons, illustrating the extent to which the narrator is kept at a distance from her.

When Mrs Tranter, Ernestina and Charles have the unfortunate occasion of visiting with Mrs Poulteney in her home, we find a significant example of the way in which Sarah adapts to repressive domestic situations. The fact that Charles is invited to the afternoon tea with Ernestina and Mrs Tranter at Mrs Poulteney's home is in itself an interesting choice as far as Victorian gender dynamics are concerned. Men and women were generally associated with specific gender related activities in the Victorian age, and there was often a significant divide between men and women in social situations. Women were understood to be uninterested in topics of politics and business while men were considered too sophisticated for the menial conversation on raising children and the finer details of

needlepoint. As a result of these conversational divides it was often the case in the Victorian era that men retired to a separate room from women at social occasions. This was especially the case with regard to the upper classes that had the space to separate the sexes and only interact on the most superficial level possible.

The conversation between Mrs Poulteney, Mrs Tranter and Ernestina in the company of Charles is therefore different to the conversation that the ladies might have had were he not present. Interestingly, Mrs Poulteney insists that Sarah remain in the room for her visitors to see her and in this regard the power dynamic within the social situation becomes complicated. As an old woman, Mrs Poulteney attempts to dominate her guests, yet with Charles in the room it is difficult for her to maintain her power as the authority figure. It is mentioned that

Mrs Poulteney and Mrs Tranter respectively gloomed and bubbled their way through the schedule of polite conversational subjects . . . servants; the weather; impending births, funerals and marriages; Mr Disraeli and Mr Gladstone (this seemingly for Charles's benefit, though it allowed Mrs Poulteney to condemn severely the personal principles of the first and the political ones of the second); then on to last Sunday's sermon, the deficiencies of the local tradesmen and thence naturally back to servants.

(Fowles, 1969:104)

The women attempt to include Charles in their conversation. However, it is ironic that while the women discuss their servants it is the servant present *in the room* that interests Charles. He is more interested in "how the wild animal would behave in these barred surroundings" (Fowles, 1969:104) than he is in the mundane social interaction he sees happening before him. Charles refers to Sarah as a 'wild animal' because he has only ever encountered her in exterior landscapes. He has at the time of the tea at Mrs Poulteney already encountered Sarah twice on Ware Commons and he finds something quite different here in this stifled Victorian room.

This particular social encounter between these five characters is revelatory because, although it is subtle, each one behaves in accordance with who they really are as opposed to how they seem to be. Firstly, the narrator manages to provide some insight into Sarah's behaviour in the sense that he appears to be watching the room from his vantage point in the 20th century. When Mrs Tranter approaches Sarah and greets her with kindness and humility the narrator explains that for a brief

moment “a rare look crossed Sarah’s face. That computer in her heart had long before assessed Mrs Tranter and stored the resultant tape. That reserve, that independence so perilously close to defiance which had become her mask in Mrs Poulteney’s presence, momentarily dropped. She smiled even, though sadly . . .” (Fowles, 1969:103). Sarah knows that Mrs Tranter is kind and she momentarily drops her mask so that she can engage with her in an honest way. Apart from this encounter, Sarah remains in an apparent state of “utter meekness” (Fowles, 1969:104), while Charles and the women engage in formal conversation. It is also important to observe that while Charles “smile[s] and raise[s] eyebrows and nod[s] his way through this familiar purgatory”(Fowles, 1969:105), he is also considering Sarah’s performance very carefully. Sarah sits in silence throughout the tea. However, Charles notices that she appears to be “labouring under a sense of injustice – and very interestingly to a shrewd observer, doing singularly little to conceal it” (Fowles, 1969:105). The ‘shrewd observer’ in this case could be either the narrator or Charles Smithson as both appear to be watching Sarah and attempting to understand her silent defiance in the present circumstances. The reader will remember that the conversation between Mrs Poulteney, Mrs Tranter, Ernestina and Charles takes a turn for the worse and within the boundaries of this repressive environment the narrator states that:

The three ladies all sat with averted eyes: Mrs Tranter out of embarrassment, Ernestina out of irritation with herself . . . and Mrs Poulteney out of being who she was. It was thus that a look unseen by these ladies did at last pass between Sarah and Charles. It was very brief, but it spoke worlds; two strangers had recognized they shared a common enemy. For the first time she did not look through him, but at him . . .

(Fowles, 1969:106)

It is in this moment that a significant change occurs in Sarah with regard to Charles. She sees something in him that is not typical of the Victorian epoch and she shows a different side of herself to Charles on Ware Commons than we have seen of her in Mrs Poulteney’s unhappy home. I have mentioned above that Sarah’s behaviour is erratic – she behaves differently in the Poulteney household to how she behaves on Ware Commons. While this contrast provides the reader with some insight into Sarah’s character, it also shows the level to which she evades all who attempt to understand her. There are times on Ware Commons that Sarah seems desperate, she provokes mixed feelings in Charles and, although it ultimately comes to light that she lies to Charles about her sexual

past, she also incites a yearning for freedom in him that is paramount to his growth as an individual. The narrator also remains a detached observer throughout the few encounters between Charles and Sarah on Ware Commons. It is almost as if he is watching them from a distance – a motif that appears throughout the novel and which places the reader and the narrator in an intriguing position.

From the vantage point of the 20th (or, now, the 21st) century we watch as Sarah changes the way that Charles himself ‘watches’ the world. His interest in fossils becomes an interest in seeing Sarah and after his third encounter with her on Ware Commons Charles finds himself in the awkward position of wanting to be free from his dull Victorian life. The narrator watches these characters with a knowing eye and explains to his reader that

strangely there had come ragingly upon [Charles] the old travel-lust that he had believed himself to have grown out of those last years. He wished he might be in Cadiz, Naples, the Morea, in some blazing Mediterranean spring: not only for the Mediterranean spring itself, *but to be free*, to have endless weeks of travel ahead of him . . . *the blue shadows of the unknown*.

(Fowles, 1969:134)

The idea that Charles wishes to be free, to experience the ‘blue shadows of the unknown’ is directly associated with Sarah and the role she plays in the novel. By maintaining her sense of mystery and by arousing certain sensibilities in Charles, she holds up a torch to the issues of freedom versus duty in an age where duty played the far more significant role. Charles has, up until this point, been watching Sarah carefully. By watching her he begins to become aware of his yearning for freedom, which is also a yearning for the more primal human desire for sex.

When Charles first stumbles upon Sarah on Ware Commons she is lying asleep on the ground and he notices something “intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay” (Fowles, 1969:74) and this provokes a “dim echo in Charles of a moment from his time in Paris. Another girl, whose name now he could not remember, perhaps had never known, seen sleeping so, one dawn, in a bedroom overlooking the Seine” (Fowles, 1969:74). In this first encounter on Ware Commons when Charles first finds Sarah asleep he is incapable of doing anything other than

stare down, tranced by this unexpected encounter, and overcome by an equally strange feeling – not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal, a certainty of the innocence of this creature, of her being unfairly outcast, and which was in turn a factor of his intuition of her appalling

loneliness. He could not imagine what, besides despair, could drive her, in an age where women were semi-static, timid, incapable of sustained physical effort, to this wild place.

(Fowles, 1969:74-75)

It is interesting, in terms of the Victorian repression of sexuality, that in his first meeting with Sarah on Ware Commons, Charles is incapable of recognising his attraction to her in sexual terms. Rather, he attempts to repress his sexual attraction to her by convincing himself that he wants to protect her, or that he wishes to behave in a paternal capacity with her. This remains the case as Charles returns to the undercliff for the third time, convinced that he has no interest in seeing Sarah (Fowles, 1969:117). He attempts to banish any thought of her from his mind for a time, but “when he came to where he had to scramble up through the brambles she certainly did come sharply to mind again; he recalled very vividly how she had lain that day” (Fowles, 1969:117). My reader will notice that Charles does not bring to mind his paternal feelings about Sarah that emerged that day but rather he remembers the *sexual* way that she lay. Glimmers of the urge for freedom begin to materialise in Charles and they initially show themselves as sexual urges. He is quick to banish them from his mind and at the fourth meeting between Sarah and Charles on Ware Commons, in which Sarah attempts to make Charles her confidante, we see the way that Sarah seems to “assume some sort of equality of intellect with him” (Fowles, 1969:140). It is here that we find a woman significantly different to the one we have come to know in the Poulteney household.

Sarah takes control of the conversation between herself and Charles at their fourth meeting on Ware Commons, while at the same time playing the role of the helpless female victim. The dynamics of this meeting are particularly significant because, while Charles has always been the one to see Sarah first, it is in this encounter that she finds him before he finds her:

He had been at his task perhaps ten minutes, with no sound but the lowing of a calf from some distant field above and inland . . . He heard then a sound as of a falling stone. He looked, and saw nothing, and presumed that a flint had indeed dropped from the chalk face above . . . He glanced sharply round. She stood above him, where the tunnel of ivy ended, some forty yards away. He did not know how long she had been there but he remembered that sound of two minutes before. For a moment he was almost frightened; it seemed uncanny that she should appear so silently. She was not wearing nailed boots, but she must even so have moved with great caution. To surprise him; therefore she had deliberately followed him.

(Fowles, 1969:135-136)

The scene is particularly eerie; Sarah stands ‘above’ Charles and seems to be watching him for some time before he becomes aware of her presence. From the first instance of this encounter, Charles is unnerved. Sarah has managed to command a sense of power over the situation by ‘frightening’ him slightly. She appears as quietly as a ghost and Charles is adequately taken aback by her presence. As they begin to speak, the narrator discusses “some kind of hold she had on [Charles]” (Fowles, 1969:139); whether or not Sarah is aware of this hold she has over him, she is seemingly playing the role of the desperate woman in search of a hero. Charles is uncomfortable with her request that he become her confidante, but Sarah explains with uncanny insight why she needs him:

‘Because you have travelled. Because you are educated. Because you are a gentleman. Because...because, I do not know, I live among people the world tells me are kind, pious, Christian people. And they seem crueller than the cruellest heathens, stupider than the stupidest animals. I cannot believe that the truth is so. That life is without understanding or compassion. That there are not spirits generous enough to understand what I have suffered and why I suffer...and that, whatever sins I have committed, it is not right that I should suffer so much.’

(Fowles, 1969:139)

Sarah flatters Charles in order to try and make him see that he is her only refuge. She goes on to tell him that he is kind (Fowles, 1969: 142) and that he has an understanding that is “beyond . . . any in Lyme” (Fowles, 1969:142).

Sarah plays two roles in this scene. On the one hand she is making herself vulnerable to Charles and she plays the role of the isolated, damaged victim of circumstance. She speaks in a “low voice” (Fowles, 1969:142) and begs Charles to meet with her again or she will be driven to despair and madness (Fowles, 1969:142). In a moment of desperation she even “sank to her knees” (Fowles, 1969:141) in a final attempt to convince Charles to help her and by this she shows that she is at his mercy and in need of his help. On the other hand she is a strong, wild and independent woman who takes charge of the meeting by assuming a kind of equality of intellect with Charles that he has never before encountered in a woman. Charles recognises that he is being “outwitted” (Fowles, 1969:144) by Sarah, that he is engaging in the forbidden (or rather that the forbidden is engaging him) (Fowles, 1969:144) and that Sarah, in many ways, is a “woman most patently dangerous” (Fowles, 1969:144). Sarah is not only dangerous in terms of her ability to live with a sense of freedom in a duty-bound society but she is the embodiment of individuality and a sexuality that Charles is terrified he cannot

refuse. Throughout the meeting the narrator describes Charles as being “lost and lured” (Fowles, 1969:143) and Charles himself admits to Sarah that she “bewilders” (Fowles, 1969:140) him. She is direct in explaining her need for Charles and she manages to manipulate him into agreeing to be her confidante.

Linda Hutcheon’s assertion that Sarah is “a fine impresario of her own show” (1984:67) is appropriate here. We see from Charles’s point of view that she unsettles him with her seeming honesty. Alas, on this point Charles is sorely mistaken – he has yet to learn that the story she ultimately tells him of her encounter with the French Lieutenant is a lie. He thinks of Ernestina, and women like her who “behaved always as if habited in glass: infinitely fragile, even when they threw books of poetry. They encouraged the mask, the safe distance; and this girl, behind her facade of humility, forbade it.” (Fowles, 1969:143). Sarah does wear masks; she is difficult to understand because she does not allow her masks to fall. She is both meek and timid (in the Poulteney household) while at the same time strong and independent (on Ware Commons). The contrast between the Sarah we know in the domestic environment of the Poulteney house and the Sarah we encounter on Ware Commons is important for many reasons. Although the narrator of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* often uses a mocking tone to refer to the Victorian age (and to Charles) he holds back when it comes to Sarah. The fact that the novel is written in 1967 gives the narrator a sense of authority and power over his Victorian world, which he uses in order to explain why the characters (apart from Sarah) behave as they do in Victorian society. According to Linda Hutcheon “it is the ironic, parodic function of the modern narrator to suggest that existentialism is the only view possible for a modern individualist who *will* see Sarah as Sarah, and not as the French Lieutenant’s Whore” (1984:61). I agree with Hutcheon to a certain extent. I think that the modern narrator of the novel does take an ironic and parodic stance with regard to managing the way in which information is supplied to the text. However, I think that the narrator drops all pretences of hindsight and knowledge when it comes to Sarah. The presence of Sarah Woodruff rattles the idea that the narrator and the reader of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* have some over-arching power over the Victorian world described in the text based on the fact that we have 100 years between us and them. It is certainly the case that

Existentialism, the two World Wars, Freud and various other factors will make it easier for us to engage with the novel with a sense of knowing irony. However, when it comes to Sarah, the narrator and the reader are still left strictly in the shadows.

My argument is that, although he is modern and there are 100 years of collective experience between him and the Victorian age, the narrator is still incapable of understanding Sarah. He, and all who live in the 20th century along with him, are as bewildered by Sarah's opacity and her spirit of defiance as Charles and the rest of Victorian society. Hutcheon is suggesting that the only way Sarah can be understood as an individual as opposed to a Whore is with the benefit of existentialism. In other words, the modern narrator and the modern reader will have more access to Sarah than Charles because the narrator is capable of understanding something that the Victorians were not. In this regard I disagree strongly with Hutcheon. The modern narrator is just as puzzled by Sarah as Charles is and his 'modern individualist' understanding of the world does not bring him any closer to understanding Sarah's complexity.

It is for the above reasons that it is important for my argument to discuss Sarah's behaviour in a repressed domestic setting *and* in a wild and untamed landscape such as Ware Commons because both illustrate her ability to transform herself according to her environment. The narrator, Charles Smithson and the reader are all placed in a similar position when it comes to Sarah. We watch her carefully but we are unsure of how she will behave *because she is free*. Regardless of the era in which she lives, Sarah lives her life with a sense of freedom that is Other to the Victorian as well as the existentialist. Her freedom is shown in the way that she quietly defies Mrs Poulteney, in the way that she seems to act on an equal intellectual plain with Charles on Ware Commons and also in the way that she provokes desire in Charles. The fact that Sarah is free in both environments illustrates the fact that, although he writes from a position of hindsight, the narrator is still incapable of knowing who she is; she resists all attempts at possession and. In this regard, the relationship between Sarah and John Fowles is also particularly interesting.

Chapter 2

You do an awfully good impression of yourself.

Brett Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (2005)

Chapter twelve of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ends with the narrator asking two questions: "Who is Sarah Woodruff? Out of what shadows does she come?" (Fowles, 1969:96). Fowles is delicate in his handling of these questions and it is in this moment of the novel that he gives his own first sustained appearance. Up until this point he has only given the odd insight into Sarah that the narrator could not provide himself. An example of this is found toward the beginning of the novel when the narrator is describing Sarah as she reads from the Bible to Mrs Poulteney:

I risk making Sarah sound like a bigot. But she had no theology; as she saw through people, she saw through the follies, the vulgar stained glass, the narrow literalness of the Victorian church. She saw that there was suffering; and she prayed that it would end. I cannot say what she might have been in our age; in a much earlier one I believe she would have been either a saint or an emperor's mistress. Not because of religiosity on the one hand, or sexuality on the other, but because of that fused rare power that was her essence – understanding and emotion.

(Fowles, 1969:62)

The use of the word 'I' is used by Fowles only at certain times in the novel and it interrupts the narrator in order for Fowles to have his say. Fowles intervenes in the novel both as a voice and as a physical character, which injects the text with a sense of ambiguity that helps us to see below the surface of the stiff Victorian world and into a freer environment where hazard and choice play a significant role in the meaning giving process.

The change in tone between Fowles and his narrator is illustrated in the way that Fowles begins Chapter Thirteen by responding to his narrator's questions with the answer "I do not know" (Fowles, 1969:97). Chapter Thirteen is an extremely important chapter in *The French Lieutenant's*

Woman because it deviates significantly from the story that is being told and moves into a post-modern analysis of how an author relates to both his characters and his readers. In his 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel' Fowles states that

there is a danger in being ironic about the apparent follies and miseries of any past age. So I have written myself another memorandum: *You are not the 'I' who breaks into the illusion, but the 'I' who is a part of it.* In other words the 'I' who will make the first-person commentaries here and there in my story, and who will finally even enter it, will not be my real 'I' in 1967, but much more just another character, though in a different category from the purely fictional ones.

(1998:18)

Fowles himself admits that he is not the same voice as his narrator but he is also suggesting in the above quotation that it is not necessarily John Fowles the novelist who enters into the text as a voice and a character. Fowles makes clear that we must step cautiously when dealing with fiction because, while we assume that the John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the actual John Fowles of reality, we may simply be fooled into thinking that this is the case. Fowles is the first to admit that there are many difficulties concerned with writing a novel and in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* he seems to be orchestrating many different commentaries on the novel form all at once. Nowhere are these commentaries on the novel more prominent in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* than in Chapter Thirteen.

The fact that Fowles interrupts his seemingly Victorian narrative in order to discuss the post-modern agonies of where and with whom meaning lies is pertinent because, in doing so, Fowles comments on the way that modern readers question the authority of their author. Hindsight features quite prominently in Chapter Thirteen because, as Fowles himself admits, he is writing in the "convention universally accepted at the time of [his] story: that the novelist stands close to God" (Fowles, 1969:97). The fact that Fowles is writing in the time of Allain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes (Fowles, 1969:97) makes it impossible for him to be the authoritative figure head of the novel, as the Victorian author had previously set him/herself up to be. Fowles can question his narrator, his characters and his own authority in the novel because he can look back on the 19th century and see that the "godgame" (Fowles, 1998:21) played by his 19th century colleagues is quite different to the one that he is now playing.

Fowles is also clear that it is, in fact, a game because he states clearly in Chapter Thirteen that the story he is telling is all imagination (Fowles, 1969:97), that he might be writing from one of the very houses he has brought into his fiction (Fowles, 1969:97) and that he may be disguising himself as Charles Smithson (Fowles, 1969:97) in order to write a transposed autobiography (Fowles, 1969:97). In many ways the reader has to keep him/herself alert to the possibility that he/she is simply being tricked in the same way that Charles is tricked by Sarah (in the sense that she lies to him about Varguennes in order to gain his sympathy). If Nietzsche announced God dead in the 20th century and Roland Barthes followed this through by killing off the author then Fowles is playfully declaring himself alive and well in the form of an “oddly fertile corpse” (Fowles, 1998: 25).

The ‘game’ of fiction that Fowles ascribes to in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is also directly associated with his ideas on freedom. By stepping into his novel as both a voice and a physical character Fowles is presenting the idea that freedom is not found in the rigid rules of 19th century literature but rather in the hazardous unknown of the 20th century. Hazard, for Fowles, is of utmost importance when it comes to writing a work of fiction. In hazard there is a sense of contingency that is paramount to the success of any free individual. As far as Fowles is concerned existentialism (a term that came into being only after the Victorian age) provides a good explanation of the way in which the modern individual might approach the notion of freedom. In *The Aristos* Fowles argues that

it is to me impossible to reject existentialism though it is possible to reject this or that existentialist action. Existentialism is not a philosophy, but a way of looking at, and utilizing, other philosophies. It is a theory of relativity among theories of absolute truth. To most people it is a pleasure to conform and a pleasure to belong; existentialism is conspicuously unsuited to political or social subversion, since it is incapable of organized dogmatic resistance . . . it is capable only of one man’s resistance; one personal expression of view . . .

(1964:116-117)

In this regard, existentialism is “the revolt of the individual against all those systems of thought, theories of psychology, and social and political pressures that attempt to rob him of his individuality” (Fowles, 1964:115). If my reader will now consider the character of Sarah Woodruff in light of the above quotations he/she will recognise that although Sarah lived in a time when existential freedom (especially in a woman) was condemned, Fowles is now writing from a position where he

(along with his reader and his narrator) can admire and marvel at Sarah's sense of freedom because he knows about and adheres to the ideology of existentialism. Not only does Fowles give Sarah the benefit of being free as a character and as a woman in the novel but he also gives her the freedom to choose how she might like to react in a given situation. In 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel' Fowles writes:

I was stuck this morning trying to find a good answer from Sarah at the climax of a scene. Characters sometimes reject all the possibilities one offers. They say, in effect: *I would never say or do a thing like that*. But they don't say what they *would* say; and one has to proceed negatively, by a very tedious coaxing kind of trial and error. After an hour over this one wretched sentence, I saw that she had in fact been telling me what to do: silence from her was better than any line she might have said.

(Fowles, 1998:23)

Fowles also writes that he had an initial image of a woman (who would later become Sarah Woodruff) that sparked the inspiration for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and, although he did not know why, he wished to protect her (1998:14). In Chapter Thirteen Fowles protects Sarah in many significant ways. He uses his hindsight in order to protect her by navigating away from a literal description of who she is and into a discussion on the notion of freedom and how it develops within the fictional world. He uses his freedom as a modern author to confront the issues of how we, as modern readers, should approach both Sarah Woodruff and the fictional world that she inhabits. By doing this Fowles steers the reader away from an explanation of who Sarah is and turns the attention of the chapter to the significantly modern dilemma of having freedom, as opposed to authority, as the principle by which we live. In this way Fowles keeps a veil over Sarah and abdicates his control over her by granting her the freedom to behave as she likes. He thus protects her even from himself. He does not allow her to become his puppet, which would strip her of both her mystery and her freedom. Instead he turns the attention away from her and towards the relationship that the author has with his characters and his reader in the 20th century.

The epigraph to Chapter Thirteen is a quote from the Victorian poem entitled *Maud* which was written by Alfred Tennyson. It reads: "For the drift of the Maker is dark, an Isis hid by the veil" (Fowles, 1969:97). Tennyson was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom for much of the Victorian age and it is significant that Fowles should choose to use a Victorian quotation to head a chapter that is

decidedly post-modern. By using the quotation from *Maud* Fowles is making a comment on the fact that although *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not a Victorian novel, it still uses some of the conventions of Victorian literature in order to make an observation on how we approach literature now. The reference to the 'drift of the Maker' as 'dark' indicates that Fowles as 'Maker' and author of the novel is not necessarily going to be straightforward in his approach to telling his story. He is 'dark' and, therefore, we cannot be sure what to expect from him.

Fowles also chooses the Tennyson quote to head Chapter Thirteen because it is here that he explains his ideas on the author as a freedom-giving God. In this way the author as 'Maker' and as God is not necessarily the omniscient God of the 19th century, but rather the veiled Isis who pleads for freedom as opposed to authority as his/her means of creation. The 'Isis hid by the veil' could also refer to Sarah, who is kept hidden in Chapter Thirteen even though it is ostensibly the chapter in which Fowles wishes to "unfold her true state of mind" (Fowles, 1969:97). The epigraph is also illuminating with regard to Sarah when one bears in mind Book 1 of Kant's 3rd Critique, in which one reads that "there has perhaps never been a more sublime utterance or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well known inscription upon the Temple of Isis (Mother Nature): 'I am all that is, and that was, and that shall ever be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face.'" Fowles chooses a 'veiled Isis' whose face has never been unveiled by a 'mortal' because, even though he is supposed to be a kind of God in his position of author, Fowles is still incapable of keeping control over Sarah. He remains a mortal while she remains free of his totalising authority.

When Fowles addresses his reader in Chapter Thirteen he does so in order to explain why he, as author of the novel, is incapable of behaving like a puppet master. Fowles's characters do not behave as puppets because he believes that they maintain relative freedom in the fictional world that he has created for them: "I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control, however hard you try, however much of a latter day Poulteney you may be – your children, colleagues, friends, or even yourself" (Fowles, 1969:99). By referring directly to the reader as 'you' Fowles is inviting him/her into his fictional world and asking him/her to consider that, while novelists write for many different reasons, the one reason that is shared by all is that they "*wish to create*

worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was” (Fowles, 1969:98). In doing this Fowles shows the reader that his fictional world is as full of hazard as the real world. Characters and their decisions are left to chance and this, he explains, is why a novel cannot be fully planned:

We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live.

(Fowles, 1969: 98)

Fowles is adamant that in order for him to be free himself he must also allow his characters the freedom to disobey him. For Fowles there is “only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist” (Fowles, 1969:99). He argues that “the novelist is still a god” (Fowles, 1969:99) because he creates other worlds. What has changed, however, is that they are no longer “the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom [their] first principle, not authority” (Fowles, 1969:99).

The novelist of the 20th century is therefore akin to the God of the 20th century – if not dead then certainly struggling to keep control over the world it has created. With hindsight Fowles can see the shortcomings of Victorian literature and he is aware that Sarah could only have existed in a novel written 1967, rather than 1867. She is therefore free from a structural point of view and from a psychological point of view in the novel. Structurally she is free to behave as she wishes within the confines of the novel and psychologically she is free because neither the narrator nor Fowles can access her interior world. Fowles abdicates control over her and protects her from being scrutinised by reporting “only the outward facts” (Fowles, 1969:99) of her behaviour. The ‘mortal’ John Fowles living in the 20th century cannot lift the veil from her face and the ‘godlike’ author John Fowles is equally at a loss when attempting to manage her because his is not the omniscient God/author of the 19th century. He cannot escape the fact that he is a 20th century ‘God’ and a 20th century author; in both respects his authority is questionable and he is ironically less powerful (even with hindsight) than his 19th century predecessors.

Fowles offers three alternative endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a device which he uses to illustrate the vast difference between the way that novels were written in the 19th century and the way that they are written in the 20th century. By providing the reader with three options from which to choose, Fowles is also providing the reader with the freedom he has offered his characters. The burden of choice is never far from the luxury of freedom and Fowles is consistent in his post-modern position that an author living in the 20th century must provide both his characters and his readers with an alternative approach to the way in which he/she assigns meaning to a text. In Linda Hutcheon's article, "Theorizing the Postmodern: Toward a Poetics", she gives an account of the way in which the "familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order *versus* chaos and disorder) no longer holds" (1988:7). For Hutcheon it is "not that the modernist world was a 'world in need of mending' and the postmodernist one 'beyond repair'" (1988:7) but rather that "postmodernism works to show that all repairs are human constructs . . . from that very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation" (1988:7-8). The fact that Fowles provides his readers and his characters with certain freedoms within the confines of the novel indicates that he is in agreement with Hutcheon – that meaning is a human construct and, as such, it is confined to human limitations. Meaning is thus not necessarily divinely inspired or held in Godly esteem, but rather it becomes a hazardous muddle of choice that each reader, character and author must attempt to decipher in his/her own human way. The idea here is that even though we are limited by the fact that meaning is confined to human constructs, we are within that provided with with a world of hazard, a world of choice and, as Fowles would have it, a world that is *alive*.

In the first optional ending to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles does not allow Charles to grow into the kind of modern person that Sarah has been throughout the novel. He abruptly ends his story with Charles marrying Ernestina and living, not happily, but together, for the rest of their lives (Fowles, 1969:325). Charles never hears from Sarah again and Fowles admits that he does not know what happens to her. Her mystery thus remains intact and Fowles protects her by allowing her the freedom to disappear. She "never trouble[s] Charles again in person, however long she may have lingered in his memory" (Fowles, 1969:324-325) and although Fowles gives a brief account of the

future for the rest of his characters he leaves Sarah alone. In this ending Charles never consummates his relationship with Sarah and, even though he has had moments earlier in the novel in which a kind of existential desire for freedom invades him, he decides to return to Ernestina, work for her father and live comfortably, as opposed to happily. My reader will remember that, much earlier in the novel, Charles visits London and makes the observations that:

Lyme was a town of sharp eyes; and this was a city of the blind. No one turned and looked at him. He was almost invisible, he did not exist, and this gave him a sense of freedom, but a terrible sense, for he had in reality lost it . . . A man and a woman who hurried past spoke French; were French. And then Charles found himself wishing he were in Paris – from that, that he were abroad . . . travelling. Again! *If I could only escape, if I could only escape* . . . he murmured the words to himself a dozen times; then metaphorically shook himself for being so impractical, so romantic, so dutilless.

(Fowles, 1969:282)

Following on from the way in which Charles chastises himself for wanting to be free earlier in the novel we feel in this first ending a sense of disappointment and regret. Charles chooses duty over freedom and he never learns the value in the kind of life that Sarah is trying to offer him.

Although Charles may not have attained freedom in this first ending, it represents the level to which Fowles has freedom to make things up as he goes along, not according to any particular plan. When Fowles marries Charles off to Ernestina he writes: “They begat what shall it be – let us say seven children” (Fowles, 1969:325). In doing this, Fowles is illustrating the fact that he is not sure how many children they might have had. There is an element of hazard in his decision and he has not conclusively planned anything with regard to their future. The implication further is that should the reader wish to imagine that Charles and Ernestina have only two children, then he/she is free to do so. Fowles is making fun of the reader’s assumption that the author must decide how many children the couple have.

This is a work of fiction; Fowles is openly explaining to the reader that he has the option of to change his mind and he does this by deciding that the story will not, in fact, end in this conventional way. Rather it will go on and Fowles will complicate its Victorian setting by incorporating a sex scene between Charles and Sarah. The reason Fowles chooses to do this is that, “magnificent though the Victorian novelists were, they almost all (an exception, of course, is the later Hardy) failed miserably

in one aspect: nowhere in ‘respectable’ Victorian literature (and most of the pornography was based on the brothel – or on eighteenth-century accounts) does one see a man and a woman described together in bed. We do not know how they made love, what they said to each other in their most intimate moments, what they felt then” (Fowles, 1998:17).

It is interesting to note that Fowles attempts to conclude the novel with a conservative ending, yet in the next chapter moves immediately into a postmodern reflection on the way that we fictionalise our own lives even as they carry on in reality:

I [Fowles] said earlier that we are all poets, though not many of us write poetry; and so we are all novelists, that is, we have a habit of writing fictional futures for ourselves into a film. We screen in our minds hypotheses about how we might behave, about what might happen to us; and these novelistic or cinematic hypotheses often have very much more effect on how we actually do behave, when the real future becomes the present, than we generally allow. Charles was no exception; and the last few pages you have read are not what happened, but what he spent the hours between London and Exeter imagining might happen.

(Fowles, 1969:327)

Fowles has tricked his reader into a false sense that the story has come to its end, but in the following chapter he explains that the ending was simply one of Charles’ fantasies. Fowles has the freedom to behave as he pleases in this fictional world and he himself admits that the ‘I’ who consigned “Sarah to the shadows of oblivion” (Fowles, 1969:328) was not Fowles himself but merely the “personification of a certain massive indifference in things – too hostile for Charles to think of as ‘God’” (Fowles, 1969:328). After Fowles has provided the novel with a possible ending and decides not to use it, he places himself as a physical character in the text, thus not only providing himself with the freedom to behave as he wishes as author but also to change the inner workings of the fictional world with his physical presence on a train with Charles.

On his train ride to London Charles is met with a character that closely resembles John Fowles. The author and ‘God’ like creator of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has physically made an appearance in the novel and the reader is aware by the 55th chapter that the author of this postmodern novel is comfortable with destroying the fictional illusions held tantamount in Victorian literature. However, it is a moment in the story that Fowles uses to explain why he believes that not much has changed, in terms of human interaction, between the 19th century and the 20th century. With the

benefit of hindsight, an author may now look back at Victorian fiction and see that the rigid structure of the omniscient God-like narrator, who dictated from his all-knowing position of authority, is perhaps an impossible expectation in the 20th century. By positioning himself as a character in his own fiction Fowles is presenting the idea that he, like his characters and his readers, is fallible. He can judge and worry about his created world but he cannot state categorically what might happen within the confines of its pages. Fowles even describes himself as he would one of his fictional characters:

The latecomer [Fowles] muttered a ‘pardon me, sir’ and made his way to the far end of the compartment. He sat, a man of forty or so, his top hat firmly square, his hands on his knees, regaining his breath. There was something rather aggressively secure about him; he was perhaps not quite a gentleman ... an ambitious butler . . . a decidedly unpleasant man, thought Charles, and so typical of the age – and therefore emphatically to be snubbed if he tried to enter into conversation.

(Fowles, 1969:387-388)

Ironically, of course, Fowles is not of Charles’s age but of an age one hundred years in the future. This is a gesture of fun from Fowles, who is presenting himself to Charles on the train to London in order to decide what he should do with him. Fowles watches Charles while he sleeps and he explains that the stare he inflicts on him “became positively cannibalistic in its intensity” (Fowles, 1969:389). Through this description Fowles is presenting an idea of the author as wishing to consume his characters. He admits that the writing process becomes a situation in which one begins to suspect that one has fallen prey to an unhealthy obsession (Fowles, 1998:24) and in this instance Fowles considers Charles disapprovingly (Fowles, 1969:388). He likens it to a sexual look and explains to the reader that

you may one day come under a similar gaze. And you may – in the less reserved context of our own century – be aware of it. The intent watcher will not wait till you are asleep. It will no doubt suggest something unpleasant, some kind of devious sexual approach ... a desire to know you in a way you do not want to be known by a stranger. In my experience there is only one profession that gives that particular look, with its bizarre blend of the inquisitive and the magistral; of the ironic and the soliciting. Now could I use you? Now what could I do with you? It is precisely, it has always seemed to me, the look of an omnipotent god – if there were such an absurd thing – should be shown to have. Not at all what we think of as a divine look; but one of a distinctly mean and dubious . . . moral quality.

(Fowles, 1969:389)

The above quotation is important for various reasons. Fowles has presented himself as a character in his own novel, while at the same time looking at Charles in the way an ‘omnipotent god’

might look at his creations. The ‘moral quality’ that Fowles assigns to this ‘absurd’ omnipotent god is the same look that he himself gives to Charles while acting as a character in the novel. He abdicates his role as ‘God’/author of his fictional world, yet he still looks at Charles in the same way that a God would look at his subjects were such a system to exist. Fowles is working within a particularly postmodern context with reference to the way in which he handles his role as author in this chapter.

According to McHale the

oscillation between authorial presence and absence characterizes the postmodernist author. Fully aware that the author has been declared dead, the postmodernist text nevertheless insists on authorial presence, although not consistently. The author flickers in and out of existence at different levels of the ontological structure and at different points in the unfolding text. Neither fully present nor completely absent, s/he plays hide and seek with us throughout the text, which projects an illusion of authorial presence only to withdraw it abruptly, filling the void left by this withdrawal with surrogate subjectivity once again.

(1987:202)

As Fowles flickers in and out of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* he makes it clear that it is only now, in the 20th century, that he is allowed the freedom to relate to his fictional world in this way. As a character on the train watching Charles, Fowles wonders to himself: “what the devil am I going to do with you?” (Fowles, 1969:389) He thus presents himself both as a character and a God. In keeping with McHale’s suggestion that the postmodern author plays ‘hide and seek’ with us, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* depicts a strategy adopted by Fowles in which the illusion of fiction is destroyed, but also maintained. This paradox can be explained by the way that Fowles creates a world of fiction that the reader knows is an illusion, namely, Victorian story that dominates the novel. He then presents the self-reflexive Chapter Thirteen to explain to his reader that he/she should be aware that this is merely artifice, it is a novel held in a 20th century reader’s hands. It is also a Victorian story written from the vantage point of the 20th century and in this regard the author is free to behave as he wishes. He is also fallible and ready to make things up according to no particular plan.

The illusion of fiction is destroyed because the reader is constantly reminded that he/she is reading in close proximity to his/her author. Fowles appears as a voice to explain the internal workings of the fictional process. In this way the story is interrupted and the reader and his/her author become implicated in the meaning-giving process of the text. On the other hand the illusion of fiction

is maintained because Fowles himself is a fictional character who must attempt to decipher how his story will unfold. He is simply presented as a character that exists in a world of hazard, and he finds himself at a loss as to how to manage Charles's future. In this way Fowles is perhaps suggesting that "while every novel has to have some measure of authorial control, it is a regrettable and trivial part of a novelist's job; the task of both characters and readers is to escape this domineering aspect of the author and to lead their own independent lives" (Loveday, 1985:58). This attitude could only come from a postmodern author who understands that he is both author and character, mortal and God. The fictional story maintains an illusion for the reader because he/she wants to know what happens to the characters in the novel. However, the presence in the story of an author who reveals his writing processes to the reader destroys the illusion of fiction.

As a 'fight-fixer' (Fowles, 1969:390) Fowles explains that an author wishes to "show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one – whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will. I have pretended to slip back into 1867; but of course that year is in reality a century past. It is futile to show optimism or pessimism, or anything else about it, because we know what has happened since" (Fowles, 1969:390). Fowles is consistent in his idea that the world has changed significantly in the hundred years between 1867 and 1967, yet he is clear that in many ways human beings have remained the same. While our approach to freedom has become more sophisticated since the Victorian age, we are still embedded in a search for meaning that was once resolved by the rigid doctrine of duty and the church. Fowles cannot provide his reader with either an optimistic or a pessimistic approach to the world because 'we know what has happened' since the Victorian era. Hence, Fowles uses his hindsight not in order to make a comment on the Victorians, but rather to make a comment on human nature in general. This is extensively explored with regard to the issues of sexuality that the novel addresses.

Chapter 3

But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)

But simmering sexuality – as you may well know, children – is always there.

Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983)

In the previous chapter I discussed the way that Fowles looks at Charles on his train ride to Exeter. The nature of this look is explained as being both 'cannibalistic' and sexual in nature. I suggested that it is perhaps a moment in which Fowles wishes to fully possess his character and consume him. The motif of watching in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has already been briefly discussed. However, the voyeuristic nature of Fowles watching Charles on the train to Exeter is perhaps the most intriguing example of the way in which this motif is realised in the novel. As author of the novel, Fowles has the luxury of watching his characters in different ways. He allows Sarah the freedom to make her own decisions and he does not impinge on her privacy. As far as Charles is concerned, however, we find that Fowles is constantly attempting to know him 'in a way that he does not necessarily wish to be known' (Fowles, 1969:389). Fowles grants Charles his freedom in the same way that he grants Sarah hers. He does this by giving him the right to make his own decisions, as in Chapter Thirteen, where Fowles argues that "it is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. When Charles left Sarah on her cliff-edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the dairy" (Fowles, 1969:98).

Fowles is, however, more interested in possession of Charles because he does not understand him as well as he understands Sarah, in the sense that Sarah is a creature more of his own century, whereas Charles' character is firmly rooted in the Victorian social structure. The sexual freedom that Sarah exudes is directly contrasted with the repressed Victorian in Charles, and Fowles seems interested in watching how Charles might behave in a sexual situation. Interestingly, Fowles places Charles in two sexual encounters: first with Sarah the prostitute and second with Sarah Woodruff. The voyeuristic nature of the author is not to be underestimated and, as Loveday acknowledges, "the process [for Fowles] of creating a work of fiction is simultaneously erotic and obfuscatory in nature" (1985:75). Fowles himself admits in 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel' that his characters are like lovers in the sense that they "need constant caressing, concern, listening to, watching, admiring" (1998:14). I am suggesting here that the writing process is linked to a type of voyeurism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The voyeurism that Fowles is entertaining on the train with Charles is associated with the freedom that the 20th century author has to see his characters as sexual beings as opposed to sexless Victorian puppets. Fowles is interested in how Charles will behave sexually and he is also illustrating an element of the writing process in which the author becomes mildly obsessed with knowing his characters even in their most private moments. Fowles is allowed to do this because he lives in a time when sexuality is open to scrutiny and can be freely discussed in respectable literature.

Fowles interrupts his narrator in Chapter 35 in order to give an account of why he thinks that sexuality is as complicated in the 20th century as it was in the 19th century. Fowles suspects that the difference is merely in the "vocabulary" (1969:260) or in "a degree of metaphor" (1969:260). The suspicion that sexuality has evolved into a more free and sublimated element of human life in the 20th century is not taken seriously by Fowles because he believes that, although the 20th century person is constantly inundated with sexuality from every area of modern culture, so too were the Victorians (it was simply hidden from view in the Victorian age). Hindsight has not provided human sexuality with anything more than the freedom to express and openly discuss the problems associated with sex. In fact, Fowles argues in Chapter 35 that "in a way, by transferring to the public imagination what they

left to the private, we are the more Victorian – in the derogatory sense of the word – century, since we have, in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure” (1969:261). Fowles explains that the Victorians lived in the confines of a highly repressed, guilt-ridden age with regard to sex. However, we, living in the 20th century, are not to assume that they were not as involved in sexual practice as we are now. According to Fowles, the 19th century was a time in which “woman was sacred” (1969:258) yet you could buy “a thirteen year old girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two” (Fowles, 1969:258). It was a time in which more churches were built

than in the whole previous history of the country [England]; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel . . . Where the female body had never been so hidden from view . . . Where there is not a single novel, play or poem of literary distinction that ever goes beyond the sensuality of a kiss . . . Where it was universally maintained that women do not have orgasms; and yet every prostitute was taught to simulate them.

(Fowles, 1969:259)

Sexuality can be discussed more openly in the 20th century, but Fowles makes it clear that “the prudish puritanity we lend to the Victorians, and rather lazily apply to all classes of Victorian society, is in fact a middle-class view of the middle class ethos” (Fowles, 1969:261). For instance, Fowles suggests that premarital intercourse in Victorian society was “*the rule and not the exception*” (1969:260). The fact that it was not spoken of or referred to in polite conversation or distinguished literature does not take away from the fact that the Victorian age saw more pornography published than any age has seen since (Fowles, 1969:258). The significant difference between the Victorian age and the modern one is that “the Victorians chose to be serious about something we treat rather lightly, and the way they expressed their seriousness was not to *talk openly* about sex, just as part of our way is the very reverse. But these ‘ways’ of being serious are mere conventions. The fact behind them remains constant” (Fowles, 1969:260).

This fact that ‘remains constant’ seems to be the idea that sexuality cannot be contained or refined with social convention. The fact that the Victorians were repressed and we are liberated does not detract from the fact that human desire is the same as it always has been. By repressing this desire and attempting to preach abstinence Victorian society hid their promiscuity from view, yet it remains

a 'human constant' that sex (or the desire for sex) will feature prominently between individuals of any class. Fowles uses his hindsight to show that, despite the forward movements of culture, there are still areas of human nature that categorically do not change. For example, it is widely acknowledged that the Victorian age was a time in which the church governed much of the moral foundations of society. The "sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit" (Fowles, 1969:258) and women were seen as hysterical or mad if they appeared to show signs of sexual curiosity (as is the case with regard to Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). The church restricted all legitimate sexual desire to exist within the bounds of the marital bed and it therefore appears as though the Victorians existed in a state of constant purity – as if their desires and perversions were so effectively repressed that they ceased to exist. From the position of the 20th (and now the 21st) century we can discern that this was not the case. My argument shows that the intimate moments between individuals living in both the 19th and 20th century is fraught with difficulty and confusion. Despite the fact that women living in the 20th century are liberated from the constraints of Victorian puritanism there is still a significant part of sexual interaction that remains consistent with the 19th century. The prostitute of the 20th century is the same in nature to the prostitute of the 19th century, albeit that she can vote. I agree with Fowles in that we are perhaps as perverse and as repressed as the Victorians, but we express ourselves with existentialist terminology, thereby transforming our desire for sex into a problem of meaning as opposed to a problem of morality.

In this instance, we are as guilty as the Victorians were of transferring our sexuality into discourse. By doing this we attempt to contain the sublime act of sex within language, through which we can attempt to interpret it. The Victorians were guilty of this in the sense that they were indoctrinated into confessing their 'sins' and their sexual perversions/desires to God and the church. We are equally guilty of a compulsion to confess, but instead of confessing to God we confess to each other. We don't turn to the church, but we do openly discuss sex in almost all modern cultural formats. The idea that 'sex sells' shows itself in television, literature, visual arts and fashion. The rest of this chapter will examine the ways in which sexuality is tamed and refined by the human need to place it in discourse, through an exploration of Michel Foucault's writing on the subject. Both

Fowles' and Foucault's positions are in line with my argument because they assess the ways in which sexuality has remained significantly rampant in every age despite attempts to repress it. Foucault asks the very astute question of whether or not there was "really a historical rupture between the age of repression", or the Victorian age, "and the critical analysis of repression"(1978:10), instigated by Freud and his disciples in the 20th century. Foucault's writing supports my assertion that, Charles and Sarah, in dealing with their sexual encounters, both attempt to take the sublime act of sex and confine it to language. He does this by visiting the church, while the modern Sarah has no need of confession in the typical Victorian fashion. She prefers to 'confess' herself to Charles on Ware Commons, thereby maintaining her modernity.

According to Foucault the central issue that needs to be addressed with regard to sexuality is not

to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the overall 'discursive fact', the way in which sex is 'put into discourse.'

(1978:11)

Foucault explains that he is interested in the way that sexuality functions in terms of pleasure and knowledge. Foucault is consistent with Fowles who argues that along with the repression of sexuality in the 19th century there came a list of polymorphous perversions and sex acts that did nothing for the seemingly puritanical union between husband and wife that pervaded morality at the time. According to Foucault, "silence became the rule" (1978:3) on the subject of sex in the 19th century. In this regard silence was the means by which the Victorians related to sexuality and they managed to create a regime of repression:

These are the characteristic features attributed to repression . . . repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know. Such was the hypocrisy of our bourgeois societies with its halting logic. It was forced to make a few concessions, however. If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a

place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be places of tolerance.

(Foucault, 1978:4)

The above quotation is particularly significant with regard to Sarah Woodruff. She is referred to as the French Lieutenant's 'whore' and she is understood by those living in Lyme to be "a little mad"(Fowles, 1969:15). The idea that Sarah Woodruff is known as a prostitute is also significant because of the encounter that Charles has with the other Sarah who is literally a prostitute. From a structural point of view this is a good example of the way in which Fowles sets up a parallel between Sarah Woodruff and Sarah the prostitute. When Charles first notices the prostitute he decides to choose her because she reminds him of Sarah Woodruff, first from a physical point of view and then later from an emotional one: "She was not really like Sarah. He saw the hair was too red to be natural; and there was a commonness about her, an artificial boldness in her steady eyes and red-lipped smile; too red, like a gash of blood. But just a tinge – something in the firm eyebrows, perhaps, or the mouth" (Fowles, 1969:297). Charles only acknowledges her in the first place because he thinks that she might be Sarah Woodruff. He later likens the prostitute to Sarah Woodruff in the sense that "Sarah the prostitute had reminded Charles of the uniqueness of Sarah the outcast: the total absence of finer feeling in the one only affirmed its astonishing survival in the other" (Fowles, 1969:319).

My reader will remember when Sarah leaves Lyme and Charles visits with Dr. Grogan to discuss his involvement with the lady. The doctor warns Charles that "[he] must remember that a deranged mind is not a criminal mind. In this case [he] must think of despair as a disease, no more or less. That girl [Sarah] . . . has a cholera of the mind, a typhus of the intellectual faculties" (Fowles, 1969:217). It is for this reason that Dr. Grogan suggests that Sarah be committed to "an asylum" (Fowles, 1969:221). In this instance the relationship between sexuality, repression, power and medicine in Victorian society becomes quite obvious. Sarah is seen to be melancholic and 'mad' because of a failed love affair. In order to assign blame on Sarah, the Victorian method is to repress her sadness and transfer it to insanity. The idea of hiding openly sexual women in a brothel or a mental institution in order to 'cure' them of their 'sickness' or to condemn them to a life of sexual inferiority was, of course, not a common practice in the 20th century. However, what I am suggesting

is that sexuality is always confined to the discourse and practices of its time. It is also interesting to note that Fowles explains that “what we today call hysteria” (1969:226) in the behaviour of Victorian women was almost invariably caused by sexual repression (Fowles, 1969:226). There may well have been something of the hysteric in Sarah, which was caused by extreme repression. However, the fact that she is a character who is free, but living in a world of strictly controlled boundaries, is also a possible explanation of why she decides to live as an outcast. While Charles is constantly battling with his freedom and his sexuality we find that Sarah is surprisingly unfazed by her desire to love in a way that is not dictated by the Victorian moral norm. She does, however, feel the need to confess her sins to Charles on Ware Commons. Sarah’s confession is not to God or the church but rather, in keeping with her position in the text, to a fellow human. Sarah’s modernity shows itself here because she is not interested in forgiveness but rather in the act of confession itself. Charles, on the other hand, chooses the church in a final Victorian bid for absolution.

The fact that Sarah wishes to confess to Charles instead of God is a good example of the ways in which approaches to sexuality have both changed and remained the same between the 19th and 20th centuries. Fowles himself admits that we are dealing with a human constant with regard to sexuality and the difference is simply in the ‘vocabulary’. Both the modern Sarah and the Victorian Charles feel the need to confess, to place their sexual acts or fantasies into discourse. However, the one wishes to do so in order to decipher meaning and understanding, while the other is too confused to do anything other than return to the safe hands of an omniscient God. The fact that Charles is “shriven of established religion for the rest of his life” (Fowles, 1969:353) after visiting the church is significant because it is only after he has engaged in a sex act with someone that he loves that he starts to become a truly modern man, who can choose freedom over the misleading doctrine of the church. It is also significant to note that in the first ‘closed’ ending to the novel Charles marries Ernestina and never has a sexual encounter with Sarah Woodruff. He lives with Ernestina, works for her father and behaves as a dutiful Victorian man should for the rest of his life. The sexual encounter with Sarah Woodruff thus pushes Charles into a terror-filled quest for freedom (Fowles, 1969:328) and he begins

to learn what it means to struggle through existentialist doubt, as opposed to living in a contained bubble of repression.

This is not to say that Charles and Sarah share a romantic scene in which the reader can luxuriate in the fictional beauty of sex. Fowles himself hands the task over to his narrator, who describes the initial intimacy between Charles and Sarah as if they are shy of each other. When Charles arrives in Exeter to visit Sarah at Mrs Endicott's hotel he is slightly disturbed by the way that Sarah seems so "helpless" (Fowles, 1969:333). Having told both Mrs Endicott and Charles that she has a sprained ankle, Sarah once again presents herself in a form in which Charles can relate to her as a victim, a fragile woman, as opposed to someone who he perceives as his equal. As a result, the power dynamic between Charles and Sarah remains in keeping with the typical Victorian scenario of the gentleman arriving to rescue the delicate damsel in distress. He feels as if "all her mystery, this most intimate self, was exposed before him: proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal . . . Seeing her was the need; like an intolerable thirst that had to be assuaged" (Fowles, 1969:334). Charles comes to a profound realisation in this scene when he comprehends "why her face haunted him, why he felt this terrible need to see her again: it was to possess her, to melt into her, to burn, to burn, to burn to ashes on that body and in those eyes" (Fowles, 1969:334). In this intimate hotel room with the fire burning and his wounded love sitting in front of him, Charles feels the human desire for possession. He realises that despite his mental attraction to Sarah he also desires her from a physical perspective. The fact that she remains a mystery to him even in her 'wounded' state makes him desire possession over her. The kiss shared by Charles and Sarah before they have sex is described as having almost "savage fierceness" (Fowles, 1969:336). Following the kiss, the description we have of the sex act itself is that

he strained that body into his, straining his mouth upon hers, with all the hunger of a long frustration – not merely sexual, for a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality, all these coursed wildly through him . . . raising himself a little, he drew up her nightgown. Her legs parted. With a frantic brutality, as he felt his ejaculation about to burst, he found the place and thrust. Her body flinched again, as it had when her foot fell from the stool . . . he began to ejaculate at once.

(Fowles, 1969:336-337)

The act of sex remains unchanged over the centuries. The notion of possession remains a human constant and, although Charles ‘ejaculates’ a torrent of sexual repression into Sarah, the scene is not fraught with clichéd lovemaking syntax. Fowles is showing that sex is an animal instinct, as raw in the Victorian age as it is now. We are informed that the act takes exactly “ninety seconds” (Fowles, 1969:337) and that they lie afterwards “congealed in sin, frozen with delight” (Fowles, 1969:338). For Charles, there arrives the inevitable Victorian guilt, which manifests itself in “an immediate and universal horror” (Fowles, 1969:338). Ironically, the horror that Charles ought to be recognising is three-fold and not at all to be associated with guilt. Firstly, he learns that Sarah was a virgin and that she had lied to him on Ware Commons about having previously given herself to Varguennes (Fowles, 1969:341). Secondly, she stands and walks to the window with no limp, which shows that she did not have a sprained ankle (Fowles, 1969:342). Lastly, Charles must now understand that Sarah has no intention of marrying him. She exists in a “swarm of mysteries” (Fowles, 1969:342) and admits to deceiving Charles in order to sleep with him (Fowles, 1969:342). This would naturally have been unheard of in Victorian society. However, Sarah is a modern woman who behaves in such a way as to desire something and then act upon it for her own benefit. It is never explained within the context of the narrative why she lies to Charles about the French Lieutenant. However, it is clear that this is a move on the part of Fowles to keep Sarah protected, to allow her privacy and keep her freedom intact. The bewildered Charles begs Sarah for an explanation of her behaviour, but she simply refuses his pleas: “ ‘Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained’ ” (Fowles, 1969:342).

When Charles leaves Sarah after they have had sex he walks “blindly” (Fowles, 1969:344) into the street with no idea of where he is going (Fowles, 1969:344). In these moments his greatest desire is for “darkness, invisibility, oblivion in which to regain calm” (Fowles, 1969:344). It is thus significant that Charles “finds” (Fowles, 1969:345) himself alone in a church because it shows that he is not conscious of what he is doing or where he is going. He does not actively ‘look for’ or ‘seek’ a church but rather ‘finds’ himself walking into one. In this way he is portrayed as being at the cross roads between his Victorian sense of duty and his impending modern self. In an earlier quotation, I

referred to Foucault's query of whether or not there was an "historical rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression" (1978:10). The fact that Charles finds himself in a church in order to confess himself is significant with regard to this question because Foucault argues that "since the Middle Ages . . . Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (1978:58). The confession thus became one of the West's "most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (Foucault, 1978:59) and "Western man became a confessing animal" (Foucault, 1969:59). If Charles is in search of some small truth onto which he can hold, he has been taught to find it in confession to a higher power. Having found a comfortable home in the church in the 19th century, confession has since

spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else.

(Foucault, 1978:59)

The idea here is that confession has been secularised in the 20th century. This is illustrated well in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* when Charles notices the crucifix in the church and it is explained that Jesus "could not be for them [the Victorians] what he is for us today, a completely secularised figure, a *man* called Jesus of Nazareth with a brilliant gift for metaphor, for creating a personal mythology, for acting on his beliefs" (Fowles, 1969:346). We thus find in this scene a difficult relationship for Charles between 'repression' and the 'critical analysis of repression'. He is a man standing on the cusp of modernity, and he has to choose between confession in order to save his mortal soul or confession in order to understand himself and his own free actions. Charles does not know himself what draws him into the church. However, Foucault writes that "from the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession" (1978:61). Hence, the reader is aware that the fact that Charles has just had sex with Sarah is relevant because he visits the church in order to make a confession which relates directly to this act.

The notion of confession found optimum conditions in the 19th century church and it evolved in such a way that “the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us”(Foucault, 1969:60). The power that constrained Charles was in Christian confession and the power that still constrains us today, according to Foucault, is also in confession, yet we can no longer see the power it dictates. We believe we are the freer century and that our confession is liberated because it does not ask for forgiveness, yet it remains a powerful tool in our ability to relate to our sexual selves. According to Foucault, modern man assumes that he is not seeking absolution because he does not confess to God in a religious context. However, this is not the case. Foucault believes that

the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.

(1978:61-62)

By using words such as ‘redeems’, ‘unburdens’, and ‘salvation’, Foucault risks becoming embroiled in a biblical lecture on the secularised nature of confession. However, I think he is being particularly ironic here. Sarah Woodruff confesses to Charles in order to unburden herself; she wants to redeem herself in his eyes and be saved from his judgement on her. She confesses her sad story (which is of a sexual nature) to him and can experience a sense of relief because she has been able to express herself to someone. In this way Sarah is truly modern because her confession shows that “the confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex. It has undergone a considerable transformation, however. For a long time, it remained firmly entrenched in the practice of penance” (Foucault, 1978:63). It is, however,

no longer a question of simply saying what one has done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it. For the first time no doubt, a society has taken upon itself to solicit and hear the imparting of individual pleasures.

(Foucault, 1978:63)

In the modern era a discourse therefore came about, which spoke “not of sin and salvation, but of bodies and life processes” (Foucault, 1978:64). The desire to confess oneself to someone remains a vital human need in the 20th century but it is a different confession to the one of the 19th century. This is illustrated in the way that the Victorian Charles finds himself in a church to confess to his sexual ‘sin’ to God while the modern Sarah Woodruff wishes to confess herself to Charles, which transforms the notion of confession for forgiveness into the modern notion of confession for the sake of expressing oneself. This involves the modern idea that expressing oneself is healthier than repressing one’s desires and that God cannot necessarily provide salvation. The Victorians used confession within a power structure that was dictated by the church, while the modern age uses confession within a power structure that is dictated by psychology. The benefit of hindsight is found here only in that we can now see the problems that came about as a result of the repression of sexuality and desire.

In the church scene, Charles finally encounters a kind of “clarity and calm” (Fowles, 1969:346) and a “dialogue began to form, between his better and his worse self – or perhaps between him and that spread-eagled figure in the shadows at the church’s end” (Fowles, 1969:347). The ‘spread-eagled figure’ is literally the crucifix hanging in the church. However, the ‘God’ with which Charles begins his inner dialogue seems to resemble the post-modern ‘god’ who is also the author of the novel. John Fowles steps into the narrative once again and makes the fictional world transparent by playing the role of ‘god’/author for Charles. In keeping with the rest of the narrative, he maintains that this is not the God of the 19th century but rather the ‘god’ of the 20th century. His position upholds that Charles must make up his own mind about his future and his past and that freedom is still this modern god/author’s main priority. The ‘god’ in conversation with Charles urges him to realise that “duty is but a pot. It holds whatever is put in it, from the greatest evil to the greatest good” (Fowles, 1969:347). Charles’s confession remains guilt-ridden and typically Victorian in the sense that he is battling to come to terms with his human desires in opposition to his responsibility towards duty. Charles – or the dying Victorian in Charles who must have his final say – states to the ‘god’ that his “duty is clear” (Fowles, 1969:347). By referring to his character as “my poor Charles” (Fowles,

1969:348), Fowles is offering the reader with the choice of deciding for him/herself what kind of a 'god' the post-modern author is. The best advice he can offer to Charles and to his reader is to choose freedom over the "iron certainties and rigid conventions" (Fowles, 1969:350) of duty. In this regard he is doomed to be "crucified" (Fowles, 1969:349). but, according to Fowles or the post-modern author/'god', that is better than not *living*.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, our perversions and desires in the 20th century are shared by those who were living in the 19th century. The Victorians chose to deny these desires and to repress their human instincts, whereas the 20th century came about as a remedy for repression. Although the Victorians hid from their sexuality in public, this does not mean that they did not still engage in various sexual activities that would have been condemned by the church. The 20th century was more lenient in terms of sexuality and it provided the individual with the freedom to desire sex in an open environment, which was still accepted by the boundaries of society. The 20th century made public what the 19th century believed should be kept private or entirely repressed. In the 'decent' literature of the 19th century, sexuality was repressed – the authors of the time chose simply not to discuss it. This is not to say that there wasn't a significant amount of innuendo with regard to sex in Victorian novels, but it takes discernment on the part of the reader to find and acknowledge it.

Sarah Woodruff illustrates the frustration of a woman who is free, in the 20th century understanding of the word, in a society that does not support her desire to live authentically and on her own terms. However, the novel is structured around the benefit of looking back, and in so doing posits the idea that Sarah would remain an enigma no matter the age in which she exists. Fowles has the luxury of letting her remain entirely mysterious because he is writing in the 20th century. He is afforded the freedom to openly discuss issues pertaining to women and their sexuality that the Victorians simply would not have tolerated. Although relationships between men and women remain as complicated in the 20th century as they were in the 19th century, those living in the 20th century

were free to openly desire sex. Their attitude towards the role of women (and their sexual independence) had shifted significantly since the Victorian age even though sexual relationships on an individual level remained similar in nature to those of the 19th century.

In the three alternate endings to the novel, Fowles once again offers the reader a role in the meaning-giving process of the text. After years of searching for Sarah, Charles finally finds her and goes to visit her in her home in London. Charles sees that Sarah is happy and has a young daughter who lives with her in a house inhabited by artists. In a twist of fate, Charles believes that he will find Sarah a broken individual that Victorian society has systematically destroyed and it is explained that “he had come to raise her from her penury, from some crabbed post in a crabbed house. In full armour, ready to slay the dragon – and now the damsel had broken all the rules. No chains, no sobs, no beseeching hands. He was the man who appears at a formal *soiree* under the impression it was to be a fancy dress ball” (Fowles, 1969:426). Charles acknowledges that the “electric and bohemian apparition” (Fowles, 1969:423) that greets him in the house is still the Sarah he once knew and loved. She has maintained her “implicit air of defiance” (Fowles 424) and instead of looking two years older she “looked two years younger” (Fowles, 1969:424). Sarah explains to Charles that she is happy and that she does not wish to marry him. She shows great bravery and strength in the sense that she wishes to be who she is (Fowles, 1969:430) and not what a husband “however kind, however indulgent, must expect [her] to become in marriage” (Fowles, 1969:430). The humiliation that Charles suffers at the hands of Sarah manifests itself in his thought that he “did at last perhaps begin to grasp her mystery. Some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny had begun; he was no more than a footsoldier, a pawn in a far vaster battle; and like all battles it was not about love, but about possession and territory” (Fowles, 1969:432-433). Significantly, the second optional ending sees Charles and Sarah embracing and the reader is led to believe that Sarah’s daughter is also Charles’s daughter. In this ending it may be perceived that Charles and Sarah make a life for themselves and live happily together.

Fowles does not, however, allow things to end there. The reader must be careful not to expect the clean closure of a 19th century novel from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. In the final chapter to

the novel Fowles makes his second physical appearance and, in doing so, presents himself as the ultimate impresario admitting that he “very evidently regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes” (Fowles, 1969:441). Watching the scene he has created between Charles and Sarah from a vantage point just outside the house, Fowles admits that he is indulging a vague sense of amusement (Fowles, 1969:441) with regard to how the story might proceed. Twisting the tale once more, Fowles mocks himself, his reader and his characters by stating that

while this *flaniere* in Chelsea has been a pleasant interlude . . . more important business awaits him. He takes out his watch – a Breguet – and selects a small key from a vast number on a second gold chain. He makes a small adjustment to the time. It seems – though unusual in an instrument from the bench of the greatest watchmakers – that he was running a quarter of an hour fast.

(Fowles, 1969:441)

The physical character of John Fowles has manipulated the clocks and, because he is also the author of the novel, he has broken all the rules by stepping into his story and changing its ending. The final ending to the novel finds Charles seeing Sarah as a manipulator and the two characters part ways. The last offering that Fowles gives to Charles and his reader is therefore the freedom to choose how meaning can be assigned to what Charles has undergone. To see Charles alone outside the Rossetti house with his new found “faith in himself” (Fowles, 1969:445) is 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” (Fowles, 1969:445).

In these endings the reader must choose for him/herself whether or not Charles and Sarah are to remain together, and in this way Fowles provides his final impression of the importance he assigns to freedom both in life and in literature.

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