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The French Lieutenant's Woman
**An Analysis of John Fowles's Postmodern
Novel and Karel Reisz's Cinematic Adaptation**

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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One	3
The author: John Fowles (1926 – 2005)	3
1.1 Life and Literary Works	3
1.2 Nature as the Key to John Fowles’s Fiction	14
Chapter Two	17
<i>The French Lieutenant’s Woman: a Postmodern Novel</i>	17
2.1 Historiographic Metafiction: a New Novel Genre	18
2.2 The Disappearance of the Author	25
2.3 Narrative Freedom	31
2.4 Intertextuality	34
Chapter Three	40
The Settings, the Protagonists and the Three Alternative Endings	40
3.1 Temporal and Geographical References	40
3.2 Sarah Woodruff: a New Woman in the Guise of a Social Outcast	44
3.2.1 A Mysterious and Unconventional Personality	44
3.2.2 The Deliberate Deception about Sarah’s Love with Varguennes	49
3.2.3 A Hysterical Disease?	52
3.2.4 The Achievement of Sarah’s Emancipation	54

3.3	Charles Smithson's Journey Towards Existential Authenticity	59
3.3.1	Charles's Divided Spirit: Victorian and Modern	61
3.3.2	Darwinism and the Evolutionary Theory	63
3.3.3	Sam Farrow, Charles's Valet	66
3.4	Ernestina Freeman: the Conventional Victorian Woman	69
3.4.1	Mary, Ernestina's Housemaid	73
3.5	The Three Alternative Endings	76
3.5.1	The First Ending	76
3.5.2	The Second Ending	78
3.5.3	The Third Ending	81
	Chapter Four	84
	Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter's Cinematic Adaptation (1981)	84
4.1	A Movie-Within-a-Movie: the Cinematic Solution for an Uncinematic Novel	85
4.2	The Blurred Boundaries Between the Victorian and the Modern Plot	89
4.3	Cuttings and Amplifications	95
4.4	The Dual Ending	98
	Conclusion	101
	Bibliography	103

Introduction

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is a complex postmodernist novel not only for its intricate and extended plot, but also for its metafictional and thematic structure. Likewise, the eponymous cinematic transposition (1981), scripted by Harold Pinter and directed by Karel Reisz, proves to be elaborate owing to its twofold storyline and its self-conscious configuration.

With the purpose of analyzing the narrative work in relation to its corresponding film adaptation, this dissertation is organized in four chapters. Specifically, Chapter One centers upon the author's life and literary production, lingering on his major works, *The Magus*, *The Collector* and *The Aristos*. A special emphasis will additionally be laid upon Fowles's close relationship to the natural world.

The ensuing chapter focuses on the strategies deployed by Fowles in order to make *The French Lieutenant's Woman* a postmodernist novel; in this respect, some light will be thrown upon Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, the disappearance of the author, and upon the concepts of narrative freedom as well as intertextuality, all encompassed within the novel in question.

The third chapter analyzes in depth the main characterizations, exploring therefore the central themes which run through the novel. After a brief examination of the temporal and geographical scenario in which the work is set, particular attention will be devoted to the titular character Sarah Woodruff, the French Lieutenant's Woman, who represents the emancipated and unconventional New Woman of the late-nineteenth century in the guise of a mysterious social outcast. Chapter Three then unfolds with the portrayal of the novel hero, Charles Smithson, highlighting his evolutionary trajectory from a stereotypical Victorian gentleman into a modern existentialist. In addition, this chapter leaves considerable room to the impact that Darwinism and the theory of evolution have upon Charles as well as his valet Sam Farrow. The character of Ernestina Freeman, the embodiment of the conformist Victorian woman, will be also discussed, briefly digressing to the discussion of her relationship with Mary. The last section of the chapter will direct the attention to the novel's three alternative endings and to their conflicting interpretations.

With regard to Chapter Four, the final one, it deals with Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter's film transposition, foregrounding the ingenious solution of the movie-within-the-movie that transforms an uncinematic novel into a cinematic movie. With an attentive eye upon the similarities and differences between the novel and the film, this chapter will also mark its amplifications, its cuttings and eventually its double ending.

Chapter One

The author: John Fowles (1926 – 2005)

1.1 Life and Literary Works

John Robert Fowles was born on 31st March 1926 in the Essex suburban town of Leigh-on-Sea at the mouth of the Thames River from Gladys May Richards and Robert John Fowles. Portrayed as an attractive woman, a pious churchgoer and a caring wife who devoted all her energies to domestic duties, his mother was the daughter of a London prosperous lace tradesman. Her ten-year-older husband belonged to an affluent middle-class family in the partnership of Allen & Wright, a tobacco-importing business.¹ When Robert Fowles was embarking on a career in law, the onset of World War I shattered all his dreams, forcing him to enlist in the British army. The traumatic three-year experience in the trenches of Flanders left him physically uninjured but heavily weighted upon his mental health, causing him a tormenting sense of loss as well as a nervous illness which prompted him to beg for help through Freudian psychoanalysis.² When Robert Fowles returned from war, every day he commuted to London in his bowler hat in order to run the family company of cigarettes which fell into gradual decline in the 1930s. Interestingly, John Fowles depicted his parents as typical Victorians;³ this criticism should not be interpreted as an unemotional behaviour towards their child, but rather as a blind adherence to conformism and respectability.

After Fowles's birth, her mother's second pregnancy ended in either miscarriage or stillbirth, and more than fifteen years had to pass before she gave birth to a baby girl, Hazel.⁴ Grown up basically as an only child, John Fowles spent most of his childhood in solitude, becoming not only the central focus of his parents' attention but also the object of their high ambitions. In truth, his only

¹ E. Warburton, *John Fowles. A Life in Two Worlds*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2004, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles. A Reference Companion*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1991, p. 2.

⁴ E. Warburton, *John Fowles. cit.*, p. 4.

playmate was his adored eighteen-year-old cousin, Peggy Fowles, who cared for him until he was ten.

With the outbreak of World War II, the Fowleses were evacuated to the rural county of Devon in southwest England, where Fowles fell in love with the wild nature of western landscapes. It was at that time that, deprived of his mother's attention due to her new-born daughter, John Fowles spent his time writing his diary and reading nature journals. Although his father was a gardening enthusiast, obsessed with his meticulously cultivated orchard, Fowles inherited the passion for the natural world from his maternal uncle, Stanley Richards, an eager naturalist as well as an avid entomologist.⁵ Under his expert guidance, Fowles grasped the opportunity to make both daily and nocturnal explorations into the untamed Essex countryside, hunting and collecting a variety of insects. According to John Fowles, unlike his mother's younger brother, Robert Fowles appeared not only totally blind but also distinctly hostile to wilderness, considering even short walks in the country as possibly dangerous.

From 1939 to 1944, John Fowles was educated at Bedford School, a prestigious boarding school well-known both for its highly academic offer and its brutality. In the first two years, hard-working Fowles excelled in all subjects, revealing an innate talent for the French language and literature. Furthermore, sport played a key role in the author's boyhood, and he distinguished himself for his athletic skills in cricket and rugby.⁶ Despite his remarkable success, in the following years he became victim of an ear infection, the first of other illnesses, which, combined with homesickness and the intolerable pressures of the school system, caused him nervous tension. On the verge of a mental breakdown, in 1941 Fowles opted to leave the fall term, joining his family to Ipplepen, in Devon.⁷ His return to that idyllic scenery and to his solitary strolls in the green nature captivated his imagination and helped him regain his strength in order to come back to Bedford School and conclude his career successfully, fulfilling the role of Head Boy as well as Captain of Cricket.

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶ B. Goosmann, *John Fowles. The Website*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.fowlesbooks.com/collecting-john-fowles/> [Accessed: 2023, March].

⁷ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 8.

At the age of eighteen, after enrolling in a naval introductory course at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, Fowles was ready to undertake the compulsory military service. Firstly, in 1945 he was assigned to Deal, in Kent, where he submitted to basic preparation. In fact, Fowles never had the chance to serve his country against Nazi Germany, because his training finished one month later than the end of the conflict in Europe. Secondly, he was sent to Portsmouth as a lieutenant in the Royal Marines and finally, he was recruited at Okehampton Camp, in Dartmoor, where he continued his military drill until 1947.⁸ Needless to say, army life became absolutely unbearable to young men educated according to the principles of moral behaviour. Not only did they have to abide by rules, but they also had to learn to shoot and kill. It is interesting to note that Fowles gathered all his thoughts of that experience in a diary. Uncertain about whether to proceed with the military service or enroll at the university, one day during a visit of the encampment, he was persuaded by the Mayor of Plymouth to choose the latter. Up to the age of twenty, Fowles had always conformed to the code of norms and conventions at the basis of the twentieth-century society. Nevertheless, as he declared in an interview in 1969, when he turned twenty-one, he intended “consciously to revolt against his middle-class background”.⁹ This statement traced Fowles’s first steps on the road to unconventionality, the cornerstone of his way of thinking and writing.

Determined to resume the university path, in the following three years Fowles attended New College at Oxford where he studied Modern Languages, specializing in French and German. Because of his deep dissatisfaction with the latter, he opted to abandon it, focusing mainly upon French literature from the Middle Ages to the early Modern Era. Thanks to his intellectual relationship with his French lecturer, Merlin Thomas, Fowles approached the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus which shed light upon the sense of doubleness entrapped within himself. In other words, Fowles realized that his public life did not mirror his private one, that his persona did not correspond to his real self, that he was not what he actually wanted to be. As he declared: “I [...] began to hate what I was becoming in life – a British Establishment young hopeful.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

I decided instead to become a sort of anarchist.”¹⁰ It is evident that Fowles’s academic education at Oxford marked a crucial turning point in his life. With the purpose of exploring his new side and asserting his individual identity, he relished uncontrolled freedom and exhibited irresponsible behaviour. In this electric atmosphere, he often spent his nights drinking in pubs and became infatuated with mysterious and ambiguous women.¹¹ Since he craved for a life of delight, culture, beauty and prestige, Fowles doubtlessly began to loath the duty-bound and monotonous society of Leigh-on-Sea, where his family returned to live. Furthermore, he resented his father for his dreary life, his puritan morality and his middle-class ethos, ascribable to the Victorian Age. Fowles was also disgusted by his mother’s emptiness and ignorance: she was too involved with household chores, too interested in trifling things and undervalued reading literature.¹² However, it is noteworthy that Sartre’s and Camus’s existentialism encouraged Fowles to pursue his writing career and, after some translations, he devoted himself to write poems, plays and short stories, all of which was lost.¹³ At the end of 1949, Fowles’s ambition to become a professional writer was undermined by his inferiority complex about his literary skills which, coupled with recurrent symptoms of nausea and loss of appetite, provoked anxiety and depression. After a brief period of convalescence in a London clinic, he was finally nursed back to health. Thus, in 1950 Fowles graduated with honors in French and was heartily recommended by Merlin Thomas for a teaching position at the University of Poitiers, in western France.

In the ensuing year, thanks to his tutor’s reference, Fowles was hired as lecturer of English literature in Poitiers. Even though he initially reacted with enthusiasm, he soon suffered from aching loneliness and terrible homesickness which, combined with his bashfulness, prevented him from becoming acquainted with anyone. In addition, he felt that he was not working properly, not only because he was much more knowledgeable in French rather than English literature, but also because his classes seemed extremely tedious. Fowles’s unique source of pleasure was his spare time which he spent studying Latin, reading, and writing. During his

¹⁰ “Imminent Victorians”, interview and review of “The French Lieutenant’s Woman”, *Time*, 7 November 1969, quoted in J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 14.

¹¹ E. Warburton, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

stay at Poitiers, he progressively developed friendly relationships with his undergraduates. Shortly after he became emotionally involved with one of them, he was informed that his teaching position would not be renewed.¹⁴ Nonetheless, he was immediately offered the appointment as either a French professor at Winchester, England, or an English teacher at a boarding school in Greece.¹⁵ Yearning to escape abroad and to live in a remote island, John declined the former and readily accepted the latter offer.

From 1951 to 1953, John Fowles found himself teaching English at Anargyrios and Korgialenios College on the Greek island of Spetsai, situated southwest of Athens. Contrary to his optimistic expectations, Fowles was slightly disappointed by his tenure there, because he entirely disagreed with the strict educational approach adopted by educators in order to impose discipline among unruly and ebullient pupils.¹⁶ Those rigid principles vividly reminded him of his traumatic experience at Bedford School. Nevertheless, Fowles found delight outside the classroom environment; the pastoral and rustic beauty of the Peloponnesian landscape, juxtaposed to the enchanting atmosphere of its wilderness, perfectly matched his taste and, most importantly, stimulated his artistic creativity. This is the reason why, besides inspiring the setting for *The Magus*, Greece played a central role in his poetic collection, *Greek Poems* (1973), the result of his psychological exile.

Another aspect which is worth noting within this context is Fowles's troubled relationship with his middle-class colleague, Roy Christy. Determined to abandon his career as an architect and pursue his true vocation as a writer, he decided to accept a vacant chair at Anargyrios school. Alongside his working-class wife, Elizabeth Christy, and his infant daughter, Anna, Christy entered Fowles's life, changing it forever.¹⁷ From the beginning, he revealed himself to be a charming, extravagant, influential and temperamental man, addicted to alcohol as well as absent both as a father and as a husband. His bond to Fowles was in truth not so different; although they were travelling partners and drinking companions, they often entered fierce competition when discussing literary and philosophical

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁵ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁷ E. Warburton, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 114.

questions, ending up with quarrels. Just as shameful, Christy repeatedly begged for money from his new friend, without clearing his debts. Consequently, while offended and appalled by his colleague, Fowles's initial sympathy for Elizabeth gradually turned into mutual affection. Taking advantage of Christy's absence or drunkenness, the two secretly spent time together, and their romance started blossoming. Victim of this love triangle, Fowles however ascribed his burning interest in Elizabeth to his terrible fear of bachelorhood rather than to a real sentiment of love. However, their romantic catastrophe occurred during a trip to Acropolis when Elizabeth surprisingly kissed him. Christy, who until then remained blissfully unaware of everything, soon began to suspect a liaison between them. Interestingly, the John-Elizabeth-Roy intrigue seems to foreshadow the romantic entanglement in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Back in the United Kingdom in 1953, after the two English masters had been dismissed by the Greek school because of their attempt to establish moral reforms, Fowles found employment in the Management Department of Ashridge College, Hertfordshire, in charge of taking courses for adults.¹⁸ Puzzled about his ambiguous relationship with depressed Elizabeth, with whom he kept dating, Fowles found refuge in sentimental attachments with other young women, finally breaking up with Elizabeth. Nevertheless, Fowles immediately regretted, returned to her, and they planned to go to live together. For this reason, Fowles moved from Ashridge to her cottage in Hampstead, London, where he was appointed to a post as English teacher at a female school, St. Godric's College, until 1963.¹⁹ Although from 1954 the couple pretended to be married, Elizabeth and John secretly celebrated their wedding only on 2nd of April 1957. The ceremony was a short and solitary event, from which parents and relatives were excluded, because they conceived marriage as unnecessary, in the sense that it would not alter their love. Noticeably, in "Epithalamion", the poem that Fowles composed and dedicated to his wife that evening, he wrote: "The day was yours, was mine; was ours."²⁰

¹⁸ P. Guttridge, "John Fowles. Virtuoso author of 'The Collector', 'The Magus' and 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", *Independent*, 8 November 2005, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/john-fowles-325435.html> [Accessed: 2023, March].

¹⁹ E. Warburton, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 174.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

Once married, Elizabeth bridged the gap between Fowles and his parents who, only after their union, began to like her.²¹ Aware of the fact that their relationship was partly ruined, Elizabeth played a crucial role in restraining Fowles's behaviour from criticizing Gladys's idleness and superficiality, highlighting instead her domestic virtues. As far as Robert Fowles is concerned, Elizabeth persuaded her husband to sympathize for his father, prompting him to enjoy his company, to stroll and to play golf together.

In 1959, John Fowles and Elizabeth Christy decided that it was time to start a family of their own.²² Devoid of her daughter, who for the first time was offered a nuclear family thanks to Roy's second marriage, Elizabeth heartily wished a baby. Fowles instead desired a child for his wife's sake as well as for his father's delight. Unluckily, her separation from Anna was made much more painful by Elizabeth's infertility caused by fallopian tube infection after her pregnancy.²³ At the age of thirty-seven, overwhelmed by a dark sense of hopelessness, she decided to undergo a surgical operation which actually turned to be unsuccessful.

Since he came back from Greece, Fowles had devoted his spare time to writing. He started with *An Island and Greece*, a brief autobiographical book about his experience on Spetsai which, after being sent to a publisher, was soon rejected. Still overcome with nostalgia for Greece, in the first months of 1956, Fowles began to write his first novel, initially called *The Godgame*, which for the following seven years would be subjected to a process of countless modifications until it would be finally entitled *The Magus*. Set on the desolate Greek island of Phraxos, this is the story of a school teacher, Nicholas Urfe, who becomes involved in a series of mysterious events, supposedly orchestrated by Maurice Conchis, an enigmatic trickster that lives into a secluded villa in the wood. Ending with an open finale about the uncertainty over the protagonist's relationship with his Australian girlfriend, Alison Kelly, *The Magus* explores one of the recurring themes of the whole Fowlesian literary production: freedom.²⁴ The novel traces Nicholas Urfe's process of self-revelation, which allows him to mature into a free human being. In order to achieve such final self-awareness, the protagonist has to resist his

²¹ Ibid., p. 201.

²² Ibid., p. 215.

²³ Ibid., p. 216.

²⁴ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 99.

irresistible impulse to provide a logical and rational answer to anything that occurs to him. By contrast, he has to acknowledge and accept his experience as mysterious and thus inexplicable. What is also interesting is that, through the character of Conchis, *The Magus* introduces the concept of metatheatre, thus mirroring the metafiction that Fowles himself is creating.²⁵ In the analogous way in which Conchis blends art and life confusing Nicholas, the author mingles the boundaries between fiction and reality thus puzzling the reader. In this sense, besides being given to characters, individual freedom is extended to the reader too: like Conchis who in the end allows Nicholas to determine his own future, Fowles leaves the reader free to choose the best version for the hero's future prospect.

Dissatisfied with his first novel, at the end of 1960 Fowles opted to leave it on one side and dedicate himself to the first draft of his second novel, *The Collector*, which was concluded in one month. It is the story of Frederick Clegg, a butterfly collector who, in the grip of the obsession with an art student, Miranda Grey, abducts and then imprisons her within the basement of his country house. Specifically, the novel might be divided into three different sections: the first, which begins with Clegg's observation and abduction of Miranda and ends with him taking pornographic pictures of her, is told from the hero's viewpoint; the second, which coincides with Miranda's diary and therefore presents a more reflexive tone, traces the same events from her perspective; the third resumes Clegg's storytelling, culminating in Miranda's illness and death. Although it is often misinterpreted as a thriller, for Fowles *The Collector* represents a metaphor for the sickness of the world:²⁶ in this light, whereas the masculine protagonist is a symbol of meanness, selfishness and degradation, his victim stands as his perfect foil, embodying instead benevolence, humanity, tolerance and love. Not coincidentally, the thematic opposition between male and female characters, which is particularly evident in *The Collector*, plays a significant role within Fowles's entire literary production:²⁷ on the one hand, as Clegg clearly exemplifies, men are generally associated to the domaine of science and classification, of violence and war; on the other hand, women tend to be representative of the world of feelings, sensibility and creativity. Furthermore, *The Collector* develops a central trope of Fowles's fictions, the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

²⁷ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1985, p. 5.

conflict between the Few and the Many.²⁸ Agreeing with Heraclitus, Fowles believes that humanity can be divided into two parts: the Few, the “moral and intellectual *elite*”²⁹, the so-called *aristoi*, the characters endowed with wisdom and intelligence, personified in this novel by G.P., a middle-aged artist who Miranda admires, by Conchis in *The Magus*, and by Dr Grogan in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. The Many, on the other hand, coincide with the “unthinking, conforming mass”³⁰, namely the *polloi*, the mindless and common characters. By acknowledging such disparity between the Few and the Many, society should attempt to struggle against the oppressions suffered by the Many and to allow the Few to lead an authentic life. The publication of *The Collector* in 1963 undoubtedly functioned as a springboard for Fowles’s international success and allowed him to abandon his teaching career. In the ensuing year, his second novel, *The Magus*, was finally published, winning immediately widespread popularity, mainly among young generations.

Although Fowles came to fame thanks to his fictions, he was also a writer of non-fiction. In this respect, in 1964 he published *The Aristos: A Self-Portrait in Ideas* (1964), a collection of thoughts and musings centered on the importance of philosophy.³¹ In line with the idea that his books coincide with a form of teaching rather than of entertainment, *The Aristos* not only includes references to Heraclitus’s doctrine concerning the contrast between the Few and the Many, but also conveys ideas deriving from modern existentialism, another fundamental theme of Fowles’s writings. As he wrote in the preface of this philosophical work, the main concern of existentialism is “to preserve the freedom of the individual against all those pressures-to-conform that threaten our society”.³²

After more than a decade in London, in 1966 the Fowleses moved to Underhill Farm, a crumbling and abandoned farmhouse, along the Undercliff on the English Channel coastline and one-half mile from the town of Lyme Regis. Fowles chose this south-western area because he meant to mingle neither with the middle-class community nor with the London intellectual society. By contrast, he longed for a life immersed in wild nature in which his naturalist spirit could find

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ M. Thorpe, *John Fowles*, Windsor, Profile Books, 1982, p. 12.

³² J. Fowles, *The Aristos*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1964, p. 7.

shelter in utter seclusion and personal privacy. When Fowles was not engrossed in the renovation of the farm, he ventured into the nearby forest, walked along the empty beach, searching for fossils and remained indoors to write.³³ In this regard, as he declared during an interview, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) arose “from an obsessive image of a woman with her back turned, looking out to sea” which sprang to his mind as he woke up one morning.³⁴ That mental picture clearly inspired the beautifully enigmatic female protagonist, Sarah Woodruff, who in the opening scene of the novel is portrayed with her back turned at the end of the Cobb in Lyme Bay, as if defying the standards of the Victorian society. By means of its postmodern metafictional techniques, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* not only traces the heroine's journey from a social outcast to an emancipated New Woman, but thematizes also Charles Smithson's evolution towards existential freedom, supported by Sarah's role of mentor. As regards the setting, this novel takes place within those south-western spaces, oscillating mainly between the provincial life of Lyme Regis and the natural world of the Undercliff.

Whereas Fowles at Underhill Farm, the model for “The Dairy” in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, felt himself comfortable, Elizabeth did not feel at home in Dorset; she was indeed removed from the frenetic city life and catapulted into a natural landscape, consequently falling victim to despondency and misery. To alleviate his wife's melancholy, after a couple of years of absolute solitude at Underhill Farm, in 1968 Fowles decided to move to Belmont House, in the neighboring town of Lyme Regis, where he would live until the end of his days. There Fowles devoted himself solely to full-time writing and was actively supported by his wife. Besides being his inspiring muse especially for mysterious and obscure female protagonists, Elizabeth was also his trusted helper who ruthlessly edited his works, critically analyzed and originally proposed alternative endings.³⁵ As a consequence, in the next two decades Fowles published four new fictional works: *The Ebony Tower* (1974), a volume of five short stories; *Daniel Martin* (1977), a sort of autobiographical novel; *Mantissa* (1981), a brief satirical fable; *A Maggot* (1985), a combination of an eighteen-century-style science fiction

³³ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 24

³⁴ J. Campbell and J. Fowles, “An Interview with John Fowles”, in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1976, p. 464.

³⁵ P. Guttridge, “John Fowles. Virtuoso author of ‘The Collector’, ‘The Magus’ and ‘The French Lieutenant's Woman’”, cit., [Accessed: 2023, March].

and a historical novel. Additionally, for the National Theatre Fowles translated *Don Juan*, *Lorenzaccio*, *The Lottery of Love*, *Cinderella* and *Ourika*. He also composed a number of poems, gathered in the eponymous collection (1973) and collaborated upon several screenplays. With regard to nonfiction, Fowles wrote extended essays, introductions and commentaries for many collections of photographs such as *Shipwreck* (1974), *Islands* (1978), *The Tree* (1979), *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (1980).³⁶ As a result of his passionate interest in the geological and social history of Lyme Regis, from 1979 to 1988 Fowles became Honorary Curator of the Lyme Regis Museum, producing various pamphlets for it, as for instance *Three Town Walks* (1982), *A Short History of Lyme Regis* (1982) and *Medieval Lyme Regis* (1984).

Into his sixties, Fowles's health began to rapidly deteriorate, and in 1988 he suffered a minor stroke, followed by a heart surgery. Even though he managed to recover well, his frail condition had a dramatic effect upon his working career, forcing him to stop writing fiction in favor of reading and reviewing books. The worst came however two years later when Elizabeth passed away only nine days after she was diagnosed with a pancreatic cancer.³⁷ Overcome by grief and loneliness for his wife's loss, Fowles could not write for a whole year, but with the support of Anna, his stepdaughter, as well as other women, who fueled his inspiration, he finally resumed his writing activity, working upon a novel previously commenced, *Tessera*, which would never be printed, as well as upon a new book of essays, *Wormholes* (1998).

Fowles's physical condition increasingly worsened, because he began to suffer from poor blood circulation, causing him ulcers on his feet and legs. Far from healing, his veins required surgical intervention but even though his right foot made progress, his left leg did not, and thus it had to be amputated.³⁸ In the following years, he was nursed by a large number of women who constantly crowded his household not only for doing daily chores, but also for interviewing him, writing about him and entertaining him. Among them, he was very fond of a life-long family friend, Sarah Smith, who, with her sensitive and caring spirit, could deeply

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ P. Guttridge, "John Fowles. Virtuoso author of 'The Collector', 'The Magus' and 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., [Accessed: 2023, March].

³⁸ Ibid., p. 451.

sympathize with him and look after his ill health, especially when he broke his ankle and when he was admitted for a pace-maker operation.³⁹ After a secret engagement in the summer of 1998, on 3rd September John Fowles and Sarah Smith celebrated their civil wedding alongside their close relatives and intimate friends.⁴⁰

On 5th of November 2005, following a two-week hospitalization at Axminster, John Fowles died of heart failure at the age of seventy-nine. Throughout his life Fowles had always been regarded as a reclusive and solitary author who, besides feeling uneasy when labelled as ‘novelist’, was protective of his privacy and felt uncomfortable with London pompousness.⁴¹ This was the reason why he always tried to distance himself from popularity, taking shelter in his voluntarily forty-year exile at Underhill Farm and then in Lyme Regis. Nevertheless, his close attachment to the natural world and to the Lyme Regis community proved that he had not certainly been antisocial. It sounds distinctly paradoxical that his last works, *The Journals – Volume One* (2003) and *The Journals – Volume Two*, published after his death in 2006, encapsulate the essence of his inward life, appearing ironically the most private and introspective within his literary production. In this light, he explained: “I just hope they give a detailed picture of what I have been. [...] I do not begin to understand my own personality myself.”⁴²

1.2 Nature as the Key to John Fowles’s Fiction

Nature had always played a pivotal role in John Fowles’s life yet changing considerably over the years. His childhood and adolescence were spent in the guise of an orthodox amateur naturalist, hunting, collecting, identifying and scientifically analyzing animal as well as vegetable organisms. His youth instead had been profoundly influenced by his uncle, an entomologist, as well as his two cousins, a tea planter and an ant enthusiast, who awakened Fowles’s interest in natural history. Immersed in the rural beauty of the countryside, Fowles thus learned nature for the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 459.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 460.

⁴¹ C. Higgins, “Reclusive Novelist John Fowles Dies at 79”, *The Guardian*, 8 November 2005. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/nov/08/books.booksnews> [Accessed: 2023, March].

⁴² A. Lee-Potter, “Fair or Fowles?”, *The Guardian*, 12 October 2003. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/oct/12/biography.johnfowles1> [Accessed: 2023, March].

first time, becoming increasingly aware of the inadequacy of his former attitude.⁴³ According to Fowles, nature represented a place to hide, a refuge of intimacy, the space of discovery of his inner self.⁴⁴ What most people looked for in the human contact, Fowles managed to find in his relationship with the natural environment. As a result, he never felt alone in nature, although it was mysterious and marvelous at the same time. In other words, the pleasing mystery of wilderness bewitched him, and every time he entered the world of woods and fields, he finally found contentment and peace of mind. John's approach towards nature was undoubtedly different from his father's, and this is the main cause of their troubled relationship. On the one hand, Fowles conceived the natural environment as a private reign of self-exploration; on the other hand, as he wrote in *The Tree*, Robert Fowles's passion for nature coincided merely with a leisure pursuit rather than with an existential need. Beside the fact that each plant of the garden was given its own name and its own character, his orchard was so trimmed and cared that John could not but desire to escape those 'highly unnatural trees [...], and all they stood for'.⁴⁵ Unlike his father's superficial attitude, Fowles believed that to establish an intimate connection with nature, it was necessary for the individual to detach himself from the notion of usability.⁴⁶ In other words, to extricate themselves from the habit of regarding natural resources as useful for the survival was essential to preserve harmony with nature.

Since the natural world exerted a huge impact upon Fowles's life, it is logical that nature acquired centrality also in his literary production. In this regard, Fowles revealed: "The key to my fiction, for what is worth, lies in my relationship with nature."⁴⁷ From this statement, it transpires not only that his fiction relied upon authentic realism because it portrayed the natural world around him, but also that the exploration of unusual landscapes, which generally thematized his works, aimed at making readers reflect upon the treasures and the threats of the natural world.

⁴³ J. Fowles and C. M. Barnum, "An Interview with John Fowles", in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1985, p. 188.

⁴⁴ BBC News Meridian, *Talking with John Fowles*, 30 June 1992. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03m0v2p> [Accessed: 2023, March].

⁴⁵ J. Fowles and N. William, *The Tree*, Seattle: Marquand Books, 1994, pp. 8, 10.

⁴⁶ M. Gillespie Andrews, "Nature in John Fowles's 'Daniel Martin' and 'The Tree'", in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1985, p. 150.

⁴⁷ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*. cit., p. 33.

With this in mind, it is noteworthy that John Fowles drew an interesting parallel between the natural world and the process of writing. Notably, he interpreted the act of composition in terms of different gardens: the wild garden symbolized the novelist's creative imagination during the writing phase, while the formal garden mirrored the author's quiet mind in the revision step.⁴⁸ In this light, Fowles distinguished between two forms of writing; the most important is the first draft or draft stage which is extremely intuitive and uncontrolled. Being associated to wilderness, it coincides with the process in which countless ideas come to the author's mind and allow him to start composing. It is then followed by the stage of editing and correction, namely the so-called revision writing. Besides being quite tedious, this phase functions as the most complex one, because the writer has to reread his work and remove unneeded passages. Curiously, Fowles had always found pleasure in the act of writing, when imagination and creation are activated, rather than in the accomplished work.⁴⁹ This is the reason why, once his books were published, he fell into melancholic state instead of being filled with joy. For being actively involved in the natural theme, especially among young generations, Fowles earned the reputation of 'green writer', because his interest in nature was in line with the increasing concerns about the environment.

⁴⁸ J. Ezard, "John Fowles", *The Guardian*, 7 November 2005. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/nov/07/guardianobituaries.johnnezard> [Accessed: 2023, March].

⁴⁹ J. Campbell and J. Fowles, "An Interview with John Fowles", cit., p. 456.

Chapter Two

The French Lieutenant's Woman: a Postmodern Novel

John Fowles's fiction is generally placed within the realm of postmodernism, an extremely complex movement which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe as well as in North and South America, resulting from the late-capitalist decline of the middle-class supremacy and the development of popular culture. Although the term 'postmodern' was initially used in architecture, it soon found expression in many other cultural fields: literature, art, film, philosophy, music and photography.⁵⁰ Its glaring contradiction stems from the paradigm of "the presence of the past"⁵¹, a motto coined by postmodern architects for the 1980 Venice Biennale. This notion encapsulates the paradoxical combination of the past and the present, the representation of history and its performance in the contemporary age. In other words, the postmodern phenomenon thematizes historical issues with the sole purpose of denaturalizing them. It means that rather than evoking a sense of nostalgia for the past, postmodernism revisits history encouraging a critical re-evaluation as well as an ironical reworking of it in relation to the present. The result is therefore a problematization not only of the content of the past, but also of its aesthetic forms.⁵² In this sense, the historical concern of the postmodern, juxtaposed to its self-reflexive spirit, determines its twofold nature, both retrospective and introspective.

In literary terms, the presence of the past is enacted through the narrative technique of metafiction which, by means of its self-aware identity, reflects upon the artificiality of the text. Furthermore, coupled with the key instrument of parody, metafiction deliberately incorporates and dismantles, asserts and denies the traditional conventions of literary realism, exploring therefore the relationship between fiction and reality, art and history.⁵³ This second chapter will analyze the

⁵⁰ L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵² L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 1.

⁵³ L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. cit.*, p. 45.

postmodernist techniques which emerge in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, throwing light upon historiographic metafiction, the disappearance of the author, narrative freedom, and intertextuality.

2.1 Historiographic Metafiction: a New Novel Genre

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be defined as one of the most successful examples of historiographic metafiction. Classified as the typical novel genre of postmodernism, historiographic metafiction is described by Linda Hutcheon as:

[a] well-known and popular novel which [is] both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages.⁵⁴

From this definition, it transpires that such experimental literary form is built upon the combination of self-reflexiveness, the primary feature of metafiction, and the return to history, the central theme of the historical novel. However, historiographic metafiction is not merely self-conscious, nor is another version of the historical novel. On the contrary, historiographic metafiction "works within conventions in order to subvert them".⁵⁵ By encompassing the domain of theory, fiction and history, it exploits its theoretical self-awareness both to enact and deconstruct not only the historical contents but also the narrative techniques of the past. In this light, by writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in 1967 but setting it exactly one century before, in 1867, Fowles explores the Victorian culture and deliberately employs the mid-nineteenth-century narrative conventions of realism with the purpose of paradoxically calling them into question.

For a thorough analysis of historiographic metafiction, it is worth concentrating upon the two terms which compose its definition. The word "metafiction", often interchanged with "narcissistic narrative fiction", coincides with a typically postmodernist mode of writing which refers to:

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

the type of fiction that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.⁵⁶

It means that through its self-referential quality a metafictional work reflects upon itself, upon its own status as a literary work, thus commenting on its language and revealing its own process of formation. In other words, postmodern novels manifest self-examination, turning the reader's attention towards the self-reflexive act of writing itself. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is indeed a novel-within-a-novel, that is, a novel which deals with an author (not Fowles himself) writing a novel about Victorian England. By foregrounding the explicitness of its fictionality, this textual consciousness automatically breaks the illusion of reality and violates the ideological principles of classic realism.⁵⁷ By inviting the reader to detach himself from narrativity, the metafictional technique functions as a revolutionary challenge to the traditional standards of storytelling.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning Chapter Thirteen of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* which clearly exemplifies its metafictional nature:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in [...] a convention universally accepted at the time of my story. [...] We wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is.⁵⁸

This passage undoubtedly marks the rupture of the narrative illusion. By claiming that he knows neither his characters nor his story, the modern narrator subverts the notions of realism and undermines the authority of the omniscient voice, though in the previous chapters he attempts to reproduce it. Nevertheless, the reader has to acknowledge that this narrator sounds totally ironical: while through the self-referential tool he pretends to break that fictional illusionism, he paradoxically reinforces it, thus making his novel appear more real.⁵⁹ The ploy of parody, which permeates postmodernist texts, is here deliberately made use of by Fowles to trick and confuse the reader who then becomes unable to distinguish the fictitious world

⁵⁶ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992, p. 24.

⁵⁷ L. Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 47.

⁵⁸ J. Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, [1969], London, Vintage, 2004, pp. 95, 96. Henceforth: all quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited in the text with the page number.

⁵⁹ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 19.

of art from the real world of history. It is indeed the modern narrator's cheating attitude which authenticates the illusionistic flow. In order to emphasize the artificiality of his postmodern novel Fowles resorts to ingenious devices such as the anachronistic allusions to twentieth-century characters or events, the appearance of the narrator himself in the action, the choice among three alternative endings, and the use of footnotes.⁶⁰

By allowing the reader to discover the mechanisms which govern his postmodern work, Fowles is experimenting on the novel what Bertolt Brecht and Luigi Pirandello did instead for drama.⁶¹ While the former formulated the well-known theory of *Verfremdungseffekt* or "alienation effect" (58), aimed at maximizing the distanciation between the play and the audience, thus shattering the illusion of reality, the latter mingled the boundaries of art and reality through the scheme of the play-within-a-play. By synthesizing the modern techniques pioneered by these two leading exponents of metatheatre, the experimental fiction of John Fowles reveals its artefact, dispelling therefore the illusion of the Victorian novel.

With this in mind, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not only self-consciously metafictional; it is also historiographic because it incorporates and recontextualizes the Victorian past with the purpose of providing an ideological critique of that period. Even though this novel might be slightly confused with a historical novel, in truth Fowles himself admitted: "I don't think of it as a historical novel"⁶² since "the genuine dialogue of 1867 is far too close to our own to sound convincingly old".⁶³ In his postmodernist work, Fowles does not intend history as it is traditionally conceived in the historical novel; instead of portraying great historical events from the point of view of the people who experienced them, in the postmodernist novel the past is rethought and reworked as a human product.⁶⁴ This process of creative reconstruction of history coincides exactly with the task of historiography.

⁶⁰ A. J. B. Johnson, "Realism in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1980 – 1981, p. 291.

⁶¹ S. Gaggi, "Pirandellian and Brechtian Aspects of the Fiction of John Fowles" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1986, pp. 324, 328, 334.

⁶² "The Achievement of John Fowles", *Encounter*, XXXV, August 1970, pp. 66-67, quoted in A. J. B. Johnson, "Realism in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 287.

⁶³ "On Writing a novel", *The Cornhill*, no. 1060, Summer 1969, p. 281, quoted in A. J. B. Johnson, "Realism in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 287.

⁶⁴ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 42.

The result of this imaginative reworking is the narrativization of history: taking shape of a narrative text, history is rebuilt in the light of the present and transformed into fiction.⁶⁵ In other words, the presence of the past, in this case the Victorian past, which is narrated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a figment of John Fowles's own imagination. This is the reason why in Fowles's novel, like in many other historiographic metafiction, the connection between the historical and the fictitious assumes overriding importance. History and fiction are strictly intertwined and perfectly combined with one another to represent fictional protagonists, such as Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson, within the Victorian context. As a consequence, the historical events narrated by John Fowles in his postmodern work are not referential because they do not refer to authentic facts which really happened in the Victorian age.⁶⁶ On the contrary, the historical past is merely representational because it functions only as an historical framework, in which events are incorporated without being utterly absorbed as actual circumstances which really occur in the narration. Likewise, historical personages are incorporated within the text with the sole purpose of strengthening the illusion of reality, but they are never integrated into the fictional community of characters. Some important personages who are often quoted in Fowles's novel such as Jane Austen, Karl Marx, John Ruskin, Charles Darwin or Henry Moore play the role of constructing the historical background, but they are never fully assimilated in the text as integral characters.

Thanks to its accurate reconstruction of the Victorian society in Lyme Regis between 1867 and 1869, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be interpreted as a Neo-Victorian novel or, as it is defined by Eddins, "a 'Victorian' novel that is a contemporary novel 'about' the Victorian novel"⁶⁷. This brilliant definition encapsulates not only the Victorian heritage that this novel seeks to preserve and yet to reject, but also the Victorian aesthetic conventions which again are paradoxically employed to be deliberately disrupted.

The presence of the Victorian past derives from Fowles's lively interest in Victorianism. Though the author had a limited academic knowledge about the Victorian history, he declared that he learnt "quite a lot about the byways of

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

⁶⁷ D. Eddins, "John Fowles: Existence as Authorship", in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1976, p. 217.

Victorian life”⁶⁸ thanks to his collection of books. Among them, it is worth mentioning not only *Punch*, a Victorian magazine which supplies fine details about food, clothing items and dialogues, but also Royston Pyke’s *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*, one of the most comprehensive anthologies of the nineteenth century, often quoted in Fowles’s epigraphs.⁶⁹ Just as important, Fowles’s reading of Victorian novels strongly influenced the creation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*:⁷⁰ the characters with their outward appearance, alongside the key themes, the style and the narrative voice are inspired to George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, although only the third one is frequently mentioned both in the epigraphs and in the narration.

The major legacy of Victorianism manifests itself in the protagonists of Fowles’s work who conform to traditionally Victorian stereotypes.⁷¹ Starting from the novel’s mysterious heroine, Sarah Woodruff, the French lieutenant’s woman of the title, she is depicted as a penniless governess coming from Dorset who, after having worked for Captain John Talbot’s middle-class family, finds employment to at cruel Mrs. Poulteney’s household. Like Charlotte Brontë’s characterization of Jane Eyre, Sarah fulfils the role of governess, generally assigned to destitute educated women. By distinguishing herself as a social outcast like Thomas Hardy’s tragic heroine Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Sarah embodies the stereotype of the Victorian New Woman in her attempt to emancipate herself. Similarly, the male protagonist of Fowles’s novel, a thirty-two-year-old aristocrat named Charles Smithson, typifies the conventional Victorian gentleman not only for his attraction towards women, but also for his idleness as well as his reluctance to working activities. At the same time, Charles incarnates the traditional ideal of the Victorian New Man due to his religious scepticism, his scientific interest in the Darwinian theme of evolution and his passion for paleontology.

Besides these two leading characters, even the minor characters of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, dominated by stylized flatness, mirror the conventional figures of the Victorian novel.⁷² Ernestina Freeman, Charles’s

⁶⁸ J. Campbell and J. Fowles, “An Interview with John Fowles”, cit., p. 464.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ F. Kaplan, “Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov”, in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1973, p. 111.

⁷¹ M. Thorpe, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 26.

⁷² Ibid., p. 31.

fiancée, represents the prototype of the pampered, fashionable, wealthy and obedient Victorian lady whose main concern is marriage. Mrs. Poultney, Sarah's severe employer, exemplifies the pious hypocrite as well as the Victorian moralistic consciousness. Furthermore, Dr. Grogan, Charles's trustworthy Irish confessor, incarnates the pragmatic as well as logical voice of rationality, generally associated to masculine identity. Sam Farrow, Charles's shrewd valet, symbolizes the working-class man who, aware of his human rights, struggles for social elevation.

Further indebtedness to Victorian culture emerges from epigraphs taken from Victorian poetry.⁷³ By prefacing most of the chapters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with epigrammatic verses of Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough and Alfred Tennyson, Fowles successfully rebuilds the cultural and the social milieu of the Victorian age.

In addition, the link to Victorianism clearly emerges from John Fowles's stylistic choices. With the purpose of echoing the narrating omniscience, Fowles employs a godlike narrator who sounds like an authentic Victorian. His old-fashioned lexicon is evident, for instance, in Chapter One when Charles is described while shaving his "dundrearies" (5), a typically Victorian term for the modern word 'sideburns'. Another example of outdated language appears in the same chapter, when Ernestina's headgear is described as "pork-pie hats" (5), a type of hat with a flat crown which became popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Fowles's particular attention to his characters' physical appearance and clothes again contributes to evoke the Victorian atmosphere.

A further stylistic strategy which is commonly applied to Victorian fiction and is deployed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* coincides with serialization, the abrupt shift from one chapter to another. This is exemplified for instance between the ending of Chapter Four and the beginning of Chapter Five; while the former closes with a conversation between the vicar and Mrs. Poulteney about the figure of Sarah, the latter does not resume the narration as the reader might be expecting. Rather, it suddenly opens with a completely new topic: "Ernestina had exactly the right face for her age" (26). Another sudden movement from chapter to chapter is showed between Chapter Thirty, which ends with Sarah being dismissed

⁷³ F. Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov", cit., p. 110.

from Mrs. Poulteney's house, and Chapter Thirty-One which, by contrast, catapults the reader into the barn while Sarah is sleeping:

Two moments later she was kneeling by her bed and weeping silently into the worn cover. She should rather have prayed? But she believed she was praying.

And now she was sleeping. That was the disgraceful sight that met Charles's eye as he finally steeled himself to look over the partition. (247, 248)

Diametrically opposed to this device, Fowles exploits also the suspension of the plot, another typically Victorian technique.⁷⁴ This is illustrated for instance in the closing lines of Chapter Twelve which, through the narrator's questions "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadow does she come?" (94), seems to freeze the characterization of the heroine, suspending the plot for a few instants. The following chapter surprisingly begins with the answer to those questions "I do not know" (95), melting therefore the frozen figure of the protagonist.

The French Lieutenant's Woman additionally revives the Victorian spirit through the exploration of the dominant themes which were recurrent in that period;⁷⁵ the characteristic opposition between religion and science is aroused in Fowles's novel through Dr. Grogan's adherence to Darwinism and the theory of evolution. In existential terms, this topic strictly intertwines with the quest for self-identity, of which Charles Smithson finally becomes representative, overcoming his anxiety for freedom. A further leitmotiv of Victorian literature, the path towards female emancipation, is evidently developed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* through the figure of Sarah: in this respect, she takes advantage of her condition of a fallen woman to extricate herself from a duty-bound society and become an independent woman of the late nineteenth century. A further commonly Victorian trope which finds expression in Fowles's novel regards the perception of sexuality within a highly Puritan society and its confrontation with a less moralistic and restricted system.

From this long digression, it transpires that John Fowles inherits a large number of narrative, stylistic and thematic strategies from Victorianism. Nevertheless, the Victorian history within *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not

⁷⁴ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 107.

⁷⁵ F. Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov", cit., p. 110.

naively thematized to give a portrayal of the Victorian culture; this task is assigned to the historical novel. The Victorian past and its literary conventions are instead fictionalized by Fowles with the sole purpose of being contested, questioned and criticized. It follows then that in historiographic metafiction history is always observed critically and never nostalgically. This postmodernist new genre paradoxically enacts and deconstructs the Victorian past by exploring its aesthetic boundaries through metafiction self-reflexiveness.

2.2 The Disappearance of the Author

Postmodernist fiction, as in the case of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, tends to adhere to Roland Barthes's notion of "the death of the author"⁷⁶, a metaphor indicating the author's removal from the text. Deprived of his supreme authority, the author is no longer in charge of the process of narration, of the creation of characters or of the explanation of facts. The suspension of his power promotes therefore not only a plurality of narrative voices but also a textual openness which, in turn, implies a dynamic reading. In other words, the author's monolithic or dominating voice is substituted with a narrator's polyphonic voice that releases the text from its nineteenth-century artistic canons, allowing thus narrative freedom. As a result, the reader's function gains absolute importance: rather than a passive role, the reader performs an active role which enables him to choose among the alternative endings of the text and give multiple interpretations.

The disappearance of the author in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which corresponds to the displacement of John Fowles himself as novelist, gives rise to:

two levels of authorial commentary within the novel; one is meant to be particularly Victorian [...] [while the] other [...] represents the artist as magician, as magus, as the great keeper and controller of the clock.⁷⁷

As this quotation clearly explains, the narrator of Fowles's novel has a dual existence; one coincides with an all-knowing, godlike, omnipresent and omnipotent

⁷⁶ R. Siegle, "The Concept of the Author in Barthes, Foucault, and Fowles" in *College Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1983, p. 126.

⁷⁷ F. Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov", cit., p. 113, 114.

voice which, echoing the traditional Victorian omniscience, communicates the whole fictional narrative and intrudes to comment upon characters and events. With his vast knowledge about late nineteenth-century culture, Fowles's first-person narrator strategically adopts Victorian vocabulary as well as the common rules of realism.

In contrast with it, the narrator's other nature proves to be particularly modern. His belonging to the twentieth century is indeed revealed through his declaration: "I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes" (95), who are the leading theorist of the French new movement of the *nouveau roman* and the author of the essay *The Death of the Author* (1967) respectively. Fowles's authorial persona emphasizes his removed vantage point from the Victorian Era through the deployment of anachronistic interferences. By freely jumping from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, contradicting therefore the chronological process of history, the Fowlesian narrator not only informs the reader about the future of his characters but also transposes them into more modern dimensions. This is indeed part of the project of displaying the temporal as well as cultural distance between characters, placed in the 1860s, and Fowles, the modern narrator and the reader, located instead a century later, in the 1960s. Examples of anachronistic allusions to modern history are evident from the first pages of the novel: for instance, when the Cobb, the long old quay of Lyme Bay, is compared for its "curves and volumes" (4) to a contemporary sculpture of Henry Moore. A further example is provided when the narrator announces that Ernestina "died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" (28); moreover, in order to emphasize Mrs. Poulteney's ruthless nature the narrator states that "there would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady" (21); anachronism is also expressed when Sarah is described as if she "was born with a computer in her heart" (53); this of course highlights her ability to assess other people's impression. In addition, the narrator explains that during the Victorian period towns at night were silent because "people went to bed by nine in those days before electricity and television" (93); another anachronistic reference is illustrated when Charles, after his sexual intercourse with Sarah at Endicott's Hotel in Exeter is compared to "a city struck out of a quiet sky by an atom bomb" (354).

This modern narrator is responsible also for the whole structural arrangements of the novel, namely the division of the chapters, the choice of the epigraphs, the insertion of the footnotes, as well as the interpolation of historical

documents. Most importantly, by adopting the ironic *I*, Fowles's authorial persona occasionally enters his own narration both to discuss the process of storytelling and to exhibit its fictitious constructedness.⁷⁸ The technique of the narrator's intervention was already common among Victorian writers: it had been anticipated not only in Chapter Fifteen of Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) but also in Chapter Seventeen of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*.⁷⁹ In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the first blatant intrusion of the narrator can be noticed in metafictional Chapter Thirteen as he declares:

I am writing in [...] a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. [...] The novelist is still a god, since he creates [...]; (95)

He then resumes with:

what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (97)

Fowles's narrator foregrounds his modernity by admitting that he does not intend to conform to the Victorian tradition of omniscient novelists whose cardinal principle coincides with authority, the power of planning events as well as dominate characters. On the contrary, he attacks the authorial might, insists upon the fictional nature of his texts and finally advocates freedom. In this light, he proclaims:

we cannot plan. [...] We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world [...] is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey that they begin to live. [...] I do not fully control these creatures of my mind, any more than you control your children, colleagues, friends or even yourself. (96)

Here it is evident that Fowles's modern narrator renounces to plan events and limits himself to report his characters' actions. Moreover, unlike the third-person Victorian narrator who does not allow his characters to be independent, Fowles's first-person authorial persona promotes his characters' freedom. In this sense, they

⁷⁸ P. Cooper, *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1991, p. 104.

⁷⁹ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, London, Continuum, 2007, p. 21.

can lead their own lives and develop their own personality depending on the narrator's will.

The reader however must acknowledge that this authorial power of freedom is in truth completely illusory because the narrator still represents the creator who arranges his text and manipulates his characters.⁸⁰ The ironic component lies precisely in it: in other words, it is exactly when the narrator promotes freedom that he paradoxically suspends it, since complete liberty in fiction is impossible. He cannot fully renounce his authoritative power without denying his existence as a novelist. Unsurprisingly, the deployment of the ironic first-person narration is likely the most suitable form for preserving the illusion and at the same time for concealing authority. It is for this reason that John Fowles is as present as any other author of mid-nineteenth-century fiction.

A further feature which contributes to enhance the Fowlesian narrator's degree of singularity is his unexpected appearance in the text. Through the third-person narration, which often overlaps with the first-person one, thus misleading the reader, the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* incarnates a fictional character who appears twice on the scene.⁸¹ In his first appearance, which occurs in Chapter Fifty-Five, he portrays himself as a bearded man of forty who travels alongside Charles in the train first-class compartment from Exeter to London.

[...] Charles thought he had won the solitude he craved. But then, at the very last moment, a massively bearded face appeared at his window. [...] 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 (but butlers did not travel first class) or a successful lay preacher. (406, 407)

Without ceasing to stare at him, the character-narrator studies Charles and reflects upon what he is going to do both with his male hero and the endings of his novel:

For a while his travelling companion took no notice of the sleeping Charles. [...] the prophet-bearded man began to stare at him, safe in the knowledge that his curiosity would not be surprised. [...] A stare of a minute or so's duration, of this kind, might have been explicable. Train journeys are boring; it is amusing to spy on strangers; and so on. But this

⁸⁰ P. Cooper, *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity*, cit., p. 108.

⁸¹ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 116.

stare, which became positively cannibalistic in its intensity, lasted far longer than a minute. (407, 408)

Addressing directly Charles, the narrator asks himself: “Now what could I do with you? [...] What the devil am I going to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles’s career here and now” (408). Rather than concluding his novel with Charles on his way back to London, as he has already planned, or better, as he induces the reader to believe, the authorial persona solves his dilemma by opting for two different but equally plausible endings to his work. The choice of which to exhibit first is made by flipping a florin. It is in that moment that Charles looks at his creator and with a disapproving glance perceives him either as mentally insane or as a gambler:

So I continue to stare at Charles and see no reason this time for fixing the fight upon which he is about to engage. [...] The only way I can take no part in the fight is to show two versions of it. that leaves me with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the ‘real’ version.

I take my purse from the pocket of my frock-coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my right thumbnail, I flick it, spinning, two feet into the air and catch it in my left hand. (409)

As this passage clearly illustrates, Fowles’s narrator unexpectedly shifts from the first person “I” to the third person “he”, causing therefore bewilderment in the reader.

The narrator’s second appearance takes place instead at the end of the novel, in Chapter Sixty-One. Although his bushy beard has been shaved, thus looking as a “foppish and Frenchified” (465) individual, Fowles’s authorial narrator is not a new character: he still considers the fictional world as his own and manipulate it as he prefers. In the role of a real “impresario” (465), the narrator takes out his Breguet watch and sets it fifteen minutes back so that he can grasp the opportunity to witness the closure of his novel without being late.⁸² Like a passive observer, the narrator stands outside Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s house in Chelsea and scrutinizes Sarah and Charles’s final scene. He then beckons to a carriage, gets in and goes away:

⁸² S. Gaggi, “Pirandellian and Brechtian Aspects of the Fiction of John Fowles”, cit., p. 330.

In this he has not changed; he very evidently regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes.

But now he straightens. This *flânerie* in Chelsea has been a pleasant interlude, but 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 of watchmakers – that he was running a quarter of an hour fast. [...] He is meanly providing himself with an excuse for being late at his next appointment. (465)

To attribute the modern narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to the spokesperson or the embodiment of John Fowles himself would signify to misinterpret the novel. In this light, by addressing his ironic first-person voice, Fowles himself writes:

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 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.⁸³

Here Fowles draws a sharp distinction between the ironic, Victorian and modern “I” who pretends to be the writer of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, even actively joining the narration as a new character, and the real “I”, the mastermind of this postmodernist novel.⁸⁴ The former does not correspond to a dominating self but represents rather a textual and linguistic mechanism which is not only intrinsic to postmodern metafiction but also part of the narrative illusion. The narrating voice sounds authorial since it pretends to be responsible for the structural arrangements, the insertion of epigraphs and the choice of footnotes. The latter instead refers to the true author, Fowles himself, the actual impresario of the novel. By concealing himself behind the first-person narrator, Fowles adheres to Barthes's postmodern concept of the displacement of the author: he leads the reader to believe that he has detached himself from his narrator and has disappeared from his own novel, delegating his task to another narrating voice. From this, it follows that no authorial voice is ever Fowles's own voice.

The interpolation of the self-questioning narrator between the Victorian characters and the twentieth-century novelist, namely John Fowles, builds, in *The*

⁸³ J. Fowles, *Notes on an Unfinished Novel*, quoted in R. Siegle, “The Concept of the Author in Barthes, Foucault, and Fowles”, cit., p. 129.

⁸⁴ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 37.

French Lieutenant's Woman "a number of worlds within worlds"⁸⁵. Specifically, Linda Hutcheon identifies three distinctive levels of narration which are framed in one another, forming therefore the commonly postmodernist Chinese-box structure. The first level or the core represents the fictional universe of the Victorian characters which takes place throughout the time of novel, between 1867 and 1869. By developing outside the core world but actually including it, the second level of narration refers to the first- and third-person narrator who not only breaks into his storytelling with metafictional commentaries but also transforms twice into a character, in the London-bound train and in front of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's residence. Beyond these two worlds lies John Fowles himself, the authentic creator of his novel, who coincides with the third and the least accessible level of narration. The novelist deploys the strategy of inserting one story within another to deliberately expose the novel's fictionalization.

In short, by renouncing his role of novelist, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles completely vanishes from the scene, giving rise to a plurality of voices and causing textual freedom. Fowles then entrusts his task to an illusionary first-person authorial voice who sounds both like a Victorian authoritative and a more modern narrator. In fact, by employing a twentieth-century self-exhibiting narrator who breaks the fictional illusion to comment upon the novel's artificiality, Fowles has not the purpose of imitating the traditional nineteenth-century omniscience, but rather of criticizing and rejecting it. In addition, the modernity of Fowles's authorial persona relies upon his double intrusion in the text as a fictional third-person character.

2.3 Narrative Freedom

In Fowles's postmodern novel the theme of freedom appears prominently and is articulated at multiple levels: social, existential, and narrative.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the first two forms are both defined within the framework of existentialism,

⁸⁵ L. Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980, p. 57.

⁸⁶ R. P. Lynch, "Freedoms in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vo. 48, No. 1, 2002, p. 50.

referring therefore to personal liberty, namely the freedom of individuals from social and political constraints. Operating basically in the core world of characters, existential freedom is embodied by Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson, the novel's protagonists: entrapped in the closed Victorian society and threatened by his unstable financial situation, Charles Smithson is encouraged by Sarah, his catalytic agent, to embark on the journey towards the discovery of his existential authenticity.

On the other hand, the third form of freedom is formulated in terms of textual structure. In other words, the existential freedom is translated into narrative freedom. This formal indeterminacy manifests itself in the novel's open-endedness, in the reader's freedom as well as in the characters' free agency from the narrative voice. As far as the first two aspects are concerned, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* does not impose one absolute conclusion, as in the case of most Victorian novels, but offers instead three alternative endings, among which the reader has the opportunity to choose.

This postmodernist device is indeed used by Fowles to highlight the difference between how nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels were written. The first optional ending in Chapter Forty-Four, which in truth occurs only in Charles's imagination, is profoundly conservative because it mirrors a typically Victorian conclusion. Choosing to leave Sarah in order to return to Ernestina, marry her and enter Mr. Freeman's business, Charles rejects his existential freedom and yields to his traditional self, remaining stuck in the duty-bound Victorian society without growing into a modern man.⁸⁷ The second choice of ending in Chapter Sixty, which coincides with Charles's reunion with Sarah, echos again the stereotypical epilogue of a nineteenth-century novel, since the Victorian-romantic side of Charles's personality triumphally overcomes his anxiety for freedom.⁸⁸ The third finale in the last chapter of the novel, which witnesses the separation between the two protagonists and the achievement of their existential independence, mimics instead the twentieth-century dramatic and open endings of canonical modernist fiction.⁸⁹ In this sense, the textual open-endedness is a form of freedom not only to Charles

⁸⁷ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

but also to the reader:⁹⁰ by offering three viable solutions of ending, Fowles provides the reader with the free will to choose the epilogue which he personally prefers. Like the fictional hero of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the reader is totally free to maneuver and establish his own position within the novel.

In this context of textual openness, readers' viewpoints diverge considerably. Some believe that the third epilogue plays a dominant role upon the other two since it encompasses the existential philosophy running through the novel. In this light, Elizabeth D. Rankin writes:

without this ending [...] there would be no perfect exemplar of existential freedom in the novel and hence that concept would remain hazy throughout.⁹¹

By stressing the crucial importance of Chapter Sixty-One, here Rankin suggests that Charles's detachment from Sarah, however painful, is essential for both protagonists to achieve existential awareness, one of the leading themes of the novel.⁹² Without this ending, Fowles's work would result vague and inconclusive. Instead of proclaiming the supremacy of one closure over the other two, other readers argue that the choice of a threefold ending encapsulates the postmodernist essence upon which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is built. In this regard, to draw a comparison among the three conclusions would allow the reader to notice the difference of the narrative canons between the Victorian and the modern period, preventing the narrator from intervening to directly explain them.

A further form of narrative freedom is expressed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* through the character's free existence from the author.⁹³ This means that the twentieth-century narrator provides his characters with the liberty to lead their life and build their own subjectiveness. By rejecting authorial omniscience, in Chapter Thirteen Fowles's narrative voice declares:

It is not only that he [Charles] has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it, and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real.

In other words, to be free myself, I must give him, and Tina and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedoms as well. (97)

⁹⁰ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 134.

⁹¹ E. D. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1973, p. 205.

⁹² W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 24.

⁹³ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 7.

As highlighted in this passage, within this postmodernist playfulness characters are released from the narrator's control and dependence: in other words, characters are free to live their life as they want, to choose their future and to establish themselves as subjects rather than objects manipulated by the narrator. In this respect, the narrator ironically claims:

I have disgracefully broken the illusion? No. My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. [...] I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid; and I would have you share my own sense that 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 Mrs Poulteney you may be – your children, colleagues, friends, or even yourself. (97)

Needless to say, this is an artifice employed by the novel's orchestrator, Fowles himself, in order to create a form of illusionistic freedom. Even though all characters are provided with free will, Sarah Woodruff is actually the only one who perfectly exemplifies the concept of narrative freedom. Not only does she embody existential freedom, the same that she finally grants to Charles in the third finale, but she is also surrounded by an aura of mystery from the beginning to the end of the novel. Sarah is portrayed as an unknowable character whose subjectivity can be deciphered neither by the narrator nor by the reader.

2.4 Intertextuality

The connection between fiction and historical reality plays a crucial role in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. To blur the lines between the fictitious and the historical, Fowles adopts the postmodernist technique of intertextuality, that is, the interaction among different texts and their meanings, which is clearly exemplified in the use of epigraphs and footnotes as well as in the interpolation of other stories.

With regard to epigrammatic allusions, Fowles prefaces most of the chapters of his work with extracts taken both from Victorian poetry and Victorian prose. Specifically, of the sixty-one chapters which compose Fowles's novel, nineteen epigraphs refer to Alfred Tennyson, eleven to Matthew Arnold, eight to

Thomas Hardy, eight to Arthur Hugh Clough and others to folksongs.⁹⁴ Further epigraphs of nineteenth-century prose in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* refer mainly to Jane Austen and Lewis Carroll. Besides Victorian literature, in his prefatory citations Fowles also deals with politics, society, economics and ideology, themes which are generally mentioned in the nineteenth-century writings of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. Though the epigrammatic references to the Victorian Age significantly abound, Fowles frequently incorporates introductory quotations from the non-literary texts of the twentieth century, like for instance George M. Young's *Portrait of an Age* and *Victorian Essays*.

Epigraphs are deployed by Fowles's modern narrator essentially for two distinct reasons; firstly, they have the purpose of reconstructing and reproducing the typical Victorian background in which characters are introduced. By providing an outlet of nineteenth-century life, they "express notions about the world, man's situation in it, and how he should live"⁹⁵. Secondly, the epigraphs of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have the function to create a subtext running through the novel aimed at the interpretation of the main text.⁹⁶ In other words, epigrammatic allusions are not excluded from the plot; they rather constitute an intrinsic part of the novel and allow the reader to understand the message of each chapter. However, the reader must be aware that Fowles freely selects, situates and appropriates these citations according to the novel's thematic purposes and, as a consequence, he generates his own version of the Victorian past.⁹⁷ In so doing, the reader is not only unable to grasp the real essence of epigraphs, because they are always filtered through Fowles's twentieth-century mind, but he also must contextualize them in relation to the novel.

To mention some examples of nineteenth-century epigraphs within Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it is worth focusing upon the one which opens the novel:

Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world
and of human relationships to man himself
Marx, *Zur Judenfrage* (1844)
(initial page, below the title)

⁹⁴ F. Kaplan, "Victorian Modernists: Fowles and Nabokov", cit., p. 110.

⁹⁵ J. Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, quoted in W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 24.

⁹⁶ D. Bowen, "The Riddler Riddled: Reading the Epigraphs in John Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1995, p. 70.

⁹⁷ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 61.

By choosing this quotation centered upon the concept of emancipation as the initial epigraph, from the beginning of the novel Fowles tries to suggest that emancipation is the central theme of his work. Nevertheless, Marx and Fowles assign different shades of meaning to emancipation:⁹⁸ for the former, it is interpreted in social terms, as the citizen's inalienable right to fulfil freedom; for the latter, the notion of emancipation is contrastingly conceived in existential terms, as a form of self-realization. From this exemplification, it is evident not only Fowles's capability of textual appropriateness according to his thematic concerns but also his supreme authority over the text.

A second example of epigraph is taken from Thomas Hardy's poem *The Riddle* which introduces Chapter One. As its title clearly indicates, these lines disclose the beautifully enigmatic nature of the novel's female protagonist, Sarah:

Stretching eyes west
Over the sea,
Wind foul or fair
Always stood she
Prospect-impressed;
Solely out there
Did her gaze rest,
Never elsewhere
Seemed charm to be. (3)

Through his poem Hardy seems to anticipate Sarah's first appearance in the novel, described as the French lieutenant's woman, a mysterious and insane black-clothed figure who stands alone at the end of the Cobb gazing at the sea. Unsurprisingly, this image was exactly the one which haunted Fowles into writing his novel. If Fowles interprets *The Riddle* as the profound enigma of an unconventional woman that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* attempts to unravel, Hardy instead hinted at something completely different:⁹⁹ indeed, the first stanza of Hardy's poem conveys a woman's intense absorption in the sea, followed in the second stanza by her communion with the land.

A further appropriated epigraph is taken from a folksong which opens Chapter Two:

I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun,
I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun,

⁹⁸ D. Bowen, "The Riddler Riddled: Reading the Epigraphs in John Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 73.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

And my false love will weep, and my false love will weep,
And my false love will weep for me after I'm gone. (6)

Considering that this chapter introduces the three protagonists of the novel, this quotation implies that Charles's irresistible attraction to Sarah will result in his disengagement from Ernestina;¹⁰⁰ sailing off to a new romantic destination, Charles will leave his false love, miserable Ernestina, behind. However, later in the novel the reader will discover that, as Varguennes, the alleged French Lieutenant, has sailed away from Sarah, she in turn will sail away from Charles, confirming that even their liaison is again nothing other than a false love.

Other remarkable cases of intertextual references derive from John Fowles's admiration for a nineteenth-century literary icon, Jane Austen. Referring specifically to her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, written about fifty years before 1867, Fowles quotes it in three different epigraphs, namely in Chapter Five, Ten and Fourteen. In addition, Austen's novel plays a crucial role in Fowles's choice of the town of Lyme Regis as the geographic backdrop of his postmodernist novel. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that both Lyme Regis and the Cobb, a stone pier jutting into Lyme Bay, represent the recurring scenery of Austen's *Persuasion*. Reader who are familiar with this text will immediately acknowledge that Fowles alludes to it; if in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the Cobb is depicted as "quite simply the most beautiful sea-rampart on the south coast of England" (3), from which "the sombre grey cliffs, known locally as Ware Cleeves" (4) can be viewed, in *Persuasion* Jane Austen writes:

the Cobb itself, its old wonders and new improvements, with the very beautiful line of cliffs stretching out to the east of the town, are what the stranger's eye will seek.¹⁰¹

Besides these allusions, Fowles explicitly mentions both Jane Austen and her novel in Chapter Two when Charles and Ernestina are coming down the Cobb: "These are the very steps that Jane Austen made Louisa Musgrove fall down in *Persuasion*" (8). From this quotation, it can be deduced that both lovers not only read the novel but also were knowledgeable about its plot, otherwise Ernestina, a fictional character herself, would not have referenced other fictional figures of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰¹ J. Austen, *Persuasion*, [1818], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 93.

Austen's novel. The intertextual dialogue with *Persuasion* allows Fowlesian characters to appear much more real and true.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the project of intertextuality is carried out also by the deployment of footnotes, explicative commentaries which appear at the bottom of the page. Taken from historical documents, these annotations have the function to prove historical authenticity, contributing therefore to confuse the boundaries between fiction and reality. Footnotes abound in Fowles's novel, manifesting themselves for instance in Chapter Fourteen, Seventeen, Twenty-Eight and Thirty-Five. Dealing with the theme of sexuality, it is precisely this last chapter which contains one of the lengthiest footnotes of the whole novel.¹⁰² After Fowles's modern narrator cautions the reader about "the error of supposing the Victorians were not in fact highly sexed" (269), he inserts an accurate footnote about birth-control techniques used in the mid-nineteenth century and illustrates that the first approach to the sexual theme was discussed in George Drysdale's 1854 manual, entitled *The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion*. The footnote additionally aims to offer helpful advice to the reader:

Impregnation is avoided either by the withdrawal of the penis immediately before ejaculation takes place [...]; by the use of the sheath [...]; by the introduction of a piece of sponge into the vagina [...]; or by the injection of tepid water into the vagina immediately after coition. (270)

As footnotes in Victorian novels have the purpose to enhance the historical accuracy of the facts, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* they aim at providing the reader with the historical context of nineteenth-century England, breaking the illusion of the fictitious reality.

Besides the incorporation of epigraphs and footnotes which authenticate Victorian history, in Chapter Twenty-Eight of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles interpolates the account of the trial of Lieutenant Émile de la Roncière that took place in 1835. Taken from a French text, this story deals with the wrongful conviction that La Roncière, Baron de Morell's charming officer, wrote anonymous letters to his commander's sixteen-year-old daughter, Marie de Morell, and eventually raped her. In spite of the implausibility of his crime, La Roncière was innocently convicted and sentenced to a ten-year imprisonment.¹⁰³ After the

¹⁰² M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 26.

¹⁰³ E. F. Shields, "Hysteria, Sexual Assault and Military: The Trial of Émile de La Roncière and 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1995, p. 85.

description of the trial, Fowles strategically inserts an extensive passage from Matthaei's documents which, in favor of the lieutenant's unsuccessful appeal, attributes Marie de Morell's attitude to hysterical illness. Likewise, according to Dr. Grogan and Charles, Sarah might exemplify another case of emotionally unbalanced woman who, in order to escape her condition of an outcast, deliberately invents her false story to unblind Charles.¹⁰⁴ In other words, La Roncière's interpolated narration functions as a reminder for the reader that, like Marie de Morell, Sarah constitutes a curiously enigmatic character from the beginning to the end of Fowles's novel.

In general, the multiplicity of intertexts which are both alluded to and directly quoted in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* contributes to turn the novel into a multi-layered text. The incorporation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century epigraphs, of explanatory footnotes and of narrative segments from different texts subverts the chronological linearity of events which constitutes most of realistic novels and promotes instead the synchronic or horizontal progress of actions. Not by chance, this sort of discontinuity is typical of postmodernist novels. Even though on a surface level intertextual references give the impression of authenticating historical truth, on a much deeper level they have the function to dispel that illusion and problematize the separation between fiction and reality. By fusing the past with the present and the historical with the fiction, intertextuality does not invite the reader to take refuge in the mid-nineteenth-century history, but rather to assess, subvert and finally reconstruct the values of the Victorian society.

¹⁰⁴ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 49.

Chapter Three

The Settings, the Protagonists and the Three Alternative Endings

3.1 Temporal and Geographical References

The creation of John Fowles's third novel dates back to 1967, under the influence of the existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus as well as the intellectual movement of postmodernism. The action of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* however takes place a century before, within the framework of Victorian England, precisely in 1867, a year that the novelist selected painstakingly. It is not a coincidence that this date refers specifically to three crucially important events both for the national and international historical landscape.

First of all, as Acheson points out, it coincides with the year in which John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, politician and economist, took advantage of the Reform Act 1867 to present to the House of Commons a petition in favour of women's suffrage.¹⁰⁵ In this respect, his fruitless attempts to struggle for female enfranchisement and the establishment of equal voting rights are reported in the novel in order to paint the dramatic scenario of mid-Victorian women's treatment:

But remember the date of this evening: April 6th, 1867. At Westminster only one week before John Stuart Mill had seized an opportunity in one of the early debates on the Reform Bill to argue that now was the time to give women equal rights at the ballot-box. His brave attempt ... was greeted with smiles from the average man ... and disapproving frowns from a sad majority of educated women who maintained that their influence was best exerted from the home. None the less, March 30th, 1867, is the point from which we can date the beginning of feminine emancipation in England; (115)

In addition to this historical reference regarding the female condition in England, in 1867 Karl Marx published the first volume of his masterly work, *Das Kapital*, a key text centered on the concept of social class, a thematic concern which features

¹⁰⁵ J. Acheson, *John Fowles*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, p. 33.

prominently in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.¹⁰⁶ It is noteworthy that Marx dedicated that same volume to Charles Darwin, the English naturalist who less than a decade before published *On the Origin of Species* (1869), the theory of evolution that completely discarded the traditional idea of creation narrated in the Bible.¹⁰⁷ In this light, Marx's choice might be read as his recognition of the importance of Darwin's ideology at that time: the class struggle, one of the foundational tenets of the Marxist doctrine, according to which an ample and powerful proletariat is able to overthrow a weaker and more limited middle class, is indeed strongly influenced by the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest.

With this in mind, it is evident then that John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin exerted an enormous impact not only upon the nineteenth-century era, but also upon the twentieth century. Fowles's allusion to such leading personalities has indeed the purpose both of providing the historical backdrop in which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* develops and highlighting how mid-Victorian concepts of female emancipation, social class and evolutionary progress are still significant in the twentieth-century thinking. At the same time, however, by writing his novel when the existential philosophy was extremely influential in the European context, Fowles also intends to foreground that, as his protagonists, Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson, might show, the Victorian Age is exceptionally existentialist, almost as for the individuals' inner dilemmas.¹⁰⁸ Existentialism thus forms the core of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: Sarah, the emancipated heroine who has already gained personal freedom by means of her status as a social outcast, drives Charles towards the achievement of his own existential authenticity, liberating him from the Victorian conventions which oppress him.

As far as the geographical references of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are concerned, they refer to the south-western coast of England and include the littoral towns of Lyme Regis and Weymouth, the untamed Undercliff, and the city of Exeter. Nevertheless, the novel extends its boundaries reaching the city of London and, towards the end, the United States of America. In Fowles's novels settings are so vividly described that, playing the role of real characters, they almost come to life:¹⁰⁹ the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰⁹ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 51.

exuberant liveliness of the Undercliff, the lifeless and repressed provinciality of Lyme Regis, and the various angles of the nocturnal London represent some striking examples.

What instead might appear less evident within an overplotted and complex text like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is that, as Loveday argues, these settings slide from closeness to openness, mirroring therefore Charles's existential trajectory.¹¹⁰ As Charles begins his journey in Lyme Regis, where his spirit feels entrapped into the narrow conventionality of the town, the novel opens exactly in the same confined and colourless space. With the purpose of taking distance from Lymers' greyness, the Fowlesian hero then begins to oscillate among London, Weymouth and Exeter, more tolerant yet hypocritical environments. When towards the end of the narrative the protagonist starts travelling aimlessly through Europe and is finally prompted to visit the United States, he discovers a totally unknown yet free dimension, where he is surprisingly capable of finding a glimpse of hope:

What the experience of America, perhaps in particular the America of that time, had given him – or given him back – was a kind of faith in freedom; the determination he saw around him, however unhappy its immediate consequences, to master a national destiny had a liberating rather than a depressing effect. (438)

In addition to the movement from the closed to the open, within Fowles's novel Loveday identifies a further category of setting which for the characters function as refuges, hidden-like or secluded worlds: among them there are of course the well-known Undercliff and uncle Robert's estate of Winsyatt.¹¹¹

With regard to the former, the Undercliff is a wooded and unpopulated slant which expands "between Lyme Regis and Axmouth six miles to the west, one of the strangest coastal landscapes in Southern England" (66). From its geological conformation, it emerges that in Fowlesian terms the Undercliff stands for nature: notably, it is not only the area that Charles penetrates whenever he decides to hunt for fossils, but also the place where Fowles himself devoted to the writing of his novel. Portrayed as "an English Garden of Eden" (67), the Undercliff coincides also with a primeval space, associated to a world of temptation; not casually, it is in the shadow of this untamed forest that Sarah and Charles's first clandestine encounters take place. Standing in sharp contrast with the dead and monotonous world of Lyme Regis upon

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 52.

which the engagement between Charles and Ernestina lays its foundations, the Undercliff has the power to bring characters back to life. In other words, it is exactly in this place that Sarah finds shelter and transforms her inconsolable grief for Varguennes's departure into peace and finds the courage to tell her story to Charles. In line with this, when she enters this wild world, she is described with a healthy appearance against the pale complexion of Lyme's female inhabitants: "The skin below seemed very brown, almost ruddy, in that light, as if the girl cared more for health than a fashionable pale and languid-cheeked complexion" (71). The Undercliff's salutary effect is prominently displayed also by Sarah's sleeping position which reminds the reader of childlike tenderness:

The girl lay in complete abandonment of deep sleep, on her back. [...] the sleeper's face was turned away from him her right arm thrown back, bent in a childlike way. (70)

While for the lovers' couples, Sarah and Charles as well as Mary and Sam, the Undercliff gives vent to their private passions, its "total wildness" (67) is traditionally discredited by the sanctimonious community of Lymers, who do not miss a chance to associate it to a place of scandalous immoralities and sexual pleasures.

The mysterious atmosphere which dominates the Undercliff is reiterated once again at the end of Chapter Ten when the narrator pronounces the following words: "the whole Victorian Age was lost" (72).¹¹² As one might guess, marking a turning point throughout the narration as well as in the relationship between the two protagonists, this sentence condenses the liberating force that the Undercliff is capable of conveying to whoever enters it. In other words, penetrating this wooded area allows the novel's characters to abandon the Victorian Age and to be catapulted into a wilder and more intense way of life that would be totally unconceivable for the repressed environment of Lyme Regis. If in this duty-bound community it is out of question that a betrothed man like Charles agrees on secret rendezvous with an unconventional young lady like Sarah, in the Undercliff instead such private encounters would take place without being regarded as immoral.

A second place that for Charles seemingly represents a retreat from the provinciality of Lyme is Winsyatt, his uncle Robert's large Palladian estate in Wiltshire

¹¹² Ibid.

which will be bequeathed to him. Affectionately described in Chapter Twenty-Three, Winsyatt is where Charles spent part of his childhood:

But it was the great immutable rural peace that was so delicious to re-enter. The miles of spring sward, the background of Wiltshire downland, the distant house now coming into view, cream and grey, with huge cedars, the famous copper beech (all copper beeches are famous) by the west wing, the almost hidden stable row behind, with its little wooden tower and clock like a white exclamation mark between the intervening branches. It was symbolic, that stable clock; [...] As the chaise emerged from the end of the avenue of limes, where the railed pasture gave way to smoother lawns and shrubberies, and the drive entered its long curve up to the front of the house – a Palladian structure not too ruthlessly improved and added by the younger Wyatt – Charles felt himself truly entering his inheritance. (197, 198)

Though Winsyatt, of which Charles is genuinely fond, might appear as a protected environment, throughout the narration it proves to be nothing but a fake shelter.¹¹³ In other words, in the light of the protagonist's personal development, the inheritance of Winsyatt would be more compatible with the typically conventional Londoner that he personifies at the beginning of the novel, rather than with the existentialist into which he evolves in the end. In this sense, rather than liberating his lively self, as the Undercliff contrastingly does, Winsyatt contributes to suffocate and entrap Charles's spirit.

3.2 Sarah Woodruff: a New Woman in the Guise of a Social Outcast

3.2.1 A Mysterious and Unconventional Personality

The euphemistic label, the French Lieutenant's Woman, which strategically appears as the title of John Fowles's postmodernist novel refers to its heroine, Sarah Woodruff. Even though the title clearly places the character of Sarah in the foreground, in fact it

¹¹³ Ibid.

does not necessarily proclaim its complete centrality within the narration;¹¹⁴ on the contrary, it rather tends to emphasize the unsavoury reputation as well as the mysterious aura which surrounds her from the opening pages of the novel.

Introduced for the first time at the end of Chapter One after the Cobb and the engaged couple of Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman have been presented, Sarah enters the scene and appears as:

the other figure on that sombre, curving mole. It stood right at the seawardmost end, apparently leaning against an old cannon-barrel up-ended as a bollard. 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. (5)

From her first portrayal, Sarah is described as a black-clothed and immobile creature who stands at the end of the Cobb, with her gaze fixed on the sea. Specifically, what strikes one's attention is that she is associated to a figure which is literally 'other'. In this regard, Michael argues that Sarah clearly acquires the status of a mysterious figure, a sort of enigmatic object and unknown symbol, which totally undermines both her female identity and her human dignity.¹¹⁵ To confirm her enigma, the number of epithets with which she is identified by her townspeople, and which contribute to confine her to the margins of the mid-Victorian society play a fundamental role. Besides "The French Lieutenant's Woman" (9), she is also nicknamed as "poor Tragedy" (9), grossly as "the French Loot'n't's Hoer" (86), the vernacular form of "the French Lieutenant's Whore" (176). Although these appellations seem to reinforce Sarah's apparent status of the fallen woman, she paradoxically continues to demand them since they preserve the individual freedom she needs to escape from the oppressing Victorian conventions. Sarah however will not deserve her own human identity until the end of Chapter Four when the vicar, conversing to Mrs. Poulteney, finally reveals her new companion's full name: "Her name is Sarah Woodruff" (25).

Sarah's association to the unknown in the first chapter of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* fully discloses her proud unconventionality:¹¹⁶ she lives beyond

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

¹¹⁵ M. C. Michael, "Who is Sarah?: A Critique of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman's' Feminism" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 28, 1987, p. 231.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

her time, emerging as a completely untraditional and nonconformist woman. In other words, she typifies the unconventional mid-nineteenth-century woman who, attempting to define her independence and her emancipation, resists the conservative patriarchal standards of Victorian society, challenging therefore the male-centric ideology which dominates it. In this respect, Sarah's aware otherness, her diversity from the typically Victorian womanhood, clearly appears in Chapter Twenty when she declares:

What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. I shall never have children, a husband, and those innocent happinesses they have. [...] I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. (176)

Sarah's nonconformity transpires also from her physical traits; endowed with a "dark brown" mane (70), "red tints" (71), a "very brown, almost ruddy" skin (71), a "strong nose" (70), "heavy eyebrows" (70) and "dark eyes" (70), Sarah's appearance reflects the canons of exotic beauty.¹¹⁷ In this regard, when Charles for the first time looks at Sarah, he realizes that:

It was not a pretty face, like Ernestina's. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period's standard or taste. But it was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring. There was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness. (10)

As this passage suggests, Sarah's lack of conventionality derives from her unordinary and mysterious outward appearance which seems to come closer to the oriental kind of beauty, rather than the western one. Furthermore, the heroine's "instinctual profundity of her insight" (53), evaluated as one of her two curses, enhances her mysteriousness. Anachronistically compared to a twentieth-century computer for her ability to comprehend people's impression in their fullest sense, Sarah is endowed with an unusual power of vision, a form of innate intelligence, which enables her not simply to look at people, but rather to look through them. This is the reason why Charles, after his first unexpected encounter with Sarah on the Cobb, "thought of that look as a lance" (10). Similarly, her clothing style does not comply the accepted Victorian standards;¹¹⁸ this might be grasped when Charles, approaching Sarah for the first time, looks quite stunned at her unladylike way of dressing:

She had taken off her bonnet and held it in her hand; her hair was pulled tight back inside the collar of the black coat – which was bizarre, more like a man's

¹¹⁷ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 129.

¹¹⁸ E. Dominguez Romero and V. Martin de la Rosa, "A percept/concept/ual approach to stereotype reading in Fowles' 'Lieutenant's Woman'" in *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, Vol. 4, 2017, p. 6.

riding-coat than any woman's coat that had been in fashion those past forty years. (9, 10)

On their first encounter on the stone pier in Lyme Regis, it is evident that the Sarah's appearance is clearly filtered through a male viewpoint, of course Charles's. In this light, as Michael underlines, the novel's heroines does not exist outside the male perspective and to confirm this, her characterization alludes to various mythologies, all built upon the masculine perception of the woman.¹¹⁹ To provide some examples, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* incorporates the Original Sin myth of Adam and Eve, personified by Charles and Sarah respectively: not only does the savage Undercliff evoke the Garden of Eden, but also Sarah plays the role of temptress Eve. In this sense, fitting the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, a further result of the male point of view, enigmatic Sarah appears to Charles as a dangerous woman. To witness her tempting behaviour, Sarah's sensuality undoubtedly plays a central role: when Charles, for instance, discovers her sound asleep in the Undercliff, he notices that "There was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay" (70). Acting as a sensual seductress, disguised however by her mock innocence, Sarah has the capability of manipulating Charles: "It was as if, when she was before him, he had become blind: had not seen her for what she was, a woman most patently dangerous" (147). With this in mind, it is undeniable that Sarah's typically exotic appearance, coupled with her sensual attractiveness, discloses potential dangerousness as well as a threat to the community in which she lives.

A further aspect which preserves the titular protagonist's mysteriousness in the course of the novel is her lack of subjectivity, strategically excluded from the text.¹²⁰ Functioning as an enigmatic object, rather than a transparent subject, Sarah never reveals her own point of view, nor allows the author-narrator to read her mind or have insight into her inwardness. Since her characterization is filtered exclusively through others' perspectives, male perspective to be more accurate, (such as that of Charles, of the omniscient narrator, and eventually of Fowles himself), her freedom as a character is just an illusion. The fact that the narrator possesses a limited knowledge of Sarah's psychology is exemplified in his declaration: "I no more intend to find out what was going on in her mind" (242). To add further ambiguity around this character, when the

¹¹⁹ M. C. Michael, "Who is Sarah?": A Critique of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman's' Feminism" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 28, 1987, p. 231.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

narrator refers to Sarah, he continuously makes use of dubitative expressions such as ‘perhaps’, ‘as if’ and “it was hard to say” (150). Most importantly, the author-persona prominently displays his unawareness of Sarah when, at the end of Chapter Twelve, he asks himself: “Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?” (94)¹²¹ He is incapable of answering those question until the beginning of the following chapter, when he answers to himself by affirming, “I do not know” (95), not solving therefore Sarah’s enigma. Likewise, Charles—admittedly confesses his inability to unlock the mystery that revolves around the character of Sarah. In this regard, the narrator claims that Charles: “had become a little obsessed with Sarah ... or at any rate with the enigma she presented” (128). In this regard, when in Chapter Forty-Nine Charles writes to Sarah announcing his intention to break off his engagement to Ernestina, he addresses her as “my sweet and mysterious Sarah” (373) and as “my sweet enigma” (374). Most strikingly, not even Sarah is unable to understand her own psychology.¹²² In her last dialogue with Charles, she indeed reveals: “I am not to be understood even by myself. And I can’t tell you why, but I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding” (455). In this sense, it clearly appears that Sarah’s mind, being enigmatic both to Charles and to the author-narrator, cannot but be indecipherable to the heroine herself.

Needless to say, the narrator’s and Charles’s ignorance about Sarah’s inner thoughts is a tactical ploy used by Fowles to focus the reader’s attention on the mystery surrounding the novel’s heroine.¹²³ In this light, during an interview Fowles himself declared: “I deliberately left her character [Sarah] and motives very open”.¹²⁴ To preserve her mysteriousness throughout the narration without attempting to solve it is thus absolutely fundamental in order to fulfil her role in the novel. Since the narration appears to rely on Sarah’s mysteriousness, Fowles’s postmodern work would have certainly altered if Sarah’s viewpoint had been revealed within the novel.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 229.

¹²² M. Salami, *John Fowles’s Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 127.

¹²³ B. Woodcock, *Male Mythologies: John Fowles and Masculinity*, New Jersey, Barnes & Noble Books, 1984, p. 98.

¹²⁴ J. Fowles and C. M. Barnum, “An Interview with John Fowles”, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1985, p. 195.

3.2.2 The Deliberate Deception about Sarah's Love with Varguennes

As far as Sarah's pre-history is concerned, she is orphan of her mother and the daughter of a tenant farmer, "a man of excellent principle and highly respected" within his community (33). The obsession with his established ancestors however prompted him to terminate his tenancy and buy a new farm for his own. Unable to redeem the mortgage and preserve his respectability, Sarah's father went insane and thus was sent to a lunatic asylum where he died only a year later. In the meantime, he "provided the girl with a better education that one would expect" (33). Because of her father's loss, Sarah is forced to earn for her own living, finding employment as the governess of Captain Talbot's children at Charmouth, west Dorset. It is precisely during her stay there that Miss Woodruff becomes acquainted with a foreign naval officer, named Varguennes, the French Lieutenant of the title, whom she has to take care of, after he gravely injured his leg during the shipwreck of his vessel:

His name was Varguennes. He was brought to Captain Talbot's after the wreck of his ship. All but two of the others were drowned. [...] His wound was most dreadful. His flesh was torn from his hip to his knee. If gangrene had intervened, he would have lost his leg. He was in great pain, those first days. Yet he never cried. (168, 169)

Once Varguennes recovers, he takes his leave from the Talbot's household, openly expressing his affection to his caregiver: "He made me believe that his whole happiness depended on my accompanying him when he left – more than that, that my happiness depended on it as well" (171). The distance from the French Lieutenant however causes Sarah overwhelming feelings of loneliness and misery that she is not able to endure. Determined to deceive Mrs. Talbot with a plausible excuse, Sarah decides to temporarily quit her job and begin a journey to her lover, but when she finally meets him at a quite disreputable inn, she realizes that she "had been for him no more than an amusement during his convalescence" (174). Although the novel's protagonist is aware of Varguennes's seducing spirit and does not restrain herself from depicting him as "a liar" (174) as well as "a worthless adventurer" (174), she proclaims that "he would never violate a woman against her will" (175). At that point, unable to resist his sexual advances, Sarah consents to intercourse with Varguennes, admitting during one of her first encounters with him, that she "gave myself to him" (175). Nevertheless, before his return to France, the French Lieutenant promises Sarah he will come back to Lyme Regis to marry her but allegedly that return will never occur.

In truth, Sarah's confession to Charles about her love affair with Varguennes is a deliberate lie: pretending to have been seduced and then jilted by the French Lieutenant, Fowles's heroine actually deceives Charles (and before him, all Lymers). Though she is conscious that her past as the French Lieutenant's whore will condemn her to the tragic condition of an emarginated pariah, a disgraced and fallen woman, Sarah resorts to this ploy in order to defend her role of social outcast and finally achieve existential freedom.¹²⁵ In other words, it is her status of a social outsider, reinforced by the various insulting appellations with which she is identified, that paradoxically gives her the individual liberty she needs to ensure her independence.

In this sense, she evidently acts as a rather selfish, cunning and untrustworthy manipulator, who perfectly schemes as well as maneuvers situations and events just for her own sake.¹²⁶ Her skillful manipulation can be witnessed in several episodes throughout the novel, such as when in the shadowy Undercliff she fabricates a different version of her sexual affair with Varguennes. Intentionally allowing Charles to believe that she lost her virginity, Sarah has the purpose of eliciting his sympathy but at the same time of seducing him. A second episode that exemplifies Sarah's deceitfulness occurs when she allows Mrs. Fairley to see herself in the prohibited Undercliff in order to be dismissed by her employer, Mrs. Poulteney. A further instance coincides with the seduction scene at Endicott's Family Hotel in Exeter: again, Sarah has carefully planned to sprain her ankle, purchase the bandage before the accident and wear only her nightgown, in order to show herself as sexually available:

Sarah was seated by the fire in a chair facing the door, her feet on a stool, with both them and her legs covered by a red Welsh blanket. The green merino shawl was round her shoulders, but could not quite hide the fact that she was in a long-sleeved nightgown. Her hair was loose and fell over her green shoulders. She seemed to him much smaller – and agonizingly shy. (348)

To sustain her false pretense, when Charles enters her room, Sarah appears totally spontaneous and exclaims: "Forgive me. I ... I did not expect..." (348). From this line, it clearly emerges that Sarah has concocted this story with the sole purpose of submitting and possessing Charles. Nevertheless, soon after they consummate their sexual intercourse, Charles surprisingly notices "a red stain on the front tails of his shirt" (357):

¹²⁵ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 70.

¹²⁶ B. Zare, "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', in *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 374, 1997, p. 184.

he discovers he has deflowered the virginal Sarah. It is only in Chapter Forty-Seven, namely more than halfway through the novel that the narrator reveals:

She had not given herself to Varguennes. She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis has been based on a lie. But for what purpose. Why? Why? Why? Blackmail! To put him totally in her power! (357).

Charles therefore becomes aware that Sarah has not told him the truth about her love affair with the French Lieutenant. Meanwhile, she admits she has deceived him out of envy of Charles's betrothal to Ernestina. She has fallen in love with Charles, but she fears she is not worthy of him.

Yes. I have deceived you. [...] You have given me the consolation of believing that in another world, another age, another life, I might have been your wife. You have given me the strength to go on living. [...] There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I loved you ... I think from the moment I saw you. (358)

By deliberately telling her lie, Sarah Woodruff interestingly transforms into a real fiction-maker, the narrator's double.¹²⁷ As highlighted by Cooper, Sarah acts as a real storyteller who creates and then narrates her own story.¹²⁸ In other words, Sarah's active role of inventing stories and manipulating individuals might be compared to the author's task of constructing plots and developing characters. In Chapter Twenty, indeed, for the first time in the novel, Sarah unleashes her talented creativity by telling the story of herself and Varguennes, and then of herself and Charles. In this respect, if Sarah is the authoress of her own lies, Charles in turn interprets the role of the reader who attempts to decipher her mystery. As a result, it is not Charles but Sarah herself who becomes the seducer, guilty of leading Charles astray.

Even though in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles entrusts his heroine with creative powers, narrating stories is not Sarah's natural disposition.¹²⁹ Such disinclination might be witnessed in her verbal ineptitude which, coupled with her inability of self-expression, is often exemplified in the novel through declarations such as "I do not know how to say it" (145), "I cannot explain" (174), or "I am at a loss of words" (450). The protagonist's wordlessness is proved until the end of the novel when, in Chapter Sixty, in her struggle to give voice to her heart, she twice claims that she does "not know what to say" (450). Sarah's deceptiveness is thus central in Fowles's

¹²⁷ E. D. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 206.

¹²⁸ P. Cooper, *The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity*, cit., p. 110.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

narration, because the heroine betrays Charles but the reader as well. By means of her creative power, Sarah invents her deliberate lie, resembling therefore the novel's narrative voice. In so doing, if Sarah performs the role of the narrator, Charles in turn becomes the listener, subjected to her deception and manipulation.

3.2.3 A Hysterical Disease?

Throughout the novel Sarah's enigma leads Charles to turn to Dr. Grogan and seek advice, specifically in Chapter Nineteen, Twenty-Seven and Twenty-Eight. With no surprise, the doctor confirms the protagonist's mysteriousness by declaring: "We know more about the fossils out there on the beach than we do about what takes place in that girl's mind" (154, 155). Compared to "a mist" (157) that shrouds her real identity, according to Grogan, Sarah suffers from an "obscure melancholia" (155), a disease of the mind rather than of the body, "a cholera, a typhus of the intellectual faculties" (225). Regarding Sarah as "mentally diseased" (227) who needs to be cured in "a private asylum in Exeter" (228), Dr. Grogan warns Charles that she might be another Marie de Morell.¹³⁰ Notably, she is a hysterical sixteen-year-old girl who, according to her version, has been offended by a gallant young officer, Émile de La Roncière, for having received a number of poison-pen letters, both written in his handwriting and signed with his initials. Not satisfied with having this lieutenant excluded from his father's school, Marie de Morell additionally concocts a story in which she is victim of a sexual assault made by La Roncière who in the trial of 1835 has been pleaded guilty and innocently sentenced to a ten-year imprisonment.

At that pre-Freudian time, Marie is supposed to suffer from a painful form of nervous disorder which not only causes her oneiric and hallucinatory visions, but has also effects on her imagination, inducing her to conceive herself as the victim of a man. In clinical terms, Marie's mental illness coincides with what in the twentieth century has been classified as 'hysteria'.¹³¹ Even though neither fictional Dr. Grogan nor realistic Karl Matthaei use such terminology in the novel, the Fowlesian narrator

¹³⁰ L. F. Shields, "Hysteria, Sexual Assault and Military: The Trial of Émile de La Roncière and 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 96.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 86.

purposely misleads the reader in the depiction of Sarah as a hysterical woman.¹³² In this respect, especially in the first half of the novel, the narrator denies that hysteria might be attributed to Sarah: when in Chapter Two her tragic face is put in the foreground, the narrator highlights that in it there is “no hysteria, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness” (10). In line with this, when at the end of Chapter Twelve Sarah weeps and contemplates suicide, the narrator reassures the reader that her teardrops are not “the sobbing, hysterical sort of tears that presage violent action” (94). When in Chapter Thirty-One Charles finds Sarah sleeping in the barn, the narrator explains that “there was a wildness about her. Not the wildness of lunacy or hysteria” (249, 250). These quotations thus seem to confirm that the aura of mystery which revolves around the character of Sarah cannot be associated to any hysterical illness.

Nevertheless, the narrator simultaneously misdirects the reader by often applying the hysterical illness to Sarah.¹³³ Just to provide an example, in Chapter Twenty-Eight, he explains that women who tend to behave like Marie de Morell are supposed to suffer from:

The mental illness we today call hysteria – the assumption, that is, of symptoms of disease or disability in order to gain the attention and sympathy of others: a neurosis or psychosis almost invariably caused, as we now know, by sensual repression. (233)

In this sense, as this passage suggests, Sarah behaves hysterically in order to grab attention and elicit sympathy: “mental illness of the hysteric kind” is “a pitiable striving for love and security” (237). In other words, playing the false role of the hysterical woman, the novel’s heroine has deceived Charles with the sole purpose of gaining his love, his security and his affect, thus becoming an object of his interest and eventually seducing him. This of course implies that Sarah does not prove herself sincere and trustworthy, but on the contrary, deliberately acts as a mysterious woman in order to conceal her true self and her real intensions. Sarah’s conscious simulation of a social outsider might thus confirm that she does not suffer from any type of hysterical disease, nor any dissociation of identity.

Even though no trace of hysteria can be found in Sarah’s personality, it does not necessarily signify that she may not be identified as hysteric by twentieth-century psychiatrics.¹³⁴ Since the definition of hysteria has remarkably altered over the last

¹³² Ibid., p. 101.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 100.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

century, in 1968 the second edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* introduces a new category to the list of mental disorders, that is, ‘hysterical or histrionic personality’.¹³⁵ Diagnosed especially in female subjects, it is defined as a common personality disorder whose main symptom coincides with self-dramatization, namely the tendency to purposely grab attention, behave seductively, and depend upon others. With this in mind, as Shields interestingly notices, several traits of the hysterical personality can refer to Sarah.¹³⁶ In this respect, the novel teems with countless examples which mark Sarah’s histrionic behaviour: from Chapter One, she catches her townspeople’s eye by standing at the end of the Cobb, gazing out at the sea; she continuously captivates Charles’s attention by seeking him and demanding secret encounters in the Undercliff; it is precisely throughout these trysts that Sarah, by means of her false story about Varguennes, tries to elicit Charles’s sympathy until, at the Exeter hotel, she finally seduces him. Though the novel’s narrator creates ambiguity around Sarah Woodruff’s characterization, both accepting and rejecting her hysterical disorder, according to mid-twentieth-century studies, the novel’s protagonist might be diagnosed as suffering from hysterical or histrionic personality.

Despite such divergent assumptions about Sarah’s hysterical disorders, through this character Fowles aims at portraying just a potential idea of female personality within the Victorian era.¹³⁷ In this regard, besides the conventional and even idealized representation of the Victorian woman, perfectly embodied by Ernestina Freeman, there are also other types of women who, like Sarah, due to their strongly independent spirit, might be subject to psychological illnesses and thus regarded as emotionally unstable.

3.2.4 The Achievement of Sarah’s Emancipation

Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* follows the heroine Sarah Woodruff’s trajectory from an alleged fallen woman to a nineteenth-century emancipated New Woman. Because of her reported love affair with the titular French Lieutenant who seduced and then abandoned her, according to the moral standards of the Victorian society of Lyme Regis, Sarah earns the reputation of a social outcast, feeling thus

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

rejected from her community. Since she knows that there is “no other way to break out of what [she] was” (176), Sarah decides “to be what [she] must be: An outcast” (180). In addition, the denomination ‘The French Lieutenant’s Whore’ cannot but confirm her moral condemnation and thus enhance her marginality. Her condition is given evidence when she declares:

My only happiness is when I sleep. When I wake, the nightmare begins. I feel cast on a desert island, imprisoned, condemned, and I know not what crime it is for. (142)

However, throughout the novel Charles Smithson is the only character who is realizes that Sarah’s disapproval appellations fail to determine her real self.¹³⁸ He is not aware of whom Sarah actually is but he knows that her enigmatic identity does not coincide with what she is supposed to be by her townspeople.¹³⁹ In this respect, it is exactly Charles’s intuition that helps the reader throw light upon her unsolved mystery: what is striking is that Sarah deliberately plays the role of the French Lieutenant’s woman. This means that she pretends to be a disgraced woman, a dangerous *femme fatale*, a social pariah in order to refrain from the moral and social constrictions imposed by Victorian England and hence develop her individual freedom. In this regard, in one of their secret rendezvous, Sarah confides to Charles that she is “a doubly dishonored woman. By circumstances. And by choice” (175). Sarah intentionally plays the role of a social outsider, not only because her adverse circumstance dictates that condition, but also because she personally chooses it.

By pretending to be a fallen woman, Sarah asserts her own independence.¹⁴⁰ She defends her individual liberty for instance when she claims: “I married shame” (175) and, again, when she states: “What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like the other women” (175). Not caring about the humiliation to which she is subjected, Sarah affirms:

I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human anymore. I am the French Lieutenant’s Whore. (176)

¹³⁸ M. Marais, “‘I am infinitely strange to myself’: Existentialism, the Bildungsroman, and John Fowles’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’” in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2014, p. 248.

¹³⁹ R. P. Lynch, “Freedoms in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2002, p. 60.

¹⁴⁰ E. Dominguez Romero and V. Martin de la Rosa, “A percept/concept/ual approach to stereotype reading in Fowles’ ‘Lieutenant’s Woman’” in *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, Vol. 4, 2017, p. 9.

Taking into account her behaviour, Sarah might be conceived as a committed feminist who, attempting to transcend the limitations of the Victorian Age, silently struggles for her personal liberty and her existential authenticity. She intelligently takes advantage of her reputation of the French Lieutenant's Woman in order to affirm herself as an independent lady. As Karl Marx's initial epigraph announces, "Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself" (initial page), the key theme of emancipation unfolds throughout the plot: from the beginning of the novel Sarah Woodruff behaves like a liberated woman in the guise of a social outsider living within a strictly conventional community. By the end of the novel, she completes her journey towards emancipation and transforms into an existential heroine, a liberated modern woman, realizing therefore her project of feminist awareness.

When in Chapter Sixty Charles visits her in Chelsea, Sarah finds herself within Dante Gabriel Rossetti's household, joining his circle of celebrated yet revolutionary Victorian painters, writers and thinkers, the so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Working as Rossetti's "assistant" (448) and occasionally serving as "his model" (448), within this new artistic community Sarah can finally give vent to her pure and nonconformist spirit, no longer feeling an outsider.¹⁴¹ To this purpose, she openly admits:

I am happy, I am at last arrived, or so it seems to me, where I belong. [...] No one knows it better than myself. [...] I am not to seek it elsewhere. [...] I cannot wish my life other than it is at the moment. (453, 454)

Both for his disposition and for his role of major artist within the Pre-Raphaelite movement Rossetti represents a turning point in the fake sanctimoniousness of the Victorian era.¹⁴² This is the reason why in Chapter Twenty the omniscient narrator writes: "The revolutionary art movement of Charles's day was of course the Pre-Raphaelite: they at least were making an attempt to admit nature and sexuality" (177). In this regard, during an interview Fowles claimed: "The Pre-Raphaelite movement was one of the key movements in working out that awful strait-jacketed, puritanical aspect of the Victorian age".¹⁴³ This reference to such progressive group of artists is aimed at

¹⁴¹ J. R. Aubrey, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 170.

¹⁴² J. Noakes and M. Reynolds, *John Fowles: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature. The Collector, The Magus, The French Lieutenant's Woman*, London, Vintage, 2003, p. 188.

¹⁴³ J. Campbell and J. Fowles, "An Interview with John Fowles", cit., p. 464.

legitimizing Sarah's untraditional nature, thus accepting her as a Pre-Raphaelite woman who establishes herself as a subject rather than an object. Within the circle of the Pre-Raphaelites Sarah seems to have finally found her own environment in which she has the opportunity to give voice to her nonconformist personality without being dishonoured.

When she first appears to Charles at Rossetti's mansion, Sarah proclaims her apparent unconventionality through fashionable and colourful clothes:

And her dress! It was so different that he thought for a moment she was someone else. He had always seen her in his mind in the former clothes, a haunted face rising from a widowed darkness. But this was someone in the full uniform of the New Woman, flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions of female fashion. (446)

Wearing a "pink-and-white striped silk blouse" (446) with a "delicate small collar of white lace" (446), and a "rich dark blue" skirt (446), tight at the waist by a "crimson belt with a gilt star clasp" (446), Sarah vividly evokes the colours and patterns of the flag of the United States, fostering therefore the battle for women's political as well as social freedom.¹⁴⁴ Besides her bohemian style, Sarah also manifests her nonconformity by refusing Charles's proposal of marriage: "I do not wish to marry" (453). Notably, this choice is motivated mainly by two reasons; the former coincides with her past, with her feeling of solitude, which has encouraged her to maintain her independence without building a family:

first, because of my past, which habituated me to loneliness. I had always thought that I hated it. I now live in a world where loneliness is most easy to avoid. And I have found that I treasure it. I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage. (453).

Her latter motivation regards instead her present, her wellbeing both with the company of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and her working career:

My second reason is my present. I never expected to be happy in life. Yet I find myself happy where I am situated now. I have varied and congenial work – work so pleasant that I no longer think of it as such. (453)

By achieving "her new self-knowledge and self-possession" (454), Sarah finally establishes herself as an emancipated modern woman, the New Woman of the late nineteenth century, endowed with "an independence of spirit" and "a determination to

¹⁴⁴ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 44.

be what she was” (119). Through the violation of the social and moral standards of the Victorian Age, together with her unusual femininity and her sensual beauty, Sarah thus epitomizes a totally new form of freedom.

In her role of sexual seductress, Sarah simultaneously functions for Charles as a helper, a sort of catalytic agent.¹⁴⁵ her emancipatory process towards the status of a new independent woman propels the Victorian gentleman on his path towards self-awareness. Viewing the titular French Lieutenant’s woman as “a glimpse of an ideal world” (177), which he will never be able to access with his conventional fiancée Ernestina, Charles also conceives Sarah as an escape into “a mythical world” (177), far away from the social restrictions imposed by Victorian England. In this sense, Fowles assigns to the character of Sarah the role of his liberator, the promulgator of his freedom.¹⁴⁶ This signifies that the female protagonist represents for Charles an existential impetus, the driving principle of Charles’s development, a “symbol around which [he] had accredited all his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms” (336). Having already gained her individual liberty by means of her otherness, Sarah is capable of granting the same existential freedom to Charles, encouraging him to pursue the path towards his personal growth. By attributing to a female character the role of existential mentor, Fowles unveils the feminist streak which develops throughout his novel, the belief that blind men can reach their existential authenticity into the arms of women. In this light, Fowles himself declared:

I am a feminist. Men need to realise that a great deal of truth in life lies in the woman. A woman’s main task is to educate us, to make us see we’re not fully educated yet.¹⁴⁷

As *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* thematizes, the conception of the woman as emancipator, capable of addressing men towards their personal freedom, is strictly linked to the existential theme of the novel. Borrowing this motif from Sartre’s existential philosophy, in one of his many interviews Fowles indeed revealed:

I’m interested in the side of existentialism which deals with freedom: the business of whether we do have freedom, whether we do have free will, to what extent you can change your life, choose yourself, and all the rest of it. Most of my major characters have been involved in this Sartrian concept of authenticity and inauthenticity.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ M. C. Michael, “‘Who is Sarah?’: A Critique of ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’s’ Feminism”, cit., p. 232.

¹⁴⁶ B. Zare, “Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, in *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 374, 1997, p. 185.

¹⁴⁷ A. Lee-Potter, “Fair or Fowles?”, cit.

¹⁴⁸ J. Campbell and J. Fowles, “An Interview with John Fowles”, cit., p. 466.

3.3 Charles Smithson's Journey Towards Existential Authenticity

Though the title, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, implies that Sarah Woodruff plays the role of the leading character, in truth the novel centers on Charles Smithson's evolutionary progress from a conventionalized Victorian gentleman to a fulfilled existentialist.¹⁴⁹ In this sense, Charles becomes the novel's real protagonist: the narrator not only carefully follows his actions, but also adopts his perspective, filtering the character of Sarah according to his viewpoint. His centrality is confirmed by the fact that, whereas Sarah's characterization is cloaked in mystery throughout the plot, Charles's social and financial status, conflicting emotions, as well as deep fears are openly expressed.

Introduced for the first time in Chapter One while walking along Lyme Bay arm in arm with his beloved fiancée Ernestina, Charles is accurately portrayed in Chapter Three as a thirty-two-year-old aristocratic Londoner. With regard to his origins, he descends from a family of "English country squires" (13): his grandfather bequeathed his elder and unmarried son Robert the family estate of Winsyatt, in Wiltshire; to his younger son, Charles's father, he left instead an amount of money as well as a number of lands. The narrator also explains that the protagonist's father suffered a terrible tragedy, "the simultaneous death of his young wife and the still-born child who would have been a sister to the one-year-old Charles." (14). After his father passed away, Charles fell "heir not only to his father's diminished fortune [...] but eventually to his uncle's very considerable one" (14). The thematic concern of inheritance, which starts emerging in the first pages of the novel, will run through the end of it in relation to this character. It is no coincidence that the epigraph taken from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* that prefaces the same chapter deals exactly with this motif: "But a still more important consideration is that the chief part of the organization of every living creature is due to inheritance" (12).

Being the prototype of the affluent aristocratic, Charles becomes one of those "intelligent idlers" (17) who totally refuses to work.¹⁵⁰ As a result, the reader can easily comprehend why the narrator declares that "laziness was [...] Charles's distinguishing trait" (17). Not casually, the narrator claims that in the Victorian period "one of the commonest symptoms of wealth [...] was tranquil boredom" (13). Charles then mirrors

¹⁴⁹ M. C. Michael, "Who is Sarah?: A Critique of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman's Feminism'", p. 231.

¹⁵⁰ D. W. Landrum, "Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1996, p. 104.

a typical member of the Victorian upper class: “he was a gentleman; and gentlemen cannot go into trade” (290). Confident that he will inherit his uncle’s fortune, Charles affords not to work and thus occupies his time studying fossils: “During the last three years he had become increasingly interested in paleontology; that, he had decided was his field” (17). Charles’s amateur interest in paleontological research evidently mirrors the typical Victorian as well as Darwinian penchant for analysis and classification.¹⁵¹ In other words, the tendency to categorize, define and label, which characterizes Charles during the activity of fossil hunting and collecting, generally coincides with the force that drives Victorian science to study nature.

Since before the actions of the novel begin, Charles has already been engaged to Ernestina. With her elegant allure and her refined manners, she is capable of bewitching sexually unfulfilled Charles. In so doing, “what she did not know was that she had touched an increasingly sensitive place in Charles’s innermost soul;” (81). Fascinated by conventional and virginal Ernestina, Charles intends to marry her, though he feels that his passionate yearnings can be satisfied only through mysterious women.¹⁵² In his past Charles indeed used to travel abroad, away from the stagnant and restrictive Victorian world. His journeys therefore function for him as an escape into a more open and more permissive world than the Victorian one, in which he has the opportunity to fulfil his wild fantasies:

He was not like the great majority of his peers and contemporaries. That was why he had travelled so much; he found English society too hidebound, English solemnity too solemn, English thought too moralistic, English religion too bigoted. (129, 130)

Nevertheless, in the two years before becoming acquainted with Ernestina, “Travelling no longer attracted him; but women did, and he was therefore in a state of extreme sexual frustration” (82). Notably, Charles realizes that:

previously travelling had been a substitute for not having a wife. It took his mind off domestic affairs; it also allowed him to take an occasional woman into his bed, a pleasure he strictly forbade himself (81, 82).

Even though at the beginning of the novel Charles believes that “he loved Ernestina” (82), his encounter with Sarah will be fatal and will dramatically change

¹⁵¹ M. K. Booker, “What We Have Instead of God: Sexuality, Textuality and Infinity in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, cit. p. 183.

¹⁵² M. Salami, *John Fowles’s Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 121.

forever his destiny.¹⁵³ He is not just sexually attracted to the French lieutenant's woman, but he has also "become a little obsessed with Sarah ... or at any rate with the enigma she presented" (128). Despite his betrothal with Ernestina, Charles "had no thought except for the French Lieutenant's Woman" (117). As the narrator describes in Chapter Seventeen, the protagonist:

began to feel sorry for himself – a brilliant man trapped, a Byron tamed; and his mind wandered back to Sarah, to visual images, attempts to recollect that face, that mouth, that generous mouth. [...] it unsettled him and haunted him, by calling to some hidden self he hardly knew existed. (130).

3.3.1 Charles's Divided Spirit: Victorian and Modern

Engaged to Ernestina, but fascinated by Sarah's mystery, Charles undoubtedly struggles between two contrasting worlds: the Victorian and traditional world on the one side, and a more modern, permissive and freer world, on the other side.¹⁵⁴ Experiencing such inner conflict, the novel's hero appears as a split individual who in part tends to conform to the Victorian norms of behaviour which regulate his society but simultaneously feels entrapped in that duty-bound atmosphere. The complexity of Charles's characterization derives exactly from his twofold nature: on the one hand, he is portrayed as a traditional Victorian gentleman of his age and social class who, besides feeling attracted to charming women like Ernestina, is characterized by the "Byronic ennui" (17) that restrains him from any working career. On the other hand, taking into account his interest in paleontology, his lack of "political conviction" (17), combined to his passion for reading and walking instead of shooting and riding, Charles appears less than an ordinary Victorian. Discontented with his betrothal to Ernestina, the novel's hero meditates upon whether his choice to marry and settle down with her is actually too conformist:

So? In this vital matter of the woman with whom he had elected to share his life, had he not been only too conventional? Instead of doing the most intelligent thing had he not done the most obvious? (129, 130)

¹⁵³ E. D. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 198.

¹⁵⁴ M. Salami, *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 122.

In other words, it is as if Sarah “made him aware of [the] deprivation” (130) which Ernestina represents for him: “His future had always seemed to him of vast potential; and now suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place. She had reminded him of that” (130). It is as if Sarah helped Charles open his eyes and realize Ernestina’s limitations and how absurd his life with her might be. With his divided soul, “one part irony to one part convention” (15), Charles doubtlessly epitomizes what Scruggs labels as the Victorian Age’s “bifurcation”¹⁵⁵: his true and private self lies concealed underneath a more public and respectable self, dominated by notions of duty and conformity.

At this point, Charles has to choose either to follow his superficial self, marrying Ernestina and remaining as he is, an idle English gentleman repressed by the Victorian culture, thus living safely yet inauthentically; or, alternatively, to give vent to his buried self, break off his engagement to Ernestina and start behaving authentically by Sarah Woodruff’s side.¹⁵⁶ Although Sarah admits “There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I love you ... I think from the moment I saw you.” (358), giving Charles false hope, she rejects him: “There can be no happiness for you with me. You cannot marry me, Mr. Smithson” (359). Charles consequently begins to be overwhelmed by a feeling of defeat. In search for “darkness, invisibility, oblivion” (360) where to calm himself down, he takes refuge into a gloomy sanctuary. It is precisely while staring at the crucifix in the altar, in which he sees Sarah’s face, that the novel’s hero has a mental collapse, exemplified by an inner and yet contradictory dialogue “between his better and his worse self” (363):¹⁵⁷

I did not do it. I was led to do it.
What led you to do it?
I was deceived.
What intent lay behind the deception?
I do not know.
But you must judge.
If she had truly loved me she could not have let me go. (363)

Charles is then “caught in a dilemma that was also a current of indecision” (365): “You know your choice. You stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honour, self-respect,

¹⁵⁵ C. Scruggs, “The Two Endings of ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1985, p. 101.

¹⁵⁶ J. Acheson, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 42.

¹⁵⁷ M. Salami, *John Fowles’s Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism*, cit., p. 122.

and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified” (365). As the narrator suggests, Charles’s dilemma is:

the vicious circle that haunted him; that was the failure, the weakness, the cancer, the vital flaw that had brought him to what he was: more an indecision than a reality, more a dream than a man, more a silence than a word, a bone than an action. And a fossil! He had become, while still alive, as if dead. (366)

With Ernestina, Charles would undeniably feel dead like the fossils he collects. Alongside Sarah, described as “the pure essence of cruel but necessary [...] freedom” (369), Charles would contrastingly see “a glimpse of another world: a new reality, a new causality, a new creation” (368). However, what detains him from choosing Sarah and relishing existential freedom is his tremendous sense of “anxiety of freedom” (343), an existential *angst*, a feeling of fear at the mere thought of being free and lonely. Charles begins to experience freedom for the first time in Chapter Thirty-Nine, when he becomes acquainted with a streetwalker, coincidentally named Sarah.¹⁵⁸ In his way back from a London club and a brothel, Charles stops by a “solitary girl” (309) who invites him to her flat. Feeling “for the first time that day [...] a fleeting sense of peace” (314), drunk Charles listens to her story and is then sexually approached by the prostitute but does “not commit the fatal deed” (321). On the contrary, while the young woman is outside to find a cab for him, one of the most loving scenes throughout the plot takes place: the novel’s protagonist is indeed depicted while dandling Sarah’s infant. Even though no sexual intercourse takes place between them, Charles leaves her some money and silently leaves her house.

3.3.2 Darwinism and the Evolutionary Theory

The French Lieutenant’s Woman outlines the evolution of Charles Smithson who from a stereotypical Victorian aristocrat gradually develops into an existential modern hero thanks to Sarah’s guidance.¹⁵⁹ The theme of evolution is therefore central in Fowles’s novel and is introduced by means of the hero’s enthusiasm for Charles Darwin, the

¹⁵⁸ J. Noakes, and M. Reynolds, *John Fowles: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature. The Collector, The Magus, The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, cit., p. 177.

¹⁵⁹ E. D. Rankin, “Cryptic Coloration in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, cit., p. 197.

British naturalist who formulated the evolutionary theory, grounded on the survival of the fittest. In this regard, in Chapter Eight the narrator declares that “Charles called himself a Darwinist” (50) but immediately afterwards, he unexpectedly adds: “yet he had not really understood Darwin” (50). With this declaration, Fowles means that the novel’s protagonist is reading Darwin according to the typically Victorian tradition, which completely differs from the postmodern one.¹⁶⁰ Premising that the Darwinian philosophy has changed since its originator, Darwin himself, has developed, the Victorian Darwinism, which permeates Victorian novels (like those of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy), diverges from the postmodernist Darwinism, exemplified in this case by Fowles’s novel.¹⁶¹ Whereas Victorian Darwinism asserts the fall of the human dominance over nature, discovering a principle of natural pre-eminence, postmodern Darwinism disregards the superiority of nature in order to rescue a positive conception of human existence from the anthropocentric remains. In other words, the salvation proposed by evolutionists enables the individual to redefine his own self and to transform him into an existential self. For this reason, Fowles claims that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* displays “an existential awareness before it was chronologically possible”.¹⁶² Considering that the underlying theme of evolution has to be read as a synonym for existentialism, the modern narrator incorporates references and quotations from Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* with the sole purpose of appropriating them. Through this reenactment of the theory of evolution, the reader is granted the freedom to use and misuse Darwin, thus adapting and interpreting his discourse in different terms. In this sense, the redefinition of Victorian Darwinism is perfectly in line with the process of appropriation applied by Fowles to any other Victorian source cited in the plot as well as in the epigraphs.

Charles’s adherence to Darwinism, coupled with his friendly bond with Dr. Grogan, a fervent supporter of Charles Darwin, and his choice of Sarah over his traditional engagement to Ernestina, undoubtedly direct the protagonist towards evolution and encourage him to undertake the path to personal freedom.¹⁶³ In truth, what is worth noting is that Fowles broadens the concept of existentialism to the social sphere,

¹⁶⁰ W. Stephenson, *Fowles’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’*, cit., p. 63.

¹⁶¹ T. E. Jackson, “Charles and the Hopeful Monster: Postmodern Evolutionary Theory in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’” in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1997, p. 221.

¹⁶² M. Bradbury, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, Totowa, Manchester University Press, 1977, p. 140.

¹⁶³ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 65.

encompassing therefore social evolution.¹⁶⁴ As Mr Freeman suggests during an encounter with Charles, an individual needs to change in order to survive:

‘I would have you repeat what you said, what was it, about the purpose of this theory of evolution. A species must change ...?’
‘In order to survive. It must adapt itself to changes in the environment.’
‘[...] if one does not [...] change oneself to meet the taste of the day, then one does not survive. One goes bankrupt.’ (290).

In the similar way in which Charles feels trapped in his relationship with Ernestina, he realizes that if he remains part of his moneyed aristocratic class, he will be doomed to extinction, to transform into a “poor living fossil” (293). With the loss of Winsyatt, due to his uncle Robert’s unexpected marriage with Bella Tomkins, “an upper middle-class adventuress” (213), Charles learns that any hope of inheritance and baronetcy fades away. Regarding himself as “a victim of evolution” (290), Charles not only feels threatened by his economic possession, now diminished, but also despairs about his future financial prospect. Nevertheless, out of idleness and snobbery, he resolutely refuses to inherit and carry on Mr Freeman’s business: “Trade. Commerce. [...] it was an insult, a contempt for his class ... Freeman must know he could never go into business, play the shopkeeper” (295). In this respect, the narrator also claims:

But there was one noble element in his rejection: a sense that the pursuit of money was an insufficient purpose in life. [...] he would [...] be [...] a what-you-will that lets others work and contributes nothing. [...] a sense that choosing to be nothing – to have nothing but prickles – was the last saving grace of a gentleman; his last freedom, almost. (297)

Although the novel’s protagonist is aware that due to the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest his aristocratic rank will not be able to survive and will thus be superseded by the industrious bourgeoisie, Charles does not intend to contaminate his noble dignity by entering middle-class professions.¹⁶⁵ In this sense, by neglecting Mr Freeman’s job offer and restraining himself from rescuing his financial condition, the novel’s hero aims at achieving individual authenticity through the choice of self-discovery, rather than of social evolution.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ W. Stephenson, *Fowles’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’*, cit., p. 58.

3.3.3 Sam Farrow, Charles's Valet

To complete the portrayal of Charles Smithson's characterization, some attention has to be focused on his ten-year-younger "Cockney servant" (42), Sam Farrow, and on their troubled relationship. Portrayed as a black-haired, pale-skinned, and grey-eyed man, Sam has a "faintly foolish face" (42) that reveals a degree of ambiguity; he is indeed described as:

absent-minded, contentious, vain, fancying himself sharp; too fond of drolling and idling, leaning with a straw-haulm or sprig of parsley cocked in the corner of his mouth. (42).

The relationship with his master Charles is equally ambiguous;¹⁶⁶ even though Sam is described as "too young to be a good manservant" (42), in Chapter Seven the narrator claims that Charles actually plays the role of a caring and kind-hearted master who shows fondness to "his Sancho Panza" (44) and does not take advantage of him:

his relationship with Sam did show a kind of affection, a human bond, that was a good deal better than the frigid barrier so many of the new rich [...] were by that time erecting between themselves and their domestics. (43)

However, when the novel unfolds, the hostility between master and servant begins to break out; not only does Charles blame Sam for being too often drunk:

"Sam, you've been drinking again."

[...]

"*Quod est demonstrandum*. You have the hump on a morning that would make a miser sing. *Ergo*, you have been drinking."

[...]

"You may have been, [...], born in a gin-palace" (40, 41)

Charles also asserts his educational superiority, addressing his valet in Latin and making him feel socially inferior. In Chapter Fifteen he claims for instance: "*Ursa?* Are you speaking Latin now? Never mind, my wit is beyond you, you bear" (110); or some lines later, he asks him: "Ah, but where is the *primum mobile?*" (110). In addition, suspecting that Sam is going too "fast" (41) with his lover Mary, Charles speaks to him in a threatening tone: "if you're not doubly fast with my breakfast I shall fasten my boot on to the posterior portion of your miserable anatomy" (42).

Entrapped within such financial, social, cultural as well as educational inferiority, Sam Farrow feels the urge to free himself from that subordinate and servile

¹⁶⁶ D. W. Landrum, "Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'" cit., p. 105.

condition, taking the path to his own emancipation.¹⁶⁷ It is precisely at this point of the narration that Karl Marx and his key concept of class struggle come into play, thematizing the subplot of the novel. Needless to say, Marx's materialistic philosophy, based on the principle of class conflict as the mechanism for human progress, exerts an enormous impact upon the late nineteenth-century scenario. To witness it, Fowles not only decided to set his novel in 1867, the year in which the first volume of *Das Kapital* was published, but also quoted and alluded to Karl Marx on several occasions. Notably, already in Chapter Three Marx is indirectly referred to as:

the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum; and whose work in those sombre walls was to bear such bright red fruit. (13)

In *Das Kapital* Marx advances the theory that when wealth begins to be accumulated within the hands of a minor group of individuals, namely the capitalists, that minority will fall prey to decadence and will eventually be superseded by a stronger majority, the working class.¹⁶⁸ Although, according to Marx, the laboring class's emancipation might take the shape of that "bright red fruit" (13), a metaphor for bloody revolutions, in line with his strategy of appropriation, Fowles remodels Marxism in existentialist terms. In other words, rather than embracing the Marxist ideal of revolutionary class conflict, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* incorporates a social definition of emancipation. The result is that, through a re-reading of Marxism, violence is undermined and each of Fowles's characters achieves a different form of personal emancipation: while for Charles and Sarah emancipation coincides with existential freedom, for Sam the key which unlocks his personal development and social elevation cannot but be the dismissal from his master, the liberation from the subservient position from which he "suffered" (44).¹⁶⁹ This is exactly what happens in Chapter Forty-Nine when Sam, disapproving his master's secret affair with Sarah, does not hesitate to leave his employment:

‘I’ll leave ‘is hemploy.’
‘Sam!’
‘I will. [...]’ (377)

Incorporating those "signs of social revolution, [which] Charles fails to recognize" (43) due to his ignorance of the Marxist ideology, in Chapter Fifty-Seven

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁶⁸ J. Acheson, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁶⁹ D. W. Landrum, "Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'" cit., p. 103.

Sam Farrow is presented as a totally new character, finally liberated from that subjugated condition of servitude.¹⁷⁰ From a domestic valet, having “a very sharp sense of clothes style” (43) and with the ambition “to be a haberdasher” (132), Sam manages to socially evolve into an “indispensable member of the window-dressing staff” (426), employed by Mr. Freeman for his London store. Not enough, thanks to his generous salary of thirty shilling per week, alongside his pregnant wife Mary, Sam can afford to live comfortably in London with his new-born daughter and to employ a fourteen-year-old housemaid, Harriet.

As the epigraph, not casually taken from Marx’s *Zur Judenfrage*, which prefaces Fowles’s whole novel, claims, “Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world” (initial page), Sam Farrow’s emancipation coincides with a social advancement, made possible by Mr. Freeman’s productive activity.¹⁷¹ With the purpose of rewarding Sam for having informed him of Charles’s betrayal of Ernestina, Freeman offers him employment in his shop. Functioning therefore as the enabler for Sam’s financial and social growth, Mr. Freeman appoints him to set up his shop windows. To his surprise, Sam is capable of decorating “the best window-dressing” (425), bold and eye-catching, which attracts countless strollers:

The back of the display was a simple draped cloth of dark purple. Floating in front was a striking array, suspended on thin wires, of gentlemen’s collars of every conceivable shape, size and style. But the cunning in the thing was that they were arranged to form words. And they cried, they positively bellowed: FREEMAN’S FOR CHOICE. (425)

What is interesting is that this catchphrase, invented by Sam’s genuine sharpness, ironically builds a contraposition between his master’s and his own social class.¹⁷² On the one hand, the novel’s hero decides not to take up the commercial career, offered by his future father-in-law; on the other hand, supported by “Mary’s aid” (423), the impetus for his change in life, Sam “play[s] his cards very right” (423) and finally manages to “throw himself” (423), that is, to take courage, dismiss from his master and change his life.

Besides restoring human conditions, Karl Marx’s initial epigraph also suggests that “Every emancipation is a restoration [...] of human relationships to man itself”

¹⁷⁰ J. Acheson, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁷¹ D. W. Landrum, “Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’” cit., p. 109.

¹⁷² W. Stephenson, *Fowles’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’*, cit., p. 57.

(initial page). Although this strengthening of human bonds might be witnessed in the relationship between Sam and his wife, it cannot be observed in Sam's connection to Charles, whose arrogant and disdainful attitude prompts the valet to rebel against his master.¹⁷³ Because Sam has sabotaged Charles's secret liaison with the French lieutenant's woman, he begins to be haunted by guilt, a feeling that is further exacerbated when in Chapter Fifty-Seven, Mary, completely unaware of her husband's plot, announces that she has seen Sarah Woodruff: "'Twas 'er, Sam. I saw 'er clear as – ' 'I can't hardly believe it'" (422). When he hears the news of Sarah's unexpected reappearance, overcome with remorse, Sam decides to answer the advertisement that Charles's lawyer has published in the London newspapers, making him believe that it is Sarah herself who sends him the anonymous "sheet of paper containing nothing beyond name and address" (441). It becomes evident that it is Sam who sends the post with the attempt to redeem himself and finally put his conscience at rest. Despite Sam's effort to resume relations with his former master, Marx's "restoration [...] of human relationship" (initial page) between the two characters fails to succeed.

3.4 Ernestina Freeman: the Conventional Victorian Woman

"Born in 1846" (28) and "died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland" (28), that is, in 1939, Ernestina Freeman plays the role of Charles Smithson's eleven-year-younger fiancée and represents an obstacle to his whirlwind romance with mysterious Sarah Woodruff. Only daughter of two extremely apprehensive parents, Ernestina grows up as a pampered and whimsical child:

The poor girl had had to suffer the agony of every only child since time began – that is, a crushing and unrelenting canopy of parental worry. Since birth her slightest cough would bring doctors; since puberty her slightest whim summoned decorators and dress-makers; and always her slightest frown caused her mama and papa secret hours of self-recrimination. (28)

Mr. and Mrs. Freeman's most nagging worry proves to be Ernestina's health. In truth, "she had never had a serious illness in her life; she had none of the lethargy, the chronic weakness, of the condition" (28). Since they are "convinced that she was consumptive"

¹⁷³ D. W. Landrum, "Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'" cit., p. 112.

(28), Ernestina's parents opt to annually send their daughter to Aunt Tranter's house, hopeful that the mild weather of Lyme Regis might have a curative effect on Ernestina's frail health:

An indispensable part of her quite unnecessary regimen was thus her annual stay with her mother's sister in Lyme. Usually she came to recover from the season; this year she was sent early to gather strength for the marriage. (28)

Not surprisingly, it is precisely while walking down the Cobb in Lyme Bay that Ernestina along with her fiancé Charles Smithson enters the first scene of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, appearing as Sarah Woodruff's exact opposite.¹⁷⁴ As far as their outward appearance is concerned, while Sarah is presented as a black-dressed figure, Ernestina grasps the reader's attention for "the paleness of her skin" (26) and the vividness of her clothes:

The young lady was dressed in the height of fashion [...]. The eye in the telescope might have glimpsed a magenta skirt of an almost daring narrowness – and shortness, since two white ankles could be seen beneath the rich green coat and above the black boots that delicately trod the revetment; and perched over the netted chignon, one of the impertinent little flat 'pork-pie' hats with a delicate tuft of egret plumes at the side – a millinery style that the resident ladies of Lyme would not dare to wear for at least another year; (4, 5)

If Sarah, thanks to the profundity of her look, is capable of seeing through "her stare [...] aimed like a rifle at the farthest horizon" (10), Ernestina is contrastingly "short-sighted" (9) and fails to view the world in an accurate way. This is the reason why instead of recognizing Sarah as a female figure at the end of the Cobb, "all she could see was a dark shape" (9).

Endowed with a "small-chinned, oval, delicate" face (26), "grey eyes" (26), "lithe brown hair" (31), "a minute tilt at the corner of her eyelids, and a corresponding tilt at the corner of her lips" (26), unlike Sarah, "Ernestina had exactly the right face for her age" (26). This means that Ernestina personifies the stereotypical Victorian lady "with a very proper respect for convention" (29).¹⁷⁵ In other words, incompatible with the novel's mysterious heroine, who evades the nineteenth-century standards of Victorianism in order to secure her existential freedom, Ernestina perfectly belongs to her historical time, the Victorian Era.

¹⁷⁴ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 68.

¹⁷⁵ R. E. Dominguez and V. Martin de la Rosa, "A percept/concept/ual approach to stereotype reading in Fowles' 'Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 2.

To further witness her conventional as well as repressed personality, the novel's narrator also underlines Ernestina's "total obeisance to the great god Man" (26). Ernestina's respect and devotion towards her fiancé Charles Smithson cannot but reinforce the Victorian cliché of the 'angel in the house', which is diametrically opposed to that of the 'fallen woman', exemplified instead by Sarah.¹⁷⁶ Even though for her prosperous financial situation Ernestina proves to be neither meek nor modest as instead the 'angel in the house' should be, she actually aspires to become a pure, devoted, caring, and obedient wife, thus conforming to the traditional standards of ordinary Victorian womanhood.

Ernestina's innocence is further confirmed by her virginity. Despite her desperate longing for a marriage and a family with Charles, not only does she have a "profound ignorance of the reality of copulation" (29), but the vague notions she has of sexual reproduction derive from animals:¹⁷⁷ "She has once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind" (30). In addition, "the aura of pain and brutality" (29, 30) which seems to surround the coital act terribly frightens Ernestina, prompting her even to "deny all that gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles" (30). What Ernestina has not realized is that if she "want[s] a husband, want[s] Charles to be that husband, want[s] children" (30), "the payment" (30) for them is painful and excessive. In sharp contrast to sensual Sarah, who expresses her own sexuality in order to seduce Charles, virginal Ernestina firmly represses any sexual thought that comes to her mind. To this purpose, she obeys to:

"a kind private commandment – those inaudible words were simply 'I must not' – whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force to entry into her consciousness." (30)

With this in mind, the narrator undoubtedly introduces the innocent character of Ernestina Freeman, to whom the typical mid-nineteenth-century ideals of self-denial and sexual repression are associated, in order to comment upon the allegedly oppressive as well as restrictive Victorian attitude towards sexuality.¹⁷⁸ Even though Ernestina's figure might induce the reader to make broad generalizations about Victorian women, in fact Chapter Thirty-Five clearly displays Victorian hypocrisy. In line with Ernestina's moral ethics, it is true that the Victorians "chose a convention of suppression, repression

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

and silence” (271), yet with the sole purpose of “maintain[ing] the keenness of the pleasure” (271). With reference to the theme of sexuality, which prominently features in Fowles’s novel, Ernestina and Sarah thus perform two divergent roles, the former chaste while the latter tainted, who equally belong to the complex and multifaceted Victorian society.

As far as her social status is concerned, Ernestina is the daughter of Mr. Freeman, a London-based draper, owner of a cloth sales store in Oxford Street. Built by Fowles as the exemplification of that “great revolutionary class” (235), the ascending entrepreneurial upper-middle class of Victorian England, Mr. Freeman, who consciously believes “he was a perfect gentleman” (283), hopes that Ernestina inherits the aristocratic title by marriage.¹⁷⁹ Even though her family, by means of its productive business, turns out to be much wealthier than Charles’s aristocratic one, Ernestina is tormented by the social discrepancy between herself and her betrothed. In this light, by comparing the modern and the Victorian attitude towards bourgeoisie, the narrator declares:

we see much more the doughty aspect, the bourgeoisie as the heart-land of reaction, the universal insult, for ever selfish and conforming. Now this Janus-like quality derives from the class’s one saving virtue, which is that: that alone of the three great castes of society it sincerely and habitually despises itself. Ernestina was certainly no exception here. (255)

Despite such inferiority complex, Mr. Freeman’s young daughter aims at becoming the conventionalized married woman of an affluent man, Charles Smithson. In this sense, their marriage, which coincides with the first of the three optional endings proposed in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, will forge the alliance between old aristocracy and the new enriched middle class that takes place in the mid-nineteenth-century industrial England.¹⁸⁰

As one can grasp from the narrative, the engagement between Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman takes place before the actions of the novel take place. Notably, it was through her surprisingly fascinating coquetry, combined to her elegant prettiness, that Ernestina immediately enraptures Charles:

She made sure other attractive men were always present; and did not single the real prey out for any special favours or attention. She was, on principle, never

¹⁷⁹ D. W. Landrum, “Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restauration in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’” cit., p. 104.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

serious with him; without exactly saying so she gave him the impression that she liked him [...]. (81)

However, considering that Ernestina fully conforms to the established principles of the Victorian period, it might be expected that even her engagement to Charles Smithson is grounded on cultural conventions, social customs as well as financial questions.¹⁸¹ In truth, although Ernestina has always felt the sensation that Charles “had never really been in love” with her (74), as the novel progresses, their romance will clearly transform into an artificial and sterile relationship, devoid of love and sincerity. In this respect, Charles and Ernestina do not speak the genuine language of love; their communication appears instead extremely superficial and unnatural. As Landrum suggests, it is their affectedness, combined with their lack of transparent communication, that prompts the betrothed to conceal their sentiments, obscure their souls and thus detach them from one another.¹⁸² Throughout the narration, it can be noticed that Charles’s increasing attraction to Sarah’s mysteriousness involves his emotional detachment from Ernestina and his sexual dissatisfaction with her purity, to the point that he realizes that “Ernestina had neither the sex nor the experience to understand the altruism of his motives” (165).

3.4.1 Mary, Ernestina’s Housemaid

As Charles and Sam’s relationship rapidly deteriorates throughout the novel, mutual antagonism develops also between Ernestina and Mary.¹⁸³ Though she plays the role of Mrs. Tranter’s housemaid, during Ernestina’s prolonged stay at her aunt’s household in Lyme Regis, Mary becomes subordinated to her needs. Intimidated by Ernestina, Mary begins to experience a sense of subjection from which, unlike her lover Sam, she does not evade. Notably, such subordination depends mainly on two different aspects: firstly, Mary is jealous of Mrs. Tranter who seems to care more about Ernestina than her: “Of course, Ernestina was her niece, and she worries for her more; but Ernestina she was only once or twice a year and Mary she saw every day” (76). Secondly, Mary, who is

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid. p. 106.

an impoverished carter's daughter, is envious of Ernestina's economic possibilities which allow her to live ostentatiously:

Mary was not faultless; and one of her faults was a certain envy of Ernestina. It was not only that she ceased abruptly to be the tacit favourite of the household when the young lady from London arrived; but the young lady from London came also with trunkfuls of the latest London and Paris fashion, not the best recommendation to a servant with only three dresses to her name – and not one of which she really liked (76).

With regard to her outward appearance, according to the omniscient narrator, Mary is definitely more attractive and bewitching than Ernestina or Sarah; not enough, she has also the liveliest and the least selfish spirit:¹⁸⁴

Of the three young women who pass through these pages Mary was, in my opinion, by far the prettiest. She had infinitely the most life, and infinitely the least selfishness; and physical charms to match ... an exquisite pure, if pink complexion, corn-coloured hair and delectably wide grey-blue eyes, eyes that invited male provocation and returned it as gaily as it was given. (75)

As opposed to Ernestina, the prototype of the sexually repressed Victorian wife, endowed with seductive plumpness Mary is portrayed as sexually free and available.¹⁸⁵ This is exactly for a stableboy's kiss to which she was not able to resist that Mary is immediately dismissed by pious Mrs. Poulteney, her former employer. Despite her words of warning, with her kind-hearted and compassionate spirit Mrs. Tranter opts to hire the servant girl and, on several occasions, she displays her contempt for social disparity by privately dining with her: "there were times, if cook had a day off, when Mrs. Tranter sat and ate with Mary alone in the downstairs kitchen" (76). It is precisely in Mrs. Tranter's household that Mary comes into contact both with fascinating Charles, who she appreciates as "a beautiful man for a husband; a great deal too good for a pallid creature like Ernestina" (76) and with his valet, Sam Farrow, her future husband.

If on the one hand Charles and Ernestina's romantic relationship goes through a process of deterioration throughout the narration, on the other hand Sam and Mary's love intensifies.¹⁸⁶ Unlike their masters who are not able to communicate between each other, the servants instead use the language of true love, showing transparent honesty to one another. Sam and Mary develop therefore a communicative inclination which enables them to reinforce their loving sentiment and to respect each other. This genuine

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

ability to speak is well illustrated for instance when Charles openly talks with her about his future plans, his need for economic growth as well as his social evolvment from the subordinate condition which is oppressing him. In supporting Sam and addressing him towards the path of self-fulfillment, Mary functions for him as the impetus for his evolvment, the necessary force for his life change. Interestingly, Sam's emancipation at the end of the novel brings an advancement also in Mary's life, transforming her from an penniless housemaid to a respectable mistress:

To Mary, it was all like a dream. To be married to a man earning over thirty shillings a week! [...] To live in a house that cost £19 a year to rent! And, most marvellous of all, to have recently been able to interview eleven lesser mortals for a post one had, only two years before, occupied oneself! (427)

The authenticity of their love inevitably gives rise to an active sexual life against their masters' passive one.¹⁸⁷ In this respect, Sam and Mary's secret encounters in the savage Undercliff cannot but confirm it, and it is no coincidence then that Sam and Mary's first little daughter comes out from their pre-nuptial sexual intercourse at Carslake's Barn.

Although Mary plays the role of a secondary character, her presence is particularly important for the novel's message, because through her characterization Fowles comments upon the erotic activity among the lower classes of Victorian society before marriage.¹⁸⁸ As Sam and Mary's private meetings perfectly exemplify, it was a frequent common tendency among the rural classes to consummate the sexual act before being married. With this in mind, contrary to what can generally be thought, the ideal of Victorian womanhood does not merely correspond to the sexually repressed lady, perfectly typified by Ernestina Freeman; on the contrary, it includes also less traditional and more sexually available women of the rural classes such as Mary. To witness this, in the digression of Chapter Thirty-Five the all-knowing narrator claims:

The hard [...] fact of Victorian rural England was that what a simpler age called 'tasting before you buy' (pre-marital intercourse, in our current jargon) was the rule, not the exception. (272)

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

3.5 The Three Alternative Endings

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles proposes three alternative endings, scattering them throughout the novel: while the first one is narrated in Chapter Forty-Four and Forty-Five, the second and the third are located in Chapter Sixty and Sixty-One respectively. Appealing to a typically postmodernist taste, Fowles's deliberate ploy of a threefold finale has the purpose of helping the reader reflect upon the complexity of the Victorian world.¹⁸⁹ In other words, by presenting three contrasting fictional dimensions, Fowles illustrates the characters' agency in relation to a specific historical time, be it the nineteenth or the twentieth century. In this regard, by providing three different conclusions, Fowles depicts an 1867 Victorian society that, apparently solid and stable, turns out to be essentially weak, heterogenous and inconsistent because of the new modern currents flowing in the late-nineteenth-century England.

Considering that a historical period can never be inflexible and unchanging, through his postmodern work Fowles aims to shed light upon how the conformist and conventionalized Victorian society progresses towards the new modern era and how characters react to these new influences.¹⁹⁰ The triple finale therefore witnesses Charles Smithson's evolutionary progress, indicating the three different paths that he might pursue in his life journey, from that dreadful condition of anxiety for freedom to that desirable condition of personal awakening. As the Victorian yet existential hero of the novel is free to choose whatever direction he wishes, by means of these three optional endings the reader is simultaneously provided with the same freedom to choose the one which best suits his taste.

3.5.1 The First Ending

The first ending of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, located after the second half of the novel, specifically in Chapter Forty-Four, is generally regarded as untimely and imaginary, and therefore a fake finale.¹⁹¹ After a "night of rebellion" (334) spent

¹⁸⁹ C. Scruggs, "The Two Endings of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 97.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁹¹ B. Zare, "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 178.

first at a brothel and then in the company of Sarah the prostitute, Charles is unexpectedly determined to “go through with his marriage to Ernestina” (334). In so doing, rather than reaching Sarah the outcast in Exeter, the novel’s hero opts to return to his fiancée Ernestina in Lyme Regis. At this point, the omniscient voice interrupts the narration, suddenly jumping to its end and shattering therefore the fictional illusion:

And so ends the story. What happened to Sarah, I do not know – whatever it was, she never troubled Charles again in person, however long she may have lingered in his memory. [...]

Charles and Ernestina did not live happily ever after; but they live together, though Charles finally survived her by a decade (and earnestly mourned her throughout it). They begat what shall it be – let us say seven children. Sir Robert added injury to insult by siring, and within ten months of his alliance to Mrs. Bella Tomkins, not one heir, but two. This fatal pair of twins were what finally drove Charles into business. [...]

Sam and Mary [...] married, and bred, and died, in the monotonous fashion of their kind.

Now who else? Dr. Grogan? He died in his ninety-first year. Since Aunt Tranter also lived into her nineties, we have clear proof of the amiability of the fresh Lyme air.

It cannot be all-effective, though, since Mrs. Poulteney died within two months of Charles’s last return to Lyme. [...] and then she fell, flouncing and bannering and ballooning, like a shot crow, down to where her real master waited. (340, 341)

From these lines, it emerges that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman’s* first ending coincides with Charles and Ernestina’s marriage, followed by a conventional yet miserable married life with large offspring. Since Charles cowardly makes the choice to share his life with Ernestina, rather than with Sarah, the dramatic epilogue that one would have expected from Charles and Sarah’s romantic liaison is denied in order to leave room to a totally different yet plausible closure.

Only when the following chapter, Chapter Forty-Five, begins, the previous conclusion turns out to be nothing more than a product of Charles’s creative imagination, a fantasy he builds within his mind.¹⁹² During his rail journey from London to Exeter the novel’s hero escapes into a vivid daydream which in truth never takes place. As in Chapter Thirteen in which the narrator dispels the fictional illusion to comment upon the characters, here the narrator does the same: directly addressing the reader, the narrative voice breaks into the scene to reveal that “the last few pages you

¹⁹² W. Stephenson, *Fowles’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’*, cit., p. 31.

have read are not what happened, but what he spent the hours between London and Exeter imagining might happens” (342).

Foregrounding Charles and Ernestina’s marriage as well as the start of their family, the first finale of Fowles’s novel undoubtedly fits the definition of a “thoroughly traditional ending” (342). As highlighted by Loveday, Charles’s choice of stereotyped Ernestina over independent Sarah implies that the novel’s hero renounces to his liberty, succumbs to his dutiful and conventionalist spirit, becoming merely “one of life’s victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history, stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil” (336).¹⁹³ In other words, this dreamlike ending entails Charles’s denial of freedom and his conformity to the Victorian notions of duty and respectability. Celebrating in this sense the predominance of Charles’s “Victorian side”,¹⁹⁴ this closure is condemned not only by Charles, because it is “an end he did not like” (342), but also by the narrator himself, because it seems to contradict the novel’s central theme of existentialism. In fact, as the narrator suggests in Chapter Fifty-Five, what really detains Charles from choosing Sarah and proceeding to self-fulfillment is that terrible feeling of “anxiety of freedom” (343) which continually threatens his soul and impedes him to achieve self-awareness:

what he felt was really a very clear case of the anxiety of freedom – that is, the realization that one is free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror. (343, 344)

In this light, the first ending of course does not connote Charles’s progress into a modern man, into an existentialist. The fact that he begins to feel this existential *angst* seems to confirm that Charles at this point of the narration finds himself at the starting point of his journey towards self-knowledge.

3.5.2 The Second Ending

After the first ending, the authorial voice resumes the narration as if nothing has happened: Charles reaches Sarah at Endicott’s Family Hotel in Exeter, has sexual intercourse with her, discovers that he has deflowered her, and eventually Sarah

¹⁹³ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁹⁴ E. D. Rankin, “Cryptic Coloration in ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, cit., p. 201.

confesses she has deceived him, although she cannot explain why. Uncertain whether to perform his duty of Victorian gentleman or to achieve personal freedom, Charles takes refuge in a church and finally makes the decision to commit himself with Sarah. He thus turns back to Lyme Regis, breaks off his engagement with Ernestina and cancels the wedding. With the intention of declaring his love to Sarah, Charles writes her a letter that she will never receive because of Sam's interception. Believing she has disappeared, Charles begins to desperately search for her in agencies for governesses and in brothels. Two years later, during his stay in the United States, he receives a telegram from his solicitor Montague announcing that Sarah has finally been found in Chelsea, London. At this point, Charles reaches her at Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house where he discovers a totally new Sarah Woodruff, the prototype of the self-realized and independent New Woman, and thus the second optional ending of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* takes place.

Narrated in Chapter Sixty, it specifically foregrounds Charles and Sarah's reunion and imply that they will spend their life together and give a happy home to Lalage, the little daughter that Charles discovers he has sired:¹⁹⁵

The head against his breast shakes with a mute vehemence. A long moment. The pressure of lips upon auburn hair. In the distant house the untalented lady, no doubt seized by remorse (or perhaps by poor Chopin's tortured ghost), stops playing. And Lalage, as if brought by the merciful silence to reflect on the aesthetics of music and having reflected, to bang her rag doll against his bent cheek, reminds her father – high time indeed – that a thousand violins cloy very rapidly without percussion. (462, 463)

Sounding at some extent excessively sentimental, this second ending coincides, as Loveday highlighted, with “the triumph of the Victorian-romantic side of Charles's personality”,¹⁹⁶ namely the passionate self that has always been captivated by mysterious Sarah and that has been repressed by his anguish of freedom in the first ending. In other words, this second romantic closure corresponds to the fulfilment of Charles's desires, that is, to his ultimate choice of Sarah over Ernestina and to the celebration of their love.

Although this second finale might lead the reader to believe that Charles has finally gained self-knowledge, in fact he is rather far from it.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, this ending proves to be inconsistent with the evolutionary trajectory of an existentialist: if *The*

¹⁹⁵ J. Acheson, *John Fowles*, cit., p. 35.

¹⁹⁶ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 58.

¹⁹⁷ E. D. Rankin, “Cryptic Coloration in ‘The French Lieutenant's Woman’”, cit., p. 204.

French Lieutenant's Woman had ultimately concluded with Charles and Sarah's reunion, the novel's hero would have never obtained that existential freedom that he heartily wishes yet seriously fears. Needless to say, this romantic conclusion functions as Charles's second answer to his existential anxiety; in the second finale Charles's Victorian (yet romantic) part still dominates, preventing him from behaving authentically and from relishing his own true freedom. After all, as the narrator declares, his reconnection with Sarah and Lalage is left in "God's hands" (462). Acting as though he was protected by God, Charles takes refuge from his existential *angst* in Sarah's courage and for the second time renounces to be free.

Likewise, Sarah's reunification with Charles seems to contradict her nature, although at Dante Gabriel Rossetti's household she is outwardly as well as socially portrayed as an independent New Woman.¹⁹⁸ According to her deception, Sarah decides to follow Varguennes to Weymouth with the hope of becoming a woman like her former mistress, Mrs. Talbot, surrounded by "a happy marriage, home, adorable children" (170). With this in mind, Scruggs interestingly argues that Sarah's choice to rejoin Charles in Chapter Sixty might be interpreted as the typically mid-nineteenth-century stereotype of the fallen woman who finds redemption in a man's true love.¹⁹⁹ By establishing her new identity, Sarah however reverts to the Victorian female cliché that she believes she has overcome but actually has not.

Although Sarah seems to be projected towards emancipation, the second closure unexpectedly overturns such hypothesis, confirming instead that her present life is still intertwined with her past.²⁰⁰ Sarah indeed cannot escape from her past, and her daughter Lalage enters the narration only to remind her that her past as an unconventional woman cannot be erased but, on the contrary, is inherent in her present life. Being the product of her parents' clandestine romance, Lalage has the function to proclaim the couple's union as well as their present love.

¹⁹⁸ C. Scruggs, "The Two Endings of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 102.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

3.5.3 The Third Ending

Even though Chapter Sixty closes happily with the celebration of Charles and Sarah's love, the final chapter of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* coincides in fact with the third optional ending, as well as the true ending of Fowles's novel.²⁰¹ Opening with the bearded character-narrator outside Dante Gabriel Rossetti's house who sets his pocket watch fifteen minutes back, Chapter Sixty-One foregrounds Charles and Sarah's last encounter, as though the previous ending had never happened. After Charles accuses her of having caused him unbearable sorrow, by telling her "You have not only planted the dagger in my breast, you have delighted in twisting it" (466), Sarah's decisive rejection of Charles as a husband reveals her determination to defend her personal independence and her self-realization as an emancipated New Woman.²⁰² Whereas in the second ending Sarah's present is determined by her past with Charles, in the third closure Sarah's present leaves no room for a future with him: now that she has finally reached that condition of existential freedom, Sarah does not want to allow anyone to destroy it, not even Charles.

Once he is aware that "from the first she had manipulated him" (468), and that "she would do so to the end" (468), Charles takes his leave from Sarah without realizing that the infant on his way out is Lalage, his little daughter:

He threw her one last burning look of rejection, then left the room. She made no further attempt to detain him. He stared straight ahead, as if the pictures on the walls through which he passed were so many silent spectators. He was the last honourable man on the way to the scaffold. He had a great desire to cry; but nothing should wring tears from him in that house. And to cry out. As he came down to the hallway, the girl who had shown him up appeared from a room, holding a small child in her arms. She opened her mouth to speak. Charles's wild yet icy look silenced her. He left the house. [...] It was as if he found himself reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories. But with the baby's helplessness – all to be recommended, all to be learnt again! (468)

As suggested in this passage, in the third finale Charles is at the starting point of his journey towards self-authenticity, unlike Sarah who has just finished hers.²⁰³ Devoid of Sarah's guidance, for the first time in the novel Charles Smithson is left completely alone with "no intervening god" (469), and his existential spirits finally triumphs over his anguish for freedom.²⁰⁴ Hence, the third ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

²⁰¹ E. D. Rankin, "Cryptic Coloration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 204.

²⁰² C. Scruggs, "The Two Endings of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 108.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 110.

²⁰⁴ S. Loveday, *The Romances of John Fowles*, cit., p. 59.

proves to be the more modern as well as the more existential one because it completes Charles's evolution from a Victorian gentleman as he was at the beginning of the novel to a twentieth-century existential hero. In this respect, the last finale is undeniably the most Fowlesian one among the three: thanks to this conclusion which is logically in line with the existential theme of the novel, Fowles cannot but approve Charles's existential awakening, as opposed to the first ending, which is denied as imaginary, and the second one, which is instead undermined. Without this closure, the novel would not accomplish its central theme, the achievement of existential freedom, personified by its protagonists, Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson.

As *The French Lieutenant's Woman* opens with Sarah staring intently at the empty sea, the novel closes with the same image, yet transposed to Charles Smithson, who intently watches the River Thames while walking along it.²⁰⁵

The river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice, flows past a deserted embankment; and along that other deserted embankment Charles now begins to pace, a man behind the invisible gun-carriage on which rests his own corpse. He walks towards the imminent, self-given death? I think not; (469, 470)

As these lines suggest, Charles does not pursue the path of death; what actually saves him from that is the discovery of "an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build" (470). In other words, only when Charles captures his real essence and becomes aware of himself, can he finally realize what life is:

[Charles] has already begun, though he would still bitterly deny it, though there are tears in his eyes to support his denial, 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 the dice; but is to be, however inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. And out again, upon the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea. (469, 470)

Echoing Matthew Arnold's poem *To Marguerite* (1853), which for Fowles is "perhaps the noblest short poem of the whole Victorian era" (429), the final line of the extract as well as of the entire novel invites the reader to meditate upon the unpredictability of life and the willingness to change.²⁰⁶ As in this poem Arnold alludes to the ancient continents which, however combined together, are doomed to get separated by the sea, the two protagonists in Fowles's novel, though attracted to one another, are destined to

²⁰⁵ C. Scruggs, "The Two Endings of 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 109.

²⁰⁶ B. Zare, "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 189.

live their life solitarily. Fowles indeed opts to conclude his novel with Sarah and Charles's separation in order that both could be free to achieve their existential authenticity that can only be encountered in the solitude of life, in the "unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" of human existence (430). Although Charles's estrangement from Sarah might sound as tragic and pessimistic, to attain existential freedom is necessary for the individual's sake. In this sense, only when Charles liberates himself from Victorian conventions and Sarah's guidance, does he evolve into a twentieth-century modern man. In the absolute solitude of his individuality, he can finally relish existential authenticity and consequently build his new life.

Chapter Four

Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter's Cinematic Adaptation (1981)

More than ten years after the publication of John Fowles's bestselling novel, in 1981 *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was transposed into the eponymous cinematic adaptation as a result of the collaboration between the Czech-born English filmmaker, Karel Reisz, and the Nobel Prize winning screenwriter, Harold Pinter.²⁰⁷ The procedure of selecting and engaging the film director, scripting the novel, funding the movie, and casting the acting company doubtlessly proved to be extended and particularly troubled. Not only did Karel Reisz initially reject to work on *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* adaptation due to his intense involvement in the direction of his drama film, *Isadora* (1968), but multiple other directors also refused to take part in the project.²⁰⁸ In addition, deeply dissatisfied with the screenplay he wrote for the filmic transposition of *The Magus*, in his own words, "disastrously awful"²⁰⁹, Fowles was unwilling to write the script and therefore entrusted the task to Harold Pinter, renowned especially for his minimalist style and pruning skills:

It was toward the end of this period that we began to feel that what the project needed above all else was a demon barber – in political terms, someone sufficiently skilled and independent to be able to rethink and recast the thing from the bottom up. Once again we had no argument as to the best man for that difficult task. It was Harold Pinter.²¹⁰

In 1978, after Tom Maschler, the novel's editor as well as the film's producer, for the second time approached Reisz, he unexpectedly agreed to work on the movie. Thus, for

²⁰⁷ M. L. Dodson, "'The French Lieutenant's Woman': Pinter and Reisz's Adaptation of John Fowles's Adaptation" in *International Cinema*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1998, p. 299.

²⁰⁸ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 94.

²⁰⁹ D. L. Vipond, *Conversations with John Fowles*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1999, p. 66, quoted in W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 95.

²¹⁰ J. Fowles, "Foreword", in "The French Lieutenant's Woman": *A Screenplay*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1981, p. viii.

Fowles, “the second miracle happened: we found ourselves with the writer and director we most wanted.”²¹¹

The third miracle instead might be attributed to the excellent cast, starring Meryl Streep in the twofold role of Sarah Woodruff and Anna, as well as Jeremy Irons in the part of Charles Smithson and Mike. The filmic production features also a large number of actors, including Lynsey Baxter, playing Ernestina Freeman; Emily Morgan, interpreting Mary; Hilton McRae, in the part of Sam; Peter Vaughan, in the role of Mr. Freeman, and Leo McKern, acting Dr. Grogan. Financed by United Artists, the filming finally began in Lyme Regis on May 27, 1980, and about three months later was released.

4.1 A Movie-Within-a-Movie: the Cinematic Solution for an Uncinematic Novel

Before analyzing the transposition of Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* to Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter’s film, some light needs to be thrown upon the concept of adaptation. Theorized by Linda Hutcheon in her critical work, titled *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), the notion of cinematic adaptation produces in the viewer an experience of pleasure, derived from “repetition with variation, from the comfort of the ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise.”²¹² In line with its dictionary definition, according to which ‘to adapt’ means to appropriate, to transform, to modify, so that the original text can become suitable for the adapted product, the phenomenon of adaptation involves a dual process: firstly, that of the adapter’s interpretation of the primitive source, and secondly, that of creation of a new, adaptational product. To use Hutcheon’s terminology, it corresponds to an act of “(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation”.²¹³ In this sense, adaptation does not merely replicate or imitate the content of the primitive source; it coincides instead with a more complicated process, entailing a rereading of the original version followed by its adjustment.

If the adaptor functions more as an interpreter rather than an imitator of the prior source, within the context of filmic adaptation exact correspondence between the

²¹¹ Ibid., p. ix.

²¹² L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 4.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 8.

original text and the adapted product is out of the question.²¹⁴ This lack of perfect equivalence is indeed motivated by the divergent modes of expression upon which they rely: while novels select the “telling mode”, namely a narrative approach, films adopt the “showing mode”.²¹⁵ According to Hutcheon:

The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural “equivalents” for characters’ emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects.²¹⁶

In other words, whereas literary sources can communicate only through the power of words, the filmic media can contrastingly resort to several other instruments, including the actors’ facial mimicry, their visual appearance and movements, the music and sounds, and framing techniques. In line with this, in her 1926 essay, *The Cinema*, Virginia Woolf too declared that literary sources and film adaptations make use of divergent expressive modes: “Cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression”²¹⁷ in verbal language.

Since acts of mutation from the source text to the screen version prove to be absolutely inevitable, criteria of authenticity and faithfulness to the original text cease to function as the measurement of success for a cinematic adaptation.²¹⁸ Though it is a common tendency to evaluate an adapted film on the basis of its similarity to the source text, for Linda Hutcheon, it is necessary to subvert this prevailing convention of literal repetition: “one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one’s own and thus autonomous”.²¹⁹ In this regard, in an interview, answering to the question whether his cinematic transposition is faithful to Fowles’s novel, Karel Reisz declared:

[...] no. You don’t have to be faithful to anything, you have to make a variation on the themes of the novel which, A., is a film, not a filmed novel, and B. is a film in which you can put your feelings and your associations. By making the movie, you don’t change the novel, you don’t change the novel; it continues to exist! The whole business of being faithful is a nonsensical aim.²²⁰

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

²¹⁷ V. Woolf, “The Movies and Reality”, *New Republic* Vol. 47, 1926, p. 306, quoted in L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., p. 3.

²¹⁸ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., p. 6.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

²²⁰ H. Kennedy and K. Reisz, “The Czech Director’s Woman” in *Film Comment*, Vol. 17, No. 5, 1981, p. 28.

Excluding faithfulness between literature and cinema, because one medium cannot duplicate the other, Fowles's thought is perfectly in harmony with his film director's:

the great gift a good screenwriter can give a director is not so much a version 'faithful' to the book as a version faithful to the very different production capability of the cinema.²²¹

Aware that Fowles's postmodernist novel and its cinematic version exist as two separate artistic entities, free to remain unfaithful to one another, before beginning to work on the screenplay, Pinter acknowledges that the major obstacle in adapting *The French Lieutenant's Woman* coincides with its twentieth-century intrusive narrator.²²² Endowed with an overly loquacious and all-knowing nature, the narrative voice provocatively intervenes in the narration revealing what happens in the characters' mind, self-consciously commenting upon the novel's structure, and anachronistically referring to people and places. After profound meditation on how to find an ingenious filmable solution for what Fowles himself defined an "unfilmable"²²³ novel, inspired by Reisz's proposal Pinter responds to this challenge by employing a "brilliant metaphor",²²⁴ the best-working strategy to have the omnipresent narrator on screen:

The problem with adapting John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was that of the active role the author plays in the book. To have an author on screen, seemed to Karel Reisz and me to be impossible. Karel solved this dilemma brilliantly, I thought, by proposing that the actors playing Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson in 1860 also play the actors themselves in the present, so that the two narratives run concurrently and the perspectives constantly shift. The two narratives, in other words, complement and illuminate each other.²²⁵

As Pinter anticipates in the *Introduction to The French Lieutenant's Woman's* screenplay, Reisz's filmic adaptation does not attempt to replicate Fowles's uncinematic omniscient narrator. On the contrary, it follows an alternative path, deploying the original technique of the film-within-the-film:²²⁶ rather than adding the character-narrator who metafictionally reflects upon the process of writing a novel, Pinter opts to remove it, yet replacing it with a modern counterpart of Sarah and Charles's secret romance, namely the adulterous affair between the actress and actor, Anna and Mike,

²²¹ J. Fowles, "Foreword", cit., p. xii.

²²² S. Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 165.

²²³ Ibid., p. viii.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. xii

²²⁵ H. Pinter, 'Introduction', in *Collected Screenplays 3: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child'*, London, Faber and Faber, 2000, p. vii.

²²⁶ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 95.

who interpret in turn the novel's protagonists in the eponymous 1979 screen version. With the purpose of cinematically mirroring Fowles's "novel-in-the-making",²²⁷ Pinter appropriates the self-reflexive structure of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, adjusting it to a "film-in-the-making"²²⁸, that is, a movie which intentionally exhibits its filming process.

The film's double configuration, which narrates both the Victorian plot of Sarah and Charles and the contemporary framing story regarding the actors, Anna and Mike, not only reproduces the typically postmodernist self-consciousness which pervades the entire novel, but also expresses an ironical contrast between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century world.²²⁹ This means that the metafictional structure of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is cinematically expressed through the juxtaposition of the Victorian couple's fictional dimension and their real actors' contemporary one. The intersection of this double plot additionally offers a parodic commentary upon the divergent mores, especially those regarding love and sexuality, between the past and the present, the Victorian Age and the mid-twentieth century. In this regard, Mike and Anna's framing tale clearly highlights how the moral and sexual restraints imposed by Victorianism have been gradually removed with the beginning of the new epoch, allowing therefore what the film thematizes, the actors' extramarital relationship.

Pinter and Reisz's tactical ploy of the movie-with-the-movie works immediately from the initial scene.²³⁰ The film opens indeed on the Victorian harbor of Lyme Regis, in the proximity of the Cobb, with the movie crew preparing for shooting: after an off-screen voice, of course the director's, exclaiming: "All right. Let's go. [...] Action!",²³¹ the camera captures a clapperboard on which it is written "Prod. 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'. Director: K.Q. Rogers. Cameraman: Joe Ainsley. Slate 32. Take 2."²³² The following shot depicts Anna, in the role of black-dressed Sarah, the French Lieutenant's Woman, who climbs the steps and quietly walks along the stone jetty, while the film credits begin to roll. Since the cinema audience has just been catapulted within

²²⁷ P. Wolfe, *John Fowles, Magus and Moralist*, quoted in S. Tucker, "Despair Not, Neither to Presume: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman': A Screenplay", in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1996, p. 64.

²²⁸ B.N. Olshen, *John Fowles*, quoted in S. Tucker, "Despair Not, Neither to Presume: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman': A Screenplay", cit., p. 64.

²²⁹ J.C. Martin, "Postmodernist Play in Karel Reisz's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.22, No. 3, 1994, p.153.

²³⁰ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 96.

²³¹ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child'*, cit., p. 3.

²³² K. Reisz *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, MGM/UA, 1981.

the modern production of a Victorian plot, the credits remind the viewer that the main movie is Reisz and Pinter's, whose true actors are instead Streep and Irons, and not Anna and Mike. After a series of brief shots depicting the town bustle of the Victorian community in Lyme Regis, among which Sam with a bunch of white flowers can be observed, the camera focuses on the co-protagonist Charles Smithson, while he is examining a fossil in a room hotel. The Victorian plot then continues to unfold, tracing Charles's visit to Mrs. Tranter, his valet's encounter with Mary and his marriage proposal to Ernestina. It is precisely when Charles and Ernestina tightly embrace that a ringing phone suddenly interrupts the scene, cutting for the first time (since the beginning of the movie) to Charles's twentieth-century counterpart Mike who, lying naked in a hotel bed and with a still sleepy voice, answers the call. When the camera however zooms out, his clandestine lover, red-haired Anna, is captured while lying in bed beside him. In the screenplay, Pinter writes:

HOTEL ROOM. EARLY MORNING. PRESENT. 1979.

*Dim light. A man and a woman in bed asleep. It is at once clear that they are the man and woman playing Charles and Sarah, but we do not immediately appreciate that the time is present.*²³³

Although it is evident that Mike and Anna are the actors interpreting Charles and Sarah in the nineteenth-century plot, for a viewer who for the first time watches the filmic adaptation the abrupt transition from the Victorian to the contemporary scene doubtlessly appears disturbing and upsetting.²³⁴ In other words, Pinter's deliberate strategy of jumping from the past to the present and vice versa contributes to disorientate as well as to puzzle the viewer.

4.2 The Blurred Boundaries Between the Victorian and the Modern Plot

With the previous example in mind, as highlighted by Simonetti, Pinter's sophisticated technique of intercutting two different scenes, the former from the Victorian and the

²³³ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 12.

²³⁴ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 99.

latter from the modern plot, has the purpose of blurring past and present, and thus, of confusing the boundaries between fiction and reality.²³⁵ In other words, the abrupt yet deliberate transition from a nineteenth-century to a twentieth-century scene mingles Victorianism with modernity, blending therefore art and reality. By means of such strategy, Pinter and Reisz create the same effect achieved in Fowles's novel: as the omniscient narrator breaks into the narrative, dispelling the illusion of reality, Mike and Anna's real world reminds the viewer of the fact that Charles and Sarah's world is illusory.

Such chaotic mixture of Victorian and modern time, of imagination and reality, is reinforced by the so-called montage technique. Labelled also "crosscutting" or, more precisely "imbricated montage", it is defined by Chatman as "the separate but interspersed assemblage of shots back and forth between two different strands of a story which ultimately goes tied together".²³⁶ With specific reference to Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the transition from a Victorian scene to a contemporary scene cannot only be sudden and unexpected, as the previous example strikingly illustrates, but it can also be flowing and uniform.

In general, sudden crosscuts are announced in the film through typically modern sounds such as the ringing telephone, the roaring train or the traffic rumble which prepare the audience to shift to the contemporary world.²³⁷ Besides merging the two dimensions of the film, such devices serve to bridge the gap between the two different times. A further example of this immediate passage between two epochs, yet fusing fiction and reality, occurs when the valet Sam is awaiting Charles outside Endicott's Family Hotel in Exeter. This scene closes with the sound of a noisy train that anticipates the following scene, in which Anna and Mike, still at Exeter railway station, take their leave once the shootings are over:

EXT. ENDICOTT'S HOTEL. EVENING.

Sam standing at a doorway, looking up at a dimly lit window.

[...]

EXT. EXETER STATION. PLATFORM. NIGHT. PRESENT.

²³⁵ M.C. Simonetti, "The Blurring of Time in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', the Novel and the Film", in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3. 1996, p. 302.

²³⁶ S. Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, cit., p. 175.

²³⁷ M.C. Simonetti, "The Blurring of Time in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', the Novel and the Film", cit., p. 303.

*The London train is standing at the platform. Mike runs up the platform with a sandwich to the open window of a carriage. Anna is at the window looking out. Porters banging doors. He gives her the sandwich.*²³⁸

On the other hand, rather than appearing hasty and rapid, the progression from a past to a present scene might develop fluently, producing therefore a sequence of flowing shots in which one moves after the other without interruption. Reisz frequently adopts such alternative filmic device, for instance when the modern actors are rehearsing the scene coinciding with the Victorian protagonists' second encounter in the wooded Undercliff in which Sarah accidentally falls and Charles readily catches her. As the screen adaptation shows, in the greenhouse Anna begins to slip, but it is Sarah who completes the following scene by falling to her knees in the Undercliff. In this regard, Pinter writes:

ANNA: Let's start over again.

She goes back to the chair.

I've got my coat caught in the brambles. Suddenly you see me. Then I see you.

MIKE: Miss Woodruff!

She mimes her coat caught in brambles, tugs at it, walks along carpet towards him. He steps aside. She moves swiftly to pass him, and slips. She falls to her knees. He bends to help her up. She looks up at him. He stops a moment, looking down, and then gently lifts her. With his hand on her elbow, he leads her towards the window.

[...]

*Sharp cut to: SARAH TURNING SHARPLY. A BRANCH SNAPPING. UNDERCLIFF. DAY.*²³⁹

In addition to the montage technique, which contributes to blend the Victorian with the contemporary period from a visual perspective, the modern actors' identification with the characters they interpret doubtlessly plays a fundamental role in enhancing such blurring.²⁴⁰ In this respect, as the movie progresses, Anna's personality gradually mingles with that of Sarah: like her nineteenth-century counterpart, not only does she have a sentimental relationship with a French man, named David, but throughout the course of the movie she also strives to establish her independence as a modern liberated self.²⁴¹ In this sense, it is exactly in her feminist struggle for

²³⁸ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 95, 96.

²³⁹ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 42.

²⁴⁰ S. Barber and R. Messer, "'The French Lieutenant's Woman' and Individualization" in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1984, p. 226.

²⁴¹ H. Kennedy and K. Reisz, "The Czech Director's Woman", cit., p. 27.

emancipation and individual authenticity that Anna closely resembles fictional Sarah. In other words, the analogy between modern Anna and Victorian Sarah exists essentially in existential terms. The same occurs for Mike as well: like Charles, who falls in love with nineteenth-century Sarah, Mike becomes infatuated with her twentieth-century co-protagonist, Anna. The actors' identification with their fictional counterparts is clearly exemplified in a considerable number of dialogues between Anna and Mike, who ironically play with their characters' lines in order to reveal their feelings.²⁴² Needless to say, such misleading conversations contribute to perplex the viewer who, as a consequence, is no longer capable of distinguishing the actors' feelings from Charles and Sarah's ones.

A striking example illustrating such blurring between Anna and Sarah's identity coincides with the hotel scene in which the modern actors are introduced: still in bed, Mike answers the phone call from Jack who is waiting for Sarah to arrive on the set. Fearing that the crew might discover her clandestine affair with Mike, Anna worries that she might earn the French Lieutenant's Woman's unsavoury reputation:

ANNA: Did you answer the phone?

MIKE: Yes.

ANNA: But then – they'll know you're in my room, they'll all know.

MIKE: In your bed.

(He kisses her.)

I want them to know.

ANNA: Christ, look at the time.

He holds her.

They'll fire me for immorality.

He embraces her.

They'll think I'm a whore.

MIKE: You are.²⁴³

Anna's concern about her reputation clearly echoes Sarah's in the novel. In this regard, when some scenes later the camera captures again Anna in the hotel room consulting a book about prostitution in Victorian London, she then reads from the screenplay a quotation taken exactly from Chapter Eighteen of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

ANNA: You know when I say – in the graveyard scene – about going to London?
Wait.

²⁴² S. E. Lorsch, "Pinter Fails Fowles: Narration in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'" in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1988, p. 149.

²⁴³ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 13, 14.

She picks up her script of The French Lieutenant's Woman, flips the pages, finds the page. She reads aloud:

'If I went to London I know what I should become. I should become what some already call me in Lyme.'²⁴⁴

A second example that witnesses Anna's loss of identity, due to her identification with the character of Sarah, thus dissolving the margins between fiction and reality, is provided with the modern actors' goodbye scene at the train station in Exeter. Notably, when Mike demands her to spend the night together in Exeter, Anna responds that he just had her, in Exeter. Of course, it is not Mike, but Charles who just had Sarah in the scene they have just shot:

MIKE: I'm losing you.

ANNA: What do you mean?

MIKE: I'm losing you.

ANNA: What are you talking about? I'm just going to London for –

MIKE: Stay tonight.

ANNA: I can't.

MIKE: Why not? You're a free woman.

ANNA: Yes. I am.

MIKE: I'm going mad.

ANNA: No you're not.

She leans through the window and kisses him.

MIKE: (intensely) I want you so much.

ANNA: (with mock gravity) But you've just had me. In Exeter.²⁴⁵

A further scene (present in the screenplay, yet partly cut in the film) which would have been illuminating in the emphasis upon the mingling of fiction and reality coincides with Charles and Sarah's first encounter in the Undercliff. After the Victorian gentleman introduces himself to the French Lieutenant's Woman and offers to accompany her home, in the modern plot the actors would have evoked and reiterated the previous dialogue lines with playfulness:

SARAH: I prefer to walk alone.

They stand.

CHARLES: May I introduce myself?

SARAH: I know who you are.

CHARLES: Ah... then?

SARAH: Kindly allow me to go on my way alone. And please tell no-one you have seen me in this place.

She walks on.

He remains still, looking after her.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 96, 97.

[Deleted:
INT. CARAVAN. PRESENT. DAY.
Anna in her caravan. A knock on the door.

ANNA: Hello!

Mikes comes in.

MIKE: May I introduce myself?

ANNA: I know who you are.

They smile. He closes the door.

MIKE: So you prefer to walk alone?

ANNA: Me? Not me. Her.

MIKE: I enjoyed that.

ANNA: What?

MIKE: Our exchange. Out there.

ANNA: Did you? I never know...

MIKE: Know what?

ANNA: Whether it's any good.

MIKE: Listen. Do you find me – ?

ANNA: What?

MIKE: Sympathetic.

ANNA: Mmn. Definitely.

MIKE: I don't mean me. I mean him.

ANNA: Definitely.

MIKE: But you still prefer to walk alone?

ANNA: Who? Me – or her?

MIKE: Her. You like company. (*He strokes the back of her neck.*) Don't you?

ANNA: (*smiling*) Not always. Sometimes I prefer to walk alone.]²⁴⁶

In enhancing the fusion between past and present, although in scarce quantity, Simonetti's tool of "matches on action"²⁴⁷ exerts a significant impact. Functioning as "actions matched at different times and different locations",²⁴⁸ this technique is adopted for instance in the scene which captures Mike, still in Victorian clothes, and Anna in her twentieth-century style. As the screenplay underlines, here Victorianism and modernity mix:

EXT. UNDERCLIFF. DAY. PRESENT.

Anna, wearing jeans, weaves her way through the crowd towards Mike. Mike is in costumes, eating salad. She sits beside him.

*In the background a mobile canteen – the unit eating lunch at trestle tables: some playing football. 'Ernestina' and 'Mary' in costume at a table.*²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 33, 34, 35.

²⁴⁷ M.C. Simonetti, "The Blurring of Time in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', the Novel and the Film", cit., p. 304.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 74.

As exemplified in the previous scenes, Pinter and Reisz's cinematic adaptation teems with countless overlappings of the modern actors' dialogues with the Victorian characters'. Besides creating playfulness, a basic tenet of postmodernist writings, such technical devices of course exerts the metafictional effect which invades Fowles's novel: in the analogous way in which the authorial voice destroys the illusion of reality, in Pinter and Reisz's filmic transposition the combination of modern and contemporary voices fuses the boundaries between art and life, Victorianism and modernity.

4.3 Cuttings and Amplifications

Taking into consideration Julie Sanders's definition of filmic adaptation, according to which it coincides with a "transpositional practice"²⁵⁰, that is, a process of converting a generic mode into another different one, the transposition from a novel to a movie inevitably involves not only "the exercise of trimming and pruning; yet it can also be an amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation".²⁵¹ This means that, in order to transpose the narrative mode of the novel to the showing mode of the movie, adaptors generally resort to cuttings and subtractions as well as amplifications and extensions. Of course, this applies also to Reisz's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: with the purpose of writing a viable script, not necessarily faithful to Fowles's postmodernist narration, Pinter opts to preserve the original plot, proposing however additional sequences and eliminating some secondary characters, marginal scenes as well as peripheral thematic concerns.

With regard to what Pinter's cinematic adaptation has gained, the twentieth-century framing plot of Mike and Anna coincides with the most remarkable insertion.²⁵² Without doubt, the contemporary actors' interpolated story is the tactical ploy designed by Pinter in order to create the metafictional dimension that in Fowles's novel is accomplished through the twentieth-century voluble narrator. Thematically, both the postmodernist work and the screenplay center on love, ironizing the sexual mores of the

²⁵⁰ J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 18.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² S. Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, cit., p. 175.

two different ages: whereas in the former the modern authorial voice alludes to the sexual constraints of the Victorians by means of long digressions, its filmic counterpart dramatizes the comparison between the two eras through the juxtaposition of the actors' and their characters' stories. Furthermore, although both novel and movie are entitled *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, neither of them focus only upon the titular character Sarah. On the contrary, crucial importance is attached to the representatives of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century era, Charles and Mike.²⁵³ As the novel opens with the conventional Victorian gentleman in the Cobb and closes still with him walking along the River Thames, in the movie Charles speaks the first dialogue line and Mike has the last word.

Simultaneously, Pinter resorts to various filmic ellipses in order to condense a 470-page novel into a 123-minute film. As far as the characterization of Charles is concerned, the movie transposition drastically cuts the wider relevance of Darwinism, incorporating however only occasional references to it.²⁵⁴ Darwin's evolutionary theory is hinted at, for instance when Dr. Grogan is described while reading *The Origin of Species*: "Grogan goes to a book shelf and takes down a copy of Origin of Species. He puts his hand on it, as a Bible".²⁵⁵ Reisz additionally deleted Charles's final encounter with him, thus eliminating the association of the French Lieutenant's Woman's mysterious behaviour to Marie de Morell's hysterical disorder.

Centering the film mainly on the theme of love, Pinter and Reisz opt to exclude the motif of inheritance which in the novel assumes secondary importance: in other words, the adaptation does not contain any allusion to Charles's opportunity to inherit Winsyatt, nor does it include the characters of his uncle Robert or his wife Bella Tomkins. In line with this, Charles's unique financial support derives from Ernestina's father, Mr Freeman, who offers him a working position within his trade: in contradiction to Fowles's narration which portrays him as a draper, in the film Mr Freeman still embodies the entrepreneurial mindset, yet working as a prosperous spice and tea merchant with a warehouse in the London port.²⁵⁶

EXT. MR. FREEMAN'S WHARF. PORT OF LONDON. DAY.

A carriage draws up. Charles gets out of it and looks about him. A ship unloading. Tea chests, on pulleys, being deposited on the wharf. They are

²⁵³ S. Tucker, "Despair Not, Neither to Presume: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman': A Screenplay", cit., p. 64.

²⁵⁴ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 96.

²⁵⁵ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 74.

²⁵⁶ H. Kennedy and K. Reisz, "The Czech Director's Woman", cit., p. 31.

stamped: 'Freeman's Teas'. Men wheeling the tea chests towards the warehouse. Dray horses carts standing by.

INT. MR FREEMAN'S OFFICE. WAREHOUSE. DAY.

The office looks over the wharf. Mr Freeman and Charles are sitting at his desk. [...]

MR FREEMAN: This isn't the time to talk about it, but if you ever felt disposed to explore the world of commerce, I would be delighted to be your guide.

Charles looks at him.

CHARLES: Thank you.

MR FREEMAN: The times are on our side. This is the age of progress, Charles. Progress is like a lively horse. Either you collar it or you come a cropper. I am convinced that one day an empire of sorts will come to Ernestina and yourself, and thereafter to your children.²⁵⁷

Due to Mr Freeman's altered employment, in the film there is no mention of Sam Farrow's social evolution: in this regard, differently from the novel, in which Charles's valet manages to evolve into one of Mr Freeman's workers, who can afford a house as well as a housemaid, in the cinematic adaptation Sam's emancipatory process is totally cut out. In addition, the subplot concerning Sam and Mary is considerably shortened in order not to deflect the viewer's attention from the two couples' love affairs.

The script further diverges from Fowles's original source also because of the cutting of Charles's meeting with Sarah, the London prostitute.²⁵⁸ Subtracting this, the unique sexual encounter of the Victorian plot is that between Charles and Sarah at the Exeter hotel. In sharp contrast with this, the modern actors are frequently captured while behaving amorously.

An additional relevant contraction of the screenplay, if compared to the novel, concerns Charles's two-year journey in the United States.²⁵⁹ Whereas the Victorian plot devotes an entire chapter to his restless movements among the cities of the new continent, in Pinter's adaptation none of this is mentioned. The line "Three Years Later"²⁶⁰ appears on a black screen which subsequently dissolves into the image of a bearded lonely Charles who, sat down in the terrace of a hotel, unblinkingly stares at

²⁵⁷ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 15, 16, 17.

²⁵⁸ W. Stephenson, *Fowles's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'*, cit., p. 96.

²⁵⁹ M.C. Simonetti, "The Blurring of Time in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', the Novel and the Film", cit., p. 306.

²⁶⁰ K. Reisz, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, MGM/UA, 1981.

the sea. At this point, the porter gives him a telegram revealing: “She is found. Under name Mrs Roughwood. Montague”.²⁶¹ Completely bypassing the first imaginary ending of Fowles’s novel in which Charles and Ernestina marry and start their family, the cinematic transposition directly jumps to the twofold finale, yet deleting the character of Lalage, Charles and Sarah’s daughter, born from their second intercourse in the barn.

4.4 The Dual Ending

The juxtaposition of the Victorian and the contemporary plot allows Pinter to preserve the dual ending which characterizes Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, encompassing therefore the existential theme.²⁶² As far as the first cinematic ending is concerned, it does not take place at Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s house in Chelsea, nor is Sarah portrayed as his assistant or muse. On the contrary, it develops at architect Mr Elliott’s white estate overlooking Lake Windermere, in the romantic area of the Lake District, with Sarah playing the role of his children’s tutor. Whereas in Fowles’s novel Sarah is accidentally seen in London by Mary, in Pinter’s transposition it is the French Lieutenant’s Woman who lets Charles find her, after she noticed her own name in newspapers advertisement:

CHARLES: You have married.

SARAH: No. I have not. I pass as a widow... in the world.

CHARLES: What is this house.

SARAH: He is an architect. His name is Elliott. They gave me shelter – a long time ago. I am tutor to their children, but I ... I am free to do my own work. They have encouraged it.²⁶³

When Charles blames Mrs Roughwood for abandoning him, Sarah justifies herself by saying that she could not renounce to struggle for her own emancipation. Speaking existential words, Sarah admits: “You misjudge me. It has taken me this time to find my own life. It has taken me this time... to find my freedom”.²⁶⁴ This sentimental

²⁶¹ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’, ‘The Heat of the Day’, ‘The Comfort of Strangers’, ‘The Trial’, ‘The Dreaming Child’, cit., p. 129.

²⁶² J. C. Martin, “Postmodernist Play in Karel Reisz’s ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’”, cit., p. 152.

²⁶³ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: ‘The French Lieutenant’s Woman’, ‘The Heat of the Day’, ‘The Comfort of Strangers’, ‘The Trial’, ‘The Dreaming Child’, cit., p. 132.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

confrontation ends happily with Charles and Sarah's final kiss, which then dissolves into a final shot of the protagonists rowing a boat onto the peaceful lake in sunset light:

EXT. LAKE BOATHOUSE. EVENING.

A rowing boat is emerging from the darkness of a boathouse on to the lake. Sarah sits in the prow, Charles is by the oars.

*As the boat glides out into the calm evening water Charles begins to row slowly.*²⁶⁵

With this image as the last shot, the film's first ending not only seems to parody the conventional happy ending, proving however to be far more sentimental than that of the novel; it also seems to reproduce the dim light which pervades the Pre-Raphaelite paintings.²⁶⁶ In other words, from a visual point of view, Charles and Sarah's final reunion on the boat, combined with countless other sequences of the Victorian plot, is filled with frontal light that contributes to provides further definition to the image and add more vividness to the colours. Moreover, as Simonetti suggests, it is not a coincidence that the nineteenth-century characters of the film are dressed in brilliantly colourful costumes which match the settings.²⁶⁷ In opposition to the Victorian shots, the modern images are brightened by a paler and softer light that makes the lines appear more blurred and indistinct. In this regard, Reisz claims:

In the Victorian scenes we very consciously went for an academic kind of lightning, the sort of high definition that you see in Victorian paintings. We used front light and side light – a pre-Impressionist kind of light – to paint the object. We had our own shorthand motto for this: 'Constable, not Monet'. So the film uses unfashionable front-light most of the time. But the modern portion is lit more softly with reflected light and the edges of the images are less sharp.²⁶⁸

With reference to the second finale, the audience is offered a prophetic anticipation of its unhappiness during the Sunday party at Mike's house, when David asks him how the cinematic adaptation will end:

DAVID: Have they decided how they are going to end it?

MIKE: End it?

DAVID: I hear they keep changing the script.

MIKE: Not at all. Where did you hear that?

DAVID: Well, there are two endings in the book, aren't there? A happy ending and an un happy ending?

MIKE: Yes. We're going for the first ending – I mean the second ending.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

²⁶⁶ J.C. Martin, "Postmodernist Play in Karel Reisz's 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'", cit., p. 155.

²⁶⁷ M.C. Simonetti, "The Blurring of Time in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', the Novel and the Film", cit., p. 303.

²⁶⁸ H. Kennedy and K. Reisz, "The Czech Director's Woman", cit., p. 30.

DAVID: Which one is that?
MIKE: Hasn't Anna told you?²⁶⁹

As these lines imply, Mike's answer, which undoubtedly creates a state of confusion in the viewer, anticipates that his love affair with Anna is doomed to conclude tragically, exactly like Fowles's third ending between Charles and Sarah.

During the cast party for the end of the shooting, at Lake Windermere house, where the Victorian plot's final scenes have just been filmed, Mike attempts to confront Anna about the prospect of their relationship. In order to avoid him, Anna conceals herself within her dressing room where she stares at herself in the mirror and scrutinizes the reddish wig she wore in the role of Sarah. When Mike rushes to the house to reach her, he unexpectedly finds the room empty and suddenly hears a car, Anna's car to be more precise, driving off. He runs to the window and, instead of calling out Anna's name, Mike loudly cries: "Sarah!"²⁷⁰ Coming at the end of the film, such metafictional climax confirms what the viewer has suspected throughout its course, namely Mike's identification with the character he plays.

With this in mind, it is evident then that Mike and Anna's dramatic ending mirrors Fowles's unhappy ending: as Sarah rejects Charles out of her need for existential freedom, Anna decides to leave Mike because she realizes that she is not Sarah, that her identity cannot coincide with Sarah's, nor can she live as though she was the woman Mike imagines.²⁷¹ For the same reason according to which Sarah struggles for her own emancipation, Anna wants to achieve her own happiness and live her existence as the free woman she claims to be. Similarly, as Charles in the third ending finally finds faith within his self, Mike at the end of the film is at the threshold of his journey towards existential awakening. In this light, the theme of existentialism, which gains crucial importance in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is developed also in Pinter and Reisz's cinematic adaption.

²⁶⁹ H. Pinter, *Collected Screenplays 3*: 'The French Lieutenant's Woman', 'The Heat of the Day', 'The Comfort of Strangers', 'The Trial', 'The Dreaming Child', cit., p. 125.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁷¹ S. Barber and R. Messer, "'The French Lieutenant's Woman' and Individualization", cit., p. 229.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as this research has demonstrated, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is an extraordinarily complicated novel; such complexity not only arises from its postmodern and thus metafictional structure involving a twentieth-century narrative voice that breaks into the narration and dispels the fictional illusion; it derives also from its historiographic configuration, according to which the narrator deliberately appropriates and enacts the Victorian past as well as its aesthetic conventions with the sole purpose of questioning and deconstructing them. Such complexity is further enhanced by the novel protagonists, Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson, who through their agency develop central themes of both the nineteenth and the twentieth century, such as the achievement of female emancipation, the quest for existential freedom, and the journey towards social evolution.

Because of the postmodernist nature of Fowles's work, the transposition from novel to film turned out to be arduous and challenging. By means of the ingenious technical device of the film-within-the-film, Karel Reisz and Harold Pinter succeed in reproducing, albeit with a number of cuttings and amplification, the metafictional atmosphere which pervades Fowles's novel. The tactical ploy of the twofold plot, Victorian and modern, which in turn entails a double ending, functions as a parodic comment upon the differences between the nineteenth- and the twentieth-century mores, mainly in terms of sexuality.

Despite its postmodernist essence, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and along with it, Pinter and Reisz's eponymous cinematic adaptation, is neither tortuous nor unfeeling as postmodernist novels tend to be; on the contrary, the passionate story between Sarah and Charles, coupled with the countless references to the Victorian world, contribute to make the novel an enjoyable and entertaining reading like traditional novels of the mid-Victorian Age.

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