

Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

BONNIE ZARE

Many works of feminist criticism during the 1970s focused exclusively on women's oppression, rather than their capability to resist it. As Elaine Showalter pointed out, this earlier stage was necessary for feminist discourse; however, the resulting negativity led to a tedious repetition of "find the example of misogyny." For instance, Judith Fetterley's book *The Resisting Reader* (1978) makes one point over and over, that female readers ought to resist accepting stereotypes about women in literature. Although the texts change from chapter to chapter, the discussion or treatment remains the same. This strategy, moreover, encourages a defeatist attitude. Of course, we cannot reject all texts that do not clearly escape from markedly patriarchal ideology and assume they persuade female readers of their unworthiness.

In her essay "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading" (1986), Schweikart revises Judith Fetterley's claim that texts with narrow or hostile views of women often seduce women because women have been socialized to prioritize those concerns that foster patriarchal dominance. Schweikart offers the quite different argument that some male texts attract women and particularly feminist women by depicting "processes of liberation." She argues that we are attracted to patriarchal myths not only because of socialization, but because they may contain moments of

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liberatory potential, moments that strongly appeal to feminists in their fight for equality. She uses Lawrence's *Women in Love* as an example, suggesting that despite Birkin's need to dominate Ursula, his wish to enact his personal utopian vision makes him an attractive figure for feminists to align themselves with, for he exalts the goal of improving the world.

Thus Schweikart believes that many male texts—and I would add many female ones too—have both “a negative hermeneutic that discloses...complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment” (Schweikart 43).¹ She insists that feminist readers can wrest control from a patriarchal text and align themselves with the liberating moment, while simultaneously condemning the narrative's implied sexism.

People may indeed want to conceptualize the reading process according to Schweikart's model of the powerful woman reader, but probably find it more difficult to put this in practice. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) has generated a fierce debate about its appeal to modern feminist readers, and thus provides a good test as to whether, in certain cases, feminist readers may empower themselves by discovering overlooked interpretive possibilities. Certainly the ingredients of the novel—an explicitly male narrator who focuses upon a male character and claims Sarah's thoughts and movements are often inaccessible or ambiguous—may suggest it is prepared for male consumers. Yet many of this text's readers are female. It is significant, for instance, that Judith Thurman's review of the film adaptation in *Ms.* (1981) begins with the assumption that her female audience enjoyed the book immensely. And it is no coincidence that the 1981 Signet paperback edition was targeted at a female audience: the cover, which displays a woman with windswept long hair whose blouse is coming off her shoulder, directly invites the (traditionally) female reader of romances. The film adaptation stresses romantic conflict and was also clearly marketed as a romance. In fact, though the novel admittedly touches on other issues, such as the hypocritical espousal of religious beliefs (in the figure of Mrs. Poulteney) and class conflict (illustrated by Charles' relations with his servant), the novel's plot corresponds with what is generally considered the formula for the “romance,” outlined by Janice Radway's well-known *Reading the Romance* (1984). For Fowles' plot possesses the following elements: a contrast between a spirited but underprivileged woman and a refined lady, a love triangle (the competition of Sarah and Ernestina for Charles' affection), a

¹ Schweikart falls prey to the all-too-common feminist practice of “mak[ing]...us think that feminists should critique and demystify male writing and find pleasure in female writing” (Gallop (b) 110).

brooding "hero" who reveals both his brutishness (when he makes love to Sarah) and his capacity for sensitivity (when he expresses concern for this misunderstood woman), the obstacle course of courtship, and (in one of the conclusions) a "marriage plot" ending.

To explain why heroines search for nurturing qualities in a commandingly assertive male lover, and why females like to read about such searches, Radway astutely turns to Nancy Chodorow's model of female identity-formation. Although Chodorow's work has more recently been labeled "ahistorical" and "universalist" by social constructionists, her premise still deserves consideration because such a substantial number of women grow up with the idea that mothering is a central part of a woman's role.² Briefly, Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) argues that the system in which the mother is the primary caretaker produces asymmetrical development in the personality of boys and girls. Girls have trouble differentiating themselves from their mothers because 1) they share the same sex, and thus the mother tends to identify with the daughter as a smaller version of herself; and 2) the father, who would perhaps counterbalance this intimacy, is frequently absent. The result of this is that girls tend to define themselves in relation to others, "to be continuous with and related to the external object world" (Radway 137). A boy, on the other hand, is encouraged to end the fusion he feels with their mother, not only because this fusion necessarily contains a sexual element but because he needs to establish his gender as differing from his mother's. Young men, therefore, learn to reject any signs of dependence on their mothers and, by extension, on any females. Thus a fictional heroine attempting to make a powerful male reveal his nurturing qualities convincingly mirrors the actions of many young women, who search to re-experience with men the intimacy they shared with their mothers as children. It is likely that many of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* female readers obtain pleasure from it because, like a typical mass-marketed romance, it validates the reader's desire for tender nurture and legitimizes her wish to seek love and thereby recover the primary love of her initial caretaker.

Bearing in mind that the text is read by many female readers, let us return to the debate the novel created as to whether it *ought* to appeal to feminist ones. In one corner we have critics such as Deborah Byrd, who in her 1984 essay "The Evolution and Emancipation of Sarah Woodruff" calls this novel an "ideal feminist text." To recuperate the text for feminism, Byrd highlights how crucial a role Sarah's emancipation plays in Charles' growth. Byrd is one of the very few critics to condemn Charles' lack of

² Alison Assiter makes this point in *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (1996). See p. 27-28.

knowledge of and love for Sarah, and she makes a number of convincing points. Nevertheless, she is only able to portray the second ending in such a positive light by a falsification: she overlooks Charles' harsh condemnation of Sarah's lust for power and the narrator's refusal to counterbalance Charles' judgment.

In the other corner stand critics who instead see this text as a pitifully traditional representation of women's role and capabilities. The reasons given for the novel's description as specifically anti-feminist include 1) that Sarah does not fit the criteria of a fictional subject at all and instead functions mainly as male fantasy and *femme fatale*, 2) that the second ending, which celebrates open-endedness but emphasizes feminine deviousness, is elevated over the first by its existential implications and dispassionate language, and 3) that Charles' final interpretation of Sarah as selfish in the second ending is the only available interpretation. While this text may not inspire feminists, I will defend the novel against these charges and in the process demonstrate Schweikart's model of finding the liberatory interpretation lurking in the text. What fascinates me and what remains to be addressed is the text's appeal to female and feminist readers, despite the narrative's ambivalence about female power.

The charge that Sarah is only a facsimile of a character is made by feminist critic Magali Michael, who responds to Byrd in "'Who is Sarah?' A Critique of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* Feminism" (1987). Michael declares that this text has been inappropriately praised for its feminism because the text's perspective is male. The narrator's reference to his beard, for instance, shows his sex; furthermore, he is aligned with Charles through their shared bewilderment by and fascination with Sarah. For instance, in the "premature" or "dream" ending, which appears 17 chapters before the termination of the narrative, Charles imagines that he marries the proper Ernestina, and Sarah's whereabouts are unknown to him. The narrator himself has suggested much earlier "perhaps Charles is myself disguised" (80). Because we are never permitted to enter the mind of Sarah, but see her only through these two men's eyes, readers, particularly female and/or consciously feminist readers, are without guidance as to how to judge her.

In fact, Fowles stabilizes no part of the narrative ground: his metanarration casts doubt on reliable authority or truth throughout the story. The narrator absurdly insists that the consequences of events, particularly the ultimate outcome, are unknown to him, and flips a coin to determine which ending he will show first. Thus the postmodern emphasis on undecidability is more than a philosophical preference illustrating the power of chance—it is a strategy to mask power.

Michael urges all feminist readers to break the illusion that Sarah has "independence as a subject or character" (229). Because the fiction denies Sarah a point of view, it contains "no representation of Sarah as...[a] being" independent of her representation as an object (235). Fowles' refusal to reveal more of Sarah's interior and grant her her own voice is indeed frustrating. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Sarah does function within the conventional expectations of a fictional character. Due to a shared understanding that subjectivity is fragmentary, notions of what "character" means have become more fluid in twentieth century fiction and literary criticism, yet character is still vital to storytelling, particularly in stories which are structured by some reference to causality. To reject the notion that Sarah is a character is thus to reject the entire novel, for our engagement with the unfolding narrative strongly relies upon our belief that the main characters do not act in a vacuum, but influence one another. If Sarah's behavior and actions were too obscure, as Michael argues, one would imagine the novel would not have gained the critical and popular attention it has. The majority of readers clearly *do* find her characterologically "sound."

In her critique, Michael also objects to the presentation of Sarah as a "male fantasy." In accordance with the traditional romance, Fowles misses no opportunity to remind us of Sarah's sensuality and attractiveness, as in the following description: "Her hair, already enhanced by the green shawl, was ravishingly alive where the firelight touched it; as if all her...most intimate self, was exposed before him" (272). The sexual tension in their meeting in the Undercliff is heightened by small details, such as Sarah's plucking of milkwort, whose flowers are "like microscopic cherubs' genitals" (138). In these meetings the author makes Sarah's rebelliousness inseparable from her intense sexual feelings and attractiveness. Often when Sarah does something unexpected, it is compared to the act of proudly disrobing, a preparation for love-making. As she announces the most taboo part of her story about the lieutenant, "I gave myself to him," she, for the first time, turns her full gaze on Charles with "a kind of ardor, an anger, a defiance; as if she were naked before him, yet proud to be so" (142). Similarly, a few moments later when they see Mary and Sam fondling one another, she "did something as strange, as shocking, as if she had thrown off her clothes. She smiled" (150).³ With the words "naked" and "thrown off her clothes" what is brought to our attention is the audience's (both Charles' and by implication our) interest in seeing the naked female body, defiant and desiring.

³ This smile reveals to Charles her acceptance of sexuality in general, as well as her knowledge of Charles' mixed motives for helping her.

Because it appears to stabilize the status quo, obtaining pleasure from the emphasis on Sarah's sexual desirability and the lovers' passion seems "dangerous" to a feminist reader. Indeed, the description of Sarah could be interpreted as objectifying Sarah for the male gaze, a notion first put forth in E. Ann Kaplan's well-known 1983 essay "Is the Gaze Male?" Yet this oversimplification denies that people of both sexes take pleasure from identifying with their own objectification. In her essay, Kaplan states that the male gaze, unlike the female, "carries with it the power of action and possession" (311), but this generalization has lost the authority it once had. Jean Baudrillard and Camille Paglia were among the first academic voices to protest the mainstream women's movement's shame about seduction, but popular culture followed suit.⁴ For instance, Nancy Friday introduces a recent collection of female fantasies, *Women on Top*, by saying how her subjects reveal a surprising joy in powerful action rather than passivity. Women may feel freer to enjoy sexual representations of female characters because they are, in fact, learning to parody the archetype and play with the gaze by initiating it.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler distinguishes between the "expression" of gendered norms and the "performance" of them which would indicate that gender identity exists as a political construction. Butler exhorts people to "repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (148). Other than briefly mentioning cross-dressing, she does not show how to enact such disruption.⁵ Some examples, however, show that we at least may be approaching this new ideal. For instance, as Janice Winship argues, because feminism has made many contemporary young women more confident and aware of power structures, they also can knowingly "laugh at and enjoy" sexual images of women (qtd. in Young 184). Shelagh Young offers Madonna as an example: because Madonna seems to feel dominant and to "parody the peepshow" in her videos, her female viewers may feel more powerful (184). We may never be able to separate sexual attraction from playing with power, and we should not be so eager to reclaim women's power that we negate all incarnations of the erotic. Laura Mulvey's well-known claim that the cinema fetishizes women's bodies,

⁴ See Baudrillard, 8; Paglia, 288.

⁵ Baudrillard wants women to treasure the unpredictable role of seduction in order to resist the dominant masculine modes of production, but he is similarly vague about how to do so. He vaguely suggests imitating the gameplaying of objects. Douglas Kellner's characterization of Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies* as "an obscure call to imitate strategies and ruses of objects" seems to apply to this text as well (16).

pinning them underneath a lens for the penetration of the explicitly masculine gaze, assumes that female viewers either gain no pleasure from this spectacle or only do so because they have been socialized to associate sexuality and beauty almost exclusively with the female body. Jane Gaines critiques this concept, for to call males' pleasure through looking "*inherently voyeuristic*" implies that this behavior is not socially constructed but innate and unchangeable (80; my italics). Similarly, feminist film critics Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams contend it is inaccurate to characterize a female gaze that "'submits' to a mainstream text's pleasure" as adopting "the position of a single subject" (Gledhill 72). Instead they argue we are capable of shifting viewing positions, just as we take on different identities in different situations.⁶

While I agree that too much emphasis is placed on women as spectacle for a male surveyor, I believe we must recognize that women derive some erotic pleasure from what I will call "cross-looking"—gazing at a woman from what has traditionally been a heterosexual man's perspective.⁷ No matter how much we would like to change this structure, erotic feelings are spontaneous and do not necessarily obey the will. As John Berger has written in *Ways of Seeing* of the artform of the European nude:

...the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. (63)

As Berger notes, everything woman "is and everything she does...and ultimately how she appears" plays a crucial role "for what is normally thought of as the success of her life." Thus "her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another" (46).

This formulation, albeit general, has validity. Just as Fetterley's claim that we are seduced because socialized overlooks the appeal of liberatory acts, whether committed by men or women, feminists have been too quick to equate an emphasis on female sexuality in a novel or film with permission to continue objectifying women's bodies over all other aspects of their

⁶ Diana Fuss makes the similar suggestion that we think of readers as sites of difference, enacting (sometimes simultaneously) various subject-positions as they read. See *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989).

⁷ Doane, in an early essay, names this process "hermaphroditic," Laura Mulvey calls it "transvestitism," and de Lauretis "double identification." Doane notes that all of these terms betray that masculinity is required to imagine "access to activity...(whether illusory or not)" (Desire 8).

being. The undeniable fact remains that erotic representation, no matter who it displays or who it is intended for—male or female, gay or straight or bisexual—must involve some degree of objectification. To overlook this and pretend that all objectification stems from evil, power-hungry authorities is to pretend that women are not sexual and do not enjoy their sexual feelings.

In summary, the emphasis on Sarah's sensuality may present not only a male but a female fantasy, and I believe the emphasis on Sarah's sensuality primarily emphasizes spontaneous erotic desire, rather than the use-value of female sexuality. From my experience of teaching this novel, what readers seem to find most memorable is the pleasurable buildup of romantic desire between Sarah and Charles,⁸ which is pleasurable precisely because it is forbidden. In fact, the narrator suggests at one point that sublimation may have heightened Victorians' sexual pleasure and that they may have been reluctant to give it up in order to preserve this pleasure (213).

Michael's final objection is to Sarah's depiction as a conniving siren who lures men to their destruction, in accordance with the age-old patriarchal myth. It is true that Sarah is the one who "stages" their intimacy by asking Charles to hear her history in a "secluded place," the suitably shadowy Undercliff. Even her position, as she sits on a hummock, is interpreted by Charles as strategy: "Charles found...that...her face was half hidden...and yet again, by some ingenious coquetry, that he must take note of her hair" (136). Soon Charles perceives in her silence a "challenge to coax the mystery out of her" (136), yet this challenge seems a form of flirtation rather than selfish calculation.

Still, Sarah is guilty of using a fabricated version of her sexual history to gain Charles' sympathy as well as titillate him, and this deception problematizes our impression of her. We must be careful to remember that the only two clear discrepancies between her first and second account of the affair is that she 1) allows Charles to assume that she lost her virginity⁹ and 2) states she saw the lieutenant for the careless philanderer he was, without mentioning that he was on the arm of a prostitute. Sarah possesses the intelligence and wisdom to know Victorian society would label her a lost and despicably evil woman the moment she ran to see Varguennes, whether she spent the night with him or not. Hence, Sarah's careless gloss

⁸ As the film reviewer Richard Grenier put it, "This novel's foundation...is a steamy...romantic style" and "Sarah Woodruff is a romantic figure of the deepest hue" (79-80).

⁹ She also tells Charles that the lieutenant wrote her that he was married, although he probably never did write.

of the truth functions to show that she is not concerned with representing herself as having “innocent” motives, and that she is unwilling to play by society’s rules because they arbitrarily restrict her freedom.

Sarah’s enigmatic actions do force us, whether male or female, to continually renegotiate our relationship with her, but careful readers should understand that love primarily motivates her. For example, she admits she lied about her relations with Varguennes partially out of “envy” of Charles’ engagement (279). Sarah has fallen in love with Charles and suspects, from his own gaze, that he is incapable of giving her love in return. No man has ever proven to her that she can inspire love, and her education has made it impossible for her to settle for anything less than a “marriage of true minds.” Although the state of being in love is often linked with submission, particularly when women are the ones experiencing it, Sarah is very active throughout, trying to control the situation to gratify her desire to receive and give love. For instance, she concocts the story about turning her ankle to lure him to her room because she needs to feel she has been able to possess Charles wholly, to believe “that in another world, another life, I might have been your wife” (279). She explains, “Now that I know there was truly a day upon which you loved me, I can bear...any thought” (277). What is perhaps most puzzling, is that Sarah rejects and then later evades Charles, even though she knows he wants to contact her. As I have mentioned, Byrd convincingly attributes Sarah’s departure to Charles’ insensitivity and feelings of guilt which she senses will doom their relationship. Even Charles links her distance with his own weakness: she left him, he tells himself “because you [Charles] lack[ed] the courage to give her back her gift” of love and freedom (204).

Significantly, Sarah’s gloss of the truth allows Charles and society to name her as a “bad ruined maiden” who, rather than submissively hiding herself, proudly flaunts convention. Although she is not, as Dr. Grogan says, a mentally disturbed masochist, he is right in that she needs to stand out from other women as a martyred victim. We may better understand Sarah’s stubborn decision to embrace tragedy when we also bear in mind that most Victorians regarded madness as congenital. Although she would have been ridiculed more if her mother had been mad (for mothers were thought to play a more vital genetic role in their daughters’ constitutions), she would have been stigmatized as a young woman by her father’s slow descent into madness and his eventual committal to an insane asylum (49). Thus she presumably has been made to fear for her own sanity, in addition to being isolated by her companions because she had been educated “out of her own class, but...not raise[d]...to the next” (48). Rather than bowing humbly to her fate, she parades her resentment, deliberately donning the clothing and ways of the “hysteric” before anyone imposes this label on her.

Sarah is thus one who takes charge of her destiny, and like the seductresses of film noir, must be typed as devious because she derives *power* rather than weakness from society's emphasis on her sexuality.¹⁰ She wants to be called "Tragedy" because this term not only reflects her inner feelings about what society has condemned her to, but grants her an identity separate from the common household drudge. To survive, she agrees to work for the tyrannical Mrs. Poulteney, but she refuses to comply with restrictions on her privacy. Sarah is able to capture Charles' attention precisely because her ideas are new to him. She tells him,

I live among people the world tells me are kind...Christian people. And they seem to me crueler than the cruellest heathens...I cannot believe...that there are not spirits generous enough to understand...why I suffer...and [that] it is not right that I should suffer so much. (116)

Charles is astounded at Sarah's very tone: "A woman did not contradict a man's opinion when he was being serious unless it were in carefully measured terms. Sarah seemed almost to assume some sort of equality of intellect with him and precisely...where she should have been...deferential" (116). Sarah's fierce independence and contempt for society's artificial rules thus make her a protofeminist. Naturally, these qualities attract feminist readers like myself to her.

I do not wish to downplay the qualities of Sarah's characterization that encourage anti-feminist judgments. Partly because of the novel's second conclusion, and partly because of the ease of constructing women as scapegoats in our society, critics and the students to whom I have taught this book, both male and female, are apt to see Sarah narrowly as a selfish manipulator, while they do not judge Charles' ambiguities. Peter Wolfe rightly calls Charles "likeable," but Fowles gives us plenty to criticize in Charles' behavior.¹¹ During the course of the novel, Charles repeatedly deceives Ernestina, abuses his servant Sam, and appears to thin objects in his environment, such the home he will inherit, exist out of love for him (157). Actually he loses this home, partly because he neglects his relationship with his uncle. Plainly, not only Sarah but Charles exhibits weaknesses that we must confront and ultimately judge. We are meant to notice that Charles resembles the first man in Sarah's life, the lieutenant. Just as

¹⁰ See Janey Place's "Women in Film Noir" for a somewhat positive spin on these "female gangsters"; in her book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, E. Ann Kaplan rightly balances this view with a reminder that no one can admire an "independence...based on...greed and murder" (72).

¹¹ Wolfe later admits not only Sarah but Ernestina outshines Charles in human qualities. See his book *John Fowles, Magus and Moralist*, p. 165-7.

Charles deceives Ernestina, Varguennes tells falsehoods. When Sarah is disillusioned and realizes the lieutenant is a “worthless adventurer,” she compares him to a “lizard that changes color with its surroundings” (141). Earlier the narrator describes Charles as a creature capable of “cryptic coloration,” one who changes his color to match his circumstances (118). To further the parallel, when Charles hears that Sarah meets Varguennes in Weymouth, “He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down” (143). Like the lieutenant, Charles is capable of an easy selfishness; like other Victorian men he unquestionably believes that women are inferior to men and are primarily useful either as hearth ornaments or sexual companions. Though he finally can transform himself into a less self-centered individual, his own guilt after he makes love to Sarah betrays how invested he was in his image of himself as a defender of an aristocratic and patriarchal order. As Byrd convincingly argues, “Not only does he...propose to her out of a sense of obligation, but he reacts with suspicion and hostility, rather than with tender solicitude, when he discovers that Sarah had been a virgin” and thus reveals how shallow his affection is (314).

In my opinion, Sarah’s limited role (as a catalyst for male development) and occasional association with the archetypal *femme fatale* are compensated for by a broad view of the descriptions of Sarah as sexual, and the symbolism of the Undercliff—as well as the flexibility of the text’s two endings, a point which I will take up in a moment. The overgrown tunnels they travel, and the woodsy precipice of the Undercliff, the locus of Sarah’s rebellion against servitude and the expression of her growing desire for Charles, may be read as an image of female genitalia (as with Eliot’s the Red Deeps). The shape of the mons and its hidden quality is certainly suggested by the name. Especially because Sarah often stands above Charles, the core of the plot seemingly takes place on the landscape of female sexual power, an ancient power that remains despite the many attempts to subdue it. Thus, female readers may subconsciously be enticed by this landscape, despite the narrator’s traditional viewpoint.

Finally, the double ending enables some readers to feel partially freed from a novel told by a male narrator and focused on another man’s actions. The ostensible emphasis on Sarah’s selfishness in the second ending may produce distress for readers in favor of egalitarianism; however, an opportunity exists in the conclusion for a feminist reader to seize hermeneutic control. No prior criticism has been noted that the two ending scenes are vague enough to cast doubt on Charles’ and the narrator’s interpretations of Sarah.¹²

¹² For instance, Michael simply dismisses the two endings because “both are products of a totally male view and as such are limited” (234).

As a brief reminder, both of the endings depict Charles learning the whereabouts of Sarah and discovering that she has found her own niche assisting Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹³ Charles is surprised at her comfort, a surprise which arises from his traditionalist belief that “fallen women must keep falling” (347). In fact, Charles makes a number of brash assumptions during this interview (the first part of which takes place in both endings). After he explains how he discovered her address, Sarah repeats his words (perhaps to stall for time as she thinks about how she feels):

‘Your solicitor?’

‘Did you not know I broke my engagement to Miss Freeman?’

Now she was the one who was shocked. Her eyes probed his a long moment, then looked down. She had not known. He drew a step closer.... (348)

As we will soon see, Charles reads Sarah for the reader, and since we have no other reading we must trust his judgment—but only temporarily.

For, after some dialogue in which Sarah explains to Charles her aversion to the restrictiveness of the married state, she calmly says she learned Charles had broken his engagement a year and a half ago. Horrified, Charles proceeds to build up three more fictions about Sarah. First he thinks he sees a “faint exultation” in the glance she throws him, and “apparent indifference” in her moving “quietly away from him,” a gesture others might interpret as in keeping with her need to assert her own boundaries. He then decides that her need for this freedom is “another lie,” that she is forcing herself to play out “some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny” (355). As Sarah asks him to see another woman who will better explain her situation (their baby daughter although he does not know it),¹⁴ this “perversion” extends to the idea that Sarah might be that “alarming” thing he cannot name—a lesbian. He wonders,

What new enormity was threatened now! Another woman, who knew and understood her better than...that hatred of man... he dared not say it to himself. (357)

¹³ What disturbs me most about Sarah’s final position is her occasional service as a model for Rossetti, which, to my knowledge, has gone unacknowledged by critics. Sarah has not “progressed” so dramatically: it is unsettling to think that the words of Christina Rossetti apply to her: “One face looks out from all his canvases/...A nameless girl/...not as she is, but as she fills his dreams.” Fowles originally had Sarah become a model for the Royal Academy. Because in the published version she actually lives with pathbreaking intellectuals, her position as occasional model seems less problematic. The text implies that, in this historical moment, this is Sarah’s only way to contribute to great art.

Earlier in the text Fowles has planted a reference to Sarah with her arms thrown around another woman, the servant Millie. He glosses this "common Victorian phenomenon of women sleeping together" as an "innocent" reaction to these women's daily pain from class and gender discrimination (130). As Bruce Woodcock observes, this scene occurs simultaneously as Charles and Dr. Grogan engage in "male-bonding," discussing Sarah over their brandy, and it enables Fowles to subtly mock the men's greater pretentiousness and inability to help one another (104). Yet there is no compelling reason to present Sarah's compassion for working class people in this exact way. Fowles seems to enjoy chiding us for our suspicions of "perversity" (130), assuming that readers see lesbian sexuality as "perverse" and "guilty" as opposed to "innocent" (130) and "healthy."

Perhaps the narrator chooses to discourse on lesbianism at this early juncture in order to facilitate Charles' later suspicion that Sarah has a female lover. Fowles seems to be using the hint of lesbianism to distance the reader from Sarah and to affirm the second ending in which Charles will separate from her. Political groups have commonly linked the fear of or misunderstanding directed against lesbians or gay men with that directed against women, for both of these groups have been oppressed by dominant society's insistence that behavior be circumscribed by commonalities so long thought to be natural to each gender. A feminist reading of this novel must acknowledge that the text subtly employs the image of lesbian love to defend Charles' fear of feminine power. As history shows, a common strategy to divide women from one another is to emphasize their differences.

Oddly enough, despite the misunderstandings on Charles' part I have detailed, the first ending allows Sarah and Charles to rediscover their feelings of tenderness and decide to unite. After Charles makes a declaration of his pain and outrage at her deliberate torment, a cry which the narrator emphasizes was from the soul and which Sarah's eyes respond to, Charles turns to go and Sarah just manages to get between him and the door to block his exit. This close contact recreates their intimacy, and he finds the depth of his love allows him to make himself vulnerable: "He spoke to the gilt clasp [of her belt]. 'What am I to understand by this?'" (357). After they

¹⁴ It is tempting to believe Charles' guess that this is Christina Rossetti, given Sarah's reference to respecting the lady's situation and age; yet the unreliable "it seemed" appears when Charles dismisses the servant's entrance as accidental, and this servant has the last laugh when she points to the child and gently informs Charles the lady has already come (358). When Sarah re-enters, Charles realizes "he was being taunted" but pleasurably so, by the appearance of this "photograph in flesh" (359).

reunite, Charles asks why she tested him in this way, and they agree that it "had to be so...it had been in God's hands" (360). Fowles has earlier established that in the world of this text "God" refers only to circumstantial chance and free choice,¹⁵ and thus many critics believe this reference to God must indicate the inferiority of this ending. However, if one literally equates the agency of God with chance, as the text suggests, this statement can highlight the existential implications of this ending. For if Charles had not shown his humility and vulnerability in time, Sarah would not have considered him worthy of her love. Without this expression, Charles would not have stayed to meet his daughter, and they might never have convinced each other of their mutuality.

That "timing is all" is proven by the next ending as well. In this second ending Charles and Sarah exchange all of the dialogue of the first ending, up until Charles' dramatic declaration that she has wanted him to suffer and that she deserves punishment. Significantly, unlike the first ending, the text does not state that this declaration "came out of Charles' whole being and despair" (355). This version of his statement makes Sarah concerned, but hesitant. Charles' inflexible appearance is noted: he stares at the foot of the door "with the violence of a determined unforgivingness" (363). She does not block his exit but stops short behind Charles, puts her hand on his arm to detain him, and then looks at him and blushes. That look is interpreted by Charles as a suggestion that they become companions or lovers. Common sense intervenes to deny critics' claim that we really have no other choice but to believe this gloss. Can such a complex concept, described by Charles as "a Platonic—and even if one day more intimate, never consecrated—friendship," really be communicated by one glance? Next Charles suddenly thinks he can summarize her whole personality:

He saw his own true superiority to her: ...an ability to give.... She could give only to possess ... And he saw finally that she knew he would refuse. From the first she had manipulated him. (364)

With this thought Charles angrily and decisively plunges out of the door, and both he and we leave Sarah behind. Yet what is to prove that these statements, originating from a highly emotional situation, are any more "authentic" a reading of Sarah than Charles' former disproven assumptions? In both endings Sarah clearly awaits some evidence that Charles cares for her so unselfishly that he will respect her fear that she cannot submit to his idea of marriage. He could earn more trust by sincerely explain-

¹⁵ The narrator promises to conform to the "only...good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist" (80).

ing his own doubts and desires, but in the second ending Charles' fear that such a confession may emasculate him supersedes his desire to give Sarah what she wants.

As the rejected Charles emerges into the London street, he is plunged into the "river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice" (366). The last line, echoing Arnold, proclaims we are islands in life's estranging sea; the last ending confronts us with freedom and thereby celebrates mystery and openness to change. The postmodern emphasis on life's flux is clearly important to Fowles, as *The Aristos* indicates: indeed, estrangement is frequently what contemporary life offers, and an ending without a reconciliation need not imply pessimism.¹⁶ However, Fowles might have made Charles face the existential dilemma in other ways, such as blocking Charles from Sarah by revealing her as joined with another partner. Here a man's confrontation with life's unpredictability is unnecessarily based on a woman's selfishness.

The last sentence of the first ending, which ends with the admonitory "a thousand violins cloy very rapidly without percussion," indicates Fowles may deliberately be doling out a sentimental ending for his romantically inclined readers (360). Most critical interpretations from the 70s, such as Peter Wolfe's, Elizabeth Rankin's, and Barry Olshen's, do not regard this ending as equally plausible: to them the conventionally happy ending can represent only a cunning false one. The occasional hackneyed dialogue of the first ending does display the author's irony, but the entire novel's tone is playful. Fowles has reiterated that it seemed most "fertile" to him to include both conclusions ("Hardy" 35).¹⁷ In fact, as Elizabeth Mansfield's scholarship has brought to our attention, Fowles' first draft only possessed a single "happy" conclusion, and in the next draft the happy ending was put last (277).

While even the second ending subtly reveals Charles' deficiencies, almost all of the critics neglect to notice how problematic Charles' assumptions about Sarah are, and declare that the second ending is the authoritative one.¹⁸ For example, John Hagopian contends that the second

¹⁶ Ihab Hassan has stated that indeterminacy does not necessarily lead to discord, and Linda Hutcheon defends this choice in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). She argues that given our development into a "mindless consumer society" it is urgent to "present the reader with a literature that gives him models for a creative truth of 'construction' rather than a passive truth of 'correspondence'" (210).

¹⁷ Though he presumably knew that films with happy endings have more market value, it may be significant that Fowles, who had considerable control over the film version, reserved the second ending for the minor characters Anna and Mike, and allowed Charles and Sarah to reconcile their differences.

ending is superior due to its greater resemblance to the narrator's existential beliefs (200). Yet the element of chance is highlighted equally by interpreting the text as possessing *two equally plausible endings*, one where the protagonist is able to make his unselfish love known in time, and another where he lets his insecurity and fear of choosing a strong woman overcome him. Most recently critic Katherine Tarbox (1996) convincingly argues "the double ending *is* the ending" (99). Why? Fowles depicts his two characters moving towards an evolution of consciousness and does so in a way that challenges the reader to do the same. Therefore that evolution requires the acceptance of simultaneously contradictory possibilities, the perception, no matter how momentary, of "other worlds coexistent with our own" (100). Like Tarbox, I think Fowles challenges the reader to accept two valid endings and therefore to reject the notion of a self that ever attains stasis. I have been arguing that a reader who is sympathetic to gender issues may desire and/or struggle to read from a particular position; similarly, Charles struggles to read Sarah from his own evolving position. Post-structuralist theory acknowledges that "the self is a constellation of positions, formed by changing historical and personal relations"¹⁹; surely, then, it is not too radical to propose that the same Charles is capable of both succeeding and failing at achieving intimacy when he meets Sarah.

Nothing contradicts Byrd's thesis that this is an "ideal feminist novel" more than the attitude of most critics towards the first ending, which illustrates their deeper agenda: they find it easiest and most convenient to "blame the woman," thereby suppressing women's power. For example, Jungian critic Robert Huffaker supports his critique of Sarah's (read "woman's") final "inability to give" by relying upon the dubious authority of misogynistic quotations from Jung's writings. While critic Charles Scroggs begins his essay "The Two Endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*" promisingly, by validating all of the novel's endings in light of their appropriateness to distinguishable historical world views which are present in the book, he concludes with the most commonly held view: we are meant to reject Sarah for her inability to "give," her selfishness. In the early part of his essay, Scroggs admits that the plausibility of the two end-

¹⁸ Michael also notes that the second ending is more misogynistic (234). Maybe Fowles recognized that women were likely to favor this ending because Draft II, which ends with the happy outcome, contains an extra section just before (the published version's) last paragraph with the observation: "I have been accused before of favoring my female characters over my male" (qtd. in Mansfield 284).

¹⁹ Richard Pearce uses these words to describe Linda Alcoff's espousal of "positionality" in his essay "How does Molly Bloom Look through the Male Gaze?" See also Alcoff's "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." *Signs* 13 (1988): 405-36.

ings forces the reader to construct two Sarahs and trace two lines of narrative development. What he ignores is the possibility that there are also two Charleses: one worthy of Sarah's love and one who is not, and who, as *she* is accused of doing, demands complete power to bestow or withhold approval. The text itself gets us to think along these lines: "Every Victorian had two minds; and Charles had at least that" (289). The first ending does not condemn Sarah as selfish and speaks to careful readers as being at least equally valid: when Charles fully registers how his impatience and narrow-minded assumptions almost lost him all possibility of knowing his daughter and loving Sarah, he may gain some appreciation for her independent decisions.

The many critics who belittle Sarah get the satisfaction of agreeing with the narrator, who clearly passes judgment on her. The last we hear about Sarah is that the narrator cannot distinguish whether she is crying or not after Charles leaves her. By having us believe that Sarah obscures the male narrator's vision, the text perpetuates the idea that she represents the archetypal "mysterious and dangerous Everywoman." Pressed to comment on Sarah's motives in a 1985 interview, Fowles stated that he did not blame her "for using Charles to find her own freedom" but then immediately jumped to the following generalization: "The problem of feminism—indeed of all revolutions—is its unhappy habit of beginning for just and good reasons but ending as one more tyranny, not very different from the one it started by destroying" (Barnum 196). Of course, in this context the tyranny or power play Fowles criticizes is Sarah's inability to share her life with Charles now that she has established her own identity. Although one isolated statement can never tell the whole story, this comment tellingly suggests that Fowles was content to let the Sarah of the second ending symbolize protofeminist dogmatism.

Throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the narrator ridicules Victorian men's belief in women's inherent weakness, yet the text suggests to most critics that women like Sarah who act independently are deceptive and therefore dangerous. Perhaps because of the author's own ambivalence over the issue of women's changing roles, however, the narrative in some way anticipates a reader's desire to intervene in the text, to resist Charles' facile conclusions: the text is finally ambiguous enough to allow Sarah to transcend the bounds of the words which try to circumscribe her.

As Janice Radway observes, mass-marketed romances show women how to patiently look for and be satisfied with the hints of vulnerability an otherwise stoic hero reveals. In contrast, this novel illustrates how a woman may read a man's expressions from a distance to test whether he is ready for a mature and egalitarian partnership. A feminist reader of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* may increase her pleasure by empowering herself, for Sarah's characterization and the two endings are open to another

interpretation that critics have missed. Schweikart's model of finding "moments of liberation" supersedes Fetterley's model of resistance and justifies a wider range of feminist reader response, although it is easier to follow Schweikart's injunction when reading a postmodern and/or contemporary text. Schweikart's model works successfully with this controversial novel: readers are able to negotiate a conclusion to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that not only accords with the narrator's philosophy but also validates the female hero's, and by extension any woman's, right to test whether their male partners favor mutual freedom.

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