

## FOWLES' GODGAME: CHARACTERS AND CONCLUSIONS IN THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the three different endings of Fowles' *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN* and demonstrates that only the third ending is consistent with the development of the female protagonist throughout the novel. We should not forget, on the other hand, that *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN* is a parody of the 19th century novel, therefore Fowles' playfulness at the end is also part of his plan to "ridicule" the role of the victim in the novels of the previous century.

Prescott Evarts, Jr., in his essay on *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, says that "the most evident and disturbing irony [in the novel] surrounds the triple ending; instead of throwing the whole work into aesthetic relief, the triple ending turns the experience inward for our puzzled musing."<sup>1</sup> We would rather shed tears at the end of a novel than confront a series of possible conclusions. Our immediate response to the three different endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* varies according to our acceptance of the authorial intrusion throughout the novel. It seems almost impossible, however, to read the novel and remain immune against Fowles' playfulness which culminates with the triple ending. We come to see playful authorial intrusion as part of the seriousness of the writer. "In my novels," says Fowles, "I am the producer, director, and all the actors; I photograph it . . . there is vanity about it, a wish to play a godgame."<sup>2</sup> Fowles' godgame includes comments, digressions, use of biographical material; it does not include howe-

1 EVARTS JR., P. Fowles' *The French lieutenant's woman* as tragedy. *Critique*, 13(3):58, 1978.

2 FOWLES, J. Notes on an unfinished novel. In: MCCORMARCK, T., ed. *Afterwords: novelists on their novels*. New York, Harper & Row, 1969. p. 189.

ver decision-making for his characters. Fowles feels that all of his characters have to be autonomous, free from his control. "When Charles left Sarah over her cliff edge, I [Fowles] ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not, he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy. . . . the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself. It is not only that he 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."<sup>3</sup> Fowles allows his characters to have autonomy because he thinks "we [contemporary writers] 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."<sup>4</sup> Fowles' only commandment is: "Thou shall be free" and he extends the implication of this commandment in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to reach the reader. At the end of the novel we are free to choose which ending we find the most appropriate. We are, however, conditioned to such an extent to depend on the author's decision about the life of what ardy calls his "puppets" that instead of being grateful because Fowles gives autonomy to his characters and to us, we resent the freedom we did not ask for.

Generally speaking, Fowles offers an ending to suit "Victorian" readers, a second one to please the early-twentieth-century readers, and a last one for the contemporary reader. Some critics like Jeff Rackham<sup>5</sup> ignore the first ending completely. If the first ending were to be totally ignored Fowles would not have included it. But being so far removed from the Victorians' need to preserve and emphasize conventional values, it seems rather easy to dismiss the first ending in favor of the second. Yet, although Fowles tells us that "Charles and Ernestina did not live happily ever after"<sup>6</sup> in the first ending, he does not attach a fairy-tale flavor to the second ending either. We rejoice when Charles and Sarah become reunited but Fowles never says that they lived happily ever after. This omission raises doubts concerning the relationship between Charles and Sarah. After the mystery and enchantment of her being is dissolved in quotidian reality, a union between Charles and Sarah may be less satisfactory than a marriage between Charles and Ernestina.

While we still have to adapt ourselves to the new information about Sarah, introduced in the second ending, Fowles proposes a different turn in Charles' and Sarah's rela-

3 FOWLES, J. *The French lieutenant's woman*. New York. New American Library, 1970. p. 82.

4 FOWLES, J. *The French*. . . . p. 82.

5 RACKHAM, J. John Fowles: the existential labyrinth. *Critique*, 13(3):89-103, 1972.

6 FOWLES, J. *The French*. . . . p. 264.

tionship. We are not left musing for long about Charles' and Sarah's future, because she may have rejected him, says the third ending. Evarts calls these two possibilities the happy and the tragic endings. He says: "However we yearn for the fulfillment of the happy ending, we know that the tragic one is the real one; we acknowledge it, but the desire in the other direction remains. In this sense, the tragic emotion is full of tension and profound questioning."<sup>7</sup> Evarts seems to predict, from the second ending, that Charles and Sarah will live happily ever after. No ending given by Fowles implies a vision of unalloyed happiness or its opposite. We have to look at the endings as possibilities within reality and not as departures from it into the realm of illusion, even though romanticism may appeal more strongly to us.

Looking at the endings from a different perspective, we see that the first two fulfill our expectations of Charles, but only the last one fulfills our expectations of Sarah. Of course these are expectations raised by the additional information we have on her character from the second ending.

Fowles' method of increasing complexity seems to be the result of a very simple plan. Compare, for example, the three different endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with the endings of Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Hardy felt compelled by publishers to add Part VI, a happy ending, to his novel. He found a way of adding a "happy" ending without altering his original concept of Clym Yeobright, by simply changing the focus of his novel to another character. By doing so, Hardy was able to preserve the integrity of his view that the happiest people, but not the best, are those who are in harmony with their environment. Hardy's characters do not have the autonomy Fowles' do and his manner of referring to them as his "puppets" well illustrates that they were neither free from the fictional world nor from the author's preconceived notion of character. Yet we have to laugh at an audience who allows itself to be cheated into believing that by the addition of an extra part which includes a happy marriage the tragic tone of the novel is changed.

In Fowles the triple ending is complex first because what we find is not a series of possibilities which requires one decision. We are faced with two sets of possibilities the first one involving Charles and the second one involving Sarah as the decision-makers. In a sense we have the repetition of the same pattern twice: Charles and Sarah may choose to act according to convention or against it for individual freedom. Charles succumbs to convention if he mar-

7 EVARTS JR., p. 66.

ries Ernestina. Sarah succumbs to convention if she marries Charles, the man who seduced her. But either way Charles decides he is acting in character. The same is not true with Sarah.

When the novel opens Charles is engaged to marry Ernestina. He is a gentleman and the only heir to a rich uncle. Ernestina is a daughter of a wealthy businessman. Their relationship runs passionless and smooth. They seem to view each other realistically and openly. She often teases him for his scientific mind and he acts towards her in a playful and patronizing way. "After all, she was only a woman."<sup>8</sup> They are together walking at Lyme Bay when Sarah first appears in the novel. Charles is concerned about her safety and talks to her, but the only answer he receives is a glance from her dark eyes which penetrates through him.

She turned to look at him — or as it seemed to Charles, through him... 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."

With each "accidental" subsequent meeting, Sarah's influence upon Charles becomes like an enchantment from which he cannot get rid of.

Under this swarm of waspish self-inquiries he 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. Undoubtedly it awoke some memory in him, too tenuous, perhaps too general, to trace to any source in his past; but it unsettled him and haunted him, by calling to some hidden self he hardly knew existed. He said it to himself: It is the stupidest thing, but that girl attracts me. It seemed clear to him that it was not Sarah in herself who attracted him — how could she, he was betrothed — but some emotion, some possibility she symbolized. She made him aware of a deprivation. 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.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> FOWLES, *The French*.... p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> FOWLES, *The French*.... p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> FOWLES, *The French*.... p. 107.

But in one of their "fortuitous" meetings, when Sarah says she would like to tell Charles what happened eighteen months ago, Charles withdraws from her. Charles' permanence in Lyme Regis is marked by conflict between the desire to act according to the moral code of his society and the simultaneous desire to break free from it. We have enough evidence, before the first and second endings, that Charles is a divided being who could act either way: as a conventional character or a man in the vanguard of his age.

Sarah Woodruff — whether guilty or innocent — has from the beginning of the novel committed herself to the position of an outcast. When Charles asks her why she had concealed the fact that she no longer loved her seducer and never wanted to see him again, Sarah answers: "To be what I must be. An outcast."<sup>11</sup> How ironic Charles' notion that "he himself belonged undoubtedly to the fittest; but the human fittest had no less certain responsibility towards the less fit,"<sup>12</sup> turns out to be when he recognizes, in the second ending, that Sarah is and was the fittest. She has chosen the world to be her stage and Charles, the fittest human being, was merely part of her cast.

Until the first ending we experience sympathetic and puzzled feelings towards Sarah. Sympathy because we see her as a victim of society, being "forced" to work under the insufferable Mrs. Poulteney. Puzzlement because until we reach the second ending we are not to explain some of her attitudes in the novel. Take for example the heroine's bold statement when Mrs. Poulteney dismisses Sarah from her employment. We rejoice in the fact that Sarah was able to say it but yet it seems so out of character then.

"Take your wages!" [says Mrs. Poulteney]  
Sarah turned on her, and shook her head. "You may keep them. And if it is possible with so small a sum of money, I suggest you purchase some instrument of torture. I am sure Mrs. Fairley will be pleased to help you use it upon all those wretched enough to come under your power."<sup>13</sup>

How can we fail to stare incredulously at Sarah as Charles does when she discloses a strange, ironic smile after observing Sam and Mary in love's *flagrante delicto*.

<sup>11</sup> FOWLES, *The French*..., p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> FOWLES, *The French*..., p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> FOWLES, *The French*..., p. 195.

Then she did something as strange, as shocking, as if she had thrown off her clothes.

She smiled.

It was a smile so complex that Charles could at the first moment only stare at it incredulously. It was so strangely timed! He felt she had almost been waiting for such a moment to unleash it upon him — this revelation of her humor, that her sadness was not total. And in those wide eyes, so somber, sad and direct, was revealed an irony, a new dimension of herself — one little Paul and Virginia would have been quite familiar with in days gone by, but never till now bestowed on Lyme.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Grogan is the only one in the novel who comes close to interpreting Sarah's personality and role in society. Of course Dr. Grogan's perception is flawless although it never occurs to him that Sarah's audacity goes beyond choosing to be an outcast to fabricating the means to be one. Dr. Grogan compares Sarah to other girls who have been seduced but who never played the role of sacrificial victim and adds:

"Now you see how it is? Her sadness becomes her happiness. She wants to be a sacrificial victim, Smithson. When you and I flinch back, she leaps forward. She is possessed, you see."

He sat down again.

"Dark indeed. Very dark ... She could be cured. But she does not want to be cured. It is as simple as if she refused to take medicine."<sup>15</sup>

After we are aware of Sarah's motivations for acting an outcast, it seems rather improbable that she would accept Charles' love for her. Some characteristics of Sarah's character have to be re-emphasized to see which ending, the second or the third, fulfills our expectations of her.

We might have noticed that Sarah does not play the role of an outcast to entrap Charles, but to free herself. When Charles comes to Lyme Regis she has already chosen to be an outcast. When we read the second ending we are informed that Sarah has imagined her seduction. Therefore, she was not, as she told Charles by the sea, only partially responsible for choosing to be in isolation but completely responsible for it.

14 FOWLES, *The French*.... p. 150.

15 FOWLES, *The French*.... p. 127.

Sarah's response to Mrs. Poultenev also illustrates how she was totally in command of her situation. She laughs ironically when she observes Sam and Mary together probably because they re-enact in front of her eyes her own imagined seduction and certainly also because she can perceive the entrapment of dependence each one of them is falling into.

After Charles "seduces" her and she disappears he tries to find her for two years. He employs detectives, places ads in newspapers, goes abroad to search for her. When he finally finds her, she tells Charles, in the second ending, that she has come across one of his notices in the newspaper but decided to remain silent. Does this attitude "prove" that Sarah loves him or that she has trained Charles to perform the seduction in order to be not only "imaginatively" but realistically free from a death-in-life imposed by the Victorian conventional values? That Charles became an outcast seems to be irrelevant to Sarah. She probably did not predict that Charles would be entrapped by his love for her. She says:

"It is not you I fear. It is your love for me, I know only too well that nothing remains sacrosanct there."

He felt like someone denied a fortune by some trivial phrase in a legal document; the victim of a conquest of irrational law over rational intent. But she would not submit to reason; to sentiment she might lie more open. He hesitated, then went closer.

"Have you thought much of me in my absence?" She looked at him then; a look that was almost dry, as if she had foreseen this new line of attack, and almost welcomed it. She turned away after a moment, and stared at the roofs of the houses across the gardens.

"I thought much of you to begin with. I thought much of you some six months later, when I first saw one of he notices you had had put in—"

"Then you did know!"

But she went implacably on. "And which obliged me to change my lodgings and my name. I made inquiries. I knew then, but not before, that you had not married Miss Freeman."<sup>16</sup>

Sarah's remarks lead Charles to the recognition that

16. FOWLES, *The French...*, p. 354.

perhaps he did at last begin to grasp her mystery. Some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny had begun; he was no more than a footsoldier, a pawn in a far vaster battle; and like all battles it was not about love, but about possession and territory.<sup>17</sup>

Can we, after all this, picture Sarah leaning her head on Charles' breast? Is this a happy ending, like Evarts calls it, or an imposed conclusion to satisfy our need to be cheated into participating in a happiness that seems to contradict everything we have seen before?

Should we go on accepting Evarts' notion that the third is a tragic ending or assume with Rosemary M. Laughlin that Sarah, by using Charles, is representative of a "power, the power that one person can wield over another to violate him, annihilate him, or even, ironically, to help him achieve a fullness of personality and humanity"<sup>18</sup>?

Only the third ending fulfills our expectations of Sarah as a character committed completely to individual freedom from the beginning of the novel, and, having Laughlin's statement in mind, only in the third ending Fowles satisfies our contemporary need to see a human being's triumph solely dependent on the power of his or her self.

## RESUMO

Este trabalho analisa as três conclusões do romance *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN* de Fowles e demonstra que apenas a terceira conclusão é coerente com o desenvolvimento da protagonista através do mesmo. Considera-se também que este romance é uma paródia do romance do século dezenove e que portanto a "brincadeira" de Fowles no final de sua obra é parte de seu plano de ridicularizar o papel da vítima dentro dos romances do século anterior.

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17 FOWLES. *The French*.... p. 355.

18 LAUGHLIN, R.M. Faces of power in the novels of John Fowles. *Critique*, 3(3):71, 1972.



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