

# French lieutenant's woman and techniques postmodernism assignment

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Examine how FLW represents a postmodern way of thinking. Postmodernism encompasses a reinterpretation of classical ideas, forms and practices and reflects and rejects the ideologies of previous movements in the arts. The postmodern movement has made way for new ways of thinking and a new theoretical base when criticising art, literature, sexuality and history.

John Fowles' 1969 historical bricolage, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, utilises the ideas of postmodern theorists such as Foucault, Barthes and Sartre amongst others to form a postmodern double-coded discourse which examines values inherent in the Victorian era from a twentieth century context. The novel's use of intertextuality, metafiction and its irreverent attitude can be seen as a postmodern parody of Victorian fiction and the historical novel.

For the purpose of examining the values and ideologies of the Victorian era in comparison to the postmodern paradigm, Victorian conventions are shown juxtaposed with postmodern techniques such as the authorial intrusion and alternative endings. Sarah Woodruff is different from other characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* because she is epistemologically unique and because the narrator does not have access to her inner thoughts: in chapter 13 the author directly addresses the reader and states that he gives his characters the free will to determine their outcome in his novel.

In a typical Victorian context, the protagonist's inner conflict and motives would be exposed to the reader. Fowles denies his right as the author to impose definition of characters and in this way recognises "the age of Alain-Robbe Grillet and Roland Barthes" in bringing about the "death of the

author" and the birth of the "reader". The reader must interpret the text in ways (s)he views it and is forced to actively engage in the text. Fowles also introduces the author as a god-like figure (who turns back time) to craft multiple endings. He (the author) allows Sarah to act in an existentialist way to determine her outcome in the novel.

It allows her to exercise her individuality, making her stand as a lone feminist figure amongst the tides of Victorian conventionality. The novel rewrites Victorian sexuality and in this way is an example of the way the sexual revolution of the 1960s is described in the historical novel of its time. Foucault described the Victorian period as the "golden age of repression" and he revises the notion that the Victorian era was silent on sexual matters in his works. Both Foucault and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* claim that the forms of power and resistance are historically conditioned.

For example, Sarah's body is still institutionalised at the end of the novel since she appears only as a minor character in Rosetti's house. The fact that Sarah is an anachronistic creation points to the idea that the novel is not about the Victorian era but a critique of relative values in their context. The metafictional structure of the novel successfully elucidates that Sarah seems to be subordinated in the patriarchal power of the contemporary narrator- it also endeavours to show that even the most emancipated groups during the Victorian period could not carry the liberation of women completely.

This is a reflexion of what Fowles deems backward in the context of his society, and is apparent in Sarah's repressed sexuality; and the blatant disparity regarding notions of female sexuality: Ernestina is always confined

within the strict boundaries of patriarchal, societal convention- this is shown by the way she represses her sexual desire for Charles, being content with the most "chaste of kisses". In this way the novel represents the truth as a form of pleasure in a Foucauldian sense.

The institutionalisation of prostitutes, a somewhat clandestine pastime for Victorian gentlemen, is a situation that reflects the obvious hypocrisy of Victorian society when compared to Sarah's situation. She (Sarah) is labelled a "fallen woman" (hence her nickname "Tragedy") and is ostracised because of her free-will and "feminine misconduct". Charles finds her forwardness rather intimidating as it goes against his beliefs that the stratification of society is a vital element of social stability. This enforces Charles' Darwinian beliefs about the social hierarchy (in reference to Social Darwinism).

Darwinian evolution finds its expression by creating a new way of thinking. Fowles' novel represents the great crisis of Darwinian Victorian England and traces its impact on society. Charles questions his religion in the Church, admitting he is agnostic, and the narrator himself labels Charles as having agnostic qualities. At the end of the novel Charles has become a "modern man" and Sarah the "hopeful monster" who feels alienated in Victorian culture without being able to conceptualise Charles' intuitive understanding of her otherness and modernity.

Darwinian evolution and nineteenth century psychology are portrayed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as providing a corrective culture dominated by narrow minded Evangelicalism. Examples can be observed in Mrs

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Poulteney's fickle attempts at being charitable, her dismissive attitude towards her duty to the church which is merely a habitual pastime for her, and her decision to dismiss Sarah. Then novel's intertextuality is made up of its bricolage of history and fiction.

Victorian epigraphs (and the irony used in them) serve to reconstruct the cultural milieu of the age using representations of facets of its literary world through the poetry of Hardy, Tennyson, Arnold and Clough. It provides a context within which the characters try to construct their subjectivities where they can emancipate themselves from the novel's dominant ideology (this is an example of how Freud's ideas about literature's subjectivity are utilised).

Also, the footnotes reinforce the author's presence and allude to the fact that the author is omnipresent (in the novel). The alternative endings represent two types of Victorian endings and the last, a more postmodern, existentialist one. Fowles' plays with different endings to epitomise the early postmodernist problem of artistic form and representation and this technique agrees with Umberto Eco's idea that literature has openness and can be interpreted in many ways.

The postmodern style is successful in creating a tension between these endings within a single text. The last alternative ending in chapter 61 can be construed as the existentialist one. The existentialist theme dramatises the struggles of individuals to define themselves and to make moral decisions about the conduct of their lives in worlds which deny them of freedom. Both Charles and Sarah are searching for themselves, trying to find their own existences by rebelling against the norms of tradition: Charles by embracing

Darwinism and declaring himself agnostic (in line with the Nietzschean existentialist ideology); and Sarah by redefining herself (such as labelling herself "Mrs") and avoiding the hypocrisy of Victorians towards sexuality and human relations. Like Charles and Sarah, the reader is free of manipulation (by the author) and we can manoeuvre our position in the narrative to create our own "meaning". The use of the existentialist theme in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* makes the reader aware of Sartrean-style thinking which was not in existence in Victorian times but was conceptualised in Fowles' era.

It is successful in allowing the reader to criticise and contrast the differing ideologies present at the respective times and, by highlighting the shift in values, Fowles effectively expounds a new way of thinking. Fowles successfully blends the Victorian novel with postmodern ideologies and twentieth century sensibility by applying paradigms which lead to the reader being allowed to question previously held values, in particular relative values which change according to context, such as sexuality and religion.

Through his pastiche of traditional Victorian romance, and historical narrative Fowles deconstructs his novel and makes the reader aware of contextual codes and conventions through ironic, metafictional comments: "Perhaps it is only a game.... Perhaps you suppose the novelist has only to pull the right strings and his puppets will behave in a lifelike manner" -*The French Lieutenant's Woman* Chapter 13 \*