

Tess of the d'urbervilles and the french lieutenant's woman



**ASSIGN
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One might expect women in Victorian society to be depicted as, stereotypically, pretty little ornaments to be owned by, in turn, their father and their husband, and that their future lives will continue along the same path, without significant input by themselves. Both *Tess* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have many female characters, which deviate to different extents from this portrayal. One difference in the two novels is in the number of main female characters in each.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there are principally two: Tess herself, whose progress through her life is chronicled throughout the novel, and Mercy Chant, who is a minor character. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, however, there are four important female characters: Ernestina, the woman due to marry Charles, Sarah, the eponymous heroine, Mrs. Poultney, a rich elderly woman and Mary, Ernestina's servant. 'Ernestina had just the right face for her age' tells us nearly all that we need to know about Charles' fiancée.

She is the stereotypical Victorian woman; I think that Charles describes her best when he says '[she is] a pretty little thing, yet a shallow little thing'. She does see that society's expectations for her are less than thrilling, although her wanting to be 'something exciting, like a dancer' shows us that her desires are strictly Victorian. The fact that 'she died on the day Hitler invaded Poland' obviously shows us that she is a creature of the Victorian age only. Tess Durbeyfield is the definitive 'independent woman'. While most Victorian women feel that they are incomplete without a man, she is happy to live alone.

However, the irony of her life is that this independence and refusal to be tied down only makes her more attractive to men. I think that Mrs. Poultney represents the sum of Charles' doubts and fears about his relationship with Ernestina. Inside, I think that he worries that Ernestina will grow up to become the same as her; a sad, boring old woman whose only pleasure in life comes from terrorizing all who are employed by her. Sarah, the French Lieutenant's woman, is a strange character; at first we see her to be in the same position as Tess; having had her virginity taken from her by a man that she didn't love.

However, as the novel progresses, we discover that, while Tess' tragedy is forced upon her, Sarah actively 'marries shame'. Money was a very important factor in the life of a Victorian woman. Ernestina's tragedy is the Victorian view on the matter. In those days, society saw someone who had earned all their money through the business world as inferior to a man who had inherited all his from his relations. This seems a strange notion; after all, the person who has earned all his money through hard work is surely more deserving of respect than the person who has simply been given it all.

Ernestina's grandfather is a draper, meaning that she isn't highborn, and that all her inheritance will be seen as dirty. Because of this fact, she is overjoyed at the prospect of marrying Charles, and is all the more bitter when Charles loses the inheritance from his uncle, and eventually his love for her. Tess and Sarah are both born into very poor families, and this fact haunts them both forever afterward. Alec D'Urberville tries to help Tess' poor family in order to make her love him more. The fact that these two

independent women are so poor means that the men who wish to own them actually find their task slightly easier.

One of the most important differences between the two novels is the hundred-year time split. John Fowles, while writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, was able to judge and make decisions about Victorian society with the perspective gained by the passage of time. He could also draw parallels from the 1800s to his own time. In fact, one of the great ironies in Fowles' novel is that while Sarah is such an innately free spirit, she is born and trapped into this intolerant, hypocritical society. He leads the reader to believe that if only Sarah were born into the liberal age of the 1960s, her spirit would be fulfilled.

In both of the novels, intellect is clearly a key factor to the structure. 'Born to be a farmer's wife but educated to be something... better' shows that although both Tess and Sarah have been born into very poor families, they have still been educated quite well. However, Ernestina, the rich businessman's daughter is evidently a lot less deep and mature in her thoughts than either Tess or Sarah. This hints that, while Ernestina may well have had a more expensive education than the other two, she has had a lot less experience of life, having been pampered by servants since the day that she was born.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the theme of evolution is very important. At the beginning of the novel, Sarah is seen to be a very similar character to Tess. However, eventually she turns out to be something quite different. Also, Charles and Ernestina both start out very shallow. I think it is one of the

most important points in the novel that Charles, as a man, has the opportunity to progress and become something better, while Ernestina, being a woman, cannot. One of the main tasks of women in Victorian society was their role in personal relationships.

Their task was to find a rich gentleman, to marry him and then to keep him happy. Their man was almost a god to them, and they saw that, to keep him happy, they should do whatever he wanted them to. Prime examples of this role are Ernestina and Mercy Chant. The way men viewed women in marital relationships was entirely different. Alec D'Urberville wanted Tess to be his doting housewife; she should cook and clean for him, talk to him and make love to him when called for. In the same way, Charles sees Ernestina as 'an ornament'.

Both of these men have the same quintessential Victorian property; they see women as nothing more than yet another item for them to possess. In the same way that a Victorian gentleman should be seen to own a fine mansion and a horse and carriage, he should own a wife, preferably with a hefty sum of inherited money and a good title. 'Charles was like most men of his time; he simply couldn't believe that any woman could, in any way, actively enjoy lust' tells us a lot about Victorian relationships.

It brings us back to the idea of ownership; why would an item enjoy performing one of its natural functions? I would say that the only relationship in either of the novels that would be considered good by our modern standards is between Sam and Mary. Ironically, this very simple and lusty relationship is frowned upon by ancient relics of Victorian society like Mrs.

Poultney, and seen as ' against God's wishes'. In the novels there are both dominant and subservient female characters.

Tess and Sarah both try to be dominant, but the constant pressure that the men in their respective novels put on them forces them to be more subservient. Ernestina and Mercy Chant are both very passive in their relationships, although, after Charles has left her, I think that Ernestina evolves into a much more dominant character. Ironically, it is the women who are more dominant who ultimately become victims in both novels. Since women in both books are described predominantly in terms of their connection with someone else, it is interesting to see whether their characters grow or diminish with this treatment.

Ultimately Tess is a heroine whose life ends in tragedy and Sarah achieves a measure of satisfaction with her child but is far from being wholly content. In all cases but one the women lose their men, with unhappy results; only Mary finds happiness as she settles down with Sam, Charles' servant. So it seems that in both books we are led to believe that a woman's fate is inexorably sealed to the continuance or otherwise of her relationship with a man. Both authors appear to deny the possibility of a woman creating her own good fortune and happiness.