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# Mystery, Knowledge, and Freedom in The French Lieutenant's Woman

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# Mystery, Knowledge, and Freedom in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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### **RÉSUMÉ**

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* est un roman construit autour d'une multitude d'énigmes que le lecteur est invité à déchiffrer par le biais de sa participation active à la construction du texte. A travers cette narration énigmatique, le personnage principal, Charles Smithson, se lance lui-même à la poursuite du mystère que représente celle dont il est épris : Sarah Woodruff. Au fur et à mesure, la quête de l'énigmatique Sarah s'avère également être la quête du personnage principal vers la connaissance de soi. Surplombant à la fois la narration et les personnages, la figure quasi divine du narrateur, à la fois cynique, ironique et didactique, s'amuse à exposer ses connaissances et sa capacité à contrôler le monde qu'il construit. De mystifications en révélations, le narrateur est la figure centrale du mystère au sein du roman. Ainsi, le jeu narratif conduit le lecteur et le roman lui-même vers un idéal philosophique : celui de la liberté.

**KEYWORDS:** Riddle, text, narrator, narrative game, freedom

### **ABSTRACT**

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel built upon a network of different riddles that the reader is asked to decipher through his active participation in the construction of the text. Within the enigmatic narrative, the protagonist Charles Smithson first initiates a quest for Sarah's mystery. Progressively, the quest for Sarah turns into a quest for his own self-knowledge. The distant god-like figure of the narrator stands above the characters and the narrative; cynical, ironic, didactic, he aims at displaying his ability for knowledge and control in manipulating both his characters and the reader. Mystifying and revealing, the narrator is the key figure as far as the mystery surrounding the novel is concerned. Finally, this whole narrative game heads towards a philosophical ideal: that of freedom.

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*The French Lieutenant's Woman* (FLW 2004) is a fascinating novel setting up a romance within the Victorian society of 1867, told and commented by a contemporary narrator living in 1967. It is the account of the tumultuous passion of Charles Smithson, the scientist, for Sarah Woodruff, the outcast. It is also a story between a clever manipulative narrator and a disoriented but active reader. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is eventually the impossible meeting of differences, contraries, opposites: a novel where tension is constantly palpable. If the plot of the novel is mesmerizing, its main interest can be found in the story-telling itself, with a flamboyant use of language and a perverse game with the reader's expectations. In the microcosm of Lyme Regis in England, Charles is an aristocrat whose life could have been determined by a respectable marriage with Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of an earnest businessman, and a pre-determined career in trade with his father-in-law. Yet, Charles's fate is disturbed by his encounter with the mysterious figure of Sarah. Paradoxically, his natural curiosity for exact sciences draws him into resolving the irrational enigma that Sarah represents. This encounter, the starting point of the novel, leads Charles onto an unexpected and insecure path from which he never goes back. Throughout the symbolic journey that the novel represents, the narrator's voice comments upon Charles's thoughts and Victorian conventions as well. This hetero-diegetic narrator (Genette, 1987, 248), physically separated from the story by a temporal gap of 100 years, becomes an essential figure in the novel. The reader is plunged into Victorian society and withdrawn at the same time by the narrator's critical and ironic comments. The novel powerfully depicts past and present in a back and forth movement, creating for the reader both empathy and distance regarding the characters. Therefore, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, like any piece of art, tackles the subject of life. Yet, it does not claim or pretend to be what life is; the novel

is the account of a subjective and personal view of life. As a proof, John Fowles said: “The novel is simply, for me, a way of expressing my view of life.” (Olshen, 1978, 2)

If we compare *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with *The Magus* (Fowles, 1978), we understand what John Fowles means when he talks about his view of life. The comparison between the character of Charles Smithson and Nicholas D'Urfe is easy to draw: they are both the victims of their perceptions of life, based on self-delusions and the idea of destiny. They both encounter what we could call an existential crisis, that of Nicholas reaching its peak at the end of chapter 8, when he attempts to commit suicide, that of Charles being made clear in chapter 48, when he has an obscure exchange with a voice in a church. Then, their lives are guided by the idea of mystery: Nicholas sees a glimmer of hope for his fate when “the mysteries began” (*Magus* 66) and Charles's destiny is disturbed by the mystery of Sarah from chapter 1: ‘I wish you hadn't told me the sordid facts’ (speaking to Ernestina about Sarah), for in provincial life, “there is no mystery. No romance” (FLW 11). The last parallel I want to draw is the idea of freedom that is conveyed throughout these novels. Nicholas and Charles gain a certain freedom after having reached true self-knowledge. The two novels are actually a path leading towards the idea and ideal of freedom and we see then John Fowles's view of life: “How you achieve freedom. That obsesses me.” (Olshen, 1978, 11) It is easy to notice then that John Fowles's obsession has been transmitted to his characters in a “new reality (or unreality) more valid.” (FLW 96) The worlds of fiction created by John Fowles, or this ‘new reality’, are actually more valid, for the author is personally a recognized moralist: “His works possess obvious moral or didactic elements.” (Olshen, 1978, 11) And indeed, I think that these two elements can be found in the character of Conchis in *The Magus* and the figure of the narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Then, they embody John Fowles's view of life, being the very voices of the text, transmitting the author's moral mission. It is important

not to confuse the author's presence and the voices of the novels, particularly in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The author's withdrawal also has a moralistic purpose.

The year in which John Fowles set the story *The French Lieutenant's Woman* corresponds to the moment when literature and its processes were challenged. In 1967, Roland Barthes wrote his famous essay entitled 'The Death of the Author'. He is considered today as "the most brilliant and influential of the generation of literary critics who came to prominence in France in the 1960's." (Barthes, 2008, 311) In Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrator evokes his affiliation to the French writer: "But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes." (FLW 95) 'The age' of Roland Barthes is actually that of a revolutionary theory stating that a text is a space where the author's identity disappears to let the enunciation have "no other content than the act by which it is uttered." (Barthes, 2008, 315) By affiliating his novel to Roland Barthes, John Fowles, through the narrator's voice, evokes his own disappearance. If the narrator plays with uncertainties, saying "So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography" (FLW 95), it is to emphasize his (by extension, John Fowles's) involvement in the process of self-reflective writing. In other words, if the author withdraws, he aims indirectly at analyzing the processes of his own text and displaying them: the novel tackles the subject of metafiction. And indeed, metafiction was not new in the 1960's, for the absolute reference is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, written in 1760. Throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the so-called digressions are meant to comment upon the flow of the narrative and the possible autonomy of its characters. 'So-called', for digressions may represent what the novel is aiming at. In using metafiction, John Fowles clearly cuts himself from realistic novels and paradoxically enough, uses the model of realism as a basis for his novel and turns this model into a parody. There is a play with conventions in this novel: those of Victorian society and the Victorian novel are illustrated but challenged by the fight for modernity and change at the same time. Saying that

he lived in ‘the age’ of Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Fowles’s narrator alludes to the investigator of the ‘Nouveau Roman’: “the movement, if so it can be called (...) rejected much that had gone before’ arguing that the novel ‘should be about *things*.” (Cuddon, 1999, 558) In this revolutionary atmosphere, John Fowles could but write a revolutionary novel.

*The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is a parody based on the genre of the Victorian novel which deals with Victorian society itself. It seems that John Fowles uses this background to put forward his didactic and moralistic purposes. The society of the 1860’s is obviously a society in which strict conventions are ruled by puritanism. Therefore, what the narrator comments upon is a world of mysteries and taboo, especially surrounding the question of sexuality. At the same time, the question of evolution and change is central at that period; Charles “called himself a Darwinist” (FLW 87) and 1867 is “the year in which the first volume of Marx’s *Kapital* appeared (...) and during which Mill campaigned for the emancipation of women.” (Conradi, 1982, 60) There is obviously an internal conflict within the Victorian Society of 1867, torn between traditional moral values and the ideal of progress. In the centre of this crossroad John Fowles creates a microcosm where he can achieve his didactic purposes through the narrator’s ironic comments. Yet *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is not a novel comparing past and present in order to praise the society of 1967. In fact, John Fowles intends to draw his characters – and the novel itself by extension – into his personal view of life characterized by existentialism, that he describes as an “‘obstinate individualism’ that makes for ‘the revolt of the individual against all those systems of thought...that attempt to rob him of his individuality.’” (Conradi, 1982, 26) And indeed, the codified Victorian society and more particularly the microcosm of Lyme Regis embody a kind of imprisonment and enclosed space that cancel the ideal of individuality and freedom. On the contrary, the character of Sarah, the outcast of the town, corresponds to an archetype of escape and freedom regarding oppression, thus epitomizing the values and ideals of the

1960's. The combination of what seems to be two impossible universes turns into the 'unreality' that Fowles talks about. Moreover, by revisiting the Victorian novel model with its realistic aspect and codes, the author creates a 'new reality' where the classic realist novel meets modern philosophy; no doubt, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* hides a personal view of life.

What I have found worth studying is more the path leading to the idea of freedom than freedom itself. I think that throughout the novel, the subtle narrative discourse creates a riddle or a series of riddles making the whole novel move forward. We as readers witness the perpetual creation and regeneration of a novel going irresistibly towards evolution and change. At the same time, our passivity turns into an active participation in the novel, for the riddle is a constant intellectual game that we are invited to play. We have to decipher what is told and what remains untold throughout the narration to experience and understand the novel. I would like to show that the narrative logic of the riddle hides a philosophical discourse that gives the novel its energy and strength and leads towards the very application of this philosophy, in other words, how the logic of the riddle constitutes an act of freedom in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

First, I will show how the riddle lies at the heart of the narrative, then we will see how mystery sets up the process of freedom. Finally, the question of knowledge will be studied as the central point between the riddle and the act of freedom.

## I. The riddle at heart of the narrative

### 1) A network of riddles

#### a) An enigmatic narrator

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* sets up a network of different riddles, one hidden behind another. The figure of the narrator, commenting upon the Victorian period though he belongs to the twentieth century, remains enigmatic throughout the novel, until its end, and even after several re-readings. John Fowles has created a skilful, fascinating manipulator, a narrative voice that could be a character of the story he is telling, an intrusive narrator who says "I" from the first chapter and whose identity remains mysterious. We have here a challenging narrator on show, imagining the questions the reader might ask, and confidently answering them. After giving a personal aesthetic account of Lyme Regis, the narrator interrupts his description to address the reader: "I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test" (FLW 4). But even if the narrative voice is strongly present, it is above all characterized by its critical distance from the Victorian period, the twentieth century, the characters and even itself. The narrator proves deliciously pitiless with the character of Mrs Poulteney. The narrator being cynical, ironic and critical juxtaposes both her tyrannical behaviour and her high sense of morality, accompanied by a genuine fear of divine judgment. His comment upon her imaginary place in the Gestapo as if she were a contemporary both highlights the distance the narrator is creating with his characters, adding a strong comic effect, and the

temporal gap separating him from the story. (FLW 21) Thus, complicity is being created between the narrator and the reader despite the secret identity of this multifaceted voice.

One of his particularities is to pretend ignorance towards his own story-telling, something that questions his reliability, as for example: “Later that night, Sarah might have been seen – though I cannot think by whom, unless a passing owl” (93) and a sense of frustration, for we know that the narrator is deliberately mocking us. Most of the time, the narrator says that “he does not know”. It creates a particular effect, as if certain things were impossible to figure out, as if mystery were shadowing what is not meant to be mysterious, as if mystery were part of life and consciously part of fiction. Furthermore the narrator comments upon his own status in chapter 13, underlining his so-called uncertainties about himself and about the narrative. Indeed, the narrator definitely has a selective omniscience and the discourse he creates constructs the mystery of the novel as well.

Adopting the internal focalization through the figure of the spy in chapter one, the narrative voice introduces the mysterious figure of Sarah, who is for the moment a dark, immobile creature, obviously not belonging to her time if we simply compare her with what has been said about Ernestina Freeman in the previous paragraph (5). Throughout the novel, we understand that the narrator is playing with the notion of mystery, not presenting himself as the voice of truth and paradoxically at the same time seducing us into believing him. Here is the basis of a complex network of riddles.

#### b) Commenting upon a character who is an enigma to himself

The narrator is mainly commenting upon a character who becomes more and more aware that he is an enigma to himself: Charles Smithson. The privileged access to the scientist’s interiority gives an account of his progressive quest towards an un-scientific

answer. If Charles is first obsessed with Sarah, he becomes step by step obsessed with himself as well. Charles's certainties are progressively deconstructed throughout the narration. The narrator presents him as a static character, unaware of the changes taking place in Victorian society. In chapter 7, the narrator says that "He could not have imagined a world without servants" (44) though the narrator invites us to think that times are changing. It is indeed Sam's struggle with certain letters that "were signs of a social revolution, and this was something that Charles failed to recognize". (43) Moreover, Charles is described as a man whose laziness is his "distinguishing trait". (17) His will to "seem respectable, in place of the desire to do good for good's sake" (17) and a question such as: "How could one be a creative scientist, with Lyell and Darwin still alive?" (17) highlight his general state of inaction and contemplation. The narrator contributes to justifying Charles's behaviour by showing that he does belong to his time and his society. This serves the narrator to point out Victorian ideology: "After all, he was a Victorian. We could not expect him to see what we are only just beginning (...) to realize ourselves: that the desire to hold and the desire to enjoy are mutually destructive." (69)

Furthermore, the narrator makes us understand that he knows more about Charles than Charles knows about himself, as the statement about Darwin suggests: "Charles called himself a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin". (50) In other words, Charles has fantasies about who he is; he is blind. The limits of his perception are put forward in several passages in which he goes and seeks for fossils. It is only after his work that Charles "[begins] to look around him" (51) but previously, we learned that he did not give a second thought to "the woman who stared" (47), and this woman was actually Sarah. This lack of sight, then a lack of insight, mirrors the effects that Sarah is already having upon Charles. Charles's main problem remains in his own beliefs: influenced by Darwin, he belongs to the fittest though in reality, he has to struggle if he wants to survive.

c) A character looking for the enigma that Sarah represents

Charles realizes that he is an enigma to himself thanks to his decisive encounter with the outcast Sarah Woodruff, whom everybody in Lyme Regis calls “the French lieutenant’s woman”. When Ernestina and Charles first come across Sarah on the Cobb, Ernestina gives a vague account of Sarah’s story at Charles’s request. Then, coming closer in order to talk to her, Charles is suddenly puzzled by Sarah’s deep look. He gets the impression that Sarah is looking “through” him (10), as if she had the capacity to see to his mind. The motif of Sarah’s eyes recurs very regularly throughout the narrative, particularly each time Charles meets her. Charles always renews his perception of Sarah’s eyes, as if they were revealing her multifaceted personality, and as if they were revealing the truth about her. Charles is immediately convinced that Sarah is not what the others think of her and that her look is genuine and pure, and above all frank since it is deprived of “artifice”, “mask”, and “hypocrisy” (10). Yet, he feels disarmed at the same time, “both pierced and deservedly diminished” (10), as if he were now an enemy to himself. This series of mixed feelings, his constant uncertainties about who Sarah is and what sort of effect she has on him is what builds Charles’s quest to resolve the enigma that she presents and by extension, the enigma that he himself presents. The attraction created by the combination of opposites she seems to embody – as her look testifies since it can be “a lance” (10) or “both timid and forbidding” (119) and the uncertainties about her self – as the “dark movement” (118) that Charles perceives when he notices her at first sight – slowly make Charles fall into an abyss from which he will not emerge.

He also sees in his relationship with her the possibility of a romance, of courtly love; Charles originally has “chivalrous intentions” (86) towards Sarah as he sees her as an

innocent and sad woman who needs help. Charles thinks that because he belongs to the fittest in nature, his duty is to help the weakest to survive. He apparently finds himself invested with a mission and believes in its achievement. After Sarah's confession about Varguennes, Charles blindly thinks that "he had cured her of her madness" (189). Yet it does not prevent him from being scared of the situation. Once he accepts to help Sarah, Charles immediately feels confused and already sees himself outside society's boundaries: "He knew he was about to engage in the forbidden, or rather the forbidden was about to engage him" (147). Charles is convinced of his superior knowledge, but Sarah has already become a riddle as he thinks when he is "free as god (...) and understanding all. All except Sarah that is." (163) His conventional side is defeated by his curiosity and imagination. His feeling of "dissatisfaction" (178) with his own life right after Sarah gives an account of her personal freedom definitely marks Charles's "fall". Burden underlines that "Sarah Woodruff's rebellion against society in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offers Charles a model for action. (...) he is an agent who is written into a plot by her actions" (153).

#### d) The narrator and the enigma of Sarah

Apparently, Sarah represents an enigma for the narrator himself. Actually, the narrator contributes to the creation of this enigma because of his ambiguous behaviour and Sarah's ambiguous behaviour as well. We have already evoked the strength of his presence throughout the narrative and the impact of his commentaries. Obviously concerning Sarah, the narrator is playing the game of selective omniscience. Kerry McSweeney underlines that until chapter 12, "the reader is given some information about Sarah that only an omniscient narrator could provide" and yet in chapter 13 "the narrator has changed his tune" (McSweeney 1983, 140). It is true that the narrator has an ambiguous behaviour towards

Sarah. Giving an account of Sarah's deep intelligence in chapter 9, the narrator explains her "ability to classify other people's worth" (FLW 53) and her readings as a "substitute for experience" (54): this can be directly opposed to "the outward facts" (98) that he reports afterwards from chapter 13.

It is worth noticing that each time Charles and Sarah meet, we are given Charles's point of view that we can identify thanks to literary devices such as punctuation, modals or verbs of perception such as "seem" when Sarah is described. This process enables the narrator not to get involved with Charles's thoughts and creates at the same time an ambiguity about Sarah. We can often feel irony created by the narrator's distance when for example, Charles perceives Sarah: "And there, a dark movement!" (118) The narrator obviously has the power to mystify Sarah when he chooses. There is a blurring effect when the narrative contains both Charles's interiority and the narrator's distance and then, a personal comment from the narrator. "But there was something in that face, which Charles examined closely in profile" (119) followed later by "I do not mean that she had one of those masculine, heavy-chinned faces popular in the Edwardian Age (...)" (119) Is the narrator sharing Charles's perplexity? It seems difficult to answer that he is. At the end of chapter 12, the narrator asks ironically who Sarah is without answering his question.

The narrator refusing to break the silence surrounding the enigma of Sarah puts forward the special relationship that exists between them. Kerry McSweeney argues that "the quality of Sarah's mysteriousness is enhanced by suggestions of a certain intimacy, a special bond, between her and the narrator" (McSweeney 1983, 140) and mentions the Toby Jug episode of chapter 36. In describing Sarah unfolding her items in her room at Exeter, the intrusive narrator makes a puzzling comment on the cracked Toby which "was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago (...)" (280). Not only does the episode cross the temporal boundaries between the narrator and

Sarah for they share the same object at two different times as regards the narrative, but as McSweeney says that “it does suggest a shared taste and sensitivity between her and the narrator.” (McSweeney 1983, 140) If the narrator creates Sarah as his accomplice, a double figure contributing to the creation of the enigma she herself represents, then only Charles and the reader are left to find out the answer. Yet here is one of the keys of the novel: “The task of Charles and the reader is therefore not to interpret Sarah (...) but to enter into an acceptance of unknowing and mystery” (FLW 141). Similarly to the characters and the narrator, the context that is built up in the novel contributes to the logic of the riddle which characterizes *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

## 2) Creation of an enigmatic context

### a) An age of taboo commented by a free-minded narrator

The narrative of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* contributes to the creation of an enigmatic context: that of the scrupulously detailed depiction of the repressed mid-Victorian society juxtaposed with the critical commentaries of a free-minded narrator. The Victorian age that is represented through the microcosm of Lyme Regis is marked with a concern for morality and conventions, an acute sense of hypocrisy – properly explored by Mrs Poulteney as regards people and religion – and a taboo concerning sexuality. The latter is a central issue for John Fowles: as the novel is deeply influenced by Victorian realism, the characters behave as the period expects them to. Added to this, the didactic narrator seems delighted to teach the reader about the fundamental differences that exist between the reader’s modern state of mind and that of someone who has learnt to repress one’s feelings. As Peter Conradi notices, “It is thus a pastiche 1860s sensation novel which turns its later readers into voyeurs of mid-Victorian *moeurs*” (Conradi 1984, 62-63) If the aim is for the reader to sympathize with the

characters, it may paradoxically reinforce the sense of distance that is already present because of the time gap, for the narrator does not hesitate to establish some parallels between past and present. The way the narrator introduces this fundamental difference between us underlines a mystery that only history can explain. The oppression of Lyme Regis is to be opposed with the sexual freedom that foreign countries seem to offer: Charles contemplating the sexual attraction of Sarah sleeping in the Cobb reminds him of a girl he has known in Paris (FLW 70). At the same time, the narrative tells us that Ernestina fears Charles flirting, knowing that “he had lived in Paris, in Lisbon, and travelled much.”(74) In chapter 18, Charles wishes that “he might be in Cadiz, Naples, the Morea (...) not only for the Mediterranean sprint itself but to be free” (137).

Repression of feelings and ignorance are also at stake. The narrator tries to share his empathy for Ernestina when giving an account of her first moment of intimacy with Charles. If her chastity and sensitivity are put forward, the narrator critically observes her current situation: “How can you merciless imprison all natural sexual instinct for twenty years and then not expect the prisoner to be racked by sobs when the doors are thrown open?” (83) The most interesting moment may be when the narrator teases the reader about his so-called prejudices about sexuality. Describing Sarah lying down next to a girl in the dark, the narrator addresses the reader’s perverted imagination: “A thought has swept into your mind but you forget we are in the year of 1867” (158). Then, giving an account of lesbianism, the narrator explains that at that period, “some vices were then so unnatural that they did not exist” (158). Innocence and ignorance seem to be the signs of the period, and yet at the same time, the narrator reflects upon the special pleasure that can be found with the sublimation of sex (271). A long reflection is made about the possible virtue of a convention of repression which highlights at the same time that the society the reader belongs to has lost a mystery that could contain a lot of promises.

Sexuality is undoubtedly part of the riddle which constitutes the novel. The sexual relationship that takes place between Sarah and Charles in chapter 46 leads Charles to the discovery of a truth in the following chapter: he finds out that Sarah has lied about her virginity and her story with Varguennes. Moreover, the transgression that their act symbolizes is the sign of the definitive exclusion of Charles from society. He cannot go backwards, and he tragically knows it, for the first question he asks Sarah is: “what is to become of us?”(354). Charles is not yet aware that he is the only one to be really concerned with the answer and this creates a sudden dramatic irony. A tension is clearly constructed between mystery and sex, between an epoch of taboo and an epoch of sexual freedom, contributing to reinforce the riddle that the novel presents.

b) A disoriented and manipulated reader

The reader occupies a very ambiguous position in the novel. His existence is clearly mentioned since the narrator directly addresses him. Being a “voyeur” of Victorian habits, the reader is invited to participate in the course of the action, to reflect upon the plot and its context and to read actively. The narrator invites him to do so throughout his several digressions. Roland Barthes suggests in *S/Z* that what is at stake in the literary work is to “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.” (Barthes, 1987, 4) Yet the reader must be active since he is constantly being manipulated by the unreliable narrator whose discourse is based upon directness and detachment, uncertainties and revelations or else fantasies made directly out of his imagination, as can testify for example, his account of Mrs Poulteney going to hell in chapter 44. Basically, there is no mystery about the narrator’s manipulation since he freely alludes to it at times. After the first ending he has created, the narrator cynically states in the following chapter that what he has previously described “did

not happen quite in the way you may have been led to believe.”(342) The narrator obviously plays at disorientating the reader and deceiving his conventional expectations. This privileged relationship has direct consequences upon the feeling of empathy that is likely to exist from a reader towards a character. Breaking the flow of the narrative either to address the reader or to comment upon a character, a distance is obviously being created between reader and characters. Depicting Charles in his professional apparatus to go and seek for tests, the narrator suddenly interrupts the narrative: “He would have made you smile, for he was carefully equipped for his role” (47-48). We cannot but feel distant with such an ironic commentary, and at the same time we should feel closer to the narrator. In the same passage indeed, the narrator establishes complicity between the reader and himself by using several times the plural pronoun “we”. He states for example: “Nothing is more incomprehensible to us than the methodicality of the Victorians” (48). Yet the narrator’s didactic function has the upper-hand and he inevitably creates an unequal relationship with his reader.

This tension between proximity and distance mirrors the tension caused “by the relationship between what we know and what we will never know” (Burden 1960, 168-169). Once again, the figure of the narrator is central in this literary game: he regularly plays with his so-called ignorance. After a crucial moment in the narrative – the first private encounter between Sarah and Charles at Ware Commons – the narrator ironically states: “Whether they met that next morning, in spite of Charles’s express prohibition, I do not know” (134). An essential question is raised and cruelly left unanswered at the same time and it is not the only frustrating game. What also contributes to the disorientation of the reader is the oscillation between revelation and silence. Being put into the confidence, the reader suddenly learns a capital piece of information about Sarah in chapter 9: “You will no doubt have guessed the truth: that she was far less mad than she seemed...or at least not in the way that was generally supposed” (65). This type of equivocal revelation – which includes the central notion of

“truth” in a novel whose aim is to build enigmas – remains confusing for the reader who is implicitly told that the truth is to be deciphered by himself alone, not to be revealed. It is again an appeal to the reader’s active participation.

Without being directly teased by the narrator, the reader is constantly disturbed by the interpenetration between fiction and reality. Giving an account about Ernestina’s life, the narrator alludes to an important moment of history: “She died the day that Hitler invaded Poland” (28). Not only does the narrator make Ernestina break the temporal frame but he is able to predict the exact day of her death, a fact which goes beyond the narrative of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. This kind of blurring effect creates a doubt about the nature of the novel, questioning its degree of “reality” and reinforcing the reader’s disorientation. We have seen that the narrator’s techniques of manipulation contribute to the reader’s confusion. He actually reaches the paroxysm of his techniques when he discusses his own processes of narration.

### c) A narrator questioning his own process

Chapter 13 is a turning point. First it represents an important and unexpected digression in the narrative. Then, the narrator no more comments upon the story but upon his own status. At the end of Chapter 12, the narrator has left two questions unanswered: “Who is Sarah?” and “Out of what shadows does she come?” (94). It may not directly answer his previous questions but his first statement in chapter 13 is “I do not know” (95). Throughout the chapter, the narrator illustrates his ambiguous position towards his characters. The distance he establishes seems bigger than usual. He first talks about “these characters” and admits that he has been pretending so far to know their inner thoughts. Besides, the illusion worked out for the narrator has given an amount of details about Sarah, presenting her as a

knowable character to the reader though she represents a mystery for Charles. The narrator admits that he tried to be a godlike figure as well as a real Victorian novelist. Then, he displays a series of doubts related to the nature of his writing, beginning his sentences with “Perhaps” (95). It seems obvious that his uncertainties are less real than his will to lead the reader into confusion, to make him reflect about the illusion he has created so far. Displaying his capacity to enter his own story: “But I find myself suddenly like a man in the sharp spring night (...)” (96) the narrator appeals to the interpenetration between fiction and reality. The autonomy of his characters is also at stake, with Charles having apparently been disobedient at Ware Commons: “I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not” (96).

The reader’s perplexity may reach a peak at this very moment, a perplexity that can find an echo with the detective in John Fowles’s short story “The Enigma” in *The Ebony Tower*. At one point, Isobel Dodgson is illustrating her private theory about Fielding’s sudden disappearance and deliberately appeals to fiction in order to explain what could have happened to the Tory. Faithfully echoing what *The French Lieutenant’s Woman’s* narrator says in Chapter 13, Isobel enigmatically explains that “Nothing is real. All is fiction.” (Ebony 229) Her account about the possibility that all of them may be characters written from a fiction by a writer is puzzling: “Somewhere, there’s someone writing us, we’re not real” (Ebony 229). Moreover, she explains Fielding’s disappearance out of an act of disobedience regarding the plot and above all, out of a desire for freedom. The reader may be as astounded as the Sergeant, for no other explanation is given in the end. We clearly see that both Isobel’s voice and the narrative voice of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* call for a modern vision of fiction. Freedom is presented as the main point in the narrator’s new definition of novelists, “with freedom our first principle, not authority” (FLW 97). From that point indeed, the narrator obviously selects the information he gives the reader since he states about Sarah then:

“I report, then, only the outward facts” (98). If the narrator plays with language, we are going to see that the text actually represents a riddle itself.

### 3) A textual riddle

#### a) Intertextuality as a riddle

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel which claims its affiliation with other texts if we simply consider the epigraphs opening each chapter. Gérard Genette states that “the actual presence of a text within another text<sup>1</sup>” is intertextuality (Genette, 1980, 8). John Fowles makes good use of intertextuality for it obviously helps his novel to reinforce the ideological discourses that are conveyed through story and history. Every text he alludes to conveys a discourse and the narrative is to be read through the prism of other texts. We can relate every epigraph opening a chapter with the chapter itself, as if it were a clue to understand the deep meaning of the text. Most of the epigraphs belong to the Victorian period as authors and dates indicate, and contribute to the creation of an historical context within fiction. Actually, the paratext as a whole conveys a context, creates it and invites the reader to reflect about it. Yet it also conveys an indisputable part of mystery. We more and more have the impression that we are playing with Chinese boxes: riddles contain riddles which contain riddles themselves. And indeed, the first mark of intertextuality in the novel is a poem called “The Riddle”. The poem certainly provides clues to introduce the character of Sarah but the reader can only understand its meaning in retrospect at the end of the chapter when a figure similar to that of the poem, “staring out to sea” is mentioned. (5)

If the epigraphs are programmatic, they are also, like the rest of the paratext,

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<sup>1</sup> « la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre »

representative of the issues of the historical period: for example, Burden highlights that “quotations from Marx delineate the plight of the working class” and that those from Darwin give “a certain perspective on history as a determinant force” (Burden 1980, 273-274). The context that these realistic elements create makes the characters first appear as trapped in their age, for history is past and already written. Yet, “the narrative itself progresses from this fateful view of history to the more existential realization of personal choice” (Burden 1980, 277). Chapter 37 is very interesting concerning this progression through intertextuality. The chapter opens with a quote from Karl Marx dealing with the bourgeoisie which “creates a world after its own image” (FLW 283). Not only does Mr Freeman display this fact through his discourse but he appeals to what has previously been “intertextually” quoted in the novel. Without being a Darwinist, Freeman admits that he now believes in Darwin’s statement: “A species must change...in order to survive. It must adapt itself to changes in the environment” (290) especially as regards the “great age of progress” (290). Then he alludes implicitly to Marx, stating that “being a gentleman is an insufficient pursuit in life” (290) which recalls – and foreshadows – Marx’s definition: “History is the action of men in pursuit of their ends” in the epigraph to chapter 42. Charles immediately feels “in all ways a victim of evolution” (290). Though he used to think that “he himself belonged undoubtedly to the fittest” (165) Charles suddenly realizes the “ostentatious vulgarity” of “the abstract idea of evolution” (291). In this way, intertextuality helps Charles to go further in his quest for self-knowledge, as if Darwin had been so far a riddle that he had misinterpreted – as the narrator had alluded to in chapter 8: “Charles called himself a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin.” (50) Thus, intertextuality is a riddle that the narrator constructs and that both characters and reader have to decipher. Charles has to transcend history and the reader is “asked to judge his society and himself as the construction of a previous historical period.” (Burden 1980, 282)

## b) The riddle of scholarly language

The narrator presents himself from the first chapter as an erudite. The way he introduces Lyme Regis nearly turns him into an historian who has a great knowledge about the place, its history and geography. His aesthetic judgment concerning the beauty of the Cobb can be opposed to the inhabitants' materialistic point of view. If the Cobb "has cost them enough in repairs through the centuries to justify a certain resentment" (3) the narrator considers the place as "a superb fragment of folk-art" (4). The narrator keeps on describing the place with elaborate language, using oxymora such as "primitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate" (4). Addressing the narratee "if you have turned northward..." (4), the narrator already challenges him to follow his gaze, and by extension he challenges him to follow his scholarly language as well.

Throughout the novel, the narrator deliberately plays with his knowledge to challenge the reader that he considers nearly as educated as he is, for instance by confidently saying: "Of course to us any Cockney servant called Sam evokes immediately the immortal Weller" (42). He considers at least the reader able to understand and to find a certain interest in the scientific or historical accounts he gives, as the precise account on geology testifies in chapter 10: "its wild arbutus and ilex and other trees rarely seen growing in England" (67). The narrator's language is technical and difficult; he certainly calls for our capacity to decipher some sentences written with foreign words, as the embedded text shows in illustrating a note written in French chapter 25: "Je vous ai attendu toute la journée (...)"(209) without any translation. The numerous scholarly references, to art with Henry Moore's paintings (4) or to religion with the passage "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*" taken from the Bible that Sarah reads for Mrs Poulteney (58) challenge the reader to go and look for the meaning of the references

by himself if he does not know them, for they are not explained at all in the narrative. As a part of the mystery can remain unanswered or explained, part of the narrator's language can follow the same process. The presence or absence of certain footnotes seems arbitrary, or at least dependent on the narrator's free will.

What may be the most important point in this linguistic game is for the reader to access the humorous dimension of the novel, that is to say perceive the narrator's constant irony towards his characters, society, the readers and even himself. The narrator's irony may sometimes be related to a cultural reference: for instance, Mrs Poulteney, whose tyranny is as huge as her will to save her soul, hesitates between two psalms for Sarah's reading: 'Blessed are the undefiled' and 'Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man' (37). Even if the titles of the psalms speak for themselves, the humorous dimension is stronger if the reader actually knows the references. The narrator's irony can be fully understood only if the reader accepts to play the game of distance that is at the heart of the novel, as well as mystery. Language in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seems to be a riddle that only the reader's active participation can resolve.

c) A language generating its own meaning

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a self-reflexive novel. As we have noticed in chapter 13, the novel reflects about its mechanism and its identity through the narrator questioning its own status. We have also seen how intertextuality is meant to convey a discourse in the text. This is actually what metafiction is about. Patricia Waugh also says that "the novel draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 1984, 2) and the narrator's statement: "This story I am telling is all imagination" (FLW 95) properly illustrates what Waugh is driving at.

The issue at stake is not only the story but also how the story is constructed through a peculiar use of language. Besides, Patricia Waugh highlights that ‘Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its ‘own meanings’ (Waugh, 1984, 3). Language cannot represent the world as it is, for “in literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to ‘represent’ the *discourses* of that world” (Waugh, 1984, 3). John Fowles cannot represent the Victorian period as it really is. Though his text explores realistic aspects and displays the force of history, it always reminds us of its deep fictional aspect thanks to the obtrusive narrative voice.

What is important is how Victorian conventions are used and revisited, for *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* “attempt[s] to create alternative linguistic structures of fiction which merely *imply* the old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions (...)” (Waugh 1984, 4) These alternative linguistic structures are indeed constructed on the principle of metafiction: self-consciousness. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* creates its own language for it combines both the realistic form and the critical distance towards this form. In chapter 13, the narrator does not reject the fact that “the novelist stands next to God” (95). He simply redefines the status of the narrator as a god, with now “freedom our first principle, not authority” (97). To explain this attitude, Kerry McSweeney states that John Fowles “may be described as conservative and traditional” (McSweeney 1983, 104) and adds that he does not share “the general pessimism about the so-called decline of the novel” (McSweeney 1983, 104). The author alludes here to the Nouveau Roman, a literary movement that influenced the 1960’s, and we will see later that Fowles did not entirely share its values in writing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

The language of the novel also aims at creating a parody of a genre: the Victorian novel. We can perhaps consider it as a pastiche if we use Genette’s definitions, for pastiche

would be “imitating a style without any satirical function<sup>2</sup>” (Genette 1980, 34) though “parody” would be “the twist of a text with minimal transformation”<sup>3</sup> (Genette 1980, 34). Genette also explains that “imitation is no more a simple reproduction but really is a new production: that of another text in the same style, that of another message in the same code<sup>4</sup>” (Genette 1980, 92). What is indeed worth noticing is that John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* does recreate the Victorian novel “but also explicitly offers itself as one out of many possible ‘versions’ (Waugh 1984, 69). The language of the novel seems to be questioning itself at any moment as we can notice in Chapter 55 with the series of questions that the narrator asks: “Now could I use you?” “Now what could I do with you?” (FLW 408). These questions and particularly the adverb “Now” give the impression that the language of the novel is constantly reinventing itself, free to take any direction but impossible to grasp.

We have seen that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* aims at creating a subtle network of riddles in an enigmatic context and language. The riddle is definitely a principle in the narrative. The reader clearly cannot play the game of passivity if he wants to appreciate what the text is really for. Yet, Fowles’s game does not only consist in creating mysteries to entertain and draw his reader’s curiosity – though Fowles deliberately shows that it represents an important part in his novel. As we will see, mystery is a principle especially because it embodies a special energy which allows one to go further and to transcend one’s initial condition. The riddle is a principle which hides another principle: that of freedom. In my second part, I will show how mystery, through various devices, sets up the process of the freedom of the novel.

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<sup>2</sup> « L’imitation d’un style dépourvu d’une fonction satyrique »

<sup>3</sup> « Le détournement d’un texte à transformation minimale »

<sup>4</sup> « L’imitation n’est plus simple reproduction mais bien production nouvelle : celle d’un autre texte dans le même style, d’un autre message dans le même code. »

## II. Mystery setting up freedom

### 1) Ambivalence of the genre of the novel

#### a) An enigmatic genre

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* apparently avoids any strict classification. The novel deals with many literary aspects without being confined in one of them. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be considered as a historical novel because history is what constitutes the setting of the novel and because the narrator pretends to be an historian, filling his narrative with extracts from historical documents. And indeed, the Victorian era is very precisely depicted, added to the mentions of historical moments such as the writing of Karl Marx's *Kapital* in the British Museum library: 'in only six months from this March of 1867, the first volume of *Kapital* was to appear in Hamburg' (13). This gives an impression of verisimilitude. Yet the novel cannot properly be historical: the gap separating the narrator from the story-telling represents 100 years and the narrator does not try to conceal the gap separating his modern point of view from the narrative of the past. This acute awareness of the difference between then and now establishes a modern reflection upon the Victorian age, especially a philosophical one concerning the relation of the protagonist to his historical situation. If the novel were properly historical, the reader would be drawn into the historical period only. Yet the reader is constantly withdrawn from this period by the comments of the modern narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator gives his personal judgment about his characters – which are fictive and "never existed outside of my own mind" (95): in short, he has a critical function. After depicting Charles's loathing at the idea of going into business, the narrator argues that the form of things dies although 'the matter is immortal' (297). He explains this by drawing a

parallel between Charles in 1867, a Charles living in 1267 and another living in 1967: they all have a common point in their attitude as regards history. Obviously, the narrator wants to draw our attention upon the human condition through the ages and the universality of some feelings. Then the reader is asked to consider Charles for whom he is: “a man struggling to overcome history”(298), a character at first view determined by his time until his meeting with a kind of mythic, a-temporal and ahistorical creature whose name is Sarah. If the narrative were truly historical, the whole philosophical aspect covering the novel and the reflection on history would certainly have been out of place. Thus if this novel is a historical novel, John Fowles revisits the genre.

The question of the genre is to be asked for the Victorian novel as well. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been built upon the Victorian novel model but it is not truly a Victorian novel. The idea of distance that characterizes the novel – distance between the narrator and the characters, between the reader and the characters, between the reader and the narrator for example – corresponds to the distance that John Fowles takes to re-create the Victorian world of 1860s. This distance is due to irony and metafiction as we have previously seen. In this way, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be considered as a ‘metafictional parody’ for it “reveals how a particular set of contents was expressed in a particular set of conventions recognized as ‘literature’ by its readers, and it considers what relevance these may still have for readers situated at a different point in history” (Waugh, 1984, 67). In *The Form of the Victorian Novel*, Miller describes an important point of the Victorian novel: ‘In Victorian novels, for the most part, the characters are aware of themselves in terms of their relation to others. The integrity of the selfhood of each person’ does not depend on ‘reaching the deep buried self by a descent into the mind in solitary meditation.’ (Miller, 1968, 5) In comparing this definition to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we can draw an important difference which marks the novel as a metafictional parody. It is true that without the help of Sarah, Charles

would not have found his truth on his own. He would not have thought of finding it perhaps, since “the structure of society is invisible to those who live unquestioningly immersed in it, just as the foundations of selfhood are invisible to someone who can take his identity for granted.” (Miller, 1968, 94) Charles is indeed introduced as this kind of blind character, enclosed in his identity and his time, blind to progress when progress can concern his own life, as revealed by his conversation with Mr Freeman. If his encounter with Sarah and his dependence on her are crucial in his metamorphosis, the fact is that – and Fowles cannot be more explicit – one needs to exclude oneself from one’s society to reach one’s true self. Fowles has juxtaposed a traditional literary process to a philosophical one which encourages the ‘solitary meditation’ that Miller cannot assimilate to the Victorian novel. Basically, there is no unique genre constituting the novel but a multitude of possibilities that self-consciousness makes possible. The genres of the historical novel and the Victorian novel are parodied: they are deconstructed and then reconstructed.

a) Escape from classification

The ambivalence and multi-faceted features that constitute the genre of the novel reinforce the riddle it represents. If the novel escapes any strict classification, it is because the genre of a novel itself is plural. Its genre is not fixed, and this corresponds to its main characteristic. Patricia Waugh remarks that this plurality corresponds to a plurality of ‘languages’, that is to say that several genres can co-exist within a novel and, as she explains: “they question and relativize each other to such an extent that the ‘language of fiction’ is always, if even covertly, self-conscious.” (Waugh, 1984, 5) Then, the question of the genre of the novel becomes secondary since metafiction – the reflection upon the variety of genres constituting a novel – gives the novel its identity. Patricia Waugh uses Bakhtin’s work to

illustrate this idea: “Mikhail Bakhtin has referred to this process of relativization as the ‘dialogic’ potential of the novel.” (Waugh, 1984, 5) “The novel assimilates a variety of discourses (representations of speech, forms of narrative) – discourses that *always* to some extent question and relativize each other’s authority.” (Waugh, 1984, 5) Undoubtedly, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* tends to break free from the dogma imposed by a unique literary language.

On the model of the theory of evolution, the novel is constantly evolving to adapt itself to the period of its publication. Fowles refuses to obey the traditional literary rules, as the three endings in the novel and the difference between the first traditional one with the two other modern ones testify. If Charles is reduced to the state of a fossil in 1867, overtaken by the changes of his time, Fowles, on the contrary, is creating a self-conscious and enigmatic novel in 1967, adapted to the literary movement of his own time. He refuses radical illusionism and radical realism: he deliberately lays bare the illusion surrounding his novel and adopts at the same time a realistic approach by giving it many possible endings as real life could offer. In other words, Fowles refuses to be imprisoned either in tradition or modernity in order to keep his critical distance, “manipulating the romance form to effect a sceptical examination of the romance experience and, more radically, a critique of contemporary realist fiction for its lack of moral responsibility.” (Conradi, 1982, 18) And indeed, Fowles creates both a historical and modern romance between Charles and Sarah: historical because their affair takes place in 1867 and paradoxically modern, because their love is ahead of time. The very moment preceding their kiss “overcame the age” (252) - such an awareness underlines the extraordinary nature of the action itself - and their sexual intercourse is such a matter of transgression that Charles is overcome with “an immediate and universal horror (...) All lay raised; all principle, all future, all faith, all honourable intent.” (354) Every action has a moral consequence in the world that Fowles creates for his characters as it has a moral consequence for himself as an author whose

duty is to write a self-conscious literary work. Fowles's novel finds a sense of freedom in the moral responsibility it claims. In the same way, this relation regarding morals reinforces the realistic – and critical – aspect that Fowles wants to give to his novel. Its moral aspect highlights the 'truth' of a certain part of the text: obviously this truth does not deal with the plot but with the universality of human actions. Then, the enigma surrounding the novel as far as the genre is concerned gives the reader no particular answer except one concerning the importance of values that obviously sets the novel free. Or as he suggests in chapter 13: "Perhaps it is only a game." (95)

## 2) Interpenetration between fiction and reality

### a) The transformation of reality into fiction

The narration of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is not a linear account of fiction but an oscillation between fiction and reality. The gap separating the narrator from the story he tells reflects this oscillatory movement: basically in the novel, the narrator *represents* reality though his characters live in the world of fiction he has created. This narrative pattern is disturbed, debunked by the so-called powerful narrator who sometimes plays at blurring the effect between these two categories. In the last chapter, the narrator appears in his story as an 'extremely important looking person' (464) tired with his '*flânerie*' (465) who takes out his watch and rewinds it. This symbolical act erases the previous scene between Sarah and Charles and makes the reader go fifteen minutes backwards in the narrative. This illustrates the freedom that the narrator owns to manipulate both the narrative and the reader.

He actually invents a world of fiction out of a historical period, the Victorian Golden Age. Not only can the real world be fictionalized but the narrative fiction can be paradoxically considered as truthful. Indeed, the narrator asserts: 'I find this new reality (or

unreality) more valid.' (97). As this other reality is being created – that is to say fiction – the narrator crosses the boundaries between 'his' 'primary' reality and this new one. From the first chapter, the reader is invited to follow the gaze of the intrusive narrator – an observer who examines the small microcosm of Lyme Regis and comments upon the validity of his own assertions. “I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write” (4) is a prolepsis which testifies to the authenticity of his assertions as if the world of fiction he is describing were actually real. This blurring effect is intensified by the comment he addresses to the narratee in chapter 13. Putting his “*hypocrite lecteur*” (97) to the test, the narrator explains that we, real readers, fictionalize and re-create reality, this being “the basic definition of *homo-sapiens*.”(97) If we all have our own “romanced autobiography” (97) as the narrator suggests, there is no absolute reality but an infinity of relative realities, all perceived in a subjective way. This philosophical statement justifies the transformation of reality into fiction with which the narrator plays throughout the novel: our conception of the world could be a fiction. This idea creates a frame-breaking towards the freedom of the novel and the reader himself who gains knowledge about his own reality through fiction.

As if the narrative were Chinese boxes, the characters fictionalize their (fictive) reality into fiction. Sarah Woodruff deliberately revisits her real story with Varguennes: in the novel, the fiction of her narrative has become the fiction of her own life. Sarah has become what she has fictionalized. When Ernestina recognizes her in chapter 2, she can guess that “it must be poor Tragedy.” (9) In Lyme Regis, her identity is that of a fallen woman – who has been dishonoured then left – and that of an outcast – both being excluded and excluding herself from her society. She has created the circumstances of her present life, performing a specific social role: “What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women.” (176) In the same way Jacky Kennedy exhibits her blood stained dress after her husband's murder in the epigraph opening the chapter, Sarah exhibits her shame. When Charles finds out

that Sarah has deceived everyone – and especially himself – about her giving herself to Varguennes, a series of questions is immediately raised: “Why? Why? Why?” (357) An ironic explanation followed by a blank is given to Sarah's trap: “A swarm of mysteries.” (358)

Sarah's fiction undoubtedly reflects the fiction invented by the narrator. She has created a plot through the power of language and the power of fiction itself. Is not Charles imagining a chivalrous romance between them, comforted by the idea of rescuing her? Once again, the narrative proves what the narrator tells the reader in chapter 13: our whole life is fictionalized. Sarah can be seen as the accomplice of the narrator by creating a subplot and manipulating the characters as the narrator does himself. Moreover, she represents a freedom that no other character owns in the novel: “I think I have a freedom they cannot understand.” (176) The mystery surrounding Sarah's sense of freedom is mirrored in the mystery surrounding the narrator's freedom. Such a freedom is explored elsewhere in John Fowles's work: In “The Enigma” in *The Ebony Tower*, Isobel turns reality into fiction to find an explanation to the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Fielding. Her “private theory” (Ebony 228) is that “Nothing is real, all is fiction.” (Ebony 229) Like Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Isobel is an accomplice of the narrator who eventually chooses to give no realistic answer in the plot and lets her speech have the upper-hand on the whole story. This is the freedom claimed by the story: exhibiting its deep sense of fiction.

#### b) Interpenetration between fictive past and historical present

In a foreword written by John Fowles himself, the author talks about writing an imaginary past and the “wicked pleasure of creating a succession of mythical presents outside the historical series of presents that constitute the ‘real’ past” (Fawcner, 1984, 10) to make up for our inability to re-create the past “as it truly was” (Fawcner, 1984, 10). The revenge that writing offers over reality is illustrated in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* through “the

interpenetration between fictive past and historical present.” (Conradi, 1982, 73) The intrusive and knowledgeable narrator plays a temporal game that the gap of 100 years between himself and the characters allows from the start. At times, he uses prolepses in his narrative: he knows for example precisely when Ernestina dies. In this very passage, his ability to foresee the future is accompanied with an irony that mocks the inability of his own characters: “Had they but been able to see into the future! For Ernestina was to outlive all her generation.” (28) This particular anticipation belongs to what Gérard Genette calls “external prolepses.” (Genette, 1987, 68) External prolepses are to be situated outside the story, “they function most often as epilogues, serving to continue one or another line of action on to its logical conclusion (...)” (Genette, 1987, 68) Here however, the evocation of Ernestina's death does not correspond to any epilogue. It actually occurs in the third chapter of the novel in which the narrator gives a brief account of her beauty and her character. Its function is to create a mythical present in which Ernestina's death has actually happened, this being reinforced by the historical date. Fowles plays at blurring the effect between fictive past and real past, fictive present and real present.

By extension, his prolepses are also metalepses. Genette describes metalepses as “the transition from one narrative level to another (...) introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation.” (Genette, 1987, 234) It is indeed striking when the narrator describes the Toby jug that Sarah owns in his story, predicting that it will be re-cracked, “having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged.” (280) As Genette argues, “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (...) produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical or fantastic.” (Genette, 1987, 234-235) In the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, this allusion produces a fantastic effect, as if the narrator and Sarah were intimately linked together, thanks to a real object having gone through the real past to the real present.

This attempt to create a reality that does not exist and has never existed is part of the enigma of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 'Truth' cannot be taken for granted.

Besides, the narrator has a particular function in this passage: he is oriented towards the reader but above all towards himself, since he gives a private account. As Genette explains, the “*testimonial function*” is “the one accounting for the part the narrator as such takes in the story he tells, the relationship he maintains with it.” (Genette, 1987, 256) Then, we understand that the testimonial function of the narrator reinforces the interpenetration between fictive past and historical present: and he seems at first sight personally involved in the process of maintaining fiction and reality blurred.

However, temporal precision is a clue to unmask the narrator and to pierce the mystery surrounding this interpenetration. Indeed, H. W. Fawcner states that temporal precision is “repeatedly made to evoke a strong sense of unreality.” (Fawcner, 1984, 57) Basically he argues that Ernestina's death “on the day Hitler invaded Poland” (FLW 28) “serves to stress the supreme unreality of all fiction and all fictional characters.” (Fawcner, 1984, 57) There is apparently no coincidence with the date, for it is situated “at the very point where history begins to trace the fatal time-line of a much vaster human destiny.” (Fawcner, 1984, 57) As the reader knows that Ernestina is only a character of fiction, the juxtaposition of an imaginary scheme and a real one cancels any effect of realism. Moreover, the touch of fate that this episode and that of The Toby jug give, especially with the mention “was to” (Fawcner, 1984, 57): “Ernestina was to outlive all her generation” (FLW 28) and “The Toby was cracked and was to be re-cracked in the course of time” (FLW 280) is “much in contradiction to the existentialist theme of free human action outlined in the Marxian epigraph.” (Fawcner, 1984, 58) Thus, the interpenetration between fictive past and historical present is meant to underline the illusion that fiction represents and not to mislead the reader into believing the so-called truth of certain facts. It constitutes a narrative game that the reader is asked to play, a series of

enigmas that he is asked to decipher if he basically wants to find the promised freedom.

Interestingly, Waugh gives an explanation to the reader's attitude as regards the Toby jug episode: "This brings the reader up against the paradoxical realization that normally we can read novels only because of our suspension of disbelief. Of course we *know* that what we are reading is not 'real', but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment." (Waugh, 1987, 33) Then, displaying illusions is also a way to seduce the reader: he is invited to enjoy the illusion on his own for here fiction is both a source of pleasure and an intellectual effort.

c) The novel is a stage where reality is a simulacrum

It seems that *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exposes its level of illusion: a play could do the same in showing the audience its artifice in order to remind them that theatre is not real life and works with its own codes and logic. We could consider the novel as a stage and analyze its theatricality. The narrator often appears in the narrative in spite of his being extradiegetic. Moreover, his way of commenting upon the action and the characters can resemble theatrical asides. Twice in the novel, he even becomes a character in his own story: he embodies a passenger intensely looking at Charles in chapter 55 and he performs the role of a fantastic impresario leaning against the parapet of the embankment before taking his watch in chapter 61. These two metalepses naturally defy verisimilitude and, as Genette says, they cross "a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds: a world in which one tells, the world of which one tells." (Genette, 1987, 236) Besides, we can think that this transgression is reinforced by the very performance of the narrator in chapter 61: with his "patriarchal beard" (465), and "more than a touch of the successful impresario about him" (465), "he very evidently regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes." (465) At that moment, the narrator is the ruling stage

director and even the god that he claimed not to be in chapter 13. Appearing in the last chapter, he can be considered in a way as the opposite of a 'deus ex machina': the god who at the end of Greek plays was lowered onto the stage in order to untangle the plot and solve the characters' problems. In the novel the narrator is lowered onto stage but his role is to make the situation more complicated. Besides, chapter 13 could be interpreted as a soliloquy in which the situation of the narrator is described: "I do not know" (95), in which he reveals some truths: "I know in the context of my book's reality that Sarah would never have brushed away her tears (...)" (96) and he reveals his plan: "To be free myself, I must give him, and Tina (...) their freedoms as well." (97) Eventually, chapter 13 is a stage representing nothing but itself.

The novel can also be considered as a stage as regards the particular way it deals with temporal effects. We know that time in theatre does not represent real time – several years can be turned into five acts out of efficiency. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, there is no efficient handling of time in this way, but there is a constant play with anachronism: it tends to turn the characters into puppets that can easily be removed from their own time. Some anachronisms are "deliberate provocations" (Conradi, 1982, 72) such as the allusion to the place of Mrs Poulteney in the Gestapo, for "she had a way of interrogation that could reduce the sturdiest girls to tears in the first five minutes." (FLW 21) Others can produce a complex anachronistic effect, as Sam "stood stropping his razor, and steam rose invitingly, with a kind of Proustian richness of evocation – so many happy days, so much assurance in position (...)" (38-39) Conradi explains that "the conjunction of Sam and Proust is nostalgic in a perplexing way. The mood could be described as one of anticipatory nostalgia, or as creating a prospective retrospect." (Conradi, 1982, 74) The paradox that Conradi underlines, the confusion between past and future, is made to create a sense of 'timelessness' in the reader's mind. Indeed, Conradi argues: "Our experience of local temporal flow in the novel is defamiliarized and experienced as disjunction and conjunction." (Conradi, 1982, 72) The critic means that we experience both

distancing and empathy at the same time in the narrative. The distancing effect created by the gap of 100 years is paradoxically weakened by the process of anachronism, for Proust and the Gestapo are familiar, even contemporary notions to the reader – at least more contemporary than the Victorian period.

It is worth noticing that anachronisms in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are always external to “the temporal order of the narrative” (Genette, 1987, 35). Only situations and characters can be considered as anachronistic. We may wonder for example if Sarah is anachronistic: Barry N. Olshen argues that “although we do not realize this until the end, Sarah is quite constantly described as an early prototype of the liberated woman.” (Olshen, 1978, 68) And indeed, in chapter 60, what Charles finds out in Sarah is unexpected: the modernity of her clothes is underlined, Sarah being described in “the full uniform of the New Woman flagrantly rejecting all formal contemporary notions of female fashion.” (FLW 446) Not only does she look “two years younger” (446) but Charles feels that he has done “a round voyage back to America.” (446) Sarah does not belong to her time, nor to the place she lives. The speech about her personal freedom: “I shall never have children, a husband, and this innocent happiness they have” (176), resembles a feminist speech and proves that she is out of her time – or at least, in advance. And indeed, Charles “found incomprehensible” (176) her talk of freedom. All these elements remind the reader of the artificiality of the novel.

### 3) Play between mystification and revelation

#### a) A narrator controlling his knowledge

The narrator is the master of the novel: not only does he create riddles but he works at maintaining these riddles throughout the narrative. He is knowledgeable but he pretends

ignorance at times: this constitutes a literary game between the reader and himself. He actually controls his own knowledge in hiding his ability to give the answers to the questions he raises. By extension he manipulates the reader in the latter's interest, turning him into an accurate detective of the text. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes deciphers one of Balzac's novels in order to illustrate the process of the *enigma*. What is important to note concerning truth, is that "the dynamic of the text is (...) paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer" (Barthes, 1987, 75). For example, it is not surprising thus to notice a device that Barthes called the "proposal and jamming of the answer" (Barthes, 1987, 46): In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, there is indeed a 'proposal' at the very end of chapter 12: "who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?" (FLW 94) It is followed by the 'jamming' of the answer right away in the first line in the following chapter: "I do not know." (95) This assertion – cynical enough for a knowledgeable narrator – is what Barthes calls a *snare* (Barthes, 1987, 32). Indeed, he explains that "narratively an enigma leads from a question to an answer, *through a certain number of delays*. Of these delays, the main one is unquestionably the feint, the misleading answer, the lie, what we will call the *snare*." (Barthes, 1987, 32) Several numbers of these delays can be found in the novel: for instance in chapter 13, the narrator delays the question of the genre of the novel, introducing every possibility with the adverb "perhaps" and does not eventually give any answer. (95) Besides, after one of his first enigmatic interviews with Sarah, Charles "turned and looked at the distant brig, as if that might provide an answer to this enigma. But it did not." (125) Here, the enigma is properly called an enigma but the narrative does not provide any solution to it. Moreover, this process is what Barthes calls an '*index*': "it points but does not tell; what it points to is the name, the truth as name." (Barthes, 1987, 62)

Actually, there is a fundamental difference between *S/Z* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: in the first book, there is finally an answer to the question but in the second one, the

question is cynically unanswered, in spite of the amount of delays produced by the narrative. Some delays can simply intensify the mystery surrounding something or someone. The narrator plays at describing Charles's perception of Sarah with the 'seme' of shadow – mentioned by himself with the unanswered question "Out of what shadows does she come" – especially when Charles comes across her at Ware Commons: "But he had hardly taken a step when a black figure appeared out of the trees" (85), "And there a dark movement!" (118) and "He now guesses darker qualities." (120) The different metaphors depicting Sarah underline the narrator's irony: he dramatizes her appearance, giving Sarah a sensational and mysterious aspect although he is supposed to possess the key of the enigma. Interestingly, a shadow is a reflection and has, by definition, no substance: it cannot be grasped, and neither can Sarah.

As we have already seen, Sarah is an enigma for the narrator but she remains so in the interest of the narrative only. His so called-ignorance can have no particular influence on the narrative: there are some facts that he claims not to know in order to emphasize the so-called independence of his story and his characters, as he tries to show in chapter 13. For example, the narrator pretends to ignore the physical intimacy that could have happened between Charles and Sarah: "But whether it was because she had slipped, or he held her arm, or the colder air, I do not know (...)" (118) and does not know if they have met again: "Whether they met that next morning, in spite of Charles's express prohibition, I do not know." (134) There are some mysteries the novel creates but declines to dispel. Even the lexical field of mystery pervades the text: "a mystery no lover will need explaining." (135), "The Victorian was a prolix age; and unaccustomed to the Delphic."(343) and even the ballad Charles hears in a street of London is composed of the word 'riddle': "We'll riddle-dee-ro-di-dee, ooooh." (294) The reader is constantly reminded of the enigmatic world he has been plunged into, a world in which eternal truths have no place. As Barthes reminds the reader, 'the discourse has no responsibility vis-à-vis the real: in the most realistic novel, the referent has no 'reality'. (Barthes, 1987, 80) Then,

the narrator can play at mystifying and revealing what he wants: what matters in the narrative is to preserve the impenetrability of the novel.

b) Tension between male rationality and female mystery

A tension between male explanation and female mystery lies at the heart of the novel. This dichotomy can be explained by gender performance: the sphere of masculinity deals with rationality and scientific explanation whereas the female sphere deals with irrationality and mystery. As far as Ernestina is concerned, her character does not properly fit the female sphere: she corresponds too well to what is expected from a woman in the Victorian Age, she perfectly embodies “the pure and sacred sex” (237) of her time and, the shallowness and predictability that characterize her can be rationalized. For instance, Doctor Grogan does rationalize Ernestina’s behaviour: in his opinion, Ernestina fails to understand Charles because she is twelve years younger than him and also because “she is hardly out of the schoolroom.” (227) He finally concludes his observation with a motto: “The best wines take the longest to mature” (229), this contributing to generalizing Ernestina’s temper. At the same time, Charles has a “real conviction about Ernestina: that she would never understand him.” (227)

The word ‘conviction’, the adverb ‘never’ are to be opposed to what characterizes Sarah, for Charles’s speech is stamped with interrogation: ‘How could I?’, repetition ‘A woman so, a woman (...)’, hesitation: ‘But...’ ‘Beneath the dross...’ and comparison ‘it is as if...’ Moreover, Charles accumulates substantives, trying to describe what is deep in her: ‘A knowledge, an apprehension’. He finally ends his explanation asserting that ‘I cannot explain.’ (227) His fragmented, impressionistic speech reflects Sarah’s essence: she is essentially unfathomable. Actually, Sarah occupies the feminine sphere alone, being the only character concentrating such a degree of irrationality – or at least she cannot be rationalized. Yet Doctor

Grogan gives Charles a scientific hypothesis about her, rationalizing the mystery she presents. Grogan, through an impersonal – almost universal – speech, tells Charles that Sarah has been performing melancholy out of disillusionment and has been using him in order to “escape from [her] unhappy lot” (223) The pity she inspires being her fatal weapon, Charles would have been trapped because he is a “kind-hearted man” (224). Finally, Grogan gives an ambiguous diagnostic, as if he lacked the proper words to describe her: “That girl, Smithson, has a cholera, a typhus of the intellectual faculties.” (225)

Furthermore, there is a tension between Grogan’s warning and Charles’s ignorance. The doctor solemnly warns Charles against his own self-ignorance: “Know thyself, Smithson, *know* thyself!” (226) And indeed, the doctor has the ability to read through Charles – after all, Charles is the most knowable character in the novel – and reveals he knows that Charles is “half in love” with Sarah. (225) Not only does Charles refuse to admit his feelings but he feels “like a man possessed against his will – against all this is better in his character.”(227) Besides, it is especially because Charles is a stranger to himself that he has no more control over his own life. After reading the trial of Lieutenant Emile de la Roncière, “psychiatrically one of the most interesting of early nineteenth-century cases” (230), Charles goes through a series of doubts concerning his own reliability: “Had he not (...) misled Grogan? Exaggerated her strangeness? (...) Why had he allowed Grogan to judge her for him?” (238) Though Charles could have associated Sarah’s strange behaviour with the case of hysteria he has just read – and indeed he has seen “few parallels now with Sarah’s conduct” (238) – the protagonist finally decides to trust Sarah and to find an answer elsewhere. Burden notices that “Charles will continue searching, because the enigmatic question about her mysterious character coerces his involvement” (Burden, 1980, 109) Moreover, the interest of the story itself is at stake in this passage, as Barthes underlines in *S/Z*: “the character’s freedom is dominated by the discourse’s instinct for preservation” (Barthes, 1987, 135) even if “the freedom of the alternative is nobly

imputed to the free-will of the character, who appears to have complete responsibility for choice.” (Barthes, 1987, 135) As far as the narrative is concerned, Charles cannot stop searching for the answer to Sarah’s mystery, for this research gives him the energy to pursue his quest for self-knowledge.

Basically, Charles has gone from the known to the unknown in meeting Sarah and is now looking for the ‘known’ again in trying to find out Sarah’s truth. Kerry McSweeney quotes John Fowles saying that: “My female characters tend to dominate the male. (...) The sexual attraction leads to an ‘ordeal’ for the male, a situation of stress in which growth becomes possible.” (McSweeney, 1983, 107) This sexual attraction can partly explain Charles’s ‘energy’. The first time they meet at Ware Commons, Charles thinks that “there was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay” (70) and even after Sarah confesses that she gave herself to Varguennes, Charles visualizes what she had implicitly meant: “He saw the scene she had not detailed: her giving herself. (...) Deep in himself, he forgave her for her unchastity; and glimpsed the dark shadows where he might have enjoyed it himself.” (177) Being sexually attracted to her and at the same time enclosed in his moral convictions until their ‘fatal’ sexual intercourse in chapter 46, Charles’s behaviour can illustrate the tension between “lust and renunciation (...)” – like Hardy renouncing Tryphena – which “structures the whole age itself.” (FLW 275) Then, McSweeney goes further in his explanation: “the catalyst of this movement from the quotidian to the mysterious is “the great alchemy of sex”, of which an aura of strangeness and contingency, intensified by real or imagined deception, is a part” (McSweeney, 1983, 106) Thus, it is the mystery contained in sexuality, this “destabilizing attraction” (McSweeney, 1983, 107) – and sexuality is conveyed by Sarah in the novel – that partly pushes Charles towards his transformation, this giving another reason to his quest.

Finally, the tension between male explanation and female secrecy is not released, since

Sarah does not let anyone, even herself, understand the mystery she represents. At the end of the novel, she tells Charles: "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 saying so, Sarah reinforces the tension between female secrecy and male explanation, for any explanation can be given, except one of her vague assertions: "A madness was in me at that time." (451) In this case, the play between mystification and revelation creates the central tension of the novel: it is a tension between sexes, made both of misunderstanding and physical attraction. The result is frustrating for each of them, but at least, they have allowed Charles to escape his initial condition.

Through several devices, mystery sets up the process of freedom of the novel. The genre of the novel remains enigmatic and the impossibility to classify it constitutes an escape from classification itself. The interpenetration between fiction and reality pervades the text in such different ways that the reader has to fight against the constant blurring effect of the novel to discern fiction from reality, or he has to accept the situation and cope with it. Finally, the play consisting in mystifying and revealing creates a tension that stimulates both the characters and the reader. The sense of frustration that we get in not resolving the riddles leads us into accepting that the novel is everything except a world conveying eternal truths. As mystery is meant to break some symbolical barriers in the novel, we will see in my last part how the riddle can be a way towards knowledge, and how knowledge is a door opening on freedom.

### **III. The riddle as a path towards knowledge and freedom**

#### 1) Escape from a Victorian world

##### a) Truth at the cost of exclusion

The closer we come to the end of the novel, the more we feel that the characters, the novel and even we, as readers, are escaping from Victorian society and the Victorian novel as well. Progressively, an act of freedom has been set up in the narrative, and it is actually at the end that this act becomes effective. In coming closer to the end then, we cannot but notice that the protagonist has been creating the conditions of his own exclusion from society. Charles has been as knowable to the narrator and the readers as he has been unknowable to himself. We may think that he unconsciously created the conditions of his exclusion from society, for the only quest he is aware of is that of Sarah's enigma – not even that of his own self-knowledge.

Sarah becomes progressively an agent of transformation in Charles's life. The more he is obsessed with her, the more he questions his own life. If he does not understand her account on freedom at first, he progressively sympathizes with her condition. In chapter 48, Charles enters a church in Exeter. He finds himself alone and yet starts a conversation with a mysterious voice – the origin of the voice could be his conscience, Jesus-Christ or the narrator himself. The dialogue leads Charles to understand a first truth: that he has deliberately sinned in choosing to see Sarah in the Undercliff or to come and see her in Exeter. The second truth concerns duty, the voice arguing that: “you stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honour, self-respect, and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified.”(365) The notion of duty epitomizes Charles's respect of conventions and obedience to the rules of society. On the

contrary, freedom is the reward of crucifixion and crucifixion logically the consequence of freedom. Then, Charles sees himself crucified, and imagines that Sarah is the one who will uncrucify him (366). At that point, he seems to represent Sarah as the hope and answer of his life and cannot see the solitude that foreshadows his actual state of crucifixion.

However, Charles now perceives that his age is “the failure, the cancer, the vital flaw that had brought him to what he was (...): he had become, while still alive, as if dead.” (366) Charles realizes that his life has been determined by society. From the following chapter, Charles symbolically prepares his exclusion from society: he breaks his vows with Ernestina, renouncing the life that was written for him. Grogan’s last warning does not make Charles give up the quest for knowledge that he is now aware of. Charles justifies himself, highlighting the obsession that this quest creates: “But once that knowledge is granted us, can we escape its dictates? However repugnant their consequences?” (398) And indeed, Grogan lets Charles know that without any morality in his actions, he will be ‘doubly-damned’ (401)

Once again, Fowles illustrates the idea that behind any action – though its cause seems noble as that of reaching freedom – man cannot act blindly and selfishly. And indeed, as the direct consequence of his rupture with Ernestina, Charles is asked to sign an “admission of guilt” which illustrates his deeds and deprives him of his status as a gentleman. Charles is socially dead, being nothing but a shadow in Victorian society. His freedom now depends on the existential truth he is seeking. Burden explains that in Fowles’s work, “the individual is invited to reject the rigidity of conformity for the sake of a limited freedom.” (Burden, 1980, 31) In the case of Charles and Sarah, freedom is characterized by the discovering of a knowledge which creates alienation and isolation. Burden adds that “to transcend this state of torpor, man must be critical of socially determined action and develop an independence of judgment.” (Burden, 1980, 32) That is how Charles reaches a state of “maturity” (Burden, 1980, 32) as Sarah has previously done. The Victorian society that John Fowles re-creates is a

society that the protagonist must leave in order to find his path towards freedom. Fawkner explains this specific freedom as regards the sacrifices it includes: “There is, to be sure, freedom; but selfhood being also a terrifying loneliness, this freedom is bitter, fragmentary (...) Charles loses everything to gain a freedom that is equally frightening and unshared.” (Fawkner, 1984, 121)

b) The absence of answer is a principle of freedom

In not giving any answer at the end, the novel shows its domination over the various riddles it has presented. However, the narrative explores the “liberating possibilities” (Olshen, 1978, 12) that fiction offers. In writing the first ending fifteen chapters before the actual end of the novel, the narrator offers an abrupt alternative that reminds the reader of traditional novels. As Olshen illustrates, “While it is perhaps an alternative for the Victorian hero, it provides none at all for the modern. It is psychologically unconvincing, a betrayal of all that the novel has been moving towards.” (Olshen, 1978, 82) In offering an ironic ending in which Charles and Ernestina marry and have seven children, the novel mocks the literary tradition and at the same time claims its freedom to use it anyway. In this ending, Sarah is ironically dismissed by the narrator: “What happened to Sarah, I do not know (...)” (FLW 340) as if even the traditional Victorian novel could not furnish an answer to her mystery. Then, the novel more convincingly offers two other alternatives at the very end of the novel. The first ending is romantic – Charles finally finds out the existence of his daughter, and kisses Sarah’s hair with tenderness – but it remains unconvincing since “the neatness of its resolution is unacceptable in an age in which lucid and simple resolutions are so few and far between.” (Olshen, 1978, 88) Moreover, the reader has the feeling that “Charles has not taken its journey to its end, that this cannot be the end.” (Olshen 1978,86) Finally, the two endings the novel has been proposing so

far illustrate the various possibilities of fiction and especially the fact that fiction has no responsibility towards the real. Thus, the more enigmatic ending of the very end seems to be the more faithful one to the ideal of the novel. We do not know what will happen to Charles, or to Sarah, and we especially do not know who Sarah is, for she has remained unknowable. However, the narrator warns the reader against his possible prejudices and tries to lead him towards the 'better' ending: "What you must not think is that this is a less plausible ending to their story." (FLW 469) In saying so, the novel admits that there is neither a right ending nor a right answer. The novel remains as undetermined as the characters and here is its freedom. The novel escapes from any form of enclosure, acknowledging that "the river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice, flows past a deserted embankment" (469-470), for there is no one to answer the mysteries that give the novel its meaning. As Charles "walks away from the house (...) he walks out of the world of Victorian society and Victorian fiction into a twentieth-century reality where not even a fictional narrator can pretend to omniscience." (McSweeney, 1983, 142) Once more, the novel finds its freedom in the power of self-consciousness. Thus, the novel is set free: morally, "by involving us in the quest of the fictional characters" (Olshen, 1978, 12) and aesthetically "by illuminating the liberating possibilities, for reader and writer alike, of fiction itself." (Olshen, 1978, 12)

### c) The reader's emancipation and birth

The reader is challenged from the beginning to the end of the narrative. The Victorian novel is deconstructed before the reader's eyes and his horizon of expectation is manipulated: that is the reason why there are three endings. Not only is he seduced, but his so-called credulity is tested as well. And indeed, the narrator is a knowledgeable figure who turns at time into a didactic figure. Somehow, the character's journey towards knowledge is close to the

reader's journey towards the end of the novel: they are both manipulated by the narrator and they find themselves with a mysterious, unanswered enigma at the end. Peter Conradi creates an analogy between us and Charles: "Our story and his thus progressively converge, and when, at the end, he is thrust on to his own resources we also painfully thrown back to ours, disappointed perhaps, but freer and better men." (Conradi, 1982, 68) Thus, the lesson that Charles learns is a lesson for the reader as well. The solution is not to sympathize with Charles, but to take a critical distance in order to extract our own meaning from his journey towards self-knowledge.

The reader is also asked to have a global reflection about history, as does the narrator when comparing Victorian society to that of 1967. And indeed, Burden says that the reader "is asked to judge his society and himself, as well as the construction of a previous historical period." (Burden, 1980, 282) Thus, the freedom taken by fiction itself is a freedom offered to the reader as well, being himself less determined by the narrative. The reader is also 'put to the test', exactly as the narrator asks in chapter 1 and as Charles is put to the test by Sarah throughout the novel. From the first chapter for example, the reader is implicitly asked to remember the mysterious "local spy" (FLW 4): he learns later that the spy is Doctor Grogan himself with the description of "an elegant little brass Gregorian telescope rested on a table in the bow window" (151) in Grogan's cabinet. The narrator invites the reader to be both an observer – hence the importance of the gaze in chapter 1 and chapter 55 – and to solve the enigma.

The irony of the novel is illustrated by the impossibility to solve this enigma though there are constant observations to be done in the narrative. In the same way as Charles leaves England for America, the reader leaves traditional literature to enter a new world: a world based on inheritance and critical perspectives. Again, Charles leaving Victorian society mirrors the reader leaving the Victorian novel: they both enter a world of uncertainties and intellectual

emancipation. Burden highlights that: “Life is as artificial as the theatre, and man must learn critically to suspend his disbelief in the world as well as in art.” (Burden, 1980, 41) Burden means that the world must be understood in the same way as fiction: Man must transcend his human condition, his knowledge and his beliefs in order to extract the meaning of his life. And indeed, upon the model of Charles who “has been taught by Darwin that the species survives by adaptation” (Burden, 1980, 41), the reader is invited to widen his vision of fiction and his vision of life. Such a concern for the reader is the direct consequence of the relationship between the novel and metafiction. Metafiction is meant to improve the reader’s consciousness as regards the value of a text. And indeed, Waugh argues that “Metafictional novels allow the reader (...) to enjoy and engage with the world within the fiction. For the duration of the reading at least, this world is as ‘real’ as the everyday world.” (Waugh, 1984, 104) The reader is asked to participate actively in the elaboration of fiction. “However the reader is further reminded that this act [of consciousness] cannot create anything that could exist outside the dialectic of text and consciousness (...)” (Waugh, 1984, 104) Thus, the reader is made aware both of the possibilities and the limits of a text: here lie his intellectual emancipation and freedom.

## 2) Choices and Actions

### a) The paradoxical narrator’s behaviour

We have seen that Charles and Sarah find their truths at the cost of their exclusion from Victorian society. If at the end we can consider Charles as a free character – with all the limits that the notion of freedom includes in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* – yet we cannot be certain that Charles has been freed from the god-like figure of the narrator. Even if the narrator

claims to be a god defined by “the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist” (97) he lets the reader know that Charles’s autonomy is a possibility if, he says, “I wish him to be real.” (97) Basically, as long as Charles is in the plot, he is trapped within the narrator’s order. Patricia Waugh explains that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* explores “an existential concern with human freedom through a wryly awareness that characters in fiction, in predetermined fictional ‘scripts’, can never really be free.” (Waugh, 1984, 123) This ‘determined’ impossibility of freedom can be explained by the metafictional process: “At the furthest metafictional extreme, this is to be trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means to escape.” (Waugh, 1984, 119-120) Then, the reader can wonder whether the characters are unexpectedly set free and to what extent they can be considered as free.

Throughout the novel, the narrator puts forward Charles’s progression towards his self-consciousness. The reader witnesses a series of questionings that characterize Charles’s awareness of the futility of his existence. Charles’s first shock happens during his decisive interview with his future father-in-law. After Mr Freeman demonstrates that “being a gentleman is an insufficient pursuit in life”, (290) Charles feels “in all ways a victim of evolution. Those old doubts about the futility of his existence were only too easily reawakened.” (290-291) Charles progressively gets a sense of fate: “Charles felt a sense of sadness and loss, of having now cast the fatal die (...) until that moment, all had been potential.” (335) This awareness reinforces his status as a ‘victim’: “There was no doubt. He was one’s life victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history.” (336) Charles’s progressive insight towards both history and his historical situation lets him perceive “the great human illusion about time (...) that time is a room, so close to us that we regularly fail to see it.” (323) Even if Charles feels that his future resembles a “terrible emptiness” (323), Charles does not yet realize that his life is less and less determined. Charles’s sense of fate is

the consequence of his state of unhappiness and anguish. Yet, in the logic of the novel, Charles is leaving his fate, the fate that Victorian society has chosen for him. Step by step, the reader realizes that Charles's life depends more on chance than destiny. Despite his belief in a form of 'Destiny', especially concerning the chivalrous romance he has imagined between Sarah and himself – as his determination to trust Sarah after reading the trial of Lieutenant Emile de la Roncière reveals: "Destiny. Those eyes" (238) – the reader is aware of Charles's confusion between Destiny and existential choices. Thus, we see the narrator's will to show Charles's progressive self-consciousness as regards his freedom.

Yet, we must underline the narrator's irony that most of the time accompanies Charles's knowledge towards freedom. This gives the impression that Charles's self-awareness cannot escape, at least, from the critical stance of the narrator. After Charles's philosophical realization of being trapped in his age, a "consoling image" (299) appears in his mind. "Hope? Determination? I am afraid not. He saw a bowl of milk punch and a pint of champagne." (299) Possibly, the narrator displays a variety of mocking conclusions to Charles's thoughts in the aim of showing that he is the one who creates these thoughts. Moreover, the use of ironic comments illustrates the narrator's final control over his character. The illusion of Charles's autonomy is broken, and displayed.

Eventually, Charles gains faith and a belief in freedom. His travel to America is crucial: he finds out that it is a place of frankness, freedom and forwardness. Symbolically, Charles's attraction towards "the transatlantic emancipation movement" (436) corresponds to Charles's forwardness in his philosophical emancipation. Thus, America has "a liberating rather than a depressing effect." (438) This country marks Charles's first glimmer of hope in his new life, as underlined by one of the verses of his last poem: "For he shall one day walk in pride." (439) At the end of the novel, Charles "has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build." (470) and knows that "the sea of life" (430) that Arnold writes about is a

sea of loneliness. Thus, Charles is set free, at least from Victorian society and even from the Victorian novel. Thanks to the figure of Sarah, Charles has learnt to make existential choices. He understands at last that there is no god but only life, this life being made of choices. The narrator has a paradoxical behaviour to a certain extent: he creates the conditions of Charles's freedom but shows that there is always a god in the narrative, even if there is none in reality.

b) The reconstruction of the Victorian novel

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* illustrates the de-construction and re-construction of the Victorian novel. If determinism is the dominant value in the Victorian age for example in Hardy's novels, the novel progressively deconstructs this belief and replaces it by a modern one. Determinism is cynically illustrated in the fake first ending of the story: For instance, Sir Robert eventually has not one heir but two heirs; this sets off Charles's career in trade. "This fatal pair of twins were what finally drove Charles into business (...) His own sons were given no choice; and their sons today still control the great shop". (340) The tone is grotesque since the narrator underlines the limits of determinism. And indeed, Charles's life could have been exactly determined as is described in the first ending.

Yet the interest of the novel lies in that Charles is suddenly confronted with the theory of evolution when he meets Sarah Woodruff – who is an accident in his life. Convinced at first that he is an elect, Charles has to cope with the realization that his age is crippled – in its convention and hypocrisy – and meaningless – with the belief in progress and capitalism. For instance Charles, "standing against the vast pressures of his age" (299) concludes that "the meaning of life was not to be found in Freeman's store." (299) Peter Conradi argues that at that moment, "Charles becomes that quintessentially Fowlesian hero (...) standing in fact against the vast pressures of the evolutionary plot itself." (Conradi, 1982, 75) It is actually because the

plot is evolutionary that Charles can find a release in existentialism, the “book’s most audacious anachronism.” (Conradi, 1982, 75)

Being the anachronistic figure of the novel, Sarah embodies existentialism. The reversal of her situation at the end is significant: She has unexpectedly conquered her place in society though she could have kept on assuming the role of the outcast. Charles understands that her personal achievement is “no more than a factor of her new self-knowledge and self-possession.” (454) Her freedom of choice illustrated in her saying: “I wish to become what I am, not what a husband (...) must expect me to become in marriage.” (453) points out the consciousness of her sense of happiness and that of being a free individual. Thus, Sarah’s quest for freedom is existential. Olshen quotes Jeff Rackham’s observations about Sarah: “in the best existential[ist] manner, [she] has created a new self by her own choice, an authentic self, one outside the recognition of decent people and freed from their petty morals and conventions.” (Olshen, 1978, 78) It is actually through the character of Sarah that existentialism is depicted and claimed.

Choice is one of the most important issues in the novel, for it is directly related to freedom. John Fowles himself states that a series of questions is raised in his work: “Can we choose freely? Can we act freely? Can we *choose*? How do we do it?” (Olshen, 1978, 11) McSweeney notices that “any consideration of these questions presupposes an awareness and an acceptance of the primacy of mystery in human existence.” (McSweeney, 1983, 105-106) In order to act freely, man needs to accept the idea of chance and refuse the idea of predestination. The ‘awareness’ McSweeney talks about is the self-knowledge that Charles is seeking throughout the novel. At the end, the protagonist seems to have accepted ‘the primacy of mystery’ since he paces besides “the river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice.” (469) Existentialism puts forward that an individual makes choices that create a series of consequences.

In the novel, the metaphor of crucifixion illustrates the source of anguish and pain that the ideal of choice offers: “But escape is not one act (...) each day, each hour Charles, it has to be taken again. Each minute the nail waits to be hammered in.” (365) As Fawcner explains: “the process of emancipation does not involve a single choice, a single moment of indecision and pain, but a lifetime of discomfort and struggle.” (Fawcner, 1984, 83) Thus, this specific notion of choice raises some questions about the human condition and particularly about man’s happiness, for John Fowles’s passion for freedom seems to transcend any human feelings. Actually, Sarah demonstrates at the end that her new social condition and her new self-knowledge have created the conditions of her unexpected state of happiness: “I never expected to be happy in life. Yet, I find myself happy where I am situated now.” (453) But she raises a paradox when she admits: “I believe my happiness depends on my not understanding.” (455) We finally understand that behind our capacity to choose freely, self-knowledge is not absolute; we also learn that not only is mystery part of life and of choice, but it has to be accepted as a condition of one’s own happiness. Thus, happiness can be an end pursued by men through out their actions.

At the end of the novel, the narrator quotes Marx in order to illustrate what life is: ‘*the actions of men (and of women) in pursuit of their ends.*’ (469) Marx’s definition is supported by Arnold’s in the epigraph: “True piety is *acting what one knows.*” (464) Thus, not only is life made up of choices, but these choices themselves constitute the actions that shape man’s life. The narrator’s belief that these actions “always guided Sarah’s” epitomizes her “free-will” – to the extent of the plot – and once more her position as a symbolical agent of social transformation in the novel. This Marxist interpretation could be the answer to the whole book: an answer to the paralyzed Victorian society, an answer to the enigma of Sarah and an answer to Charles’s future. Moreover, if there is a god in the narrative – embodied by the narrator – yet “there is no intervening god beyond whatever can be seen.” (469) This means that man is

potentially the ruler of his life but needs to be aware of his human condition – a solitary existence constituted of the disappearance of god – and to have faith in the liberating possibilities of his life.

### 3) The birth of the text

#### a) A self-reflexive novel leading to freedom

The self-consciousness of the novel is expressed throughout the novel, especially thanks to the narrator's commentaries. At the end, the text seems to reach the paroxysm of its knowledge: for example, Sarah uses the metaphor of art so as to explain that she had to destroy her love story with Charles. She says: "I was told that if an artist is not his own sternest judge he is not fit to be an artist (...) I was right to destroy what had begun between us." (451) In highlighting the artist's self-consciousness, at that moment Sarah becomes the herald of the text. She says afterwards that her observations "were intended to apply to life as well." (452) And indeed, they actually apply to the text: from the beginning, the novel has proved autonomy, freedom to use literary tradition and freedom to challenge it. Like the artist, the text is its own 'sternest judge'. Sarah pursues her explanation with the idea of falsehood: "the natural had been adulterated by the artificial, the pure by the impure." (451) Sarah's account may be understood as a reference to the genre of the novel: either the Victorian novel represents the natural whereas the artificial is represented by the actual pastiche, or the natural is what is closer to life – the novel presenting a myriad of possibilities – and the artificial is what tradition represents. In both cases, the idea of destruction that Sarah applies to her relationship with Charles can be applied to the destruction of the Victorian novel. The 'falsehood' can be found in the absence of knowledge and self-reflexiveness of the Victorian

novel. If Sarah says that “I know too well which part I contributed” (451) in the alteration of the natural by the artificial, she probably is the artificial since she is both an incident in Charles’s life and a character out of time. Yet, she could be the natural since she embodies all the values of the novel: mystery, freedom, existentialism, Marxism. Thus, in this way, nothing or no one is more ‘natural’ than Sarah in the narrative.

The text raises some doubts about its moral contribution to the Victorian novel. In any case, it claims its attachment to literary tradition in being a metafictional parody: the model is asserted as well as the critical distance. Waugh explains that the text “is freed from the ‘anxiety of influence’ (Bloom 1973) by the paradoxical recognition that not only can literature never be free in terms of tradition; it also cannot be free either in its relation to the historical world.” (Waugh, 1984 67) The ‘mise en abyme’ that Sarah’s metaphor on art offers underlines the ambiguities of the text towards the Victorian novel.

Yet Sarah does not concentrate all the meaning of the text; she is part of its *structure*. In the definition of The Nouveau Roman, a structure is a system: “a totality made up of identifiable elements which are interdependent. (...) A structure, in other words, is by definition dynamic, involving changing relations between its elements.” (Britton, 1992, 49) In this way, Sarah does not carry any crucial meaning, for her speech simply mirrors the narrative. Britton states that: “Meaning can no longer be considered as extractable from the text (...) rather, it is a product of the system as a whole.” (Britton, 1992, 59) That is how we have to understand the meaning of *The French Lieutenant’s Novel*.

The novel is the space of some tensions between traditional views on literature and modern ones. We know that John Fowles lived in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet, an author at the head of the movement of the Nouveau Roman. Yet Fowles’s novel is in a way anachronistic in that it puts forward some values that are rejected by the modern movement. First, Fowles has to be opposed to the Nouveau Roman for he “denies the function of art as

self-expression.” (McSweeney, 1983, 104) On the contrary, the group of novelists claims that “writing a text is not a means to an end but an end in itself.” (Britton, 1994, 12) Fowles’s aesthetic can be seen as conservative for “he believes that the novel’s traditional purposes (...) [are still] “viable and important” and that the duty of all art “is in some way (...) to improve society at large.” (McSweeney, 1983, 104) And indeed, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is certainly made out of a humanist conception of literature through its didactic tone, its entertaining tone and its capacity to make the reader reflect upon the individual in relation to his historical situation.

The treatment of realism in the novel raises another tension with the Nouveau Roman. We have seen that the Victorian period is realistically depicted, as well as the characters – despite the sense of unreality that is often conveyed in the narrative – and this faithful representation is certainly the cost of making a pastiche out of the Victorian novel. Yet Fowles is personally committed to “the great tradition of the English Novel realism” (McSweeney; 1983, 104), claiming that “for me the obligation is to present my characters realistically (...) Believability must dominate even the most outlandish situation.” (McSweeney, 1983, 104) Fowles’s statement creates a rupture with the Nouveau Roman’s group who rejected any representation of the world. Barthes even states that “any representational text – any text, that is, which asks to be read as a presentation of reality – is now seen as complicit with bourgeois ideology.” (Britton, 1992, 86)

However, we can argue that Fowles uses realism to a certain extent: He does represent the world as it used to be but he is aware of the limits of this representation; he does not intend to re-create reality but “a more or less successful parody of how such a past might have been.” (Fawcner, 1984, 10) In this way, Fowles’s intent can be seen not as an accomplice of bourgeois ideology but as an accomplice of self-conscious novels. His use of realistic conventions can simply be seen as the use of one language among other languages. Thus, we see that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* finds its own way – and its own knowledge – between tradition and

modernity. The novel is free in that it claims its attachment to the past and its conviction in revolutionary values.

b) Refusing to fix meaning is to refuse God

If John Fowles is the author of the novel, his presence disappears in the narrative. He symbolically gives his right to the narrative voice which assumes the story-telling and the recurrent digressions. John Fowles's presence is only desirable outside the space of the narrative, as regards publication for example. Only the text matters and does make sense in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes explains that "to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing." (Barthes, 2008, 315) Thus, the freedom of the text is at the cost of the death of the author; without him, the text is free of any superfluous meaning. Moreover, the text is taken for itself, not as a piece of autobiography. In refusing the author, the text is also refusing an ultimate god-like figure standing over the novel. Interestingly, the god-like narrative figure of the novel reflects upon the status of the novelist in chapter 13. In identifying with the novelist himself – for he tackles the subject of writing, not only telling – the narrator symbolically makes the novelist disappear. The novelist is 'fictionalized', as if he had no other existence outside the narrative. Moreover, in listing the possible genres of the novel – saying for example 'So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography' (95) – the narrator creates a distance: between the actual author's reality and his own reality as a trickster who pretends to be the author himself. And as the only available reality is that of the text, this process contributes to highlighting the idea of the death of the author.

This textual death gives way to the multiplicity of the text, to the heterogeneity of its languages. Barthes says that "In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled,

nothing deciphered; (...) the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.” (Barthes, 2008, 316) Basically, Barthes means that the death of the author contributes to the suspension of the secret of the text, for this secret is to be found in the author himself. Moreover, Barthes explains that “literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as a text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity.” (Barthes, 2008, 316) At this point, it is important to specify the difference between the search for ‘ultimate meanings’: if there is no ultimate meaning to be found in the novel, yet the principle of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* resides in its mystery and in the reader’s capacity to decipher it. In our novel, the mystery that has to be found is part of the narrative anyway and does not belong to the author. Then, the ‘anti-theological activity’ that Barthes discusses can be seen as an act of freedom from dogma. As McSweeney says, “Human freedom lives in human art.” (McSweeney 110) and the death of the author in literature is also the death of unliterary truths and the re-birth of art. Finally, Barthes argues that “there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader.” (Barthes, 2008, 316) Yet, paradoxically, if the “birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes, 2008, 316), Barthes explains in *The Pleasure of the Text* that “in the text, in a way” (The Pleasure 27), the reader can ‘desire’ the author. The critic simply states that there is a necessary relation between them, a ‘need’ to know each other’s existence before the act of writing as the act of reading.

Freed from the author, the text is independent and conveys its own values. Barthes even demonstrates that a text is a source of pleasure and a source of bliss [jouissance] for the reader. The distinction between pleasure and bliss is ambiguous but basically Barthes says that pleasure is “contentment” (Barthes, 1976, 19) and bliss is “rapture”. (Barthes, 1976, 19) Interestingly, Barthes explains that the pleasure of reading “proceeds from certain breaks” (Barthes, 1976, 6) and this is a break between a conformist form of language and ‘another

edge' (...) the place where the death of language is glimpsed.' (Barthes, 1976, 6) We can certainly relate *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to this theory of pleasure, for the narrative proceeds with constant breaks such as jamming, silence, time-breaking, or deception. The language creates each time a rupture by going suddenly flat, like a balloon: we have seen the number of anticlimactic scenes in which Charles, understanding a crucial element in his life, finally goes back to the most trivial or vulgar activity as a conclusion. The language suddenly dies, as if literature was desacralized for the sake of the pleasure of the text. Barthes adds that "These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so." (Barthes, 1976, 6-7) In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the language reaches the paroxysm of its obedience towards canonized literature when describing the moment when Sarah and Charles are passionately about to make love; the 'other edge' is assumed by the transformation of language after Charles's ejaculation – a scientific account is given: "Precisely ninety seconds had passed since he had left her to look into the bedroom." (353) Interestingly, it is not the 'orgasmic' moment of Charles which pleases the reader but the "intellectual pleasure" (Barthes, 1976, 10) created by the gap between what is expected and what is unexpected. The interest of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be found in the fact that it is both a text of pleasure – "linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (Barthes, 1976, 14) – and a text of bliss – a text that "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" (Barthes, 1976, 14). Finally, it is worth noticing that the text is to be read both as a classic narrative and a modern one, this reinforcing breaks and collisions and probably being the central source of the pleasure of the text. The birth of the text is the product of its self-consciousness: not only does it free itself from dogma but it sets the reader free as well.

We have seen that the riddle of the text is a path leading to knowledge: Charles and Sarah find out their knowledge, the novel is set free by keeping its mystery and the reader can find his own path between reality and fiction. Moreover, if the novel is a riddle, and especially Sarah who embodies the Sphinx of the novel, life is not a riddle but a series of actions conducted by choices. The Victorian novel is reconstructed in the aim of transcending fiction and improving society at large, in reality. The refusal of an ultimate meaning is the refusal of an ultimate god: the text is set free from any authorial influence in order to please the reader, who is the most important figure in the novel.

## CONCLUSION

Is *The French Lieutenant's Woman* a riddle? It is, as regards how the story is built, how the text itself represents a network of riddles, how until the last page the reader is seeking an answer. The novel invites active participation, intellectual effort, and the pleasure of the text: the riddle especially refers to the relation between the text and the reader. Fowles teaches that mystery has to be found everywhere, especially in life. It is finally our acceptance of mysteries which sets us free, and the novel itself must be accepted and understood as mystery. The acceptance of mystery itself is the key to mystery.

The novel also acknowledges that freedom is to be gained along the path: and indeed, on the model of Sarah, Charles achieves freedom in freely choosing his life. Moreover, the novel is set free from dogma and the reader is set free both from the author and from a passive attitude towards reading. The world of contingency that the narrator creates in a primarily deterministic setting as well as the undetermined end he gives to the novel constitute an act of emancipation as well. Yet freedom is a philosophical notion which must be discussed with care, especially in literature. The freedom created by the text, for the text and within the text is primarily the freedom of fiction. It is important to note that this act of freedom actually happens in the space of the narrative. Fiction is not to be confused with reality even if in this specific case, fiction certainly aims at creating an impact on reality in order to improve society at large.

Then the freedom explored by the narrative remains particularly ambiguous. As it is a freedom which deals with man's existence, the freedom gained by Charles is made up of anguish, isolation and suffering. It is an escape from the pressures of society and an enclosure, for this particular freedom is the sanctuary of loneliness and exclusion. The freedom is limited

in that a man must make existential choices to exist but his choices condemn him to an eternal state of crucifixion. There is no idealistic message conveyed by the narrative, except, maybe, Sarah's personal achievement at the end of the novel, which can be seen as an ideal improvement from the state of exclusion and isolation through her acts. As far as the reader is concerned, the freedom he gains is certainly not painful but it is surely made of frustration and disillusionment. The freedom which Fowles is looking for is necessarily double-edged.

Fowles illustrates the necessity for man to evolve and to question his existence in order to improve his life: the author is certainly a modern humanist. His obsession with self-consciousness and self-knowledge is not necessarily to be opposed to his obsession for riddles: not only do riddles represent the starting point for one's quest but what is to be found at the end of the quest is ironically constituted of riddles. If Charles's quest for mystery turns into a quest for self-knowledge, in the same way, the quest for self-knowledge is certainly a quest for mystery. Added to the quest for freedom, Fowles illustrates the fact that both man and the work of art are perpetually seeking something. It may be the direct consequence of man's loss of faith in religion: God has disappeared, and the only faith that is to be found is exactly what Charles finds at the end: a faith in freedom.

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