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Feminist Power and the Extinction of Mankind in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and  
*Possession: A Romance*

Scholars find the representation of feminist ideas in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* quite problematic. More specifically, the issue lies within whether it should be considered a feminist novel, or simply a masculinist text with a feminist theme. Critics like Magali Cornier Michael and Bonnie Zare are polarized on this topic. According to Michael, John Fowles' narrative technique undermines its feminist agenda by denying the reader access to Sarah's inner world. Moreover, Michael points out that because of this, "Sarah remains objectified and never becomes a subject in her own right" (228). In direct response to Michael, Zare astutely observes that "Fowles stabilizes no part of the narrative ground: his metanarration casts doubt on reliable authority or truth throughout the story" (178). Indeed, it would be absurd to outcast *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a non-feminist novel simply because the protagonist is a male. Alike Michael, Robert Huffaker notes that the novel has various Edenic qualities in which Sarah acts as a temptress (110). Thomas C. Foster provides a sympathetic view of Sarah by noting that "readers will recognize in her the beginnings of the liberated modern woman: she thinks her own thoughts, shapes her own identity, and ultimately pursues her own destiny" (79).

Here is the thing about *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that—I believe—just about every critic of the novel skips over: Fowles' conscious or unconscious warning about the extinction of humanity. Whereas critics widely agree that the novel suggests Charles' class to be

nearing extinction, most critics also elide Sarah's freshly realized Darwinian self-reliance in terms of the impact it holds for the future of mankind. Fowles evolves the British literary tradition of portraying female chastity as a source of virtue and moral power; for Fowles, the potential power of female chastity is elevated to the highest degree as his female protagonist refuses to conform to the Victorian expectations of marriage. Chastity is no longer a concern for women in the 1960's; the popularity of birth control alongside self-reliance leads women to keep the power associated with chastity without actually having to be chaste. Reading the novel with an emphasis on evolutionary potential singlehandedly solves the "feminist novel" dilemma since Fowles accredits his female characters the capacity to eradicate civilizations; such a power is next to divine, and for that reason, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is undoubtedly a feminist text.

Before any further analysis can take place, it is imperative that we take notice of the epigraph from Chapter 2:

In that year (1851) there was some 8,155,000 females of the age of ten upwards in the British population, as compared with 7,600,000 males. Already it will be clear that if the accepted destiny of the Victorian girl was to become a wife and a mother, it was unlikely that there would be enough men to go round. E. Royston Pike, *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age*. (Fowles 6)

Interestingly enough, this paratextual data seems to drive the association Fowles makes between the dynamics of the British people in the Victorian period and the post-World War II British population he himself is a part of. In terms of Sarah's contribution to the novel's existential overflow of ideas, the epigraph validates the third ending as the one Fowles favors and foresees early on—unless, of course, Sarah is read as suspending her inimical views of the traditional

social hierarchy in favor of marriage. This, however, is unlikely as Sarah repeatedly expresses disdain toward her unfair, random position in a classist society. If Fowles offers three endings, and we dismiss the first ending because there is yet much narrative proceeding it, then logic follows that the second ending must be dismissed as well, even if there is just a few pages left in the novel.

Considering that Sarah's behavior embodies the modern Victorian, as well as the futuristic modern woman, then her insistence on "not being able to love Charles as a wife" indicates a new self-reliance—the modern woman is slowly but surely shedding an unnecessary vestigial structure, the husband (463). In the United Kingdom, women also outnumbered men by close to 2 million in 1960, and therefore, Sarah's reluctance to adapt to Victorian conjugality could only signal Fowles' commentary on the future likelihood of women to denounce men altogether. This would potentially lead to an extinction of more than Charles' social class and more than just the British people. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles exposes the modern woman's power to eradicate the human species. Even with there being less women than men, Fowles elucidates the idea that the modern woman will follow in Sarah's footsteps; as a result, the modern man will have to abandon traditionally patriarchal views in order to mate.

Mrs. Poulteney's bitter character symbolizes just the type of woman Sarah refuses to become. As she discusses her presumed delay in independent thought following the death of her husband, Mrs. Poulteney explains to the vicar, "If only poor Frederick had not died. He would have advised me" (22). Then, the narrator clarifies Mrs. Poulteney's stance on her husband's death as being a punishment:

Not all the vicars in creation could have justified her husband's early death to her. It remained between her and God; a mystery like a black opal, that sometimes shone as a

solemn omen and sometimes stood as a kind of sum already paid off against the amount of penance she might still owe (23).

Instead of viewing her husband's death as chance, Mrs. Poulteney directly associates it with God punishing her. It does not appear that Mrs. Poulteney is still trying to make meaning over the death because she loved him so immensely, but because she no longer has a masculine presence guiding her life—there is no one to advise her. As a result, Mrs. Poulteney sulks in bitterness, and she does not prioritize a search for another husband. Despite being able to prosper without her husband, Mrs. Poulteney's traditional patriarchal values blind her from the realization that she has been self-reliant all along.

Free of the tragedies surrounding both Sarah and Mrs. Poulteney in the beginning of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, “Ernestina wanted a husband, wanted Charles to be that husband, wanted children; but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive” (29). Unlike Mrs. Poulteney, Ernestina wants to be married but believes that sex, not the lack of a husband, is the true punishment from God. From the novel's inception, Fowles's female characters either have no one to have sex with (Mrs. Poulteney), fear sex (Ernestina), or just simply attempt to reject the sexual need altogether (Sarah). Such gendered detail promotes the unlikely continuance of reproduction between human beings in the future; and the common thread of chastity in the novel emphasizes that the patriarchy as well as religion are to blame.

As Charles officially breaks up with Ernestina, however, she seems to find the self-awareness missing from Mrs. Poulteney's conception of herself. Despite Ernestina's childlike temper tantrums and her inclination for vanity, she tells Charles, “I know to you I have never been anything more than a pretty little ... article of drawing-room furniture. I know I am not innocent. I know I am spoiled. I know I am not unusual. I am not a Helen of Troy or

Cleopatra...Perhaps I am just a child” (379). This admission demonstrates the birth of a feminist seed in Ernestina—she acknowledges being objectified by Charles; she acknowledges the long-lasting effects the patriarchy had on her character. Ernestina then adds, “You know that I have been...dangled before a hundred other men” (379). Earlier in the novel, Ernestina does not disclose her antipathy for the patriarchy, but the ellipsis here reveals Ernestina’s search for a verb that would be strong enough to communicate a new disgust for her repetitive objectification. Of course, Ernestina does not evolve to the extent that Sarah does, yet her self-awareness signals a similar capacity. This is especially accurate if we look at what prompts Sarah’s existential crisis: heartbreak and disgrace.

Sarah’s development in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*—from a tragic, sad woman dreaming of a family to an independent, resourceful, satisfied female—accounts for the historical evolution of femininity. In the immediate context of Chapter 2, Sarah’s enigmatic behavior echoes the quote concerning Britain’s unequal distribution of men and women. Ernestina answers Charles’ questions about the mysterious woman with vague gossip their town has constructed for Sarah. According to Ernestina, Sarah relives her tragedy as she stares out into the sea, hoping that her lover, the French Lieutenant returns. With less men than women among the British, it initially appears that Sarah loses hope in the idea of companionship unless that companionship involves someone of her past. Sarah’s supposed thought process mirrors the epigraph’s idea that if “the accepted destiny of the Victorian girl was to become a wife and a mother, it was unlikely that there would be enough men to go round” (6). Considering that finding a husband was already difficult enough for a British woman, finding a prospective husband just to lose him again appears devastating for Sarah.

Fowles' first portrayal of Sarah's character also amplifies her preliminary dependence as the narrator literally reduces her to the "French Lieutenant's woman" (9). Sarah's nickname around town denotes the Victorian woman's need to be married, and in Sarah's case, this need further leads to the erasure of her own identity as the narrator simply depicts Sarah as the objectified "figure by the cannon bollard" (9). Moreover, upon learning this about the French Lieutenant's Woman, Ernestina asks Charles: "But ... does no one care for her?" (9). This immediate question emphasizes the Victorian woman's need for a masculine presence. Although Charles clarifies that Sarah is "a servant of some kind to old Mrs. Poulteney," he quickly adds, "If she springs on you, I shall defend you and prove my poor gallantry" (9). Here, Charles implicitly reasserts the notion that Ernestina needs him to care for her as if a woman is not suited well enough to protect herself. In the initial stages of the exposition, Sarah allows herself man-induced melancholy before embarking on a journey toward her newly found self-reliance at the end of the novel.

Sarah's final rejection of marriage is indicative of more than Charles' social class coming to an extinction. As Robert Huffaker points out, the protagonist of Sabine Baring-Gould's Victorian novel *Mehalah* is a "faintly masculinized Victorian female" that resembles Sarah's feminist character. Unlike Sarah, however, "Baring-Gould's heroine, far less genteel and mysterious ... is a lower-class woman of the 1870s" (92). In this case, Sarah's class has little to do with her decision to depend on herself. Despite Mary's devotion to Sam, it is unlikely that Fowles suggests women like Mary will not eventually come to the same self-reliance Sarah stumbles upon. Such self-reliance, of course, becomes much easier for women in Fowles' post-World War II society and therefore, uneducated lower-class women alike Mary, alike Baring-Gould's protagonist may find themselves wholly independent of men. Fowles' apocalyptic vision

of humanity's possible extinction prescribes female chastity incredible power, and simultaneously urges men to abandon their patriarchal roles.

Readers should also consider both the Victorian and post-WWII societies in terms of birth control access. Fowles is writing from the perspective of the Sexual Revolution that brought about more choice for women. "Acceptance for intercourse outside of monogamous, heterosexual, marriages increased which gave individuals more freedom as well as a feeling of being less deviant" (Pastor). Furthermore, the 1960s are famous for the introduction of the pill and IUD's for birth control (Pastor). The Victorian era also had its fair share of advancements in the birth control arena as well—the rubber condom was popularized in the mid-1800s (Lieberman). The popularity of birth control in the 1960's along with Sarah's decision to remain single progresses the idea that the modern man will have to change in order to create offspring.

With these advances in mind, the sexual encounter between Charles and Sarah becomes even more grotesque. The moments leading up to intercourse between them emphasize that Sarah's sexual desire is equal to Charles'. However, whereas Charles "pressed against her with such force that the chair rolled back a little," Sarah "turned her head away against the back of the chair, almost as if he repelled her; but her bosom seemed to arch imperceptibly towards him and her hands gripped his convulsively" (348). This indicates a disconnect between Sarah's sexual desire and rational thinking. Although Sarah is a sexual creature, she undergoes massive confusion—emotion and logic are consistently at odds for her. For all the build-up the narrator provides, the actual event proves disappointing for Sarah. After all, the whole thing is done within moments; "He began to ejaculate at once ... Precisely ninety seconds had passed since he had left her to look into the bedroom" (350).

In her evaluation of Fowles' major influence, Thomas Hardy, Gillian Beer observes that the world is consistently pushed forward by procreation, and sexual joy is meant to combat extinction (240-241). Considering Charles' lousy sexual performance, horrifying selfishness (he does not use a condom), traditional views of marriage, and shadiness toward Ernestina, Sarah inevitably and rightfully feels used. Whether Sarah lies to Charles about her chastity is thus a trivial issue in comparison to Charles' baggage. The final ending does everything but shock the reader—in fact, it makes logical sense—Sarah revels in her self-reliance, and so does the modern woman. This same feminist, modern self-reliance is present in the women of Fowles' time, yet these same women obtain their first indiscriminate access to birth control in 1967. Although the pill was available in 1961, Great Britain was still emerging out of its downtrodden Victorian values, and the British National Health Service only permitted married women such luxury ("The Pill"). Fowles' Darwinian implications fly far higher than a mere change in social hierarchies; Fowles instills the idea that women have been self-reliant in the past, are self-reliant now, and will become even more self-reliant in the future. If men continue embracing selfish patriarchal values, they will have little hope in finding a mate.

At their reunion in London, Sarah has difficulty in conveying the reason she does not want to marry Charles. What is perhaps the most important, most straightforward answer Charles receives from Sarah comes after he accuses her of being more selfish than Mrs. Poulteney. Sarah then poses this significant question: "And I should not be selfish if I said, knowing I cannot love you as a wife must, you may marry me?" (463). Although some critics read Sarah's indecision as connivance and manipulation, the patriarchy thoroughly drove her to an existential crisis that could have only resulted in unavoidable confusion. "Fowles considers man's happiness an outgrowth of knowing that he has survived—and that man's survival a feat only possible by

evolving. But to evolve, survive, and be happy, man must also suffer the unhappiness brought on by chance” (Huffaker 109). Thus, Sarah’s initial experience with the French Lieutenant, coupled with the grotesque sexual encounter then heartbreak with Charles, paves way to her independence. Sarah realizes that being content on her own terms is better than being happy for a limited time since there are so many possibilities of marriages going awry. Such a possibility includes death, and Mrs. Poulteney exemplifies the bitterness Sarah wants to avoid. “Fear is, in the Victorian anthropological sense, a ‘survival.’ Like certain primitive tribes, this primitive emotion survives into the modern world unchanged” (Beer 236). Indeed, Sarah views self-reliance as a superior pathway to happiness in comparison to marriage because the latter fosters a potential loss of identity.

Some critics point out the misogynist impact of the myths about women contained in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, yet those same myths only further the link between tremendous female power and extinction. Most of the women Fowles’ narrator presents perform self-harm in order to obtain their single objective—sympathy. From a girl “introducing stones into her bladder” to a woman who “plunged some hundreds of needles into the flesh of various parts of her body,” Fowles’ throws us some truly atrocious medical stories that serve to contrast Sarah’s self-harm in the novel (233-34). Likewise, Sarah is capable of self-harm, but instead of aiming for sympathy, she discards her fantasy family life to fulfill her independence and survive.

Fowles’ placement of the modern woman exactly a hundred years before the pill becomes widely legalized in Great Britain is instrumental in conveying the new godlike power this modern woman acquires. Sarah’s ideology along with these medical advances together have the capacity to cause extinction for all humanity. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* witnesses the evolution of chastity as a powerful tool for survival. Instead, the new tool of survival becomes

ownership over the modern woman's own sexuality. Since the novel situates Sarah's ideology—or the new modern woman's ideology—as rooting out of the psychologically confining patriarchy, Fowles also suggests that it is the modern man who will now have to adapt. More specifically, in order to mate, the modern man will have to shed any remnants of the patriarchy and embrace the existence of individuality in both genders. Critics like Michael—that base their argument on the limited perspective of Sarah's character—fail to confront the advantage such limited perspective actually poses for the text as a feminist novel. Charles observes Sarah's behavior, and we in turn read those observations. As a representation of the modern man, Charles becomes a detailed case of masculinity in need of serious evolution. If the modern man does not comply, the power of femininity just might cause the extinction of humanity. Considering the remarkable evidence, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* should be deemed a feminist novel once and for all.

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