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"Fowels' conception of femininities in 'The French Lieutenant's Woman'"
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Introduction

The novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman" was written in 1969, at a time of significant changes in literature. The post-modern novel, where traditional literary features, such as established narrative techniques, reference to reality, etc. which had to give way to completely new ways of expression, came into being. As there were general doubts about the ability of language to mirror the subjective inner as well as objective outer world, the novels very much reflected on inwardly. That tendency led to the development of a new genre, the meta-fictional novel whose central theme was writing fiction about fiction in order to declare itself as an illusion and to expose the techniques of creating that illusion.

Fowles' novel, however, was mainly influenced by French existentialism and clearly marks the shift to the post-modern novel. On the one hand, it closely follows the conventions of a Victorian novel, as a common historical novel, on the other hand it shows the formal characteristics of an experimental, a meta-novel.

It is necessary to take these literary movements into consideration to properly understand the issue with which I intended to deal. Namely the conception of femininities in Fowels' widely debated and unconventional novel. As the title of the book implies, the reader assumes a woman to be the protagonist of the novel. Yet, when reading the story one gets the impression of Charles playing the major role in the book.

In my paper I am going to analyse this point, discussing the questions whether the novel is a feminist one or not, what Sarah, the French lieutenant's woman, stands for and what impact her character has on the course of the novel. In dealing with these main points, other aspects connected with them will also be taken into account.
1. Is it a Feminist Novel?

First of all I am going to refer to two critics who discussed the question whether the novel is a feminist one comprehensively. Bryd answers in the affirmative, declaring that Sarah is a positive role model, a woman of intelligence, imagination, daring and modern integrity who develops a feminist consciousness and liberates herself from restrictive circumstances. There are three phases of development to be distinguished: first we meet an innocent young governess with traditional goals in life. Gradually she develops a growing self-awareness and self-confidence with the helpful influence of Charles. Finally she represents an articulate spokeswoman for feminist concerns with a fulfilling job, self-respect and independence. (Bryd 306-308)

I think that Bryd regards Sarah and her development in a very "straight" way, ignoring the variety of facets that are all part of her personality and that make her "way" a rather contradictory one. Cornier opposes that position and argues the following way. For him Sarah is not granted her own point of view, which makes her appear rather ambiguous. Her own thoughts remain outside of the realm of the novel as Sarah is only portrayed through different layers of voices. Charles, the narrator and the other characters who are all part of the male ideology shape the perspective offered of Sarah, which is purely masculine. Although Fowles obviously intended to write a feminist novel, as many historical references to prominent women in the emancipation progress imply, he fails to make his critique of the male ideology evident. Therefore the reader views Sarah precisely the way the narrative presents her. Put differently, Fowles is aware of the limitations of the male view.

...perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game. Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them. (85)

He nevertheless relies too much on the reader who is himself caught in the patriarchal world to be able to "see through" that perspective. (Cornier 227) Allen also agrees that the novel is an investigation of the Victorian Man, not the Victorian woman and that the view we get of Victorian Society is a man's view.
I consider Fowles' approach more clever and effective than trying to project male thinking into Sarah's perspective, pretending to know what she thinks. Consequently, the reader is obliged to view her from the perspective of the "Victorians" on the one hand but is also able to "enlarge" this image with his "modern thinking". No matter from which angle she is seen, her acts of liberation speak for themselves. Even if the novel is not referred to as a feminist one, most of the critics come to regard it as an existentialist novel. It is almost considered an undeniable fact that Sarah and Charles, the two main characters, undergo an evolution to existentialists, people who have found their own way, their own inner freedom detached from the confining ties of society. Whereas Bryd continues to judge Sarah's development in a positive way, ultimately presenting her as "an articulate spokeswoman of feminine concerns". I suspect she is simply substituting existentialism with feminism and vice versa. Of course, this interpretation is possible if one is willing to ignore the contradictory quality of Sarah's nature. Rackham notes that all of Fowles' novels are explorations of existentialism and its absurdity and anxiety. Since this novel is based at a time where existentialism as such does not exist yet, Fowles can ignore certain "existentialist clichès". Existentialism, he argues, is no more than a key to the world like all "-isms". It is therefore an equally misleading sidetrack. (Rackham 102)

2. Who is Sarah?

I think this question is one of the most crucial ones in the novel as it always yearns for being answered. The only problem is that it is hard to do so. Every attempt to see through her character is bound to fail as none of the approaches can logically be led to satisfactory conclusion. Even if one tends to accept one explanation, there is always some scrap of mystery left to it. This might even be the key to the great success of the novel.

At least Hagopian tried to create some clarity by introducing three ways of regarding Sarah: The first one shows a modern woman who remains an unfathomable enigma. The second confirms with Dr. Grogan's diagnose of a psychopathic personality. The third presents an intelligent young woman using all means available to liberate herself from society. (Hagopian 201) Like Hagopian, Rackham, agrees with the last description of Sarah's personality.
In the best existential manner, Sarah has created a new self by her own choice, an authentic self... freed from petty morals and conventions... Not only has her freedom not been forced upon her by circumstances, the circumstances themselves have been invented by her. (Rackham 100-101)

Rankin adds that in Charles's transformation she is the catalytic agent who in too many ways remains an enigma throughout the book. (Rankin 197) Adam, however, emphasises that Sarah is a mystery woman, an anti-character in the sense of being liberated from societies' conditioning which defines the identity and the destiny of others. Furthermore, he notes that although much can be said about Sarah, there is not enough known in more ordinary ways like taste, habits, history, desires, antipathies. The emerging conflict stems not from her existentialist heroinism rather the underdevelopment of vital aspects of her personality. (Adam 345) As with most of the critics I feel that Sarah embodies a mixture of different elements. Although she can certainly be seen as an existentialist woman, she remains at the same time an enigma and, as I think, partly a "psychopathic case". In refusing the Victorian concept of sin and in deliberately making herself an "outcast". From other peoples' perspective, she liberates herself. According to the existentialists' realisation that- "As long as you believe in sins you accept them, if you do not, you are free."- she finds her new way. The only fact I find hard to comprehend is the action of lying to the man she apparently loves. Consequently, she can no longer be trusted and, moreover, there seems to be a contradiction between love and existentialism. Is an existentialist not allowed to love somebody or if he does, does he need to suffer from it instead of "living" it? This point will definitely be mentioned in chapter four again.

Admitting that Sarah displays a somewhat "masochistic" behaviour, Bryd nevertheless regards her as a sane woman. Why? She comes up with an existentialist argument, brought forward by Simon de Beauvoir: Sarah must use whatever means available to obtain her freedom and seek full membership in the human race. also by deceiving and manipulating others because she belongs to an oppressed, powerless group. The second argument says that the majority of characters question Sarah's sanity. Ernestina thinks Sarah is a "little mad"; she tells Charles, "I don't like to go near her." While the vicar claims that Sarah is somewhat mentally unbalanced, Mrs. Poulteney is the "preacher" of Sarah's insanity. Even Charles and Dr. Grogan, two intelligent men, are unable to come to terms with her elusive character.
Fowles, however, undercuts the reliability and objectivity of each of these "character witnesses". For example, Dr. Grogan who gives the most fully developed explanation of Sarah gets discredited as an eccentric rather than Whig Darwinian, a man who ultimately functions in terms of Victorian morality. (Bryd 309) Furthermore, the author himself indicates quite clearly that Sarah is not an insane woman: "There was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask and above all no sign of madness."(13), "Her exhibition of shame had a kind of purpose"(200), "Tears produced by conditional rather than emotional misery".(87)

Cornier's image of Sarah is rather one of an enigma. Expressions, such as "as if", "perhaps", "it was hard to say", "the enigma she represented", "mysterious Sarah", support the fact that the narrator shows an undeniable notion of uncertainty whenever he refers to Sarah. Charles' inconsistent interpretations, ranging from Sarah- the personification of freedom, Sarah- the manipulator or the at times strong or fragile woman seem to give the same impression. (Cornier 228)

Yet, it has to be stated that part of the plot is based on the mysterious Sarah as a means of creating the necessary suspense. Sarah in general embodies various classical myths, such as Eve, the femme fatale, the symbol of sexuality, the seductress, "a siren", "Virgin Mary" as well as a scientific myth epitomised by doctor Grogan. Charles even appears to be obsessed by her being a symbol, an enigma. "some possibility she symbolised", "a glimpse of the ideal world or a mythical world", "the symbol around which had accreted all his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms." (87) Cornier finally concludes that Sarah is only a functional object, a "mystery woman who is both a male fantasy and the catalyst for male redemption, an object functioning for man." (Cornier 230)

Horracher, another critic, points out the striking parallels between the image of Sarah and the one of "historical witches". She has "shabby clothes" and a "ruddy skin", Charles feels bewitched like "like a man possessed against his will". Her physical appearance also plays a vital role and certainly deserves a mention: "abnormally large", "melancholy attracted by wild nature", "conscious of her sexuality", "red, wild hair", "a girl like a coachman, a female soldier", "directness of look and language", "there was something male about her" - at the same time she is sensual and feminine. It is quite obvious that at least in the broadest sense these images match those of a witch. Horracher emphasises that just as the texts about witchcraft
persecution do, these descriptions reflect the "projections of patriarchal fears onto atypical women". The scientific official truths of men run counter to the "spiritual wisdom, female non-rational traits like sensuality, intuition" of witches. Whereas in the Middles Ages witches were decimated, in the Victorian Age they were forced to conform, viewed warning symbols, or get institutionalised. As Horlacher sums up, the novel unmaps the artificiality and constructed character of the "witch image" as a product of men's perception and projection. Therefore, it is based on fantasy rather than on reality. (Horlacher 559-602)

In my opinion, Sarah comes across as a fairly tragic character from today's point of view. Although she is able to find her independence and break with conventions, she remains a lonely person to the end. That may result from the fact that people judge existentialism in a more critical way than in the 60s. As we are the "products" of the individualisation trend, we value human bonds, reassurances and relationships more than the people who wanted to break away from them.

3. Sarah's Role in the Relationship to Charles

Although Sarah's part in the novel is relatively small compared to Charles', her influence is catastrophic. After Charles sees her asleep and feels somehow deeply touched by that picture, it is said that "the whole Victorian age was lost." (66) Initially Sarah exists only as an object in the eyes of Charles, Ernestina and the gossips of Lime: "It stood right at the seawardmost end... Its clothes were black....a figure from myth." (9) It is only later in the novel when she is given a proper name and a history.(Docherty 123) We actually come to know Sarah when Charles comes to know her and, as already mentioned, we just receive a limited number of facts about her whereas we know everything about Charles' status, motives and feelings, etc.. At first when we meet her- the "a fallen woman" waiting for the lost lover day for day, I tended to feel sorry for her. The striking impression she gives in the seduction scenes with Charles and also at Mrs Poulteney's house, make her seem to "grow" in the reader's eyes. She appears to have the right constitution for a heroine, being hated by the powerful and merciless and loved and admired by the servants. As Prescott pointed out, both Sarah and Charles go to the Undercliff in defiance of conventional society. There their meetings lead to an open defiance as soon as
Charles comes upon his "Eve" and the apple, the latter symbolised by sexual attraction. (Prescott 60) Some critics compare the setting of their meetings, the Undercliff, with the English Garden of Eden, a place that has to be reached through a tunnel-like a symbol of the womb where he follows her into. (Miller 74) When Charles meets Sarah, he "feels like a man possessed against his will" (196).

It seemed clear to him that it was not Sarah in herself who attracted him- how could she, he was betrothed- but some emotion, some possibility she symbolised. She made him aware of his deprivation. His future had always seemed to him a vast potential; and now suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place. She made him aware of that. (114)

But Charles's attraction goes further. Sarah, being the opposite of the model Victorian woman with regard to her outer appearance and "lifestyle", Charles feels drawn to her by the "passion" she radiates. As Fowels remarked, much of the prudancy of the Victorians can be attributed to their divided-mindedness. They viewed the soul as being more real than their body. Also Sarah was a curious mixture of passion and constraint. Still, Charles suspected "darker qualities" in her. When men see their own fibre present in a woman, it is perceived as a hint of something masculine and therefore unbecoming in their nature. As Sarah conforms with the description of a woman with partly masculine traits, the assumption of an inversion of male and female sexual roles may be justified. Naturally, Charles is unaccustomed to being dominated by a woman. Charles is also distressed because his usual ability with language deserts him as he finds himself uttering "uninspired words" and is positive that Sarah cannot but have seen "that he was a trite, a mere mother of convention", "there was something about her there. Charles felt himself an old woman; and did not like the feeling." (Miller 71) Charles tries to dispel Sarah's mystery, to dehumanise his relationship in bringing up rational arguments saying that he has to be charitable and show her that there are also benevolent people to be found. During one meeting Sarah reveals to Charles her wish to make a confession by telling him her story. According to Docherty, this is the point where she creates her own history and begins to assert herself as a manipulative force, luring Charles into her fantasy world. (Docherty 123) I think that from now on she deliberately plans every step that will lead her out of Lime and into another life. She spots the only means through which she might gain help. Once again, the woman's outlet for becoming the master of her own mind lies through man. The way is not open to her
unless she secures his involvement in her plan. Therefore, she must tempt and ensnare him. (Miller 74)
Sarah gives him a detailed report of the past events. At the end she says: "What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women." (153) Charles is puzzled and in total grip of her and her story although he cannot really explain his attraction reasonably.

He was at one and the same time Vargueness enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down; just as Sarah was to him an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman. (154)

I think that in retrospect it is hardly imaginable that Sarah only played her part like an actress playing her role. She must have been very determined to achieve her aim of "another life" otherwise she could not have acted so convincingly. Nevertheless, I felt just as deceived as Charles when he finds out about the lie later in the novel.

On the verge of fulfilment of their love, many incidents destroy the comfortable, secluded world in which they had met. The forces of the outside world mount up until even their love for each other is revealed when Sam and Mary surprise them in front of the barn. This could almost be called the first step in a tragedy of love. (Evarts 60)

The next event I would like to write about is Charles' and Sarah's meeting in Exeter. Not only does it present the sexual climax of their love relationship, but also the climax of the novel. (Brantlinger 343) The act that should have brought them together had the opposite effect, namely their alienation. After they made love, it turns out that her leg was not hurt and that Sarah had been a virgin. Both points come like a shock - for Charles and the reader and the only fitting answer is the fact that she had deceived him. Love could not have been the motivation unless she had been able to combine love and calculated lying. Feeling trapped she reacts in a self-destructive manner:

I am not worthy of you...Yes, I have deceived you. But I shall not trouble you again....There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I loved you...What duped you was my loneliness. A resentment, an envy: I don't know. I don't know... Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It cannot be explained. (308)

The whole answer is not what I would call satisfactory. It rather expresses a somewhat schizophrenic disposition. On the one hand she deceived him for she
envied him, on the other hand she loved him truly but feels bad for having troubled him. The answer probably is that there is no answer and that Sarah remains as mysterious as she had been. Rackham says that the turning points of the novel are fixed by irrational actions: Sarah deceiving Charles about her virginity and Charles giving up his social position for a governess with bad reputation. (Rackham 101) One could still claim that love itself often does make people behave irrationally as it sets you free- makes you feel spiritually "renewed", "reinvented". Which surely is part of love's seduction.

Brantlinger asserts that the brevity of sexual union enacted in 90 seconds indicates a certain fear of intimacy on both sides. On the conscious level passionate love is displayed but unconsciously emotional and physical disengagement can be observed. (Brantlinger 340) I think that the brevity of the sexual act is by no means related to the intensity of love. Brantlinger’s conclusions are based on norms and standards which do not enlighten us as to the intimate nature of Charles' and Sarah's relationship. What sets the whole turn of emotions off, was the discovery of having been deceived to to such an extent. Therefore, Charles' reaction is understandable, he even increasingly becomes the sympathetic figure whereas Sarah personifies inscrutability and untrustworthiness. The only point to be appreciated is her ability to maintain her independence. But why, I wonder, has she fallen in love with Charles in the first place if her freedom is the prime goal to live and strive for? Her whole behaviour seems to turn into mere absurdity. Her effort to keep up the image of an enigma is only a strategy of self-protection, of not needing to give herself away. At least in my view this is rather a poor than a heroic "achievement" to be proud of. Nevertheless, projected on the background of existentialism this behaviour has surely to be taken in a more symbolic than "real" way.Moreover, Sarah says the following:

You have given me the consolation of believing that in another world, another age, another life, I might have been your wife. You have given me the strength to go on living... in the here and now. (308)

In order to defend Sarah, this quotation could be put forward as it reflects her affection and respect for Charles at least in some way even if she would probably reject marriage in any age. Otherwise she would have given their relationship a future existence. Why could they not have tried to live in a "modern" marriage, where
both man and woman have equal rights. If love had been so mighty, why should Sarah not have had the strength to change Charles the way she has from the moment he saw her? Other critics suggest that Sarah recognised Charles’ as the patriarchal husband he would have become once they had married. For example, Hagopian stresses that Sarah uses Charles and abandons him when he becomes a threat to her existential development. "Sarah is a mutant for her time, a new species of woman." Her survival may require "cryptic coloration" but she is a woman ahead of her time who moulds Charles into a pre-modern man. (Hagopian 197) Later on in Exeter when Charles is still arguing with himself, he obviously starts to understand Sarah's deceit. It is said "that a modern man would no doubt have gone straight back." (318) But he is, although in the right direction, still on his way:

She knew he loved her; and she knew he had been blind to the true depth of that love. The false version of her betrayal by Varguennes, her other deceives, were but stratagems to unblind him; all she had said after she had brought him to the realisation was but a test of his new vision. He had failed miserably; and she had then used the same stratagems as a proof of her worthlessness. Out of what nobility must such self-sacrifice spring! (319)

According to that, Sarah is the noble, wise woman who loves Charles and guides him to a better future, "a new vision" by setting tests for him. At this stage of the novel, it is the vision Charles has of Sarah.

4. The Significance of the Endings

As Brantlinger states, Fowles turns a bad Victorian habit, namely the use of different endings, into an experimental mode. (Brantlinger 342) He actually presents three endings, of which the first is given in the middle of the novel. It is also called the Victorian or traditional ending for Charles is again the representative of convention. He decides to return to Ernestina, marry her and become a business man after all. He realises that "He was one of life's victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history; stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil." (289) However, the author points out that this is definitely not the true ending and continues on telling the story.
Before the second ending Charles, having the solicitor look for Sarah, goes travelling through Europe and America. He has almost given up hope of ever seeing her again when he receives a message reporting her discovery in London. We learn that she is living in the house of the Rossettis', a famous artist at that time and works as his assistant. The Rossettis were members of an influential circle of artists including poets, painters and critics- called the Pre-Raphaelitists. Their art captured a dream world of beauty and sensuality which presented a contrast to the ugliness and materialism of the Victorian everyday life. Accordingly, they too were "outcasts" in the Victorian society. While the figures of the book were created by fiction, the Rossettis did exist in real life, that is, as Docherty puts it, they are history itself. (Docherty 124)

When Charles visits her, he is still the "slave of his love to her" and therefore the less free of the two. Seeing her again, he is impressed by the "blossomed and realised creature." (379) before him. He senses that now their positions are strangely reversed. She still dazzles him with the directness of her language, "her refined vocabulary and accent" that "had articulated intuition, had deepened her clarity of insight." (386) Also her bright clothes are visible evidence of her "new self-knowledge and self-possession." Once again he articulates his love and presses Sarah to reveal her feelings towards him. She reacts in a pretty cold and emotionless way, referring to "new affections" that are not of the kind one could suggest. She clearly says that she does not want to get married, however indulgent the husband might be. Only when Charles faces her with a harsh accusation, does she change her position. Charles saw (and again we are only let into Charles's thoughts not into Sarah's): "that her supposed present happiness was another lie. In her central being she suffered still, in the same old way" (387) Than he says: "I think you lie. I think you revelled in the thought of my misery." (388)

Charles' effort to leave are unexpectedly cut short by Sarah introducing him to a young lady, who turns out to be his daughter. At last they come together to share their future life happily or that is what the reader assumes to happen. This second ending is, as it has been hoped for, the most satisfactory one for me. Also Evarts admits that we yearn for the fulfilment of the happy ending though we know that the tragic one is the real one, we acknowledge it, but the desire to the other direction remains. (Evarts 66) In addition, even the author himself implies that this ending is not the true one. Rackham interprets the renewed union of Charles and Sarah as if
the separation has only been a test to prove the honesty of their relationship. (Rackham 102) Similarly, Rankin describes this ending as the romantic one, where love conquers all and both are reunited under the protective eye of a benevolent god. (Rankin 204) In any case, I think that Sarah's ambition to live in a family comes pretty much unexpectedly. If she had wanted it right from the beginning, she would have sent a note to the solicitor earlier as she had known about the advertisement in the newspaper. She rejects marriage, only to revise her opinion a few moments later. I think that these events quite openly contradict everything that has been going on so far. Though the actions have often been illogical in themselves, their whole flow has had a certain logic and conclusiveness in the end. Sarah and Charles were apt to become existentialists, though I as the reader had wished to let their unhappy love come true.

The last ending, which is supposed to be the ultimate and real one, can be summarised the following way: After Charles blamed Sarah for having manipulated him from the beginning and having enjoyed doing so, he threatens to leave her for good. Sarah tries to stop him by putting her hand on his arm. Charles hesitates and comes to two crucial realisations about Sarah:

...and found only a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but itself- ready to surrender truth, feeling, perhaps even all womanly modesty in order to save its own integrity. (397)

And he saw deeper still:

He saw his own true superiority to her: which was not of birth or education, not of intelligence, not of sex, but of an ability to give that was also an ability to compromise. She could give only to possess; and to possess him- whether because he was what he was, whether because possession was so imperative in her that it had to be constantly renewed, could never be satisfied by one conquest only... (397)

Than he takes his leave and faces the world as it lies before him. Although trembling with anger, he has found an atom of faith in himself that will help him to make a new life for himself far away- in America, the country that is the symbol of hope per se. As Rackham puts it, Charles though not knowing where he will go exactly, is choosing his own self- definition. (Rackham 102) Similarly, all critics agree on this ending being the existentialist one. Rankin even suggests it to be Sarah's ending as Charles sees her for what she really is- a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but
itself. After all, Rankin regards her as a manipulator who is as such not to be trusted-not as a human being and certainly not as a representative of the moral truth. (Rankin 206) Sarah's notable obsession with possessing people for the sake of possessing is once more underlined by Laughlin and Hagopian who regret Charles' realisation coming too late. In accordance with my own observation in one of the preceding chapters (see chapter tree), Hagopian wonders whether a true existentialist cannot with integrity and authenticity make a commitment to heterosexual love and family life. Does existentialism represent the inability of engaging into human relationships? (Hagopian 198) It probably does, at least in the abstract, theoretical sense it is dealt with in the novel. However, I cannot endorse that attitude.

Since Sarah seeks freedom to avoid making commitments, at least heterosexual commitments, one could also suspect her of being a lesbian. There are scarce but distinctive hints supporting that hypothesis. Though it might be worth having a closer look at it, I will leave this speculation as it is.

Unlike Laughlin and Hagopian, Miller describes the last endings as fortunate falls as they confirm the belief that neither men nor women need rely on the other for fulfilment. Therefore, it is a victory for both. According to him, Sarah's actions are all part of mere "instruments to a greater end". After Charles decides that only he has the "ability to give". He realises that it is she who is responsible for his finding himself "reborn". (Miller 74)

I would agree with all critics mentioned except Miller in most of the points discussed. Fortunately in the last ending Charles manages to triumph over Sarah. Although his hopes are shattered, he can finally start to free himself from Sarah's bond. Admittedly, Sarah did make Charles become an existentialist but she did it rather indirectly and unconsciously. Consequently, it was the effect of her dishonesty and unreliability as well as Charles's fate to be hopelessly in love with Sarah. Even if she may have been an existentialist from the beginning, Charles' nobility easily surpasses Sarah's as he kept the "ability to give".
5. The Resemblance of Sarah to the Narrator

In the following I would like to investigate the thesis whether Sarah and the narrator show parallels in the way that Charles and the reader do. This is what many critics believe to be true or go even further in assuming that Sarah functions as the narrating novelist's surrogate. Unlike other characters, Holmes thinks:

...Sarah is aware that the fiction she creates is a fiction whereas the others often fictionalise in order to produce comforting delusions which will relieve them of the burden of their own freedom... her purpose in deliberately courting the pains of social ostracism is to claim her uniqueness, to grow as a free individual. (Holmes 195)

I think this is a bold statement as the fear of freedom felt by the "other characters" is being made clear. I suppose that one of the primeval instincts of men is the fright of the "terrible" freedom which goes along with the existential angst that Charles was confronted with. Therefore people rather tend to put up with almost any other social condition than choosing to challenge the absolute freedom of the individual. Within the given limits they struggle to attain at least a minimum of freedom. However, since they are part of society and accept its norms and morals which serve as "comforting delusions that relieve them of the burden of their own freedom". I would like to "correct" this assertion in so far as to claim that the delusions are not produced by the people but presented by society. As the conformity in social communities carries with it decisive dangers, Sarah, whether intentionally or not, plays the part of a martyr by putting herself into the position of an outcast, pretending to suffer the consequences though secretly taking pleasure in her self-chosen freedom. From this position she plays tricks on the others and manipulates them just the way the narrator does. His intention is, according to Holmes, identical with Sarah's as his manipulation of the reader is aimed at leading him to the truth and making him choose to be free. The illusion is fostered that Charles and the reader, in assuming responsibility for their destinies, become authors of their own lives. Rankin supports this, adding the following idea: Like the narrator, Sarah "confesses" information when she has the reason to confess, and refuses to explain herself when an explanation would allow a "violation of her territory." (197) This observation can clearly be proved in the novel. As mentioned before, Sarah withholds information about her feelings and thoughts from Charles. As a result, we only learn about Sarah through Charles' or the
narrator’s perspective. Similarly to Sarah, the narrator often pretends to lose track of his characters. For example: "There are tears in her eyes? She is too far away for me to tell..." (398) Still, though the reader is played and with by the narrator, I felt far from having been taught a lesson. It may be a noble ambition to make the readers "authors of their own life" but this can hardly be achieved in reality. That is because the reader is not directly effected by the sufferings of Charles or Sarah's influence. Rankin also goes on to say that Charles experience differs from ours in so far as his manipulation was not planned by an omniscient authority. Whatever Sarah's motives were, they were basically selfish while the narrator's purpose of constructing a meaningful world can not be assigned to such motives. (Rankin 206) However, the reader is able to understand his plan to "teach" us in theory only. As I have written in chapter two, people nowadays are much more free than Sarah was more than a hundred years ago. For we live in an age of individualism, we probably judge the whole matter differently and more critically from today's point of view.

Rackham also sees a correspondence between Sarah's first story which is like the narrator's first ending, a deliberate lie. She is eager to conceal the purpose, the seduction of Charles, as our narrator is to conceal his, the seduction of the reader. (Rackham 99) Hagopian expresses his opinion as follows: He repeats the fact that Fowles as an existentialist bases the novel on his concept of freedom. He as the novelist feels that to be free himself, he must give Charles, Ernestina and Sarah their freedom as well. The critic's argument is that no reader with intellectual integrity will appreciate being tricked by a guru instead of telling the truth. (Hagopian 194) He thinks that the parallels between Sarah and the narrator exist for the same purpose: the realisation that "there is no intervening god" and that we make our own lives "within our hazard- given abilities" that "a planned world is a dead world."
6. The other Female Characters

As Sarah has been the focus of my discussion so far, I would like to have a look at the other female characters of the novel now. There are Ernestina, Charles' fiancee; Mrs. Poulteney, Sarah's "mistress", to be taken into closer consideration. Ernestina, who is the daughter of a well-to-do bourgeois business man in London, serves as the counterpart to Sarah. As her character is fully revealed by the narrator, the reader seems to get a better insight into her personality and has no choice but to accept the picture drawn by the narrator. Though we have to put up with the presented image and touch scarcely more than the surface of it, we still perceive a very clear-cut and one-dimensional portrayal of her character. While we keep on puzzling over Sarah's mysterious actions that hardly ever get commented on by the narrator, it is perhaps made a little clearer with a better understanding of the other characters.

Ernestina thoroughly complies with the ideal of a model Victorian female character, being demure, obedient, shy, pretty and dependant on men. Although she is quite passive and "speechless", she is a well adapted member of patriarchal society. As she had always been treated with an over-protectiveness, she is to a certain point a victim of her social upbringing. Ernestina is destined to become the wife of a strong and socially elevated man and supposed to gather strength for the marriage, which had the form of a good business deal. As the only child she had to suffer the agony of parental worry. Typical of the zeitgeist of the Victorian age, she is horrified of anything carnal:

Since birth her slightest cough would bring doctors; since puberty her slightest whim summoned decorators and dressmakers; and always her slightest frown caused her mama and papa secret hours of self-recrimination.....she had evolved kind of private commandment...."I must not"- whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force an entry into her consciousness. (28-30)

As these quotations may indicate, the scandal Sarah must have caused for the people who regarded Ernestina's life as "standard" can easily be imagined. Throughout the novel Ernestina remains rather static in her personality, without experiencing any dynamic development. Although Sarah is given "power" by being fairly independent from the narrator, who keeps much of her life secret, Ernestina, though given a voice of her own, does not seem to be able to measure up to Sarah's
impact in any way. There is, at least, one point where the narrator examines Ernestina in a more differentiated way. He says that she "had certainly a much stronger will of her own than anyone about her had ever allowed for- and more than the age allowed for." (29) Fortunately she had a very proper respect for convention and she shared with Charles a sense of self-irony. In casting that light on Ernestina, the reader for a moment forgets about the stereotypical picture she resembles and starts to see her as a real, multi facetted woman with a certain potential that could be built on.

In stark contrast to her, Mrs. Poulteney does not get rid of her cliched image at any stage of the novel. She, as Brantlinger puts it, is "a symbol of British imperialism and a sort of priestess of the rites of castration." (Brantlinger 192) There are two things that she is obsessed with: dirt and immorality. She is the select representative of the belief in the Victorian concept of sin. As she believes in hell, she is willing to do a minimum work for charity for real "sinners" in order to "reserve" a place in heaven. Moreover, she comes close to a dictator who notoriously needs to be in control of everything and everybody. As a result, Sarah is her chief object of suspicion and her decisive enemy, who she is projecting all her fears onto. Her function in the novel, I think, is to give us an idea of the stringent and rigid rules in Victorian times as Mrs. Poulteney embodies all the negative associations connected with that age.

Like Ernestina she is not a dynamic but rather a static character. Just as Sarah sets tests on Charles to let him become a better human being, Mrs. Poulteney sets tests on Sarah. "Sarah had passed the tract test." (55) As she is in command of the whole power structure in the house, she has also spies to keep the system function.

There would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady...she was an epitome of all the most crassly arrogant traits of the ascendant British Empire. Her only notion of justice was that she must be right; and her only notion of government was an angry bombardment of the impertinent populace. (23)

I believe that her exertion of power is backed and morally justified by religion just the way colonies are exploited under the cover of other "truths", such as Darwinianism. Interestingly, despite all differences, Sarah and Mrs. Poulteney still have something in common. Both have obsessive personalities. While the mistress must control the humble, the sinners, Sarah, according to one theory discussed, needs to be in control of men. In one passage that refers to Sarah and Mrs. Poulteney, it is said: "It was, in short, a bargain struck between two obsessions." (59)
Conclusion

In my paper I tried to examine the femininities in the novel with Sarah being the major woman of interest. Resulting from the controversial, outstanding personality she has in the novel, I regarded her as a "grateful" character to look at. In the attempt of analysing her thoroughly, I chose different aspects for discussion. By investigating the issues of her relationship to Charles, the significance of the endings for both, Sarah and Charles and finally her resemblance to the narrator, I intended to underpin the most central question, namely the one asking: who is Sarah? These aspects listed, were supposed to view her from different angles. As among some critics there was an interesting debate going on about the feminist character of the novel, I also made it the first point of discussion in my paper. At last, two other female characters deserved a mention as they were part of the femininities though they played completely different roles than Sarah.
Bibliography


