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The figure in the unconscious: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

When the male narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* boards the train with Charles Smithson in chapter 55, he sits observing him with a look which is 'more than a shade disapproving, as if he knew very well what sort of man this was (as Charles had believed to see very well what sort of man *he* was) and did not much like the knowledge or the species.' (*FLW*, p.347) Men as a species are very much under scrutiny in Fowles's third published novel. It suggests that unless the species is ready to adapt to new social conditions, which include the emancipation of women, then, like the aristocrat and the gentleman, certain kinds of men may find themselves becoming evolutionary dinosaurs. Charles's 'sort of man' is ostensibly Victorian but through him Fowles traces the roots of present male attitudes and behaviour, suggesting as he does so that contemporary masculinity is to be understood as part of a historical process. Simultaneously, as the primeval battle of male wills mentioned above indicates, the narrative of the book is framed within a specifically male viewpoint in ways which are highly ambiguous. All in all, one might expect the historical distance afforded by the novel's setting to allow Fowles detachment in his analysis of men. Instead it acts as camouflage for the voyeur in him.

The book is partly an expiation of the Victorian past, that legacy which so decisively shaped the men of Fowles's generation as well as shaping his characters. Fowles told Melvyn Bragg 'I had a little debt to settle personally with the Victorian age' in writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.¹ For him, the Victorians are 'closer than you may think',² and 'the 20th Century was already inherent

in the Victorian age'.³ He also suggested to Bragg the central analogy between Charles's time and our own:

for me the 20th Century was born let's say roughly between 1850 and 1870. This is when various neurosis [*sic*] begin to creep into the Victorian age. And so the heroine [of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*] of course represents at one level women's liberation[,] the beginning of the movement. And John Stuart Mill in the year in which the novel was set actually did try to you know get a vote through Parliament, to get the vote for women. He failed, of course. But that really is the beginning of sort of public, feminine emancipation.⁴

The association of women's liberation with neurosis may be more than a telling slip of the tongue. Essentially it is the male anxiety of the late 1960s at a newly-emergent female autonomy that the novel charts. It allows Fowles to explore male dilemmas which have a highly topical relevance 'to the writer's now' as he has put it.⁵ To appreciate the links we need to take a brief look at the historical situation behind the book.

In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë's heroine complains, 'If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light: they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman always a fiend.'⁶ In the Parliamentary debate to which Fowles refers, John Stuart Mill spoke of the 'silent domestic revolution' taking place whereby 'women and men are, for the first time in history, really each other's companions',⁷ but it is quite clear that few men at the time shared his perception or his hope. On the contrary, at the same time that forces were at work encouraging the possible liberation of women, the Victorian middle-class man's misreading of women underwent an intensification designed to keep women in the home.⁸ It was an ideological strengthening of male defences against possible challenge which, as is inevitably the case, tells us far more about the Victorian male than about women. Victorian patriarchy produced its own versions of those archetypes common to male-dominated societies, the madonna-magdalen syndrome, as part of its social control. That this was a 'production' of sexual

categories rather than a repression has been emphasised by a number of recent writers who see sexuality being employed within the strategies of power that maintain the dominance of certain social formations over others.⁹ For Victorian women this involved living up to male imagery that both condoned and condemned their sex, the redemptive domestic angel and the outcast harlot; but it is a process which needs seeing in relation to what men were also doing to themselves. The intensification of sexual codes was equally applied to notions of masculinity to produce a model of behaviour against which men measured their own sexuality in ways as exacting as those expected of women. There is one crucial difference: the contradictions men forced themselves to live out were in the interests of maintaining their own social power as middle-class males.

Still, despite the licence allowed to men by their privilege and status, we should not underestimate what Fraser Harrison, in his book on Victorian sexuality, has called the 'psychological authority' of patriarchal codes over men's lives.¹⁰ Restraint, guilt, a terror of economic, moral and physical bankruptcy from the ghosts of illicit sex, all played their part in enforcing heightened male standards onto the Victorian man. Marriage and the domestic ideal played a central role in the self-policing that men endured; but while the social institutions of home and family helped endorse and maintain assent to male power, they brought with them contradictions which individual men experienced as personal tensions. In his book *Sex, Politics and Society*, which examines 'The regulation of sexuality since 1800', Jeffrey Weeks has pointed out how 'Many men battled valiantly with what they conceived of as temptation and strove to live up to a higher ideal of married life',¹¹ often turning for help to the stream of handbooks on how to achieve male self-sufficiency. Weeks quotes the study of reproductive organs by William Acton as one example of a large number of texts which put forward 'a gospel of real manhood': Acton wrote that virility is an attribute 'Much more developed in man than is that of maternity in women. Its existence, indeed, seems necessary to give a man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler, and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the well-being of the family, and through it,

of society itself.¹² Given this arduous responsibility for maintaining social order through their manliness, Victorian men created a whole mythology of masculinity which was the measure of their power in their own eyes as well as the means by which it was shored up, the legacy of which we still live with. As with any structure of power, it was lived as much as an anxiety as a reassurance. The harsh constraints men imposed on themselves correlated to male economic, moral and sexual prerogatives in uneasy and demanding ways. Chastity, virility and manhood were linked to notions of duty and order in ways which promised economic success and social status for those who adhered to them, but with accompanying threats and fears about failure. Weeks demonstrates such links in the case of the obsessive concern with masturbation, as well as the cult of masculine prowess promulgated through institutions such as the growing public schools and the expanding network of male clubs. Will-power, physical strength, self-reliance, 'the new stress on games and militaristic training',¹³ an accompanying imperialism, a devotion to order, duty, hierarchy, the repression of emotion and any traits associated with the heightened versions of 'femininity' of the time—all these are familiar to us now as the popular components in the imagery of masculinity, and they received specific formulation and focus in the nineteenth century as a means of social regulation, definition and organisation.

The contradictions of Victorian masculinity would have been between the clear social prestige and privilege men enjoyed and the anxieties they felt in maintaining their power and self-image. One specific anxiety developed in response to the very phenomenon Mill pinpointed—women's emancipation and its accompanying threat to male power. The feminist agitations from the 1860s onwards showed that women were capable of assuming and demanding self-determination which deeply worried orthodox male views. The emergent 'new woman' had overtones of that other woman, the *femme fatale* whom most middle-class men thought of as safely incarcerated in the brothels. It must have seemed to many men as if all the sirens and harpies they had consigned to the nether regions of their social order and their psyches were threatening to break out in vindictive retribution.

One response was the virulent anti-feminism of the later nineteenth century which asserted the domestic role of women with an aggressive dogmatism. Another response was the ambiguous portrayal of female ideals and female duplicity such as one finds in Hardy's own anxious work.

The resultant schizophrenia among men which so often projected itself in terms of seeing women as virgins, whores or both, received one remarkable exposé in the book which Fowles's narrator cites as possibly 'the best guidebook to the age' (*FLW*, p.319), R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). As we have already noted, Stevenson's own fiction shows the male psyche as the root of that sexual duplicity about women which mirrors male fears about sexuality and power. The 'thorough and primitive duality of man'¹⁴ which Stevenson depicts in the double personality of Jekyll was no doubt something which he felt to be part of the 'human condition' in general. Nevertheless, like Hardy's Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville, it dramatises key tensions in Victorian masculinity whose resolution men effected through appropriating women as the imagery of their own paranoia.

In simple terms, Charles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* embodies these contradictions to the full and in doing so he personifies a contemporary malaise of his own time and that of Fowles. The trauma Charles faces in the challenge posed by Sarah is one clearly being felt in new forms by the time Fowles published the novel and his way of telling the story is such that it answers anxiety with a realigned male fantasy in ways that are quite as contradictory as the Victorian situation it examines. To see this continuing paradox at work, let us look first at Charles as representative of the Victorian male dilemma.

Despite its title, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is quite definitely about a man, or more precisely as we shall see, about two men. Fowles indicated as much to Melvyn Bragg when he said 'practically everyone's assumed the central character is the heroine Sarah. But for me the book was always equally about Charles.'¹⁵ Charles represents those male assumptions which generate his fantasy of 'the French lieutenant's woman', the same patriarchal preconceptions which typecast Sarah as 'the French

Loot'n'nt's Hoer' (*FLW*, p.77), as the dairyman describes her. Charles is also the means through which those assumptions can be dissected. He is presented as characteristic of a certain type of male throughout history. He belongs to a line that extends back to the parfit knights of the Middle Ages and forwards to the modern gentleman, 'that breed we call scientists', all of whom make up a 'self-questioning, ethical elite' (*FLW*, p.256). The narrator suggests that we might not see much connection between 'the Charles of 1267 with all his newfangled French notions of chastity and chasing after Holy Grails, the Charles of 1867 with his loathing of trade and the Charles of today, a computer scientist', but we are told there is a link: 'they all rejected or reject the notion of *possession* as the purpose of life, whether it be of a woman's body, or of high profit at all costs, or of the right to dictate the speed of progress.' (*FLW*, p.257) If Charles is to be endorsed as one of this elite however—and, as we shall see, the narrator's opinions are not necessarily to be taken at face value—then it is a position which he has to earn by learning the lessons Sarah seems to offer. The transhistorical dimension suggested here is quite different to that of the male character in Günther Grass's novel *The Flounder*. In that book, the character is presented as the archetype of maleness living on throughout history and encountering the archetype of femaleness in different historical manifestations. Charles is a case-study of masculinity but in the form of a specific man living under the conditions of a specific time, 'a man struggling to overcome history' (*FLW*, p.257) but faced by an almost overwhelming pressure to conform to the general pattern laid down by patriarchal law within his society.

In this respect it is important that Charles is shown as not typical of the genus of males characteristic of his time. He does not fit in with the dominant preconceptions of male behaviour epitomised by his uncle, for example. He dislikes hunting and hunters, prefers walking to riding, and has 'a sinister fondness for spending the afternoons at Winsyatt in the library' (*FLW*, p.17). At Cambridge, he proved himself to be 'unlike most young men of his time' by actually learning something. Though he shares the general middle-class male's penchant for having a club, his excursion with some of its members to Madame Terpsichore's is

more from a sense of the expected pattern of a gentleman's existence than from any anticipated enjoyment. Whilst there he finds himself unable to endure it and has to leave, with the result that his manhood feels slighted: 'He did not feel nobly decent; but as if he had swallowed an insult or funk'd a duel. His father had lived a life in which such evenings were a commonplace; that he could not stomach them proved he was unnatural. Where now was the travelled man of the world? Shrunk into a miserable coward.' (*FLW*, p.266)

If he is untypical, Charles is at the same time the victim of current definitions of what constitutes 'being a man'. His response is ambiguous. His struggle against the trappings of Victorian society is real enough. His early life has allowed the cultivation of the 'man of the world' persona which he adopts when he first meets Sarah, 'at ease in all his travel, his reading, his knowledge of a larger world' (*FLW*, p.107). A suitably detached attitude accompanies this privileged freedom, 'one part irony to one part convention' (*FLW*, p.18). There is also his shocking espousal of Darwinism which permits his brief camaraderie with Dr Grogan. Yet in itself, his struggle is hardly a revolt, merely the icing on his fundamental acceptance of his age, a conservatism manifest even in his challenges. His Darwinism, like his scientific pursuits, is a dilettante's pose adopted to give himself a sense of identity and worth. When, dressed the part of the Victorian palaeontologist and 'carefully equipped for his role' (*FLW*, p.45), he wanders on the seashore looking for fossils, what he sees in the strata is 'an immensely reassuring orderliness in existence... the survival of the fittest and best, *exempli gratia* Charles Smithson' (*FLW*, p.47). The palaeontological metaphor is of course ironically inverted against Charles when Sarah gives him, and puts him to, the fossil 'test', but we have already been made aware of the essentially conformist aspect of Charles's personality which he shares with the rest of this 'Adam' society.¹⁶ On the beach he picks out a particularly large and heavy ammonite to take back for Ernestina, a labour which gives him a perverse satisfaction because of its arduousness: 'Duty, agreeable conformity to the epoch's current, raised its stern head.' (*FLW*, p.48)

Charles's central act of conformity is his proposed marriage to

the aptly named Ernestina. That decision to marry is itself fraught with the paradoxical demands of Victorian masculinity in the face of respectable society's call to duty. Charles has already undergone his initiation into the male sexual schizophrenia characteristic of his age whilst in Paris, and he continues to see escape abroad as offering licence to sexual adventures (*FLW*, p.74). According to Ernestina, Sam, Charles's manservant, 'fancies himself as a Don Juan' (*FLW*, p.71) and he receives a reprimand about this from Charles for his 'past relations with the fair sex' (*FLW*, p.97); but Charles himself hardly stands free of the same accusation. Reserving Paris for his sexual exploits, in England Charles is quite ready to play the lone wolf: he 'liked pretty girls and he was not averse to leading them, and their ambitious parents, on', but 'he would sniff the bait and then turn his tail on the hidden teeth of the matrimonial traps that endangered his path' (*FLW*, p.20). This privileged position has its problem since his 'moral delicacy' increasingly leads him to abandon the weekends in Paris and as a result he 'was therefore in a state of extreme sexual frustration' (*FLW*, p.74). Hence his marriage to Ernestina presents itself as desirable sexually, the inevitable next step in his social aspirations, an unmistakable business deal and, even before the impact of Sarah, a trap.

Charles's disillusion with Ernestina is symptomatic of the contradictions he experiences as a man. His initial attraction to her is founded on a shared sense of irony and 'dryness' (*FLW*, p.72) towards social conventions. She had a quality which 'denied, very subtly but quite unmistakably, her apparent total obeisance to the great god Man', a touch which meant 'to a man like Charles she proved irresistible' (*FLW*, p.27). She takes the initiative in their relationship with a carefully timed look which 'made it clear that she made an offer; as unmistakable, in its way, as those made by the women who in the London of the time haunted the doorways round the Haymarket' (*FLW*, p.74). This air of minor revolt about Ernestina is quickly dissipated by the demands of orthodoxy: after their tiff at Mrs Poulteney's, Ernestina adopts the part of the by then less than fashionable doll-like maiden in order to reclaim Charles's affections, so much so that while 'happy to be adulated, fussed over, consulted, deferred

to. What man is not?', Charles soon finds her attentions 'just a shade cloying' (*FLW*, p.100). After meeting Sarah for the second time, Charles feels Ernestina is 'only too conventional' a choice as a wife: 'he began to feel sorry for himself—a brilliant man trapped, a Byron tamed'. His response to these tensions is thoroughly contradictory and symptomatic:

After all, she was only a woman. There were so many things she must never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children.

All would be well when she was truly his; in his bed and in his bank. . . and of course in his heart, too. (*FLW*, p.114)

What this ironic note exposes are the paradoxes of male privilege which the individual Victorian male would have felt both beneficial and restrictive. Zoë Fairbairns reveals a similar situation in her recent historical novel *Stand We At Last*, in which Jonathan, a Victorian man of similar status to Charles, expresses a desperate sense of contradiction which finally drives him to suicide. Reflecting on his sister-in-law's judgements on his marriage he thinks

Did she know how difficult it was for a man who must wait until middle age to marry? Did she guess how varied his tastes and adventures had been? And how difficult it had been to wean himself off them once he realised that his wife was going to provide no substitute for them in the physical aspect of marriage. . . he remembered the time he bought Helena a French night gown in the hope that she would turn into the sort of woman who wore such things. He had been in moral and physical turmoil in the first few years.¹⁷

These are the agonies of the powerful, trapped by their own exploitations. Charles's response to these tortuous conflicts is an idealising fantasy of a woman who challenges patriarchal restrictions and thus provides a possible escape from the problems, but who brings with her the corresponding anxiety of the challenge she poses to his own power. The very design of the novel, however, is to indulge this fantasy as it exposes it. The reason for this can be found in two related features of the book—its employment of a male narrator and the interconnected mystification of Sarah.

So far, we have tended to assume, as we did initially with Clegg and Urfe, that the character of Charles can be taken in some

direct way as historically representative of masculinity. Of course this is not the case. Though the discussion of Charles as representative of Victorian masculinity has its place, he cannot be seen as an unmediated example. He is, after all, the fictional creation of a contemporary male author and, within the frame of the book, he is presented to us by a narrating voice which itself is not necessarily identifiable with the author in any direct way. Fowles made a very clear choice about his narrator. In an essay written whilst engaged on the first draft of the book, he writes of his preference for 'the ironic voice that the line of great nineteenth-century novelists, from Austen through to Conrad, all used so naturally',¹⁸ a voice which elsewhere he describes as a 'narrating persona that is above all unpretentious and clubbable'.¹⁹ As this suggests, the narrator is also a fictional character in his own right as Fowles makes plain in 'Notes on an unfinished novel':

I have written myself another memorandum: You are not the 'I' who breaks into the illusion, but the 'I' who is part of it. In other words, the 'I' who will make first-person commentaries here and there in my story, and who will finally even enter it, will not be my real 'I' in 1967; but much more just another character, though in a different category from the purely fictional ones.²⁰

The critic Peter Conradi suggests that 'this voice is the book's true hero',²¹ a view which ought perhaps to be set beside the response of a feminist colleague that 'the narrator's a pig!'

The point we need to make is that the narrator's voice is distinctively and uncompromisingly a male one, with all the 'clubbability' that affords. What is more, he embodies glaring contradictions of his own. He is quite capable of calling frequent attention to the devastating effects of Victorian patriarchy on women, as when he calls the nineteenth century 'that black night of womanhood' (*FLW*, p.82), or when he applauds John Stuart Mill's 'brave attempt' at supporting women's suffrage which, he tells us, 'was greeted with smiles from the average man, guffaws from *Punch* (one joke showed a group of gentlemen besieging a female Cabinet minister, haw haw haw)' (*FLW*, p.101). In the first draft of the novel the narrator went so far as to deplore the

treatment of women by men over the last hundred years and the miserably inadequate concessions made to equality, describing them as 'the grudging interest payments of a born welsher on his debts; the garish plastic beads that will distract the gullible natives' eyes from the real and continuing exploitation'.²² Like the other passages mentioned, the sympathies of this hardly tally with the otherwise blatant male assumptions manifest elsewhere in the narrator's comments, notably with regard to the women of the novel. He displays a male camaraderie which extends to assessing at one point the various sexual appeals of the women characters:

Of the three young women who pass through these pages Mary was, in my opinion, by far the prettiest. She had infinitely the most life, and infinitely the least selfishness; and physical charms to match... an exquisitely pure, if pink complexion, corn-coloured hair and delectably wide grey-blue eyes, eyes that invited male provocation and returned it as gaily as it was given. (*FLW*, p.68)

Later, commenting on Charles's sexual arousal whilst kissing Ernestina, the narrator says 'What Charles unconsciously felt was perhaps no more than the ageless attraction of shallow-minded women: that one may make of them what one wants.' (*FLW*, p.229) With an equally characteristic gesture, the narrator excuses the activities at Madame Terpsichore's with indulgent irony as 'this ancient and time-honoured form of entertainment' (*FLW*, p.264).

Of course the ironising function is crucial, but the premises are fundamentally masculine. The tone invokes a knowing male complicity between narrator and reader, which can be unfortunate if the reader is not male. It goes alongside the narrator's repeated nostalgia for the romance and mystery of the days when men were men and women were women. In chapter 17, he admits to being a 'heretic' in believing that there is too much communication between the sexes in the twentieth century. He envies the Victorians for their reserve which meant that 'Strangers were strange, and sometimes with an exciting, beautiful strangeness.' (*FLW*, p.115) By comparison with 'our own uninhibited, and unimaginative, age' (*FLW*, p.182), the supposedly repressed Victorians were 'quite as highly sexed as our

own century' (*FLW*, p.232), and had 'a much keener, because less frequent, sexual pleasure than we do': they 'chose a convention of suppression, repression and silence to maintain the keenness of the pleasure', whereas we 'in destroying so much of the mystery, the difficulty, the aura of the forbidden, destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure' (*FLW*, p.234). He concludes that the 'gap between the sexes which so troubled Charles when Sarah tried to diminish it, certainly produced a greater force' (*FLW*, p.234). It is an odd viewpoint to reconcile with the earlier bewailing of this 'black night of womankind'. Such nostalgia only has real meaning as part of a contemporary male conception of sexual desire and pleasure such as Fowles himself defended to Sarah Benton as the 'mysterious quality in eroticism'.²³ Despite the intensity of feeling which overtakes Ernestina when Charles kisses her, the restrictions placed on female sexuality during the nineteenth century meant that most women would have experienced little pleasure from sexual contact, while the man would have been beset by paradoxical feelings of desire and guilt faced with the angelic status of his wife, to such an extent that in all probability he would have found sex with a prostitute less inhibiting and more pleasurable, as contemporary sources in fact recommended.²⁴ More than anything else, the narrator's nostalgia is a function of a contemporary male anxiety in the late 1960s.

The male complicity indicated here becomes highly ambiguous with regard to the way the narrator presents not simply Charles, but Sarah and her effect on Charles; and the ambiguities stem from Sarah's function in the book. She is the central term in the equation at the heart of Fowles's work, the mystery woman who is both a male fantasy and the catalyst for male redemption. In 'Notes on an unfinished novel' Fowles admits 'My two previous novels were both based on more or less disguised existential premises. I want this one to be no exception.' The Victorian age he sees as 'highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas', one of its similarities with his own time; and from his initial image of Sarah at the end of the Cobb he imagines 'an existentialist before his time, walks down the quay and sees that mysterious back, feminine, silent, also existentialist, turned to the horizon'.²⁵ In the book's terms, Sarah is 'the woman who was the door', while

Charles is 'the man without the key' (*FLW*, p.162).

For this reason, she is also posed as an insurgent against patriarchy's oppression of women, a self-inflicted martyr to its exploitations and finally outside the bounds of its law. In her challenge to convention Charles sees a potential for his own liberation through what she can seemingly offer him. This potential is not so much to do with Sarah herself as with his idealisation of her. At the same time that he begins to feel how conventional Ernestina is, he registers Sarah's attractions: '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 symbolized.' (*FLW*, p.114) The potential she reminds him of is his threatened freedom: later in the novel 'it was hardly Sarah he now thought of—she was merely the symbol around which had accreted all his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms' (*FLW*, p.288). What this calls attention to is the process of male fantasy about women and, like Urfe, Charles is to be disintoxicated of his power through one of its central myths. When Grogan reprimands him over his treatment of Ernestina for having 'embroiled that innocent girl in your pursuit of self-knowledge' (*FLW*, p.340), the comment is apparently endorsed by the narrator at the end of the book when he remarks that 'life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, is not a symbol, is not one riddle and one failure to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone' (*FLW*, p.399). Put quite crudely, Charles has to grow up and relinquish the Oedipal desires which lead him to want to possess women by idealising them, an educative process which he assents to in his own lame verses:

What matter if the mother mocks

The infant child's first feeble hands?
What matter if today he fail
Provided that at last he stands
And breaks the blind maternal pale? (*FWL*, p.373)

The contradiction is, of course, that it is through his idealisation and attempts to appropriate Sarah that he is forced to a realisation of self and autonomy. It originates from her denial of his claims. As

a symbol of freedom for Charles Sarah is far from consolatory, challenging and rejecting as she does the need that obsesses him.

The point to bear in mind is not simply the way the narrating voice presents these ambiguities. There is also Fowles's position behind his surrogates. In her annotations to the original manuscripts, Elizabeth Fowles acutely commented on how evasive Fowles was about Sarah: 'The mystery of Sarah is not answered, wonder if it should be, but dislike what for me seems almost disintegration as if you really don't know when to—or how to explain her strangeness to yourself.'²⁶ This insight indicates a process of both exorcism and indulgence of Sarah's mystery, the imaginative appeal of which Fowles himself explained directly to Melvyn Bragg in terms of his now familiar lost mother theme: 'its about what drives all of us who are novelists I think, that is the search for the lost relationship of the mother and the figure of Sarah at the end of the cobb is really the lost mother of infancy.' Later in the same interview in response to a question about Sarah's mysteriousness he has this to say:

I did in the course of writing this book know I was dealing with this derivation of all art in my view, from the relationship between the infant and the vanished and un-noble mother. You know one can never get back. It's instant those months, a very early period of life when your identity showed with your mother. And therefore, in fact in very early drafts I described Sarah and gave her more details than appeared in the final thing. I realised she must be a mysterious woman because the figure in our unconscious is mysterious for all of us. And it's also partly because I think it is good that the reader has to add something.²⁷

The effect of this is to make the book thoroughly ambiguous: it ostensibly charts Charles's escape from patriarchy's roles achieved through the impact on him of Sarah and her challenge to both his private life and his society; but in doing so it reinvokes the idealising male myth embodied in Sarah, presenting it for the indulgence of the reader. This is done by means of narrative strategies designed to make Sarah mysterious, one of which is the book's point of view.

L.R. Edwards is right when he says of Sarah that 'We never get to see inside her head', but that 'Far from being a weakness, this

externality of character is itself part of the subject of [Fowles's] books', a subject which he takes to be partly 'masculine fantasies about the nature of the ideal woman'.²⁸ The corollary to this is Elizabeth Mansfield's view in her article on the original manuscripts of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* from which the comments by Elizabeth Fowles come. She stresses the manipulative effect of maintaining a mysteriousness about Sarah which Fowles's narrative tactics promote:

From the first the author-narrator abnegated responsibility for answering the mystery of Sarah. . . . The several portrayals of Sarah in the drafts indicate Fowles's unwillingness to explore possible definitions, but his final solution is the least transparent of the lot. What does not change, and what may finally determine the preservation of Sarah's mystery, is his use of point of view. He supports the position taken by the author-narrator in Chapter Thirteen and reports 'only the outward facts' about Sarah. We never know what she is thinking, only what she says and what the narration provides of Charles's interpretation. Thus, Sarah's mystery is maintained by narrative point of view.²⁹

The deliberateness of this strategy on Fowles's part is indicated in his 'Notes on an unfinished novel' when, pondering what line of dialogue to give Sarah at the climax of a scene, he decides 'silence from her was better than any line she might have said'.³⁰ To see this at work in the book is to see the duplicity of Fowles's male imagination in action.

The access we have to Charles's mind and speculations is complemented by our having to guess at Sarah's through what Charles construes as the motives for her actions. Quite simply, we are given his construction of her and the narrative employs innumerable qualifying phrases which build her into an enigma. In her case it is always 'as if' or 'it seemed'. When Charles first sees her on the Cobb, he is 'intrigued' enough (*FLW*, p.12) to want to see her face. He addresses her for that purpose and 'She turned to look at him—or as it seemed to Charles, through him. . . . Charles felt immediately as if he had trespassed. . . . Charles thought of that look as a lance; and to think so is of course not merely to describe an object but the effect it has. He felt himself in that brief instant an unjust enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished.'

(*FLW*, p.13) From the start, Charles registers Sarah as a challenge and as a reflection on his own power. What is more, the narrative indicates this process, warning us that his view of Sarah is an active reading of her in his own terms. The enigma of Sarah can, therefore, be seen as of Charles's making, existing within the boundaries of his male apprehension.

Equally important, however, is the way the narrating voice participates in this, showing Charles projecting an image onto Sarah and doing the same for the reader. The first view we have of her through the narrator presents her as 'like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth' (*FLW*, p.9) and that elusiveness characterises the way the narrator describes her in general. When introducing her in chapters 4, 6 and 9, the narrator does so indirectly through other characters, avoiding any direct access to her psychology in any sustained way. We learn about her most directly in chapter 9, but it is still done in an oblique manner. We are told that Mrs Talbot associates Sarah with the 'starving heroines' of the 'more romantic literature' (*FLW*, p.49). Even when the narrator tells us, somewhat reluctantly, something direct about her, it is in such a way as to make her seem unusual and out of the ordinary. 'Sarah was intelligent', we are told, 'but her real intelligence belonged to a rare kind' (*FLW*, p.49): 'It was rather an uncanny... ability to classify other people's worth.' She saw people 'as they were and not as they tried to seem' because she had an 'instinctual profundity of insight' (*FLW*, p.50). She is thus given a position of superior judgement in an obscure way while at the same time the motives for her actions are deliberately shrouded in mystery by only giving us limited information: 'It would not be enough to say she was a fine moral judge of people. Her comprehension was broader than that, and if mere morality had been her touchstone she would not have behaved as she did—the simple fact of the matter being that she had not lodged with a female cousin at Weymouth' (*FLW*, p.50), with which the narrator changes the subject leaving the reader guessing as to where she *had* been in Weymouth. This tantalising excursion into her psychology and motives ends with a speculation about her marital status, present and future. We are told that she was 'too striking a girl' not to have suitors, but that her astute judgement

meant she could see through them all too easily: 'Thus she appeared inescapably doomed to the one fate nature had so clearly spent many millions of years in evolving her to avoid: spinsterhood.' (*FLW*, p.51) With this suggestion that the most 'natural' destiny for a striking woman is marriage, the narrator again shifts the ground with the most overt example of the way other characters are used to present Sarah, Mrs Poulteney's list of 'fors and againsts on the subject of Sarah' (*FLW*, p.51), during which, while commenting on her apparent moral earnestness, he says: 'I cannot say what she might have been in our age; in a much earlier one I believe she would have been either a saint or an emperor's mistress. Not because of religiosity on the one hand, or sexuality on the other, but because of that fused rare power that was her essence—understanding and emotion.' (*FLW*, p.54).

It is the closest we get. Behind the apparent explaining, there is a process of mystification, attributing to Sarah a superior knowledge and an aura of mysteriousness, both of which lend Charles an undeserved reflected glory from her attentions to him. On the two prominent occasions when she is seen alone and not in relation to Charles, the narrator adopts a distance from the character which assumes a lack of omniscient knowledge that never occurs with his male character. At the end of chapter 12 after the confrontation with Mrs Poulteney, 'Sarah might be seen—though I cannot think by whom... standing at the open window of her unlit bedroom.' She is 'in her nightgown, with her hair loose' (*FLW*, p.83). She is alone with no one watching—except us: 'If you had gone closer still, you would have seen that her face was wet with silent tears.' (*FLW*, p.84) We are told that she was thinking of committing suicide; but we know she did not, not because we watch any longer but because 'We know she was alive a fortnight after this incident.' (*FLW*, p.84) It is a strangely evasive way to put this information and even more evasively the chapter ends with the narrator's provoking question 'Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?'

The answer is provided by the equally provoking opening to the next chapter: 'I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind... perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is

only a game. Modern women like Sarah exist, and I have never understood them.' (*FLW*, p.85) This admission by the male narrator of his bewilderment at his own 'invention' is thoroughly paradoxical but easily explained. He has access to Charles's thoughts and even to Ernestina's—witness her 'sexual thought' in chapter 5 (*FLW*, p.30)—why not to Sarah's? Because the preservation of her mystery is essential to her function in the book. Indeed, it is her function in the book. Both the narrator and Charles serve as surrogates for this fantasy woven round the uncapturable mystique of the lost woman, an image designed to satisfy the demands of the male imagination. The role of the narrator is the one he invites the reader to adopt when looking up at Sarah in the window: 'Certainly I intended at this stage (*Chap. Thirteen—unfolding of Sarah's true state of mind*) to tell all—or all that matters. But I find myself suddenly like a man in the sharp spring night, watching from the lawn beneath that dim upper window.' (*FLW*, p.85) This is the novelist as peeping tom with the reader invited to play the voyeur.

It is a clever and effective piece of manipulation by Fowles which has the further function of structuring the theme of existential choice into the very design of the narrative; but it is a trick: as he told Melvyn Bragg with regard to this very passage, 'What I say on that subject [whether the author controls the characters] in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is really a little bit of eye-wash. And I'm afraid I'm playing a sort of double trick on the reader. Of course I control the text [...] we all do.'³¹ Part of the trick is the deliberate choice of narrative devices which create a complicity between male narrator, male character and a presumed male reader so that Sarah can be used to pander to male desires for an imagined encounter with the lost 'female' mystery which men project onto women. She is both outside the jurisdiction of the male narrator and, by virtue of that, fitted for the role of unattainable female. The only reality the narrator can imagine for Sarah is that she would not have delivered 'a chapter of revelation. She would instantly have turned, had she seen me there just as the old moon rose, and disappeared into the interior shadows.' (*FLW*, p.85) When, having listened to Sarah's confession about Varguennes, Charles suddenly gets a

momentary glimpse of possible liberation from the sexual constraints of his time, 'a glimpse of an ideal world... a mythical world', that vision is significantly shadowed by 'a figure, a dark shadow, his dead sister [which] moved ahead of him, lightly, luringly, up the ashlar steps and into the broken columns' mystery' (*FLW*, pp.154-5). The mystery and shadow which Sarah comes from is, as Gilbert Rose speculates in his marvellously evocative piece on the book, maternal.³² Charles embodies the male deprived of his mother, who died giving birth to his stillborn sister (*FLW*, p.16), caught in a material world in which 'there is no mystery. No romance' (*FLW*, p.14), and searching for consolation. Sarah is made the enigma of his Oedipal quest and his story invites the indulgence of the reader's own fantasies.

All this, as one might expect, puts 'Sarah' well and truly within the bounds of the male sexual imagination and the effect of that on some male readers can be measured by Wolfe's response to what he calls the 'fertility' of Sarah's mystery. For him, it accounts 'for much of the novel's spell': 'Women need to exude secrecy and mystery; men need to penetrate this female magic. The necessary collision of these two drives can be fatal.'³³ This comment is made without any apparent critical perspective and it exemplifies the potential function of male-defined art which Fraser Harrison has identified. In his pertinent remarks on John Berger's analysis of the genre of paintings of the nude, Harrison suggests that the female nude as painted by men involves a deliberate artistic selection of images of women at a point of potential submission, for the purpose of 'depriving the woman of her sexual autonomy'. Berger himself sees paintings of female nudes as 'offering up their femininity to be displayed' and Harrison expands this by saying that the female subject 'can only surrender to the invading gaze of the male spectator, she is defenceless. She is, however, seen to be gladly surrendering: she happily, though modestly, accepts his inspection.' Harrison pinpoints how male-orientated art can service the male imagination and, significantly, male power: 'Female defencelessness is precious to the male's sexual vanity; his belief in his own potency is enhanced by the sight of a woman who has been denied the means of resistance. The artist who implies that there is an alliance between the woman's body and the desire

of the male onlooker which the woman herself is powerless to restrain is furnishing a deeply reassuring image.³⁴

In the case of narrative art, the dynamic of the form makes this relationship between artist, object and audience complex in other ways, of course, which necessitates adapting Harrison's suggestions; but their general drift typifies the function of the narrative viewpoint which characterises *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Sarah is, equally, not as defenceless as the nudes Harrison describes, but this serves merely to compound the situation in the book. For she is presented as a dangerous woman, a *femme fatale* whose mystery derives in part from her status as social outcast and threat to the patriarchal order; and having been posed in this way, she is won and by force. Her dangerous quality is patently there as a spice to gratify a male viewpoint, an imagined dalliance with danger whose complications are instructive for our purposes.

In Charles's mind, the significantly heart-shaped echinoderms or 'tests' from the Undercliff become linked with thoughts 'of women lying asleep on sunlit ledges' (*FLW*, p.119), and increasingly his involvement with Sarah develops a sexual aura around her. The link between her and the primitive Undercliff allows them both to act as correlatives for Charles's own repressed sexuality. When Charles drives through the gates of Winsyatt into 'his inheritance', the 'absurd adventure in the Undercliff was forgotten. Immense duties, the preservation of this peace and order, lay ahead, as they had lain ahead of so many young men of his family in the past. Duty—that was his real wife, his Ernestina and his Sarah'. (*FLW*, p.171) It is to this patriarchal order and Charles's final entry into it that Sarah, 'a woman most patently dangerous' (*FLW*, p.128), poses such a threat, and it is manifest in two ways.

Firstly she echoes the sexually desirable women of Charles's past, disturbing in Charles recollections of 'his time in Paris' (*FLW*, p.64) on a number of occasions. What he sees as 'the suppressed sensuality of her mouth' and her dark eyes are associated for him with 'foreign women—to be frank (much franker than he would have been to himself) with foreign beds. This marked a new stage of his awareness of Sarah. He had realized she was more intelligent and independent than she

seemed; he now guessed darker qualities.' (*FLW*, p.105) She reminds him of another fictional *femme fatale*: 'as he looked down at the face beside him, it was suddenly, out of nowhere, that Emma Bovary's name sprang into his mind. Such allusions are comprehensions; and temptations.' (*FLW*, p.106) In the Assembly Rooms during the concert, 'his mind wandered back to Sarah, to visual images, attempts to recall that face, that mouth, that generous mouth. Undoubtedly it awoke some memory in him, too tenuous, perhaps too general, to trace to any source in his past; but it unsettled him and haunted him, by calling to some hidden self he hardly knew existed.' (*FLW*, p.114) The sexuality ascribed to Sarah is underlined by the narrator's attribution to her on a number of occasions of 'a kind of wildness' (*FLW*, p.121). In fact the narrator continually suggests her sexuality, usually in an oblique manner which carries a promise of availability. When Charles and Sarah are surprised by Sam and Mary, Sarah's smile to Charles is described as 'something as strange, as shocking, as if she had thrown off her clothes' (*FLW*, p.161). Her look has 'an anger, a defiance; as if she were naked before him, yet proud to be so' (*FLW*, p.152). Such hints anticipate what is the central dynamic of Charles's quest for Sarah—his sexual conquest of her later in the book.

The other element in her dangerousness is linked with this implied sexuality—her status as both fallen woman and 'new woman'. Sarah stands outside the middle-class norms of her age by her breaking of taboos in a way which 'seemed almost to assume some sort of equality of intellect with him' (*FLW*, p.124). This 'presumption of intellectual equality Charles sees as 'a suspect resentment against man' (*FLW*, p.159) which manifests itself in her account of her betrayal by Varguennes. The vicar tells Mrs Poulteney that Sarah suffers from a 'fixed delusion that the lieutenant is an honourable man' (*FLW*, p.35) and 'honourable man' is a phrase which reverberates through the book, implicitly questioning whether there can be such a phenomenon or whether it is a contradiction in terms. What we learn from Sarah is that her self-martyrdom as an outcast woman is designed as an indictment of men in general. They are, as her first look makes Charles feel, 'an unjust enemy' (*FLW*, p.13). She appears quite specifically as

the representative of all women exploited and oppressed by male society, a defiant embodiment of its injustices and thereby outside its control: 'there are not spirits generous enough to understand what I have suffered and why I suffer... I feel cast on a desert island, imprisoned, condemned, and I know not what crime it is for.' (FLW, p.124) When she first met Varguennes, she did not know 'that men can be both very brave and very false... He seemed a gentleman' (FLW, p.147); but he was 'a man without scruples, a man of caprice, of a passionate selfishness' (FLW, p.152). She tells Charles that she sees him as different from the rest of society—i.e. other men—: 'You are not cruel, I know you are not cruel' (FLW, p.125), but in one sense this is the key to the self-deception practised by Charles. After hearing the outcome of her story his response is 'But my dear Miss Woodruff, if every woman who'd been deceived by some unscrupulous member of my sex were to behave as you have—I fear the country would be full of outcasts', to which she replies 'It is.' (FLW, p.157) Charles's assumption that he is different is refuted by his own betrayal of Ernestina which reproduces in essence Varguennes's relations with Sarah: Ernestina tells him 'you are a monster', to which he replies 'You will meet other men... not broken by life. Honourable men, who will...' (FLW, p.329). It is Charles's complicity along with all other men in the social exploitation of women that we can see indicated in his response while Sarah tells her story of Varguennes's supposed betrayal: 'He saw the scene she had not detailed: her giving herself. He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down; just as Sarah was to him both an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman.' (FLW, pp.153-4) The book itself reproduces this paradox by revealing the process of male power, as it does here, whilst at the same time casting Sarah as the mythical mysterious woman.

Part of this ambiguity comes through the suggestion that what Sarah practises on Charles is a justifiable revenge on men. What Charles later comes to understand as 'her feeling of resentment, of an unfair because remediable bias in society' (FLW, p.351) is represented in hints throughout the book, as when speaking of her sense of injustice Sarah says 'when I read of the Unionists' wild

acts of revenge, part of me understands. Almost envies them, for they know where and how to wreak their revenge. And I am powerless.' (FLW, p.149) When Sarah reveals to Charles, in so far as she ever does, the reasons for her deceptions, she explains 'There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I loved you... I think from the moment I saw you. In that, you were never deceived. What duped you was my loneliness. A resentment, an envy, I don't know. I don't know.' (FLW, p.308) Charles feels himself to have been 'no more than the dupe of your imaginings' (FLW, p.309), though it would be more accurate to say he was the dupe of his own preconceptions.

Yet while Sarah's status as social outcast, emergent feminist and revenging *femme fatale* displays an awareness in the book of the patriarchal oppression of women, the role is equally an imaginative exploitation of her as a tantalising woman of mystery and a fantasy substitute for the mother figure. In this respect, Charles's thoughts after nearly being discovered with Sarah by Sam could equally be applied to the function of the book for Fowles and the male reader: 'all variations on that agelessly popular male theme: "You've been playing with fire, my boy."' (FLW, p.164) The rationale for casting her in this way is itself part of the *femme fatale* tradition, in which, according to sex historian Reay Tannahill, women 'dominated and even, like the praying mantis, killed the men they loved or coveted. And the men quite enjoyed it. Until the nineteenth century, there had been no precise stereotype of the predatory feminist... but the Victorians' muddled blend of public courtliness and private guilt made it necessary to create one.'³⁵ As with all such fantasies, in which men are what Swinburne called 'the powerless victim[s] of the furious rage of a beautiful woman',³⁶ there is a devious male satisfaction to be gained from the masochism involved. Tannahill reflects how 'Times change. Whereas the arrogant imaginary woman acted as a sexual stimulant to the Victorian male, the flesh-and-blood feminist today often alarms her lover into impotence.'³⁷ Though Sarah is not a stereotypical example, Fowles's book is quite overtly a fantasy of dominance and submission in which she is made both sexual and threatening. The present-day sense of male guilt and anxiety comes through strongly in two crucial areas of the

book—Charles's visits to the arch-misogynist Dr Grogan, and the sexual encounter between Charles and Sarah.

It is Grogan who occupies chapter 19, separating the two meetings between Charles and Sarah during which she confesses about Varguennes, and as such he plays a key role in generating suspicion about Sarah's motivation. Grogan inhabits the 'masculine, more serious world' (*FLW*, p.132) of the confirmed bachelor. He classifies Sarah as suffering from a form of hysterical melancholy and warns Charles 'You must not think she is like us men, able to reason clearly'. (*FLW*, p.137) At this point in the chapter, Fowles intercuts a scene in which we see Sarah in bed with Millie, Mrs Poultney's maid. The treatment of this episode is intriguing. It has a dual function: it ironises the assumption of male superiority just expressed by Grogan and at the same time it treats the implications of the two girls sleeping together in an ambiguous and suggestive manner. Sarah's sleeping with Millie is finally explained as a concerned tenderness for the younger girl, but at first it is tantalisingly suggested as a potential lesbian encounter which might explain Sarah's mystery—'A thought has swept into your mind.' (*FLW*, p.137) We are, in fact, reassured that 'some vices were then so unnatural that they did not exist' (*FLW*, p.137) and the point seems thus to be an ironic comment on Victorian sexual mores. Yet this is far from the final impression of the episode. The narrator ends his comments on it by saying that no doubt somewhere 'a truly orgasmic lesbianism existed then; but we may ascribe this very common Victorian phenomenon of women sleeping together far more to the desolating arrogance of contemporary man than to a more suspect motive. Besides, in such wells of loneliness is not any coming together closer to humanity than perversity?' (*FLW*, p.139) While the nod in the direction of Radcliffe Hall's novel suggests a deference towards lesbianism, the censorious note of 'suspect' and 'perversity' suggest the opposite; and it is thus we are returned from 'these two innocents... to that other more rational, more learned and altogether more nobly gendered pair', the 'two lords of creation' who are discussing Sarah with their own blatant male presumptions. The issue of lesbianism, the ultimate female autonomy, recurs at the end of the book when Charles visits Sarah

in the Rossetti house (*FLW*, p.389), while the anxiety occasioned by such fear of women is reproduced when Charles goes back to see Grogan later in the book and the true dimensions of the doctor's misogyny are revealed. Grogan reads Sarah's behaviour as part of a general female inclination 'to lure mankind into their power' (*FLW*, p.193). Speaking as if he had himself personal experience of men becoming victims of dangerous women, he voices what he sees as their motivations: 'I am cast out. But I shall be revenged.' (*FLW*, p.194) Under Grogan's influence, Charles admits to feeling 'like a man possessed against his will' (*FLW*, p.196) and ready to do 'Anything to be rid of her—without harm to her' (*FLW*, p.197) including sending Sarah to a 'model' asylum. To cement this purgation, Grogan lends Charles the La Roncière trial account, one of the vast number of Victorian misogynistical tracts. Charles's initial reaction is shock: 'he had no idea that such perversions existed—and in the pure and sacred sex' (*FLW*, p.204). He feels a total loss of respect for women: 'Behind the most innocent faces lurked the vilest iniquities. He was Sir Galahad shown Guinevere to be a whore' (*FLW*, p.205), despite which the recollection of 'Those eyes' (*FLW*, p.206) sends him off to meet Sarah at the barn.

The misogyny theme has a twofold importance. It exposes the fear of women and sexuality as the psychological breeding ground for the schizophrenic male response. At the same time it lays the ground for the quite contradictory effect of the sexual climax of the book. That climax in the Endicott Family Hotel is the hidden dynamic for the obsession with Sarah and its effective function is intensified by the factors outlined so far, the 'endlessly repeated luring-denying... the cock-tease' as Fowles has called it.³⁸ The visit to Madame Terpsichore's, the encounter with Sarah the prostitute, the spurious false ending in which Charles fantasises that he has done 'the moral, the decent, the correct thing' (*FLW*, p.288) and married Ernestina, are all tactics to delay the gratification further. The actual encounter itself enacts the same pattern, but adding the central ingredient, imagined sexual congress.

The first point to notice about this sequence is the play made between our knowledge that Sarah has manipulated the situation,

and the role she enacts for Charles of the submissive woman. Her control of the encounter maintains her autonomous status, an important element in her fantasy function. She sends Charles the address; she pretends to have a sprained ankle, planning in advance by buying the bandage as a strategy presumably to get him alone in her room without social inhibitions (*FLW*, p.242); and she reveals that she has lied about Varguennes, being still a virgin. But before any of this becomes apparent at least during a first reading, Charles as the stand-in for the author-reader has enacted a forceful physical possession of Sarah little short of rape. The other factor to consider contradicts this physical dominance entirely—Charles's premature ejaculation.

The submissive role Sarah adopts is significant since, though it is a trick to draw Charles on, it puts her in a position of apparent vulnerability displayed nowhere else in the book: 'as if all her mystery, this most intimate self, was exposed before him: proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal' (*FLW*, p.301). Charles's 'violent sexual desire' (*FLW*, p.302), though it is seen as specifically his response imposed upon her, acts as an urgent imperative for the culmination of the fantasy woven round Sarah: his 'terrible need' for her is 'to possess her, to melt into her, to burn, to burn, to burn to ashes on that body and in those eyes.' (*FLW*, p.302). Charles's presumptions about Sarah proliferate in marked abundance as his desire grows more frantic: 'as if by an instinctive gesture, yet one she half dared to calculate, her hand reached shyly out'; 'as if she knew she was hurting him'; 'this was a face that seemed almost self-surprised, as lost as himself'; 'She turned her head away... almost as if he repelled her; but her bosom seemed to arch imperceptibly [*sic*] towards him'; 'She seemed to half step, half fall towards him.' (*FLW*, p.303—my emphasis) At the same time, there is an insistence on Charles's quite brutal physical dominance over Sarah: 'Their mouths met with a wild violence that shocked both; made her avert her lips.' (*FLW*, p.303) 'He swept her up and carried her through to the bedroom. She lay where he threw her across the bed, half-swooned, one arm flung back.' 'With a frantic brutality, as he felt his ejaculation about to burst, he found the place and thrust. Her body flinched again, as it had when her foot fell from the stool. He conquered

that instinctive constriction'. (*FLW*, p.304)

In its structure, this passage duplicates the insistent urgency, violence and brevity of male sexuality in its 'orthodox' form. It creates a tension between imagined sexual possession of Sarah, and all she stands for, and the anxiety of male desire itself; and this tension is at the root of the effect achieved by the ending of the book. Charles's hasty climax, his corresponding disregard for Sarah's sexual response and his ensuing guilt seem both absurdly inadequate and quite appropriate as manifestations of his 'love' for Sarah. Effectively, he has merely used her to fulfil his desire as part of the more general presumption by men that male sexual pleasure is sexual pleasure. His momentary abandonment to desire is shown to be totally within the jurisdiction of the patriarchal order he himself embodies: he hears footsteps outside and his immediate response is 'A police officer, perhaps. The Law.' (*FLW*, p.305) He tells her he is worse than Varguennes: 'Her only answer was to press his hand, as if to deny and hush him. But he was a man. "What is to become of us?"' (*FLW*, p.305) Charles is blatantly caught in the contradictions of masculinity in his paradoxical reaction to Sarah's unconventional behaviour. When she seems ready to accept responsibility for what has happened 'Charles was flooded with contempt for his sex: their triviality, their credulity, their selfishness. But he was of that sex, and there came to him some of its old devious cowardice: Could not this perhaps be no more than his last fling, the sowing of the last wild oats?' (*FLW*, p.306) But with the revelation of Sarah's duplicity Charles's reaction is an abrupt about-turn:

She had not given herself to Varguennes. She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis had been based on a lie. But for what purpose. Why? Why? Why?

Blackmail!

To put him totally in her power!

And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mould them to their evil fancies... these, and a surging back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in the La Roncière appeal, filled Charles's mind with an apocalyptic horror. (*FLW*, pp.307-8)

What this sequence shows is Charles struggling to come to terms with a woman who is outside the parameters of his control and thus must pose a threat to his power. The effect of this is capped as Sarah 'castrated the accusations in his mind' (*FLW*, p.308) by admitting the deception and asserting that she did love him but 'There can be no happiness for you with me. You cannot marry me, Mr Smithson.' (*FLW*, p.309) The paradox Charles has to face in Sarah and which goes some way towards explaining the present-day relevance of the book, is that she represents an ethic which acts both as an indictment of male power and a potential liberation from it. When Charles asks her how she can tell him to go after their sexual union, her response is 'Why not, if I love you?' (*FLW*, p.306) Sarah offers a freedom from patriarchal restraint which is also a denial of the necessary relation between the sexes which is one of its founding mythologies. After the event, Charles can see only the reinstitution of patriarchal roles through marriage to Sarah, or at least a fixed relationship: in his letter of decision he writes 'I am resolved, my sweet and mysterious Sarah, that what now binds us shall bind us for evermore.' (*FLW*, p.320) Sarah, on the other hand, offers the uncomfortable uncertainty and challenge of self-determination, choice and a defiance of patriarchal models.

Yet whilst she undoubtedly embodies this ethic of freedom and the indictment of patriarchy, Sarah is *used* both to teach men a lesson about themselves and as an instrument for imaginary gratification. The subsequent denial of a continuing relationship between her and Charles merely serves to heighten the potential for what Fowles, we may remember, calls 'the characteristic male preoccupation with loss, non-fulfilment, non-consummation'.³⁹ It is essential in terms of Fowles's sexual imagination: the quest is now repeated but under the new conditions of Charles's enforced and precarious sense of 'freedom', in which the oppressor becomes 'the outcast, the not like other men': 'When he had had his great vision of himself freed from his age, his ancestry and class and country, he had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile.' (*FLW*, p.366) His exile is the emblem of the male exile from the mother figure and all it implies for Fowles in terms of values and

redemption.

The mythical status of that redemption when articulated in these terms is demonstrated by the way Fowles chose to deal with the ending of the book. In the 'Hardy and the Hag' essay he quotes the double ending as an example of the male imagination's insistent 'need to embark upon further stories. . . to search for an irrecoverable experience':

I wrote and printed two endings to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* because from early in the first draft I was torn intolerably between wishing to reward the male protagonist (my surrogate) with the woman he loved and wishing to deprive him of her—that is, I wanted to pander to both the adult and the child in myself. I had experienced a very similar predicament in my two previous novels. Yet I am now very clear that I am happier, where I gave two, with the unhappy ending, and not in any way for objective critical reasons, but simply because it has seemed more fertile and onward to my whole being as a writer.⁴⁰

In one sense what Fowles is saying is that the denial of fulfilment in imaginative terms serves, as with Hardy, to stimulate his imagination to undertake another quest, write another fiction. At the same time it is possible to read in this and in the unhappy ending of the book itself an implicit injunction that no good can come from the continuing desire to pander to the Oedipal trauma; that change can only be brought about by men effectively taking responsibility for changing themselves rather than looking towards a mythical solution from women, a solution which is both the creation and mark of male power. The final sense of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is much more about being liberated *from* Sarah, the mythical shadow haunting male experience and nurturing its desire for power, than being liberated *by* her. This dilemma, and the troubling anxiety which accompanies it, is manifest in Charles's increasingly contradictory attitude to his quest and its object: 'he became increasingly unsure of the frontier between the real Sarah and the Sarah he had created in so many such dreams: the one Eve personified, all mystery and love and profundity, and the other a half-scheming, half-crazed governess from an obscure seaside town.' (*FLW*, p.367) As yet, Charles is incapable of stepping outside his own male thinking, though he has made a partial break with his society: Sarah remains his

creation, whether as ideal or *femme fatale*, and he cannot see any third possibility outside the limits of this enclosed paradox. His love of Tennyson's poem *Maud*, itself an incisive portrayal of male fantasy in action, suggests that he identifies with the bereft hero rather than seeing his own tendencies mirrored in that character's incurable and destructive idealisation. While Fowles can quote appropriately from that poem as an epigram—'ah for a man to arise in me, That the man I am may cease to be!' (*FLW*, p.295)—Charles shows little capacity for meeting the challenge for his species to adapt to the new conditions signified by the emergence of women like Sarah. What both forms of the ending insist on is the very slight possibility of this happening easily.

In the shared run-up to the two endings, Charles is shown still desiring to act out the mythical roles of his patriarchal outlook and being frustrated in the task: 'He had come to raise her from penury, from some crabbed post in a crabbed house. In full armour, ready to slay the dragon—and now the damsel had broken all the rules.' (*FLW*, p.381) Finding Sarah a free, working woman, he is again bewildered by her desire for autonomy: 'I do not want to share my life', she tells him, 'I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to become in marriage.' (*FLW*, p.385) Her 'new self-knowledge and self-possession' (*FLW*, p.386) provoke Charles, going quite contrary to his own Darwinism, into saying 'you cannot reject the purpose for which woman was brought into creation', what he calls 'the natural law', whilst in the same breath asserting 'I too have changed. I have learnt much of myself, of what was previously false in me.' (*FLW*, p. 386) Sarah's answer, with its suggestion that male 'love' inevitably involves possession, and his response sound a note of threat to male prestige that goes to the heart of the book:

'It is not you I fear. It is your love for me. I know only too well that nothing remains sacrosanct there.'

...perhaps he did at last begin to grasp her mystery. Some terrible perversion of human sexual destiny had begun: he was no more than a footsoldier, a pawn in a far vaster battle; and like all battles it was not about love, but about possession and territory. (*FLW*, p.387)

The emerging autonomy of women and the challenge it presents to male power, which Charles and/or the narrator sees as a 'terrible perversion of sexual destiny', demand an evolutionary adaptation which Charles finds impossible. It demands a change in his outlook and an accompanying abdication of power which he cannot accommodate since his thinking is still framed in terms of the necessary relation of the sexes subserving a dominantly male idea, a mythical resolution.

The first ending gives Charles such a resolution. In it, he meets his daughter and this, as Gilbert Rose demonstrates, links up the whole pattern of the lost female and the bereft child which is woven through the book like a hidden consolation or a distraction from the frustrations of reality: 'Like the French Lieutenant's Woman's daughter, or the daughter of that other Sarah, the novelist is the child of one parent only. Aroused from sleep or taken from his nurse's arms, with fear and curiosity, wishing both to return and to explore, he comes to sit upon the knee of the stranger who dangles a watch.'⁴¹ Against that, there is Sarah observing Charles with 'a curiosity: a watching for the result of an experiment' (*FLW*, p.389). When he asks 'Shall I ever understand your parables?' she shakes her head 'with a mute vehemence', the form of his question indicating how correct her answer is. The Charles of this ending is both apparently open to learn and the continuing victim-perpetrator of his sex's mythologies. When he told his lawyer Montague that he had to see Sarah because 'she continues to haunt me', Montague evades comment by saying 'You must question the Sphinx', a fatalistic resignation to Charles's obstinate pursuit of his destiny, to which he adds 'As long as you bear in mind what happened to those who failed to solve the enigma.' (*FLW*, p.376) At least Charles is deflected from his self-regarding presumptions by having to amuse his daughter (*FLW*, p.393), though it would be too much to see this as suggesting Fowles foresaw the political need for men to take on the responsibility and values of childcare.

In the second ending, Charles's misogynistical misconceptions about Sarah win the day—'she had manipulated him. She would do so to the end'—and he leaves abruptly. He feels, in an echo planted earlier in the book, like 'the last honourable man on the

way to the scaffold' (*FLW*, p.397), and we are left with the image of him pacing down the deserted embankment, 'a man behind the invisible gun-carriage on which rests his own corpse' (*FLW*, p.399), the only mourner at the imaginary funeral of his kind. Intriguingly, the narrator's position becomes increasingly overt in its endorsement of Sarah in this final version. We are invited to see Charles's leaving Sarah in such a way as his 'final foolishness', and Sarah's 'battle for territory' as 'a legitimate uprising of the invaded against the perennial invader' (*FLW*, p.398). For his philosophical conclusion on life, the narrator adapts Marx's definition of it as 'the actions of men (and of women) in pursuit of their ends' and adds 'The fundamental principle that should guide these actions, that I believe myself always guided Sarah's, I have set as the second epigraph.' (*FLW*, p.398) The epigraph is Arnold's—'True piety is acting what one knows.' (*FLW*, p.394) And despite his despairing pose, the disintoxicated Charles, who we can presume had until now only acted what he imagined, 'has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness, on which to build' by realising that Sarah is not the Sphinx, its question or its answer.

This ambiguous and muted hope for the future is symptomatic of the effect of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as a whole. It remains a book which, while it raises the whole problem of the way men see and appropriate women, also purveys an integrally 'romantic' appeal which reproduces that problem. This paradox was latent in Fowles's original conception of the central situation. In the 'Notes on an unfinished novel' he records the genesis of the book in terms of 'a visual image. A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea.' In its effect he felt the image had 'some sort of imminent power. It was obviously mysterious. It was vaguely romantic.' He remembers registering the woman as 'An outcast. I didn't know her crime, but I wished to protect her. That is, I began to fall in love with her. Or her stance. I didn't know which.'⁴² The male protectiveness and idealisation became both the impulse and the subject of the book, a fact which Fowles came to realise only after the event as a personal exorcism of his obsessive concern for the female archetype. To Melvyn Bragg he said

I've never really known what I was doing until I wrote *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. And even now I can still see things in it which I didn't realise at the time. I think the fact that freedom plays a considerable part in the novel is because I was trying to get free or to make objective this sort of relationship we all have with the vanished mother of infancy. In other words, I was psycho-analysing myself if you like. I didn't realise that when I was writing the book.⁴³

This act of bringing this myth into consciousness, of freeing himself by writing it out, is one which allowed for a definite advance in his next novel, *Daniel Martin*. In that book he attempts the ambitious task of stepping outside his own activity not simply as a male, but as a male novelist. In doing so, he gives his most overtly political analysis of the action of male power in the contemporary world and shows at the same time that the exorcism is far from complete.