Title of Paper: “The novel is only a game … or narrative techniques in John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman”
Author: Irina I. Simonova Strout
Affiliation: The University of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK
Section: Department of English
Date of Publication: May 2015
Issue: 4.1
URL: www.journals.sfu.ca/vict/index.php/vict/

Abstract: John Fowles’s novel, The French Lieutenant Woman, published in 1969, produced a lot of controversy in the literary and critical circles. Fowles was accused of mimicking the Victorian novel’s narrative techniques; nonetheless, the work is not a copy of the Victorian novel, but an exploitation of the narrative form. Fowles returns to an early form of fiction as a way of constructing his novel. The panorama of Victorian England offers close-ups of typical activities and lifestyles of urban and rural England, as well as numerous discussions of politics, science and economics in the nineteenth century. Yet The French Lieutenant Woman is more than a historical novel as many scholars see it, the novel becomes an original modern expansion upon older traditional narrative forms. The purpose of the paper is to focus on the narrative techniques (a combination of Victorian and modern narrative elements) applied by John Fowles in the novel, which transforms it into a contemporary novel about the Victorian novel. The relationship between Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson resembles one of an author and a character/reader as well as the clash of the twentieth century consciousness and the Victorian mentality. The search for freedom both characters pursue is based on the meta-fictional concept of the fiction/reality relationship. The narrative techniques revolving around Sarah’s character offer a new interpretation of her; she is no longer a model of self-liberation from the Victorian conventions but ‘a text to be read.’

Keywords: narrative, game, Victorian, freedom, gender, meta-fiction

Author Bio: Irina I. Simonova Strout received a B.A. degree in Languages and Linguistics from the Moscow State Linguistic University in 1999 in Moscow, Russia. Having received M.A. (2003) and Ph.D. in English from The University of Tulsa (2009) with the aid of a Bellwether Fellowship, Irina I. Strout is currently a teaching Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. Her research and teaching interests include Victorian, Romanticism and 19th century Russian fiction, with sub-emphasis in gender studies. She teaches a variety of English courses at the University of Tulsa from developmental writing, first-year composition, technical writing and literature-based composition courses.

Author email: strout@xtremeinet.net; irina-strout@utulsa.edu
When John Fowles’s novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* first appeared in 1969, it produced a great deal of controversy in the literary and critical circles. A number of critics accused Fowles of mimicking the traditional Victorian novel; although a number of fiction writers of the period ignored the task and attempted to avoid the Victorian literary legacy. Nevertheless, this novel is not a copy of the Victorian novel, but an “exploitation of the form,” according to Thomas Foster (67). Writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges and John Barth of the postwar era applied features of various genres in their own fiction. John Fowles is one of the few novelists who “returned to an early form of fiction as a way of constructing his novel” (Foster 67).

The paper focuses on the narrative techniques and structures (a mix of Victorian novel elements and modern features) John Fowles applied in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, which transforms it into a “contemporary novel about the Victorian novel.” The relationship between Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson resembles one of an author and a character/reader as well as it represents a clash of modern twentieth century consciousness and Victorian mentality. The search for freedom for both characters is based on the meta-fictional concept of the fiction/reality relationship. The narrative techniques revolve around Sarah’s character and offer new opportunities to look at her, from a model of self-liberation from the Victorian conventions to “a text to be read.”

Walter Allen in his work *The Achievement of John Fowles* admits that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is “a most interesting novel and a genuine achievement;” and, at the same time, he calls it “a historical novel of an old-fashioned form” (66). The novel’s panorama of Victorian England offers close-ups of typical activities and life styles of urban and rural England, as well as discussions of science, politics and economics in the nineteenth century. But *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is more than a historical novel as John Fowles himself “denies interest in the genre and does not consider this book part of it” (Allen 88). The novel, similarly to Sergei Prokofiev’s *Classical Symphony*, (which ran through Fowles’ mind while he was writing this novel) is an “original modern expansion upon older traditional forms” (Huffaker 98).

In his essay *Notes on the Unfinished Novel*, John Fowles explains that the genesis of the novel appears out of an obsessive image: “A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea. … [T]he woman had no face, no particular degree of sexuality but she was Victorian; with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian Age. An outcast” (60-61). The novel becomes a way of completing this image, making it real and finding her story. Throughout the novel, Sarah Woodruff always remains a mystery for both readers and characters as the narrator following the Victorian fashion asks: “Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?” (94). Her enigma drives the novel, bringing its characters together and pushing them for action.

The novel is set in England, in 1867, a year when Karl Marx’s *Das Capital* is published. The choice to place the characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in a Victorian period is not a conscious one. Not knowing the Victorian age “in the
The Victorian

historian’s sense very well, [the novelist] knows the by-ways, the psychological side” of the time (Fowles 190-1). However, Fowles fully understands the “unconscious” motives in choosing this time, as he “also ha[s] to come to terms with [his] own hatred of it” (“An Encounter with John Fowles” 191). Fowles admits that he and “every English child of his generation … grew up with” (“An Encounter with John Fowles” 191).

Once John Fowles began writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it became “an exercise in technique. . . . a complex bit of literary gymnastics” (“A Sort of Exile in Lyme Regis” 36). As Robert Burden points out, every work of art should combine two essential components: “tradition and innovation,” maintaining the pressure on the work of art of “inherited past along with the necessity to break new grounds” (qtd. in Onega 70). John Fowles’s novel is a unique collage of a “self-conscious relationship of the new work to past form” (Onega 71). Borrowing literary pieces from the writers of the age, Fowles composes the structure of the novel combining conventions of the Victorian novel along with creating new fictional devices. The interruption of events’ sequence as well as the change of location from one chapter to another used by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are techniques similar to the novels of the nineteenth century. Chapter Eight, for instance, ends with Charles preparing to return from Undercliff; the next chapter is expected to open with Charles’ s reunion with Earnestina. However, the following Chapter Nine begins with a description of Mrs. Poulteney.

One of the most interesting Victorian novel techniques is the usage of an intrusive and omniscient narrator. The novel succeeds as John Fowles uses both the old omniscient and intrusive (such as footnotes, editorial remarks, quotes of poetry and prose) techniques in their best form. In the First Chapter the narrator openly addresses himself to the reader, situating the action on “one incisively sharp and blistering morning in the late march of 1867” (3). He further describes the Lyme Regis quay and its beauty, its location in the South of England, then suddenly stops to address the reader: “I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write” (4). Having a ‘cinematic eye,’ the narrator freely moves from one character to another, describing events that are happening simultaneously. Fowles realizes “of course the novelist is a God” (“John Fowles: Profile 7” 35). Similarly to God, he shifts and moves not just the characters, but also places and events. Nevertheless, in Chapter Thirteen he refuses to intrude in Sarah’s inner consciousness: “There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to this definition” (97). He insists that his characters are free since he cannot violate ideas of human behavior as “freedom of will is the highest human good” (Fowles 22-26).

Explaining his definition of God, the novelist as ‘God,’ although not dispossessed of his power, acknowledges his limitations. According to Michel Foucault, the author is “reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence” (qtd. in Rabinow 102). The novel’s structure is constructed “less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier” (qtd. in Rabinow 102-03). As Roland Barthes suggests, “there is a site where this multiplicity is collected, and this site is not the author … but the reader” (59), in realizing the existence of different writings within a single text. Mixing a number of discourses
The Victorian

from the era of Victorian literature, philosophy and politics, John Fowles is able place the reader in the foreground. One of the novel’s techniques is the extensive use of epigraphs to show that “the novel’s narrative is representational but not referential,” suggests Mahmoud Salami (109). These borrowed features foreground the novel as an artifice, an attempt to reconstruct a possible history in the narrative.

The omniscient narrator with his godlike capacities to adopt any point of view of all his characters “ensure[s] an objective rendering” (Onega 72). Absolute objectivity is the primary goal a Victorian writer aims for. The interruption of the narrative by a rhetoric question “I exaggerate?” follows the Victorian novel fashion. Instead of breaking the illusion of realism, the narrator enhances it, producing the l’effet de reel, which makes the fictional 1867 Cobb appear real, “a mere ancestor of the Cobb everyone can still see standing in 1967” (Onega 72). Apart from the authorial intrusion into the text, the author of 1967 is physically present in the events of 1867. John Fowles’s breach in the frame of a narrative is an attempt to erase the boundaries between fiction and reality. Accepting the action of the novel as a part of history, readers accept its reality as well as its reliability and credibility by a narrator who is presented as “impartial, if somewhat erudite and pedantic historian” (Onega 72).

Many minor intrusions of the narrator function in the same way and a number of footnotes (in which the narrator explains the aspects of Victorian life) suggest his objectivity as a narrator. Often these breaks in the narrative frame do not destroy the illusion of reality but reinforce it. For instance, when he comments upon the life of Ernestina Freeman, he says, “For Ernestina was to outlive her generation. She was born in 1846. And she died on the day Hitler invaded Poland” (27). An exaggerated effort of the readers will accept the coincidence of these dates as being historically accurate. Fowles’s intrusions can be compared to the ones of Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne as well as their Victorian successors, but his personal presence is much more extreme. Following the older traditions, the novelist steps into the presence of his reader. John Fowles, however, keeps the reader at a distance and actually joins his characters (Huffaker 103).

By establishing himself as a twentieth century writer looking back in the past, John Fowles acquires the necessary historic view to be able to understand a segment of evolution: the time of Sarah and Charles, which makes our century what it is. Omniscience allows him to travel back to 1867 past (along with the modern present) and explore characters’ thoughts “without technical elaborate ruses” (Huffaker 104). His omniscience offers the personal insights into Charles’s misgivings in his involvement with Sarah, Ernestina’s hidden desires and passions, Sam Farrow’s business schemes as well as Mrs. Poulteney’s struggle to get to Paradise by any means. Fowles’s editorial notes throughout the novel reveal his Victorian irony, an important part of the novel. This point of view is just that the easy way to solve problems is to have faith in Victorian God, another irony he applies in The French Lieutenant's Woman. By using the epigraphs and essay materials (as a Victorian novelist might use), John Fowles “forcefully connects past and present” (Huffaker 104). His intrusions often control the readers’ sympathy to characters; for example, his comment on Charles’s first poem moves the focus away from his character’s aching heart (Huffaker 105). It is significant that Sarah Woodruff is a truly fully
realized modern character to underscore her quality of representing the twentieth century consciousness. John Fowles turns her to be an enigma, as she is the only one whose mind he cannot enter. The statement “I am not to be understood even by myself” (452) is an example of Sarah’s modern nature. In the light of Darwinism she is the only link between the centuries, more modern than Victorian.

The narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* states that he is only writing in a “convention universally accepted at the time of [his] story”(95), which demonstrates that the novel is “only a game” (95-96). Fowles has created “a ‘Victorian’ novel that is a contemporary novel ‘about’ the Victorian novel” (Eddins 48). The playfulness Fowles displays concerning the narrative demonstrates his interest in the construction of a narrative, as well as his response to the literary theory, which focuses on the role of the author. Incorporating a number of the Victorian conventions into the frame of a text, John Fowles later challenges them. Claiming “the Victorian age . . . was highly existentialist in many of its personal dilemmas” (“Notes on Writing a Novel” 90), he parodies the existential philosophy of freedom by having his characters placed in both the social frames of the age and their limited freedom as pure fictional characters “who never existed outside [his] own mind” (95-96). The combination of history and fiction is a characteristic feature of the modern novels. As Linda Hutcheon argues, both history and fiction “derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs” (105). The correlation of these two types of discourses allows John Fowles to criticize and parody the society in an historical novel.

One of the strengths of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* “resides in its meta-fictional self-consciousness and in the way it addresses the reader and connects him/her with the world outside the text” (Salami 107). Fowles achieves this effect by employing a number of narrative techniques, which make the reader question his/her own role in the novel. By challenging the role of the author as a godlike figure, John Fowles leaves open the authority position of the reader as a constructor of the text. Brian McHale calls this technique “laying bare the processes by which the readers, in collaboration with texts, construct fictional worlds and objects” (100). In his power as a novelist, John Fowles is able to transcend time, ignoring its boundaries, allowing the “narrator to represent the hindsight made possible by history, and in this way facilitate the illumination of the past in the optic of the present” (Cooper 105). Finally, Fowles gives Sarah Woodruff the role of the author within the text. All these processes help to involve the reader in becoming an active participant of the narrative.

Structurally, the first twelve chapters contain a third-person narrative; the ‘author’ invades his text in Chapter Thirteen. At the end of Chapter Twelve, after asking “Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?” (94), the author shocks the reader by the outspoken “I do not know” (95). Both readers and characters acquire certain autonomy. However, Fowles claims some accountability for what is allowed in the text, for “possibility is not permissibility” (96). The author also refers to the reader as “you,” indicating the “presence of a communicative circuit linking addressor and addressee”(McHale 223). Readers almost merge and become characters as much as the author dissolves the boundaries between the two.

Often the contemporary writer “appears to know that she/he is only a function, she/he chooses to behave. . . . like a subject” (McHale 201). In *The French
The Victorian

*Lieutenant's Woman* the author is not a subject but a function as an important link between one hundred years of history. The story of Sarah and Charles takes place in 1867, although the author lives “in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes” (95). Linda Hutcheon suggests that a modern novel aims “to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history,” which in both cases opens it up “to the present” (110). In the novel John Fowles does not only reveal history to the present, but dissolves the boundaries between past and present. Fowles enters the action of the narrative as an observer twice in the novel: first on the train to London with Charles and later in the house of the Rossetti’s. The author “pretended to slip back into the year 1867; but of course that year is a century past” (332).

Apart from the narrator’s power over the text, there is a visible similarity of the two eras. The “historical past, by being inserted directly or indirectly into a novel at certain crucial points in the narrative, can provide a striking commentary on the present by the simple power of contrast” (Gross 19). In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* this is exactly what happens. Using the “Victorian age as foil,” John Fowles comments on modern society in the novel. By putting an author into the historical text, Fowles tries to find common grounds of the present within the past. Erasing the time boundaries, John Fowles obviously has more freedom to make a statement on the modern world and society: “time was the great fallacy; existence was without history, was always now, was always this being caught in the same fiendish machine” (176). Fowles does not suffer from “society’s repression of remembrance-society’s own past” (Jacoby 5), as a part of the past often continues to exist in the present. For Fowles, “time is a function of matter; and matter therefore is the clock that makes infinity real” (Jacoby 25). The matter of the past, and of the present, is what Fowles is concerned with in the novel.

One of the essential techniques is that John Fowles’s narrator is in many ways a character that is “part Fowles himself, and part device” (Huffaker 99). The writer enters the novel in different appearances; and, as the novel is completed, he offers alternative interpretive endings, a Victorian and a modern one, which determine the book’s final impact upon the reader and the writer/s differing personae as well. When the narrator appears in the Charles’s railway compartment, he is the “incognito as the archetypal Victorian novelist” (Huffaker 105). He is ‘prophet-bearded’ with the look of God; heponderes, “Now could I use you? Now what could I do with you?” (405). But in reality, he is a modern writer as he wonders what to do with Charles in the novel,” which Victorian conventions forbid an open, inconclusive, ending” (106). The writer also takes on a role of a successful impresario who “has got himself in as he really is ...” (461). The modern novelist is no less in control of his own fiction than the Victorian one who admits its omniscience: “In this he has not changed: he very evidently regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes” (462). Both modern and Victorian authors have always controlled their fiction as Fowles’s narrator demonstrates here. Refusing the role of an intervening God, he accepts the role of a novelist with “all this dramatic manipulations” (Huffaker 106).

Speaking about the endings of the novel, fictions’ endings have for centuries “assured the accomplishment of a divine justice” (Huffaker 107). In the Victorian period the novelist often relies on the most improbable coincidences, and the laws of nature and mathematics are often ignored. The appearance of Lalage, the child of
Sarah Woodruff, provides the closed ending of the novel in the traditions of Victorian novels. The birth of a child is believable in the Victorian context (if Sarah conceived from a single action) but the modern readers will treat it with some disbelief. John Fowles says to the readers that “but what you must not think is that this is less plausible ending to their story” (466). The child transcends the mystery of Sarah, though the laws of biology cannot explain Lalage. As Robert Huffaker suggests, “in this final ending there is an unidentified child. Lalage perhaps? We shall never know” (108). This modern ending intensifies the idea of a person’s isolation and evolution of survival through the centuries. The reader has options to choose either one of the endings: a modern one with its idea of evolution or a Victorian one with the idea of improbability and God’s intervention. Readers mentally re-write the ending to “suit themselves” (Foster 86) and their tastes. Why two endings one may ask? The Victorian model Fowles follows admits of the only two endings. Two opposite endings act as a kind “of litmus test for readers,” (Foster 86) suggesting there are two kinds of readers asking each other “What kind are you?”

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, John Fowles depicts the influence of Queen Victoria, the “monstrous dwarf” of the age. As the Victorian period becomes a mirror for the Post-World War II society, Fowles examines its influence on the lives of characters and society. According to the novelist, the Victorian age is a time of transitions and contradictions, an “age where a woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen year old girl for a few pounds” (266). It is the period of duty and responsibility, where traditions are more important than a person’s individuality and uniqueness. The expectations and rules of society often impose a behavioral pattern on people; and, the characters of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are no exception. The narrator tells us of Charles: “His statement to himself should have been, ‘I possess this now, therefore I am happy,’” instead of what it so Victorian is: “‘I cannot possess this forever, and therefore am sad’” (69). It is important to understand that “The relationship between a psychological and historical dimension” (Jacoby 98) is key here. The conventions of the period, the sense of duty and the fear of God (as in Mrs. Poulteney’s case) regulate human behavior in society.

In the novel, John Fowles explicitly exposes these themes by using a number of epigraphs, particularly of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin, which become a reminder of the political situations and theories of the time. Moreover, moving in the background of the novel there is the 1832 Reform Bill as well as the Pre-Raphaelite movement: the central events in “working out that puritanical aspect of the Victorian age” (“An Interview with John Fowles” 464). Acting within the conventions and not violating the ‘norm’ is the only way of being accepted by society. As John Fowles writes, gentlemen of the period have a “profound humorlessness (called by the Victorians earnestness, moral rectitude, probity, and a thousand other misleading names)” (17). In terms of sexuality, the intercourse is treated as an act of duty: “[Ernestina] sometimes wondered why God had permitted such a bestial version of Duty to spoil such an innocent longing”(29). The compliance with the norm is expected from everyone and is regarded as the only way to keep society ‘civilized.’ However, as the novel proves, the contrary can happen and it does. Charles, for example, is said to lack both passion and imagination: “This dismissive double equation was Charles’s greatest defect--and here he stands truly for his age” (153).
Mrs. Poulteney is a vivid example of Victorian England’s rules and conventions in the novel. As the narrator writes about Mrs. Poulteney: there “would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady” (20), he describes her as a woman with two obsessions: “one was Dirt … and the other was Immorality” (20). Being a God-fearing woman, Mrs. Poulteney “believes in hell” (21). Trying to ‘win the seat to heave,’ she has to let Sarah into her home (a woman of immorality and open sexuality in Mrs. Poulteney’s eyes) because “there [was] God to be accounted to” (35). However, Mrs. Poulteney’s positive motives cause wrong actions.

Sarah Woodruff is the only character that challenges the societal conventions and its order. Being named after her, the novel is primarily concerned with her development as an individual. While Sarah and Charles both fit in the thematic concerns of the novel, Sarah is much more involved in the narrative structure. In Sarah Woodruff, Fowles “creates a positive role model … a woman of imagination, intelligence, daring, and moral integrity” (Byrd 306). The story of the novel revolves on her being the “surrogate author.” She is in fact the “magus” of the novel’s world, as she creates a reality; her “fake” encounter with the French Lieutenant; and, she is the one who allows other characters to take actions within that reality.

As Patricia Hagen suggests, by “re-writing herself as a ‘fallen woman,’ Sarah rejects the roles constructed for her by Victorian convention and writes for herself a freedom” (446). Establishing Sarah as the surrogate author of the text plays a significant role in considering the political nature of the novel. A few scholars implied that Fowles “wants to represent the development of such a feminist consciousness and yet he does not give Sarah a voice” (Michael 233). However, considering the importance of Sarah’s role, (as she controls the text and dictates the roles of the other characters) it is obvious that Sarah has a voice and a strong one. If considering the differences between men and women in terms of emotions, intuition, logic and their ways of thinking, Sarah’s voice “cannot be transmitted in a conventional manner” (Michael 234). Her thoughts and feelings are not offered to the reader unless she wishes it so. Philip Cohen argues that, by “placing a veil between Sarah’s thoughts and the reader, the narrator may be respecting her autonomy, but someone is keeping the book’s structure intact” (158). Nevertheless, Sarah’s autonomy has another purpose, as it defines the structure of the novel and it also shows Fowles’s concern with the emancipation of women.

Sarah Woodruff is the one who guides Charles through the hard process of evolution that will eventually lead both of them to freedom. She embodies the values more of the twentieth century and perhaps her ability to mesmerize Charles is a part of modern time. Sarah’s plight is Victorian in nature: her isolation because of her past reputation, her work as a governess, the lack of career choices and the opportunity of spinsterhood are “all nineteenth century impositions on her liberty and autonomy” (Foster 78). Sarah, however, maintains her autonomy and independence in spite of the social norm. Her appearance (dark “beautiful hair fully loose” (165), full lips, “heavy” eyebrows) resembles one of the modern age rather than of the Victorian, as well as her look that is often described as “naked” (“those sincere naked eyes,” 144), which emphasizes her open, untamed sexuality. It is interesting how at times Sarah contradicts Charles and is outspokenly opinionated, following the pattern of the behavior of a 1960 woman rather than a 1867 one. Sarah Woodruff is an early model
Sarah is the woman who magically excites and attracts Charles who does not understand her nature or “the enigma that she present[s]” (128). In the sleep scene on the Cobb (70-72), Sarah catches him watching her and their gazes do not meet but merge: “Charles did not know it, but in those brief poised seconds above the waiting sea, in that luminous evening silence broken only by the waves’ quiet wash, the whole Victorian Age was lost” (72). The power structure of the time is present in the novel in such characters as Dr. Grogan, Mrs. Poulteney and Mr. Freeman, and Charles can very easily fit into this structure. In his ‘eternal’ battle between self and the proper society Charles is not yet lost. However, he loses his way gazing into Sarah’s “fine dark eyes” (71) as suddenly the new sense of identity opens up and there is no way back to the old Charles. Sarah seems to look past Charles and others as she gazes into the modern twentieth century.

Sarah Woodruff represents the artist figure in the novel. Through her character, John Fowles examines the relationship between life and art. An artist is expected to be aloof from his/her creation. T. S. Eliot insisted on the non-personal involvement between the writer and his creation. The theme of an individual desiring selfhood is explored in Sarah’s character. She has consciously created a world in which she can freely choose her own destiny. The two of her choices are especially important in the text: her choice to lie about the French Lieutenant (“the French Lieutenant’s whore” is her creation) and her decision at the end of the novel to live without a relationship with a man. The last choice proclaims Sarah’s freedom from the conventions of the Victorian society. She is a social “outcast” (179), lost in the society’s opinion, yet she becomes “authentic,” existentially speaking, due to the freedom she creates for herself. In terms of emancipation, Sarah becomes the New Woman, the woman who escapes the “Adam- consciousness” that defines the nineteenth century patriarchal society. Magali Michael states that the novel “wants to assert the theme of feminism and yet fails as a feminist novel” (225). Although the novel does not construct a narrative in which words “acquire new meanings which validate and celebrate a new, positive version of women” (Weedon 9), the obvious feminist notes cannot be ignored. By making herself the “surrogate author,” Sarah challenges the male power. The male characters closest to Sarah are Charles and Dr. Grogan. In Dr. Grogan’s opinion, Sarah suffers from “melancholia as plain as measles” (154) and she “wants to be a sacrificial victim” (156). Sarah’s sadness is not because of the French Lieutenant, as Dr. Grogan falsely believes. Her despair comes from being “allowed to live in paradise, but forbidden to enjoy it” (168). To achieve freedom in paradise, Sarah makes up the story of the French Lieutenant: “all her conduct all her motives in Lyme Regis have been based on a lie” (354), so that “she should never be the same again. She did it so that people point at [her] … there walks the French Lieutenant’s Whore. … So that they should know she has suffered, and suffers, as others suffer in every town and village in this land” (172). Fowles sounds concerned with the social position of women in the male dominated society, which has such enormous powers over women. Identified with women in other towns, Sarah becomes the voice of emancipation of women.
In the first of the two endings Sarah suggests her role as the artist. When confronted by Charles she claims that she has “seen artists destroy work that might to the amateur seem perfectly good … [She] was told that if an artist is not his own sternest judge he is not fit to be an artist” (448). She justifies destroying any possible relationship with Charles because it contains a “falsehood in it” (448). It is significant that Sarah, given the opportunity to marry Charles, declines. Unlike Ernestina, who is prepared to become the dutiful wife and a companion to her husband, Sarah is not. “I have found new affections,” she says, “but they are not of the kind you suggest” (447). Sarah continues to state her decision: “I do not wish to marry … I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband must expect me to become in marriage” (450-51). Brunilda Lemos suggests, “only the last [ending] fulfills our expectations of Sarah” (87). In this ending, Charles hurries out into the streets, leaving Sarah and her child behind. Rejection of the marriage is Sarah’s victory over the Victorian societal conventions imposed upon her.

Charles is a representative of the readers in the novel, trying to decode and understand Sarah Woodruff as a character. Sarah is treated as “a text to be read” (Foster 81). There are a few ways to look at her as a text. To the general public of Lyme Regis, Sarah is a fallen sinful woman, ruined by a French sailor. To Dr. Grogan she is another text, a story of an emotionally unbalanced woman, a study material. He literally turns her into a text; showing Charles the medical papers revolving around the similar case to Sarah (a story of a Lieutenant Le Ronciere and Marie). Of course to Charles, Sarah is a complicated text, very unpredictable and ever changing. She is a puzzle, pieces of which he has to put together to see the actual picture of Sarah. Every time they meet, she opens a new part of herself: from a madwoman to a lover, from a villain to an outcast, from a victim to a betrayer. Unlike the ordinary reader, Charles gets to question the mysterious author – Sarah herself. “If the text is radically unstable, it is sufficiently provoking to spur him to action” (Foster 82). His search for the real Sarah is complicated by his ‘fantasy version’ of her. This fantasy text is a “masculine narrative,” with Sarah being “a mystery, a dangerous Eve and a contradictory subject” (Salami 123). He can never understand her text until he learns to “accept her feminine narrative without bending it to the will of his masculine prejudices and desires” (Foster 83).

In his social status Charles is a wealthy and educated man. He, similarly to Sarah, experiences a loss of a parent at a fairly young age. The story of the novel takes place in 1867. It is likely that Charles is in his early twenties when his father dies in 1856. Charles’s character undergoes its development in the Victorian Age. Being raised to be a gentleman, Charles was largely unmotivated: “Laziness was, I am afraid, Charles’s distinguishing trait. Like many of his contemporaries he sensed that the earlier self-responsibility of the century was turning into self-importance: that what drove the new Britain was increasingly a desire to seem respectable, in the place of the desire to do good for good’s sake” (16). According to Pamela Cooper, “it is in relation to Charles, therefore, that Sarah (at least within the framework of the book) assumes her full narration function – a function that defines him by association as a reader” (123). Charles becomes both a reader and a character in Sarah’s text. Sarah is “the mystery woman who is both a male fantasy and the catalyst for male redemption” (Woodcock 92). Nevertheless, Sarah already positions herself as a
“fallen” woman before Charles’s arrival, and it is impossible to disagree that Charles makes Sarah into his own creation. On the contrary, it is Sarah who creates a new world for Charles, offering him a road to self-knowledge. Charles’s break of his engagement with Ernestina because of his obsession with Sarah is a result of his dissatisfaction with his life and a bride to be “who would never understand him” (226). Charles eventually realizes that he has to remain within the conventions of society. This realization perhaps explains Charles’s fascination with Sarah as she becomes a woman who defeats traditions and rules in his opinion and breaks away from the ties Charles himself wishes to escape: “If I could only escape, if I could only escape …” (291).

Sarah Woodruff is Charles’s chance and hope for redemption in the novel. Intrigued and puzzled by Sarah’s position, Charles tries to live up to “his original chivalrous intention: to show the poor woman that not everybody in her world was a barbarian” (74). If the novel is considered to be a modernist one, then Charles becomes the ‘reader.’ Along with readers, Charles discovers Sarah’s lie during the climax of the novel. Up to this point, “Charles … views Sarah less as author than as text; reading Sarah as one reads a novel … he continually constructs and revises his hypotheses about her” (Hagen 445). Charles’s acquiring of freedom does not happen in a traditional way. With his uncle’s marriage, Charles “had been disinherited” (200). Ernestina’s father offers a proposal to Charles that consists of becoming a partner in the family business. Charles’s final decision is to rebel and “feeling trapped” (296), he breaks off his engagement with Ernestina, leaves his father-in-law’s money, and attempts to begin a relationship with Sarah. As it has been suggested, it is not Sarah who willingly deceives Charles, but it is Charles himself who comes to understand his inner self and breaks away from the convention. It is significant that Charles experiences confusion about the sudden turn of events. He says: “If you only knew the mess my life was in … the waste of it … the uselessness of it. I have no moral purpose, no real sense of duty to anything” (280). Sarah’s rejection of him comes as a painful experience: “behind all his rage stood the knowledge that he still loved her, that this was the one being whose loss he could never forget” (455). The final ending suggests not the oppression of Sarah, but rather her emancipation as she rejects the marital ties. How Charles views Sarah is more of a comment on his character than on hers. Sarah achieves her freedom and autonomy from the Victorian convention and from the reader. In this sense the book’s epigraph by Karl Marx indeed defines the drive of the novel becoming its leitmotif: “Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself” (qtd. in Fowles 844).

John Fowles examines the complex relationship between men and women and the social framework, which determines their behavior as well as their roles in society. In this novel, John Fowles portrays the Victorian Age in terms of his own history and society as he comments on its faults and ills, which continue to exist. Being sympathetic to women in his fiction, he claims: “My female characters tend to dominate the male. I see man as a kind of artifice, and woman as a kind of reality” (“Notes on Writing a Novel” 94). In this novel, the concern of the feminine voice is one of the acute issues for Fowles. The protagonist of the novel, Sarah Woodruff, becomes a ‘surrogate author,’ who acquires the power of the narrative within the text.
frames. She indeed “writes for herself a freedom ‘beyond the pale’” (Hagen 446) as she continues to question and challenge the conventions of the Victorian era.

Works Cited
The Victorian