

## DEPICTION OF VICTORIAN VALUES IN “THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT’S WOMAN” BY JOHN FOWLES

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### ABSTRACT

The article presents a short analysis of the novel, “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” by John Fowles which displays the system and the life style of the Victorian society and the role of the Victorian women. The research considers the different conditions of the people in upper and low classes. The novel describes the influence of Victorian period on people’s lives and their painful fates if they went against the social rules. This academic piece of work depicts some prevalent issues in Victorian era such as the influence of the social norms and the religion on the main female character – Sarah Woodruff and her life.

**Keywords:** Victorian period, religion, prayer, woman values, social rules, upper and low class, John Fowles.

### INTRODUCTION

John Robert Fowles, an English novelist, was internationally renowned and critically positioned between modernism and postmodernism. His works were influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others. Fowles was born in Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, England, the only son and elder child of Robert John Fowles and Gladys May, née Richards. He attended Alleyn Court Preparatory School, where a maternal uncle and aunt were teachers. In 1939, he won a place at Bedford School, where he remained a pupil until 1944. He was an athletic standout and became a head boy: a member of the rugby football third team, the fives first team, and the captain of the cricket team, for which he was a bowler. In 1951, Fowles became an English master at the Anargyrios and Korgialenios School of Spetses on the Peloponnesian island of Spetses (also known as Spetsai). In 1965 Fowles left London, moving to Underhill, a farm on the fringes of Lyme Regis, Dorset. The isolated farm house became the model for “The Dairy” Fowles was writing: “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” (1969)

The mysterious novel was published in 1969 in the US. After publication, the novel was admitted as must-read literature



several times as it could raise numerous historical and romantic themes in Victorian age. Via reading this masterpiece one can feel nothing but power and impact of religion for the first time. This specific factor reiterates the hero's challenges that are oriented by the Christian Church and the belief to the Lord. The impact of the religion was so great that Christian the people had lifelong bonds with the Christian church and with their all faith. For example, Mrs. Poultney's faith about hell. Furthermore, main characters described as "heroes of their period" because of their worshiping, sorrowfulness and conviction and fear.

## METHODOLOGY

The novel is built on the author's authority in Victorian literature, both being contradictory and following most of the conventions of the literature of that time. The exposition of this work starts and connected with the period when Queen Victoria reigned. And the name Victorian literature is the English literature during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901). The nineteenth century is considered by some to be the Golden Age of English Literature, especially for a prodigious number of British novels. It was in the Victorian era that the novel became the leading literary genre in English prose. In this period literature was characterized by depictions of common ordinary people, their hard lives, and moral lessons based on their lives. As an example, we can read of the narrative by the character: "Madam, I should rather spend the rest of my life in the poorhouse than live another week under this roof". They were meant for more than just entertainment. Victorians were interested in the hero as well as folk art. Victorian novels often focused on these themes.

Another crucial factor of that age which was stated by the narrator was Chartism. The narrator mentioned this event when Charles and his uncle who had a complex political idea were talking about the construction of a new railway station. Chartism was a working-class movement which emerged in 1836 in London. It expanded rapidly across the country and was most active between 1838 and 1848. Chartists as well had a great impact on the perception of the humans as it was highlighting the importance of deterrent social political changes.

## RESULTS

One of the main characters of the novel is Mrs. Poulteney, a noble lady, Victorian dowager and prayer who fears from the hell, however she holds a wrong confidence and actions. For example, in novel the narrator underlines that she is not "a stupid" [ref, page] when it comes to considering her through her acts the way she deserves. "As she lay

in her bedroom, she reflected on the terrible mathematical doubt that increasingly haunted her; whether the Lord calculated charity by what one had given or by what one could have afforded to give. Here she had better data than the vicar. She had given considerable sums to the church; but she knew they fell far short of the prescribed one tenth to be parted with by serious candidates for paradise". Mostly Mrs. Poulteney is described as a negative character but, personally, she is only a member of that time, she was brought up by noble people`s, she was taught all manners of being cool and living like a bigot. That`s why she had those wrong understanding and actions of the church. In contrast, Sarah Woodruff would be sincerely worshiping, was ready to more knowledge and kept her modesty. The author mentions: "But sprang from a profound difference between the two women. "Mrs. Poulteney had a faith in a God that never existed and Sarah knew a God that did" [] actually, Mrs. Poulteney was dishonest and disgraceful to her footmen and servants like every other rich and honorable lady of her time of Feudalistic style, including "Butler`s, footmen, gardeners, grooms, upstairs maids, downstairs maids, all, they took just so much of Mrs. Poulteney`s standards and ways and then they fled. This was very disgraceful and cowardly of them. But when you are expected to rise at six, to work from half past six to eleven, to work again from half past eleven to half past four, and then again from five to ten, and every day, thus a hundred-hour week, your reserves of grace and courage may not be very large"( Fowles, 1969, p.18) All these lines describe how hard was their ruling system of Feudalistic style on ordinary people and Mrs. Poulteney`s wrong assumptions about a religion, actually, in Christianity, it not good being rude to people. As in Exodus 34:6 (NAS): *Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth;*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England yet existed a distinct division between several classes which shows their social status and its systematic failure. The novel`s main male hero is Charles, a 32- years old rich heir. His grandfather was a baronet and his father lived in luxury and from his early years he had his fiancée- Ernestina. Charles`s mother and little sister died when he was one-year-old. Important point about Charles is that he was an adherent of the theory of Charles Darwin. His theory was like: *"Species can change over time, that new species come from pre-existing species, and that all species share a common ancestor. In this model, each species has its own unique set of heritable, various from the common ancestor, which have accumulated gradually over very long time periods"*. In fact, he, Charles, was a copy of Darwin`s theory in



real life because he ignores some “family traditions” like fox hunting or riding, instead, he studies at Cambridge, tries some fields of studies such as paleontology, and he has unnatural fondness of walking. But likewise, “*all species share a common life*” he was mundane from his life.

While he feels boredom, Sarah, as a perfect victim of a castle society, tries to gain some money to study “*she had learned during the day and paid for learning during the evening*” []. It is one example of how people in laboring classes had no equal degree to be taught. Sarah’s knowledge and its equivalent was greater than any low-class representor as “*her handwriting was excellent, the spelling faultless and reading voice was firm, rather deep*” (even Mrs. Poulteney admitted her voice via reading from the Bible). One can see from Sarah’s image a typical woman of nineteenth century with favored feminine look that was the demure, obedient, and shy who thought that she never would be glad from her life. The opposite hero for Sarah was Charles’s fiancée – Ernestina, she had exactly the right face for her age; that is, small-chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. Her gray eyes and the paleness of her skin only enhanced the delicacy of the rest. Despite her aristocratic background her life was not so wished one. The possible reason was her childhood, Ernestina lived with a crushing and unrelenting canopy of parental worry: “Her slight cough would bring doctors, slightest caused her mama and papa secret hours of self-recrimination and most urgent case for her was engagement from her earliest years as it later led for worst consequences: disconnection from Charles”.

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning the acts started from the act that Charles and Ernestina hanging out near the sea. Sarah’s Lieutenant sails and never comes back, when she feels miserable, she goes to the sea and her second unfortunate meeting was near the sea as well. Every single accident was connected with the sea. Personally, it seems that sea is used as a metaphor for the evil as all orientation is connected with the religion. The sea has a connotative meaning in that all men fear death of drowning, which symbolizes damnation in the theological sense. Consequently, the sea in the Bible is apparently evil as well as a symbol of evil. As it is obvious that, not only nowadays, but also in Victorian period the role of woman was much lower when it comes considering their ideas as a resolution for a few numbers of problems or understanding and giving them some opportunity to self-development. As the society was divided in several groups according to their level of living standards, only high-class women representors had chance to get taught subjects, languages or study in some prestigious places.

However, even being from a high class, women did not possess any additional voices to decide what they want to do with their own life like: Ernestina from her childhood was engaged with Charles whether she wanted it or not and she declares “why I should wait for him to continue my great destiny” bringing female voice of self-decision. Most woman thought like her about it then in that very manner.

## REFERENCES

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