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# *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

by

**John Fowles  
1969**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide Edited by Diane Sauder

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The setting throughout the novel is predominantly Victorian. Most of the novel's action takes place at Lyme Regis, Dorset, England. Lyme Regis was one of many small villages in southwest England scattered along the coast. It consisted largely of small houses surrounded by hills on one side and the sea on the other. The Cobb was built along the shore and it is a promenade where people could enjoy the sea air while taking a walk. A section of the hills, known as the Ware Commons, was a meeting ground for most young couples and .....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Sarah Woodruff** - The bearer of the book's title 'The French Lieutenant's Woman.' She is also referred to as "Tragedy" or "The French Loot'n'nt's Tenant's Hore." She is the scarlet woman of Lyme, the outcast dismissed by society because of her affair with a French sailor. She is a figure of intrigue due to.....

**Charles Smithson** - Male protagonist of the novel. He is a wealthy Victorian gentleman and heir to a title. He is interested in Darwin and paleontology and considers himself to be intellectually superior to.....

**Ernestina Freeman** - Charles' fiancée. She is pretty, coy and intelligent, but at times she tends to reveal her youth and naivete. She likes to think of herself as a modern woman but her attitudes are.....

**Aunt Tranter** - Ernestina's mother's sister. She is a kind woman who is loved by her .....

**Mrs. Poulteney** - A cruel old woman, she takes great delight in harassing her domestic staff. Her temperament is exactly opposite to that of Mrs. Tranter's. She believes herself to be an upholder of.....

**Mrs. Fairley** - Mrs. Poulteney's housekeeper. She pretends to be virtuous but is a.....

**Dr. Grogan** - An intelligent, friendly man who befriends Charles. The younger man finds him to be a sympathetic listener. Dr. Grogan empathizes with Sarah but finds her behavior too.....  
Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonists** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. The novel has two protagonists, Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson. Both of them are character types commonly found in a nineteenth century romantic novel. These lovers are doomed from the beginning. Sarah is an outcast, rejected by Victorian society. Charles is an aristocratic Victorian gentleman already.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. The novel's antagonist is the Victorian society, which spurns women like Sarah who do not conform to normal.....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. Charles breaks his engagement with Ernestina when he realizes that he loves Sarah but when he goes to Exeter to meet her, he does not find her. Finally, in despair he leaves England to try and.....

**Outcome** - They finally meet after a two-year separation period at the Rossettis. Sarah has changed drastically and Charles cannot adapt himself to this new version. To complicate matters.....

## SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

At the beginning of the novel, Charles Smithson and Ernestina Freeman are engaged to be married. Charles is an upper-class aristocrat and Ernestina is a wealthy heiress. They meet Sarah Woodruff, an unemployed governess and the scarlet woman of Lyme. Charles is struck by this woman who "had been dumped by her French lover and now wandered the shores in the hope that he would return someday."

Sarah is employed as a lady's companion by Mrs. Poulteney of Malborough House. Her stay is miserable due to Mrs. Poulteney and the housekeeper, Mrs. Fairley, who keeps spying on Sarah. They attempt to restrict her freedom in the name of making her repent for her sins. Meanwhile, Charles is intrigued by the outcast. His interest in her grows to be an obsession. An amateur paleontologist, he meets her on several occasions at Ware Commons. He wants to help her but his interest is routed in the fact that he finds her singularly different from other Victorian woman. As an outcast, Sarah does not follow societal norms yet she insists on Charles help. Dr. Grogan, Charles friend, sympathizes with her situation but believes that Sarah wants.....

## THEMES

### Major Theme

In this novel, Fowles is interested in the literary genre of the nineteenth-century romantic or gothic novel and succeeds in reproducing typical Victorian characters, situations and dialogue. But Fowles perception of the genre is touched with typical twentieth-century irony. His thematic concerns range from the relationship between life and art and the artist and his creation to the isolation that results from an individual struggling for selfhood.

### Minor Theme

Fowles' aim is to bring to light those aspects of Victorian society that would .....

## MOOD

The general mood throughout the novel is somber and turbulent. From the initial chapter, the mood is set. A strong easterly wind is blowing and a storm is coming in. It is in such a setting that Charles and Sarah meet. The atmosphere suits Sarah's enigmatic personality. Throughout the novel, she is.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

John Robert Fowles (1926), novelist, was educated at Bedford School and New College, Oxford, where he read French. After serving in the Royal Marines, he worked as a schoolteacher before embarking on a career as a full-time writer. He spent some time on the Greek island of Spetsai before the success of his first novel, *The Collector*, enabled him to write full-time.

*The Collector* is a psychological thriller in which a girl, Miranda, is kidnapped by a psychologically possessive repressed clerk and butterfly-collector who keeps her as one of the many specimens of his butterfly collection. The novel ends with her death and his plans to add another specimen to his collection.

This novel was followed by *Aristos* (1965), an idiosyncratic collection of notes and aphorisms aimed at a 'personal philosophy.' It is a self-portrait, revised in 1980, on ideas that set forth the.....

## LITERARY/ HISTORICAL INFORMATION

In this novel, Fowles is interested in the genre of the nineteenth-century romantic or gothic novel and successfully recreates typical characters, situations and even dialogue. Yet his perspective is that of the twentieth century as can be noted in the authorial intrusions and opening quotations drawn from the works of Victorian writers whose observations were uniquely different from the assumptions that most Victorians held about their world. In this way, he attempts to critique those values that Victorians most heralded.

Until today, the Victorian Age was seen to be a Golden Age where Reason and Rationality were proclaimed as dogma and faith. People were beginning to question the claims that religion made about the existence of God and the beginning of man. Anything that could not be proven through experimentation and.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

The initial chapter begins with an extensive description of Lyme Bay in 1867. The narrator observer informs the reader that since that time very little has changed in Lyme. He compares it to a tiny Greek island, Piraeus. It is picturesque place a dozen or so houses, sloping meadows and wooded hills. From the perspective of an outsider looking in, the narrator informs the reader that he is the local spy. He uses his telescope to spy on two people taking a walk along the Cobb. The two people seem to be well-dressed and from the upper class. The young lady is dressed in the height of fashion, which the narrator says was a revolt against the crinoline and large bonnet commonly worn by Victorian women. The man too is expensively clothed.

The narrator/spy then shifts his telescope to the other figure standing at the end of the Cobb. Dressed in black, the figure is staring out to sea. She is a woman who appears distressed.

#### **Notes**

The novel begins with a quote from Thomas Hardy's "The Riddle" and is an apt description of the *French Lieutenant's Woman* and the reader. She is portrayed as a singular figure, alone against a desolate landscape. This image piques the reader's curiosity.

Chapter 1 gives an extensive, detailed description of Lyme Bay. The narrator makes it a point to insist that very little has changed in Lyme Regis since the nineteenth century to the present day. The narrator deftly moves between the two centuries and comments on the present day events in the same tone in which he comment on the Victorian period. That is, he adopts a rather formal, stiff Victorian tone while narrating the events in the novel yet the content of what he says is contemporary.

The narrator is in the persona of John Fowles, the author. His authorial intrusions are very pointed and sometimes biased. He comments on Charles and Ernestina's dress sense, saying both appeared fashionable, especially Ernestina who has adopted a more provocative style of dress. For instance, Ernestina's skirt is shorter than the accepted length, and she wears a pork-pie hat instead of a large bonnet. Her sense of fashion is alien to a place like Lyme Regis, which is provincial and rooted in conventions. This gives the reader a sense that Ernestina may be less conventional than a typical Victorian woman yet whether her adventurous dress sense matches her ideas will soon be seen.

The narrator plays the role of participant and observer. It is through his lens, metaphorically seen in the use of his telescope, that the characters and situations are wrought. He provides insight and information about the characters as well as providing authorial commentary about the setting.

### **CHAPTER 2**

#### **Summary**

Fowles gives a quotation from E. Royston Pike's "Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age" which is a commentary on the role of Victorian women.

The chapter introduces the reader to Ernestina Freeman and Charles Smithson, the two people walking along the Cobb. The couple are engaged to be married. Their conversation is largely small talk and rather trite.

Ernestina appears to be lively, romantic and coy, typical of Victorian women. Her fiancée, Charles is interested in the theories of Darwin. He likes to think of himself as rational and scientific. His aim is to be different from other Victorian gentlemen.

The wind is blowing rather hard and a gale is coming in when Charles sees the women in black standing at the far end of the Cobb. He is concerned for her safety. Ernestina tells him that the woman is nicknamed "Tragedy" and that she is awaiting the return of her lover who has abandoned her. Charles is intrigued by the story and curious to meet the woman. He attempts to warn her about the storm but the woman simply turns around and stares at him. The look has a strong impact on Charles. He finds her face is unforgettable and tragic. When she turns away from them, Charles and Ernestina leave.

## Notes

Chapter 2 starts out with a quotation from E. Royston Pike's "Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age" which comments on the population of women being higher than that of men. Pike implies that because of these statistics the set role of Victorian women is that of a wife and mother. Yet because there are more women than men, not all women can fulfil their role as wives and mothers; therefore, the quote becomes ironic in the context of the *French Lieutenant's Woman*. Although Sarah's epithet appears to attach her to a man, he is in fact not present so far in the novel and she is free of the conventional role society attempts to impose on her.

The reader is introduced to Charles Smithson and his fiancée, Ernestina Freeman. Their conversation is banal. Ernestina typifies a Victorian woman in that all of her energy is expended on captivating a man's attention yet what she says is insubstantial. Much of this has to do with her socialization and she cannot be judged too harshly. Yet the differences between her and Charles is significant here. Whereas she has no interest in Sara other than the story of misfortune, Charles finds her odd and disconcertingly attractive because she is outside the norm. He has a predilection for scientific inquiries and theories such as Darwinism yet Ernestina shares none of this. He believes himself to be rational and analytical as he is scientifically inclined, but in reality, he is like any other Victorian gentleman: romantic, idealistic and conventional. When Ernestina informs him about Sarah, he is attracted by her unconventionality yet repelled by her strangeness. It is as though he is looking at some exotic specimen.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

#### Major Characters

**Sarah Woodruff** - From the very beginning, she has been introduced as the French Lieutenant's Woman. Being the scarlet woman of Lyme, she has been ostracized by the entire community. Charles learns of her through the rumors that abound about her. To him, she presents a picture of dark intrigue and mystery. In fact, her portrayal is supposed to match the mold of the dark, mysterious woman of the typical Victorian romantic novel. Such a character type either played the heroine or the villain but always stood as a symbol of all that was forbidden. Charles paints his own idealistic picture of her and his attraction for Sarah stems mainly from the aura of strangeness that the local rumors have built around her as well as his own imaginings.

Sarah's "strangeness" should be considered in the light of the Victorian era. She is very different from her Victorian counterparts in dress, behavior and attitude. Her unconventional attitude makes her stand out from the conventional community of Lyme. She deliberately chooses to defy convention as.....

**Charles Smithson** - He is the male protagonist of the novel and his character is supposed to represent that of a Victorian gentleman typically found in a Victorian romantic novel. Charles is an educated, wealthy gentleman and heir to his uncle's title. He is interested in Darwin and the scientific theories of his age. He desires to be

different from other Victorian men by keeping himself occupied in scientific pursuits, but it soon becomes evident that Charles is more interested in keeping himself from getting bored than any real scientific interest. His interest in Darwin is rather superficial. Also, his interest in paleontology serves.....  
Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS (Style & Structure)**

By recreating a nineteenth century literary genre, John Fowles is doing much more than simply parodying it. In its capacity to recreate and redefine an older fictional life, *The French Lieutenant's Women* acts as a key to understanding the best of contemporary British novelists whose relations with Victorian fiction and culture, although less conspicuous than here, are often equally intimate and complex. The novel recreates an older sort of realism to serve the old purpose of studying society. Fowles is interested in cultural continuity, in how our social conditions evolved. He deliberately works within the tradition of the Victorian novel and consciously uses its conventions to suit his own purpose. At the same time, the reader is made aware of Fowles' intentions through his authorial intrusions.

When the reader is first introduced to Charles and Ernestina, their relationship is typical of those found in Victorian romantic novels. Being Victorian and at least middle class, they both are bound to each other by their sense of duty and propriety. Their engagement is more or less contractual in nature. Ernestina will.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

**Major Theme** - The Victorian world was not as stable and solid as it seemed. It was a period of transition and change. Old social norms were no longer applicable to the changing order. Thomas Hardy, the novelist, and poets like Matthew Arnold and Alfred Lord Tennyson were sensitive enough to feel this change and raise their doubts about the so-called 'stability' proclaimed by prominent leaders of the era. Fowles has picked up this theme and used it in the novel. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is deliberately written in the literary genre of the nineteenth century as it enables Fowles to explore this theme further.

Also, it enables Fowles to test the conditions of fiction but within the world of the Victorian novel, with its solid narrative comforts. This novel allows one to understand the best of contemporary British novelists, whose relations with Victorian fiction and culture are often equally intimate and complex. Thus, Fowles is able to explore the relationship between life and art. An artist is expected to be aloof from his creation. T. S. Eliot insisted on non-personal involvement between the writer and his creation. Fowles is attempting to.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS / IDEAS**

1. Compare the characters of Sarah and Ernestina and the roles they play within Victorian society. How are their actions and behaviors influenced or affected by Victorian attitudes towards women? How do their varied social and economic status affect their experiences? Explain.  
Compare several members of the working class with those of their employers. What are their differences in social attitudes towards courting, work or professions, success, and marriage?.....

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