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_The French Lieutenant’s Woman: A Pro-Feminist or Anti-Feminist Novel?_

John Fowles’ _The French Lieutenant’s Woman_ gained the attention of readers quickly after its publication in 1969. The postmodern approach to the Victorian era marked a style that many readers had never seen before. This novel was published at a time in history in which critics were attempting to analyze works in light of certain important social issues; feminism was one such issue. Over the years, this novel has in fact sparked debate among critics over whether it should be considered a feminist novel. Fowles certainly expressed feminist sentiments throughout his life, yet the presence of real feminist ideals in this novel is still in question. Critics on one side of the argument state that this novel made a progressive step forward as a work with a real feminist perspective through an independent female character, Sarah Woodruff. Other critics find that the novel lacks a female perspective throughout due to the fact that it is told solely through a male character and narrator.

Deborah Byrd is one such critic who believes that _The French Lieutenant’s Woman_ is to be considered a feminist novel. Byrd goes so far as to say that this novel is “an almost ideal feminist fictional work” (306). Byrd believes that Fowles “creates a role model in the character of Sarah Woodruff” describing her as “a woman of imagination, intelligence, daring, and moral integrity” (306). Many anti-feminist critics argue that Sarah’s purpose in the story is to simply act as a catalyst in Charles’ life; that Sarah is given no real perspective in the novel. Byrd argues that “to conclude . . . that Sarah is little more than an energizer of the plot . . . is to view the novel from a masculinist perspective” (307). Byrd acknowledges that many critics view Sarah as an underdeveloped character and argues that “Fowles provides sufficient information about Sarah’s
personality traits, values, and experiences for one to understand her character and history by the time one has finished reading the novel” (307).

In her analysis, however, Byrd too generously evaluates Sarah based on few details from the text. Perhaps because she is attempting to read Sarah as a feminist symbol, Byrd believes Sarah to be an intelligent character, much more intelligent than her male counterparts. It is Byrd’s belief that Sarah is able to read people and situations instantly, allowing her to understand things more precisely than other characters. This is not to say that Byrd is drawing these conclusions completely out of thin air. Certainly, in the novel Sarah is described as being intelligent. Readers must, however, question the narrative voice from which this information comes. Do readers know that Sarah is intelligent because they are able to experience the inner workings of her mind? Are readers given a reliable description of Sarah’s thought process? Not in the least. Readers are never able to gain insight directly from Sarah’s mind.

Byrd’s pro-feminist reading starkly contrasts with that of perhaps one of the most ardent anti-feminist critics of this novel: Magali Michael. Michael criticizes Byrd’s views outright by stating that “the way in which the novel ultimately projects Sarah runs counter to the theme of feminism” (228). Michael asserts that the novel cannot be considered a feminist novel because Sarah’s point of view is absent from the story. Because Sarah’s point of view remains absent from the text, “Sarah remains objectified and never becomes a subject in her own right” (Michael 228). Not only is Sarah never given a point of view, but “everything known about Sarah is mediated through the male perspectives of Charles, the narrator, and ultimately Fowles himself” (Michael 228). It is this “triple layering of voices” that removes readers even further from Sarah (Michael 228).
Not only do Sarah’s thoughts “remain outside of the realm of the novel,” the “perspective offered of Sarah is purely masculine” (Michael 225). Michael believes that the novel’s “failure to realize Sarah as a character and human being in her own right . . . is due to its exclusive use of male views” (225). Michael states that “if the novel is created within a masculine ideology and only masculine perspectives are allowed inside the text, then it necessarily follows that its characters cannot transcend that male ideology” (228).

Michael points out the possibility that “by describing Sarah purely from an external position,” the novel is “presenting an honest view of male perspectives of women and not falling into the trap of projecting male thinking into Sarah’s mind” (226). Michael’s objection to this idea, however, is that “Fowles is not explicit enough and thus relies too heavily upon the reader” and that he “seems to assume that the reader will be able to see that the novel is depicting the imposition of male perspectives onto the portrait of Sarah” (226). In this reliance upon the reader, the irony of Fowles’ depiction of the patriarchal society misses its mark.

Michael recognizes Fowles’ effort to create a feminist novel. The actions of Sarah that are reported “do suggest that she is a woman who rebels against patriarchal society by casting herself outside that society and thus outside masculine ideology” (233). Michael goes on to say that “the problem . . . is that the Sarah who performs these revolutionary acts has no existence outside of the male perspectives that depict her” (233). Ultimately, Michael believes that Fowles “wants to represent the development of . . . a feminine consciousness,” yet he does not achieve this because he fails to “give [Sarah] a voice” (233).

Throughout her critique, Bonnie Zare suggests that perhaps readers, particularly feminist readers, are not exploring all of the ways in which one can interpret this text. Zare recognizes that the novel is considered a male text, yet encourages readers not to automatically dismiss the
novel because of this fact, but rather to consider how a feminist reading of this text could take place. Zare uses Schweikart’s model as a lens through which readers can interpret the novel (175). Zare summarizes this model by stating that readers (including feminist readers) are attracted to male texts “not only because of socialization, but because they may contain moments of liberatory potential, moments that strongly appeal to feminists in their fight for equality” (175-176). Zare states that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* “provides a good test as to whether . . . feminist readers may empower themselves by discovering overlooked interpretive possibilities” (176).

Zare recognizes that critics such as Magali Michael consistently highlight the fact that the novel’s feminist credibility is in question because the text is written from the male perspective. Zare argues that “because we are never permitted to enter the mind of Sarah, but see her only through these two men’s eyes, readers, particularly female and/or consciously feminist readers, are without guidance as to how to judge her” (178). Zare makes this statement relying wholly on the notion that readers will have been previously socialized to think only through a patriarchal mindset.

In her critique, Zare defends the expression of female sexuality. Zare once more acknowledges Michael’s critique that Sarah is included in the novel simply to be read as a “male fantasy.” While Zare does admit that Fowles “misses no opportunity to remind us of Sarah’s sensuality and attractiveness,” she goes on to argue that this “oversimplification” of Sarah as a sex object “denies that people of both sexes take pleasure from identifying with their own objectification” (180). Zare states that “because feminism has made many contemporary young women more confident and aware of power structures” they can now enjoy “sexual images of women” (180). Zare does agree that “too much emphasis is placed on women as spectacle for a
male surveyor,” but she also believes that “we must recognize that women derive some erotic pleasure from . . . gazing at a woman from what has traditionally been a heterosexual man’s perspective” (181). Zare, therefore, believes that one can treat the novel as a feminist text because the novel attempts to describe a sexually liberated character in Sarah. Sarah chooses to cast off the societal norms which guard females from their own sexuality. While this may be the idea that Fowles attempts to convey, it does not serve to resolve the problem of Sarah remaining a character without perspective. Her actions could truly be considered remarkable, but once again they fall short because she is not allowed her own perspective in the novel.

In her critique, Gwen Raaberg digs deeper into this objectification of women and explores the idea of women being read as Other in texts. Raaberg criticizes Deborah Byrd’s pro-feminist opinion of the novel by stating that “Byrd neglects to analyze the problematic of Sarah’s role in the novel” (525). Unlike Byrd, Raaberg does believe that Sarah’s presence serves to work as a catalyst for Charles’ “evolution” (524). Raaberg attributes this reading to the fact that “Fowles’s work has so often been read from the perspective of the male protagonist that it has become critical commonplace . . . that his female characters function to activate male character development” (524). Throughout the novel there is a “persistent focus on Charles’s development and Sarah’s role as his teacher and muse rather than as an active character also in development” (Raaberg 524).

Like Magali Michael, Raaberg agrees that though The French Lieutenant’s Woman attempts to question “traditional patriarchal cultural expectations,” this attempt is lacking because readers are only being offered a male perspective (526). Due to this male narrative perspective, readers are forced to “attempt to ‘read’ the mysterious woman” (Raaberg 527). The reading of Sarah as an Other is inevitable because we are only being given the male perspective,
which chooses to interpret the female objectively. Raaberg states that even the female characters in the novel “interpret Sarah through the perspective of Victorian patriarchal culture” (533). Raaberg is in agreement with Michael that Sarah is never given a true identity. The other characters in the novel attempt to “construct her identity” by “naming, classifying, and delimiting her,” but ultimately this does not give Sarah a real identity (534).

Though it does appear that Fowles made an attempt to appeal to feminist ideals, he ultimately does not succeed in creating a feminist novel. The absence of Sarah’s point of view and the inability to understand Sarah except through the interpretations of a male character create a detached relationship between the reader and the “heroine.” Sarah is an underdeveloped character, and the feeble attempt made to show growth at the end of the novel by allowing her to finally “speak her mind” does not make up for the lack of character growth throughout the entire novel.

Had Fowles truly wished to create a reputable feminist work, he would have included a female perspective. At the very least, Fowles could have made more of an attempt to make it clear to readers that the overwhelming presence of the male perspective is meant to serve an ironic purpose. Because Fowles does not make this obvious, readers are left simply with the story of a mysterious woman dominated by the male perspective. Fowles has proven to be a gifted craftsman, causing one to assume that if he wished to write a novel with feminist perspective he could certainly do so. His failure to succeed, however, causes one to wonder whether or not Fowles himself is trapped within the cage that is the patriarchal society.
Works Cited


