The Leading Ladies of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The leading ladies of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: Miss Ernestina Freeman and Miss Sarah Woodruff are set to live at a time when upper class women were all supposed to fit the same naïve, submissive, virtuous and sensual mould of the perfect Victorian woman. This thesis endeavours to demonstrate that Ernestina and Sarah’s personalities and characters were formed a great deal by their upbringing, experiences and social status, rather than having been predetermined by their “feminine nature.” In fact, many of the supposed “feminine qualities” come quite unnaturally to them. However, their different upbringing and prospects shape them from an early age and make the ladies develop some different, socially acceptable, characteristics. Ernestina has always been destined to become the wife of a rich, titled man, and therefore she has been taught, her whole life, to behave properly in society, to check her wit and stubbornness, and to take good care of her appearance. Sarah, on the other hand, was always destined to become a governess, which is why she develops a lonely, independent character, and pays very little attention to her appearance. Other aspects of their nature, such as their sensuality and intelligence, have also been suppressed by their environment. Victorian women were supposed to appear sensual, but be completely innocent at the same time. Both of the ladies experience sexual desire, however, proving that it is completely natural. The novels male protagonist, Charles, the person through whom much about the ladies is discovered is very hypocritical in regards to women’s sexuality, and also believes it impossible that a woman could be his intellectual equal. Ernestina and Sarah have, nonetheless, both been blessed with strong minds: Ernestina is quite clever and witty, although she seldom has an opportunity to use her gifts, while Sarah has a deep emotional intelligence.
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1. Introduction

John Fowles’ novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, was first published in 1969 and became his most commercially successful book. It tells the story of Charles Smithson, a rather stereotypical English gentleman, and his two leading ladies: his fiancée, the rich heiress Miss Ernestina Freeman, and the mysterious Miss Sarah Woodruff, and is set in England, at the height of the Victorian era. The main backdrop is Lyme Regis, a small coastal town in South England, although some parts of the story are set in London, Exeter and abroad. John Fowles was in fact so interested in the history and culture of Lyme Regis that he ended up moving there in 1968 and was eventually appointed as curator of the Lyme Regis Museum in 1979, which he remained for ten years (“Biography”). His passion for the location is evident from the beginning of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, when Charles and Ernestina are out on a walk in the windy weather and see a dark, sombre figure that turns out to be Sarah standing on the end of the Cobb, an old stone pier that is a famous landmark in the area. Fowles’ vivid and dramatic description of her standing there: “motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day” (Fowles 9), immediately rouses the readers’ curiosity and interest.

The characters and personalities of the two leading ladies of the story, Miss Ernestina Freeman and Miss Sarah Woodruff, are poles apart, even though they turn out to have a similar taste in men and both end up falling in love with Charles Smithson. It is, however, very important for the modern reader to be critical of the judgements that are passed on the ladies in the story, because, as Magali Cornier Michael phrases it, the novel mainly shows the women from a male perspective, “through a triple layering of voices which includes Charles, “the male narrator,” and Fowles’ voices” (Michael 225). Since John Fowles’ own ideas on women and femininity were, naturally, developed during his lifetime, which spanned most of the 20th century, whereas the ideas in the novel are based on 19th century Victorianism, Fowles managed to portray the women in a more realistic, and less “perfectly moral” manner than the Victorians would have liked. Ernestina and Sarah, are therefore not cut from the same angelic mould as an
ideal Victorian woman would have been, but have their own individual characteristics, tastes, feelings and minds. Their characters and personalities have, therefore, been shaped and formed by the collective influences of their upbringing, experiences and social status, rather than been predetermined by the “natural feminine qualities” they were born with.

To attempt to understand Ernestina and Sarah’s actions, behaviour and feelings, it is, first of all, necessary to look into the way that they were raised and compare society’s expectations of them. Sarah and Ernestina’s early upbringing and childhood will be examined to determine to what extent the ladies’ early memories and life lessons have shaped their characters. Subsequently, Ernestina and Sarah’s natural beauty and acquired vanity will be contrasted and examined, to establish to which extent these characteristics have influenced their personalities and people’s perception of them. Then the ladies’ relationships with Charles will be compared to see if their sensuality is in line with the high moral standards of Victorian times, when ladies were supposed to be “virginal,” “innocent,” and “sensual” at the same time, or whether the ladies struggled to adhere to those standards. Next, Ernestina and Sarah’s wits and intelligence is compared with that of Charles, and it is examined whether they could be his intellectual equal or not. Lastly it is researched whether the ladies can have any influence on their destinies, or whether they are always destined to fulfil their predetermined and socially accepted roles.
2. Being Born a Wealthy or a Poor Woman

Sarah Woodruff and Ernestina Freeman have been blessed with very different starts in life, which significant influence the development of their characters and personalities. Their fortunes seem, indeed, to be complete opposites: Sarah is born poor and Ernestina is born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Although the reader may assume that the latter won the genetic lottery, it can be argued that on some levels her many blessings are holding her back. Likewise, it can be argued that Miss Sarah’s less blessed childhood gave her more freedom to become her own person because she has very little to lose from breaking out from the confines of her socially acceptable role. Sarah and Ernestina’s early experiences, hardships and privileges cause them to develop many of the qualities they retain for the rest of their lives, however. Alice Eagly and Valerie Steffen corresponding state in their article: “Gender Stereotypes Stem From the Distribution of Women and Men Into Social Roles,” that “socializing agents [have a tendency to] prepare girls […] for the social roles that they believe these girls […] will probably occupy as adults” (752). Therefore, it may be assumed that women who came from very different backgrounds and were expected to fulfil very different roles in their lives, similar to Sarah and Ernestina, did not grow up to have the exact same qualities.

A look at Miss Sarah Woodruff’s childhood circumstances makes it clear that she was always destined to become educated, independent and lonely. During her childhood, she never experienced what it is like to have a happy family life nor benefited from parental love and affection. Her mother had passed away, she had no siblings, and her father was a rather cold-hearted and poor farmer, with “a fine collection of all the wrong [principles]” (Fowles 51). He was also obsessed with his own ancestry, and knew that “four generations back on the paternal side one came upon clearly established gentlemen” (Fowles 51), which made it his main ambition in life to raise his station back to where he thought rightfully belonged. In order to achieve that goal, he sent his only daughter away to be educated at a boarding-school, so that she could become a governess to upper-class children or possibly marry above her station.

Matters did not turn out as her father had hoped, however, and as a result of his lofty aspirations Sarah spent the majority of her childhood in loneliness and was forced
to learn how to stand on her own feet at a young age. She was an outcast at school and did not have any friends because her peers, who were all from a higher class, never let her forget that she was not their social equal. They looked down on her, even though she was quiet, kind and intelligent. According to Fowles, her intelligence was not of the traditional academic sort, however, but a kind that enabled her to: “classify other people’s worth: to understand them, in the fullest sense of that word. […]. [Sarah] saw [people] as they were and not as they tried to seem. It would not be enough to say she was a fine moral judge of people. Her comprehension was broader than that” (50), which in turn made it difficult for her to socialize, even on a superficial level, with girls she knew were unkind or hypocrites.

Correspondingly, Sarah’s deep comprehension, on top of her education, made it virtually impossible for her to ever find a husband who could consider himself her equal. Sarah’s father had “forced her out of her own class, but could not raise her to the next. To the young men of the [class] she had left she had become too select to marry; to those of the one she aspired to, she remained too banal” (Fowles 50-51). Thus, her father had condemned Sarah to remain alone forever, and never to have a family and children of her own. Even though “she was too striking a girl not to have had suitors, in spite of the lack of dowry of any kind” (Fowles 51), her deep insight into people’s true character made her unable to force herself to settle for a man who was not her equal in mind and spirit.

Sarah’s education and intelligence eventually even distanced her from her only close relative: her father. When she returned home to the farm from boarding-school, at eighteen years old, Fowles suggests that her father may have been disappointed. A probable explanation is that once Sarah arrived with her fine, quiet manners and fancy schooling, Mr Woodruff felt inferior to his own daughter. This led him to overcompensate in other ways, with disastrous consequences:

He gave up his tenancy and bought a farm of his own; but he bought it too cheap, and what he thought was a cunning good bargain turned out to be a shocking bad one. For several years he struggled to keep up both the mortgage and a ridiculous façade of gentility; then he went quite literally mad and was sent to Dorchester Asylum. (Fowles 51)
Therefore, both Sarah’s childhood and Mr Woodruff’s old age were eventually sacrificed in his quest for a higher social status, and she was left with no family and no inheritance.

Miss Ernestina Freeman, on the other hand, grew up in a very different environment. She was the only daughter of rich parents who both adored her. She received the best education that money could buy for women at that time and was very spoiled by her parents. Her upbringing encouraged her to be vain, sweet, funny and clever, that is: to have all the qualities needed to attract and keep a good husband. Ernestina also takes very good care of her appearance and dress at all times, since society has taught her that her good looks are her most significant quality. There are however quite a few hints in the novel that Ernestina is merely playing a role, and not revealing her true self, such as: “Ernestina had certainly a much stronger will of her own than anyone about her had ever allowed for – and more than the age allowed for” (Fowles 29). She has been trained her whole life not to show those aspects of her character and merely to accentuate the personality traits that are considered socially acceptable, because upper class Victorian women were absolutely not supposed to be wilful and strong, but quite the opposite: soft and angelic.

Miss Ernestina’s parents, who had become rich through a successful family business, spoiled Ernestina both materially and emotionally, and did everything in their power to make her happy. They were nevertheless also overprotective of her, and especially her health. They did not believe her when she said she was perfectly healthy, and even though “half Harley Street had examined her, and found nothing” (Fowles 28-29), her parents remained convinced that she was consumptive, despite the fact that “she had never had a serious illness in her life,” and “had none of the lethargy, the chronic weaknesses, of the condition” (Fowles 29). For that reason, they sent her to her old spinster Aunt Tranter in the seaside town of Lyme Regis every year, against her will, to regain her strength.

This overprotection may have been the factor that caused Ernestina to preserve some of her rebellious streak into early adulthood, because despite the Victorian pressures and ideals imposed upon her she always goes her own way; refusing all the suitors that her parents approve of until she meets Charles Smithson. Her duty, as an
only daughter of rich parents, was of course to find a titled husband, whose station could raise her family’s status to the highest class. Nonetheless, Ernestina does not appear to have a problem with fulfilling that duty, even though she insists on choosing her own husband.

By comparing the women’s very different childhood circumstances, and keeping Judith Butler’s following interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in mind: “Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions” (40), it is clear that both women have adapted quite well to their surroundings and understand what is expected of them. Since they are born into very different circumstances, it is to be expected that the prescriptions and sanctions of the people closest to them, are very different. Sarah comes to realize and accept that her peers will never see her as an equal, and eventually decides to embrace her loneliness and status as an outcast quite dramatically. Ernestina, on the other hand, tries to restrict and shape her natural character to fit society’s standards and become the perfect Victorian woman, by, for example, reining in her stubbornness and pretending to be more submissive and naïve than she actually is.
3. Beauty, Vanity and Personality

Ernestina Freeman and Sarah Woodruff could hardly be greater opposites in appearance, both as a result of their genes and as a result of their nurture. Their facial features, bodies and style are, nevertheless, contrasted and compared throughout *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* by Fowles, the narrator and Charles. These three male voices even infer a number of character traits about the women solely based on their appearance and the amount of effort that they put into it. Therefore, Miss Ernestina and Miss Sarah’s respective beauty and vanity will be compared to determine whether these aspects of their personalities have been affected by societal pressures, or are a direct consequence of their natural character.

When Charles and Ernestina first spot Sarah out on the Cobb, it takes them a while to realize that the dark figure is a woman, for they first assume that it is a fisherman (Fowles 12). Sarah is described as masculine several times in the novel, but it seems to be more the result of her attitude than her actual appearance. When the engaged couple has approached Sarah on the Cobb, Charles addresses her, after which:

She turned to look at him – or as it seemed to Charles, through him. It was not so much what was positively in that face which remained with him after that first meeting, but all that was not as he had expected; for theirs was an age when the favoured feminine look was the demure, the obedient, the shy. [...] It was not a pretty face, like Ernestina’s. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period’s standard or taste. But it was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring. There was no artifice here, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask; and above all, no sign of madness. (Fowles 13)

Furthermore, Sarah is described as having a firm, deep voice, strong eyebrows, a well modelled and feminine face, a wide mouth and beautiful and sometimes wild brown-auburn hair. Her eyes are attributed a particular intensity, and Charles considers them to be “abnormally large, as if able to see more and suffer more” (Fowles 78). Merely from looking into Sarah’s eyes, he also infers a great deal about her character: “They could
not conceal an intelligence, an independence of spirit; there was also a silent contradiction of any sympathy; a determination to be what she was” (Fowles 105).

Ernestina is quite different and a rather more narcissistic character. She is, overall, quite happy with her own appearance, and one night, while inspecting herself in front of the mirror, she even admits to thinking that she, herself, is “one of the prettiest girls she knew” (Fowles 29). She is described as having very pretty, although short-sighted, grey eyes, smooth brown hair, and:

Exactly the right face for her age; that is, small-chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. […] At first meetings she could cast down her eyes very prettily, as if she might faint should any gentleman dare to address her. But there was a minute tilt at the corner of her eyelids, and a corresponding tilt at the corner of her lips – to extend the same comparison, as faint as the fragrance of February violets – that denied, very subtly but quite unmistakably, her apparent total obeisance to the great god Man. (Fowles 27)

Thus, she is described in a very different manner from Miss Woodruff: Sarah’s features are more masculine whereas Ernestina’s are more feminine, and therefore it is concluded that the former must be strong and dramatic and the latter delicate and childish.

The conclusions the male narrators draw from the ladies’ appearance do seem to be somewhat farfetched. Nobody can describe what a face without hypocrisy looks like, for example, nor can a tilt of a woman’s eyelids deny her “total obeisance to the great god Man” in any way. These assumptions and deductions are therefore highly subjective and therefore questionable, and may tell the reader a lot more about the male characters than the female ones. The insistence that Sarah’s face contains no artifice and no mask is, however, clearly in contrast with the portrayal of Ernestina’s “act,” which can be considered as rather ironic because Charles is eventually deceived far more by Sarah than Ernestina.

Miss Freeman and Miss Woodruff’s wardrobes and daily dress are likewise very different, with Ernestina putting a lot more effort into her outfits than Sarah. As was previously mentioned, Ernestina was raised to value her appearance, because society
regarded it as her most valuable asset, after her inheritance. To be noticed by a prospective future husband, she needed to stand out from the other rich ladies by looking her best. She, therefore, puts in a great deal of money and effort to ensure that she is always wearing the latest fashions. Sarah, on the other hand, was raised to be a governess: a person whose appearance is expected to be neat and tidy while at the same time inconspicuous. She, therefore, needed to be able to fade into the background of the homes she served in, while also remaining pleasing to the eye, by wearing neutral colours and clothes that would in not overshadow her mistress.

In Lyme Regis, Ernestina is by far the most daring in her fashion choices compared with the local women’s dress, and is generally the first one to introduce the latest trends from London and Paris to the small town. For example, on the day she and Charles go for a walk to the Cobb, she was wearing a:

Magenta skirt of an almost daring narrowness – and shortness, since two white ankles could be seen beneath the rich green coat and above the black boots that delicately trod the revetment; and perched over the netted chignon, one of the impertinent little flat “pork-pie” hats with a delicate tuft of egret plumes at the side – a millinery style that the resident ladies of Lyme would not dare to wear for at least another year. (Fowles 8)

The narrator adds that: “The colours of the young lady’s clothes would strike us today as distinctly strident; but the world was then in the first fine throes of the discovery of aniline dyes” (Fowles 8). It is, thus, very clear that Ernestina is not afraid to stand out among her peers.

Even though her appearance and dress usually give Ernestina confidence, she is very dependent upon outside approval. For example, after having put a lot of effort into her outfit one morning; wearing a “rosepink “breakfast” dress with bishop sleeves – tight at the delicate armpit, then pleating voluminously in a froth of gauze to the constricted wrist” (Fowles 226), she is quite upset when Charles does not notice and pay her any compliments on it. This strengthens the assumption that Ernestina is mainly dressing up for society and to influence other people’s perception of her rather than for her own innate pleasure.
Sarah, on the other hand, has probably been used to being the person wearing the plainest clothes in the room since she was at school, and, thus, does not appear to care very much about her clothes. She always wears the same outfit, it seems: a black coat, an indigo dress with a white collar and a bonnet. To the fashionable couple, Ernestina and Charles, her coat even seems “more like a man’s riding-coat than any woman’s coat that had been in fashion those past forty years” (Fowles 13). When she is telling Charles the story about the French lieutenant and herself, he has plenty of time to reflect closely on her peculiar ensemble:

Something about the coat’s high collar and cut, especially from the back, was masculine – it gave her a touch of the air of a girl coachman, a female soldier – a touch only, and which the hair effortlessly contradicted. With a kind of surprise Charles realized how shabby clothes did not detract from her; in some way even suited her, and more than finer clothes might have done. The last five years had seen a great emancipation in women’s fashions, at least in London. The first artificial aids to a well-shaped bosom had begun to be commonly worn; eyelashes and eyebrows were painted, lips salved, hair ‘dusted’ and tinted … and by most fashionable women, not just those of the demi-monde. Now with Sarah there was none of all this. She seemed totally indifferent to fashion; and survived in spite of it, just as the simple primroses at Charles’s feet survived all the competition of exotic conservatory plants. (Fowles 146)

Thus, even though Ernestina, an obvious example of an “exotic conservatory plant,” tries so hard to impress the people around her with her clothes and style, her own fiancé seems to prefer the completely natural and effortless look of Sarah.

There is, however, one occasion on which it becomes clear that Sarah is not completely void of vanity. When she has arrived at the Endicott’s Family Hotel in Exeter, it is evident that she does not have many possessions with her. She does, nonetheless begin to unwrap some newly bought parcels very carefully: one contains a nightgown, and another contains a “dark green shawl, merino fringed with emerald-green silk” (Fowles 241). She then continues to lay a lock of her hair on the green fabric “in the first truly feminine gesture [the narrator has] permitted her” (Fowles 242). This is on the occasion when Sarah is planning to seduce Charles, and clearly she is making
an effort to look her best and accentuate her most beautiful features for him. In the process she reveals a certain degree of vanity to the novels’ readers.

The previous paragraphs demonstrate that Miss Freeman and Miss Woodruff had both been genetically blessed with some beautiful features: Ernestina is, however, considered the prettier one by society’s standards. Nevertheless, their facial features cannot tell the readers, nor Charles, anything about their characters, even though the three male voices urge them to accept their baseless assumptions. The women’s vanity, on the other hand, exhibits the effects that the nurturing that they have received has had on their personalities to some extent. Because Ernestina relies on her appearance for success, she takes great care of it, and takes pride in it. Sarah, in contrast, relies on her education for success, and has, therefore, no need to take special care of her appearance. She is aware that her hair is considered her best asset, however, which can be observed when she accentuates that asset in preparation for her great seduction by wearing a shawl in a complementing colour.
4. Sensuality and Victorian Ladies

Sarah Woodruff and Ernestina Freeman live during a time when unmarried women were supposed to be virginal, submissive, sensual and highly moral at the same time. Charles has a romantic relationship with both of the ladies, which provides a first-rate opportunity to compare the differences between the ladies’ sensuality. However, because the reader mainly sees the women from Charles’ perspective the reader’s judgement of the ladies tends to align with his. Thus, in order to be able to form a more objective estimation of Sarah and Ernestina, it is important to understand his subjective perceptions of them.

Charles is shocked when Sarah Woodruff tells him, more as a challenge than as a confession, that she has had sex, and he finds her openness and unapologetic immorality very disturbing. This demonstrates to what an extreme extent people of Victorian times held different standards for men and women’s sexual expression. Even though Charles has had many sexual experiences with women, especially in Paris, the thought of upper-class women in England having sensual desires and even sexual experience before marriage disgusts him to a shocking degree. This reveals a hypocrisy in Charles and in Victorian society in general. The narrator of The French Lieutenant’s Woman even brings these double standards and falseness to the forefront in the beginning of chapter thirty-five:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old-girl for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her only for an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in sixty thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. (Fowles 231)
It also becomes clear that Charles manages to separate his own sexual experiences completely, still considering himself a perfect example of a gentleman despite his many extramarital affairs. On the other hand there is Sarah, whose sexuality “disturbs and challenges Victorian propriety” (Fletcher 33). In her rebellion, she makes a point of frequently going for a walk through the Ware Commons, a wooded, secluded area where people reportedly go to have affairs, and stays in Exeter, which is “notoriously a place to hide, . . . [a] safe sanctuary from the stern moral tide that swept elsewhere through the life of the country” (Eagly and Steffen 238), when she waits for Charles. According to Lisa Fletcher, “in this sense, Sarah belongs to the Victorian age as a necessary foil to propriety. She is the improper figure without whom the notion of a proper Victorian would not make sense” (33). However, in an interview with Carol M. Barnum, John Fowles maintains when asked whether Sarah is a deceiving woman, that he “deliberately left her character and motives very open, and [is] not going to encourage one interpretation over another” (156).

Magali Cornier Michael determines, that “Charles not only sees in [Sarah] “an independence of spirit” and “a determination to be what she was” but also observes that she transcends the conventional portrait of Victorian women by being both “completely feminine” and full of overt “sensuality”” (226-227), suggesting that those two are usually not generally thought of as going hand in hand. Thus, the “masculine air” that she is regularly mentioned to give off in the novel, might merely be the sum of her character traits which were ordinarily not considered acceptable in Victorian ladies. The fact that Sarah is held to such high moral standards is rather unconventional though, because she is only a farmer’s daughter, and women of lower classes were held to more liberal moral standards than women of the upper classes. It may, however, be explained by the fact that her manner and education as a governess would fool most people into believing that she is from the middle class, and therefore subject to a stricter moral code.

Despite his scruples, Charles eventually succumbs to Sarah’s charms. At first when he meets her in the barn, after Mrs Poulteney has thrown her out, he tries to calm her down by saying reassuring words. His intentions are honourable, and:
He had thought by his brief gesture and assurance to take the first step towards putting out the fire the doctor had told him he had lit; but when one is oneself the fuel, firefighting is a hopeless task. Sarah was all flame. Her eyes were all flame as she threw a passionate look back at Charles. He withdrew his hand, but she caught it and before he could stop her raised it towards her lips. He snatched it away in alarm then; and she reacted as if he had struck her across the face. (Fowles 216)

He could not resist for long, though, and took her into his arms and kissed her. It is very unusual for a Victorian woman to have shown her passion and longing so overtly, however, as the aforementioned excerpt makes it clear that Sarah was, if not the initiator of the first touch, a more than willing participant.

Ernestina Freeman is eleven years younger than Charles, completely inexperienced sexually, and could probably never have imagined the scale of his promiscuous past and previous sexual experience. Even if she would have known about it though, she would have had to forgive him by society’s standards, because men simply had sexual urges that they needed to take care of, while proper women were not supposed to have these urges, nor to enjoy sex.

Nevertheless, Charles realises that Ernestina might be a bit less moral than the typical young Victorian woman, and according to his musings in The French Lieutenant’s Woman, she had in her “a promise of certain buried wildnesses…a wildness to learn perversity, one day to bite timidly but deliciously on forbidden fruit” (Fowles 229). The fact that she is not completely like the innocent and proper girls of the Victorian age is what attracts Charles to her in the first place, which sets them both apart from most of their Victorian contemporaries. Charles notices from the start that, even though “she was so nearly one of the prim little moppets, the Georginas, Victorias, Albertinas, Matildas and the rest who sat in their closely guarded dozens at every ball” (Fowles 27), there is something different about her which he finds very attractive.

The reader knows more details about Ernestina’s budding sensuality than Charles, however, for in her bedroom, one night, she suddenly stops admiring herself in the mirror and looks up at the ceiling:
Her lips moved. And she hastily opened one of her wardrobes and drew on a *peignoir*. For what had crossed her mind [...] was a sexual thought: an imagining, a kind of dimly glimpsed Laocoön embrace of naked limbs. It was not only her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all that gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles. She had only once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind. (Fowles 30)

The words that her lips mouthed were “I must not,” which she repeated to herself “whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force an entry into her consciousness” (Fowles 30). The simple fact that she had developed her own personal mantra, to help her in such situations, strongly indicates that these “forbidden thoughts” did not cross her mind infrequently.

Even though it was not admitted that it was so in Victorian times, women are naturally equally as sensual beings as men. It is clear from the previous arguments and quotes from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* that even though society has taught Sarah and Ernestina that sex and sensuality is a sin in a woman, neither of them can resist having some indecent thoughts and urges. Nurture has trained Ernestina to act as if she is an angelic virgin, but her natural sexual thoughts can not be completely suppressed. The same thing is true for Sarah, who has grown so tired of playing her role of asexual governess that she is prepared to throw her whole life away for the passion she feels, first for Varguennes, later for Charles. Therefore, the feelings Sarah and Ernestina both feel completely refute the Victorian notion that it was unnatural for women to have sexual urges and longings, because despite society’s pressures, they were both unable to resist them.
5. Intelligent Women

By reading *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* the modern reader can established for a fact that Ernestina and Sarah have sharp wits and intelligent minds that are equal to Charles. His opinion on both of the women’s capabilities develops throughout novel, however, and undergoes considerable changes. At first he appreciates and admires Ernestina’s cleverness and ironic sense of humour and is affronted by Sarah’s presumption that she is his intellectual equal, believing such a thing as a man and woman being full equals to be impossible. Nevertheless, Charles eventually begins to see Ernestina’s wit as artificial and annoying, and slowly starts to accept Sarah’s intelligence as a match for his own. Through Charles’ thoughts on- and preconceptions about the women’s intellectual abilities, the readers will see that they are both biologically his equal, although their nurture has not allowed them to develop their capabilities and confidence through as extensive an education as Charles has enjoyed.

At the beginning of the story, the reader learns how Ernestina and Charles came to be engaged. When they first met, she stood out to him from the crowd of other young ladies searching for husbands, because she was smarter than them and had a mischievous air about her. Her intellect enabled her to assess Charles’ character and determine exactly which seduction strategy would enable her to secure him. She did the absolute opposite of what other ladies would do: she did not throw herself at him and gave her parents strict instructions not to hint at engagement or marriage in his presence. At social gatherings she often ignored him and talked to other eligible men, while occasionally making playful, witty joke: setting her even further apart from the rest of the ladies. Ernestina’s clever scheme worked: Charles fell head over heels for her and proposed before long. The fact that her subtle but highly strategized seduction worked, proves that Ernestina knew Charles better than he thought possible, and that she even outwitted him, for Charles had not even been looking for a wife when she managed to get him to propose.

At the beginning of their engagement, Charles and Ernestina had a very teasing and affectionate relationship, but at Lyme Regis, Charles suddenly begins to see Ernestina in a different light. For example, when they have gone to a local concert with
Aunt Tranter, he observes that: “Her humour did not exactly irritate him, but it seemed unusually and unwelcomely artificial, as if it were something she had put on with her French hat and her new pelisse; to suit them rather than the occasion” (Fowles 113). Later in the evening, he has the following, rather condescending and cold-hearted, train of thought:

[Ernestina] was so young, such a child. He could not be angry with her. 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. (Fowles 114)

This indicates that he had started doubting his choice of wife, whilst underestimating her intelligence. Without any explanation he also reduces her capacity for empathy and understanding to that of a child, not admitting that she may have been covering deeper, more mature thoughts and feelings. However, it is likely that this was the way most Victorian men thought about women: as inferior humans, merely capable of innocent, childlike views.

It is similarly clear that Charles could not accept that Sarah was his intellectual equal, even though she demonstrates a deep knowledge and understanding of the world on several occasions. For example, when Sarah is telling Charles the false version of her immoral meeting with Varguennes, she passionately and eloquently describes the pain and hopelessness she felt about her situation in life:

“‘You were not born a woman with a natural respect, a love of intelligence, beauty, learning … I don’t know how to say it, I have no right to desire these things, but my heart craves them and I cannot believe it is all vanity …’ She was silent a moment. “And you were not ever a governess, Mr Smithson, a young woman without children paid to look after children. You cannot know that the sweeter they are the more intolerable the pain is. You must not think I speak of mere envy. […] But to live each day in scenes of domestic happiness, the closest spectator of a happy marriage, home, adorable children.” She paused. “Mrs
Talbot is my own age exactly.” She paused again. “It came to seem to me as if I were allowed to live in paradise, but forbidden to enjoy it.”” (Fowles 148)

After Sarah as made her revelation, Charles is very distraught and confused, although he is still denial about her intellectual abilities:

“He perceived that her directness of look was matched by a directness of thought and language – that what had on occasion struck him before as a presumption of intellectual equality (therefore a suspect resentment against man) was less an equality than a proximity, a proximity like a nakedness, an intimacy of thought and feeling hitherto unimaginable to him in the context of a relationship with a woman.” (Fowles 159)

Thus, he remains unwilling to admit that she is his equal, only that she is more intelligent than he ever believed a woman could be.

When Charles’ own intellect is compared with those of Ernestina and Sarah, it is clear that the main difference between them is their confidence and education, not their natural abilities. Despite the fact that Charles believes Ernestina to be small-minded and childish, she manages to outsmart him, and Sarah exposed him a profound self-knowledge and intelligence that he would never have believed a woman capable of. Therefore, it is clear that if the ladies had benefited from the same quality of education as Charles, they might have been as confident in their own intelligence as him and been able to use their minds in more ways than they had possibly believed they could before.
Ernestina and Sarah’s socially constructed destinies have a great impact on their lives, because in Victorian times women generally lived to fulfill predetermined destinies and not to create their own path in life. The socially acceptable lots for upper class women like Ernestina were only to marry or to become old, respectable spinsters like Aunt Tranter, while the options for poorer women like Sarah were equally few, even though they were permitted to work out of necessity. Despite the fact that women had so little freedom in those days, Fowles cannot resist to “create “free” characters, characters who determine their own history, who existentially create themselves in the writing of their own textual histoire” (Docherty 119), which is why Sarah Woodruff, the “free” character, seems so out of place in Victorian times.

Sarah has been brought up with the pressure to raise her father’s station in life and has prepared her whole life for the destiny of becoming a governess, even though the idea of pursuing that career for the rest of her life made her miserable. The fact that Sarah grows up to believe that it is her destiny to become an old maid, living only as a governess in other people’s homes, watching and taking care of upper-class children in happy families that are not her own, makes her feel extremely unhappy and lonely. While she is doing exactly what she was meant to do; living as a governess with the friendly Talbot family, the drain of hiding her unhappiness becomes too much for her. The reader knows from the very beginning of the story, when she stands on the quay, that she has become outcast, “rebuked by but also rebuking Victorian society” (Fletcher 32). She made a drastic decision to escape her fate and spread the story that she had extramarital relations with Varguennes, the French Lieutenant who had been recovering from an injury at the Talbot’s house, condemning herself in the process. Now she is finally free to show her true emotions and live her life in a way that is true to her character. Interestingly, though, it is a great relief for Sarah for others to see that she is a true outcast, and be treated like one, rather than merely feeling like an outcast. Eileen Warburton explains that Miss Woodruff “clings to the fictional persona of fallen woman because it reinforces her vital sense of separateness and uniqueness” (172), which is why she refuses all offers of help from Charles, Aunt Tranter and Mrs Talbot.
By becoming “the French Lieutenant’s Whore” (Fowles 175) Sarah Woodruff is set free from society’s standards and expectations of her, because whatever she does, she has nothing more to lose. She was already poor, and the only thing that was keeping her in check, was her reputation. By undertaking this drastic action, she has managed to change her own fate, in a very un-Victorian manner for a young woman. According to Warburton, Sarah takes on this negative identity willingly, because “it is an identity which forces a shocked community to afford Sarah at least a negative status. They treat her as dangerous, which at least recognizes that she is a power and that she is different from Victorian notions of what women should be” (172-173). This fear and apprehension she evokes from the tight knit Lyme Regis society emphasises the fact that she stepped out of her appropriate and “proper” gender role, simply by embracing her independence. Freedom and independence are traditionally embodied only by the masculine gender, and therefore Sarah was clearly taking a step away from femininity and towards masculinity. The behaviour of the people in Lyme Regis can be explained, in that they became terrified and suspicious of Sarah when she “[trespasses] upon another gender territory,” which “testifies to the social constraints upon gender interpretation” and to the “essential freedom at the origin of gender” which is not predetermined by nature according to Judith Butler (42). The townspeople evidently disagree with Butler, because in their minds Sarah’s behaviour upsets the natural balance of the way things are done.

Ernestina, on the other hand, is more accepting of her fate, and although she manages to exert control over who becomes her fiancé, rather than giving in and simply obeying her parents’ wishes, she never tries to change her fate of becoming a wife and eventually a mother to the children of a rich and possibly aristocratic husband. Nevertheless, life is not always easy for her either: After she manages to attract Charles and become engaged to him, he begins to look elsewhere, and eventually realizes how shallow his attachment to her is. Even though she is not the typical Victorian woman, she has all the appearance and fake manners of one, because she has been prepared to play the part her whole life. Lisa Fletcher speculates on the possible reasons for Charles’ sudden disenchantment with Ernestina:

Ernestina, however, the properly dressed (and hence “proper”) Victorian woman cannot phrase romance for Charles. Instead, these early chapters [of the book]
seal her fate. Rather than inspiring love in her fiancé, she will present an obstacle to his desire for Sarah. Ernestina represents a threat to romance. She is the mundane and hence absolutely knowable woman (the truly repressed Victorian woman) who will stand as a foil for the mysterious and unknowable Sarah. Unlike Sarah, Ernestina […] is, in the terms of the novel, absolutely representable as a “Victorian.” (34)

Although Fletcher considers Ernestina to be an “absolutely knowable” character, the reader has seen flickers of rebellion in her which might lead her to surprise us. John Tosh explains that women of the time were told “not to expect full equality of emotional support” (54) from their husbands, and were expected to be “all attention to lighten his load and calm his spirit, and […] must present a demeanour of “cheerful complacency”” (54), which is exactly what Ernestina tries to do at all times. For example, when Charles receives the bad news about his old uncle Robert’s engagement, which means that Charles might no longer be his heir, Ernestina at first becomes angry and indignant on Charles’s behalf. When she realizes that her reaction does not please him, however, she immediately corrects herself and makes an effort to be “ladylike” and sympathetic (Fowles 174-175), even though her act does not manage to convince Charles.

Due to the novel’s unconventional structure and narrative approach, it is necessary to consider whether the different endings of the story have a great effect on the Sarah and Ernestina’s characters. Regardless of which of the three proposed endings, or any other imaginable ending, would have taken place, Ernestina would in all probability have ended up marrying a wealthy husband and living a life of comfort and leisure. Although her spoiled upbringing, and her habit of always getting her way, would result in her becoming very upset if Charles left her, she would probably have been able to move on after not too long and find another suitor. Some remarks in the story hint that Miss Ernestina may not be so much in love with Charles, as she is in love with the idea of being in love with the perfect gentleman. For example, her behaviour when Charles breaks the engagement, and she slumps to the floor in a carefully precise “delicate” manner (Fowles 331), depicts her doing her best to behave like a perfect Victorian lady, rather than truly breaking down due to the strong emotions following the loss of someone she loved. Her behaviour reminds Charles “of the artificiality of their
relationship and Ernestina’s willingness to embrace and inhabit a culturally conditioned construct” (Buchberger 147).

Furthermore, Ernestina’s great tragedy is that she has the natural capacity: the brains, the confidence and the passion, to be so much more than she is raised to be. Judging by her father’s conversation with Charles it is evident that if she had been born a man, she would have been destined to do more than just get married and have children, she would have been a smart business owner, running and responsible for a great business empire. Mr Freeman is willing to give his whole business to his daughter’s fiancé, a man he does not know, nor like very much, while he has most likely never even considered that his daughter might be able to take over the family business. This excerpt from the novel supports the claim that Ernestina is biologically able to take on the role of business owner, as she was evidently paying attention to her father’s life lessons when she had the opportunity to:

[Ernestina] had a very sound bourgeois sense of proportion. Thirty rooms when fifteen were sufficient was to her a folly. Perhaps she got this comparative thrift from her father. (Fowles 218)

Although it may not seem important, this leads us to infer that if her father had imparted more of his wisdom, apart from relative thriftiness, to her and taught her the tricks of the trade instead of grooming her to become a society wife, she would have been perfectly able to follow in his footsteps. As the decades would have gone on, and if the business would have remained in the family’s possession, it is highly likely that one of her granddaughters would have eventually run the business – just as well as her male predecessors.

By comparing the two leading ladies, it is clear that Miss Ernestina fulfils more of the standards Victorian women were expected to fulfil, even though the book’s language seems to suggest that the author has more admiration for Miss Sarah, whom he believes to be the epitome of femininity. Thus, even though Fowles labelled himself as a feminist, his idolization of the “feminine” goes against most modern feminist theories, which believe that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 295).
6. Conclusion

The previous chapters support the statement that Ernestina and Sarah’s personality and temperament have been greatly impacted by their nurture, and that many of their behaviours are learned and not born. Their first experiences of people and Victorian society, during their childhood, have a great effect on both of them. Ernestina was spoiled by her parents with love and material goods, and learns that a “proper Victorian lady” is quiet, meek, naïve and beautiful. She strives to make her character fit into that “ideal” mould as well as she possibly can by reining in her stubbornness, sensuality and wit, but it is clear that she is struggling to hold back her natural character. Sarah, on the other hand, has a poor, loveless childhood, and becomes very lonely, independent, and intelligent in her early life. Ernestina and Sarah can, of course, change nothing about their physical features, but it is interesting to compare their attitude towards them. Sarah, raised to become a governess, dresses neatly, but only wears dark, outdated clothes, because she depended on her mind to get by, not her beauty. Ernestina, on the other hand, needed to play up her beauty and stand out from the other eligible young ladies by wearing the most colourful, and decorated new fashions. Her worth lay in her beauty and her wealth, rather than in her intelligence. Despite that, she was very clever and witty, which a virtuous Victorian lady was not necessarily supposed to be. Ernestina is only shown once in the novel, however, to use her cleverness: when she seduces Charles. On other social occasions, she tries her best to be proper and to only make appropriately witty and innocent remarks. Sarah’s intelligence is greater, although for the times she is considered a very strange woman for “daring” to suppose herself Charles’ intellectual equal. Her overt sensuality and sexual forwardness is, likewise, very unusual in Victorian times and greatly shocks Charles. Sarah, however, embraces her sensuality and is freed by it, finally escaping the confines and dreariness of living in propriety. Contrastingly, Ernestina, who is also a lady who is more sensual than the times allowed for, is frightened by her own sexual thoughts, and does not escape from her predetermined fate. Whichever ending of the novel would have prevailed, she would eventually have married a titled man, and maintained the traditions and morals that she was taught growing up. Finally, Fowles,’ the male narrator’s and Charles’ thoughts and narration of the novel, makes it easier for the modern reader to see the hypocrisy of the
Victorian era in regards to women. They inferred personality traits and characteristics of the ladies from the way they looked physically, and found the behaviour, attitude and confidence of Miss Woodruff “masculine,” solely because it did not adhere to the strict confines of what a Victorian woman should look and behave like. If these women had been subject to the same moral standards and nurturing as the male protagonist, Charles, they would have grown up to have quite different personalities. That is, Ernestina would have been more in touch with her natural stubbornness, wits and sensuality, while Sarah would have embraced her own character much earlier, and been admired for her intelligence.


